

Naomi Sakr

Optical illusions

Television and Censorship in the Arab World

Should people believe a government that promises to surrender control over terrestrial television? In the Arab world, the precedents for such a promise being made, let alone kept, are extremely rare. King Abdullah's plans to shake up the broadcast media in Jordan, revealed late last year, include releasing the country's sole broadcaster from the clutches of the Ministry of Information and introducing joint private-public ownership.

It is tempting, after nearly ten years of Arab satellite television, to interpret talk of ending a government broadcasting monopoly as an acknowledgement that tight control in this sector no longer works. In fact a veritable kaleidoscope of Arabic-language programming is now available, via satellite, on Middle Eastern television screens. This diversity has had some impact on the content of terrestrial television. But a mountain of legislation still weighs down on both satellite and terrestrial channels, perpetuating television censorship.

The case of Lebanon

Like any set of institutions rooted in a political system, the broadcast media of a country or

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region reflect the existing distribution of power. To see how this structural relationship can result in censorship, it is instructive to start by looking at broadcasting arrangements in Lebanon, since these are potentially the most liberal in the Arab world.

In the Lebanese confessional system, political positions are assigned on the basis of sectarian affiliation, while unified state institutions take a back seat. In Lebanon today, the state broadcaster, Télé-Liban, is obliged to compete in its own territory with locally-based private stations. Each private station is linked to a prominent politician or religious group.

The official ending of Télé-Liban's monopoly under Lebanon's 1994 Audiovisual Media Law occurred at a time when the spread of Arab satellite channels was in full swing. Indeed, it gave the country's private broadcasters – led by LBCI and Future TV – a timely opportunity to enter (and galvanise) the satellite race. But its primary purpose was to regulate the chaotic proliferation of small broadcasting stations that

had mushroomed during the Lebanese civil war. When, for political rather than technical reasons, only six Lebanese television stations were awarded licences under the law, those denied access to the airwaves denounced this as an act of censorship. There was little surprise that Rafiq Hariri, Lebanon's prime minister at the time, became a beneficiary of the licensing system through his shareholding in Future TV.

In 2000, with Mr Hariri out of office and licences granted to some of those excluded first time round, multiple layers of censorship still persist. In addition to the control that Syria exercises over Lebanese affairs, and the limitations on free speech carried over from the Penal Code and Press Law to the Audiovisual Media Law¹, individual stations impose unwritten restrictions of their own. Maguy Farah, a presenter with Future TV, recently told a Lebanese magazine she had «absolute freedom» in her position. Yet she conceded that the link between Future TV and Mr Hariri meant she would be unlikely to host Selim al-Hoss, the current prime minister, on her show.²

Meanwhile, Mr Hoss's cabinet, fearful of partial election coverage by private stations, evoked a storm of protest in early 2000 by introducing a bill to forbid all such stations from reporting on parliamentary election campaigns.³ This attempt at blanket censorship provided yet another reminder that the scope for political commentary by both terrestrial and satellite broadcasters based in Lebanon remains subject to local regulation.

Media free zones

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¹ See Article 35 [2] of Law 382/94, which states: «transmission is considered equal to publication».

² *ArabAd*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January 2000, pp. 28-29.

³ *Daily Star*, 29 January, 2000.

Channel (ESC) and Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) – to meet the challenge created by alternative sources of news about Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent Gulf war. The ESC is based in Cairo as part of the state-owned Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU). MBC, based in London, is owned by a brother-in-law of King Fahd.

The common ground between ESC, MBC and the other pan-Arab television channels should not be exaggerated, even though members of the Al Saud are also behind the two leading pay-TV channels, ART and Orbit, and have business and personal links to Lebanon's LBCI and Future TV. Nevertheless, as members of the Satellite Channels' Coordinating Committee within the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU), these channels have shown they can take a collective stand. They did so against Qatar's Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel after Al-Jazeera's controversial political programmes attracted attention across the Arab world during 1998. It soon emerged that the committee had isolated Al-Jazeera as the only satellite channel ready to break with censorship taboos. Committee members insisted that Al-Jazeera should abide by the «code of honour of the Arab media» before it would be accepted into the ASBU club.⁴

Resistance to any departure from the common censorship code was exposed again at the end of 1999 when Jordan announced plans for a «media free zone». MBC and Orbit were known to be considering relocation from their expensive bases in London and Rome to cheaper alternatives in the Middle East. Seeing a chance to accommodate them and create jobs for Jordanians at the same time, King Abdullah moved quickly after his accession in February 1999 to promise investment incentives and freedom of expression to any Arab or other media company establishing a base in Amman. In January 2000 the draft law governing Jordan's proposed media free zone was released.

