

Nov 04, 2016 by [Adam Clayton Powell, III](#)

No independent Arab media exist, say Arab journalists ^[1]

WASHINGTON, March 4 -- There are no independent news organizations in the Arab world. That was the assertion of Arab journalists addressing a conference on Arab media today, who said the only truly independent voices in the Arab world are bloggers.

Even the new satellite television networks, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, were criticized -- including by one of Al-Arabiya's anchors, Hisham Melham. He credited the new networks with breaking taboos and showing the Arab world through Arab eyes, instead of through the eyes of European and American observers. But the networks focus only on the extremists.

"Misleading and staged debates," said Melham, are the prime feature of the Arab satellite networks. "The huge and important center is absent." Instead, said Melham, the networks feature traditional "tribal" views, dressed up in the latest modern video "look" imported from the U.S.

[Jon Alterman](#), director of the CSIS Middle East Program, went even further this afternoon, describing many of the Pan Arab television talk shows as political pornography and wrestling. But [Marc Lynch](#), a political science professor at Williams College, disagreed.

Some programs are "very different in tone, in quality, in issues that are raised," said Lynch. "Hisham [Melham] has a brilliant show. What's happened in the past ten years is that it's okay to disagree. You can be an 'authentic' Arab and still disagree."

Lynch said the real innovation in Pan Arab satellite networks has been broadcasters siding with the Arab people and against Arab governments -- with the exception of the government paying the bills. And one consequence, he said, was recent online polls conducted by Al Jazeera and others showing "90% of respondents" saying Syria should withdraw from Lebanon. Those interactive polls, call-in shows and interactive entertainment, such as "Star Academy," where viewers can vote for singers they like, have become "extraordinarily popular."

Melham also noted that every major newspaper and broadcaster in the Middle East loses money, with the possible exception of the [Lebanon Broadcasting Corporation](#), a network featuring popular entertainment programs including "Survivor" and "Star Academy." And that, he said, means they are relying on government subsidies to survive. As a result, according to Melham, the only truly independent media are online.

However, there are opposition newspapers, noted [William Rugh](#), former U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. But he said these opposition newspapers are almost all

owned by political parties, so they are not at all impartial.

Rugh also expressed concern about Arab media's reliance on subsidies, noting even such popular networks as Al Jazeera are built on shaky financial foundations. The ambassador noted Al Jazeera was supposed to be subsidized only for the first few years, but "that didn't seem to work." Now, Al Jazeera is up for sale, but Rugh said that is no guarantee it will last.

"If Al Jazeera is privatized and sold, will it be able to survive?" asked Rugh. The network has alienated both advertisers and governments, he said, and that does not bode well for its future as an independent commercial enterprise.

Mona El Tahawy, a columnist at the daily Asharq Al Awsat, agreed, emphasizing the role of blogs.


Bloggers in Iran and Iraq "have inspired others in the Arab world," she said, singling out Big Pharaoh as an example of an independent voice in Egypt, where all of the media are state-controlled. She also pointed to Saudi Girl as one of the first voices in any medium of Saudi women.

Bloggers are "young, very articulate and the very people we write about," said El Tahawy. Despite working in an elite medium, requiring a computer and literacy, she said bloggers are the voice of the true Arab street, especially the young.

Reliable data does not exist about the Arab street, according to another speaker this morning. Brian Katulis of Freedom House said there are no meaningful public opinion surveys of any kind published about the Arab world.

"Extreme caution" should be exercised, he said. "Nationwide or representative" samples often turn out to be "college-educated men in cities." In addition, many of the most valuable survey questions are deleted by government censorship or by self-censorship, because surveyors fear government reprisals.

The one country where accurate surveys can be taken and where media can be independent is Iraq, which has other problems:

"The biggest threat to press freedom in Iraq is security," he said. Katulis conducted research on Iraqi media for his report published last summer, "Liberated and Occupied Iraq: New Beginnings and Challenges for Press Freedom"  ."

But the last word on what is now driving Arab media came from Lynch, who said the most popular channels attract audiences with a particular form of entertainment familiar to viewers of MTV:

"Music videos are the single thing that attracts the most Arab viewers to a station," he said, adding the most popular videos are quite "risqué," featuring lightly clad female singers.

"They (television networks) are spreading this unstoppable form of sexy music videos," he said, adding no one really knows where that is leading.

[Ed. Updated with new material at 3:30 p.m. March 4, 2005.]

