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Arab-American Media

Bringing News to a Diverse Community

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Overview

If it were just a matter of population growth, the story of the Arab-American media would be a simple tale of opportunity. Over the last decade, Arab Americans have become one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States.

But the story of the media trying to serve that audience is more complicated than that: The Arab-American population across the United States is ethnically diverse. Arab-American media are being buffeted by the same technology and economic trends as the news media generally, as well as a more challenging advertising market. And, advancements in technology have brought new competition from Arab outlets located in the Middle East and North Africa.

Overall, the current Arab-American news media are relatively young. Newspapers and news websites are currently the most prominent sector, with much of the coverage focused on community news and events. There is also coverage at the national level, though, and recently, the Arab uprisings have given rise to more international coverage of news from “back home.”

A number of papers are seeing rising circulation. Some new publications have even launched. However, most papers are still struggling to recover financially from the economic recession of 2007 and at the same time keep up with the trends in digital technology and social media.

The story is more challenging for radio. Overall, radio programming aimed at Arab Americans is declining in the face of even more limited advertising revenue. For one radio program, sponsorship from a few individuals within the Arab-American community is enabling market expansion, but it is unclear if this is an industry-wide solution. Other outlets are increasing their audio content online, averting the high costs of broadcasting on air altogether.

Arab-American television news remains almost nonexistent. And now, interested viewers can turn to satellite programming and online television from Arab countries.

The recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have created some new opportunities for Arab-American media, particularly as attention to that subject by the mainstream media faded.

Social media also played an important part in the uprisings. New research suggests that the primary role was in spreading news outside of the region, connecting a global audience to the events through tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. This has not been entirely positive for Arab-American news media, as their audiences are now presented with an abundance of alternative sources of information online.

Arab-American Population Growth

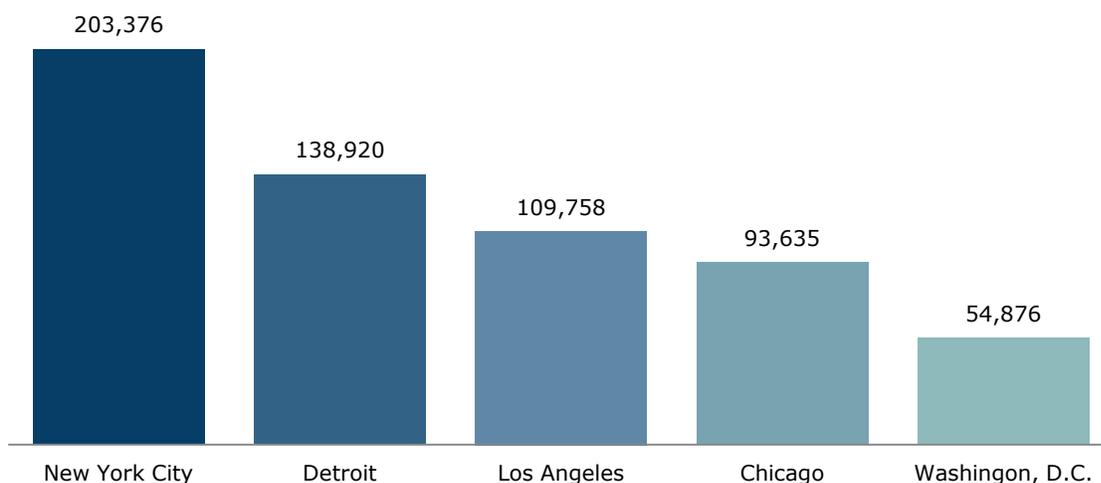
Though there is debate about the exact numbers, the Arab-American population is clearly on the rise. In the 2011 American Community Survey, the U.S. Census Bureau reported there were close to 1.8 million Arab Americans living within the United States, an approximately 47% increase in population size from 2000.¹ Some believe, moreover, that this dramatically undercounts the population. According to the [Arab American](#)

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. “2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.” 2011. de la Cruz, Patricia and Angela Brittingham. “The Arab Population: 2000.” Census 2000 Brief. Dec. 2003.

[Institute](#), for instance, the number of Arab-Americans is increasing at an even greater rate, with a total population closer to 3.7 million.²

Regardless of the exact size, the community is enormously diverse. The Arab-American population has ancestral ties to 22 countries, varying religious backgrounds, and complex historical, cultural, and political identities. The U.S. population is concentrated in five markets—the Detroit/Dearborn area, Los Angeles, New York/New Jersey, Chicago, and Washington D.C., but segments of the population live in all 50 states.³

Population of Top Five Arab-American News Markets



Source: Arab America: Demographics, U.S. Census 2010 and 2011 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates

Note: Washington D.C. population from 2010 ACS 1-Year Estimates; all other populations from the 2011 ACS 1-Year Estimates

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Print Media

Trends across most print outlets point to a shift toward online and the importance of maintaining community news coverage, even while trying to increase coverage of the Middle East and North Africa. And for the most part, Arab-American newspapers are offering both Arabic and English content to their changing readership.

The Arab-American print industry in the United States dates back to the late 19th century. Most of those original papers are now out of print and newer publications have stepped in. Suzanne Manneh, national media coordinator and Arab-American media monitor for the ethnic media coalition, [New America Media](#), places the current number of newspapers around 40. Six papers publish weekly, according to Manneh, while most others come out either every other week or monthly.⁴

² Arab American Institute Foundation. "[Demographics.](#)" 2012.

