

**Satellite Television and Public Sphere in Egypt: Is there a Link?**  
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## **Introduction**

Among the most salient developments in present societies are fundamental and rapid changes of mass media. Public discussions and academic literature are speculating on the societal consequences of these changes. There is a concern that media changes contribute to a deterioration of the political process in general and to a fragmentation of the public sphere and an increase of political cynicism in particular (Schulz, in Splichal, 2001). Research on this area has mixed conclusions on how communication technologies affect the public sphere. More importantly is that political and communication sciences literature on democratization offer little guidance on the hypothesized relationship between electronic communications and public sphere and the level of democracy within a nation. This is of course not surprising; given the novelty of the Internet, e-mail, direct satellite broadcasting and even the widespread availability of fax machines. (Hill & Hughes).

On the other hand, we should not read the ongoing broadcast transformation as a linear process leading to a truly independent and critical political role for television in contemporary Arab societies. The emergencies of commercial television and the restructuring of government-operated systems are in no way conducive to political pluralism and diversity in Arab societies dominated by authoritarian political systems (Aysh, 2002). I argue that most of questions about the impact of satellite television on the public sphere in the Arab world have not been answered yet and what has been written on the subject reflects individual understanding of the hypothesized links between developments of satellite television and that of public sphere. It is unlikely to find an empirical research project in the Arab region focusing on the possible impact of communication technologies on public sphere. It is also evident that most of what has been written about the public sphere is mainly based on the writings of Habermas and mostly reflects the Western perspective on the public sphere. Mass media

including satellite television have been referred to in writings of Habermas and many other Sociologists, Political Scientists, and Philosophers as mere instruments and not as a legitimate force in defining and shaping the public sphere.

This paper adopts the "media constructed public sphere" approach originally developed by Winfried Schulz (2001) in his article "Changes in Mass Media and Public Sphere". The main idea of this approach is that media are regarded as constitutive of a public sphere. This does not ignore the fact that there are some other social arenas in which persons interact face-to-face in order to exchange information and opinions, such as, coffee houses, club meetings, and party conventions.

This article discusses how satellite television introduces a new public space for Egyptians to engage in and debate relevant sociopolitical issues. Since the programs of any Arab satellite television channels can be received by Egyptian audience, it is difficult to separate the impact of Egyptian satellite channels from that of non-Egyptian channels. Arabs share the same Arabic language, culture historical background and many other characteristics that made it possible for any Arab audience to easily receive and interact with the programs of all Arab television satellite channels.

The article is based on the argument that the revolution that has been taking place in Arab satellite television since the mid-1990s introduced a new public space to the Egyptians with new political programs, with different style in news coverage and different style in talk shows. The Arab satellite television revolution has also positively affected the original government-controlled terrestrial television in Egypt. The new public sphere made it possible for Egyptians to engage in political debate completely different from the kind that was presented on government-controlled television. However, the impact of new quasi-liberal public space is limited in terms of its potential to form Egyptian public opinion and its ability to affect the political policies and decisions especially, the recent constitutional amendments. This is largely due to the fact that the parliament is largely composed of members of the ruling party, in addition to other political and security restrictions.

To sum up the argument on which this article is based, I may say despite the fact that satellite television has brought about new quasi-liberal public sphere in Egypt; there is in fact, no noticeable improvement in the democratic quality of political institutions and political life in Egypt. This is mainly due to the fact that democratic transformation is contingent on a comprehensive political reform that considers the rule of law, free elections, independent media, a real separation between state authorities especially executive and legislative authorities, independence of judicial authority, powerful civil society and public opinion, and absence of emergency law and dominance of principles of good governance; transparency, accountability, responsibility and decentralization. The article is divided into three sections. In the first part I look at the public sphere as a cornerstone of democratic developments. The second part deals with satellite television and public sphere and the debate on linkages between satellite television and public sphere in Egypt is presented in the third part.

### **Public Sphere and Democracy**

Most directly, “the public sphere is paradigmatically associated with discussions on democracy and its shortcomings” (Pinter, 2004, in Sinekopova, 2005). In this respect, the public sphere is viewed as a resource for growth of democracy, promoting discussions of civil society and public life (Baum, 2001; Gandy, 2002, in Sinekopova, 2005). The concept of the public sphere appeals to the nature of civil society as it attempts to explain the social foundations of democracy and to introduce a discussion of the specific organization of social and cultural bases within civil society for the development of an effective rational-critical discourse (Downey & Fenton, 2003, in Sinekopova, 2005). Habermas (1992) saw the public sphere as a domain of social life in which public opinion could be formed out of rational public debate. Ultimately, informed and logical discussion, could lead to public agreement and decision making, thus representing the best of the democratic tradition.

