

Global Communications

EDITED BY CAROLA RICHTER AND CLAUDIA KOZMAN

Arab Media Systems





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Conclusion

Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman

What do we learn from comparing the individual media systems of Arab countries? We consciously refrained from building a typology for the eighteen Arab countries that are examined in this book. Instead, we have opted for highlighting major themes that we detected when carefully reviewing the seven dimensions that each author used in the analysis of the respective countries. These themes comprise 1) the state's approach to media, 2) media ownership, 3) fragmentation and polarization, 4) technological advancement and innovation, and 5) transnational mobility and connection. We explain how the media systems examined differ or concur with regard to these five themes.

Deconstructing Typologies, Reconstructing Themes

Comparing Arab media systems can lead to paradoxical results, given their ambivalent developments. A shared history has left its marks, albeit in different ways. Ongoing changes distinguish several dynamic fields, while at the same time a strong authoritarianism persists in other fields. What conclusions, then, can we draw for the present and future of Arab media?

Throughout its chapters, this book has confirmed that Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's (1963) indication that the "press always takes on the form and coloration of the political and social structures within which it operates" still holds true today (p. 1). Nonetheless, these political and social structures change over time and, depending on other factors such as the economic power or the embeddedness of a country in transnational settings, may play out differently. Moreover, while this

deterministic view seems to have allowed Siebert and his colleagues to assign the different political and social structures of all countries worldwide to only four distinct types, we have found it impossible to identify an appropriate typology for Arab media systems. Thus, we consciously refrained from building such a typology for the 18 Arab countries that are examined in this book.

Instead, we have opted to highlight the major themes we detected when carefully reviewing the seven dimensions that each author used in the analysis of their country. These themes will enable us to create new perspectives that could lead to more detailed discussions about the notion of state and business power, the role of transnational influences, and the impact of the particular social settings of Arab countries on the media. Which major themes, then, are characteristic of Arab media systems from a comparative perspective?

In the extant media system typologies, the nature of the state or the government is analyzed along with the kinds of intervention they apply to the media. In her chapter in this book, Sarah El-Richani, however, contends it is "important to take stock of the *de facto* situation... in addition to that which is *de jure*." This implies that the media in general might reflect the political and social structures of a given country, but there are still manifold ways in which these structures affect actual practices. While the legal written rules and regulations are often the focus of a media systems analysis, the chapters on the respective countries urge us to take a more general perspective that also reviews typical practices of control and influence beyond the written rules and regulations. Instead of considering only the legal framework, we consider the government or *the state's general approach to media* as an important theme. This includes the ways in which journalism and the performance of media workers are affected by red lines, unwritten rules, and the kinds of self-censorship resulting from the state's overarching approach to media being incorporated into its work practices.

Another major dimension in the extant global media system typologies is the ownership of media. While this has often been analyzed as a simple distinction between state-owned and private, or "public" and "independent" media, we instead consider the patterns that shape *media ownership* and their impact on content. Here, William Rugh's (2004) notion of "loyalist" media in the MENA region is important

because it hints at the fact that media privatization does not necessarily result in pluralistic media landscapes or regime-challenging media. Additionally, Hallin and Mancini's (2004) idea of analyzing political parallelism in the media is to be taken into consideration when assessing ownership patterns because of the typical interwovenness of politics and business, and how this is mirrored in the media scene.

The notion of political parallelism reappears in audiences' preferences and journalists' performances. In all of the countries analyzed, we find strong patterns of both societal and political fragmentation and polarization. Arab media systems seem to be characterized by a division of audiences, journalists, and content owing to conflict driven by ethnic, religious, or political differences, which often come to light during times of crisis and war. We thus consider the nature and effects of *fragmentation and polarization* of the media system as another theme.

An aspect that is not reflected strongly—or at all—in existing typologies is *technological advancement and innovation*. Media systems are converging throughout the world; therefore, the traditional distinction between print, audio, and visual media is not very helpful in an era of pervasive Internet, since it fails to provide us with in-depth knowledge about the realities of media production, usage, and control. Thus, we need to take a critical look at a media system's achievements and performance in terms of technology and infrastructure. The country chapters indicate that this theme is of major importance, even when some states simply do not have the wherewithal to engage in technological advancement and innovation.

