Editorial

Dynamics of Development in Arab Broadcasting

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Broadcasting in the Arab world has come a long way since its inception in colonial and post-colonial times. A surge in infrastructural capacity for satellite transmission in the past two decades has been accompanied by rapid and major changes in the ownership, organization and content of both television and radio. Convergence of media and telecommunications technologies through digitalization has intensified the shake-up of structures underlying public communication. But how do upheavals in the audiovisual media sector relate to wider political, social and economic developments in Arab countries, and what can we learn about change in Arab societies from the changes taking place in broadcasting?

The articles in this themed issue of MEJCC address those questions. They are based on papers presented at a two-day workshop entitled ‘Dynamics of Development in Arab Broadcasting’, which was organized as part of the Ninth Mediterranean Research Meeting convened by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence and Montecatini Terme, Italy, in March 2008. It should be stated at the outset that the workshop theme of ‘development’ was adopted simply to reflect a sense of change unfolding, leaving open for debate any questions as to the nature, direction or desirability of that change. The term ‘development’ may have positive overtones when taken to mean ‘enriching the lives and freedoms of ordinary people’ (UNDP 2000: 19) or ‘improving the conditions of life for the world’s poorest people’ (Sparks 2007: 1). Yet it may also be contentious, especially if understood to signify that there can be a state of ‘underdevelopment’,...
defined as such by the self-proclaimed ‘developed’ countries of the world, whose own supposed ‘development path’ is mapped out as the desired trajectory for the rest (Rist 1997: 79). Whatever its trajectory, the development of broadcasting is central to development more generally. As a form of communication that is accessible to communities in remote areas or populations with low literacy, it is key to notions of development that carry any sense of extended participation in decision-making, because it offers a medium for negotiation of collective visions of desirable change.

As for the workshop’s attempt to engage with the ‘dynamics’ of development, this was prompted by an awareness that Arab countries share several characteristics — including language and, to varying degrees, cultural norms and historical experiences — that call for careful probing of the complex interplay of influences on broadcasting. This interplay can be seen in terms of political geography, involving interactions between the local, national, regional and international, and in terms of history, involving interactions between past and present. It might be argued, for example, that Arab interest groups were quick to take up the possibilities offered by satellite television in the 1990s precisely because a strong regional dynamic had already been at work in the exchange of political and cultural content over more than a century. In broadcasting, cross-border activity gained in significance in the 1960s, when Egypt’s state-run broadcaster used its pan-Arab radio station, Voice of the Arabs, to promote Nasserist ideology, prompting Arab monarchies, led by Saudi Arabia, to fight back over the airwaves (Boyd 1999: 146-47). With the scene set for regional rivalries to be played out by means of transnational media, there was ample reason and precedent for governments and their allies to seize on the medium of satellite broadcasting at the moment when technical feasibility coincided with the arrival of alternative sources of information, led by CNN, during the 1991 Gulf War and its aftermath.

In one way or another, all the articles that follow seek to theorize contemporary interactions between developments in Arab broadcasting and developments in Arab politics and society. They leave far behind the somewhat one-dimensional preoccupations of an earlier phase of Arab media studies, when — as our colleagues in the field have shown — ‘Arab media’ was too often interpreted to refer exclusively to a single broadcasting enterprise, namely Al-Jazeera (Armbrust 2005: 1), instead of the system from which Al-Jazeera emerged (Guaybess 2008: 199-200), and a prime topic of interest was perceived to be differences between Arab and Western television representations of the victims of war (Haefez 2008: 33-39). Two of the articles here explore forces shaping certain aspects of the Jordanian, Lebanese and Palestinian broadcasting systems and show how those forces relate to outcomes. Two