

# IT COMES OF AGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Valerie Sinclair

THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION IS CREATING A NEW GENERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST THAT WILL LIKELY, BUT NOT NECESSARILY, BE MORE DEMOCRATIC.

By *JON B. ALTERMAN*

**I**n the United States and in much of the developed world, new information and communications technologies have created a universe in which information is unimaginably plentiful and accessible. This abundance has shaped a new generation of youth, fundamentally different than their elders. Many of them cannot imagine research without the Internet, or communication without cell phones, e-mail and instant messaging. The idea of terrestrial television — showing just a handful of programs, often at awkward times and with imperfect reception — has

yielded to a limitless world with hundreds of crystal-clear channels, hundreds of thousands of DVDs, and digital video recorders that render broadcast schedules irrelevant. Potential audiences are huge, but they are fickle, and beyond the control of any single individual, group or movement. What once had been arcane is now commonplace.

The Middle East is going through a similar transition. Although access to media and information remains far more restricted than it is in Western Europe and the United States, in relative terms the change is just as revolutionary. There, too, a new generation is emerging. They share with their Western counterparts the creativity that follows from an exponentially freer media environment, and the growing sense of individualism that such an environment creates. What is confounding to many in the United States is that this new generation does not feel an instant kinship with the media-rich Western culture. If anything, a growing menu of Arab media offerings has accentuated divisions between the Arab world and the West, and made more raw the feelings of anger, injustice and unfairness that many Arabs feel toward the non-Arab world.

In the near term, the primary effects of the information revolution in the Arab world are likely to be domestic. Old categories will be challenged, and a richer spectrum of thought and belief will spring up. Governments that relied on familiar tools to mobilize the public and censor undesirable views will find themselves stripped of the capacity to do either; nongovernmental groups and individual personalities will have a reach within and between countries that would have been unimaginable only a few years ago.

The world this new generation creates will likely — but not necessarily — be more democratic, but it may be even less liberal than its predecessors. Most important to remember is that information and communications technology will reshape the task of governance in the Middle East, and governments who fail to respond to the new environment will do so at their peril.

The second half of the 20th century in the Middle East

was the age of mass media. Government newspapers reached out to the newly literate, and government television reached out to those suddenly wealthy enough to own a television. In places like Cairo and Baghdad, elite politics gave way to populist politics, and the children of the newly urbanized became the newly politicized.

### **An Age of Media Plenty**

Now, in the first half of the 21st century, Middle Eastern governments are losing their strangleholds on their publics. It is an age of media plenty. Any notion that there is a single “Arab line” on a matter of interest is demolished nightly on Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and a host of other stations. It is fascinating to see how different the new generations growing up in this environment are from their elders: so much more questioning of their identities, so much more individualistic, so much more impatient.

Much has been written about the relative youth of Middle Eastern societies. Forty-six percent of Yemenis and 45 percent of Palestinians are under 15, according to U.N. numbers. Half of Saudis are under 18. Many Arab countries are among the youngest societies in the world.

What is often forgotten in the mix, however, is how much more literate young people in the region are than their parents’ generation. In just the last 15 years, UNESCO estimates, adult literacy in Yemen has shot up from 50 to 68 percent, and in Syria from 80 to 95 percent. Egypt’s overall literacy rate among those 15 and older is 55 percent; its literacy rate among youth aged 15 to 24 is 73 percent. Jordanians, Palestinians and even Omanis now enjoy youth literacy rates above 95 percent, suggesting that complex information can pass hands far more easily than even a generation ago.

Feeding into this more literate population is a smorgasbord of information platforms that barely existed a decade ago. First off is the publishing revolution that computers created. The ability to publish not only books, but, even more importantly, pamphlets and fliers, has become a great equalizer for those with limited resources. Marginal tracts can be produced with great skill, and the key challenge is no longer to get something in print. The challenge, instead, is convincing someone to read one’s work instead of a myriad of other articles, pamphlets, tracts and books that can be found on any street corner in the region and outside every mosque.

