

FRONTIERS OF FREEDOM: DIVERSE RESPONSES TO SATELLITE TELEVISION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Satellite channels have proliferated in the Middle East and North Africa, responding to the prevalence of a shared language (Arabic), the wide extent of labour migration and the diasporisation of the Palestinian and Kurdish communities. By definition these channels are “de-terrestrialised,” but in many senses they also appear to be de-territorialised. They may be based abroad, target foreign audiences, hire foreign nationals etc. The process of receiving them enables viewers to escape from the territorial and jurisdictional confines of the countries where they live. While acknowledging that the phenomenon of deterritorialisation exists, this paper sets out to trace and locate the real power relations behind satellite broadcasting in this context.

The evidence presented is divided into two parts, the first focusing on policy responses to the advent of satellite technology and the second on ways in which these responses have reconfigured the region’s communicative space. The paper concludes that satellite broadcasting in the Middle East and North Africa may be deterritorialised in some aspects but is essentially driven by the exercise of political power and access to capital on the part of individuals and groups inside specific states. Thus satellite television may cross frontiers, but does not thereby bring freedom of expression.

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Introduction

The transnational medium of satellite television might have been invented for the people of the Middle East and North Africa, so perfectly does it suit their situation. This is a region where some 250 million people understand the same language (Arabic), where two dispersed and stateless peoples (Kurds and Palestinians) struggle to communicate across geographical divides, and where labour migration is so extensive that workers' remittances can prop up whole economies. Saudi Arabia alone hosts some 3.5 million non-Saudis from other Arab states.¹ Nearly 3 million Egyptians live temporarily or permanently abroad, in the Gulf, Europe and USA.² Morocco has over 1 million migrants in Europe alone (Khachani 1997). The list could go on but the implications are clear. When home is thousands of miles away, satellite television programmes can be the next best thing to being there. Today a host of satellite channels are competing for the attention of Middle Easterners at home and abroad. In the process they appear to be crossing literal and figurative sets of boundaries. Behind the process is a power struggle that needs to be explored and understood.

For many years now writers have, with reason, questioned the binary oppositions, or "banal dichotomies" (Walker 1993, 160) that traditionally characterised our understanding of borders related to territory and nationality. The concepts of "inside" and "outside" lose their purchase in a world where transnational companies have manoeuvred, with or without the complicity of governments, to overcome barriers to trade and investment so that they can treat large parts of the world as a single place (Scholte 1997, 431). When state sovereignty is eroded, and individuals map their destinies "within a perspective of the world as a whole" (Camilleri and Falk 1992, 65), notions of "same" and "other" as applied to people inside or outside a given country are eroded too (Dalby 1990, 19-20). In this context, "deterritorialisation" (Appadurai 1990, 301-2) is a useful word, evoking the way that money, people and commodities pursue each other around the globe. For Appadurai, deterritorialisation is one of the central forces of the modern world, being evident in the displacement of people, the creation of "invented homelands" and the conduct of homeland politics from afar. As Cohen (1997, 175) points out, "globalization and diasporization are separate phenomena with no necessary causal connections, but they 'go together' extraordinarily well."

The problem with a term such as deterritorialisation, as with globalisation, is that it puts the emphasis on effect rather than cause. The force it describes is a shapeless one, overlain — according to Appadurai (1990, 296-301) — by mystifying and unpredictable sets of "disjunctures between economy, culture and politics," "concatenations of images" and "terminological kaleidoscopes." Given that satellite television to and from the Middle East and North Africa is a transnational activity that may be prone such disjunctures, there could be various approaches to discussing it. One might be to dismiss this particular type of television, with its *mélange* of Western and local programming formulae and production values, as a hopeless muddle of hybridisation that defies coherent analysis. Another, inspired by satellite broadcasters' technical ability to circumvent harsh local censorship laws, might be to celebrate it as a shining example of the political possibilities created by transnational communication technology. Or, following the sound advice of Strange (1996, 42), a serious attempt might be made to discover exactly who in this field is exercising authority, with what purpose, by what means and with what consequences. The latter option, selected for this paper, is one that takes issue with the suggestion that there can be a major

disjuncture between politics, economics and culture. It recognises that markets are "not natural phenomena but have to be politically constructed and politically maintained" (Gamble 1995, 523). On this basis the paper traces the growth of satellite broadcasting to and from the Middle East and North Africa in terms of historically specific sets of circumstances, identifying some of the leading players and their objectives. It goes on to consider briefly how political, economic and technical factors combine to determine how viewing communities are configured and how some channels are run. Finally it reflects on the power relations that allow satellite television in this region to cross some lines but not others.

