

Transnational Television and Asymmetrical Interdependence in the Arab World: The Growing Influence of the Lebanese Satellite Broadcasters

by Marwan M. Kraidy

In spite of its small size, Lebanon is a major player in transnational satellite television in the Arab world, so broadcasters and researchers alike are wondering about the implications of the return of Rafik al-Hariri to power. Hariri, appointed prime minister shortly before the publication of this issue of TBS, is not just a construction magnate as the news agencies like to describe him, but has emerged in the 1990s as a media baron as well. Hariri's Future Television has competed with the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI) for the leading spot among Lebanese transnational satellite broadcasters.

Hariri's success as a businessman and his connections at the highest levels in Arab business and government is bound to reopen the issue of satellite broadcasting from Lebanon. Hariri's stand and actions on the issue are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, he is a staunch believer in the private sector and a leading voice advocating the privatization of state assets in Lebanon, and a supporter of investment in media and technology for Lebanon to regain its influence as a cultural and intellectual force in the region. On the other hand, Hariri's cabinet has clamped down on Lebanese television stations, especially LBCI's pan-Arab satellite broadcasts, justifying his actions as necessary to protect Lebanon's image abroad in order to attract Arab and international direct investments.

All this is happening at a time when other Lebanese stations are fast moving towards a stronger transnational presence. Tele-Liban, the half-state-owned broadcaster, is considering an offer from a leading pan-Arab broadcaster to buy 49% of its shares, the maximum allowed for a private company. The National Broadcasting Network (NBN), owned by House Speaker Nabih Berri, has recently launched satellite activities, while al-Manar, Hizbollah's televisual mouthpiece, has attracted a pan-Arab audience with its savvy broadcasts of anti-Israeli operations by the Lebanese resistance.

As a result, Lebanese television is poised to grow in size and influence on the Arab scene. Abu Laban reported that in the 1960s, President Nasser of Egypt read the Lebanese press first thing in the morning to get a sense of current affairs in the Arab world (1) Several scholars have noted that Lebanon's unique political and media experience gives Lebanese media a pan-Arab influence disproportionate to Lebanon's size and real power as one of the smallest and most vulnerable nation-states (2) This is not due to any direct power Lebanon has over its Arab neighbors, but to the fact that the Lebanese press has historically reflected the political currents and power struggles occurring in the region. In the digital age of satellite broadcasting and the Internet, Lebanon's media's influence has grown with the adoption of new technologies.

The pan-Arab success of Lebanese television is also explained by other factors. From its early days as mouthpiece of Maronite paramilitary forces, LBC has been run as primarily a commercial corporation, and only secondarily as an instrument of propaganda. During the most heated moments of the war, LBC captured a sizeable segment of the Muslim audience by broadcasting Fawazeeer Ramadan and other special programming. This entrepreneurial logic, emulated by Future Television to some extent, has made these companies competitive, aiming for international production standards. Unlike other Arab broadcasters, these companies did not have to please the ruling class, but had to attract and keep an audience in order to maintain a steady flow of incoming advertising dollars.

In addition to the entrepreneurial dimension, Lebanese stations in general have a more relaxed idea of sexual acceptability than what is offered on most Arab national channels. Both LBCI and Future use attractive, scantily clad female anchors, presenters and program hosts. Besides, they both used sexuality in a systematic way as part of their marketing plan. LBCI's aerobic show with Haifa, for instance, provided a platform for the company to offer an erotically charged show wrapped in the shroud of a sports and health program. The host Haifa, accompanied by a trio of models in tight clothes, executed aerobic movements in a warehouse-like studio, captured in suggestive poses and evocative camera angles and broadcast to an pan-Arab, largely male audience via satellite.