Finally, the MENA region has been characterized for centuries by a tradition of *transnational mobility and connection*, which is also evident in the realm of media and journalism. On the one hand, and due to a common language, the potential outreach of media to publics beyond national borders enables content and production to travel in a way that is not even imaginable in other regions of the world. On the other hand, transnational connectedness raises its own unique problems, such as the asymmetry between the civilian experiences on either side of wars or conflicts, as in those between Yemen and Saudi Arabia or Palestine and Israel. With regard to outreach, mobility, and ownership the theme of transnationalism has been highlighted in several country chapters and thus requires further attention.

In the following section, we examine these themes more closely by comparing and contrasting the findings of the 18 country chapters.

Arab Media Systems: A Comparative Perspective

1. The State's Approach to Media

Reflecting on the state's approach to media allows us to understand the ability and means of ruling elites to control the media, or influence its production and content to shape public opinion. Indeed, the most common feature of almost all Arab political regimes is their continuous effort to make the media suit their immediate policies. Ehab Galal, for example, argues in his chapter on Qatar that the state "carefully navigate[s] a balance... between liberalization and control" and Bouziane Zaid and Mohammed Ibahrine detect a "cyclical fluctuation" of liberalization and repression in Morocco.

In most of the Arab countries, constitutions or other guiding legal texts guarantee freedom of media and expression—but almost always within the limits of vague concepts such as "national security" and "public morals." It thus remains within the jurisdiction of the regimes to execute what is meant by freedom of expression or, more generally, what they want the media to be and do in society. We identified mobilization and modernization purposes as the two main goals regimes typically use to justify the instrumentalization of the media. In addition to this line of comparison, we found varying degrees of enforcement of laws and (unwritten) regulations, which prompted us to include a second dimension of comparison: the contrast between a *laissez-faire* approach and strong control of media (see Figure 1).

Mobilization, in this context, is often framed as an educational effort by self-proclaimed elites to enlighten the masses who seem to be "not there yet," that is, not yet in the state of mind the regime wants them to be. More often than not, mobilization has turned out to be propaganda used extensively by socialist—or those claiming to be socialist—republics, such as Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Iraq. Yet, mobilization in the sense outlined above is a vanishing characteristic of Arab media systems. As seen in their respective chapters, only Algeria and Sudan still appear to be aiming to mobilize the "uneducated masses," although

Sudan's approach is apt to change due to revolutionary transformation, and in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, a unified state approach is completely lacking, due to the de facto fragmentation of these countries. In the latter three cases, militias or opposing elites today instrumentalize the media using propagandistic means to mobilize it for their causes and to delegitimize opposition, therewith constructing a new kind of mobilization media that is not likely to vanish if the wars finally end.

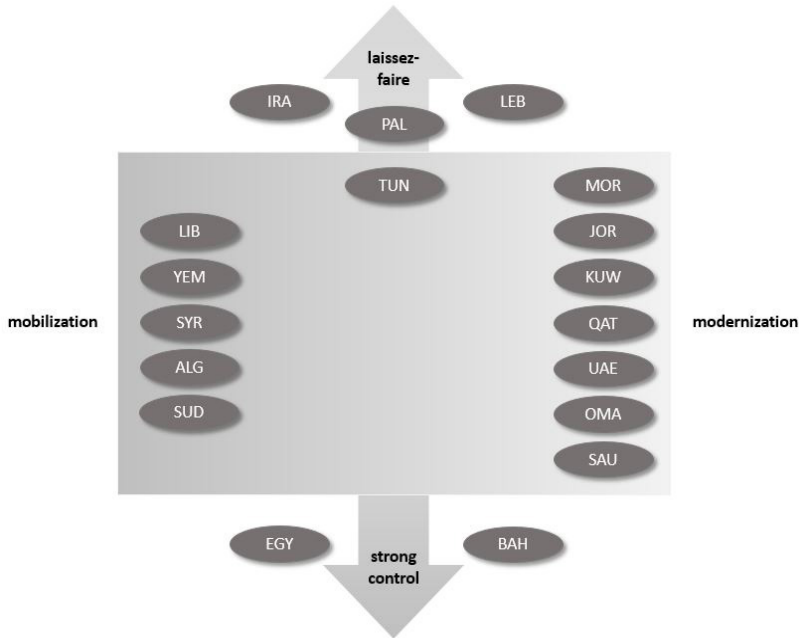
In Iraq, the situation has changed since the US invasion in 2003, throwing out the idea of mobilization as a main feature to describe the state's approach to media. Similarly, in Lebanon and Palestine, state structures are weak and thus a kind of *laissez-faire* approach towards the media exists, with restrictive laws in place but rarely applied. In these cases, the state is not in a position to dictate a specific media policy, neither can it mobilize for its causes. In a way, this makes these media systems freer than others. The problem, however, lies in the inability of the state to provide legal security to media outlets and physical security to media workers, making them vulnerable to any kind of attacks. Tunisia is a special case here: it has created laws to guarantee a more autonomous media system, balancing protection and control and avoiding instrumentalization of the media. However, the actual practices resulting from this approach have yet to be observed more closely.

