

Inventing Fiction?

Conspiracy Theories in Arab Media

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AMID INCREASING SCHOLARLY INTEREST in emerging Arab media outlets, the relationship between these media sources and the conspiracy theories that have historically shaped Arab public opinion merits attention. In particular, do Arab media sources perpetuate conspiracy theories, and if so, what might remedy the situation? This article contends that social and technological trends have indeed imbued mainstream media outlets with a tendency towards conspiracy theories, a trend that threatens the vitality and development of the Arab world. Ultimately, however, this tendency is more a reflection of popular beliefs rather than a cause for them. In that light, critiques of Arab media must be complemented by analysis of the factors that create and encourage conspiratorial thinking.

First we must understand what is meant by “conspiracy theory.” For the purposes of this essay, the term refers to any unsubstantiated conspiratorial claim, irrespective of either the outlandishness or the underlying merits of the claim. The term “conspiratorial framework” will refer to a mode of thought that reflexively trusts conspiracy theories, even when they contradict what is easily empirically proven.

This essay addresses Western and Arab concerns about the role of the media in propagating the conspiratorial framework. Indeed, the preponderance of conspiracy theories in Arab print and broadcasting is extensive, so much so it comes as no surprise that some observers blame the Arab conspiratorial framework wholly on the media. Yet especially as Westerners seek to understand the relationship between popu-

lar opinion and media in the Arab world, it is important to note that the conspiratorial framework long predates the advent of genuine Arab media. This fact does not absolve Arab publications and broadcasters of responsibility for perpetuating conspiracy theories, but in acknowledging that Arab media emerged in part to fill an information void that conspiracy theories had been occupying for generations, one is compelled to investigate what first encouraged the conspiratorial framework.

The notion that the media encourages the Arab conspiratorial framework stems from extensive research on the impact of media in other regions. As this article will explain, the conclusion of this research, which took the European school of critical communication theory as its point of departure, is that mass media powerfully shapes the opinions of its audience. American research, in particular, has demonstrated that by repeatedly airing certain issues over others, the media can become the most influential determinant of the audience's interests. In fact, this finding suggests that pressing an audience to consider a certain set of issues can be as important a factor in shaping public opinion as particular editorial slants in the interpretation of issues.

The conclusions of global scholarship on the relationship between media and public opinion hold true in the Arab world. The mainstream Arab media's ability to shape opinion is magnified by the weakness of institutions that countervail media bias in

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countries with more open flows of information. Specifically, the low quality of education in Arab world and the paucity of civil society participation prevent the kinds of information exchanges that might otherwise undermine the conspiratorial framework. Thus, Arab media can readily be said to monopolize a sizeable share of Arab thought.

If one accepts the dominance of the media in the Arab intellectual space, one's instinctive reaction might be to condemn the Arab press and media networks. But in doing so, one risks perpetuating the simplistic view of Arab power structures that the conspiratorial framework promotes. Rather, one should examine the role that political, economic, cultural and technological factors play in shaping the media. This examination has three components.

The first component is an analysis of the mechanisms by which the media supports the conspiratorial framework; without this analysis, the notion that there are forces shaping the media's message is moot.

The second component is an understanding of the institutions that depend on the conspiratorial framework, and for that reason, use their influence on Arab media to

promote conspiracy theories. Specifically, this includes both governments and those government-affiliated groups that benefit most from the widespread thrall of conspiratorial thinking.

The third component is that myriad of social and institutional factors further contributing to a climate within Arab media of shoddy journalism, and with it the conspiratorial framework. Among these factors are the character of an average Arab audience (for indeed, even as influential as media is in shaping public opinion, Arab media outlets still compete for audiences, and to some extent have to cater to audience interests); the political expediency of conspiracy theories; the limits on Arab intellectual and academic capital; and Arab journalistic values and attitudes with regards to objectivity.

With due acknowledgement of the above three components, a critical examination becomes possible of the role Arab media has played in encouraging the conspiratorial framework and why it has done so.

Cultivation and the spiral of silence

George Gerbner's research on the media's role in "cultivation"¹ and Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's theory of "the spiral of silence"² provide useful frameworks for understanding the mechanism by which Arab media so powerfully shapes its audience's beliefs.