The influence that transnational satellite broadcasting has given to smaller Arab states such as Lebanon is an interesting phenomenon that promises to shuffle, or at least disturb, Arab power dynamics and public opinion. I would also like to give my analysis a theoretical grounding by borrowing Straubhaar's notion of "asymmetrical dependency" (3) as a framework for Arab transnational broadcasting. While Straubhaar has proposed the concept to discuss the cultural implications of transnational broadcasting in the Americas beyond cultural imperialism, I will apply asymmetrical interdependence to the regional political realm in the Arab world. The concept of asymmetrical interdependence holds that although countries might be vastly different in terms of political and cultural power, they are not locked into relations of dependency. His case study is Brazilian television, which, Straubhaar demonstrates, is no longer dependent on American television for imports.

Transferred to the Arab world, the concept of asymmetrical interdependence gives a grounding for the transnational television flows and their socio-political impact. More specifically, it highlights how smaller countries, such as Lebanon and Qatar, have been empowered by satellite technology and have expanded their reach beyond their borders. *continued*

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While regional behemoths like Egypt and Saudi Arabia retain a dominant presence, partly because of their ownership of satellite technology, and because of Egypt's traditional strength in the media and Saudi Arabia's financial resources, smaller countries are playing an increasingly important role. Syria, for instance, has become one of leaders in dramatic productions, while Qatar's Al-Jazeera has been dubbed the "Arab CNN." Transnational broadcasting and the Internet have challenged information control by Arab states in a way that was not imaginable only a decade ago. It has also forced Arab states to reconsider bilateral relations among each other. Besides, transnational Arab broadcasting holds the promise of integrating Arab nations in a cultural regionalism that could give the Arab world a strong and distinct presence in global intellectual and popular culture.

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However, challenges remain, the most important of which is for smaller Arab countries to maintain their presence on the region's airwaves and screens. Here, Lebanon is a case in point. Before the war, many Lebanese newspapers distributed more outside than inside Lebanon. Even with the knowledge that many of these newspapers were bankrolled by embassies, Arab countries would often ban or seize Lebanese newspapers in unstable times. With its political pluralism and its openness to political dissidents from across the Arab world, the Lebanese system was feared by some authoritarian governments (4) Today's Arab world is in some ways very different from what it was a few decades ago, as a new generation of leaders takes the reins of power. Still, some fear that Lebanese influence in matters of politics and culture needs to be filtered.

In the 1990s, for instance, Lebanese television stations, including LBCI, produced a variety of socio-political talk shows which became wildly popular with Lebanese audiences. These shows tackled many issues that are considered taboo in the Arab world, many of which were social issues such as premarital sex, incest, and homosexuality. Other episodes had decidedly political themes, such as the benefits of representative democracy, civil rights, women's liberation, religion and atheism, freedom of speech and others (5) Many of these shows were not broadcast via satellite, and therefore did not reach a vast pan-Arab audience. But the point remains that some of the issues discussed in these shows were lightning rods for the Arab world, where representative democracy is still largely absent, human rights are still not fully protected, and religious leaders play an important socio-political role. In other words, transnational satellite programming from one of the Arab world's smallest nation-states could have important implications for the societies of much larger Arab countries.

Even in the post-war era when the political landscape in Lebanon is ruled by one dominant discourse, and even with the great influence that Syria has on Lebanese politics (5), the Lebanese parliamentary elections in September 2000 showed, one more time, an unpredictable and independent streak that some Lebanese politicians and journalists have. For the longest time, Syrian-Lebanese relations were considered a taboo issue, one of two red lines for the Lebanese press, the other being President Emile Lahoud. During 2000, An-Nahar's publisher, Gebran Tueni, wrote a strongly worded editorial calling for a re-evaluation of bilateral relations between Lebanon and Syria, advocating a more equal partnership. The echo of this editorial suddenly became a thundering noise during the electoral campaign in August and September, when Lebanese politicians of all affiliations began calling for re-evaluation of Lebanese-Syrian relations, with the Lebanese media covering these developments very closely.

