

REPORTING TRUTH – ONLINE JOURNALISM,
CENSORSHIP, AND THE CREATION
OF KNOWLEDGE IN JORDAN

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ABSTRACT

Through research grounded in participant observation among online journalists in Jordan, this project contributes to the investigation of longstanding problems in social theory by asking how the relationship between mass communication and politics is changing in the post-internet age. Or perhaps more skeptically, it asks: Is this relationship changing, or do we merely assume that it must be? Focusing on the concept of censorship, where media and politics meet most forcefully, I investigate the intersections of new technologies, journalistic practices, and state control. My dissertation examines how journalists in Jordan negotiate state censorship and understand their own processes of self-censorship as they mediate modernity and political change in a country where political truths are to a great degree contrived and manipulated. My research explores the effects of censorship on digital news transmission – and the effects of digital transmission on censorship – as journalists create knowledge in an evolving media environment.

Particularly in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring, new technologies have enabled a cadre of Jordanian journalists and media activists willing to test boundaries, and permitted an explosive media pluralism in the kingdom. In response to this more distributed, smaller-scale media production, the Jordanian state seems to be changing its tactics. Where it earlier relied on newspaper editors to act as gatekeepers, it now relies on cultivating self-censorship in the individual.

My research shows that as media production and consumption become more individuated, so must state censorship. No longer centrally negotiated between

government and media institutions, it is communicated to journalists through diffuse control, prosecutions of their peers, changing regulatory schema, and professional codes that promote "responsibility" and "balance" on the part of the individual. Nevertheless, there are still avenues of resistance available to journalists at both independent online news outlets and larger state-aligned outlets.

I argue that the Jordanian regime disciplines its media to act as a form of window-dressing, in which it performs certain democratic ideals while ceding no power to its citizens and institutions of civil society. Through this strategy, aimed in part toward its own people but primarily at its all-important foreign investors and donors, the state adds a veneer of freedom to its autocratic foundation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The journalists sat crammed together in a sleek office filled with stylish, uncomfortable chairs and desks covered in MacBooks. Through the glass walls of the modern office building, we could hear the bustle and honking of the dense traffic in Amman's business districts. Perhaps a dozen journalists were in the office that day, half working in Arabic and the other half in English. Their backgrounds were as diverse as the set of stories they were working on: the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, a transgender woman barred from Jerusalem's Western Wall, Dubai Aluminium's new \$1.8 billion loan, and Amal Clooney's style choices.

In the outside world, just beyond Jordan's narrow borders, conflict raged. Egypt, the most populous Arab nation, was in the throes of a repressive counter-revolution led by its military. Violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians that centered on al-Aqsa mosque rocked the Occupied Territories. Syria's bloody civil war had spilled into Iraq, and was beginning to involve Turkey and Lebanon. In the regional power vacuum, a violent, depraved terrorist group had declared a caliphate and was using videos and social media to spread hatred and lure recruits from around the world. Jordan found itself just behind the front lines, hosting American air power and sending its own F-16's on bombing missions. A feeling of trepidation, concern, and depression seemed to permeate the Jordanian capital.

At first glance, Jordan seems riven with complexities bordering on contradictions. It has historically been one of the more stable Arab-majority societies. It is considered by most observers to be far less repressive than many of its neighbors, but its elected bodies and courts – its outwardly democratic institutions – offer little in the way of checks and balances to the power of the king and security services. A majority of its citizens claim Palestinian identity and are staunchly anti-Zionist, yet it has a peace treaty with Israel and close strategic ties to the United States, Israel's main supporter. As a polity, Jordan is a pure product of twentieth-century European colonial treaties. Some of its people have ancient local roots, though many are recent arrivals from elsewhere. The ruling family themselves are outsiders from the historic Hijaz region of what is now Saudi Arabia, installed by the British in return for their First World War alliance. The kingdom has few natural resources, very little water, and a burgeoning population. It is surrounded by nations in varying degrees of turmoil and it is threatened itself by terrorism. In 2015, the fabric of its national middle-class narrative of stability-amid-chaos (Tobin 2012; Yom 2014, 2015) seemed, to many with whom I spoke, increasingly threadbare.

It was these seemingly exotic complexities that, in part, drew me to Jordan as an undergraduate in 2000 and 2001. On my first trip I lived with members of a prominent Bedouin clan in a small village, making the briefest acquaintance with the finely layered expressions of status and the intricate social arrangements of village life. (One of my first lessons: Only farmers ride in the backs of pickup trucks, and it's better to walk in the heat than ride like a peasant – at least from the upper-class perspective of my hosts.) On my

second trip I found myself living in Amman, a rapidly growing metropolis where white Westerners were still rare enough to attract comment on the street (a circumstance which is no longer true, for good or ill). I began to get a somewhat clearer picture of Jordan's urban-rural divide, the much-discussed rifts between its "Palestinian-Jordanian" (West Bankers) and "Jordanian-Jordanian" (East Bankers¹) populations, and the odd position Jordan occupies as a strategic U.S. ally and major foreign aid recipient in a tumultuous region.

I also started to take notice of Jordan's media: its emphatically banal state TV newscasts and the English-language *Jordan Times* daily newspaper. As a friend remarked at the time, the *JT* seemed to have the same three front-page stories every morning: what the king had done the day before, how great the economy was doing, and what was happening in Palestine. Flippant, yes, but not entirely inaccurate. Years later I looked back and found that his observation had planted a seed of interest in the mechanisms of state media control, and the relationships between journalist, reader, and government.

After finishing my undergraduate degree, I gave little thought to returning to Jordan. With vague desires to contribute to social justice, and little clue how to do it, I found myself following in my mother's footsteps and pursuing a career in newspaper journalism. My six years in the news business (at two daily papers, an Associated Press bureau, and an online financial news site) coincided with a period of enormous upheaval in the news business, particularly in the United States but to some extent globally. The first decade of the 2000's saw the expansion of craigslist, the founding of YouTube and Facebook, the rise of blogging and Twitter, and the realization of a 24-hour news cycle. I

¹ Referring to the west and east banks of the Jordan River.

remember showing off my first mobile phone with a full keyboard, and hearing my excited editor remark that it would be useful for texting updates from trials and meetings. We struggled with questions such as whether to save content for the print product by not publishing news online first, a nearly unthinkable strategy in U.S. media in 2016. The compression of time in our working lives, and the increasingly blurry nature of the borders between work and leisure, became more and more evident.

For me, as it did for thousands² of other U.S. print journalists, this period ended with the economic crisis of 2008. The sector was hard-hit by losses in advertising revenue and declining print readership, and newspaper conglomerates struggled with the acquisitions and debt they'd assumed in the heady days of the 1990's. Laid off from my beloved daily paper, I found myself covering the insurance industry for a financial information company. Frustrated, miserable, and knee-deep in quarterly earnings reports, I realized my predicament could end only one way: graduate school.

As a reporter, I had already begun to harbor deep misgivings about the news business as practiced in the United States, particularly its ideological commitment to objectivity and balance. Objectivity, it was clear, depended entirely on the context and positionality of the observer. Balance, which in practice often meant including a simple statement from someone easily identified as an opponent to the main voice, helped create a world in which every issue had exactly two diametrically opposing sides. And I soon realized that what I was trying to uncover and report were not facts, exactly, but attributions. My own observations were not particularly valuable to my editors. What

² Citing the American Society of Newspaper Editors, a Pew Research report said full-time newsroom jobs had fallen from 52,600 in 2007 to 38,000 in 2012 (Jurkowitz 2014).

they wanted most were documents, or statements from people we could present as experts – *people who should know* – so that if anything were wrong it would be someone else's mistake.

In large part my research interests derived from these previous observations and misgivings as a journalist. I am interested in the ways journalism reinforces (and occasionally disrupts) hegemony; how journalists imagine their audiences and how those imaginaries are changing in the internet age; how new technologies intersect with existing institutional structures and ethical codes; and whether new media actually possess the democratizing potential that we often ascribe to them. Censorship, provocatively explored by Dominic Boyer and William Mazzarella, has been a particularly compelling organizational schema, and provided a hook from which to hang my diverse research questions.

After brief scouting trips to Morocco and post-revolutionary Tunisia, I began thinking more about going back to Jordan for fieldwork. I was set on doing my fieldwork in the Arabic-speaking world, in part because its contemporary urban societies (with the exception of Cairo) have historically been under-anthropologized, though that trend has reversed in recent decades (Deeb and Winegar 2012). The second major impetus has been that most of the American undergraduate students I encounter have a dismal understanding of the region that consumes so much of this country's attention on so many levels. My last reason, which I mention in the spirit of academic honesty, was that I wanted to choose an anthropological location in the Middle East in an attempt to increase my chances of finding a job in a discipline that still privileged a seemingly exotic or

difficult fieldwork location at the end of the twentieth century (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), and may continue to do so today. Within the anthropology of the Middle East, Jordan has received relatively little attention compared to places such as Israel/Palestine, Beirut, and especially Cairo (Deeb and Winegar 2012).

One important spark for my fieldwork in Jordan was a 2012 article about increasing press and internet censorship in the kingdom (Guthrie and Adely 2012). Then, in the summer of 2013, just days before I left for my preliminary fieldwork trip, Jordanian authorities suddenly began enforcing an amendment to the country's Press & Publications Law, an amendment that had been passed months before but never implemented. Hundreds of news websites were blocked with little or no warning, and the government's move was met with condemnation by both Jordanian journalists and international organizations for human rights and journalistic freedom. Many of the news websites quickly started the licensing procedures required by the amendment and were soon up and running again. A few sites were able to resume publication after arguing that the law did not apply to their activities, and a handful resisted the government's efforts to block them. Only one such – 7ibr.net – was still fighting the law in September 2014, when my fieldwork began in earnest, but its editors yielded to the inevitable after a few more months and complied with the government's demands (see Chapter 4). This episode of the Press & Publications Law amendment neatly encapsulated my interests in censorship and the relationships between state and press; new media; and social media and journalistic activism.

In this light, I developed the following research questions: First, why would a supposedly liberalizing regime move to censor its press? And without pulling the plug on the internet, how did it intend to censor online media? Second, how were journalists responding to this move? How did journalists in Jordan conceive of their relationship to the state, and how did they imagine their audience? How did these intangible relationships between state, journalist, and audience shape the knowledge that journalists produced?

Next, how did censorship operate? I had a feeling already that there wasn't a bureaucrat with a red pencil in a room somewhere. From the outset, I strove to approach the concept of censorship as Dominic Boyer (2003) does, as a productive intellectual exercise, something that creates certain forms of knowledge, akin to any other framework of decision-making. This is antithetical to a Western common-sense understanding of censorship, and to my own habitus as a former journalist, and at times it has been a struggle to maintain that theoretical view.

My other research questions involved new technologies. How were they complicating and facilitating journalists' jobs? It was clear from the start that new media, what I have come to call distributed digital production, would be a major component of this project.

Then, at the most abstract level, I developed the following questions: What does "press freedom" mean? What is the role of journalism in society? Is censorship actually a useful and viable framework for media research, either mine or that of others, in Jordan

or elsewhere? What really *is* censorship? And how does it differ from any other process of editing and decision-making?

My fieldwork in Jordan coincided with a staggering wave of change in the region. I began my research as the aftereffects of the "Arab Spring" revolutions were coming into focus, punctuated by the fall of the Morsi government in Egypt in the summer of 2013 and the capture of swaths of Syrian and Iraqi territory by Daesh³ (known in most English-language media as ISIS, ISIL or Islamic State). As a participant-observer, I helped cover (while safely behind a desk) the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, the U.S.-led air war in Iraq and Syria, the siege of Kobani, clashes in Jerusalem over the al-Aqsa mosque, conflicts in Yemen and Libya, and countless other acts of violence, terror, and oppression. It was an exciting time to be back in a newsroom, and a compelling and valuable period for research. But my excitement was tempered by – well, by what I can only call depression – from the constant reminders that my research was benefitting from the intense mediation of profound human suffering. At times it has seemed that all of my data have sprung from horrific acts of violence.

As a former journalist, the mode of writing that anthropologists refer to as "giving voice" to one's research subjects feels the most natural to me. From the outset, I anticipated (only somewhat consciously) that I would be presenting my data in this format. I have no doubt that that framework has structured and limited the data I was able to collect, and that the form in which I am presenting my work has certainly influenced the conclusions at which I've arrived.

³ An Arabic acronym for the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

"Giving voice" is also highly problematic – it is situated in a patriarchal, colonial epistemology, one that I am now reproducing as a white, Western man presenting and interpreting the actions of non-whites and women. An Arab-American woman conducting research at the same field site would in all likelihood have produced a very different document, as a product of her own positionality and of her different relationships with her research subjects. Both texts would be incomplete, but incomplete in different ways. I have endeavored to be as mindful as possible about my own positionality in the data collection and writing processes. However, there are important questions that have not yet occurred to me which will be immediately obvious to other readers.

In an attempt to make my research more collaborative and responsible, everyone who appears in my text has had the opportunity to see it and request changes. Very few of them did so, and as Lorraine Nencel (2014) notes, this is still no guarantee that the resulting work represents its subjects as they would wish to be represented. Such strategies, while well meaning, have themselves become formulaic in anthropology, as have self-reflexive confessionals like this one. Critics of these strategies, like Wanda Pillow (2003), argue that they merely mask and reinforce the very discursive imbalances that they seek to rectify.

As with my representational mode, my background and position influenced my relationships with my co-workers and research subjects, and thus the data that arose from those relationships. I am a product of U.S. newsrooms in which an aggressive, argumentative, and normatively masculine culture pervaded. In addition to the inevitable

tensions between the "participant" and "observer" roles in participant-observation ethnography, there were times when my modes of communication, aesthetic choices, and work habits rubbed people the wrong way. I spoke several times about it with Layla, the site's executive editor who has been a good friend for several years, and endeavored to fit in as best I could. For example, I volunteered to help craft the site's first style guide, a document that Layla hoped would establish standards and guidelines for spellings, punctuation, and image captions, and give the site a more uniform appearance. I attempted to base the guide on practices that were already in place, and solicited input when decisions needed to be made; but I was still seen as trying to tell the other staff members what to do. Layla and I shelved the project, both as an expediency and also to help me maintain more productive research relationships (a decision that, again, still served my privileged position).

As one might expect, my relationship to Jordan has changed over time, though I am still grappling with exactly how. For now I can only say that these days, after my fieldwork, Jordan seems far less different than it did as an undergraduate, and no longer particularly exotic. I now see more similarities to other countries than differences – in part because my own attitudes have shifted, and in part because of the increasing commodification and neoliberalization within Jordanian society is actually making it more like those other places in some ways. My continuing attraction to Jordan has less to do with any sense of place, and more to do with the lasting relationships I have formed with people living there.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this project begins with Gramsci, and while he doesn't specifically reference mass media in his writings, it has long seemed reasonable to me to include them with the other institutions of civil society that are important to his theory, such as churches, schools, etc. These are the institutions through which hegemony – the ideas and ideals of the dominant class – are infused throughout society. Mass media seem to fit this category perfectly well. If we accept that the media are among the institutions of civil society, then in Gramsci's articulation, they would be one of the battlegrounds of the war of position, the constant struggle over ideas in social space. In an ongoing social struggle, hegemony can never be said to be established once and for all. Opponents of the dominant class can thus build consent within civil society (Gramsci 2000, 201, 224-225; Schwarzmantel 2014, 102, 208).

Here's where it all falls apart. While institutions of civil society and the mass media certainly diffuse the ideas of the dominant class, this battleground idea is no longer true, if it ever was. It certainly isn't in late capitalism. And yet, we are left in the West with this idea of constant struggle in social space, of the social space as an arena in which change can take place, or in which consensus is built in democratic society. (Here I don't mean to suggest that this strain of thinking comes from Gramsci, only that he offers us some useful ways to think about it.) Western political thought is home to a collection of ideas about the role of the press in democracy: that it is a watchdog on government, that it

is a forum for public debate, that it creates responsible citizens, that it helps constitute national unity and identity (Anderson 1991).

And here is where it all falls apart - again. Communications scholars have undone these notions in various ways. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model is one. Hanno Hardt, quoting Max Horkheimer, notes that "the media profess to adhere to the values and freedom of the individual, but they 'fetter the individual' to prescribed thoughts, attitudes, and buying habits instead" (Hardt 2008, 2). Hardt argues that the relationship between mass media and democracy is failed – that while people need mass media for information, the media are ultimately harnessed to the wagon of mass consumption. Further, he writes, "mass communication is determined by the ruling ideas of political and economic forces, and is, therefore, focused on the production of consent and compliance rather than on the autonomy of the individual" (2008, 28).

Hardt's essay is largely focused on the U.S. case, but I would argue that wherever we look, mass media are implicated in the manufacture of consent, compliance, and consumption. And through consumption, mass media are involved in the constitution of identity in the individual in capitalist society, both through the media we consume, and the advertising that leads us to the other things we consume. And as Bourdieu (1984) notes, that consumption is fundamental to the construction of identity in contemporary society.

The particulars of all of this vary from context to context, but regardless, we still must confront the idea of the press as a progressive, democratic arena; the idea that if the press is not serving all strata of society then it has not reached its full potential; that it can

and should be made to reach its full democratic potential; and that to do so it must be "free." I do not wish to hew too closely to a cultural imperialism model, but at least in the case of Jordan, a U.S.-derived dominant discourse of the press as guardian of democracy is at work. But as I hope to show in the following chapters, that discourse is at work in very complicated and cynical ways.

Outline of the Following Chapters

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a brief history of mass mediation and news production in Jordan, and the state's regulatory practices. I then describe the organization and institutional outlook of my primary field site, which is a pan-Arab online news portal, and the daily practice of content aggregation and production in its diverse, bilingual newsroom.

Following this introductory chapter, I have organized my dissertation into three main ethnographic chapters. My second chapter addresses the daily practice of journalism at my primary field site, a content-aggregation news website owned by a Jordanian businessman. This chapter is organized around one of Al Khaleet's⁴ weekly planning meetings, and a debate between the English-speaking and Arabic-speaking "teams" over a particular piece of content. Here I highlight the perils of translation, the different ways each team imagines its audience, and the ways in which culture and ideology structure news production. Using observations from a pan-Arab website with an international

⁴ A pseudonym meaning "the hodgepodge" or "the assortment," which I think reflects the organization's content aggregation and often idiosyncratic approach to news.

English-speaking audience, I show how national boundaries and affinities remain relevant and continue to structure its institutional ethics – its "news values."

My third chapter deals with the complex and evolving landscape of state control over Jordan's news media, and some of the ways in which the state seeks to regulate the production and flow of information. This chapter centers around media coverage of the murder of Jordanian Air Force pilot Muath Kasasbeh, who was burned to death by Daesh terrorists⁵. While many of the practices I discuss might be considered "censorship," the reality is far more complex than a simple dichotomy of censor-vs.-journalist. As researchers like Burt (1993) and Boyer (2003) have shown, the Western common-sense understanding of the term "censorship" is inadequate to accurately describe the way that cultural producers and regulators interact, both contemporarily and historically. In this chapter I discuss the Jordanian state's various methods of control, domination, and coercion, the ways it instills self-censorship, and how the degree of control it exercises has fluctuated over the years. I also address how news producers in Jordan both accept and reject state control, in some cases internalizing national-security justifications for reduced civil liberties, and in other cases advocating for a "free press" along the lines of Euro-American democracies, and thereby rejecting one hegemonic ideal in favor of another.

My fourth chapter is organized around the concept of resistance. Much of this chapter is devoted to a timeline of the Press & Publications Law amendment and the

⁵ A fraught term, and one that I do not use lightly, as it is those in positions of power who determine who is labeled a terrorist. In some cases, one state's terrorist may be another independence movement's freedom fighter. In this case, however, I think it is the most appropriate word, and I feel nothing but revulsion for the group, its aims, and its methods.

various interests that were marshaled by its proponents and detractors. Drawing on interviews with a variety of Jordanian media producers, activists and observers, I describe the origins of a group that I call "journalactivists," a diverse assortment of young, well-educated Jordanians who selectively adopt some of the techniques and rhetoric of objectivist journalism as they work for social change through media production. I examine how they and other media producers overtly and covertly resist state controls and social constraints. I address the role of online and social media and their democratizing potentials and, in brief, the role of journalism education.

A Short History of Jordanian Media

The following is a short sketch of the history of journalism and mass mediation in Jordan. It is not intended to be comprehensive, and there are few accessible, authoritative sources, especially for the earliest years.

The dissemination of news in what is now Jordan began – as it did everywhere – with oral transmission among tribes, villages, and cities. Typically overlooked in the many recent academic texts on so-called "Arab journalism," the oral transmission of news and information remains a critical source for many Jordanians about information in their local communities. For some topics, it is often the only source. When the local economy in the southern town of Wadi Musa was upended by the collapse of a rumored money-laundering operation in which thousands of residents had invested their life savings, the event went completely unreported, to the best of my knowledge, in the

Amman-based national press⁶. Talk among relatives, neighbors, and kinfolk – not social media – was the primary source of information for those affected. Many of them were elderly, and some were less than perfectly literate or otherwise disconnected from digital media. Such talk is not the focus of my research, but it is often the most important – and sometimes the only trusted – source of news in the kingdom. Incidents like the Wadi Musa traders crisis are effective reminders of the limits of mass mediation and digital media, particularly in the developing world, and the overall irrelevance of most Jordanian news media to most Jordanians.

As with other countries in the Middle East, the mass mediation of news accelerated in the colonial period, though Jordan does not seem to have experienced the direct application of printing technology to the colonial project, as Egypt did under the British (Mitchell 1988). While the borders of every Arab state were carved in the modern period by colonial powers, many, like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, had historic cultural identities that carried into their modern polities. Jordan lacks this longer historical identity, and in the pre-colonial period its north, center, and south "belonged" culturally to Syria, Palestine, and the Hijaz, respectively.

Jordan was also less intensively colonized than many of its neighbors. Mohammad Ayish and Noha Mellor (2015) argue that newspapers in less intensively colonized Arab states did not become the forums for political debate seen in the media of Egypt, Syria, and Algeria, where newspapers became harnessed to nationalist projects. In general, they argue, Arab news outlets have tended to emphasize political discussion over

⁶ As in most of my research, it's impossible to know exactly why. I can only speculate that government interference, a sense that the government *would* interfere, and Ammani disinterest in rural matters might all have played a role.

public-interest investigation, a result of post-independence concerns of nationalism and pan-Arabism. Historically, low literacy rates in the Arab world coupled with small, elite readerships have caused outlets to depend on subsidies from political interests, much as early U.S. newspapers were linked to specific political parties before economic realities, population density, and ideological changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pushed publishers towards non-partisan, "objective" reporting that appealed to mass audiences (Schudson 2012). Blaming a combination of state influence and lack of training for journalists, Pintak (2011) argues that Arab readers came to privilege opinion columns over news stories, reasoning that their insights derived from their access to power. The Middle East's most respected journalists, he argues, were respected not for their objectivity, but their informed opinions.

Amman was home to two weekly newspapers before the 1948 *Nakba* (Catastrophe) war with Israel forced many Palestinians into exile in Jordan, and Jordan occupied and later annexed the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Palestinian publishers founded daily newspapers in Jordanian East Jerusalem,⁷ including one that would evolve into *ad-Dustour*⁸, one of Amman's most prominent dailies. From 1948 into the early 1960s, William Rugh argues, Jordanian newspapers enjoyed relative independence, and some were critical of the government, though the regime at various times attempted to

⁷ For decades Jerusalem had been the intellectual center of the region, and was a seat of administrative power under the British. Despite its status as the Jordanian capital, Amman remained comparatively insignificant for years.

⁸ For transliteration of Arabic words, I have followed the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. In the case of proper Arabic names already rendered in English, I have followed the spelling and style used by the entity in question. While the name of my fieldsite is a pseudonym, I have chosen to render it in the style used by other Arabic news outlets with English-language versions such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya.

control their content. In early 1967 the government, on the grounds that the press was insufficiently "responsible" in a time of crisis, revoked all publishing licenses after newspapers criticized the army's responses to Israeli raids. After the war with Israel later that year the government forced the merger of four Jerusalem papers into two Amman papers, *ad-Dustour* and *al-Quds*, in a move to reign them in (Rugh 2004, 138).

The kingdom's greatest moment of crisis came in 1970 when tensions between the Hashemite regime and the PLO,⁹ then based in Jordan, erupted into violence. Thousands were killed in the "Black September" conflict between the Army and PLO, an event sometimes called Jordan's civil war. Amid the violence the regime initiated a crackdown on the media, closing one daily and launching another, the pro-government *al-Ra'i*, to be its mouthpiece. The Jordanian press remained under strict government control through the late 1980's, with the regime at one point forcing newspaper owners to sell their shares to the government (Rugh 2004).

Internal tensions rose sharply in 1989 when the national economy collapsed under its debt burden. International lenders imposed structural adjustment-style austerity measures, and southern tribal areas rioted over price increases to basic commodities and fuel as subsidies were slashed. In an effort to defuse tensions (but without ceding any real power), King Hussein began to lift some of the controls of martial law that had been imposed in 1967, and called for the first parliamentary elections in more than two decades (Robinson 1998; Yom 2015). When political parties became legal once more in

⁹ The Palestine Liberation Organization, an armed nationalist movement headed for decades by Yasir Arafat. The PLO was based in Jordan in the late 1960's, where its militants came into increasing conflict with Jordanian forces, and its cross-border operations against Israel threatened to draw Jordan further into the conflict.

1992, a party-linked press began to emerge. The government passed a new Press & Publications law in 1993, which, on paper at least, laid out the least restrictive press regulations in the country's history. The government, however, retained the authority to withdraw newspaper licenses for violations of security or decency, and codified a number of prohibitions including unauthorized reporting on the military or royal family (Rugh 2004, 138-139).

Many of my older sources for this project fondly recalled the mid-1990's as a golden age for Jordanian journalism, in which a host of independent weekly papers with a wide range of political orientations vied for readership. At times, they said, things devolved into muckraking or "yellow" journalism. But on the whole, they proudly looked back on the period as one of experimentation and optimism. That "golden age" was short-lived, however. Adam Jones (2002) argues that the Jordanian establishment was wary of this dimension of the press and its lower-class readership, and pushed through regulatory changes designed to reduce the number of outlets in operation, and the diversity of their political ideologies. The government imposed strict new capital requirements, massive amounts clearly set to force smaller publishers to close and rein in debate and criticism. The regime shut down numerous weeklies amid protest, though the law was later invalidated by the Supreme Court. But the writing was on the wall, and a subsequent law the following year reinstated the onerous capital requirements and cemented government oversight of the press (Jones 2002; Robinson 1998; Guthrie and Adely 2012). This 1998 law, amended most recently in 2012 to include online media, remains the basis of press regulation in Jordan, though, as I shall discuss, the country's anti-terrorism laws allow the

security services unbridled power to jail journalists. In some respects, the initial Supreme Court decision and Jordan's constitutional guarantees may seem like indications of an openness to liberal governance and media protections on the part of the Jordanian state. And in some degree they may be just that, and operate in tension with the state's broader impulses towards media control. This is a theme that will recur throughout my study, that Jordan's outward-facing statements and postures seem at odds with the reality of producing news content under its authoritarian regime.

Since the death of Hussein in 1999, and the accession of Abdullah II to the throne, Jordan's stance on press freedom – at this point we must begin speaking more broadly of media freedom – has become far more visibly contradictory. In the early years of his reign, Abdullah spoke repeatedly of his desire for a "free" but "responsible" press, and appeared to champion media freedom as an accompaniment to the country's broader push for liberalization and democratization. However, in the context of the U.S.-led "War on Terror," the so-called Arab Spring, and the civil wars which followed, degrees of media freedom and restriction in Jordan have fluctuated. Beginning in the mid-2000's, when internet access became a reality for many Jordanians and other Arabs, a robust online news sector emerged out of the Arab blogging movement. Jordan allowed these sites to operate relatively free of overt government restraint until 2013, as it had with the bloggers before them. At the same time, readership of the government-aligned or -owned daily newspapers declined, mirroring changes in readership habits more globally, and their financial situations deteriorated. The independent newspaper *al-Arab al-Yawm* temporarily closed in 2013 before reorganizing and cutting staff and in 2015 suspended

its print run (Al Emam 2015; Mansour 2015; Obeidat 2015c). In 2014 there were rumors that *ad-Dustour*, Jordan's oldest and at one time most prestigious daily, would soon be forced to close for financial reasons. Despite being majority-owned by the government through the Social Security Investment Fund, people said, it was simply losing too much money¹⁰. Sources told me that *al-Ra'i*, Jordan's largest daily and the main government mouthpiece, had also been losing money.

Jordan has been steadily (neo)liberalizing its economic sphere, to the point of sparking protests in 2012 over a decrease in fuel subsidies demanded by international lenders (Yom 2013), and outsourcing the operation of its new airport terminal to a French company. In this environment, it's no surprise that the state-owned newspapers have suffered economically, as the government has reduced the advertising it purchased as an unofficial subsidy. As Ayish and Mellor point out, the trend across the Arab world has been towards privatization and a steady liberalization of business regulatory environments – including in the media sector – even as Arab states have tried to restrict any attendant social and political change (Ayish and Mellor 2015, 16-17). In short, unregulated and unsubsidized media production has been deemed well and good as long as it does not seek to transcend a safe, comfortable, and orderly "public sphere" by advocating political change or critically examining entrenched power structures.

¹⁰ As of March 2017 *ad-Dustour* was still publishing.

"Arab Media" research and perspectives

Academic attention on media coverage in and of the Arab world has increased in recent years, especially after U.S. military involvement in the Middle East and the Bush administration's jingoistic arm-waving over Al Jazeera's coverage of Al Qaeda and the Iraq invasion. With a few exceptions from anthropologists (such as Bishara 2012), many of these recent investigations have been performed by media studies scholars, generating book titles like *Arab Media* and *Reporting in the MENA Region*. Surveys like Rugh's *Arab Mass Media* (2004) attempt to generate typologies of various states' media spheres, grouping, for example, Jordan, Tunisia, and Egypt under a rubric of "transitional" media, as opposed to "loyalist" and "diverse" press systems. Setting aside the questionable utility of such typologies, the underlying assumptions of many such academic works on "Arab media" are anachronistic at best, and farcically Orientalist at worst. Such a survey of "African media" or "European media" would hardly seem credible in the current academic environment. So why should "Arab media" be perceived as any different? Part of the reason is good ol' fashioned Orientalism, and a tendency among scholars to make generalizations about what Deeb and Winegar (2012) refer to as Arab-majority societies.¹¹

Another reason is the linguistic component of Arab identity. Literate Arabs across the region will all be comfortable reading and listening to Modern Standard Arabic,

¹¹ Deeb and Winegar eschew such terms as "Arab world" or even "Middle East" as insufficiently precise and homogenizing. While I agree with them, and also prefer the term "Arab-majority society" on a theoretical level, in my dissertation I tend to follow the language practice of my primary field site and my key sources, who refer to themselves as living in and covering "the Middle East."

occasionally referred to as "news Arabic" (Pintak 2011). MSA, or *fusha* (FOOS-ha, from a root meaning "eloquent") is the Arabic of officialdom, academia, TV news, and periodicals, and is more closely related to the Arabic of the Qur'an than are the various dialects spoken in everyday conversation. The prevalence of MSA, bolstered by the numerous Arabic-language satellite news and entertainment channels, makes it possible to speak of a pan-Arab audience – and many academic studies of "Arab media" focus on pan-Arab properties such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and MBC (i.e. Zayani and Sahraoui 2007). And while there is certainly a pan-Arab audience, and while authors such as Pintak (2011) make intriguing connections between pan-Arab media and increasing expression of pan-Arab and pan-Muslim sensibilities, "Arab media" neither begins nor ends with Al Jazeera and its ilk. Such outlets have been influential, but countless media outlets – especially at the national level – have been left unexamined. Oliver Hahn argues convincingly that public-sphere models of media analysis are of limited use when applied to the Arab mediascape, as nothing there approaches their criteria, and notes that "the main attribute emerging so far in pan-Arab media, and in the global media landscape to which they belong, seems to be heterogeneity" (2007: 26-27).

Even authors who take a broader view of "Arab media" like Mohamed Zayani limit their arguments to general observations that rapidly break down at local levels. For example, he writes that over "the past two or so decades," state censorship has eased with the "prevalence of a liberalized transnational Arab media over traditional state-controlled media" (2014: 16-17) Jordan's experience is quite different, with the mid- and late-1990's having been a period of media plurality and relative "freedom" followed by a sharply

repressive move by the state, in turn followed by a period of plurality online, and yet another chilling regulatory move. In short, the kingdom's media control has not followed a nicely teleological line from "censorship" to "freedom."

What's more, Zayani argues that a more vibrant "Arab mediascape" has "accentuated civil activism and consolidated the presence and role of civil society" (2014: 20). That may be true elsewhere, but in Jordan the situation is almost the reverse. The Muslim Brotherhood, a civil society organization in the classic sense, was the target of a streak of hostile editorials that my sources felt had clearly been orchestrated by the state on the eve of a broader crackdown (Magid 2016, Al Jazeera 2016). In short, I would argue that news media have no inherent qualities that support civil society – they can just as easily be leveraged against it.

