

PARADOX OF THE FREE PRESS IN EGYPT

USEF EXPERT PANEL DISCUSSION NOTES

July 26, 2006

SPEAKERS:

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Co-Sponsor:

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Event Brief:

USEF was most fortunate to host an expert panel discussion on July 26, 2006 that addressed the contemporary media in Egypt. They addressed the fact that there is a consensus among close observers of the confusing Egyptian scene that Egypt is "in transition"; however, progress on reforms is unbalanced. Economic reforms are moving ahead, while progress on political reforms appear to have stalled. The government sanctioned Human Rights Organization speaks out against perceived government abuses, while simultaneously bureaucratic and other official obstacles prevent the growth of the civil society sector.

Through this often murky picture, one important reform factor is very clear: the media will never be the same. It appears that the press itself is forging ahead to become increasingly open, independent, and critical, while constrained by various laws. One example of the legal constraints placed on the media by the governmental reforms is the new government-drafted bill, which won preliminary approval in parliament on July 8, which eliminates imprisonment as a penalty for some media offences, but continues to allow judges to impose jail terms for journalists in many other instances.

The following statements represent the personal views of the speakers. The remarks do not constitute a USEF policy statement.

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Adel Iskandar:

I will start off by offering a few general and broad brushstrokes about the media circumstances that effect Egypt directly, especially in the contemporary era, I am specifically interested in Egyptian media and my research agenda has focused primarily on satellite broadcast in the region, specifically, *al-Jazeera's* impact on domestic politics, which leads to a more specific analysis of Egyptian press during the recent presidential election, and from there to the press laws, etc. This culminated in article that came out in last issue of *Georgetown University Journal of International Affairs*, tentatively titled, 'Shifting Tides of the Free Press and the Impeding Political Transformation of Egypt' and which eventually became titled 'Egypt's Media Deficit.' Showcased in the article was the general tension and dialectics that reflect the Egyptian media circumstances that are present in this era.

About the Egyptian press, in general, there is a tendency to imagine and orient ourselves with the idea that Egyptian media and Arab press is highly juvenile and elementary and has little to no journalistic tradition, which are mischaracterizations. The Egyptian press is not monolithic; the Egyptian journalists speak highly of their tradition of the 1920's and 1930's to the origination of the earliest regional press. A characteristic and transformative moment in the last decade, was an explosion of oppositional and independent media in Egypt, varying in type, form, affiliation, denomination, allegiance, all reflecting a desire to explore information and news from a variety of perspectives. This explosion has a negative effect on the distribution of information, primarily in Egypt, because there are so many independent and oppositional media sources, they tend to be under-funded, low subscription, low distribution, and with low readership comes very little impact; so, they are not viewed as *true* opposition, but viewed as the defanged opposition, but by no means are they a monolith. Consequences, have been far reaching. Most Egyptians and most observers of Egyptian press are aware of three different categories of press: media agent organizations that are operated, funded, and sponsored by the government, media agents that are affiliated with political parties and following those ideologies, and lastly, the independent press.

One must recognize that the past two decades have reflected a transformation in press, if not simply because of domestic public tendency to aspire to find greater information, but also by searching through external forces. There is a large impact from the satellite broadcasting in Egypt. *Media schizophrenia* is the common term media scholars use to describe the situation in many Arab countries. *Media schizophrenia* occurs when the viewers witness specific political circumstances unfolding which are not reflected cohesively in domestic and international broadcasting, there is now a greater openness to controversial events and topics, if the information is not available through the domestic press it can be accessed through international media agents.

Egypt is dominated by three colossal presses: *al- Abram*, *al- Akbbar*, and *al- Gumburia*. These organizations' budgets out-shadow independent and smaller presses, which are vulnerable and weak, often presenting the opposition and bringing a new dimension to topics. One side of the independent press is profiteering, drawn to sensationalism, which I call the "party press". The other side can be associated with the paper parties or the weak and defanged presses, and these papers have little to no impact on political atmosphere.

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Thus far, the recent laws passed are not enough. In consequence, some experts have admonished the administration and some have acknowledged it as a step in the right direction. The Egyptian media must operate on incremental basis, which is vital and redemptive to further complete a successful transformation. There is a steadfast consensus that Egyptians do not want to take directives or instructions from abroad and that the media is independent. This reaction to criticisms not only enhances camaraderie but it is something that may create further reform. Most reactions to free press law, are held on the basis that it is premature and not far enough along. There is a desire to create accountability in Egypt, but the circumstances remain shadowy and vague.