On the other side of the spectrum, Egypt and Bahrain exercise strict control over the media, often under the pretext of stabilizing national security and the modern state. Due to the political turmoil these countries have faced since 2011, their governments view the media as potential enemies that need to be controlled through restrictive laws, intimidation of media workers, and ownership.

In between these two extremes—the *laissez-faire* and the strong control approaches—many countries oscillate between control and liberalization under the pretext of modernization and development. With the exception of Bahrain, all of the Gulf states, as well as the kingdoms of Morocco and Jordan, legitimize control of the media as a means to foster national stability and unity, while at the same time somehow conceding to private (foreign) investors in order to bring to life their visions of media as revenue creators. These governments also invest strongly in building a high-end digital infrastructure in order to keep their promises of modernization with regard to digital media. In this

context, media content often is not directly censored; instead, journalists commonly revert to self-censorship in order to avoid jeopardizing their own position in a media industry that these governments view as a must-have in creating a modern society.

Fig. 1: The state's approach to media



2. Media Ownership

Media ownership reveals much about the distribution of power in the context of financial viability. It also raises questions about who is at the center or the margins of power, in addition to which role external donors play.

In the Arab world, state-owned and privately-owned media coexist, but to varying degrees. In some countries, such as Lebanon and Kuwait, print media have always been set up as entirely privately financed outlets without any state-ownership, while in most other countries, the print media market was at least liberalized in the 1990s or early 2000s, leading to the coexistence of state-owned, privately-owned, and party-owned press. The much wider reach of the broadcasting sector meant

that regimes attributed much greater significance to it. Television, in particular, remained in the hands of governments and their ministries of information (or similar institutions) well into the mid-2000s. Lebanon is the only exception to this rule. One media type that is absent in the MENA is up-to-date public service broadcasting (PSB) that aims to represent all segments of society without governmental interference and commercial interests, although there have been some attempts to establish a PSB model similar to that of the *BBC* in Iraq. Currently, Tunisia faces the task of reorganizing state-owned broadcasting and turning it into a real PSB.

However, the simple facts of public or private ownership do not help us understand either the underlying patterns of media ownership or their effect on content. First, we must therefore glean patterns that shape ownership structures by taking into consideration the state's general approach to media as well as the availability of financial means by certain actors. Second, we have to consider Rugh's idea of "loyalist" media and pit it against its very opposite, which we term "confrontational" media (see Figure 2).

With regard to "loyalist" media, we find three distinct ownership patterns in our sample with one common characteristic: ownership of key media sectors, such as broadcasting and telecommunications, is almost exclusively in the hands of cronies or extended family members of the regimes. In countries such as Egypt, Sudan, and Algeria, the security apparatuses and the military play a huge role in the ownership of "privatized" media. In countries like Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Bahrain, or Oman, private ownership extends to influential businesspeople who have become successful due to their close links to the ruling family. These relationships allow them to make cross-sector investments in the media, for example to advertise their products. A third pattern is primarily linked to what we call "pan-Arab outsourcing" and applies mainly to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. While these countries still operate rather banal national state-owned television outlets, the main investments of the royal families and their allies go into pan-Arab consortia, such as *Rotana*, *Al-Jazeera*, and *MBC*, which provide professional journalism and high-end entertainment, but are entirely loyal to the political ideologies of their sponsors. None of these three ownership patterns is exclusive in any media system, rather they often