Gerbner's studies were initiated to discover whether television audiences readily accepted as facts ideas presented to them via television. Gerbner and subsequent scholars of cultivation theory found that the relationship between mass media and given audiences is complex. Rather than simply adopting the ideas and values of broadcast media, audiences subconsciously conceive of their immediate surroundings using the vocabulary and social frameworks that predominate in broadcast media. The idea that media shapes the audience's cognition of subject matter explains how the overall conspiratorial framework could be promoted by media outlets that report conspiracy theory as fact. Moreover, subsequent studies suggest that audiences lacking personal experience with the subject matter will base critical decisions on the "symbolic reality" constructed for them by the media. This may be particularly important in the Arab world, where suppressed information exchanges mean that Arab audiences have less personal exposure to the subjects of media reports than other audiences may have.

1 George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview," *Mass Communication & Society* Vol. 1, No 3/4 (Summer/Fall 1998); George Gerbner, et al. "Growing Up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective" in Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (eds.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., Inc., 1993).

2 Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 1993).

Noelle-Neumann's theory of the "spiral of silence" posits that one is less likely to voice – or even adhere to – an opinion if one perceives that the opinion will be in the minority. Mass media, then, can vastly alter public opinion by portraying one or another stance as conventional wisdom. Consumers of mainstream media usually estimate the popularity of any given belief by its treatment in the media they consume. Individuals who feel that they are minority opinion-holders tend towards silence. The phenomenon "spirals" because the more these individuals remain silent, the less representation their beliefs have in the media, since, as noted earlier, the media is responsive to public interests. Importantly for our analysis, the theory applies not only to opinions, but also modes of thinking, such as the conspiratorial framework.

Just as the risks of value "cultivation" in the Arab world are elevated by the region's social and political climate, so too is greater the risk posed by the "spiral of silence." Whereas the mechanism of disenfranchisement of minority opinion-holders may be subtle – or not present at all – in Western societies, minority opinion-holders in Arab states are subject to explicit and costly punishments. Not only the state, but also opposition and socio-familial groups that presuppose unanimity on cultural and political issues often punish dissent, whether overtly or implicitly. Minority opinion-holders are often branded agents of foreign powers, a charge that can have drastic social and security consequences. Interestingly, when Noelle-Neumann articulated the "spiral of silence" theory she suggested that it only holds true for subjective matters of opinion; that the spiral of silence would not undermine public understanding of empirically provable facts. Ironically, in the Arab world, the historical predominance of the conspiratorial framework created an intellectual milieu in which facts are subjective. In this context, the spiral of silence makes the conspiratorial framework self-reinforcing.

Government interests and the conspiratorial framework

Once one understands the mechanisms by which the media reinforces the conspiratorial framework one must ask what motive Arab media has to propose conspiracy theories. In order to define this motive, one must identify institutions that have the ability to create incentives that reward or punish certain types of media behavior. Traditionally, Arab governments have used sticks and carrots to manipulate national media to their benefit. It is a logical supposition, therefore, that governments are one of the factors in the media's advancement of the conspiratorial framework.

Despite developments in press independence over the past decade, Arab governments' continued propensity to manipulate press coverage to their benefit is well documented. To the extent that conspiracy theories could advance these interests of governments, one can assume that government officials would naturally seek to pro-

mote the conspiratorial framework. Notably, most ruling parties or monarchies in Arab government use conspiracy theories to blame other groups for government failures.

For example, the Egyptian government used press controls to encourage reports that portrayed Israel's victory in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War as the outcome of an international conspiracy rather than Arab governments' military and economic shortcomings. As a consequence, Arab discontent focused on Israel and the international community, proving less of a threat to defeated Arab regimes. In that instance, government promotion of conspiracy theories was explicit. Arab media now plays a similar role in shaping the public response to terrorism, though the influence of governments on Arab media has been obscured by privatization and the nominal liberalization of press laws. Notwithstanding countless studies, particularly the work of Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, that demonstrate the role of the state in creating conditions that breed terror, Arab media perennially portrays terrorism as the product of conspiracies for which the state bears no responsibility.

If one accepts the premise that Arab governments can and do underwrite the Arab media's embrace of the conspiratorial framework, the next question is how contemporary Arab regimes, often constrained by international pressure and nominal reforms in press laws, exert influence on national media.

1. Overt monopolization

Public ownership, which is to say ruling party control, is still the dominant model for Arab media. There are myriad reasons why this pattern prevails, the most important being rivalries between Arab regimes and restrictions imposed on private capital. But irrespective of its causes, state ownership removes even the pretense that media is disinterested when discussing state policy or issues that reflect on the state. Such stifling control has also inhibited the development of journalistic skills on a par with international standards. As a result, Arab media remains deferent to the policies of the forces that own it.

