



# Through The Looking-Glass

Think of Alice as the media, chronically curious, occasionally misled, sometimes inventive, periodically startled—and always the rapt audience for and narrator of the strange doings of the Red Queen and the White Knight, of Humpty-Dumpty and even Tweedledum and Tweedledee of Lewis Carroll's allegorical nonsense tale *Through the Looking-Glass*.

No nonsense at all. Consider the United States and Arab governments, policies, peoples and cultures as key pieces in the story's continuing game of chess, with their respective publics as combination pawn, spectator and bystander. And recall what Alice remarks to the black Kitty in the first chapter about the disconcerting nature of Looking-glass house:

*First there's the room you can see through the glass—that's just the same as our drawing room only things go the other way... Well then, the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way. I know that because I've held up one of our books to the glass, and then they hold up one in the other room.*

What Alice characterizes as reverse, asymmetrical images is the very phenomenon experienced and practiced by the Arab and U.S. press in the tricky task of writing, reporting and broadcasting fairly and accurately



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN TENNIEL FROM THE ANNOTATED ALICE (CLARKSON N. POTTER, ©1960)

about what they see and sense of one another.

The oft-acknowledged perception gap between Arab and American cultures has widened, and the press is, wittingly or unwittingly, a factor in the pull-apart. Social tensions triggered by the bombings of 9/11 and the subsequent war in Iraq periodically turn into full-blown media misrepresentations with reporting from each side reflecting biases, suspicions and stereotypes.

## REASONING TOGETHER

The cause and effect of this troubling dynamic lay behind two bold meetings among two dozen Arab and U.S. journalists, editors and media persons that took place earlier this year—the first in Luxor, Egypt, on the banks of the Nile River in mid-March, the second at the Aspen Wye River Conference Center on a tangle of Maryland's Chesapeake Bay in mid-June.

Conceived as a step in addressing the misperceptions of the U.S.-Arab looking-glass relationship, the sessions produced some fresh fraternal understanding and some concrete suggestions to improve things. Several days of pointed discussion prompted the media participants to propose a series of collective and individual actions in an effort to present a more representative reality.

## *Arab and American Media Leaders Debate, Dialogue—and Rededicate*

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# COLLATERAL DAMAGE

## AMIDST THE FOG OF WAR

by Crocker Snow Jr.

The reporters, editors and media persons who participated in the twin Luxor-Wye sessions were invited by the Aspen Institute, Ford Foundation and William and Flora Hewlett Foundation organizers based on their experience, influence and willingness to reflect critically on their own performance. “In a time of great mistrust within and between these regions, it is incumbent upon the journalistic institutions to foster greater knowledge and understanding of the other’s culture,” said convenor Charles Firestone, head of the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program. “Yet in each region journalists find themselves facing barriers to achieve this objective, whether pressures of patriotism from within or outside the organization, issues of ownership and the marketplace, or general (mis)perception of the underlying truth of another culture.”

To get beyond political posturing, the dialogue centered on core professional issues such as press freedoms, staffing and training, political and marketplace pressures, issues of ownership, barriers for whistleblowers and investigative reporting more than on headline events that triggered the need for dialogue in the first place. Still, indelible memories of 9/11 in prompting patriotic sentiments in the U.S. media and the impact of the war in Iraq on the Arab participants were very much in the air. All acknowledged the occupational impossibility that the media could be objective, dispassionate and avoid jingoistic cheerleading in such a charged climate.

The first session at the first forum in Luxor documented this reality. It revolved around the coverage by both media of a singularly dramatic news event: the December 2003 capture of Saddam Hussein by U.S. forces in Iraq. Before a press pool was taken to the spider hole near Tikrit where the capture took place, media coverage around the world was limited to the exact same information released by U.S. military authorities and a handful of official news photographs.

Identical input didn’t produce notably similar output, however. A range of headline and front page treatments culled from the Arab and U.S. press and presented to dialogue participants revealed significant differences in style, tone and message.

Headlines, photo captions and analysis articles in much of the Arab press carried a tone of hurt pride and humiliation. Syrian journalist Mustapha Karkouti accounted for this feeling in part because Saddam was captured by Americans, not by his own subjects or even by Arabs. That the dictator went down without a fight and was subjected to a degrad-

ing and well-recorded dental examination to assure his identity only added to the sense of humiliation. In stark contrast, the U.S. media—print and broadcast—bore a not so subtle, triumphant tone reflected by “We Got Him” and “Caught Like a Rat”—two

particularly flawed newspaper headlines appearing at the time.

The evidence underscored for everyone that the ideal of balanced and dispassionate reporting of the charged events in Iraq was rarely achieved by media

## HOLDING OURSELVES ACCOUNTABLE

THE WORLD IS POISED on the brink of some very real disturbances, and we journalists have enormous responsibility to keep people as well informed as possible.

To use a boxing metaphor, we ought to be relaying the match quietly into the mike, not baying for blood at the ropes.

Yes, we’re all under pressure, some of us more than others. For most U.S. journalists, ‘pressure’ means advertising or accusations of low patriotism. At worst, they’d be looking for another job. No joke, I realize. In this part of the world, however, pressure can mean a knock on your door at 3 am, and then you disappear. So if we’re to have any effect at all, I believe there has to be a concerted effort to produce an international accountability machine that could constitute an ethics board of some sort.



