

Arab Satellite Television Between Regionalization and Globalization *

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Introduction

Arab media burst onto the North American radar screen when Al-Jazeera, a Qatari all news pan-Arab satellite television station, scooped the world's media with its coverage of the U.S. attack on Afghanistan in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Until then, with the exception of counted academic experts and a few articles and opinion pieces in the leading national newspapers, the Arab mass media had not received much attention in American public discourse. Because of this lack of interest, the development of the mass media in Arab countries, their socio-cultural impact and their political implications, remain poorly understood. For this reason, this article aims at introducing Arab media from a historical perspective, focusing on satellite television broadcasting, and analyzing the relationship between that media sector and the phenomenon of globalization. This article revolves around the following questions: How did Arab television, especially satellite television, evolve historically? What political, economic, and cultural forces shaped the operation and content of Arab media and how? What challenges do these regional Arab mass media face in the era of globalization? Finally, what are the political, economic and cultural implications of transnational Arab satellite television?

Since its inception in the 1950s, Arab television has been owned and operated by governments, most of them non-elected and authoritarian. Until the 1990s, there were a few exceptions to this trend, with private television experiments in Iraq, Morocco, and most notably Lebanon, where television was initially conceived as a partnership between the state and business interests (Boulos, 1996; Kraidy, 1998b). The 1974-2000 war in Lebanon eroded the power of the central government and opened the floodgates for private— what Boyd (1991) called “unofficial”— broadcasting inaugurated in 1985 by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), now LBCI with the addition of “international” to its name. The launching of LBC by the Christian paramilitary formation called the Lebanese Forces triggered a wave of private television stations opened by the militia’s competitors in Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in more than fifty television stations in 1995 (Kraidy, 1998b).

More than six years after the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation initiated terrestrial broadcasting, the Gulf War revealed the popularity of the Cable News Network (CNN) among Arab audiences. This triggered a series of developments that lead to the establishment of private television in Arab countries, inaugurated with the 1991 launching in London of the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) by Saudi business interests with the support of the royal family. While the Lebanese experience with private television was originally with terrestrial television—expanding to the satellite realm only a few years later (Kraidy, 1998a)—the Arab experience with non-governmental media has been largely restricted to satellite television. In addition to the launching of MBC, 1991 saw the opening of the Egyptian Satellite Channel, owned by the Egyptian state, and in subsequent years, numerous Arab satellite stations, both government-owned and private, went on the air (Amin & Boyd, 1994).

The Historical Development of Satellite Television in the Arab World

While recent events have put Arab media at the center of world politics, the history of the development of satellite broadcasting in the Arab world warrants a detailed rendition, because the rapid growth of the satellite industry in the Arab world during the past decade (Amin, 2000; Amin & Boyd, 1994; Barkey,

1996; Kraidy, 1998a; Millichip, 1996; Sakr, 1999; Schleifer, 1998) was made possible by political and technical developments since the late 1960s.

In 1967, Arab information ministers articulated the principles of a satellite network whose goal was the integration of the social and cultural activities of the Arab League, a regional organization formed after World War Two (Overview, 1997). In the meantime, the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) was formed in 1969 (Boyd, 1999). Saudi Arabia did not join the Egypt led and Cairo-based ASBU until 1974, most probably because of the tense relationship between Saudi Arabia and Egypt at the time.

On April 14, 1976, the Arab Satellite Communications Organization (ARABSAT) was established under Arab League jurisdiction and entrusted with serving the information, cultural and educational needs of its members (Overview, 1997). Saudi Arabia, because of its considerable financial resources expanded by the oil price boom of 1973, was the main financier of the new organization and Riyadh, the Saudi capital, housed its headquarters. After a failed launching attempt by a French Ariane rocket led to the loss of the first satellite 1-A, the U.S. space shuttle Discovery successfully launched a second satellite, 1-B in 1985 (Amin & Boyd, 1994). ARABSAT 1-A and 1-B were switched off in 1992 and 1993 respectively ("Satellite Generations," 2002).