2. Concealed monopolization

The relationship between Arab media and Arab political and social institutions in the broadest sense is unique. In much of the world, developments in the past two decades have reshaped this relationship, loosening the grip of political and social institutions on the media and making the press and associated networks more responsive to the

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market. The Western European press, for example, became less partisan than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Western European radio and television broadcasting has also become less subject to public control (which was a result of public funding). The same has happened to varying extents in India, Eastern Europe, East Asia and Latin America.

In the Arab world, however, the last two decades' changes in the media industry – and even the advent of satellite channels – have not really changed the relationship between the media and dominant social and political institutions. Whereas media outlets elsewhere are increasingly private and accountable to non-governmental interests, privatized Arab media outlets have been strategically shaped to pro-government business concerns. These corporate entities are usually composed of pro-regime figures that, in tacit exchange for their loyalty to the sitting government, receive preferential access to various markets. This dynamic means that corporate media source owners have a strong incentive to bolster the state and ensure its continued viability. Thus, corporations that own media outlets, rather than the editorial leadership of outlets themselves, can be considered the primary private sector force encouraging the conspiratorial framework embraced by governments. This dependence may explain the lack of foreign investment in Arab media as capital has poured into equivalent markets in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa.

Nominally, private networks deploy several strategies to tow the government line, but most important for this analysis, in light of Gerbner's cultivation theory, is a preponderance of government commentary. Official or semi-official figures represent the overwhelming majority of people appearing in broadcast news coverage, and government agencies are by far the most common subject of Arab news stories.

Arab media in context

The above analysis addresses the reasons for, and mechanisms of, intentional efforts to promote the conspiratorial framework in Arab media. But just as important are circumstantial conditions that, taken together, seem – rather fittingly – like part of a grand scheme but are in fact unfortunate byproducts of the political and social stage of Arab development. Acting simultaneously, these conditions bolster the conspiratorial framework. Just as importantly, they offer good reason to reserve judgment of Arab media outlets themselves, for they are more the products of their environment than the causes of it.

1. The Arab audience

The first of these conditions is the character of the Arab audience. Despite the discussion above on the ability of media outlets to determine their audiences' interests, the

relationship between mass media and public opinion is at least somewhat reciprocal. Especially since the advent of satellite television networks, and the slow trickle of alternative media that are becoming available, the “spiral of silence” is being interrupted by competition. Ordinarily that would be a good thing. In the Arab world, however, interests that audiences develop independently of the media are just as likely to be shaped by conspiracy theories as those developed via television and the press. The Arab public’s willingness to embrace the conspiratorial framework – which is a conditioned result of the long dominance of the conspiratorial framework – is as much to blame for the proliferation of conspiracy theories as anything else. In this way, the predominance of the conspiratorial framework is self-reinforcing, the audience whose interests are ultimately at stake also part of the problem.

In light of increasing competition among satellite channels, Arab media outlets are becoming increasingly responsive to audience interests. In particular, networks that do not enjoy government sponsorship (or government-affiliated support) are scrambling for viewers. With the conspiratorial framework already entrenched as described above, these private networks can scarcely afford to alienate viewers, even if only briefly. As a result, networks are unwilling to undermine the conventional wisdom that holds Arabs victim to conspiracies, whether foreign or domestic. This portrayal appeases the Arab masses that do not want to bear responsibility for change or modernization, a feeling supported by low levels of political awareness, prevalent illiteracy, inadequate education and the predominance of cultural values belonging to the distant past.

The conspiratorial framework also appeals well to Arab audiences because of the predictably conservative reaction it provokes. At the risk of making an observation the defense of which is beyond the scope of this essay, one can observe that Arab culture has become reflexively conservative in the face of modernization and globalization. The reasons for this are complicated, but the conservative dynamic is well rooted in Arab

history. The waves of rational thinking that swept into Arab life are perennially unable to confront the brand of metaphysical thinking dominant since Muslims chose to follow Al-Ghazali rather than Averroes. Yet Arab objections to modernization go beyond the protestations of Salafists; even many moderate Muslims and non-Muslim Arabs object to the social change they fear will accompany political and economic

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modernization. In this context, the conspiratorial framework offers the best excuse to dismiss modernizers; specifically, that modernization is a Western-imposed plot to oppress the Arab world and exploit its resources. Only this conspiratorial conflation of modernization and Westernization could justify out-of-hand dismissal of the merits of modernizing and reforming tendencies.