صَدِيقُكَ مِنْ صَدَقِكَ لَمْ يَنْصَدَقِكَ

*Your friend is he who tells you the truth, not he who agrees with everything you say.*

News does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in context: social, cultural, domestic, economic, political. Journalists have traditionally been one of the best litmus paper indicators of public opinion and mood. The relationship is entirely symbiotic, and as such, journalists carry an enormous responsibility that I believe has been seriously abused over the past couple of decades.

An international ethics/accountability committee would be a nonpartisan international tool. Such a body composed of Arab and U.S. journalists might wield real power because policymakers (and media owners) realize that the media are plugged in to average voters. That connection translates into power that, in turn, translates into leverage for the ethics body to do its job—to wit, ensuring balanced, culturally relevant and responsible reporting.

I think it could be a useful tool for maintaining international calm and minimizing the kind of bias and paranoia that frankly pollutes the media on both sides of the world.

—Mirette Mabrouk, IBA Media, Cairo



outlets of either side. The linguistic judgment reflected by CNN reporters regularly referring to the “liberation” of Iraq juxtaposed against Al Jazeera’s consistent use of “invasion” was representative of this imbalance.

Arab participants critiqued the U.S. press for not asking hard questions during the buildup to the war and for largely accepting the different justifications offered by Washington for the invasion. Why was this, they pressed, when the evidence of weapons of mass destruction or any Al Qaeda connection was so sketchy? The answer—not a proud one—was best offered by ABC News correspondent John Cochran: “We don’t know how to conduct a one-sided debate.” Put another way, because there wasn’t much political opposition in Washington to the invasion in the aftermath of 9/11 and the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan, there wasn’t much Congressional questioning of policy for the U.S. press to report.

### WHO PAYS TO PROPAGANDIZE?

Those engaged in the dialogue participated as individuals. Yet inevitably they reflected, and sometimes represented, the values, policies and cultural environment of their employers and peers. Core differences in press practices and pressures in the United States and the Arab world were key debating points among those from the venerable state-controlled *Al Ahram* in Egypt or the fiercely

independent *New York Times*, *Washington Post* or *Wall Street Journal* in the United States, between editorial directors of Qatar’s heavily subsidized Al Jazeera and the proudly free-market CNN.

The Arab participants acknowledged that as their respective governments are not freely elected, so too is their press not altogether free of government control and coercion. In an environment in which all major media are subsidized directly by government or depend on extensive government advertising, political independence is rare. “It comes down to the fact that we can report pretty freely about other countries, but not about our own,” remarked Hani Shukrallah, managing editor of *Al Ahram*’s English-language weekly publication. “There’s a double bind for Arab media based on ownership and censorship.”

Several Arab newsmen deplored what one described as a “twisted warren” of national security, emergency and economy laws that inhibit freedom of the Arab press. “How can you have investigative reporting when there is no rule of law, no access to verifiable information, no ability to protect journalists from governments, not to speak of his or her own editors?” asked Lebanese moderator Hisham Melham.

By contrast, U.S. journalists operating in an increasingly congested media environment with all manner of print, broadcast and Internet communications described the primal pressures of the mar-

ketplace as more central to their performance than any political pressure. For them, the necessity to engage the attention of readers, viewers, listeners and ultimately advertisers is key to media survival and sustainability. The acceptance of national and international ad agencies along with detailed reader and viewer demographics is as important as consumer confidence for much western media.

The media are the only major industry in the world in which the consumer doesn’t pay the primary cost of production. In a commercial context, typically it is the advertiser, the one who wants to reach the hearts and minds of media consumers with a product to sell, who pays. In the media environment of the Middle East, however, governments that want to plant their political message and assure public support—creating what moderator Melham calls “mobilization media”—are the primary funders.

All participants acknowledged this difference. Most argued that this won’t change and that there appear to be no viable business models for the Middle East media on the horizon. A few took exception. Daoud Kuttub, chairman of Palestine’s *Al Quds* Education TV, insisted that the Arab world’s fledgling independent press represents the hope if not the wave of the future for Middle East media and warrants international support.

Curiously, the who-pays-the-press-piper debate revealed a certain symmetry in these apparently



*The Arab-U.S. Media Forum first convened in Luxor, Egypt in March 2004.*

*Front row, from left: Crocker Snow Jr., Walter Isaacson, Mustapha Karkouti, Hisham Melham, Barbara Cochran, Mostafa Al-Hosseiny, Emma Playfair, Caroline Faraj, Basma El Husseiny. Second row: Patricia Kelly, Smita Singh, Daoud Kuttub, Gary Kamiya, Khaled Dawoud, Charles Firestone, Jamal Dajani, Jon Funabiki, Akram Farag. Back row: Mirette Mabrouk, Mohamed Yousri, Moukhtar Kocache, Amy Garmer, Hussein Shobokshi, Monroe Price, Edward Walker, Kenneth Cooper, John Cochran, Steven Erlanger, Hani Shukrallah, Mohamed Salmawy, Paul Steiger, David Ignatius*

asymmetrical models. In both the Arab and U.S. cases, the outsider pays for the insider—the journalist—to practice his or her trade. The media audience is the target and the prize. As Paul Steiger, managing editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, put it, “Pressure is pressure, whether political or commercial.”

## HUMILITY TRUMPING HUBRIS

Journalists and editors are often cynics about the world they see and, equally, their own capacity to reflect it fairly and well. The conference participants were no exception. Few expressed any conceit about routinely reporting and reflecting the other side and its personalities fairly and in proper context or that they had, in effect, “gotten it right.”