Blumler and Gurevitch (2001) argue that the new interactive media have a “vulnerable potential” to enhance public communications and enrich democracy. Scholars of political sciences also ask if it is possible to foster democratic development with the help of communication technology (for example, Bertelson, 1992; Calabrese and Borchert 1996; Friedland 1996; Ogden 1994). Hagen states that research on the relationship between communication technologies and democracy has turned up ample evidence illustrating that concepts of electronic democracy contribute

both to democratic theory and our understanding of the working of a democratic political system in the information age (Newhagen, 2000).

Accordingly, it is the condition of the public sphere that differentiates democratic political systems from non-democratic ones. In the absence of the public sphere, people are deprived from a space through which they can govern themselves by themselves for themselves. "The importance of the public sphere to democratic theory and democratic movements cannot be underestimated. For a functioning and purposeful citizenry to develop, it is argued that they must have a space in which to engage debate and make decisions. This space is thought to exist outside of the governmental sphere and the private sphere. The public sphere is seen to lie between these two other parts of social life in order to develop solutions to social problems. Citizens in the public sphere are meant to leave their personal concerns behind, and transcend their limited subjectivities in pursuit of 'the common good'" (Franko, 2005).

Engagement in the public sphere defines the public, and it is best to envision the public sphere not necessarily as a public space, but as a purposeful interaction towards discussion and democratic decision-making. Habermas tells us that, "a public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (Franko, 2005).

To better understand the nature of the public space we need to differentiate it from other types of spaces. A space is private when given individuals are recognized by others as having the right to establish criteria that must be met for anyone else to enter it. Thus, we speak of a private room, a private meeting, and private parts. Such a space belongs to someone that has the right to establish criteria by which access is allowed or denied. Sacred space is different and similar. Such a space is neither made by human action nor can it be owned. It is the God. The sacred space as identified here reflects the European view which is completely different from that of Islam, as there is no separation between private and public spaces from the Islamic point of view. At the other extreme, a space may be common to human beings. There are no criteria for common space. It is not owned or controlled and is open to everyone. Thus, the sea or forests are (or can be) common space. This is not a space to which

one goes to speak with others and therefore, it is not a public realm, and its boundaries are not contestable per se. Public space is a space created by and for humans that is always contestable, and it is open to those who meet the criteria, but it is not owned in the sense of being controlled (Henaff & Strong, 2001).

In the tradition of Western thought, the very idea of democracy is inseparable from that of public space. It is perceived as a disposition to open and contradictory debate with the aim of making possible a reasoned understanding between citizens with regard to the matter of the definition of institutions, the formulation of laws, and their enforcement. From this point of view, public means simultaneously: open to all, well known to all, and acknowledged by all. Public space stands in opposition to private space, because it is civic space and it belongs to the citizens. Historically, the public sphere has been associated with revolution. The public gathering of individuals, to make decisions and garner support is critical to most reform movements. Thus, Habermas defines the public sphere as “the scene of a psychological emancipation that corresponded to a political economic one” (Henaff and Strong, 2001).

The public sphere and democracy should not be considered as inseparable from one another, because the democratic political systems are based on the voice of the people and the rule of the majority that is likely formed through a liberal public sphere in which people freely discuss the critical public issues. In Egypt, the situation is different from that of Western countries, as the separation between public sphere and democracy is the most likely dominant principle in the Egyptian milieu. The government is obliged to allow a partly-free public sphere. However, it restricts the formation of real public opinion and establishes the types of laws and legislations that perpetuate the dominance of the ruling party. Simply speaking, it seems that the government allows people to say whatever they want, while allowing itself to act whatever it wants. In this political atmosphere, it is difficult to find a link between public sphere and democratic transformations. However, a free or partly-free public sphere may eventually lead to formation of public opinion that will govern.

Habermas (1989) first conceived of the public sphere as a physical space that first emerged in coffee houses in England and salons in France in the 17th and 18th centuries with the rise of capitalism and the state. He describes the public sphere as a physical place where propertied, educated men who were members of the bourgeois joined together to engage in rational-critical discourse on public matters

and other issues of the day. Even in the early public sphere, newspapers and journals were an enabling technology that helped create a network bringing the forums of the coffee houses and salons together to create the larger public sphere. For Habermas and Alexis de Tocqueville, the public sphere was a place where men gathered to rationally discuss issues of the day. Newspapers played a key role in the public sphere by supplying information, creating interest, and helping set the agenda for participants in the public sphere (McCrery, and Newhagen, 2001).

Conversation and action oriented around discussion define what the public sphere should be, according to classic theorists. John Keane describes the public sphere as “a particular type of spatial relationship between two or more people, usually connected by a certain means of communication...in which nonviolent controversies erupt, for a brief or more extended period of time, concerning the power relations operating within their given milieu of interaction and/or with the wider milieus of social and political structures within which the disputants are situated” (Rajagopal, 2004). The linkage between people via means of communication is critical here, whether this communication exists via conversation, in the press or on satellite television. Communication is essential for the public sphere, and in many ways, it is the only constitutive element of that space (Franko, 2005).

