



MIDDLE EAST: Charter checks satellite TV revolution

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SUBJECT: The impact of the recent Arab Satellite Broadcasting Charter.

SIGNIFICANCE: Satellite media have created new avenues for political engagement and commercial opportunity in the region. However, the charter, which lays out principles for regulating satellite broadcasting, threatens to curtail its growth with new strictures on news and entertainment programming, and threatens an industry that is still struggling to achieve long-term financial viability.

ANALYSIS: Arab League information ministers in February adopted an agreement to impose restrictions on satellite channels, which seemed to be aimed primarily at Al-Jazeera and its brand of contentious news and political coverage (see [MIDDLE EAST: Al-Jazeera International mission in doubt - April 13, 2006](#)). It also takes aim at sex channels and other 'immoral' acts such as drinking, smoking, and violence. Only Qatar and Lebanon failed to sign the document.

Charter impact. The Egyptian-Saudi sponsored charter, once approved by national legislatures, will allow governments to suspend or revoke broadcasting licences on very general grounds. This will affect existing stations such Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and Al-Hurra, which allow free-wheeling debates, uncensored call-ins, and live coverage that often transgresses traditional red lines and draconian domestic press laws and penal codes:

- Saudi Arabia already banned live programmes on state TV earlier this month and Egypt has cracked down on press freedom over the past year, though some lively shows continue (see [EGYPT: Press crackdown linked to succession - November 1, 2007](#)).
- These two countries are especially hostile to calls for democracy and reform, and it is thus little surprise that they sponsored the charter.
- Egyptian state-owned NileSat has recently dropped London-based channel Al-Hewar -- the first casualty of the charter.

Al-Jazeera impact. A decade ago, Al-Jazeera sparked the new media revolution by challenging the status quo through the development of a public forum where politics, culture, and society could be discussed. It pioneered the creation of a new Arab journalism focused on the people in a region where the political process offers minimal chance for expression.

Its journalism practices have seeped into the rest of the sector, from other satellite stations to state-run terrestrial networks, and even into the print media, raising standards and public expectations. Terrestrial state-run stations have suffered accordingly:

- Government officials must now defend their policies on air while ordinary people have the opportunity to comment on events.
- Journalists increasingly want to adhere to international norms and be respected as professionals.
- In view of competition from Al-Jazeera and the other pan-Arab news stations, even state-owned news stations are feeling pressure to adhere to basic journalistic standards.
- Therefore, in Egypt and Jordan, government stations cover items that would have been taboo in the past in order to maintain their legitimacy.

This has challenged the ability of governments in the region to control information. Arab publics have also become accustomed to having real news and routinely turn to Al-Jazeera as their most trusted source, a sore point with Arab governments which have sought to punish the station and its Qatari sponsor (see [QATAR/SAUDI ARABIA: Doubts linger over diplomatic thaw - December 17, 2007](#)). This charter is only the latest attempt.

Media cities. However, Arab governments also realise they need to be part of the media revolution and benefit economically from the boom. Evidence of this can be seen in the development of media cities in several countries. Their creation in Dubai, Jordan, Syria and Egypt creates the perception of greater freedom and has been responsible for London's decline as an Arab media hub. However, largely they offer freedom from taxes rather than editorial freedom.

Regulation arguments. The Arab satellite industry is relatively unregulated, and transnational satellite journalists, until now, have been relatively less subject to censorship than their domestic counterparts (though several Arab countries have arrested or detained Al-Jazeera's journalists). Proponents of the charter argue that the Arab satellite industry needs to be regulated just as media are regulated in the West:

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- They draw disingenuous parallels with the EU and US regulatory bodies to argue that even the West imposes guidelines on televisual content.
- In reality, the charter does not create a regulatory body, but simply places severe restraints on freedom of expression.

Censorship. The charter prohibits insulting heads of state and Arab values and requires the media to uphold "the supreme interests of the Arab countries" -- ie the status quo. Such wording in fact rehashes language already in most domestic press laws and penal codes. It also bans broadcasting that undermines "social peace, national unity, public order and general propriety," criticises religions or defames political, national and religious leaders. However, it panders to the general love of sport by guaranteeing the right to view major sporting events regardless of ownership rights of such events.

Entertainment shows. The charter also targets entertainment programming, focusing on 'immorality' and 'un-Islamic' activities:

- Such programmes have created new fora for participation and expression that challenge social taboos and the boundary between public and private life.
- Reality television shows are also fora for political expression; these have been one of the most economically successfully formats.
- Talk shows are among the most popular formats because they are relatively inexpensive to produce, but risky because of live call-ins.

Such shows enable women to participate in public debate even in societies where they are typically excluded or secluded. Entertainment is also one of the most profitable sectors of the satellite industry.

Economic considerations. Although Arab states have begun to privatise their media and telecommunication sectors, the line between state and private sectors remains blurred. Privatisation and commercialisation of the satellite media does not guarantee democratisation:

- Satellite media owners throughout the region have close ties to those in power, and their interests are aligned with them.
- The advertising industry is not able to sustain the growth of financially independent satellite television. With flat growth in 2005 and 2006, revenues may be falling as growth in the number of stations outpaces advertising sector expansion.
- States and well-connected investors will continue to play an important role in financing them and thus control content.
- Investors are often wary of jeopardising their chances of further investment in media and telecom privatisations and thus have little interest in funding controversial programming.

While the economic outlook for sports and entertainment channels looks bright, news and political talk shows are at risk since few local advertisers want to risk government wrath, making satellite media dependent on a handful of multinational companies as advertisers. Yet even these companies must consider the economic implications of negative coverage. The new charter is likely to make investors shy away from news and politics.

Outlook. There is no turning back the tide on relatively freewheeling and diverse stations, of which there are now more than 400. The public likes choice, debate, contention, variety and entertainment. States are losing their grip ever more quickly on communications as fewer citizens watch state-run networks with their old-fashioned approach to news and entertainment, and low-budget graphics and sets.

CONCLUSION: While the new charter will damage investor confidence, the opportunity to invest in a fast-growing industry, as well as WTO and other external conditions, make it unlikely that Arab governments can significantly retract the new freedoms. At least some satellite media, along with new mobile and internet technologies, will continue to give the Arab public a place to express itself and scrutinise governments and also heighten expectations of greater freedom of expression.

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