

Podcasts and political plurality in MENA: Finding the [ephemeral] voice of the Arab street

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Abstract

Podcasting presents itself as an innovative platform, one that is able to deliver media content by means of audio files. As a communication format in the MENA region, it has become an alternative pathway to project politically driven content that otherwise is not often discussed in the media sphere. In so doing, many Arab producers aim at gathering audiences willing to discuss and engage with topics and issues that are normally not touched on by traditional legacy media nor covered on digital native websites. When understanding the role of podcasting, radio, and audio in general in Arab societies, we need to consider the ephemeral nature of orality, which makes it more difficult for authorities to track and control, at least in the minds of those who produce the content. Thus, this article argues that they provide a greater degree of political diversity than their more traditional legacy media counterparts.

Keywords: *Podcast, Middle East, North Africa, Arab, Political Diversity, Orality.*

Introduction

Podcasting presents itself as an innovative platform, one that can deliver media content by means of audio files. The term podcast comes from the words broadcast and iPod to express on-demand radio programmes, so individuals can listen to podcasts at any time they want, unlike on radio and television stations, where content broadcasts are programmed (Cloud 2022). It consists of the preparation and distribution of audio files using a Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed, which is an online file that contains details about every piece of content a site has published. These files are then uploaded to streaming services, which users listen to on their smartphones or digital music, multimedia players and computers. They convey all sorts of content and content producers tend to make extensive use of conversational genres while emphasizing storytelling.

In the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, podcasting and other audio-based media platforms have been embraced by important segments of the public. For example, Clubhouse has been downloaded 1.1 million times in the Middle East since it became available there in January 2021, accounting for nearly 7 per cent of global downloads (Yee and Fassih 2021). Moreover, the Media Uses in the Middle East survey, led by Professor Everette Dennis at Northwestern University in Qatar (2020), the largest and most comprehensive one of its kind in that part of the world, suggests a decline in screen usage and a shift to audio media engagement among the general population, including younger generations.

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All in all, podcasting is growing at a rapid pace in the MENA region, both in relation to audience engagement and consumption as well as in terms of content production, where one finds an increasing number of options and topics in Arabic, English and French, among other languages present there. This is in addition to the continuous presence of radio, which as a traditional legacy media platform, is still very present in the daily lives of millions of people there. As Ramsey G. Tesdell (2019), executive director of Sowt Podcasting in Amman, Jordan, put it recently,

In MENA, the number of podcasts is increasing quickly. At the beginning of 2018, we were counting 300+ podcasts. Now, ar-podcast.com lists 464 shows and we can assume that not all podcasts are listed. So in a short 12–18 months, we've seen a 60% increase. Anecdotally, from the first edition of the ME Podcast Forum until the 2nd, we saw a huge increase in interest as well as attendance.

However, beyond these numbers one must also ask what are the types of contributions that podcasts are making in terms of enhancing diversity of views and expanding the range of voices within the media public sphere in that region?

This study aims to focus on the role of the Middle East podcast in presenting political issues, and the sources that contribute to the export of this production; this topic is considered very important through a platform that enjoys some freedom compared to other media platforms.

We aim to identify the nature and general trends among content podcast programmes in Arabian countries and the sources of information on which podcast programmes rely to articulate the political and social topics they address. We also analysed the topics and styles these programmes adopted. The study carried out the analysis of a variety of podcast programmes based on their degree of influence on, and popularity among, audiences.

This perception assumes that it is more difficult for authorities to track and control what is discussed in these media spaces, despite podcasts being recorded and shared as RSS files. As one podcast producer pointed out,

I really do not see authorities following my podcasts. First, there are too many, second, they would have to listen to the whole thing to spot what exactly was said that could somehow be provocative. I mean, they could do it if they wanted. They could transcribe and then use the software to go through it. But honestly, I don't see them doing that for now. Perhaps if we reach millions, then they would do it, but we don't.ⁱ

In this context, it is also very important to underline that there is a very present oral tradition in cultural and political life in the Arab world, often referred to as 'the voice of the street' (Regier and Khalidi 2009; Zayani 2008). Not only from a religious and cultural point of view, where there has been a long-standing tradition in orality (Abdul-Jabbar 2018; Haugbolle 2010; Denny 1989; Hirschler 2011) but also in the political realm, where orality has also been very present even among closed regimes (Lynch 2003, 2015).