The intense coverage of the war in Iraq only highlighted the failings. Struggling with masses of detail and breaking news events, fighting for access in a combat zone, contending with embedded reports and military censorship and the factional conflicts of a complex Islamic society seemed to bring out some of the best and some of the worst in U.S. media performance.

The media’s very role as chronicler of the times came under challenge not just from the sweep of events but from technology itself. As the first meeting in Luxor took place shortly after the headline capture of Saddam Hussein, the second at the Aspen Wye River Conference Center came in the aftermath of revelations about the mistreatment and torture of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. military police manning the country’s Abu Ghraib prison.

The bitter irony that the epicenter of this story was the very prison made infamous by the toppled dictator was trumped by how the story itself got out. The scandal was recorded and even released not by enterprising professional reporters but through digital documentation made by the prison guards and perpetrators themselves. The original news break, which came on the April 28, 2004 broadcast of CBS News’ *60 Minutes*, and the photographs that circulated and were reproduced throughout the world thereafter were neither assigned nor official nor professional. They were spontaneous images taken by the participants, distributed via the Internet to their friends and families and only then circling back into media distribution.

This dynamic represented a first. What arguably might become the most indelible images of the war were spontaneous, unpremeditated and proudly unprofessional. “We’re no longer collecting all the key information, and we’re no longer assigning or even editing those who do,” commented Barbara Cochran, president of the Radio Television News Directors Association. “We’ve been reduced to deciding what to run, what to use and what to prioritize.”

This observation prompted fresh insight into changing press dynamics. “We’re not in control of anything much anymore, except our own standards, which are wavering,” lamented Steven Erlanger of

the *New York Times*. His *Washington Post* colleague David Ignatius seconded this observation. “Having your own standards rooted in an idea of your mission is the only way to operate in this environment,” he said. “Our gate-keeping role is enhanced in this environment, and we should take it more seriously.” Eason Jordan, chief news executive of CNN, echoed this concern.

Aspen Institute organizer Firestone speculated that the media is becoming the “authenticator, legitimizer and contextualizer” more than the reporter and originator of the news. “Maybe the gatekeeper role is changing more than we realize,” added Ford Foundation observer Jon Funabiki. “Now the press is not just deciding whether or not to run sensitive information but sometimes to run it in order to refute it.”

None of the participants seemed pleased with this situation, but none refuted it either.

## CAN WE DO BETTER?

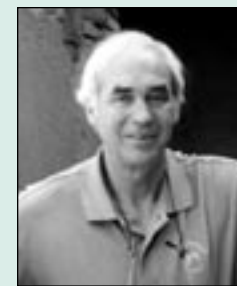
As the niceties were dispensed with and fundamental differences fairly emerged during the paired meetings three months apart, a constructive consensus began to develop among the participants. The original Luxor group, supplemented by several fresh faces for the gathering in the United States, expressed a desire to move beyond rhetoric and get practical, adopting a collective confessional: *We recognize and acknowledge our professional sins of omission and commission. We all know our professional and political environments vary a lot. We can see the problems and the differences. We even understand some of the reasons why. We have a civic and public responsibility as media professionals to do better. Let’s see what we can do about it. Let’s get on with it.*

## THE HUMILIATION FACTOR

IT’S IRONIC. U.S. press coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal that broke in May 2004 carried the same tone of humiliation that the Arab and Middle East press reflected in their coverage of the capture of Saddam Hussein in mid-December 2003.

Two of the biggest and starkest news events of the war in Iraq and its aftermath brought out deep-seated issues of broken pride and consequent humiliation in the national press most personally engaged.

The sense of humiliation that Arab editors acknowledged around Saddam’s capture was based on his being overthrown and ultimately captured by westerners, not Arab forces; of his meek surrender in the spider hole of Tikrit; and of his being subjected to a debasing dental exam as the prime, post-capture official photo op. It was, in effect, the humiliation of U.S. actors on Arab events.



أَنَا وَخِي عَلَى ابْنِ عَمِي  
وَأَنَا وَابْنِ عَمِي عَلَى الْغَرِيبِ

*My brother and I against my cousin;  
my cousin and I against the stranger.*

As moral standard-bearer for much of the rest of the world, we have been undressed. We suddenly met the elusive enemy in our war on terrorism, and it was the denigration of our own standards and values as much as the actions of any Al Qaeda operatives.

Not surprisingly, the Arab media reacted to the Abu Ghraib revelations with the same “Gotcha” headlines and analysis as the U.S. media displayed with the capture of Saddam. This time, however, it wasn’t an unprincipled and unsavory individual that was “got” but the self-righteous standards of a society itself.

—Crocker Snow Jr., Boston



Of course, 'getting on with it' meant different things to different participants. Several U.S. editors focused on the value of more exchanges as the most effective form of consciousness raising. Some advocated more monitoring of press performance as a way to increase peer-group pressure and accountability and help avoid stereotyping. Several Americans took to the idea of employing more Arab journalists to help spot insensitivities and inaccuracies in the media boiler room before they become public. Despite an apparent consensus that most Arab media know and report more about the United States than vice versa, all argued for improved two-way information flow across the media board.

For Mohamed Salmawy of *Al Ahram's* French-language weekly *Hebdo*, the cause of better journalism would best be served through working exchanges involving real reporting and even a jointly produced product for consumption in both media

environments. Several participants took up this challenge with particular joint investigative reporting ideas.

Among the participants—professionally stretched for time and resources and occasionally jaded about outcomes—there was a clear desire for the dialogue to continue. The twin meetings in geographically correct locales three months apart with the same core participants were revealing, even compelling, in the candor and constructive attitude engendered.