Policy Responses

Satellite broadcasting is usually said to have taken off in the Middle East and North Africa during the 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the 1991 Gulf war. However, its origins go back some 20 years earlier, to the aftermath of the first oil price explosion in the mid-1970s. It was then that the Saudi government, having introduced television against stiff opposition from conservative clerics during the previous decade, managed to exploit the medium to underline the kingdom's role as guardian of the Muslim holy places in Mecca and Medina. Saudi television began live coverage of Ramadan prayers and pilgrimage rituals in 1975 and, in 1980, after the siege of the Grand Mosque of Mecca by religious extremists and the revolution which created the Islamic Republic of Iran, the proportion of religious programming on Saudi TV was dramatically increased. Against this backdrop the agreement to create the Arab Satellite Communications Organisation (Arabsat), within the framework of the Arab League, was signed in 1976. While the Arab League has 22 members, the Arabsat project was dominated by the League's wealthiest oil exporters; 60% of the project's capital was owned by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Libya, Iraq and Qatar, with Saudi Arabia alone holding almost 30% (AlSaadon 1990, 155). The first satellite, launched in 1985, was used by Saudi Arabia to send live coverage of the pilgrimage to every country interested in receiving it. Other than that, the project was heavily under-utilised in its five years, whether for telecommunications, regional programme exchange or the domestic networks of member countries. The link between this under-use and the fact that Egypt, the Arab world's biggest producer of television programmes, was excluded from Arabsat during most of the 1980s, is demonstrated by what happened next.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait on 2 August, 1990, and split the Arab world into two camps, Arabsat was one of the pan-Arab bodies left in disarray. Talks on the proposed second generation of Arabsat craft, due to take place in September, were cancelled. Yet less than three months later the Arabsat craft finally came into their own. Egypt, which had been suspended from the Arab League in 1979 because of its peace treaty with Israel, had been readmitted in 1989. In early December 1990, with troops assembling for the war to evict Iraq from Kuwait, the state-run Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) arranged to lease an Arabsat transponder to broadcast television programmes across the Arab world all day, every day, for the next three years. Almost immediately it began using the facility to counter Iraqi propaganda by beaming the Egyptian Space Channel (ESC) to Egyptian soldiers stationed in the Gulf (Amin 1992, 21). Meanwhile the Iraqi invasion had provided a stark demonstration of the contrast

coverage. For the first four days after it happened, the Saudi official broadcast media had omitted to mention the invasion altogether. Members of the Saudi elite who had satellite dishes learned of the event through Cable News Network (CNN) or US Armed Forces Television beamed to US troops already based in the Gulf (Boyd 1998, 10). After that, dishes spread rapidly throughout the Gulf, and CNN built a reputation in the region through its instant, live newscasts from Baghdad. The contrast with censored state channels was accentuated by CNN's practice of minimising commentary on screen and leaving viewers to interpret events (Turner 1992, 83). The emphasis on spontaneity is widely believed to have marked a turning point for Gulf viewers.³

The war thus provided a major catalyst for both the spread of satellite access throughout the region and the raising of expectations regarding content and presentation. Yet it was not the only stimulus. Algeria had been among the first Arab countries to tolerate satellite television from France in the late 1980s, via a France Télécom satellite. As part of a shake-up in the French media at that time, including some partial privatisations, the French government had taken pains to ensure that French television programmes were easily obtainable in francophone Africa, including the Maghreb countries of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia (Mostefaoui 1995, 59-60, 67-69).⁴ The arrival of French satellite channels coincided with a process of political liberalisation that began in Algeria in 1989 and lasted until the military coup of 1992. The new government attempted to regulate the spread of satellite access but by then it was too late. As the violence escalated and censorship was tightened, French-speaking Algerians turned *en masse* to sources of news and analysis available quite cheaply to families on meagre incomes through shared satellite dishes and improvised cabling. Islamist militants, initially opposed to satellite programmes, became less hostile on discovering that they had some chance of airing their views on foreign stations, as compared to no chance at all on Algeria's single government-owned national television channel, ENTV.