We believe that orality in the context of social media and in the broader framework of politics in the MENA region requires further attention. Scholars and experts should consider the ephemeral nature of orality, at least in the minds of those exchanging content, to explain why it is possible for podcasters to touch upon areas and issues that the written word does not seem able to do. Media studies have been, perhaps too vested in the idea of the written word, while neglecting orality. In this study we establish how the perceptions around the temporary existence of the message (its ephemeral nature)

encourages and permits greater diversity in the content. Nevertheless, more research about orality and diversity is needed to better understand how they relate to each other.

As there are renewed calls to de-westernize media and communication studies, one must bring a new theoretical explanatory framework which accounts for orality in the context of media systems situated in the Global South. Only then can one get a better grip of understanding not only the current role, but also that of the future role of new media formats in shaping the public sphere in the MENA region and other parts of the world. And particularly in those settings characterized by illiberalism and limitations to individual freedom.

Explaining the media systems in MENA

Firstly, it is important to explain that although there is a great degree of diversity, the media systems in the Arab world tend to operate under official government guidance (even when they are privately owned) and follow authorised editorial policies, even when they are in the hands of private proprietors (Rugh 2004: 6). Thus, their main role has been to promote government politics (Hamdy, 2013: 71). Hence, rather than scrutinise policy or challenge power, they remain subservient to state narratives.

In this sense, the media in MENA functions within political systems that, because of post-colonial settings and the legacy of the Cold War, continue to be mostly illiberal. Indeed, many of the laws and normative settings that regulate and curtail freedom of speech and professional autonomy of journalists in the region, were originally implemented by colonial powers or set by authoritarian regimes that remain in power thanks to aid from the West in the context of efforts to contain the advance of Soviet influence in the Global South and guarantee secure access to energy commodities (Lugo-Ocando 2020; Olmedo Salar and Lugo-Ocando 2018).

One important aspect to note is the fact that in these societies the distinctions between the private and public spheres and between religion and secularism have never truly occurred, at least not in the same ways as it did in Europe (Asad, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2003). This is not to say that one must fall into the intellectual trap of axiomatically assigning rationality to secular thinking, while ascribing irrationality to the religious. As these scholars have debated in critical religious studies, these dichotomies are profoundly problematic and unrepresentative as categories of analysis. Nevertheless, we ought to acknowledge the profound weight of religion in the shaping of professional, organizational, and institutional cultures in the MENA region.

One particular area where this weight has been felt is in broadcasting, where on top of political control there is a whole layer of cultural and religious normative expectations that impact the way this media spectrum is regulated and controlled (Lahlali 2011; Zaid 2018). This means that very few broadcasters have the necessary independence and autonomy to produce and disseminate content that challenges power and cultural norms (Cherribi 2006; Mellor et al. 2011; Miles 2010). Hence, there are limited opportunities for local broadcasters in the MENA region to reach out to the general segments of the public by means of traditional legacy media such as radio and television.

This is where the role of political podcasts in the Arab world comes into play as they offer a space for debate, dialogue and controversy in a region where adversarial journalism simply does not exist in the mainstream media sphere (Mellor 2005, 2007; Zayani 2008). The way we have defined political podcasting in our research means that not only is it a sound-based technological product that allows for the dissemination and consumption of information, but also, in the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer (2020), a cultural artefact that can help share ideology. Contrary to other podcast genres, political ones referred directly and explicitly to current affairs and debate issues that are politically and socially relevant –and at times controversial- in society.

Indeed, we consider that the aesthetic evaluations and discussions often extend to areas of broader concerns that are not explicitly labelled as political but that intrinsically reflect the issues and themes that affect people's lives or the broader aspects of current affairs that relate to their society. Indeed, researchers have pointed out that cultural critics have helped nurture public spheres in which civic issues can be enthusiastically and creatively talked about in non-political spaces and have suggested that we need to see this as an extension of the formal Habermasian public sphere, thus suggesting a more significant civic role for entertainment television programmes (Wu 2011:46).

It is also important to underline that podcasts, as radio, belong to the category of 'hot media' (McLuhan et al. 2011). This is because as a format it is driven by sound rather than explicit image, allowing the public to formulate images in their own imagination. In doing so, listening to podcasts incentivises the public imagination and defines levels of intellectual interaction with the content. Strictly speaking, it is not ephemeral as it is a closed and fixed product that is produced and edited and remains digitally present after being initially launched. Having said that, the very fact that it is oral in nature means that recollections around it depend more on people's interpretations unlike with the indelible ink of the written word.

