

Muhammad Abduh's Role in *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* an Official Egyptian Gazette

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the role of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) in his illustrious career as leading editor of *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* (الوقائع المصرية) [Egyptian Events] an official Egyptian gazette. It brings profound impact in the field of journalism in the context of rising popularity of *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* during his editorship (1880-1882), that established its reputation as leading Egyptian newspapers highlighting unprecedented socio-cultural and religious reform undertaken by the establishment, in the midst of phenomenal and competitive growth of independent press. His writing was instrumental in developing national consciousness toward modernization program and influencing public opinion in Egypt. It allowed for better development of formidable national spirit and awakening their higher ideal and convention in language, literature and culture as well as mobilizing social awareness of intense political and cultural dynamics. His career span the period of Riyad Pasha and Sharif's administration and subsequent political unrest. The research is based on qualitative and documentation technique. It reviewed accumulated data by way of descriptive, analytical, historical and comparative method. The finding shows that *al-Waqā'i'* has assumed unprecedented influence and success during the editorship of Abduh through his dynamic and productive articles and rigorous daily basis of production of the newspaper that help to raise public issues and concern and attract awareness of global political situation as well as defending the significance value, norms and ethics of journalism.

Introduction

The article examines the significant ideas and role of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) in his leading position in the highly reputed newspaper *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* (الوقائع المصرية) [Egyptian Events] as its chief editor in 1880. This highly stimulative and encouraging activity involved many dynamic position and role he assumed in the newspaper's bureaucratic structure that had brought meaningful influence and connection in a wide-ranging intellectual networks and activism forthcoming from his impressive career as leading activist and journalist of the modern intellectual movement of late 19th

century Egypt. With the mediation of newspaper, it provides significant medium for his modernist project, as a mouthpiece that allowed him to articulate his social, political and literary views, aiming to interpret and understand the ever expanding political, cultural and ethico-moral norms and values of the universal world, and developing his global religious ideas and its underlying reformist tradition. According to Ammeke Kateman, “Abduh formulated his ideas in the newspapers of Cairo...responding to domestic politics, engaged with Islamic tradition, reflected his friendships and animosities – in addition to the ways they participated in global developments.”

His creative and meaningful approaches of interpretation has enabled the formation of global and broadly international network of audiences and followers, which fascinated by the progressive ideas he espoused for educational and social reform and the deeply metaphysical and intellectual articulation of tawhid and religious enlightenment and reforms he led to uphold the imperative of moral orders, expanding the well-being and welfare of the people, expressing dynamic force of political, religious, cultural, artistic and social movement, ideas and national consciousness.

The social context and progressive nature of journalism in Egypt was instrumental in enabling the spread of his rational and pluralistic ideas (*jama'i*) to flourish. The projection of these radically global and transformative ideas was developed through his influence and writing in local newspapers that profoundly impacted the entire make up of socio-cultural and national fabric, in awakening their spirit toward social cohesiveness, leveraging their cultural awareness of the productive scientific and technological invention in education and literature, and ultimately toward national progress, religious reform and universal freedom while simultaneously brought into consciousness the ongoing secular onslaught in the midst of the revolutionary upheaval in Egypt.

Since his school days, Abduh had developed an interest in writings and scholarship by contributing his work in local magazines and newspapers, such interest and activity which never faded until the end of his life. The momentous experiences and exposure gained throughout the years had greatly help to widen his horizon of evolving religious views and concerns, a theme which attracted much discussion among young generation of Muslim community in the Islamic world.

In the process of modern advancement and progress of the Egyptian land, the part played by newspaper and journalism were far more important than most of the western countries, which reflected an interesting fact that most of the pioneers of modern religious movement and reformism started their career as writer and journalist in newspaper, such as Mustafa Kamil (1874-1908), Sa'ad Zaghlul (1859-1927), Ahmad Mahir (d. 1945), Taha Husayn (1889-1973), 'Abbas Mahmoud al-'Aqqad (1889-1964), Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888-1956) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Abduh's technical achievement

in journalism alone is enough to remembered him as one of the precursors of modern journalism in Egypt in colonial age.

