

## Arab Youth, TV Viewing & “Affluenza”

By Mark Harmon

**September, 2008.** Popularized by several books, articles, and even a stage play over the last several years, a hypothesis known as “affluenza” predicts that media consumption will correlate positively with higher levels of materialistic traits. This paper re-analyzes data from a lifestyle survey administered to youth in Egypt and Saudi Arabia with an eye towards testing the affluenza hypothesis in light of the ongoing boom in Arab satellite television. While the survey was not specifically designed to test for affluenza, and therefore not an optimal tool, it did collect data on television viewing and several lifestyle topics which have been linked to affluenza in previous studies. Surprisingly, the data from this survey of Egyptian and Saudi youth did not show a link between increased television viewing and materialistic traits – in stark contrast to surveys conducted in the United States and Europe.

Before 1990, when most Arabic television stations were state-controlled monopolies with limited transnational reach, it would not make much sense to consider Arab television in terms of materialism. Programs, delivered by land-based transmitters, generally followed the political line of the state, rarely delivering programming that could be called daring. As Abdallah Schleifer put it, “Arab television, which came into being during the high tide of republican police states, did not even attempt journalism. Its photographers covered only occasions of state, and there were no correspondents, since it was ‘information’ not news that was sought. Anchors could do the job of reading state news agency wire copy describing these ceremonial occasions while unedited footage was transmitted.”<sup>i</sup> Advertising existed, but was restricted heavily, and clustered between programs—not interrupting them.<sup>ii</sup>

Free to air satellite TV networks, however, soon changed the media landscape. Dubai-based Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) debuted in 1991, Lebanese-based Future TV in 1995, Qatar-based al-Jazeera and Lebanese LBCI in 1996. The Syrian-owned, London-based ANN started in 1997. Lebanese al-Manar and NBN both came onboard during 2000, as did Tunisian al-Mustaquilla. Zayn-TV and Egypt’s Dream TV started one year later. In 2002 al-Mihwar and al-Khalifa joined the crowded satellite offerings, as did al-Arabiya in 2003.<sup>iii</sup>

The new viewing options found success with formats borrowed from Western operators. MBC in 2000 had a hit show with *Man Sa Yarbah al-Malyoun*, an Arabic version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Al-Jazeera’s *Al-Ittijah al-Muaakis* (The Opposite Direction) is modeled after CNN’s now-defunct *Crossfire*. ABC’s all-female hosted *The View* is mirrored in MBC’s *Kalam Nawa’em*. Glitzy talent shows also came along for the ride. *Super Star*, adapted from *Pop Idol*, began in 2003 on Future TV. LBCI, a terrestrial broadcaster in Lebanon but also a satellite channel, countered with the phenomenally successful *Star Academy* in the summer of 2003. By December of that

year, viewers could follow their favorite contestants 24 hours a day on the LBC Reality network. Religious clerics objected to the show on many cultural grounds, but especially the social mixing of unmarried men and women.<sup>iv</sup>

Marwan Kraidy notes that a small but vocal group of political activists and religious leaders routinely condemn all reality TV not only on social grounds, but also because it “facilitates cultural globalization characterized by Western values of individualism, consumerism, and sexual promiscuity.”<sup>v</sup> The concern is hardly new. As early as 1998 a Muslim orator, speaking in Mecca to worshippers, deemed satellite TV “poison.”<sup>vi</sup>

### **Ratings and viewing habits**

Getting precise figures on audience size and advertising revenues for Arabic television remains difficult. One 2005 estimate put entire Arab world advertising at a mere \$1.5 billion for all media, and deduced that most forms must still rely on government dollars or wealthy patrons.<sup>vii</sup> On the positive side, MBC by 1998 had an estimated audience of two million for popular programs, making it the both the most watched and the most attractive to advertisers. Exact numbers on dish ownership are also shaky, but one 2002 estimate had a range of 20 to 60 percent household penetration in most Arab countries.<sup>viii</sup>