2. The political expediency of conspiracy theories

Inasmuch as Arab governments are conscious and willing contributors to the conspiratorial framework they can be blamed for the preponderance of conspiracy theories in the Arab world. But like media outlets, governments are only acting predictably in reaction to the circumstances in which they find themselves. In the Arab world, poor education and weak civil society make media manipulation by any means easier than addressing the problems that would otherwise lead to more discontent with Arab governments. State influence on the media offers a “quick fix” for failed initiatives, removing incentives for governments to improve their policies. If governments can recover from failures by masking them in the press, they are unlikely to expend the necessary resources to critically analyze their failures and improve. This discrepancy, in turn, leads to even more dismal failures that require a more complicated media strategy to explain, necessitating the conspiratorial framework.

True, governments are also at least partly responsible for these shortcomings. But the failure that can and should be addressed is the failure to develop a robust civil society. Given other constraints on Arab media, a freer and more liberal press will likely stem from a freer and more liberal society, rather than the other way around. The ultimate goal of crowded Arab airwaves seeking to cross Arab borders is the desire of Arab governments to control the political street, a lasting lesson learned upon Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent division of the Arab street with regards to both the invasion and the subsequent policies of Arab governments.

3. The influence of conservative powers

Conspiracy theories are invaluable for the predictability of the reaction they provoke. Whether directly or indirectly, the Arab media industry, especially Arab satellite channels, is mostly subjugated to conservative political and social forces. These forces impose either overt or covert restrictions on Arab media’s handling of political and ideological issues, as well as limiting the media’s ability to enlighten its audience, which would seem to be what the Arab mind needs most at the current time. Conservative forces generally resist change, modernization, or both together. Thus, conservative forces by their nature and goals provide a convenient climate hospitable

to a pattern of thinking seeking to clear the individual of responsibility by blaming a given situation on conspiracies and other parties, hidden or open. Conspiracy theories in effect blame the devil for current events, with the devil also becoming responsible for the sins committed by individuals. Thus, individuals are largely absolved of initiative and belief in change. The predominance of metaphysical thinking in Arab culture helps engender conspiratorial thinking, since phenomena are attributed to forces that cannot be subjected to rational study.

Some Arab media outlets deliberately align themselves with conservatives whereas others are forced to yield to conservative pressure. The result is that the media's ability to enlighten the audience and promote rational thinking is greatly diminished. Many media outlets have learned their lesson well and gone out of their way to avoid Enlightenment thought. In the early 1990s, for example, *As-Sharq Al-Awsat* was fiercely attacked by conservatives, with mosque sermons calling for it to be boycotted as "a threatening evil." Similar threats were made against *Al-Hayat*. In Egypt, conservative forces acquired expanding influence, revealed in both nonstop growth in the number of mosques and media coverage devoted to examining social issues and even scientific matters according to metaphysical thinking and conspiracy theories. In *Al-Ahram*, for example, the arbitrary link between the Quran and celestial and geological events merited a full page every week for years, this only recently being reduced. Furthermore, the nature of the *fatwas* published in the press and broadcast on television reveal a metaphysical mentality and psychological illiteracy constantly fostered by the media.

In addition, conservative forces are not far removed from the most influential satellite channels that cover regional and international events; the two most popular channels in this category (*Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiyya*) are closer to conservative forces than they are to those supporting rational thought, falling as they do between the hammer of conservative owners and the anvil of an audience eager for analysis based on conspiracies.

4. Limits on Arab intellectual and academic capital

At present, Arab media entities are mostly not profit generating and are therefore at the mercy of their backers. This situation is unsurprising; the astounding expansion in Arab media since the beginning of the 1990s overstretched Arab financial and journalistic resources, which left media outlets scrambling for cheap journalistic input. This low-cost mixture encourages conspiratorial thought in the media in four ways.

First, the intensive use of media for entertainment numbs sensitivity towards reality rather than encouraging attempts to understand it, a mindset that leads to widespread passivity in society. Ironically, despite the series of catastrophes the region

is suffering, media is used for diversion among broad sectors of the Arab public. This attitude may be a reaction to the almost nonstop crises and attendant failures Arabs have experienced since the middle of the 20th century, which together have destroyed confidence in ever finding solutions. This use of media as escapist entertainment fosters conspiratorial thinking as a way to avoid confronting continued failure.