In this way, the arrival of satellite television presented governments in the region with a choice. They could attempt to deny citizens access to the new technology by banning or licensing satellite dishes, or they could seek to exploit the medium to their own advantage. The dish bans introduced in Saudi Arabia and Iran in 1994, on grounds of protection against a foreign cultural assault, seemed to Western observers to drive another nail into the coffin of the already-unfashionable cultural imperialism debate: they illustrated the one-sidedness of such protectionism (Tomlinson 1997, 127-8) and emphasised the urgency of recognising that, whereas the "national" may be "local" in global terms, it is in fact a site of struggle between local voices and identities (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1991, 129). The nature of the struggle in the Saudi case became clear as the ban remained virtually unenforced, while the proportion of households able to receive satellite channels continued to increase. By 1998 it had reached some 60 per cent.⁵ Television viewers in Bahrain and Qatar were meanwhile offered multiple channels through MMDS (wireless cable) systems in place of direct satellite access. Tunisia replaced a temporary ban on dishes with a licensing system in 1995, but this was widely flouted (Article 19, 50). Legal loopholes were created in the Iranian ban by the Council of Guardians' ruling in 1995 that Articles 2 and 3 of the law were unconstitutional.⁶ The ban, sporadically enforced by vigilante groups, succeeded in slowing satellite penetration in Iran but not in stopping it. With the advent of digital technology and the associated reduction in the size of dishes, it became increasingly obvious that a ban in any country would eventually be impossible to police.

Given the futility of the openly protectionist option, governments with sufficient means turned to alternative policies. Some were definitely high-profile, others more low-key. The low-key variety consisted of arranging a few hours' daily satellite delivery of existing terrestrial programming for the benefit of nationals overseas. Between 1993 and 1995, the governments of Jordan, Morocco, Syria and Yemen, among others, took this route. It began to be seen as a matter of national pride for state-run television channels to provide such a service for expatriates, as failure to do so might mean that nationals of one country would be exposed to political influence via the satellite channel of another. Such influence is often considered malign by governments of neighbouring Arab countries who may be at odds with each other and use the state-owned media to express their grudges. Rather more remarkable than these low-key efforts were the responses of individuals and organisations from Dubai (in the United Arab Emirates), Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and later Lebanon and Qatar. Dubai's state satellite channel, EDTV, started in 1992, was soon transmitting from so many satellites to so many continents that by 1995 it was describing itself to advertisers as the world's second biggest satellite broadcaster in terms of area covered. The other precedent-setting channels are reviewed below.

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi authorities could hardly have had a more bruising first encounter with satellite television than the one they had when Iraq invaded Kuwait. It is tempting to think that their response, involving massive expenditure on satellite channels owned and run by allies, proxies and members of the ruling family, was a concerted effort. It is sometimes presented as such in the Saudi press. The daily *Al-Riyad* contained an article in November 1997 which began: "When talk in Arab media circles turns to Arab television news, the sentence 'space is Saudi' is often heard." The writer went on to list the Saudi companies that gave rise to this expression, attributing what he described as the "Saudi stampede" in television investment to an "astute sense" of the importance of media on the part of a "select elite of Saudi businessmen" with their "long experience in the field of investment."⁷ Whether the result of collaboration or good business sense or not, the most obvious aspect of the Saudi investors' response was the way they deployed financial muscle to fill the airwaves with politically safe material. The net effect of the Saudi investment in satellite channels, when combined with the two leading London-based pan-Arab daily newspapers which are also Saudi-owned, was a concentration of ownership unprecedented in the Arabic-language media.

The first Saudi satellite venture was the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), launched in London in September 1991, just months after the Gulf war and a few weeks before the multilateral Middle East peace talks opened in Madrid. It was started by King Fahd's brother-in-law, Shaikh Walid bin Ibrahim al-Ibrahim, together with a Saudi billionaire, Shaikh Saleh Kamel, owner of the Jeddah-based holding company, Dallah al-Baraka, with assets valued at \$7bn⁸ in banking, shipping, manufacturing and other sectors. The MBC project absorbed vast funds. Legal and social constraints inside Saudi Arabia necessitated locating the company abroad, but there was never any doubt that MBC programming was directed primarily at those audiences in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf who had tuned in so readily to CNN. From the outset, MBC managers put the stress on news output, calling on early editorial recruits to produce "CNN in Arabic" (Amin and Boyd 1994, 46). They continued to describe the station as

“news-led” throughout its first six years⁹, during which time annual operating costs are believed to have reached \$100 million¹⁰ while advertising revenues remained much lower, rising to barely half this figure in 1997.¹¹ Since Saleh Kamel pulled out in 1993, it has always been assumed that these costs were borne by Shaikh Walid with more than a little help from King Fahd. Indeed, people once joked that the initials MBC had been chosen by Fahd to stand for “My Broadcasting Company” (Alterman 1998, 21). Signs of the king’s heavy financial involvement became more visible as his health deteriorated and steps were taken to set the company on its own feet, apparently in readiness for the eventual accession of a new king who might feel less inclined to support it. After a change in management in 1998, a third of MBC’s staff were made redundant and its evening schedules for the coming autumn revealed a decisive shift in favour of entertainment at the expense of news. It should be noted, however, that “news” on MBC was never interpreted to mean investigative reporting on politics in the Gulf. Content analysis of MBC news items has shown the emphasis on international rather than Saudi or Gulf news (Ayish 1997, 482).¹²