One of the most important period of his journalistic career is during his incumbency as its editorial and later was officiated to became the chief editor of the Egyptian Government Gazette, “*al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah* (October 1880-September 1882). In spite of the newspaper being the official tongue and channel of the government, he showed his own independent voice and exclusive views, in bringing out the reality of socio-cultural and economic conditions of the ordinary people. This is especially highlighted in his critics of the establishment, and his defend of the right of the oppressed, the leftist group and opposition, the fate of the workers, activists, and their local representative, meant to safeguard the liberal democratic space and principle and their inalienable right to freedom of expression.

His writings expressed a significant pattern of balance and moderate viewpoints, of justifiably fair reporting in casting social aspirations, inculcating social empathies and current matters of concerns, while upholding progressive and rational policies and values. This has significantly made way for improvement of governmental bureaucratic functions besides influencing public opinion on the ways issues and policies being highlighted to raise public awareness of its rationale and consequently finding practical solutions to the problems.

Toward this objective, the present paper aims to comprehensively discusses the immense role of Muhammad Abduh as editor-in-chief of Egyptian State Gazette, “*al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah* (1880-1882) in his effort to enhance the standard of journalism in Egyptian national context.

Method

This study is qualitative in nature, using documentative and bibliographic technique. It analyzes qualitatively and quantitatively the historical archives of the past serials of *Al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah* especially leading articles and writings of Muhammad Abduh. Other relevant data were obtained from certain primary and secondary sources including books, magazines, manuscripts, thesis, articles, and periodicals such as *al-Mu’ayyad* and *al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqa*. These were analyzed in a descriptive, analytical, historical and comparative manner based on empirical and scientific basis to make an accurate and coherence finding from the interplay of its theoretical arguments and environmental factors and premises.

Results and Discussion

The portrayal of Muhammad 'Abduh as journalist and its influence in the shaping of political consciousness and the enriching of *adab* in Egyptian context was succinctly encapsulated by William Ryle-Hodges in his article on Muhammad 'Abduh's notion of political *adab*, and the virtue of modern citizenship in late 19th century Khedival Egypt, in which he addresses the significance dynamics of his newspaper writings and its interaction with largely enlightened ground of universally modern context of religious sphere and politically embedded traditional ethics reflecting its cultural-moral and philosophical significance: "Muhammad 'Abduh's engagement with Islamic ethical traditions was shaped by his practice in addressing the broad social and political questions of his context (which has) to do with nation-building and political journalism. As a bureaucrat and state publicist, he took pre-modern Islamic ethical concepts into the emerging discursive field of the modern state and the public sphere in Egypt."

Hodges argued that since assuming his role as Director of Publications for the Khedival state and editor of the official newspaper between 1880-1882, 'Abduh had practically articulated the modern civic notion of *adab*, a vision which was comprehensively embedded in public sphere and people's lives, animating their "souls", which implied "wide breath of knowledge, good taste, and the virtues." This ethical notion he conceived was contextually enshrined in his holistic approach to nation building, underlying his respond to local modernizing practice. The inception of this ideas forthcoming, from "a series of newspaper articles that 'Abduh wrote for the state newspaper, *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah*" show how he conceived this *adab* as the answer to the emerging problem of freedom, in the context of allowing free speech in public sphere and the power of public opinion to shape governance."

In essence, this provided the backdrop of his enlightening work in the modern period of the history of Ottoman Egypt. It integrates the religious and ethical norms that moulded an Egyptian consciousness which embrace freedom and liberty and envisioning the value and ideal of patriotism. In his article on 'Political Life" he emphasized on the progressive symbol of identity and nationhood and the fundamental motive and reason for the love of homeland: "firstly, the homeland is the abode of sustenance and security, family and children. Secondly, the homeland is the place in respect of which we have both rights and obligations, the pivot of political life. Thirdly, it is in relation to their homeland that people are raised to dignity or lowered to humility." In the occasion of the formation of Constituent Assembly on December 26, 1881, he wrote an article in favour of constitutional and representative government. In his article "Shura" he espoused the necessity of national representation for both rulers and ruled. The partialities and propensities of rulers can be restrained through public opinion and consultation. He also propounded on the basic postulate of law. In safeguarding social institution, it is necessary that a law (constitution) be enacted. The ideal law is one that would be an expression of public opinion and based on consultation, that suit with local need and tradition.