Second, the number of pundits who are qualified and willing to offer rational and objective analysis of contemporary issues is more limited in the Arab world than elsewhere. Certainly the Arab academy is not adequate to fill the demand for regular scholarly commentary in the media. In fact, according to some estimates, the number of expert commentators available to Arab satellite networks and the press lingers at around 150. In this atmosphere, the rubrics of a commentator's success have become distorted; the popularity of some pundits stems more from their ability to hold the audience's attention than from the profundity of their insights. Coupled to the intrigue inherent to conspiracy theories, this low threshold of intellectual capital rewards pundits who can most eloquently explain a conspiracy rather than the few who might be able to debunk one.

Third, the rapid flow of information which began at least a decade ago in the Arab world so far appears to be more a technological fact than a cultural one; the rapid

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exchange of knowledge and intellectual rigor that accompanies it has not taken sincere root in the region. Otherwise healthy flows of information become more complicated when the flood of knowledge taxes the very ability to keep up with it. Education has not kept pace with the sudden influx of media sources, creating a situation in which audiences are unequipped to discern the quality

of media they consume. Not surprisingly, the weak empirical and logical foundation of most conspiracy theories does not undermine their credibility with a gullible Arab audience.

Fourth, the last 10 years of information flow within the Arab world have not empowered freedom of expression, which had been allowed a certain liberty by some Arab regimes, but have been dealt a blow culturally and socially by the ascendance of conservative forces. Freedom of expression is not necessarily the logical result of the free flow of information, given the absence of development and current levels of political awareness. In the Arab world, champions of freedom of the press, a concept that has progressed relatively far, are still largely unaware of another more important freedom,

which is freedom of thought. Freedom of expression is being restricted to the freedom to criticize the government, whereas many other types of freedom of expression are waning. Looking at the freedom to criticize the political system in Egypt today, for instance, versus the same right before the July 1952 revolution, the two situations are roughly comparable, but freedom of expression in the broader sense cannot be compared.

5. Arab journalistic values and attitudes on objectivity

Notwithstanding the questionable credibility of some partisan commentators, Western media is dogmatically devoted to objectivity. The notion of dispassionate reporting is at the core of journalism, but it is also an 18th century Anglo-Saxon invention. To Arab pundits, objectivity – that is, respect for the audience’s right to have facts presented untainted by opinion – is a less noble virtue than adherence to one’s stance. This set of priorities is further complicated by the importance of news analysis in contemporary media. That is, even for Western news organizations, reporting must be supplemented by analysis to be valuable. Absent a clear commitment to objectivity, analysis quickly becomes slant. In the Arab world, strict news is retreating before the advance of opinion pages, with their near-complete disregard for objectivity. The result is the supremacy of opinion over fact and editorials over news columns. In this “opinion media,” there are more opportunities for conspiratorial thinking to appear and predominate, since compelling language is more important than empirical support for one’s argument, and since there is simply less straight reporting to contradict wrong-headed beliefs.

This cultural reality threatens the media’s position and destroys the chances of increased objectivity in news coverage in general. The sudden change in news coverage of the war on Iraq before and after the collapse of the Iraqi regime shows how much news coverage is subject to polarization, both regarding the media’s work and its audience. This polarization dominates not only direct news coverage but also opinion articles. Studies of op-eds in four Arab countries (Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Syria) revealed that the vast majority were unabashedly one-sided messages. This means that many Arab op-ed writers assume a readiness on the part of the reader to accept the one point of view adopted in the article, or that the writers support the dominant opinion amongst the target audience. In any case, the pluralism currently allowed in many Arab countries is under pressure, checking its growth if not threatening its very existence.

Conclusion

The success of the conspiratorial framework in Arab media is complicated and, fitting-

ly, is not the product of an orchestrated effort to obscure fact. Rather, the dominance of conspiracy theory over rational thought is the product of institutional incentives, cultural and professional values, and limited resources. Though it would certainly not behoove the Arab world to turn a blind eye to the media's malfeasance, those who would see the media change must focus their efforts elsewhere. The Western presumption that a vigorous media is vital to a free society is not mistaken; the Arab press will surely play a part in future bouts of liberalization. But given how multifaceted the constraints on Arab media currently are, efforts to alleviate those constraints, whether by improving education, encouraging civil society, or reforming Arab economies, are a worthier use of time and resources than efforts dedicated to media reform. Only once the media is free of its encumbrances can it help overturn conspiracy theories and become the tool for democracy that reformers so desperately need. ■