In my opinion, there are six points that are vital to press reform in Egypt:

1. Ensure that press laws are not anti-climactic. At this time, the laws don't go far enough but there is a desire to create incremental change. But, despite the passing of Egyptian press law, it falls very short of the international press standard. However, it is good progress in the right direction and I am proud to say Egypt is in the forefront of the Arab media scene for journalistic rights.
2. Re-evaluation of what constitutes press. There has to be a shift toward objectivity in news coverage, with notable journalists, columnists, and editorials. The news delivered should ensure that it is fair and balanced with the notion of objectivity.
3. The impact of external forces on the galvanized Egyptian press. There is a nationalistic fervor to develop stories for audiences who identify with conspiratorial thought, however by increases accountability and the role of satellite television this allows openness and domestic acceptance of criticism from outside.
4. Slowly diminish the current media schizophrenia, because now the Egyptian public has a growing tendency to see and to accept information on a broader scale.
5. The open-press agenda in Egypt should be driven by the press, not external diplomatic forces or citizenry, it should grow out of journalist syndicate and the existing infrastructure. The Egyptian press should prepare to create reform to lead to the transformation.
6. The observer phenomenon, because Egypt, as a regional leader, is being closely watched. People and states in the Middle East look to Egypt as an example, there should be a desire for accountability and increased transparency in the Egyptian media scene.

Evidently, there is a strong interest in Egypt domestic politics outside of Egypt; it is watched in a compassionate sense. To evoke a statement from Saad Zahlu, "Truth over power, and nation over government" and I must stress the importance of delivering truthful information, not only because the Egyptian audience is very receptive, but also to ensure that tyranny does not take place. A sluggish transformation to open media is in place, with the Egyptian media is fundamentally moving in the right direction; however this doesn't seem like it is enough just yet.

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Tarek Atia:

I begin my remarks on the changes taking place in the Egyptian media scene with a brief overview of how I get my perspective and expertise in this particular area. I am part of the press, having worked for *Al-Abram Weekly* for quite some time now. *Abram Weekly* itself is both a part of, and apart from, that press. On the one hand it is an English language newspaper in a predominantly Arabic scene, but at the same time it is also an integral part of that scene, because it is a part of Egypt and the region's largest press house – *Al-Abram*. That means that our newsroom is very much privy to the goings on of the daily Arabic *Al-Abram*, the biggest circulating and most widely read paper in the country, and one that is closely aligned with the government. That means that the *Weekly* has tremendous access to the corridors of power and is very much privy to the goings on in the country. Half of my particular perspective on the press scene comes from this, and the other half is from my private media work on the Internet. I have founded and continue to run two pretty well established news media sites online, *caiolive.com* and *zabma.com*. The primary thing that these sites do right now is aggregate news from a wide variety of sources -- *caiolive.com* does that in English, and *zabma.com* does that in Arabic. To do that on a daily basis, I go through dozens, maybe hundreds of sources of news about Egypt. That has given me a unique window into the dynamics of the newsgathering and dissemination process. The name *zabma* itself is somewhat telling. I chose the name -- which means, "crowded" -- for a very specific reason: the media scene is very crowded, there are lots of different voices, and within the next few years, the crowd will get even bigger. *Zabma* is popular because it helps people skillfully navigate through that media crowd to provide readers with a multiple uncluttered perspective.

Now I'd like to look briefly at that crowded local scene, examining it in a macro sense. The Egyptian news scene is, like its global counterparts, going through a major transformational process. The market may currently still be skewed in favor of publishers aligned with the government, but emerging independent voices are also shaking things up. This is a guide to major players including the new print and digital forces that are changing things.

I divide the scene into five sectors:

-- The first are the big dailies, which are *Al-Abram*, *Al-Akbar*, and *Al-Gumburia* -- all three being state affiliated. But whereas they only had to previously compete with one or two major opposition papers, the more independent papers that are emerging these days are changing the whole scene. The most prominent of these independent papers is *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, which has watched its circulation climb over the past few years, purely on the principle that instead of presenting either the government or the opposition's point of view, it presents both -- in the same article. That is something that the *Weekly* has been doing for years now, which meant that Arabic readers were taking the trouble to read it in English because we did that. But since *Al-Masry Al-Youm* came along a few years ago, they no longer come to us because there is now someone who has done it in Arabic. Their formula seems logical, but because audiences have not been getting that for a long time, it comes across as a huge breath of fresh air. As the years go on, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* will probably face other competitors. I don't have specifics about these different independent newspapers being formed, and I don't know whether or not they will come to fruition, but some are certain to appear. Meanwhile, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* has to be very careful about sticking to this formula, because it could be easily find itself veering to either side. As for the state-affiliated papers, they may have already lost much of their readers' trust on that particular issue, but it is clear that with just a little more balanced reporting on the hottest political news, that trust can be regained.

