

Satellite TV

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Satellite television stations are subtly challenging the state's monopoly over the means of persuasion and information in the Arab world. A Qatari-based television channel, Al-Jazeera's coverage of Syrian politics exemplifies how satellite television is changing the conditions of communication between citizens and states in the Arab world and increasing the space for civil society, creating more moments in television that are not as controlled by states. The significance of the Syrian case lies in the fact that the Syrian regime is highly authoritarian and still maintains near total control of information and communication. The following examines Al-Jazeera's reporting of several issues considered highly sensitive according to the censorship policies of Syria's Ministries of Information and Culture and Guidance: political opposition in Syria, succession, and the impact of the peace process on the regime's survival ability.

Since the 1963 military coup, the Syrian authority closed down all independent newspapers. It passed several restrictive articles under the State of Emergency that gave the state the right to control newspapers, books, broadcasting, advertising, and visual arts, which might be threatening the security of the state.¹ Starting in 1974, the Syrian media became a vehicle to promote the cult of Asad.

Syria's style of communication

The Syrian government has developed a long list of taboo topics. For example, it does not allow criticism of the following topics: the president and his family, the ruling Ba'ath Party, the military, the legitimacy of the regime, the sectarian question, the government's human rights record, Islamic opposition, involvement of Syrian troops in Lebanon, graphic descriptions of sex, and materials unfavourable to the Arab cause in the Arab-Israeli conflict.²

The government also has not tolerated any independent source of information considered threatening to, or critical of, the regime. A case in point is the crackdown on independent Lebanese newspapers in Lebanon immediately following the Syrian military intervention there. Moreover, human rights organizations documented the arrest, expulsion, and even assassination of prominent journalists by Syrian security forces. Nonetheless, the Syrian government has not succeeded in maintaining total control over the dissemination of information. Syrian citizens turned, before the age of satellite television, to Western radio stations such as the BBC, Monte Carlo, and to a lesser extent the Voice of America.

Occasionally, Syrian media, especially newspapers, have been allowed and sometimes encouraged to criticize corrupt officials in the bureaucracy. While the Syrian government has strived to maintain its strict control over the dissemination of information, it has been less successful in controlling the receiving satellite dishes than in restricting the internet.

More than One Opinion, Al-Jazeera.

Al-Jazeera's Coverage of Syrian Politics

Al-Jazeera's contesting coverage

Al-Jazeera's coverage of Syrian politics has moved toward progressively more assertive coverage of Syrian politics, pushing the limits with each report. The coverage has included three types of issues: indirect reference to Syria under topics such as democracy, human rights and Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab world; direct discussion of the Syrian-Israeli peace process; and reporting on Syrian domestic developments.

Over the last three years, programmes such as *al-Itjah al-Mu'akis* (Opposite Directions) and *Akthar min Ra'i* (More than One Opinion) and *Bila Hudud* (Without Bounds), have debated democracy and human rights with a tone condemning authoritarianism and human rights violations. Another offensive topic for the Syrian regime is the issue of Islamic opposition. Having confronted an armed Islamic movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Syrian government considers this topic taboo. Al-Jazeera featured an interview with the leader of the banned Syrian Muslim Brothers for two hours on the programme *Without Bounds*. Both the Syrian and general Arab audiences had the opportunity to hear a very moderate voice advocating democracy, demanding an end to marshal law rule, and insisting that his party be legalized.³

The second category of coverage concerns the Syrian role in the peace process. While the overall coverage is somewhat sympathetic, discussions of the domestic imperatives and implications of the peace process for the Syrian regime and society have not always been appreciated by the Syrian government. On *More than One Opinion*, Najib Ghadbian – the author of this article – being one of the guests, questioned the lack of democracy in Syria and how this affects the peace process. Syrians do not get the chance to debate their government's policies in their press or their rubberstamp parliament.⁴

The third contest over the dissemination of information between Al-Jazeera and the Syrian regime is in the area of reporting and analysing significant domestic political developments. When the Syrian President Asad died, Al-Jazeera played a leading role in the coverage of the domestic and regional implications of the departure of Asad. It was on this station that several Arab commentators expressed their outrage over the speedy amendment of the Constitution in order to in-

stall Asad's son, Bashar. Another recent example is Al-Jazeera's distinguished coverage of Monzer al-Mouseli, an independent member of the People's Assembly, who dared to raise an objection to the formality of the infamous constitutional amendment. Syrian television discontinued broadcasting during his daring remarks, transmitting instead the comments of the Speaker who censured Mouseli and made a statement on his behalf, affirming that 'the respected member's sinful part of his soul led him into error, and he has realized his mistake and repented.' Al-Jazeera had a full report of what had happened and then interviewed Mouseli to get his side of the story, which was totally suppressed by the Speaker's comments. The interview was followed by another discussion with Mustapha Abdul'al, the director of the Centre for Pluralism, who was very sarcastic about the session and the obvious lack of freedom of expression in the Syrian Assembly.⁵

Response and effects

Al-Jazeera soon became a major contending source of news for many Syrians. Some Syrian viewers, however, have complained that Al-Jazeera's programmes are more confusing than illuminating. Some viewers in Damascus say that Syrian audiences are alarmed at hearing vehement contradictory views about such basic issues, being used to hearing only one correct version of the 'truth'.⁶

As for Syrian officials, the rise of Al-Jazeera coincided with the ascendance of Bashar al-Asad to power. Officials have attempted to engage this medium rather than to boycott it. They express approval of Al-Jazeera as long as it does not step on what they consider sensitive topics or violate what they consider 'objective' reporting.