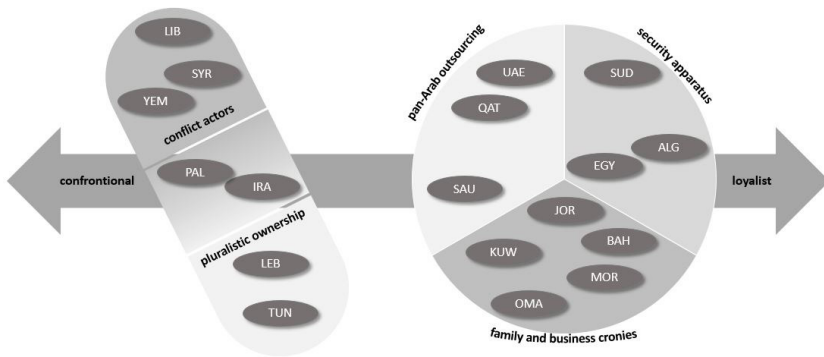
greatly overlap within a single system. Here, we highlight the prevailing pattern for each country.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, “confrontational” media are prevalent in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where media ownership is completely unregulated, at least from a national perspective. In these cases, media almost exclusively belong to actors involved in the conflict and consequently disagree with one another. At the same time, media loyalty is enforced in areas where one side dominates, such as in the Houthi-dominated north of Yemen or in east Libya, which is under the control of General Haftar. Here, media are typically owned by those who have the financial means to operate them and who are most often the conflicting parties themselves.

However, in the realms of both loyalist and confrontational media, a new development concerning small media has occurred. In some countries, small media, such as local radio stations or websites, are operated by local actors and provide a true alternative to the “big” national media, whereas in others, as in the cases of Libya and Iraq, they pop up unregulated, and often get support from external donors, such as European media development organizations. Still, in other countries, such as Tunisia, community media are part of the official new media scene. These examples indicate that small or alternative media could be a breeding ground for new media ownership models in the foreseeable future.

In addition to the patterns of enforced and unregulated media ownership, there exists another, more regulated kind of pattern on the “confrontationalist” side. In Lebanon, Tunisia, Iraq, and Palestine, media are owned by a variety of political and/or confessional actors, creating a rather pluralistic media landscape. While, in Iraq and Palestine, this can easily turn into the conflict model described above, in the cases of Lebanon and Tunisia, there seems to be a stable and healthy external pluralism.

Fig. 2: Media ownership



3. Fragmentation and Polarization

This theme identifies fragmentation and polarization as a result of lines of conflict driven by ethnic, religious, social, or political differences. It reflects the supremacy of power and control in dictating how social structures and divisions are represented. We identified two dimensions through which to compare the countries: how the political system deals with conflicts, and how the media represent conflicts. On the political level, the country cases indicate two opposing ways in which these phenomena are treated: either the lines of conflict materialize to such a degree that they are omnipresent in society and shape all societal discourse, or they are strongly suppressed so as to mimic political and social homogeneity for the sake of creating national stability. Different ways of representing these conflicts can be found on the media level, ranging from “conscious inclusion” to “conscious exclusion” of the voices of others (see Figure 3).

On one side of the political spectrum, in which strong political, religious, and/or ethnic divisions openly shape society, are post- and current-conflict countries that are mired in civil wars, including Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon, or those that are shaken by major political rifts, such as that between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine. In all of these cases, media performance oscillates between providing an external pluralism of opinions and perspectives, on the one hand, and hate speech and denunciation of the opponent, on the other. With regard to each of Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where wars are still ongoing,

a completely unregulated, polarized media is dominant, and there are only minor tangible efforts to overcome this polarization, such as small, local reconciliatory initiatives. This means a conscious exclusion of and fight against other actors' voices takes place in the respective media, thus reinforcing polarization through media discourse.

In the cases of Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, where the fragmentation of the media landscape along political and confessional lines has long been the case, more signs of professionalization, such as the use of less aggressive language or more objective reporting, can be observed. Thus, we can detect that some learning has taken place, perhaps due to the perceived necessity of including opposing voices of in different media in order to mimic openness and reduce polarization.