MBC was the Saudi royal family’s first satellite venture to be based overseas, but it was only one of three. Saleh Kamel, having helped to found MBC, went on to start a pay-TV company, Arab Radio and Television (ART) in partnership with another leading Saudi entrepreneur, Prince Al-Walid bin Talal, billionaire son of a half-brother of King Fahd. Although Kamel has said on more than one occasion¹³ that he sees the revenues accruing through pay-TV as a better means of funding good television than relying on advertising, it is clear from the limited number of subscribers to the ART package that ART subscription revenues have a long way to go to match the outlays of the company’s owners, who have paid for expensive production and relay facilities in Avezzano, Italy, as well as in several Arab cities. They added \$266 million to ART’s capital in January 1998, to cover the cost of adding four more channels to ART’s Middle East bouquet.¹⁴ One of the new channels, an educational one called *Iqra’* (Read) and designed to encourage reading of the Quran, provides an example of the type of television programme Shaikh Saleh seeks to promote. He has said his aim is to “present Islam as it should be presented to the rest of the world”¹⁵ and staff employed by ART describe their output as unashamedly conservative, being aimed at the Arab world’s “middle class silent majority” who are “neither secularists nor Islamic fundamentalists.”¹⁶ Shaikh Saleh has decided that there will be no news channel in ART’s bouquets, which cover Europe as well as the Middle East, because of the risk such a service would create in terms of getting into trouble with Arab governments or being called upon to do them favours.¹⁷

The third Saudi satellite television company is Orbit, the Middle East’s first pay-TV provider, launched from Rome in May 1994. Orbit is owned by the Mawarid group, which belongs to Prince Khaled bin Abdullah al-Saud, a cousin and brother-in-law of King Fahd. Like MBC and ART, Orbit is a project characterised by heavy investment and, as shown below, a commitment to avoiding coverage that might embarrass Gulf regimes. Its backers started out with so much money they considered buying Star TV, based in Hong Kong, before it was sold to Rupert Murdoch in 1994. In the event, instead of buying Star TV they hired a leading Star executive, Alexander Zilo, sending a plane for him to come to Riyadh for talks (Boyd 1998, 14). Orbit had a weak start. Its signal on one of the ageing Arabsat craft was so poor that in March 1995 it shifted to Intelsat 704.¹⁸ Its initial subscription price of \$10,000 met so much resistance that it

had to be cut to \$2,000. Its start-up costs, including promotional distribution of decoders, have been independently estimated at upwards of \$1bn. Yet by mid-1996 its most publicised achievement was the premature termination of a 10-year £100 million contract with the BBC to provide an Arabic television news service. The contract stipulated that there would be no editorial interference in the BBC's output. However, friction between the two sides mounted as BBC journalists covered news stories relating to the exiled Saudi dissident, Mohammed Massaari. Orbit's objection to such items led to breaks in transmission in January 1996.¹⁹ When a BBC *Panorama* programme highly critical of Saudi Arabia's human rights record was aired that April, the contract was brought to an untimely end. Orbit's president, Alexander Zilo, denounced the programme as a "sneering and racist attack on Islamic law and culture."²⁰ As BBC Worldwide Television could not pay for the Arabic television news service with UK licence revenue and had no other backer, more than 200 staff, including 90 Arabic-speaking journalists, were put out of work.²¹ Over the next three years Orbit made a name for itself by showing live phone-in programmes featuring well-known political figures, but it did not fill the gap left by the removal of the BBC's Arabic news.

Egypt

While the Saudi acquisition of satellite broadcasting capability involved large sums of money, the Egyptian government's response to the advent of the satellite television era was noteworthy for its pioneering spirit. As mentioned above, the Egyptian Space Channel (ESC) was the first of its kind in the region, preceding MBC by several months. In 1994 the ERTU set up Nile TV, the Arab world's first satellite channel to be aimed at non-Arabs, being broadcast in English and French. The uniqueness of this enterprise is underlined by obstacles it faces in some European states. The ERTU's deputy head, Hassan Hamed, says he has found that France, Germany and the UK allow foreign-language cable channels to serve ethnic minorities but are less accommodating to indigenous programming from developing countries destined for Western audiences.²² Soon after the Nile TV innovation came the order for Egypt's own satellite, Nilesat. In April 1998, with the launch of the third generation of Arabsat satellites still a year away, Nilesat 101 went into orbit, equipped with the latest digital technology giving it the capacity to transmit scores of television channels. Nilesat's management went on to score more firsts by agreeing to lease transponder space to the Iraqi government, the Palestinian Authority and other bodies unable to do deals with Saudi-dominated Arabsat.