At a general level, the concept of the public sphere is defined by many scholars as designating a realm related to democratic political discourse. Here, the notion of "public" as in "public opinion" refers to a collection of politically significant shared common interests impacting ideologically upon the exercise of state of power. Of course not all politics (democratic or otherwise) take place through discussion (public or not). The public sphere, however, is a concept applicable to voluntary and violence-free political behavior. For this reason, Habermas argues that the public sphere needs institutional guarantees of a constitutional state on the one hand, and on the other, a political culture in the broader society of populace accustomed to freedom. This perception helps explain the importance of a democratic constitution and the rule of law as contextual conditions of media's optimum democratic role (Habermas 1992, in Berger, 2002).

When Alexis de Tocqueville, a French nobleman and political scientist, visited the United States in 1831, he was so impressed with what he termed the "voluntary associations" of men in the United States; he devoted much study and later description of these associations in his treatise on American life, democracy in

America. Although Tocqueville utilizes the term “associations” rather than “public sphere,” a thorough reading of both men's writings leaves little doubt that they are talking about the same thing. There are obviously some differences between the European and American public spheres. These differences are both political and cultural, but the similarities are more numerous and profound than are the differences. Tocqueville even surmised that the notion of associations in America was imported from England and that the differences can be attributed to Americans' incorporation of their manners and customs (Newhagen, 2004).

There are numerous and profound similarities between the American public sphere of the 19th century as described by Tocqueville and the European public sphere of the 17th and 18th centuries as described by Habermas. Nonetheless, there are also discernible differences between the spheres with the greatest difference resting in the relationships between the spheres and their governments. The American public sphere did not clearly reside in the private realm; it was often tied to government. The stronger relationship between government and the American public sphere is logical when one remembers that the Americans were members of a self-governing democracy who believed they had a duty to take an active role in the official governance of their communities. The public spheres of Europe occurred at times and within countries where political power was still very much vested in monarchs and church leaders.

Another difference between the two public spheres is that within the American associations, people pursuing public interests coexisted with people pursuing private interests (Tocqueville, 1956 in Newhagen, 2004) Habermas believed that the pursuit of private interests displaced the pursuit of public interests in the European public spheres (Habermas, 1989 in Newhagen, 2004) In Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere he privileges face-to-face communication, believing the most valuable role for the media is to provide information for intimate exchanges. He accepts that the printed word played a significant role in the development of the bourgeois public sphere, but he did not fully conceive of the key role for media in the public sphere. In his writings he also expresses a distrust for mediated communication, seeing it as an obstacle to "discursive rationality and communicative authenticity," (Dahlgren, 1995, in Newhagen, 2004)

Taking the aforementioned discussion into account, it is safe to state that public sphere depends to a large extent on the nature of the political system in which it exists. In Europe, the public sphere-which was achieved despite opposition from the state powers, is at odds with what transpired in the United States. Habermas' suggestion that the European public sphere was regulated by its individual members is contradicted by the U.S.'s case, where the media emerge instead as the first and foremost project of nation-building. Starr considers three extended and overlapping "constitutive moments" when political choices and technological developments shaped the media's growth. "America's first information revolution" was the first constitutive" moment," extending from the colonial period to the onset of the civil war" (Rajagopal, 2006). Its distinctive trait was the deliberate development of inexpensive postage, schools, and newspapers through direct and indirect subsidies. The intent was to enable the people of the nascent and geographically dispersed republic to communicate with each other and thereby strengthen their internal ties. The result was a population that actively participated in public and political life. Thus, while European countries discouraged communication by placing taxes on the postal service, the early Post Office in the U.S. saw its goal as promoting intercourse, and reducing the mental distance between town and country. At one point, America's ratio of post offices to people was four times that of England or France.

Starr also notes the government's early realization of the importance of public education, although it was public schools of the North, not the South, that regularly increased enrollment. Starr explains at length the policies that made books and newspapers far less expensive in the United States than in Europe (among these was a disregard for European copyright laws that made windfall profits possible for U.S. publishers). Contemporary observers noted the effects of the early development of the press in the US. The private realm did not arise from a struggle against state absolutism, as in Europe, but as an effect of state formation. Not surprisingly, the constitution and the government are frequently granted cultural sanction to restrict the scope of these customs (Starr, 2004).

