Behind the scenes of pan-Arabism

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The emergence of new private, transnational Arab TV channels in the 1990s raised hopes that, having shrugged off state control, Arab media would provide the kind of coverage that critical issues in Arab nations deserved. Ouidyane Elouardaoui investigates what went wrong.

Scholars on Arab media, like Douglas Boyd, Naomi Sakr, Marwan Kraidy, all note that since their early emergence, the majority of Arab TV channels have been both state-owned and government-controlled. Arab state officials have invariably argued that state control over the broadcasting system has been necessary to preserve the common Arab cultural heritage as well as to secure national unity and political stability. On Arab television stations, particularly the national ones, TV shows undergo censorship for the depiction of excessive sex, violence and in the case of Saudi Arabia, any allusion to Christianity (Rinnawi 2006: 29). Arab government-controlled TV channels also serve to emphasize the ethno-national identity by promoting national products such as literature and sports. However, starting in the 1990s, the Arab television sphere experienced a drastic change with the introduction of a significant number of transnational and private channels. This new move in Arab media brought hope that Arab television, now mostly privately owned and operated, would adopt a more transparent and profound coverage of the most critical political and social issues in the region.

For instance, Marc Lynch argues that satellite Arab channels, particularly Aljazeera, helped to present imposing national problems in countries like Egypt and Lebanon as regional challenges that necessitate the involvement of every Arab state. While Lynch believes that this move has several positive bearings, other scholars, such as Muhammad I. Ayish, argue that the new transnational TV channels are government-friendly, as they are very reluctant and at best times cautious about discussing topics that might provoke the ire of state officials. This article examines these two opposing arguments, focusing on the extent to which transnationalism and privatization in Arab media have effected democratization and social development in the Arab world. Aside from relying on the rich scholarship that examined the recent shift towards satellite transmission in the Arab word, I draw on my personal communication with professionals at the satellite Moroccan TV channel known as 2M.

2M was established in 1989 as the first privately owned Moroccan television channel that
began as a joint venture between private investors and the state. 2M is the abbreviation of the French word *deuxième* that means second, since 2M was launched as the second national TV station that would offer more diversity of programming to Moroccan viewers. 2M was initially a pay-TV channel, but later in 1997 due to a financial crisis, the Moroccan government bought 70 percent of 2M shares and made it a free-to-air service. In spite of government control over 2M, it remains more widely watched than RTM (Radiodiffusion-Télévision Marocaine), which is more closely identified with the government control. Unlike 2M, RTM does not abundantly air popular global TV shows and its agenda is directed by protocol, as it mostly traces the activities of the King’s and government ministers. In interviews I conducted with head of programming at 2M Nezha Mousshine, my queries concerned the censorship regulations of the channel. In particular, I posed questions about the parameters that executives at 2M follow regarding imported TV shows, such as Arabic-dubbed Latin telenovelas.

I contend that in spite of the unifying role of contemporary Arab satellite channels, allowing widespread access of regional news and imported TV shows within the Arab world, this new regime of accessibility has had very limited effects on the critical issues of democratization and social development due to three main reasons. The first is the close relationships between the media industry’s owners with Arab leaders and the ruling political parties, which renders several satellite private TV channels as a propaganda voice for these interest groups. The second decisive factor is the enduring firm grip of Arab state officials over the visual content of satellite TV channels that they see challenges the state’s notions of “morality”, “national security” and “political stability”. This obviously restricts the channels’ critical coverage of the social and political changes taking place in the region. This control over media broadcast is best manifested in the way imported TV shows are habitually censored to fit the government parameters. This can be illustrated by examining the different ways in which 2M executives culturally adapt Arabic-dubbed telenovelas to make them compatible with the Moroccan context. The third rationale is related to the clearly biased agenda that Arab satellite TV channels adopted during the recent pro-democracy protests that spread across the Arab world. While certain private TV channels (Hannibal TV), afraid to provoke the ire of the regime’s figures, provided no coverage of the ongoing unrest, others (Dream TV) provided a dishonest reporting by disseminating the government-moulded discourse that presents the protesters as thugs who threaten the nation’s internal stability.

Before making the case for these assertions, it is important to examine how the evolution of the rhetoric of nation-building on Arab television coincided with the initial post-independence launching of state-owned TV channels and how regional political circumstances facilitated a return to the Islamic-Arab heritage, seen as the most viable means for social and political progress, as against secular ideologies.