ARABSAT launched its second generation satellites 2-A and 2-B in July and November, 1996 respectively ("ARABSAT second," 1997). These geostationary (longitude 26 degrees East), high-power satellites carry a total of 34 active transponders (Fixed Satellite Service). Their expanded technical capacities were said to give ARABSAT a competitive edge in the region (Kazan, 1996). ARABSAT 1-C, launched in 1992, was sold to the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) in 1997 ("Satellite Generations," 2002).

The third generation ARABSAT 3-A satellite was launched in February 1999, co-located with 2-A. This is a powerful satellite with one single transponder covering all Arab countries, most of Europe and a good part of Africa.

With technical development having laid the groundwork, Arab governments have competed with private companies for a share in the distribution and content of information and entertainment beamed to more than 300 million Arabic speakers across the Arab Middle East. Initial satellite broadcasts by the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) and the Egyptian government satellite channel (ESC) in 1991 have been followed by a variety of contenders: In 1993, Arab Radio and Television (ART) began broadcasting in Arabic and English. It was soon followed by Orbit Satellite Television and Radio Network who in 1994 transmitted on 19 television channels (Russell, 1994). By 1996, Arab and Middle Eastern skies were invaded by a plethora of satellite programs (Barkey, 1996). Several government sponsored services such as Libya TV, Yemen TV, Jordan TV and the Syrian Satellite Channel, competed against private corporations such as MBC, ART, Orbit and also the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International and Lebanon's Future Television, both of whom were relatively late comers when they went on the air in 1996 (Kraidy, 1998a).

From Regionalization to Globalization?

While the importance and implications of these regional developments should not be underestimated, transnational broadcasting is not a novelty in the Arab world, which is the underlying discourse encountered in much commentary on the phenomenon. Arabs have historically been targeted by numerous Arabic language media. As recently as 1999, Boyd (1999) noted that "Arabic [was then] second only to English as an international broadcasting language" (p. 5). The proliferation of mass communication in the region can be explained by the region's geopolitical importance as a world center for oil production and the cradle of Islam. Because of the common Arabic language, the small size of many Arab countries, and political tensions, many of these media operations reached across national borders. For decades, Arab audiences were able to receive various signals from numerous Arab stations, the highly popular Radio Monte-Carlo Arabic service, Radio France Internationale, the British Broadcasting Corporation, The Voice of America and Radio Moscow, to name but a few. In light of these established precedents of transnational broadcasting, what changes has satellite television brought to the

region?

With the advent of satellite television, most media operations are de facto recognized as not only pan-Arab, i.e. covering the Arab world, but also global. While pan-Arab media are not global in the same sense that some Western companies, such as Cable News Network (CNN) or the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), or even Latin American conglomerates like Globo or Televisa, the reach of Arab satellite television exceeds the regional sphere. Does this mean that Arab satellite television stations are truly global players? There are indications that geographically, Arab satellite television does cover most of the globe's surface, but does this global presence translate into real global influence?

Currently, diasporic Arab audiences in North and South America, Europe, Africa and Oceania receive Arabic programming delivered through shortwave radio, the Internet, or more commonly, by cable or satellite. Arab population centers in the United States, including the Toledo-Detroit corridor in Ohio and Michigan, the Los Angeles, New York and Washington, DC areas, are connected to their home countries via television. The same can be said of Arab population centers in Europe, Australia, and to a lesser extent South America. As early as the late 1980s, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation was targeting Lebanese communities in Montreal and Toronto. At that time, ongoing military fighting in Christian areas in Lebanon has intensified emigration, especially to Canada, and Lebanon's first fully private media company catered to the growing Lebanese-Canadian community. During the same period, the Arab Networks for the Americas (ANA) was launched in Virginia, USA, and later sold to MBC. Arab satellite television, by virtue of following the global migration patterns of Arabs, has achieved a global reach concentrated in metropolitan areas in the West.

