

Global Communications

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Arab Media Systems





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II. Oman: Time for Fundamental Changes

Abdullah K. Al-Kindi

This chapter examines the most prominent milestones in the development of mass media in the Sultanate of Oman, and the relationship between media and the political system as well as the legislative frameworks regulating media work in the Sultanate. At the end of this chapter, the author also discusses a number of challenges facing the Omani media, which are structural, legislative, and professional in nature. The author argues that the conditions and developments in the media industry globally and regionally seem to be conducive to bringing about fundamental changes in the media system in Oman, but those changes are totally linked to the political system's desire and decision to make these changes.

Background

On 23 July 1970, the Sultanate of Oman witnessed the beginning of a new political era led by Sultan Qaboos bin Said, succeeding his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur (1910–1972), who had ruled Oman for nearly 38 years from 1932–1970 (Marefa, 2019). At the beginning of his reign, Sultan Qaboos faced a communist movement in the southern part of the country, which had been launched in 1965. The new political system was able to suppress that movement in 1975 with international support led by the United Kingdom and the participation of some regional powers, mainly Iran and Jordan. This new political era, called “contemporary Oman,” was characterized by comprehensive development, especially

in education, health, and social development, and a return to the culture and heritage that has always been a staple of Oman. The contemporary Oman is also characterized by the consolidation of the idea of a civil state through the implementation of laws and legislation in various fields, and the organization of a civil service sector, which has witnessed several developments in the period from 1970 until today.

Oman is located in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula and has land borders with three Arab countries: the United Arab Emirates to the northwest, Saudi Arabia to the west, and Yemen to the southwest. It also has maritime borders with Iran and Pakistan. The coastline of the Sultanate of Oman stretches over 1,700 kilometers, and the total area of the Sultanate is estimated at 310 square kilometers.

This geopolitical location led the Sultanate to establish a continuous interactive relationship with different countries in its neighborhood. One of the most important achievements of contemporary Oman was the signing of border agreements with the neighboring countries of Saudi Arabia (1991), Yemen (1992), and the UAE (1999), and maritime border agreements with Pakistan (2000) and Iran (2015).

The Sultanate places great emphasis on the establishment of friendly and equal relations with countries worldwide, noninterference in the internal affairs of others, and respect for international laws, covenants, and customs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Today, Oman has extensive diplomatic relations with many countries worldwide. It was a founding member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and has maintained its membership since 1981, and it has been a member of the Arab League and the United Nations since 1970, as well as being a member of various other regional and international organizations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

Oman has also avoided engaging in wars or conflicts with any of its neighboring countries or getting involved in conflicts that have taken place between them in the period from 1970 to the present. Perhaps the only exception to this was its participation in the war to liberate Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion on 2 August 1990, as part of the joint military forces of the GCC. The Sultanate takes the role of a political and diplomatic mediator among its neighbors rather than taking sides between them and other countries of the world. It solidified this role by hosting the

signing of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries (USA, Russia, China, UK, France, and Germany) in 2015 (Gupta, 2015).

Arabic is the official language of the Sultanate, used throughout governmental and educational institutions, and it is the language of social, cultural, and media discourse. English is the second most widely-used language, especially in the private sector and university education and, particularly, in the fields of science and technology. In addition to Arabic, the population speaks certain ethnic languages that reflect the sociocultural diversity of the Sultanate. In northern Oman, some residents speak Swahili, which they acquired and inherited from their ancestors during the Omani presence in East Africa, in general, and Zanzibar, in particular. Some people in the north also speak Baluchi, which was the result of the extension of Omani empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Asia and around the Indian Ocean, particularly Gwadar and Mekran, as well as other languages such as Zadjali and Sindhi (Al-Balushi, 2015, p. 9). Some speak Shihi, particularly in Musandam, located in the far north of Oman. In the south of the country, the population speaks Arabic as well as the languages or dialects of ancient South Arabic, such as Shahriyah, Jabaliya, Harsusia, and Btahrifa. This multilingualism reflects the human and cultural diversity in the Sultanate (Al-Mashani, 2003).

