

Why the Arab world needs community radio

Social media and satellite television played a crucial role in the Arab uprisings, but Daoud Kuttab argues community radio must be embraced to effect positive change in the region.



Despite ongoing debates about cause and effect, the protest movements that began in Tunisia and spread throughout the Arab world have had one clear vehicle: freedom of assembly and expression. The crowds of Arab youth that have assembled in cities, towns and villages have forced authoritarian rulers to recognise them, their right to protest the status quo and their right to demand change. While in some countries winning this right has been accomplished relatively easily and quickly, in other countries it has been difficult, dangerous and deadly. Yet protesters have continued to demand the right to voice their grievances against the powers that be.

While demands have largely been aired using traditional means like word of mouth, demonstrations, marches and sit-ins and broadcast via satellite television channels, we have also seen an explosion of creative ideas and creative solutions. From the use of colourful graffiti in Libya to new and social media in Egypt and Syria, young Arabs have made their voices heard through a variety of new platforms.

Yet one tool the majority of Arab protesters have not used is radio.

Like many other traditional media tools, radio has been declared dead numerous times only to see its revival and novel usage in new settings and contexts. But while the rest of the world, including many semi-closed regimes, has been tolerant of private and community radio, the Arab world, including some relatively open societies, has limited radio licences to government organisations or the elite business entities that circulate within their orbit.

There are historic reasons for this anti-radio policy. As radio was experiencing its golden age, the post-colonial Arab world witnessed repeated revolutions and coups in which military generals took over national radio stations along with presidential palaces. The first communiqué announcing a new ruler was usually broadcast over radio, and all other government organs quickly fell in line. These military dictators who took power by capturing the radio network would naturally oppose others using it to challenge their power. In the Arab world, the buildings that housed radio stations, and later television stations, often became the most heavily guarded pieces of real estate in the country. Media outlets were effectively turned into military installations with multiple forms of identification and body searches required for entrance.

The programming broadcast by these stations was also entirely controlled by central governments. A direct telephone line would connect the office of the radio or television director to the palace of the president or king. Even with the proliferation of satellite television and the internet in the 1990s and 2000s, radio licences remained limited to rulers' most loyal and trusted friends. When private licences were granted, station owners were given clear instructions not to deal with politics and news. This system ensured that news coverage was sanitised of anything that might disturb or question the prevailing government narrative. The stark absence of local news ensured that the public's attention was diverted from pressing social, economic and political issues in their communities.

This control over media sources was so entrenched that even when the Arab uprisings managed to unseat ruling powers, little was done to change the prevailing media structures. It became clear that changing rulers was easier than changing the media regulatory framework that had been built up over decades.

The millions of protesters in Tahrir Square, Alexandria and Suez who succeeded in creating geographical zones free of security and police control were unable to even think about—let alone work towards—creating an equivalent on local radio stations through which they could propagate their revolutionary vision. Transmitter equipment was nowhere to be found and electrical engineers were not called on to create simple transmission systems. Decades of government intimidation had clearly had its effect on the psyche of everyday Egyptians, Tunisians and Yemenis, leaving the airwaves uncontested by revolutionary voices.

Autocratic Arab rulers who enforced national unity by the power of the gun were certainly not

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interested in media that encouraged and empowered local communities to celebrate their specific ethnicity, language, culture or religion. To deny this basic communication capacity ensures that these populations remain forever ignorant, unable to educate themselves and therefore unable to fight for their rights.

Some powers wrongly claim that community-based media will exacerbate tensions between various ethnic and national communities, contribute to the break-up of countries and even spread civil war across the Middle East. The fact is that people living in the various countries that make up the Arab League are diverse in a multitude of ways. Instead of denying this diversity and forcing people of different backgrounds to conform to a single cultural and national identity, a more humane approach would be to allow these diverse flowers to bloom within their national garden. By embracing and empowering these different groups, the Arab world's new rulers will be planting the seeds for stable governing bodies that will better withstand both internal and external threats. Community radio would therefore be a saviour for these new regimes rather than an obstacle.

Communities, especially those outside the main metropolitan capitals of the Arab world, have largely been ignored by autocratic powers. Now that these totalitarian power structures are being replaced by democratically elected governments, one would hope that new leaders will change their policies towards these communities for the better. Allowing community radio to thrive costs governments nothing and produces amazing results in communities, and therefore in nations. Creating a welcoming administrative and legal environment for community radio in the Arab world should be a "no-brainer"—provided we have leaders that genuinely care about their communities.

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