The Cultural and Educational Functions of Public Service Broadcasting in the Arab World

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An Overview

The Arab media systems are characterized by state control, regional availability and influence of national media and Egyptian dominance (Van Zoonen, 1994). Each country in the Arab world has a broadcasting system that is either directly operated by the government or is run by an organization that is funded and directly influenced by a government agency, generally a Ministry of Information, a chartered monopoly system owned and operated by the government. (Boyd, 1983).

It is, therefore, justified to say that national public sphere in Arab countries has a restrictive and government controlled character in which it is hard if not impossible for the media to play an independent role. The wide availability of regional and international media may provide Arab audience with a culturally and politically diverse image of the world (Van Zoonen, 1994). Listeners and viewers understand that the government has its priorities and its points of view, and those who tune to non-Arab international broadcasts appear to be listening in order to gain another opinion about a local or international event. Listening during times of crisis is an almost standard procedure in the Arab World, particularly among the elite (Boyd, 1983).

Government ownership and operation of the electronic media derive from the belief that government is best suited to broadcast policy-making and management, and from fear of the consequences if ideas inimical to the government were permitted to circulate (Hijab, 1981). Television service is a reality in all countries in the Arab Middle East -rich and poor alike - for even the poorer countries such as Egypt, the Sudan and Syria realized that television can be an important political and developmental tool.

Television stations in the Arab Middle East have always telecast productions made in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt as well as imported entertainment programs from the United States and Europe. Imported programs from the West are shown with the original soundtrack but with subtitles that have been added electronically. This process is used heavily in Jordan and in some other Arab countries (Boyd, 1982).

Television stations in the Arab world provide similar schedules including news and commentaries which focus on public affairs; innovative drama (plays, concerts, series, serials); cultural
documentaries; religious talks; entertainment and a variety of cultural programs. Some TV stations use rural development programs as a basis for discussions leading to local decisions on courses of action suggested by the programs (Hijab, 1981; and Boyd, 1982).

In most Arab countries a great deal of programming time is concerned with political information, though in general such non-entertainment programming, including news and current affairs, merely extols the accomplishments of the political leaders (Boyd, 1982).

The Arab culture is traditionally an oral culture; with few competing forms of information and entertainment, radio listening was, and in some places still is, a major pastime. In the Arab world, television from one country is viewed in other countries and international viewing is pervasive in the Arabian Gulf states. In some areas in the Gulf it is possible to receive as many as nine signals. Also in the Arabian Gulf states, television has relatively little competition. Few cinemas and high clubs exist and of those fewer appeal to the home and family-centered Arab culture. A new form of television is, therefore, becoming pervasive there: the Arabian Gulf, specifically Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, may be the largest video cassette market in the world and the underground market for pirated American and British television programs is now a major business (Boyd, 1982).

The basic format of radio services in the Arab world is similar where programming is presented in blocks that include special features for children, women, and laborers, plus sports, religious and cultural programs, agricultural programs, music, a variety of entertainment programs, educational and instructional programs, interposed with music and regularly scheduled newscasts (Boyd, 1982). Programming is basically entertainment oriented on Arab television stations and it is not unfair to say that both radio and television in the Arab countries are believed by the audiences to be primarily for entertainment. A television set is often bought with the intention of entertainment and few people think of television as a mean of acquiring education. This does not mean that educational programs do not exist. Most of the Arab states use both radio and television for nation-wide improvement in education, literacy, health and agricultural practices, with effective motivational and informational messages. Experimental applications of broadcasting to help solve specific educational and development problems have been tried in Jordan, for example (Jarrar, 1979).

**Jordan**

To raise national educational standards, educational television has been introduced and programs illustrating textbooks used in regular high school as well as other guidance programs are produced in Jordan TV (JTV) studios. In addition to its regular output, JTV devotes 24 hours weekly to the transmission of educational programs to schools. Channel 1 (the main program) and Channel 2 (the Foreign Programs) broadcast high school educational programs four hours daily.