The latest statistics by the National Center for Statistics and Information show that, as of September 2019, the population of the Sultanate of Oman is now 4.8 million, of whom 57% are Omani nationals and 43% are expatriates. Notably, approximately 74% of the expatriates in Oman are from India and Bangladesh (36.9% from India and 36.8% from Bangladesh) (National Center for Statistics & Information, 2019).

Oman consists of 11 governorates or geographic regions with 61 local states. The features of modernity in contemporary Oman include attention to education, health, parliament, arts and literature, and other areas where the state has achieved advanced results as a modern nation.

Historical Developments

Oman could be considered a latecomer in terms of its introduction of mass media in comparison with other Arab countries. The first radio station was established in Oman in Muscat on 30 July 1970. This radio

station was only one kilowatt and was transmitted to limited areas of the capital city (Al-Mashiaki, 2015, p. 32).

However, several recent studies have indicated the possibility that Oman had established several radio stations before that time, pointing to the likely beginning of *Radio Muscat* in the 1960s. Another radio station was established in the southern city of Salalah in 1961, *Radio Al-Hisen*, however the transmission of this radio station and its activity was limited and therefore did not reach the general public (Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2013, pp. 66–67).

Printed periodicals initially appeared in Oman with the establishment and publication of *Al-Watan* for the first time on 28 January 1971, as a private newspaper founded by Nasr bin Mohammed Al-Taie. *Al-Watan* is still published today.

It should be noted here that Omanis knew and practiced journalism as a profession before 1970, but this was done outside the borders of contemporary Oman. Some Omani pioneer journalists established newspapers on the island of Zanzibar in the early twentieth century. Omani presence in East Africa, specifically on the island of Zanzibar, dates back to the seventh century, when the first Omani families and individuals migrated to Zanzibar and East Africa as well. The official Arab Omani ruling of Zanzibar lasted for more than a century; from 1832–1964 (Al-Kindi, 2004, p. 48). Omanis were responsible for many cultural and civilizational influences, journalism and newspapers being one example. The first of these was *Al-Najah*, founded by Nasser bin Salim bin Odeiam Al-Rawahi in 1911. *Al-Falaq* was founded by the Arab Society in Zanzibar in 1929, *Al-Murshid* by Ahmad bin Saif Al-Kharousi in 1942, and *Al-Nahda* by Sayyed Saif bin Hamoud Al-Said in 1951 (Al-Kindi, 2004, pp. 71–72).

While it is important that the founders of these newspapers were all Omani and most of their coverage was devoted to local Zanzibar events, it is also worth noting that these newspapers were interested in covering the news of Oman and described it as the “motherland” or “great homeland” (Al-Kindi, 2004, pp. 86–87).

These newspapers ceased publication in 1964 or even earlier, as the AfroShirazi Party led a revolt against the regime and against the Arab presence in Zanzibar on 12 January 1964, a date that marked the end

of the Arab presence and the rule of the Omani Al-Said family on the island of Zanzibar (Al-Riyami, 2009, pp. 367–77).

Television began broadcasting as a state-funded project across Oman on 18 November 1974 and has since witnessed several developments in its programs, broadcasting hours, and program quality. *Oman News Agency (ONA)* was established in 1986 as an official source of news and information, especially from the government. In 1997, the Internet was extended for public use, and in 2004, journalists and media personalities established their professional society, the Omani Journalists Association.

Political System and Legal Framework

Since 1970, the mass media in Oman have witnessed remarkable developments, especially in terms of increasing the number of media outlets, content, and policies governing media environment. Today, there are 12 radio and six television channels broadcasting in Oman.