By this time other Middle East capitals had also announced similar plans. But competition was

⁴ <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk>, 7 January, 1999; *Financial Times* 13 March, 1999.

not the biggest drawback to the Jordanian scheme. The main problem lay in doubts as to whether King Abdullah and his ministers shared the same understanding of free speech. The Prime Minister, Abdel-Raouf Rawabdeh, said companies signing contracts to operate in the free zone would be required to abide by a code of ethics similar to the one adopted by the Arab Federation of Journalists. This code complies with vaguely-worded media legislation in force across the Arab states, outlawing material deemed to be against religion or morality, or harmful to national unity or foreign ties.

Those sceptical about the likelihood of uncensored material being broadcast from Amman can point to what happened to Al-Jazeera's correspondents there in 1998. In November that year the Jordanian Ministry of Information, through the Press and Publications Department, cancelled their accreditation in protest at a panel debate screened by Al-Jazeera from Doha. A Syrian guest in the programme, delving into history, had said Jordan was established for Israel's benefit. He then accused it of colluding with Israel to deprive Syria of water resources.⁵ The Jordanian authorities felt this to be an intolerable insult that could not go unpunished.

33 prohibitions or no censor at all?

In imposing censorship, even in a media free zone, Jordan would hardly be stepping out of line. Competition among media free zones in different Arab countries is seen more in terms of freedom from taxes, customs duty and building restrictions than freedom from media laws. Egypt's Information Minister, Safwat al-Sharif, announced in January 2000 that private Egyptian companies would be allowed to broadcast by satellite from a free zone linked to the film studio complex called Media Production City, just outside Cairo. In making the announcement, however, he stressed that the Ministry of Infor-

mation reserved the right to censor both news and entertainment broadcast by private channels.⁶

The basis for such censorship is laid out in the 33 prohibitions contained in the Code of Ethics observed throughout the ERTU. These prohibitions forbid criticism of state officials, the national system, traditional values, and religious beliefs. Restrictions like these make it all but impossible to risk transmitting television broadcasts live. Yet it is live broadcasts that television viewers in the Arab countries have shown they want. It is in the mounting conflict between censorship imperatives and the demand for live television that the impact of satellite technology is most clearly seen.

Orbit, owned by the Mawarid Group of Saudi Arabia, is credited with taking a pioneering step towards live debates when it introduced *Ala al-hawa* (On the Air) in January 1996. This successful experiment attracted attention by featuring guests such as the former Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, and the Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, with viewers calling in from around the world. It offered a striking contrast to the collapse of Orbit's other high-profile initiative at that time, namely its contract to take news and current affairs in Arabic from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). A few months into 1996 Orbit ended the BBC deal, apparently because BBC reports about Saudi Arabia risked offending Orbit's Saudi subscriber base.

The liveliest of the live broadcasts have been those on Al-Jazeera. In part this is because the machinery of censorship was modified in Qatar when the current emir took power in 1995. First the post of Information Minister was left vacant and then in 1998 the ministry was abolished altogether, in line with the emir's policy of reform. But Al-Jazeera also has controversy built in. There is professional rivalry among its best known presenters, such as that between Faisal al-Qassem of *Al-Ittijah al-muakis* (The Opposite Direction) and Sami Haddad of *Akthar min rai* (More than One Opinion). At the same time, Al-Jazeera has won its audience precisely by breaking the taboos

⁵ BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, ME/3377 MED/6, 6 November, 1998

⁶ <http://www.arabicnews.com>, 19 January, 2000.

imposed on other Arab satellite channels. Audience ratings ultimately determine profitability.

«Where do you think you are, Switzerland?»

It is a moot point whether the increasing number of viewers turning to satellite television are more interested in politically contentious live debates or glamorous filmstars, fashions or lifestyle and consumer programming. What cannot be disputed is the increasing proportion of households with television access and the viewers' own verdict that censored terrestrial television now seems too tame.⁷ Even in Egypt, where satellite penetration is still far below the levels of 20-60 per cent recorded elsewhere in the region, satellite dishes, at around 410 US-Dollars, have become more affordable.