The awareness of Jordan development planners and intersectorial policy makers of the role of communication in development was indicated in the five year plan. In the section "culture and information", we read "information is an instrument for achieving
social, economic and cultural change. This is so because the information media are able to penetrate, enlighten, educate and orient the great mass of the people". The plan stresses the need for setting up a center for preparing and producing development information programs in order to achieve the aforementioned objectives (Hijab, 1981.) Radio and television in Jordan broadcast instructional programming which deals with basic subjects of ordinary school curriculum such as language, mathematics, geography, sciences and history. The programs in an instructional series are tightly articulated one with another to the extent that an isolated program might be incomprehensible to a student who has not followed the sequence from the beginning (Al Rasheed 1987.) Currently, Jordan Television & Radio Corporation is coordinating with the Ministry of Education to start an open school in Jordan shortly.

Programs for children are an important element in television programs in Jordan and other Arab states; television stations devote transmission time to cartoons and educational programs for children. Examples of some children programs are: "Rainbow" produced by Jordan television with the same idea as the British "Rainbow"; "Iftah Ya Simsim", the Arabic "Sesame Street", and children's variety, "Al Manahil" broadcast by Jordan, Syria and some other Arab states, particularly the Gulf states.

Egypt

In Egypt, instructional TV programs are broadcast in the morning. Transmissions are extended during selected months throughout the school year. Egyptian Radio broadcasts "People's Programs" which are primarily intended for the groups of people who make up the majority of Egypt's population: farmers; women; youth; the armed forces; and the police. The "people's programs" use most known forms of radio programming in order to promote national development, literacy training and population planning. Also relevant in the case of Egypt is the youth broadcast (started in 1975) which is intended to reach school-age audience with educational, political and social messages. One of the major goals of Egyptian broadcasting, which is also applicable in other Arab states, is the spread of culture among the masses. Egypt is an Arab world leader in the development of broadcasting and has influenced radio and television in the region.

Algeria

In Algeria, in the early 1970's, a policy of neo-traditionalism was promulgated. Arabic was to take the place of French, and the indigenous cultural tradition was to be re-explored. Radio and television were to be used more intensively to raise the cultural awareness of the population by providing formal education for those who had been deprived of it or had dropped out, and, above all, by introducing a more extensive provision of adult education. This change was due not to political crisis but to growing recognition of the nation's ability to cast off inherited models in the fields of culture, economics, and international relations (Katz & Weddell, 1978; Van Zoonen, 1994).
Algerian television could establish itself as one of the most independent, creative, and innovative broadcasting organizations in the Arab world. It is faced with the task of advancing the nation’s development in cultural, educational, and political terms. Forty-two percent of the programs in 1979 were informational (education, news, discussions, current affairs, and documentary), the remainder were entertainment and religious programs. In the same year, 53 per cent of television programs were imported: 14 per cent from the U.S.A.; 6 per cent from France; 5 per cent from Great Britain and 5 per cent from West Germany. The remainder were imported from Arab countries and the United Nations Informational and Educational programs. The proportion of imported programs is to be reduced to 25 per cent.

On average, 16 per cent of Algerian television output is devoted to educational broadcasts, mostly aimed at older students and adults. Subjects taught at high school level include mathematics, physics, natural sciences, history and geography. The main emphasis is on non-formal and informal education.

Sudan

In Sudan, the national radio service is intended to reach the entire country with a mixture of news, music, commentary, and educational as well as cultural programs. Several attempts have been made to produce a continuing series of educational programs: programs about nutrition and medicine have received particular attention on the radio service (produced in cooperation with the Ministry of Health). However, a shortage of both trained personnel and transmission power to reach a national audience has tended to discourage some officials. Television (the one national colour channel) in the Sudan broadcasts 60 per cent religious programs, locally produced dramatic shows, educational programs, interviews, news, and sports and 40 per cent of programs are imported from the U.S.A, Great Britain, Egypt, and other Arab countries.

