Beyond Media Censorship: Speech and State in the Middle East and North Africa Workshop
April 20, 2007
Background Paper

This paper provides a background and context to address issues for the workshop ‘Beyond Media Censorship: Speech and State in the Middle East and North Africa.’ The organizers have outlined the purposes of the Workshop in the following way:

The hypothesis is that there is a bit too much scholarly focus on the regional and national press and news and broadcasting in the formation of the public sphere, in the shaping of notions of community, allegiance, public opinion, etc. in the Middle East (leaving definition of that region aside). It would be useful to gather a group that has experience with modes of speech, influences and techniques for diffusion that are significant and worthy of greater scholarly attention. The class of media that interests us for this purpose includes song, sermon, poetry, literature, vernacular art and graffiti film as examples. A particular interest would be how the state conditions, reacts, exercised control and shapes this sphere. But it is not only the state, it is also other types of ‘states’ including specific forms of external efforts to affect this sphere through these mechanisms. This could involve issues of intervention to affect the strength of various religious movements, the significance of poetry in particular places, debates over music and dress. Our hope is that this is a planning meeting that would lead to a second workshop, probably a book.

In light of this sense of direction, this paper outlines potential areas of inquiry. The last few years have seen a boom in interest in issues of ‘free speech’ and censorship in academic and policy-making circles dealing with the Middle East and North Africa. This has been clearly one of the objectives of the U.S. government’s repeated calls for democratization in the region. The customary approaches to state and speech relations in the Middle East and North Africa are closely related to the political and economic structure of media systems in those states.

1 The workshop is co-sponsored by the Annenberg Scholars Program in Culture and Communication and the Middle East Center. Organized by Center for Global Communication Studies.
Formation of Public Opinion and Alternative Modes of Expression

New Media

The term ‘new media’ represents a number of communication tools which use digital interactive technology. For our purposes, new media can be divided into offline and online activities. The first refers to a number of media that are accessible through computer hardware such as games, multimedia and software. Online activities allow some type of connectivity such as email, blogs, podcast, mobile devices and interactive television. Generally, the access to ‘new media’ is dependent on various economic, social, political and technological factors. In contrast with ‘old media,’ which required investments that only states could afford, ‘new media’ is relatively cheaper, does not require advanced training, and can be used for a variety of purposes – including entertainment, religion and politics, among other things.

The work of London-based Saudi dissident Dr Muhammad Al-Mas'ari is often cited as an example of ‘new media’ and censorship. As head of the exiled Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), Al-Mas’ari established a website and began to use telecommunication technology, including faxes and electronic mail, to communicate with his supporters in Saudi Arabia and abroad. The Economist reported that the CDLR faxed 800 copies weekly of its newsletter to individuals in Saudi ministries, government agencies, private houses and all sorts of businesses; the recipients would distribute the bulletins among networks of friends. Commenting on the effect of up to 1,000 faxes per week transmitted to the kingdom, Al-Mas’ari has said, “Perhaps 150,000 people see what we write and perhaps 80 per cent of people oppose the government…10,000 of them are activists…” CDLR’s activity was prolific, and became a source of embarrassment for both the Saudis and the British establishment. Between 1994 and 1997, the British government attempted twice to deport Al-Mas’ari under pressure from the UK arms industry and the Saudi

2 For more on internet use and censorship in the Middle East consult W. Sean McLaughlin (November 2003) “The use of the Internet for political action by non-state dissident actors in the Middle East” First Monday, (8)11.
government. Inside Saudi Arabia, CDLR-associated activists were subject to government repression; more interestingly, the government tried to censor faxes.

