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***Sawt Al-Arab* or *Sawt Al-Nasser*? The Case of Mass Media Under Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Convoluted Rise of Pan-Arabism**

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Abstract

Under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser from 1956 to 1970, *The Voice of the Arabs* or *Sawt Al-Arab*—a radio broadcasting program created by Nasser himself—played a prominent role in strengthening the Pan-Arabian identity, fueling anti-colonial sentiments and nationalist ideologies. This paper looks into the factors that led to the success of the radio as a medium of mass media, followed by a close analysis of the methods and forms of propaganda employed by Nasser through the radio program to promote and maintain these ideologies. Radio thrived within the Arab world as it was considered as an extension of cultural features rooted in the Arabic culture and one which complimented the tradition of oral communication. The region's familiarity with this media platform led them to overlook Nasser's true intentions. Such associations only masked the capacity for the people to recognize methods of propaganda which dominated the airwaves, in an effort to strengthen the gap between the state and society. Ultimately, this paper seeks to prove that *The Voice of the Arabs* played a significant role in enabling Gamal Abdel Nasser to maintain Pan-Arabism in the Middle East, as it was employed as state apparatus to spread propaganda, fueling an atmosphere of anti-colonial discontent and, amongst other ideas, the dissemination of nationalist ideologies.

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Introduction

Today, the internet, which is home to forms of social media networks and two-way interaction services, is employed for the widespread dissemination of information to anyone who has access to it. These methods, however, were unfamiliar platforms to the majority of the world and, more specifically, to the people living in the Middle East. This was especially true in Egypt under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser from 1956 to 1970. During this time, radio took the place of the internet. In fact, the radio was a popular medium and, due to its affordability and portability, was present in a majority of Egyptian households. Nasser started *The Voice of the Arabs* in an effort to promote and manipulate societal values, a form of bio-power, as taken from French philosopher, Michel Foucault. *The Voice of the Arabs* played a significant role in enabling Gamal Abdel Nasser to maintain Pan-Arabism in the Middle East, as it was employed as state apparatus to spread propaganda, fueling an atmosphere of anti-colonial discontent and, amongst other ideas, the dissemination of nationalist ideologies.

Nasser's Rule and the Role of Radio

To better understand the relationship between Gamal Abdel Nasser and the rise of Pan-Arabism we have to look at the relationship between the state and society, the role of *The Voice of the Arabs* and the decline of Pan-Arabism by the late 1960s. First, this section is committed to explaining the reasons behind Nasser's motivations behind the creation of *The Voice of the Arabs*. Why is radio so important during this era, especially within the Middle Eastern region?

Before we delve into the cultural roots of radio within Egypt and the Middle East, it is important first to understand the history of radio in the Arab world. Zein Nassar's *A History of Music and Singing on Egyptian Radio and Television* informs us of the prevalence of radio even before the time of Nasser in Egypt. More specifically, radio was such a widespread form of media that within Egypt "by the end of December 1933, at least eight private radio stations were operating in Cairo *Fu'ad, Faruq, Fiyula, Sabu, Wadi al-Muluk, Ramsis, Misr al-Jadida, and Sayigh*, while Alexandria boasted four (*Majistik, Farid, Radiyu Fuwis, and Radiyu Bafir*)."¹ Radio within Egypt was also mostly state-owned or heavily regulated by the state as it was believed that media like the radio "which have the potential of reaching every single person in the country, and many outside it, instantaneously, are regarded by Arab governments as too important to be left to private interests."² Thus, right from the inception of radio, it was deemed to be an extremely effective state apparatus to disseminate forms of information. William Rugh supports this, arguing that the Egyptian state "devoted a great deal of attention to radio, programming its expansion so that it could be used as a political tool to mobilize the masses and propagate the official line."³

Gamal Abdel Nasser was well aware of the presence of radio within both Egyptian and Middle Eastern societies and, therefore, continued to invest revenues to further develop the radio broadcasting system.