Other, mostly political, factors have led to the increased globalization of Arab media. In spite of the abundance of international broadcasting in Arabic, most Arab media were focused on domestic audiences, who were subjected to a daily diet of protocol news, state directed programming, and in many cases direct propaganda. Broadcast dissent was unheard of, and many national audiences were not informed of events happening in neighboring Arab countries. With the commercialization of Arabic television in the 1990s, and the growth of satellite television, a pan-Arab audience has emerged and changed the way that media programmers, advertisers and politicians conceived of the Arab audience.

With the conflict between Israel and Palestine acting as a lightning rod mobilizing Arab audiences with daily footage from the West bank and Gaza, there has formed a pan-Arab "imagined community" that the proponents of Pan-Arabism could have only dreamt about a few decades ago. This sense of belonging to a community has also made the "Arab street" a constant topic in the United States media, especially in the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, 2001. In the wake of the United States war on terrorism, the festering conflict in Israel/Palestine, and the Washington drum beating on Iraq, there is a growing sense that Arab public opinion does have global implications. The United States State Department has hired Charlotte Beers, a Madison Avenue advertising executive, as Under-Secretary for Public Diplomacy, with her main mission consisting of "selling" American policies and viewpoints to Arabs. Radio Sawa, which means together in Arabic, is a new U.S. government funded radio station using a mixed format targeting Arab youth.

Perhaps the main impetus behind these effort is the growing importance of transnational Arab news media, notably the phenomenon of al-Jazeera, the Qatari all news channel that has become a global cause célèbre since airing videotapes produced and featuring Usama Bin Laden, leader of the al-Qaeda network and public enemy number one in the prevailing world order. As el-Nawawy and Farag (2001) demonstrate, al-Jazeera has become a household name by challenging every imaginable Arab taboo, ranging from interviewing Islamic radicals and Israeli generals, to frontal attacks on Arab government and no-holds barred discussion of social and cultural controversies. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and the US attack on the Taliban regime, al-Jazeera had for weeks exclusive access to the Afghan scene. The network sold footage to an impressive range of world media, and became a source of fascination, praise and outrage in global public discourse.

In the current conjecture the Middle East is again at the heart of global geopolitics. With the Saudi-American relationship at an historically low ebb, the drums of an Iraqi war beating loudly in

Washington, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reaching a boiling intensity, the stakes of the post-September 11 era are very high for Arab regimes. As a result, political issues are taking an unprecedented importance on the level of transnational media. While these developments might appear to be unprecedented, they in fact fall in line with history, which provides the willing contemporary observer with important insights on the current situation. In the 1950s, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's Voice of the Arabs was one example of a country using pan-Arab broadcasting in order to assert cultural and political views on neighboring countries. Voice of the Arabs was generously financed and staffed because Nasser's regime saw it as a strategic asset in mobilizing Arab masses for the war against Israel and the political struggle with the oil-rich Gulf regimes, to fulfill his vision of a united Arab nation.

In fact, Saudi broadcasting developed largely as a counterbalance to hostile Egyptian broadcasts hostile to the Saudi royal family (Boyd, 1999). After Libya's diplomatic relations with Malta deteriorated in the late 1970s, Libya's Qaddafi unsuccessfully targeted Cyprus as the site of a pan-Arab Libyan radio station ("Kooley, 1980). Broadcasting "battles" animated Middle Eastern airwaves in the early 1980s as warring Iran and Iraq waged a radio propaganda war (Temko, 1984, March 7) and broadcasts from Lebanon reached neighboring Jordan, Syria, Israel and Cyprus (Badran, 1991; Kraidy, 1998b). Perhaps more important for Arab regimes was the fact that their citizens sometimes tuned in to the Voice of Israel, the Jewish state's Arabic language propaganda service (Temko, 1984, August 14).