**National state-owned TV channels and the move toward more “conservative” content**

Arab media has long promoted the project of nation-building as a means of social development. Douglas Boyd traces the evolution of nation building in Arab media to Gamal Abdel Nasser’s regime when radio and print media were more widespread than television. Boyd focuses more on the way radio channels in Egypt were constructed to serve Gamal Abdel Nasser’s pan-Arab projects. Moreover, in his examination of the
development of broadcasting in the Arab world, Boyd explains that Nasser took advantage of the Arabs’ emotional attachment to the Arabic language to advance his political schemes. Boyd asserts that Nasser’s modest rural background made him aware of the significance of the oral tradition in Arab culture and thus incited him to expand the national broadcasting system, particularly radio, for propaganda reasons. Boyd also discusses Nasser’s “three circles”, which Nasser believed would form an economic and political power base in Arab countries and beyond, in order to stand up to Western imperialism.

It should be noted that Nasser’s pan-Arabism project had been based on liberal and socialist foundations in which religion did not play an integral part. Nasser’s Islamic circle was not given priority in his monograph; instead he focused on the theme of Arabism and the African continent’s shared social and political challenges. Michaelle L. Browers points out that, even though the religious dimension has always been present in Arab nationalism, it has mostly been overshadowed by a strong secular trend. Arab nationalism has generally “based its principle of unity around such factors as language and geography rather than faith” (Browers, 2009: 20). This liberal orientation, which strengthened during Anwar Sadat’s, term was reflected in the content of media productions. For instance, themes that are considered taboo now and seldom feature in cinematic or television production, such as homosexuality, rape and atheism, were treated in films like al-Karnak (Dir. Ali Badrakhan, 1975), El-Soud ela al-hawia (“Climbing to the cliff”) (Dir. Kamal El Sheikh, 1978) and Qalbo Alayl (“Heart of the night”) (Dir. Atef al-Tayeb, 1989).

However, after the failure of Nasser’s pan-Arabism project, Arab disappointment over the 1967 military defeat and Sadat’s political actions, the 1979 peace treaty with Israel among them, conservative and often extremist trends began to intensify in response to the failure of past secular regimes. Islamists in the Arab world reacted to the Azamat (defeats) succeeding the 1967 period by demanding a return to the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage (Browers, 2009: 29-30). Moderate Islamists not only believe that Islamic laws are tolerant of national ethnic and religious differences but see that political freedom and democracy in the Arab world cannot be reached without allowing for an open participation of different ideological groups in the national elections.

Moreover, the recently overthrown president Hosni Mubarak authorized the Muslim Brotherhood [1] to perform their religious da’wa (missionary) as long as they abstained from challenging the dominant ruling party, the National Democratic Party, in the political realm. In fact, pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Wahabisim [2] in Saudi Arabia, as well as the profusion of Islamist groups in other Arab countries, has created a form of cultural conservatism present in recent films and series. Arab media productions had to abide by the socio-religious redlines set by those pressure groups and this applies to both locally produced and imported media. However, a number of Arab satellite TV channels have been able to bring to the surface taboo topics that the traditional government channels usually resist tackling. For instance, Al-Mehwar, a popular private Egyptian channel launched in 2001, aired a talk show called Kalam Kebir (“Brave talk”) in which the presenter, a veiled middle-aged Egyptian psychologist, openly discusses sex issues, offering the audience advice regarding their sexual life in a straightforward and explicit manner.
Politics, capital and religion or, the emergence of satellite TV channels

In parallel to the “conservative” backlash displayed in terms of media content, the structure of Arab media industries has also witnessed radical change. A large number of private satellite TV channels emerged in the 1990s and secured an important status in the Arab media landscape. This shift towards privatization and transnationalism is the offshoot of three main forces: the constant political changes, the flow of capital and the growth of conservative religious trends. In light of the different wars that took place across the Arab world in the 1990s, national governments saw the need to launch transnational TV channels, again for purely political reasons. The Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC) that was first aired in December 1990, aimed at reaching Egyptian soldiers during the Iraq-Kuwait war, opposing Iraqi state propaganda.

The flow of capital in Gulf countries subsequent to the oil boom led to the emergence of a significant number of private TV channels. Thus, the Dubai-based MBC (the Middle East Broadcasting Center), which is the first private and commercial-based Arab channel that went on air in 1991, was initially owned by two Saudi media moguls Alwaleed Bin Talal and Kamal Shaikh before the withdrawal of the latter. Similarly, though LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation) started as a militia-war channel during Lebanon’s civil war, it has become a very popular Arab satellite channel due to an increasing portion of entertainment content that reflects its commercial-oriented and liberal agenda. It should also be stressed that LBC is now mostly owned by the Saudi media mogul Alwaleed Bin Talal, who despite his conservative social background, is interested in the profit to be gained by media entertainment. Therefore, apart from the consistent airing of the latest Arab music clips, LBC also hosts the most successful yet controversial reality TV shows such as Alwadi, which consists of local stars living together on a farm governed by the Lebanese pop singer Haifa Wahbi.