In this sense, orality has been found to have cultural virtues that helped overcome censorship (Ireland 2012; Ruquoy 2017). In the so-called Global South, orality has been central in avoiding control and censorship as well as being part of traditional forms of news dissemination (Beltrán et al. 2008; Ruquoy 2017; Tomaselli 1995). The oral nature of the exchanges and the fact that podcasts can be disseminated simultaneously across different channels, makes it more difficult to censor it. This partially explains why many have embraced podcasts as a format to communicate news and current affairs to their audiences.

The emergence of political podcasting

The emergence of political podcasting and a substantial growth in the market has meant that all over the Global South, news publishers are making significant investments in podcasting, perhaps in the hope of attracting younger audiences, build a news engagement habit, and bring in additional revenue (Jin, Segal, and Carroccio 2020). This is despite the fact that news podcasts still only make up a small proportion (6%) of the 770,000 existing podcasts (Newman and Gallo 2019). However, speaking in more general terms, the content distribution format is increasingly present among wider audiences (Jham et al. 2008; Lundström and Lundström 2021).

In the Arab world, the production of, and public engagement with, podcasts continues to grow steadily. The Lebanon-based Podo reports that the platform saw a 700% growth between 2019 and 2020 and which maintains a month-on-month growth (Desai 2021). These numbers are based on a report on podcasts in MENA produced by Amaeya Media, a UAE-based podcast network. The study points out that audio will continue to play a significant role in the future.

It adds that the launch of platforms such as Clubhouse, an audio-only social networking app open to the public, and Twitter's voice-based Spaces as well as other audio spaces, are enhancing the MENA region's tradition of orality. The brands state that media companies are now broadly exploring podcasts as a cost-effective option for both content creation, and brand awareness through marketing (Arab News 2021).

Overall, the reports state that users prefer shorter podcasts, a trend strengthened by the lack of being outdoors or commuting during 2022 due to COVID-19 restrictions. They also detail that most users prefer entertainment, followed by self-help and improvement. However, this report is based on quantitative data. This means that the download analysis only accounts for the label set by the producers about the type of content, but not about

the content itself. What we found in our data instead is that a lot of these labels do not reflect the true nature of the podcasts. By means of qualitative analysis of content, we were able to determine that a great deal of this content is ‘political’ and addresses current affairs and issues even when labelled as history or claiming to be about international affairs, sports, or entertainment. We analysed 18 of the most popular podcasts in the region in terms of number of downloads:

Table No.1 Distribution of the study sample

| Podcast Title | Episode title | Presenting | Duration | Episode guests | Podcast Location | Episode Content | No. |
|---------------------|---|-------------------|---------------------------|---|------------------|---|-----|
| The other dimension | The future of film production in Saudi Arabia | Muntaha Al Ramahi | 29 minutes and 21 seconds | Mr. Ahmed Al-Mulla, Mr. Ibrahim Al-Aris | Arab Network | It focuses on a story about people with disabilities, the challenges they face, and the hopes they hold. It centres on the story of how a young athlete lost her sight but still fights for her passion and manages to get past it even after life-threatening surgery. | 1 |
| The other dimension | Possible war scenarios between Iran and the countries of the region | Muntaha Al Ramahi | 28 minutes | Ali Awad Al-Asiri | Arab Network | Focuses on how Iran is approaching the transition to a military nuclear weapon is being discussed as they consider resorting to larger and more dangerous wars, as it is assumed that the region will be forced into these potential | 2 |

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| | | | | | | conflicts. | |
| Political memory | Jah Ibrahim reveals the plot to assassinate President Anwar Sadat | Taher Berki | 26 minutes | Dr. Ibrahim Najjar | Arabic Podcast | It discusses the events that led to the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the secrets behind that. | 3 |
| The story | The shortest war in history | Taha Abdel Nasser Ramadan | 5 minutes and 20 seconds | Article by Taha Abdel Nasser Ramadan | Arab Broadcasting Podcast | The discussion topic focuses on the events leading up to the Anglo-Zanzibar War and what made it the shortest war in history. | 4 |
| The Story 2 | end of world war | Taha Ramadan | 6 minutes and 30 seconds | Taha Ramadan | Arab Broadcasting Podcast | A topic focused on the events of Germany's surrender and the end of World War II is discussed on the European scene. | 5 |
| The Story 3 | 100 beheading contest | Taha Ramadan | 5 minutes and thirty-eight seconds | Taha Ramadan | Arab Broadcasting Podcast | Focusing on the challenge set by two Japanese soldiers to see who can behead 100 Chinese prisoners during World War II. | 6 |
| Iraqi podcast | Baghdad city | United Nations | 12 minutes and forty-one seconds | United Nations | Iraqi podcast | Discuss suppression of freedoms in Iraqi society by religious | 7 |