The new Egyptian Leadership that seized power in 1952 found only a modest 72 kilowatt medium wave radio facility, with no short wave and a small broadcasting staff ... [but] in less than a decade, the government increased transmitter power 28 fold providing good reception throughout the country and abroad. During the 1950s, programming expanded to include not only the General Service but also the "second" program of cultural fare for intellectuals, and "With the People" aimed specifically at workers and peasants to provide political indoctrination as well as practical information. The "European Program" was

¹Frishkopf, Michael A. *Music and Media in the Arab World*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. 2010, 68.

²Rugh, William A. *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics*. Westport, Conn: Praeger. 2004, Chapter 9.

³Ibid.

*developed in six foreign languages along with the "Sudan Corner" and "Voice of the Arabs".*⁴

In addition to this, radio was a platform that disseminated more than news. Even before the time of Nasser, Egyptian radio, for example, had already begun broadcasting religious Qur'an recitations to locally produced music. It is clear, therefore, that through the rapid development of radio it "had begun to influence Egyptian daily life more than anything else. For the first time, people were able to listen to famous Qur'an reciters, musicians, and singers from the comfort of their homes."⁵ A new cultural revolution was sparked by locally-produced music that was popularized through the radio's ability to circulate and reach anyone who had access to an antenna.

In this way, we see that radio started to become an especially significant medium within Egypt and the Middle East as it complemented the cultural histories of the region. Lyricists, for example, provide us with an example as they were "implored to present nationalistic songs or songs characterized by Egyptian style and spirit, taking up Egyptian topics such as cotton and the daily life of peasants and workers."⁶ In addition, Egyptian radio founded the culture and set the standard for Arabic music within the Arab world. Frishkopf confirms this, stating that "Cairo was the entertainment capital of the Arabic-speaking Middle East, producing ... *al-musiqa al-arabiya* and ultimately set the standard by which any newly composed Arab music was to be gauged."⁷ We will see later, therefore, how Nasser cleverly exploits this newly-formed music culture to promote his Pan-Arabian ideologies.

We also see how radio broadcasts also have close ties with the traditional methods of oral communication within the Arab world, that is, oral histories. Radio broadcasts in some ways signified a modern manifestation of the traditional methods of oral histories. It is, therefore, important to consider the strong traditions of oral history within the Middle Eastern society, which ultimately allows for the introduction of radio as more easily adaptable to the people of the Middle East. Rugh supports this claim and argues that "oral communication channels remain extremely important throughout the [Arab World]."⁸ Looking back at history, for example, Rugh explains that it is "common in contemporary Arab society to find informal circles of friends ... who meet regularly and talk frankly about public affairs as well as private concerns."⁹ The advent of the radio has, therefore, served as a contemporary form of oral communication and dissemination, already so familiar to the people living in the region, who meet in groups "known as *shillas* or by various other names [to] talk openly about matters that are politically or otherwise too sensitive to appear in the press."¹⁰

Another reason which has contributed to the success of the radio within the region can be found within its ability to reach the masses. First, radio is an inexpensive form of media, so it can easily be found in many households even amongst the lower classes. Secondly, even though Egyptian radio was "commonly associated with elitist cosmopolitan sectors of Egyptian society, its reach [still] transcended societal boundaries determined by class, ethnicity, and creed."¹¹ Third, there were already extensive radio transmitters in place, which "made these [radio] programs audible all over Egypt and in most of the Arab countries as well, even on medium wave." These factors combined to make radio broadcasts very accessible to all, from the poorest Egyptians to the elite members of society.

During his reign from 1956, Nasser successfully integrated nationalist ideologies and various methods to promote a national consciousness into the strong cultural link which

⁴Ibid.

⁵Frishkopf, 68.

⁶Frishkopf, 70.

⁷Frishkopf, 141.

