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The Rest of Arab Television

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The common U.S. image of Arab television – endless anti-American rants disguised as news, along with parades of dictators – is far from the truth. In fact, Arab viewers, just like viewers in the U.S., turn to television looking for entertainment first and foremost. (And just as in the U.S., religious TV is a big business throughout the region, particularly in the most populous Arab country, Egypt). Arabs and Americans watch many of the same programs – sometimes the American originals with sub-titles, but just as often “Arabized” versions of popular reality series and quiz shows. Although advertising rates are low, proper ratings scarce and the long-term future of many stations is open to question, in many respects the Arab TV landscape is a much more familiar place, and far less dogmatic overall, than most Americans imagine.

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For an American viewer, *Al-Lailah ma' Moa'taz* has a familiar feel: The opening titles dissolve into a broad overhead shot of the audience. The host strides on stage, waves to the bandleader, and launches into a monologue heavy on jokes about politicians and celebrities. He introduces the band, then walks to the interview set while the music plays and the bandleader mugs for the camera.

It all looks remarkably like Letterman or Leno. This is not, however, CBS or NBC. It is the Dubai Satellite Channel. The show originates in Cairo, and the Moa'taz of the title is Moa'taz Demerdash, an Egyptian. The language, obviously, is Arabic.

The similarity to American late night television is not coincidental. “When I was very young I was one of ‘The Late Show’s’ fans,” Demerdash says. “I thought that it’s a very good idea to combine politics with comedy and entertain people at the same time.”

Like Letterman, Demerdash switched networks. *Al-Lailah ma' Moe'taz* (“Tonight, with Moe'taz”) debuted on MBC, the Middle East’s dominant satellite channel, before moving over to the Dubai Satellite Channel two years later.

Demerdash is a small piece of a huge – and growing – universe of Arab satellite television, a world most Americans are barely aware exists. The news channels Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya get the most attention in the West, but in their home region they compete for viewers with a dizzying array of entertainment, sports and religious channels. Viewers can choose among film channels in Arabic and English (the latter with Arabic subtitles), four music video channels, dozens of talk-oriented stations, at least three all-sports channels and even an Arabic version of CNBC. And that is just what’s available free-to-air (meaning stations that can be received by anyone owning a satellite dish, no subscription required).

Arab Advisors Group, an Amman-based media and telecommunications consulting company, estimates that there are currently 130 Arab satellite television channels.ⁱ

And what are Arabs watching? That is a subject of great debate, since Western-style ratings systems do not exist in the Middle East. But surveys such as those conducted by Arab Advisors provide some guideposts.

Regionwide, “MBC1 is the most popular amongst the entertainment channels,” Judeh Siwady, a researcher at Arab Advisors, says, citing recent surveys in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In Cairo, the Arab world’s largest city, Dream TV, an Egyptian channel whose schedule is heavy on chat shows, also makes a strong showing. Jordanians and Saudis appear to prefer Rotana, a Beirut-based channel known for, as Arab Advisors’ founder Jawad Abbassi puts it, “cheesy Lebanese guys and girls. Mostly girls. Scantily-clad girls.”

And just as in the United States, religious programming has a significant place in the mix. Depending on how one defines “religious” there are at least a half dozen Muslim religious stations broadcasting by satellite across the region and perhaps as many as 20.ⁱⁱ

At least one religious channel appeared in the top four in all three countries in the Arab Advisors survey. In Egypt a religious channel, Irqa, topped the poll.

Whether the fare is news, sports, movies, religion or music videos there is wide agreement that the proliferation of satellite television has resulted in dramatic changes in both Arab society, and in the nature of political debate around the region.

Youssef M. Ibrahim, a longtime foreign correspondent for both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, who is now a Dubai-based energy consultant, says these channels have changed the Arab world “radically.” He adds that he is referring to entertainment channels as much as to the better-known news stations.

“I look at the sum total of the intrusion of these satellite channels into the life of your average Arab citizen. A majority of people have been sheltered, isolated and under, basically, government stewardship. And I think cracking this nut, regardless of whether you do it with a news program or with scantily-dressed women, is a very worthwhile exercise.”