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|---------------|----------------------------|-------------------|--|--|--------------------------|--|----|
| | | | | | | parties and extremists, and a request to cancel concerts in Baghdad for religious reasons to “preserve” the values of Iraqi society | |
| podcast myths | Damages on the second dam | Sherine Sharif | Thirty-three minutes and fifty-three seconds | Dr. Mohammad MohiDeen Dr. Ahmad Mofti | BBC Arabic Broadcasting | Discussed the Renaissance Dam and how it has damaged relations between Egypt and Sudan. It also discusses whether Israel is seeking a share of the Nile's waters | 8 |
| Why | Corona from Wuhan to Sudan | Mustafa Al-Zawawi | Thirty minutes | Heba Mohamed Hassan | Why Sudan | Discusses a topic focused on the concerns of the Sudanese people that began with the Corona pandemic. It discusses their concerns about the side effects of the virus, new vaccines, and the spread of rumours about the virus | 9 |
| Tell me 1 | Solo | Ghada El Khalil | Thirty minutes | Hoda Hamad | Mont Blanc International | Is about the story of an old lute player. It | 10 |

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|-----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|---|----|
| | | | | | | also discussed that many types of art have been abandoned by viewers. | |
| Tell me 2 | Towards Haneen | Ghada El Khalil | Thirty minutes | Hadr Al Shawi | Mont Blanc International | A story that highlights language, wordplay, and grammar. | 11 |
| Tell me 3 | Dirhams and perfumes | Ghada El Khalil | Thirty minutes | Hadeel Al Isawi | Mont Blanc International | Focuses on the story of a mother who put so much effort into raising her son only for him to grow up and leave her. | 12 |
| Tell me 4 | job interview | Ghada El Khalil | Thirty minutes | Hadeel Al Isawi | Mont Blanc International | Discusses the story of a girl looking for a job. She was quickly called for an interview but ultimately failed | 13 |
| Parliament | Integrity and anti-corruption | Sawsan Ziadeh | 51 minutes | Khaled Wamdan | Jordan | A topic focused on the most important amendments made to the Integrity and Anti-Corruption Law in Jordan. | |
| | | | | Safwan Al Majaly | | | 14 |
| Open discussion | A call for peace in Lebanon | Dr. Charbel Maroun. | 44 minutes and twenty-eight seconds | Dr. Tia Elias, Bassam Cherani | Lebanon | Talks about how factories owned by foreign companies have caused | 15 |

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|---------------------|--|----------------|---|---------------------------------------|--------------|--|----|
| | | | | | | all these Lebanese tragedies throughout history. | |
| ultimate politics | The effects of the Russian operation in Ukraine on the economy | | Forty-Seven minutes and twenty-four seconds | Dr. Salma Sedky, Dr. Muhammad Aktifoy | Algeria | Discusses the Russian-Ukrainian military operation continues in to its third week and the economic repercussions on North Africa, and Morocco in particular. | 16 |
| ultimate politics 2 | The US President's policy in dealing with the epidemic | Marwan Alonesi | Forty-one minutes and 10 seconds | Noureddine Bilqis. Amir Amin | Algeria | Discuss the political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. | 17 |
| The Circle | All of them mean all | Jihan Khatib | Thirty-eight minutes and twenty-three seconds | Bashar Al Halab | Social media | It discusses the crisis in Lebanon and how it affects its people. | |
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Source: Authors' mapping of top Podcast

In the case of the West, scholars and researchers have noticed substantial differences in terms of production among different news media outlets. These authors have underlined the fact that digital-native and legacy print media tend to centre on chat formats and deep-dives that allow them to showcase the storytelling talents of their newsrooms. Meanwhile, broadcasters have instead tended to make the most of their existing output (catch-up radio), only investing in native podcasts where they are focused on addressing younger or more diverse audiences that cannot be reached in traditional ways (Newman and Gallo 2019).