At the concluding session, Moukhtar Kocache, representing the Ford Foundation in Cairo, stated what was clear: "The symbolism of the group is pretty powerful in itself." Egyptian editor Shukrallah wasn't content to leave it at that. "There's something incomplete in what we've done," he said. "Now we must go forward to build common cause based on a commitment to truth and to building professional standards."

As a concluding statement, this sounded neither the cynical nor defensive tocsin often echoed by the media when it engages in self-criticism. It tolled a more positive and constructive tone—which just might crack the looking-glass in question.



## PARTICIPANTS

### An equal number of Ar

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# LOOKING-GLASS ILLUMINATIONS AND INCENDIARIES

## IRAQ WAR TESTS COURAGE, OBJECTIVITY AND ETHICS

The 2003–2004 war in Iraq has highlighted media passions, priorities and prejudices. The U.S. and Arab press particularly were on the front lines in covering the buildup to the U.S. invasion in March 2003 through the fall of Baghdad three weeks later, from the search for weapons of mass destruction to the capture of Saddam Hussein, from the Abu Ghraib prison scandals to ongoing religious strife, terrorism and insurgency.

The influence of the Arab and U.S. media on their respective reading and viewing publics has been a key consideration for policymakers. The proverbial battle for hearts and minds has been fueled by media reports and images, characterized by great variations in coverage and affecting the very status and treatment of the different media outlets.

For the media it has not been a zero-sum game. The casualty rates for the media have been high. By August 2004, according to figures of the Associated Press and the not-for-profit Committee to Protect Journalists, a total of 40 journalists and their translators or assistants died covering the war and the postwar insurgency.

The media fatalities were roughly evenly divided between print journalists, including freelancers and radio and television broadcast journalists. Equal numbers—11 each—were accredited to U.S. and Arabic and Kurdish news outlets. Eighteen of those killed were accredited to other national press enterprises and organizations.



**CONTROLLING THE CONTROL ROOM:** Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based satellite station that has revolutionized Arab media and consistently riled U.S. authorities with its reporting on Al Qaeda and the war in Iraq, was temporarily blacked out in Baghdad by the Iraqi interim government in August 2004.



ذِكْرُ وَاُنْتَىٰ وَاَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا  
كُمُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ اَنْتَقَكُم

Oh mankind! We created you from a single [pair] of a  
tribes, that ye may know each other, [not that ye may  
in the sight of God is [he who i

The Qur'an, Chapter 49, "Hujura





يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَا لَكُمْ فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ آيَاتٍ لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَكُونَ

[male and a female, and made you into nations and despise each other.] Verily, the most honored of you [is] the most righteous of you.

at” (“The Dwellings”), Verse 13

## Information Imbalance: Turning On, Tuning In

The extent and penetration of mass media varies greatly within individual Arab countries and even more between the Arab world generally and the United States.

	Newspapers/1000 (2000)	Radio Sets/1000 (2001)	TV sets/1000 (2002)
Egypt	31	339	229
Iraq	19	222	83
Jordan	75	372	177
Kuwait	374	570	413
Lebanon	107	182	357
Palestine	na	na	143
Saudi Arabia	326	326	265
Syria	20	276	182
United States	213	2,117	933

The digital divide that exists broadly between developed and developing countries is one aspect of the information imbalance that is mirrored by the Arab world and the United States.

	Personal Computers/1000 (2002)	Internet Users/1000 (2002)	Internet Cost/20 hrs month (2003)	GNP % per capita (2003)
Egypt	17	28	\$5.00	5
Iraq	8	1	na	na
Jordan	38	58	\$26.00	18
Kuwait	121	106	\$25.00	2
Lebanon	81	117	\$37.00	11
Palestine	36	30	\$25.00	33
Saudi Arabia	130	62	\$35.00	5
Syria	19	13	\$55.00	59
United States	659	551	\$15.00	0.5

Sources: Newspaper, radio and personal computer data from World Bank, World Development Indicators 2004 (for year 2001). Television and Internet data from International Telecommunications Union, World Telecommunications Development Report 2003.



DOUBLE TROUBLE: Al Hawza, one of many new Iraqi papers that began publishing after the fall of Saddam Hussein, was closed by U.S. authorities in March 2004—prompting a series of protests on behalf of cleric Muktada al-Sadr—and allowed to reopen by the interim government of Iraq in August.

# JOUSTING KNIGHTS:

## A CLASH OF TWO MEDIA NARRATIVES

By Hisham Melham

Ever since the advent of the Arab satellite television phenomenon, specifically Al Jazeera in the mid-1990s, and particularly since the bombings of 9/11 and the rise of anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim worlds, the U.S. media, like the U.S. government, have felt the need to explore how these new media are shaping—or manipulating—‘the Arab street’ and ‘the Arab mind.’ Few observers have asked or hoped that these new media that have revolutionized how Arabs receive news of their world and beyond will lead inevitably to new politics.

Arabs, on the other hand, have been loudly complaining for many years about their negative images and stereotypes in the U.S. media. The quality of the coverage of things Arab or Muslim in the mainstream media, particularly in the U.S. print media, has improved markedly in recent years. Most anti-Arab bias or misrepresentation is limited now to some columnists and editorial writers. Overall, however, the metamorphosis of the negative images, in the popular culture and in the media, has been staggering.