As changes are made to terrestrial television in an effort to retain audiences, the key question will be whether these changes are cosmetic or whether they represent a decisive break with heavy-handed censorship. In some cases it seems as if governments in the region have actually tightened their control over the media in the era of satellite television, rather than the reverse. Egypt's draconian Press Law of 1995, only slightly modified in 1996, remains in force. Jordan's 1998 Press and Publications Law reinstated restrictions that caused an international outcry when they were first applied in 1997. Further revisions to the law under King Abdullah have softened it somewhat, but the clauses removed from the press law are still to be found in the Penal Code.

The spread of satellite television has not stopped the practice whereby Penal Code provisions are invoked to detain journalists and ban newspapers across the Arab world. Editors of popular Kuwaiti dailies have had to fight against fines, jail sentences and suspension of their newspapers in recent years. Kuwaiti ministers tried this February to withdraw the licence of *Al-Siyassah*

and close *Al-Watan* for two years; the action was stopped only when the emir intervened.

This article is not long enough to list the many similar incidents occurring across the region in past year, so two more examples taken just from February 2000 will suffice. In that month a Yemeni court convicted Gamal Amer of harming relations with Saudi Arabia. It banned Mr Amer from writing for life and closed his newspaper, *Al-Wahdawi* for a month. Meanwhile the Palestinian police closed down Hebron's Nawras TV for discussing issues involved in the Palestinian teachers' strike, and the Palestinian Authority's General Intelligence called Khalid Amayreh in for interrogation about the content of his Hebron newspaper, *Akthar al-Khalil*. When Mr Amayreh cited press freedom guarantees and questioned the legality of this interrogation, they laughed: «Where do you think you are, Switzerland?»⁸

Credibility at stake

Clearly governments in the region consider the printed word extremely powerful, or they would not be so determined to silence their newspaper critics. Given widespread illiteracy in many Arab countries and the undisputed potency of the television image, the stakes in television censorship are even higher. Where Penal Codes, codes of ethics or straightforward government ownership fail to achieve the desired effect, the authorities have shown that television personalities are liable to receive the same treatment meted out to newspaper journalists.

Maher al-Desouqi, the host of television talk-show broadcast by two private Palestinian stations, was detained by the Palestinian Preventive Security Service in September 1999 shortly after the mother of a Palestinian prisoner had criticised the Palestinian Authority during a live phone-in on Mr Desouqi's show. The next month Jordanian police injured and detained MBC's correspondent, Saad Selawi, as he tried to film the scene

⁷ Middle East Times, 15 October, 1999; TV Dish No. 56, August, 1998.

⁸ Middle East International, No. 619, 25 February, 2000, pp. 11 and 28.

where an armed bank robbery had taken place the previous day.⁹

With such an armoury of methods still in use for inducing self-censorship, satellite channels will not be the instrument that erodes censorship in terrestrial television. For this to happen will require a change in political systems. As members of UNESCO, Arab governments are party to the Sanaa

⁹ Jordan Times, 13 October, 1999.

Declaration, adopted by the 29th session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris in 1997.¹⁰ This enjoins them to end censorship and the intimidation of media professionals and to grant statutes of editorial independence to their state broadcasters and news agencies. On past evidence, any government promise to meet these requirements will need to be implemented before it is believed. ♦

¹⁰ Decision No. 150 ex 3.1, Part 3, November 1997.

Resumee

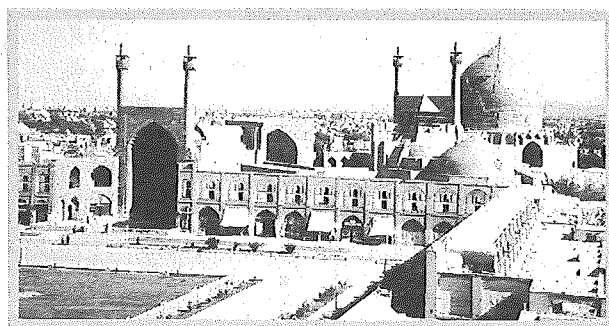
Wer in der arabischen Welt die grösste Freiheit für Medien sucht, schaut zuerst nach Libanon. Abgesehen von der generellen Dominanz der syrischen Interessen prägt das Erbe des Konfessionalismus, des Religionsproporz, die Fernsehlandschaft und ihre Grenzen bis heute.