The Egyptian information minister, Safwat al-Sharif, presents his country's policy on satellite television as a response to the challenge inherent in Egyptian history. Contemporary Egyptians, he says, must take their cue from fact that the Pharaohs were pioneers in writing and construction.²³ Yet the pioneering fervour has not yet extended to allowing non-government broadcasters to operate in Egypt or to scrapping censorship. Political coverage is considered especially sensitive on ESC. Its head, Sana Mansour, accepts that terrestrial television should be picking up on local issues but argues that satellite channels need a wider focus: instead of taking the government to task, ESC and Nile TV should be "ambassadors for Egypt."²⁴ Ratings suggest that the satellite viewing public finds the resulting programming somewhat lacklustre.²⁵ This may be because, thanks to some relative newcomers to the regional satellite scene, that public has finally started to sample television of a kind that pushes at the frontiers of political and cultural acceptability in the Middle East.

Lebanon

Middle East satellite television entered a new phase at the end of 1996. In this phase, for the first time in six years, existing players faced real competition. Until that point Lebanon, despite its traditional renown in regional media affairs, had not been represented in the satellite field. Once an entertainment centre for the Arab world, Beirut was from 1975 to 1990 shattered by civil war. Reconstruction of the city began in 1992 but restoration of uninterrupted electricity supplies and reliable telecommunications took until 1995-96. The Audio-visual Media Law, passed by the Lebanese parliament in October 1994, was put into effect in September 1996. This law officially revoked the broadcasting monopoly held by the state broadcaster, Télé-Liban, making Lebanon the first Arab state to authorise private radio and television stations to operate within its borders.²⁶ Another law of 1996 specifically catered for private satellite channels. Armed with a licence under these laws, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (founded as a Christian station in the 1980s) launched its own satellite station, LBC-Sat. Future TV, a satellite offshoot of the terrestrial station part-owned by Rafiq Hariri, a Sunni Muslim who was Lebanon's prime minister from 1992 to 1998, was also launched at this time. The new arrivals made an instant impression on audiences in the Gulf, challenging the dominance enjoyed by Egyptian and Saudi satellite channels until then. Game shows, general informality and attractive female presenters were noted as hallmarks of the two Lebanese channels, which were easily accessible to viewers on Arabsat C-band.

While the Egyptian and Saudi channels spent money, LBC-Sat set out to earn it. According to the Pan-Arab Research Centre (PARC) in Dubai, its nominal advertising revenue (before discounts) exceeded \$93 million in 1998, accounting for more than a quarter of the pan-Arab satellite television total for the year. The next highest amount was that going to Future TV. In stark contrast to the situation in other Arab states, and despite its potential role in promoting national cohesion in a country recovering from civil war, Lebanon's multi-confessional state broadcaster, Télé-Liban, remained sidelined. Left to fend off competition for viewers inside Lebanon from five private terrestrial television stations in a market barely able to support two or three, it was denied the wherewithal to enter the satellite stakes. But this did not signify the absence of powerful Lebanese politicians from either the terrestrial or satellite scene. On the contrary, it seemed as though Télé-Liban owed its unfavourable position to the consociational model developed for the Lebanese media by top politicians from the country's different confessional groups. It is not hard to find evidence of political interference in the content of satellite programmes put out by LBC and Future TV. The most obvious example is the ban on political news imposed by the Minister of Information for most of 1998 after he had allegedly received unfavourable comments on Lebanese satellite news programmes from information ministers "in the Gulf."²⁷ Although the ban applied to Future TV as well as LBC-Sat, Future TV's reticence about it was widely attributed to close relations between its backer, Rafiq Hariri, and King Fahd. Before becoming prime minister, Hariri had made his fortune through completing construction contracts in Saudi Arabia in record time, thereby endearing himself to the King. LBC's Chief Executive, Pierre Daher, regarded the ban on political news as an attempt to preserve MBC's ranking as the most-watched television newscaster in Saudi Arabia in the face of strong competition from LBC-Sat.²⁸ However, LBC-Sat is also subject to internal controls, brought about by all-pervading presence of Syrian

military intelligence personnel in Lebanon. In August 1998, after some carelessly timed interviews on LBC were deemed by the Syrian authorities to have detracted from the impact of Syrian President Hafez al-Asad's visit to France the previous month, a Syrian proxy was appointed to a position inside LBC to oversee its political coverage.²⁹