Yemen

Since 1987, the Yemen government has increasingly realized the importance of radio as a means of communicating with the largely illiterate population. Television in Yemen started in September 1975 (the last Arab country to start a television service. Most programs are imported from other Arab countries, especially from Egypt.

Libya

In Libya, the media before the Revolution of September 1969 never appeared to figure very prominently in national development. After the Revolution, broadcasting has been used as a vehicle for political development. Radio, which as in most countries, is the dominant medium, has served as the primary source of information and news. The objectives of radio and television in Libya have been the projection of Arab socialism and Arab unity to a national audience. The main service on television begins each day, when schools are in session, with instructional programs supporting varied subjects in the national
primary or secondary curriculum. In concert with the political and cultural objectives of Libyan broadcasting, the programs tend to focus on serious discussion and commentary; programs focusing on history and folklife are staples of the main television service.

**Iraqi**

Iraqi broadcasting is heavily political and devotes a great deal of time to documentaries about the progressive stance taken by the government. President Saddam Hussein has provided some thoughts on the role of the Iraqi media:

"Information is one of our revolutionary democratic means for enlightening, informing the people and acting as a surveillance. To function properly, information media need great care, not only on the part of those directly responsible for it, but also on the part of all of us" (Boyd, 1982, pp. 109-113).

Unlike most other Arab television systems, Iraq's uses relatively little Western television programming. The general philosophy of the government has been to down-play things Western and considered imperialist.

**Syria**

In Syria, radio and television are the primary sources of news, information, and entertainment. Syria operates two television channels which broadcast news and informational programs. A good deal of time is devoted to news and political programs, interviews and discussions and drama, Islamic religious thought, and even music supportive of the Baath party and specifically the policies of President Al - Assad. A locally produced children's program and various programs of an educational nature are scheduled every evening for transmission to school children who are at home during this time.

**Morocco**

In Morocco, instructional radio was experimented with in 1960 and launched in October 1961 with the help of French broadcasting and UNESCO. The main purpose was to retrain primary school teachers. There were six hours a week in French and 10 hours in classical Arabic. Educational television started in 1965 with a daily half-hour transmission aimed at adults (housewives especially), stopped in 1967 and was revived in 1968-69. It was intended for high school students about to graduate. Radio Television Scolaire (RTS) was created in 1972 under the authority of the Ministry of Education. In the same year, educational television was relaunched mainly to provide primary school teachers with refresher courses.

**Tunisia**

In Tunisia, radio broadcasting was firmly in place as an instrument of national development 10 years after independence (1966), while
television was in its infancy but displayed every sign of enjoying a healthy future. Tunisian radio and television serve many needs: entertainment, information, and education. Over half of the broadcast time for both media is taken up by entertainment. Information in the form of newscast, analysis, and press round-ups takes another quarter of the total hours. And less than a quarter of the time is devoted to education, most of it informal. These categories of programming contain developmental messages to enhance political, economic, and educational development. Political development was a part of the mission of Tunisian radio, from the first day of independence, to raise political awareness among Tunisians.

The Ministry of Education has taken little interest in the direct use of radio and television in the classroom, although there was an interesting short-term experiment in 1972 which involved the use of TV programs of educational nature from France, Canada, the United States, Sweden and Niger. In this experiment, the programs were taped and shown in the classrooms, if they could not be received directly through transmission of the television signals. The programs appeared to promote a good deal of classroom participation. The experiment was financed by UNESCO and the Agence de cooperation culturelle et technique of France. The emphasis on transnational approach to education should have been especially welcome in Tunisia, given the country's openness to other cultures but there is no indication that it has been continued in any form, on television at any rate.

Tunisia's "literacy through radio and television" is more successful. The Tunisian government launched a literacy campaign in 1966 with the announcement of a series of five-year plans running until 1997. However, one might well assume that classroom use of radio and television would be widespread in Tunisia. That it is not could be explained by the lack of interest in these media on the part of the Ministry of Education. But educational broadcasting has succeeded in the aspects of family planning and literacy training.

