

Arvind Singhal and Vijay Krishna (1994). *An Analysis of the Mass Media System in Syria*. In H. Mowlana and Y. Kamalipour (eds.), *Mass Media in the Middle East: A Comprehensive Handbook* (pp. 261-272), Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

SYRIA

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INTRODUCTION

Although Syria only gained its independence from France in 1946, it is one of the oldest inhabited lands in the world. Its history and geography are closely intertwined with those of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Palestine. These modern nation-states, created as a result of the defeat of the Turkish Ottoman Empire in World War I, were previously part of what was commonly referred to as "Greater Syria."

The Syrian Arab Republic covers an area of about 71,500 square miles and is slightly larger than the state of Oklahoma in the United States. The country lies south of Turkey and west of Iraq. Syria's southern frontier is bordered by Jordan, and to its west are the Mediterranean Sea, Lebanon, and Israel. From the perspective of military and trade, Syria occupies a highly strategic geographic location. The three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe converge here; in addition, Syria serves as a crossroad between the Caspian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Black Sea, and the River Nile. Consequently, Syria is a melting pot of diverse cultures, religions, and beliefs. Damascus is Syria's capital city.

In 1992, Syria's population was about 13 million and growing rapidly at a rate of 3.8 percent per year. Thanks to improved health facilities, the average life expectancy in Syria has climbed to about 65 years. If the present growth continues, the Syrian population will double by the year 2010. In 1992, some 50 percent of the Syrian people were under the age of 15.

The official language of Syria is Arabic. Nearly all Syrians speak Syrian

was largely controlled and regulated by the French. Licenses were issued to those publications that favored the ruling French power.

- *Phase II (1946–1963)*. After the French colonial rule was lifted in 1946, newspapers became politically active. During this period, the country experienced a “high degree of political activity” (Rugh, 1987). The frequent change of power in the government, and the internal competition among contenders for power, was reflected in the press. Almost all newspapers were owned and operated by individuals with strong political affiliations.
- *Phase III (1963 to present)*. Since 1963, one wing or another of the Ba’ath Party has ruled Syria (Rugh, 1987). The Syrian press has been largely influenced by the socialist stance of the Ba’ath regime. The structure of the press has been modified according to socialist patterns. The government plays a big role in deciding what news is in the greater public interest. To begin a new newspaper or periodical, one must apply for a government license (Rugh, 1987; Boyd, 1982; *Europa World Year Book*, 1992).

The daily newspapers account for a total circulation of 266,000 (*World Media Handbook*, 1992). The nine major Arabic-language newspapers and one major English-language newspaper are listed in Table 18.1. The major Arabic newspapers are *Al-Ba’ath* and *Tishrin* with circulations of over 75,000. Table 18.2 lists the major Arabic-language periodicals in Syria.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Radio

Radio broadcasting began in Syria in 1946 with the formation of the Syrian Broadcasting Organization. Administratively, radio was located in the office of the prime minister until 1959, when it became part of the newly formed Ministry of Information. In 1950, the government boosted the power of the radio transmission system from 13.6 kilowatts to 150 kilowatts, bringing many remote regions of Syria within the reach of a radio signal (Rugh, 1987). In the main cities of Aleppo and Damascus, four medium wave transmitters were established to broadcast radio programs in English, French, Turkish, and Hebrew. Short-wave transmitters were also installed to broadcast Syrian radio programs to other foreign countries. However, until the early 1960s, lack of funds and a lack of government commitment to radio limited radio’s expansion in Syria. Unlike Jordan and Egypt, Syria did not have strong, stable political leadership to implement the expansion of radio personnel, transmitters, and studio facilities (Boyd, 1982).

Syria’s radio and television services were greatly influenced by its union with Egypt between 1958 and 1961. Many Egyptian radio employees came to Syria, and many Syrian media officials went to Egypt for training. Syrian radio officials learned the Egyptian technique of using radio for propaganda purposes, which proved to be useful when the Egypt-Syria unification pact crumbled in 1961 and

Table 18.1
The Major Daily Newspapers in Syria

Name of Publication	Place of Publication	Time	Language	Circulation
<i>Al-Ba'ath</i> (Renaissance)	Damascus	Morning	Arabic	75.000
<i>Al-Fida</i> (Redemption)	Hama	Morning	Arabic	4.000
<i>Al-Jamahir al-Arabia</i> (The Arab People)	Aleppo	Morning	Arabic	10.000
<i>Al-Orouba</i>	Homs	Morning	Arabic	5.000
<i>Ash-Shabab</i> (Youth)	Aleppo	Morning	Arabic	9.000
<i>Al-Thawra</i> (Revolution)	Damascus	Morning	Arabic	75.000
<i>Al-Wahdah</i> (Unity)	Latakia	Morning	Arabic	10.000
<i>Barq ash-Shimal</i> (The Syrian Telegraph)	Aleppo	Morning	Arabic	6.400
<i>Syria Times</i>	Damascus	Morning	English	12.000
<i>Tishrin</i> (October)	Damascus	Morning	Arabic	75.000

Source: Compiled from data in *World Media Handbook*, 1992; and *Europa World Year Book*, 1992.

also in subsequent years with hostility mounting against neighboring Israel (Boyd, 1982). By 1965, Syria had installed 16 radio transmitters that could broadcast radio programs to the entire nation (Boyd, 1982).

