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“The Impact of Arab Satellite Television on the Prospects
for Development and Democracy in the Arab World”

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Has Arab Satellite Television had a positive impact on the prospects for development and democracy in the Arab world? I agree in more ways than one might imagine.

The starting point is that little more than a decade ago there was no such thing as television journalism in the Arab world. State-owned national television channels had news bulletins, but insofar as “news value,” there was no TV journalism before satellite television because stories that were covered and transmitted were due to some intangible and intrinsic “news value” on which professionals generally never reached a general consensus.

News bulletins were dominated by footage covering ceremonial occasions of state – and this held true whether the country was a republic or a monarchy. This footage included the ruler receiving newly accredited diplomats, or hosting another head of state and more recently with his guest addressing the press; the ruler being received at the airport upon returning home, or addressing parliament on a significant occasion; and/or the inauguration of a new dam or some other massive facility. However, do not imagine that state television was devoted solely to recording ceremonial activities of the ruler, it included the Prime Minister; the Prime Minister convening a meeting of the cabinet or other ministers opening factories.

In this sealed universe there were no television reporters. Just a cameraman who recorded the event, editing in camera, so to speak, so that his film or tape could be played directly on the evening news, while a presenter read wire copy from the state or semi official news agency that had covered the same event. Since the

wire copy only approximated the footage being shown – the same event but with nothing written to pictures, nor any picture edited to fit the copy, there was always a desultory, oddly detached quality, aside from the basic banality of the events that were covered.

Unlike radio, there was no comparison effect. Terrestrial television had a range of 50 miles, with boosters so that the signal could be relayed within the country, and only that country. Unlike BBC Arabic radio service, which anyone could listen to in the Arab world, no one could see BBC television news in the Arab world, or any other broadcaster - be they American, French or Italian covering the news according to international standards.

Television news agencies supplied video of major international news which at times included regional events like the civil war in Lebanon, but again this was footage from the field, not a field report. The television news agencies provided pictures and a written description of the shots, the location, names of personalities but did not include a script which could be translated and read. The national television channels would again take copy from their own state news agency, or even an international news agency, the copy carefully vetted so as not to contradict the official take on the event – but again this wasn't a news report, and the copy which the anchor read rarely amplified the significance of the picture shown. If it did, the result was purely accidental since the idea of writing to picture was part of the art of television journalism that simply wasn't practiced.

Regional news – a coup, a civil war, a massacre might never be broadcast if deemed embarrassing to a friendly fellow Arab state, or perhaps a report would finally appear a few days late while the channel waited for the political leadership to decide what its response to the event in a neighboring country might be. Of course this could be ludicrous since short wave radio – BBC Arabic service, VOA and Monte Carlo Arabic radio would be reporting on events. So at the very least “the educated classes,” a linguistic flourish to which I have grown accustomed, living as I do in the Arab world, were aware of the event. Most notoriously in that vein, was the failure of the Saudi official media to mention the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait for more than 48 hours after the event; a response that is no longer conceivable thanks to the impact of satellite television.

But I must confess that once the system is understood, it had its extra journalistic uses. Let's say our bureau was in desperate need of another but difficult-to-secure international telephone line. There were very few available in Cairo in the mid-seventies. I knew President Sadat was to inaugurate a new cultural center, so that morning I would show up with my camera crew. Of course NBC News wouldn't have had the slightest interest in the event and I had no intention to

ship the film we would shoot, and needless to say, my competition - CBS and ABC weren't covering it: only a cameraman from Egypt TV who would always accompany the President. This was just fine. At the right moment I would approach the President and ask him for his reaction to any seemingly relevant question or two - a rumor from Washington, a report from Tel Aviv. Needless to say, my crew would film the stand-up interview. But more important, Egypt TV - not having its own correspondent would film every second of the interview. Now in those days there was no other television to watch but Egypt TV, and that night, approximately 50 million Egyptians watched President Sadat chatting with me about reports from Washington and Tel Aviv, just like old friends. The next morning I would rush over to the Ministry of Telecommunications where everybody would recognize me as the foreign correspondent friend of the President! I would be ushered into the office of the minister and within minutes, the phone line was ours.