⁸Rugh, Chapter 9.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Frishkopf, 142.

the radio networks had already established within the region. This is when it started to become evident that “Arab information media have always been closely tied to politics.”¹² The promotion of culture and local identity through music on the radio was, therefore, manipulated to promote politicized sentiments to enable Nasser to intensify the spread of his Pan-Arabian ideology. It is also important here to consider that the radio was thus utilized to increase subjective links—such as the cultural gap—between state and society. Middle Eastern states might not be the most successful in terms of service delivery but clever enough to play and manipulate cultural values, so the subjective gap between state and society is not large. That is to say that Nasser has made use of local artists to improve the relationship between state and society—to make sure that the ideological gap and cultural gap between state and society are manageable. Evidence tells us that Nasser specially commissioned artists like Umm Kulthum to broadcast songs pregnant with lyrics which promoted Pan-Arabian nationalist ideologies (which will be analyzed in greater detail in later parts of this paper). According to a study by Frishkopf, the argument is made that:

*Pan-Arab broadcasting during the Nasser era was characterized by a small number of state-owned radio and television channels, dominated by Egypt. This concentrated, state-controlled output tended to unify Arab listeners around a common media experience, to consolidate taste (according to the dictates of Egypt's governmental “listening committees”), and to project Egyptian music ... as a primary effective basis for pan-Arabism.*¹³

As we have learnt, if this gap between the state and society widens, one direct result will be an increase in civil society organizations. The state does not want an increase in such organizations, is never keen to allow these organizations to operate, and is always suspicious of such self-help groups within its society. Therefore, “until the 1990s’ advent of satellite television, Egyptian broadcasts were entirely controlled by the state, supporting state power.”¹⁴

Nasser’s Rhetoric

Now that we have looked into the role and history of radio within Egypt and the Arab world, we can delve into an analysis of Nasser’s speeches and broadcasts on *The Voice of the Arabs*. This section will focus on a close analysis of the radio broadcasts on *The Voice of the Arabs*, through looking at the Nasser’s word choice, mannerism and charisma—all the factors that define his rhetoric. Through an analysis of his rhetoric, Nasser utilizes the radio as a medium to fuel an atmosphere heavily centered on Pan-Arabian ideologies across Egypt and the Arab region.

Nasser chose his words carefully when he broadcast on the radio networks. The language used by Nasser and his word choice were other methods employed to spread forms of propaganda within the region. Research conducted by Anas Al-Ahmed informs us that the language employed by Nasser “varied between aggressive and sympatric approaches,”¹⁵ especially in situations when Nasser referred to the West or Israel. For example, Nasser said in one of his speeches that “extermination of Zionism in the second round of the Palestinian war ... Zionist co-operation with local Communists.”¹⁶ Sometimes, Nasser even challenged these opponents directly by stating “We challenge you, Israel!”¹⁷ In addition to this, in the same taping, Nasser continues to express his discontent towards the West by calling them “white dog imperialist, blood suckers and colonialist oppressors ... Let us teach Americans

¹²Rugh, Chapter 9.

¹³Frishkopf, 13.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Alahmed, Anas. “Voice of the Arabs Radio: Its Effects and Political Power during the Nasser Era (1953-1967).” Indiana University, 21.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

we do not need their tainted dollars nor do we require their conditioned aid.”¹⁸ These examples taken from Al-Ahmed’s study clearly support the argument that Nasser’s specific word choice during his radio broadcasts was made specifically to target the West and to spread anti-colonial sentiments amongst those who heard his speeches.

Secondly, Nasser also made sure that he spoke in colloquial Arabic rather than the more formal, *fus’ha* Arabic. This only serves to indicate that Nasser wanted to reach as wide an audience as he could, in this way create greater appeal to his listeners, and provide them with the opportunity to better understand his speeches. We can also relate this back to our analysis of the links between state and society. In this case, the use of colloquial Arabic can be seen as an example to improve and strengthen the gap between state and society; for a high ranking politician such as Nasser to speak in colloquial Arabic over the formal option will only lead the masses to believe that he is trying his best to befriend his people, to become closer to the people of the nation. In colloquial Arabic, Nasser once said that “Egypt is a sovereign, independent Arab state ... and the Egyptian people are an integral part of the Arab nation.”¹⁹ His charisma and persuasive tactics were evident through such broadcasts.