Offline activities have been nurturing various religious and political subcultures in the region; they have allowed an informative/instructional and propaganda form of speech. For instance, the Lebanese group Hezbollah promotes itself as an Arab resistance movement against Israel. In addition to traditional mass media, Hezbollah has invested in non-traditional media such as computer games. In the game “Special Force,” produced by the Hezbollah Internet Bureau, the Global Liberation Army, an Arab guerrilla force, is fighting the Israelis. After launching the game in 2003, Mahmoud Rayya, an official from the Hezbollah bureau, said “[T]his game is resisting the Israeli occupation through the media. [...] In a way, Special Force offers a mental and personal training for those who play it, allowing them to feel that they are in the shoes of the resistance fighters”.5 Similar examples abound in the region, and the ability to control borders for this type material is becoming almost impossible. The UK-based Innovative Minds, an Islamic educational software firm, produced a CD-ROM that teaches Muslim children a wide variety of Islamic topics. If banned, these CD-ROMs are easily pirated or smuggled into any state in the region.

Recent controversies reveal that security-conscious states perceive widespread access to ‘new media’ as more threatening than access to satellite TV receivers. For instance, the Kuwaiti and Saudi bans on text messaging to the reality TV show Star Academy did not prevent their nationals from submitting their votes through the internet. Because of the difficulty and expense of monitoring or controlling exchange, on-line activities have fostered a new arena for ‘free speech.’ For many Arab states, blogging has amounted to an ‘epidemic’ of uncontrollable ‘free flow’ of stories, pictures, opinions and discussions. Within a few months of its launch, Arabic portal Maktoob accounted for more than eleven thousand blogs, with 130 new ones going up every single day. Traffic to these blogs is growing by 20 percent a month. The biggest blogger country at Maktoob is Saudi Arabia, followed by Egypt and Morocco.6 Censorship of blogging has taken two forms: banning or jail. Several blogs in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have been blocked by the state-owned bodies that control Internet

access; at least six Egyptian bloggers were prosecuted with sentences involving jail time. Interestingly, many bloggers in Saudi Arabia were suspicious of a call to establish the ‘Official Community of Saudi Bloggers’ (OCSAB). These suspicions were based on the community’s promise to offer direct advertisers to the sites of its members, but it has a set of rules against attacks on the government or individuals. In other words, a mainstreaming of the blogosphere could be achieved through commercial and legal institutionalization.

The penetration of ‘new media’ in the region is part of a broader communication revolution that has undermined the notion of territorial sovereignty. Although the territorial state has faced serious challenges from the communication revolution, the concept of nation-state is subjected to serious threats. The first challenge is not just whether state sovereignty will survive (with Iraq as an example), but to what extent that territorial control can still extend or should extend to areas of speech. Second, the rise of networked patterns of communication, from Usenet groups to Facebook, reveals de-territorial and multi-territorial arrangements that subvert the premises of the nation-state. Third, the various institutional responses that have been offered to limit the effects of the communication revolution -- the statist, the proceduralist, and the liberal internationalist responses – have been unable to control it. By promising modernization, Arab states are caught between the technological reality of routine transborder information flows, such as mobile phone, and the institutional claims of the territorial state, censorship. On one hand, the communication revolution is an essential tool for modernization. On the other, the means of controlling ‘new media’ has often fallen short of achieving full censorship.

Religion

Preaching by conservative clerics is closely monitored both in Western societies and allied Arab countries. In many states, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, Muslim clerics are routinely re-trained and their speeches are subject to prior approval. There is great attention to madrasas. Religion is often invoked as an excuse for censorship and also a zone for exercising control. Consider the communication-related laws recently passed in Kuwait or Iraq. Though hailed as a

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7 “Outspoken Saudi bloggers wary of "official” group” (2006, May 3). Reuters,
major step towards ‘free speech,’ religious offences can result in lengthy incarcerations. These offences are yet undefined and in many cases depend on hegemonic interpretations of what constitutes an ‘insult’ to Islam or an incitement to ‘sectarian’ violence. Even in Lebanon, an extremely liberal country by most standards, the musician Marcel Khalife was accused in 1999 of blasphemy for singing a song "Oh my father. I am Yusuf," based on a poem by Mahmoud Darwish. The story of the biblical Yusuf and his brothers, from the Koran, drew hostile attention from Dar al-Fatwa, Lebanon's highest Sunni religious authority.