Ownership of radio and television channels in Oman is divided equally between the government and the private sector in an attempt to balance ownership and to avoid monopolization by a single sector. The number of radio channels outnumbers television channels by a 12 to 6 ratio, which is related to the higher costs of investment in television channels. Therefore, the financially more potent government is the investor and operator of four television channels through the Public Authority for Radio and Television versus two private television channels. As for the ownership of radio channels, the private sector is ahead of the government sector. In terms of the interests of these radio and television channels, most of them tend to be of general interest (13 general radio and television channels versus five specialized channels). This reflects a lack of interest in specialized fields and the desire of these channels to reach out to different audiences and, thus, achieve adequate financial and advertising revenues to ensure their survival and continuity. As for the language used on these channels, Arabic dominates in 13 radio and television channels out of 18, compared with four in English, and one in Arabic and English.

The dominance of the Arabic language is expected, although it overlooks large groups of residents in Oman who do not speak Arabic or English, especially those coming to work in the Sultanate from

the Indian subcontinent. There is no media to address them in their language.

Printed periodicals have witnessed many developments in Oman. According to the Ministry of Information (2018), there are about 84 periodicals published in Oman, including seven dailies, the most important of which are *Al-Watan, Oman, Al-Shabiba*, and *Times of Oman*. The private sector owns more daily newspapers and is also ahead of the government sector in its establishment of these newspapers. The private sector established the first daily newspaper in Arabic in 1971, and this sector also founded the first daily newspaper in English in 1975.

More than half of all Omani periodicals are owned and published by governmental and semi-governmental entities. These kinds of periodicals, however, could be described as public relations publications representing the concerned entities (Ministry of Information, 2018).

Unfortunately, there are no known or reliable circulation figures for the printed periodicals in the Sultanate, and there is no system for publishing and disclosing these figures to the public. However, these numbers are made available to advertisers in a very limited way.

The mass media in Oman have been an essential part of the Omani regime's project to build a modern state. Therefore, the establishment and emergence of mass media in contemporary Oman has been linked to the desire of the new political system, led by Sultan Qaboos bin Said since 1970, to employ these means in his comprehensive development project. The media is therefore meant to document the achievements of the Omani regime in various fields, comment on them, and provide the audience with appropriate explanations to support these achievements.

The political system in Oman is a hereditary monarchy, and the sultan is the head of government, the prime minister, and the final arbiter in all state affairs. The media system reflects the orientations of the authoritarian political system in which the mass media cannot violate the orientations of that regime or act contrary to its views (Abu Zaid, 1986). News stories sometimes note a departure from the general political orientation in one country or another, but such stories are rare, and are not representative of a mass media that is subject to an authoritarian political regime.

In Oman, the mass media are subject to direct and indirect regime control through specific institutions. The Public Authority for Radio and Television, as a governmental entity, supervises and operates five public radio and television channels, four of which are *Oman TV*, *Oman Cultural Channel*, *Oman Radio*, and *Oman Youth Radio*. The Ministry of Information also directly supervises and operates two daily newspapers in Arabic and English in addition to a quarterly cultural magazine and the *Oman News Agency*. Private broadcasting outlets are under the supervision of the Ministry of Information, which also regulates the work of these channels and gives them permission to broadcast. A special committee in the Ministry of Information is in charge of monitoring these channels. The Ministry of Information, through its publication's unit, also supervises all government and private print publications issued in the Sultanate. According to the Press and Publications Law of 1984, the Ministry of Information is the authority responsible for issuing licenses for the government and private publications.

Online media are subject to the technical supervision of the Information Regulatory Authority through the Telecommunications Regulatory Law of 2002. However, there is no specific government body responsible for licensing or permitting electronic online publications or radio and television channels. When any individual or company opts to produce any media using the Internet, they need to get a special domain assigned from within the Sultanate through the Information Technology Authority or register outside internationally. Thus, regime entities control the content published by both government and private mass media through a set of laws and legislation, as well as general policies and practices.

The public receives free radio and television broadcasts and buys daily newspapers and publications at nominal prices. A daily newspaper costs Bz 200 (USD 0.52), and the value of other periodicals offered for sale is not more than OMR 1 (USD 2.60). Many institutional publications are provided to ministries and companies free of charge.