The last salvo was fired in late September by the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, who made scathing comments and asked Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, during an interview with the BBC. Relayed on BBC radio and heard throughout the Arab world, the patriarch's remarks elicited a strong response from the Syrian information minister, who criticized those opposed to Syria's presence in Lebanon. In addition to the BBC, Lebanese stations such as LBCI covered the story closely, which led to a power struggle within the station to control news about bilateral relations between Lebanon and Syria (6)

Although Syria's influence on Lebanese affairs remains considerable, the media sector offers an exception, and illustrates how the concept of asymmetrical interdependence can actually be applied in the Arab world. On September 29, 2000, Lebanon and Syria signed a comprehensive media and information agreement. The text of the agreement stipulates collaboration in production procedures, technological expertise, and between press agencies. It also calls for intensified exchanges in film and television programs and a coordination of "exterior information," as in Arab and international conferences and festivals (7) While some people fear that the agreement provides a framework for increased Syrian influence over Lebanese affairs, early indications point to the contrary, since Lebanon's media sector is much more developed than Syria's. As the Syrian Arab Advertising Association, Syria's trade group, attempts to reform and revitalize the weak national advertising sector, the Lebanese advertising industry is poised to play a leading role in that reform (8) As mutual influence grows in both directions, "asymmetrical interdependence" reflects bilateral media relations better than "dependency" or "dominance." Lebanon's transnational media activities are also set to get a boost with plans for a Technology Valley to be built in the Bekaa, since the project is said to have the support of President Emile Lahoud, and of Rafik al-Hariri, who, after a strong showing in the September 2000 parliamentary elections and his appointment as prime minister, will be highly influential in the direction of Lebanese transnational broadcasting.

This story demonstrates the power of transnational media to expose political discourse by taking it public on the airwaves. This is not to be underestimated, even though a variety of legal and less legal control mechanisms still exist on Arab media. The situation in the Arab world can be described as one of "asymmetrical interdependence," since the larger countries can no longer dominate smaller ones completely, as these smaller countries carry their political discourse beyond their borders via transnational broadcasting. Al-Hariri's re-emergence is bound to polarize Lebanese political, business, and media circles, as most people either have unabashedly rejoiced or unequivocally lamented his reappointment as prime minister. His dual status as both player (as a media tycoon) and referee (as prime minister) continues to raise eyebrows in the industry. Also, al-Hariri's appointment of Ghazi Aridi, not a very well-known figure, as minister of information has left many wondering about the direction of the activities of the ministry at a time when a draft of an advertising law text is circulating among legislators and media people. With the recent violence between Palestinians and Israelis and Lebanon's looming economic recession, the Lebanese government will most probably play a delicate balancing act, keeping a vigilant eye on satellite broadcasters in an attempt to control Lebanon's image in the Arab world. TBS

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Notes:

- (1) Abu-Laban, B. (1966). Factors in social control of the press in Lebanon. *Journalism Quarterly*, 43, 510-518.
- (2) See Boyd, D. (1999). *Broadcasting in the Arab World*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press; Kraidy, M. M. (1998). *Broadcasting Regulation and Civil Society in Postwar Lebanon*. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 42(3), 387-400; Kraidy, M. M. (1999b). *The Local, the Global, and the Hybrid: A Native Ethnography of Globalization*. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 16(4), 456-477; and Rugh, W. (1987). *The Arab Press*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- (3) Straubhaar, J. (1991). Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8 (1), 39-59.

- (4) Kraidy, M. M. (2000). Television and Civic Discourse in Postwar Lebanon, in H. Amin and L. Gher, (eds). *Civic Discourse and Digital Age Communications in the Middle East* (pp. 3-18). Stamford, Connecticut: Ablex.
- (5) Kraidy, M. M. (1999a). State Control of Television News in 1990s Lebanon. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76 (3), 485-498.
- (6) Darrous, S. (2000, October 2). Storm swirls around LBCI as Franjeh turns screws to bring station to heel. *The Daily Star*. Available http://www.dailystar.com.lb/02_10_00/art2.htm
- (7) Coop ration libano-syrienne au niveau de l'information. (2000, September 30). *L'Orient-Le Jour*. Available at <http://aujourd'hui/politique/politique.htm>
- (8) Moubayed, S. (2000, October 2). Syria takes a long hard look at "primitive" advertising market. *The Daily Star*. Available http://business/02_10_00_a.htm