Deeb and Winegar note that Jordan, along with Algeria and Tunisia, has been understudied in comparison to Egypt, Lebanon, and Israel-Palestine. I suggest that this trend is already changing in the wake of the so-called "Arab Spring" revolutions of 2011 and subsequent conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and elsewhere. Remote areas in many Arab-majority states are increasingly closed to anthropologists, especially Westerners, as conflict spreads. Numerous anthropologists have been drawn to Jordan to study Syrian refugee experiences. While we should welcome any further anthropological attention to Jordan, our discipline's focus there remains disappointingly narrow. This study brings an anthropological approach to questions of how the media operate in Jordan, and with what ethics, ideologies, and constraints, and how journalists negotiate

complex relationships with the state in an atmosphere of great uncertainty and trepidation.

The Daily Practice of Content-Aggregation Journalism

My primary field site was a news website called Al Khaleet (kha-LEET). I lack the humorous, self-effacing "entry tale" common to many ethnographies. As with so many social interactions in Jordan, my initiation to the site was surprisingly easy and fluid. I happened to meet someone within Jordan's tight-knit community of American academics and students who was interning at the news website. I soon met the site's executive editor, offered free labor in exchange for research access, and within days was contributing to the website as an online content producer.

Al Khaleet was¹² a news organization owned by a Jordanian businessman. Publishing in both Arabic and English, it had a news staff of roughly 30 people, divided between two groups referred to internally as the Arabic and English "teams," with their respective content portals called "the Arabic side" and "the English side."

While it produced a certain amount of its own original content, and its journalists aspired to create more, Al Khaleet was in the main a content aggregator. It operated through a network of content-sharing agreements with dozens of other online publications, some of which were associated with older, established print products. Al Khaleet journalists selected stories from these partner sites, copy-and-pasted them into

¹² I use the past tense throughout, to reflect the fact that my work deals with a specific period of time, and that institutions and their environments are constantly changing. However, as of May 2017, the organization was alive and well and this could just have easily been written in the present tense.

the site's own content management system, re-titled them in accordance with the site's style guidelines and search-engine-optimization strategies, attached some sort of image, and re-published them. Its chief editor explained the operation to outsiders as "sort of like an Arabic *Huffington Post*."

Al Khaleet was first and foremost a business enterprise, one of several interests controlled by its owner. It was founded in 2000, and became quite prominent in the early Arabic-language internet mediascape. In those days it had a large staff, and produced a great deal of its own content, filling a gap that its owner saw in content production both from and about the region. As other companies based in the Middle East began to produce more content themselves, Al Khaleet switched to content aggregation to stay ahead of the curve.

At the end of the day, its owner told me, the company's reason for being came down to profits (as is true for a great many, if not nearly all media companies). But that is not to say that it operated without a conscious political ideology. The executive editor reiterated on numerous occasions that the owner wanted the site to be provocative, to open up taboo topics for discussion, and even to disrupt social mores in the Arab world. He wanted to expose hypocrisy, promote transparency, and approach news from a secularist, liberal position. Ideally, the owner told me, he would like the site to observe even fewer social and political taboos – "red lines" as they're known in Arabic media – but said it needed to operate with enough restraint and respect certain sensibilities to avoid being blocked or boycotted, which would have a negative financial effect. But, he said, those red lines were steadily becoming fewer and fewer.

The site's audience came mostly from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United States; while the order changed, those were always the top three countries for readership. Numbers four and five, in changing order, were almost always Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. I address the makeup of that audience in greater detail in Chapter 2.

At one point about a decade before my research began, Al Khaleet had been one of the world's most-visited Arabic-language websites. It saw frequent recurrent traffic, and was what I call a "destination site" for thousands of web users who bookmarked its home page or otherwise navigated back there repeatedly. In more recent years, as web usage patterns in the Middle East shifted away from home PC's and internet cafes to mobile browsers and social media, the site lost some of its prominence. Links from Google News, Facebook, and Twitter accounted for most of its traffic, and the company switched its focus to building a broader social media presence. While I worked there, the organization also increased its push towards search engine optimization, or SEO. In effect, this change meant that the site's audience became Google's search algorithms instead of actual internet users themselves. What the end-reader or viewer wanted to see became of secondary importance – what mattered was what Google considered important. More Google visibility meant more clicks, and more clicks meant the potential for higher revenue and greater prominence.

How the site looked and navigated

Al Khaleet's homepage looked like many other news websites. Images against a white background took up the bulk of the page's real estate, with advertisements in banners across the top and along the side.¹³ The top of the homepage was dominated by four news stories, each with a large photograph and small text caption. The text captions, which served as links, were always visible, but the images above them constantly rotated one-by-one. There was no English text on the Arabic page, and no Arabic text on the English page – a small link at the top of each page allowed visitors to switch languages. The different language homepages had mirrored layouts based on the direction their respective written languages are read – the main news zone appeared to the left on the English homepage, and to the right on the Arabic homepage. Next to the main news zone was a smaller box where the site's slideshows appeared; these items did not rotate, but sideways arrows and a row of five white-and-black dots indicated that the user could click through to see additional links.

Below the main news zone was a narrow strip of four static, non-rotating images with captions below. This zone was called "Editor's Choice," and served as a repository for strange, wacky, and interesting items that didn't fit in the site's other categories – "EC's" or "ed's choice" as they were called internally – were often the site's most popular stories. Below the editor's choice strip were vertical columns of content, including the business, entertainment, and sports zones. Only the image attached to the most recent story appeared at the top of each column, but the rest of the stories here were accessed by

¹³ I agreed not to reproduce screenshots in order to help maintain the site's anonymity.

text only links. Like many other websites, Al Khaleet had "most popular" and "most discussed" sections that populated automatically.

Working at Al Khaleet

Al Khaleet's journalists reported for work to a sleek, minimalist office in a modern glass building in one of West Amman's prominent business districts. The office was not easy to find, as it lay down a long, twisting, narrow hallway with no signage. Visitors who managed to find it arrived at a sliding glass door operated by a code panel that also recorded the time individual employees entered and exited for payroll. The odor of cigarette smoke permeated this vestibule, as Al Khaleet's Jordanian employees took their smoke- and coffee breaks in the emergency stairwell nearby – most of the English-speaking staff were non-smokers.

Beyond the office door was a small reception area with angular couches, blonde woods, red-and-white panels, glass, and chrome fittings. The reception desk was staffed by a young, female receptionist in tightly fitting Western clothes, her outward appearance matching the emphatically Western, modernist aesthetic of the physical space.

Al Khaleet's news staff sat to one side of the office – the rest was occupied by the staff of a sister organization, a few shared IT and accounting employees, and a small kitchen staffed by a middle-aged Egyptian messenger who made tea and coffee, fetched lunch, and ran errands.

Desk space was somewhat scarce in the newsroom. At the time I worked there, the Arabic team sat in an open-plan room at four rows of four desks. While there was some slight flexibility based on who was or was not present in the office on a given day, each Arabic team staffer had his or her own assigned desk. There were no cubicle divisions, and no privacy whatsoever. Colleagues conversed sporadically, but the Arabic staff generally worked quietly while listening to media through headphones. Staffers were quite conscious that their conversations could be overheard, and the receptionist nearby occasionally sent emails reminding the newsroom staff to keep their voices low after particularly boisterous discussions. In order to communicate privately, colleagues chatted with their neighbors about work, office gossip, and personal matters through Google messenger and similar services – the digital equivalent of passing notes in class.

The English-side staff sat crammed into two small offices along the edge of the Arabic side's open-plan area. These small offices, which had glass walls and doors, were fairly well soundproofed, offering their occupants the privacy to talk among themselves that no one else in the organization shared. Other employees would occasionally use one of these offices to perform prayers or conduct personal phone calls. In part because they were divided up between two small offices, the English team often struggled to communicate effectively. Much of the communication took place through email or private message, and there was frequent foot traffic between the small rooms. Tapping on the glass partition followed by pantomime and gesture was also common between staffers thus divided.

At any given time, however, there were typically only four to six English-side journalists working in the office. Many worked remotely, including some who started working for the company while in living Amman and continued after returning home to Europe or North America. Weekend and evening shifts for English-side staffers were also done from home, or some Western-style cafe with decent wifi. Some English-side staff took extended trips home, working remotely for part of those periods and taking vacation time for the rest. Expatriate English-side staff who lived permanently in Amman also frequently worked from home. While not exactly encouraged, this practice was allowed by the site's executive editor – herself an expat – because, as she explained it, people working in a foreign country needed additional flexibility. They lacked the support networks of the local employees, who had family members available to help them with errands, wait for plumbers, and so forth, she said. It was also a bit of a perk – the foreign employees were paid typical Jordanian wages, so they were making quite a bit less than they could have at home.

The Arabic side staff were required to report to the office daily, and had their hours tracked for payroll. During my time at Al Khaleet there were usually about nine Arabic staffers present during the day, and another three or four who arrived for evening shifts at various points in the afternoon. The Arabic-side staff were largely Jordanian, and reflected some of the diversity of contemporary Jordanian society. Most staff members were Muslim, and the rest Christian. Roughly half were women, and about half of them in turn wore hijab. Most staffers were in their 30's, or younger. Al Khaleet staffers represented a broad range of categories in Jordan's often fraught internal identity politics.

Some were "East Bankers" or "Jordanian-Jordanians" from powerful tribes based in Jordan's more prosperous north; others came from "Palestinian-Jordanian" families of varying tenure in Jordan. One had recently moved back to Jordan to raise his family, giving up more lucrative employment in the Emirates. Another Arabic-side editor had recently come to the country from Syria, reflecting growing diversity in upper sectors of the labor force. The site's executive editor, who oversaw both the English and Arabic sides, was born to a Lebanese father and a Palestinian mother from a very prominent Jerusalem family. She was raised and educated in England before moving to Lebanon, and then to Jordan for the job at Al Khaleet. She almost exclusively spoke English in the office, except for when she talked one-on-one with members of the Arabic-side staff who had limited English ability. While her spoken-language ability was very robust, she was less comfortable with written Modern Standard Arabic, and rarely read the site's Arabic language content closely.

On the English side, Al Khaleet's staff reflected Amman's increasingly cosmopolitan makeup. Nearly all of the staff members were women, a dynamic that had been true for several years. Most were U.S. or British citizens with English as their first language; a few had an Arab parent or spouse. Their grasp of Arabic ranged from fluent to non-existent. Some took Arabic classes during their stay in Jordan, and others expressed no interest in learning the language. The English side typically experienced high turnover, and only one staff member on the English side had been at the site more than two years. She lived in Amman with a Jordanian parent, but had been raised in the U.K. where she still had family. The Arabic side, which experienced much less staff

turnover, was more mixed – its "main news" staff was entirely male, but its business and entertainment writers were female. The Arabic-side staffers responsible for slideshows and editor's choice material were mostly men.

Jordan for some time has functioned as a training ground for young English-language writers trying to establish themselves in journalism, a competitive field with a shrinking number of paid positions in the United States. Many of Al Khaleet's journalists came to Jordan to gain experience reporting in the Middle East, which they saw as increasing their chances of employment with established outlets. While there, many of them sought freelance assignments. Others were "stringers" for international news media¹⁴ that had no permanent presence in Jordan but wanted someone in place whenever major news broke in the kingdom.

In an effort to stabilize the staff, the management of Al Khaleet were trying to hire English speakers with native-level language ability, but who had lived in Jordan or elsewhere in the Arab world for some time, and had more permanent ties to the region. Such hires included the American spouses of Jordanians, or the spouses of diplomats or NGO employees with long-term assignments in the country.

Because of the office's spatial arrangements and the English side's habit of working remotely, Al Khaleet staffers relied heavily on email and shared Google documents to communicate and manage workflow. At times these email chains and group chats took on a watercooler-like atmosphere, providing a virtual place for jokes, gossip, and talk of politics and entertainment, particularly on the English side with its distributed

¹⁴ An industry term for a non-staff contributor paid on a freelance basis, but called on somewhat regularly to report on a particular topic or place.

workforce. It was not uncommon for English-side staff to receive 60-80 emails a day, three-quarters of which might be directly related to work matters, and the rest of a more social nature. For the English news side, nearly all of their daily workplace communications took place with their colleagues – working as they did for a content aggregator culling from other websites, they had very little contact with other companies and organizations, or people outside the institution, until they went home.

Journalists at Al Khaleet were divided among the business, entertainment and "main news" sections. (There was one bilingual staffer responsible for sports, but he arrived in the evening and had less contact with the rest of the newsroom.) One journalist was responsible for business content, and two (one of them part-time) for entertainment. These were considered specialized positions that did not overlap with main news positions. Main news staffers occasionally filled in for the business writer, and vice versa, but entertainment coverage was treated as a separate, specialized beat. The site's English-language entertainment coverage, which dealt exclusively with Arab celebrities and A-list Western stars on trips to the region, was often the most popular section of the site. Staff said it was one of the only places on the internet to get news about Arab celebrities in English.

Shifts at Al Khaleet were staggered to extend the time that the site was staffed. For weekday main news shifts (Jordan's workweek runs Sunday-Thursday), the early person arrived around 7:30 or 8 a.m. Two stories from the night before would have already been scheduled for time-release by the previous night shift in order to have the site looking fresh in the morning. Al Khaleet's site design displayed four main news

stories at once, and managers told the staff to keep the site looking as fresh as possible.

The site's owner checked the news portal regularly, and sent emails to the managing editor if he thought the site looked stale, or if a story had been featured for too long.

Exactly how long qualified as too long was never spelled out. It remained a judgment call, and so journalists had to carefully balance the need to keep the site fresh with the limited amount of content that they were allowed to use from any given content partner, and – on slow days – a finite amount of news that met the site's standards for relevance and newsworthiness.

Al Khaleet operated with quotas for all of its content areas. Each day the staff was expected to post a total of 20-25 main news stories, four or more editor's choice articles, about 16 business and entertainment stories, and so forth. Quotas were lower on weekends, when sometimes only one staffer was working. Additionally, some days required a new op-ed or analysis piece, and three new slideshows went up every week.

An English-side staffer began her day by opening her corporate Gmail account, reading her email, and loading the "news schedule." Sometimes called simply "the news doc" or "the schedule," this document was the newsroom's primary organizing and governing tool. Not a schedule in the traditional sense, the news doc was a shared Google text file that was constantly updated throughout the day. The current day was listed at the top, and previous days were pushed down the document. It had categories for main news, entertainment, and business. The document sometimes grew to cover several weeks' worth of material before someone chopped it down to just three or four days. As

journalists republished articles, they posted a draft headline or a four- to five-word

description of the story in the relevant section:

3. South Leb. bids farewell to Hezbollah fighters - (DS) - 8am
4. Kuwait closes anti-government newspaper - Done (Press TV)
5. Syrian government airstrikes kills at least 39 - Done (DS)
6. Nine Israelis stabbed by Palestinian in Tel Aviv bus attack* - Done (JPost)
7. UN condemns attack on Yemen's presidential palace - Done (euronews)

In item #3, the "(DS)" indicates the source of the item is the Daily Star of Lebanon, and "8am" indicates that the article was scheduled in advance, likely the night before. The asterisk in item #6 indicates that the article has been "featured," an option that holds the item in a certain place on the news page until it is "unfeatured" or another article has been featured instead.

After a staffer found an article that she planned to post, she first checked the news schedule to see if it had already been published by someone else, either on the same shift or in previous days. This was done by quickly scanning the headlines in the main news section of the document. If a story overlapped with business or entertainment, she might look in those sections, or message the journalists covering those sections to discuss who, if anyone, would post the story. Such overlaps could involve a celebrity commenting on politics, or the work of a famous figure like human rights attorney Amal Clooney. The shared document was considered the most reliable way to check what the site had recently published. Staffers thought that looking at the content management system (CMS) or the site itself was unreliable and slow. They cited the difficulty of knowing what had been advance-scheduled, the fact that the CMS did not show articles in progress, and the website's difficult navigation and unreliable search function. Because the shared document was considered essential for avoiding duplications, oversights, and

errors, there were frequent conflicts over its care and maintenance, and disagreements over the best practices for listing articles. In part because of staff turnover, methods of logging items in the shared doc could vary from person-to-person and day-to-day.

Staffers who saw themselves as senior sometimes admonished their perceived juniors by email or in person over irregularities or untidiness in the news schedule, a concern that highlighted the difficulty of managing Al Khaleet's complex information flow.

If the staffer found that her article had not been published, she would write a draft headline in the shared document and put her name at the end so that her colleagues knew who was working on a given entry. These decisions on whether or not to publish an individual piece of content were made largely without oversight, especially for the more experienced staff members. If a staffer was unsure whether a given piece merited republishing, she might ask a colleague across the desk for her thoughts. She could also consult with the executive editor, but those moments were rare. People working solo shifts were completely on their own. The most influence that managers had on these coverage decisions came during the weekly meetings, when they pointed out what sorts of stories had done particularly well, or what trending topics we seemed to be missing. In contrast to the other newsrooms in which I have worked (most of which were larger organizations), Al Khaleet had no formal decision-making process on whether or not to republish a particular piece of partner content. By and large, the only hierarchical or collective decision-making on publishing at Al Khaleet was applied to the limited content that the site created itself, which I discuss below.

After deciding to publish, the staffer would then open the site's content management system by clicking a link on the webpage that was only visible to users with access privileges. The first step was choosing the type of story to be posted – this determined where on the website it would be published. A variety of text fields, checkboxes and pull-down menus next appeared. Depending on the type of content perhaps half a dozen choices needed to be made, such as country, region, theme (i.e. Syrian civil war, Israeli-Palestinian conflict), etc. Some of these choices could overlap or conflict, and mistakes made here could be highly visible, or result in a story not appearing on the website at all. Further complicating the publishing process, many of these back-end functions were rendered obsolete by changes to the front-end of the website over the years. Even Al Khaleet's managers and more experienced staff had different understandings of these intricate choices, and there were often discussions and disagreements over these "codings" when questions arose.

In addition to coding the article, the staffer wrote an original headline and article summary, both of which appeared on the homepage. Then she cut-and-pasted the article from the source page into the CMS, while removing any HTML coding that might appear in the republished piece. In the opening words of the item to appear on Al Khaleet, she inserted a hyperlink back to the original partner source, selected that source from a drop-down menu that attached its corporate logo to the published page, and included the original author's name at the end of the article if it was available.

In what was often the longest part of the process, she next searched for an image to append to the article. Al Khaleet's site design required that every content item have an

associated image, else they would not appear properly on the site. The company subscribed to the Agence France Presse photowire, and at times had access to other services such as Getty. It also had a limited Shutterstock subscription, and these were its primary sources of imagery. Though AFP had generally good coverage of Middle East news, Shutterstock was limited in its images connoting Arabs, Muslims, and locations in the Middle East. This scarcity of images – together with time pressures on the journalists – contributed to circumstances in which stories about Arabs or places in the Middle East were illustrated with stock photos of Caucasians or generic locations. The executive editor told the staff to append the phrase "image used for illustrative purposes" when this occurred.

Once the story was published or scheduled for time-release, the staffer returned to the shared document and put in her finalized title. She then removed her name and wrote either "done" or the scheduled advance-publication time in its place. For an experienced staff member, the entire process took about 20 minutes. That was under ideal circumstances – a good internet connection and no errors in the CMS¹⁵, an easily found photo, an obvious headline, etc. With each staffer posting 12-16 stories a day, posting articles thus consumed at least four hours of an eight-hour shift – but that did not include finding the items in the first place.

Finding content at Al Khaleet was often frustrating. The company had content-sharing agreements with dozens (if not hundreds) of organizations, ranging from the UK daily *Independent* to the regionally prominent *Jerusalem Post* and Beirut *Daily Star* newspapers. But many of these content sharing organizations were totally irrelevant to

¹⁵ These were common enough that we had t-shirts printed with "502 Bad Gateway" and the company logo.

the company's news product, such as the *Pakistan Journal of Weed Science Research*.¹⁶ On slow news days it could be a struggle to find content that met the site's criteria for relevance, newsworthiness, and timeliness.

Editors described using the widest possible variety of sources as both an ideological and pragmatic goal. Part of Al Khaleet's self-described mission was to present a wide array of opinions and perspectives from Middle East-based sources and writers. On a practical level, we were told to be wary of overusing particular sources, especially in the early days of a new sharing agreement. A general guideline was that no one source should be used more than once a day, and certain sources even less. Management periodically sent reminders through the executive editor to go easy on certain sources, and editors sometimes charted our source usage and presented the data at meetings in an attempt to get the journalists to spread things around.

Sadly, in recent years there have been few "slow news days" in the Middle East, so finding enough stories was not often a problem for Al Khaleet journalists. A much bigger concern was finding stories fast enough. Only a handful of Al Khaleet's English-language content partners quickly posted breaking news on their websites, and some content partners such as *The Jordan Times* and its Arabic-language sister paper *al-Ra'i* updated their websites as little as once a day. But Al Khaleet's business model, and its reliance on Google search traffic, demanded a quick response to breaking news. As a result, for major breaking news Al Khaleet staffers found themselves limited to only a few sources that operated in English, published quickly, and met their personal and

¹⁶ Such agreements stemmed from the site's sister organization, which was involved in much broader data collection.

institutional criteria for quality and the appearance of objectivity. On this last point, most staff members did not spend a great deal of time analyzing individual pieces of partner content, though if it was badly written or was missing basic who-what-where facts then they would likely pass and look for another source. Where the appearance of objectivity became an issue was with sources that obviously did not conform to norms of "balanced" language. A prime example was Iran's Press TV, which rapidly published on a wide range of Mideast topics in English. As such it was a go-to source for many topics, but staffers avoided it for others because it used terms like "takfīr"¹⁷ to refer to Syrian opposition groups and "the Tel Aviv regime" to refer to Israel.

Given this set of constraints, how did Al Khaleet staffers operate? Often it was by bending the rules and using more than one item per day from a site. Otherwise, they might take information from one or more non-partner sites, such as Reuters, *Haaretz*, the AP, or *The New York Times*, and "do a rewrite" for Al Khaleet. Staffers used different strategies for these rewrites. Some cut-and-pasted from a single item into a word processing document, and then reorganized and re-worded the source content, while citing and linking to the original. Others took bits of information from two or three sources, along with social media posts, and crafted an article from those, citing and linking to each source as they went. In any case, the site was careful to append attribution and source credit, and always hyperlinked back to the original material. While the writers saw rewriting as a necessary tool, it was always a last resort. It took substantially more time and effort than a cut-and-paste job from a partner site. Rewriting also had the

¹⁷ A takfiri is a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of apostasy. It has become used in some quarters to refer broadly to Sunni extremists, but is used by others as deliberately polarizing language.

potential to introduce errors, and it still required the same intricate manipulation of the content management system. Occasionally a bilingual staff member would translate an outside article or a social media post, usually from Arabic to English, in order to fill a hole in coverage or develop an exclusive.

These tasks – looking for stories, posting partner content, doing rewrites and dealing with internal email – took up most of an Al Khaleet staffer's time. But they were by no means their only duties. The staff also produced Al Khaleet's main pieces of proprietary content: its slideshows. Al Khaleet posted three of these a week, on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. They occupied a prominent position on the homepage, a fixed block in the upper right corner. Al Khaleet's chief editor explained that when the site was at the peak of its popularity, in the mid- to late 2000's, these slideshows generated a lot of traffic for the site and were extensively shared on social media. They had since fallen in popularity as traffic to the site was more search-engine driven and less destination-driven (that is to say that most users came to the site via Google instead of navigating specifically to Al Khaleet). Slideshows were once a trendy medium for online news presentation for a variety of outlets, but they have since been eclipsed by video and other forms of storytelling as web usage, mobile devices, and bandwidths have evolved.

Despite the decline in popularity of these content items, Al Khaleet management still required three slideshows a week from both the English and Arabic teams, and in many weeks the owner personally approved each concept. The chief editor explained that the owner believed slideshows could still be popular and drive substantial traffic to the site if they hit the right notes. The current writers, none of whom were at the site in those

glory days, tended to be a little skeptical that slideshows could achieve substantial numbers. Many saw slideshow duty as a thankless task. The slideshows often took a great deal of effort, demanded more advance planning than other duties, and required coordination with the overworked multimedia editor who was responsible for processing (and in many cases, finding) the imagery. Three slideshows per week meant roughly 150 original ideas per year from each team. Ideally they were supposed to be either topical and timely, or lighthearted and funny. Though the presentation was largely visual, most of the slideshows started as more textual ideas expressed in Al Khaleet's weekly planning meeting. After approval in the meeting, staffers wrote captions and the multimedia editor found images to fit the texts. Only rarely did a slideshow concept begin with a collection of images for which a text was then created.

At times, slideshows on the English side were treated as a collective responsibility. Someone would start a shared document in Google Drive and send an email to the English team, and everyone who was available was expected to help flesh out ideas and research the captions. With no clear creative ownership, these slideshows could be somewhat disjointed in tone and sometimes missed their deadlines, leading to last-minute scrambles by the chief editor or senior staff. At other times, slideshows were assigned to two staffers, one primarily responsible for presenting the finished product on time, and the other assigned to help write and research the content.

Like other forms of labor at Al Khaleet, work on slideshows required constant attention to a variety of different communication streams. The slideshow schedule, which laid out the staff assignments, slideshow theme and tone, and deadline, was a shared

Google doc. Much of the actual labor of the slideshow creation took place in another shared Google document specific to the article. Conversations about images, captions, introductions, and headlines took place mostly over email, but also in person or by Google chat. Part-timers or staffers working out of the office communicated with their colleagues by phone, text, and WhatsApp. Because of the vagaries of the CMS, it was vital for staffers to make sure that only one person at a time had the "node"¹⁸ open – otherwise they risked the potential loss of hours of work. On publication day as deadlines neared, the staff inevitably needed to make changes to images, captions, and the introduction. This necessitated a complicated handoff of the node among as many as three or four people, some of whom were not in the office. Even experienced staff could easily forget to hand-off properly, and slideshow days frequently saw frustrated email exchanges as writers asked if anyone else was currently editing, or complained of lost work and changes that failed to apply.

Topics for slideshows ranged widely. The staff usually strove to give each one a "hook," or timely angle, such as a series of red-carpet celebrity shots from the Dubai International Film Festival on its final day, pictures of bloody 'Ashura'¹⁹ celebrations, or a humorous piece on what an Arab-Muslim Thanksgiving holiday might look like. Non-timely ideas might include photos from the Israel-Palestine conflict, minority religions in the Arab world, or the most common excuses from Amman cabbies when they don't want to pick you up.

¹⁸ The internal term for an unpublished piece of content.

¹⁹ A Shi'i holy day that some practitioners observe with self-flagellation.

As with other content items, the site's layout dictated what media forms were included in a slideshow, and constrained the presentation to one basic format. Any deviation resulted in blank spaces or improperly displayed content. Al Khaleet slideshows consisted of a text introduction of about 250-500 words, which was statically displayed below a rotating series of images. Below each image, and rotating with it, was a number (i.e. "8 of 11"), and a caption. Captions were limited in the CMS to 340 characters, including spaces. Staff were told that in practice, captions longer than 330 characters could cause the CMS to produce an error message and refuse to publish. In the CMS, slides in a nascent slideshow were numbered, beginning with 0. Slide 0 was the preview image that also served as a link from the homepage to the content page. As such, the staff tried to make it one of the most "readable" and "best" images, one representative of the overall slideshow theme. However, slide 0 did not actually appear on the slideshow page to which it linked. Halfway through the period of my research, the staff began duplicating Slide 0 as Slide 1, or as one of the later slides, ensuring that it was visible to readers within the context of the slideshow. But until they made that change, the structure of the CMS and the site's web design restricted what the staff had determined as the best image to a reduced size and divorced it from the larger context of the presentation.

Occasionally a slideshow idea would come from an existing set of images, such as when one staffer discovered a collection of Middle East desert landscapes from the European Space Agency. She then wrote an introduction, quoting extensively from Carl Sagan's musings on the insignificance of human struggles, and relating his words to

ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. The headline was a pun – as Al Khaleet slideshow headlines often were – about looking down on the Middle East.

However, most slideshows began not with a set of images, but an abstract concept. Staff developed each concept into an introduction and a set of captions for which images were later found, sometimes by staffers themselves, but more often by the site's multimedia editor using the captions as guide, and in consultation with the lead writer on the slideshow. Such was the case with the slideshow about what a Muslim-Arab-American Thanksgiving celebration might look like. The concept was pegged to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's assertion in November 2014 that Muslim explorers had discovered the Americas before Columbus.

The images for the Muslim Thanksgiving slideshow (as it became known in office shorthand) were conceived of by Isma'il, the site's multimedia editor, who had recently joined the staff. The other writers and I asked him to come up with a set of humorous images to go with captions that highlighted cultural differences between Arab-Muslims and Americans. One caption described how tea and coffee would be the beverages of choice at a Muslim Thanksgiving, pointing to the drinks' ubiquity at any social gatherings in Arab majority societies. While tea and coffee are staples in many other societies – and Arab Christians consume them in the same quantities as Arab Muslims – the Al Khaleet staff (along with many other Jordanians) often invoked them as a symbol of life in the Levant to which foreigners must adjust. Jordanians treat the country's tea-and-coffee phenomenon, its ritual importance, and its social ubiquity, with varying degrees of reverence and self-deprecating humor.

Other captions suggested that at a Muslim Thanksgiving event, a few aspects wouldn't be all that different. For example, some relative would invariably show up with their disgusting signature side dish, be it green bean casserole or *mulūkhīa*, a stew of jute leaves and mutton with a somewhat snotlike consistency. Another, suggested by a vegetarian staff writer, argued that everyone would be similarly irritated at vegetarian guests for forcing menu changes. The first caption was illustrated with a not-entirely-appetizing bowl of green sludge, and the second with a box of Tofurky.

The homepage thumbnail, reproduced as the final image of the slideshow, was a Photoshop pastiche of J.L.G. Ferris' early 20th Century painting *The First Thanksgiving 1621*. Isma'īl replaced many of the male figures' heads with an image of Turkish president Erdogan in a traditional Arab *kaffiyeh* (a selection that Isma'īl consciously used to blur Erdogan's Turkish identity with Arab iconography). Isma'īl also inserted a sheep and a plate of *mansaf*, an iconic Jordanian dish with strong national connotations. Isma'īl was proud of the image, one of his first projects in his new job, and other members of the staff found the picture funny.

This image, and the slideshow overall, reflected Al Khaleet's particular Jordan/Palestine-centric vision of its coverage area, which it shorthanded as "the Middle East" both internally and externally in its 'eye on the Middle East'-style tagline. The map included in its staff handbook was more specific – it showed all of the Arab-majority societies in the area we commonly think of as the Middle East and North Africa. Along with Israel, they were color-coded red on the map for mandatory coverage. (Sudan,

though majority-Arab, was excluded.) Iran and Turkey were coded green for occasional coverage.

In actual practice, the staff frequently picked up stories from Turkey and Iran, especially as they related to the conflict in Syria, and, in Iran's case, sectarian tensions and regional conflicts with Saudi Arabia. News from Morocco, Algeria, and Oman rarely appeared on the site. On the English side, these dynamics may be partly explained by a paucity of English partner sites covering Morocco, Algeria, and Oman, and large amounts of timely English content available from Turkish news agency Anadolu and Iranian state Press TV.

Al Khaleet's staff certainly recognized that there are internal diversities in the Middle East's Arab-majority societies, and among Americans, but such diversities were readily glossed in favor of what the staff considered the most readily recognizable representations. These symbols were those most recognizable to the staff, based on their own polarities of reference. Looking more closely at the Photoshop pastiche of Erdogan and Ferris' *First Thanksgiving*, we can see how this manifested. Erdogan is wearing a *kaffiyeh*, a man's headdress consisting of a red-and-white checked *shmāgh* (scarf), and *agal*, the woven rope. Colors, weaves, and styles of *kaffiyeh* and *shmāgh*, and the ways they are tied, draped, and worn vary enormously between and within Arab-majority societies. They are steeped with social, religious, and nationalist significances, all interwoven with personal fashion preferences, and as such would be several dissertations in themselves. For now, suffice to say that the red-and-white *shmāgh*, though it appears elsewhere in the region, is for Jordanians a strong symbol of Jordanian East-Banker

nationalism. Its origins are debated, but it was incorporated into the Desert Patrol and Jordanian military uniforms by their British overseers, and it remains a martial symbol. The distinctive weave pattern appears on t-shirts, as well as women's headbands and handbags. The red-and-white check thus markets a specific version of Jordanianness linked to forms of bedouinity, sovereignty, and not-being-Palestinian (Massad 2001). *Shmāgh* and *kaffiyeh* are also distinctly non-Turkish. (The original image was taken by a Getty photographer as Erdogan visited a Syrian refugee camp in Urfa, Turkey, presumably wearing the garment in solidarity.)

The two other elements Isma‘il added to the painting were equally telling. One was a plate of *mansaf*, the Jordanian national dish.²⁰ Traditionally eaten from a communal plate on the floor, *mansaf* consists of mutton or goat meat over a pile of saffron rice garnished with parsley and nuts. Its sauce is made of dried, reconstituted yogurt, a preservation technique used by Jordan's nomadic Bedouin pastoralists. *Mansaf* is claimed as distinctly Jordanian, and taxi drivers will often ask visitors if they've had *mansaf* yet (and where, and with whom, and under what circumstances, and how they liked it). By including *mansaf*, Isma‘il was using a symbol of Jordanianness to reference both Arab-ness and Muslim-ness (he himself was Christian). The final element Isma‘il added was a lamb, which carried connotations of some Jordanians' pastoral ancestries or contemporary orientations, as well as the annual sacrifice Muslims perform at *īd al-adḥā*. The choice of a sheep was not only Jordan-centric, but Amman-centric; goats are preferred for *mansaf* and the Eid sacrifice in southern Jordan. A camel might have been a

²⁰ Though not, of course, an uncomplicated one. See Massad 2001 for more on *mansaf* and Jordanian identity.

more broadly recognizable symbol of Arabness for U.S., Canadian, and British readers, but they are not a common sight in Amman and its environs. (Camels appeared elsewhere in the slideshow, in an image of Arab men watching a football match on a MacBook in a desert campsite.)