We can tie this into the other methods Nasser employs to maintain his Pan-Arabic ideologies. In the book entitled *Rethinking Nasserism* the authors explain that “in many respects, Nasser represented an entire Arab generation mesmerized by similar problems, and this is precisely what made Nasserism such a powerful force in the Arab region.”²⁰ He was able to forge a shared identity with the lower classes (who were, after all, the majority) as he understood the people because his very own identity was tied to similar roots. Nasser, of course, used this to his advantage and was able to once again strengthen the gap between state and society, ultimately maintaining his Pan-Arabian ideologies.

Another method Nasser employs is the use of music. As mentioned previously, Nasser manipulates the locally-produced songs by commissioning artists such as Umm Kulthum to sing songs containing nationalistic ideas. We have to understand here that Nasser specifically chose only to broadcast songs that fitted into his rhetoric, one that included a united Arab identity and a united Pan-Arab nation. Therefore, beyond his personal rhetoric and broadcasts of speeches, his choice to include music within the same radio broadcasts indicates how

*...mediated music powerfully expresses and influences social and material transformation, a key component of formative social practice. While music as a social force—the power of music to shape social relations—is infrequently acknowledged in local discourse, it is demonstrated in practice, all the more powerful for being unrecognized, for flying under the radar of discourse.*²¹

One example that holds much cultural weight even today is the music of Umm Kulthum, an Egyptian singer, as mentioned previously. Under Nasser, “the station broadcast many songs, presented by the greatest composers and performed by the greatest singers, such as Umm Kulthum, Mohamed Abdeul Wahab, and Riyad al-Sunbati.”²² In fact, the success of the music of Umm Kulthum only indicates “how, Umm Kulthum, personally acquainted with Nasser, influenced an entire generation of Egyptians through their patriotic songs (*wataniyyat*).”²³ As with the use of colloquial Arabic, traditional music transcended social classes, and statuses within society. The music of Umm Kulthum is definitely an example that signifies this transcendence, through “the phenomenal effect Umm Kulthum’s singing

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid, 24.

²⁰Podeh, Elic, and Onn Winckler. *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2004, 26.

²¹Frishkopf, 42.

²²Ibid, 68.

²³Podeh et al., 23.

had ... it was not uncommon to see children, villagers, and uneducated people singing the sophisticated and esteemed poetry written by some of Egypt's greatest poets."²⁴

Other songs played that tended to deviate from the style of Umm Kulthum did not stray too far away from fueling Pan-Arabian ideologies. Alahmed states that songs were also written specifically to "act as an anthem to provide encouragement and enthusiasm especially for the Arabs' victory during the Suez War in 1956, praising Nasser and his accomplishments."²⁵ The creation of these songs of celebration indicates to us that, unlike the songs of Umm Kulthum, there was no attempt to underplay Nasser's efforts to promote and strengthen his nationalist ideologies which ultimately served to strengthen the Pan-Arab identity.

