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NAOMI SAKR

Oil, Arms and Media: How US Interventionism Shapes Arab TV

The phenomenon of Arab-owned transnational media outlets expanding globally since 1991 might, on the face of it at least, be taken as evidence to support the 1990s paradigm shift in international media studies, from an approach informed by concerns about American cultural imperialism to one more aware of vibrant regional centres of cultural production and the growing multi-directionality of media flows. With the rise of Arab media conglomerates broadcasting out of Cairo, Dubai and Beirut, and the Qatari television news channel Al-Jazeera gaining high levels of global recognition for its brand, mainstream Western media (often using translations served up by the Washington-based Middle East Media Research Institute, MEMRI) have tended to characterise Arab broadcasting as showing content that is not only locally generated and wholly independent of the United States but also stridently anti-American. Indeed, after the September 11 attacks on the US in 2001, the US bombing of Afghanistan in 2001 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, accusations of virulent anti-American bias came so thick and fast against Al-Jazeera and some other Arab channels that reports of US military action being intended to silence their broadcasts came to seem less and less farfetched as time went on. Attacks blamed on US forces include the bombing of Al-Jazeera's office in Kabul and fatal shootings of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya journalists in Iraq. In 2005, a leaked memo emerged of a conversation in which US President George Bush reportedly suggested bombing Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Doha.

If it can be considered plausible that a superpower would countenance military action against a foreign media outlet, this would seem to imply – notwithstanding paradigm shifts in communication studies – that theories of imperialism may in fact retain some explanatory value with regard to trajectories of change in Arab media. The main difference from the former

'cultural imperialism' approach would lie in the rebalancing of coercion and consent. Whereas dominion was previously theorised as being practised through the apparently consensual spread of media styles and content originating in the US (albeit backed by US government leverage over trade), any fresh recourse to imperialism as an explanation for certain characteristics of non-US media might be expected to pay more attention to armed conflict and coercion, and specifically US coercion, than hitherto. To describe the US as an imperialist power is hardly controversial after the invasion of Iraq. The neoconservative Project for a New American Century explicitly urged the US to assume global leadership in order to maintain an international order tailored to particular perceptions of US security and US prosperity. Advocates of the US undertaking 'imperial tasks' have called on 'Americans to recognize that their role is now an imperium' (Lal 2004: 212), not least because 'empires survive only by understanding their limits' (Ignatieff 2003: 54). Imperialism is also the term widely used to characterise US policy by those who are critical of it (Harvey 2003; Nederveen-Pieterse 2004), whether or not they agree on the precise mix of military, political, economic and cultural power by which they argue that US domination is achieved. Thus, it makes sense to ask whether cultural choices made by interest groups that dominate Arab media can be explained by reference to the position of key Arab states vis-à-vis the US, and whether something amounting to US imperialism forms any part of that explanation. To answer the latter question would mean considering choices in mainstream Arab culture industries in the light of military, political and economic penetration by the US.

The making of media policy within individual countries, traditionally seen as a national responsibility, is today routinely "transposed to the transnational level" (Raboy 2002: 5) because of satellite broadcasting, the Internet and the global expansion of media conglomerates. This makes it harder, perhaps, to distinguish between internal and external policy pressures unless theories that address the possible fusion of such pressures are taken into account. Johan Galtung's structural theory of imperialism (Galtung 1971) postulated interaction between a central imperial power and local ruling groups in terms of a hierarchy of centres and peripheries. In Galtung's model, imperialism is maintained through a harmony of interest between the centre in the 'centre nation' and the centre in the 'periphery nation', and through a disharmony of interest between the periphery in the

‘centre nation’ and the periphery in the ‘periphery nation’. Ronald Robinson, writing about European imperialism, proposed a theory of collaboration, according to which the controlling mechanism of imperialism was made up of relationships between the agents of external expansion and their ‘collaborators’ in non-European political economies caught up in the expansion process (Robinson 1972: 120). For Robinson, understanding the role of collaborating or mediating elites in the transfer of resources, protection of imperialist interests and containment of local resistance is key to explaining not only imperialism but also eventual decolonisation, since he sees the latter as precipitated through the inversion of collaboration (Robinson 1972: 138f). It is not unusual for analysts to view relations between dominant US and Arab political figures as a form of elite collaboration. Paul Aarts, for example, argues that US-Saudi relations have remained “pretty robust” for well over half a century, despite “occasional sharp tensions”, because the relationship has never relied on broad-based public support in either Saudi Arabia or the US. In effect, he writes, it “always has been an elite bargain”, sustained on the Saudi side by the ruling Al Saud family’s control over “economic, religious, political and symbolic” capital (Aarts 2005: 403, 426). These theories of collaboration suggest that any study of US domination over the Arab media landscape should pay due regard to the identity and choices of leading Arab media owners.

