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## **European-Middle Eastern Relations in the Media Age**

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It is not easy to find a theoretical basis for explaining how international relations are influenced by mass media. Traditionally realism in international relations thinking saw relations between states as being determined by the interests of national governments, but not by those of the mass media. Liberalists, globalists, postmodernists – they all believe that the media are important vehicles for all kinds of transnationalization processes, but they hesitate to consider the media core actors of international relations. As I see it, they are quite right to do so, because, despite all the ongoing debates about globalization, about connectivity, the “media age” or even “media democracies”, it is my understanding of the current state of research that we have not enough evidence that the traditional actors – mostly governments – have been pushed aside by the media or that it is corporate transnational media that rule world politics. I shall argue that the mass media can certainly influence international relations but that transnational media connectivity is still too underdeveloped to escape the logic of the nation state and to create global interdependence.

As you can see this talk is not construed as a “Who done it?”-criminal story, the conclusion is not saved until the very end. Rather I would like to be frank with you and tell you right away that I do not believe that the more than 1000 years old dichotomy of Orient and Occident and of “Islam” versus “the West” is currently being transformed into a “global public sphere” with politics and societies at both ends using the media as a vehicle for debate about political and social issues and problems that they would like to solve in tandem. Is Europe evolving as a kind of bridge between the United States and the Near and Middle East? I doubt it. Even though I have always thought that Samuel Huntington was wrong to speak of deeply and essentially antagonistic “civilizations” in the West and Islam, I am afraid that there is a real danger that nationalist and religiously fundamentalist hegemonies in the world's media systems can merge into cultural warfare and can help to create conflicting ideologies of the “West versus the Rest”. Huntington's notion of the clash of ancient civilizations is wrong because he failed to understand that it is not the “clash of civilizations” but a “lack of communication” that is at work. “Why do they hate us?” Well, if they do, I guess it is because somebody told them to, and it is television and radio more than books which reach the masses.

But let's analyze the problem step by step. The basic question is: what kind of judgement can be made about the quantity and quality of the content of foreign reporting in the West and in Europe about the Middle East – and vice versa. Does the state that it is in make political dialogue viable? Can we talk of “intertextuality” in the sense that the argument and the interest of “the other” is present in Western and in Middle Eastern media?

The answer is not easy but somewhat alarming. Since we have representative content studies of Western media coverage about the Middle East, we are in a position to state that our image of that region is at best fragmented and rudimentary. There is hardly any disagreement among scholars that the Western mainstream mass media's agenda focuses on very narrow aspects of life in the Middle East. Let me give you a few examples:

- The quantity of Middle East reporting in countries like Germany has grown in the press over the last decades, but not on TV. The consumer is exposed to an average of 2-3 articles about the Middle East in a national newspaper per day, which is, of course, much less information than he or she receives about domestic affairs. TV news and reporting are usually extremely event-centered, with terrorism and wars being covered at length, but in an extremely discontinuous way. Neither 9/11 nor the Iraq war have led to a permanent growth in Western television reporting about the Middle East—on the contrary. Pippa Norris from Harvard argues that audience interest has decreased since the end of the East-West-conflict.<sup>1</sup> Since I doubt if, due to the constraints of everyday life, more news about the Middle East could be digested by Western audiences, I am not arguing in favour of more news. Nevertheless one could plead for more *contextualized* and continuous news and information.
- About four fifths of the German newspaper and magazine reports over the last thirty years have dealt with political issues. Economic information is below 10 per cent, and other subject areas like culture, entertainment, tourism and religion (in the narrow sense of religious teachings and practices) do not make up for more than perhaps 2 per cent of the coverage. As a result, the diversity of everyday life escapes media attention. The Middle East is a zone of political and sometimes economic interest to Western media – nothing more. Interesting enough there were decades after the Second World War when entertainment and cultural aspects of the Middle East were front page news in the West. Just remember the stories about the Persian Shah and his wife Farah Diba that made front page news even in magazines like “Der Spiegel”. If you look at the statistical news development it is quite obvious that the Six-Day-War of 1967, in particular, was the first of a series of political shock waves that went through Western media, politicizing the news and changing the whole fabric of news making. The second shock that transformed what communication scientists call “news values” – the principles guiding news selection - was the Iranian revolution and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in 1978/79. I think it is much too simplistic to hold that Western culture is inherently based on stereotypes of the Middle East. The change in news values over decades makes it much more plausible that great events tend to create their own news standards. In the case of Western reporting on the Middle East it has been a step-by-step worsening of standards and the creation of so-called “news routines” in the selection of topics that all players – news agencies, newsrooms and audiences – adhere to. It is about time to question this primacy of political news making and come up with a clearer view of Middle East life and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> (Norris 1995; Utley 1997)