What changed all of this? Here is a pertinent lesson of how benign foreign intervention can become a motor for change in the Arab world: CNN coverage of the build-up and the eventual combat between the American-led Alliance and Iraq in 1991. There were very few dishes in the Arab world at the time, but given the need to dispel outrageous Iraqi radio propaganda, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia and in time other Arab countries pulled down CNN 24/7 coverage of the build-up and then the war, and retransmitted them via terrestrial television. Suddenly Arabs could see events in the Arab world significantly covered - CNN reporters out in the field coming back with finished reports. Since the reports were in English, English speakers were suddenly in great demand in millions of Arab households and coffee shops. In Egypt a pay TV company CNE continued to retransmit CNN terrestrially after the war ended.

Saudi private interests with very close ties to the palace sensed the importance of satellite news and the potential for mischief, if it was placed in the wrong hands, and quickly moved after the war ended to establish a satellite channel with morning and evening news bulletins transmitting real reports - footage from the field edited into meaningful news stories by Arab correspondents in the field with their cameramen. The MBC channel, was logically based in London where there was already a cadre of expatriate Arab journalists trained to international standards, or trainable by executives brought in from the BBC and ITN, and where the ambience in no way resembled that of state television channels, which were literally extensions of the ministries of information, invariably occupying the same building.

Again, one must acknowledge outside influence, the ambience of London - where the coverage of political life, could be simplified into a schematic. This contrasts vividly with what had become after the 1948 defeat in Palestine and the

waves of coup d'état and revolutions that followed as the prevailing mode of thought and expression in Arab media, reflected above all in the commentaries of the state-owned or directed printed press, which were always long on commentaries and short on news. That mode of thought and expression is based on the fact that every problem has its roots in a conspiracy and the contending issues were, and in some cases, still are, between rival or shifting conspiracy theories – a political media environment that has been described so well by our colleague Saad Eddin Ibrahim at a media conference last year in Cambridge. His paper, titled “Thoughts in Arab Satellite Television, Pan Arabism, and Freedom of Expression” can be found in the Fall/Winter issue of Transnational Broadcasting Studies at www.tbsjournal.com

Needless to say, in such an environment, to see real news reports from the field, narrated in Arabic was a stunning experience and MBC quickly acquired a large audience particularly in the Gulf and eastern Saudi Arabia, since the satellite signal was downloaded in Bahrain and retransmitted terrestrially. In those parts of Arabia and the Gulf MBC took major audience share.

Other channels followed and after an aborted attempt at 24/7 Arab language TV news coverage produced by BBC in the service of another Saudi group, the newly installed Emir of Qatar provided funds and facility to launch Al Jazeera, in 1996, approximating the BBC model of public-owned, but not state-controlled television. The core staff at Al Jazeera had all been trained and served as broadcasters at BBC.

By now dishes and a number of entertainment satellite channels were proliferating across most of the Arab world; that proliferation of dishes provided Al Jazeera with a rapidly growing mass audience – estimated at more than 40 million viewers. However, al Jazeera is a 24/7 news operation it quickly seized the leadership position in Arab satellite broadcasting that would not be significantly challenged until just before the invasion of Iraq, when the MBC group which had first launched TV news coverage, but in a limited news bulletin format back in 1992, brought together a group of Arab journalists, including the first news director at Al Jazeera and a number of Al Jazeera reporters, and launched Al Arabiya. The competition has had a positive effect – Arab satellite television journalists are less likely to indulge their personal ideological takes on the news when they know a more detached, and thus, a more reliable version of the same event is available on the TV screen just one click away on everybody's remote control.

So, here we have one of those amazing historic reverses where the most servile, state controlled, and least professional media in the Arab world, is suddenly refashioned in a satellite format -- providing news reports more in accordance

with international professional standards than any other form of media in the region. Also, because those reports can be uplinked from Europe to a satellite, which can download the reports to dishes anywhere in the Arab world, this was an un-censorable format by virtue of the transmission technology and satellite links.

For many Arabs, however, the great joy in watching Al Jazeera was to follow the several cross-fire type of political talk shows that would pit critics of Arab regimes against their defenders, Islamists against either liberal secularists or Arab nationalists, while debates that were unimaginable on state national television channels flowed back and forth. In addition, the audience could join in by telephone, again expressing his or her own opinion in a manner unimaginable only a decade ago. But as Ibrahim Helal, former chief editor at Al Jazeera acknowledged at that same Cambridge conference on Arab media last winter, all too often these talk shows degenerated into unproductive shouting matches in which abuse replaced dialogue and analysis. One senses that these talk shows are too often a vehicle for the collective venting of emotion, rather than exercises in critical thinking that foster critical thinking on the part of the audience.