Together, this selection of symbols pointed to an unsurprising Jordan-centricity operating at Al Khaleet. As Damien Stankiewicz (2017, 32) shows in his study of the European satellite station ARTE, "national talk, national assumptions, and national stereotype" remain prevalent even at (or perhaps especially at) avowedly transnational media outlets. While Al Khaleet presented itself as an outlet for Middle East news and analysis, it was based in Amman, and most of its staff were not only Jordanian, but Jordanians from West Amman²¹. It was "Middle Eastern" mainly in its aggregation – in its class outlook, apolitical stance, and secularism, it reflected West Amman's increasingly cosmopolitan, middle-class, and neoliberalizing sensibilities.

Such slideshow concepts and ideas were readily generated by Al Khaleet's English staff, who, to greater or lesser degrees, crossed such perceived cultural boundaries on a daily basis, through their blended heritages, their presence as expats in an Arab-majority society, or both.

Slideshow topics were brainstormed, discussed, and assigned to staff at a weekly meeting. Most if not all news organizations have such meetings, in which staff discuss upcoming events and ongoing trends, plan future coverage, pitch stories, and allocate resources. At Al Khaleet these weekly meetings usually took place at the start of the work

²¹ Speaking very broadly, West Amman is wealthier, more liberal, and more Western-identifying than East Amman.

week, on a Sunday or a Monday. The entire English-side staff was expected to attend, and managers tried to hold the meetings when the largest number of part-time employees were scheduled to be in the office. On the Arabic side, only the two or three editors most involved in slideshows attended. The multimedia editor, who worked with both language teams and was primarily responsible for building slideshows in the content management system, was also generally present.

These weekly meetings were one of the few organized points of contact between the English and Arabic teams, and my next chapter looks closely at one of these weekly planning meetings, and a disagreement that arose over a slideshow.

Note: Following my fieldwork, the organization has made several changes. I'm told that there is now a greater emphasis placed on original content and less on meeting quotas, and that management responsibilities for the English and Arabic teams have been divided.

CHAPTER 2

THE DAILY PRACTICE OF ONLINE JOURNALISM

This project started as an exploration of state censorship, the mechanisms through which it guides production, and the types of knowledge it produces. But as I was drafting my proposal and going through the grant-writing process, I began struggling with what remains a fundamental problem in my research. That is, how do I differentiate among state censorship, self-censorship, and any of the other constraints that operate on cultural producers? This is particularly murky in an environment like Jordan, where the state tries to obscure its media control, and where cultural issues like gender, sexuality, religion, and so forth seem, at least to a Westerner, so delicate and restrictive.²²

Part of me hoped that, like Justice Potter Stewart, I would know state censorship when I saw it. To a large extent that was true, as we shall see in my next chapter. But state control is never the only concern structuring decision-making in a Jordanian newsroom, and only rarely was it consciously considered at Al Khaleet. In order to throw state censorship into relief, I need to address other factors like politeness, habit, audience expectations, educational background, ethnicity, and social class, all of which contributed to the way that decisions were made at Al Khaleet, and consequently to the knowledge that it produced.

²² I do not argue that Jordanian society is somehow more 'strict' and U.S. society more 'free.' Cultural constraint, or habitus, operates the same way there as it does anywhere else. However, I think it is safe to say that both Jordanians and foreigners in Jordan are more conscious of the importance of public propriety and honor than, say, Americans.

Together I refer to these elements as cultural constraints, and in this chapter I discuss how they interrelated with two other factors – digital media technology, and considerations of site's audience – in Al Khaleet's multi-ethnic, multi-lingual newsroom. Taken together, these elements show how the rapidly evolving nature of online news production adds yet another layer of complexity to the daily labor of producing journalistic knowledge.

While I tend to focus on changes in the technology that journalists use, I could just as easily describe them as changes in journalists' consideration of time. The gathering and dissemination of knowledge, and the time it takes, have been interrelated with technology since the days of cuneiform on clay tablets. More recently, telegraphy and telephony, radio, and television have greatly accelerated the rate at which information can be distributed to audiences (with the last two, like the internet, having each been hailed as the death knell of the newspaper). So while news production has always been influenced by time, seconds now matter in online news. Being first to Twitter or Google News has very real economic consequences. In many ways, search engines – Google in particular – are the audience that matters most. Attracting their algorithms is crucial, and news organizations are paying more and more attention to search engine optimization in their keywords, headlines, and summaries. Time zones and readers' waking hours still matter somewhat, but the classic daily news cycle is increasingly irrelevant. There are readers to be reached somewhere at all hours of the day. At the same time, online production has enabled smaller organizations to reach potentially massive numbers of consumers. As I describe below, Al Khaleet struggled with these new realities during my research period.

It had a small staff, with frequent turnover and varying levels of experience on the English side, but the owner expected us to handle breaking news at all hours. Due to the nature of "screenwork" we had more and more information to sift and process, and time felt increasingly compressed (Boyer 2013). In particular, chief editor Layla felt torn between the imperative to quickly and constantly post new content, and the levels of quality and sophistication that her professional pride demanded.

All journalists struggle with a constant problem of reconciling the information that they learn with their professional and ideological understandings, and finally with their sense of what their audiences want. One example would be the general avoidance in the U.S. press of suicide, except in cases when the victim is particularly well known, or the death is unusually public. There are no legal constraints that would keep U.S. journalists and media outlets from reporting suicides when they learn about them, and they frequently do. But they typically choose not to report on them, differentiating suicides from car accident deaths, murders, and all of the other tragedies that constitute news. One could even argue that reporting suicides as an aspect of mental health is in the public interest, but the U.S. news media treat them as private issues, a consequence of the cultural taboos surrounding mental illness and suicide in U.S. society. Every media environment has such cultural constraints stemming from the concerns and expectations of the broader societies in which they operate. In turn, the media content produced in light of those concerns and expectations continues to reinforce them.

In the rest of this chapter, I address two instances in which cultural expectations and constraints resulted in very visible changes in the way that the staff approached

particular news stories. At the same time, I point out how the realities of the Al Khaleet newsroom and the technical qualities of its website frustrated the staff, and led them to make certain choices in the supposedly less restrictive realm of online publishing. Such incidents reveal the limits of journalists' assumptions about their autonomy (Pedelty 1995) and demonstrate that objectivist, fact-based reporting is no less subject to cultural, institutional, technical, and regulatory influences than any other cultural production (Bourdieu 1984, 1991; Peterson, R. 1976; Peterson, R. and Anand 2004; Hutchby 2001). That is to say, the proposition that "facts are facts" only holds true within the boundaries of particular ways of thinking about facticity.

The data for this chapter all derive from one of Al Khaleet's weekly planning meetings. These meetings were typically held on Sunday, the start of the workweek, and they lasted from 30 minutes to two hours. They included as few as six or more than 12 people. Sometimes they followed a written agenda, while other times they flowed more freely, and they could range in tone from serious to lighthearted. Because of Al Khaleet's staff turnover, there was always a wide range of experience levels present, both at the site and in journalism more broadly. The executive editor explained to me later that she tried to have a mix among the staff of trained journalists and people with experience in Arab societies – it was rare to find both qualities in one person, she said, and those individuals usually commanded too high a salary. Further, she said, journalists with more traditional backgrounds and training were often "too rigid" to fit well into Al Khaleet's mix of content aggregation and creation. So farewells and welcomes were common, and the meeting sometimes served as the beginning of an evening of socialization among the

expat English staff, while the Arabic-team staff went home to their families.

Employees who were traveling or working remotely were sometimes asked to Skype in, leading to frequent connection problems that slowed meetings.

Meetings were conducted almost entirely in English, and generally began with a discussion of upcoming events and ongoing trends, and any topics that the editor felt the staff needed to highlight further, or things that we'd been overdoing. The Arabic-side staff were asked to alert the English-side staff to stories and events trending in Arabic that may have not yet crossed over into the English-language media from which the English side drew its content.

The meeting I discuss below took place in mid-December, shortly before a number of English-team employees were scheduled to be away for Christmas and New Year's, and all the other English team members were going to be working remotely. The staff were attempting to produce about three weeks' worth of slideshows beforehand, and advance-publish them for the period of reduced coverage. They had tried to do so unsuccessfully in years past, and this year there was a renewed push to have everything ready before we dispersed. The deadline to have the slideshows wrapped up had been set for five days after the meeting took place.

Skyping In: Technological Freedom and Constraint

The meeting began with a problem familiar to any journalist working as part of a larger team – how to allocate and coordinate labor. While this problem was by no means

unique to Al Khaleet, several aspects of the site's labor allocation were particularly thorny. First, how should a news team with an international focus respond to breaking news in a 24-hour news cycle when it only had the resources to be staffed 16 hours a day? Second, how should it try to coordinate a flexible, remote, and part-time workforce? The third and most difficult question was how to manage flows of information and communication - the constant stream of news content, tips, queries from coworkers, social plans, Facebook messages, Twitter streams, text conversations, and phone calls.

The Arabic team had a system with someone working nearly around the clock, but the English team had a rotating schedule in which most journalists worked one or two night shifts every week, from roughly 2:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Many people on that shift worked remotely, or came into the office for the first half, then went home to have dinner and finish their shift afterwards. In the evenings, then, there was only one set of eyes on a region's worth of content, each piece demanding a set of judgment calls by the journalist on duty. Amman's overloaded 3G mobile internet²³ services, upon which we depended when not in the office, could make searching the web and posting stories even more problematic than usual. These internet connectivity problems were a daily reminder that infrastructure still exerts pressure on media and news production even in the era of digital transmission.

Two issues that frequently bedeviled the journalists emerged in this portion of the meeting. The first was the frequent staff turnover among a part-time, expat workforce.

²³ During my research period, most Jordanians were consuming their online content on mobile phones. The internet cafes of the previous decade had all but disappeared. Jordanians who used laptops mostly depended on mobile internet "dongles" loaded from pre-paid scratch-off cards purchased by the gigabyte. These services were slow and unreliable, especially in crowded Amman.

The second, related to the staff's geographic fragmentation, was the challenge of remote work in Jordan's overtaxed IT infrastructure. Though Jordan has tried to position itself as an IT hub in the Middle East, internet service is expensive and often unreliable. Slowdowns and outages in fast-growing Amman were common. Al Khaleet had constant, frustrating bandwidth issues that made it difficult to trawl the internet for content and imagery, and sometimes made it hard to get accurate reflections of changes we had made to the site. Working at Al Khaleet, and in Jordan more generally, offered frequent reminders of ongoing inequalities in telecom services, even as the internet is sometimes understood through a facile rhetoric of global interconnection and a world “brought together.” Jordan at that time was certainly on the "haves" side of the digital divide, as opposed to the have-nots. Access to the internet was available, but it was a very uneven sort of access – expensive, slow, linguistically divided, and mostly obtained through scratch-off cards that required a cash transaction at a physical store.

The first few agenda items all touched on these problems, including the fact that everyone on the English side would be working remotely for roughly the next two weeks. With so much of the English-side staff on holiday leave, or back in their native countries and working remotely, the managers had decided it would be simplest if the rest of the English-side staff worked remotely as well.

The HR manager, Charlotte, who was Skyping into the meeting from out of the country, raised an issue that was a longstanding concern at Al Khaleet – how to communicate and handle breaking news in off-hours, and with remote workers. About two weeks previously, the English team had been chewed out by the site's owner for not

having covered the result of a UN session on Palestine. (It never became entirely clear why the English team had not covered the event. In the postmortem, staffers brought up that they'd already written a preview of the session earlier in the day, and that nothing particularly noteworthy had happened. The Arabic side, however, had covered the result.) The proposed solution was an all-staff group in the mobile messaging service WhatsApp.

Charlotte's proposal was an attempt to improve communication between the lone evening shift worker, the social media team, the executive editor, and anyone on staff who happened to notice breaking news after hours. Jordanians eagerly use WhatsApp to communicate without incurring SMS (text message) charges, and frequently use the service to share photos and messages with large numbers of their friends and contacts. Its logo appears on roadside coffee stands as a form of borrowed branding. It's not uncommon to see male drivers with the app logo and their contact information in the back windows of their cars and minivans.

However, just setting up the WhatsApp group was an exercise in tangled, multi-stream communication. Charlotte sent an email asking people to submit their phone numbers; half a dozen staff members replied—all, some with as many as three phone numbers that they used for the service depending on what country they were in. Charlotte then had to pursue people in person, and later raised the issue at the weekly meeting. (Despite that, not everyone was successfully added to the list until a second catastrophic failure in coverage by the English team more than a month later.)

During the meeting, Layla, the executive editor, and two entertainment writers, Salma and Georgia, discussed the WhatsApp group with Charlotte. Layla wondered if the

two entertainment writers needed to be included. She quickly acknowledged that they did, after Charlotte said that stories such as those involving mega-popular Palestinian singer Mohammed Assaf needed to get pushed to the social media team. But Layla was concerned about information overload with yet more channels of communication, and that Salma and Georgia might be inundated with irrelevant messages in their off-hours. She even borrowed the term "spam" from an earlier form of electronic communication. Charlotte pointed out that certain kinds of entertainment coverage "go through" social media. Whether she meant the site learned about them on social media, or needed to post them on social media after they went up on the site was not clear. In practice both things were true. Georgia noted that she could disable notifications from the app, but then acknowledged that that could be "dangerous."

Layla: Yeah, but it's going to be, a lot of it might be this, this, this breaking news, who's covering it? But as long as you don't -

Salma: I don't care.

[Inaudible]

Georgia: I can set it to where it doesn't notify me -

Layla: - ok yeah -

Georgia: But then that might be dangerous, and I would miss something. But ...

Layla: I know. Let's, ok, no no, keep it as it is -

Georgia: Can, can you just tell them that if it is something for entertainment maybe just send it personally to us? I don't know if that ... what would be the point of us being in the group then, if that was the case.

Ultimately the four women agreed that the two entertainment writers did need to be in the WhatsApp list along with the main news staff. And so the WhatsApp group joined email, text messaging, Google Messenger, and the chat function in Google shared documents as the fifth text messaging protocol that the Al Khaleet staff used to share information. By design, WhatsApp was one of the most intrusive because it pushed notifications to everyone's phone. As a side effect, the WhatsApp group tended to further erode barriers for the entire staff between work and leisure. Due in part to their shared expat experience, the English team often socialized together; this and the increasing off-hours electronic contact gave rise to a feeling that they were always "Khaleeting," a feeling Charlotte also foretold.

Charlotte: Exactly. And on that, and on that, it's not just the social media guys, if you are ever seeing some of the technical issues that have been happening this week happen to you, then, you know, page this WhatsApp group so that someone can cover for you straightaway. Because [inaudible] different time frames [zones] now, so at least one of us will be awake at any given hour of the day.

Layla snickered.

Salma giggled: "That's funny."

Layla: Wow. 24-7.

Georgia: News around the clock.

In her initial email about the WhatsApp group, Charlotte had said that the English team needed a method other than email to communicate within itself and loop in the social media team. In part this was because Al Khaleet's English team suffered from a distinct email overload. Because of the remote workers, and because of the layout of the

office, many conversations took place over email that in other workplaces might take place in person. Staffers could easily receive 75 or more emails a day, many of them discussions about content that took place over lengthy reply-all email chains. At times the journalists complained about the volume of email, though some also complained that certain colleagues did not send *enough* email to keep everyone else informed. Some staffers developed reputations for not reading their email, or for routinely missing important missives.

Such problems of overload are common at many workplaces that use electronic communications, but media production sites may be particularly susceptible. Dominic Boyer argues that the "screenwork" inherent in managing flows of digital information – which with very few exceptions was all that Al Khaleet staffers did – creates a narrowness of focus, and makes it harder to concentrate on non-screen matters. Boyer distinguishes between *mediological* labor (loosely, the transmission of news within a vast network) and *praxiological* labor (the creation of news product from unwoven threads). At first glance, labor at Al Khaleet would seem to be almost entirely mediological except for the slideshows that the staff produced themselves. The majority of the labor that went into the site involved searching, cutting-and-pasting, and reformatting. Boyer describes an oscillation among his subjects between these two understandings of their labor (2013, 44), and argues that studying their interplay is crucial for discerning how understandings become knowledge in the digital age.

While much of Boyer's analysis of mediological and praxiological newsmaking is relevant to my field site, there is one important difference. Rather than "oscillating"

between the two understandings, the English-side Al Khaleet staff understood themselves to be engaged in mediological labor first and foremost. And yet, they also understood themselves to be creating something original – in their case not individual news articles, but the site itself, as a unique compilation of curated, bilingual information about events in their area of coverage. The entertainment staff in particular felt that their area – Arab entertainment news in English – was wholly unique. So rather than engaging in labor understood to be alternatively "craft" or "treadmill", as Boyer (2013, 44) puts it, the journalists felt that they were producing praxiological news *through* mediology. While the individual components of day's report were all the product of someone else's reporting, the staff felt that they had established intellectual ownership over the site itself through their labor of aggregation and curation.

But, as Boyer notes, such screenwork is exhausting (2013, 28) even on relatively slow news days. Al Khaleet journalists, and Layla in particular, were constantly struggling to manage flows of information from Facebook, Twitter, email, the web, their mobile phones and various apps, not to mention the face-to-face communications of the office. With a limited staff and varying levels of experience, the English team often struggled to meet the demands placed upon it, and it was no surprise to me that stories sometimes fell through the cracks. The WhatsApp group definitely improved communication, and was soon an essential part of the staff's labor-allocation toolset, but it came at a cost of further eroding work-life boundaries.

Crossfit and Christmas – Defining an Audience

Cultural producers such as journalists, by economic necessity, produce for an audience. We might think that as experts in their field they would know who composes that audience, and what that audience wants to read or view. The reality is more complicated (Ang 1991). As the planning conversation below reveals, content producers must grapple with a variety of imperatives that are sometimes in conflict. One is to create content that is entertaining, and that people will consume, but that stays within the outlet's guidelines of acceptability. Each outlet has standards for the presentation of its content based on the audience it claims to be targeting and the social world in which it operates – standards expressed in terms of facticity, objectivity, morality, taste, etc. For example, Al Khaleet's owner wanted the site to be provocative, and to prompt debate on social issues; at the same time he recognized that it could not be so provocative as to alienate its audience and thus imperil its profitability. Negotiating such conflicting demands is a daily struggle for media producers, who must base their decisions on their understandings of the audience. The portion of the meeting I describe below demonstrates one way that this can play out, as the team discussed how to broaden the focus of a slideshow idea in an attempt to both reach a wider audience, and conform to Al Khaleet's own internal mandate to report on an entire region.

After addressing the logistical issues of holiday leave and the WhatsApp list, Layla turned to slideshows. Discussions of slideshows were often fraught. These slideshows were the primary pieces of content that Al Khaleet created itself, and they

assumed outsized importance relative to the amount of traffic they received. They were also the only content pieces the owner approved before publication. In Al Khaleet's earlier days, the slideshows had been quite popular with its readers, many of whom came to Al Khaleet as a destination site (i.e. navigating directly to the homepage directly instead of landing on an individual article from a search engine). The executive editor felt pressure from the owner to regain that popularity, and staked her own professional pride on trying to boost slideshow readership numbers, often tweaking text and headline for hours to optimize them for Google and entice readers. For this slideshow discussion, the stakes were even higher than normal with the impending deadline to get everything prepped for the holiday period.

The slideshow planning started with a concept about "CrossFit" gyms²⁴ in Jordan. The idea had been kicked around for a few weeks, and was in the hands of a staffer whose husband worked for a CrossFit franchise in Amman. Charlotte's Skype connection grew steadily worse, and at one point the staff turned to other matters for a few minutes while she tried to reconnect.

As they returned to the discussion of the CrossFit slideshow, Georgia said the gym already had pictures of and quotes from some of its members, and that she could spin the piece into how the CrossFit trend was catching on in the Middle East. With Christmas and New Year approaching, she also said that she could mention people's plans to "work off their holiday weight," a typically American concern that doesn't really translate to Muslim-majority societies. She went on to say that the first Palestinian CrossFit franchise was about to open in Ramallah.

²⁴ A branded fitness regimen with a particularly avid, vocal following.

Georgia: I have a picture, because they all have Facebook pages? Um, and so, I can, that's kind of the angle that I'm going at it, throwing a little bit of funny into the intro, and talking about, cause it's very, people make fun of it, CrossFit a lot, and call it like an occult [sic], because it's so like addictive and community driven, but also this culture is very like tribe oriented and, so kind of make some funny parallels with that ...

[...]

Layla: Um, because I, I like that, because we're going to get from [the owner] why is this just Jordan-only if there's no rhyme or reason for it to be Jordan for the region's purposes, so that's good if you open it up a bit even if it's just an odd Palestine and what's happening in the Gulf with it. But, and maybe just that humor about, is it too intense for, um, people that are used to doing their workout on their phones and whatever.

Georgia: Yeah. And like the steroids and big muscles – [a reference to stereotypical Jordanian gym culture]

Layla: Yeah.

Georgia: – and this is like total body fitness and stuff. But yeah, like I've, I've found, there's over a hundred that have popped up in the Middle East, there's tons in Dubai, so I'll put in statistics like that too, um, but just that, like, we, we, interviewed some at one particular, you know, one of the region's CrossFit of, you know why they do it.

Layla: Cause it's not like we'd really be talking about a CrossFit in Syria, or, you know, couldn't have access anyways, so it can make sense to be Jordan.

Georgia: Yeah, but I can also reach out to a couple of the other, like the ones in Palestine, see if they can send me a picture of somebody from there, and like what it means to them. Everybody loves a good Palestine story. So, I don't know.

Layla: Or Holy Land, going towards Christmas.

Here the staff are grappling with a perennial problem for Al Khaleet – how to credibly report on an entire region when the staff is located in Amman. The company's

mandate, often reinforced by the owner through missives to the executive editor, was to report on the entire Middle East²⁵. While they frequently created slideshows that dealt with a particular country or sub-region, such as the Gulf, which were pegged to a particular news event, the executive editor knew from experience that the owner would have been unhappy with a slideshow limited to a single company in a single city. In a strategy also employed by Arab regimes to distract from their own shortcomings, the writer and editor both suggested that expanding the theme to Palestine would suffice. As Georgia noted, "everybody loves a good Palestine story." For many Arabs, Palestine exists as both a literal locality and a constantly mediated pan-Arab sensibility. Most Arabs, especially those in the Levant, support Palestinian causes. Hard news about Palestinian politics and the Israeli occupation fills newspapers and TV broadcasts, and human-interest pieces about life under occupation are common. For decades, authoritarian Arab states have used the Israel-Palestine conflict as a foil, blaming it for both internal and regional problems, and arguing that it needed to be resolved before they could, say, become more democratic.

Because it was a content aggregator, it is a little more difficult to pinpoint the "slant" of Al Khaleet's Palestine coverage, but the sources it drew from were largely Palestinian themselves. Some, such as Iran's Press TV, were distinctly anti-Zionist, but the staff tended to avoid that outlet for Palestine coverage on the grounds that its bias was too overt. The site ran pro-Palestinian op-ed pieces and reported extensively on Israeli

²⁵ The term "Middle East" is contested both within and outside Al Khaleet. See Deeb and Winegar 2012 for a comprehensive discussion. Al Khaleet provided staffers with a color-coded map of the region. It included all the Arabic-speaking countries of North Africa (except for Sudan), Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, and all the countries of the Arabian peninsula. Iran and Turkey were marked for coverage of stories affecting the broader region.

violence towards Palestinians. It thus reflected the political views of much (but by no means all) of its editorial staff on both the English and Arabic sides, and simultaneously reflected the political views that it expected its Arabic- and English-language audiences would both share. Layla told me that she strove to have the site publish "more critically rounded pieces" on the conflict as a general rule to build its credibility, so that when it *did* publish distinctly pro-Palestinian content it could do so without being "disqualified or dismissed as a typical Arab pro-Pal[estinian] rag."

In some ways, this dynamic runs counter to Bourdieu's argument regarding what he calls "omnibus" publications, which "systematically eschew everything which might offend any section of their actual or potential readership" (1984: 442). They take a very different strategy from what he calls the "vanguard grouplets and avant-garde reviews" that depend on narrow, passionate subscription bases and activists. Bourdieu singles out explicitly political messages, except those that are seen as least political, such as official announcements, and it is this aspect that makes large omnibus papers seem like semi-official outlets. All omnibus cultural products, Bourdieu writes, come to share a quality of broad and bland acceptability (1984: 442). In Jordan, this is certainly true of television broadcasts and newspaper coverage, both for the reasons Bourdieu suggests, and due to state media control. But this dynamic seems less and less true in environments of greater media pluralism. The issue comes down to how we define the boundaries of the community, or social world, that a given publication reaches. For Bourdieu, writing during a period when the reach of newspapers and terrestrial TV broadcasts was constrained by their infrastructural realities, the communities in question were

communities of geography. For an outlet directing itself towards a geographic audience in which some members were pro-Israeli, and others pro-Palestinian, then its content would tend to the blandly neutral, following Bourdieu's assertion. But on the internet (and to a lesser degree on satellite and cable TV), when those with access and linguistic competence can in theory engage with any content regardless of its geographic origin, the question becomes one of *communities of interest*. Al Khaleet was not radically anti-Zionist, and eschewed such rhetoric, but neither was it blandly neutral. If we accept Bourdieu's initial premise, then internet and satellite distribution seem to allow for a third type (at least) of outlet, neither "omnibus" nor "avant-garde," able to reach a non-activist audience large enough to sustain itself, yet appealing to the political beliefs of that audience in a way that makes it unappealing to other readers outside that community of interest.

At Al Khaleet, we knew that expanding a story to include Palestine expanded its community of interest to concentrations of the Palestinian diaspora. Al Khaleet's metrics often showed that Palestine-related content was among its most popular offerings – adding a Palestine angle was thus a recognized method for improving search engine hits and social media shares.

At the same time that Georgia was attempting to broaden the slideshow's scope to fit the owner's mandate, she was attempting to blend the content with a mixture of Arab cultural tropes and U.S.-derived stereotypes. She turned to the “tribal” orientations of Jordanian society, a quality commonly invoked both internally and externally as its

essential nature.²⁶ As with the Muslim Thanksgiving slideshow in my preceding chapter, such cross-cultural comparisons occurred readily to Al Khaleet's expat workforce. The staff saw them as humorous, and frequently used them in slideshow leads or headlines as hooks, or sometimes as the structuring elements of entire slideshows.

Some of Al Khaleet's readership no doubt found stories based on cross-cultural tropes humorous and relevant. The company believed that many of its readers were expat Arabs living in the UK, the United States, and Canada; many others were probably expat English speakers living in Arab-majority societies. But the truth is, that like many news organizations, the Al Khaleet staff did not really know who was reading their material.

As Ien Ang notes in her study of television producers, their first concern "is to seize control over their own conditions of existence," or in other words, to manage their social, regulatory, and economic circumstances in a way that allows them to perpetuate themselves. Ang argues that knowing too much about the audience – the nuance of its composition and realities – is actually counterproductive for institutions. A controllable, constructed category of "the audience" is far more helpful in furthering institutional goals. Producers' subjective, intuitive perceptions of the audience are more useful than quantitative knowledge because they allow them to reduce complexity in their decision-making schema (Ang 1991, 6-7; Espinosa 1982).

At Al Khaleet, Ang's model of the imagined audience largely still held, though recent global changes in media production and consumption were presenting increasing challenges. Layla in general rejected the idea that the site should pander to its readers –

²⁶ Tribal identity is certainly important in Jordan, and helps to structure many social and political interactions. However, both Jordanians and non-Jordanians overuse tribalism as an explanation for those realities, glossing over other differences such as social class, urbanism, ruralism, etc.

she liked a snappy headline, but never suggested we should use "clickbait" titles. As we shall see in Chapter 3, she at times framed debates over news coverage as a choice between going with general sentiment versus "setting the agenda," and she preferred the latter. Her own occasional op-ed pieces tended towards the dry intellectual end of the spectrum rather than popular outrage. She believed that readers would find their way to "good" content, and though she was grateful for the popularity of the site's gossipy entertainment news, she occasionally expressed a certain wry jealousy of its success. The raw numbers of click counts mattered to her, but much less than the occasions when respected organizations or prominent individuals referenced the site's content.

More recently, in their study of online news sites, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein find a significant "news gap" between the supply of public-interest reporting, which the journalists who produce it deem important, and the demand for infotainment stories on crime, entertainment, weather, and sports that readers actually consume the most. While there are limits to their study – it draws its sources from the U.S., Latin America and Europe, and accounts for audience factors like social class and gender in superficial ways – it suggests several important findings relevant to the Jordanian case. First, that journalists tend to aim their cultural product at cultural and intellectual elites, including other journalists. Second, that demand for different types of journalism is not static – reader interest in the public-affairs reporting that journalists value more highly increases during what the authors call periods of heightened political awareness. Third, that the power media organizations have to "set the agenda," is limited by the divergence in

preferences between journalist and reader (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; cf. Herman and Chomsky 1988).

The upshot is that the audience that journalists know best, and create the most content for, is actually themselves. However, they use their concepts of the audience to bolster their arguments for choosing one story over another, or approaching topics in different ways – in other words, to determine how they assign their labor. When journalists within the same organization have divergent concepts of the audience, or when those audiences are actually different, friction results. When they attempt to tailor content to their ideas of the audience's taste, and when they translate an article across linguistic and cultural boundaries, those fault lines become especially evident.

As the CrossFit slideshow reveals, journalists default to writing for themselves. The story idea readily presented itself to Georgia because of her own interests and her husband's job. She had easy access to quotes and images, making the piece attractive from a labor standpoint. And as the staff worked to develop the story's angle, she and Layla drew on ideas that were familiar to them: cross-cultural humor, Christmas holiday weight loss, and the musclebound male culture of Jordanian gyms. The CrossFit slideshow was only intended for the English-side audience, and there was no discussion of translating it for the Arabic side.²⁷ In the next portion of the meeting, we see what can happen when one team tasks the other with translating their ideas across linguistic and cultural lines. This next incident points to the difficulties – or perhaps impossibilities – of

²⁷ In the meetings, each side typically told the other what slideshows they were working on, so the Arabic side was almost certainly aware of it. I can only guess that they did not think it would be interesting to their readers.

translation, and helps explain why Al Khaleet mirrored so little of its content on both language portals.

Sluts, Jews, and Taxi Drivers: Translation and Taste

The final portion of the meeting demonstrates how the two previous components – technology and audience – interrelate with cultural constraints in the production of news. This last datum derives from a disagreement between members of the English team and members of the Arabic team over how to approach a particular piece of content. The discussion remained cordial throughout, and never approached the level of an argument. (In fact, I have observed far more heated debates in newsrooms where the participants were from more obviously similar socio-cultural backgrounds, and I think it's safe to say that disagreements over coverage occur in every newsroom.) However, because of Al Khaleet's bilingual setup, and the different audiences for each language team's content, the incident is especially revealing of the ways in which producers' and audiences' cultural backgrounds shape their ideas about what constitutes good content. Paradoxically, the journalists involved invoked both homogenizing and heterogeneous visions of the site's audiences as they defended their positions, articulating a pan-Arab culture but then arguing that such a thing could not exist. Following the site's vision of reporting on the entire Middle East, the ideological argument of the article was addressed to a monolithic Arabic-speaking community. But through the limits of the journalists'

own experiences and access to information, the actual content was restricted to a smaller geographic and cultural-linguistic area.

As the Al Khaleet planning meeting progressed, the conversation turned to a slideshow that had already been problematic on a number of levels. Though we had been referring to it as the "PC words" slideshow, it actually dealt with the opposite – terms employed in colloquial Arabic that Layla (and two or three other contributors on the English staff) felt were offensive to women, ethnic minorities, the disabled, and other groups. The idea behind the slideshow²⁸ was to explain how Arabic words such as *abd*²⁹ – which she equated in her text to the "N-word" – should be outright "banned" from colloquial usage, or at the very least used much more critically. In her planning discussions with staff, Layla was adamant that the slideshow should not portray Arabs as "backwards" for continuing to use such terms, and that it had to be "measured."

One morning before this meeting, Layla and Isma‘il, the multimedia editor, had spent several hours discussing an early draft. That version included the words *kāfir* and *insh`Allah*. After discussion with Isma‘il, Layla decided to take those terms out – *kāfir* because of its growing association with Daesh, and renewed prominence of the concept of *takfir*.³⁰ She had initially included *insh`Allah*³¹ because some Western-oriented,

²⁸ The piece was inspired by a similar, though smaller article in August at <http://scoopempire.com/5-phrases-arabs-must-stop-using/#.Vt9KpelGT8E>

²⁹ *Abd* means 'slave' or 'servant.' Historically, Arabs used it to refer their sub-Saharan African slaves, and it persists in rather limited usage as a synonym for phenotypically black individuals. *Abd* is also a common nickname for Arabs with names such as Abdullah or Abdelrahman (lit. "servant of God" and "servant of the Merciful," respectively).

³⁰ *Takfir* refers to an accusation of apostasy made by a *takfirī*. Recently the terms have been leveled at Sunni extremist groups like Daesh, and have acquired derogatory meanings.

secularist Arabs associate it with "Islamic fatalism" and backwardness, a rough equivalent to stereotypes about "mañana culture" or siesta in Spain and Latin America. As one editor put it in an early draft, "Nowadays, insh'allah has as little do with god [sic], and more to do with lying ... and getting someone to stop nagging you about getting something done." But as Isma'īl noted in his discussion with Layla, *insh'Allah* has a generally positive connotation, and telling people to stop using the phrase "God willing" would be problematic, he thought.