Qatar

While EDTV, MBC, ART, Orbit, ESC, LBC and Future TV are all clear about the editorial "red lines" that they cross at their peril, the same could not be said of the other major newcomer of 1996, Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel from Doha in Qatar. Al-Jazeera, dedicated exclusively to news and current affairs, swept to fame (or notoriety, depending on your point of view) by identifying red lines and storming across them. The channel started off at a disadvantage to its counterparts because it was restricted to less widely available Arabsat Ku-band. It was not until a C-band transponder became available on Arabsat on 1 November 1997³⁰ that Al-Jazeera began to be seen by large numbers of people throughout the Arab world. But it soon demonstrated that Qatar's policy, under its new emir who had seized power from his father in 1995, was to acquire some leverage on the Gulf political scene by injecting a nuisance factor into regional satellite television. Qatar today is almost alone in the Middle East and North Africa in having no Ministry of Information to act as a centralised censorship institution. The Qatari government staffed Al-Jazeera with BBC-trained professionals rendered jobless by Orbit's decision to cancel BBC Arabic news and took steps to safeguard their editorial independence by financing the channel with loans rather than direct subsidies. The channel's managers then took the experiment further; they broadcast deliberately controversial talk shows featuring guests with diametrically opposing views and they broadcast them live. One by one, governments across the region, from Morocco to Bahrain, were scandalised by the appearance on these talk shows of dissidents from their countries who would never be allowed to appear on television at home. Independent critics meanwhile pointed to the predominance of talk shows over news in Al-Jazeera's schedules. They noted a dearth of hard-hitting political coverage of Qatar itself and questioned the wisdom of screening fractious and inconclusive panel debates to audiences unused to the genre. But Arabic-speakers across the Middle East and in Europe were so captivated by the opportunity to watch outspoken discussion of relevant subjects, and word of the new-style programming spread so quickly, that many viewers arranged satellite access specifically to watch Al-Jazeera.

Border Crossings

An exhaustive review of all relevant policy responses would inevitably be longer than the present one, as it would have to include other ventures based in the Gulf, such as the UAE Defence Minister's emerging Dubai 2000 channel, and others based in London, such as Arab News Network (ANN), owned by a nephew of the Syrian president. Nevertheless, the responses reviewed above are sufficient to draw attention to a series of shifts taking place in the Middle East media landscape. These shifts, amounting to what Keane (1995) would call a "restructuring of communicative space," can be detected on different fronts and at different levels. They include: the criss-crossing of territorial and jurisdictional borders in obvious and not-so-obvious ways; regrouping of linguistic and cultural communities; overcoming the barrier of illiteracy; and interpenetration of foreign and local programming practices and managerial elites.

One effect of satellite communications is to superimpose the outline of different satellite footprints over the geopolitical borders of groups of states. The geography of the Middle East is such that terrestrial broadcasting has long spilled across certain borders, especially those in the eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, Egypt in particular has a long history of radio broadcasting aimed at the wider region. With the advent of satellite broadcasting, however, the phenomenon of spillover moves onto a different scale; the same applies to the scale of jamming operations required to block incoming signals. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the question of how far international regulation of transnational broadcasting protects state sovereignty on one hand and the universal freedom to "receive and import information ... through any media and regardless of frontiers"³¹ on the other. Instead the aim is to reflect on similarities and differences between actual satellite footprints and the region's geopolitical contours

Today a large number of satellites are able to broadcast to all or part of the Middle East and North Africa. In theory, the more there are, the easier and cheaper it is for aspiring broadcasters to lease capacity and the more opportunity viewers have to sample programming from different sources. Nilesat, by covering the same area as Arabsat, loosened the latter's grip on access to transponders and viewers' choices. However, the same function is also performed to a lesser degree by the extensive Eutelsat fleet of satellites which can serve the Mediterranean and parts of the Gulf, as well as others such as Panamsat 4, or Asiasat 2, which beams as far west as Cairo, or Turksat and the Israeli satellite, Amos. In practice, programme choices — and therefore the configuration of viewing communities — are determined by the actual satellite beams that can be received by the equipment used. Reception of Nilesat's digital transmissions requires a special set-top box and the majority of satellite households in the region have to decide that the channels available from Nilesat are worth the expense. In Algeria and Morocco, on the other hand, where around half the population speak French, it is common to have one dish for the France Télécom satellite system and another for Arabsat. Viewers orient themselves towards the Arab world when they watch Egyptian films on ESC or news bulletins on MBC via Arabsat, and towards the European world when they watch French-language channels. The latter provide visual evidence that rights denied to many people in the Maghreb, such as the right to strike, or demonstrate, or criticise the head of state, are enjoyed by citizens of France. Arabic subtitling of Israeli satellite programmes carried on Amos enables Jordanian or Egyptian viewers who have the necessary equipment to follow probing and non-deferential interviews with Israeli ministers of a kind that Jordanian and Egyptian ministers rarely face.