Litigation procedures in case of any violation of the applicable laws include administrative procedures carried out by the Ministry of Information, as stated in the Press and Publications Law of 1984, and judicial procedures if the concerned people decide to take it further.

Economy and Ownership Patterns

Ownership of the mass media in Oman is divided between the government and the private sector. Private sector investments are more interested in radio stations, while investments in television channels remain limited. One potential reason for this is the relatively high financial cost required to invest in the establishment of a television channel compared with the fewer technical requirements for founding a radio station. Another reason is that the advertising market in the Sultanate remains limited compared with that in other countries in the region, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Most of the private mass media companies in Oman can be described as family-owned businesses. *Al-Watan*, the first Omani Arabic daily newspaper, is owned by the Al-Taie family. Similarly, the *Times of Oman* (founded in 1975) and *Al-Shabiba* (founded in 1993) are owned by the Al-Zidjali family. The *Al-Roya* newspaper (founded in 2009) is owned by another member of the Al-Taie family, which is the case for quite a few of these newspapers and periodicals. These families invest mainly in media, but also hold certain other businesses, since they either belong to the business elite or maintain a strong relationship with them and organize their media activities through publishing houses.

Ownership laws in the Sultanate allow a single company to own more than one media outlet and to exist as “multi-activity” companies. This has allowed some companies to publish different newspapers using both Arabic and English languages since the 1990s. For example, the Omani Institution for Press, Printing, Publishing and Distribution, which has published *Al-Watan* since 1971, started publishing the *Oman Tribune*, a free weekly newspaper, in 2004, *Futon* in 2005, and a free weekly sports newspaper, *Al-Malaeb*, in 2007.

Recently, some media companies have been diversifying their media activities. Muscat House for Press, Publishing and Distribution—which has owned the *Times of Oman* (in English since 1975), *Al-Shabiba* (in Arabic since 1993), and a free weekly newspaper, *Al-Youm Al-Sabi'*, since 2007—established a radio station, *Shabiba Radio*, in 2018. The same is true for Al-Roya Press and Publishing, which has published the Arabic daily newspaper *Al-Roya* since 2009, and launched *Al-Roya Radio Voice* in 2017.

Allowing media companies to engage in multiple enterprises and outlets and, thus, encouraging a certain diversity of the means owned by them is a positive and healthy phenomenon that reflects the potential of these companies, their desire to expand within the market, and to get a greater share of advertising. This trend also reflects the state's confidence in these companies, their media line, and their relationships with the political system. But this trust may also evolve into a kind of monopoly or centralization of the mass media in the hands of a limited and narrow group of families and individuals who own these companies.

The economic system in the Sultanate allows private companies to own mass media in accordance with limited rules and conditions, the most important of which is the existence of financial efficiency, and the stipulation that over 50% of the company's capital and shares are owned by Omani nationals. The Sultanate has not attracted international investment in the media sector, perhaps due to economic laws that do not provide enough incentives in this regard, or because the media environment in the Sultanate is not encouraging enough to attract international media companies to operate from there in free media cities, as is the case in the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Qatar, and Jordan.

Oman is not expected to open its doors to international investment in the field of media, as Dubai has already done for nearly 20 years or as Qatar has recently begun to do. From a political point of view, opening up to international investments might contradict the policy of neutrality and noninterference in foreign affairs, and there is also a concern that the state would lose its control over the media sector in such a scenario. International investors might require greater freedom of expression to say what they want in their media, which could cause embarrassment to the Oman on the world-stage.

Oman is classified as one of the Gulf Arab oil countries, which rely on oil as a main source of national income. According to the latest statistics and reports for 2019, the state's revenues from oil and gas reached OMR 7.4 billion (USD 19.7 billion), which comprises about 74% of its total revenue (PWC Middle East, 2019).

However, Oman's oil and gas revenues remain modest compared with those of other countries in the Gulf region, outperforming only Bahrain in oil revenues in the region. Since the beginning of the development movement in contemporary Oman, the state economic

situation has positively impacted the media. The oil revenues that have flowed since the 1970s have helped to establish and develop many mass media outlets.