Hugh Miles demonstrated the wide range of estimates for TV advertising expenditures in the Middle East. The monitoring service Ipsos-Stat said the 1999 total was \$240 million; the Pan Arab Research Center said \$100 million; and the trade magazine ArabAd claimed just \$55 million. What is clear is that the satellite services are splitting an advertising pot of hundreds of millions of dollars among a rapidly growing number of outlets. By the end of 1999 in most of the Middle East one could receive at least 60 terrestrial and free-to-air satellite channels in Arabic, another five in English, and six in Hindi.<sup>ix</sup> By May 2007 one author tallied 280 Arabic language satellite TV offerings, including foreign broadcasters such as Deutche Welle, BBC, France 24, and Russia TV Today.<sup>x</sup>

Imad Karam’s research on television consumption habits among people aged 16-27 in the Arab world also provides valuable new data.<sup>xi</sup> More than half the 200 respondents to his surveys reported watching television up to three hours a day on a typical school or work day. Seventeen percent watched four to six hours a day, and seven percent watched more than six hours. Only 24 percent reported watching less than an hour a day. More than half were motivated to watch for entertainment, and one in ten admitted to using TV to pass time. Movies are by far the most popular programming, followed by singing and music shows. Karam’s focus groups show that Arab youth, though a large and growing demographic, do not feel that many news and public affairs programs take their concerns seriously, reflecting their lack of voice in school, home, or the wider world. On entertainment programming, Walter Armbrust has observed that individuals who voice concern about the social effects of shows like *Super Star* often watch and enjoy the programs nonetheless.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Methods**

Two major studies, one in the U.S. and another in Europe have tended to support the affluenza hypothesis.<sup>xiii</sup> Given that Arab satellite networks are multiplying rapidly, attracting increased ad expenditures, and often mimic Western programming formats

like reality TV and game shows, it seems logical to ask if materialist/consumerist values correlate with heavier television viewing among Arab viewers.

To test the hypothesis, I re-analyzed data collected in a 2005 survey by the Association of Religion Data Archives entitled "Youth, Emotional Energy, and Political Violence: The Cases of Egypt and Saudi Arabia."<sup>xiv</sup> The survey targeted youth aged 18 to 25 using face-to-face interviews, conducted in Egypt May 5th to June 30th, 2005, and in Saudi Arabia during July 10th to 25th. A representative sample of 928 youth were drawn from three Egyptian cities: Alexandria, Cairo, and El-Minya. In Saudi Arabia the 954 young people were in Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam/Khobar.

The survey was designed to analyze certain cultural and sociopolitical attitudes of young Saudis and Egyptians, including: authorities they relied upon, awareness of development ideas, relationships between politics and religion, preferences for forms of government, attitudes toward Western culture, social status of women, and religiosity. These sample sizes are large enough to assure high reliability that the findings represent the overall group under study. The researchers neither used nor needed over-sampling techniques or weighting of the results. Furthermore, the use of face-to-face interviews and paper-and-pencil questionnaires added both depth and generalizability. One did not have to account for the unavailability of landline phones in some areas or income groups, or the preference of many young people for cell phones (whose numbers can be difficult to obtain or use for polling purposes). The mean length of the interview was 57 minutes, allowing for some 223 question replies. One drawback of the survey was a slight gender imbalance; 56.6 percent of respondents were male.

Past quantitative work on Arab youth has relied on school-based surveys, leaving out those who are not enrolled, attending, or are beyond their school years.<sup>xv</sup> School-based surveys and internet-based surveys have advantages, especially for certain topics and target audiences, but these face-to-face surveys seek a broader array of potential respondents.

### **Defining and measuring affluenza**

The affluenza hypothesis predicts that heavier TV viewing will be associated with a shallow, materialistic lifestyle. This differs from past work on materialism and consumerism in that it seeks to connect materialism with individuals' mass mediated experiences. Several researchers have laid the groundwork for these explorations. Sirgy, for example, led a team of researchers whose cross-national studies of 1,226 respondents found a two-step link from television viewing to materialism to life dissatisfaction.<sup>xvi</sup> A pair of Dutch researchers twice conducted studies finding a link between child TV viewing, materialistic values, and requests to parents for purchases of heavily advertised products.<sup>xvii</sup> The connection between materialistic values and life dissatisfaction is fairly well established. Wright and Larsen, for example, conducted a meta-analysis of seven empirical studies with a total of 39 hypotheses testing the link. The negative correlation, namely that greater materialism was associated with decreased life satisfaction, was consistent across all studies.<sup>xviii</sup>