The issue of access to alternative sources of information has always preoccupied Arab leaders wishing to control information available to their population. With the advent of satellites, porous electronic borders and the ensuing lack of control over television programs caused some "accidents" that underscore the far reaching implications of Middle Eastern and Arab satellite broadcasting. In Saudi Arabia, the media did not announce the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait until two days later, and the coming of American troops onto Saudi soil remained secret for a week (Fandy, 1993). Satellite dishes rapidly proliferated as people looked for more reliable sources of information (Fandy, 1993; Ambah, 1995; Boyd, 1993). In Saudi Arabia, dishes were mostly "neither permitted, neither prohibited" (Tawil, 1997) and a dish black market flourished (Russell, 1994), leading the government to enact, but not enforce, a ban on dishes in 1995 (Millichip, 1996). In spite of the ban, a 1996 study estimated the number of illegal dishes in Saudi Arabia at 750 thousands (Millichip, 1996). According to advertising industry figures, satellite penetration in 1999 was estimated to be at around 50 % in wealthy Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar (Sakr, 1999). While reliable figures are impossible to obtain, it is probable that satellite ownership has increased substantially since September 11, 2001.

While Arab satellite television has established a visible global presence, it remains too underdeveloped of an industry to be a truly global player. Regionally, however, satellite television is a potentially revolutionary force. The so-called "satellite revolution" is due to the convergence of three factors, with global and regional dimensions: relative political liberalization, economic privatization, and the acquisition of "new" communication technologies (Ayish, 1997). As a result, the satellite industry has changed parameters of television production, control and reception. These changes have political, economic and cultural implications.

Political Governance After Satellite Television

The political forces that have shaped the nascent satellite industry remain problematic for that industry's growth. Satellite television has undermined state control of television flows, since programs could be transmitted from any Arab countries and be received in any other. Idealists see this development as the harbinger of a pan-Arab civil society unshackled from government censorship. In this logic, satellite television talk-shows serve as a catalyst for a democratic renewal, where Arab audience members would mobilize as citizens and become increasingly interested in participation in democratic politics. The reality of the situation, however, is that most governments in the region have allowed a level of freedom to satellite television still exercise substantial control, albeit obliquely. Indirect control of privately owned media companies takes different shapes. In Lebanon, most members of the board of LBC are associated with the Syrian regime, and thus reign in the station's occasional forays into politically sensitive territory. In spite of the fact that MBC is not owned by the Saudi government, its owners are links to the Saudi family, and its editorial policy is Saudi-friendly. In Egypt, the much trumpeted Media Production City is

50% owned by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union. This stake gives the ERTU “ultimate editorial control” (Sakr, 1999) over program content. Even al-Jazeera, the much celebrated all-news station which has become a global household name, is notably timid when it comes to its coverage of Qatari politics.

While several countries (Bahrein, Jordan, Qatar) have been discussing the elimination of their Information Ministries, Lebanon’s Minister of Information is being rendered irrelevant by the intervention of state security agencies in the daily operations of the media, at the expense of enforcing laws and regulations. This is in spite of assurances by the current Lebanese administration that it would protect media freedoms (Kraidy, 1999b). The closure of Murr Television by security forces on September 4, 2002, revealed these troublesome trends: The Minister of Information, Ghazi Aridi, was not informed of the decision, which he objected too in strong terms. Also, since the Audio-Visual Law would not condone the station’s closure, authorities resorted to the Law of Publications to justify the crackdown. Creative interpretation and enforcement of the law is thus an instrument of political control even in the Arab world’s most liberal countries.

Also, while Arab regimes maintain various levels of control over their satellite television stations, they are notably permissive when these stations are critical of other Arab regimes. In fact, Arab regimes opposed to each other have used satellite television for propaganda purposes, or to offer their satellite channels as a platform to dissidents, critics and opponents of other governments, a theme which was increasingly associated with the Qatari al-Jazeera news network. As a result, transnational broadcasting via satellite has caused, intensified or publicized rifts between Arab governments. Al-Jazeera remains a constant source of objection and tension between a variety of Arab governments and Qatar’s rulers, and as of the writing of this article in September 2002, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have tense relationships with Qatar because of recent al-Jazeera broadcast. Because of these intra-regional tensions, plans by the Arab Ministers of Information to launch a satellite channel destined to Western and Israeli audiences were never implemented, while Israel launched in the summer of 2002 a satellite television station for Arab audiences. Also, emerging Arab media policies (Kraidy, 2001b) could either bring positive change to the sector, or consolidate the status quo.