While medium wave broadcasting flourished in Syria, shortwave broadcasting witnessed a decline in the 1960s and the 1970s. A lack of commitment to shortwave broadcasting and poor infrastructural maintenance led to the deactivation of all shortwave transmitters in 1978. In the 1980s, five 150-kilowatt replacement transmitters with sophisticated antenna systems were installed (Boyd, 1982).

In 1992, there were a total of 29 transmitters and 3 million radio receivers in Syria (*World Media Handbook*, 1992). Syrian radio broadcasts programs in 11 languages: Arabic (major language of radio programming in Syria), French, English, Russian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, Polish, Turkish, and

Table 18.2
The Major Arabic-Language Periodicals in Syria

Name of Periodical	Place of Publication	Periodicity	Language
<i>Al-Daad</i> (Literary)	Aleppo	Monthly	Arabic
<i>Al Funoon</i> (The Arts)	Damascus	Weekly	Arabic
<i>Al Iktisaad</i> (Financial)	Damascus	Monthly	Arabic
<i>Al Mara'a Al Arabiah</i>	Damascus	Monthly	Arabic
<i>Al-Maseerah</i> (Progress)	Damascus	Weekly	Arabic
<i>Al-Maukef Al Arabi</i>	Damascus	Monthly	Arabic
<i>Al-Mawki'f al-Arabi</i> (The Arab Situation)	Damascus	Monthly	Arabic
<i>Al Thakafah</i> (Cultural)	Damascus	Monthly	Arabic
<i>Al Usbu' Al Adabi</i> (Literary)	Damascus	Weekly	Arabic
<i>Kifah Al Ummal Al Ishtiraki</i>	Damascus	Weekly	Arabic
<i>Nidal Al Fallaheen</i>	Damascus	Weekly	Arabic

Source: Compiled from data in the *World Media Handbook*, 1992; and *Europa World Year Book*, 1992.

Bulgarian. Overseas shortwave broadcasts are targeted mainly to sympathetic expatriate Syrians, who escaped to Europe, North America, and Latin American countries during the Ottoman rule.

Radio broadcasts from the central studios in Damascus are available in Syria, except for a few hours in the early morning. Newscasts, drama, interviews, music, capsules on agriculture, health, and sanitation form the basic radio fare. While mainly designed for the Syrian audience, radio broadcasts are also intended for neighboring states. The content of radio programs is strongly influenced by the Ba'ath Party ideology. Media officials of such countries as Jordan,

Iraq, and Israel continuously monitor Syrian radio broadcasts to gauge possible shifts in Syrian policies that might affect them (Boyd, 1982).

Television

Syria's television system began in 1960 after the country briefly unified with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (Boyd, 1982). The United Arab Republic forged a contract with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) to implement a comprehensive television system in Syria. Both Syria and Egypt started their official television broadcasts on July 23, 1960 (Boyd, 1982). During the early years of Syrian television, Egyptian programming dominated nightly telecasts (Boyd, 1982). In fact, after the United Arab Republic collapsed in 1961 (with Egypt and Syria separating), Syrian officials blamed Nasser for having promoted the Syrian television system in order to have an eastern relay for Egyptian television programming (Boyd, 1982). During the 1960s and early 1970s, the facilities for television broadcasting did not expand rapidly in Syria owing to limited budget allocations and the frequent change of government leadership. Four studio facilities were built in Damascus in the 1960s, and television stations were also built in the cities of Aleppo and Homs in the 1960s.

Four major factors contributed to the rapid rise of television in Syria in the 1970s. First, the Ministry of Information with the Directorate General of Radio and Television embarked on an ambitious plan to install transmitters and relay stations in various parts of Syria. One motivation for installing relay stations was the increased availability of television signals from such neighboring countries as Jordan and Iraq. Particularly attractive was the Western entertainment programming broadcast on Jordanian channels (Boyd, 1982). Second, the Syrian Ministry of Industry began its collaboration with Siemens of Germany to assemble TV sets in Syria under the brand name of Syronex and to sell them to Syrian audiences at subsidized prices. At this point, the government also eliminated the television license fee, which also helped spur the sales of TV sets in Syria. Third, the Euphrates Dam was commissioned in Syria in the 1970s, which made possible large-scale electrification of almost every household in Syria, consequently encouraging the Syrian people to adopt television sets. Finally, several expatriate Syrians who worked in the Gulf brought home several thousands of television sets (Khudr, S. Personal Communication, January and March 1993).