On the other hand, Arab political systems have created a politically repressive atmosphere to control the public sphere. The development of media and state in the Arab world confirm the fact that all Arab states controlled the media, especially radio



and television, to prevent the establishment of a free public sphere, to restrict the formation of public opinion and to hinder any democratic transformation in the region. "There are several reasons for the predominance of government-owned broadcasting system in the Arab World. However, the most important factor is the intense government interest in the media as political instruments, media reach beyond borders and literary barriers; the government has a much greater interest in controlling them or at least keeping them out of hostile hands" (Rugh, 2004).

In his research on "Arab media and communication systems in the information age", Hamada concludes that democratizing the media and communication system represents a real threat to any undemocratic regime. The majority of Arab governments have never been interested in creating a democratic communication environment in which the citizens can have a voice regarding public issues. Government operated media agencies provide most of the information, and much of the content it supplies is politically biased, incomplete, and of poor quality.

Most Arab governments claim that the issues of development must take priority and that the time is not right for democracy. Therefore, democracy is not a part of most Arab leaders' political agenda.. Although democracy and development represent two distinctly different human endeavors, they are both required, to ensure success, sustainability, adequate levels of information and popular participation. The more objective and the wider the scope of information conveyed, the more likely it will be to sustain democracy and development. Modern communication technology is essential in the speed and efficiency with which data and news are processed and disseminated among different citizens of the society. Another common and related requirement for both democracy and development is an active and public participation (Attiga, 2001).

The bulk of the discussion on media pluralism as a political value continues to be based on the conceptual framework of the public sphere. As a general normative concept against which to assess the media, much of the debate draws upon Habermas's early work (1989) but also, more broadly, the public sphere is understood as a general context of interaction in which deliberation and discussion take place and citizens in general inform and form themselves into the public (Karppinen, 2004). Lippman conceives of public opinion as the aggregate opinion of persons whose

individual opinions are pieced together from what they hear, read, see and are able to imagine. He also believes that their exposure to information is manipulated to create a certain opinion that meets the needs of elites (Elliott, 1982 in Newhagen, 2004). Lippman's idea of public opinion is quite different from Habermas' conception. Habermas believes public opinion is what develops in the public sphere as the result of rational discourse. He views public opinion as the culmination of sharing of information among enlightened individuals operating in the public interest (Newhagen, 2004).

The author completely agrees with Habermas's notion of the priority of public interests as a condition for the public sphere. First, in order for the public sphere to exist, priority has to be given to social issues. If people left public issues behind and concentrate on their private interests, there will never be a space for the common good, common grounds for members of the public to exchange experience, but personal interests that work against the collective mind. In Egypt, the overwhelming majority are poor, illiterate, and unemployed people who spend much of their time trying to save their food. Hence, the majority is handicapped by illiteracy, poverty, illness and unemployment to such a great extent that they lack motivation to engage in the "public sphere". Also complicating the problem is the government's intolerance with the activities of the opposing parties and political movements. Due to this atmosphere, the role of new communication technologies, especially the Internet, in enhancing public sphere is limited.

### **Mass Media and Public Sphere**

As Mansson (1999) points out, many scholars regard the media as the main institution of the contemporary public sphere. However, we have to consider the fact that restricted media will never contribute to public sphere. If the media are state-owned, working under direct supervision of the government officials and suffer from political and economic pressures, the government's voice is the only one that will be heard in the public sphere. For Habermas, the real public is the one that assembles and engages in dialogue. There is no public space without "reciprocal communication". For Régis Debray, the real public is the one that reads and writes, that reasons, as opposed to one that allows itself to be influenced by images (Agacinski, 2001, in Henafe and Strong, 2000). In the author's opinion, the public sphere is the freedom of

the public to convene via free media space which is detached from the government, providing marginalized people an arena to speak out about public policies and decisions. As my definition illustrates media ownership, media diversity and freedom of speech are requirements for a true public sphere.

Although we can accept the assumption made by Manuel Castells who asserts that “the media have become the essential space of politics”, we have to be careful of whether all types of media have the potential to establish a public sphere or not. For the public sphere to exist, the media have to provide equal opportunities for its users to freely discuss and form their opinions which eventually will form an important mechanism to affect state policies. Thus, any analysis of the contemporary political climate must take into account the interaction between the media and political candidates, issues and citizens. Political participation, citizenship and the media cannot be separated. As Castells points out, “to an overwhelming extent people receive their information, on the basis of which they form their political opinion...through the media. Thus the media space is the space of information, and the sphere citizens depend on to direct them towards relevant issues” (Franko, 2005).

Having said this, it is not acceptable to conclude that entertainment-oriented media or government-owned media will play a significant role in shaping an Egyptian public sphere. Therefore, Habermas' was concerned about modern media and his concerns stem in part from the media's reliance on mass advertising for revenue. Although advertising dates back to ancient times, mass advertising sharply increased following the industrial revolution as manufacturers sought markets for their factory-produced goods. (Fang, 1997 in Newhagen, 2004). So, much of what appears in media today is not meant to be informative and enlightening for participants in the public sphere. It is merely entertainment and designed to attract audiences that will appeal to advertisers.

