

Al-Jazeera: the world through Arab eyes

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A booming satellite television industry offers the Arab world's 280 million people fresh perspectives on Middle East and global affairs. Hazem Saghieh assesses the costs and benefits of a revolution in Arab minds and screens.

The current vigorous growth of the television industry in the Arab world has its origin in three factors. Their mixture of technological and political elements symbolises, as if in a distorting mirror, the struggles of a people who are negotiating a difficult historical inheritance while painfully attempting to enter the world of globalisation on their own terms.

First, the advances in global communications made possible by audio-visual technology. The war to liberate Kuwait in 1991 was a landmark in demonstrating the power of television, of the American network CNN in particular. The Arabs had a ringside seat as spectators of these developments; more recently, they have entered the field as active participants.

Second, the decline of the Arab nationalist cause in its various guises. What used to be known as the “national liberation movement” has turned into an array of religious, ethnic and sectarian factions united only by their hostility to the outsider – and to the American outsider above all. This has allowed the Arabs to feel imaginatively bound in a common cause, one that television finds it appropriate and lucrative to fuel.

Third, the disintegration of intermediate institutions able to connect the individual citizen, the state and society. The communist parties began to wane with the decline, and then collapse, of the Soviet Union. They were also fatally undermined by profound changes in the nature of the working class and the fabric of society in general, along with the rise of ethnic and sectarian allegiances.

In brief, all modern Arab political projects have ended in failure. The *Ba'ath* party ended as a mere repressive apparatus in two major Arab countries, Syria and Iraq, while Nasserism has long been receded into a dim and distant past. Even the Palestinian revolution has lost its hold on Arab sentiment, its institutions having been reduced by the Oslo agreements of 1993 to an impoverished “national authority”. The Arab trade unions, never able in any case to mobilise society in a poorly-industrialised region, have shared this political decline. Television both articulates the resultant sense of loss and failure, and provides ways of escape from its crushing realities.

These three factors help explain why al-Jazeera, the successful Arabic satellite television station, has become in effect the most popular “political party” in

the Arab world. Millions of Arabs watch its news bulletins, and as many as 30 million watch its flagship debate programme “Countertrend” (*al-Itijah al-Mua’akis*).

Between 1998 and 2002, total TV viewership showed a marked increase, according to the Pan-Arab Research Company. The 15-24 year old age group shows the highest rate of increase, though it is high in every category. According to the Arab media research company Ipsos-stat, the number of female viewers was in 2002 almost equal to male.

Al-Jazeera’s impact derives from its ability to fuse two dimensions of globalisation: sophisticated technology (what might be called “capitalist globalisation”) and an appeal to ethnic and religious populism (what might be called, from old marxist phraseology, “*lumpenproletarian* globalisation”). The result is a fascinating combination of progress and regress – one that is being contested daily between and within Arab hearts and minds from Iraq to Morocco, from Algeria to Yemen.

The paradoxes of progress

There are, in turn, three positive aspects of the flourishing satellite television industry in the Arab world.

First, al-Jazeera and other channels have broken the western, and particularly the American, news monopoly in the region. The resulting expansion in the range of information sources and views is not simply a healthy counterweight to American-dominated coverage; it also accustoms Arab viewers to criticism of *their own* rulers and governments – an unthinkable trend until the 1990s. The presence on al-Jazeera and other channels of human rights activists and feminists, for example, represents a significant “normalisation” of political discourse.

Second, al-Jazeera has changed the way Arab television reporters work. Many now feel equal in dignity and professional pride to their western counterparts, covering conflicts in similar ways and competing for scoops. They even encounter comparable problems with the authorities in various Arab countries.

Third, al-Jazeera has helped enable the Arabs, a people with a recent history of domination by colonial powers,

to improve their collective morale and self-belief. One important component here is the documentary films that Arabic satellite channels buy from their western colleagues, above all the BBC; another is the debate programmes on Arabic TV that involve Israeli as well as American politicians and journalists, which help to demystify the “enemy” and show him to be a normal human being like the rest of us. All this widens people’s horizons, an important source of confidence.