By 1989, Syria had an estimated 710,000 television sets in the country (*Europa World Year Book*, 1992), and it was estimated that in 1992 at least 80 percent of all Syrian households owned a TV set. Many of these television sets are black and white, since color transmission only began in the late 1970s. Syrian television signals reach all parts of the country and also spill over into neighboring countries.

In 1992, Syrian television had two major national-level channels. One chan-

nel, which began as an experiment in commercial programming for the Damascus area, broadcasts entertainment programming (including imported television shows) in Arabic, English, and French. Such programs as the U.S. serial *Dallas* and many other Egyptian, Jordanian, and Lebanese shows are highly popular with Syrian audiences and achieve high audience ratings. The second channel broadcasts entirely in the Arabic language. Programming on this channel typically begins at 2:00 P.M. and runs until midnight. On Fridays and Saturdays, the programming hours are extended, beginning in the morning and closing at midnight.

Programming on the Arabic channel is mostly government supported, and there is a strong emphasis on such issues as news and public affairs, maintenance of Arab culture, children's programming, and light entertainment. Educational programs are broadcast in the afternoon from 2:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. for middle and high school children. The subjects treated on television include Arabic literature, English, French, math, physics, and chemistry. From 5:00 P.M. to 6:30 P.M., children's programs are telecast (including animated cartoons, folk stories), followed by a half-hour news program consisting of international news, national news, and news related to governmental affairs. The news program is quite easily the most important program to both the government and the Syrian viewers, and the television personnel put a great deal of time and effort into producing this program. From 7:00 P.M. to 9:30 P.M., light entertainment programs, including Arabic-language serials, are shown. From 9:30 P.M. to about midnight, feature films and sports programs showing mainly soccer and boxing events are shown.

Television programs on Syrian television are sponsored by both government sources and commercial advertisers. The operating costs of the Arabic-language channel come from the Ministry of Information; so there is virtually no pressure to raise money through the sales of commercial advertisements. Commercial advertisements, however, are increasing in number on Syrian television, even though only 30 percent of the advertising revenue that is raised is retained by the Syrian television system; the remaining 70 percent goes to the Ministry of Finance (Boyd, 1982). A large portion of commercial advertising on Syrian television includes publicity for state-run consumer goods industries.

While the television system in Syria expanded rapidly in the late 1970s and the 1980s, it is unlikely that Syria will build an elaborate national multichannel television system on par with that of some other Arab countries (Boyd, 1982), as national priorities and economic constraints serve as limiting factors. Audience research on viewers' preferences or on the effects of Syrian television is virtually nonexistent.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Videocassette recorders (VCRs) are increasingly being adopted and are mainly used for entertainment purposes, including watching films, soap operas,

and imported shows. Satellite dishes that can access overseas channels are highly controlled because of national security concerns. Owning a satellite dish requires government permission.

MOTION PICTURES

As in most Arab countries, motion pictures are a highly popular form of entertainment media in Syria. Syria started producing Arab-language movies in the early 1960s, and it produces about 15 to 20 movies a year. However, most Arabic-language movies are imported from Egypt, the ‘‘Hollywood of the Arab World,’’ and from India. English and French movies are also screened on a regular basis in theaters in Damascus and other major cities. In most cities, some theaters feature exclusively foreign-language films, while others prefer to feature only Arab-language films. There are about 20 movie theaters in Damascus, a relatively small number when compared with the number of theaters in other major cities of the world. Islamic traditions, which restrict women’s movement in public places, limit the numbers of theater-going audiences.

A government agency called the National Organization for Cinema, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, produces documentaries and full-length feature films. Many have won high acclaim in the Arab and Western worlds.

All foreign movies, especially the non-Arab-language movies, have to be cleared by the Censor Board, which is part of the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance. The Censor Board follows strict guidelines to make sure that extreme violence, sex, and obscenities are banned from movies.

Many Syrian artists and technical personnel were educated in the former Eastern Bloc countries. Hence, their filmmaking style is highly influenced by their teachers from those countries. In Syria, the Institute of Theater and Public Art, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and located in Damascus, is one of the few renowned schools that offers courses in acting and film production.