However, in the case of the MENA region, one of the first things that is noticed is the nature and background of the producers. To be sure, apart from key outlets such as Al-Jazeera in Qatar and Al-Arabiya in the United Arab Emirates to name a few, podcasts are not produced by legacy media outlets but mostly by independent companies, digital-native and, foremost, by individuals. Moreover, there is an important gap in the market for podcasts in the Arabic language. Indeed, one can say that as for 2022, podcasting in the Arab world is still in its infancy. While the number of programmes in the world ranges in the dozens of millions, the number of regular podcast programmes –at least twice a month and sustained for at least one year- in the MENA region is still very modest and may not exceed numbers in the thousands (Al Sharif 2022).

This is even though there is an important growth in its numbers. Many new programmes are launched every year, and the number of listeners is also increasing. Today, we find that the largest groups listening to podcasts in the MENA region are young people aged from 18 to 34 years. According to the statistics of the Arab podcast site, it reached 2019 average hours. The weekly listening of the Arab individual is nearly 4.75 hours (Al Sharif 2022; Desai 2021).

We find that for most part, Arab countries have embraced the culture of podcasting, especially the Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, which has the largest number of listeners and interactions with podcasts. This is followed by the United Arab Emirates, where more than 1.3 million people listen to podcasts, and about 80% of its residents know what podcasts are. For content makers, business owners and various companies to enter the world of podcasts or podcasting in the greatest capacity, most Arab media networks and many content makers with business owners have their podcasts (Al Moghadam 2022).

Our study is broadly concerned with defining the categories of these programmes in relation to their nature. This is in addition to exploring their reach in terms of provoking political discussion by addressing current affairs and issues normally not covered by other media formats. In so doing, the piece examines the trends of podcast programmes in the Arab world by looking at the content from a qualitative approach. The data suggest that most of the programmes are intrinsically political, even when they claim otherwise, and that they touch upon issues and topics normally not addressed by other media formats.

Methodology

The study's main question relates to the level of political plurality displayed by podcasts in the MENA region. In this research, we have defined diversity in political terms as the ability of news providers to produce content that is adversarial, critical, and evocative of subjects that remain controversial in MENA. In other words, the ability to produce and disseminate information that displays and demonstrates a degree of professional autonomy and authorial control. In so doing, we seek to enquire about the degree to which political podcasts in the MENA region can cover issues and topics not normally addressed by other more traditional media formats. Therefore, by examining the degree of diversity in the opinions and views expressed in these podcasts we can learn about the extent to which they diverge from official narratives set by the regional governments and reproduced by the mainstream media.

To answer these questions, we have explored 18 of the top podcasts in Arabic language and analysed their content. We follow a form of thematic analysis by emphasizing, identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Joffe 2012). This thematic analysis means identifying codes around official narratives that reflected the editorial line imposed by governments, then contrasting them to the codes present in the podcasts and subsequent explanations, versions and discursive regimes defining their content.

Regarding this, we identified political podcasts and compare these with non-political podcasts as well as defining the key issues upon which these podcasts focused. We have explored 18 of the top podcasts in Arabic language based on the number of downloads. These are the most listened-to podcasts that deal with politics and current affairs in the region. Based on the study's questions and objectives, an analysis was carried out to collect data on topics related to programmes. The study then went on to classify and assess the sample comprehensively in terms of the political nature of the topics addressed in each programme as well as the issues they covered.

We also carried out a framing analysis in which we established a set of categories such as: corruption, war and conflict, rumours, holidays and retreat, jobs and work,

propaganda and fake news, suppression of political freedoms and the mishandling of natural disasters. These categories were chosen because they represent issues that directly and explicitly relate to current affairs and provide an ideological and political viewpoint about them. The framing analysis undertook a very basic dichotomy between positive and negative representation as the basis of the analysis to explore the degree of divergence with official narratives that are overwhelmingly uncritical.

After that, we included data from a set of semi-structured interviews with some key podcast producers in the region to triangulate the qualitative data. Interviews play a major role in looking at the podcast from an applied and realistic perspective, as they are able to highlight the producers' own view of what they present, what they target, and what they pursue. In addition to discussing the most important challenges they face today, the most important issues that the podcast addresses, and their aspirations for the coming period. The interviews addressed key issues about podcasts as a space for discussion and the producers' views in relation to this media format as a platform for political debate and engagement. Data from the interviews were used to develop the explanatory framework for the more general analysis, providing reflective elements based on the content producers' own accounts. To assess this data, we again used a strand of thematic analysis that allows comparisons among common features and issues raised by the interviewees (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015).