³ U.S. Census Bureau. "2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates." 2010.

⁴ Hanania, Ray. E-mail to PEJ. July 19, 2012.

["Overview of Arab American Media in the United States."](#) National Arab American Journalists Association. 2009.

In general, Arab-American newspapers are suffering from a significant drop in advertising revenue, which is a major source of funding for the papers. Most are free if picked up at a newsstand or store, though there is usually a fee attached to having a newspaper home delivered. Subscriptions range from \$20-to-\$30 annually for quarterly papers, to \$75-to-\$150 for some weeklies.⁵

As more young Arab Americans do not read Arabic, an increasing number of outlets are also publishing in English, according to Manneh. Whether an Arab-American paper remains entirely in Arabic or incorporates English depends in part on the market. “It would behoove the media outlets to at least have some kind of English [content], and I think a lot of people are slowly catching on to that,” said Manneh. That trend, she noted, affects other bilingual media as well.⁶



One of the more established Arab-American newspapers still in print is [The Arab American News](#), started in 1984 by publisher Osama Siblani. Published in both Arabic and English on a weekly basis, it focuses on bringing together a diverse Arab-American community in the Dearborn/Detroit area.⁷ Circulation of the paper in 2012 was 35,000, up almost 17% from 30,000 in 2009, according to Siblani. The vast majority of those readers, about 90%, reside in Michigan. Siblani said that in the past he tried to broaden distribution to markets outside of Michigan, but the cost of large-scale expansion proved too expensive.⁸

Siblani also believes that despite a growing demand for the paper, The Arab American News' circulation is not as high as it could be because of budgetary constraints. Advertising revenue has fluctuated over the past few years, and while the paper continues to recover, faring better than in 2010 and 2011, figures for 2012 are still down about 25% to 30% from what they were before the economic crisis.⁹

Print readership is higher than digital, but The Arab American News is also trying to expand the paper's online presence. Its website has averaged about 10,000-15,000 visitors per week so far in 2012, and Siblani said he expects those figures to continue to grow. Arab-American readership is changing and younger generations are becoming more involved. “The paper has to either... stay with them or they're going to... leave us... and go somewhere else,” Siblani said.¹⁰



Arab American News also offers an [e-newspaper](#) (or e-edition)--an electronic publication identical in content and layout to the print version. E-editions tend to be found within the outlet's main website, usually in PDF or Flash format. For locally-based outlets there are certain advantages to an e-edition. “People can see the [same] advertisements and the articles [that are in] the newspaper,” according to Fatmeh Atieh Bakhit, publisher and editor-in-chief of the Los Angeles-based paper [Al Enteshar al Arabi](#).¹¹

⁵ Arab America Website: Organizations.

⁶ Manneh, Suzanne. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 13, 2012.

⁷ [The Arab American News website](#).

⁸ Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012.

⁹ Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012.

¹⁰ Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012.

¹¹ Atieh Bakhit, Fatmeh. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 4, 2012.

Community news is a growing part of The Arab American News' original content, which makes the paper stand out from outlets that are increasing international coverage. Siblani explained that the high cost of sending reporters into the field is making it difficult for the paper to keep up with mainstream media coverage of national and international events. Additionally, Siblani reasons, if Arab-American media are to offer something their audiences cannot get elsewhere, it is in community news and information.¹²

Still, the paper does contain some original reporting from abroad. Despite cuts in revenue, the newspaper has three part-time international correspondents stationed in the Middle East, in addition to its Michigan-based staff. The paper aims to provide coverage of events in Arab countries from an Arab-American perspective. The Arab American News relies on outside sources such as [International Press Agency](#) for some of its international coverage, and also includes analyses from various experts, ranging from academics to former intelligence officials.¹³



Left: Aramica website; Right: Aramica e-edition

Another one of the larger Arab-American newspapers is the Brooklyn-based [Aramica News](#). The paper was launched in the digital age, in 2002, by publisher Antoine Faisal. Aramica publishes every two weeks in Arabic and English. (The word "Aramica" is comprised of the words "Arab" and "America.") After 9/11, Faisal sought to find a "common denominator" to bring together an Arab-American readership by "offering readers a mix of hyper-local coverage of the Arab-American diaspora, as well as interviews with national newsmakers and public opinion surveys on perceptions of Arab Americans among non-Arabs," he

told the Herald News.¹⁴

Aramica's circulation is around 35,000, according to Faisal, which is up approximately 9% from 2009.¹⁵ The increase in circulation, however, has not been accompanied by a rise in advertising revenue. Faisal puts revenue for Aramica at around a third of what it was before 2009. He also said the paper continues to run on a minimal budget, unable to send reporters to cover as many events as it once did.¹⁶

The newspaper's website, which includes access to an e-edition, is growing. Aramica.com saw a sharp increase in visitors over the past six to seven years. In 2005, Faisal said there were only about 1,400 unique visitors per month; by 2011 there were 350,000.¹⁷

¹² Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012.

¹³ Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012.

¹⁴ Henry, Samantha and Michael Karas. "[Newspaper is Voice for Arab-Americans.](#)" Herald News. July 30, 2007. Re-posted on [Arab Journalism](#).

¹⁵ Faisal, Antoine. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 1, 2012 and Manneh, Suzanne. E-mail correspondence with PEJ. September 7, 2012.

¹⁶ Faisal, Antoine. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 1, 2012.

¹⁷ Faisal, Antoine. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 1, 2012.