- The existing content analyses show that there is an extensive concentration on conflicts and violence in our Middle East coverage. While no doubt violent events need to be reported, they surely tend to be over represented. An analysis of some 12,000 articles in German newspapers has revealed that 60-70 % of all articles on Islam are connected to violence – as if that was an authentic view of a religion that 1.2 billion people worldwide adhere to. Coverage on other spheres, in which Islam doesn't play a dominant role, let's say the Palestinian conflict with Israeli, are reported in a more "civilized" way, with much more reporting about regular politics and diplomacy. But especially news and reports where "Islam" is involved create the image of a chaotic Middle East. Although media effects on people's opinions are hard to gauge by scientific means, it seems plausible that the concentration on negative news creates the widespread feeling in Western societies that the Middle East is a dangerous place – an area of the world where you'd better not go.

Comparative research in various media systems of the world has shown that such news standards are a universal feature. Asian media tend to report about the West in pretty much the same way as Western media do about the East. Political violence in Ireland, Spain or Islamist terrorism make for preferential news. But there is also a certain North-South gap in the sense that developments in European and US societies get more attention in non-Western media than non-Western societies get in the media of the West, which demonstrates that the US and Europe are at the centre of the global news system. Despite all recent political conflicts in the last years culture in the West, not only Europe, but also the US, has received greater attention in the Middle East than vice versa (we will come back to that later). The West is "metropolitan" news in the world's media.

Such disparity of news values shows a deep divide in each society's values on both sides. Where one side is interested in the life and culture of "the other", "the other" is not, so "dialogue" remains but a political catch phrase with no real impact. The terrorists' effort to force attention is not helpful and has made Western societies even more self-centered and eurocentric.

However, there is another field where similarities between Western and Middle Eastern media are perhaps more significant than the differences are; namely in the way narratives, frame the way stories are told and events are interpreted. Now, I am quite aware that in a radical philosophical sense "objectivity" does not exist. But there are various truths, as Immanuel Kant would argue, and truth is certainly, in Kant's words, "what man can't change". Yesterday's massacre is yesterday's massacre: you might not agree on the causes that led to it, but it should be possible to agree on the number of dead, for instance - as we should be able to agree on the number of people that have been killed in Iraq, and that are still being killed. Besides the search for such "absolute truths" journalism is emboldened to report in a "balanced" way, which usually means that news is duty bound to consider the arguments of all the relevant parties within a conflict. In the end, there *are* ways to conceptualize narratives and the intertextuality in news.

Although I and many others have done numerous case studies about Western conflict reporting on the Middle East, I will not bother you with any results but merely present

my very simple, but noteworthy conclusion: There are cases in which a greater balance of reporting can be witnessed than in other cases. And it seems that there are rules as to whether one-sidedness or balancedness prevail.

Let me just recall two different conflicts in order to give you an idea of what I am talking about:

- In Germany and in many Western media the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has undergone tremendous changes over the last decades. While in the sixties and early seventies support for Israel was often overwhelming, the perception changed in the course of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the first intifadah of 1987 and the Oslo agreement in 1993, allowing for much more balanced reporting. There is still a notion in our media that I would call "in dubio pro Israel" – but still, things have changed, and especially in Europe, much less in the US, the cause of a Palestinian state is well established. There might be imbalances in the presentation of specific news events, but on the whole coverage tends to be rather balanced. Protagonists of both governments get ample space to spread their views. Atrocities perpetrated by both Israel and Palestinians, as well as massacres and terrorism are covered.
- Now, while such analysis is based on long-term observations let us look at the short-term case of the war in Iraq, which in the narrow sense of a fully-fledged war lasted about four weeks in 2003. In the United States during the war almost all mainstream media, the press as well as radio and TV, supported President Bush or at least did not allow any real criticism. Germany's media were much more pluralist in their approach, allowing for anti- as well as pro-war voices to express themselves in articles, talk shows etc. While 80% of Germans as well as the government were against the war, the media were pretty diverse. The situation seemed comparable to countries like Spain, with the difference that the Aznar government was pro war, although the Spanish people were against it, and the Spanish media system comprised various elements from pro- government TV to critical newspapers.