As for the role of religion in this new phase of Arab television, it should be stressed that a wide range of private religious channels emerged recently as the result of the financial power of Saudi media moguls, who are capitalizing on a newly emerging conservative religious context. An example of this trend is the satellite channel, Iqraa, founded by the Saudi businessman Kamal Shaikh in 1998. It is considered to be the most widely-watched Arab religious TV station. Alwaleed Bin Talal has joined the competition regarding these specialized TV channels by introducing Al-Rislah in 2006. The fact that these two TV channels are both owned by Saudi media moguls and are widely popular has further substantiated Saudi Arabia’s religious hegemony in the Arab Islamic world. [3] Nevertheless, Egyptian media officials allowed for the launching of the 24 Al-Nas in 2006 which hosts different types of religious preachers and not only the ones from Al-Azhar. [4]

The real gain for these channels’ owners is their ability to secure constant media exposure on the national level that they can use towards political ends (Ferjani, 2010: 87-8). In this context, Sakr has quoted Kamal Shaikh’s statement on the general agenda of his TV channels, particularly Iqraa: “someone like me, not completely to the left or the right – and there are millions [of Muslims and Arabs] like me – wanted to present a more tolerant, middle-of-the-road message to the Arab and other peoples of the world” (Sakr, 2001: 47). Kamal Shaikh’s phrase clearly demonstrates that he is more concerned about
disseminating his ideological messages than financial profit. Interestingly, Alwaleed Bin Talal also claims that Al-Rislah fosters moderate Islamic views. Sakr quotes Alwaleed’s 2003 press conference speech in which he asserts that Al-Rislah “would project our Arab heritage through a modern medium and project Islam as a religion of moderation” (Sakr, 2007: 154-55).

The crisis of satellite Arab TV channels

In light of the rapid profusion of all these satellite Arab TV channels, one might wonder if the shift towards privatization, transnationalism and liberalization in Arab media has only led to the emergence of commercially-based entertainment programs and ideologically-oriented religious channels, without affecting the issues of social development and democratization. In fact, Khalil Rinnawi holds a very positive view regarding the role these private and transnational TV channels play in raising political consciousness. For instance, he praises the structure of MBC because of its adoption of CNN’s news casting form, with its exclusive coverage of politically sensitive issues that are usually disregarded by other Arab TV stations, in addition to its first-hand reports. Also, Aljazeera, the Qatari all-news channel launched in 1996, is argued to offer a different take on politically and socially controversial issues in the Arab world. This is primarily the result of Aljazeera’s \textit{laissez-faire} policy in which the station has autonomy from the Ministry of Information, making it an exceptional media case in the Arab world. The channel airs the most popular political Arab talk shows, such as \textit{Shahed’Ala al-A’ser} (“Witness to an era”), hosted by Ahmed Mansour, which invites Arab political figures and spokesmen (though most of them have already retired) to give their opinion on the most important political events to have taken place under a particular regime. \textit{Akthar min Ra’iy} (“More than one opinion”), hosted by Sammy Hadad, also strives to present a variety of opinions regarding the latest news topics by featuring guests from different political and social persuasions.

The second significant all-news channel in the Arab world is Al-Arabiya, launched by Al Walid Al Ibrahim, son-in-law of the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, in 2003. Unlike Aljazeera, Al-Arabiya has adopted a moderate approach in its coverage of the political conflicts in Arab countries. For instance, during its coverage of the Iraqi war, Al-Arabiya showed less sympathy to Saddam’s regime in contrast to Aljazeera, which made it more popular in Iraq. Also, unlike Aljazeera, Al-Arabiya shuns the use of ideologically loaded terms like “martyrdom” during its reporting of the ongoing wars and conflicts in the region. However, despite this supposedly more balanced approach, Al-Arabiya’s editorial line is very deferential of Saudi Arabia’s political interests.

In the same vein, the change that electronic Arab media have experienced since the 1990s is believed to have generated public mobility in the region. Marc Lynch argues that the relatively new satellite TV channels, particularly Aljazeera, have been able to act independently of the repressive government laws and suggests that this transformation has led to the emergence of a new Arab public sphere attuned to public affairs. Lynch contends that, “where Arab public life had for decades been dominated by the voice of the state, al-Jazeera ushered in a new kind of open, contentious public politics in which a plethora of competing voices clamoured for attention” (Lynch, 2006:2). For instance, Aljazeera’s \textit{Al-Itijah al-Mu’aks} (“The opposite direction”), which invites guests with opposing political affiliations, is known for raising very sensitive questions that relate to
political oppression under contemporary Arab regimes. It also discusses a variety of political and social ills that include the spread of AIDS in the Arab world and the present deteriorating economic and social status of Arab countries. Given this TV show’s bold approach and content, it is argued to have succeeded in engaging and mobilizing the Arab public.