[The Beirut Times](#), one of the six weekly Arab-American newspapers, was started in 1985 and is based in Pasadena, Calif. It, too, has suffered from losses in advertising revenue since 2009. Managing editor Samuel Mansour said that businesses serving his audience are struggling since the recession. But he also suggested that the Arab uprisings have a lot to do with this drop in advertising. “The situation in the Middle East, especially Syria... it’s affecting [community members’] families, their land... so their businesses [are] going down and they’re not spending [on advertising] anymore.”¹⁸ He said this loss in revenue has also hurt the paper’s circulation because they can’t print as many copies. It was at 32,000 in 2009 and has since dropped almost 16% to 27,000.¹⁹



The Beirut Times website

Mansour and his staff remain heavily focused on the print edition, which they see as unique from all of the information available online. But they also recognize that increasingly “many people like to see something on the internet.”²⁰ So even with diminished resources, the paper has updated its website and now offers English content in addition to Arabic. Mansour said that The Beirut Times “cannot be behind” technologically, citing the recent closure of smaller papers.²¹

One Arab-American newspaper that prints most of its content in Arabic is Al Enteshar al Arabi. Started in 1999 by publisher and editor-in-chief Fatmeh Atieh Bakhit, Al Enteshar is published two to three times a month, with a circulation of about 200,000. In addition to its staff in Los Angeles, Al Enteshar works with freelance reporters based in the West Bank, Jordan, Egypt, and London who send reports in Arabic back to Los Angeles about once a month.²²



Al Enteshar Al Arabi

Al Enteshar’s circulation has remained relatively stable in the past few years , according to Atieh Bakhit, though advertising revenue has decreased by approximately 25%. Atieh Bakhit also cites struggling local business as a main reason for the decline. During certain times of the year, such as the month of Ramadan, ad revenue increases enough to publish the paper more than twice month.²³

The paper is comprised of international political news, entertainment, economic news, community events, and some religious content, with a significant portion devoted to international events since the onset of the Arab uprisings.

Typically Al Enteshar publishes at least one full page in English per issue, though this has decreased recently. “In the last two months... [there were] three or four articles in the newspaper in English,” Atieh Bakhit said. While the majority of Al Enteshar will remain in Arabic, the newspaper plans to print more English content in the near future.²⁴

According to Atieh Bakhit, there are several reasons that the Al Enteshar is mainly in Arabic. First, a large part of the readership tends to prefer it. She states that “most leaders from the community, they feel...

¹⁸ Mansour, Samuel. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 7, 2012.

¹⁹ Mansour, Samuel. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 7, 2012.

²⁰ Mansour, Samuel. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 7, 2012.

²¹ Mansour, Samuel. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 7, 2012.

²² Atieh Bakhit, Fatmeh. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 4, 2012.

²³ Atieh Bakhit, Fatmeh. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 4, 2012.

²⁴ Atieh Bakhit, Fatmeh. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 24, 2012.

comfortable when they read [the paper] in Arabic.” Al Enteshar also has readers in the Middle East and North Africa who do not necessarily read English.²⁵

The surge in news coming out of Arab countries following the uprisings has also played a part in the paper choosing to print primarily in Arabic. Much of the best reporting comes from reporters based there, who write in Arabic, according to Atieh Bakhit. It can be difficult to translate the more nuanced aspects of some Arabic stories into English.²⁶

The majority of Al Enteshar’s readers are in California, but their [e-newspaper](#) reaches a broader audience across the United States. The paper does not have a full website. Atieh Bakhit said the e-edition works well and that it would cost too much money and time to create a separate website.²⁷

Select Arab-American Print Outlets

Outlet	Publisher	Year Founded
The Arab American News	Osama Siblani	1984
Aramica	Antoine Faisal	2002
The Beirut Times	Samuel Mansour	1985
Al Enteshar Al Arabi	Fatmeh Atieh Bakhit	1999
Arab America	Amal David	2007

Source: PEJ interviews with the publishers.

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Print Media’s Digital Presence

At least one Arab-American news outlet chooses to publish only online. Warren David, founder and former publisher of [Arab America](#) (previously Arab Detroit) started the website five years ago.²⁸ David felt there “was a need for a website or digital media that would be able to communicate the Arab-American perspective,” by covering events, news, and information while accurately portraying Arab Americans and uniting the Arab-American community.²⁹

Arab America currently has “tens of thousands” of visitors each month, according to David. The publication also sends out a weekly e-newsletter to the 40,000 subscribers on its email listserv.³⁰

The site covers national and international news as well as local news from five major U.S. cities with concentrated Arab-American populations. The publication does so by offering multiple community sites linked to from its main webpage, [arabamerica.com](#). The community pages are for geographic areas with large Arab-American populations—California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, and the District of Columbia. Each

²⁵ Atieh Bakhit, Fatmeh. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 24, 2012.

²⁶ Atieh Bakhit, Fatmeh. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 24, 2012.

²⁷ Atieh Bakhit, Fatmeh. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 4, 2012.

²⁸ David’s wife, Amal David, has since taken over as publisher of Arab America.

²⁹ David, Warren. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 31, 2012.

³⁰ David, Warren. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 31, 2012.

of the pages highlights community events in those areas, national and international news, an Arab-American business directory for the region, and a national directory of Arab-American organizations.

