

TITLE: Civil Society and Community Media in Jordan: The Case of Al-Balad Radio

ABSTRACT: This paper situates academic theorizing concerning civil society in the Arab region of the Middle East within the experiences of Al-Balad Radio 97.9FM, “Voice of the Country and People,” Jordan's first community radio station, broadcasting from Amman, the country's capitol and home to more than two million people. So far no academic literature has documented the work of media activists at Al-Balad Radio. This paper will apply the work of leading community media scholars (such as Ellie Rennie and Kevin Howley) and extend the frames offered by several authors documenting civil society (and similar concepts) in relation to the region's changing media landscape.

I. Introduction

A. Draw a picture of listening to Radio Al-Balad (play a station ID, 33secs)

B. Question: Is civil society a useful concept in approaching community radio in Jordan?

C. Brief Overview

Sitting in rush hour traffic in Amman, Jordan, can be a frustrating experience for the over two-million residents who live in the capitol city. Luckily, there are new distractions on the FM dial for drivers caught in the daily congestion. Over the last decade, new programming is available because of the issuing of private FM radio licenses to non-state broadcasters, including one of the first granted to Radio Al-Balad. On any given day, tuning into 92.4FM, you might hear a catchy jingle with the station's identification: Radio Al-Balad the voice of the people and the country, 92.4FM [translated from Arabic].

Shortly after launching the Arab world's first Internet radio station ten years ago, AmmanNet also found a “terrestrial home” on the local FM dial through the help of nearby radio stations in Palestine. This group of independent Arab journalists and media activists produced audio reports, news bulletins, and other programming made available on the website AmmanNet.net and broadcast over FM signals and borders locally to large sectors of Jordanian society. Since this project began in 2000, the importance of producing material from Amman and broadcasting it back to the community was a priority at AmmanNet. Initially, FM broadcasting was not an option for media activists working in Jordan since the FM dial was always monopolized by the

state. When the current King of Jordan, King Abdullah, inherited the throne in 1999, he immediately called for democratic reforms, including changes to the media landscape. These media reforms did not include any substantial transformation, according to Arab media experts, like Naomi Sakr (2002). However, taking advantage of these small openings in Jordan, media activists working at AmmanNet secured an FM broadcasting license and began its own community radio station in 2005. That year Al-Balad Radio, 92.4FM, became the first radio station on the dial to broadcast independent news and community programming to the region of Amman, home to the capital of Jordan and more than two million people.

The recent increase in changes to the Arab media landscape, including the rise of internet access for Arab households and rapid growth of satellite networks like Al Jazeera, has lead media theorists to document an emerging civil society in the Middle East (Eickelman and Anderson: 2003, Salvatore and LeVine: 2005). This does not come without hesitations. These concerns speculate on the usefulness of viewing civil society in understanding the changing media landscape in the Arab region of the Middle East. In the Arab world, community media like Al-Balad Radio exists with the support of what could be described as a fledgeling civil society. While the station's programming and governance prioritizes the participation of a broad range of residents from the region of Amman, economic support for the station is still dependent on a diversity of external and internal funding sources; including UNESCO, the Open Society Institute, the Mayor of Amman and other private donors.

Is civil society a useful concept in approaching community radio in Jordan? In an absence of widespread attention in English language media studies concerning Arab community media, this paper will review concepts like civil society, public sphere, “Arab street,” and “public Islam”

that arise in theorizing on mainstream and new media in the Arab world. This paper will also assess the applicability of these concepts to the experiences of Al-Balad Radio as well as review the application of civil society in the work on community radio produced by Ellie Rennie and Kevin Howley.

II. Community Radio and Civil Society

A. Define Radio Al-Balad and Community Radio

- 1. AMARC (2-way communication), CRTC, & Radio Al-Balad,**
- 2. Coyer (normative good, problematizing)**

B. Review contemporary approaches

- 1. Hadl and Dongwon**
- 2. Rennie**
- 3. Howley**

What is a community radio station? After reviewing several definitions of community radio, including those of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), Canada's regulatory body (the CRTC) and Radio Al-Balad, I will offer Kate Coyer's own definition and her caution to problematizing the “community” in community radio (by viewing who is “in” and who is “out”). Surveying the international English language literature on media research, Gabrielle Hadl and Jo Dongwon (2008) suggest community media studies “must tackle the unequal development of research and practice, reconcile the differences in approaches, and account for differences in cultural and linguistic contexts” (*Ibid.*: 103). In drafting a “to-do list for *our media* theory researchers,” they include the task of “clarifying in accessible language, the pros and cons of different approaches in different context” (*Ibid.*: 104). This section will review the work of two leading community media theorists, Ellie Rennie and Kevin Howley, in order to assess these approaches in the context of the changing media landscape in Jordan. Both Rennie and Howley draw from and re-work the literature on Habermas' public sphere (1996) to define the relationship between community media and civil society.

III. Arab Media Landscape and Civil Society

A. Civil Society in Jordan

B. Civil Society and Arab Media Landscape

While Dale Eickelman has written that new communications media are “turning the Arab street into a public sphere in which greater numbers of people, and not just political and economic elite, will have a say in governance and public issues,” Naomi Sakr is critical of this view as the change concerns only a say in governance, not a say about governance (quoted from 2001 by Sakr in 2007: 6). She concludes that there is very little change in much of the media's complicity in serving the agendas of governments and political elite. Later, Eickelman along with author Jon Anderson in *New Media in the Muslim World* qualify the limitations of the traditional conceptualization of civil society, “It is a bit naïve to expect that authoritarian government will be routinely challenged by groups of citizens who lack effective legal frameworks to resist, protest, or to demonstrate” (2003: 27). These concerns speculate on the usefulness of applying the public sphere in understanding community media in the Arab region of the Middle East. In reconstructing the public sphere in Muslim societies, Armando Salvatore and Mark Levine theorize that civil society within Muslim contexts must be shaped by understanding the role of “public Islam,” which “cuts across, challenges, and shapes governmental and oppositional public spheres in Muslim majority societies” (2005: 5). They argue that it is important to document what constitutes the public sphere, specifically who participates in it and especially the genealogy of specific notions of the “common good” (*Ibid.*: 7).