Walter Armbrust has collected several normative critiques from the Arab world about music videos or other video clips. The opinions of average viewers and cultural gatekeepers such as newspaper columnists or religious figures are nearly uniform in attacking the video clips for sexual suggestiveness as well as cultural imperialism. The

latter point dovetails with the affluenza argument; such clips repeatedly use ostentatious displays of Western notions of wealth, notably luxury cars, mansions, and green lawns. Further, such mediated messages "make Arab youth want to become what they can never be."<sup>xix</sup>

We can look for this effect in attitudes and beliefs, such as valuing money and the acquisition of goods, as well as in genuine financial distress such as credit card debt. Further, because the pursuit of happiness through material goods ultimately is unsatisfying, as demonstrated by Sirgy, Wright and Larsen, we might also see an indirect connection to unhappiness, stress, and pessimism. The available survey data presented opportunities to explore some of these claimed links.

## Results

Television viewing was measured by the question "Do you ever watch television?" If the respondent answered yes, he or she was then asked "How much time do you usually spend watching television on an average weekday?" The researchers clearly underestimated the actual amount of television viewing, which was reflected in their survey design. Nearly 47% of these young people were in the highest-viewing category, with 880 reporting watching more than three hours of TV per day. Less than three percent reported not watching or not having access to a TV. About one fifth watched one to two hours daily. More than one in four indicated two to three hours of daily TV.

The first surprise in these data came in responses to the question "To what extent are you optimistic or pessimistic about your future?" It was scaled from highly pessimistic to highly optimistic. Greater TV viewing correlated at statistically significant levels with *greater* optimism among these respondents – the exact opposite of a predicted affluenza effect.

The next surprise came from a question about life control. Participants were asked if they agreed with the statement: "Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them." Contrary to both Karam's observations and the claims of affluenza, TV viewing among these young Arabs modestly increased with a greater feeling of choice in their lives, though the relationship was not statistically significant.

Affluenza is heavily individualistic both in theoretical orientation and claimed effects. Unfortunately, in this survey "happiness" was not measured by asking participants if they were happy; rather the issue was framed around the possibility of achieving happiness in life. The exact statement was "It is not possible to live very happily in this world." Among the Egyptian sub-sample of respondents there was no significant difference in TV viewing among those agreeing or disagreeing with the statement. However, among the Saudi sample, heavier TV viewing correlated with agreeing with the statement, a modest but weak overall affirmation of an affluenza effect.

Presumably self-sacrifice is an anathema to an affluenza world view, yet in this secondary analysis TV viewing correlated with greater support for self-sacrifice. The statement tested was "For the realization of a truly ideal society, people must be ready for self-sacrifice." Those who reported watching more TV viewing were most likely to

agree and agree strongly with that statement, and the association was statistically significant.

Few other correlations of note could be found related to any linking of TV viewing with materialism among these Arab youth. TV viewing was not associated at statistically significant levels with: self-reported thinking on the meaning and purpose of life, support or opposition for incomes being more equal, support or opposition of government efforts to provide for everyone, perception of cultural invasion by the West as a problem, or perceptions of the morality of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or the United States.

## Conclusion

The general lack of association between TV viewing and affluenza values in this secondary analysis of an Arab youth survey should not be interpreted to mean that materialism is not a serious concern, nor should it be interpreted to mean that the introduction of satellite TV is not without substantial audience effects. Instead, this analysis can be viewed as complementary to a similar one done regarding Spain shortly after that country's explosion of television viewing options. That study, like this one, found little evidence for a rapid expansion of materialism shortly after commercial viewing options increased dramatically.<sup>xx</sup> Instead, affluenza may be neither pure commercial TV effects nor pure audience gratification. It may well be a cycle where the already materialistic-oriented seek commercial-laden TV, and from it get validation of their shallow lifestyle. When material goods fail to satisfy, they return for a dose of the same message, a handful getting upset at the message that does not match their reality but many more lamenting the reality that doesn't match the glitzy fantasy.

**Dr. Mark D. Harmon** is associate professor of journalism and electronic media in the College of Communication and Information, University of Tennessee. He conducts research on broadcast news content, media and materialism, and political communication. He also is an elected county commissioner in Knox County, Tennessee.