So Arabs are getting new pictures of themselves and Americans new and improved pictures of the Arab world. In times of tension, crisis or war, however, some of these latent images are resurrected, dusted off and used again.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq, coming against the background of the Gulf war, a devastating regime of economic sanctions and the tremendous imbalance of power between the United States and Iraq, produced strong popular opposition to the war and, inevitably, a clash of two media narratives.

At times, the Arab and U.S. media appeared to be covering two different wars. The differences were conceptual, linguistic and cultural. They involved not only the push and pull of media market forces but, more fundamentally, how each media culture sees itself, its role in society and its relationship with the powers that be.

### NEW MEDIA, SAME OLD POLITICS

The Arab and U.S. participants in the Luxor and Wye River media conferences brought with

them aspects of this tale of two conflicting narratives. Most participants expressed awareness of a deep, structural asymmetry affecting their professional passions and performance.

The Arab and U.S. media operate under different rules. In the United States, the pressures of the market bring their own demands and strains. In times of national crisis, added pressures from what one participant labeled the “patriotism police” can be an intimidating factor.



Arab journalists, however, operate in mostly autocratic environments. Questions of control, ownership and censorship take on different meanings. Most media in the Arab world, including the most influential satellite television stations, are either owned by governments or financed by wealthy individuals close to the ruling political elite. This situation raises questions about the ability of new media to help create new politics, to hold governments accountable for their actions, let alone to call for fundamental change.

In the Arab world, privately owned media are not necessarily free or independent media. In some states the ministry of information appoints the editors of ‘privately owned’ newspapers. Daoud Kuttub, direc-

tor of *Al Quds* Education TV in Palestine, observed that in recent years various Arab governments have managed to stifle the growth of independent media by overwhelming them with Draconian laws.

Most Arab journalists practice self-censorship. Their media, old and new, can criticize other governments but not their own, at least not frontally or specifically. Hence, the strange phenomenon found in some societies—including Lebanon, which has arguably the oldest most interesting and influential journalistic traditions in the Arab world—where a considerable level of freedom of opinion exists, but not freedom to report the facts.

Freedom to criticize and opine against corruption in general is tolerated. But accurate reporting on specific scandals involving embezzlement or abuse of power, especially if it involves the security agencies or the military, including naming names, is prohibitively difficult and costly.

One major failing of Arab media is the absence of investigative reporting. However, investigative reporting is predicated on journalistic ethics, access to verifiable facts and, most important, the rule of law to protect the whistleblower and the reporter from government wrath. None of this comes easily, if at all, for Arab journalists.

Still, as many Arab participants observed, the satellite stations have broken artificial barriers among Arab states and effectively challenged some social and political taboos. For the first time they present the Arab world and the wider world beyond to the Arabs in their own

language and through an Arab lens. The proliferation of Internet web sites, which are generally more independent, has widened the circle of news and views.

Yet there is a negative, even debilitating aspect to the satellite TV stations on Arab politics and culture. They are degrading the political discourse by false liberalism, contrived objectivity and misleading and staged ‘debates.’ Most swim with the tide and pay homage to some worn-out ideological, political and social orthodoxies. Most of the journalists staffing these stations have little professional training or experience.

Many of their programs have married the latest American technology or ‘look’ with old mytholo-



gies, a tribal sense of solidarity and a skewed sense of victimhood that regards the outside world as the primary source of “Arab failure.” Instead of fostering healthy debates about the real causes of the current state of Arab malaise—in which, of course, the role of the West and Israel is probably as important as the role of Arab political and religious elites, mass movements and romantic, messianic nationalisms—they reinforce old fears and prejudices. Rather than questioning the powers that be and articulating the grievances of Arabs against their autocratic and hereditary rulers, they vent steam, engage in outlandish conspiracy theories and provide governments with safety valves to direct anger toward real or imagined foreign foes.

In the absence of open political processes, tolerant if not vibrant civil societies and the rule of law, the new media will not contribute significantly to the emergence of new politics.

## YOU SAY LIBERATION, WE SAY HEGEMONY



Initially, Arab participants in the dialogue explained that their media’s coverage of the war in Iraq reflected deep popular opposition to it. Here the question of how the Arab media, with few exceptions, sees its role as ‘mobilization media’, articulating and defending the views of Arab governments, their interests and Arab causes (mainly Palestine) came to the fore. This self-image was clear from the editorial line, phraseology, selection of stories and, most important, overwhelming emphasis on civilian casualties in Arab press coverage. A focus on the absence of a United Nations blessing, and lack of convincing evidence concerning Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction also were highlighted.

What was dubbed by the U.S. government as ‘Operation Iraq Freedom’ and taken up uncritically by some U.S. media outlets such as CNN and FOX, was described in the Arab media, including satellite stations such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, as an ‘aggression’ or ‘invasion’ to control Iraq’s oil and create a U.S. emperium in the Middle East, rather than to spread democracy.

The U.S. media talked about war *in* Iraq; the Arab media described an American war *against* Iraq.

## EMBEDDED—ON SCREEN AND ON THE GROUND

Most of the dialogue participants agreed that the U.S. media’s coverage of the prewar period and the early stages of fighting was wanting, displaying at times a sense of triumphalism, even

jingoism, with the U.S. flag fluttering while embedded on television screens.

The role of U.S. reporters who were actually embedded with U.S. military units was something else again. They reflected a sense of fascination with the wizardry of new weapon systems and the doctrine of shock and awe, with little appreciation of the impact of such hellish bombing on a society that had experienced the twin effects of a murderous political regime and a cruel period of economic sanctions due to U.S. pressure. At best, the embedded reporters provided a tiny slice of a complex picture.

