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Several positive developments have taken place in the Arab media. The media landscape in the Arab countries has been considerably enhanced and transformed in recent years. This may largely be ascribed to the wide dissemination of two technologies, namely, satellite broadcasting, on the one hand, and the Internet, on the other.

Should recent developments proliferate and multiply, these two technologies may help create a novel paradigm for political and social transformation throughout the Arab countries. One thing is already quite certain ; it is no longer practical to block information about the outside world in line with central policies and confine information from within behind frontiers. Citizens of the Arab countries are no longer captive audiences to media machine ry dominated by information ministries or ruling parties, despite all the good will these ministries or parties may have.

Growth in satellite TV broadcasting has been one of the more prominent developments of the past decade. Satellite TV has seriously overshadowed local broadcasting, providing the average citizen with possibilities for widely accessing information and expressing opinions, luxuries unheard of in the recent past. The quality of broadcast material and programme design also appear to be improving. Passive one-way information flows have given in to more interactive modalities and participation in debate on a wide range of political and social issues. This, coupled to the presence of field reporters in the heart of conflict areas, is providing Arab citizens with the means to formulate and express opinion about events as they occur.

Satellite TV and Internet technologies are also allowing news and views from the Arab countries to be more widely disseminated the world over. Thus, during some of the more traumatic days of the past few years, the whole world was able to follow, from the comfort of their homes, events unfolding in the West Bank, in Iraq and in Afghanistan, thanks to efforts by emerging media enterprises as well as dedicated individuals.

While Internet penetration leaves a great deal to be desired, it is encouraging to note the rate with which access has been spreading throughout the Arab countries. The commitment shown by most Arab governments towards the formulation and adoption of policies that enhance this growth is quite heartening.

Additionally, the Internet has proven invaluable in recent conflicts, allowing students to access their university professors, libraries and administration. Examples from the West bank testify to the utility of the Internet in retaining a semblance of normalcy under occupation and political tension with frequent curfews and ubiquitous roadblocks.

Arab satellite TV channels have been proliferating. The Arab TV media landscape has witnessed important positive changes. These changes are already impacting freedom of expression in the Arab countries. The following is a list of salient developments:

- Two Arab satellite companies have been established ; the first is Arabsat with a potential of more than 200 digital TV channels, and the second is the Nilesat with more than 150 channels. This facilitated the creation of private TV channels.
- The number of private independent TV channels is increasing in the Arab world. There are now more than 130 Arabic TV-channels, more than half of them are private channels. This change resulted in more freedom of expression, more transparency and openness. The Arab citizen is no more restricted to watch governmental official TV; he even can access many foreign non-Arab TVs. On the other hand, cable TV ser vices are also flourishing in some Arab countries.

- New trends in TV programmes on private TVs, with more media freedom and better proficiency and objectives.

- Arab media, and particularly the private media, are having on-the-site correspondents. This is resulting in more independent and free media.

- TV for women (example Heya TV), for children (several TVs), and for minorities (Kurds TV) are emerging.

- TV penetration density (TV sets for 100 inhabitants) is increasing in the Arab world. Many families have access to satellite TV receivers. Some Arab countries have 88% penetration density ranking the 3rd worldwide. Four countries have PD greater than 40%. But on the other hand, there are still Arab countries with PD less than 12% such as Iraq and Palestine.

Numerous challenges and opportunities lie ahead. Despite the above developments, what we have witnessed during the past few years must be characterized as too little too late. A lot more will need to be done.

While positive developments have taken place, and while such developments may continue to proliferate, most citizens in the Arab countries still lack access to free media.

While educational TV channels and programmes are gaining currency in a few Arab countries, and while some institutions of higher education have initiated moves towards operating in cyberspace, a good deal will need to be done before the dissemination of information and knowledge relevant to socio-economic development acquires adequate proportions.

Clearly, the above developments pose challenges as well as opportunities. Both will need to be handled responsibly. Both will have to be urgently tackled by all concerned, governments, non-governmental organizations as well as enterprises.

Thus, despite the fact that satellite TV is contributing to greater diversity of views, novel content and programming modes, there is still room for wider and more serious programmes that aim to enhance the knowledge and freedom to interact with the myriad political issues and cultures of the world. As far as the Internet is concerned, this technology could enjoy much brighter prospects for information sharing than satellite broadcasting as it offers room for diversified knowledge and views to be shared by all. Of particular importance for the Arab countries that have suffered from intensive brain drain is the fact that the Internet could provide an excellent conduit for communication and cooperation involving the sizeable diasporas of Arab professionals abroad.

There is urgent need for action on many fronts. What can be done to improve things further, to accelerate positive changes and limit the impact of negative developments? For negative developments are certainly going to make themselves felt soon and might well proliferate more rapidly than hitherto!

The slow rate of progress in Internet propagation as an instrument for disseminating new values and modern learning methodologies leaves the door wide open for extremist views that find their way to susceptible segments of the population, also through the Internet.

Press freedom, when coupled to trade liberalization, may also mean that people would be viewing much the same pre-packaged news, political views and cultural material all over the world. Clearly, these are not good recipes for diversity and democracy.

One of the most urgent needs is to improve access by the masses to sources of free and relevant content. To do this it would be essential to foster new initiatives aimed at training journalists and media specialists. There is need to encourage greater efforts in the development of new but relevant concepts for media freedom at the local, national and even international levels. The needs of youth and women should always be at the heart of our endeavours and our efforts should always prepare for radical change in attitudes and foster new thinking.

The Arab countries are in need of media that address concerns for socio-economic development in addition to commercial or political interests. It is with this in mind that ESCWA is seriously looking into setting up a United Nations channel in cooperation with regional donors and Arab satellite TV stations.

Many of the problems faced by the Arab countries are due to lack of information sharing among stakeholders and with other countries and cultures. What is more, few attempts are being made to provide Arab citizens with the quality of content that bring them closer. With regional integration gaining prominence on many agenda, both in response to globalisation and in view of economic necessities, this is an issue that deserves focused attention.

In the Information Society we wish to promote, media firms will undoubtedly be the most prominent content providers. In addition to traditional media such as print and radio, the ongoing convergence of a variety of modes of transmission in the media industry has tremendous implications for content creation and dissemination. However, the economies of scale inherent in digital content development, the high cost of developing advanced content, such as that used for digital TV broadcasts or mobile communications systems, coupled to the tremendous power wielded by just a few trans-national media giants are threatening the existence of local media companies. In tackling all of the above issues there is clearly need for multilateral and concerted action involving governments, non-governmental organizations as well as concerned enterprises.

There is also need for new codes of conduct to protect the freedom and diversity of the media not only on the national but also the global landscape.