Economic Dimensions of Pan-Arab Satellite Broadcasting

The conventional wisdom reflected in trade journals and general publications is that Arab satellite television offers unparalleled opportunities for media businesses and advertisers. At stake is an Arab audience estimated at over 300 million people, most of whom were not accustomed to commercial television in the early 1990s, and thus were ideal targets for corporations wishing to shape consumer loyalties. In industry publications such as Arab Ad and TV World, the satellite industry is touted as the prime engine of the regionalization of marketing and advertising. This regionalist outlook is based on the fact that the Arab audience is united by language, and, to a large extent, by religion, which makes standardized advertising viable. According to some observers, regionalization facilitates Arab economic integration by embedding individual countries in a pan-Arab market.

The challenge to this rosy scenario resides in that most Arab satellite television stations still have to cross the threshold of profitability. Many stations in Egypt, Jordan, Syria and others remain government operated, and thus do not face pressure to become profitable. Not enjoying the deep coffers of governments, privately owned stations face financial challenges of different kinds. First, there is a reluctance in the Arab world to pay for television programs, which makes pay-TV extremely difficult to sell to Arab audiences. Orbit and ART, pay-TV pioneers, are challenged by the free services of MBC, LBC and Future (Schleifer, 2000). Second, the advertising industry has not fulfilled its potential, and advertising rate cards remain relatively cheap despite hikes between 30 and 50 % in 2000 and focuses obsessively on wealthy Gulf states, which translates into a small audience. Third, audience and market research is not sophisticated, systematic, and when available, is often unreliable (Fakhreddine, 2000). Fourth, the race for specialization and differentiation is shrinking audiences and therefore reducing markets, but is poised to continue, with Al-Jazeera focusing exclusively on news, spiced with some sensationalism, while LBC, ART and to some extent, Future TV, focus on talk-shows and variety programs, spiked with the obvious sexual appeal of flirtatious and scantily clad hostesses. Fifth, the efforts of satellite broadcasters to understand who they are in fact reaching are complicated by the

Internet and related digital technologies that fragment the audience into myriad small segments.

It is therefore understandable that there has not been a keen interest among global media conglomerates to acquire shares in the privately held Arab satellite stations. Unlike Latin America and Asia, and despite wealth pockets in the Gulf region, the Arab audience overall does not have the income that would make it a desirable target for global advertisers. This means that the pan-Arab satellite industry remains non-integrated in global media circuits. Undoubtedly, many people in the region and elsewhere see that lingering Arab control as a positive sign. Others, including business interests, lament this as a sign of backwardness. The industry, however, remains in flux. There were talks of a merger between Saudi owned, Dubai based (having recently moved from London) Middle East Broadcasting Corporation, and Future TV, owned by Lebanese billionaire Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. Discussions have so far not lead to clinching a deal, but changing economic parameters might fulfill the merger talks. All, in all, however, the economic outlook of the pan-Arab satellite industry, while not imminently troublesome, is far from secure.

Cultural Implications of Transnational Arab Television

The cultural implications of pan-Arab satellite television are twofold. On one hand, transnational media have the potential of strengthening cultural ties between Arab countries, who would capitalize on their cultural commonalities in order to bring their national diversities in contact. Regional festivals, exhibits, competitions and production cooperation are seen as some of the desirable consequences on the cultural front. In that respect, satellite television has brought about a pan-Arab consciousness. The depth and significance of this regional identification have not been empirically researched, but anecdotal evidence suggests that, at least on the surface, satellite television has created a pan-Arab audience.

During morning talk-shows on LBCI in the mid-1990s, for instance, callers participate in games and conversations from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Sudan, Egypt, even Cyprus, Bulgaria, and France. In these conversations carried live, audience members refer to events in other Arab countries, and express concerns on regional issues (see "Satellite Programs," 1997). This mantle is now carried by Al-Jazeera's own program Manbar al-Jazeera, which has a more pronounced political focus than LBCI's programs. At the same time, Arab production centers such as Amman, Beirut, Cairo and Damascus have seen their creations disseminated to an audience considerably larger than the domestic market. Watching Arab satellite television, one often senses a pan-Arab vernacular language emerging, heavily influenced by Levantine Arabic, as a kind of pan-Arab lingua franca. These developments do point to the emergence of a pan-Arab "imagined community" with converging concerns and a sense of regional belonging.