Arab Advisors’ founder Abbassi had a similar thought. “I think there’s been a consensus in the industry now that satellite TV in the Arab World has been a huge, transforming technology,” he says.

Beyond the commercial stations there also exist a large number of state-run Arab satellite channels. As the Jordanian activist and media critic Sa’eda Kilani writes, “The difference between Arab satellite performance and state-owned television is staggering.”ⁱⁱⁱ The state channels remain numerically dominant.

Lamees Al-Hadidi, editor-in-chief of *Alam Al-Youm*, one of the region’s top business newspapers, estimates that 70 percent of all Arab satellite stations are government-controlled. In Egypt alone, she says, the government runs 30 satellite channels.

Some of the state channels remain mind-numbingly dull. Typical examples of the sort of “leader TV” that has long dominated parts of the developing world (Egypt’s main state-

run channel recently ran a six-hour interview with President Hosni Mubarak), but others have made a concerted effort to break out of old molds, while retaining the promotional message that is fundamentally the heart of any state television channel.

“When the satellite channel was launched it was seen as a way of targeting not just Arab countries in the region,” said Suzanne Afanah, a former head of the Jordan Satellite Channel. Noting that “Jordan has always seen itself as a country with a message as far as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is concerned,” she said JSC also targeted a broader international audience, particularly through its English-language news broadcasts, which could be seen both in Israel and the United States.

“Because it was national television it also felt that it was responsible to cover many other areas, like promoting business opportunities,” she said. The schedule, however, leans heavily on music shows and soap operas as a way of drawing in audiences. “It had a message, but in order to attract and capture audiences you have to attract them through entertainment programs.”

Jordan launched its satellite channel in the late ‘80s. But by the time Afanah took over a decade later (she ran the station from 1999-2001), the programming landscape had changed radically. Commercial satellite broadcasters were coming into their own, backed by the deep pockets of Gulf-based investors, and lacking the burden of promoting an overt political agenda. Afanah sought to break what she calls “the ‘state-run responsible national broadcaster’ image.”

“It was focused much more on the country, but in a very entertaining way, not in a preaching tone. So we had entertainment programs that focused on tourism, entertainment programs that focused on Jordanian businesses in a very lighthearted manner. It gave a fresh look to existing programming, so we just tried to break out of that mold and include a bit more entertainment. But we also kept the more important political talk shows.”

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The irony is that commercial channels such as Dubai-based MBC, Beirut's LBC and Future Television, and Cairo's Dream TV are challenging the traditional state-run stations from a commercial standpoint, despite the fact that few, if any, of them are making money.

Precise figures are almost impossible to obtain. "We tried," Abbassi said. "If you ask (the stations), 'How much are your revenues? How much of that is advertising revenues?' They'd laugh at you."

Estimates, however, usually put the region's advertising market at around \$1.5 billion per year (for comparative purposes, this is about half the size of the Spanish-language advertising market in the United States). Conventional wisdom also holds that about 90 percent of that money flows to about 10 stations. If those figures are even remotely accurate, that means no one has a particularly large piece of the pie.

The term one often encounters for this situation is "vanity broadcasting,"^{iv} meaning stations that are run for reasons other than profit. The owner's motive may be political, or it may be simply the prestige value of owning one's own channel.

"They don't think profit, that's the thing. That's why none of them discloses revenues or numbers," Abbassi says. "We insistently ask, please share with us numbers and, you know, if the numbers were really nice many of them would be happy to share them, because that would draw in more advertisers."

Perhaps surprisingly, some people on the other end of this debate don't really dispute that claim. Tim Riordan as director of channels for MBC Group runs what are by common consent the two most successful channels in the Arab satellite universe, MBC1 and MBC2:

"I don't think a lot of them are making money. I think a lot of them are there because they're either the channels of the country or the channels of the person. I don't think every channel is launched with a financial business plan that's on a route to make it successful."