Meanwhile the sprouting of satellite dishes in even the most remote Kurdish villages³² of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, signalled Kurdish determination to gain access to the Kurdish satellite television station, MED TV. Broadcasting from London on Eutelsat, MED TV strove, in the face of persistent objections from the Turkish government, to cater to a sense of shared identity among Kurdish migrants in Europe and Kurds in the Middle East. Given the overwhelming obstacles to creating a unified Kurdistan on the ground, the Kurdish satellite channel created a kind of Kurdistan in space. But this notional Kurdistan was a vulnerable entity. MED TV's political content was the cause of repeated clashes with the UK regulator, the Independent Television Commission, leading to its suspension and threatened closure in March 1999.³³

As MED TV's penetration into Kurdish villages demonstrated, satellite television is by no means an elitist medium in the Middle East. Its wide availability in the region—in a quarter of homes in countries such as Syria and Morocco, over a third in Algeria and Lebanon, and a half or more in Saudi Arabia and the UAE³⁴—underpins another point to be made about the restructuring of communicative space. Satellite viewing communities are configured in such a way as to incorporate people who, because of gender, illiteracy, or disinterest in overt government propaganda, were previously left out of the media loop. Illiteracy, poverty and poor distribution systems are major barriers to the growth of newspaper readership in the region and these barriers are reinforced by the fact that the amount of news in “newspapers” is kept to a minimum by government censorship. Censorship of terrestrial television news has a similar effect, producing newscasts in which the lead item is often devoted to the list of dignitaries who visited the head of state during the day, and the accompanying footage consists of pictures of people shaking hands. Compared with this type of programming, satellite channels offer varied entertainment, a semblance of hard news and a highly-prized window on the world. Where women work principally in the home and where female illiteracy is widespread³⁵, satellite television occupies a central role. Millions of families attach so much importance to receiving it that they are ready to invest the several hundred dollars required to do so; others rely on a combination of piracy and technical resourcefulness to gain access to pay-TV channels for just \$10 a month. In other words, the satellite beam does not only cross state borders; it crosses divides inside societies. The same may not be true of specific channels, however. Sophisticated ratings data are lacking, but academic studies of satellite viewing habits in the region and among expatriates in Europe point to different preferences between men and women, between generations, between new and settled migrants, and so on (Al-Abd and Al-Ali 1995; Madani 1996; Hargreaves and Mahdjoub 1997; Kennedy 1999).

A third way in which boundaries are crossed is the interpenetration of “foreign” and “local,” most noticeably—but not exclusively—in the Saudi satellite channels. This takes place through advertising sales (mostly to western multinationals), choice of programming (ranging from Mexican soap operas to Disney films to local copies of CNN's *Larry King Live*) and staffing, including executive appointments. In 1998, Ian Ritchie, a British national with experience in UK television companies, replaced a Bahraini, Hala Omran, as Chief Executive Officer of MBC. Ritchie appointed another Briton, Phil O'Hara from the Mirror Group, to run MBC sales and marketing and, in the effort to revive MBC ratings, commissioned a UK company, Action Time, to produce game shows.³⁶ Orbit, headed by an American, Alexander Zilo, who was previously at Star TV, carries a selection of Star channels. In these and other comparable cases the blurring of “foreign” and “local” is a function of the deterritorialisation of Saudi satellite channels. Yet these are forms of boundary-crossing that are just as susceptible to tracking and analysis as the viewing preferences discussed above.

Conclusion

The first section of this paper examined policy responses to satellite television. It showed, among other things, that the leading Saudi-owned channels are based in London and Rome. These, along with the other London-based channels, ANN and MED TV, would appear to be both “de-terrestrialised” and deterritorialised. The second section focused on further examples of t

the Middle East context, noting viewers' ability to break through the confines of censorship in their country of residence, or retain links with their country of origin. Throughout this account, however, it has been apparent that the power relations behind satellite television in the Middle East and North Africa are in no way deterritorialised. In every case they can be traced to the exercise of political power and access to capital by groups and individuals in specific states. It is true that ordinary individuals in the region, and expatriates from the region living in Europe and elsewhere, have gained the power to switch between channels broadcasting in their own languages. Yet the net gain should not be overestimated. In the Middle East, satellite channels only started to compete for ratings and revenues in 1997-98 and the competition remains heavily skewed by the channel owners' political objectives. Qatar's experiment in uncensored satellite television contrasts strikingly with the other channels, but, like them, will survive only as long as it suits the purposes of the head of state. MED-TV's version of Kurdish television, alleged by the Turkish government to be a propaganda tool for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), appeared able to operate beyond the reach of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, but not beyond the reach of the UK's ITC.

