

Information freedom tied to politics, culture, economy

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A study by two University of Arizona journalism professors indicates that Arab countries are not quite ready to embrace government transparency.

It could take some time before Arab countries embrace the rights of citizens and the press to access government information.

Two University of Arizona School of Journalism researchers came to this conclusion in their analysis of a dozen political, cultural and economic factors common to countries that have adopted freedom-of-information laws, and those that haven't.

"We decided to pursue this line of research as we read about draft access-to-information legislation being debated in a half-dozen Arab countries," said Jeannine Relly, an assistant professor who co-authored the study with David Cuillier, also an assistant professor in the School of Journalism.

"Interestingly, the U.S. Agency for International Development has provided funding support in the region for news media and civil society networks that are advancing government transparency ideology. We wanted to look at the context in which this legislation may be adopted," Relly said.

Of the 22 Arab countries, only one – Jordan – has adopted a freedom-of-information law similar to the U.S. Freedom of Information Act that

gives citizens the legal right to access government documents. Worldwide, out of more than 190 countries, nearly 80 nations have such laws.

In the study, published in the recent issue of *Government Information Quarterly*, Relly and Cuillier examined 12 political, cultural and economic factors that have been associated with countries that adopt freedom-of-information laws, such as press freedom, lack of corruption, women's rights, literacy, wealth and telecommunications infrastructure.

They found that Arab countries closely mirror other countries that haven't adopted freedom-of-information laws, suggesting that the political, cultural and economic environments are not conducive for government transparency in the Arab world.

"As always, there are exceptions," said Relly, noting that Jordan, for example, which adopted an access-to-information law, had literacy, rule of law and control of corruption scores that were close to the group of other nations with the legislation.

"From what we can gather, a number of governments in the Arab world, and elsewhere, are considering this legislation as a development tool, as a way to demonstrate government accountability in a transnational business environment rather than as a pronouncement of democratic governance," she said.

In the area of the economy, some Arab countries should be able and prepared to set up the infrastructure necessary for implementing freedom-of-information laws. They share the wealth of many countries that have access laws. But as the study indicates, just because a country is wealthy doesn't mean its government will be forthcoming with information.

In particular, Arab countries face the greatest challenge in the political realm, where they exhibit lower ratings than most nations in press freedom, civil liberties, political rights and the rule of law – all of which are seen as important in governments adopting laws providing citizens the right to access government records.

Political will appears to be one of the most important factors in [government](#) transparency, Cuillier said. He noted, however, that non-democratic countries can and do adopt freedom of information laws. For example, China and Russia have such laws.

"We think of China as a closed, undemocratic society, but in reality it was the first country in the world to adopt open-government policies," Cuillier said.

"Emperor T'ai-tsung in the A.D. seventh century allowed people to beat a drum in front of the palace if they wanted information. China went astray for awhile but maybe with its new freedom-of-information [law](#) it's coming back. That goes to show that freedom and liberty can come and go in a nation – it's up to the people to let them wither or demand they stay."

Provided by University of Arizona

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