Pensée 3: New Media in the Arab World

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The reform process in the Arab world has been largely stagnant. Political change is moving at a very slow pace despite claims to the contrary by autocratic leaders. Whereas change from top to bottom is slow and at times nonexistent, change at the grass roots is another matter. For one thing, the population is becoming younger and younger, and this young generation of Arabs is being exposed to many new trends and communication tools, of which many older generation leaders are for the most part not even aware.

Nowhere is change at the grassroots level more evident than in what has been dubbed "citizen journalism." With the castle walls of traditional journalism getting higher and higher and the ability of young people to break through almost nonexistent (many are not interested in classical media in any case), new media tools are becoming available. Technology has provided ways for everyday people to circulate more information than ever before. With traditional Arab governments unable to stop the flow of virtual information at border crossings, young Arabs learn more about what is happening in their own country by logging onto regional and international websites, in addition to watching satellite TV, which has also proved unstoppable by ruling governments.

My own experience with Internet radio might be an interesting example in this regard. As one of fifty recipients of the Freedom of Press Heroes award, sponsored by the International Press Institute, I was invited to attend a regional conference, "Freedom of Expression and Media," which was held in Amman on 5 February 2000. One of the speakers at the conference was Jordan's minister of information, Saleh Qallab. He spoke about the reforms taking place in the country and mentioned, among other things, that his ministry had succeeded in removing all previous roadblocks to the dissemination of Internet technologies.

I previously helped establish a unique Arab website, amin.org. This site was based on the concept that only through the Internet can one overcome the physical obstacles that Arab regimes place on print materials, especially because the press in most Arab countries is free to report news about any Arab country except its own. Using the Internet to break up radio monopolies in the Arab world intrigued me. Radio in the Arab world has been under a state monopoly since most countries' independence. Radio and TV stations are well protected by national forces because in many a past coup, radio was among the first institutions taken over and used to issue the first communiqué of the new military power.

Although Internet radio is still a long way from becoming a tool for the masses, it has made important breakthroughs. It provides an alternative to

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conventional media, especially in closed communities. Original audio online gives this medium a high degree of credibility. Online radio programs are also easily transferrable, with the possibility that terrestrial stations (and even nongovernmental organizations) can easily download and rebroadcast them. Perhaps the most important lesson of the AmmanNet experience is that the creation and success of an Internet radio station in a country of state-run monopolies offers a major forum for activists, liberal politicians, and government officials as they help the press reform and push to allow terrestrial radio to broadcast with freedom.

A young Arab in Jordan, Morocco, or Bahrain today can be part of the news and not simply a consumer of it. Blogs that started as text have developed into photo blogs, audio blogs, and even video blogs and are providing an authentic and fresh point of view that until now has been missing from the Arab media landscape. In some cases, traditional media have paid attention and are trying to incorporate these new citizen journalists, but for the most part they are completely unaware of what is happening.

Thanks in part to traditional media's and traditional rulers' lack of understanding about the power of the new media in the Arab world, these media are thriving. Except for occasional shocks that governments register as a result of provocative content here and there, officials have had little choice but to let this new phenomenon develop uninterrupted. Sooner or later, however, something will have to give. Governments will have to change or a real confrontation will take place.

New media have also allowed instant reaction from across the world to published or broadcast news stories. An informed, plugged-in individual today can monitor broadcasts about an issue of importance and react instantly to erroneous or biased reporting. This is happening a lot with the Middle East conflict through such pro-Palestinian websites as Media Monitors Network, Electronic Intifada, and CAIR, as well as many pro-Israeli ones. An energetic, critical interaction is taking place with the help of the Internet in collecting information, monitoring published and broadcast reports, and using technology to respond quickly.

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