In their analysis of the Iranian revolution, Srebern-Mohammadi and Mohammadi argue that “small” media created a political “public sphere”: “they were channels of participation, extended preexisting cultural networks and communicative patterns, and become the vehicle of an oppositional discourse that was able to mobilize a mass movement.” The ‘small’ media used by Khomeini consisted of flyers, faxes, phone and audio tapes; these primarily functioned within a repressive society where political activity is severely restricted. Consequently, the community networks built around religion become the space for extensive expression, but within very strict limits.

In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, the space for religious-based ‘small’ media has expanded dramatically to incorporate traditional forms such as sermons as well as modern communication tools such as websites, CD-ROM, music videos and songs. In addition, the appearance of male and female Day’ia, Muslim preachers, has fostered religious-based media. Unlike traditional Muslim clerics, the Day’ia operate outside conventional space, the mosque, or institutions, like Al Azhar in Egypt. They have experimented with traditional media (mostly satellite television), and non-traditional media (mostly CD-ROM). The effects of Day’ia like Amr Khaled cannot be undermined; they have managed to co-opt the traditional religious system and the political system.9

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9 For more on Amr Khaled and other Day’ia consult Lindsay Wise (2003) "Words from the Heart": New Forms of Islamic Preaching in Egypt. M.Phil Thesis in Modern Middle Eastern Studies, St Antony’s College, University of Oxford.
‘Free speech’ is both a product and a prerequisite of modernity; it has provided the moral and legal safeguards for individual pursuits of thought and expression. In many ways, ‘free speech’ reflects the relation of the individual to society. In comparison, religious Islamic writings stress the importance of traditional society; and thus, community freedom is more valued than individual freedom. The difficulty in reconciling the notion of ‘free speech’ and in state censorship practices tends to reflect the conflict between modernity and tradition.

**Street life**

The use of ‘Arab Street’ is a common rhetoric in any Arab discourse that involves freedom and democracy; political leaders speak on its behalf, newspaper editors reflect its opinion(s) and television reporters pulse its attitude(s). In fact, the rhetoric of ‘Arab Street’ replaces elections, referendums and polls; in many states, it is perhaps the most democratic of all spheres. Life on the ‘Arab Street’ is a combination of poetry, performances, music, graffiti, demonstrations and a large number of communal activities. A thriving street life often sends an alarming message to any government in the Arab world; censoring or controlling it (its very architecture, its aesthetic, its population) becomes a serious undertaking.

**Poetry**

Since the pre-Islamic era, poetry has played an important role in street life, so much so that “[M]odern audiences in Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo can be stirred to the highest degree by the recital of poems, only vaguely comprehended, and by the delivery of orations in the classical tongue, though it be only partially understood.”10 The traditions of poetry are centuries old and have survived the various tyrannies, occupations and colonization in the region.

Perhaps the oldest of these traditions was a regular pre-Islamic poetry festival held at 'Ukaz, a market town not far from Mecca. At the festival, poets from various tribes would compete in poems of praise (madih) and ridicule (hija). With the arrival of Islam, this tradition continued with the popular poets Al-Farazdaq and Jarir. A more contemporary version of this style of poetry is found in Zajal, a popular form of poetry in the Levant, that involves two groups commenting on public life. Zajal is an

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oral tradition recorded on tapes and memorized by audiences; it is accompanied by some music. To avoid censorship, many verses of critical Zajal remain anonymous; people learn them by word of mouth.

Contemporary poets are also known for being politically committed, often suffering harassment and exile. From Egypt, Ahmed Shawqi was exiled by the British only to return and champion the Arab nationalist cause. In the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Syrian poet Nizar Kabbani transformed his traditionally romantic poems into political statements about his disenchantment with Arab regimes. In fact, his poems were so successful that he was harassed and later forced into exile after the death of his wife by a terrorist bomb. Similarly, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish championed the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) since the 1960’s. His poems were treated as manifestos; however, he was also critical of the PLO and was marginalized as a result. Poets are often targeted by censorship because of their mastery of words and their access to hearts.