Ultimately Layla, who was working as the lead writer of the slideshow, decided on a collection of 16 images, beginning with *'ānis* (spinster) and ending with *yahūdī* (Jew). *Abd* made the cut, as did words like *munghūli* (literally Mongolian, but used to mean someone with Down syndrome or a similar disability), *raqāsa* (dancer or slut), *sūmālī* (Somalian, meaning someone who looks too thin or anorexic) and *tante* (sissy or gay, perhaps from the French for aunt, via Lebanon). After some debate with Isma'īl over whether or not there were parallels between their usages, Layla also included *musrī* (Egyptian) and *sīrīlānkhī* (Sri Lankhan), terms used in the Levant to refer to laborers and housemaids respectively, regardless of their national origins, much as an Anglo-American might problematically refer to all Hispanic laborers as Mexicans. At first she also included the term *fine*, an English word adopted as a brand name by Jordan's preeminent toilet-paper and facial tissue company. Jordanians call all tissues and paper napkins *fine*, the same way that many Americans refer to all tissues as Kleenex. In a shared-document brainstorming draft, someone argued it should be included "so that it's

³¹ Meaning "God willing," *insh'Allah* can be invoked when discussing any future event, ranging in importance from the birth of children to meeting for coffee or turning left at the next traffic circle.

not exclusively awful grim stuff that reflects poorly or meanly on the culture but also we include those common brand name misnomers like Hoover for vacuum cleaner." Not having seen that, I lobbied against putting *fine* into the slideshow on the grounds that it was entirely local to Jordan, and though some elite Jordanians see the usage as a little hokey or provincial, it is by no means offensive. Layla agreed that putting it in would dilute the message she was trying to convey in the piece.

In their lengthy discussion about the slideshow content, neither Isma‘il nor Layla voiced any awareness of the contradictions inherent in producing a slideshow about Arabic word usage for the site's English audience. None of the other staff pointed it out either, at least not publicly. And as the piece was being produced, there was no discussion within the English team as to whether it should be offered to the Arabic team for translation.

Four days after it went live on the site both the executive editor and owner said they wanted the Arabic team to translate it and publish it on the Arabic side. This was an uncommon occurrence. Given the labor that slideshows took, and the fact that they were ostensibly composed of largely visual content, I expected when I started my research that the two sides would try to "mirror" their slideshows as much as possible. In practice, such collaborations were quite rare – during my research period only a handful of slideshows appeared on both sides. At several points I asked Layla, the executive editor, why the site didn't mirror more content, including its slideshows. She told me that the lack of mirroring was due to inherently different senses of what was newsworthy, interesting, and entertaining. She typically described the Arabic-side content as uninteresting,

unsourced, and uncritical – qualities that the Arabic audience accepted, but that the English audience would not. In an interview a few months after the planning meeting I describe in this chapter, she told me that what passes for news in the Arabic world doesn't carry the same credibility or other ingredients of news that English audiences expect. She continued to say that the site should be mirroring more, and making more of the fact that it was based in the Middle East and had large amounts of Arabic content to draw from, but that a lack of resources kept it from fully realizing its potential. The company was starting a new section of the site intended to help "bridge the gap," she said.

"But we tend to depart from the Arabic side because, like I said, the credibility – some of it's more or less rumor at times. And some of it just isn't, it isn't quite interesting, it doesn't have the – it just doesn't read well in English," she then added. Further, she said, because of limited staffing resources the site sometimes wasn't able to take more advantage of its bilingual nature. "Right or wrongly, we've often had our eyes shut on it a bit."

Another complication related to the way slideshow concepts originated. Given the inherent visual nature of the slideshows, we would normally expect them to need less translation and contextualization, and as such they would seem to be ideal candidates for mirroring. But while the slideshows always involved imagery, few of the story concepts derived from imagery that the staff was already aware of. Most began as text-based ideas for which the writers and the multimedia editor found images in the final phase before publication. This phenomenon traced back to an institutional constraint – the site only subscribed to one major news image service and one stock photo service, so large

numbers of pictures about a single topic were hard to come by. Sometimes the staff used a batch of related, publicly available images, such as in a slideshow of satellite photos of the Middle East from the European Space Agency, but most of the time the slideshows were born from text. As such they were not automatically treated as candidates for mirroring.

Earlier in the day, before the meeting, the owner and executive editor had said that they wanted the slideshow translated and published. Jamil, who had very good spoken English, was tasked with translating it into Arabic, and Layla asked me to help him as best I could with the writing. As we looked at the slideshow together, he began to voice his misgivings. Many of the slides could be used, he said, but "spinster," "dancer" and "taxi driver" needed to be reworded extensively. "We can't use 'slut' in media," he said. Soon a lively discussion broke out between Jamil and his four colleagues in the Arabic side's open-plan newsroom. They agreed that some slides could work, with *musrī*, *ṣ'āidī* and *hindī*³² all going together. *Mu'aq*, meaning handicapped, and *munghūli* would be fine too, they said. But that wasn't enough for an 8-10 item piece of content. Some slides couldn't be used at all, especially *yahūdī*. "If we say [to stop calling people] Jews, people will hate us. They hate Jews here. Let's be honest," said Jamil.

His choice of pronouns is telling. Like many of Al Khaleet's staff, he had been partly raised outside of Jordan, and had worked outside of the kingdom for several years. He typically identified as Jordanian, but at times invoked the more cosmopolitan aspects of his background. Here he chose "they" for Jordanians when speaking to an outsider, not

³² Egyptian, upper rural Egyptian, and Indian, respectively.

"we." He thus distanced himself from the anti-Jewish/Israeli/Zionist sentiments commonly expressed by many Jordanians in everyday speech.

The Arabic staff discussed changing the *yahūdī* slide to *tafīlī*³³, which I said we'd thought about using but rejected as too local. They agreed it was too "Jordanian," and decided to use *ṣ'āīdī* instead. Despite those changes, the consensus among the Arabic staff was that the slideshow wouldn't be a good fit. I soon lost the thread of the Arabic conversation, and asked Jamil to help me catch up. "We're agreeing that it's not going to work in Arabic," he said.

At this point Layla walked through the newsroom, and we spoke with her about the problems the Arabic side envisioned with the piece, particularly the *yahūdī* slide, which they asked if they could omit. She left to speak with the owner, and came back a few minutes later. "It's not an option, he wants them all," she relayed. "But the title can say something like 'Do these words need to go.'"

"We'll do it - we'll just manipulate it. It's the only thing we can do," Jamil told me once she'd left.

As the slideshow came up again in the meeting, Jamil and I explained that the Arabic team had some concerns about certain of the inclusions. One of the English team writers asked for more specifics. Jamil replied, "OK. We are going to the Arabic audience. And the Arabic audience they have a different culture."

The idea that the Arab audience was different was a frequent theme at Al Khaleet. No one on the staff disputed the idea – and nor do I. But the idea formed a critical piece of Al Khaleet's structuring ideology, and was used to justify a variety of practices,

³³ A person from Tafila, a rural governorate in Jordan and the butt of many jokes.

including the lack of collaboration between the English and Arabic teams. Instead of attempting to find commonalities between the audiences that might save labor or create a more collaborative workplace, the audiences were treated as two monolithic, internally homogenous entities, Arabic-speaking and English-speaking. At the same time, as we saw in the CrossFit slideshow, Al Khaleet's journalists operated with only a vague, general sense of who their audience actually was, and wrote predominantly for themselves. The writers and editors had some data from Google analytics about what had been most enticing, and the average length of time readers stayed on a given page. From social media portals (Facebook, Twitter, Google+) they could also tell how many times a piece of content had been shared, commented on, and clicked on, and they were given a somewhat nebulous figure regarding its potential reach. Shares and comments were treated as especially valuable forms of reader interaction and distribution, so the top stories in those fields were given particular attention with a view to replicating their success. How that attention translated into changes in practice was less clear on the news side, where the numbers weren't often discussed outside of the meeting. The general sense seemed to be that the team should be covering everything 'newsworthy' regardless of popularity, and that what did or did not do well was left to the vagaries of the readership. The two entertainment writers, on the other hand, did consciously direct their attention to subjects that were well shared online, with Palestinian heartthrob Mohammed Assaf topping their list. Lastly, the writers knew that most of their traffic came from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United States in various orders, with Jordan and the UAE switching between fourth and fifth place. And that was about it. They had a small amount

of information gleaned from user comments and social media posts, but those commenters were self-selected, and represented only a fraction of the overall audience.

This lack of data about the site's readers left the writers and reporters free to imagine the audience as they liked: young or old, moderate or conservative, male or female. The imagined audience could be invoked to support just about any opinion on how to approach coverage. The company's "hard" quantified data on reader behavior was no less subject to interpretation. For decades, small-scale content producers had limited access to the sort of quantitative, "expert" audience research that became so important in network television programming decisions. Google analytics, click counts, and similar tools are beginning to give smaller producers like Al Khaleet more quantitative information. But, as Ang notes, such "rational" data are used within institutions to ground managerial decisions within a more neutral discourse. As she puts it, "more often than not, research is a tool for symbolic politics rather than for rational decision-making" (Ang 1991, 22). That is to say, quantitative data are invoked to rationalize non-rational decisions that have already been reached.

If a piece did well, or poorly, we might attribute its success or failure to a late editing change, a boring headline, a good photo, or some other proposition, but the actual causes lay outside our actual, rational understanding. Combined with the cryptic nature of search engine optimization and Google's evolving, occult algorithms, we found ourselves scrying snippets of data, graphs of user traffic, and trending topics without definitive lines of causality. In a process reminiscent of Malinowski's description of the function of magic, we made sense of our limited, quantified feedback from the audience-world by

invoking unprovable scenarios. We had our "well-known set of conditions ... coped with by knowledge and work" – our journalistic labor, our understanding of language, our access to photographs and information. But even with that knowledge, we seemed to be "at the mercy of powerful and incalculable tides, sudden gales" of reader interest, world events, and Google placement. In the face of such limitations to our knowledge and rational technique (1954, 29-32), whether or not a piece did well became a matter of faith.

From the owner's perspective, the Arabic-side audience consisted of broad swaths of society in Arab-majority countries. On the English side, in his view, it consisted of atheist, (and mostly elite) Arabs as well as Arab-Americans, -Canadians and other English-speakers with Arab ancestry or Middle-East interests. But for Jamil, as he told me later, the Arabic-side audience was made up of older people, of his parents' generation. He felt strongly that it was important to not offend their more conservative sensibilities. So while it was universally accepted within the company that the Arabic audience was somehow different from the English audience, with different sensibilities and expectations, the natures and extents of those differences varied according to the audiences imagined by each staffer.

Drawing on his understandings of the Al Khaleet audience, Jamil argued that the word *hāmīl*, an impossible-to-translate term for a layabout, a sort of harmless loser, shouldn't be included in the slideshow because it was impossible to clearly explain even in Arabic. As an example of someone who might be called *hāmīl*, he suggested an otherwise good person who didn't perform his daily prayers. Layla countered by saying

that that sort of ambiguity in usage was precisely what the slideshow was attempting to address, and said she worried that the Arabic team was missing the point.

Layla: It's meta, it's a complicated thing. Bear with me. The point is that people like you, the Arab writer, Arab society, and English people exposed to the language ... are trying to say this word has too many weird usages, and it's often incorrectly used, or it's prone to being abused or misused ...

Here, Layla assigned Jamil an Arab identity, as an Arab writer and member of Arab society, showing that the mutable identities of Al Khaleet staff could be harnessed in much the same ways that the imagined audience could be. As she struggled to formulate her thoughts, Layla shifted back to her concept for the slideshow but attempted to walk back some of its didactic tone.

Layla: ... so that's why we're raising them as words. We're not saying, we're not advocating that they can only be used in this way or that way. We couldn't, we don't have space in the caption to really define how to use that word. We're actually then making it easier on ourselves and saying 'let's, let's kill the word.' I know that's, a, that's too simplified ...

Citing the hard limit of characters in each image caption, enforced by the online publishing system, she argued that she and the English editors who produced the original hadn't had the technical capacity to write what they *really* thought. Nor had they had the time, as she argued in her next appeal. The slideshow was difficult and confusing, and she had missed its deadline because it was so hard to put together. Trying to reassure the Arabic team that she thought at least some of their concerns were valid, Layla said that her own Jordanian friends were curious why she had included *hāmil*, which the English

team had illustrated with a picture of a crowd in a nightclub. Jamil responded by saying that it would be too difficult to retain the meta-meaning of the slideshow in translation. Rewriting it would mean completely recasting the context to make the meaning clear.

Jamil: Like the word *yahūdī*. If you, if you want to say to an Arab person that you stop saying *yahūdī* for a conky [?] person or something, he would not like this. The word -

Layla: But Arabs sometimes need to hear what they're not going to like, as does -

Unknown: Yeah.

Jamil: Yeah!

Layla: - the world. And that's been ok when, in the, how did the, how did they get rid of victor-, *yani*, this is something we said in our introduction it's not just for Arabs, like we said that, every culture has to address their language at some points –

To support her point, Layla again returned to ideas of bounded, monolithic cultures that become agentive entities of their own. That is to say, it is not individuals who must 'address their language' but cultures, collectively. This is another example of the way in which Al Khaleet's bilingual organization of English-team and Arabic-team reinforced its institutional outlook on its split audiences, even as it was structured by those audiences' linguistic realities. In other words, the very real linguistic divide between the audiences was equated with irreconcilable cultural differences between those audiences (cf. Stankiewicz 2017). But staffers on both teams were more prone to assign monolithic characteristics to the Arab audience than the English audience, despite the

diversity of national origin and lived experience present among the Arabic speakers on staff. These assigned characteristics were even more striking in the context of the "bad words" slideshow. Many of the objections raised against the piece as a whole, and against some of the individual slides, were that the usages were highly regionalized. Most of the terms are only encountered in spoken Arabic, which Jordanians call *'amiyya*³⁴. Almost all of what Al Khaleet and other Arabic-language media organizations publish is in *fushā*, or Modern Standard Arabic, the official and literary language of newspapers, parliaments, formal education and documentation. *Fushā* is more or less intelligible to educated Arabic speakers regardless of their national origin, whereas *'amiyya* varies widely between countries and regions. For example, the most common word in Amman for "wife" is *zauja*, while in the south, people use *mart*. Ammani women and some men are likely to pronounce the letter *qaf* as *'af*, making a light glottal stop of sorts in place of a 'k' or 'q' sound. Rural Jordanians (and some Ammani men affecting Bedouin masculinity) pronounce it as *gof*, making a hard 'g' sound. *'Amiyya* is thus heavily loaded with considerations of social class, gender, urbanism, and nationalism. Unpacking Jordanian *'amiyya* would require a dissertation in and of itself, but suffice to say that it varies widely within the country, and is highly politicized. Now magnify these differences across the entire Arabic-speaking world that Al Khaleet claimed as its coverage area, and the scale of the problem becomes clearer.

Many of the Arabic team's initial stated objections to the slides were based in what they felt were overly local usages that wouldn't be relevant or comprehensible to

³⁴ From a root meaning "public" or "common."

wider audiences in Egypt or the Gulf countries. Others were rooted in what they felt were inaccurate interpretations on the part of the English-team authors, though there had been debate and disagreement within the Arabic team on both sets of objections. The term about which there was the least internal disagreement – but the most concern – among the Arabic team was the word *yahūdī*. That was the one entry about which the owner, through Layla, was being most adamant. He routinely emphasized that he wanted the site to be provocative and spark debate on social issues from a liberal perspective, and calling for a reconsideration of *yahūdī* certainly fit that agenda.

Again positioning Jamil as an Arab representing Arab culture, Layla then said that he might even want to position the slideshow in opposition to "the West." Then she offered that the Arabic team may want to appear that they were organically suggesting that they and their fellow Arabs needed to approach their language usage more critically.

Layla: As an ambassador for your own language and culture you'd want to sound more empowered, maybe, and so you'd want to say um, we Arabs need to look closely at, we Arabs are suggest-, like we suggest, we suggest, ah, how would we want to put this word, *bil 'arabi, hella*, what could you say the title, we sa-, *bidna* ...

The discussion continued for several more minutes, in which the staff struggled with these considerations. Jamil argued that using "taxi driver" as an insult for someone uncouth or ill-mannered had fallen out of favor, while others responded that they heard it in common usage. After more discussion, Jamil again agreed that the Arabic team would translate the piece, but that they wanted to have the freedom to change it and make it

more broadly accessible to the Arabic audience. They were worried, he said, that not everyone would understand what they were trying to say.

In response, another English-team staffer argued that not all of the Arabic audience would understand it no matter what they did, just as not all of the English audience would understand a given article. Layla then joined in again.

Layla: The Arab world is so, is so diverse –

...

Layla: – and the thing is that we mentioned in the introduction, Levant. I did that deliberately because I knew that I may be talking for *bilād al-shām*, guys, you can do what I said, which is I said somewhere *bilād, bilād al-shām* ...

Here Layla revealed one of the internal inconsistencies that Al Khaleet frequently struggled against. Where she had earlier argued in favor of the slideshow on the grounds that pan-Arab culture must address its language, here she argued that the Arab world is so diverse that the piece cannot be changed in order to make it intelligible to the entire imagined audience. Referring to *bilād al-shām*, a traditional term for the northern Levant, she said that she had specified in her introduction that the piece was directed at that region. (Though in fact that element is missing from the published English version of the slideshow.) The Arabic team's objections were overruled, first on the grounds that the piece must speak to all Arabs, and later on the grounds that it cannot be expected to.

This points to the fundamental disconnect between Al Khaleet's stated mission and its organizational structure. The site's mandate is to cover the entire Middle East, publishing every story of regional relevance, as well as more local stories with quirky or

bizarre angles. As Stankiewicz (2011, 168-9) notes, such claims to regionality or globality from cultural producers demand scrutiny, as "such labelings and discourse elide the ideological webbing that still hang together the national and global or transnational and international", and understanding the ways that producers invoke these categories is essential to understanding how they produce the "global" or "regional" through mediation. In Al Khaleet's case, we must further consider its position as a content aggregator, making it even more removed from the individual subjects through which it represents the region. Except for events happening in Amman, and to a lesser degree in the rest of Jordan and in its neighbors with which they had direct experience, the staff made decisions not based on their own direct observations of events and conversations, but based on their observations and interpretations of other reporters' direct or indirect observations, often many degrees removed from facts on the ground. Their only access to "the street" was through social media, which, to its credit, Al Khaleet was mining more and more. In their study of pan-Arab news organizations, Ayish and Mellor (2015) argue that Arab journalists were using social media to crowdsource ideas for talk shows, drive traffic to media platforms, share links with audience members on material their organizations are not directly addressing, and to comment on events. The authors remark that pan-Arab news organizations are not fully utilizing the news-gathering potential of social media, suggesting that Al Khaleet may be at the forefront relative to its competitors. At Al Khaleet, Jamil (who was a member of the news staff, not the social media team) spent much of his time trawling Facebook in Arabic, feeding material to both English and Arabic teams, and allowing them to break news that had not yet been

published in English or to flesh out meager reports from content partners. Al Khaleet was becoming a content aggregator not just of news published by professional journalists, but of observations gathered from Twitter and Facebook, further blurring the lines between observation and commentary and reporting and aggregating.

At this point, nearly an hour in, the meeting began to devolve into numerous separate conversations in both English and Arabic, and these interludes became more frequent. After some more back-and-forth about the mechanics of translating the slideshow, the discussion did not conclude so much as break down. The practical upshot was that the Arabic team agreed to translate the slideshow, but were allowed to change some of the items, adjusting the images and captions as they saw fit. Layla said, repeatedly, that they must include *yahūdī*, and that the owner wanted the slideshow to retain a provocative edge.

In light of the discussion and disagreement surrounding the slideshow, the Arabic team's final published version is revealing. Their *yahūdī* slide – the last slide in both language versions – is captioned as follows: "Normally mixed up between Judaism as a religion and Zionism, which was behind the whole crisis of the Palestinians, of killing and expulsion, but still we remain cursing the Jews, while many of the of Jews stand with Palestinians, and these Jews call for a differentiation between Judaism and Zionism."³⁵

The Arabic team's caption focuses on the political aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, drawing a sharp distinction between Judaism and Zionism, and

³⁵ In my translations from Arabic, I have opted for a more literal approach that preserves some of the stylistic qualities of the original, at the expense of a more idiomatic English rendition. My deficiencies as a translator should not reflect on the original authors and their prose.

lauding Jews who do the same. In contrast, the English team's caption focuses much more on the perceived racial/cultural insinuations of the language use, arguing that Arabs use the term as a synonym for dishonesty, stinginess, and greed. While the Arabic caption is focused on post-1948 usage, the English caption references a term "pre-dating Israel" and a "medieval" quality to contemporary Arab usage of the word *yahūdī*, positioning Arabic speakers as anachronistic and backwards.

The Arabic version omits the slide for *hāmīl* (loser), but retains *raqāsa* (slut/dancer) and *sā'ik taxi*, two of the other entries the Arabic team had found problematic. Instead of *hāmīl* they included a slide referencing *ṣ'ādī*, *homsī* and *ṭafīlī*. That caption read, "All of these names are for residents of cities found in Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and this derivation is used in all the jokes that talk about idiots and stupid people. And this phenomenon spread to the extent that some books have been published to fight the phenomenon."

Both sides' *raqāsa* slide was illustrated with a pair of images, one of a busty Arab belly dancer in a constrictive, bejeweled bikini top, the other of a thin ballerina of indeterminate ethnicity in a modernist ballet costume. But in their captions, the teams chose to highlight very different elements of the juxtaposition. The Arabic team's *raqāsa* slide focuses on the Arab world's increasing cosmopolitanism, mentioning that the word persists in usage despite the "spread of institutes that teach classy Latin dances in some Arab countries." The English team's *raqāsa* slide, on the other hand, again plays on a temporal disconnect between the Arab world and Europe, referencing how "actress" had been a euphemism for prostitute in the early 20th century. The underlying message of the

Arabic caption is one of increasing connection to the Western world. The English caption implies that the Arab-speaking world remains 90-plus years behind Europe. Similarly, the English slide for *ibn harām* [bastard] suggests that it needs to be changed to something "more fitting for the 21st Century."

The English slideshow introduction – a roughly 400-word setup that sits below the scrolling images on each slideshow page – also continues this temporal theme, arguing that in 2014, it's time for certain usage to be eradicated. Attempting to soften their tone, the authors argued that other cultures had made changes in their linguistic usage, and that the problem was not unique to Arabic. However, by focusing on the temporal aspects, and by choosing examples that have already been critically addressed instead of the many problematic phrasings that persist in colloquial English, they inadvertently undermined their efforts to not make Arabic-speakers appear backwards, as Layla had cautioned against in the writing phase.

In contrast, the Arabic team's introduction takes a somewhat different angle. It first laments the degradation of the Arabic language from its implied Qur'anic ideal, linking it to "the ethical degradation that we reached, on top of all of this our ignorance of each other and other people," tired tropes of decadence and decline common to Arabic op-ed pages and sermons. The example it gives is "as when we don't succeed in differentiating between Judaism as a religion and Zionism as an occupying movement."

The Arabic introduction then turns to a brief acknowledgement of divisions within Arab societies, and ends with a call for unity. "Enough for our countries from what they have in division and breakages. The beginning of development will start with a

word; that is why we must start filtering our Arabic of these hateful words." This plea comes in the context of the ongoing violence of the Syrian civil war, which had directly affected at least one member of the Arabic team, and which was evoking anger, sadness and depression among other Jordanians. Its message of unity is in contrast to the underlying expression of "isn't it about time"-ness of the English version.

In many ways, the "bad words" slideshow was an anomaly at Al Khaleet. Most of the company's slideshow content was less explicitly polemical, and very little of it took such an overtly opinionated tone. Further, few of the slideshows in English were translated to Arabic, and vice versa. Typically the owner and executive editor gave the Arabic team a great deal of autonomy – in the period of my research, this is the only time I was aware of them dictating coverage so forcefully and specifically. But in spite of its anomaly – or perhaps because of it – it reveals some of Al Khaleet's underlying tensions, and the different assumptions and strategies employed by the journalists on its coverage teams.

Pierre Bourdieu's articulation of taste offers a useful framework for analyzing how the "bad words" slideshow translation debate unfolded. Bourdieu does not mean taste in the common-sense meaning of personal preference, but as an element of *habitus*, "the primary forms of classification ... [that] function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will." In other words, taste is one of the systems for classification that people use to organize and make sense of a complex world, a way of knowing in advance – or as Bourdieu puts it, "practical anticipation" – the meanings and results of actions, things, and messages

(1984, 466-467). The English and Arabic teams formed distinct social groups. While each had internal distinctions of gender, background, religion, social class, etc., the individuals within each team had more in common with any given teammate than any given member of the other team, with these differences being structured in large part by language and education, and most crucially by belonging and not-belonging to the mutually exclusive categories of "Jordanian" and "expatriate." As I argue above, in the absence of other data on who constitutes the audience, the journalists wrote for themselves, or, more precisely, other members of the broader social categories of which they formed a part. Their reactions to it, both pro and con, were thus based not on an objectivist understanding of their audience, but on their own subconscious understandings, their habitus. As Bourdieu writes, understanding knowledge of the social world involves "conferring on this knowledge a genuinely constitutive power," and that "knowledge of the social world, is an act of construction implementing schemes of thought and expression." This knowledge of the social world does not merely describe the social world, but helps to *produce* the social world through its descriptions and classifications (1984, 467).

What happened with the bad words slideshow represents a collision of these factors. We see two communities of practice in the English and Arabic teams, each with their own understandings of the social world based on their own systems of internalized schema (Bourdieu 1984, 467). Each language portal of the site represents a separate omnibus publication; their staffs have a solid handle on the parameters of acceptability for their respective audiences (by virtue of the fact that their audiences represent the same

social categories from which their cultural production derives, and which it in turn helps structure). But they do not have the same internalized understandings of the *other* team's social world. Complicating this dynamic even further was the owner's desire that the site be provocative and edgy, and run counter to what he saw as a conservative bent in the region's news media. At the same time, Al Khaleet could not be *too* provocative, as it was a business that relied on the goodwill of audiences, advertisers, and authorities to stay in operation. The staff found itself in a situation where an appropriate amount of provocation for one team was far too much for another.

The "bad words" slideshow thus says a great deal about the limits of translation. Even the brute facticity on which the opinion piece was based – do Arabs use the words, and how? – was called into question alongside its politics. The English side and Arabic side, though under the same institutional roof, produced content for substantially different audiences. More importantly, the two sides' understandings of those audiences, deriving from an inherently limited knowledge of audience interest, and filtered through their own cultural expectations, produced conflicting demands.

The technological and institutional realities of content aggregation also made the piece especially challenging. With a mandate to cover an entire region, but a staff located in just one city, the journalists had to try to make the piece applicable to a very diverse set of linguistic actors using data drawn only from their and their peers' language practices. Other news organizations might perhaps have solicited reader input through an online survey or tool, but such forms of reader engagement or crowdsourcing simply weren't on Al Khaleet's radar. Secondly, with roughly 150 slideshows to generate per

team per year, the already busy staff had limited time to do research. Finally, the hard character limit in the slideshow captions left the journalists trying to fit the nuances of their argument into 340-character texts. Such materialities are what Hutchby (2001) refers to as *affordances*, the qualities that structure the uses and meanings of technologies. The affordances of technologies are not immediately obvious, nor are they finite, as they emerge from interactions between actors and artifacts, and are layered with social structures (Hutchby 2001; Lievrouw 2014).

All of these constraints – cultural, institutional, and technological – helped shape the knowledge that journalists were producing at Al Khaleet. Returning to my opening question, if state censorship also shapes the knowledge that journalists produce, is there a substantive difference between that and the way culture – or *habitus* – operates? From the perspective of journalists themselves, there certainly is, and it is rooted in their agency as social actors and observers, a theme I take up again in my next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

THE PILOT

I initially conceived of this project as a study about censorship; how it worked, who practiced it, who was affected by it, and what sort of knowledge it produced. As a former journalist working in a notionally "free" press environment, I was most interested in what it was like to produce journalism under Jordan's censorial regime. (The short answer, I soon learned, was that it's not that different in the day-to-day, and that makes for an unsatisfying dissertation.) I have long believed, however, that every journalist works within a framework of constraints that structure her decision-making and that no press system is truly "free." My previous chapter addressed the cultural constraints at work in Jordan, and in this chapter I take up the country's obviously political constraints – which we might reasonably call "censorship."

But through the writing process, I came to realize that this project isn't really *about* censorship. Censorship is merely an expression of the broader theoretical issue: How do media workers and the state interact, and how do those interactions affect the cultural production (in this case, the "news") that's available for citizens to consume? "Censorship" itself isn't even the best term, at least not for Jordan. It too narrowly denotes the set of dominating (and resisting) practices at work there. I prefer the phrase 'media control' (Boyer 2003) precisely for its vagueness – under its umbrella we can include censorship, self-censorship, co-option, regulation, and takeover, all strategies the Jordanian state has used and continues to employ in its relationships with the press.

Further, Jordanians are perhaps more likely to use the word *saytara* when discussing the state of the press, which translates better to "control" or "dominance" than *raqāba*, which carries a stricter meaning of censorship.

That said, censorship (understood as a practice within a framework of broader media control) remains a particularly useful framework for studying media-state interactions. Its study reveals "basic problems in the grounding of political and cultural authority in mass-mediated societies" (Mazzarella 2013, 2) Censorship represents a background against which we can project and compare other practices of domination. By contrasting with this background, I hope to show that Jordan's practices of media control represent a broader shift in relationships between state and citizen – one that is less "traditionally" family- and clan-oriented, and more individuated, subjective, and neoliberal in its discipline.

As I shall explain in this chapter, censorship in Jordan bears little resemblance to our common-sense ideas of a petty bureaucrat with a red pencil crossing through lines of text. A variety of actors, sometimes with conflicting goals, from the security services, military, palace, information ministry, and other government institutions, all have interactions with the press that on their face match Western common-sense notions of censorship and contribute to Jordan's broader environment of media control. Other social actors, from tribal leaders to journalists' own extended families, further complicate the question of who or what "the censor" is. And following Boyer's (2003) analysis, censorship in Jordan has long been a *productive* force as much as a *suppressive* one. The state works to promote certain narratives, push particular stories, and shape the news

along friendly lines. There are definitely certain types of stories or pieces of information that the state works to suppress entirely. But even those suppressive efforts by the government create other forms of knowledge – such as the knowledge that media messages are incomplete truths.

The threat of state violence looms in the background for Jordanian journalists, represented at its extreme by the anti-terrorism courts. Prison is the state's ultimate disciplinary measure, and a very real threat. Through intimidation, coercion, or (as some allege) bribery, the actors that govern Jordanian politics engender self-censorship in the country's journalists. Self-censorships are *functionally* no different from any other editing process. Along with professional ethics, institutional codes of conduct, audience feedback, competitive pressures, and taste, they form part of the matrix of considerations that Jordanian journalists employ as they decide what to report, and the language and images that they use. What is different from other considerations, however, are the *effects* of these censorships on the individual journalists who alternatively reject, embrace, and embody them. Further, these censorships provide insight into the changing relationships of power in Jordanian society, its increasing individuation and mass mediation, and the sources and legitimations of state authority.

That Jordanian journalists practice self-censorship is not really in dispute. They say so themselves – more than 80% of respondents to an annual survey acknowledge that they censor themselves (CDFJ 2012). The broader point, though, is that journalists everywhere practice self-censorship or engage in other publishing decisions that are functionally the same, that come to privilege certain narratives over others to avoid some

sort of negative consequence. What makes Jordan so interesting is a question almost of affect, in the ways that journalists recode their self-censorships, aligning themselves with ideals such as national unity and public order, and social norms of politeness and propriety, especially when it comes to religion. Below I describe an incident in which a publishing decision that an editor initially described as an effort to avoid a government intervention became recoded as realigning the story with the site's journalistic principles and its audience's expectations of taste, demonstrating that cultural constraint and state authority are inextricably intertwined, and that any study of censorship must also incorporate an understanding of cultural norms.

Sue Curry Jansen argues that that histories of Enlightenment thought claim that the West has abolished its censors, thereby divorcing power and knowledge. As such, the word censorship has become a term to describe the evil, the reactionary, and above all the foreign. She argues that instead of abolishing the censor, Western thought merely shifted it from a church-state institution to the censorship of the market, and that knowledge remains inextricably bound to power. Jansen further argues that understandings of the term in liberal societies discourage investigation of censorships' most subtle and enduring forms – she uses the phrase "most serious" – which are censorships in the name of national security, and censorship through the profit principle. Liberalism, she argues, has merely "forced censors underground," concealing them in the mechanisms of the corporate state, in tools that determine what is likely to be profitable. "And most of the time the products that survive the prior censorship of marketing research ... incorporate

ideology and values that celebrate the corporate state and [vilify] its critics" (1991: 14-17).

In the Jordanian case, both the national security and profit principle expressions of censorship are operating, though my focus here tends less to the censorship of the market and more to that of the security state. In the few cases when the state publicly restricts the publication of information, it is almost invariably in the name of national security³⁶. To that end, the conflicts on Jordan's borders since 2011, and attacks within the kingdom in 2016, have emboldened and enabled the state's censorial regime. Jordanians seemingly have become more willing to accept restrictions on civil liberties in the name of security, much as U.S. citizens have done in the "War on Terror" era.