**Gulf States**

In the Gulf States, each country has developed a broadcasting system that it believes best suits its needs and that is different from the system of other states. However, there are many similarities among the programs on the electronic media in these countries. Gulf television is entertainment oriented; programs are imported from the West or from other Arab countries or produced locally.

All forms of entertainment programs dominate television; perhaps the major reason for this situation is a lack of understanding on the part of producers about how television might be used for purposes other than entertainment. Officials are often too busy keeping the stations running and coping with technical expansions to plan programming that will meet educational and developmental goals. This is also applies to radio (Boyd, 1982).

Saudi Arabia introduced broadcasting with great caution because of the conservative nature of its Islamic culture. Few programs are imported from the West; because Saudi Arabia is an important market for Arab television programs, particularly dramatic programs dealing with Islamic history and Bedouin culture, these programs are made
with requirements of the Saudi system in mind. The Saudi government has commissioned several studies on how television can be used for educational purposes, but little educational programming is shown, except for a few programs on health, safety, and literacy.

**Distance Education in the Arab World: Al-Quds Open University**

Al-Quds Open University (QOU) is a national institution for higher education which is temporarily located in Amman, Jordan. It enjoys an independent status in academic, financial and administrative affairs. QOU was inaugurated in 1985, and in 1990, it started providing its services to Palestinian students in the occupied territories through a branch in Al-Quds al-Sharif (Jerusalem), with the intention of extending future activities to Palestinians in Diaspora and later to students from other Arab countries, (Al-Quds Open University, 1993 Official Bulletin).

As a national institution for higher education, training, and research, QOU philosophy stems from the belief in and commitment to playing a role in the education of Arab individuals and the development of Arab community in Palestine and more generally in the Arab world. QOU is a pioneering higher education project in the Arab world arising from the principle of democratizing higher education and providing equal opportunities of higher education and training for all. It attempts to provide educational services to interested students through distance learning, a mode of university education adopted by other distance education universities.

The University provides opportunities and facilities for higher education and advanced training in various fields of study, including science and technology, thus meeting the needs of the largest possible number of Palestinians and other Arabs who otherwise would be deprived of higher education. The University provides continuous education and professional preparation in various applied studies to enable students to play a constructive role in their communities. The University supports local pre-University and University education, as well as training through the production of high quality instructional printed, audio-visual, and computer-oriented materials; it also encourages educational research. QOU has adopted distance education to:

1. contribute to solving problems arising from the inability of conventional universities to meet the massive increase in the numbers of students who are qualified for and interested in higher education;
2. train students in self-learning mechanisms and enhance their intellectual abilities and critical thinking;
3. broaden the scope of graduates' expectations and their interest in job opportunities beyond clerical work through providing them with knowledge and skills, the means of self-reliance, and the ability to establish and manage individual and joint projects;
4. provide study programmes that meet the needs of the Palestinian people and the Arab world and support their development plans;
5. reduce the number of Palestinian youth seeking higher education by going abroad; and
6. secure greater student interaction by providing opportunities for student-student and student-faculty meetings in the would-be established centres, through seminars, summer courses, continuous evaluation and exchange of ideas between the university and its students. (QOU Official Bulletin, 1993).

QOU has, in principle, adopted a flexible admission policy accepting applications of students with a secondary school-certificate or equivalent, regardless of age, in any of its academic programs. QOU awards the first degree (B.A or B.Sc.) in the various fields of specialization, which are equivalent to its counterpart in conventional universities. The university offers studies in the following programmes: Agriculture, Social and Family Development; Applied Science and Technology; Management and Entrepreneurship; General Education and Continuous Education. The QOU has adopted an integrated multimedia approach. A special department for the preparation of audio-visual and other instructional media has been established. It produces items such as audio and video tapes, films, interactive video disks, computer soft-ware as well as traditional audio-visuals like transparencies, slides, wall pictures, maps, and 3-D objects.