Many participants agreed that on the whole the U.S. media was deferential to the White House and its rationale for going to war.

Still, the role of the Arab media as defender of Arab interests blinded many Arab journalists from seeing the whole picture, including their obligation to report the facts, even when notably uncomfortable. They focused mainly—as they should, because they belong to the culture and their primary audience is Arab—on the destructive aspects of the war, particularly civilian casualties, dead and wounded children and women.

Even publications not known for sensational

coverage, such as the panregional *Al Hayat*, published shrieking headlines. Yet focusing the camera of Arab satellite stations, at times in slow motion, on the severely wounded and dead bodies had a numbing effect. There was something ritualistic, even obscene, about displaying maimed civilians because there was no doubt that the purpose was to mobilize support for Iraq and its regime against the invasion and to paint the United States government as reckless in the extreme.

The Arab media’s preoccupation with showing the war’s civilian costs and its display of moral indignation was at the expense of providing their viewers, listeners and readers with a fuller picture of the war. For many Arabs, the true “shock and awe” was not in experiencing or witnessing precision bombing but at the ease with which Baghdad fell. They could not believe that the U.S. forces were at the outskirts of Baghdad. Many Arabs wanted to believe the outright lies of Iraq’s ‘information’ minister, Muhammad Said Al Sahhaf, a buffoon who dominated the air and was elevated by some media outlets to the status of a star.

(continued next page)

## THE PATRIOTISM POLICE

THE MAIN PRESSURES on U.S. media are often the pressures of the marketplace: for readership, viewership and, ultimately, for the support of advertisers. Yet there certainly can be political pressure as well. Since 9/11, patriotism sells. Conversely, when one is not seen as sufficiently patriotic, one can be subject to pressures from what I call the patriotism police.

These kinds of pressures will always be there. If I were sitting in my editorial director job at CNN and I had those pictures from Abu Ghraib, and the government called and said “don’t run them right now because it could really cause us



problems,” there would be two reasons I might pause. One reason is the position taken by the late, great Katharine Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*: Give them a day or two because nothing is necessarily gained by jumping the gun. The other is that I know I would get slammed if I go directly against the U.S. government.

أجانبها عماما

*He came to beautify the eye; instead he poked it out.*

It would start stirring up resentment against us, and the whole Rupert Murdoch controlled News Corp. and FOX would start attacking us because we did something that harmed our soldiers. We would have become the story, more than the pictures.

The difference between the good old days of Mrs. Graham, with her quite correct reasons, and today is the patriotism police pressures that are increased about 50 percent over the way it ever was before.

- Walter Isaacson, president and CEO of the Aspen Institute, was chairman

## PLUS ÇA CHANGE, PLUS C'EST LA MÊME CHOSE

To date, few voices in the Arab media have looked critically at the shortcomings of their coverage of the war in Iraq and its aftermath. Although there is much to criticize—the many blunders of the U.S. occupation authority, the inability

of an Iraqi government regarded by some as lacking legitimacy, squabbling among Iraqi factions and communities—many in the Arab media outside Iraq prefer to question or condemn *a priori* any decision taken by the United States or the new Iraqi government while romanticizing the resistance.

Participants in the media dialogue dealt briefly and hesitantly with anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotypes in the U.S. media and anti-Jewish senti-

ment and anti-American stereotypes in the Arab media. These phenomena are not new, but particularly in the Arab-Muslim world, they have become almost like a religion.

A 1950 memo signed by the U.S. Secretary of State and sent to American embassies in the Arab world warned of rising sentiments against the United States in the Arab media because of Palestine. It suggested a countercampaign of 'propaganda' to

## MASS MEDIA ARE SOLDIERS IN A WIDER WAR

### Media Only Sector That Arabs Engage U.S. on Equal Footing

IN THE CURRENT war in Iraq and Washington's wider confrontation with the Arab world, the U.S. and Arab mass media have become instruments and weapons of war, as well as targets of war. In the heat of battle, both sides' mass media reflect the fear and anger that define their societies. Operating according to commercial dictates, they both seek to expand audience share and advertising income. They do this by pandering to, and reflecting, their public opinions. They wave the flag. They touch the heartstrings.

The result is that Osama bin Laden uses Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyya satellite channels to disseminate his views, and the U.S. creates new Arabic-language media channels to send its views to Arab audiences. The Pentagon uses embedded American journalists to reflect its perspectives, and Arab television reporters go to Fallujah and Gaza to show the full consequences of U.S. and Israeli military actions on the ground, going beyond the sanitized versions in the U.S. and Israeli media.

أَنَا الْغَرِيقُ فَهَاخَوْفِي مِنَ الْبَلْبَلِ

*Since I am drowning, why should I  
fear getting wet?*

This transformation of the media from detached chroniclers of events to active combatants on the information front line reflects a profound change that is only now becoming evident: the mass media is the only sector where the Arab world can engage the United States on equal ground. In all other important arenas—diplomacy, the military, economy, technology—the United States is vastly more powerful than the Arab world and dictates policy to largely pliant client regimes. Yet in the mass media's basic reporting and analysis work, the half-dozen established pan-Arab satellite channels have countered the U.S. mainstream media and fought them to a draw.

Typically, the Pentagon said that its attacks in Fallujah carefully targeted militants, and Al Jazeera's reporter on the ground showed film of dead civilians and bombed mosques. Other than resistance fighters in

Palestine, Iraq and south Lebanon, Arab satellite channels may be the only credible popular symbols of Arab self-assertion and success in a landscape otherwise defined by Arab weakness, docility, servility and humiliation. No wonder 35 million viewers watch Al Jazeera every day.