Michael Robinson's research (1975, 1976, and 1977) demonstrates that voters who rely on television for political campaign information are prone to develop a feeling of political inefficacy, distrust, and cynicism. He coined the term "videomalaise" in order to express that television gives rise to political malaise among the public. Gerbner and his collaborators' research seems to justify the interpretation that television viewing cultivates fear, alienation, and interpersonal mistrust (Gerbner,

1990, Gerbner and Gross, 1976). In Europe, similar concerns became an issue in public debate and an object of study in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the course of deregulating and commercializing the broadcasting sector. European television adopted the American model in the 1980s and conquered the market with programs emphasizing entertainment, crime and violence. It is quite likely that changes of this kind have an impact on the political system and the public sphere (Schulz, in Splichal, 2001).

With the advent of the technologies of modernity, time has become separated from space and space from place, giving rise to ever more "disembedded social systems". Social relations have been lifted out of local contexts of interaction and restructured across "indefinite spans of time-space" (Giddens, 1990). As a result, what can be defined as a global public sphere emerged. The world trend of democratization starting from the mid of 1980s until now should be understood from the link between global mass media and global public sphere. Political observers like Ted Turner to Robert Kaplan have suggested that many of the changes that led to the breakup of the Soviet Union stemmed from the rapid and uncontrolled spread of information, news, sports, and entertainment across political borders. The Soviet Union spent two decades fighting in vain to control broadcasting into their country. Significantly, they sought to place limits on countries and satellite networks that would seek to beam programming across international boundaries. The Soviet Union's attempt failed and it subsequently broke up. Indeed, the power of satellite broadcasting is powerful.

Though Habermas relates public sphere to face-to face conversations and was skeptical about the influence of mass media, theorists posited suggestions as to how the public sphere was consequently being transformed into the new 'information society'. The national control of governments over the information delivered to the national population was eroded. The new ICTs allowed information to traverse borders and individuals to interact with other audiences beyond the reach of the state. Thus they accelerated and intensified a global social transformation which threatened to make national political structures redundant. Writers like Manuel Castells have notably argued that ICTs provide new opportunities, or spaces, for information to accumulate and be exchanged, not least about what governments do. He has suggested that governments will find it increasingly difficult to control interactive access to this

information and thus to assert the power of the state in, or over, the public sphere. He has further suggested that this would progressively lead to a more horizontally networked society in place of current top-down forms of communication. The power of the state would be eroded, while the individual citizen's capacity to engage directly with an un-bordered society would be exponentially increased. The capacity of the state to exert its authority over the range of information or modes of political participation available via conventional means is reduced (Murphy, 2006).

Consistent with assumptions about communication technologies and public sphere, it was the 2002 UNDP report that apparently established a link between communication technologies and freedom and democracy. However, it still rejects a cause-effect relationship between the two. The report concludes that the world has more democratic countries and more political participation than ever, with 140 countries holding multiparty elections. Of 147 with data, 121—with 68% of the world people – have some or all of the elements of formal democracy in 2000. This compares with only 54 countries, with 46% of the world's people, in 1980. Since then 81 countries have taken significant steps toward democratization while 6 have regressed.

The impact of communication technologies in fostering democracy is not universal. Satellite television's potential for democratization depends on the overall socio-economic political context in which it operates. As Noveck comments: it is not technology per se which either fosters or denigrates between communication media and participatory democratic culture. Technology exists within a framework of values and ideals both inherent to it and imposed by the external legal and institutional structures" (2001). Hence, there is no single relationship between ICTs and democracy, and it is safe to suggest that the Internet and satellite television may have different and sometimes contradicting effects on the democratization process in different socio-economic and political contexts (Hamelink, 1999). The communication revolution has also led several authors to assume that a fragmentation of the public will be the result of a proliferation of channels in an expanding media environment. Fragmentation refers to the process whereby the same amount of audience attention is dispersed over more and more media sources. The public sphere may dissolve into a large number of subcultures and when this occurs,

the common experience for all members of society disappears (McQuail, 1977 in Schulz).

### **Satellite Television and Public Sphere in Egypt**

Because the global nature of satellites limits governments' ability to control the domestic usage of these technologies, Egypt has begun taking tentative steps to deregulate their broadcasting policies and liberalize their content. Egyptian government has also found itself unable to cover the cost of infrastructure, and has chosen to let private investors enter the market (Gher, 2000 in Amin, 2004). Therefore, Egypt is considered to be one of the leading Arab countries that has initiated some tentative liberal initiatives to cope with the international developments in communication technologies, international demands requesting more democratic communication and more free public sphere.

