

## Arab Broadcast Media Scene Toward Decade-End

### **Soft Content to Prevail: “News” Give in to “Sports” and “Movies”**

Local Channels flourishing, Pan-Arab stations waning

By Mourad Haroutunian

The Arab media scene in the last few years of the first decade of the third millennium has totally changed from what we had seen in the first half of the same decade.

**Pan**-Arab channels seem to have given up their place as the most viewed TV channels to **national** (local) channels. In parallel, **news** channels seem to have lost their former glamor, unable to compete against the ever-increasing number of **sports** and **movie** channels.

Channels such as Qatar’s Al Jazeera and Saudi Arabia’s Al Arabiya no longer influence Arab audiences in the way they did until two years ago. On the other hand, recently launched channels such as Al Hayat 1, 2 and 3 of Egypt (launched 2008), Modern Sport, Moga Comedy, Panorama Drama 1 and 2 seem to be thriving.

Similarly, the TV program once considered the best in the Arab World, Al Jazeera's "Al-Ittijah Al-Mu'akes" ("The Opposite Direction"), seems to have lost its appeal for viewers. In contrast, the talk shows doing well in Egypt are "Ninety Minutes", hosted by Motazz Al-Demerdash on the private Egyptian station Al-Mehwar, "El-Bet Betak" hosted by Mahmoud Saad on the Egyptian state-owned television’s Channel One, and "Al-Ashera Masaan" hosted by Mona Al-Shazly on the private Egyptian channel Dream 2, in addition to “Al-Qahira Al-Youm” hosted by Amr Adib on the private coded channel Al-Youm of Orbit network.

### **DIRECT CAUSES: “THE EGYPTIAN SOLUTION”**

Several causes, direct and indirect, are behind this significant change and the most important of those are related to decisions taken by Egyptian and Saudi media actors.

Let’s begin with what we can call “**the Egyptian Solution**” to what the Egyptian government is presumed to have considered a problem.

Egypt has long been unable to counter the effects of Al Jazeera, which ever since its launch in Doha in 1996 is widely seen to be advancing an agenda unfavorable to existing Arab regimes including Egypt, a leading country in the Arab region. In the late 1990s, when Safwat el-Sherif (Minister of Information 1980-2004) was the Egyptian government's chief media policy maker and executive, the country had up to nine terrestrial local public channels and up to eight satellite channels, in addition to eight educational channels. Those 25 or so state-owned channels, even combined, were failing to counteract the impact of Al Jazeera.

Egypt, despite its large population of some 80 million people, has failed to launch a news channel to challenge Al Jazeera, which is based in a country of about one million. Egypt knows well that it does not have the financial resources to do that job. And even if it had the resources, it would not have launched such a channel because that would have meant playing in the very court in which Al Jazeera excels, with unpredictable results.

Ever since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952, the Egyptian government's media policy has been dictated by one overwhelming consideration – maintaining the power of the person at the top of the political hierarchy. One of the best media techniques to pursue that goal, maybe old-fashioned but still effective, is to distract the attention of the audience. Consequently, in order to divert the public from the content of Al Jazeera, the Egyptian government's media policy maker and executive, presumably current Minister of Information Anas Al Fiqi (2005-present), purportedly in order to establish strong competition between the private and public sectors in the field of media in line with the government's privatization program, gave the green light for the launch of an unexpectedly high number of TV channels specializing in sport, movies and TV serials. It has also shown tolerance for a number of night-time talk shows, giving them freedom to criticize government officials and ministers.

Imagine what such an array of channels can do? For example, there are movie channels such as Nile Cinema, Cima and Cairo Cinema, in addition to those launched far earlier such as Rotana Cinema, Rotana Zaman, Melody Aflam and Panorama Film. That's, seven free-to-air round-the-clock movie channels (not to forget the coded movie channels of Orbit and ART).

Imagine also the impact of TV channels that broadcast serials, such as Panorama Drama 1 and 2, Oscar Drama, Al-Hayat Musalsalat (all launched in 2008 and 2009), in addition to state-owned Nile Drama (launched 1996).

Imagine further the impact of sports channels such as Modern Sport, Ahly TV, state-owned Nile Sport, as well as the sports talk shows produced by Al-Hayat (hosted by media-tycoon Ahmed Shouber, 2007-2010), Dream (hosted by former football players Mustafa Abdou and Khaled Ghandour, 2007-present), Nile Sports (hosted by senior sport journalists Dr. Alaa Sadek and Ibrahim Higazy, 2009-present)

Imagine what all of those channels can achieve at a time when TV serials and movies are so popular among Egyptian women, half of society, and when Egyptian men, the other half, appear to be such solid fans of local football.

The Egyptian media policy maker has managed to place a virtual “cordon” around Egyptian viewers, who amount to one third of all Arab viewers, with all this appealing content.

That was how to solve the problem in a typical Egyptian way: keep your public asleep, in the meantime get your business people working ... protect your chair”..