In this sense, his writings had manifested a sense of journalistic responsibility and inclusivity, in its treatment of domestic and foreign affairs patterned on the progressive model of *al-Manar*, *al-Mu'ayyad*, *al-Ahram*, and *Thamarat al-Funun*. that propounded the creative knowledge and social practice of the complex and dynamic society and projected the social utility of religion in the policing of social morality.

In historical terms, Abduh's early exposure to the world of journalism initially began with his meeting with his celebrated mentor Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in Egypt who introduced him to the nuance and practice of journalism. This relationship had drawn him into the unique experience of higher philosophical and intellectual inquiry and horizon and its conceptual and metaphysical underpinning. Al-Afghani's penetrating insight and progressive outlook had deeply influenced and brought him into complex religious, philosophical and cultural dynamics that influenced his intellectual formation, an impression that drawn him into the classic of Western tradition and philosophy. His intellectual life was molded by the impact of rational and empirical enquiry which later realized in his struggle in the intense political scene and intrigue. This was also reflected in his mystical and philosophical writings that reveal the profound appeal of moral and ethical imperatives as well as his reflection on the influence of colonial expansion and imperialism in Egypt. In 1293/1876, Abduh actively wrote essays for the weekly *al-Ahram* ("The Pyramid") which was aligned with his function and involvement in the controversial newspaper propaganda in order to uphold the widely-held aspiration of Egyptian people for self-determination and safeguard their national heritage and interest, which culminated in the organized mass uprising mobilized by 'Urabi Pasha to remove the corrupt regime of powerful ruling elite.

According to Masato Iizuka in his analysis of 'Abduh's struggle in the period of 'Urabi Pasha revolt, his movement was aimed to uphold the *shari'ah*, which he took part in the wake of the resignation of the Cabinet of Riyad Pasha in September 1881. Before that, he was editor-in-chief of the Egyptian official gazette, *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah* unquestionably supporting the move of reactionary Government. This changing of attitude was due to his recognition for the existing effort in the creation of representative parliament, as inquired from his articles published in the periodicals *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah* entitled "*Ikhtilaf al-qawanin bi-ikhtilaf ahwal al-umam*" (laws should change in accordance with the conditions of nations) and "*al-shura wa'l-qanun*" (the parliament and the law) which espoused for the national programs of reform and unified convention of law as well as the contextual application of shariah.

Abduh's Journalistic Career

Abduh took up his career as a journalist and newspaperman of the periodical *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah* in October 1880 until September 1882. In addition to writing articles and reports in headlines, he also run in ex-officio as Head of the Press Bureau, responsible for monitoring and filtering foreign news in Turkish and Arabic, and commit his best effort to raise its standard in terms of style and content. In this capacity, it is amazing and unprecedented to see this profound and magnanimous role he assumed as described by

Muhammad Rashid Rida in his accounts in his *Tārīkh*, of an extraordinary look in this double function of:

“a turbaned Azhari participating in the affairs of a Government whose activities were far removed from the world of scholars and men of religion, looking out from a window of his editorial office onto the Ministries and Law-Courts and Services of the Government, reforming the literary style of their servants and directing them to improve their work; then looking from another window onto the Egyptian nation, rectifying its morals and reforming its corrupted customs...; then looking from a third window onto the Arabic press, teaching it a refined editorial style and training it to write the truth.”

In view of his position as leading editor of *al-Waqā'i‘ al-Misriyyah* was parallel with nationalist movement led by 'Urabi Pasha, and as everyone involved in public affairs in no way can be separated from political activities, 'Abduh came to the scene in the centre stage, in which he played an immensely significant role.

Since 19th century, Egypt has undisputedly become the epicentre of Arabic thought and culture, and its Arabic newspapers have made huge impact on the cultural, literature, social and political development throughout the Arab world. The first Arab newspaper, under the autocratic rule of Muhammad 'Ali, arguably was *al-Waqā'i‘ al-Misriyyah* which was established as a state organs, which was also the first newspaper in the Arab region as a whole under direct Ottoman rule. After that period, many competing independent newspapers emerged in Egypt, in a relatively free environment, compared to the Ottoman provinces which allowed no such liberty in publishing.