It is important to mention that, following the recommendations set by standards among ethical committees in our university, we decided in all cases to anonymize the interviewees' identities. Interviewees were also offered the opportunity to see the material before publication and to withdraw at any point. Despite this, and even with those steps put in place, it proved to be a difficult task and many interviewees showed a reluctance to speak. We contextualised this data within the broader discussions around the formation of the public sphere in the Arab world and the role of technology in incentivising plurality and participation.

Overall, the research approach looked at how a variety of content in podcasts in the Arabic language reflect not only the topics they claim to be focusing on, but also that, because of the ephemeral nature of orality, are able to facilitate (?) engagement and discussion with political issues and current affairs not always present in the more mainstream media or in written formats. The results shown below suggest that the main topics covered by podcasts in Arabian countries tend to be fundamentally political as do the discussions that derive from them.

Greater degree of diversity in podcasting

The main Arabic-language podcasting in the MENA region tends to be fundamentally political, addressing current affairs. The frequency of words and topics relative to the distribution of other main topics illustrates this,

Table No.2: The main topics of Podcast programmes in Arab countries (words):

| Rates | No. of words |
|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Politics | 56% |
| Social, Entertainment and Others | 44% |

Source: Authors' analysis of 18 Podcast series, each 11 programs 2022

As this Table indicates, the main topics addressed by these programmes are political issues, which came first. These results reflect similar findings from other studies in the region (Al-Yaqoubi 2020). One can conclude that political issues ranked first among several groups studied in the sample.

Another important finding relates to the nature and category of the programmes in question. That is, the types of programmes to which podcast programmes are created,

produced, or developed (?) in Arab countries. In this sense, we looked at the frequency and relative distribution of the types of podcasts related to the sample,

Table No.3: Types of podcast programmes to which podcast programmes in the Arab countries

| No. | Rates | Topics |
|-----|-------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | 33% | • Individual Talk Show |
| 2 | 28% | • Dialogue/Conversational/Interviews |
| 3 | 39% | • Investigative/Production |

Source: Authors' analysis of 18 Podcast series, each 11 programs 2022

The data indicate that the most popular categories to which podcast programmes belong in the Arab world are those of -an investigative nature (looking in depth at current affairs and serious issues affecting society) and in second place came individual talk shows, which also addressed political topics. It is interesting to note that the predominant style within the sample is investigative. That means that podcasts in Arabic exhibit a good deal of production, there is data gathered by either one person and a team and it is not only opinions but also actual features that are supported by proper reporting in the field. This is, however, not too dissimilar to what other studies in the region have found in relation to language and education podcasts. That is, that most programmes were produced by two or more individuals, who actually carried out some sort of investigation and production (Hasan and Hoon 2013). This suggests that the programmes were not just a forum for providing opinions but that they also incorporated an important degree of production and investigative reporting. We interpret this as Arabic-language podcasts adding value to the content by incorporating a fair degree of production. This last finding contrasts with many English-speaking podcasts that are all about one person talking and commenting with little added value.

Framing of political topics

Another key finding relates to the framing of the topics and issues that these programmes provide.

The frequency and relative distribution of values related to the study sample of podcast programmes were extracted, and the following Table No, 4, illustrates the findings. This Table highlights the main topics covered in terms of frequency of words by specific nodes,

Table No. 4: Topics mostly covered in Arabic Language podcasts and how are they framed

| Negatively-Framed Issues | | Positively-Framed Issues | | Issues Mixed Framed | |
|--------------------------|------|--------------------------|------|------------------------|------|
| Topic | Rate | Topic | Rate | Topic | Rate |
| Corruption | 10% | Success stories | 3.5% | Market and competition | 5.5% |
| War and conflict | 12% | War and conflict | 18% | War and conflict | 4 % |
| Rumours | 5.5% | Nation's future | 5.5% | | |
| Holidays and retreat | 10% | International peace | 5% | | |
| Jobs and | 5.5% | Legal | 2% | | |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------|-----------|--|--|--|
| work | | integrity | | | |
| Propaganda and fake news | 4% | | | | |
| Suppression of political freedoms | 5.5% | | | | |
| Mishandling natural disasters | 4% | | | | |

Source: Authors' analysis of 18 Podcast series, each 11 programs 2022

These results highlight that many of the discussions and debates in the main podcasts are critical and, to some degree, adversarial. More qualitative analysis of these programmes reveals that the discussions in which there are arguments-counterarguments exist in all of the podcasts analysed in our sample. Of course, as one might expect, most of the treatment given to current affairs was positive, with over 56% of the key topics being debated in positive terms. This is set against the dynamics and nature in which professional communication is practised in the MENA region.

