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# ARABIZING THE NEWS

by Hanan Elbadry

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The Arab broadcasting map is as varied and complicated as the region itself. Currently, each Arab country has one or more government-owned and official satellite channels broadcasting from its capital. Egypt has the distinction of being the only Arab country to launch its own, French-built satellite (NILESAT) and broadcast about 30 different channels with the excess satellite capacity contracted out to other Arab governments. Egypt also plans to launch a second satellite (NILESAT-2) with a much larger capacity.

Most Arab governments have also encouraged the private sector to enter the field with some predictable and understandable restrictions. An ever-increasing number of semi-official and private channels are entering the fray and broadcasting from their countries of origin or from abroad. The latter have more freedom in terms of format and content, and hence are more interesting and are worth mentioning.

Private Arab channels broadcasting from London include the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC)—financed by Saudis—and the Arab News Network (ANN) financed by Saudis and Syrians. The Arabic Radio & Television (ART)—owned by Sheikh Saleh Kamel, a Saudi businessman—which specializes in entertainment, movies, children's programming and talk shows, broadcasts through several facilities in Arab countries and Europe. Both Lebanese-financed LTV and Future TV—owned by former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri—broadcast from

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Lebanon. The Qatar-based and financed Al Jazeera channel is probably the most watched of these channels.

## Politics Determines

This media explosion is driven not by market forces but by purely political ones. It can be traced to the availability of sufficient funds for promoting the political agendas of their sponsors, as well as the need to accommodate regional instabilities, conflicts, and intra-Arab policy differences. In addition, almost all Arab countries view the ownership of one or more satellite stations as an essential symbol of state sovereignty.

In a region where freedom of expression was until recently considered a luxury; where printed publications and newspapers with opposing points of view are still regularly confiscated; where jamming of rival radio broadcasts was the norm; technology is making a drastic change. On the positive side, newscasts available through satellite dishes and unrestricted Internet access to the news (in Egypt, it is at 40 percent and growing, with 90 percent of Internet users in the 18-40 age bracket) are making it very difficult for governments to continue to enforce these policies. And as a result, the direct control exercised by Arab governments on news coverage and content is decreasing rapidly in response to

mounting public pressure for more open and comprehensive news coverage.

On the negative side, some governments still view satellite channels as mere extensions to their propaganda efforts. Following last December's Operation Desert Fox and the role the Qatar-based Al Jazeera channel played in arousing the Arab public opinion against it, Kuwait is rumored to have allocated millions of dollars—fiscal crises notwithstanding—to start a similar channel. With broadcast facilities in Greece or Cyprus, it will pursue and reflect the political agenda of the Kuwaiti government while claiming impartiality and independence from the government.

## Testing CNN's Model

Arab broadcasters were quick to adopt the Western model. Not only in terms of advanced technology and production techniques, but also in filling airtime with Western-style newscasts and news programming. CNN has been the ideal news channel to emulate, especially since its ascendance to global news supremacy and popularity following the Gulf War in 1991.

Following the example of CNN, many of these channels attempted to present the news in a comprehensive and distinctive way. To cover international news, some preferred to open their own offices in the major capitals of the world—and especially Washington, DC, the emerging world center for po-



NileSat ground station

Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU)



Arabs are establishing their own broadcast companies.

litical events. Some opted to deal with well-known news agencies and news-providers like the BBC, AP and Reuters, while others relied on small private agencies run by Arabs.

Maintaining one's own worldwide news offices is an extremely expensive endeavor, as MBC found out recently when forced to scale down its operations and lay off a large number of employees. Relying on small agencies with the single distinction of being run by fellow Arabs was not very successful either. And so most Arab broadcasters were forced to settle for large news agencies as their sole provider of international news.

This last option was no panacea. News services offered by big-name agencies are quite expensive. And the news services were very quick to engage in turf wars over the region. AP, which is relatively new to TV-reporting and coverage, emerged as the victor since it managed to sign on many clients covering a substantial number of Arab countries. The dominance of AP in the region creates problems of a different kind: sameness. Arab viewers often see the same footage and the same coverage—and even the same wording—aired on different channels. Viewer satisfaction has also diminished because of Western-centric reporting. All these negatives are of course due to the fact that they come from a single source and are based on the same scripts written by Western nationals (primarily for Western con-

sumption) that are given to all clients in the region.

### Arabizing the News

Arab newscasters are starting to pay attention to this problem. Some are asking their correspondents to conduct special interviews to beef up the reports and add variety to the footage. Others are getting involved in the selection of correspondents to ensure that they are well-trained with the right journalistic background, fluent in Arabic, and pleasant enough to stand in front of a camera—and not just happen to live within reasonable proximity of the news agency's offices.

The other side of this relationship, where Arab broadcasters might provide Western media with footage and news reports, is practically non-existent. Western media always relied on their own crews to cover the Arab world, and the local contribution never exceeded the traditional roles of translating and assisting with production.

This is about to change. Arab entrepreneurs, with extensive experience and exposure to Western—and especially U.S.—news outlets, are starting their own companies to do just that. In Cairo recently, I met with Mohamed Gohar, the founder of Video Cairo. The company's office in Cairo has three studios and nine camera crews, with the latest in digital technology, including direct satellite uplinks. Video Cairo

offers its services to the likes of NBC, CBS, AP and FOX in the United States, and EuroNews, German TV and French TV in Europe. Western clients are starting to depend on Video Cairo to provide news footage and news reports from Egypt and the Arab world. To keep up with demand, and to provide easy access for its clients, the company started CairoSat—its own satellite news-feed channel.

### Future Trends

The dependence of Arab newscasters on Western media will diminish over time. This will be driven by the need for cost-containment, presentation of the news from an Arab-centric point of view, the need to have more in-depth coverage—preferably by professionals—and the need to offer the news in a unique and distinctive format that is different from the competition.

Arab newscasters will widen their production-equipment procurement sources to include Japan and the Far East where "Western" technology can be bought at a fraction of the cost. The availability of technically-advanced production equipment and the use of state-of-the-art digital systems and computers in newsrooms, coupled with a new generation of broadcast professionals, will probably put them on a par with their Western counterparts. The Internet has fashioned the world literally into a global village. Arab newscasters are beginning to live up to their responsibilities toward their viewers. As old-style tailored and censored newscasts disappear over time, Arab newscasts will have more credibility and more viewer-loyalty and satisfaction.

More Arab newscasters will be opening their own offices in all major Western capitals. But the current growth rate of satellite channels is unsustainable. The market will experience heavy consolidation due to current high costs. Only the fit will survive.

The emergence and success of companies like Video Cairo will continue and will help make the relationship between the Arab newscasters and their Western counterparts—and the coverage itself—less biased and more even-handed. ■