MIDDLE EAST: MEDIA PLURALISM VIA SATELLITE

◆ Christophe Ayad

Satellite TV channels are making inroads on state-run monopolies and widening programme choice, but the number of households equipped with dish receivers is still generally low

On October 21, 1999, Syrian security forces mounted an attack on the house of President Hafez al-Assad's brother Rifaat in Lattakieh. The latest of Syria's many political vicissitudes, the event was triggered by an interview with a former U.S. ambassador to Jordan which had been broadcast on the Arab News Network (ANN), a satellite TV channel run by Rifaat's eldest son Sumar.

During the interview the ex-ambassador had expressed scepticism about the capacities of the president's son and heir Bashar to succeed his father. Earlier, in 1997, a report on a reception given in Lattakieh by Rifaat in honour of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah had provoked the Syrian government's wrath because it had violated protocol and, even worse, had been broadcast on ANN.

◆ Middle East specialist

Crumbling censorship

Whatever its real aim—information or propaganda—satellite broadcasting has helped turn TV into a major factor in the political life of a region which has never been noted for audiovisual pluralism. ANN is only one of the players in this process.

On the 50th anniversary of what Arabs call the *naqsa* (disaster)—the founding of the Israeli state in 1948 after the Arab defeat—Arab viewers of the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC, see box) were able to see the same documentary film, made by Britain's BBC, that the Israelis saw on their national channel.

"The Jordanian government angrily denied the accuracy of a sequence in which King Hussein was said to have warned Israel of the imminence of a war in October 1973," says Jon Alterman, a programme officer in the Research and Studies programme at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP). ►

Satellite dishes have sprouted on the rooftops of Aleppo, in Syria.

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"The main thing was that they couldn't censor it," says Alterman. "In the long run, the obstacles to the freedom to inform and be informed are gradually going to crumble. The ability of governments to act as censors is weakening year by year, even if countries like Egypt and Jordan have recently passed repressive press laws."

Governments, he feels, will at least have to take account of public opinion in their countries, even if they do not set up real democracies. "And those that hesitate most about this will be left behind by the rest of the world."

The success of the Qatar satellite TV channel Al-Jezeera is significant in this respect. "It introduced discussions which showed a clash of contradictory opinions," says Alterman. Since it was started in 1997, Al-Jezeera has become a beacon of free expression in the Arab world, thanks to the professionalism of its journalists, who once worked in the BBC's former Arab Service. And because Qatar is a small country, which is very rich but has no major geopolitical interests to defend, it can afford to rub its powerful neighbours up the wrong way and serve as a meeting-point for the Arab world's opposition politicians. The station has even brought Qatar regional prestige.

Is this an exception which proves the rule? Journalist Daud Kuttab does not share this very "liberal" vision of steady progress towards democracy made possible through free competition in the information market. Kuttab, who is highly respected in the Arab world, was the first chairman of Palestinian Television but was soon dismissed for his independent approach. He was successively jailed by the Israeli army and the Palestinian Authority and now runs the Jerusalem Film Institute.

A two-speed information society

He points out that many Arab satellite channels are simply offshoots of state-run TV. "Most were set up just so that governments could extend their influence beyond national borders. That's why they often only broadcast classical music and a screen showing pink flamingos, with a small emblem or a flag in the top left corner of the screen. It's also why they spend more money on the technical side of broadcasting than on programming."

Such channels are also the last place an independent Arab film-maker would go to look for funding, he says. For cost or political reasons, programmes (animal films, uncontroversial features, soap operas) are mostly bought in Europe and the United States. This has a schizophrenic effect on viewers: the gap between their own environment and the pictures they see on the screen is just as big whether they are looking at a state-run national channel or satellite channels.

Kuttab is just as sceptical about the role of satellite channels in the emergence of independent news reporting. He has seen no sign of this. Not long ago, a minister of information told him "I can change and modernize as much as I want, but the first item on the television news will always be the daily report on the president's activities." This news programme will usually be broadcast on the satellite channels of this particular state.

Kuttab also thinks that satellite channels are first and foremost powerful weapons that some states and politicians can use against their neighbours or rivals. In fact, he says, "even when the news they carry is better and more varied than on local channels, the aim is more to harm their enemies than to inform the public." Saudi channels, for example, talk a lot about pluralism when neighbouring countries such as Yemen are concerned, but say very little about Saudi internal politics.

The other danger, says Kuttab, is that "these channels create a two-speed information society where you have people

THE MAJOR PLAYERS IN ARAB SATELLITE TV

It was during the 1990-1991 crisis in the Gulf that pictures from the sky burst in on the Arab world in a spectacular way. As in other regions, the conflict brought CNN with it and showed up local coverage as mediocre.

Egypt was the first to respond, in 1990, by using its channel on Arabsat (a satellite launched in 1986 by the Arab League) to broadcast a short programme for its troops involved in action against Iraq. The government expanded the experiment by launching soon afterwards the Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC).

But it was the arrival on the scene of wealthy Saudis that really marked the start of the "satellite revolution". In 1991, billionaire Saleh Kamel set up MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Corporation), a general interest, non-subscription channel out of London, which was later taken over by Walid and Abdelaziz al-Ibrahim, two brothers-in-law of King Fahd. In 1994, Kamel joined up with Prince al-Walid ben Talal ben Abdel Aziz and founded a group of subscription-only channels called ART (Arab Radio and Television). The third big private Saudi TV group in the region is the Orbit group of channels, set up in 1994 by Prince Fahd ben Abdullah ben Abdel Aziz, a nephew of the king.