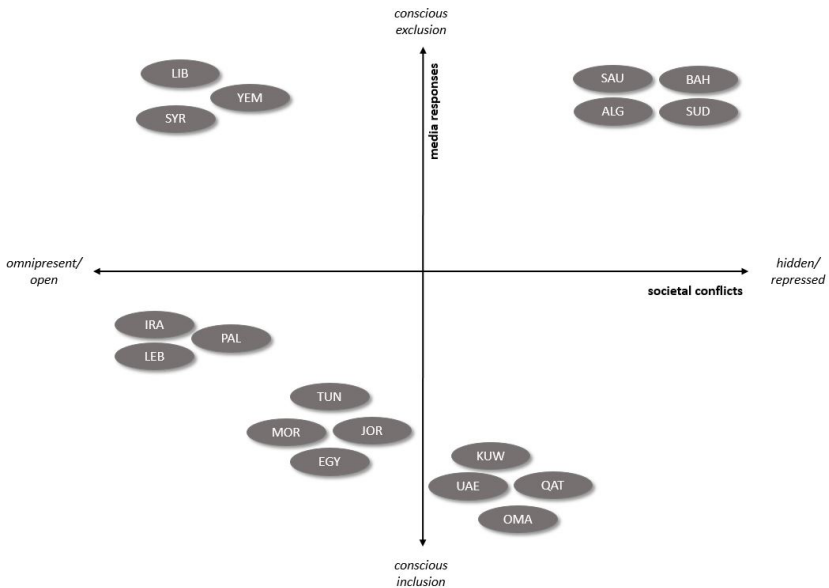
There is yet another way of dealing with conflict on the political level, as seen in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan, each of which faces societal rifts in different spheres. Egypt has a large Coptic minority; Morocco comprises substantial Imazighen communities; Tunisia faces political rifts, severe problems with Islamists and an unresolved urban-rural divide; and Jordan's population is made up of many Palestinians and other refugee populations. These countries have found ways of responding to the demands of the various segments of society by providing better representation, either through special-language programs on radio and television, as in the case of Morocco, or by a quasi-natural inclusion, such as with the Palestinians in Jordanian society and its media landscape. In these cases—sometimes only after strong political pressures from the respective organized minorities—a gradual and closely monitored inclusion in the media system has taken place. Yet socioeconomic divisions, such as an urban-rural or class division, are not adequately addressed in most of the media systems that were observed here.

In other countries, societal conflict lines are strong, but their articulation remains suppressed, as in the case of tribal minorities in remote areas of Algeria and Sudan, such as Darfur, or in the cases of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain with religious minorities of other Islamic faiths. So far, no efforts have been made to provide a more inclusionary media landscape.

As for the small Gulf states of Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE, indigenous citizens represent only a minority of the population, with the

majority of the population comprising individuals originally from other Arab countries or South Asia, and typically dwelling only temporarily in these countries. It is worth noting that expatriates are oftentimes those behind media production both in the Arabic language (as in the case of *Al-Jazeera*), or the English-language newspapers, news agencies, and transnationally operating media. Although the foreign workers are not naturalized and therefore often lack political rights, the chapters on those countries paint a picture of harmonious coexistence, emphasizing the tolerance towards foreign religions, confessions, and ethnicities. Indeed, given the dependency on foreign staff, their inclusion in everyday life and the media scene is crucial for these regimes. It remains to be seen whether an adequate representation of the non-naturalized inhabitants' problems, needs, and demands—which revolve around human rights issues—is actually reflected in media production, or whether it is glossed over.

Fig. 3: Fragmentation and polarization



4. Technological Advancement and Innovation

Technological advancement reflects both the political ideology and economic power of a given state. We therefore approached this theme from two perspectives: first, the state of the infrastructure regarding Internet connectivity and telecommunications, and second, specific policies behind building a high-end infrastructure or the lack thereof—for example, whether a state makes it a priority to invest in the Internet, liberalizes the telecommunications market, or not. Taking these two aspects into consideration, we observe a spectrum with highly developed technological systems at one end, and poorly developed systems—due to a lack of prioritization—at the other (see Figure 4).