On the basis of those two cases, and be sure I could come up with many more similar cases, my interpretation of Western framing and story telling points in different directions. Mass media in Western countries that experience existential crises or that engage in full-scale wars seem ready to "rally round their flags" and support their governments and what they define as their interests. The media on such occasions reproduce the division of hemispheres – of Orient versus Occident – and dialogue in the mass media, where it exists at all, collapses. For short periods, the media's ability to act in a pluralist way and give weight to Middle Eastern perspectives and argumentations can be seriously endangered. This is what Hannah Arendt, the well-known German philosopher, had observed during the Vietnam war and what she labeled the "mentality of *raison d'état*" – an absolutely serious threat to the plurality in Western democracies. The case of Spain as a country that was involved in Iraq but still upheld diversity in the media, does not serve to disprove this rule because the military engagement of Spain remained rather limited and did not activate the rally-round-the-flag-syndrome. Much more interesting seems the British example. I have done a small content analysis of several British newspapers' coverage of the war and was quite impressed by the relative diversity upheld even at wartime. Although there

were patriotic trends, this was certainly a much more distanced coverage than, for instance, during the Falklands War (I will come back to that).

The development of reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows that apart from times in which a media system's own country goes through crisis or war, German and other Western media are well capable of retaining a critical distance. While mass communication during crises in which one's own country is involved poses a real problem, seen as a whole Western conflict reporting fares much better. The reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the coverage of the Iraq War in 2003 in countries that were not part of the war alliance show that if countries do not have to rally round the flag or if the conflict as such is of a long-term nature, as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the potential of Western media to uphold diverse images of Middle Eastern conflicts is increasing. During the Iraq war Europe's and the Middle East's media were probably closer to each other than those of Europe and the US. American colonial style policy was utterly criticized in most European media systems, as it was in the Middle East, and the European *and* Middle Eastern quest for multilateralism was an expression of shared values between Europe and the Middle East that ridiculed all talk of a "cultural clash".

But let us take a closer look at Arab media? While I know of only few solid content analysis of Arab media, my impression is that after 9/11 Arab media developed their own qualities as well as biases when covering foreign news, especially concerning regional conflicts. For years, I was the advisor of the German-Arab media dialogue bringing Arab journalists together, and I recall that already in the late 1990s many Arab journalists, not only American or British, started to approach the new Arab satellite broadcasting media with a mixture of great respect and severe criticism. There is no doubt that transnational Arab television provides the world with images of Palestinian or Iraqi victims that went previously unnoticed by Western media. It is equally obvious that Al-Jazeera, out of all the Arab news networks, has been the most willing to integrate "the other opinion." Israeli, American and many other voices are heard on the network. In contrast, the leading American television network Fox News showed no original interviews with Arab politicians during the Iraq War of 2003. Also, I see no sign that mainstream Arab TV is falling into the trap of identifying Europe and the US as one and creating a coherent view of an enemy called "the West". That is the case with many Islamists, but not with mainstream media.

However, critics have often bemoaned that there is a clear pan-Arab bias with regard to the selection and interpretation of news on transnational Arab satellite networks. Injustices against Arabs are dealt with much more critically and extensively than injustices done to Israelis, whose victims are hardly present on screen. Al-Jazeera calls dead Palestinians "martyrs" – a label reserved for Palestinians and not applied to dead Iraqis or other nationalities. The supremacy of a pan-Arab agenda evident in programmes broadcast by Al-Jazeera becomes clear when the network – justifiably – criticizes, time and again, injustices arising from Israeli or American policy and their militaries, while often downplaying the responsibility of Arab states, regimes and the role of 'privatized forms of violence' (terrorism). Extensive reporting on the burial of Shaykh Yasin, the radical leader of Hamas, for example, or the playing of video messages by Usama Bin Ladin have echoed terrorist messages.

In a nutshell: Arab media sometimes show the same tendencies as Western media to subscribe to hegemonic nationalism. Some authors have legitimized that trend as a form of so-called “contextual objectivity”. The idea is that as long as American and sometimes European media are one-sided, Arab media have to be one-sided as well to balance out the Western dominance of international news flows and the get heard in “world opinion”. I think this approach is completely wrong, but I will come back to that later.

Comparing case studies of framing and narratives in Western and Middle Eastern media reveals that intertextuality and dialogue in the foreign reporting on both sides exists but remains vulnerable and prone to nationalist predilections. “Globality” as a culture in political reporting is still underdeveloped, for a number of reasons:

- *Mass communication cannot be dissociated from national interests:* The theoretician of international relations, Richard Rosecrance once argued that communication and conflict are linked in multiple ways. If the underlying conflict between two countries is a zero sum game, as in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict where territorial gains for one side are losses for the other, communication is of minor importance since the problem is not about a “lack of communication” or a misunderstanding – but the conflict is *real* and it will echo in different ways in the different media systems. It is only when politicians allow for a definition of the conflict as a “win-win-situation” that communication can become more important. Which means: the so-called “media dialogue” between the West and the Middle East can surely be no substitute for better policies in international relations. I think the real impact of the media on political decisions is sometimes vastly overstated.
- The second obstacle to globalization: *The fact that media echo real conflicts is itself the result of the fact that media systems are open for interference by a number of national forces and interests that limit their autonomy, since their major characteristic is still that of national media systems:* structural deficits of Western media coverage of the Middle East and the Islamic world are mostly based on the fact that even in today’s seemingly globalized world foreign reporting is, by and large, determined by national (and sometimes regional) interaction between the media system and other sub-systems and social environments. This pre-eminence of national over international interaction manifests itself in various ways, for example:
  - 1.) there is a hegemony of national language communities creating their own long-term narratives of the world - overcoming them poses a real challenge to international understanding;
  - 2.) national governments have refined their public relations instruments;
  - 3.) since in most cases foreign reporting is predominantly directed at domestic audiences, national markets prevail over international markets and therefore foreign reporting often reproduces national moods, and if people, as they often do, “rally round their flags”, their media do too;

- 4.) probably as a result of the insulation of markets, the financial resources of the media are often very scarce in foreign reporting and the media become vulnerable to government PR.

National media systems might be interconnected in the sense that foreign correspondents and news agencies, in particular, are providing each nation with the raw material of information. But national media systems are not *interdependent*, since the way events are covered is not judged by those about whom the media systems report – in this case the people living in the Middle East and in the Islamic world – but by domestic audiences, who, due to their own distance from the matters reported, have hardly any means to judge the quality of the foreign news they are exposed to.

However, neither Western nor Middle Eastern media are so “waterproof” as to prevent many truthful facts on Middle East developments from entering the news. Also, at certain times, the dynamics of public controversy allow for the so-called “little traditions” of Oriental studies and expertise to find their way into the mainstream mass media in order to clarify public misperceptions. And, as we have seen, the relative distance from involvement of a country in a heated international crisis or even in war can liberalize public debates.

Remember the case of British reporting during the Iraq war. That case is a bit of a conundrum to me, but one could start to think along the line that perhaps the relative pluralist British media coverage was a sign of slow and gradual Europeanization, meaning: due to the process of integration into the European Union the national media system might have lost its pre-eminence and opened up to more transborder influences from other European countries – and has done so *despite* all Euro-skepticism in the country. However, this is mere speculation and we have no empirical evidence to support that.

But that example should not push aside the fact that we are also “endangered democracies”. Especially with respect to the biases in US mainstream media in times when the US is at war it is an illusion to contrast „open“ Western with „authoritarian“ Muslim or Middle Eastern media systems, since both sides can be utterly one-sided and the notion of plural independent democratic media is just an illusion. From a functionalist perspective on media systems that rids itself of the normative camouflage on media theory, it must be said that Western democratic media “at war” can be as executive-friendly as any authoritarian media. The assumptions of contemporary philosophers like Antonio Gramsci or Hannah Arendt have long been proven correct by empirical social sciences.

I suggest we come up with completely new suggestions for a new, more carefully designed and fair news management during international conflicts, starting with a reflection on the definition of a responsible information management for our governments which, like George Bush and Tony Blair, have often misinformed us. We must provide our media with more resources for foreign reporting and we should think of setting up real transnational media that are trusted by both Western *and* Middle Eastern audiences.

Or shall we leave things as they are? What about this idea of “contextual objectivity” that was mentioned before? Let the national and regional media echo nationalist views of the respective peoples, and let’s hope that, due to global connectivity, the net sum of national media cultures creates something of a more balanced “global public sphere”. – If you ask me, such an approach is completely mistaken. The problem is that there is no such thing as a world media system since political and market interdependence is usually underdeveloped. This means, however, that “contextual objectivity” cannot be a substitute for objectivity *within* national media systems which is still, as I see it, the main precondition for a media dialogue in European- or Western-Middle Eastern relations. Otherwise citizens in Europe, and more so in the US and in the Arab world, are left alone with conflict interpretations that have a potential to fuel rather than moderate international conflicts.

There have been many fundamental misunderstandings about the global media in the course of the globalization debate of the last ten to fifteen years. Direct satellite broadcasting it was thought by many experts would break up national media systems. But are we connected? Certainly not through direct access to the other side’s media. Even where technical access is granted via satellite dishes, Western consumers hardly ever tune into the TV programmes of other countries. Such access is limited to migrating minorities and very tiny information elites. We subscribe to a myth of globalization if we assume that the world is construed like a giant web of communication that connects us all and comprises a “global civil society”. Quite the contrary is true! Satellite technology and the digital age have enabled the deepening and extension of geo-linguistic regional media spaces and *intra-cultural* media spheres – in Europe as much as in the Arab world. Arabs can tune into more than 150 TV channels. Europe itself is not one because it comprises various language communities between which direct transborder effects being almost non-existent are hardly measurable .

