What is ‘global’ about Arab media?

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Globalization in Arab Media?

It is inconceivable and unwise to think of any Arab media as ‘global’ when even the dominant oligopolistic media players from the first and second ‘tiers’, who enjoy a longer history and more established market structures, are not regarded as ‘global’:

- CNN, for example, has so often been labeled as a ‘global’ news channel, even though its worldwide audience (cosmopolitan and mobile elite) does not exceed 1 percent.

Globalization in Arab Media?

- For any media to be considered ‘global’, they must be able to: transcend nation-state boundaries and language communities;
- use English, the language of globalization;
- attract a cross-section of international audiences that is not limited to the rich and influential;
- also be coupled with access to the resources and means of production necessary to compete at a global level.
Where Do ‘Arab’ Media Stand In All This?

- ‘Arab’ media are hampered by restrictive state policies and also a lack of acceptance of the new media by state authorities.
- They are mostly nation-bound in terms of regulation, programming and ‘power structures’.
- ‘For as long as most governments retained both a monopoly and direct editorial control over broadcasting stations based in the Arab world, the vast majority of television personnel effectively remained government employees’.

This situation is illuminated rather conspicuously in the recent Arab Human Development Report (AHDR, 2003), which found cultural production in the Arab world to be generally adulterated by governmental restrictions on content and by superficial market preferences.

The report also found that Arab countries had lower information media to population ratios. In the case of the press in the Arab world, there are less than 53 newspapers per 1000 Arab citizens compared to 285 papers per 1000 in developed countries (p. 3).

Where Do ‘Arab’ Media Stand In All This?

- There are less than 18 computers per 1000 persons, compared to the global average of 78.3 computers per 1000 persons. This means that access to the internet in the Arab world is restricted to a very small elite which has the skills and financial power necessary to take advantage of this medium.
- In 2001, access to the internet in Arab countries reached 4.2 million, 1.6 percent of the Arab population (AHDR, 2003).
Where Do ‘Arab’ Media Stand In All This?

- The only sector in the Arab media which comes close to the category ‘global’ is satellite television, specially the Qatar-based channel al-Jazeera, thanks to its reporting of the Afghan and Iraq wars, and also to its broadcasts of Bin Laden’s tapes.

Where Do ‘Arab’ Media Stand In All This?

- If any media are to be considered ‘global’, al-Jazeera included, they will need to transcend not only nation-state boundaries, but also language communities. Al-Jazeera may be watched by some 40 million viewers in the Arab region and among the members of the Arab diaspora, but how many non-Arabs are watching the channel?
  - Westerners may hear of or read about al-Jazeera through Western news outlets, but because of the language barrier they are unable to understand the channel. Furthermore, even what Westerners hear or read about al-Jazeera is often domesticated to a news agenda that is characteristically Western.
  - Al-Jazeera may be a transnational phenomenon, but it is certainly not a global channel. To answer the question what is ‘global about Arab media?’ it is also important to ask what is ‘Arab’ about them.

What Is ‘Arab’ About Arab Media?

- The ‘Arabness’ of Arab media can be unpicked through four levels of dependence:
  - Technology
  - Stylization
  - Content
  - Ideology
What Is ‘Arab’ About Arab Media?

- **Technology**
  - Export in media and communications from the developed world to the third world, of which the Arab region is part, had by the 1990s reached approximately
    - 92.9 percent in printing press requirements,
    - 91.2 percent in television sets,
    - 94.7 percent in radio sets,
    - 90 percent of recording sets and
    - 98.3 percent in cinematographic technology.
  - As for electronic technologies, they are almost all imported from the developed world

What Is ‘Arab’ About Arab Media?

- **Stylization**
  - Television in the Arab Middle East has a predominantly Western style.
  - With regard to production, there is very little that is uniquely Arab in Arab-world television.
  - One can go beyond these findings to say that the stylization and standardization of Arab media into that of its Western counterpart, means the incorporation and mimicking of cultural and economic structures that are deeply embedded in structures of Western modernity; they replicate omnipresent Western and ‘globalized’ structures of cultural production.

What Is ‘Arab’ About Arab Media?

- **Content**
  - The total of television programmes imported from abroad in four Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen) reaches almost 70 percent.
  - A number of studies, especially those produced by UNESCO, show that, on the whole, Arab broadcasters import between 40 and 60 percent of their programmes mainly from Western sources like USA, Britain, France and Germany.
  - The majority of these programmes are entertainment-led, leaving Arab audiences with a meager 11 percent worth of cultural and current-affairs programmes.
What Is ‘Arab’ About Arab Media?

- **Ideology**
  - Western-dependent ruling class that has total control over political and economic life, not to mention the circulation of knowledge and cultural production, governs all Arab states.
  - Islamist media in the Arab world, have ceaselessly been sabotaged by the Arab ruling elite, mainly because their discourses are thought to be a threat to the stability of Arab regimes and to US hegemony in the region.
  - To this end, state owned media in the Arab region are also ideologically dependent and cannot therefore adequately play their role as an Arab 'public sphere'.

Conclusion

- Today’s rich Arab media owners are hardly driven by an historical vision to resuscitate the original Arab satellite project and its intended objectives (ARABSAT came to view primarily from a conscious political will to counter the 1967 defeat by Israel).
- They are, with few exceptions, mere cogs in the global media system. ‘The most that can be said about the leading private Middle East satellite channels’ contribution to globalization is that the billionaires who founded them simultaneously expanded their connections with other members of the super-rich elite whose business interests stretched far and wide’