MBC1 is the original commercial Arab satellite channel. It went on the air in 1993, originating from London, backed by Saudi money and featuring an on-air staff that was mostly Lebanese and Egyptian (Demerdash was one of the channel's original news anchors). It featured newcasts whose production values rivaled anything on Western television and whose reporting was a far cry from the stilted "leader television" most Arabs were accustomed to seeing. Even the Western movies and TV series were a revelation: most were only a year or two old, as opposed to the five-to-ten years that was then the norm on state-run channels.

In 2002 MBC moved its headquarters operation to Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. It also began an aggressive expansion program that saw the launch of four new channels in 24 months: MBC2, originally a new home for MBC's Western fare ("Friends," "Frasier," "Oprah" and several Western movies per day); MBC3, an all-kids channel; Al-Arabiya, an all-news station launched only weeks before the Iraq War as a direct challenge to Qatar-based Al-Jazeera; and, just last January, MBC4. The last channel is now home to Oprah and all of the other Western shows as well as all the news programs broadcast every day by both ABC and CBS. This allowed MBC2 to become an all-movie station (it claims to be the world's first free 24/7 movie channel).

On both MBC2 and MBC4 the programming is entirely in English (with Arabic subtitles). The commercials, however, are entirely in Arabic. This formula has proven extremely successful and MBC claims its own survey data now show MBC2 outdrawing the flagship station, MBC1, in prime time.

All of this is taking place, however, in a market where the rack rate for a 30-second ad is about \$5,000, and even the region's most popular show, "Superstar" – an Arab version of "American Idol" that airs on Beirut-based Future Television – commands a mere \$11,000 per spot.

Television is an expensive business. Even in Egypt, where production costs are extremely low, Demerdash says his weekly talk show cost \$20,000 - \$22,000 per episode. Add in the cost of sending the show to the home office in Dubai via satellite, plus all the general

overhead of running the channel, and it is difficult to see how anyone can possibly be making money in this environment.

Riordan will only say of MBC that, “overall, the group is in a positive position.” But he agrees with Arab Advisors’ Abbassi that a lack of hard viewer data is part of the problem.

“The advertising market is underdeveloped,” he says, with advertisers “getting a cheap ride on the back of a lot of viewers, and it suits them,” Riordan says. “It’s of interest to us all to have an accurate measurement system. Because then we can charge realistic rates. At the moment we know the success of the channels. [Yet] I don’t think we can exploit them in terms of advertising revenue.”

He says an independent rating company hopes to have “people meters” installed on the sets of viewers in Saudi Arabia by the end of the year. In the meantime he and other network heads rely on survey data, which is less precise. Programmers like Riordan use these surveys, word of mouth and viewer feedback as they try to figure out what works and what does not.

This is not merely a question of deciding which Western series to buy and which to avoid. It also involves deciding which Western shows to recreate in Arab versions. Reality and game shows, in particular, can be licensed for local production, and with everyone aware that the two most popular things to hit Arab TV in recent memory were “Superstar” (on Future Television) and the Arabic version of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” (on MBC) Riordan, like any other programmer, is constantly looking for the next big thing.

“ ‘Millionaire’ was our biggest – hugely successful. But the trick with ‘Millionaire’ – I think this applies the world over – it was more than a quiz show, it was a drama. And that’s what made it work. ... As long as we ran it, it was the top-rated show,” Riordan says.

Of course, not everything works. The reality show “Big Brother” originated in the Netherlands. Local versions have been hits in markets as diverse as the United States,

Australia and Sub-Saharan Africa. MBC's attempt last year at an Arab version, however, turned into an embarrassing mess.

"I think 'Big Brother' was the business of the acceptance of mixing male and female together in the same environment," Riordan says. "Also, the reaction where it was placed, in Bahrain."

Though the Arab "Big Brother House" had men and women living in separate, single-sex wings and meeting in a common area for competitions, that was too much for some viewers. Conservative politicians and mosque preachers in Bahrain denounced the show days after it first aired, sending petitions to the Ministry of Information and staging protest marches. MBC pulled the plug before the show finished its second week.