As to which sections of the Arab media should be scrutinised for this purpose, logic points to those that have the widest reach, command the greatest volume of investment, or attract the most advertising because their audiences have a sufficient level of spending power. On these criteria, television overcomes barriers of illiteracy in Arab countries to far surpass print media in terms of audience size, while the Arab region’s shared language means that satellite channels can aim at viewers across the entire Arab world, not to mention Arabic-speakers elsewhere. High costs of ensuring that satellite channels can draw viewers, through attractive content, limit ownership of the leading channels to governments or private companies with access to large existing libraries of drama, film and music, or large funds. Thus, even though the actual number of Arab satellite channels runs into hundreds, the biggest players in the field are governments in Egypt and in rich Gulf emirates (notably Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Kuwait and Qatar), alongside private companies allied to dominant political players in Saudi Arabia and

Lebanon. In 2004, following a period of change and expansion in pan-Arab television, market research conducted in Saudi Arabia (the largest of the Arab world's richest countries) indicated that Saudi-owned MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Centre) topped the list of Arab satellite channels most familiar to viewers. It was followed in second and third place by two Lebanese channels, LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation) and Future TV, with Egypt's state-owned Egyptian Satellite Channel (Al-Masriya) in fourth place and Al-Jazeera in fifth. Also in the top ten were Dubai TV, Kuwait TV, Al-Arabiya (part of the MBC network), Saudi-owned Rotana, and Egypt's privately-owned Dream 1 (Arab Advisors Group 2004: 18). Abu Dhabi TV came thirteenth, after Bahrain TV and Saudi Arabia's state-owned Saudi TV 1. A 2004 assessment of channels' market shares across Kuwait and the UAE as well as Saudi Arabia painted a similar picture, with MBC, Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Dubai TV, Rotana and LBC accounting for a combined 43 per cent. In Egypt's populous market, the biggest satellite competitors to the country's two principal terrestrial channels were Rotana and MBC (Booz Allen Hamilton 2006: 19).

The remainder of this paper explores whether these various channels have been used in any way to secure or disrupt relations between Arab countries and the US, and whether that process has been driven to any extent by US intervention and US government priorities. It does so first by considering the nature of US political and economic relations with interest groups associated with some of the best-known Arab satellite channels listed above. It goes on to examine US military dealings with the channels, bearing in mind the challenge of reporting US wars on Afghanistan and Iraq during a period when the Bush Administration proved ready to defy a long-standing international consensus on the laws of war (Hajjar 2003). Finally, the paper examines whether Arab satellite channels are managed in a way that deliberately increases or decreases actual volumes of American cultural imports. In a book published in 2007, the German scholar Kai Hafez argued that nationally produced television series and dramas are as prominent on Arab television as they are on European television. Using data from 2000, he also argued that the "average share of foreign films [on Arab television] is very low, with the exception of a few, albeit popular, channels" (Hafez 2007: 89). On the other hand, even scholars who favour the globalisation paradigm and reject the notion of cultural imperialism acknowledge a "virtually

unprecedented degree of American cultural primacy” across much of the globe (Lieber/Weisberg 2002: 275), including Europe (Chalaby 2005). Does this cultural primacy also extend to dominant Arab media or, as might be supposed from allegations of anti-Americanism in Arab television content, are American cultural imports widely resisted or despised?

I. Geopolitical impulses behind MBC

Timing has been an important element in the introduction and expansion of Arab-owned satellite television; two waves of channel creation, one at the start of the 1990s and the second in 2003-05, were directly prompted by conflicts that involved a build-up of US forces in Arab countries. The Egyptian Space Channel started up as Egyptian forces joined the US-led coalition formed to reverse Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. MBC was launched from London in September 1991, a few months after the coalition had restored the former government of Kuwait. The Gulf’s biggest energy producers (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, which includes Abu Dhabi and Dubai) all reacted to the Iraqi invasion by signing bilateral security agreements with the US that would ensure US access to their ports, airbases and military facilities. From the US point of view, the agreements fitted what a former US ambassador to Israel has called the US’s ‘responsibility’, as the “leading world economy and the most powerful nation”, to protect the “vital interest” and “essential objective” of ensuring the “free flow of Gulf oil at reasonable prices” (Indyk 2004: 104). For some on the Gulf side, however, agreements with the US were more controversial. In Saudi Arabia, the government’s 1990 decision to apply to the US for overt military protection, in the form of thousands of American troops stationed in the country that is home to Islam’s holiest shrines, had already created a crisis of legitimacy. Saudi Arabia’s manifest inability to rely on its own defences, despite heavy military spending prior to 1990, amounted to a humiliation for many Saudis (Al-Rasheed 2002: 164) and forced the government into rhetorical contortions to try to justify its decision (Al-Rasheed 1996).