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<sup>i</sup> Abdallah Schleifer, "Media and Religion in the Arab-Islamic World," edited version of 11<sup>th</sup> annual Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs, September 2006, appearing in *Arab Media & Society*, February 2007 [online].

<sup>ii</sup> William A. Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio and Television in Arab Politics* (London: Praeger, 2004) 181-199.

<sup>iii</sup> Rugh, 219.

<sup>iv</sup> Marwan M. Kraidy, "Idioms of Contention: Star Academy in Lebanon and Kuwait," in *Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy and Public Life*, ed. Naomi Sakr (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 44-55.

<sup>v</sup> Marwan Kraidy, "Reality Television and Politics in the Arab World: Preliminary Observations." *Arab Media & Society*, Fall 2006 [online].

<sup>vi</sup> U. S. State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 1999*, Feb. 25, 2000, Saudi Arabia section.

<sup>vii</sup> United States Institute of Peace, "Arab Media: Tools of the Governments; Tools for the People?" *Virtual Diplomacy Series #18*, released August 2005.

<http://www.usip.org/virtualdiplomacy/publications/reports/18.html>.

<sup>viii</sup> Rugh, 219-220, 237.

<sup>ix</sup> Hugh Miles, *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel that is Challenging the West* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 66-67.

<sup>x</sup> Alan L. Heil Jr., "Rate of Arabic language TV start-ups shows no sign of abating," *Arab Media & Society*, February 2007 [online].

<sup>xi</sup> Imad Karam, "Satellite Television: A Breathing Space for Arab Youth?" in *Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy and Public Life*, ed. Naomi Sakr (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007) 80-95.

<sup>xii</sup> Walter Armbrust, "What Would Sayyid Qutb Say? Some Reflections on Video Clips," TBS 14, Spring 2005 <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring05/armbrust.html>. Accessed June 17, 2008.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mark D. Harmon, "Affluenza: Television Use and Cultivation of Materialism," *Mass Communication & Society* 4 (2001): 405-418; Mark D. Harmon, "Affluenza: A World Values Test," *International Communication Gazette* 68 (2006): 119-130.

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.thearda.com>

<sup>xv</sup> See for example: Yacoub Khallad, "Mate selection in Jordan: Effects of sex, socio-economic status, and culture." *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships* 22 (2): 155-168; or Ahmad Moh'd Al-Mulla, Sahar Abdou Helmy, Jawad Al-Lawati, Sami Al Nasser, Salah Ali Abdel Rahman, Ayesha Almutawa, Bassam Abi Saab, Abdullah Mohammed Al-Bedah, Abdullah Mohamed Al-Rabeah, Ahmed Ali Bahaj, Fatimah El-Awa, Charles W. Warren, Nathan R. Jones & Samira Asma, "Prevalence of Tobacco Use Among Students Aged 13-15 Years in Health Ministers' Council/Gulf Cooperation Council Member States, 2001-2004." *Journal of School Health* 78 (6): 337-343.

<sup>xvi</sup> M. Joseph Sirgy, Dong-Jin Lee, Rustan Kosenko, H. Lee Meadow, Don Rahtz, Nuris Cicic, Guang Xi Jin, Duygun Yarsuvat, David L. Blenkhorn, Newell Wright, (1998). Does Television Viewership Play a Role in the Perception of Quality of Life? *Journal of Advertising*, 27 (1), 125-142.

<sup>xvii</sup> Moniek Buijzen & Patti M. Valkenburg, (2003, October). The Unintended Effects of Television Advertising: A Parent-Child Survey. *Communication Research* 30 (5): 483-503; Moniek Buijzen & Patti M. Valkenburg, (2000). The Impact of Television Advertising on Children's Christmas Wishes. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44 (3): 456-470.

<sup>xviii</sup> Newell D. Wright & Val Larsen, (1993). Materialism and Life Satisfaction: a Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior* 6: 158-165.

<sup>xix</sup> Walter Armbrust, "What Would Sayyid Qutb Say? Some Reflections on Video Clips," TBS 14, Spring 2005 <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring05/armbrust.html>. Accessed June 17, 2008.

<sup>xx</sup> Mark D. Harmon and Nuria Cruz-Camara, "Does affluenza spread quickly. A historical case study from Spain." *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 4 (1): 87-92.