Similarly, Aljazeera’s reinforcement of the shared Arab-Islamic identity and its equally diligent treatment of the imposing problems in every Arab country are acclaimed for having created a public sphere where viewers across the Arab world invariably relate to the raised issues and critically discuss them. Lynch enthusiastically notes that “the new television stations create warm relationships among physically distant Arabs and greatly increase the emotional salience of political issues” (Lynch, 2006:35). Lynch stresses the important role that transnational channels, specifically Aljazeera, have played in bringing Arabs together due to its presentation of national problems as urgent regional challenges that demand the involvement of every Arab actor.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the Arabs’ rising involvement in public life and their critical and open discussion of regional political and social problems cannot be separated from the role Aljazeera and other private satellite channels played in fostering diversity of opinions and adapting more transparent coverage of sensitive regional issues. In fact, this new Arab public is primarily instigated by these TV channels, and other factors mentioned by Lynch that include the growing number of independent newspapers and news websites are of minor importance, due to the high rates of illiteracy and the limited accessibility of modern technology to citizens across the Arab world.

More importantly, the effects of the close relationships between the TV broadcasters and the Arab ruling families on the channels’ degree of neutrality in relation to news coverage have not been extensively discussed by Lynch. In fact, these private and more liberal TV channels have not, by any means, led to noteworthy social development or serious political liberalization in the region primarily due to this particular reason. There are a number of satellite TV channels that have close connections with ruling families like Rafiq Hariri’s Future TV. The Sunni Rafiq Hariri received support from the Saudi royal family to launch his channel that would counter Hezbollah’s Shi’aa religious propaganda. Other private TV channels obtain direct sponsorship from Arab and Islamic governments, such as Hezbollah’s al-Manar whose main financial sources come from the Iranian and Syrian rulers. Thus, the close relationships of these media moguls with ruling class interests have meant that they lack credibility.

Gouda Abdel-Khalek and Mustapha K. Al Sayyid also point out that unlike Latin American countries, such as Brazil, where businessmen and entrepreneurs participated in the public mobilization that changed the military-based political system to a civil one, Arab entrepreneurs rarely represent civic goals. In Egypt, for example, the entrepreneurs might be the only social group that showed support to the ousted regime. This is due to their involvement with the preceding ruling National Democratic Party, which explains their contribution to shaping public opinion for the regime’s own interest. For instance, the first private TV channel to be launched in Egypt in 2001, Dream TV, was mostly owned by the Egyptian businessman Ahmad Bahgat whose close relationship with the ruling party made the incredibility of his channel quite expected. Also, the private satellite channel Al-Mehwar’s redlines are by and large determined by its owner, the
businessman Hassan Rateb. The most important boundaries had to do with avoiding any criticism to the ousted Egyptian regime. Abdel-Khalek and Al Sayyid conclude that “instead of being an agent for democratization, the nascent bourgeoisie [particularly business owners] in Egypt has become, in fact, a major foundation of support for an authoritarian regime” (Abdel-Khalek and Al Sayyid, 2011: 268).

Furthermore, the religious affiliations of the private TV channels’ owners contribute to their religious and political partiality. For example, the religious TV channel Iqraa presents religious issues predominantly from a Sunni Islamic perspective reflecting its Saudi owner Kamal Shaikh’s religious affiliation. On the other hand, Hezbollah’s Al-Manar focuses on issues that are mostly shared by Muslims from a Shi’aa perspective, which explains its airing of dubbed Iranian films and its exclusion of opinions that contradict its religious and political affiliations. Thus, despite the intense competition between different Arab media actors, this has not yielded free and critical debates of the most imposing social and political issues in the region because every actor has a particular ideological agenda that they strive to promote through a personal TV channel.

As for the assertion that Aljazeera represents an exceptional case in the Arab mediascape in its approach and structure (being independent of the Ministry of Information), Aljazeera, in fact, lacked a religiously impartial editorial line. The Palestinian-born Aljazeera manager, Wadah Khanfar, who was the managing director of Aljazeera for several years, had employed hardline Islamist journalists, which made the channel foster radical forms of Islam in addition to a biased treatment of violent events taking place in the Arab world. It should also be noted that Aljazeera’s popular political talk shows divulge troubling secrets mostly about past Arab regimes. For example, “Witness to an era” disclosed information about the way the late Moroccan king, Hassan II, ordered the elimination of his opponents following the failure of a state coup in the seventies. The same talk show made known confidential information regarding the inhuman treatment of Islamists during Nasser’s regime.