These powerful initiatives were a spectacular response to Egypt's traditional domination of regional broadcasting. Throughout the 1960s, the Voice of the Arabs, broadcasting from Cairo, had called for the overthrow of Saudi "reactionaries".

Starting in the mid-1990s, most Arab countries set up at least one satellite channel, which often picked up broadcasts from their national TV station. Egypt made a special effort in 1998 by launching the Arab world's first national satellite, Nilesat, which increased the number of special-interest channels and enabled Egypt to impose its digital decoder on the market. Another innovation in the late 1990s was the appearance of all-news channels like Qatar-based Al-Jezeera, founded in 1997, and ANN (Arab News Network), started in the same year and run by Sumar al-Assad, nephew of the Syrian president.

They have all been successful and Al-Jezeera has emerged as the "CNN of the Arab world". Its controversial talk shows, open attitudes and spectacular news presentation have won it a sizeable, though hard to measure audience.

Lebanon is a special case. During the 1975-1990 civil war, the country's audiovisual facilities developed in complete disorder which encouraged pluralism and free expression. In the mid-1990s, the authorities took things in hand again and drastically reduced the number of broadcasting licences and divided up broadcasting on a political and community basis. Today, two channels dominate the market and have won a name for themselves outside Lebanon. They are LBCI (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International), famous for its professionalism and attractive women presenters, and Future-TV, owned by businessman and former prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Jon Alterman, an American academic, says "nobody knows exactly how many people watch the satellite TV channels, or who they are or what they watch." As yet there is no commercial and marketing infrastructure. But one thing is certain: none of them is making a profit, except perhaps Lebanon's LBCI.

Al-Jezeera has given itself five years to balance its accounts and to be privatized. The chances are it will be bought back by its powerful benefactor and founder, Sheikh Hamad ben Jassem ben Jabr al-Thani, Qatar's foreign minister. Pay-per-view channels like Orbit are a long way from making money. Credibility, audience size and benefactors' financial resources will serve as a natural selection process in years to come. ■

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Outdoor televiewers in Cairo. Only around 10 per cent of Egyptians have access to satellite TV.

with access to information from abroad and the vast majority who have to make do with official propaganda.” Alterman notes that the numbers of households equipped to receive satellite TV are bound to increase but they are still generally low. “In the Gulf, two-thirds of the population have satellite dishes, but only 20 per cent in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan, and only between 7 per cent and 10 per cent of Egyptians.”

So in Egypt, the Arab world’s most populous country but also one of the poorest, access to a choice of information is just one more privilege for the ruling class. In a less serious vein, Egyptian TV viewers last summer could not see the matches of the Confederations Cup, in which the Egyptian football team was playing, because ART, a group of subscription-only satellite channels (see box),had bought exclusive rights to screen the matches.

The rare attempts to ban satellite reception have not amounted to much.In 1994, the Saudi authorities tried to do this, for commercial rather than political and moral reasons (some satellite-transmitted films are seen as offensive to Islamic morality). They were actually trying to promote the interests of cable operators who were close to the royal family. Later the government took a more tolerant view of satellite dishes. Today, Iraq is the only Arab country which has not entered the era of satellite television.

It cannot be denied that satellite channels are having profound effects on Arab societies. For example, they help to create what Alterman calls “a real basic identity”, based on a common mental landscape and references that are transmitted by the new channels all over the Arab world and thus transcend national frontiers. This identity is much more sturdy than the one governments have hitherto tried to create by “brainwashing”.Satellite channels are also a link between Arabs living in the region and the Arab diaspora in the West.

Competition prises open state-run channels

The appearance of a new kind of audiovisual operator, albeit few and far between, has helped to transform the media scene. “The competition has to keep up,” says Alterman. One example is MBC, which “has clear links with the Saudi government but can no longer afford to appear as the Voice of Riyadh if it wants to keep its viewers.”

The new satellite channels are more attractive and modern and have an impact on the state monopolies. Douglas Boyd, who teaches in the University of Kentucky’s Communication Department,says the lack of credibility of local media is the chief reason for the popularity of satellite TV.

The competition from the sky has forced the state-run channels to open up and innovate. The official Egyptian TV channel now screens a lot of talk shows which, though uncontroversial, at least give an impression of public debate. Jordanian TV has also given air time to the monarchy’s fiercest opponent, Laith Shbelat,rather than see him appear yet again on Al-Jezeera.

“Even Syria has seen remarkable progress in its television services over the past 15 years,” says Nabil Dajani, a sociology professor at the American University of Beirut. In Qatar, the ministry of information has simply been abolished.

“Paradoxically, it’s the interaction of conflicting interests, defensive government policies and competition between various channels which has increased pluralism,” says Boyd. “A biased and narrow pluralism but an embryonic pluralism all the same.” ■

Further information can be found in “TBS-Transnational Broadcasting Studies”, the electronic journal published by the American University in Cairo’s Adham Centre for Television Journalism: http://www.tbsjournal.com