A crystal-clear example of this doctrine was evident back in 1977, when the state media started to increase the “religious dose” in its broadcasts and publications, distracting the attention of the public from that period’s social and economic problems. Another motive was to counter the influence of what the state then assumed to be its primary enemy: radical leftist groups. At that time the state media also used local football to achieve this aim. And oddly enough, starting 1993, when radical Islam (violent and non-violent) had gained much from the state’s policy, expanding its influence in society, and even after assassination attempts on the minister of the interior and the minister of information, the state media found it inappropriate to cancel the religious dose in its content, so they practiced the “distracting attention” technique by increasing the amount of non-religious content, thus shrinking religion’s “content share” (analogous to market share) by almost tenfold. The launch of 25 channels by the end of the 1990s may also have served this technique or policy.

### “THE SAUDI SOLUTION”

There is also what we can describe, similarly, as the "**Saudi Solution**". Thus, in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington, Saudi Arabia wanted to improve its image to the world in general and to the Republican-led U.S. government in particular. The problem was that Saudi Arabia had the image of a religious and conservative state that had produced 16 out of the 19 perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. It wanted to solve that problem by changing its image into that of a modern state. How? Saudi had almost three major media tools, one of which was Al-Walid Al-Ibrahimi’s Middle East Broadcasting Corp. (mbc) group which until that time was launching just a single pan-Arab general TV channel (mbc) from London. So Al-Ibrahimi, on the one hand, and Saudi Prince Al-Walid Bin Talal, one of the world’s richest people in the past decade, according to the Forbes magazine, on the other hand, with his “Rotana” media group, launched several TV channels with the chief goal of giving Saudi Arabia a modern image and to push the conservative population of Saudi Arabia (some 20 million) towards modernization. Thus the mbc group launched Al Arabiya, a brand new channel, in March 2003 to be a fierce competitor to Al Jazeera. The Dubai-headquartered Al Arabiya tried to contest Al Jazeera head-to-head in every news event and story, and in every inter-Arab conflict. For example, while Al Jazeera gives preferential treatment to Syria and its allies in Lebanese politics, Al Arabiya sides with Saudi Arabia's allies in Lebanon. When Al Jazeera goes anti-American, Al Arabiya goes pro-American. No light news on Al Jazeera; but plenty on Al Arabiya.

In the middle of this decade the Saudis went a stage further. Saudis, unlike Egyptians, don't have much local sport, and don't produce much in the way of drama or movies, so the solution lay in the key words "business" and "foreign stuff".

Al Arabiya has greatly increased its coverage of business news, and the mbc group has launched mbc2, with foreign movies and serials, mbc4 with foreign TV programs, and mbc Action. The main aim was to distract the attention of the public from Al Jazeera, which was pursuing an anti-Saudi agenda through its various news shows and programs. The Saudis aimed to distract Arab audiences, particularly young men in the

Gulf, from ‘terrorism’, draw their attention to business and a better life and persuade them to watch foreign movies.

In this context, Prince Alwalid’s Rotana has launched several movie and entertainment channels under the brand name Rotana, such as Rotana Cinema, Rotana Zaman, Rotana Khalijia, Rotana Music, and lately Fox Movies. Those channels helped in boosting that new Saudi trend.

ART, owned by Sheikh Saleh Kamel of Saudi Arabia, had been working in the same direction though its coded sports and movie channels until they sold the bulk of their sports channels, on a business basis, to its declared rival, the Qatari state-owned Al Jazeera network, in late 2009.

All three served the Saudi ruling elite’s new goals of defeating ‘terrorism’, neutralizing the sympathy of a 'pro-terror' public, and finally contesting Al Jazeera.

## **INDIRECT CAUSES**

This new media scene – the decline of pan-Arab news channels – has now gained strength from an indirect cause – the change of the world order brought about by the arrival of Barack Obama in the White House and the departure of George W. Bush (Jan. 2009), something that has dramatically changed norms of international relations. The Muslim World is no longer high on the agenda of the Democrat-led U.S. administration.

Al Jazeera, which puts itself in the shoes of the underdeveloped Third World in general and the Muslim world in particular, does not now have a clear-cut enemy and it has toned down its anti-American discourse. This reduces the gap between Al Jazeera and its traditional rival Al Arabiya, and puts at stake the existence of obvious competitors such as the United Kingdom’s BBC Arabic TV (launched 2008) and the United States’ Alhurra TV (launched 2004).

## **INTERMEDIATE CAUSES**

Economic factors and technology have helped shape the new Arab media scene. These are “intermediate” causes and they include the global financial crisis. The fall of oil prices has diminished the influence of key regional players such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, and to some extent Qatar, Al Jazeera's owner, though the latter depends on natural gas rather than oil. Now Iran's allies, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories, have a lower profile than in the period before the global financial crisis and the US presidential elections.

## **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, direct, intermediate and indirect causes have changed the general media scene in the Arab region. Soft content is gaining ground at the expense of hard content, and pan-Arab channels have retreated to pave the way for a promising local television industry.

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