I would argue that it is the *informed opinion* that is of value, and not opinion for its own sake, as the Arab world has for too long suffered from the conspiracy mania and political hysteria of *uninformed opinion* reporting from the field, reporting the facts as they are in the field informs opinion.

When Saad Eddin Ibrahim was finally released from prison, during which time he had been vilified by nearly the entire Egyptian press, it was Al Jazeera, which interviewed Saad Eddin and allowed him to raise the very issue – the possibility of hereditary succession to power in Egypt, which had resulted in Saad Eddin's imprisonment in the first place. A critical issue for the democratic process had been put into play by a news report – an interview, not by confrontational talk shows, which function at best after the facts are established, or all too often are oblivious, if not indifferent to facts.

All of these characteristics hold true for development, except that the limits of the Arab satellite television transformation of media represent coverage that reflects pan-Arab interest and local news because these channels all have a pan-Arab audience by virtue of being satellite channels. If all politics are local –at least in democracies, certainly the best, the most authentic and the least destructive forms of development are local. Although the same qualities of accuracy, or a watchdog function of media assuring more transparency in both government and business, and/or reporting facts out on the field rather than conspiracy theories encourage development as well as democracy, the positive impact upon

development remains limited until the media transformation begun by Arab by Arab satellite television moves into the local environment.

Now, to return to the impact upon the prospects for democracy, as a response to widespread concern and anger in the Arab world over America's deepening involvement in the region, particularly the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and what has appeared as continued US support for the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya increased coverage of American political life by providing intensive coverage of the 2004 presidential election campaign. If the interest in the campaign was stimulated in part, by the fact that several of the contenders for the Democratic Party nomination challenged the wisdom and conduct of the invasion of Iraq, the net result was extraordinary coverage of the process of democracy starting from the time of the primaries.

Indeed, Hugh Miles, the author of a recent book about Al Jazeera observed at a recent media workshop in Doha, that Al Jazeera has done more to educate Arabs about democracy than any other broadcaster. He was alluding to Al Jazeera's regular weekly program "From Washington" with guests from both the administration and the opposition, as well as the special weekly show "US Presidential Race" which started in January 2004, and which took great pains to report to Arab viewers on the American political and electoral process, how delegates to the conventions are chosen, how the modern primary system evolved and how the Electoral College functioned. This show was supplemented by special reports, documentaries and live coverage of many of the highlights first in the primary campaigns, the conventions (with four reporters covering both conventions) and then the election campaign itself.

In contrast to usual confrontational talk shows, Al Jazeera's programs "From Washington" and "the American Presidential Face," produced by the Washington bureau and hosted by Al Jazeera's veteran correspondent Hafez Al Mirazi, had a distinctly informative style. These shows, the later one in particular, was obviously designed to help viewers newly interested in American politics to easily understand what was happening during the campaign and to grasp the basic workings of the American democratic system. The coverage deepened the Arab world's factual, rather than the imagined understanding of America, and also as a side effect, provided a familiarization course in a functioning democracy. A similar effect has been underway in the intense reporting on political life in England by the Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya bureaus in London - the stimulus again may be issues of particular interest to an Arab audience such as the debates in parliament related to the Iraqi invasion but the side effect has been a protracted education in the democratic process.

The importance of this development cannot be exaggerated. Until a few years ago there was not a single center for American studies at any Arab university. Now there are two; one is at Cairo university and the other has just started at the American University in Cairo, funded interestingly enough by the Saudi Prince and global investor, Alwalid bin Talal who is deeply involved in Arab satellite television. And the Rand Corporation has launched a regional research center in Qatar, the host country for Al Jazeera.

Two other elections have had a profound effect in stimulating the democratic process in the Arab world. I refer to the Palestinian election for President, which was a contested election and the local elections in which Hamas entered the political process and did quite well, suggesting to Fateh's leadership that there is a price to be paid for the sort of casual corruption that characterized the Palestinian Authority's rule in the territories since Oslo. But the election with the greatest impact of all was the one in Iraq in which many millions of Arabs watched millions of Iraqis braving terrorist threats to vote in a highly competitive election. And the great question those elections pose in the consciousness of every Arab, in every Arab country is that if free, competitive elections can be held in Iraq under a foreign occupation, and despite a violent insurgency, then, why not here?