In addition to news of specific interest to Arab Americans, each of the regional pages and the main page include information about the history and demographics of the Arab-American population. David said that when he began the website, he also wanted to provide “a resource site for non-Arab Americans who are interested in getting information about the Arab-American community [and the] Arab world.”³¹

Even though readership is growing, Arab America’s advertising revenue is relatively stagnant. The site is able to keep running and cover expenses, but, according to David, profit margins are too low to significantly grow the site. His sense is that advertising alone may not be enough to support ethnic web publications. “Ethnic marketing doesn’t have the advertising base that mainstream media would have,” he said. That has led him to consider partnering with a venture capital company.³²

As with the mainstream news media, the line between traditional news sources and digital media is blurring. Manneh of New America Media attributes much of the growth in media to an increase in online content and use of social media beginning around 2009.³³ Outlets are updating readers on community events and recent reports, “whether if it’s [on] their own website, or using Tumblr, or using Blogspot, or using some... aspect of the internet, they’re able to expand their reach... and the majority of those [newspapers] are also using Facebook and Twitter .”³⁴ This is not to say that print newspapers are becoming obsolete within the community, but most publications have at least a small online presence.³⁵



Audio

Arab-American radio is in a more fragile state than print.

Most Arab-American radio is what is termed “brokered programming,” according to radio talk show host, columnist and comedian Ray Hanania. That means the show’s producer pays the radio station directly for airtime, with no advertising support to help cover the cost. According to Hanania, finding companies interested in advertising on an Arab radio show is extremely difficult. As of October 2012, there were 10 programs focused mainly on Arab-American or Middle East issues. (That is down by two from 12 in 2008, Hanania said).³⁶

Hanania co-hosts [Radio Baladi](#) on WNZK AM with journalist Laila AlHusinni, broadcast for one hour every Friday morning. The show is “barely breaking even” according to Hanania, and survives largely because the

³¹ David, Warren. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 31, 2012.

³² David, Warren. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 31, 2012.

³³ Manneh, Suzanne. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 13, 2012.

³⁴ Manneh, Suzanne. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 13, 2012.

³⁵ Manneh, Suzanne. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 13, 2012.

³⁶ Hanania, Ray. E-mail to PEJ. July 19, 2012.

Chicago-based show is also broadcast in Detroit, which has a high concentration of Arab Americans and Arabs.³⁷

Hanania also hosted another show, [The Ray Hanania Show](#), or Radio Chicagoland, on WSBC AM.³⁸ However, on Sept. 23, 2012, Radio Chicagoland went off air due to lack of advertising revenue. Hanania said “the show mixed Middle East and American Arab and Muslim issues with mainstream issues, in the hopes of attracting non-Arab or non-Muslim advertisers, but it was not very successful. There are still many people who view American Arabs and American Muslims with a very negative perception.”³⁹

One program expanded its broadcast, and is now the most widely available Arab-American radio show on air. The weekday program [Good Morning Michigan](#), hosted by AlHusinni, is broadcast in Detroit, Chicago, Toledo, New York, Canada – and starting in November 2012, the Washington, D.C. and Baltimore markets. The show consists of commentary in English and Arabic on various topics of interest.⁴⁰ The program’s growth was possible because members of the Arab-American business community sponsored the expansion.⁴¹

Another Arab American-focused radio show is [Radio Tahrir](#) on WBAI FM in New York. The show is produced by executive producer Barbara Nimri Aziz and hosts Sarah Malaika and Saadia Aslam. The weekly one-hour show aims to provide “arts/public affairs programming based on the principle that ‘everything is political’” and features intellectuals, community leaders, educators, and artists from the Arab-American community.⁴²

One outlet combines radio and television in order to reach audiences. Started in 1986, the Michigan-based entertainment and news network [MEA TV & Radio](#) (Middle Eastern American TV & Radio) broadcasts about 80% of its radio programming in Arabic and the remaining 20% in English. Currently the network’s radio station reaches audiences in Southeast Michigan, Northeast Ohio, and Western Ontario, with an estimated 600,000 listeners per broadcast. However, airtime is limited to a two-hour block from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.⁴³

One solution for radio may be to increase online content. In addition to its on-air broadcast, MEA TV & Radio also has an [online radio station](#). Ray Hanania’s radio shows are all available online and he also produces separate podcasts of interviews he conducts on [Point to Point](#). Hanania’s main website, [The Media Oasis](#), is an all-encompassing source for his broadcast content, syndicated columns, blogs, books, social media sites, and resources for Arab American journalists.⁴⁴ In a YouTube video called ["Hanania Overview of His Internet Media,"](#) he touches on his support of digital content, saying that podcasting is a good way to counter the mainstream media discourse.⁴⁵

Antoine Faisal of the Aramica newspaper and website also produces a radio show, [Radio Aramica](#). Radio Aramica broadcasts free of charge online and is also accessible on smartphones as well as landlines or mobile phones without internet access. This last option is made available by dialing into a phone number to listen to the radio programming. Faisal chose this route, he said, due to the high cost of broadcasting on traditional

³⁷ Hanania, Ray. E-mail to PEJ. Sept. 10, 2012.

³⁸ [Radio Baladi](#) website.

³⁹ Hanania, Ray. E-mail to PEJ. Sept. 10, 2012.

⁴⁰ [US Chaam Media](#) website.

⁴¹ ["U.S. Arab Radio, 'Good Morning Michigan,' Announces Expansion to Washington D.C."](#) Arab America. Nov. 6, 2012.