The rich Gulf countries, with their high-end infrastructure enabling literally everyone to be connected through the Internet and mobile phones, are positioned at one end of the spectrum. Statistics indicate an almost total connectivity amongst the populations in the small emirates of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE. For instance, mobile phone penetration sometimes hits the 200% mark, meaning that statistically every citizen has two mobile phone contracts. The geographically larger and more populated countries of Saudi Arabia and Oman follow a similar trend, although their penetration does not reach the same figure. In all of these countries, the regimes heavily invest in infrastructure and facilitate the establishment of international and leading technology companies in the region. The regimes regard these ventures as investments in their futures, actions that could diversify their economies and build a competitive infrastructure for businesses in general, as well as satisfying their citizens by providing state-of-the-art communications and a ‘modern’ lifestyle. At the same time, this state-of-the-art infrastructure comes with new forms of restriction. In order to keep their control of the online sphere, the incumbent elites have released a plethora of cybercrime laws and have invested, with the help of globally operating tech giants, in Internet security that not only aims to prevent financial fraud online, but in many cases is also used to limit freedom of speech on the Internet.

There are, of course, other countries in the region that have long realized how investing in Internet infrastructure in particular, and media infrastructure more broadly, can help to advance the countries’

modernization and economic development. The governments that most strongly advocated for the distribution of computers and the development of an Internet infrastructure in the early 2000s were Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco and, after some delay, Algeria. These countries started from a very low level of connectivity, and—due to their limited financial means, vast geographies, and still substantial illiteracy rates among the population—have reached only modest levels of Internet penetration (from 48% in Algeria to 64% in Tunisia). The early and controlled liberalization of the telecommunications market, however, has stimulated comparatively high levels of mobile phone penetration among citizens (which exceeds 100% in all countries but Egypt).

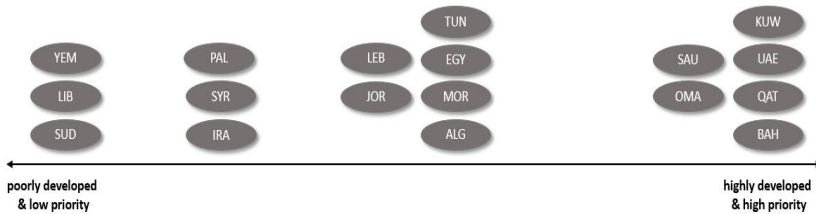
By contrast, in countries such as Lebanon and Jordan Internet penetration is comparatively better, but mobile phone use has for a long time been considered rather expensive and therefore has remained less common. In Lebanon, for example, regulation of the telecom market has favored cronies of the confessional regime, preventing a competitive environment that would push forward technological advancement.

Then, there are countries with an ambivalent record, such as Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, where a significant portion of the population is familiar with digital media due to advanced levels of education. While all three of these countries have witnessed major investments in Internet infrastructure and, in particular, in the telecommunications market, these investments continue to face major setbacks and destruction due to occupation, war, or violent conflict.

Yemen, Libya, and Sudan are situated at the opposite end of the spectrum of technological advancement, with the lowest rates of Internet connectivity. In these cases, the lag is the product of a mixture of general underdevelopment, war and conflict, and a severe lack of governmental determination to build an infrastructure until the 2010s.

Depending on the degree of state stability and investment security, technological advancement could develop rapidly in the two end groups. Regarding the two groups in the middle, policy directions and lack of financial means of investment seem to be the main problematic factors causing delays in development.

Fig. 4: Technological advancement and innovation



5. Transnational Mobility and Connection

The fifth and last theme indicates how aspects of transnational connections mirror the multiple and changing relations between the different countries and their media systems. Aspects of transnationalism have featured strongly in most of the individual countries investigated here. They manifest in unique but overlapping ways. The main aspects to consider are: 1) the transnational circulation of media content, 2) the transnational circulation of media workers, 3) the role of the diaspora or those in exile in the media scene, and 4) the space that is provided to foreign or pan-Arab media in a given country (e.g. through hosting foreign channels). If we concentrate on the level of trans-Arab connections only, and exclude non-Arab mobility, we can identify five major groups of countries that can be distinguished in terms of these aspects (see Figure 5).