The situation is a bit better with respect to Western media cooperating with Arab media – I say Arab media, although 99% per cent of Western journalists have certainly never heard of Pakistani or even Turkish TV channels. And they most probably know only one of more than a hundred Arab networks: Al-Jazeera. Many Western media have cooperation agreements with Arab networks. Therefore national Western journalism should be in a position to „translate“ Arab media discourses into Western programmes – but in fact it does not. I think there is an enormous misunderstanding when it comes to the impact of networks like Al-Jazeera on the West. Western newsrooms usually do not hire Arabic speaking personnel, and with few exceptions there is no continuous news watch. Globalization has enabled Western media to select images from Arab TV, mostly of radicals like Bin Ladin, but on a daily basis our media have no real access to the media content of the Middle East. Perhaps the planned English version of Al-Jazeera could make for a slight change, but I doubt it, because the difference runs deeper than pure language. Even the images that are being taken over by the West are highly selected, because there is still a deep divide between the imagery of Arab and Western, even European, media. You might not see too many Israeli victims on Arab TV screens - but likewise Palestinian victims of Israeli violence in Western media are hardly ever as shocking as they are on Arab TV. There is still a deep gulf between the emotions conveyed by Western and Arab media. And as Alfred Grosser, the German-French-Jewish intellectual once said, peace can only be made when the suffering of “the other” is understood and accepted .

To that understanding, institutional collaboration between Western and Middle Eastern networks and media has so far contributed very little.

It is my experience that the lack of awareness and the failure of what media scholars have branded as „transnational media diplomacy” have many reasons; reasons that lie with the journalists, with news routines, the phenomenon of closed discourse, with the national priming of our media systems – and also with the orientation of owners and media institutions. One of the major impediments to connectivity and to intertextuality is the lack of transnationalization of media capital. Media capital in the Middle East is mainly shared by Egyptian, Lebanese, Saudi Arabian and Gulf investors. Western capital in the Middle East is marginal and mostly confined to certain investments made by companies like Disney or Viacom.<sup>2</sup> Even a major transnational player like Rupert Murdoch does not generate more than 10-12% of his capital on the Asian market and retains a clear focus on the non-Muslim parts of the Far East. The same is true for Arab capital in the West. As Naomi Sakr rightly concludes, transnational capital interdependence has not reached any socio-political depth and remains without political impact, since it is not only limited, but also “blind” when it comes to imbalances in international reporting. The preliminary conclusion is that media diplomacy will receive little or no attention as long media capital is allocated either in the West or the “Islamic” world but not in both worlds at the same time.

Of course, in today’s world there are numerous media that could have an impact on Euro-Middle Eastern relations. Unfortunately, the European Union, despite many debates within relevant circles, has never managed to set up a real transnational media culture within its own confines. “Arte” and “Euro News” or “Euro Sport” are about the only examples for this. But projects like the Euro-Turkish or Euro-Arab “Arte” have never reached completion. Remember the time when CNN, despite all its political and ideological shortcomings, represented the idea of a transnational TV for the world. Leaders from around the world spoke on CNN, they made politics there, and, as in the case of for example, CNN’s critique of America’s support of Russian repression of Chechnya, their prominent position gave them the strength to mediate for peace. Today, CNN is but a shadow of itself, widely discredited in the Middle East for its pro-US reporting. But if Europe wants to build a bridge between the Middle East and the West in the media age, it should probably remember that story of CNN.

There is another field in which the European potential for media dialogue is significant, although hardly anybody within Europe takes notice of it: in foreign broadcasting. The BBC World Service, Radio France International, Deutsche Welle, Radio Nederland and many others broadcast programmes in Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Dari and Paschtu into the Middle East. Their advantage is that other than regular satellite broadcasting those programmes actually often *reach* the monolingual middle and lower classes in the Middle East, and they are often very prominent. In Afghanistan the BBC was the last station to host the Taliban leader Mullah Omar when the war broke out. In Iran, the Deutsche Welle is a highly respected radio network, hosting the government as well as opposition forces. Many European foreign broadcasters follow a reform concept that is clearly in opposition to American, Russian or Chinese hard-handed propaganda approaches. European programmes are

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<sup>2</sup> (Sakr 2001, 69, 93-96)

often based on the idea of dialogue and try to compensate for the authoritarian shortcomings of Middle Eastern media systems. The problem with Europe is, however, that our own audiences and publics are not aware of that asset and that there are many bureaucratic hurdles to take. For example, in Germany it is not allowed to air Deutsche Welle inside Germany, because that is considered the domain of the other public service broadcasters (although it is technically possible). This really gives you an impression of how seriously handicapped the idea of Euro-Middle Eastern media dialogue still is. In theory, those networks would be an ideal platform for the exchange of political viewpoints and the intellectual integration of civil societies – in practice, they are still a one-way road.