⁴² [Radio Tahrir](#) website.

⁴³ Middle Eastern American TV & Radio website. ["Distribution."](#)

⁴⁴ [The Media Oasis](#) website.

⁴⁵ Hanania, Ray. ["Hanania Overview of His Internet Media."](#) Posted May 13, 2012.

radio.⁴⁶ The website Arab America also has its own audio content, [Arab Detroit Radio](#), which is only available online. Starting with a few hundred listeners, there are now around 22,000 per month.⁴⁷

Television

Arab-American television news programming is almost nonexistent, and the channels that do exist are largely overshadowed by satellite news from the Middle East and North Africa. The first attempt at an Arab-American television and radio network was Arab Network of America (ANA), created in the early 1990s. Available in Washington, D.C., Detroit, New York City and Chicago, ANA produced about seven to 10 hours of local cable programming per day.⁴⁸

With the rise of Arab satellite channels such as [Al Jazeera](#) in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, opportunities for the growth of specifically Arab-American television news diminished, according to some observers.⁴⁹ The cost of producing programming that can compete with major Arab news channels boasting a steady stream of funding is unrealistically high for smaller outlets, said Siblani of The Arab American News.⁵⁰

Arab-American channels based in the United States are typically a mix of news, entertainment, lifestyle, cultural programming, such as [MEA TV & Radio's television channel](#) and New York-based [TAC Arabic TV](#). Straight news reporting tends to make up a relatively small portion of the content, with a greater emphasis placed on talk-show format programs that provide a forum for community dialogue and debate.⁵¹

These channels carry their own original programs, but also fill some airtime with shows from outlets in Arab countries. While the amount of Arabic versus English content varies across outlets, the majority tends to be in Arabic. TAC TV includes English subtitles for the movies and soap operas it airs and MEA TV has a few talk shows that are in English.⁵²

The Arab-American television industry has trouble reaching an audience because it is limited, both financially and because channels often cannot get picked up by cable providers. MEA TV & Radio's television channel is available on cable, but only in Michigan and the Washington, D.C. area; TAC TV is limited to the New York/New Jersey region. Both channels could potentially reach a nationwide audience via satellite and, like much of today's television programming in general, viewers can watch MEA TV online.⁵³ But this presents yet another challenge for Arab-American television outlets. As audiences turn online and to satellite technology, they are presented with an array of alternative news sources from abroad.

Arab Satellite News

There are numerous Arab satellite channels and networks broadcasting news across the Middle East and North Africa, many of which can be accessed in the United States on websites such as [Live Station](#), as well as over satellite because they are "free-to-air" feeds. Free-to-air programming is transmitted in unencrypted form, allowing anyone with the appropriate equipment to receive the signal and view content without a

⁴⁶ Faisal, Antoine. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 1, 2012.

⁴⁷ David, Warren. Interview with PEJ, Aug. 31, 2012.

⁴⁸ David, Warren. Interview with PEJ, Aug. 31, 2012.

⁴⁹ David, Warren. Interview with PEJ, Aug. 31, 2012.

⁵⁰ Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012

⁵¹ [MEA TV & Radio website](#) and [Allied Media Corp. website: TAC TV profile.](#)

⁵² [MEA TV & Radio website](#) and [Allied Media Corp. website: TAC TV profile.](#)

⁵³ [MEA TV & Radio website](#) and [Allied Media Corp. website: TAC TV profile.](#)

cable or satellite subscription.⁵⁴ This means channels not available from cable or major satellite providers are accessible via free-to-air services. Viewers in the United States are able to pick up the signals from the Arab news channels, usually over satellite [Galaxy 19](#).⁵⁵

Arab news outlets provide information directly from “the homeland” and offer a wide array of content, making it possible for viewers to access specific programming, based on country of origin, political views, or religious affiliation. Siblani said that typically this programming appeals to more recent immigrants who are closely attuned to events in Arab countries.⁵⁶

Al Jazeera and [Al Arabiya](#) lead the Arab television news business, though it is difficult to get figures on viewership.⁵⁷ Exact numbers on their operating budgets are also unknown, but some estimates put the figures in the hundreds of millions.⁵⁸

Al Jazeera was started in 1996 as a television channel with a \$150 million grant from the emir of Qatar.⁵⁹ By 2010 Al Jazeera had expanded to a network with annual expenditures reaching \$650 million, \$29 million of that from its subsidiary, [Al Jazeera English](#).⁶⁰ In addition to the initial startup grant, the Al Jazeera network “is kept alive by the \$100 million it receives annually from the Qatari government,” according to journalist, Vivian Salama.⁶¹

“Al Jazeera was never launched as a profit center,” Middle East scholar Abdallah Schleifer told Bloomberg Businessweek. According to two former Al Jazeera employees, after the 2007 financial crisis, Qatar purportedly placed minimal restrictions on what news executives were allowed to spend. When the English-language channel was launched in 2006, there were no budgetary limits and the network was not structured to collect payments from advertising sales. However, the Qatari royal family is now beginning to cut spending for the network’s “English news-gathering efforts,” and investing in sports coverage, specifically European soccer.⁶²

Al Jazeera English is slowly gaining popularity in the United States. While Arab news channels in the Middle East and North Africa tend to be delivered to U.S. audiences exclusively via satellite or online, Al Jazeera English is also carried by a handful of cable providers—[Time Warner Cable](#), [Buckeye Cable](#), [Burlington Telecom](#), [Full Channel](#), [Comcast](#), and [Verizon Fios](#).⁶³ The cable markets that have access to Al Jazeera English are New York, N.Y.; Toledo, Ohio; Burlington, Vt.; Bristol, R.I, and the Washington, D.C. region.⁶⁴

⁵⁴ “Free to Air TV.” PC Magazine Encyclopedia

⁵⁵ The content aired on Galaxy 19 used to be broadcast over Galaxy 25. A list of channels available in the U.S. can be found at [Free to Air Satellite Channels in the U.S.](#)

⁵⁶ Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012.