Public Service Broadcasting in the Arab States and Culture

Every culture expresses its purposes and conducts its affairs through the medium of communication. Cultures exist primarily to create and preserve common systems of symbols by which their members can assign and exchange meanings. Each society places events in it own cultural frame and it is these frames that bestow the unique meaning and differentiated response they produce. (Barnlund, 1988).

Cultures can exist only because their members follow predictable behavior patterns. Tasks such as eating, sleeping, dressing, working, playing and relating socially are so predictable and commonplace within a culture that they pass nearly unnoticed. Cultures invent, discover, or develop specific values as a result of two forces that affect the culture as a whole: environmental adaptations and historical factors and events that influence the formation of cultural values (Lusting, 1988).

Arab media systems are characterized, as discussed earlier, by state control, regional availability and influence of national media, international media and Egyptian dominance. The wide availability of regional and international media may provide Arab audiences with a culturally and politically diverse image of the world (Zoonen, 1994). Critics and advocates of TV's role in developing countries concur that it provides images of an alien world unlike any other medium. The Arab states rely heavily on imported entertainment TV programs mainly from United States and Europe. The percentage of imported Western programs is high. U.S and Western shows dominate most of the prime hours of programming time on television in most of the Arab states.

The reliance on imported programs in the Arab States derives from a more complex combination of causes than the popularity and the high technical quality of the programs themselves. When alternative local supply is nonexistent, it is to low cost import that program managers turn (Katz & Wedell, 1979). The problem of production quality is not only financial; human resources are also
relevant. Even where money is available, the necessary talent often is not. The high proportion of imported foreign programs appearing on TV screens caused great concern in the Arab states, particularly the effect which these imported programs might have on children. When a substantial proportion of TV programming comes from another culture, the concern is heightened since the viewers who are exposed to a high proportion of American programs toward the American culture might be affected, and their attitudes toward the Arabic culture could change. (The Arab Perspective, 1982).

Also, there is a great deal of concern about the meaning derived from the content of the programming and the subsequent effects which these meanings might have upon the individual culture. We have to look at meaning in relation to the attitudes it forms and the learning it provides. Many social critics have asserted that the importation of U.S. television programs is subjecting the world to "homogenized American commercial culture". It is less obvious, however, that imported programs will affect attitudes and behavior in the same way and to similar extent as they would affect the country of their own (Shalabieh, 1985). Most of the viewers in the receiving countries, lacking direct experience with the US, will form their attitudes and beliefs about the US at least partially from the imported TV programs. It is true that media effects are greater without competition from other sources, so the influence of US television content will be greater for non-American viewers' beliefs about their own culture. The realization that a shared culture has both intrinsic and instrumental implications for a nation has now focused attention on such matters as the proportion and relative popularity of imported television programs, the authenticity of home-made programs, the values implicit or explicit in entertainment programs, and the fate of the traditional arts.

Another issue which may also apply to the whole Arab region is the desire, as expressed and realized in Algeria, to loosen the colonial past of the media and to develop indigenous media formats better suited for various Arab needs and identities. Algeria has promulgated arabisation, an emphasis on Arabic and traditional Algerian culture and the concomitant diminution of French language and culture. In 1970, the Radio-diffusion Television Algérienne (RTA) was again reorganized in order to expedite this policy and to facilitate a more rapid increase in domestic program production. The reorganization had the effect of dramatically increasing the proportion of locally produced programs, as well as the proportion of programs in Arabic (Boyd, 1982).

The Gulf States television charters reflect some of the basic concerns of the member countries with respect to television programming standards. "One of the targets which the Gulf States television endeavours to achieve is to maintain the local cultural characteristics as these are considered among the major tributes of Arab culture. In all its programs, the television service should maintain the moral and social values of conduct originating from the Islamic Faith, which are the cornerstone of the spiritual, educational, and cultural basis of the region" (TV in the Gulf States, 1979).