In the same way, local newspapers have a harder time staying relevant. Elite regional papers — often edited in

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London and distributed to satellite-linked printing facilities throughout the region — cover the news more authoritatively than national papers, and domestic audiences increasingly turn to a wide variety of television news programs for information and analysis. Local papers often respond by playing up their “local-ness,” accentuating nationalist concerns and day-to-day interests. For elite readers, the local press in many places has become merely a way to keep track of where the government stands on many issues; it has lost its role as either a leader or shaper of opinions.

### **The Birth of MBC**

The greatest change in the regional information environment has been the rise of Arab satellite television. Its roots lay in Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 — an invasion that went unremarked on Saudi domestic television because news editors were unsure how to report the events. An urgent desire to understand what was happening next door gave rise not only to Saudi and Egyptian rebroadcasts of CNN on their terrestrial network, but it breathed life into the idea for a small Saudi-owned station called the Middle East Broadcast Center.

MBC was launched as a subscription-free satellite service in 1991, with a mix of news, entertainment and movies. The revolutionary idea behind MBC’s news programming was that a truly Arab channel could cover developments in the Arab world better than any of its Western competitors. The correspondents and editors would know the context, they could do away with a cumbersome apparatus of translators and fixers, and they would have the advantage of speaking to an informed Arab audience instead of a fickle Western one.

There were two problems. First, no one had ever done it before. Equally daunting, how could such a daring experiment flourish in an environment as restrictive as Saudi Arabia? Owners located the station in London, which simultaneously gave it access to top-flight technical talent and distance from the stultifying hand of Saudi censors.

Now, just 15 years later, more than 150 Arab satellite

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channels fill the airwaves. Most are available at no charge and, contrary to popular belief in the West, most focus on entertainment rather than news. U.S. government officials often complain bitterly about the latest outrage on Al-Jazeera, which continues to garner the highest marks in the region for the trustworthiness of its coverage. Yet the bulk of Arab audiences — and especially young ones — are not Al-Jazeera junkies. Instead, they tune in to a daily diet of game shows, music videos and reality television.

The audience for the Arab channels is impossible to estimate precisely, but upwards of 50 million Arabs — about 17 percent — have access in their own homes. Combined with the number who watch in public places like coffeehouses and those who watch videotapes of particularly newsworthy programming, the number of Arabs who are touched by satellite broadcasting begins to approach the number who have an interest in it.

### **The Internet’s Reach**

Internet access is far less common than satellite television access. The International Telecommunications Union’s 2004 figures put Internet access rates in two key Arab countries, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, at just 6.3 percent and 5.4 percent, respectively. While most surveys suggest somewhat higher numbers, the Internet is not yet a mass medium in most countries in the region, with the exception of the oil-rich United Arab Emirates.

Among young elites, however, it is a totally different story. E-mail offers further opportunities for communication, especially for those with friends or relatives overseas. Chat rooms abound, many of which are password-protected and all but inaccessible to outsiders. Arab pop stars maintain impressive sites, often in multiple languages. A variety of sites provide religious guidance from all points of view and, for readers who are only comfortable in Arabic, such sites provide the bulk of what many turn to for research on the Internet.

Surveys suggest Al-Jazeera’s Arabic Web site is by far the most popular for those seeking news, generating more than a million hits per day. Among Western sites, those from sources as diverse as the *New York Times*, the *Jerusalem Post* and the BBC are popular in newsrooms,

and local newspapers sometimes lift their articles in their entirety. That constant of Internet use, pornography, is as popular in the Arab world as elsewhere, if not more so. Governments in many parts of the region throw up firewalls and filters, but they scarcely inhibit thrill-seeking young people. As a prominent Saudi editor told me a few years ago, "They have created a nation of hackers. They try to keep us from looking at anything related to politics, religion or sex. What else is there in the world?"