These revenues have also helped the government to support mass media institutions, especially in the form of donations and direct financial support, or advertisements, subscriptions, and tax exemptions. It was only in the mid-1990s that the state ended direct financial support of private newspapers and magazines in Oman. As the world witnessed a decline in oil prices beginning in 2015, the Omani regime reduced spending on advertising in the media and subscriptions, which affected many private mass media outlets, particularly newspapers, some of which reduced their publication frequency, number of pages, or stopped publishing altogether.

Technology and Infrastructure

Oman has a well-developed technical infrastructure and is categorized by some international reports on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as one of the countries that invests most heavily in infrastructures that enable people to continuously use and spread technology. One report stated that “since 2007 Oman has completed fifty-four infrastructure projects, which is the highest number of any MENA country” (Göll & Zwiers, 2018, p. 3).

However, the problem of slow network speed should also be noted, especially in some remote areas or those affected by mountainous terrain. Calls to improve network services and reach all regions without exception continue to be made, as well as demands to reduce service pricing to enable the widest use. Regarding mobile telephony, the number of mobile and smart phone subscriptions is widespread. According to the latest statistics, there are about 6.7 million device subscriptions which amounts to 133% of the total population (Kemp, 2019).

Telecommunications services were once limited to a single company, *OmanTel*. Today there are six telecommunications service providers; only one of them is semi-governmental (*OmanTel*), while the rest are private and owned by Omani companies. These companies are under the supervision of a government authority, the Telecommunications

Regulatory Authority (TRA), which is responsible for issuing, classifying, and regulating work permits. In general, the contents of telecommunications and the Internet are subject to unspoken censorship. Advanced techniques are used for sorting, categorizing, and blocking certain content classified by government entities as “unaccepted contents,” specifically those regarding political, social, or cultural issues, or any others considered sensitive.

Regarding Internet reach and saturation in Oman, the latest statistics as of mid-2019 indicate that the number of Internet users in the Sultanate reached 3.7 million users, a figure representing 80% of the total population. The number of social network accounts in the Sultanate has reached about 2.5 million of Internet users, and *Facebook* is ahead of other social platforms in terms of the number of users in Oman, attracting about 1.8 million users (Kemp, 2019).

Despite the many and varied options offered by state-of-the-art technology in all fields, including the media, traditional media companies are still in a slow transitional phase of integrating electronic publishing into their activities. Some of these publishing houses still place more emphasis on the hard copy and have not yet improved their electronic versions or linked them appropriately to social networks. Some traditional newspapers have not yet started using electronic applications in smartphones. In general, traditional newspapers and periodicals in Oman remain reluctant to undergo digital transformation.

This reluctance may be related to the lack of financial resources to bring about digital transformation appropriately. Beyond the traditional media, there are evolving initiatives to employ technology in media work. Almost eight full private electronic newspapers are published in Oman, along with a number of news sites and applications, most notably *Atheer*, *Al-Falaq*, *Wahag Al-Khaleej*, and *Wejhatt*. Recently, some digital podcasts have emerged as private projects. The creative digital content industry is also evolving in Oman and is being led by small businesses and individual initiatives that need more support for greater success in the future.

The technology resources available today in Oman are capable of developing both the traditional and new media sectors, and employing digitization for the ultimate benefit of the media content consumer. Nonetheless, there remains a strong need for further encouragement and support of this transition.

Challenges

The main challenges facing the current media system in Oman can be divided into three types: structural, regulatory, and professional challenges.

The political system in Oman deals with the media outlets—both governmental and private—as non-independent, subordinate forces. Accordingly, the regime controls the media, their orientations, and their content through certain laws, or even through direct and indirect instructions for media outlets to take certain positions or avoid covering certain stories or events. This trend imposes a pattern of “government media” in which there is little room for disagreement or criticism, especially regarding policies of the regime. A more public service-oriented media could ensure more space for a freer and more independent media.