⁵⁷ Al-Abdeh, Malik. “The Media War in Syria.” The Majalla. Oct. 4, 2012.

Kivelin, Ian. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 29, 2012.

Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012.

⁵⁸ Sultan Al-Qassemi. “Breaking the Arab News.” Foreign Policy. August 2, 2012

⁵⁹ Sultan Al-Qassemi. “Breaking the Arab News.” Foreign Policy. August 2, 2012.

⁶⁰ Hamp, Andrew. “Al Jazeera English Looks to Build Audience Before Ads.” Advertising Age Global. June 13, 2011 in Sultan Al-Qassemi. “Breaking the Arab News.” Foreign Policy. August 2, 2012.

⁶¹ Salama, Vivian. “Al-Jazeera’s (R)Evolution?” Jadaliyya. May 20, 2012.

⁶² Nicholson, Chris V., Matthew Campbell, Tariq Panja, and Caroline Richenberg. “The New Al Jazeera: More ESPN, Less CNN.” Bloomberg Businessweek. Sept. 27, 2012.

⁶³ “How to Watch Al Jazeera English on TV” Al Jazeera English. Last Modified April 30, 2012.

Stelter, Brian. “Al Jazeera English Arrives on N.Y. Cable.” Aug. 1, 2011.

⁶⁴ Al Jazeera English. “Demand Al Jazeera in the USA.”

Al Jazeera English continues to push for wider inclusion in the cable market.⁶⁵ Part of the organization's argument for inclusion is the number of people turning to its online coverage, specifically during the Arab uprisings. According to the Huffington Post, 60% of the website's traffic during the height of the protests in Egypt was from the United States.⁶⁶

Al Jazeera English's target audience is different from its Arabic parent network, Al Jazeera, though both are owned and funded by the Qatari government. The English version is geared towards viewers outside of the Middle East, and provides content that is not exclusively relevant to Arab and Arab diasporic populations. While a demographic breakdown of Al Jazeera English's audience is unknown, the channel does enjoy brand recognition among Arab-Americans, due to the prevalence of Al Jazeera in the Middle East and North Africa.⁶⁷

Launched in 2003, Saudi-owned Al Arabiya is a news channel on the [Middle East Broadcasting Network](#). Al Arabiya received a \$300 million initial investment from the Middle East Broadcasting Network, Lebanon's Hariri Group, and investors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Persian Gulf States.⁶⁸ Based in the United Arab Emirates, the channel was created to compete with Qatari-owned Al Jazeera.

Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are more than simply competitors within the Arab news business, though. Arab media scholar Lawrence Pintak noted in a 2011 article that political motives run deep within the outlets' rivalry. A "battle for regional influence" between Qatar and Saudi Arabia underlies their approaches to covering events.⁶⁹

Initially created as an independent and alternative news source, Al Jazeera has since come under criticism for reflecting Qatar's regional ambitions.⁷⁰ Vivian Salama argues that the massive amount of information available online and from other satellite channels "has exposed gaps in [Al Jazeera's] reporting of issues that do not fall in line with the [Qatari] government's agenda, while also highlighting its biases in the various uprisings."⁷¹

Critics of Al Arabiya have similar accusations, saying it covers events in such a way that furthers the Saudi government's political interests. In the 2011 independent documentary "[Battle for the Arab Viewer](#)," filmmaker Nordin Lasfar examined how the two networks' coverage of the Egyptian uprisings reflected a rivalry not just for viewers, but also perspective. In the film, professor and broadcast journalist, Hafez al Mirazi, said his show "was taken off Al Arabiya's airwaves after promising to put Saudi Arabia under the microscope."⁷²

Some argue that coverage of the Arab uprisings has exacerbated the politics of Arab satellite news. Former Al Jazeera reporter Ali Hashem wrote in *The Guardian* that when covering protests in Bahrain, Al Jazeera and Al

⁶⁵ Al Jazeera English. "[Demand Al Jazeera in the USA](#)."

⁶⁶ Grim, Ryan. "[Al Jazeera English Blacked Out Across Most of U.S.](#)" *Huffington Post*. May 5, 2011.

⁶⁷ Ali, Lorraine and Marisa Guthrie. "[Why American Cable Systems Won't Carry the Al Jazeera Network](#)." *The Hollywood Reporter*. March 17, 2011.

⁶⁸ Feuilherade, Peter. "[Profile: Al-Arabiya TV](#)." *BBC News*. November 25, 2003.

⁶⁹ Pintak, Lawrence. "[Breathing Room: Towards a New Arab Media](#)." *Columbia Journalism Review*. May/June 2011.

⁷⁰ Sabbagh, Dan. "[Al-Jazeera's Political Independence Questioned Amid Qatar Intervention](#)." *The Guardian*. Sept. 30, 2012.

⁷¹ Salama, Vivian. "[Al-Jazeera's \(R\)Evolution?](#)" *Jadaliyya*. May 20, 2012.