Speaking of civil societies: what role does the Internet play for Euro-Middle Eastern relations? The average connectivity rate in the Arab world, except for rentier economies like the Gulf states, is around 3 %, albeit growing. Nevertheless it remains on a comparatively low level when compared to the West. Transnationality in the use of the Internet is really too complex to be grasped. There is certainly a long-term cultural international impact, yet the Internet is not primarily an international medium. Transborder connectivity is rising, but intra-border connectivity is growing even faster. Audience studies show that political information is not among the priorities of most Middle Eastern youth, but rather business and entertainment. Of course, that can turn out to be highly political in the end. But it has nothing to do with increasing knowledge of the Western international policies in the Middle East and vice versa. A recent study of the RAND corporation argues that the Middle Eastern opposition groups are hardly present on the Net.<sup>3</sup> As a result of severely limited connectivity in most Muslim countries, Fax machines are still more important for political campaigning than the Internet. Those groups that are represented on the Internet, the study says, are mostly the opposition in exile that get more attention from Western audiences and from the UN system than from civil society in the Islamic world. Other experts are more optimistic that the Internet has enabled Middle Eastern NGOs to network with their counterparts overseas in a way that seems to have raised international awareness and strengthened pressure by Western NGOs on Arab governments.<sup>4</sup> However, the methodology of that literature raises doubts as to whether that judgement is sufficiently qualified, since evidence is mostly based on mere observation or, at best, content analysis of the homepages of Islamist organizations, while neither inter-organizational links nor the usage of these sites in either the Muslim world or the West has been researched in-depth. The existence of net-based civil society networks is often presupposed, but hardly ever documented. The idea of opposition forces integrating and supporting each other across borders, called by some the “Zapatista effect” due to the world-wide attention and support Mexican Zapatista rebels received, is good. Why should one subscribe to a narrow definition of international relations as inter-governmental. But as in the mass media field, there seems to be a discrepancy between theory and practice that needs more research and attention.

If we would try to summarize we could say: yes, intertextuality and dialogue have a chance on both sides, they have a certain history, but the connectivity level is still rather low and interdependence of media markets, organizations and policies is still underdeveloped, all of which cements the primacy of national or regional over global

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<sup>3</sup> Net 38

<sup>4</sup> (Sakr 2003, 42)

media systems and makes conflict reporting, in particular, vulnerable to “warlords” of any kind, be they Middle Eastern terrorists or democratically elected governments. Huntington was wrong because there is no such thing as an unavoidable “clash of Islam and the West”. But the media sometimes prove him right because in certain situations of international conflict they clearly give way to hegemony.

But bear in mind, we might be putting the horse in front of the cart if we ask the media to make dialogue in international relations possible. Isn't it the task of politicians to do diplomacy, and aren't the mass media by nature unidirectional and non-interactive – a fact the German poet Berthold Brecht already bemoaned in the 1920s after radio was introduced? But that was long ago and the media have changed and new public spheres have been opened up due to technical and social changes. So what is the real role of the mass media in international relations and in Euro-Middle Eastern relations?

Generally speaking, I suppose that the mass media might be important for international relations in a broader, cultural sense of the term – for world views and patterns of activity of the individual European, Westerner, Middle Easterner, Arab or Muslim and for political opinion-making among citizens. But there is evidence for the fact that they are less important for international relations in the narrow sense of political relations and political elites. In any case, reflection is important because ordinary citizens' views might not be as significant for foreign as for domestic policy – think of immigration. And although the media might not be decisive for foreign policy much of the time, under certain circumstances they *could be* influential and there the media-policy game has certain rules.

Considering contemporary theory on the media-policy- and on the media-citizen-link with regards to foreign affairs most authors agree that the mass media are in a worse position than politicians, because politicians are the actors within international relations. Civil society is usually weakly organized when it comes to expressing views about world affairs, and the media are almost left alone with politicians who receive privileged information through a variety of channels from embassies to secret services and who can influence the substance and the dynamics of foreign policies and thereby create a near dependency. But mind, there are times when the media can gain superiority (we will come back to that).