At this writing MBC was preparing to debut an Arab version of "Starting Over," an NBC daytime series which, according to the U.S. version's website^v, "follows a diverse and ever-changing group of women as they attempt to make extraordinary changes in their lives – all while living together under the same roof."

"It will be interesting to see how that goes. I think it's good. It's trying a format which is acceptable to the culture because it's all women," unlike some other reality shows which, he says, are culturally acceptable only in a foreign – especially a U.S. – version.

"'Joe Millionaire' is fine to show in a U.S. version. I can't imagine making a local version of it. But it's acceptable in the U.S. version because you're looking at somebody else's culture. You're not bringing it to your own culture," he said, referring to the Fox series in which a group of women competed for the affections of a man they believed to be a millionaire bachelor. "It works seeing a group of girls with a man picking. It was very successful."

Another current MBC offering is "Wife Swap," an ABC series in which two families "trade" mothers. Again, Riordan finds that watching somebody else do it seems to work, but a Middle Eastern edition is virtually inconceivable. He also took the precaution of changing the show's title: on MBC4 "Wife Swap" airs as "House Swap."

Localizing an American concept was exactly what Demerdash had in mind when he sought to create an Arabic version of “The Tonight Show.” The spark was his disillusionment with traditional journalism: “There wasn’t enough access to information. There wasn’t enough access to decision-makers. ... So I decided it’s time to move on with my career. I’m going to be sarcastic: about politics, about social habits. Not only about politicians, about everything in our lives.”

There is, however, one crucial difference between him and most American talk show hosts: Demerdash is a journalist while the “Tonight Show” format is designed to promote stand-up comedians.

Demerdash, however, had an advantage: a family background in show business. His mother, Karima Mukhtar, is one of the Arab world’s top movie stars. His late father was one of Arab cinema’s top directors. This gives him a familiarity with the entertainment world that few serious journalists – in the West or East – can rival.

Looking at his professional and personal backgrounds Demerdash asked, “Why don’t we combine them, especially if you are talking about getting into the democratization of the Arab world? Why not go with the flow and do a democratic show, if you wish, where you can mix and entertain people, make money, talk to celebrities and, in the meantime, send a message to politicians?”

“Political participation is very, very weak in our societies,” Demerdash said. “I thought, why not try to cater for the younger generations and get them politics in the very simple way of comedy and show business and celebrities, and a nice cool band? ... If you give them this medicine in a very simple form they will grab it.”

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The thing about pushing the limits in the Arab world, however, is that one inevitably runs up against a simple fact: commercial television is advertising-driven. And the advertising market revolves around the region’s largest economy – Saudi Arabia – which is also the region’s most conservative society.

For an American viewer of a certain age, Arab television advertising often looks suspiciously like U.S. television in the early 1960s: the men all work, though it is unclear exactly what they do. Women take care of children and extol the virtues of household products.

“Although this is something we are trying to fight against, it’s mainly reflecting reality. That’s the problem,” said Afanah, the former head of Jordan satellite television (Afanah says she knows of only two other Arab women who have ever held similar positions).

“It’s the chicken or the egg. Do you make change in society and that’s how it will be reflected? Or do you try to reflect a different sort of family, and then you’re promoting change in society? What comes first? The media or reality?”

“Mainly these ads reflect the reality of Arab society where, although there’s a growing number of working women, in general, women are not that apparent in the labor force.”

Especially in the conservative societies of the Gulf.

It should be said here that Saudi Arabia is not, by any stretch, the region’s most populous country (that would be Egypt). But it is the region’s economic powerhouse. During a debate at a World Economic Forum meeting in Jordan in May 2005, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to Great Britain, Prince Turki Al-Feisal, claimed the Kingdom accounts for 60 percent of the region’s economic activity. In terms of the consumer market, Abbassi puts the figure at 50 percent.

“Saudi Arabia to the region is what the United States is to the world: the major market, the major export market, the major services market. ... When Saudi Arabia is prospering you can be sure that most of the Arab countries will feel it,” Abbassi said.