The Politics behind the Media

A statistical report and study printed in 1963 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) entitled *Statistics on Radio and Television 1950-1960*, categorized radio broadcasting in Egypt as a public service "[u]nder direct State control."²⁶ From the music of Umm Kulthum to Nasser's broadcasts, we are informed of the Pan-Arab vision belonging to Nasser and the relationship between media and politics. But as the saying goes, "actions speak louder than words." This is true of Nasser and his intentions; as Edward Webb points out, during Nasser's time, media was "nationalized and considered an extension of the ruling party and state, "mobilization" media whose role was to support top-down revolution."²⁷ There were also other programs created to fuel anti-colonial sentiments. The two most successful programs broadcast as part of *The Voice of the Arabs* "attracted millions of Arab listeners in the primetime hour of 3:00pm."²⁸ The two programs entitled "Truth and Lies" and "Do Not Forget" focused on more political topics. According to Alahmed, on "Truth and Lies", an announcer [would] read anti-Nasser newspaper articles and dismiss them as lies. He would then go on to explain the 'truth'.²⁹ Not only were there attempts to promote nationalist ideologies, Nasser also went a step further to make sure that the words of the opponent were tainted, marked as lies and far from the truth, which fueled Nasser's Pan-Arab ideology. On the one hand, Nasser preached his longing for the unity of the Arab world, but as time slowly revealed, *The Voice of the Arabs* was another strategy which contributed to the "appearance of limited diversity without troubling the dominant state narrative;"³⁰ this, ultimately, was for Nasser to be a leader, not just for the Egyptians, but for the people belonging to the Arab nations.

Conclusion

The Voice of the Arabs played a significant role in enabling Gamal Abdel Nasser to maintain Pan-Arabism in the Middle East, as it was employed as state apparatus to spread propaganda, fueling an atmosphere of anti-colonial discontent and, amongst other ideas, the dissemination of nationalist ideologies. We have looked at the history of radio in Egypt and the Arab world, analyzed the role of radio within Arabic societies and cultures, and then furthered our arguments by deconstructing Nasser's speeches and the various radio programs he started under the umbrella of The Voice of the Arabs.

Having looked at the moments and years of success that The Voice of the Arabs held onto, one can only be warned about the façade that Nasser has so successfully maintained and created during his regime. Did Nasser truly campaign for a united Arab identity, or was it all just a method for him to exercise more control and dominance over the rest of

²⁴Frishkopf, 142.

²⁵Alahmed, p12.

²⁶UNESCO. "Statistics on Radio and Television". *Statistical Reports and Studies* 1963.

²⁷Webb, Edward. *Media in Egypt and Tunisia: from control to transition?* 2014, 23.

²⁸Alahmed, 12.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

the Arab world? Nasser's broadcasts have surely been successful within both domestic and regional spheres, but in the end, it was Nasser's voice that underlined every single broadcast. In the words of Podeh, "Nasser's years in power were marked by a constant drive for all-Arab hegemony ... but he was in fact half-hearted in his self-aggrandizement."³¹ As for the development of the Pan-Arab program, *The Voice of the Arabs*, "in other words, was in most respects the voice of the Nasser regime."³² James's article highlights a quote from Ahmed Al-Said who argues that "we cannot separate the policies of Nasser from the broadcasting."³³ As for the radio as a type of mass media, one cannot help but recognize that the Nasserist regime had the upper hand. This struggle to find a balance of power between the state and its audience members is, unfortunately, not a feature granted to the audience members. Due to the one-way nature of interaction with radio, there was no direct opportunity during the regime for immediate reaction or backlash—a large shift compared to the two-way interactive nature of the Internet. Thus, during the regime lead by Gamal Abdel Nasser, the radio was very much still a strong state apparatus to spread propaganda, fueling an atmosphere of anti-colonial discontent and, amongst other ideas, the dissemination of nationalist ideologies. In this study of media and its relationship to politics, the rapid decline of Nasser and his regime reveals the futile nature of *The Voice of the Arabs* or, more generally, forms of mass media. The radio, one of the political tools which elevated the status of Nasser and his regime, was the very same thing that led to his downfall. Ultimately, this only serves to indicate how far one can rely on a form of mass media to secure an ideology before the cloak is removed, as it was to reveal the unstable nature of Nasser and his regime.

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³¹Podeh et al., 26.

³²James, Laura M. "Whose Voice? Nasser, the Arabs, and 'Sawt al-Arab' Radio." *Transnational Broadcasting Journal*. 2006.

³³Ibid.