

New Egyptian Satellite Latest Sign of Battle for the Airwaves

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May 3, 1998

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Brief Analysis

The successful launch of the \$158 million Nilesat communications satellite last week is yet another sign of dramatic changes underway in Arab broadcasting and communications. The outcome of those changes will shape American challenges, threats and opportunities in the Arab world in the coming decade.

The Egyptian-owned satellite, built by Matra Marconi Space and launched by Ariane Space from French Guiana, will utilize digital technology to broadcast 84 television channels simultaneously throughout the Middle East. While Egypt will utilize an undisclosed number of channels itself, the Cairo press reports that space has been rented to the regional broadcaster ART, Showtime, and the government services of Libya, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Lebanon and Yemen. Egypt is the first Arab country to have its own communications satellite; previously, the Arab world had relied on an Arab League-based consortium which launched its first satellites in 1992.

A decade of growth Arab satellite broadcasting has exploded since 1991, when a group of Saudi investors with close ties to the royal family created the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) in London. MBC provided its viewers with up-to-the-minute news and talk shows in Arabic with production values that matched the best available in the West. Since MBC's launch, the Arab airwaves have been getting more crowded. Arab Radio and Television (ART) and Orbit are based mostly on Western entertainment programming, and are also backed by Saudi business interests. A new rising star is the Arab News Network, a London-based station owned by Sawmar al-Asad, nephew of the Syrian President. The spunky Qatari station al-Jazeera is the talk of the region. In addition, Future Television and the Lebanese Broadcasting Company (LBC) link up to satellites from Lebanon, Egypt maintains several satellite channels of its own, and countries ranging from Kuwait to Mauritania to Dubai have acted to ensure that their national broadcasting is available by satellite to viewers throughout the Middle East.

As satellite stations proliferate, so too do satellite antennas. Only a few years ago, such antennas cost thousands of dollars and would occupy the better part of a roof. Nilesat will allow far cheaper antennas, ones as small as 50-70 cm (20-28 inches) across, which can be manufactured locally and fit easily on a balcony. As a consequence, the number of people with satellite dishes is shooting up exponentially every year. Penetration is currently estimated at roughly 40 percent of households in many Persian Gulf countries, 20 percent in Palestinian areas, and as much as 10 percent in countries like Syria which still have elaborate censorship regimes for printed materials.

Challenges Two primary challenges face the satellite television industry in the Arab world: financing and content. With annual costs in the tens of millions of dollars, few if any satellite television stations in the Arab world are turning a profit. Some have business plans which rely on advertising revenue alone (so-called "free to air" channels),

while others encode their transmissions and require a proprietary decoder and the payment of a monthly fee. Such fees, which run in the range of \$10-\$30/month and up, put satellite television beyond the reach of many in the region. At the present time, the Arab advertising market appears too weak to allow a broad variety of free-to-air systems to prosper. The market is growing, however, and television spending is growing faster than the overall market.

The large number of competing channels creates a problem in terms of content as well. Some fee-based channels broadcast up-to-date Western programming, but the audience is limited by language and, to an extent, interest in Western culture. The television production industry is expanding rapidly in Egypt and Syria; meanwhile, programmers are turning to Latin America for soap operas and other shows to be dubbed or subtitled in Arabic. With so many channels broadcasting so many hours per day, filling air time in a compelling way will continue to be a challenge.

New and provocative programming Saudi-owned Orbit began a cooperative venture with the BBC in 1994 to produce news in Arabic, but canceled the contract after a documentary explored capital punishment in the Kingdom. The tiny Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar immediately hired a large proportion of the BBC staff, relocated them to its capital of Doha, and took to the airwaves with its own channel, al-Jazeera. The Qatari station has won extraordinarily wide viewership with lively news programming and talk shows that pit guests with opposing views against each other and explore some of the most sensitive issues in the region, including religion, democratization, and the role of women in society.

Satellite channels have also broken other taboos. In October 1996 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared on an Orbit call-in show, directly taking questions in English from Arab viewers for a full hour. In March 1997 Orbit broadcast a special on the Gulf War which included interviews with Israeli and Iraqi officials, and in the coming months MBC will broadcast a balanced, multi-part documentary on the history of Israel which began airing on the BBC last month and which will air on public television in the US later this year.

Implications Regionalization: Satellite television is here to stay in the Arab world and is part of a broader process in which information easily crosses national boundaries. This process has been described in other areas as "globalization," but the linguistic unity of the Arab world as well as historical and cultural ties suggest that "regionalization" is a phenomenon which is at least as important there.

Decline in censorship: Satellite television undermines censorship because it ignores national borders. While a government may censor transmissions from its territory, it cannot censor transmissions to its territory. Censorship is declining throughout the region.

Greater importance of public opinion: Regionalization combined with greater freedom of expression will likely lead to a new importance for Arab public opinion. Because opinion in any given country will be shaped in part by information from beyond national borders, it will be more independent of government influence than has been the case heretofore, and governments will be forced to respond to and accommodate public opinion more than they have previously. This could spell trouble for the US government, which often enjoys closer ties to the governments of the region than to their respective populations.

Need for public diplomacy: At the same time, satellite broadcasting offers an unprecedented opportunity for American officials to deliver their message directly to the Arab world. The television program "Dialogue with the West," a joint production of MBC and the Voice of America, was canceled last November for a variety of reasons, but the idea of introducing American officials to an Arab audience remains a valuable one. The gesture would be even more effective if the US government were able to put forth Arabic-speaking American officials who could speak to Arab audiences without the encumbrance of a translator.

Possible source of instability: The looming question mark surrounding the development of Arab satellite television is whether governments or private sector interests will control programming. Unless the Arab advertising market takes off, free-to-air stations will be owned by those willing to forgo profits - governments seeking to use them as propaganda vehicles or individuals seeking "prestige" investments. Were the market to break into two, with state-owned, propagandistic stations for the poor, and privately-owned, Western-oriented stations for the rich, satellite television could politicize the lower classes, be a vehicle for widening the gaps between rich and poor, and add an additional element of instability to the region.

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