But in Kuwait, officials are not concerned about the cultural effect of imported programs because they believe that it is up to the viewer to make a choice between what is offered on the two services: the
main channel (K TV One) and the second channel (K TV Two). They argue that even if Western entertainment programs were not telecast on Kuwaiti television, they are available in local cinemas or on video tape for home video systems.

New technology has made it easier and cheaper for some people in the Arab States to acquire films and television shows. Piracy is justified by some entrepreneurs who stressed that the West took their culture and artifacts and they are now returning the compliment. Those in the Arab States desiring Western produced news and entertainment material available from satellites argue that the programs come to them through their own air space and should be consumed like international radio broadcasts.

**Enhancing the Cultural and Educational Functions of Public Service Broadcasting in the Arab Region**

While there are exceptions in the Arab world, broadcast officials do not seem to have a philosophy or goals for radio and television that are tied to the goals of the country and the appropriate central planning organizations. This is particularly true with regard to the programming policy for both news and entertainment. The following are suggested ways for enhancing the cultural and educational functions of Public Service Broadcasting in the Arab region.

1. Entertainment must be increasingly used to cause information to be positively received, in order to effect social changes. Entertainment is an effective form of message design; it is also efficient in that there are a variety of entertainment formats in any culture available for carrying implicit or explicit messages. Broadcasting organisations in the Arab States must take entertainment as seriously as information and education.

2. There is a surprising lack of communication and cooperation between Ministries of Information and Education. There is need for inter-ministerial communication and cooperation and for a clear policy on the intensive educational use of broadcasting.

3. Almost no serious audience research has been done in most of the Arab world. The research void is caused by lack of funds for an activity that is not believed to be a priority. The Arab countries have been slow to realize the importance of audience research the basic task of which is to provide continuing and systematic feedback from the audience. This kind of research is intended to provide a flow of information about the nature of audience and the effects of the mass media to program producers and policy makers of the media as well as to the leaders of national development. Few researchers in the Arab world have paid attention to the content of media as it affects knowledge and understanding of issues and problems of development and the role of the mass media in development. Some of the questions which need to be answered are: have the mass media established themselves as sources of information for Arab people? and for what kind of information? Is media exposure affecting knowledge and understanding of issues and problems of development? How has the introduction of new technology affected life, cultural life, of the Arab world?
Imported entertainment programs from Europe and the United States are used on all Arab television systems, and there is a great deal of concern about the effects of these imported Western programs on the national culture and of televised violence on children in the Arab world. A lot of research should be done in this area to explore those effects. Mass media research is very essential because of the very nature of the media and must be regarded as an integral part of the media system. The lack of research in the Arab countries cannot be ascribed entirely to financial limitations and the special problems of conducting mass communication research in those countries. Part of the reason for the lack is that some governments still tend to regard mass media as one-way vehicles. They see the media as a means of issuing directives, orders, fiat, or edicts, rather than as a means of establishing dialogue.

4. Satellite communication (ARABSAT) has brought technical advance to Arab broadcasters. There is a need to study the possibilities of using satellite communication for education and other development roles in the Arab countries.

5. We should consider distance education as one of the elements of a national communications policy.

6. School broadcasting should employ all the forms of presentation known to radio and television.

7. Scholars and researchers could sit together with producers and directors in an effort to find solutions to the problem of "domesticating the broadcast media". Needed not programs about tradition but a series of creative acts that will take the mood or style of a culture and translate it into broadcasting terms.

8. There is a need to link the media with other arts, traditional and modern, from which ideas will flow. There is a need to create programs that will give authentic expression to the culture in the process of its confrontation with modernity. There is a need to employ broadcasting in ways that will better fit the moods and styles of the national heritage and of its special occasions.

9. Most broadcasting organizations pay only low fees for radio and television writing. The best writers are not attracted to work for these media; a strong effort must be made to attract the best writers in the region.

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