Al-Waqā'i‘ al-Misriyyah arguably was the first Arab newspaper in the world. Founded by Muhammad 'Ali Pasha in 1828, it remained the only periodicals in Egypt which lasted for forty years, serving as historical recorder and training school for authors and guiding aid for oriental readers. This was made possible by the instrumental role of printing machine which was introduced by Napolean Bonaparte earlier as a tool of propaganda in the wake of his sacking and occupying of Egypt in 1798. After a period of stagnation, wherein it was markedly overcome by the growing popularity of other rival independent newspapers, *al-Waqā'i‘* gained a new breath and reaching the peak of its fame and prosperity under the skilled leadership of Muhammad 'Abduh. After that, in the changing political context and atmosphere, it return to its ertswhile position as a common official newspaper.

Muhammad 'Abduh was the successor to Rifa‘ah Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi (1801-73), who firstly led the periodicals in 1841 under the direction of Muhammad 'Ali, whose legacy was continued by Muhammad 'Abduh forty years later. In the hands of 'Abduh, *Al-Waqā'i‘* reached its highest achievement of transformation, starting to published on daily basis with renewed interest and influence, connecting to global audience and foreign networking, with higher level and standard rarely imagined in history. With his sustained and pioneering effort, it has left lasting force of intellectual imprint in it.

Al-Waqā'i' was revived by Khedive Ismail (r. 1863-79) after its stagnated and underdeveloped era of 'Abbas I (d. 1854) and Sa'id (d. 1863). Less than a month after 'Abduh's appointment, Bulaq's printing house has been summoned to continue its publishing which was previously banned by the regime. Under the reign of Ismail, *al-Waqā'i'* emerged as one the most authoritative and reputed newspaper, far surpassed its previous condition. In less than two years under his leadership, 'Abduh had brought the periodicals into unprecedented reform of editorial practice with heightened level of professionalisms and values while maintaining its elite standard as official state's mouthpiece, which served as vehicle and intermediary for people's aspiration and interest and espoused strong and impressive values and ideal of freedom and justice that widely influence social and religious practice in that relatively uncertain period.

'Abduh's Writings in *Al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah*

Arguably 'Abduh painstaking works in the periodical *Al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* make innovative use of his polemical and political writings in the newspaper to anticipate a resurgence (*nahda*) of national movement for legal and institutional reform in the emerging Egypt's colonial and capitalist economy. In this, his journalism - reminiscent of al-Afghani and his political activism - was targeting the elite for "failing to uphold rule of law and to distribute the benefits of modernization" while justifying its appeal for wider intellectual and power dynamics transition. The enriching discourse of nationhood, ethics and law in his newspaper articles has shaped the movement at modernizing the state, in which "he was pioneering journalism as a form of moral education (*adab*) to mobilize the souls of the reading public" in the process of promoting bureaucratic and state reform project.

The enlighten movement of rationalism in the French revolution had also found resonance in his article and seminal work, *Al-Islam wa'l-Nasraniyyah ma 'al 'ilm wa'l-Madaniyyah* (Islam and Christianity in relation to Science and Civilization) in which 'Abduh categorically defends the compatibility of reason and revelation. In this, he adopted the ideas of renown Western scientist and thinker, John William Draper (1811-1882) in his work *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) of the proposed harmony between faith and reason.

This also applied to his ethico-legal writings in the periodicals which was intrinsically imbedded with aspects of utility in legal theory, which implied centrality of *maqasid al-shariah* as principal framework in formulating and deriving legal rules and opinions. This idea was rooted on the consideration of justice and public utility and pragmatic need, which emphasized on aspects of utilization and benefit and its practicality the ranging of which was justified by its context and exigency. In this perspective, he gives precedence to reason over the literal meaning of the shariah, "in that it has the final decision on the question of happiness, and in the distinction between truth and untruth and between harmful and useful things."