Abbassi says the problem, ultimately, is that too many stations are chasing too small a market. “The rate cards of FM radio stations in the Arab World, of Satellite TV stations

in the Arab World, they're miniscule amounts compared to what American networks or European networks charge," he said.

"Another thing, we have major fragmentation, unlike the consolidation that's happened in the U.S. There are so many satellite TV stations competing for ads, and the advertisers don't trust the satellite TV stations with their audience numbers."

The result, most observers agree, is that a shake-out of some sort appears inevitable. "Left to market dynamics alone, we shouldn't have more than 10 to 15 channels--commercially viable ones," Abbassi said. "But because of vanity broadcasting you'll probably continue to have 60 or 70."

Ibrahim is one of the few observers who challenges that particular bit of conventional wisdom. "If anything it's going to be a multiplication of Arab satellites, and they are going to continue feeding this process of creating an Arab public opinion and (that) is going to continue to represent a threat to the established orders. ... It's actually a defining moment, I think."

He says he is particularly encouraged by what he sees as a new emphasis on "the art of programming" in both the news and the entertainment spheres.

"And people who do the programming are putting a value on what is the purpose of this programming, which is to acquire a bigger audience. This value is, luckily, not going the way of just showing Nancy Agram completely naked on screen," he said, citing the Arab world's reigning pop music diva.

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So when we in the West look at Arab television what should we see?

"The similarities are a lot more than the differences," Abbassi said. "Sex sells. Violence sells. (It's) advertisement-driven. And, just like in America, where you have Fox influenced by the conservative people who own it and then you have the other channels that are more liberal ones, it's also influenced by the ownership structure."

The thin, and under-priced, advertising market, however, continues to be a problem when it comes to innovative programming. Demerdash is the latest victim of this trend -- *Al-Lailah ma' Moa'taz* was cancelled shortly before the completion of this article. Even at \$20,000 an episode (pocket change by Western standards) the show, Demerdash says, seems to have been just too expensive.

He remains a star – pausing for photos with beaming fans and signing autographs as he made his way through a Cairo hotel on a recent evening. And like all cancelled stars, Demerdash casts an optimistic eye toward the future. He's eager to revive *Al-Lailah*, provided he can get it on five nights a week instead of one. That, he believes, would firm up the sponsor base. Barring that he says he is working on a new concept, something closer to a traditional political talk show, but faster-paced and edgier.

Just as in the West, the young are the most sought-after demographic as well as the source of new ideas and trends in the industry.

“There is a new generation of people who are making media now in the Arab World,” Demerdash said. “They are all liberal. They are more aggressive, and they are closer to professional television. Maybe that's not viewed in a very, very positive way among the conservatives in the Arab world. But that's beside the point. It exists.”

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About the Middle East Media Project: The USC Center on Public Diplomacy Middle East Media Project is funded by a grant from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. The project examines core issues at the intersection of media and public diplomacy in the Middle East. It aims to answer the following questions: How do the Arab and western media interact and perceive each other? How are U.S. foreign policy goals promoted to and perceived by people in the Middle East? And most importantly, what sort of new initiatives could be effective in deepening mutual understanding between the Arab and western worlds?

Notes

ⁱ The most commonly cited figure for Arab satellite channels is 120; see Sa'eda Kilani, "Freedom Fries, Fried Freedoms" (Arab Archives Institute, Amman, 2004), p 14 and Hugh Miles "Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World" (Abacus, London, 2005), *passim*. Arab Advisors' research, however, is more recent than that cited in both Kilani's and Miles' books.

ⁱⁱ American Christian evangelicals also operate satellite television stations in the region. Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network ran a station, Middle East Television (METV) out of Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon for many years. When the Israelis withdrew from Lebanon the station's operations were moved to northern Israel. METV and another Christian evangelical station, FETV, both transmit on the Israeli Amos satellite rather than on Arabsat and Nilesat, the satellites of choice for most Arab broadcasters. The American evangelicals aside there are no specifically Christian religious channels in the region.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kilani, *Freedom Fries, Fried Freedoms*, p. 10.

^{iv} Industry analyst Chris Forrester is generally credited with coining the phrase.

^v www.startingover.tv