In the past two years, the United States has mobilized and deployed in the Arab world two offensive forces—the battalions of troops that overthrew the former Baathist regime in Iraq and now occupy and administer the country, and battalions of Arabic-speaking journalists who man three new U.S.-launched mass media operations designed to change Arab perceptions of the United States and its aims in the Middle East: Al-Hurra television, Radio Sawa, and *Hi* magazine. Washington's military and media battalions are enjoying mixed success.

In this time of war, both the U.S. and the Arab media mirror and pander to their public opinions, reflect and promote a rising tide of patriotic sentiment, stereotype and sometimes demonize the other, and resolutely and irresponsibly refuse to probe deeply into the underlying reasons for the mass sentiments of the other side.

The Arab media have done a poor job of explaining why Americans have supported their government's foreign policy, and U.S. media by and large have failed to explore the full causes of why the United States has been targeted by terrorists.

The mass sentiments in the United States and the Arab world are very troubling because they comprise a volatile combination of anger, fear, ignorance and almost Pavlovian need for revenge and retribution. George W. Bush drives the common media message in the United States that Islamist militants want to destroy American civilization, and Osama bin Laden drives the common corresponding message in the Arab world that the United States and Israel are engaged in a campaign to recolonize the Arab-Islamic world and transform its values and identity. Both of these perceptions are grievously flawed and exaggerated. Yet they tend to drive public sentiments in both regions, and they define much of the tone of media coverage, which has become a proxy target in this widening war of our times.

—Rami G. Khouri, *The Daily Star*, Beirut





plant positive stories in the media and to cooperate with some religious elements to offset leftist influence. The document with minor changes is eerily contemporary. Washington today is hoping that U.S.-financed Radio Sawa and Al Hurra satellite TV

will do the trick. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

The anti-Americanism of today is built on the accumulation of resentment of the United States' almost unqualified support of Israeli politics and

Washington's coddling of autocratic, even authoritarian Arab regimes since World War II. In the 1990s, sanctions against Iraq became a factor as well.

Today the forces of economic globalization are also contributing to anti-Americanism among many Arab intellectuals. Globalization is regarded, erroneously, as the latest manifestation of an ongoing American hegemonic project. The radical apocalyptic Islamists have exploited this brew, stoked the fire under it and very effectively married their atavistic visions and impulses with the latest innovations of globalization to produce the kind of nihilistic terror visited on New York and Washington on 9/11.

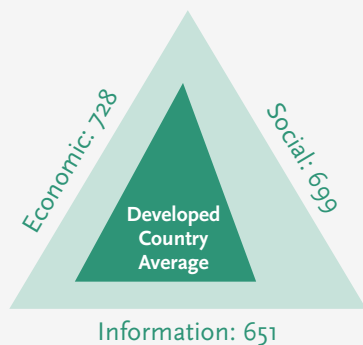
The U.S. and Arab participants at the Luxor and Wye retreats engaged in serious, open and at times blunt discussions. Not surprisingly, they agreed on the need for better understanding, more professional exchange and jointly undertaken programs and projects. Given the legacy and burden of the past, as well as the confusion and uncertainty of the present, the results may be measured as much by these positive intentions as by any ultimate actions.



## INFORMATION IMPERATIVES

### Measuring How Citizens Acquire, Share and Exchange Information

**T**HE WEALTH OF Nations Triangle Index prepared by the Boston-based Money Matters Institute measures 70 developing countries by a combination of 63 variables: one-third economic, one-third social and one-third information.



The information variables are selected to measure a nation's capacity for exchanging information internally among its citizens and externally with the outside world. The data are drawn from a range of public and private sources including the World Bank, United Nations, International Telecommunications Union, Freedom House, Transparency International and IDG.

The 21 information exchange variables are broken down into three categories:

#### Information Aptitude:

- Newspaper readership
- Literacy rate
- Students completing college
- College students studying abroad
- English as a second language

#### Information Infrastructure

- PCs in residential use
- Independent newspapers per capita
- Cable TV households
- Satellite TV coverage
- Telephone quality (connectivity time and cost)
- Cost of international calls

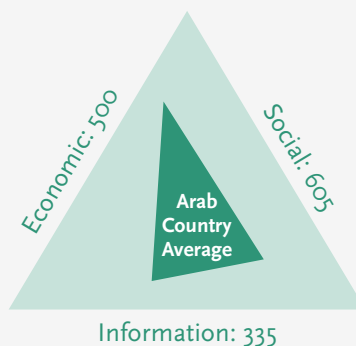
#### Information Distribution

- Radio and TV broadcast services
- TV ownership
- Telephone mainlines
- Cellular phones
- Government IT expenditures
- Press Freedom Index
- Visitors:population ratio
- Internet hosts
- Telephones
- Fax machines

The Index has been prepared annually or twice annually since 1986. Analysis of past totals and trends indicates a direct correlation between a nation's scores and relative ranking year by year in the information exchange portion of the Index and its rate of economic development overall.

The 2003 Wealth of Nations Index ranks six nations in the Arab Middle East among the 70 measured. On average they score midway in the ranking of 70 developing countries recording just over half the Information Exchange totals of the composite score of five developed countries (Japan, the Netherlands, Singapore, Spain and the United States) that are used in the Index as a comparative benchmark.