In Euro- and Western-Middle Eastern relations the supremacy of politics over the media has been amply documented. In Gulf war II in 1991 the US managed to prevent images of probably more than 100,000 Iraqi victims from being shown on Western TV screens. They were able to control the media by creating information hubs, exerting censorship and public relations initiatives that were often outright propagandist and false – quite like in the war 2003. Now, many of you might say that during the last war in Iraq the world media were critical of the US, but, in fact, mainstream US media were not and that worked for George Bush. The supremacy of politics over media is not manifested in the fact governments like that of Bush are not criticized, but that they are able to regain the political momentum through dosages of either political-military activity or through political PR that “trickles through” the media system because journalism is in most cases unable to check and dismantle disinformation as fast as would be necessary. Consensus is not needed – doubt is enough. As long as people doubt whether there *could be* danger for them or for the

country, they let politicians go to wars and as we have seen during active wartimes even critical remarks are often taboo in the media. In a whole series of books and articles that were published in the last years, the so-called “CNN effect”, the potential influence of media on foreign policies, has therefore undergone a critical reappraisal. Most authors say: The CNN-effect is an outright myth.

Moreover, there is, as I see it, no evidence that the negative image Western media create of Islam has substantially influenced European or Western political relations towards Islamic governments or even towards Islamist movements. Just think of the good relations between the US and countries like France with Saudi Arabia, Morocco, or even the very stable relations between Europe and Iran that have survived all problems. The US has excellent relations with Islamist groups and parties in Algeria, Egypt, Turkey etc. While the Western media image of Islam – not of the Middle East as a whole – is as bad as can be, Western foreign policies cannot be said to be driven by a culturalist complex of Islamophobia. It’s *Realpolitik*.

Of course, there are situations in which the media can have a greater impact. The literature has mentioned a few cases which are “sidestages” of Western-Middle Eastern relations. Media are said to have been influential in maintaining the non-fly-zones in Kurdish Iraq after the war in 1991 or in the formal break-up of the so-called “critical dialogue” of the European Union with Iran in the mid-1990s. In these cases, it was the media which exerted pressure and changed policies while politicians had to follow. For the media to be effective in international policies, one or more of the following conditions must be fulfilled:

a) there must be some kind of vacuum of decision-making, because different factions of politicians are moving in different directions. Since these splits happen to be bridged in wartimes, the media’s influence is potentially stronger in times of a low-intensity conflict and left- wing political cleavages within the political elite are more outspoken.

b) alternatively, for the media to be influential it can also base its coverage on a consensus within society, as is often the case with ongoing genocides, where most people would sympathize with intervention. Now, the last case is problematic, because, as the Darfur crisis, in which the United Nations decided not to intervene militarily, has shown even “genocide” seems open to definition and manipulation. For the media to exert pressure it needs one thing more than anything else: images of the humanitarian catastrophe. It is such images that can mobilize critical domestic audiences and exert pressure on politicians. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East or even the US government in Guantanamo know that, and they everything to prevent images of human tragedies leaving the country.

These rules for media influence also hold true for Middle Eastern media, despite the fact that European media are democratic and many Middle Eastern at best half-democratic. But as I mentioned before, in the field of foreign reporting these differences are often not as clear-cut. In the Middle East the human tragedies behind the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, much more than any sympathies with the regimes of the Taliban or Saddam Hussein, led to widespread opposition towards US policy and, in the case of Afghanistan, also European policy. The human catastrophe of tens of

thousands of uncounted victims was directly connected to the mood of resistance in the Muslim world.

What was the role of the media in this situation? Was there something like an “Al-Jazeera effect” in the Middle East on politics and on public opinion? With regards to politics I doubt it very much. A country like Qatar could very well live with double standards and could allow its own TV station, Al-Jazeera, criticize the Americans while maintaining the largest American military base. The more the media aired the feeling that Afghanistan and, more so, Iraq were existential crises for the whole Arab world, the less Arab governments had to be afraid of being toppled by some kind of coup because also in the Middle East people and the media tend to “rally round the flag”.

Now, if the media in my very narrow definition of international relations in conflict, are rather weak - what about the media’s impact on public opinion and on political mobilization? With respect to media-citizen relations modern theory has abandoned the old „mood theory“ of Gabriel Almond and replaced it by a multitude of mixed paradigms. People have core values of war or peace or of solidarity with the Palestinians, let us say, that are not easily influenced by any media output. But, since mass media are covering distant events beyond the personal experience of most people, they often have an impact on people’s political agenda, opinions and ideologies. To give you an example, most Arabs might feel solidarity with the Palestinians and media telling them not to have such feelings would hardly be accepted and trusted. But, whether Arabs opt for moderation or radicalization in a certain political situation, whether they support political plans or a certain politician or party can *very well* depend on the agenda and framing of the media. Both – values and opinions – create political action, values alone are not sufficient. And since foreign reporting operates at the crossroads of values and opinion formation it is influential with regard to political opinions among the population. Opinions are formed by values manifesting within a certain media agenda. Audiences are powerful, but so is agenda-setting and media framing. The so-called “street” is as important as the media. Politicians know that – and that is the reason why they want to influence the media.