Oman represents the media system with the fewest transnational connections: it neither invests in pan-Arab content, nor hires large numbers of non-Omani Arab media workers. It also does not have a strong and active diaspora involved in media production, and does not host foreign media. But this is actually rather atypical for the region, as we can observe by examining the other countries.

A second group, comprising Bahrain, Sudan, Libya, and Yemen, boasts substantial and active diasporas that produce a sizeable volume of media content from abroad. Libyan and Yemeni political actors, for example, operate entire systems of television channels from abroad, while Sudan and Bahrain have active exile communities that are highly present online. The content these online spaces or channels produce

is aimed at target audiences in the given home countries. Therefore, the transnational element in question here is the diasporic media production and transmission back to the country of origin, rather than the transnational circulation of content or media workers outside their home countries in general.

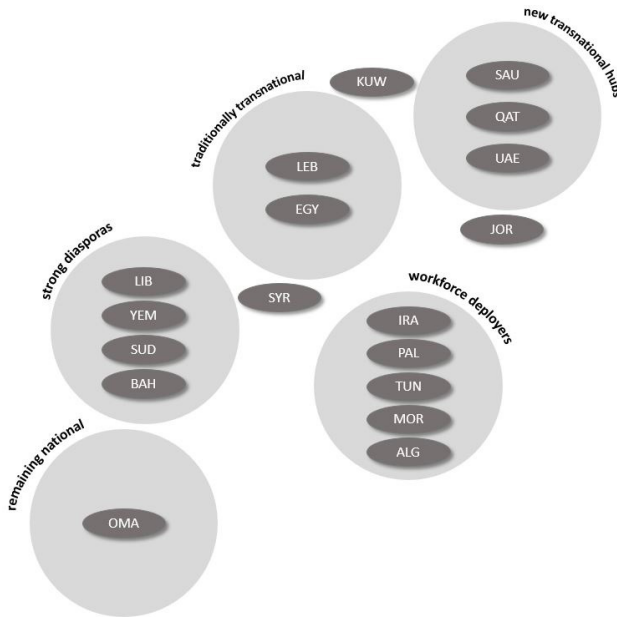
A third, very large group, including the Maghreb's Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, in addition to Iraq and Palestine, accounts for the countries of origin of many media workers who operate the pan-Arab television stations in the Gulf, such as *Al-Jazeera* or *MBC*. Moreover, these states also enjoy substantial diasporas spread over the MENA region and throughout Europe, in particular in France. These diasporas often consume the media of their home countries as well as adding to media production through a set of (mainly online) diaspora media outlets. Yet again, the content produced on these platforms is not directed beyond the respective national communities at home or abroad.

A fourth group consists of the Gulf countries Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. These states dedicate their media investments to pan-Arab outlets, producing content that primarily targets transnational audiences. As the recipients of media workforces from other Arab countries, they have succeeded in building real pan-Arab working hubs. All three countries also provide platforms and financial support to other Arab political actors, enabling them to set up media abroad and directly target their own national audiences. All three have, for example, supported Libyan political actors and their media activities, and Saudi Arabia has provided media space for Yemeni political groups that have fled their country. Although Jordan does not fit seamlessly in this group, it does to a certain extent provide space for foreign media production, and hosts many international media producers in its Jordan Media City. Ultimately, however, it cannot compete with the Gulf states as a new pan-Arab media hub. Finally, until the 1980s Kuwait had been a major hub for pan-Arab content and workforce, but it has since lost this position to the Gulf states on the other side of the shore.

A fifth and final group includes the traditional hubs of pan-Arab transnationalism, Lebanon and Egypt, with their transnationally-oriented television, serial and cinema production, strong diasporas, and circulating workforce. Both countries have shaped the transnational

flows of Arab media for decades. Before the current war, Syria had also played a strong role in pan-Arab serial production and the circulating workforce, but its transnationalism has since shifted towards the diaspora model, due to a significant decline in media production.