The Internet has also been a boon to the volatile mix of politics and religion that helps sustain the modern Islamist militancy. Although dramatically reduced since law enforcement stepped up efforts to control it after the 9/11 attacks, Web sites feature dramatic pictures of dead and mutilated Muslims, religious edicts, appeals to group solidarity and calls for vengeance. Western and Arab intelligence services have used electronic sleuthing to swoop in and shut down servers hosting such sites on the one hand, while monitoring those seeking to access them on the other.

The Internet's role is not limited to rallying the masses. Terrorists, including the 9/11 hijackers, have found the vastness of the Internet an inviting and anonymous ocean in which to swim. They use anonymous e-mail accounts, send coded messages and converse in password-protected chat rooms that are often beyond intelligence services' ability to penetrate. For movements engaged in global jihad, the Internet's global character, size and indifference to distance make it an increasingly valuable tool. Such users are few in number, but they have a huge impact.

### **The Rise of Game Shows and Reality TV**

Terrestrial television, led first by satellite programming, has sought to go where the audiences are. Confronting the threat of irrelevancy as audiences flee the mundane for something new and edgy, programmers have revolutionized coverage. News is much more watchable, and much less heavy-handed, than it was even a decade ago. Debate shows have flourished. Celebrity

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profiles abound. Slick televangelists like the Egyptian-born Amr Khaled implore audiences to sanctify their daily lives.

The greatest change, however, has been the rise of game shows and reality television. For several years in the early part of this decade, the most popular show in the Arab world was not a news broadcast or a debate show, not a religious program or a drama. It was the Arab version of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” Contestants from throughout the Arab world wracked their brains, quivered, and called friends and relatives for help. On Tuesday nights in many cities, life would seemingly grind to a halt as viewers raced for their TVs — many to watch Al-Jazeera’s signature debate show, “The Opposite Direction,” and even more to watch “Millionaire” on MBC.

This all seems horribly mundane, but it is vitally important. The reason is that game shows are culturally specific; they rely on questions to which a contestant should know the answer. There are 22 member states in the Arab League, each with its own dialects, history and culture; yet a successful regional show cannot ask questions that neither the contestant nor the audience could be expected to know if he or she were not from a specific country. The questions have to be somehow universal, and a viewer in Yemen has to feel he has the same chance of competing successfully as one from Lebanon. In this way, pan-Arab game shows serve to build a body of information that people are expected to know as Arabs; in the same way, it helps accentuate common identities. Such shows do more to nurture a shared Arab identity than decades of government-sponsored regional radio broadcasts that urged Arab unity. They foster Arabism from the grass roots, rather than from above.

Reality television is the other new arrival on the regional scene. Building on the same models as Western television, popular Western shows like “The Simple Life,” “The Apprentice” and “Fear Factor” are hits in the Arab world as well. No show has been quite as popular, however, as “Star Academy.” Produced for two years running by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, the program featured 16 young Arabs from around the region competing for a \$50,000 recording contract. Similar to the American show, “American Idol,” viewers voted weekly to eliminate contestants. In addition to Friday night shows with extended performances, LBC ran one-hour updates each night, and dedicated a separate 24-

hour channel to document contestants’ weekly preparations. Accurate audience estimates are impossible to come by, but some studies put the proportion of Lebanese 18- to 25-year-olds watching at 80 percent; estimates of close to 50 percent in many other Arab countries would be reasonable.

When Western commentators first heard about “Star Academy,” some, such as the *New York Times*’ Thomas Friedman, leapt on the idea that this was nascent democracy at work. Friedman argued that the “Star Academy” competitions were the first free elections in which many Arabs had been allowed to vote, and that it would create a hunger for democracy.

### **Rising Aspirations, Individual Choices**

Yet Friedman missed the core of the phenomenon. What the rise of game shows and reality television has captured is the aspirational aspect of popular culture among young Arabs. Youth in the region suffer through rote memorization in school and poor job prospects upon graduation. Infrastructure is often crumbling around them, and they struggle to define a future for themselves that is better than the life they knew growing up. Game shows and reality television not only provide a note of escapism, but they help build models — however unrealistic — of how their peers can be happy, successful and modern. The sets are modern, the people well-dressed, and they are surrounded by luxury.