In an absence of widespread attention in English language media studies concerning Arab community media, there are also no specific concepts built on the community media experience in the Arab region of the Middle East. Further review is required of Arabic literature concerning

community media in the Arab world. This section will identify concepts that have been put forward in theorizing the changing media landscape in the Arab world. Further, this section will assess the applicability of Rennie and Howley's vision of community radio and civil society, including the pros and cons of each of these approaches in the Jordanian context.

IV. Challenges for Radio Al-Balad

A. Al-Balad producers

B. Sakr and Media Reform

At Al-Balad Radio, community radio is described as a place for community participation in producing programming and in governing the station. In both structure and content, the members of Al-Balad Radio are defining an emerging sphere of influence. One that is challenging to the focus of news programming, providing space for local issues and citizen voices, and transforming who manages the media. Media activists at AmmanNet are building a network of radio stations who are united in their vision for community radio in the region. They are advocating for media reforms that would allow the local proliferation of community radio. This section situates this community media agenda in Jordan within the various approaches to civil society as described in literature concerning the Arab region of the Middle East, especially those authors also documenting the Arab media landscape. I will draw on the scholarship of Naomi Sakr concerning media reform in Jordan. Recent changes, including the establishment of private FM licenses, like the one Radio Al-Balad received in 2005, could indicate the beginnings of an emerging civil society in Jordan. However, Sakr concludes more dramatic reforms will be required before the Jordanian street will have a say about governance or even media policy (Sakr, *Ibid.*: 6). The continued lack of guaranteed civil rights, such as freedom of speech, should caution any theorist applying a civil society lens in Jordan. These views will help to answer the

question: Is civil society a useful concept in approaching community radio in Jordan?

V. Conclusion: So What?

A. Usefulness of a civil society approach in viewing community radio in Jordan.

B. Acknowledgments

While Rennie's own view of civil society requires a stable system of rights, she also suggests that community media can be “a means to the maintenance and extension of civil society by civil society itself” (*Ibid.*: 36). She argues that a state's political structure will determine the presence or absence of civil society. Rennie further suggests that civil society requires a stable system of individual rights, including freedom of association. She observes that the struggle for state legitimacy can constrain the growth of the public sphere and especially the public participation of citizens. Rennie concludes that ignoring this overlooks the “long term stabilization process of civil society” (*Ibid.*: 145). Her sense of the local social, political and cultural forces that shape civil society, and thus community media, matches the concerns raised in the scholarship concerning civil society in the Arab world. Community media like Al-Balad Radio exist with the support of what could be described as a fledgeling civil society. While the station's programming and governance prioritizes the participation of a broad range of residents from the region of Amman, economic support for the station is still dependent on a diversity of external and internal funding sources; including UNESCO, the Open Society Institute, the Mayor of Amman and other private donors (see Al-Balad document). In advocating for community radio licensing, AmmanNet is also seeking a change in the financial obligations for holding a FM license, which currently costs tens of thousands of dollars in annual fees.

This view of community media highlights many of the objectives stated in interviews conducted with members of Al-Balad Radio for a radio documentary about their station. In these

conversations, media activists working at the station described their efforts to implicate various members of society in their governance structures, including reserving seats on the Board of Directors for women, various trades, youth, one seat for people with disabilities, and two reserved for members of the Listeners' Club. This broad spectrum of Jordanian society is defining the community serving Al-Balad Radio and its audience. These seats were purposely created, says the Coordinator of the Al-Balad's Listeners' Club, with the aim “to outreach to all segments of society, for them to collaborate with us in furthering the work of the radio station and for them to be the source for our future” (interview conducted Nov. 2009). Howley's approach allows us to see the composition of the community and the public sphere in the terms set by media activists at Al-Balad Radio. His theory can help illuminate the local and global context in which they hope to build their community media institution, based on new and altered social formations.

Rennie reminds us that in her view, community radio and civil society can aid in this process of social and even political change. Describing the case in South Africa, she observes community radio was part of the democratization process. However, Rennie cautions that the South African community radio stations that relied on volunteers were impacted by several external factors, including poverty and the history of political and economic exploitation (Ibid.:145-6). She concludes that participation in community media cannot be prescriptive, “There are no fast results and no fast outcomes that can be predefined” (Ibid.: 156). The same is true of theoretical perspectives of community radio applied to the Arab region of the Middle East. Views of community media cannot be founded on a simple glance at the work of community media activists. Rather, to capture the complex and dynamic nature of community

media institutions, any view must be ideally constructed from within and outside of the practice of community media. Further studies of community media in Jordan, rooted in the experience of local media activists and experts, must come to the fore to develop relevant concepts. As concluded in the Korean case surveyed by Hadl and Dongwon, “An overarching theory may be neither possible nor desirable” (Ibid.: 104). They advocate for community media theorists to develop “appropriate meta-perspectives” (Ibid.). Perhaps Howley's approach can best contribute in this fashion, offering a meta-method for defining new concepts regarding Arab community media practices and even re-casting discussions documenting the formation of civil society, the Muslim sphere, or Arab street.

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