Certainly, not all Jordanian journalists oppose the state's efforts at media control. Several told me that Jordan needed state control in the media sector, if not actual censorship, echoing the voices in Mazzarella's study that supported censorship on protective, patriarchal grounds. But those sources said so in very guarded terms that revealed they knew those opinions would be unpopular among their peers, and were at odds with the ideology of objectivist independence gaining ground in the press.

Further, in a context of information overload, media control may not only be productive, but downright beneficial. One of the most difficult problems in contemporary news production and content aggregation is deciding what to publish among the hundreds of facts and articles crossing the screen. Any means to reduce the number of decisions to be made must in some sense be welcome, even if it runs counter to professional ethics

³⁶ Such as a gag order in June 2016 that banned coverage of an attack on an intelligence services office to "protect the secrecy of the investigation" (Malkawi 2016).

and ideologies. Censorship, which eliminates entire areas of reporting from consideration in relatively unambiguous terms, is such a means. Media control certainly presents other choices – whether and how to resist – but in the day-to-day grind of reporting and producing, overt censorship may make some things clearer.

Complicating the question of who censors what, we must note that not all censorships derive from the state. Two examples from the U.S. context might be a group of parents pressuring local schools to ban a book, or a church telling its members to avoid Harry Potter novels. In Jordan, as elsewhere, businesses can influence coverage by buying or withholding advertisements, and one journalist told me that their life had been threatened over an article. Journalists' own family members can also pressure them to avoid controversial articles on topics seen to be taboo, impolite, or indelicate – a form of pressure that is more acute for women journalists. Reporters must also consider the possibility of confrontations with the kinfolk of individuals or families receiving negative media attention.

In an extreme case of violence against a journalist in Jordan, in 2016 a Christian Jordanian writer named Nahed Hattar was slain outside an Amman courthouse as he entered for a trial on charges of insulting religion³⁷. His family said that he had been denied police protection, and blamed the government for emboldening his attacker (Narwani 2016), complicating the question of whether his death was an act of state or

³⁷ Hattar had shared a cartoon on his Facebook page that depicted a Daesh fighter with two women who was asking God to bring him wine. He had added that he felt that this was Daesh's god, not Islam's. When a Muslim Brotherhood publication circulated the post, they removed the images, much of the language, and Hattar's caveat (Narwani 2016).

non-state violence. Both the initial court case and the subsequent murder became the subjects of government gag orders on both social and mass media.

While not every form of censorship derives directly from state power, it is certainly safe to say that every censorship references some form of power. And as they all reference power, censorships also operate through a number of different modes of power. The most obvious is the brute, Hobbesian power by which a state might enact laws proscribing certain expressions and punish offenders, or a religious authority might use its influence to formally discourage consumption of material. Historically, such proscriptions have sometimes been accompanied by a performative, public entertainment – a bonfire of the vanities, Nazi book burnings, etc. Such events operate similarly to Foucault's descriptions of the spectacular qualities of public torture and execution in *Discipline and Punish* (1995). Other, subtler forms of censorship operate through more discrete, distributed, Foucauldian forms of power in which producers come to internalize censorships, and shape their work to avoid an official gaze. Such forms of (self-) censorship, at their most sophisticated, become indistinguishable from cultural norms.

In Jordan, these extremes are represented by the prison on the Hobbesian hand, and professionalism on the Foucauldian. Provoking the state will attract the attention of the powerful *mukhābarāt*³⁸ secret police, who maintain an extensive network of surveillance and informers. Transgressors might "get a call" or "be asked in for tea," a euphemistic order to come to a security office for an intimidation session that, as in nearly all social interactions in Jordan, also includes a cup of hot, sugary tea. Continued

³⁸ The word *mukhābarāt* derives from the root *kh-b-r*, which happens to be the same root for the Arabic word for news, *akhbār*.

provocation might result in an arrest or, worse, prosecution in one of Jordan's feared military anti-terrorism courts where the government is assured of a conviction. Such incidents become very public warnings to other media producers of the consequences of angering the state.

On the more Foucauldian side of the power equation, Jordan also disciplines its media in a less conscious, less directed fashion through an ideology of professionalism. Through a variety of initiatives, including a government-sponsored media training institute using a U.S.-derived curriculum, Jordan has been trying to professionalize its media along Western lines of balanced objectivism (Bishara 2012), with codes of ethics and systems of accountability, even as distributed digital production technologies and new (social) media production practices are already forcing journalists to confront new concepts of professionalism. While King Abdullah once famously said that the "sky is the limit" when it comes to press freedom, his regime consistently emphasizes that the news media must also be responsible. I shall return to these issues, but for now, I argue that "professionalism" and "responsibility" in Jordan, at least in part, means being able to censor oneself appropriately – that is, professionalism represents the ability to stay within the boundaries of both societal decorum and governmental limits. "Professional" reporting in Jordan also means sticking to a fact-based, objectivist style and eschewing rumor. I argue that encouraging such a style serves the interests of the regime and the broader establishment, as its functionaries can more easily govern what is reported through selective statements, withholding documents, and simple stonewalling, practices that leave "rumor" as the only source of information – and an easily dismissible one.

Much as censorships operate through a number of modes of power, they similarly operate through a number of practices and discourses that disguise censorial projects. One such is taste. Below I discuss an incident at Al Khaleet in which a decision about publishing graphic imagery became recoded from a concern about provoking the government to a concern about disturbing readers' sensibilities. Other ideologies that can do the work of censorship include objectivism and, as Boyer notes, academic professionalization and peer review that codes some research as valuable and contributory while rejecting other work (2003).

To recap, then, censorship (or more properly, censorships) vary within and between times and places. Historical censorships are different from contemporary ones. Just as importantly, historical understandings of censorships' various values, pitfalls, and mechanisms have also been quite different from our contemporary, Western understandings. Censorships do not solely restrict information; to consider them only in this way is to fail to acknowledge that censorships contribute to discourses and knowledges in the same way as other decision-making schema like editing, style, taste, and fashion. Lastly, censorships are not teleological – they do not somehow "progress" from brute power to disguised power. There is no reason to think that Jordan's media control will continue along the same lines, or that it will somehow emerge into a more "enlightened" state (Burt 1993, Jansen 1991, Boyer 2003, Bourdieu 1984).

The two most provocative anthropological investigations of censorship in recent years are Dominic Boyer's 2003 essay "Censorship as a Vocation," and William Mazzarella's 2013 *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*. The fact

that they deal with two very different forms of censorship, in the very different contexts of news production in East Germany and film production in contemporary India, is our first clue that censorships can take very different forms and derive from very different political motivations. The centerpiece of Boyer's argument is that censorships should be considered as productive intellectual practices, that, like other intellectual productions, contribute to public knowledge. The academic system of peer review, he suggests, incorporates the same socializations, legitimations, and cultivations of standards as more obviously censorial projects.

Boyer argues that East Germany's censorial practitioners saw their work as a vocation, and treated their activities as contributions to the overall welfare of the people. Journalists were expected to be (and by and large they were) independently committed to the party's ideological program of socialist cultural production, a program of actualizing and rationalizing collective consciousness to achieve Marxist-Leninist ideals. Only properly directed party mediation, in the logic of the elites, could offer the proper context and references for the Volk (2003).

Censorship in Indian cinema, as we might expect, is quite different. Films there are censored through a board established by the democratically elected government, whose constitution allows it to establish "reasonable restrictions" on the constitutional guarantee to free speech. Mazzarella argues that the media producers and censors in his study share a perception that the masses need protection from their own naiveté, immaturity and irrationality – what we might call their lack of modernity. Yet, at the same time, censorship operates in a discursive loop in which the suppression of ideas has

kept the audience vulnerable and unsophisticated, and thus in need of protection from themselves through more censorship. Further, censorship operates in a constant liminal state, "a moment between the vanished stability of tradition and a future state of sociomoral order that always lies just beyond the horizon" (2013, 28). Censorship in this mode thus has teleological attributes, a sense that censorship is shepherding society from backwardness to progress – or, in the mind of its critics, hindering that progress (2013, 78).

Mazzarella argues that in mass-mediated societies, censorship arises from a tension between an imagined face-to-face community and an acknowledgement of its impossibility, from which stems a sense that "traditional" mechanisms of regulating relationships between the provocative, sensuous message and its social meaning are extinct. Yet, in the absence of those mechanisms, the censor itself has no grounds for its decisions, a crucial disjuncture which constantly undermines the censorial project. Mazzarella is adamant, though, that we not treat censorship as a purely cynical or parochially moralistic exercise. To do so is to discount the potentiality within the relationships between media and audience. Film censorship is only the most visible iteration of a "public cultural dialectic of containment and excess," itself a product of structural tremors brought about by what he terms the "open edge" of mass publicity, the quality of anonymity stemming from the fact that public communication addresses oneself at the same time that it addresses unknown others who are also members of the same public (2013, 21, 37, 40, 221).

Both Boyer's and Mazzarella's studies offer some parallels to the Jordanian case. As with contemporary Jordan, East Germany had no official censors, and its constitution guaranteed a free press until 1968 (Boyer 2003). In fact, Boyer notes, acknowledging the existence of censorship would have undermined the party's claim as the legitimate expression of popular will. And as in Jordan, East German journalists worked under the threat of state violence (though such incidents in East Germany became more rare, while in Jordan they seem to be increasing). Postcolonial Jordan's emphasis that the news media must become more "responsible" as they become less restricted parallels the censorial logic in India that the country was not yet ready for liberal film production.

But both authors' case studies differ sharply from Jordan in the areas of intentionality and legitimation. In Boyer's case study, media control in East Germany was purposeful, intentional, and centralized, and executed through the dissemination of the party line. He argues that the entire party-state apparatus was "focused on public cultural production as the means to the actualization of *Volk* consciousness." Media taboos about bratwurst kiosks or pictures of fruit were not arbitrary impositions on creativity, but reasoned, orchestrated moves to purify public knowledge and engender a collective creativity. Though East German media control could be haphazard and contradictory, and editors still needed to carefully parse their production for deviations from the party line, they still had the party line as a reference, and many retained belief in the ideals of socialist cultural production (Boyer 2003, 526). Jordan's media control in 2015 was far less orchestrated, institutionalized, and intentional. Journalists had a palpable sense that

they were being watched, and that the media were being controlled, but it was never exactly clear by whom, or to what end. The "palace line" did not provide the same reference – deviation was an expected part of the performance of democracy, but only within limits left undefined.

So as the case study below shows, one of the toughest problems for journalists in Jordan is that they often cannot divine what the state wants. There is also a sense among many journalists that different elements of the regime (the palace, the security services, parliamentarians, the business elites, etc.) at times want different things, or are uncertain what they want. The "palace line" is distributed through the official Petra news agency, and the dailies *al-Ra'i* and *The Jordan Times* serve as official mouthpieces, but Jordan's media control is more about enforcing the boundaries of public debate and engendering self-censorship than it is about directing public consciousness along a particular ideological track. Jordan very much wants political debate within a politely idealized Habermasian (1974) public sphere, but it does not want that debate to extend to the role of the king, the primacy of the military and intelligence services, the status of Palestinians, fundamentalist Islamicist views, or any of the most crucial questions of politics and identity facing the country.

While the East German government "displayed a well-developed and centralized ideology of language and culture that provided the motivating logic for all of its media-control practices," no such centralized ideology exists in Jordan beyond maintaining a national narrative of stability (Tobin 2012). In fact, Jordan's journalists are operating in a contradictory space, in which Western journalistic ideals of objectivity, independence,

and public service are lauded but unattainable. Though East German journalists were never able to actualize the dream of *Volk* public culture, at least their ideals were aligned with the ideology underlying the state's media control.

Jordan's media control differs sharply from Mazzarella's study in its efforts at legitimation. Indian film censorship is administered openly, by a group of industry professionals whose names and positions are known. It has a stated rationale, the legitimacy of which has been openly and widely called into question. Mazzarella presents it as hypocritical, but by no means cynical. Jordan, I argue, makes no attempt to publicly legitimate its media control, but rather tries to minimize the visibility of its expressions by engendering self-censorship. The regime routinely subverts constitutional guarantees for journalists, and scapegoats elements of the press that do not toe the line.

But more importantly, the underlying logic of Jordanian media control is very different from that of Indian film censorship. In Jordan, it is not a class of (supposed) culturally unsophisticated citizens who need to be protected from themselves, though one occasionally hears that rhetoric from media professionals. In truth, it is the state that must be protected from its (supposed) politically unsophisticated citizens in order to preserve stability and maintain the status quo. In that sense, Jordanian media control lacks the teleological bent of Indian film censors' shepherding ideology, as well as the sought-after realization of Marxist-Leninist public consciousness in East Germany. It is not ideology, but *realpolitik*.

In late 2015, Jordan's most prominent offline news media consisted of Jordan TV, the Roya television channel, and the newspapers *al-Ra'i*, *ad-Dustour*, *al-Ghad*, and *The*

Jordan Times. Of those, the government directly or indirectly owned controlling stakes in all except *Roya* and *al-Ghad*, which were notionally independent. However, the realities of starting, licensing, and operating a large media corporation in Jordan meant that the ownership of both *Roya* and *al-Ghad* were by necessity ideologically aligned with the regime. They had little more motivation or ability to report critically about the state than their more overtly controlled brethren.

Of course, Jordanians have access to many more news sources, including a host of pan-Arab satellite stations like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, and other nationally oriented satellite stations from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and so forth. Many more Jordanians consume their news through satellite than print, with newspapers largely absent from most people's lives. The vast majority of these satellite channels originate outside of Jordan, and lie beyond the regime's media control. And then there are the websites. Jordan is home to a great number, but there are hundreds (if not thousands) of Arabic-language news websites originating from Europe and elsewhere in the Middle East.

This prompts a question: With so many uncontrolled media outlets available to its citizens, why does Jordan continue to work to shape narratives among its homegrown media? There is no single answer, but I offer a few suggestions. First, most of the news *about* Jordan continues to originate within the kingdom's borders, and is produced by Jordan-based outlets. Second, all media are produced within national borders somewhere, and much of the available Arabic-language news media originates from states aligned with Jordan, each with their own strategies of media control. That is to say, the interests of all of the region's autocratic regimes are best served through maintaining a docile news

media. Zayani argues that in Arab society, censorship stems from "a feeling, common among many Arabs, that information is dangerous and has to be monitored or controlled" (2004, 24). Such an assertion about an entire diverse region seems overly broad (to put it mildly), and such a feeling is by no means unique to "Arab society," but his statement is a useful reminder that such feelings exist.

Third, particularly for the large commercial satellite stations, their news is produced under rubrics of professionalism – documentable facts presented in objectivist language, alongside ideologies of accountability. I argue that this style of professional, "objective" news is particularly susceptible to state manipulation, in part because its professional practitioners need to maintain favor with and access to elite newsmakers. A fourth possibility, though an unsatisfying contribution to academic theory, is that Jordan continues to exert control over the institutionalized news media because it always has. It can continue do so with relatively little effort, while censoring individual expression or consumption would require Chinese or Iranian levels of monitoring and investment.

However, I believe the main reason Jordan expends so much effort in controlling its media is due to its position as an autocratic security state with an economy utterly reliant on foreign aid. Jordan's economy and environment are fundamentally unsustainable in the face of its population growth and refugee concerns, a problem I will pick up again in Chapter 4. With no natural resources to speak of, Jordan depends on remittances, foreign loans, and military aid. The refugee crisis and collapse of the tourist economy in the wake of the Syrian civil war and internal terror attacks has only heightened this reliance. Exceptional circumstances, Mazzarella (2013) argues, are what

make censorship necessary from the censor's point-of-view. Jordan is no stranger to conflict, but Jordanians certainly felt that 2014-2015 was an exceptional time. The wars in Syria and Iraq, Egypt's cycle of revolution and counter-revolution, and yet another massive refugee influx were just the most recent and most visible stressors on a small, postcolonial developing nation with a burgeoning population and no natural resources or water. "Demographically," a friend told me, "Jordan is fucked."

The regime is thus under intense pressure, both internal and external. I argue that it is trying to stave off change any way it can, and sees a tight grip on the media as central to propagating a public discourse in which reform must always be delayed. But at the same time, Jordan must also remain a palatable ally to its foreign donors. To that end, Jordan's media control is part of the script for a performance of democracy, in which the regime assumes many of the trappings of the liberal democratic state while ceding no authority to its elected bodies and abrogating the constitutional rights of its citizens (Yom 2009, 2013). In this performance, the regime allows individuals to question the state and describe its shortcomings on social media, while preventing its media institutions from legitimating those critiques in "professional" print and broadcast. Further, Jordan's media control allows the state to frame the public debate of its neopatriarchal petit-bourgeois intelligentsia (Sharabi 1988) on op-ed pages and talk shows, while largely ignoring the social-media arena in which much of Jordan's political discourse actually plays out.

The transition from more centralized media production to more distributed media production seems to be heightening the imperative to control the media. Christopher Kelty suggests that concepts of freedom and new information technologies have long

been discursively linked, and that as such, communication technologies are inherently political. "A notable feature of this constant association is that *new information technologies are seen as a cause both of freedom and of control and coercion* (2014, 198, italics in original)." Boyer (2013) argues that concepts of journalistic authority have been unsettled in the rebalancing of radial and lateral production models, his terms for what I call institutional production and distributed (digital) production³⁹. I argue that in Jordan, where for the last 30-plus years state authority and media authority have been intertwined, that any unbalancing or rebalancing of journalistic authority threatens to unbalance state authority. The 2012 Press & Publications Law amendment, which forced web sites to hire an editor professionalized at one of the established state-aligned media outlets, is a clear attempt to solidify that journalistic authority in the wake of the Arab Spring, which showed that authoritarian Arab states are more susceptible to rapid destabilization than previously thought.

As a part of the Jordanian state's performance of democracy, the existence of news censorship is itself concealed in the kingdom, where the constitution notionally guarantees a free press. "The censor" does not exist – no single institution governs state interactions with the news media, and only one – the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology – does so openly. The thorny question of who "the censor" is in Jordan has become even more problematic as media production has become more distributed. In the late 1990's, for example, the state had to deal with a much smaller set of media producers, each with a physical office and landline telephones. News production happened far more slowly as well, giving the state hours (if not days) in which to insert

³⁹ Excluding media such as cassette tapes, newsletters, "zines" and other small-scale distribution.

stories, disallow headlines, or otherwise intervene. In 2015, hundreds of news website producers, not to mention social media users and bloggers, propagated news in a matter of minutes from their laptops and mobile phones. As I hope to show in this chapter and the next, Jordan has had to shift its censoring tactics in response to distributed digital news production. Whereas in the past it could rely on professional newspaper editors and publishers (who were often patronage appointees) to act as gatekeepers, it now relies more on instilling self-censorship among the country's widespread, diverse pool of professional and non-professional media producers.

One element of this new set of tactics is an emphasis on responsibility and professionalism. In the Jordanian context, censorship has a clear relationship to professionalism, or perhaps more properly, a set of relationships. In its proclamations on the state of the press over the last 10-15 years, the Royal Court consistently uses "responsible" and "professional" when articulating its vision of what Jordan's "free" press should look like. For example, in a 2012 news release, the court wrote that "His Majesty King Abdullah on Wednesday attended the launch of the Media Strategy's implementation plan, which the government said is aimed at fostering a 'balanced, professional and responsible media sector' that represents all views in society" (Media & Communication Directorate, 2012). In the same release, then-Prime Minister Fayez Tarawneh was described as positioning freedom and responsibility as two points on an axis. "The strategy, which was endorsed by the government in June last year, aims to create an environment that supports an independent and well informed media based on a

suitable legislative basis to achieve balance between freedom and responsibility, [Tarawneh] said."

The royal court also ties professionalism firmly to concepts of modernity, objectivity, credibility, and balance, traits that I argue stem from a form of cultural imperialism propagated through the colonial and neocolonial projects. Hisham Sharabi (1988, 82) argues that Western educational and philanthropic foundations "substantially strengthened Western educational structures and the use of English as the language of scientific communication, as well as the privileged place assigned to empirical social science and American modes of thinking and doing." And what more American a mode of thinking and doing than objectivist journalism, even as its basic assumptions look shakier and shakier in the field of contemporary political mediation?

In a 2002 release, Jordan's British-educated king was quoted as saying, "we have determined the basic pillars to establish a modern state media that encourages pluralism, freedom of speech and respect of various views ... and helps reflect the conscience of Jordanians with full credibility and objectivity." Similarly, in a 2008 release about journalism training, the government-controlled journalists' union, the Jordan Press Association, "issued a statement commending King Abdullah's continuous support for the journalism profession and his call for the media's participation in national decision-making through presenting objective and impartial facts to citizens" (Media and Communication Directorate 2002, 2008).

In my structured interviews with journalists and media observers, I asked a two-part question: What do you think the government means when it says the media have to be responsible and more professional, and what do those concepts mean to you?

One of my sources told me a story about an article she'd written on Jordan's relationship with a neighboring country, which is dangerous ground in a country dependent on foreign aid. One of her sources in the government sharply criticized her when they next spoke. For her source, concerned with international relations, "professionalism means not to say anything about our relation with another country." For other figures in power, being responsible meant not questioning their particular interests, disrupting the status quo, or criticizing decisions. The upshot, she said, was that the meaning of "professionalism" was highly contextual.

Another former journalist argued that for the state, a "responsible," media meant a servile media. "They are using this word ... to put more restrictions on the media." He believes in the concept of professionalism, he said, but not the state's calls for "responsibility." He gave an example of a hypothetical story about unsafe water. He would publish it, he said, whereas the government would argue that doing so would jeopardize public order and the people's faith in public services, and hence be irresponsible.

Almost without exception, the journalists working in Jordan whom I interviewed for this project disagreed with the regime's pronouncements that the country has a free media (many were quick to add, however, that they don't believe *any* country has a truly "free" media). Most said that they rarely experienced active, prior-to-publication

editorial censorship from an agent of the state. Industry old-timers say that mode of oversight was common in earlier decades, but has since faded. Several veterans of the main state-aligned newspapers told me that in the old days, the security services or other officials would send headlines or entire articles to be run verbatim. One industry veteran reporting hearing that the government had once installed someone to check headlines prior to publication at the English-language *Jordan Times*, but that such days were long past.

"For us," said a longtime editor, "censorship is not something that we feel. We have the Press & Publications Law, that could be pretty muzzling depending on who wants to take it [literally] and take you to court for whatever, insulting a friendly country for example, which you cannot do, [insult] the leader of a friendly country. But it doesn't prevent us from being critical, in a nice way, of America? Of, you know."

And in the days of social media, that editor argued, the mainstream media could no longer afford to hide news at the government's behest without losing credibility. But, the editor added in the same breath, the government-controlled newspapers had to approach stories in roundabout ways. And self-censorship was routine. "Unless you are really out to be sensational, to step on some toes, to make rumors into facts, which happens pretty often, you have some sense of self-preservation."

Journalists at more independent outlets voiced similar thoughts on self-censorship, usually by using the phrase "red lines." Exact understandings varied, but Jordanian journalists articulated the red lines as: any criticism of the king and royal family; any unauthorized reporting on the army, security services, and threats to national security; any coverage seen as threatening the sanctity of Islam, stirring up secular

tensions, or espousing versions of Islam other than Jordan's official moderate, apolitical brand; and any story that "insults" a foreign leader or allied country. The reasons for the first three are self-evident. The fourth needs some explanation – the one that Jordanian journalists offered to me was that the country's dependence on foreign aid and trade agreements, especially with the Gulf countries, made it and its partners especially sensitive to perceived negative attention in the press.

Most of my Jordanian-born sources had difficulty explaining to me how exactly how they knew whether a given story would cross the red lines, suggesting that such knowledge is a product of deep acculturation in Jordanian society. It suggests equally that the red lines are somewhat shifting and mutable – pink lines, if you will. However, as an incident at Al Khaleet demonstrated, foreigners working in Jordan's press are likely to have a much looser grasp of what may constitute a transgression, due to their being less clued in to broader discursive trends, or less able to read the government's official and semi-official pronouncements in Arabic.

Further acculturation to media red-lines likely takes place in Jordan's university journalism programs and media training institutions. It certainly takes place through on-the-job training. A former editor told me, "I've worked with young journalists before ... They just don't arrive to the [profession] with built-in self-censorship ... but it gets installed. An arriving young journalist would learn it by doing," within the culture of a news organization. "If you are sort of an emerging journalist, or a new arriving journalist to the newsroom, you would sort of like put together a story or a draft on a certain issue. So you take it to the managing editor. They throw it away, so they don't tell you, why did

they do that? So you do it another time ... and you keep thinking that something is wrong, you know, with your approach, with your skills."

One young journalist described one of her early brushes against the pink lines somewhat similarly. She was covering a political event, she said, when one of the speakers began criticizing the king. "I went to the office and I was like, can I write about the king? And I wrote what [the event speaker] said. ... But I wasn't sure I can publish it because I knew from before that the king is a red line, we can't write about it, about him. And the editor corrected me, and he said 'We cannot publish this,' and the whole story was canceled."

Occasionally some journalists will deliberately test their editors' boundaries, as one told me regarding his pitch of a series of articles. He described it as a litmus test, to see more clearly where the boundaries lay. "Even as a reader I know what [news media] normally write, and what they normally don't cover. So for instance if you want to objectively write about Black September⁴⁰, it's out of the question. I don't know who's going to publish that in Jordan, maybe some opposition portal or site based in EU or outside of the Arab world will open that debate."

Without prior, active censorship, the Jordanian regime enforces its "red lines" by engendering self-censorship among media institutions and the journalists who staff them. Occasional arrests and prosecutions create substantial levels of fear and apprehension. Such incidents are widely publicized, and followed closely by other journalists. In 2015, Bani Rushaid, a deputy leader of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, was imprisoned for

⁴⁰ The bloodiest point in Jordan's "civil war" between the Hashemite regime and the PLO, which at the time was based in Jordan and a powerful force within the country.

having "insulted" the UAE in a Facebook post. The Brotherhood and other Islamist political movements have long been targets of the Jordanian intelligence services, but the incident points to the ways in which social media have expanded the security panopticon (Foucault 1995). In Jordan it is no longer the taxi driver who informs for the secret police that one must fear, but the algorithm that sifts through social media posts. In a 2016 news article, the AP reported that hundreds of Jordanians have been jailed by terrorism courts for their social media posts as the regime attempts to thwart Daesh recruitment (Laub 2016). After Nahed Hattar's assassination, an article in *The Jordan Times* said that "[the security services] warned that its Electronic Crime Division will continue to monitor social media and will detain anyone who posts statements that do 'not fit our culture, tradition, values and religious fabric'" (Husseini 2016).

In another incident that was watched closely at Al Khaleet, a pair of editors at online outlet Saraya News were arrested for reporting on prisoner-exchange negotiations between Jordan and Daesh in an article that the state portrayed as threatening national security. Even journalists at state-controlled newspapers are not immune to such arrests – in July of 2015 an *al-Ra'i* reporter named Ghazi Mrayat was jailed for a story about an alleged Iranian agent caught in Jordan with quantities of explosives. The government accused him of violating a gag order about the case. His editor, Tareq Momani, was quoted in the sister-paper *Jordan Times* as saying: "We did not receive any official letter that the ban is into effect. It was simply news that was circulated. When there is a gag order not to publish, we usually get an official letter from the authorities in charge" (Ghazal 2015).

Two things jump out about this last incident. The first is the ambiguity over what is being censored – Momani said that his paper received no official notice, and only heard talk that was circulating. I suggest that while this vagueness is not exactly a conscious or deliberate strategy on the part of the regime, such opacity serves its purposes quite well, creating higher levels of self-censorship and second-guessing than a simple statement that certain reporting is banned. Further, reducing its official pronouncements allows the state to distance itself from its censorial practices (though, it must be said, official gag orders pop up from time to time). The second and more curious aspect of the Mrayat arrest is how his offending story got to press at all. Senior newspaper editors and experienced journalists at the state-controlled and -aligned newspapers have a good sense of what can and can't be published. One possible explanation – I was not able to speak with anyone directly involved – is that the unwritten rules are rapidly changing. Over the period of my research from June 2013 to October 2015, nearly all of the industry insiders and observers with whom I spoke said that Jordan was experiencing a period of increasing media restriction. This period of restriction followed a honeymoon period after Jordan's "Arab Spring," and coincided with a dramatic increase in social media usage, smartphone and internet affordability, and the number of news websites operating in the country.

It's impossible to pinpoint the exact moment when the pendulum swung back towards increasing restriction, but I suggest that the passage of the Press & Publication Law amendment in 2012 represents a turning point. Such shifts have occurred several times in Jordan's history. The country's levels of press liberality and restriction have ebbed and flowed in a way that defies teleological notions of constant progress from

oppression to freedom. One longtime industry insider said that the most important factor in Jordanian press freedom was the individual outlook of whoever was serving as minister of information. The real explanation may not be quite so simple, but the appointment of a more progressive or conservative minister points to the broader political atmosphere, and the security apparatus' perceived levels of threat to the status quo. Other journalists and media observers suggested that, at least on a micro level, inconsistencies in press oversight were best explained by the fact that the government itself didn't know what it wanted – an explanation that both encapsulates Jordanian cynicism about the workings of the state, and points to the impossibility of treating its complex, entangled bureaucracy and security services as a monolithic entity.⁴¹

All of these uncertainties over state media control intersect with other instabilities in media production, making Jordan a fascinating and challenging place to produce news. New shifts in digital production, smaller staffs, media plurality, professionalization, compressed time, and the discourse of responsibility all combine with the state's media control and the country's cultural constraints to create a climate of uncertainty. In the ethnographic data below, I show how Al Khaleet, a mid-size digital producer with a professional staff, confronted a particularly sensitive story with security implications in a very short time span, and how the trepidation surrounding Jordan's vague, obfuscated apparatus of media control engendered self-censorship, a strategy that itself became

⁴¹ In truth, "the state" consists of multiple entities, institutions, and personalities, whose goals often align, but at other times diverge. The palace, the military, and the security services are pre-eminent, but beneath that level, a host of entities compete for attention and resources in a complex hierarchy. Interagency rivalries exist between the military and civilian intelligence bureaus, rivalries that sometimes find expression in the national media as one seeks to exploit the failures of the other (Yom 2017, personal communication).

recoded as an effort to make the site's content more professional and appropriately tasteful.

The Pilot

The tension had been building for weeks, ever since Jordanian Air Force pilot Muath Kasasbeh went down on a mission over Daesh territory. Images of him in his captors' hands soon emerged, and Jordan was gripped with apprehension over what would happen. Daesh was already notorious for torturing and beheading captives, and my friends and colleagues worried what they might do to a soldier of an Arab government fighting against them alongside Western allies. But few – certainly none of us in the Al Khaleet newsroom – could have predicted the horrible outcome.

Kasasbeh's aircraft went down on Dec. 24, and Al Khaleet covered the incident by picking up a piece of partner content from *The Jordan Times*, the country's English-language daily and a mouthpiece for the government. Media coverage died back in subsequent days, but then spiked sharply as a Daesh deadline for a prisoner swap neared. It peaked again as a captive Japanese journalist included in the negotiations was beheaded.

In the days before the Daesh deadline, Jordanians rallied in Amman and its suburbs, giving Al Khaleet staff a rare opportunity to report first-hand on major international news. We were on high alert for breaking stories, especially after a major screw-up that had happened about a week earlier. Al Khaleet's English team had missed the death of King Abdullah of Saudi, though the Arabic team had caught it and reported it

in the early hours of a Friday morning. The poor communication between the two sides had bitten us again, and the boss was upset.

In the aftermath, the English team held internal meetings to discuss what had happened, and the entire staff developed a new protocol for reaching colleagues on both sides of the newsroom. We also discussed what sorts of stories rated immediate coverage at any hour of the day or night, with the deaths of Middle Eastern monarchs or sitting presidents at the top of the list. The linchpin to the emergency protocol was our new thread on WhatsApp that included the entire news staff.

On the night of Jan. 29, I was covering a night shift as we waited for news on the pilot and the potential prisoner swap. My phone was buzzing almost constantly with chatter on the WhatsApp thread, much of it related to the pilot, some of it not. After 23 texts in nine minutes, I had to ask the other users to restrict their messages to breaking news with citable sources, things that I could actually use to craft stories that fit Al Khaleet's criteria for facticity. In addition to my work email and trawling the web for news, the inflow was just too much to handle. I was working on several other stories that night, including a bombing in Iraq with many fatalities, a rocket attack in the Sinai, and a total revamp of the Saudi cabinet. There was no news on the pilot, until Jamil, the "bridge" between the Arabic and English teams, sent a text that a Daesh magazine's Twitter account had posted that "the pilot has most probably been slaughtered." This was major news – or it would have been, but for Jamil's three texts a minute later.

Salma: Dabiq is a TV channel

Jamil: No

Jamil: It's a magazin [sic] of daesh

Jamil: But we can't [post] referring to it
Jamil: That will put us behind bars.

This is one of the few instances during my fieldwork where government control was clearly felt and explicitly discussed. Jamil believed that any reference to Daesh's publication, or any information sourced to it, would have led to severe legal repercussions for Al Khaleet and its editors. And he had good reason for thinking so. In the preceding month authorities had banned news outlets from republishing Daesh statements regarding the prisoner negotiations. And earlier that same day, various news outlets reported that Jordanian authorities had arrested the two chief editors of the prominent online outlet Saraya News and closed the site. The pair were accused of "aiding terrorism" for reporting on Jordan's negotiations with Daesh to exchange Kasasbeh and Japanese journalist Kenji Goto for the captured female terrorist known as Sajida.⁴² They had written, seemingly erroneously, that Sajida had been taken to Iraq and freed (AFP 2015, CPJ 2015).