On the other hand, the growth of pan-Arab broadcasting, and the ensuing need for programming that the new channels have created has resulted in more imported programs, notably from the West, which have triggered controversy in more conservative Arab societies, an issue that often dominates public discourse on Arab-Western relations from Egypt to Saudi Arabia (see "Arabsat says," 1997, and "Saudi clamp," 1996). The idea of a "Western cultural invasion" is a recurring leitmotif in religious, political, and intellectual discourse in the Arab world. This revolves around concerns that the region's traditions, language and social codes and conventions are under threat of elimination by Western values. Arabs in general believe in the importance of the family as the social unit, and perceive the West's focus on the individual to be a threat. Also, the region's conservative social mores and restrictive views on sexuality are challenged by Western—and now also Arab—media standards where sexual appeal is used as a marketing tool. As Fakhreddine (2000) remarked, the Arab print press, performing as a socio-cultural arbiter, is often in the vanguard of criticizing television's perceived excesses.

Another issue is consumerism. I consider consumerism to be a cultural issue to the extent that it is primarily a matter of learned behavior stoked by the media in a commercial media environment, which the Arab media context is becoming at a quick pace. Also, it is important to remember that some these cultural challenges come from within the Arab world. Lebanese authorities have always received complaints from more conservative Arab countries because of Lebanese television's use of sexual and other culturally taboo content. Elements of Lebanese society itself repeatedly criticize that kind of programming (Kraidy, 1995, 1999a and 2001a). Many problems have arisen between Saudi Arabia on

one hand, and European and other Arab broadcasters on the other, for broadcasting content deemed offensive to Wahhabi sensibilities. While consumerism is usually not the red flag for Arab guardians of tradition as is sexuality, it is a far reaching force whose potential for cultural change will be growing to the extent that most Arab states are aiming for integration into the global economy.

Conclusion

In spite of their rapid growth, transnational satellite television stations in the Arab world are still in their infancy. Although we do not have the benefit of a long history to make definitive pronouncements, the past decade does carry lessons to heed. While it makes sense for reasons of organization and analysis to separate the political, economic, cultural and media spheres, major insights can be gleaned from how these realms are mutually articulated.

First among these articulations is that no matter how permissive and free Arab talk-shows are or appear to be, the road of democratization is still arduous. Without civil society institutions that would articulate some of the reformist ideas discussed on talk-shows to concrete social or political agendas, talk will remain just that. While there are nascent civil society organizations in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and others, they remain isolated and at the whim of national government.

Second, the link between private ownership and political freedom will have to be re-thought. After all, many countries in the world have liberalized economically while maintaining the political noose tight. In the Arab world, privately owned satellite television stations are still indirectly controlled by the ruling national elites, whether through family relationships such as the case of MBC, or with a manipulated board of shareholders such as LBCI's. Government owned satellite stations in Syria, Jordan and Egypt are still the official voices of the regimes in those countries. Privatization of the media as commercial companies does not insure political pluralism.

Third, the cultural implications of transnational Arabic broadcasting remain woefully under-researched. Arguably, understanding regional media production and reception in the Arab world would give us a clearer view of how Arab societies are negotiating the tensions between tradition and modernity. The media circuit of production, distribution, reception and reproduction —the process through which audience member subjectivities engage the social totality through media texts— is where commercial, political and cultural forces clash. To understand the fundamentalisms and pluralisms that transnational media helps to shape, research on the cultural dimensions of satellite television is urgently needed.

Ultimately, satellite television is a force towards the integration of the Arab world into the global community. Whether one sees this as a dream or a nightmare does not diminish the importance of the phenomenon itself. Neither should public discourse, in the Arab world and the West, reach foreclosed and premature conclusions about the consequences of satellite television. It is a phenomenon that anyone interested in the Arab region and its international relations would well do to monitor closely ... while being prepared for major surprises along the way.

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