One of the structural challenges facing the media system in Oman is the absence of a clear strategy directing media work in the country. To the best of the author’s knowledge, there is no written or published strategy for media in the Sultanate, despite the importance of strategic planning in this field.

In addition to these challenges, there are several official institutions supervising and directing media work in Oman. This multiplicity is confusing, hampers media development, and leads to overlaps in tasks and responsibilities. For example, the Ministry of Information supervises all publications and private radio and television channels, as well as the *Oman News Agency*. At the same time, the Public Authority for Radio and Television operates and manages five radio stations and four television channels. Both the Ministry and the Authority work independently from one another and do not officially cooperate. The new media and its various applications are technically under the supervision and operation of the Ministry of Transport and Communications through the TRA and the Information Technology Authority (ITA). As for the new media, there is no specific body to supervise or even license these types of media outlet. In 2017, the Communications Center for Government Services was established. This institution is a central public relations agency whose main objective is to provide positive images about the regime’s performance.

It is affiliated with the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers and operates independently of the abovementioned media institutions, even if it cooperates with them to accomplish its various tasks. In order to overcome this supervisory chaos, the author proposes that these separate institutions be put under the supervision of a single umbrella institution in the form of a national media council to oversee these bodies and set broader policies for media work in the Sultanate.

Furthermore, the media legislative and regulatory frameworks in the Sultanate are outdated and not in line with the technical and objective changes witnessed in the media environment inside and outside the Sultanate. The Press and Publications Law, which is considered the most important legal document for regulating media work in the Sultanate, was first issued in 1984 and does not cover many of the changes in the media sector, especially in the area of new media and its various applications.

Because of the multiplicity of institutions operating and supervising media institutions, there are also numerous laws relating to media institutions. When assessing the organization of media work in the Sultanate, it is not only the Press and Publications Law (1984), Telecommunications Regulations Law (2002), and Radio and Television Private Establishments Law (2004) that must be considered, but also some other laws which have separate legal articles related to media work, such as the Penal Code (1974), the Commercial Companies Law (1974), the Trade Law (1990), and the Law of Declaring a State of Emergency (2008).

The Omani media also face professional challenges. Perhaps, first and foremost is the human and financial inability to incorporate the elements of media convergence, especially in the private sector outlets. There are limited possibilities for the current institutions to achieve this, and initiatives for media convergence on the level of media institutions and the messages they provide are lacking, along with the multimedia skills of journalists and media professionals.

Another professional challenge facing the Omani media is the absence of accurate indicators of public attitudes and their requirements from media in terms of programs and messages. There are, to the best of the author's knowledge, no monitoring centers for public opinion that can help the media in formulating their messages in more useful and

influential ways. The National Center for Statistics and Information, established in 2012, may help to provide some information about the public's preferences, but it cannot serve as a professional center for measuring public opinion.

On the other hand, there is no accurate information on the Omani media's competitiveness, level of access and influence, circulation, distribution, readership, listenership, viewership, or other important information that might help in judging the performance of these media, and measuring their public presence and influence.

Outlook

Looking to the future, two fundamental changes are required. The first is related to the traditional media and requires a major political decision. The second is being led by the new media, and could be described as a gradual shift that began a while ago thanks to the efforts of individual citizens. On the level of traditional media, the future Omani media scene will require major restructuring. First and foremost, a shift away from the government media model is necessary in order to reduce the regime's control over media work and media outlets. In spite of difficulty of accepting this model, the Sultanate has important capabilities and experiences that can help in this gradual transition, which would require a political decision to start the process.

On the level of new media, social networks in particular have given individuals the opportunity to express themselves more freely, present their different views and readings to governmental and non-governmental institutions, and critique these institutions in an unprecedented manner. It can be argued that new media have provided a more dynamic, free, and diverse public space than traditional media. However, the content, attitude and level of criticism of state institutions of traditional media could greatly benefit from the advantages brought by new media.

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