With grim newsroom humor we joked that we could report rumors under our bosses' bylines in order to have them arrested and get them out of the way. But the overall environment of trepidation and ambiguity was anything but funny.

A few days later, news broke in the evening of Feb. 3 that Daesh had released a video showing Kasasbeh being burned alive. Lily was the only staffer working that evening. A relatively new hire with no prior journalism experience, I worried that she would quickly be snowed under by a story that would make veteran journalists call for

⁴² Sajida al Rishawi, an Iraqi woman, was convicted of a role in the 2005 Amman hotel bombings that killed 60. Jordanian authorities hanged her the day after Kasasbeh was murdered, having recently reversed a 2006 moratorium on the death penalty.

backup. Since I was home and had a reasonable internet connection, I volunteered to step in and help manage ancillary content while she focused on keeping the main story fresh.

The night was a total whirlwind of communication. Lily and I were inundated with news from third-party sources, but we found little content that we could cut-and-paste from our English-language partners so late in the evening. My phone continued to buzz with WhatsApp messages and texts from colleagues – between 6:22 p.m. and 12:51 a.m. I received about 360 WhatsApp messages on the Al Khaleet breaking news group alone. That was in addition to private texts and iMessages from my friends both in Jordan and the U.S. who needed to commune electronically and share their shock and sadness at the indescribable video. With both work and personal messages coming to my phone, it was impossible to separate one from the other and concentrate on publishing news. Once again, the journalistic ideal of detached, balanced objectivity was being challenged by inhumane, barbarous acts, but as a professional working on "news" (as opposed to "opinion") at an objectivist news outlet, I could not write what I really felt.

Lily and I stepped on each other's toes quite a bit over the course of the evening, because of the limitations of the content management system. We avoided any serious problems, like losing a substantial edit, but found communication extremely challenging until we switched to the chat function in a Google document. At the time the Al Khaleet site and publishing system seemed to be slowing down and functioning poorly, which we attributed to high traffic.⁴³

⁴³ Data later confirmed that we'd had a huge spike in site visits that evening. A "celebrity reactions" piece that entertainment writer Salma put up did particularly well.

A slowdown in the 3G mobile internet connections we all used when not in the office further complicated our efforts. Internet speeds in Amman were sluggish at the best of times, and we surmised that most of the country was indoors, checking the news on their phones and tablets, watching the Daesh execution video, and communicating with their friends and family at home and overseas. Amman's city streets, always noisy and bustling until well past midnight, were disturbingly quiet.

As the story evolved that evening, we struggled with what to do with pictures of the burning man. Initially Lily and I decided not to use them, instead running a portrait of Kasasbeh in uniform that had been circulating for some time. We then heard from Layla that the owner wanted us to display an image of the burning man in the most prominent position on the homepage; we complied. He later reversed himself and wanted it moved, but he made that decision after the picture had been up for some time. Ultimately we tagged the content with a warning about the disturbing nature of the imagery, and positioned the image behind a hyperlink so that readers who wanted to see it still could.

Layla, the executive editor, told me on the phone later that night: "Our big error was having it up on the homepage for any time tonight." She said that she had agreed with our initial decision not to publish the picture, or at least not so prominently, and that the owner had reversed himself too late. "That puts us in danger with Jordan, and we don't want to get on Daesh's radar. For a variety of reasons," she said.

It turned out, though, that we already were on Daesh's radar. Our social media editors told us as we were working that night that Daesh outlets had responded to their "RIP Muath" tweet, tweeted them some more links, and messaged the video to one of

their personal accounts. This caused some consternation among the staff – we felt a duty to report the news, but we had no interest in helping Daesh disseminate its vile messages. We were also concerned that the Jordanian government would take notice and restrict our ability to publish. Finally, several members of the staff expressed concern for our physical security and worried about an attack on our offices. In Jordan's security climate at the time, such a possibility seemed unlikely, but not totally unreasonable. Layla and Salma met it with a certain grim humor about the ability of Ahmed, our middle-aged tea-and-coffee messenger, to stave off a terrorist assault. Before we all signed off for the evening, we talked briefly about how to handle the news the next day, the instructions from the top calling for full coverage on all of the site's channels.

At the office the next day, we had a stand-up meeting to discuss what had gone well, what hadn't, and some technical and stylistic points. Most of the conversation revolved around whether we should continue to use the transliterated Arabic acronym "Daesh" in headlines, following the regional Arabic media, or switch back to the terms "ISIS" or "Islamic State" that were more familiar to English-speaking audiences. But Layla then turned to the image we had published the night before, and her feeling that we'd narrowly avoided a harsh governmental response. She recapped what had happened for the staff who hadn't been working, and made it clear that Lily hadn't wanted to use the image of the burning pilot. But Lily – and Layla herself – had been overruled by the owner. Layla said that she should have stuck with her initial gut feeling to not run the imagery, and that we shouldn't post any of it in future. "Um, but, ... two reasons to be concerned about airing, showing the, even the stills, was just that Jordan government was

getting funny about things. So I thought [the boss] might be nervous about that, and he was initially, but today he's saying, 'Well I thought I'd get a call today maybe, and since I haven't, I'm confident again.'"

On the weekend following Kasasbeh's death, we had another scare related to publishing Daesh execution imagery. The weekend shift reporter put up a story about Daesh burning Iraqi prisoners, and illustrated it with an image of the execution sourced to the terrorist group. As soon as she saw it, Layla sent a text to the WhatsApp group.

9:04AM, Feb 7 - Layla: Guys can somebody please change image on site of Daesh burning 3 Iraqis today. The image used is banned!

9:10AM, Feb 7 - Layla: Can we please add Samantha to this group please? So much for all being on!

The next Sunday, when we were all back in the office, I asked Layla how we were supposed to have known that the image had been banned from publication. She offered several somewhat contradictory explanations, first saying that the staff had "heard rumors all along on the grapevine" about such photos and videos being banned by the Jordanian government, and that the staffer who had posted it had simply forgotten. A moment later she said that while the senior management had heard a rumor about a ban on Daesh imagery, they hadn't issued any guidelines to the English side staff. "We should," she added.

Such uncertainty and vague talk, sometimes glossed as "rumor," over seemingly black-and-white issues like publication bans was not uncommon in Jordan, as in the example of *al-Ra'i* reporter Ghazi Mrayat above. I believe it stems in part from selective law enforcement. Many regulations (and not just in media) are only sporadically and

selectively enforced, and knowledge that laws have been or could be enforced finds expression in hearsay. Second, the uncertainty thus instilled helps create self-doubt and self-censorship. There are sometimes court orders sent via email to media organizations by the Media Commission (Human Rights Watch, 2016), but they certainly do not cover all the topics that can get a journalist in trouble with the authorities. Further, Al Khaleet existed in a bizarre regulatory space, a news organization operating in Jordan but not classified by the media authorities as "Jordanian" in its focus, and I never heard of anyone on the staff receiving a notice from the Media Commission.

Over on the Arabic team, it was a different story. I asked Jamil, the "bridge" between Arabic and English, how we were supposed to have known. He replied that a government minister had announced it on Twitter. He and a colleague looked for the announcement, and eventually found it on a pair of news web sites in Arabic.

In a similar vein, I asked Jamil about his WhatsApp message from the 29th of January, when he wrote that we could wind up in jail if we posted references to Daesh media. How were we supposed to know, I asked? He said it had to do with the case of the two Saraya editors who were arrested amid the prisoner swap negotiations. Before that it hadn't been an issue, he said, and he'd passed reports sourced to Daesh over to the English side. But after the Saraya arrests, he had started waiting for the same information to be sourceable to other media outlets. I then asked if he'd heard anything else about the Saraya case, and if there had been any other news about it.

“Nothing,” he said, making with a downward "quashing" gesture with his palm. “Nothing will happen. They'll be fined some cash. The government wants to organize the media, so they put two guys behind bars, and the others will pay attention.”

The difference between Layla's and Jamil's takes on the government's stance on publishing Daesh imagery is striking. I asked both the same question – how were we supposed to know? Layla – who was by no means out of touch – could only attribute the ban to rumor. Jamil and his colleagues on the Arabic team pulled up a published news report about an official ban within a couple of minutes on Google, information that, again, had failed to transmit from one side of the newsroom to another.

When Layla quoted the boss as saying that he was newly confident after not hearing from the security services, she illuminated how the more direct aspects of media control actually function in Jordan. In this environment, the mechanics of control take place not between institutions such as the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (formerly known as the Ministry of Information) and newspapers or websites, but between individuals behind the scenes. As with most interactions in Jordan, it is the personal, private contacts and negotiations in which social capital is spent and extracted that govern institutional responses. As Hisham Sharabi describes in *Neopatriarchy*, such modes of interaction are common in the post-colonial Arab world. Neopatriarchy is a direct result of the "modern" European colonization of Arab societies. "Modernity," in Sharabi's articulation, refers to an external influence on internal development, arresting its autonomy and distorting it to "underdevelopment" - modernization itself is disabling within its context of dependency. Most crucially,

neopatriarchy involves "*the absence equally of genuine traditionalism and of authentic modernity*" (1988, 23, italics in original). In other words, it disrupts "traditional" allegiances without replacing them with the functional institutions implied by the modernity the state claims. The workings of the bureaucracy is tied to patronage and kinship, making it essentially patriarchal, and displacing legality (1988, 46, 131). In the neopatriarchal state, the most functional institution is the *mukhābarāt*, which "dominates everyday life, serving as the ultimate regulator of civil and political existence" (1988, 7). That is certainly the case in Jordan. Neopatriarchy, in Sharabi's articulation, produces heteronomous⁴⁴ individuals within the patriarchal family. In the neopatriarchal state, those subjects are dependent on patronage, the influence and protection of powerful individuals who both subvert and supersede the rights and consequences of the legal systems and bureaucracies. "Neopatriarchal patronage, as it displaces legality and renders public institutions superfluous, takes away the individual's claim to autonomous right" (1988, 46). Jordan's regime of media control takes on many of the characteristics of the neopatriarchal state. It bears some of the trappings of the modern liberal capitalist state, but not the supposed impersonal rationality based on the rule of law. Much of the way Jordan's media control actually functions is based on personal relationships and individual status, with warnings and blessings given behind closed doors.

A few months after the death of the pilot, I sat down with Layla for an interview. I was particularly interested in her memories of the weeks surrounding the pilot incident, and the company's concern about attracting government attention. My questions were

⁴⁴ subject to external authority

about censorship, but she quickly shifted the parameters of our discussion. The real issue, she said, was one of taste and sensitivity.

Since the Arab Spring, Layla said, the site had been feeling less censored than ever.

"However, I must note that when the Jordan pilot was burned we were very much aware that we could ... register ... on the local radar if we were to post the wrong images. And ... we wouldn't have wanted to be posting things in poor taste anyway so it was almost, it was almost a good reminder that we'd, we'd hear about it if we did. So, that was when we were made to be aware ... that we were being watched."

For Layla, the origin of that awareness of surveillance was itself somewhat ambiguous. The local staff, she said, were talking about laws they were hearing about for the local Jordanian press. And the CEO had contacted her with a reminder not to publish the fire images. When the story first broke, she said, the site had posted them because the staff felt that they were an integral part of the story, and that covering the spectacle of the Daesh video was to cover Kasasbeh's death itself. The decision to take them down was a course-correction, a return of the site to its stylistic guidelines "for running English news in English, for more like, [a] Western audience," Layla said, suggesting that Western audiences would be less likely to want to see the images than Arab audiences.

That question of audience, she acknowledged, has always been a difficult one, with the site never entirely sure whom it's writing for (see Chapter 2). Layla described Al Khaleet as operating in a grey area between Jordan and the rest of its Arab-world coverage area, and between English and Arabic audiences. "So it was another time,

another juncture that flagged up some of the complexities of how we ran and what we were doing."

At first, Layla said, the CEO wanted to pick up the story and fully run with it. Then, she thought, he was reminded by a Jordanian contact that the site needed to follow Jordanian press regulations, in this case about not reporting on military and security matters. But those regulations, she added, weren't keeping up with the pace of the story, and the state's own desires were evolving as the reactions unfolded. Layla initially felt that Jordan probably *wanted* people to be seeing the images to galvanize public opinion against Daesh. Further complicating the question of whether or not to publish was the social media angle. It seemed that everyone in the country had already seen the videos and pictures. So did that mean that the site did or did not need to run them? Layla described the choice as one between taking part in the initial Jordanian mood of outrage and sadness, or "responsible" agenda-setting in the public sphere.

At the same time, we were grappling with the emergence of Daesh as another censorial regime, both suppressive and productive. If we particularly angered them, we worried, they could conceivably attack our offices. Daesh clearly wanted the video and imagery to circulate, or they would not have released it. But how could we determine their goals, and then frame and contextualize the images in a way that did not further them? The affect of the news was colliding with our objectivism once again, revealing its logical limit. Furthermore, in a world of tweets, links, cut-and-paste, and other decontextualizing technologies, how could we maintain control over our presentation of the content, and ensure that our audience's reading matched our intended reading? An

age-old problem in mediation, to be sure, but one that seemed particularly important when trying to mediate a truly horrific act in a conflict between a terrorist group and an authoritarian security state. (And not just any authoritarian security state, but one that most of us truly loved and called home.)

When the pilot story first broke, Layla said, it took some time for the people working on the story, and for her and the CEO, to fully process what had happened and to come to grips with its emotional weight. Though Layla typically disclaims any Jordanian identity for herself, she has lived in Amman for many years and has many Jordanian/Palestinian relatives and friends. For her and for others on the news team, the locality of the story amplified its horror and import. Because the site likes to think of itself as regional and runs comparatively little "hard news" coverage of Jordan, a major Jordan-centric story caught it off guard. Dealing with the possibility of state censorship became part of the equation as the site's identity shifted in the middle of the night.

"We were suddenly all Jordan at that moment and, ah, you know dipping back into how things are supposed to be done, with the Jordan, watched by Jordanian, ah, as you, maybe, *maybe* censorship."

Layla's statement that "we were suddenly all Jordan" can be read in two distinct ways. First, that for several days almost all labor at the site was devoted to Jordan's sudden moment of relevance, an intensity of "local" news coverage not seen since the height of Jordan's Arab Spring, or perhaps even since the 2005 hotel bombings. Second, that the site's and staff's Jordanian identity came to the fore, from the "RIP" sentiments tweeted by the social media team to the site's choice of op-eds and Layla's own published

commentary a week later, to the staff's individual expressions of national solidarity like wearing red-and-white *shmāgh* prints.

The second half of Layla's statement dovetails with both of those readings. As the site focused more on Jordan, however briefly, the staff became aware that they were standing on shifting sands. Reporting on a matter of great sensitivity so close to home caused them to consider their relationships to the state in different ways – as they and their coverage became more expressly Jordanian, they were pulled more centrally into the Jordanian media panopticon, again considering, as Layla put it, "how things are supposed to be done" when watched by Jordanian news consumers. Her equivocation in May on whether or not the site was being influenced by censorship is at odds with her statements from February, and these differences are informative. Reflecting months later, she had turned the problem into one of taste and style that reflected the primacy of professional knowledge and restored a degree of agency to the journalists. She separated the site's staff from the imagined, non-professional social media poster who reproduces without consideration for the audience's taste and expectations, as well as from the cowed journalist who fears censorship. She recoded the power of state censorship into the power of cultural, middle-class norms glossed as "good taste," – recoding one form of domination into another – but in this discourse the journalist appears to be the active, undominated agent with her own free will.

Layla's statement also shows the extent to which politeness and decorum – *not offending* – are central to the presentation of news in Jordan, even codified in regulatory language that prohibits "insulting" religions or allies. To an extent, media control and

taste have become conflated – the distasteful can be illegal, and the illegal is typically distasteful. Al Khaleet has certainly published highly sexualized and violent imagery in its reporting from other countries, especially on the English side, but when the news is of a Jordanian character, the site's Jordanian sensibilities are triggered. At first, the site's owner wanted to show the images as much as the Jordanian government wanted them to be seen, if we agree with Layla's suspicions. Later, as the censorial environment shifted to ban them, they became objects of poor taste (and particularly unfit for the English audience). While it is true that my assertion here lacks corroborative evidence (fortunately for Jordan I have little to compare it to), the only time Layla spoke to me about news with such emphasis on decorum was regarding Jordan's national tragedy.

Layla then took the conversation back to the question of taste and decorum. While she felt it was initially important that readers have access to the imagery on the site, she wanted it to be a matter of choice for the readership, indicative of a move away from what Boyer (2013) calls the Keynesian model of public-interest journalism to the digitally enabled neoliberal model of the hyper-individuated audience.

Layla: "But it wasn't the most, it wasn't the most poignant thing that I remember about it all but then that's probably because I didn't feel it was censorship that was, it was just about taste for me, it was more of a, it wasn't something that was if you're writing, it wasn't anything to do with the content or the wording of things, so I didn't feel restrained very much by that."

Me: "So, is it fair to say then that what the government said should happen also matched what Al Khaleet feels it should have been doing anyway?"

Layla: "That's probably a fair statement of, of it really. Yeah. I think, I think that's, that's fair to say. And I mean obviously they didn't want to fuel, fuel the wrong things as well, but for us it had us on our toes for, like,

ah, for putting out, you know, for running awful images that would cause distress in our readership as well."

By shifting the conversation to a question of propriety, Layla reclaimed expertise and switched to a discourse of journalistic agency. She assigned herself a proactive decision-making power based on her knowledge and experience of her readers' taste. She disclaimed the trepidation that the staff felt at the time, and the ambiguity of waiting to find out if we'd "get a call" from the *mukhābarāt*. Taste, decorum, politeness, whichever term we use, are all important considerations for journalists regardless of their media environment. Though the particulars will be structured according to local norms, and influenced by considerations of gender, age, social status, etc., all journalists and editors take taste into account on a daily basis. Here I use the term "taste" both in the common-sense meaning, but also in the Bourdieuan meaning of "taste" as a socially constructed category of judgment rooted in class. Debates over propriety occurred in every newsroom I ever worked in, the boundaries of those debates established by *habitus*, the class-based systems that structure the way we perceive and appreciate the world, and the practices through which they act – "taste" being one of the expressions and descriptions of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984, 170). It is probably fair to say, without overreaching, that determining propriety is as central to the journalistic endeavor as determining facticity; *The New York Times'* famous motto stands witness that it does not seek to print all news, only that which is fit for its audience's class-based tastes. Certainly codes of propriety vary from institution to institution, from the staid approach of the Gray Lady to the lurid sheets of its cross-town tabloid rivals. But here Bourdieu's sense of taste comes into play – *The*

New York Times orients its product towards an upper-middle class audience, and in turn it is read by aspirational members of the lower-middle class, while the sensationalist tabloids adopt an anti-intellectual tone and pitch to a working-class audience, as well as those who read them as performative slumming or covert guilty pleasure.

The internet may appear to be eroding the necessity or usefulness of such institutional codes, but scandal sheets have been part of the journalistic landscape for decades; even the most laissez-faire websites with journalistic pretensions such as the late Gawker remain selective in their presentations of sex and violence. Their method of secreting their most racy material behind a "NSFW" link both sketches the boundaries of their willingness to provoke, and accelerates what Boyer calls the neoliberal shift towards the individuated presentation of news, allowing the individuated reader to click, if she is at home, or skip, if she is at work. Such presentation-consumption, individuated as it may be, still requires agency and expertise on the part of the journalist, a knowledge of the material, their audience, and the sensibilities of their readers' corporate IT and HR departments. Mirroring what for news consumers is a shift from public-interest journalism to a neoliberal model of hyper-individuated choice (Boyer 2013), I suggest that Jordan is experiencing a similar dynamic for its news producers. In the past, its news production was situated within a centralized, bureaucratic model with a handful of outlets, ideologically aligned to the government and staffed with patronage appointees, and producing for an imagined national community (Anderson 1991). Much of that model remains, and remains relevant, but news production and consumption in the country have shifted irrevocably to a distributed model in which dozens of small websites

and social media platforms compete for the attention of the hyperindividuated, post-internet consumer-producer.

This change has coincided with changes in the way Jordan's censorship operates. When Jordan had its Ministry of Information governing a more centralized press, it had more defined bureaucratic relationships among the state, security services, and media. It was, to some extent, the *responsibility* of the government and government-media-institution leadership to coordinate on the tone, content, and character of disseminated information prior to publication. With the shift towards a distributed production model, liberal on its face, in which the lines between the individual social actor and the media producing institution are thoroughly blurred, the *responsibility* to ensure that content does not cross Jordan's shifting set of red lines now lies with the individuated producer – professional journalists, social media users, bloggers, and journalactivists. What were once institutional transgressions are now personal ones (though this is not to say that individual journalists were not persecuted in years past). Retaliation is exacted not by closing a newspaper, interfering with newsprint deliveries, or replacing board members, but by threatening to jail the individual journalist, blogger, or social-media user responsible for the transgression. As Jordan's media consumption has become increasingly individuated, so have its means of censorship and control been shifted to the individual journalist and engendered through self-censorship.

Through this process of engendering self-censorship, coupled with the decentralization of Jordan's mediasphere into a large number of small micro-news-gathering organizations and journalactivist sites, it has become the individual journalist's

responsibility to know where the lines are, and to stay within them. This shift towards a more individuated censorship mirrors the broader neoliberal shifts in Jordanian society towards an individuated, consumption-oriented, neopatriarchal society in which individual patronage relationships have assumed primacy over "traditional" tribal and familial relationships.

Self-censorship has long been a conscious strategy for journalists in Jordan (and elsewhere). In surveys, they have justified it in terms of national loyalty, national security, moral obligation, "self-esteem and good reputation," and religion (CDFJ 2012). But I suggest that there is a substantive difference between practicing and justifying self-censorship, and what Layla did regarding the pilot story, which was to *recode* self-censorship as something else entirely. That she did so as a matter of good taste is particularly telling, but it could conceivably have been along other lines, such as a question of objectivity, or facticity, calling the images' veracity into question. Self-censorship is an essential tactic for Jordanian journalists, and one that media producers everywhere practice. But it seems increasingly at odds with other trends in the Jordanian mediascape, especially the country's discourse of media freedom paired with responsibility, the broader neoliberal turn in society, and U.S.-derived notions of independence and freedom. I suspect that as that discourse gains ground, and assuming the broader neoliberal turn in society is not somehow reversed, we will see fewer journalists justifying conscious self-censorship, instead internalizing it more deeply and recoding it as other practices rooted in their habitus.

Epilogue:

A couple of weeks after the episode with the pilot (but before my formal interview with Layla) I sat with Jamil in the Al Khaleet newsroom. I wanted to ask him about the supposed ban on running imagery from Daesh, as we'd had some up on the website in recent days.

"Ah ..." he said knowingly. "If there is a decree, it must be written, and it must be in the official gazette. I checked, and there is no decree in the official gazette. When it first happened with the pilot, they said don't publish the images, for the family's feelings, and to not make things worse in Jordan. Then many outlets said the general attorney had decreed 'do not publish photos or video from Daesh.' But there is no decree."

But the existence of the decree had been published widely, I replied.

"Yeah, it was on state TV!" he answered.

"Yeah, they're keeping the knife behind their back," he continued. "If you publish them [the images] the way the government wants, they keep the knife back. If you publish against their interests, the knife will come out and they will say, 'Ah, you've violated the decree!'"

"So, they're keeping it in their back pocket?" I asked.

"Yes, that's the way things have always worked ... and as I predicted, everyone has forgotten about [Muath]. All the anger is gone. It is only his close friends in the military who will have revenge feelings."

I replied that my taxi driver that day had talked about Muath. Jamil asked how it had come up – what had been the context?

I said, well, actually, he'd started talking about 21 Egyptians who had been murdered in Libya the day before, and only then did he talk about Muath.

"That's how it always goes in Jordan," Jamil replied.

CHAPTER 4

RESISTANCE

From a classic Fourth Estate perspective, my preceding chapter painted a bleak picture of the state of press freedom in 2015 in Jordan. While I have no wish to reproduce that hegemonic, Western view of the function of the press – quite the opposite – such views were shared by many Jordanian journalists and journalactivists, particularly younger ones with North American university training and political perspectives. As my previous chapter showed, the Jordanian regime's programme of media control has swung towards increasing (self) censorship through a discursive and disciplinary emphasis on "responsibility." This shift mirrors Jordan's broader social trends of neoliberalization and consumerist individuation, as capitalism and reductions to formal and informal subsidies have diminished the primacy of old social orders.

Regardless of whether we position censorship as anathema to liberal democracy's supposed innate human freedoms, or see it as a productive practice of knowledge-making, Jordanian media workers, activists, and individuals from all spectra of society in 2015 were living in a panoptic security state. Journalists knew that unauthorized reporting on the military or security services could land them in a state security court, and ultimately prison. The stakes were very high for anyone expressing political opinions that lay outside the range permitted by the state – that is to say, anything that questioned the supremacy of the monarchy and security forces, or promoted fundamentalist strains of political Islam. Even "professional" investigative reporting that scraped at the veneer of

state institutions was perceived as a threat to government legitimacy. As one of my sources put it, "If you get a story right, and you report all the facts, at the end of the day, it still sits contrary to the narrative of the status quo. And if you agitate that narrative, I don't care how good your facts are, you're going to get screwed."

After the death of Muath Kasasbeh and a series of attacks on security forces and Western targets within the country, Jordanian authorities clamped down on civil liberties and freedom of expression. These retrenchments, punctuated by a few high-profile prosecutions and pronouncements, were not subtle. But as of mid-2016 they had gone without any major protest – and in fact had been welcomed by some Jordanians as necessary measures to promote national security. In some ways, the Syrian civil war and the subsequent rise of Daesh may have been the most legitimating event for Jordan's authoritarian regime in decades. It assured flows of foreign aid, highlighted Jordan's political stability and religious moderation in the region, and renewed its importance as an American military base. More importantly, it has demonstrated to its own citizens the worst-case scenario for political upheaval, and helped legitimate the regime's self-serving proposition that the country was not ready for political reforms and greater individual freedoms.

But despite the very real threat of repression, coupled with incentives to accept restrictions, there has long been a current of resistance to both state and societal restraints on media in Jordan. In this chapter I will examine several strategies for resistance that media producers and journal-activists employed, ranging from writing-between-the-lines

to more demonstrative, public forms of resistance like voluntary "blackouts" of websites to highlight restrictive legislation.

As I describe below, Jordanian journalists of all stripes engage in resistance to media control, both those at independent online outlets, and the larger state-aligned media institutions. However, the contexts for their modes of resistance are quite different (Yom 2017, personal communication). Journalists at major outlets who are members of the official journalists' union have different legal protections. They may also find themselves in more constant contact with agents of the state, be they ministry officials or intelligence officers. In some senses, they may have to make fewer guesses at the parameters of what can and cannot be published. At the same time, their proximity to channels of state power and their need to maintain source relationships influence the types and degrees of resistances available to them. Independent online journalists have fewer protections, but are not subject to the same sorts of institutional constraints as their state-aligned peers.

The word "resistance" conjures up images of sign-waving protests or even armed revolt, but from an anthropological perspective, and for the purposes of this chapter, it often means something quite different. Certainly some of the moments I discuss below involved organized, public protest, but a great many of them involved what James Scott (1985) called "everyday forms" of resistance. Scott, writing about rice-growing peasants in Malaysia, describes their "foot-dragging and evasion" in the face of a growing income disparity and subsequent social upheaval that resulted from new farming techniques and mechanization facilitated by the state. Resistance, in his definition, involves any act by a subordinate intended to thwart demands imposed on them by dominant classes, or to

advance their own position in relation to the dominant classes. The key is the concept of intent – some acts of resistance are not visible to those being resisted, and others backfire. But understood within the context of the larger goal of this sort of resistance, which is not to overthrow the system but to survive within it, such acts form larger patterns of intentional acts aimed at "thwart[ing] material and symbolic claims from dominant classes." Further, the fact that resistance is often self-interested does not negate its ideological nature. As Scott writes, "When a peasant hides part of his crop to avoid paying taxes, he is both filling his stomach and depriving the state of grain" (1985, 290, 295, 301).

Scott frames his analysis along lines of social class, and at first glance, such an approach doesn't seem to fit the Jordanian case. Many, though by no means all, of the media workers I interviewed came from elite backgrounds. The rest, it's safe to say, came from Jordan's middle class. While I've only ever met a handful of *mukhābarāt* that I knew were *mukhābarāt*, they were drawn from similar strata of society. Further, in Jordan, while social class in the Bourdieuan sense is an important structuring element, facets of identity such as tribe, patrilineage, and religion – all of which transcend class to some extent – often form the most important and immediate structures of social relations.

But if we turn slightly to Scott's other key concept – domination – the parallels to the Jordanian case become far more clear. The security services act with impunity in support of the regime, and in that regard media producers are completely dominated by their superordinates. If their transgressions are severe enough, and visible enough, their social position ceases to matter. It may in fact draw a harsher response, as members of

prominent, respected families are supposed to know better, and support the regime.

Further, Scott is careful to draw attention to symbolic contestation, acts that call into question the dominant meanings of terms, signs and categories. This is the battleground for politicized Jordanian media producers, as they strive to present alternative interpretations to the dominant narratives of state and society. And to some extent, some of them understand their resistance as such, evidenced by their focus on "writing between the lines" and putting uncontested symbols into play.

Understanding the modes of resistance to state control that media producers employ is an important element to any exploration of a mediascape. Unfortunately, resistance to state media control is the most obvious element missing from my fieldwork at Al Khaleet. That is not to say that no one there was engaging in resistance to state control, either consciously or unconsciously, but I found no clear-cut evidence for it during my months of fieldwork. The site at one point had been blocked for failing to license under the Press & Publications Law amendment, but successfully argued that the law did not apply because it was not an outlet for predominantly Jordanian news. The site had a conscious political ideology of scratching away at conservative mores, as I discuss in Chapter 1, but this led to a tone of social irreverence rather than a distinctly political subversion. Because such resistance was largely invisible at Al Khaleet, this chapter draws entirely on other sources, though my choices of interview subject and the questions I asked them were inevitably influenced by my fieldwork experiences. Most of these interviews were formal meetings with Jordanian-born journalists working at other online and print outlets. The rest were interviews with NGO employees, and former journalists

now working in other fields. To help preserve their anonymity I have kept many details of their work experience deliberately vague.

Because I did not conduct long-term fieldwork alongside these interview subjects, and my data are thus limited to their personal narratives, I have presented this chapter as a composite history of changes in Jordanian news media practice, regulation, and resistance to regulation, based on these interviews. It thus represents an unofficial, covert history. Like all histories it is incomplete, but what emerges from these narratives, is that there is a shared sense that state control should be resisted, and that news media should be a force for social change.

Dealing first with the more overt, orchestrated moments of resistance, I begin by examining the passage of the Press & Publications Law amendment in 2012, which I have already mentioned several times. It became a flashpoint for free-media advocates and online media producers, and its formulation and passage says a great deal about Jordanian *realpolitik*.

Jordan's Political Landscape

Conditions in the kingdom seem to have been building to crisis for some time. Demographically, the country has a high population growth rate, high unemployment rate, and few natural resources⁴⁵. It is the second-most "water poor" country in the world

⁴⁵ Such figures vary widely depending on who does the measurements, and how, but as an example, a 2016 news article said unemployment had reached 14.6 percent, the highest figure in eight years (Obeidat 2016b), while another said the country's population had grown by 87 percent over the last ten years, in large part due to refugee influxes (Obeidat 2016a).

(Namrouqa 2014) and coupled with its burgeoning population and inadequate conservation measures, Jordan's hydro-demographic situation appears fundamentally unsustainable.

So does its political-economic situation, at least in the long term. While Jordan compares favorably in many inequality measurements (UNDP 2015), privatization and structural adjustment have caused upheavals in Jordan's complex economic and patronage relationships between individual, family, and state. Privatization in particular has been a hot-button issue. Individuals from families once closely tied to the Hashemite regime express deep dissatisfaction with the sale of national concerns to private companies, wealthy Jordanians, and foreign investors. The term "corruption," which is a frequent allegation leveled at those in business and government, serves in some ways as a catch-all for cronyism and privatization, as well as more general feelings of being shut off from access to economic opportunity.

During the so-called "Arab Spring" revolutions, many Jordanians took to the streets of Amman demanding political change. However, unlike the revolutions in Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt, they did so without any significant call for an end to the Hashemite regime. Rather, they sought additional political representation and reforms to end corruption. In a skillfully balanced response, the government choreographed cordial relationships with the demonstrators, such as news images of police handing out bottled water.

However, as Sean Yom (2014) notes, the highly visible demonstrations in Amman calling for measured reform were not the only outbreaks of dissatisfaction that

King Abdullah faced. One such outbreak serves as a particularly salient example of the ways in which Jordan's socio-economic unsustainability has led to political instability. On the heels of the Arab Spring, a popular movement of East Bank tribal youth, which came to be known as the *hirak* movement, upended longstanding norms of political protest in Jordan by attacking the personage of the king and calling for constitutional reforms to the monarchy.

For decades the Hashemite regime has ensured its support among the "East Banker" tribal population by handing out positions in the civil service, security forces, and military to young East Banker men. A single patronage job allows a man to support his immediate and extended family members, build the small concrete house he needs to get married, educate his numerous children, and eventually buy a modest car. Jordan's Palestinian population has largely been excluded from these jobs. In many ways Palestinians have been second-class citizens for decades, and have served as convenient scapegoats for the East Bank political center. However, largely excluded from patronage positions, Palestinians have come to dominate Jordan's commercial sector.