The participation of Syrian officials in Al-Jazeera's programmes has revealed their inability to communicate effectively with audiences outside Syria. One example of Syrian officials' attempts to take advantage of the newly popular channel is the appearance of the Riyadh Na'san Agha, head of the Political Office of the President, on *Without Bounds* just after the death of Asad.⁷ Agha immediately clashed with the host and lost the sympathy of most Arab viewers when he tried to assert that the succession of Bashar Asad to power was not a command from above but an overwhelmingly popular choice. He had real difficulties communicating with viewers from other Arab countries who were shocked by his logic – or lack thereof. One viewer from Egypt described Agha's argument as 'an insult to the intelligence of the audience.'

Lately, there has been some evidence that the Syrian government is relaxing its control over media. This retreat could be attributed to two factors. Firstly, many Syrian channels are losing audiences to other channels (e.g. Al-Jazeera) or types of media; and secondly, more recently the new leader seems to want to lead the country into the information age. A number of measures have been taken which indicate real efforts by the Syrian government to modify its media policy in response to the competition. During the 9th Congress of the Ba'ath Party, the new minis-

ter of information criticized the performance of the Syrian media, using harsh language to describe his predecessor and claiming that Syria did not have a true 'media policy'.⁸

After his inauguration, Bashar issued two directives pertaining to the development of a 'new media discourse'. The first directive asked chief editors of print and broadcast media to embark on a 'calm, logical, and balanced media address', which would 'respect the intelligence of the audience'.⁹ The second instruction was to stop printing and posting new pictures of him, and to stop the use of the phrase *al-Ra'is al-Khaled* (the immortal President). Such immortality, he said with remarkable insight, is only for God. The ministry of information reshuffled the heads of its major departments, newspaper editors, and the heads of the Syrian radio and television agency to reflect the new openness.

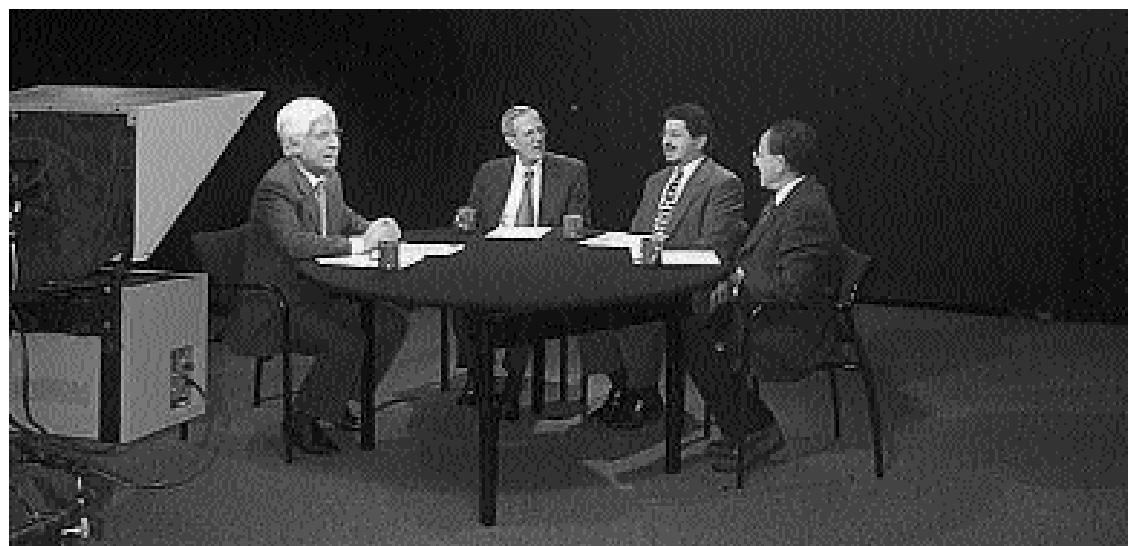
The third important indication that change is afoot in Syria came from journalists and intellectuals who demanded more freedom of speech and accountability. Ninety-nine Syrian writers issued a statement demanding freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and an end to one-party rule.¹⁰

While Al-Jazeera cannot claim full responsibility for all these positive changes, it can be credited with forcing the media in Syria – as elsewhere in the Arab world – to redefine their discourse so as not to lose what is left of their audiences. Despite the success of channels such as Al-Jazeera in expanding the communication and dissemination of information, it is clear that they cannot topple authoritarian regimes. As the Syrian case demonstrates, authoritarian regimes are capable of coping with the new technology and expanded public sphere. Another limitation on Al-Jazeera's ability to continue its contest with authoritarian media has to do with its ability to maintain its independence. Nonetheless, Al-Jazeera has become a phenomenon, and owes this as much to its own approach as to the failure of the official Arab media.

Notes

1. Middle East Watch (1991), *Syria Unmasked*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 109.
2. For a good summary of censorship in Syria, see Chapter 9 of *Syria Unmasked*.
3. *Without Bounds*, Al-Jazeera, aired on 7 July 1999.
4. *More Than One Opinion*, Al-Jazeera, aired on 7 January 2000.
5. *Hasad al-Yawm* (Today's Harvest), Al-Jazeera's nightly news programme, aired on 26 June 2000.
6. A conversation between the author of this article and viewers who watched the interview with the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brothers from Damascus.
7. Aired on 14 June 2000.
8. *Al-Hayat* (London), 18 June 2000, p. 3.
9. *Ibid.*, 16 July 2000, p. 1.
10. The statement was published in the two Lebanese dailies, *Al-Nahar* and *Al-Safir*, 26 September 2000.

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