Fig. 5: Transnational mobility and connection



By identifying recurrent themes in the separate country chapters, and applying a comparative perspective when examining these themes, we tried to determine the similarities and differences among the 18 Arab media systems and thus provide an in-depth view of the current status quo regarding political, economic, societal, technological, and transnational dimensions. However, our analysis of different types of media systems should not be interpreted as suggesting that these types are set in stone. Developments in the region are so dynamic that the current situations displayed in our analysis and the figures included above should be understood as snapshots of a certain moment in time. The frequent lack of more accurate data in the MENA region still leaves us with uncertainty regarding many aspects. As a result, comparisons can only be tentative.

The Road Ahead: Challenges for Arab Media Systems

Finally, we will refer to some of the dynamic developments characteristic of the region, which also shape media landscapes globally, and whose directions and results cannot yet be predicted.

From the beginning, media in the MENA region have been tools for mobilization and modernization, and correspond to ownership patterns that reflect these approaches. Rarely in their history have they been considered as independent entities that exist to watch over the government and other ruling elites. Many of the Arab countries lack sustainable funding models for media beyond instrumental ownership by privileged actors. This has led to what the literature calls “media capture” (Schiffrin, 2018), that is, a state of affairs in which media outlets become a trading product of political or other actors who ensure an economic grip on it in order to remain in power. This kind of approach is no longer exclusively the domain of the state or its elites, but is also adopted by the business sector, security apparatuses, militias, and other political actors. The problem of media capture is certainly not limited to the MENA region, and has become a global phenomenon, as evident in European countries and the US. In some areas of the MENA region, community media, such as small radio stations or local online newspapers, which are in particular facilitated by the Internet, could evolve as alternatives to media capture on the national and transnational levels. Our authors highlight two main solutions to allow for a more autonomous and sustainable media environment: an accountable rule of law needs to be established for individuals inclined to invest time and money into media, and a real advertising market needs to be set up.

Another major challenge that will not be easily overcome is the fragmentation of societies that could ultimately result in the disintegration of entire countries, such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya, or in rising political and economic tensions, as in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Algeria. The fragmentation of societies and the concurrent instrumentalization of media by the various fragments are clear outcomes of these crises. Taking into consideration the historical developments and the colonial trajectories as well as the current (international) political interests in the Middle East and North Africa, we realize that crises are a common feature of the region, with only a few exceptions. The manifold transnational

connections between the countries and the media systems, for example, investments in a joint *ArabSat* system or the pan-Arab workforce in many media channels, have not saved the region from infighting carried out via media. The recent outlawing of Qatar's *Al-Jazeera* by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt is perhaps the most prominent example. Such infighting within or among states and the instrumentalization of media within them result in serious security risks for media workers, making journalism a dangerous occupation.

The digital transformation of the media is a major challenge globally, as well as regionally. Some Arab countries, in particular the wealthy Gulf states, seem to be well-placed to meet this challenge, thanks to their advanced infrastructure. They have the means to invest heavily in the latest technology and do so intentionally to respond to the pressing need to transform their economy from crude oil production to a more knowledge-based economy. Other MENA countries are lagging behind, which has created a digital divide in the region. Regardless of their progress, all these countries are faced with the question of Internet control and regulation, and what to permit and what to ban. In this context, several problems that are being discussed on a global level, such as data security, privacy, and prevention of disinformation and hate speech, present challenges that are crucial to authoritarian regimes in respect to their control of opinions and marginalizing the opposition. So far, it is not clear what the trend will be, considering that some regimes do not hesitate to slow or cut off Internet connections completely, as has been done in Iraq, or monitor content closely and impose cybercrime laws as in Egypt or Qatar and many other countries in the region.

The above challenges are critical and will affect all Arab media systems for the foreseeable future. Yet, the region has always shown strong dynamics and has even pioneered media-related developments. In Egypt, radio has long been exploited as a means of reaching out to the masses and creating stars, such as the singer Umm Kulthum and President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s. The immense role of satellite television in accessing not only national but transnational audiences has been largely driven by developments in the MENA region that had already started in the early 1990s. The Arab uprisings are ultimately connected to specific uses of social media that were unprecedented before 2010 or 2011 and that showed how savvy people could incorporate technologies

into their political strategies. This inspired many movements all over the planet.

Arab media, the structures and systems behind the practices of their producers and users, and their impact and effects, will thus be of interest and relevance for many years to come.

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