The ongoing changes in the Egyptian audiovisual sector can be understood from three different perspectives. Firstly, the political: Egyptian Radio and Television Union, "ERTU" a state monopoly, is a tool of state power, a mouthpiece of state policies, official Islam, Egyptian heritage, and good morals. Through what it reveals and conceals, television reflects a biased societal view. Secondly, the economic: the ongoing liberalization process jeopardizes the state's monopoly on television. Thirdly, the technological: without falling into "technological determinism" or limiting ourselves to this paradigm, we can hold that the spread of broadcast satellite has played an important role in the current changes (Guaaybess, 2001).

Given the findings of research on media and public opinion in Egypt, it seems that the third perspective of Guaaybess is optimistic and unrealistic. The main trend of scholarly work regardless of the media under consideration, the content analyzed and the audiences interviewed or even the time in which data were collected, emphasizes the fact that media in Egypt fail to set the public's agenda. The data shows that the correlation between Al Ahram's agenda and the readers' agenda is very weak and insignificant (Hamada, 2001). In "Legal and Ethical Determinants of Private Arab Channels television"'s research, it was found that Arab news satellite channels: 1) lack freedom, 2) lack objectivity, 3) irresponsible media, 4) lack credibility, 5) impartial media and, 6) inaccurate media (Saber, 2005). Consistent with this line of research, Seham (2003) concluded that in comparison to some other Western and Arab media, Egyptian media are increasingly losing their credibility. The latter are more credible,

more reliable, more relevant and more objective than the Egyptian ones. Galal (2005) and Mohsen (2005) assert that steady incremental rise in media reform in Egypt is the result of three factors: 1) information and communication technologies that allowed the audiences to expose themselves to more liberal and opened communication with little or no government control on media sites, media channels or content that people use, 2) economic pressures that enforce the government to invite businessmen to invest in media industry and finance some new media projects that are beyond the capacity of the government and, 3) the new liberal economic wave that opened the door for a new generation of capitalists who seek to maintain political support for their economic projects by owning media outlets especially television channels like Drem and Al Mehwar. It is not likely that satellite television serves as forum or space for people to discuss the public issues and debate on how to solve their societal issues. Due to the critical role of satellite television in determining public sphere that shapes public opinion which eventually restricts the government dominance, the Egyptian government directs, distorts and constrains the local political satellite communication. However, the Egyptian government's lack of control over other Arab satellite channels that deliver different types of political programs able to form a different public sphere.

The quasi-liberal public sphere represents a threat to Arab governments that managed recently to put more restrictions on Arab satellite television. In February, 12, the Council of Arab Ministers of Information with the exception of Lebanon and Qatar issued a document that includes the principles organizing satellite transmission of radio and television broadcasting. A critical assessment of the document indicates that Arab governments intend to restrict the amount of freedom available to some free broadcasters whose programs have contributed to the quasi-liberal public sphere and also produced more antagonism against Arab regimes. According to the document, Arab television is obliged to respect the principles of national sovereignty and national interests of each state which has the right to impose what it deems laws and regulations in more details. The document also stipulates that for any violation of the principles, the given state has the right to withdraw the license or not to renew it. It is obvious that Al Jazeera's coverage of the Arab sensitive issues along with some few channels and their positive impact on the Arab public sphere lies behind the joint action made by Arab Ministers of Information to put an end for the potential of the

liberal channels. (The document of organizing principles of Arab television broadcasting, 2008).

One important strategy for appealing to public sphere is objectivity. The convention of objectivity—maintenance of a neutral perspective, detached from political partisanship and ideology—should lead to a perception of journalists and satellite television as being in the middle of the audience’s political preferences. As much as objectivity is defined philosophically, socially, and politically, it is also driven by what Lippman calls the ‘central motive’ for the immediate satisfaction of the largest number of people (Soloski, 1996). Objectivity can be defined also as the media’s tendency to seek balance in their treatment of controversial issues (Terkildsen, Schnell & Ling, 1998). The point here is to address how the public perceives satellite television in Egypt. If the public views the satellite channels as biased, it will neither serve as public space nor as determinant of its attitudes and opinions. Egyptian satellite television channels have historically and continue to broadcast entertainment programs that emphasize drama, movies, music, songs, and sports. It is rare to find a talk show on state-owned television that challenges the political ideology. The aforementioned discussion is also applicable to private satellite channels such as Dreem 2, and Al Mahwar. While they operate under different tenets, broadcasters in the private sector are not psychologically free from the old media system restrictions which served to reinforce the government’s agenda. All too often, these institutions censor themselves, which prohibits private channels from being a real public sphere for Egyptians.