According to Sawi, in term of the institutional reform accomplished during Abdūh's incumbency of the editorialship of *al-Waqā'i'*, it was due to his transcendental and pioneering work in treating religious, educational, social and moral problems in his newspaper articles, which has been widely read and highly esteemed by its various audiences and help to bring significance change in the governmental policy, "contributing towards the modern revival of the spiritual, cultural and social life of the Egyptian and Muslim peoples" and liberating them from the stagnant and dead tradition. Some of his newspaper articles on theological and legal topics issued in *al-Waqā'i'*, to name a few, were: "Attainment of eminence by virtue" (in praises of General Garfield, the President of the United States, for his skillful conduct of highly civilized and democratic rule in the United States), "The necessity of marriage for mankind" (that describes the need and virtue of marriage and its religious merit to have an essentially harmonious familial life), "Tendency to poverty or foolishness of peasants" [*Hubb al-Faqr wa Safh al-Fallāh*] (on the extravagant spending of the Egyptian peasants on luxurious and superfluous things that lead to moral decadence and poverty).

In addition, he also wrote profound articles on "Civilisation", "Untoward consequences of bribery", "Integrity and its requirements", "Much ado about nothing", "Our association and their talks", "Misplacement", "*Ma huwa al-faqr al-haqiqi fi al-bilad*" (the real poverty of the country – of adopting new methods in agricultural process, to facilitate the labour to grow their crops), *Kalām fī Khata' al-'Uqalā'* (the error of the intelligentsia – criticizing the obsession of the intellectuals with modern foreign ideas that were abruptly enforced on the immature masses. In his estimate, reform and upliftment of the nation must be developed gradually, otherwise it will fail to accomplish. He laments his fellow-countrymen who take pride in imitating the Europeans, trying to enjoy the fruits of their progress, without proceeding through its stages and following its causes. He suggests that people should be taught gradually on democratic life by means of municipal and provincial councils, as practiced in Italy and France. Political awareness can be created through newspapers and local organizations. At the same time "distinctive limitations on personal conduct and actions should be laid down", *al-Wataniyyah* (patriotism – on the responsibility of the rich to reduce poverty by spending money on the poor and making cash endowment) *Īd Misr wa Matla' Sa'ādatuhā, Ihtirām Qawānīn al-Hukūmah wa awāmirihā min sa'ādat al-ummah* (reverence for government laws and regulations necessary for the prosperity of the nation – appealing the people to respect the law, and the authorities, and to strike common understanding and cooperation between the government and the people for mutual benefit, whose welfare depend on precise interpretation of the law and its strategic goal "the country will lead a proper life if the officials use the utmost precision in interpreting the texts and limitations of the law, and in understanding its real intention"), and et cetera.

Throughout these articles, he makes the case for the productive capital drive and production of the *fellah*, by modernizing the farms and agricultural sectors. The Egyptian lands were fertile and productive however such natural qualities and resources alone were not adequate, it needs fitting labour and best technique to utilize and exploit it. The real wealth of the country is the existence of a pool of qualified worker and personnel.

In another occasion, he denounces the unbearable taxes on the natives, in those trying days, fortunately the situation has now (1880) changed, and the illegal taxes has been abolished. But alas, instead of releasing their pledged properties and farms, the peasants had fallen to luxurious lifestyle and continue to borrow from banks and succumbed to manifold interest. He also reminded of the harmful consequences of concentrating wealth in the hand of the few to the healthy demand of the market and the chain of good since the majority of population lack purchasing power, and this would affect and reduced their efficiency and interest in industry controlled by the few while depriving the majority.

The wide-ranging context and appeal of his spiritual and theological works makes an invaluable contribution to address some dimension of contested ideas in public space which geared towards modern development and revival and serve as a tool and medium of dialogue with wider horizon and setting of broad cultural and moral ground.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the undisputed role of Muhammad 'Abduh as leading editor of "al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah" has bring journalistic triumphs to *al-Waqā'i'* as first paper of the Arab world. It has set forth dynamic progress to its editorial standards and organization as exemplified by his fair reporting and unusually simple and balance writing of highly literary style. It was meant to underscore institutional and social reform by its adhering to the highest ethical and religious values and standards and compellingly modern outlook. This was also reflected in term of his editorial skills in *al-Waqā'i'* forthcoming in the significance practice and conduct of journalism which largely help to raise its standard and reclaim its rightful position as leading periodicals in the rising context of nationwide movement to proclaim its cultural, literature and art reflowering. In this spirit, he mediates the interest of state apparatus and the masses to highlight compelling issues of broad interest and to reassert their legal and social convention and responsibility in establishing its underlying cause and tentative solution.

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