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-- Moving on to the next sector, the weekly independent papers. These raucous upstarts capture the audience's imagination with really bold headline and topics previously considered taboo. The market leader at this time is called *Al-Destour*, a paper whose style is very much in your face. It emulates the language that people use when talking to each other about politics in the coffeeshouses, or via text messages on their mobile phones. It, along with others like *Sawt Al-Ummah*, have seen an increase in circulation because people are willing to pay the extra pound or two to buy these papers every week, although they are not doing the type of investigative reporting they really ought to be doing..

-- The next category is satellite channels. *Al-Jazeera*, of course, has had a fundamental impact on the press in Egypt. Now that anyone with a dish can get the news that government affiliated papers may not publish, those papers have changed their editorial policies to deal with that new reality. Plus, what has happened now is that a lot of other players have entered the market -- BBC is about to start its own Arabic language channel, and some local businessmen are actively attempting to start their own local news channels. Inevitably, these and *Al-Jazeera* will continue to have a profound effect on the media

-- Now, moving to the online only news players, sites like *Fil-Balad* and *Masrawy* have actually become mainstays for news junkies, those who don't want to wait until the next day for what the print papers will write. The newspapers themselves only seem to update their websites once a day. A lot of these online only sites get their edge by translating newswire coverage of Egypt immediately and putting it online. Their focus on the local also gives them their edge over larger regional entities like *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* which tend to look at news from a much more regional perspective.

-- The last category is blogs. Egyptian blogs have had their fifteen minutes of fame due to hard-hitting coverage of demonstrations and other hot political events. Their sustaining of the same momentum for the long run comes to question because Internet penetration is still low. Writing and reading blogs remains within the technologically elite part of society. However blogs do influence other media players and serve as watchdogs of that press right now.

Seeing these distinctions, I would like to provide clues as to where the press is going and how that might relate to where the country, as a whole, is going.

The first concept I would like to talk about is the idea of "media as a business." The idea of a loss making media entity serving a particular agenda is on its last legs -- the timeframe as to when that demise will occur is longer than expected and is uncertain, but it is definitely on its last legs. This does not necessarily mean privatization of the massive loss making state giants, but it does mean editors and administrators are being forced to think in terms of what the markets want, in terms of competition.

If we look at what readers and the public want from their media, we have to agree that the "public itself is changing". Access to satellite television and the Internet has actually meant that people require more from the media outlets than what is being provided. They are not necessarily waiting for media outlets to tell them what to think. In the future they will be looking for more investigative reporting from media outlets, and they will be looking for more service oriented media, useful information that helps them make decisions about life --here to live, what the job market is like, etc - - the kind of mainstays we are used to in American newspapers.

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An issue affecting everything is “press freedom.” People may have heard snippets about a day earlier this month, when 28 newspapers chose not to publish on the same day in order to protest the new press law. I happen to have already begun my vacation in the States before that time, so I cannot provide a first hand account of that day, but in speaking to some of my colleagues back in Cairo, it is clear that the journalistic community is not prepared to give up many of the freedom of expression gains they have won over the last couple of years.

I would like to conclude these remarks by providing some brief clues about what I think the news industry should cover so that the current transitional stage in Egyptian politics, society, culture, and economy moves in a positive direction.

One, I think there should be more emphasis on questions about identity politics and Egypt’s role in the modern world. This issue has pretty much been ignored, and as a result it has left a vacuum or void in people’s lives that is pretty easily filled by anyone else with an agenda.

The second thing, which I mention earlier and I will mention again, is more investigative reporting. This obviously takes time, money and a fundamental shift in which the way the media operates. It’s not about what one paper recently did -- and I have a lot of respect for this paper – when their reporter put on a doctor’s uniform and went into public hospitals and treated patients, and then the paper splashed photos of that on its front page. That may be the kind of sensationalism that may sell a lot of copies on that particular day, but I don’t think that’s the type of investigative reporting that has an impact in the long run.