It is a fact that Egyptians are bombarded with a huge number of Arab satellite television channels. Most of them are privately owned, while some are owned by different Arab states, in addition to many foreign channels. If we consider the language barrier and the inability of the overwhelming majority of Egyptians to access the non-Arabic satellite television, it makes sense to disregard non-Arab television from this research. Accordingly, the picture of Arab satellite television can be perceived in this way, because the television ownership is divided between the state and the private sectors. The state-owned channels are still defending the government news and views, preventing deviant and hostile attitudes and opinions from being heard. Therefore, Arab state-owned channels are far from being a public space. The private channels are owned by the wealthy businessmen whose main interest is to gain and maximize revenue from advertising. The tendency towards



maximization of profit determined the policy as well as the content of the programs of private channels which is non-informative, noncontroversial and mainly cheap entertainment.

In this context, we have to consider what Arab communication scholars observed when they call for a new understanding of the link between private ownership and political freedom in the Arab World. Most Arab privately owned satellite television stations are still indirectly controlled by the ruling national elites, whether through family relationships, or by a manipulated board of shareholders such as LBCI's. Government owned satellite stations in Syria, Jordan and Egypt are still the official voices of the regimes in those countries. Privatization of the media as commercial companies does not insure political pluralism (Kraidy, 2002). The analysis of ownership arrangements for Arab satellite channels shows that the dividing line between state and private channels is not always very clear. Furthermore, it is not always the most important criterion for distinguishing one channel from another. Some privately-owned channels have enjoyed various forms of state support (Sakr, 2002). Hence, in most Arab states, presenting uncensored views, dialogues, and political debates in a free and open manner without government restrictions is unusual (El-Nawawy & Iskandar 2002 in El -Nawawy and Gher, 2003). Al Jazeera, Al Arabya, and some other serious programs such as Al Asherah Massa of Dreeem 2, 90 minutes and Hewart on Hot Fire of Al Mehwar, Klam Rosas "pencil" on Dubai TV, represent a rarity among the overwhelming cheap entertainment and political propaganda of most Arab satellite broadcasting channels whether they are state-or privately owned (Hamada, 2002).

The aforementioned discussion does not deny the fact that satellite television has undermined state control of television flows, since programs can be transmitted from any Arab countries and be received in any other. Idealists see this development as the harbinger of a pan-Arab civil society unshackled from government censorship. From this viewpoint, satellite television talk-shows serve as a catalyst for a democratic renewal, where Arab audiences would mobilize as citizens and become increasingly interested in participation in democratic politics. The reality of the situation, however, is that the Egyptian government has allowed a level of freedom to satellite television, but still exercises substantial control, albeit obliquely. Indirect control of privately owned media companies takes different shapes (Kraidy, 2002). For example, "Media Production City" is 50% owned by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union. This

percentage gives the ERTU “ultimate editorial control” over program content (Sakr, 1999, in Kraidy, 2002).

It is clear right now that the structure and ownership of the Egyptian satellite television limits its role as a public sphere and undermines impact on shaping public opinion. Equally important to the ownership of television is content that mainly reflects the voice of the state. An accurate observation of the content of satellite television may conclude that the television is far from being a public sphere for the following reasons:

It does not present a wide variety of new and views; it never criticizes the performance of Egyptian government and never breaks the taboos or talk beyond the red lines.

The overall content of the Egyptian satellite does not meet the aspiration of the people who are looking for democratic communication.

The major content is biased in favor of the ruling party especially during election time.

Viewers with hostile views are not allowed to attend the talk shows offered by the state-owned satellite television. The program of "state of dialogue" presented by Dr. Amro Abd Elsemeh is an obvious example where Egyptian used to see the same speakers from the National Democratic Party. Representatives of the opposition parties and Muslim Brotherhood rarely appear in such programs.

Newscasts do not present any opposition parties related activities, and emphasizes to that of the ruling party.

Satellite channels sometimes provide incomplete stories and mislead public opinion.

The inability of satellite channels in Egypt to access and publish accurate information and objective and balanced coverage of the hot conflicts such as what took place at both syndicate of journalists and the club of judges on the right time affects its ability to serve as a public sphere (Hamada, 1996).

The previous debate illustrates that Egyptian channels are very weak in terms of their ability to form a liberal public sphere. However, Arab communication scholars disagree on the potential of Al Jazeera as a real public sphere. The first group regards Al Jazeera positively. Two features make Al- Jazeera stand out: 1) its extensive news coverage in Arabic by reporters who know what the Arab and Egyptian public want, and 2) its political discussion programs that deal with controversial subjects. Although other Arab satellite stations challenged the status quo first, Al-Jazeera took its critique

further. Other stations began to imitate Al Jazeera; however, the majority of the stations are not news channels and focus more heavily on entertainment. (Rugh, 2006).