Performances

Restrictions on public performances, particularly theatre and music, echoes those placed on civil liberties. There is ample evidence to suggest the ability of performances to inspire the general public, influence emotions and deliver subversive messages. In addition, religion is often invoked to censor performances which otherwise would allow people of all social orders to mix promiscuously. Several approaches have been created to limit public performances. First, the licensing of commercial venues places restrictions on the number of attendees and purpose of the performances; this bureaucratic procedure often ensures ‘speech’ compliance. Second, a variety of pre-performance examination and licensing of texts, as well as subsequent monitoring, are in place to monitor content.

More recently, Islamic pressure groups have managed to influence performances through mass mobilization. In Kuwait, Islamic members of parliament have constantly opposed performances by the winners of the reality show, Star Academy. In Egypt, singers like Ruby, Haifaa Wahbi and Nancy Ajram became the subject of a heated parliamentary debate to ban their public performances or, as a ‘half-way measure,’ to ban their clips from state television. By way of anecdotal
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reference, Bahraini singer Khaled Al-Sheikh who has had many of his songs banned told a conference in Beirut “[W]hen Sheikh Hamad [Bahrain] met King Husayn [Jordan], the latter noted that I [Khaled Al-Sheikh] was well-known in Jordan. “Yes,” replied the Bahraini ruler, “He sings nice songs which criticise the government. Do you want to hear them?” The changing expectations about performances and the austerity with which restrictions should be policed are evident in responses to current debates in the region.

In summary, street life is often orchestrated by internal intelligence services; they are entrusted to be the eyes and ears of the state. At the same time, they are also the mobilizing agents of the ‘Arab Street’. In other words, censorship of street life is more in the hands of internal security officers than a traditional censor.11

Theoretical and comparative approach

In spite of the boom in ‘free speech’ issues related to the Middle East, censorship - both as a concept and as a real practice in the cultural landscape – remains one of the most contentious issues in the region today. It includes definitional, empirical and conceptual problems (and of course these are often intertwined). One of the aspirations of the workshop is to help develop a new vocabulary for limitations, subsidies, controls and prohibitions, differentiating among actors (state and non-state).

Issues of definition and scope are thorny ones indeed in this contested area. It could be argued, on the basis of the political nature of censorship practices, that censorship in the Middle East and North Africa is best defined as military, employed to preserve unity and fight subversive elements. But one could also suggest that censorship in the region is social because media are involved in maintaining a social order that is part of the web of meanings and symbols related to culture and religion. A more sensible option is to recognise that the main interest in ‘speech’ is its alternative proposition, counter-hegemonic and, for want of a better term, free nature

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11 Missing from this discussion are other aspects of street life such as graffiti, demonstrations and social networks.
because censorship can potentially have such a strong influence on the very way we understand society – including, of course, the free expression itself.

The most likely way to produce a coherent definition of ‘alternative speech’ is to see the boundaries between such traditional modes of expression and other ‘new media’ as porous, provisional and relative, and to think about these boundaries in terms of the relationship between the utilitarian functions and non-utilitarian functions, between news and entertainment.

These definitional problems have helped create a situation whereby, in empirical terms, ‘alternative speech’ is under-reported. The relative novelty of ‘alternative speech’ as a matter of serious policy concern (at least under that the definition presented here rather than as a set of individual acts) means that the lag between, on the one hand, the creation of definitions and, on the other hand, the development of empirical research has left a knowledge gap. Second, and perhaps more seriously, because the traditional taxonomies used by many researchers were developed to monitor media in a national or regional context and ignore much of what are now regarded as local, ethnic, religious, tribal or ideological media trends of ‘speech,’ a precise definition of ‘alternative speech’ is yet to be produced.

Beyond these empirical problems, a further set of critical tensions are at work in the relationship between ‘alternative speech’ in practice and in theory. For all the growth in the practice of ‘alternative speech’, theories concerned with them are still affected by longstanding assumptions prevalent within traditional state and censorship concepts. One can point to a number of core ideas that underpin the majority of these concepts:

- The notion of the isolated ‘revolutionary’, an individual working on his own to fight the establishment – instead, people are organized in formal or informal movements.
- Censorship is for the pure public interest and public good – instead, it has been formulated at the nexus of the political and religious interests;
- Access to information can be regulated and monitored – instead, legislative approaches are ill-conceived and oversold.
• Controlling the medium controls the message – instead, it has become clear that technological quick fixes have not succeeded.