Television has led (and other forms of media picked up on the trend) in presenting the set of choices that young people in the Middle East have to make every day. How should they talk, and what should they believe? More crassly, how should they consume? How should they dress, and what should they have in their homes? Technology has made the array of choices ever more vivid, and seemingly attainable.

Of course, tantalizing and often liberal Western models are not the only ones available for emulation. Neo-traditional (or some argue, pseudotraditional) figures seek to wrap themselves in the language and dress of a simpler time, offering reassuring responses to a world full of temptation and uncertainty. At the extreme of this group are people like Osama bin Laden, whose core message is a rejection of the status quo. Most, however, represent not so much a rejection of modernity as an effort to be selective about it. In fact, many Islamic institutions in the Middle East actively seek to be more modern than

## F O C U S

their secular counterparts, thereby arguing for the fundamental compatibility of faith and progress.

The most fertile ground in the Middle East is worked by those who navigate between these extremes. They argue that Arabs should keep their feet rooted firmly in tradition while reaching for a better future. Some wear jeans, others the veil, and many women wear both. Each emphasizes a different mix of innovations and traditions, and each appeals to a different group. In a world characterized by choice, audiences determine who is popular and who is ignored. While it is often jarring to the uninitiated when apparently traditional young people embrace liberal pop stars, and apparently modern people embrace conservative clerics, it is precisely these individual choices of young Arabs that make the current environment so interesting.

Of course, information plenty is not an unalloyed good. From our own experience, we know that information simultaneously brings people together and drives them apart. Technology helps create mass audiences in

the middle — the tens of millions of people who are linked by their love of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire,” “Star Academy” and the like. At the same time, however, it also helps extremist groups find like-minded members and flourish.

But what is important here is the way in which information plenty drives choices down to the individual level. Increasingly in the Arab world, individuals maintain multiple identities, and the identities they embrace are increasingly a function of choice. Such overlapping identities are one characteristic of smoothly functioning democracies, and they are commonplace in Western societies. Individuals typically feel a part of a large number of unwieldy interest- and identity-based coalitions, and politicians seek to assemble groups of them to secure victory. When individuals think of themselves as an amalgam of economic, educational, social, religious, ethnic and regional backgrounds, it is easier for them to feel that at least some of their needs are met through the political system, even if all of them are not met.

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### **Near-term Democracy?**

Does that mean information will bring democracy to the Arab world? The answer is probably not, at least in the short term. Political systems take time to grow, and ideas about identity change slowly. In addition, increased flows of information facilitate the rise of demagogues, promising easy answers to complex problems. Osama bin Laden is a skilled user of television, but a more mainstream figure could gain even greater support. Increased flows of information can also serve to reinforce the deep feelings of injury, injustice and discrimination that many Arabs feel toward the outside world. Television has taken the plight of the Palestinians from a talking point in formal speeches to being daily fare in people's living rooms, and Web sites feature pictures of atrocities committed against Muslim populations around the globe.

Over time, though, it is clear that the sheer volume of information available to people in the Middle East, and especially eagerly consumed by young people, will transform politics. Over the last half-century, information

control has been a vital tool in the political arsenal of Arab governments. They have relied on the mass media to mobilize their populations, and they have used censorship to restrain them. Now, both tools are losing their bite. The digitalization of content, the ease of duplicating and transporting videocassettes, and the sheer volume of information swirling in the region make effective censorship a fool's errand. Information simply cannot be held back. The only solace censors can take is that technology eases surveillance; while governments cannot keep people from knowing things, they can more easily trace how information is passed.

Arabs will move into the 21st century, and the process by which they do so will be messy, confusing and slow. It will almost certainly have its setbacks. What is most exciting, however, is the creativity that these changes are unleashing. There is no guarantee that young Arabs' future will be better than their past, but the tools at their disposal to help make it so are more powerful than those of their parents, and their grandparents before them. ■

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