Conversely, Aljazeera’s political talk shows would be very cautious if the topics under discussion pertain to human rights violations that are connected with present regimes or existing political figures. The main reason behind Aljazeera’s selective agenda is the fear of provoking the ire of Arab leaders and important state officials particularly in the Gulf region who can, in turn, divulge unwanted information about the Qatari ruling family. Thus, one can conclude that the rise of privately owned satellite TV channels in the Arab world has had no impact on democratization but has instead merely provided a forum in which political opposition can be voiced, pressure can be released, and regimes can be put into question within a controlled environment.

The second important reason that restricts critical discussion of the sensitive issues in the region is the government’s endless firm grip on the content of different media forms. Arab statesmen have invariably advocated the idea that “freedom is a relative concept that has to be carefully applied in the context of responsibility, and Western free press may not necessarily be replicated in the Arab world” (Ayish, 2001:122). Arab official statesmen usually advocate this discourse by referring to the precarious economic and political conditions in Arab countries, such as the high rates of illiteracy or the ethnic and religious rivalries, claiming that the presence of a free press and media institutions independent of the state might lead to chaos and instability. Also, it is true that in the
1990s, Arab countries like Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and Kuwait allowed for the launching of a private oppositional press that could enjoy complete financial autonomy. However, individuals in these private media entities must abide by the governments’ interpretation of free expression in order to ensure their own safety. Ironically, Arab leaders frequently link the lack of press freedom and critical TV discussions of political issues to their concern of maintaining national unity and security. Accordingly, media laws in Arab countries are not only submitted to the governments’ understanding of freedom of expression but these laws are constantly subjected to revisions and changes. For example, though Morocco was among the first Arab countries to encourage the involvement of the private sector in both electronic and print media, there is still a government law that allows the banning of any media materials considered as a threat to “the public order.”

More to the point, despite the Moroccan government’s limited interference with the agenda of the satellite TV channel 2M, this channel respects the will of the state and its ruler in presenting TV materials that do not contradict the national notions of morality and religion. As mentioned earlier, 2M was basically launched as a second TV station that would offer a wider range of programs to Moroccan viewers. In 1998, the government announced that 2M would be privatized again; however, this never took place. In any case, efforts to liberalize 2M proved to be more successful during the reign of the young King Mohammed VI starting in the 2000s with the introduction of the Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle (HACA). The goal of this institution has been to improve the administrative and technical services of 2M, nonetheless, it ultimately granted the Palace more power over the management and the redlines of the now barely half-privatized channel. For instance, in 2000, 2M’s editorial chief was dismissed because the station broadcast an interview with the leader of the Polisario, a group known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al Hamra and Rio de Oro that has been seeking political autonomy from the Moroccan government in the Western Sahara (Rugh 2004: 208).

In spite of government control over 2M, it remains locally more popular than the first TV channel RTM, also presently known as Al-Oula. On both 2M and RTM, the institution of the monarchy is above criticism. According to Article 28 of the 1996 Constitution, the king’s speeches “shall not be subject to debate” (Sakr 2007: 40). Also, Morocco’s Broadcasting Act, approved in 2004, clearly states that showing any disapproval to the King’s decisions is considered “sacrilege” or as articles 3 and 9 of the Broadcasting Act put it, the general taboos on Moroccan television include challenging the country’s “sacred institutions and values, moral standards and the people’s dignity [referring to Morocco’s historical claim to the Western Sahara]” (ibid).

In contrast to the editorial policies governing RTM, 2M is a commercial station transmitted via satellite that broadcasts a wide array of foreign media including French and American films in addition to a wide range of music and sports programming. 2M produces only 20 hours per week of its aired programming and relies on imported entertainment media to cover the rest of the airtime of the week, particularly the Arabic-dubbed telenovelas. [5] Spanish-language series on 2M have evoked public controversy because they were seen as violating cultural norms, particularly related to gender norms and provocative styles of dress that conflict with Moroccan social values. For these reasons, imported telenovelas typically undergo strict censorship measure by the
censorship board of 2M to be in line with the state’s enforced notions of morality.

Nezha Mouhssine, head of programming at 2M, informed me that 2M executives have created a list of criteria that determines the cultural relevance of potential imported telenovelas, most important of which is the cultural proximity of the telenovela context to Moroccan viewers. The criterion of cultural proximity includes values and meanings that need to be close to Arab social values. For example, the series preferably should not have many love and sex scenes. However, even when 2M purchases culturally controversial telenovelas such as *The Devil Knows Best* (produced by Martha Godoy, Telemundo, 2009), in which a transgender character plays an important dramatic role, the executives resort to censorship and dubbing into Moroccan-Arabic to eliminate all potentially offensive scenes and dialogue. For example, in a climactic scene in the original Latin version, the secret of the transsexual female character’s operation is divulged by her former employer in order to drive away the man that she passionately loves. The speech of the characters in the whole confrontation scene has been completely altered in the dubbed Moroccan version. Instead of disclosing that she was a man during her youth, the villain accuses her of having undergone several plastic surgery operations and of being forty-five years old. The inconsistency between image and speech is quite striking in this sequence. The unconvincing accusations do not measure up to the hysterical cries of the woman and her frantic pleadings or her lover’s pathetic reactions that range from disbelief to total despair.