Jordan has long been dependent on foreign financial support to bolster its economy and fund its public spending. At times, structural-adjustment style policy changes demanded by international lenders have sparked unrest, such as in 1989, when riots over diminished fuel subsidies led to political changes including parliamentary elections and the end of martial law. Bread riots broke out in 1996, and fuel riots erupted again in 2012 when the state sought to raise the heavily subsidized price of the propane tanks that Jordanians depend on for nearly all of their heat and cooking fuel. The

government remains under pressure for foreign lenders to reduce its public spending and, as Yom puts it, to find a cheaper source of political support than adding more young East-Bank men to the public payroll. With Jordan's burgeoning population, there are now not nearly enough patronage positions to go around, leading to high unemployment and loss of income among the tribal families who came to depend on such work. In a profound political shift, young East Bank men began demonstrating against the state in 2011 and 2012. The government moved quickly to crush the *hirak* movement, in some cases relying on policemen from the same families as the demonstrators, knowing they would be outraged that their young relatives had dishonored their clans (Yom 2014, 2015).

Such political action, by members of social groups that have long formed the Hashemite family's bedrock of support, would have been unthinkable until recently. The country has certainly experienced periods of unrest, but the state has dealt with those expressions through a combination of repression and the appearance of political change. At the same time, it has kept any mention of civil disturbances out of the newspapers to avoid lending them any sense of legitimation. Glenn Robinson argues that, for years, Jordan had engaged in a kind of "defensive democratization," in which small reforms were enacted to relieve political pressure while avoiding any serious threat to brute political realities. Pointing to the overwhelmingly positive press coverage of Jordan's 1994 peace negotiations with Israel, Robinson writes that the Jordanian government exerted influence to keep newspaper editors "within defined parameters." I suspect that those parameters were likely left *undefined*, but Robinson's larger point is valid, as are his

observations that editors acquiesced to state restrictions on the grounds that Jordan was "not ready" for a free press. He further argues that debates over the role of the press have, in Jordan, been an elite exercise, and that lower-class Jordanians have historically expressed little to no interest in debates over the inner workings and regulations of the country's news media (Robinson 1998, 395-397; cf. Mazzarella 2013).

Transnational media enter the scene

That situation began to change with the widespread accessibility of satellite television, which made international news available to large numbers of Jordanians for the first time. Gunter and Dickinson cite the first Gulf War as a catalyst for media change. Remembered in the U.S. for CNN's endless cycle of guided-bomb videos, for Arab audiences the war represented a shift in which events were increasingly mediated by Western-trained or Western-oriented journalists (Gunter and Dickinson 2013, 4-6).

Pintak (2011) argues that international Arab media (particularly satellite TV) and their coverage of events like the 2006 Gaza war have helped spark a new pan-Arab media sensibility in the region. Citing studies that suggest links between television viewing and increased expressions of pan-Arab, pan-Muslim identities, he suggests that Arab consciousness has become more cohesive due to its mediation across national borders. Invoking Anderson's concept of the imagined community, he suggests that an imagined pan-Arab community, facilitated through linguistic commonalities, perceives itself through the mediation of the new Arab journalist. Pintak notes that no one is seriously

talking about actual Arab political unity or a relaxation of national borders; but he suggests that pan-Arab satellite news is mediating a politically aware philosophy of *being Arab* in the face of Zionism, cultural imperialism, and Western hegemony; a philosophy whose adherents are united by sentiments of frustration and anger at the state of the world and their places in it (2011, 209-219).

Setting aside the tone of his subheading "Seeking Anderson in the Desert Sands," some of Pintak's analysis is compelling, but much of it breaks down in the face of the Arab revolutions that came just after his work was published. While the revolutions saw some expressions of pan-Arab unity, and certainly had ramifications beyond national borders, the protests were focused on changes at the national level. National borders remain highly relevant in the Arab world, relevant to the organization of Arab-majority societies, to individual identities, and to the discipline of their media production. The Syrian civil war and the rise of Daesh did a lot of damage to the pan-Arab, pan-Muslim sensitivity that Pintak argues had arisen. At least in Jordan, any sense of unifying frustration and anger gave way to a sense of thank-God-we're-not-in-Syria. The country's refugee crisis heightened resentment of its neighbors, even as Jordanians expressed great pity for the plights of individual Syrians (and Libyans, and Yemenis, etc.).

But while pan-Arab media's supposed potential to actualize pan-Arab consciousness has not been realized, pan-Arab satellite TV certainly changed the landscape in which Jordan's news websites arose. In its early days, Al Jazeera became known for fiery debate and provocative material that rattled the established norms of Arab TV journalism (Zayani 2004). Satellite channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya

exposed Arab audience members to news that was not controlled by their national governments, many for the first time. And authoritarian states clearly saw such channels as a threat to their longstanding control of mediated political discourse, to the extent that the Council of Arab Ministers of Information threatened to sanction satellite channels that failed to respect national sovereignty (Sreberny 2014, 176). Of course, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are still beholden to their own sponsor national governments, about which they are far less critical, but from without such satellite channels seemed refreshingly different from the bland reporting of one's national state-controlled outlets, and operated with a "more diverse news agenda [that] again signalled an influence of western media on the editorial decisions of Arab newsmakers" (Gunter and Dickinson 2013, 4-9).

Jordan's news websites arose in this context of newly critical journalism, in which the flashy, artfully produced pan-Arab satellite stations pulled audiences away from the various subservient, predictable, state-aligned outlets. Understanding the role of different concepts of professionalism – which vary from country to country, and to some extent from outlet to outlet – is crucial to understanding how this dynamic played out. Many Al Jazeera journalists, at least in the early days of the station, came to the station from a failed joint BBC-Saudi attempt at an Arabic language satellite service, and brought with them an ideal of objectivist, balanced news presentation that (while no less problematic) stood in sharp contrast to hagiographic government mouthpieces where "professionalism" meant presenting the government line (Zayani and Sahraoui 2007, 36; El-Nawawy and Iskandar 2002, 30-32).

Depoliticization, blogging, "citizen media," and the Arab Spring

In the mid 2000's the Arab world saw the rise of a robust blogging movement. Most bloggers were young, and often highly political, and many were well educated. Blogging seems to have been largely a middle- and upper-class pursuit in Jordan, despite a relatively low barrier to computer and web access at least for urban dwellers in the country's cheap and plentiful internet cafés.⁴⁶

One blogger-turned-journalactivist, Hassan, told me that he'd started his project specifically out of frustration with the limited availability of news about Jordan in English. Non-Arabic speakers who wanted to learn about events in the country, he said, would have had to do so through *The Jordan Times*, a public diplomacy project started at King Hussein's request. *The Jordan Times* "was very propagandistic in my opinion, it had kind of taken a downturn from whatever legacy it had in the '90's, of... being home to kind of good journalists," said Hassan. "... And [the newspaper] kind of just descended into this pro-state, which also fit the context of the time, which was a new king, post-9/11 world, War on Terror, the Iraq war, so ... it put a lot of pressure on media to take or toe the government line, more so than ever. So I started the blog out of that, out of that frustration. And it culminated when the Amman bombings⁴⁷ occurred in late 2005. And suddenly we started having these discussions that were more domestic-centered for the first time."

⁴⁶ In the early 2000's the northern city of Irbid was reputed to have the world's highest concentration of internet cafés on a single street.

⁴⁷ Three coordinated suicide bombings hit the Radisson, Grand Hyatt and Days Inn, killing 60, most of them Jordanians, and injuring 115. Al Qaeda in Iraq claimed responsibility.

Another blogger, Nisreen, said she started blogging around 2004, first because of its novelty, and later because she found it to be a way of contacting likeminded Jordanians despite cultural limitations to socializing with non-family members. Soon after, she joined with a group of disparate bloggers to form a blog aggregator community out of the rapidly growing number of sites. Within a couple of years, however, the community and its members started attracting unwanted attention from the security establishment. Individual members began being harassed by *mukhābarāt*. Elsewhere in the Arab world, such as in Libya and Egypt, said Nisreen, states were sending chilling messages to bloggers. "It was really scary for all of us who were exploring this thing." As a result, the founder of the blog aggregator which she'd joined shut the project down in 2006 to protect its members.

Growing up in Jordan, Hassan said, he and others of his generation were discouraged from talking about local politics. That strategy was reflected in the state-aligned national media, which, when they wrote about local issues, almost invariably did so in optimistic, laudatory fashion. Having spent a lot of time on the bulletin-board sites of the early Internet, Hassan switched to blogging when the new platforms became accessible. He explained that he "wanted to kind of create a space where I could talk about [domestic] issues in English, and target an audience that was, you know, had my profile," be it English-speaking, western-educated, upper-class, or all three. The importance of Hassan's statement is not that Jordan's elites were any more or less underserved by national media than its middle and lower classes. Rather, it reflects that,

at the time, unequal access to technology and cultural capital meant that elites were the only group in a position to rectify the gaps they saw in the existing mediascape.

His next statement carried the importance of cultural capital even further. It takes bloggers a while to build an audience, he explained. "It's also technology by default that alienates a lot of people who have something to say, but don't have that audience to access immediately," or else, bloggers who "have something to say, but they don't have something to say every single day." Moreover, blogging takes time. Jordanians with jobs and family commitments are less likely to be able to participate with the regularity needed to build audience and develop their cachet.

In an effort to broaden the blogs' reach, and reduce the barrier to access, Hassan and several fellow bloggers launched a new media initiative in 2009. The goal was to create a curated and edited platform where those who had something to say, but didn't have the ability to sustain a blog, could reach an established audience. The partners supported themselves through social media training, emphasizing tools for citizen media and advocacy.

Given the depoliticization of many Jordanians, Hassan said, the initial challenge was getting contributors to submit the political content that the site was seeking. Then, with the spread of the Tunisian revolution to other Arab states in 2011, everything changed. "Suddenly everyone wanted to discuss local politics."

Events in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere galvanized the Jordanian public. All of a sudden, the public discussion of politics was not only possible, but essential, and even

fashionable.⁴⁸ Much has been made – especially in the Western press – of the 'digital' nature of the Arab revolutions, that they were fueled by social media, and that it was tools like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube that made them possible. Certainly social media played a role, but ending any analysis here does a major disservice to the decades-long traditions of social activism and underground agitation – some online, and some off – in Arab societies (Aouragh and Alexander 2011). In Jordan, as Hassan described it, instead of online activism fueling street protest, the upheavals that people observed *offline* led them online to discuss and make sense of those events with fellow Jordanians outside their immediate social circles.

"I mean, online, generally, people were coming onto Twitter, discovering what Twitter was, because ... Jazeera was running kind of these tweet streams," Hassan said. "It was something that we hadn't really seen or expected. And one of the things that immediately presented itself, was the fact that most Jordanians, probably because of our avoidance of domestic issues, were really ignorant to a lot of the facts." To rectify what they saw as knowledge gaps among their newly politicized peers, Hassan and his colleagues launched a series of offline panel debates on social topics. The initiative morphed into more of a lecture series, he said, as young people showed up hungry for basic information.

The complexities of Jordan's Arab spring deserve more attention than I can give them here, but I hope to have at least laid out the basic context of Jordan's media and political spheres in 2012: the largest mainstream institutions were state-aligned outlets subservient to the regime; a wide variety of new online outlets were operating with very

⁴⁸ Though, it must be noted, the vast majority of Ammanis did not join the street protests (Tobin 2012).

different understandings of professionalism; and Jordanian publics – particularly the depoliticized younger generation – were discovering new outlets and imperatives for political discourse.

The Press & Publications Law Amendment

As Jordan's "Arab Spring" wound down, the government, empowered by the specter of violence just over the border in Syria, began to withdraw some of the civil liberties it had extended in the late 2000's and during the protests themselves. Press and other media censorship began to visibly rise, culminating in the passage of the 2012 Press & Publications Law amendment.

The 1998 Press & Publications Law and its amendments set the legal framework for the state's relationship with the media. Among other things, it established the rules for newspaper publishing licenses, restricts coverage of the military and royal family, prohibits any potentially divisive coverage of religious matters, and decrees that journalists must belong to the journalists' union to work legally. But as with a great many regulations in a great many countries, the crafters of the law could not have anticipated the enormous changes in the way that Internet-connected people communicate, especially through distributed production tools like Facebook, YouTube, blogging platforms, etc. So before the 2012 amendment, online media had existed in a regulatory limbo, within a patchwork of vaguely applicable laws. There were no requirements that online news

editors be members of the national journalists' union, and there was no provision for online journalists to join the union and access professional journalists' legal protections.

I heard from many of my industry sources (several of them from the traditional print media) that they felt the online news website sector did need some regulation. They tended to describe a burst of optimistic growth in that sector of the mediascape in the mid-2000's, with some news websites evolving from the Arab blogosphere, others springing up as activists sought new reach, and some starting as entrepreneurs saw new financial opportunities in a technologically and politically liberalized atmosphere. But, my sources said, most startups found they could not support their operations through ad revenue.

Industry insiders and observers – again, most of them connected with the established print media – describe the next phase as a Wild West of online journalism. Eager for hits and facing stiff competition, many online outlets turned to sensationalism, rumor-mongering, and "yellow" journalism, they said. Since there were so many new sites vying for advertising money – and, by extension, larger audiences – they tried to one-up each other with more and more sensational content, bordering on rumor and outright lies.

"One big problem about the news websites is that they flourished, of course, hundreds of them, but they were *exactly* what the state wanted to discredit the future of free and independent media. They were exactly what gives them the evidence that you cannot have free and independent media in this country," said one former journalist.

Another said: "There are cases I know of journalists who publish rumors, especially online, because they sell. Because by virtue of being so widespread they become truth and fact, which is not the case, and could send the whole country in a panic over something that is unreal." Such a statement reproduces a (post)colonial discourse in which the masses constitute a naïve, unsophisticated and at times dangerous audience (Mazzarella 2013).

"Online media weren't maintaining professional standards, although there were some [who were]," said Omar, a former longtime employee of a state-run outlet. "The majority ... because of the lack of economic viability were very unprofessional. So, it was quite a disaster." Such a link between unprofessional behavior and economic viability was a common theme in many of my conversations with Jordanian media observers.

Some journalists, while sharply criticizing the government's stance, said that the online media had reaped the oversight that they'd sewn through their irresponsible, unethical practices. Another common theme was that one of the driving forces behind the Press & Publications Law amendment had been widespread blackmail by online news producers. Many Jordanians I spoke with, both in and outside of the news media, alleged that some online outlets had blackmailed individuals and companies into giving them money or buying advertising to avoid defamation. "That was happening," Omar said. "It's a small society ... where you could destroy a person and a whole family if you just write whatever you want about them." An activist, Yasin, described elements of the online

scene as having "a framework of blackmail, deception, fraud, discrediting sort of normal, average people."

When I first heard them, I dismissed such allegations as the product of a government-led smear, or sour grapes on the part of mainstream media workers, or both. I never heard any specifics, and I still find those charges somewhat difficult to accept. But as I kept hearing the same pattern, unprompted, from observers with very different positions regarding media freedom, I began to give them somewhat more credence. Regardless of how widespread such blackmail practices were, what really matters is that they came to be *seen* as a problem, and came to form part of Jordan's meta-media discourse. "They've done a big favor to the government," said Yasin of the more dubious sites. "And for what, to be able to access peanut money? They just give weaponry to the government." That refrain, that some unscrupulous sites had ruined it for the rest, was also common.

It is tempting to make causal links between the explosive growth and gold-rush mentality of the online media sector and the new possibilities afforded by digital media technology. Smartphones, mobile internet access and the ease of digital publishing certainly helped fuel it. But there's no evidence here for a technologically deterministic approach. Jordan, in its media history, has experienced substantially similar dynamics before, a period of "good times" for media producers followed by an authoritarian regulatory response within a few years. In the 1990's, the country experienced a sudden boom of weekly newspapers after a period of political liberalization. Some media old-timers described it as the golden age of Jordanian journalism, a vibrant period of

innovation and competition, though with a sizable contingent of sensationalist "yellow press" outlets – in short, they describe it in the same terms as the online news media boom of the late 2000's. The upshot, then, is that smartphone and Internet availability was only one factor in Jordan's online media boom, and that the social, political, and regulatory conditions at the time are just as important in explaining it.

That "golden age" of Jordan's weekly newspapers ended with new regulations that raised capital requirements for newspaper owners, effectively driving most of them out of business. Around the same time, the government moved to take ownership of the prominent dailies. The 2012 Press & Publications Law amendment represents a substantially similar strategy in which the government reined in a period of unchecked expansion with highly restrictive measures disguised as industry regulations in the public interest.

The regime had tried several times since 2009 to pass online media regulations, Hassan recalled, but was thwarted in part because of the strength of Jordan's IT industry. King Abdullah had long cherished a dream of turning Jordan into a regional hub of IT and web development, and moments such as the 2009 sale of internet portal Maktoob to Yahoo! for \$85 million were jewels in his crown.

With both political and economic clout, the IT industry was able to resist any move to bring social media sites under government authority, and its leaders were powerful allies to Jordan's online journalists and journal-activists. Ultimately it was the upheaval of the Arab Spring that gave the government the leverage it needed to enact the amendment. Hassan recalled that the government shifted its approach, moving away from

trying to regulate online news sites with internet and telecom companies as a media *distribution* issue, to trying to regulate them as a media *production* issue. By making assurances that the law wouldn't affect the IT sector, the government was able to remove the most powerful element of the opposition. With that accomplished, the state moved quickly. "Between the amendments being publicized and codified ... that whole time span was like three weeks," Hassan said, giving the websites little time to react and mobilize.

Another issue further complicated their response. Around the same time the government was renewing its push to bring online media under stricter control through the Press & Publications Law, a group of citizens began demanding that the government block access to pornographic websites in the country. Media activists trying to fight the press regulation were immediately suspicious. Hassan recalled that a small group of protesters was "just hanging around on the Eighth Circle⁴⁹ outside the Ministry [of Information & Communications Technology]. Like these 20 people, 15 people. And suddenly it was something that warranted a government response. We've seen protests where, like, *hundreds* of people showed up and the government doesn't even respond or acknowledge it."

The anti-porn group was given unusual access to university campuses, Nisreen said, and gathered around 40,000 signatures. The Press & Publications Law amendment soon passed, in part on the anti-porn pretext. The state "played it very well," by linking the law to something so difficult to argue against effectively, especially given Jordan's set

⁴⁹ Amman's main artery runs between traffic circles known as First through Eighth. The smaller numbers are in older sections of town, so Eighth Circle both denotes a physical location and connotes a newer and more cosmopolitan Amman.

of religious and social conservatisms. She went on to describe it as a clear example of the government mobilizing social issues to pass a restrictive law and to spread a culture of fear.

With the coalition against the amendment fractured, and the legislation linked to pornography, Nisreen said she and her friends and colleagues had few options left for effective resistance, especially given the short timeframe. Their response was an organized online protest aimed at galvanizing both local and international support for online information freedom.

Much like the internet blackout protesting SOPA/PIPA⁵⁰ in the United States earlier that year, hundreds of Jordanian websites "blackened out" on Aug. 29, 2012, posting a message that their readers might "be deprived of the content of this site under the amendments to the Law on the Press and Publications." The blackout attracted international attention, with online articles on the *L.A. Times*, Reddit, Mashable, and the Electronic Freedom Forum. Given that Jordan is conscious of its international image, and dependent on foreign aid from Western democracies, raising awareness through the blackout may have been the protestors' most effective strategy. It's impossible to know what reaction it generated within the Jordanian regime.⁵¹ Ultimately, the blackout was unsuccessful insofar as the amendment passed a parliamentary vote and was enacted into law.

⁵⁰ The Stop Online Piracy Act and Protect IP Act, a pair of controversial proposals that, among other things, would have expanded U.S. law enforcement's ability to require ISP's to block websites. They failed after widespread opposition.

⁵¹ It generated hostility from someone, as the movement's flagship site was subjected to distributed denial-of-service (DDOS) attacks.

The New Regulations

Among the changes imposed by the new amendment was a requirement that web sites hire executive editors who had been members of the Jordan Press Association, the government-controlled journalists' union, for at least four years. This constituted a clear effort to professionalize and discipline the sector along regime-friendly lines.

Most of my interlocutors described the JPA as an ineffectual, conservative organization dominated by old-guard print journalists. It has stringent requirements for entry based on individuals' higher education degrees and the length of time they have worked at qualifying organizations. Qualifying experience can only be earned at the large, government-aligned print and broadcast institutions. Online-only publications don't count, nor do media outlets based outside the kingdom.

One of the ways in which the Jordanian regime suppresses media outlets it does not already own is by denying legal protection to journalists who are not JPA members. Even journalists working at qualifying institutions can find their applications ignored or delayed should they or their outlets run afoul of the bureaucracy. Jordanian journalists need JPA membership in order to work legally and have access to the country's legal protections. The JPA has been known to deny entry to regime opponents or people considered troublemakers, and thus serves as an effective gatekeeper for the state.

One journalist, despite her qualifying time and advanced degree, found herself unable to get JPA membership and its legal protections after she moved to a foreign-based outlet. She described her lack of licensure as another method of censorship. "I can't

be that aggressive while I'm not a journalist in the law," she said. Without credentials, she needed to tread carefully in her reporting on certain areas, especially national security stories.

The new requirements for the news websites limited their pool of possible editors, and likely raised staffing costs for many websites. In one form of resistance, many sites at first arranged to pay a small amount to a qualifying JPA member for the use of his or her name as executive editor in a no-show job. That sort of response to bureaucratic requirements is common in Jordan, and is often ignored by the authorities. When the state soon began clamping down on sites using no-show editors, it was a clear sign that the authorities would not look the other way when it came to the new media law.

Another of the amendment's most chilling changes was one that held websites legally liable for the content of their readers' comments. In response, many websites simply shut down their comment sections. Others were forced to devote resources to curating their comment sections, approving each comment prior to publication and archiving them for six months to comply with the law. At Al Khaleet this became part of the multimedia editor's responsibilities, and it took up a significant part of his workweek.

Curiously, however, one of the only things that the amendment did *not* regulate was pornography, which remains accessible on the internet in Jordan. The issue has continued to surface as justification for other state initiatives to control internet content, and thus the regime may find it more expedient to keep pornography accessible so that it can continue to serve as a rallying point.

Enforcement Begins, and the 7iber Holdout

Though the amendment was passed in 2012, Jordanian authorities didn't begin enforcing its requirements until June of 2013. Then, basically in the middle of the night, it suddenly went into effect. Dozens, if not hundreds, of websites found themselves blocked, including Al Khaleet. In the following days most were allowed back online, after they started the registration procedure or successfully argued that the law should not apply to them. Al Khaleet's management successfully argued that since the company did not focus on Jordanian news, it should be exempt. It has operated ever since without adhering to the JPA-member requirement, though it does carefully manage its comment sections.

Though there were initially some holdouts, my sources said, most sites accepted the new reality and were soon operating within the new law. One site, however, continued to resist for well over a year. 7iber⁵² was founded in 2007 out of the blogging movement by a group of Western-educated Ammanis. Its stated goals have been to "foster a more open society" and do research on digital rights, and it says it "stands for universal human rights, freedom of expression and access to information. We believe that people and communities should have the freedom to craft and share their own narratives" (About 7iber). For most of its history the organization has supported itself through grants, many from Western European governments. Its editors take a fourth-estate view of the role of the media, and criticize the way the state has forced Jordanian media into a

⁵² Pronounced *HIH-ber*, which means ink. Arabs writing online or on mobile devices often use Western numerals to represent Arabic sounds that lack clear parallels in the English alphabet, such as '3' for the letter *ain*. In this case, the '7' represents the letter *haa*.

performative role. One of them told me: "We are very explicit in that belief that an independent media is not just a decoration for a semi-democracy, but an important and necessary aspect of a functioning, liberal democracy."

7iber presents itself as a news magazine, with sections on politics and economy, culture and the arts, technology, and so forth. Its web layout looks clean and spare, contains no advertising, and relies more heavily on the visual than many of its peers in the Jordanian online sphere. One day in November 2016, its front page featured stories on a scandal in the parliamentary elections, Bob Dylan's Nobel prize and his support for Israel, and singer Melhem Barakat. 7iber orients itself towards an elite audience, and some of its content is mirrored into English. 7iber does not seem to be as well known among middle- and lower-class Jordanians as Sarayanews.com or Ammonnews.net, but many of the upper-middle and upper-class Jordanians I encountered had at least heard of its protracted fight with the government.

I conducted three interviews with 7iber staff and former staff, in which they described their interactions with the government, their rationale and techniques to fight the blockage, and the effects that it had on their production and readerships. During the roughly 18 months⁵³ that 7iber fought the ban, it moved its domain four times, from 7iber.com, then to .org, .net and .me. Each was subsequently blocked, after a steadily shortening length of time. The first move, to .org, had relatively little effect on readership and the site's operations. The Jordanian ISPs were employing relatively simple DNS blocking – readers were able to access the site by entering its IP address directly or changing their DNS settings, and it remained accessible to readers outside Jordan.

⁵³ 7iber was not blocked in the initial wave, but in a second wave of blocked websites about a month later.

Because the site was not advertising dependent, its editors said, it was able to keep operating despite the blocking much longer than it otherwise could. But the barriers to access had a devastating effect on its readership, and each move made it harder to attract visitors. At one point the site stopped showing up in Google results, an editor said, because the domain changes had played havoc with their search engine optimization.

By August 2014, they had moved to .net, their third move. In mid-August, the site published a multimedia piece about banned books in Jordan. Even though the media commission itself had been cooperative in providing information for the piece, the site was blocked the following day. They then switched to .me, were blocked within 24 hours, and were then informed that the head of the media commission had brought charges in court.

Over the year and a half that they fought the ban, the editors told me, 7iber tried lobbying and raising awareness both locally and internationally. Its leadership was able to attract support from international press freedom organizations and other NGOs, but said they felt that Jordan's strategic importance to the U.S. and European countries engaged in the region insulated it from any major pressure to change. The site's readership initially showed a great deal of support, and a handful of visitors continued to change their DNS settings and visit the site through the ban period, but 7iber didn't have the public support to make maintaining its battle a realistic option. Eventually people lost interest in the long campaign, one editor said. And with the government acting more and more quickly to block the domain changes, its leadership felt it had no option but to give in and start the licensing process. It was a difficult decision, a 7iber editor said in our interview. "We

want to continue fighting the law, but I think it's also important to keep fighting the law with, you know, with content also. You know, with what we do best. With journalism."

One other incident of institutional resistance to state control came from perhaps the least likely media outlet in Jordan – the state-controlled flagship newspaper *al-Ra'i*. The incident was reported on in the press, and was common knowledge in Jordan's small community of journalists. Unfortunately, I did not have an opportunity to speak with any of the action's organizers. But the basic facts seem to be that *al-Ra'i* journalists, upset with the deteriorating financial picture at the newspaper, demanded the replacement of certain board members appointed by the Social Security Investment Fund, which owns 55 percent of the company's shares. For roughly six weeks, according to articles in the sister paper *Jordan Times*, the staff "boycotted" government news and ran critical articles. One editor involved was quoted as saying that the move was not a reaction to government missteps, but "to assert its status as an objective newspaper," and said it had fourth-estate obligations to its readership. The disruption, which journalists I knew from other outlets described as a "mutiny," ended with a leadership shake-up at the paper. The staff's demands for the board members to be sacked went unheeded (Obeidat 2015a, 2015b).

Both the 7iber story and the *al-Ra'i* incident demonstrate that resistance at an institutional level to Jordan's regime of media control is a no-win proposition. The state and its security apparatus have been too effective for too long at subverting, dominating, and dismantling the country's institutions of civil society. In part because the state has been so successful at making the news media irrelevant to most Jordanians, there is no

widespread popular support for the fourth-estate, liberal journalistic practices that *7iber* represents, and that the *al-Ra'i* editor invoked. *7iber* was founded by Jordanian elites, it orients towards an elite audience, and its pool of support is simply too small. For the *al-Ra'i* journalists, I suspect that their position as career employees of a state-controlled entity in a country with bad employment prospects meant they were too vulnerable to be able to sustain a labor action.

Though press freedom is enshrined in the constitution, and King Abdullah famously said "the sky is the limit" when it comes to freedom of expression, the regime views any change to the status quo as the potential start of a slippery slope to much broader social and political changes. As long as the state is able to subvert constitutional and legal protections by sending individuals to the no-win state security courts, and to close media outlets for violating security laws, the stakes are too high. Changing this scenario would require either substantial international pressure from Jordan's main donors like the United States, or major internal political change. The former is highly unlikely as long as the United States relies on Jordan to help prosecute the "war on terror" and buffer Israel from other regional powers. As events in other Arab majority societies over the last few years have shown, the latter is difficult to predict, but as of this writing, while many Jordanians express dissatisfaction with the Hashemite regime, they feel they have far too much to lose.

Individual Resistance: Writing Between the Lines

So while the potential for large-scale resistance was bleak, journalists and media producers said they have substantial scope for smaller, individual acts of resistance to state media control. Journalists told me they had honed their ability to write between the lines, a strategy that can be read either as self-censorship or everyday resistance. Much as Layla recoded a question of censorship into a question of taste (see Chapter 3), such tactics more easily fit with a discourse of journalistic agency, a narrative in which the individual reporter directs their own choices even as those choices appear to merge with the state's efforts at media control (cf. Peterson, M. 2001).

Another strategy, for particularly sensitive stories on international politics or national security, was publishing without a byline. "I have to have my own censorship," one reporter told me. "So sometimes I could write a very good report, but I will never put my name." One such story, about a terrorism arrest, had done particularly well in page views, but she'd received no public credit. "Because if I put my name, I may be, like, near him in the jail ... So something like this can make you, like, think twice. Sometimes more than twice."

The cloud of state censorship was not without its own silver lining, however: "Now, after two years, I can smell where can I, or how can I, do a thing. To be honest ... you started to be smart enough to say what do you want to say without saying it directly. So this can give you another skills. You know? So if you want to look at the full part of the glass, you can talk about this." Such statements point both to the potential for

individual, small-scale resistance to regimes of censorship, but also to the extent to which self-censorship and the need to consider potential state responses permeate the daily practices of Jordanian journalists.

Another writer, Tareq, told me that he frequently wrote one version of a story for the local press, and pitched longer, more nuanced versions to overseas publications as freelancer. This strategy represents both a clear example of self-censorship, but also problematizes the question of how self-censorship as a disciplining technology becomes instilled. For Tareq, his self-censorship always remained very conscious, and did not approach the fully internalized, Foucauldian ideal. His reporting for the domestic publication remains "responsible" and secures his income, while his freelance work scratches an itch for more complete, nuanced narratives. Tareq said he went out of his way to avoid having to cover politics, as such, but tried to include political undertones in arts and culture feature stories. In the cultural realm, he said he felt freer to engage with the political. "OK, we're not going to discuss Black September, we're not going to discuss *Nakba*, we're not going to discuss sectarianism in the Arab world. But we can write an article about a person who has a collection of 500 historical maps from Ottoman times, or 2,000 paintings from Ottoman times," stories that can reveal how alternative histories have shaped national perceptions. Tareq's strategy was to use such elements subversively to encourage readers to think more critically about Jordanian history and society. "So my personal crusade, if I have to say so, is to pick interesting individuals and people who have something to say ... to foster civil society and to bridge the gap between different communities and different regions."

Finally, digital technologies offer tools to help anonymize users' blogs and social media posts. As Hassan put it, "despite the scare tactics, there are still some ways – if you want it – if you want to fulfill that potential, to agitate the status quo. ... It can range from creating a Facebook group to creating anonymous things, to whatever. I mean, there are ways to invent and reinvent." Separately, Nisreen agreed, revealing a faith in the increasing diversification and spread of digital media platforms to empower activists. "You cannot control technology. Technology is moving *really* fast. It's much faster than governments or bureaucracy can keep up with."

Jordan's public punishments of transgressive speech certainly spread fear, she said, "but at the same time there are people who are working anonymously, and I think that will never stop." She pointed to the so-called "grey internet," or "dark web," where content flows along encrypted channels, unindexed by search engines and invisible to most users. More openly, Jordanians are using hip-hop and comedy videos, spread through social media, to subvert official narratives. "And that passes," she said, alluding to elements of what Marwan Kraidy (2016) calls "creative insurgencies." While Kraidy's work deals with far more overt revolutionary political expression, he presents a compelling articulation of the ways in which the body becomes a site of linkages for revolutionary expression, which is then digitally mediated and remediated.

Jordanian media producers are thus resisting state constraint in a variety of ways, ranging from the subtle to the over, and will no doubt continue to do so. Similarly, many young media producers are resisting social constraints in what they see as Jordan's conservative, male-dominated society.

Nisreen has turned to a media project where women can share personal stories with an Arab audience. "Media never speaks to women, in our side of the world ... news in general are written by male[s], from a male perspective *even* if they are written by women." Her contributors are often anonymized, to protect them from potentially serious social backlash, though the site and its contributors have concerns that such anonymization affects its credibility. The site saw youth and women as both underserved demographics in the media, and potent drivers of social change. To further its outreach, it aimed to create more social-media friendly content, listicles, and short-form texts that were easier to consume on mobile phones.