In conclusion it may be observed that the very rationale for the existence of satellite channels serving audiences inside the region lies in the nature of local states' political systems and the way terrestrial television is controlled. Different media laws and degrees of censorship in different states are reflected in the diverse approaches to satellite television adopted by people with power and resources in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Dubai, Syria and the Kurdish diaspora. The satellite channels they have created have a *raison d'être* precisely because of the different media laws across the region. These channels may cross frontiers, but they do not thereby bring freedom of expression. The present attempt to identify who is exercising authority over these channels, to what purpose and with what consequences (Strange 1996, 42) has revealed just how far Middle Eastern and North African satellite television is driven by power relations inside individual states.

Notes:

1. This figure from Saudi Arabia's 1992 census is quoted in Foulquier 1995, Annex 1.
2. 1996 census data from the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), Cairo.
3. Interview with Sami Raffoul, General Manager of the Pan-Arab Research Centre (PARC), Dubai, 20 October, 1997.
4. French measures in 1989 included creating the Conseil de l'audiovisuel extérieur de la France, charging the state holding company Sofirad with promoting and supporting television initiatives and establishing Canal France International as a "programme bank" (Mostefaoui 1995, 68).
5. Eutelsat, *Cable and Satellite Penetration Results*, 1998.
6. BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 13 July, 1995.
7. This translation of the article in *Al-Riyad* of 9 November, 1997, is taken from the BBC weekly *World Media* of 21 November, 1997.
8. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 23 January, 1998, p.6.
9. Interview with Mustafa Karkouti, Head of MBC Programme Evaluation, London, 17 November, 1997. Edwin Hart, Director of MBC News and International Operations made the same point in an interview with *Cable and Satellite Europe*, February 1998, p. 25.
10. This figure is the one in circulation among Arab journalists in London and was also quoted in

Arabie-Trends, February 1998, p.56.

11. *Arabie-Trends* (September 1998, p. 54) put MBC advertising revenue in 1997 at \$55.7million. However, the so-called "rate card" values of Middle East advertising spend, which are the only ones in circulation, take no account of discounts and are therefore usually over-estimated.
12. An MBC source told this author (12 October, 1998) that reducing the length of news bulletins reduced the politically sensitive problem of deciding "whether to cover a breaking news story or not."
13. E.g. while addressing a seminar at the 1998 Cairo Radio and Television Festival, as reported in *TV Dish* (in Arabic), August 1998, p.22.
14. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 30 January, 1998, p.25.
15. Interview with *Gulf Marketing Review*, June 1997, Supplement p.10.
16. Interviews, Cairo, 21 and 24 February, 1999.
17. *Ibid.*
18. James Hansen, "Relaunching a bid for Arab viewers," *International Herald Tribune*, 26 April, 1995.
19. *Mideast Mirror*, 8 January 1996.
20. Raymond Snoddy and David Gardner, "BBC-Saudi TV row reveals raw spot," *Financial Times*, 10 April 1996.
21. *Financial Times*, 9, and 22 April 1996.
22. Hassan Hamed noted this problem faced by Nile TV while speaking in Cairo on 21 February 1999 at a conference on "Satellite Broadcasting in the Middle East and North Africa: Regulation, Access and Impact" organised by the international anti-censorship organisation, Article 19.
23. Speech in Cairo on September 7 to the opening session of the 3rd annual conference of the Arab-US Association of Communication Educators (AUSACE).
24. Interview, Cairo, 15 August, 1998.
25. PARC data for 1997 and 1998 put ESC behind at four other satellite channels in terms of audience and advertising revenue.
26. The French-Moroccan channel 2M, launched as a private subscriber service in Morocco in 1989, is not comparable as it was not available unencrypted until after it was taken over by the state in 1997.
27. The Information Minister at the time, Bassem al-Sabaa, relayed the comments to Radio Lebanon on 12 December 1997 (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 15 December 1997).
28. Interview, Beirut, 26 March, 1998. The available ratings information makes this theory plausible.
29. *Daily Star* (Beirut), 7 August, 1998.
30. Telephone interview with Mohammed Jassem al-Ali, Director of Al-Jazeera, 27 May, 1998.
31. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.
32. According to eye witness reports by Western visitors.
33. "British TV body suspends Kurdish station," Reuters, 22 March, 1999.
34. Eutelsat *Cable and Satellite Penetration Results*, 1997 and 1998. UAE data from Fortune Promoseven, Dubai.
35. According to current UNDP data the proportion of literate women aged 15 and over is less than 50% in Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Iraq, less than 40% in Egypt and less than 30% in Morocco.
36. MBC press releases, 29 October and 11 November, 1998.

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