Thus, 2M executives overcame references to the transgender character by remaking the story with techniques of censorship and dubbing. When I asked Mouhssine about this problematic issue in the censorship and dubbing of *The Devil Knows Best* and the way that 2M’s censorship board addressed them, she chose not to comment claiming that she had no prior knowledge of the original subplots of the telenovelas. Whether she was evading my question or not, she and other media professionals at 2M are required to remove any potentially offensive scenes in order not to clash with the state’s agenda. Accordingly, even imported entertainment TV shows, such as telenovelas, are under strict government control, which reveals the strong nature of political authority in Morocco.

The Arab League commission for the study of communication and information report states that media in Arab countries usually just cover current affairs on a daily basis. As a result, it pays little attention to the governments’ development strategies or presenting free and critical discourse on the social and political transformations taking place in these countries (Ayish, 2001: 128). Also, the majority of Arab TV channels are believed to focus on urban centres with little consideration to the precarious conditions in the rural areas and sustain general stereotypes about the situation of women with limited coverage of their important achievements in social and economic fields. This actually drives Ayish to consider the growth of satellite transmission and privatization in Arab media as a form of plastic surgery due to its incapacity to create a space for critical social and political debates.

Similarly, Sakr argues that despite the flexible flow of capital and images across Arab nations as well as the increasing number of private satellite TV channels, having access to basic and trustworthy information still poses a problem in the Arab world. Sakr points out that the strong government censorship laws, basically related to the Saudi royal family and the previous Egyptian government, hinders development and democratization
in the Arab world and restricted effective use of the Arab satellite transmission. However, unlike Ayish, Sakr acknowledges the crucial national role of Arab satellite television. She explains that the Arab media landscape has effectively experienced deterritorialization in terms of images given that satellite TV channels have allowed the Arab diasporas in Europe and the United States to be connected with their national media output. However, Sakr notes that state control of different types of media in the Arab world has never been deterritorialized.

In this context, Saudi Arabia is believed to have the most controlled media system despite its development of satellite transmission in the early 1990s. The government appoints a committee that consists of Saudi representatives from different ministries who examine the cultural and religious relevance of both national and imported media materials before they appear on air. The political ecology of Saudi Arabia is based on a power sharing arrangement between the al-Sa’ud royal family, as the formal polity of government, and the establishment of Wahhabism associated with the family of al-Sheik, who governs the spheres of religion and culture (Marwan and Khalil 2009: 127). For instance, in 1973, the Wahhabi clerics demanded that the Ministry of Culture and Information prohibit women from becoming news broadcasters. Saudi Arabia is believed to have advocated a policy of media pacification (i’lam Tanwimi), aimed at blocking the interference of citizens in the country’s social and political strategies (Hammond 2007: 2).

More to the point, Saudi state television has long been regulated by fixed parameters that include the prohibition of sexually provocative scenes that could feature women wearing revealing clothes or dancing. Also, alcohol consumption, gambling, references to Zionism and graphic violence are specifically censored on Saudi television. The influence of the Wahhabi Sheiks has affected the airing of the Syrian-dubbed Turkish series Gümüs, entitled Noor [6] in the Syrian translation (2007), on the Saudi-sponsored satellite TV channel MBC. The popularity of Turkish soaps on MBC has provoked the ire of religious authorities in Saudi Arabia who claim that the Turkish soaps promote “anti-Islamic” values by depicting alcohol consumption, pre-marital sex and the acceptability of abortion as a matter of course. The Saudi religious clerics assert that this could negatively affect the conservative cultural values of Arab viewers. Thus, subsequent to the airing of Gümüs on MBC in the summer of 2008, Sheikh Saleh al-Luhaydan, the head of the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia, issued a fatwa that called for the killing of the owners of the TV channels that air religiously immoral matters (Buccianti 2010: 9).

Moreover, the majority of Arab satellite TV channels usually favour quantity over quality, as manifested in their extensive entertainment programming, where the content is mostly imported, along with other, heavily censored, TV shows. In fact, Said Sadek contends that Egypt has witnessed the waning of its cultural dominance in the Arab world, particularly in the realms of media and news-broadcasting. He attributes the declining number of local and regional viewers of Egyptian TV channels to their lack of freedom and their limited coverage of national developments, which makes these channels basically “parrot official propaganda.” He subsequently describes the whole communication system in Egypt as “extremely bureaucratic, heavily censored, overcautious and slow in covering emergencies while it awaits a ‘green light’ from above” (Sadek, 2006: 164).