Also, Eickelman admits that he and the leaders themselves don't know how that pressure will impact on Egyptian policy in the future. The use of the term "street," rather than "public sphere" or "public," imputes passivity or a propensity to easy manipulation and implies a lack of formal or informal leadership. Nevertheless, this use of "street" shows how policy makers now acknowledge that authoritarian and single-party states also have to take the "public" into account. This new phenomenon is attributed to Al Jazeera (Eickelman, 2003). Obaid (2002) states that Al Jazeera has taken Habermas' public sphere to a new arena, the Arab television screen. For the first time in the history of the Arab world a television channel has dared to spark public debate about the major issues of the day by allowing a free flow of information and criticism of governmental leaders and decision makers. That has made Al Jazeera the most watched (and most controversial news channel in the region, winning over viewers with its uncensored news coverage. By analyzing Al Jazeera's brief history, one would realize that this pan-Arabic satellite station has allowed audience participation through its call-in programs and talk shows, which have provided a forum for groups that would otherwise be excluded from political debates.

Similar to the aforementioned optimistic vision, Lynch (2003) concludes that unlike earlier stations, which focused on belly dancing and soap operas, from its launch in 1996 Al-Jazeera put politics first. Its talk shows pointedly included representatives from across the spectrum, promoting sharp arguments that made for good television and shocked audiences unaccustomed to such controversial content. It has infuriated virtually every Arab government because its programming includes for criticism and mockery. Commentators regularly dismiss the existing Arab regimes as useless, self-interested, weak, compromised, corrupt, and worse. Amin (2004) also is adopting an optimistic approach when dealing with satellite television and public sphere. He thinks that transnational broadcast services were responsible for the creation of a strong pan-Arab public opinion, when millions of people demonstrated in the streets of Arab capitals in support of the Palestinians Intifada. Transnational media are forums of free public discourse and can set agendas of public debates on national, regional and international issues ranging from political democratization, to intellectual freedom, to understanding about peace in the Middle East.

The second group does not see Al Jazeera as a legitimate public sphere. Naomi Sakr, editor of *Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy and Public Life*, opens her introduction to the volume by articulating the shortcomings of this relatively nascent field of inquiry: namely, the dearth of empirical research and the resultant positivist assumptions about media's influence on hearts, minds and politics. Sakr, a Reader in Communication at the University of Westminster, claims that this new collection combats these increasingly entrenched truisms by experimenting with "audience research.". This volume tackles the question of whether the media have produced a Habermasian "public sphere" in the Arab world opening with Oliver Hahn's discussion of Habermas' definition: a coalescing of society with the freedom to engage in "dialogic critical-rational discourse". Hahn roundly denies that such a sphere has taken root in the Arab world, basing his claim on the support of four books on Arab media (including two devoted to Al Jazeera) and thus relying solely on secondary sources for his analysis.

Imad Karam, makes one of the few convincing arguments of the book. He touches on a point that others have ignored-- the worldview offered by satellite media is one-dimensional. Channels like Al Jazeera focus on international politics and ignore local and national issues that have a more direct bearing on viewers' lives such as unemployment, poverty or health care. These programs therefore hardly encourage democratic behavior but rather fill viewers' heads with sensational disasters to dwarf their own suffering. Accordingly, Karam's fieldwork reveals that Arab youth turn to TV not for political guidance but merely to escape their troubled lives. Taken collectively, the "audience studies" proposed by Sakr should encourage optimists to reconsider the notion that Arab media has or will eventually galvanize its oppressed audience into political action (Swank, 2007).

The intense debate on how satellite television including Al-Jazeera provide a liberal or repressive public sphere for Egyptians reflects the need for empirical research that can be carried out through a three-step research project: 1) analysis of the controversial programs broadcast by Arab satellite television. This analysis will demonstrate how much the programs represent a varied and free content which is more contingent upon the inputs of the public rather than the government. 2) surveying the public opinion to examine how much the public is convinced that the content represents its voice and how much it is affected by it and, 3) public policy

analysis and policy makers analysis to investigate how much public opinion emerging from the public sphere is influencing the policy makers' agendas and public policies.

### **Conclusion:**

This article helps explain the possible linkages between satellite television and the public sphere in Egypt. It has made it clear that satellite television has brought about a new quasi-liberal public sphere in Egypt due, in large part, to Al-Jazeera's coverage of the most sensitive and critical issues, its unique style in providing news and talk shows, its unprecedented representation of different opposition parties and political movements in Egypt. It is not only Al-Jazeera that contributes to the establishment of an Egyptian public sphere, but also a small number of Arab television stations and a few of programs that paved the way for a quasi-liberal public sphere. Unfortunately, the efforts of the aforementioned media outlets are not dramatically affecting the formation of a real public opinion. The non-participant, alienated and latent Egyptian public opinion is a significant indicator that public sphere has little or no impact on politics.

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