

Rethinking State Control over Media Production in Egypt

Abstract

Scholars of media in the Middle East have tended to discuss state control over media production in a dyadic mode: either as a *formal* process, whereby political and legal arrangements coerce media producers into omitting subversive narratives, or as an *informal* one, whereby private organizations or ideological commitment create an environment where non-mainstream narratives are rejected, discouraged, or made unthinkable to media producers. While the language of ‘formal’ vs. ‘informal’ control has some validity in describing the state’s hold over media, it tends to assume that the source of control is some centralized agency – i.e., ‘the state’. Yet, control is in fact distributed over a number of institutions and social agents who cannot all be claimed to be acting at the behest of a central authority. This centralizing view implies, moreover, that the sphere beyond formal and informal control is one of ‘freedom’ when, in fact, media production is always constrained by the kinds of organizational and ideological factors usually subsumed under the label of ‘informal control’. Thus, while it is evident that no purely ‘free’ expression can exist, constraints over content do not necessarily have to do with coercive state intervention, whether formal or informal: they can arise by other means – to give a concrete example, via spontaneous interference with film shoots by ordinary citizens.

This paper will work to unsettle the assumption that ‘the state’, as a single agent, can control media production, with a specific case study in mind: the making of film permits in contemporary Egypt. This case study is part of a wider ethnographic investigation into the working practices of the Egyptian film industry, which I conducted in Cairo between 2013 and 2015. The argument will proceed, first, by describing the byzantine process through which film permits are issued in Egypt. Then, I will explain the importance of paper permits in terms of their material efficacy, while giving several examples of their use in the everyday life of a film set. In conclusion, I will argue that the analytical category of ‘state control’ is inadequate, on its own, to account for the social and material effects of film permits, while bringing attention to the importance of street politics in audiovisual media production.