More to the point, there has been an evident partial coverage of the recent public protests that plagued the Arab world, particularly on Egyptian and Tunisian television.
Egyptian satellite channels, headed by the state-run Channel 1, propagated a government-moulded discourse depicting Tahrir protesters as claimers of demands that clash with Egypt’s economic and political interests. These channels alleged that the Tahrir protesters had been infiltrated by thugs or what is referred to as baltagaa in colloquial Egyptian, which would lead the country into instability. Also, live calls from ordinary Egyptians, providing personal disturbing experiences because of “the lack of security” served to reinforce the state’s distorted reporting of unfolding events (Hugh, 2011).

More than that, while protests and occupied movements were still taking place, Egyptian TV aired old footage of normal traffic in downtown Egypt. Also, during the month of the revolution (January 2011), the Egyptian government dismissed Aljazeera Mubasher from the satellite transmission system, Nilesat, and ordered the closing down of Aljazeera offices in Cairo. This dishonest media coverage prompted some prominent Egyptian journalists and TV talk-show reporters to resign such as Mahmoud Saad who later joined the Tahrir crowds. Given the clearly partial approach of both state-owned and private TV channels during the January and February unrest, the Egyptian protesters carried a number of forceful slogans such as “Lies, exclusively on Egyptian television” (Abdel Rahman, 2011).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, after the successful overthrow of Mubarak, Egyptian satellite TV channels not only adopted the protesters’ side but opened their space to previously stifled voices from the Muslim Brotherhood and the youth-focused activism groups. Al-Mehwar, for instance, which showed support to the ousted regime and vilified the Tahrir revolutionaries, declared later that it has been continuously supporting the protesters. This shift can be viewed as an attempt from these private TV channels to regain credibility; however, it proves these TV channels’ consistent biased agenda because they rapidly turn of their shifts as the propaganda voice of the dominant regime. In fact, despite the emergence of new state-independent TV channels like Al Tahrir which aims to provide forums that “represent the young people who led the revolution” (Mekay, 2011) the enduring presence of politically bigoted private TV channels, such as Al-Faraeen, which has relentlessly portrayed the revolutionaries as “foreign agents” puts the credibility of a number of contemporary Egyptian private TV channels into question. Al Tahrir channel has continued airing though it had to diversify its programming in order to avoid the accusations of inciting chaos by being the voice of one particular political group (Abdel Rahman, 2011). Currently, art, religious and sports shows are part of Al Tahrir program line-up.

Biased coverage of current political events has persisted on Egyptian TV till the present. Following the rapid ousting of Mohamed Morsi by the military in June 2013, both state-owned and private TV channels deliberately ignored transmitting the image of the pro-Morsi protests that took place in Cairo’s Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. Egyptian private TV channels such as ONtv (2009) and CBC (2011) adopted a clearly partial line by underestimating the number of Morsi-supporters who took to the street. Egyptian authorities also banned the Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawakul Kerman from entering Egypt, because of her intention to participate in Rabaa al-Adawiya’s sit-ins. This pushed Kerman to state that, “Only those that support Egypt’s military coup are given a voice in the media” (Adam Morrow and Khaled Moussa Al-Omrani, 2013). Presently, there is a strong and hostile division in the political scene in Egypt between the opponents of Morsi who consider the June revolution “a second revolution” that would
bring more individual rights, and the supporters of Morsi who see it as “a military coup” due to the powerful and direct intervention of the military.

As for the Tunisian case, national state-run TV stations, Canal 21 and Tunis 7, were for long under direct state control. This applied to the first private TV channel, Hannibal TV, launched in 2005, which basically aimed at providing a variety of entertainment programming. Both state-controlled and private TV channels were sensitive to what Ben Ali’s government perceived as national and security interests. During the public protests in Tunisia that started in December 2010, satellite TV channels turned a blind eye on the internal tumultuous situation. Tunis 7 and Canal 21 maintained a firm silence on the killing of university graduate students and the persecution of other civilian protesters during the first two weeks of riots. Instead, these channels portrayed the protesters as thugs who pose a serious threat on the country’s national security. In addition, the Aljazeera office in Tunisia, like its counterpart in Egypt, was closed down for fear that it would have access and air information deemed risky for Ben Ali’s regime. Even after Ben Ali left office, national TV stations remained cautious about uncovering the horrifying corruption that characterized his regime. However, they later opened their space to previously-exiled opposition figures while private ones, like Hannibal TV, took the liberty to criticize leaders from different political orientations (Owais, 2011).