In Jordanien plante König Abdallah schon gleich nach der Thronbesteigung eine Medien-Freizone (analog zu den Freihandelszonen). Als das Projekt konkret werden sollte, verlor es viel an Attraktivität (oder an Mut): Frei sein sollen die anzulockenden Sender offenbar vor allem von Steuern, ihre Äusserungen jedoch wären einem Verhaltenskodex unterworfen, der sich an

ähnlichen (restriktiven) Richtlinien vieler arabischer Länder orientiert.

Wo ein Sender keinem direkten Zensor verantwortlich ist, üben auch einmal die Schwesterstationen in der Fernseh-Union arabischer Staaten Druck aus – so geschehen der Station al-Dschasira in Qatar, die sehr lebhaft ist und durch die besonders beliebten Live-Sendungen viel Mut beweist.

Das Arsenal der Methoden, mit denen die politischen oder wirtschaftlichen Machthaber unliebsame Informationen oder Meinungen unterdrücken können, ist weiterhin sehr vielfältig. Auch der Betrieb satellitengestützter Sender hat daran bisher nichts geändert.



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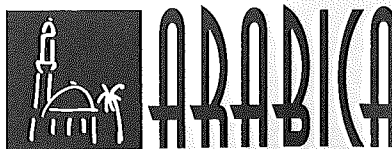
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ORIENT-REISEN

Robert M. Richter
Gestutzte Flügel wachsen nach
Ausdrucksfreiheit im iranischen Film
von der Schah-Zeit bis heute

Ich ziehe die Freiheit, keinen Film zu drehen, dem Eingehen von Kompromissen vor», sagt der Dokumentarfilmautor Kâmrân Schîrdel. Augenzwinkernd erklärt Schîrdel damit, warum er seit seinen in den sechziger Jahren gedrehten Werken keinen weiteren Film im Sinne des unabhängigen Autorenfilms mehr schuf. Weil er in seinen bitterbösen Dokumentarfilmen die Schattenseiten des Alltags zur Schah-Zeit an den Pranger stellte, den Unterprivilegierten eine Stimme und ein wahrhaftes Bild gab und mitunter die Mechanismen der Macht entlarvte, ja der Lächerlichkeit preisgab, waren die Filme zu Zeiten des Schahs wie auch danach den Zensoren ein Dorn im Auge: Zum Teil wurde das Originalmaterial vor der Fertigstellung der Filme konfisziert, zum Teil wurden die fertigen Filme verboten.

Sozialkritik zu Schahzeiten

Nach der Islamischen Revolution konnte Schîrdel zwar einige Filme fertigstellen, doch blieben sie angesichts der Themen wie Prostitution, Unterdrückung oder Machtmissbrauch in

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der Schublade. Erst im letzten Jahr konnten die erhalten gebliebenen Werke «Frauengefängnis» (Nedâmatgâh, 1965), «Teheran ist die Hauptstadt Irans» (Tehrân pâytacht-e Irân ast, 1966–1980), «Frauenviertel» (Qal'e, 1966–1980) und «Die Nacht, in der es regnete» (Un shab ke bârûn âmad, 1967–1979) wieder gezeigt werden.

Mit seinem subversiven Meisterwerk «Die Nacht, in der es regnete» hatte Schîrdel die Grenzen der Zensur bei weitem überschritten. Kaum einem anderen iranischen Filmschaffenden gelang es vorher oder nachher, so direkt und explizit Kritik am Machtprinzip eines Regimes oder ei-

ner Gesellschaftsordnung zu üben. Ausgangspunkt von Schîrdels Film ist eine Zeitungsmeldung, wonach ein Schuljunge im Norden Irans ein Zugangsglück verhindert haben soll. Nachts habe der Junge entdeckt, dass der starke Regen die Eisenbahnschienen unterspült hatte. Als er den herannahenden Zug sah, soll er seine Jacke angezündet und den Zugführer gewarnt haben. Reportageartig befragt Schîrdel echte und selbsternannte Zeugen, vom Gouverneur über Bahnan-