The Table also indicates that there are several key topics that are debated either positively or negatively and, at times, in mixed terms. That is, the same podcast can have a variety of views on the same topic. Some observers, for example, might find it hard to explain how a topic such as conflict and war is mostly framed in positive terms. The explanation can be found by looking more closely at the detail to see that many of the podcasts talk about struggles in places such as the occupied territories in Palestine and even about the recent withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, which, for most of the producers, is seen as a positive step. As one of our interviewees explained,

Conflict in the Middle East cannot be seen in black or white terms. For many of us, it is a continuum of the struggles for independence and liberation. In every single podcast, whatever the topic, if one talks about war then one refers to these movements. In my own podcast, we talk about these issues and always, well almost always, we end up referring to Palestine or the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It always comes to these recurrent themes. Hence, the arguments and debates, particularly if we have interviewees, will be both positive and negative towards war.ⁱⁱ

It is also important to examine the orientation of the opinions and comments around the issues that are addressed by the podcasts. In this sense, Table 5 shows that most of the opinions in the podcasts disagree with the established line in relation to the critical issues that are debated. That means, that views and perspectives expressed disagreement around policy or explanatory frameworks offered by official voices.

Table No. 5 is particularly important because it shows a pattern of divergence in relation to official narratives. That is, it highlights an important degree of disagreement to official statements around issues in current affairs affecting society. This is in relation to the different trends in Arabian countries regarding the content of political and social issues,

Table No. 5: The different trends in podcast programmes in Arab countries regarding the content of political and social issues, the study sample

| Direction | Rate |
|-----------|-------|
| Agree | 16.6% |
| Disagree | 61.1% |
| Neutral | 22.2% |

Source: Authors' analysis of 18 Podcast series, each 11 programs 2022

The fact that a majority of the commentary and views disagree with the official editorial line is remarkable and shows how much podcasts have become an alternative platform for criticality and dissent. This suggests a stance that represents a contrary view to the political narrative presented in other traditional mainstream legacy news media, where levels of professional autonomy and authorial control by journalists and content producers are far more limited. This confirms our initial view that podcasts not only touch on issues normally not addressed by the traditional legacy media, but that they also do so in a more critical manner. However, we should be cautious to equate oppositional views with adversarial narrative. As one of the podcast producers clarifies,

I would not describe these views as a disagreement with a particular policy. It is rather offering a critical perspective, questioning to see if there are ways to improve these projects and new ideas. Disagree is a strong word, I definitely don't disagree, but I might have a different view. In my podcast we do want to ask good questions, but we allow for debate too. That is, we might not see things the same way but that doesn't mean we are not on board.ⁱⁱⁱ

Overall, what is important to highlight from these results is that most of the topics that mainly feature in the debates and discussions on the podcasts are framed negatively. That is, that in terms of percentage of words and sentences, they refer to the topics in question in critical terms. It is equally important to underline that these are issues and topics that are not often covered in the traditional media. For those familiar with the media in the region, the fact that 5.5% of the conversations referred to suppression of political freedoms is remarkable regardless of the context in which these discussions took place (e.g., in podcasts relating to history).

Another important aspect is to define of whom do the podcasts speak about and who are the people, institutions, and organizations to which they refer when addressing the issues that are discussed in these podcasts.

Table No. 6: The active voices in podcast programmes in the Arab countries

| No. | Key subject | Rates |
|-----|---------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Countries and governments | 55.5% |
| 2 | Political leaders | 27.7% |
| 3 | Private organizations | 16.6% |

Source: Authors' analysis of 18 Podcast series, each 11 programs 2022

Most of the words used in these podcasts referred to forces in the political realm that intervene and can change policy or shape events. The Table No. 6 indicates that countries and governments ranked first as active forces of intervention and change. Leaders and individuals came second while private organizations and Third Sector actors were third. This brings us to the issue about the sources and individuals on which podcast producers rely to produce their content.