⁷² Icarus Films. Synopsis of "[The Battle for the Arab Viewer](#)." Directed by Nordin Lasfar. 2012.

Arabiya “were more interested in regional security than Bahrainis’ dreams of democracy and freedom and their revolt against tyranny.”⁷³

The outlets have given the Syrian revolt a significant amount of airtime, but again, some observers raised questions about the coverage. Hashem wrote that Al Jazeera did not air footage of gunmen fighting the Syrian regime on the Lebanese-Syrian border because it “didn’t fit the narrative of a clean and peaceful uprising.”⁷⁴ As Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya compete for viewers, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are utilizing “their media assets to hasten Assad’s demise,” according to Syrian journalist and pro-democracy activist Malik al-Abdeh.⁷⁵

The political tension in the Middle East and North Africa is not only apparent in Arab outlets. It also transfers over to the relationship between Arab-American communities and their news media. As Arab-American outlets step in to provide news about the ongoing unrest and political upheaval back home, they can fill a void left by the mainstream U.S. news media, whose reporters are no longer in those countries. However, they are also faced with the challenge of covering politically and religiously charged events within a diverse community. The growing use of social media in accessing and disseminating information presents another interrelationship—one between the events in Arab countries, Arab-American media outlets, and the Arab-American community at large.

Covering the Arab Uprisings in the Arab-American Community

When the “Arab Spring” protests began, the mainstream U.S. news media reacted quickly. Indeed, the protests generated the most U.S. news coverage of any international story measured since the Project for Excellence in Journalism began monitoring news media coverage in January 2007. That coverage peaked during the week of January 31 to February 6, 2011, when the Arab uprisings filled 54% of the newshole PEJ studied in 52 different major U.S. media outlets.⁷⁶

However, U.S. news coverage of the Arab uprisings dropped off sharply after the ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and U.S./NATO intervention in Libya. In February 2011, the uprising in Egypt made up 22% of the U.S. newshole studied. That fell to below 5% in any given month afterward. Libya accounted for 27% in March 2011. It largely vanished thereafter, only reaching 8% in August when Gaddafi’s compound was seized in September 2011. Syria has garnered even less of the U.S. media’s attention, reaching 7% of the newshole in February 2012 when the U.S. embassy was closed after two Western journalists were killed in Homs.⁷⁷

When the mainstream U.S. media’s attention shifted away from the uprisings, Arab-American media were presented with an opportunity to fill that void. The Arab-American community increasingly turned to Arab-American sources for news on “the homeland” during the height of the uprisings, leading outlets to increase coverage as the events progressed, said Manneh of New America Media.⁷⁸

As Arab-American media work to provide more coverage of the unrest in the Middle East and North Africa, it is at times challenging to stay removed from the politics. The events a news organization chooses to cover or wire stories they carry, according to Manneh, can portray the outlet’s political leanings.⁷⁹ This is not

⁷³ Hashem, Ali. [“The Arab Spring has Shaken Arab TV’s Credibility.”](#) The Guardian.

⁷⁴ Hashem, Ali. [“The Arab Spring has Shaken Arab TV’s Credibility.”](#) The Guardian.

⁷⁵ Al-Abdeh, Malik. [“The Media War in Syria.”](#) The Majalla. Oct. 4, 2012.

⁷⁶ Sartor, Tricia. [“The Arab Spring Wilts in the Media.”](#) PEJ. June 2, 2011.

⁷⁷ Anderson, Monica. [“What Happened to Coverage of the ‘Arab Spring?’”](#) PEJ. April 13, 2012.

⁷⁸ Mansour, Samuel. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 7, 2012.

⁷⁹ Manneh, Suzanne. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 13, 2012.

necessarily criticized by their readers. Instead, it is sometimes members of the Arab-American community who pressure news outlets to cover events in certain ways.

Atieh Bakhit of Al Enteshar said that she has been pressured by members of her community to change the newspaper's coverage and that advertisers in the paper were threatened with boycotts. "We have our own opinions how to cover [events]," she said, "and that's what... the first part of the constitution said—you have the freedom [of] speech, you have the freedom of press. But when somebody wants to pressure you or is threatening you to write what exactly they want, that's not going to work here."⁸⁰

Each uprising creates a different set of issues in news coverage, depending on the background of the Arab-American community in an area. Siblani of The Arab American News emphasized his paper's objective to cover both sides of a story, despite any pressure to do otherwise.⁸¹

Some outlets, such as Aramica, cover demonstrations at home and events in the Middle East and North Africa, but tend not to focus on the more divisive situations, as in Syria.⁸² Other outlets choose to strictly cover the responses and reactions of Arab Americans to the uprisings, rather than focusing on the events unfolding abroad.⁸³

The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings

Almost immediately after the Arab uprisings began, there was debate over the role and influence of social media in the ouster of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and the imminent overthrow of Mubarak. In covering what some deemed the Facebook or Twitter revolutions, the media focused heavily on young protesters mobilizing in the streets in political opposition, smartphones in hand. And since then, the violent and sectarian unrest in Syria has brought increased attention to the role of citizen journalism.⁸⁴

Social media indeed played a part in the Arab uprisings. Networks formed online were crucial in organizing a core group of activists, specifically in Egypt.⁸⁵ Civil society leaders in Arab countries emphasized the role of "the internet, mobile phones, and social media" in the protests.⁸⁶ Additionally, digital media has been used by Arabs to exercise freedom of speech and as a space for civic engagement.⁸⁷

Now, research is emerging that reexamines in a more detailed way the role that social media played in the Arab uprisings.