In recent years, the private sector involvement in film production has increased. The top private film producer is Duraid Lahham. A former professor of chemistry, Lahham is a popular movie star and producer of many hit films. His movies are a commentary on the political and social structures of Arab countries. They also deal with Arab culture and stereotypes. Much liked throughout the Arab World, Lahham’s movies, some say, have ‘‘revolutionized pan-Arabism’’ (Imadi, 1992).

The movie industry in Syria has prospered in the last 20 years. The movies have shown a great deal of improvement in production techniques. Syria exports movies to other Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon.

MEDIA OWNERSHIP

Mass media ownership in Syria is mostly concentrated in the hands of the government, which exercises a high degree of control in running the print, film,

and broadcast media and also in formulating policies for such new communication technologies as cable television, fiber optics, and computers. Private sector involvement in the form of commercial support for broadcasting and film production is limited but on the rise. The government strongly believes that the mass media and their messages have an important role to play in the development of the Syrian society and hence regulates it closely.

MEDIA REGULATION

The Syrian government regulates its mass media through a variety of licensing procedures, gatekeepers, and cultural guidelines. The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance play an important role in determining the content of television programs and movies. Government approval is needed for beginning newspapers and owning satellite dishes. Often, certain media are more easy to regulate than are others. For instance, the privately run video industry is very hard to regulate even though strong guidelines about appropriate video content and anti-video piracy laws are in place.

EXTERNAL MEDIA SERVICES

Because of the prevalence of the English and French languages among Syrian elites, Syria's external services division is quite strong. Syrian radio broadcasts in 11 different languages, while television broadcasts in Arabic, French, and English. Major English and French newspapers and magazines are published in Syria on a variety of topics (see Table 18.3). There is a lot of two-way media exchange between Syria and such countries as Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq.

NEWS AGENCIES

Syria established its own national news agency, Agence Arabe Syrienne d'Information, or Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), in 1966 in Damascus. All Syrian media receive their news stories from SANA. This national news agency has agreements with almost all major international news agencies for procurement and supply of news items from within and outside of Syria. Many foreign news agencies such as National News Agency EFE (Spain), Agence France-Presse (AFP, France), Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA, Italy), Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst (ADN, Germany) Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA, Germany), Associated Press (AP, United States), Informationsnoye Telegrfnoe Agentsvo Rossii (ITAR, Russia), and Telegrafnoe Agentsvo Sovetskovo Soyuz (Tass, Russia) have bureaus in Syria.

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Syrian government believes that the mass media can play an important role in the education and training of its citizens and contribute to national and regional development. Specifically, the government believes the media can:

Table 18.3
Foreign-Language Periodicals in Syria

Name of Periodical	Place of Publication	Periodicity	Language
<i>Ecos</i>	Damascus	Monthly	Spanish
<i>Flash</i>	Damascus	Monthly	English/French
<i>Le Lien</i> circ. 2,500	Damascus	Monthly	French
<i>Monthly Survey of Arab Economics</i>	Damascus	Monthly	English/French
<i>Revue de la Presse Arabe</i>	Damascus	2 a week	French
<i>Syrie et Monde Arabe</i> (Deals with economic, statistical, and political survey)	Damascus	Mmonthly	French/English

Source: Compiled from data in the *Europa World Year Book*, 1992.

- Promote the political, social, and cultural agenda of the Ba'ath Party in order that an appropriate climate for national development is created.
- Provide nonformal education and training to its citizens in the areas of health and hygiene, agriculture, and child development.
- Enhance Arab pride and promote "Pan-Arabism."

It is fair to say that the Syrian media has been successful in meeting at least some of its stated goals despite the criticism it has received of being a purely political propaganda apparatus.

CONCLUSION

The mass media system in Syria is strongly influenced by the ruling Ba'ath Party and is geared toward sustaining and promoting Arab culture, patriotism, and nationalism.

The print medium is a stronghold of the ruling party with many major publications having affiliations with government organizations. The broadcast media have seen some expansion in the last decade; the number of radio transmitters and television sets have increased rapidly since the 1980s. In accordance

with the interests and policies of the government, Syrian radio broadcasts in different languages to reach many neighboring countries. The television industry has prospered in the last decade but at a guarded pace set by the government.

The motion picture industry of Syria has also seen some major changes in the quality and quantity of movies produced, especially since the 1980s. With a rise in the number of talented personnel and the increasing number of private entrepreneurs, the motion picture industry is bound to exert a strong influence in the Arab World.

These improvements in the motion picture industry in the last decade indicate that the ruling socialist Ba'ath Party is not totally opposed to the concept of free enterprise. However, since the government exercises a high degree of control in running the print, broadcast, and film media, and also in formulating policies for such new communication technologies as cable television, fiber optics, and computers, the future of the Syrian mass media in general will be determined by the government's communication philosophy.

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