In an interview, one reporter told me about the variety of constraints she might be faced with on any given day, a tally that illustrates the complexity of producing media not just in Jordan, but anywhere. As a reporter working without JPA membership, she said that she needed to tread particularly carefully around national security stories. Angering the security services could make it impossible to keep working, or even land her in jail. She might also face backlash from the private sector, powerful business interests who might threaten her safety, or sway her employers. At the community level, she said, she needed to navigate expectations about reporting on revered individuals or institutions that might alienate her readers. And from her own family, she had experienced pushback on stories they felt were distasteful.

With potential problems from the government, private sector, community and family, I said, it must be very difficult to navigate at times.

"Or do you get a feel for it very quickly?" I asked.

"Now, I guess ... at least I'm controlling my family's one." She laughed.

"[And I'm] trying to play with the governmental one."

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

As I write this, in February of 2017, the relationships between media and politics in the United States are more fraught than at any point in my lifetime, seemingly. While the news media have always been a battleground for political ideologies, that fact is becoming more readily apparent to more people in the United States as claims and counterclaims are met with explanations of "alternative facts" and accusations of "fake news." As a former journalist in the U.S., where the media are constantly under attack for being "biased," I found it refreshing to work in one of the world's many media environments in which "bias" is the accepted norm and hollow performances of objectivity (i.e. "getting both sides") are not always seen as necessary.

In Jordan, the linkages between politics, ideology, and news media have been very clear for a very long time. This has been due, in large part, to the state's efforts to sanitize and streamline the public sphere, controlling its narratives while maintaining it as a place for political debate along acceptably narrow lines. As a result, Jordanians recognize that the news media, by virtue of the constraints the state imposes on the boundaries of political debate, represent a space in which an incomplete political conversation is taking place. The conversations in other mediascapes are similarly incomplete, but the incompleteness of the Jordanian media conversations, with their lack of reportage on the country's alliance with the United States, its relationship with Israel, the status of Palestinians and refugees, the appropriate role of religion in politics – all

important questions to the majority of their audience – is far more obvious, and far more visibly problematic.

But this is not to say that these conversations are not taking place elsewhere in Jordanian society. To some extent they are taking place on social media, though I suspect that with the technological expansion of the security panopticon, overtly political conversations on social media are more circumspect than they otherwise might be. More research in this area is needed, and I regret that my work to date has not been able to incorporate social media alongside the mainstream news media and semi-professional journalactivism. However, Miller et al's (2016) study of social media usage offers some compelling comparisons. In multi-ethnic, multi-religious Mardin, in southeastern Turkey, they found that in general, "social media reinforces the prior conditions of politics in the town, including the absence of debate over local politics and the suppression of opposition views." There, state surveillance was interwoven with social surveillance. They found, however, that for political matters *outside* Turkey, social media could facilitate residents' expressions of solidarity. More broadly across their various field sites they found that methods of political expression (or the lack thereof) on social media tended to mirror those that arose offline. The need to maintain offline social and economic relationships greatly influenced political expression online. Most importantly to my own study, Miller et al argue that in environments of more explicit and systematic state control, "it is not only this control *per se* that mainly influences political expression. Rather it is the way in which the state's power is manifested through social norms that govern the relationships between individuals" (2016, 142-154).

Offline, and outside the pages of the press, relatively unfettered political talk certainly takes place among male friends and relatives at coffee shops, and among women in each others' homes. It takes place after Friday prayers, and while people are stuck in Amman's interminable traffic jams. Because of the long reach of the *mukhābarāt*, some Jordanians speak guardedly with people they don't know well, but during my fieldwork I sensed a growing degree of slippage in the way these conversations played out.

Still, that slippage tends to remain within limits, so it is remarkable when it exceeds them. I vividly remember one taxicab conversation in which my driver roundly criticized the king and the military for Jordan's involvement in the aerial campaign against Daesh. Though I have no loyalty to the Hashemite regime, after spending so long in Jordan and becoming accustomed to the public discourse surrounding the king and the military, the rancor of his tirade seemed to me well beyond the norms of polite Jordanian speech. It seemed ... inappropriate. His rant was so direct and angry that I began to wonder if he was actually an *agent provocateur* trying to bait me into anti-regime statements⁵⁴. As he dropped me off, he seemed to catch himself, and implored me not to repeat anything he'd said. In the end, I think we both worried about where the other's loyalties lay.

This incident shows that just as in Turkey, Jordan's media control and regimes of censorship and self-censorship work in concert with the specific cultural constraints at work in its society. That is to say, there is a set of cultural considerations, as well as the

⁵⁴ There's some precedent for this, or at least rumored precedent. In the past Jordanians thought that many taxi drivers were *mukhābarāt* informers, though such fears seem to have subsided, possibly due to the increased potential for social media surveillance.

more obviously political considerations, that influence what media messages are produced and disseminated. In this way the importance of public propriety and not giving offense, such as not causing further pain to the grieving family of a national hero (see Chapter 3), is internalized, reproduced, and reinforced in the service of the dominating state.

Media Discourses: Imagined Communities, Alternative Fora, and the Fourth Estate

In this light, what does my research tell us about the relationship between media and politics, and between journalists and the state in Jordan? First of all, it tells us that a liberal-democratic discourse of the function of news media as the Fourth Estate, a guardian of democracy and a check on the autocratic tendencies of those in power, is alive and well in the country – the king has even used the term. But the Fourth Estate idea is not alive in the way that we might think. In Jordan at least, I argue that it exists as a form of window-dressing, a way for the autocratic post-colonial state to demonstrate that it is one step closer in its ongoing transition not just to democracy, but to modernity, a performance aimed in part toward its own people, but primarily to its all-important foreign investors and donors. Winegar (2006, 142) argues that Egypt's government used an expanded arts program in a similar performance. Tellingly, *The Jordan Times* was founded to showcase the kingdom to the English-speaking world at the late King Hussein's request. A hefty chunk of its print run each day goes to the national airline, where it is distributed to businesspeople, tourists, diplomats, and wealthy Jordanian

travelers, exactly the sort of people the country wants to impress. The importance of this performance has increased under King Abdullah, who has sought to establish Jordan as a regional hub of IT and internet content production. An ostensibly "free" national media and legal guarantees for freedom of speech help make the kingdom a more attractive business environment for the production and transmission of online content. For evidence, we need only look to the way that passage of the Press & Publications Law was facilitated after the government assured opponents in the tech sector that their projects would not be affected, according to my sources (see Chapter 4).

Sean Yom (2017, personal communication) suggests a rival interpretation. He notes, quite rightly, that Western governments will continue to support Jordan regardless of its perceived level of authoritarianism because its geopolitical position makes it simply too valuable an ally. Aid would continue to flow even if the state were far more outwardly repressive. Drawing on the work of Lisa Wedeen (2009) in Yemen, who describes how the then-president won an election by an obviously preposterous 96.3 percent, Yom suggests that Jordan's involvement in the media sphere is itself an act of intimidation, a product of actors within the state who wish to make their presence known and felt. In effect, he argues, Jordan makes its presence known in its media sector because it can, and that doing so is an advertisement of its authoritarian potential.

I would argue that these two pathways – the word "strategy" implies too much intent – are not mutually exclusive. While Jordan is authoritarian, and needs to maintain that authoritarian posture towards its own people, at least some of its media production and meta-media discourse is outward-facing, aimed at private corporations and investors,

NGO's, and even tourists, and those outward-facing messages are more effective with a veneer of freedom. It is also possible that in the long run, the regime recognizes that manufacturing consent (Herman and Chomsky 1988) is both an effective and economical alternative to domination. It need only look across its northern border to see the potential outcome of decades of the harshest authoritarian rule. Finally, I would argue that Jordan's leaders, business elites, and intelligentsia are not immune from hegemonic ideals. Yom (2014) notes that the regime's newly ascendant support base is the middle- and upper-class Ammani business elites, often educated in Western institutions. Such institutions promulgate the ideals of Western political thought, including the idea that functioning societies, informed publics, and good consumers depend on "free" media.

On my most recent trip the government unveiled a new slogan, "*irf'a r'asak, inta urdunī*" – "lift up your head, you are Jordanian." It was the central message of a speech by the king, and was soon adorning signs in Amman's chaotic traffic circles. Such a slogan represents an attempt to build social cohesion and national unity. To some extent the government may feel that its national print and broadcast media similarly contribute to an Andersonian (1991) imagined community, and help keep Jordanianness as a principle category in the matrix of its citizens' identity. That has long been a concern in Jordan, a post-colonial state with no historical antecedent, and where identity markers like Arab, Palestinian, Muslim, Christian, bedouin and – most importantly – clan and family compete for primacy. Recent anthropological research has helped show the limits of Anderson's model, and laid out the theoretical consequences of our disciplines continued (over)use of the word "imagination" and related terms as a corral for important

but unruly questions of identity, collectivity, consciousness, and culture (Stankiewicz 2017). Nevertheless, we must continue to grapple with the Andersonian ideal and its ancillaries, not necessarily as a theoretical underpinning of our own work, but as a structuring element in the ideologies and media practices of the states and societies we study. In that regard it remains highly relevant.

Secondly, I think it's safe to say that the work of most Jordanian journalists in the state-aligned print and broadcast media is largely irrelevant to the majority of their potential audience. With such incomplete debates, the large state-aligned institutions only offer insight into the government and palace perspectives on issues, much as East Germans read the state press to understand the party line (Boyer 2003). The online media, motivated by ideology, entrepreneurship, or both, represented an effort to fill some of these coverage and credibility gaps. It's not yet clear to me how successful they were at creating new knowledge and expanding debates, and to what extent they were able to inject new perspectives and alternative narratives into public fora, which for at least some of them has been their stated aim. Sites like 7iber certainly have had limited audience penetration, and it lost a substantial amount of its readership during the period it was blocked, but as a whole the web sites have clearly found audiences, and a handful of them seem to have been commercially viable.

And that brings us to another question. What does "success" mean in this context? Does it mean the creation of alternative fora? Or the expression of alternative communities? How are we as researchers, or journalists as producers, even able to know if this is happening? And as Damien Stankiewicz asks "doesn't the production of this

information matter regardless of reception and 'audience'?" (2017, personal communication).

Here I think it's instructive to return to a Fiber editor's explanation as to why the site stopped fighting the government's DNS blocking (see Chapter 4). She said that the organization wanted to continue fighting the law, but wanted to be able to use its best tool – its journalism. Without readership, that tool was largely useless. These media producers and activists who are consciously trying to enact social change have chosen to do so through journalism. For both ideological and economic reasons, the reception of their material by their audience matters a great deal. For them, their work and public lives are given meaning through the relationships – made more complex by social media – between producers, consumers, sharers, remixers, commenters, etc., any one of whom may occupy all of those positions on any given day. So while the idea of alternative fora in parallel to Anderson's imagined community may no longer be especially useful or compelling to us as researchers, it remains an essential concept to those trying to bring about change through the creation of those alternative fora. And for that reason, it continues to demand our attention.

Finally, while I need to conduct more research into the actual content of Jordan's news websites in the late 2000's and early 2010's, the fact that the government moved so aggressively to bring them under the same regulatory regime as the rest of the news media is telling. The state's use of Fourth-Estate rhetoric, however cynical, shows its familiarity with narratives of the political power of independent media. In that sense, the state's reliance on its well-controlled but notionally independent news media as a

democratic fig leaf, as one of my sources put it, may have left the government in a bind. Regardless of any actual potential that online independent news media may have as a counter-public sphere (Fraser 1990), the state cannot afford to ignore them, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings. The Jordanian government moved to control them in the same way that they have controlled the mainstream media for decades, with a combination of an overt regulatory change and subtle, behind-the-scenes pressures. In the past the regime could rely on editors and publishers to police the actions of staff and act as gatekeepers, instilling self-censorship among their employees through the editor-journalist relationship, with the ultimate disciplinary threats of blacklisting or prison in the background. But the vast number of new outlets with much smaller, semiprofessional staffs made that old strategy less workable. I argue that in response to this shift in production and labor, the state – not quite consciously, and not quite unconsciously – has shifted its tactics, and is now attempting to instill self-censorship in the new generation of distributed online media producers through a combination of a discourse of media responsibility and more upfront, spectacular prosecutions for transgressions in reporting. On this last point, I acknowledge that I don't have "hard" evidence – none exists. However, during my fieldwork, a large number of my colleagues and sources felt that the state was moving to further restrict the speech of online journalists, and incidents like the arrest of the Saraya editors (see Chapter 3) contributed to an atmosphere of increased awareness, if not outright trepidation. This strategy, if it is such, may turn out to be short-lived. Shortly after my fieldwork concluded, Jordanian courts issued a substantial number

of media gag orders involving national security issues, perhaps indicating a shift to a more proscribed form of media control.

Ultimately, my study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that questions the idea that news media can be at all "free," and problematizes the assumption that "free" media are essential to democracy. A new *Washington Post* slogan, "Democracy Dies in Darkness," unveiled in early 2017, assumes first that U.S. politics are democratic, and second that the news media are capable of shedding light on threats to democracy. As Hardt (2008) argues, they are not. Writing even before the *Post* was purchased by Amazon mogul Jeff Bezos, Hardt notes that free-market interests prevail among deregulated and consolidated media, and that they purvey not information, but diversion.

The Jordanian case demonstrates how journalists working within a press system co-create, reproduce, and reinforce the conditions that structure and perpetuate that system (Stankiewicz 2017, personal communication). That is to say, that as Jordanian media workers guess at the wishes of the palace and security services and perform the professional rituals (Tuchman 1972) that help to shield them from negative consequences, they co-construct the state through their media production. The same is true of journalists anywhere else – as they conform to professional and societal norms and institutional standards that shield them from criticism or legal threats, they co-create, normalize, and solidify their own conditions of production.

My experiences among Jordanian journalists suggest that in many ways journalists in "non-free" contexts are better able to recognize their constraints than their peers in notionally "free" systems. Thus to some extent, they may be better equipped to

resist their domination. Among Jordan's independent media producers, the absence of a discourse of free media is, in effect, somewhat freeing.

Censorship and Self-Censorship

The biggest takeaway from my research into censorship in Jordan is that "censorship" itself is too narrow a concept to accurately describe the range of practices and power relations that shape media production, and, by logical extension, media reception. I remain convinced that "censorship," understood as a pathway between state power and cultural production, is a useful organizational tool, but we cannot end our analyses with its most obvious manifestations. Broadening our focus to "media control," as Boyer (2003) does, brings us closer to an understanding of the many ways in which state power and media production are mutually influential, but it fails to address one crucial question: How are we to differentiate practices of "media control" from professional ideologies, political economy, social class, social norms, ... in short, from culture? As Miller et al (2016) demonstrate, and as my own work shows (see Chapter 3), media control and social constraint operate through one another, and are so intertwined as to be indistinguishable except at moments of crisis. In that light, I think the only answer is that we should not expect to.

"Pan-Arab" and "Global" Media

The extent to which pan-Arab media, both satellite and online, influence media practices and inform debates within Jordan needs further elucidation. Such a task will, I suspect, be complicated by changes in degrees of and motivations for pan-Arab sentiment in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring. Pintak (2011), writing before the revolutions, argued that pan-Arab media were contributing to a nationalistic, pan-Arab, pan-Muslim sentiment arising in opposition to internal and external others, and sparked by the mediation of events like the 2006 Gaza war. My sense in Jordan in the two years following the revolutions was that such sentiment, to whatever extent it had existed, was not a significant force. Among Jordanians, pan-Arabism seems to have waned as they observed Egypt's revolution, followed by the failures of its Islamicist government and subsequent counter-revolution; the bloody war in Syria that has pitted Arabs against one another and involved several other Arab and non-Arab states; and Saudi involvement in Yemen's counter-insurgency.

In recent years, transnational Arab satellite stations such as Al Jazeera have dominated U.S. academic attention paid to news production in the Arab world. But my work shows that national borders, regulatory schema, and meta-media discourses remain critical considerations for understanding how media operate. All media are produced in localized social contexts. The case of Al Khaleet shows how even independent media outlets with explicitly transnational foci must navigate local norms, laws, and sensibilities, and how these maneuvers directly affect the content they create. The

incident over the "bad words" slideshow (see Chapter 2) reveals that even within a single, relatively small organization, linguistic and cultural boundaries contribute to substantially different messages when a single piece of content is reinterpreted and resituated through the act of translation. In actual practice, and despite valiant efforts to increase cooperation, Al Khaleet operated with two distinct production staffs, each with their own internal cohesions, divisions, and outlooks, producing news for audiences that were always treated as separate (cf. Stankiewicz 2017). This prompts questions for larger news production organizations with multilingual publishing platforms, and demands even more answers in the increasingly blurry space between content aggregation and social media, between professional and non-professional content sharing.

Media Technologies and Change

My findings in Jordan run counter to technologically deterministic explanations of how and why people use online media, and how their usage intersects with politics. While it is true that online publishing technologies have lowered the barrier to entrance for many people seeking broader audiences, they are now seeking those broader audiences amid the noise of thousands of others doing the same thing – millions, if we include social media. We have yet to see what the combined effect will be of media pluralism among non-professionalized producers, and media contraction among professionalized producers, even as concepts and critiques of professionalism are changing among both groups.

Where technology does seem to strongly influence media practices, if not determine them, is in the question of speed. As I touched on briefly in Chapter 2, the relationships between speed, audience, advertising, and revenue have never been more tightly interwoven. Being first has always mattered in journalism, for inseparable reasons of professional pride and greater sales, but the rapidity at which information can now be disseminated and interpreted is unprecedented. Granted, speeds of information flow have been increasing since Sumerians put stylus to clay tablet, via Gutenberg and Marconi, and so on through human history. It will thus require a future historical perspective to establish whether or not the internet revolution is the revolution we think it is, or merely another incremental development. For now, we can certainly say that the temporality of news is very different indeed for journalists (and audiences) who cut their teeth in a daily news cycle.

Another aspect that seems very different is the re-mediation now possible through social media. The individual with a smartphone and a social media platform can now recontextualize, amend, comment, edit, and republish from their own positionality. When dominant narratives are thus repurposed and republished from subordinate positions, this re-mediation becomes, in effect, remediation, a term I employ here in two senses. First, I use it in the way that Ilana Gershon employs it to describe "how people's media ideologies and uses of one medium are always connected to people's media ideologies and uses of other older or newer media" (2010, 92), an evolution of the way that Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin earlier described remediation as "the representation of one medium in another ... [which is] a defining characteristic of the new digital media"

(1996, 339). But secondly, and in some ways more importantly, I use the term remediation in the sense of *remedying* the deficiencies of Jordan's incomplete news media narratives. What remains to be studied is to what extent remediation in this sense is taking place online, and how those reposting, repurposing, and resituating news are navigating state media control.

The missing girls

To illustrate some of these points, I want to describe a moment of great slippage in Jordan's media control and self-censorship, one that seemed to catch security officials, media observers, and journalists alike off-guard. The story involved two teenage girls who had gone missing as they went to school. Their families had not heard from them, and their disappearances were reported to the police. In a country with very little violent crime, and where family honor is rooted in the proper public behavior of women, this was big news. Numerous websites and the major daily newspapers carried the story in prominent positions. When the girls were found several days later, the Public Security Directorate issued a statement that was quickly reported by numerous online media outlets. The girls had been found unharmed, it said, and they had left their homes of their own volition, and had not been coerced. Moreover, they were found in an apartment with another individual, and all three were being transferred to the Directorate of Family Protection for questioning.

The story, as first reported, spoke to the efficiency and potency of the security services, and their effective inter-agency cooperation. The police media center statement was also remarkably transparent – and as it happened, far too transparent for local norms. By making public the fact that the girls had left home voluntarily, and had been found with someone else in an apartment, the Security Directorate (apparently inadvertently) seriously impugned the girls reputation. Such aspersions can have serious ramifications in Jordan, where each year an average of 20 women are killed in so-called "honor killings," generally by male relatives who suspect of them of illicit relationships (Whitman 2014, Coogle 2016). The girls' families immediately complained, saying the release was factually incorrect, and damaging to the girls' reputations. A second release from the Security Directorate media center confirmed that the girls had left voluntarily, but seemed to soften the story, saying that they met the mystery individual "by coincidence" and asked for help because they were late getting home, and later asked that person to help them make photos suggesting they'd been kidnapped. The media center further clarified that its earlier release had not meant to disparage anyone, and that it had only offered a 'basic view' of what had transpired. While the media center rejected the suggestion that it had made a mistake or meant to cause insult, it apologized for any misunderstanding.

Such a story has been practically unheard of in Jordan. The release of such information to the media, and then to the public, simply doesn't happen. And it caused quite a stir in the media world. The Akeed project, a media verification initiative run by

the Jordan Media Institute⁵⁵, wrote with some hyperbole that it had "occupied the most prominent place in public interest" over the preceding days because of the way the announcement was made. The Akeed analysis went on to say that the police release was the first of its kind in such a case, "which normally are described with a high level of sensitivity, in spite of the fact that transparency [as a cornerstone] is the professional standard in the flow of information regarding public issues, specifically when dealing with issues of public opinion where rumors are flying" (Akeed 2015).

This incident lays bare some disjunctures in the Jordanian mediascape, and in mediation in general. Mediation always involves framing and contextualization, but, to use the word so often repeated in Jordanian media discourse, whose responsibility is it? Should the police media center have understood the potential ramifications and guarded the girls' privacy? On receiving the media release, should the press have edited it into obscurity? Is this "simply" a case of what happens when changing media practices and new publishing technologies collide with cultural taboos? Or is this just a textbook example of problems or lacunae in fast-changing journalism ethics? I want to be clear that I do not believe that such issues are restricted to the developing world, or a result of "traditional" societies becoming more "modern." U.S. and European media outlets routinely encounter, and sometimes violate, cultural taboos for one reason or another, failing to consider how their intended messages, or modes of delivery, might mystify, mislead, or offend.

⁵⁵ A masters-level training program. The JMI is notionally independent, and its curriculum was developed in consultation with the journalism program at Columbia University. However, it was founded by a princess, and like all NGO's in Jordan it operates with the state's blessing.

What's most interesting about missing girls story and its aftermath is what it tells us about the supposed universality of media practices. Shortly after the girls were found I spoke with a senior JMI official. He repeated a sentiment that I heard from numerous Jordanian media professionals, that objectivity and unbiased coverage were global standards for journalism. "But," he added, "maybe we find it necessary to have some local specifics, in certain specific cases. But this does not negate the fact that these are global standards at the end of the day."

But which is it? Local or global? A great deal of research in both anthropology and media studies runs counter to this official's insistence that objectivity and "balanced" coverage are international standards – or even consistently applied in Euro-American contexts. Concepts of objectivity can be contested even within individual newsrooms, and they become even more frangible as we take them across institutional, cultural, and national boundaries (Bowman 2006, 2008; CJR 2004; Pedelty 1995; Hasty 2005; Bishara 2013; Donsbach and Klett 1993; Peterson, M. 2001). Rather than "international standards," I suggest, alongside Bishara, that we should think of "balanced objectivity" and similar notions as journalistic ideologies. Even their claim to international relevance is in some doubt. As Tunstall (2008) notes, the widely held notion that U.S. media are spreading their messages and influence around the world, if not false, is vastly oversimplified (cf. Larkin 2003). National boundaries, cultural norms, and different understandings of professionalism continue to shape media production, helping to maintain heterogeneity in the face of global influences (Sreberny-Mohammadi 2002; Rantanen 2005; Waisbord 2013).

That said, in the case of Jordan, the JMI official might be on to something.

Much of the meta-media discourse emanating from the palace and elected officials in recent years seems to echo U.S. and (to a lesser extent) British-derived ideologies of detached, balanced objectivity. I believe that there are a number of reasons for this, but the most obvious derive from Jordan's long-standing political and military relationships with the United States. More than a few prominent Jordanian media producers, especially among the younger generation of journalactivists, were educated in the U.S., Britain, or Canada. Many have experience at Western, English-language publications and wire services. The curriculum at the JMI, the country's most prominent graduate-level journalism training center, was developed with U.S. academic input. I argue, then, that Jordanian journalists and educators are consciously trying to impose a more objectivist framework for the country's press, along the lines of the balanced objectivism at work in the U.S. news media. As a corollary to that, they want less government control over the media, more transparency, greater freedom of speech, and an end to the prosecution of journalists in anti-terrorism courts.

That last point is certainly a noble and essential goal, at least from my perspective as a Western-trained journalist-turned-anthropologist. No one should risk an unfair trial followed by imprisonment for doing their job, especially when the constitution guarantees a free press and the palace has called journalism "one of the noblest professions" (Media and Communication Directorate 2008). That said, what really is the role of journalism in Jordan? Is it merely to print what the king did the day before, and what is happening in Palestine? Is it to expose government corruption and waste, and

agitate for democratic change? Is it to create a product that advertisers will pay for because it makes an audience feel informed, and allows them to perform their social class? It is, of course, all of these things and more, all the time.

So those first three points – less government control, more transparency, and greater freedom of speech – are highly complicated. The missing girls story is a cautionary tale that greater freedom of speech for the news media, and more government transparency, is sometime at odds with social taboos, and the freedom and safety of the individual. In this incident, the transparency-mediation-publication of the story (the way this is all supposed to work from a Western perspective) could have had serious consequences. The freedom of information and the freedom to publish – or from another perspective, a lack of control – collided with Jordanian families' careful separation of public life and private life. Thankfully I've seen no reports that the girls were mistreated by their families, and I don't want to suggest that such an outcome would be likely – only that it might be possible.⁵⁶ In the future, though, they could possibly encounter difficulty finding husbands, which is an enormous concern in Jordanian society.

This incident shows why it is important to understand that media control and cultural norms of propriety track together, and why it makes sense for Layla to recode a decision based on self-censorship into one based on propriety when she was dealing with photographs of the burning pilot. Further, it shows that attempts to impose external ideologies onto an existing cultural landscape – no matter how well-intentioned – have a tendency to backfire. There are some uncanny similarities to debates over the unveiling

⁵⁶ It's also possible that the public attention to the case prevented worse outcomes. Ultimately it's impossible to say.

and "liberating" of Muslim women, though I do not believe that efforts to inject greater transparency, professionalism, and "objectivity," into the Jordanian mediascape are fueled by the same rhetoric of salvation and polarized visions of a civilized West and unenlightened East (Abu-Lughod 2013). As with the broader societies in which they reside, reforming news media to allow them to achieve noble and lofty goals will never be as simple as just adding more "freedom."

While media reports that the girls had gone off voluntarily and been found with someone may have been factually accurate, they were not culturally appropriate. They would not be appropriate in a great many places around the world, including perhaps the U.S., and many police agencies would not have released the full details to spare the girls' reputations. As I argued earlier, facts are only facts within particular ways of thinking about facticity. Because the police media center stated facts that were not appropriate for mass mediation, though they may have been factually "correct," it later walked them back and apologized. The entire incident lays bare the complex interplay of media practice, cultural expectations, concepts of the right-to-know, and privacy. Add to that the long history of media control in Jordan, which has created an environment where informal interpersonal communication – often denigrated by those in power as "rumor" – has become the primary source for alternative narratives.

I think it's safe to say that technology also had a role in how the missing girl story played out. Before fast-time became the norm in online publication, journalists would have had more time to consider the ramifications, talk with the family, and so forth. In this case, the story was out and available to be reposted, commented on, Tweeted and

linked from myriad sites in minutes. While I have not been able to establish how the police press release was disseminated, whether by email or posted online, such digital texts can be copied and posted almost instantly, by a single person. In prior eras, faxed and hard-copy press releases needed to be re-typed, offering at least a few minutes for reflection. Before beating the competition by a few seconds became important to online publishers, a few pairs of eyes might have looked over a piece before it was aired, printed, or posted.

Lastly, and most importantly, the missing girls story indicates that the relationships and practices that journalists, their sources, and their audiences have taken for granted are rapidly changing. News outlets in Jordan (and elsewhere) print a great deal of press releases and government news agency copy verbatim, or nearly so. A *Jordan Times* article based on a JMI study said that nearly 70 percent of *al-Ra'i*'s content from October 2013 to April 2014 came ready-made from either the Petra agency, government offices, organizations, or businesses (Ghazal 2014)⁵⁷. And while the study did not track changes over time, I suspect that the amount of third-party material posted verbatim or near-verbatim is increasing. For some smaller outlets and content aggregators, such verbatim posting is the norm. This gets at the awkward issue of authorship, and who the producer actually is (Boyer 2013). At Al Khaleet, even though the staff created very little of their own content, and most was copy-pasted from partner sources, they nevertheless thought of themselves as creating through curation. This represents a dramatic shift in thinking. It opens up substantial new opportunities for

⁵⁷ The article doesn't say whether or not the study tracked changes over time, so while I cannot say for sure, I suspect this number represents a sizeable increase over previous decades.

states, institutions, and individuals to control their own narratives. Logically, it should also allow subordinate groups and individuals much greater flexibility in shaping their own self-representation, though it remains to be seen to what extent they can transcend the disparities of social, cultural, and economic capital that give already dominant groups and institutions substantial advantages in this new paradigm.

Avenues of Future Research

In addition to the aforementioned areas (pan-Arabism and media, and national versus transnational media spheres), my work so far suggests several avenues for future research, as it relates both specifically to Jordan and the broader field of media anthropology.

One area that definitely needs further attention is charting the effects of the Press & Publications Law amendment, and what if any effects it has had on the nature of online news media content in Jordan. When I was conducting my research, it was still too early to tell what effects it was having. I heard from some journalists that they did not think it would have much visible effect, and from others that it would chill online debate. It certainly had the effect of reducing opportunities for readers to engage with each other and with online content producers in comment sections. The law held website editors legally responsible for the content of comments, so many sites simply shut them down. Others, like Al Khaleet, devoted resources to preempting subversive or challenging comments, thereby limiting the scope of debate. (While anyone who has read the

comments below a news article or YouTube video might justifiably question their contributions to civil discourse, completely shutting off comments certainly reduces opportunities for engagement.)

More broadly in Arab-majority societies, we need further exploration of the influence of legal frameworks, state telecom control, and press regulations. The importance of such schema in shaping media content and journalistic practice have been explored at least since Gaye Tuchman (1972) argued that objectivity in American newsrooms was a "strategic ritual" that journalists employed to shield themselves from blame and libel suits. The cultural production model also demonstrates the influence of legal and regulatory frameworks, such as intellectual property law, on media messages (Peterson, R. and Anand 2004). Despite the scholarly recognition that an understanding of legal restrictions and governmental regulations is important to our understanding of journalism and other forms of media production, this avenue of study seems to be relatively unexplored, even as we (perhaps increasingly) recognize the extent to which media and journalism are bound to political ideology.

The rise of the cadre that I am calling "journalactivists" also demands further attention. This group of generally young, well-educated, politically minded men and women transcends many of our existing categories. They consciously, but selectively, adopt some of the techniques and ethics of professionalized Western journalists. They operate with the fluidity and irregularity of bloggers and media activists, but at the same time, they eschew that medium's focus on personal experience and aim their production more squarely at a broader mass audience. In short, they seek to effect social change

rather than "simply" reporting facts, but are utilizing much of the technique and rhetoric of the supposedly apolitical professional. I am eager to see how this group changes and evolves – I have no expectation that they will be doing the same things in the same ways five years from now. Will they become more cohesive as a group, or less? What means will they find to resist efforts to blunt or silence their messages? Will they be able to expand their audiences, or will they stop producing activist news media and move on to other endeavors? Will they find ways to monetize their production, or will they remain dependent on grants, private means, and second jobs? Will text retain its primacy, or will they move entirely to other media, such as virtual reality, that we can only begin to conceptualize?

On a related note, how will new technologies continue to influence production, and vice versa? Will Twitter, Snapchat, and other services continue a trend towards shorter-form communication? What services and technologies, only barely imaginable now, will carry journalistic messages? Wearables such as Google Glass seem inevitable, and science-fiction authors have been foretelling implanted information technology for years. How will these technologies effect social cohesions, individuation, communication, and collective action? As I write in early 2017, new revelations about the CIA's ability to break consumer-level encryption technologies once considered robust are making headlines, and the FBI director just declared, in effect, that "privacy" is dead. These have already been important considerations for social and political activists (as well as revolutionaries and criminals) living under authoritarian rule for many years. Recent trends in Jordan indicate that social media technologies have greatly expanded the

security services' ability to track and document, and suggest that new technologies expand the security panopticon far more than they enhance capacity for political mobilization.

Finally, Jordan and Jordanian society need further anthropological study. The country is already facing significant stresses, stemming from high population growth, massive refugee influxes going back to 1948, a lack of natural resources, and limited opportunities for employment and social mobility. Jordan's acceleration towards a neoliberal society seems to be increasing along with the global turn to consumerist individualism, and fault lines are developing along many of its longstanding social borders. Attacks against the security services and foreigners in 2016 and 2017 damaged its already fragile tourist economy, and Jordan may be losing its reputation as one of the safest Arab states for Western tourists, students, and travelers outside of the Gulf region.

The most critical stress of all, I believe, will turn out to be the country's lack of water. It remains to be seen what effects continued climate change will have on water availability in the country, but it is already in a precarious position. Many scholars of climate and politics already predict that water will become a major conflict driver in coming years, and Jordan seems primed for ecological conflict. These concerns bear directly on my research into Jordan's media ecology and its atmosphere of control and restriction. How will Jordanians and the country's countless foreign residents receive, interpret, and disseminate information about climate change, demographics, and security, and what will those narratives be? Will social media and distributed digital production offer opportunities for the promulgation of counter-narratives?

My hope is that additional anthropological attention to Jordan and its people will illuminate the effects of these changes, and perhaps, in some small way, may help to blunt them. Despite its ongoing struggles, Jordan is a truly marvelous, hospitable, and beautiful country, and I will forever be indebted to its people for welcoming me and making my research possible.

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