However, the phenomenon of Arabic satellite television also has two drawbacks. First, the content of the new stations’ programmes is often open to charges of political bias. This is epitomised by the main slogan of al-Jazeera (primarily a news channel, after all): “the opinion... and the other opinion”. The sense of partisanship that this evokes is the mirror image of the frequent controversies al-Jazeera has been involved in – over the quality of its reporting, the apparent targeting of its offices by American warplanes in Kabul and Baghdad, and the political links of its Madrid correspondent who was accused of helping al-Qaida.

The second drawback of the al-Jazeera phenomenon is even more serious, and is linked to the timing of its arrival. The explosion in of sudden, unfettered freedom of speech in a historically unfree Arab world lacking any democratic traditions creates many opportunities for scandal-mongering. Even worse, the new satellite channels are highly selective in their targets of criticism; they avoid condemning the rulers and governments that finance them. Their editorial line rarely deviates from government policy in the country in question.

Al-Jazeera itself, for example, was set up in Qatar in February 1996, seven months after the bloodless coup led by the then Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani against his father, the Emir Khalifa bin Hamad. It is well known that from his first days in power the new emir did his utmost to pursue policies independent of those of the major Arab states, and that his administration used al-Jazeera as a means of embarrassing those very governments.

An embrace of extremes

The cumulative impact of technological sophistication, political instrumentality and a combative, polarising reporting style in the Arab satellite channels is highly

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significant. These television stations not only depict reality, but endlessly repeat certain images in ways that give an exaggerated, even caricatured, impression of that reality.

Such extreme phenomena as war and conflict, the sanctification of “martyrs”, images of corpses, emotive scenes and the necrophiliac celebration of death and funerals are all much more common on Arabic satellite channels than they are in the day-to-day life of most Arabs. Yet the inflammatory zeal of some correspondents in covering such events is undiminished.

Every time “one of us” dies he is invariably described as having been “martyred”; but every casualty from “the other side” – even if only a child – is invariably described as having been “killed”. The stereotypical bigotry of certain programmes – especially those broadcast by the *Hezbollah* channel al-Manar – has to be seen to be believed.

Alongside politics, a religious consciousness and the propagation of religious values have assumed an important position in Arab broadcasting. This is especially dangerous when advanced technology is made an instrument of an unreformed approach to religious and secular affairs. The outcome – “capitalist” plus “*lumpenproletarian*” globalisation, exhibitionist consumerism plus religious fundamentalism, is the worst postmodern combination.

In the face of this, the official United States response is of no use whatsoever. It embraces the repressive and illiberal tradition of blaming the media for events on

the ground. Behind them, the Fox News channel, American television evangelists and the phenomenon of “embedded” journalists serve merely to justify the bias of Arabic television stations.

None of this absolves the Arab media from its responsibility to report truthfully and accurately without abusing its power – particularly when that power extends beyond the Arab world itself to Arabs living elsewhere. But the real worry is that Arab television stations are ultimately defined more by their ethnic and communal allegiances, and by the interests of their owners, than by the technological advances that have facilitated them.

There is a mordant contrast here with the kind of profound cultural and psychological change in the Arab world represented by (for example) the building of the Suez canal or the creation of the American University in Beirut. Another historical comparison may make the point best: whereas newspapers were born, a century ago, as part of a wider project to modernise the Arabs, satellite television stations fundamentally seek to defend them, reinforce their prejudices, and tell them that they are right whatever they do.

That is sad enough; what makes it tragic is that with George W. Bush in the White House and General Ariel Sharon in charge of Israel, the arguments of these Arab television channels sound very convincing.

This article is based on a talk Hazem Saghieh gave to the 11th World Editors’ Forum in Istanbul on 2 June 2004

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