Perfect information score relative to others:	<b>800</b>
Average information score for five developed countries:	<b>651</b>
Average information score for Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt and Saudi Arabia:	<b>335</b>



## CREDITS

The Arab-U.S. Media Forum was conceived in the Cairo offices of the Ford Foundation in the aftermath of 9/11. It is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, supplemented with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of Menlo Park, California.

### THE FORD FOUNDATION

THE WILLIAM AND FLORA  
**HEWLETT**  
FOUNDATION

The Aspen Institute was engaged to organize and administer the dialogue through its Communications and Society Program headed by Charles Firestone, with assistance from Amy Garmer and Tricia Kelly. The dialogue moderator was Hisham Melham.

The Arabic expressions on pages 2, 4, 9 and 10 appear in *As the Arabs Say* by Isa Khalil Sabbagh (Sabbagh Management Corp., 1983).

"Through the Looking-Glass" was prepared and edited by Crocker Snow Jr., with layout by Sid Hall of Hobblebush Books and printing by Puritan Press of Hollis, N.H.

The media forum is an ongoing initiative.

# WE CAN DO BETTER

## *In the Public Interest*

After detailing the occupational symptoms and the diagnosis, participating journalists were asked to suggest a cure. A range of proposals for monitoring, reforming and improving press practices were offered:

☛ **TALKING THE TALK**—encouraging more Arabic-speaking employees in U.S. newsrooms and more U.S. journalists in Arab countries.

☛ **COALITION OF THE WILLING**—building a network among participants and others to share databases about reliable resources in the Arab region.

☛ **REACHING FOR RULE OF LAW**—promoting changes in laws to foster freedom of expression in the Middle East to safeguard independent Arab print and broadcast media.

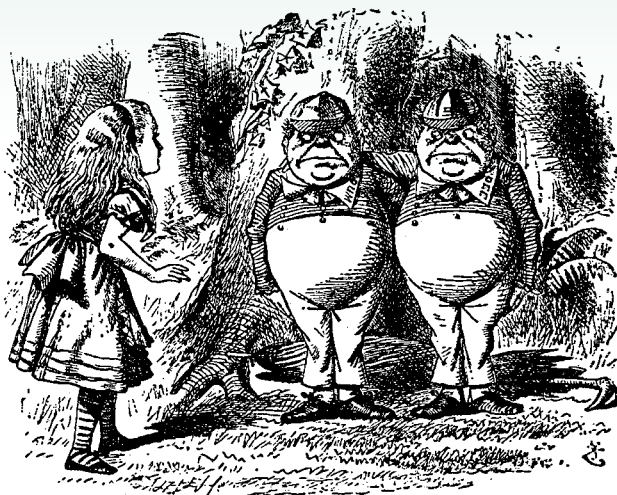
☛ **EXCHANGE MECHANISMS**—activating new exchanges of working journalists to enable Arabs to observe the practice of American journalism firsthand, and vice-versa.

☛ **THE PRESS ON PATROL**—creating an ongoing media watch to monitor press performance, conduct content analysis and apply self-policing and peer-group pressure for improved accountability.

☛ **BEST BY EXAMPLE**—using role models such as 2003 Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Shadid of the *Washington Post* or investigative reporter Seymour Hersh to visit with the Arab media as exemplars of courageous reporting.

☛ **POWER OF THE PURSE**—fostering more independent Arab media by encouraging those in existence and addressing advertising agency and market support mechanisms that could be key.

☛ **ALL TOGETHER NOW**—funding a pool of U.S. and Arab journalists to cover a critical issue jointly from their different vantage points and publishing the results in English and Arabic by the news organizations involved.

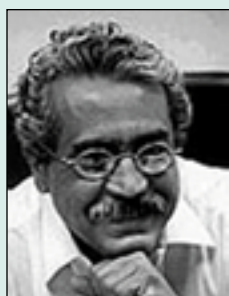


## *One Proposal: JOINT REPORTING ON THE POLITICS OF TORTURE*

**T**HE THEME FOR the project would be “Never Again.” Abuses such as those disclosed at Abu Ghraib are intolerable, wherever they take place. Motivated by Abu Ghraib, U.S. and Arab media would join in investigating the atmosphere in which a network of torture has been allowed to develop.

Our working hypothesis would be that the United States, in its pursuit of Al Qaeda, over the past decade has condoned and regimes—much like what occurred in Latin America in the 1970s and 80s.

An example is the documented use of “rendition” as a U.S. interrogation technique. In interrogating Al Qaeda members, the United States has threatened to turn over prisoners to security services that are known to use torture, such as those in Egypt,



Albania and Pakistan. When the threat fails to elicit the desired cooperation, the prisoners have in fact been rendered. We also  
b  
interrogation techniques that amount to torture.

In this “anything-goes” climate, Arab regimes that use torture have felt comfortable continuing and expanding this practice. Torture of Arab prisoners has occurred in U.S. prisons in Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay, in Israeli prisons, in Egyptian prisons, in Syrian prisons, in Lebanese prisons, in Jordanian prisons, in Saudi prisons and elsewhere.

We believe that a joint U.S.-Arab media effort to expose this network and press for change could be more effective than the efforts of any one media organization acting on its own.

—Hani Shukrallah, *Al Ahram Weekly*



—David Ignatius, *Washington Post*

**C**andid discussion of professional problems and inadequacies occasioned by the two dialogues prompted deeper questions about the root causes. When asked about the value of gathering once more and what subject to address, participants proposed the topic of *‘THE LOOKING-GLASS NATURE OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE ARAB PRESS AND ANTI-ARABISM IN THE U.S. PRESS.’*

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