Another thing I would suggest for the media in the future is to generate more creative non-fiction or literary journalism, of the sort that I was personally mentored in by Jonathan Coleman at UVA. By this, I mean in-depth stories that delve into the minutest elements of people’s lives, that don’t only cover the rich and famous or people in the public eye. By writing these kinds of stories in an engaging style that captures readers’ attention, I think this will force people to think more deeply about themselves and their fellow citizens, and about where their country is headed in the future.

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Howard Schneider:

This event was posed to me as a discussion of paradoxes of the media and I wanted to put a couple on the table and elaborate. There are two paradoxes I'd like to point out here: one, a society that has a free press but no public information law along with press laws, this being the rules for incorporation, rules for procedure, and rules for libel. Public information law by contrast says "this is what citizens have a right to know," those are facts that the government has to put on the table and ask to be given. Also, this has to do with people active in financial circles; i.e. you are going to have to let people know certain basic financial information about your company. You can go on the website of the Cairo Stock Exchange and look, and see, the traders and if the insiders or members of the boards of directors have sold some stock that day. Without that type of information the market is not going to exist and the exchange is not going to function. There is a line drawn between that and disclosure of financial interest and the affairs of public officials. These are the types of facts that would be covered by public information laws.

Why does it matter? Press freedom revolves around political speech, in any country; lines will be drawn around these issues like libel issues and criminal issues. In matters of content and degree, in the case of Judith Miller, she was journalist and she was in jail due to the fact that she published information. This might have had a chilling effect on journalists down the road, because even with the access to information, some may be unwilling to publish knowing there could be consequences. But I am not interested in only this aspect of press freedom, we can talk about the FCC. It is really about how the media system treats money and those with financial power, and for any institution to work properly the public needs to know and likewise the people who run Egypt's market know that.

What about in politics? Does the necessity of public disclosure apply to the financial interest to Hosni Mubarak, the Cabinet, or the Parliament? When talking about investigative reporting, we need a basis of factual information to work from, where is that going to come from down the road? If the press is transforming and moving forward, where are they going to get the documents to work from? This is the stepping stone, where we can talk about political discourse, but if we do not get a public information law, that is going to require disclosure of this sort of information, there is no progress. In Washington, the Jack Abarmoff case was of great interest, and the *Washington Post* won a Pulitzer Prize for uncovering that scandal. He was over billing Indian tribes and it corrupt relations he had with members of Congress. What is not appreciated by the public is that how much of that story's reporting relied on documentation that by law had to be made public, like what they had to file by Abarmoff being a registered lobbyist. All of these documents were available online, either out of the FCC or reports, all raw materials that the US press gets to work with. In this regard, I think the press in Egypt and throughout the Middle East is hampered, because they don't have access to the same materials in their countries.

There are increasing amounts of information available relevant to Egyptians and others throughout the world. For example, the tax returns of AUC, records regarding use of USAID contracts. Another example, King Hussain sold his house in Maryland for 10 million dollars. Was that King Hussain's money? Was it the Hashemite Kingdom's money? The documentation that is provided through public disclosure laws in the United States may lead to the details of the transaction.

These are questions that might be asked some day. If I was an Egyptian journalist, I would underline the wheat deals, coming out of these countries with Commodities Boards, which can be seen have vested interests in Egypt in the wheat industry.

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I think the information is out there for people, it is difficult in Cairo, but using the internet information is available online. I think the Egyptian press is hampered, by disregarding the occasional lead; this information is only going to come if the country makes a commitment to making it public and they require public officials to make these disclosures. As far as I know, there aren't any disclosure laws in Egypt, and therefore no template for judging the degree in which public officials are acting in interest of the public interest or for their own interest. Do we know who owns the hotels along the Nile or in Sharm el-Sheikh? What about the access to the pyramids, who are they paying? The Egyptians should know this information to see who is profiting and who has a vested interest in the dealing of these tourist attractions. Again, this kind information is available in the United States and the public has the right to know.

There are some things I always wanted to know in Egypt. How much land does Hosni Mubarak own and how was it acquired? Military aid from the US, a large amount of money, how much goes to salaries of generals and officials? This is public money and those who use it have to be held accountable. All of the behind-the-scene shareholding and investment holdings, I think, may be holding back privatization. The American University in Cairo's investment holdings are known, but what about Al-Azhar University? This is a bit of diversion, but it is important, not jailing people for talking about politics is one step, but to allow journalists to have full impact on society there needs to be some sort of public information and disclosure law, so the people in power-making decisions do not make them in favor of their personal financial interests while overlooking public interests.