Media scholar Marc Lynch argued that the Arab media were operational in organizing solidarity campaigns for Afghanis and Iraqis throughout the Arab world. He argues that with the media, especially with satellite TV, a new public sphere has emerged. In that sense, Lynch holds that the media *do play a role* and that the “Arab street” is becoming reactive to the mass media. I would support Lynch, but would also like to give a slightly different explanation. It is Arab media that can give Arab values a certain operative direction. Rather than claiming the superiority of the modern public media sphere over the “street” one should, however, be aware of the mutual relationship between people’s values and the media agenda. In the case of Iraq, the Arabs’ values were realized within the confines of the media agenda, which was itself limited by the rallying-round-the-flag-syndrome and therefore the media asked for solidarity rather than for a change in government.

When it comes to international affairs, the media in the Middle East have limited effects on national foreign policies, but they can be effective in shaping public opinion. The new sphere exists, it can reinforce public sentiments and shape political opinion, but it is hardly effective *against* those public sentiments. I will give you an

example. For 26 years now, Iranian mass media, including many of the most trusted papers of the reform movement of Ex-President Chatami, have condemned the US in almost everything they have done. Despite that, recent polls showed that 60-70% of the Iranians opt for better relations with the United States (the Iranian demoscope was imprisoned for publishing these results). The results show that the media might have been successful in reinforcing a negative *political* image of America in a field close to people's values (Muslim solidarity, Jerusalem etc.). But they are unable to operate against the seemingly cosmopolitan cultural interest of most Iranians and make Khomeini's cultural critique of the US and Western culture a generally acknowledged attitude. This reminds me of the East-West-conflict and the inability of communist media to destroy the people's concept of "the free West".

Now, what about us, what about Europe and the West? I am not sure whether such positive pro-Western attitudes exist in the West. If you look at relevant polls you find that 50-80% of Western populations are frightened of Islam – and this sentiment is *not* confined to political topics. Probably as a result of the colonial history and the societal crises in the Muslim world the contemporary Middle East seems much less attractive to the West than vice versa. While most Middle Eastern countries always passed through times of greater cultural introspection and, at other times, openmindedness towards the West – barely ever towards the East or to China, by the way – the West nowadays lives in a not so very "benign neglect" of the "East". Now, that is definitely not a culturalist statement of mine, saying that "the West" ignores "the East" in the way Edward Said said that in his famous book on "Orientalism". I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, that there was a time in the 1950s and early 1960s when the image of the Middle East in the West was more positive. But the history of Western newsmaking has allowed the media image of the Middle East to deteriorate enormously. And it seems that media agenda has overshadowed Western public opinion of the Middle East.

If it is true, that Western mainstream public opinion has currently little cultural resistance against "Islamophobia", then the media in the West play a crucial role in activating or de-escalating such moods. When witnessing the – organized - outrage on the streets of Teheran recently against Israel and America, one British commentator said that such public zealotry was completely unknown to the modern West. Possibly true, but the commentator compared apples and oranges here. If you consider that such demonstrations as in Iran are a reaction to the feeling that many Middle Easterners of being politically re-colonized and hijacked by the West and if you compare such feelings with the impression of many Europeans that they are being "occupied" by immigrants, the comparison makes sense. A scientific report of the European Union recently argued that there are many trends of covert and overt racism in European media which are made partly responsible for open racism in European societies.

So, we seem to be starting to understand how the media function in international relations. They are often weak vis-à-vis their own foreign affairs politicians, barely connected transnationally, but an integral part of comprising the world views of their audiences.

In the end, how do we answer the complex question of the role of media in Western-Islamic- or Euro-Middle Eastern relations?

- Are we to emphasize the shortcomings of coverage and the danger influence, especially conflict reporting, has on people's minds and world views, or the partly positive aspects in "framing" the other, or the vulnerability of truthful and balanced reporting?
- Do we relax, because the impact of the media of international decision-making and on our politicians seems limited, or shall we work for an improvement of international reporting?
- I suggest we admit, that with all reservations in mind, the media might not decisively influence people's world views today, but might be influential in the future and can influence our political cultures in the long run. Even politicians grow up as ordinary people, and an improvement in media dialogue can surely help future policies to develop a really global political vision the Western-Middle Eastern divide.

Thank you for listening!