While Tunisian and Egyptian satellite TV channels ignored covering the insisting public protests and occupied movements, Aljazeera’s airtime was generously devoted to the revolutionary protests. Aljazeera’s updated materials also came from Arab citizens who posted their personal footage on Aljazeera’s site. In fact, Aljazeera’s success is partly due to its “referencing Facebook pages and YouTube in reporting the raw events” (Miladi, 2011). Because of its supportive role in regards to the revolutions, Aljazeera came to be referred to as “the channel of the revolutions.” However, both Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya provided limited coverage of the pro-democracy protests in Bahrain. This is due to the Qatari and Saudi foreign policy that necessitates loyalty to the Gulf Cooperation Council members.

Given the partiality of the majority of satellite TV channels, social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have been seen as the driving force behind the youth revolutions in the region. Social media networks served as “a mobilizing tool” for the Arab youth given that they facilitated their congregation and exchange of information. This has been made possible through the growing number of Internet users in Arab countries (in Tunisia four out of ten have Internet access and almost 20 per cent of the Tunisian population are on Facebook). In fact, these social media platforms allowed users from different Arab countries to publicly show support to the Tunisian protesters and to share the most updated information, making these social networks operate at a transnational level. Further, Albrecht Hofheinz states that these new media platforms helped to break the psychological barrier of fear as an increasing number of users felt confidence to freely express their opinions because they realized that their opinions are widely shared.

**Conclusion**

I have discussed three main reasons that thwart the impartiality of satellite private TV channels vis-à-vis the coverage of political and social changes in the Arab world. The first is the enduring connections of the TV channels’ owners with political parties and ruling
regimes, such as the case with Al-Manar and Dream TV. These close connections meant
the absence of critical coverage of news that clash with the political interests of the
dominant regimes. Second, satellite TV channels have never enjoyed complete
independence from the central governments.

Third, the way satellite TV channels covered the recent pro-democracy protests in
different Arab countries further proves their clear political biased agenda. While satellite
Tunisian TV channels, such as Hannibal TV, maintained a firm silence on the public
unrest their Egyptian counterparts, Dream TV and Al-Mehwar, portrayed the protesters
as thugs who threaten the nation’s internal security. Moreover, the well-claimed
Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya ignored the public protests in Bahrain and other Gulf states
because of the Qatari and the Saudi governments’ loyalty to the GCC members.
Therefore, the move towards satellite transmission and privatization in Arab television
has, in effect, helped mobilize public opinion and provided a variety of regional news and
imported TV shows to the Arab viewers. However, this has served as a temporary outlet
to Arab audiences for the lack of critical news broadcasting and the absence of neutral
media agenda regarding the constant political and social changes in the Arab world.

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**Interviews conducted by the author**

Dubbing cast of *The Devil Knows Best* at Plug-in, a dubbing company, interview conducted by the author, Casablanca, Morocco, 26 August 2010.
Footnotes

1. The Muslim Brotherhood is a globally known Islamist group that was initially founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, who called for the establishment of Islamic states. It faced fierce oppression under the regimes of Nasser and of Sadat. However, its voice became stronger during the period of Mubarak's rule and its members were able to win 20 per cent of parliament seats in 2005, though electoral fraud in 2010 negatively affected their political gain. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were able to run for presidency, following the uprisings that ousted Mubarak. Mohamed Morsi Isa El-Ayyat, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, became Egypt's first civilian president when elected in June 2012. However, following the mass protests that erupted on 30 June 2013, he was ousted by the military on 3 July 2013.

2. Wahhabiya or Wahhabism is an Islamic movement that began in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth-century by a religious reformer Mohammed ibn abdel-Wahab, who advocated the exclusive reliance on Koran and Sunna (the practices of the Prophet Mohammed). Today, Wahhabism is known as a zealous religious trend that strives to revive the prophetic tradition like Salafism but is more strict in its dictation of what is haram (religiously forbidden) and halal (religiously allowed) particularly in terms of gender issues, punishment laws and dress code.

3. Saudi Arabia is the country where Islam originated and it is birthplace of the prophet Mohamed. Muslims all over the world travel to Saudi Arabia to perform the Hajj, the pilgrimage that must be carried out at least once in a Muslim's lifetime. For these reasons, Saudi religious clerics' fatwas (religious statements) are held with great reverence across the Muslim world.

4. Al-Azhar is the official religious authority in Egypt. Its preachers are believed to be more traditional in their preaching methods than the famous TV preachers who typically dress modern and do not appear in religious attire, and who speak in the vernacular languages, and not in standard Arabic. The most popular TV Islamic preacher presently is the Egyptian Amr Khalid, who has featured on a large number of both religious and non-specialized Arab channels. He is mostly famous for his casual garb, emotionally-charged speeches targeting mainly the youth and his use of colloquial Egyptian.


6. The Arabic title of this long running series refers to the name of the series' female protagonist.

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