⁸⁰ Atieh Bakhit, Fatmeh. Interview with PEJ. Sept. 4, 2012.

⁸¹ Siblani, Osama. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 24, 2012.

⁸² Faisal, Antoine. Interview with PEJ, Sept. 1, 2012.

⁸³ David, Warren. Interview with PEJ. Aug. 31, 2012.

⁸⁴ Storify compilation by Arnold, David. "[Video News & Comment About Controversy & Future of Syrian's Citizen Journalism.](#)" Multiple original stories published on Storify. June 2012.

Raziq, Abdul. "[Syrian Citizen Journalists Risk All to Bring Stories from the Frontlines.](#)" PR Watch, the Center for Media and Democracy. May 28, 2012.

Sutter, John D. "['SNN,' YouTube Help Amplify Voices in Syria.](#)" CNN. May 28, 2012.

⁸⁵ Khamis, Sahar and Katherine Vaughn. "[Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism.](#)" Arab Media and Society. Summer 2011 and Lim, Merlyna. "[Clicks, Cabs, and Coffee Houses: Social Media and Oppositional Movements in Egypt, 2004-2011.](#)" Journal of Communications. April 2012.

⁸⁶ Howard, Philip and Muzammil M. Hussain. "The Role of Digital Media." Journal of Democracy. July 2011.

⁸⁷ Ghannam, Jeffrey. "Digital Media in the Arab World One Year After the Revolutions." Center for International Media Assistance, the National Endowment for Democracy. 2012.

In July 2012 a report was published by the United States Institute of Peace based on an extensive content analysis of bit.ly links from the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain. Bit.ly links, or short URLs, are predominantly used in social media such as Twitter. The authors came to some conclusions that countered the initial assumption that social media was a causal mechanism in the uprisings.⁸⁸

Instead, the study suggests that the importance of social media was in communicating to the rest of the world what was happening on the ground during the uprisings. “New [or social] media outlets that use bit.ly links are more likely to spread information outside of the region than inside it, acting like a megaphone more than a rallying cry.”⁸⁹

[Data from the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project](#) at least somewhat supports this conclusion with its findings that the majority of Egyptians are not online. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the total population do not use the internet. When looking specifically at those with a college education, use of social media for obtaining political information is more prevalent than in other segments of the population. Though most of the country is disconnected from the internet, 84% of those who are online say they visit social networking sites for news about Egypt’s political situation.⁹⁰ These findings point to social media’s important role in spreading information, but do not necessarily indicate that social media was a mobilizing force in the uprisings.

Passing along information is an important part of the news process. Earlier PEJ research finds the role of Twitter in disseminating breaking news is not limited to the Arab uprisings – the death of Whitney Houston, for example, was announced on Twitter 55 minutes prior to the AP confirming the story.⁹¹

Twitter, Facebook and other new media offer ways for the Arab-American news media to reach audiences, but also pose a threat to smaller outlets. In addition to keeping up with the online presence of larger news organizations, Arab-American media are forced to compete with user-generated content that is rapidly available to audiences. The utility of social media in accessing information became clear during the Arab uprisings and events such as Egypt’s parliamentary and presidential elections. However, Manneh of New America Media points out that the credibility of this information is difficult to verify “depending on where it’s from, to whom it’s attributed, [and] especially when various events are happening very quickly.”⁹²

Arab-American news outlets find they must compete with this abundance of online content in order to evolve alongside readers who are increasingly turning to the internet for information. Newspapers have made the greatest inroads here so far, with most offering at least some form of digital content, while still maintaining print versions for older generations and those who prefer a physical newspaper. Radio programs, in light of the continuing challenge to find advertising sponsorship, are beginning to shift online. Arab-

⁸⁸ Associated Foreign Press. “[Social Media, Cellphone Video Fuel Arab Protests.](#)” *The Independent*. Feb. 27, 2011.

⁸⁹ Aday, Sean, Henry Farrell, Marc Lynch, John Sides, and Deen Freelon. “[Blogs and Bullets II: New Media and Conflict After the Arab Spring.](#)” *Peaceworks: United States Institute for Peace*. July 2012.

The authors use the term “new media” instead and not “social media” in the report. There is some debate about which term is most appropriate when referring to these technologies—“new media,” “social media,” “information communication technology (ICT),” “user-generated platforms,” “digital media,” and “Web 2.0 technology” are some of the more commonly used phrases.

⁹⁰ Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project. “[Egyptians Embrace Revolt Leaders, Religious Parties and Military As Well; U.S. Wins No Friends, End of Treaty With Israel Sought.](#)” April 25, 2012.

⁹¹ Bennett, Shea. “Exclusive: “The Twitter User Who Broke News of Whitney Houston’s Death and Hour Before the Press.” *Mediabistro*. Feb. 15, 2012 in *Olmstead, Kenny, freelance journalist Jane Sasseen, Amy Mitchell, and Tom Rosenstiel. “Digital: News Gains Audience but Loses Ground in Chase for Revenue.”* PEJ State of the News Media. 2012.

⁹² Manneh, Suzanne. E-mail correspondence with PEJ. Oct. 25, 2012.

American television, on the other hand, has yet to even really find a place amid the satellite programming available from Arab countries.