One important missing dimension in studying the relationship between state and censorship has been a theory that recognizes disjuncture. First, there is a typical divorce between a modern or pre-modern landscape of media in the region and a more recent view. The old model of military censorship does not fit the current contexts and contents of speech; it fails to address the new workings of theological, social, economic and other censorships. Censorship of ‘alternative speech’ operates in a complex, interconnected web of binary oppositions of ethnicity, class and gender; it is not limited to particular contexts, social formations or political ideologies. Second, there is a typical disjuncture between communication research and theory and research by sociologists, political scientists, legal scholars and historians. There is a need for a theoretical formulation that is interdisciplinary and multi-perspectival; this will reposition the relation between state, media and censorship in the public life.

**Issues and Questions arising from the background paper:**

Many of the above problems and tensions have arguably been exacerbated by a lack of proper analytical attention to what I’ve called ‘alternative speech.’ ‘Alternative speech’ has not traditionally found much of a place in mainstream mass communication studies. In a more recent turn, though, some media and sociology scholars have come to see alternative forms of communication as either already or potentially central to contemporary public life. For instance, blue tooth filmmaking of many kinds is blurred with interpersonal communication; sermons, DVDs and websites are merged with traditional religious practices. The result has been a tremendous amount of inflated commentary about the significance of ‘alternative speech’ that has often fed, and certainly not counteracted, hype and misunderstandings on the part of researchers about the regenerative and other possibilities that might arise from theorizing about ‘alternative speech’.

The stridency of advocates for particular positions towards state and censorship does not assist consideration of multitude of layers or spheres of ‘speech’. Any deterministic approach fails to recognize the multiple stakeholders in ‘alternative
speech.’ In traditional media, one can easily point to economic, social, technological or political factors that shape a specific media system and the policies that guide censorship practices. With ‘alternative speech’ being part and parcel of public life, it is almost impossible to limit the sphere of influence. With the growth of ‘alternative speech,’ theorizing about media, state and censorship becomes a daunting task faced with complicated issues.

1. Much ‘alternative speech’ is intermittent and short-lived, thus resistant to meta-theorizing.
2. ‘Alternative speech’ is increasingly multi-territorial and de-territorial, it often escapes the dichotomy of any state’s territorial control.
3. ‘Alternative speech’ is central to the debate on ‘re-traditionalization’ and modernity; it presents itself at the same time as traditional, modern or a hybrid by-product of both.
4. ‘Alternative speech’ is linked to social movements, civil society and major cultural agents; it is increasingly developing and articulating myths, ideologies, narratives and frameworks.
5. The impact of democratization efforts, or lack thereof, has affected the authoritarian image of the state and its ability to exercise unchecked censorship.

This final section briefly points, in lieu of a premature conclusion, to what could be the main research areas on censorship and speech in the Middle East and North Africa. The purpose is to be gently provocative rather than exhaustive. Topics are organized around four themes: ‘Alternative Speech,’ Localities, New Norms in Mainstream Media, New Modes of Censorship.

1. ‘Alternative Speech.’ How are alternative structures of speech developing? Who practices ‘alternative’ speech and for what purposes? What forms does alternative speech take? What is its content?
2. Localities. What cultural, economic and political contexts are conducive to ‘alternative’ speech? What contexts lead to the growth of ‘alternative speech’? What is their cultural location and how embedded are they in specific cultural practices?
(3) New norms in mainstream media. How is ‘alternative speech’ received in mainstream media? How is it represented? What discursive formations or strategies are used by mainstream media to co-opt ‘alternative speech’?

(4) New modes of censorship. How does the state react to these forms? What are other institutional forms of censorship? What measures of control are employed? How successful are they? How norms are (re)created and enforced?