Table No. 7: Sources of information on podcast topics in the Arab countries

| No. | Main source for the information/topic being discussed | Rates |
|-----|---|-------|
| 1 | News statements | 21.2% |
| 2 | Statistics and data | 33.3% |
| 3 | True story or event happening | 18.1% |
| 4 | Historical events | 15.1% |
| 5 | Future visions or plans being announced | 12.1% |

Source: Authors' analysis of 18 Podcast series, each 11 programs 2022

The Table indicates that most of the top podcasts initiate their discussion from data and statistics. This is a good sign, as it suggests a level of production and investigation before the podcast is put together. This was a surprising and interesting finding that suggests that podcasts in Arabic language are going the extra mile to offer context and explanatory frameworks to their users. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that many of the programmes were initiated by news statements made by others. In a close reading of these podcasts' content, we found that these statements mostly came from officials. Consequently, we can argue that if there are disagreements around official perspectives and policy within most of the podcasts, the overall agenda and tone is still set by official voices and statements.

One final part of the analysis was to look at the style and grammar of the podcasts. This was done to examine the reach, or at least with whom do the producers aspire to engage? To answer this question, we looked at the language used. In all cases, classical rather than colloquial Arabic was used, apart from guests in interviews. Nevertheless, the presentation of the programme, the analysis and the conclusion in all instances spoke in classical Arabic and presented content through that type of pronunciation. When asked about this, one of the producers commented,

Arabic is a language that is difficult. By undertaking classical Arabic, we can not only guarantee that anyone can understand it but also that we can have a further reach in the region for each podcast episode. We think of the wider market and in so doing, we need to think of accessibility and standardization.^{iv}

Conclusions

Generally speaking, scholarly work has highlighted the transformative power of the media in relation to the nature and configuration of the public sphere in Arab countries (Lynch 2003; Tawil-Souri 2008; Zayani 2008). In recent decades, these works have placed emphasis on the emergence of 24-hour satellite news channels such as the Qatari-based Al-Jazeera, the Saudi-owned (but Bahrain-based and short-lived) Al-Arab News Channel and the UAE-based news network Al Arabiya, among others (Behravesch 2014; Elmasry et al. 2013; Zeng and Tahat 2012).

Most of this literature has either addressed the way in which these outlets have helped in opening the public sphere to alternative voices and issues while others have centred mostly on their role in public diplomacy and projection of soft power. This literature somehow assumes that these news channels are responsible for transformations in the public sphere in the region.

The core assumption is that exposure and consumption of hard news is central in the configuration of public opinion (Cherribi 2006; Dahlgren 1995; El-Nawawy and Iskandar

2008). It is assumed, therefore, that the configuration of the public sphere in Arab countries has been shaped by decades of illiberal regimes that have limited access to information and constrained political debate (Lynch 2015). Hence, implying that capabilities for deliberation and debate remain dormant because there is no explicit and open political debate.

Our study shows the current trends in podcasting in the MENA region indicate that they serve as a vehicle for cultural critique and, consequently, political controversy and criticism. In so doing, they have come to facilitate and underpin discussions in the media sphere that do not take place within the traditional legacy media or written digital natives that produce the content within these countries (although some do so in exile). With this study, we were able to underline that despite their non-explicit political nature, podcasts do nevertheless touch upon political and current affairs. These included issues and topics that often are not debated or even covered in the legacy mainstream media or even in the written native ones.

We saw that podcasts also offered a space to express disagreement with official perspectives although not in an adversarial tone. Having said that, the results also suggest that the agenda of these podcasts continue to follow that of official voices by means of the news statements provided to the rest of the press. This is perhaps explained by the fact that many of the key influential podcasts are being mostly produced by traditional legacy media such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, BBC, and Sky News Arabia. Hence, we could see that the process of agenda-setting is still restricted to a great degree to the issues and themes coming from the top rather than those that affect the community or the journalists and content producers themselves.

Equally important, the research allowed us to determine that most of the Arabic-language podcasts do not have clear and explicit ownership and are instead a result of individual sectors. It is here that there is an opportunity to create and disseminate content that connects the audiences with issues and topics that relate to their own issues and daily problems. This is not just by - drawing attention to disagreements, but also by incorporating diversity and plurality in the stories being told.

The value of the podcast is that it makes people listen, so they are better informed when they talk. It is a format that can use its ephemeral nature as an advantage because producers and audiences think of it less as a permanent imprint or record of what they think or write. Finally, one assumes, it contributes to reducing self-censorship. However, it is also important to keep in mind that while spoken words might come and go, the ideas they convey most surely will stay.

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ⁱ Interview with Podcast producer from Qatar on May 12, 2022. Identity withheld.

ⁱⁱ Interview with Podcast producer from Egypt on May 2, 2022. Identity withheld.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Podcast producer from Jordan on May 5, 2022. Identity withheld.

^{iv} Interview with Podcast producer from Egypt on May 2, 2022. Identity withheld.