This was the context in which MBC was created by two Saudi entrepreneurs, one of whom, Walid al-Ibrahim, was then a 31-year-old relative of the reigning monarch, King Fahd. As brother of the king’s third wife,

and uncle of the king's youngest and favourite son, Walid al-Ibrahim was widely assumed to have relied on financial and political backing from this powerful branch of the ruling family when he bought out the stake in MBC held by his original partner and invested hundreds of millions of dollars in launching MBC from headquarters in London. MBC was initially publicised as a news-led channel that would meet previously unmet demand for world news and pan-Arab news in Arabic from an Arab-owned source. Basing the channel outside Saudi Arabia was essential to avoid challenging strict censorship controls on media inside the kingdom; such accommodations between senior members of the ruling family and the country's religious authorities had long been part of Saudi Arabia's political system. MBC became the first Arab television company to open a Jerusalem bureau, which facilitated reporting of the multilateral Arab-Israeli peace talks that opened in Madrid in 1991. "Israel is there and we have to deal with it", Walid al-Ibrahim told a New York Times reporter in March 1992 (Ibrahim 1992). Despite an apparent contradiction between MBC's readiness to deal with Israel and the Saudi government's official boycott, MBC received preferential treatment inside Saudi Arabia. MBC-FM radio, launched in 1994 via satellite across the region, was the only commercial FM radio station allowed in the kingdom. In 1995 Walid al-Ibrahim obtained another exclusive licence, to deliver a number of theme-driven channels to a cable network serving Saudi cities. This expansion remained on hold for several years.

MBC's second growth spurt began after Saudi and other hijackers killed nearly 3,000 people in suicide attacks on US targets in September 2001. As the Bush administration launched bombing raids to remove the Taliban regime from Afghanistan and then prepared to invade Iraq, the aftermath of 9/11 also prompted unprecedented international scrutiny of Saudi politics, education, culture and society. Behind headline coverage of harsh US criticism of Saudi Arabia, however, contacts between the Bush White House and key elements of the Saudi ruling family remained strong. Saudi diplomatic relations with the Taliban were severed and, in 2002, Crown Prince Abdullah visited President Bush's ranch in Texas. He also gave an interview to an American journalist, Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, in which he outlined a peace plan offering Arab normalisation with Israel before the plan had been revealed in Saudi Arabia or put to leaders of other Arab states.

It was against this backdrop that MBC expanded its operations and focused this expansion on Western-style programming for young people and delivery of news. January 2003 saw the start of what later became MBC2, as a conduit for English-language films and sitcoms aimed at Saudi and other Arab viewers in the age range 18-35. A plan to use MBC2 to target news at this age group was soon dropped as, in March 2003, days before the US-led invasion of Iraq, MBC launched a dedicated news channel, called Al-Arabiya, from Dubai. Although originally planned as a joint venture between MBC's Middle East News division and investors from Lebanon and Kuwait, Al-Arabiya was later fully incorporated into the MBC network. Al-Arabiya's backers were very clear that the purpose of their channel was to lure Arabic-speaking viewers away from Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera had been widely criticised in the US for its coverage of the US bombing of Afghanistan. In contrast, Al-Arabiya was publicized as offering a 'wise and balanced alternative' (Arab News 2003). Interviewed a few months after Al-Arabiya's start-up, Al-Ibrahim told a conservative newspaper in Washington: "I want my networks to make a difference in the Arab world". By 'difference' he said he meant "get[ting] rid of the Taliban mentality" (Washington Times 2003). One way to do this, according to Ibrahim, was to increase music and entertainment on MBC radio and television stations. When, in September 2003, MBC secured a licence from the TV format company Endemol to produce an Arabic version of the *Big Brother* reality show for MBC2, the Endemol director in charge of production predicted that, since a programme showing unmarried men and women living together in the same house was a "totally new idea" for the region, it would "surely leave a long-lasting cultural effect" (quoted in Stewart 2003). MBC2's *Big Brother* project was cut short by protests in Bahrain, where the *Big Brother* house was located. But it marked the start of a big increase in MBC programme imports. MBC's management turned MBC2 into a free-to-air film channel showing Hollywood movies with Arabic subtitles, and added a children's channel called MBC3 in December 2004. MBC4 followed, to carry the subtitled sitcoms and reality shows previously seen on MBC2.

While MBC's management pursued certain forms of entertainment, the editorial line followed by Al-Arabiya continued, in the main, to reflect a coincidence of perceived Saudi and US interests vis-à-vis conflicts in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. This was consistent with policy on MBC news bulle-

tins, which had long been tailored to avoid contentious aspects of the US-Saudi relationship. (For example, an MBC journalist who delivered a report to camera in 2002 on Israel's use of Apache helicopters against Palestinians was reprimanded afterwards for specifying that the Apaches were US-made.¹) President Bush chose Al-Arabiya, along with the US state-funded Arabic-language channel Al-Hurra, as the medium through which to apologise for the torture of prisoners by Americans in Iraq. During elections for a Palestinian president in 2005, Al-Arabiya devoted the majority of its election coverage to Washington's favourite candidate, Mahmoud Abbas, with more than three-quarters of its coverage of Abbas rated 'positive' in a comparative statistical analysis of content on four channels conducted at the time (Maiola/Ward 2007: 106, 110). After Hezbollah's capture of Israeli soldiers sparked a full-scale Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, Saudi government criticism of what it saw as Hezbollah's recklessness was seen as underlying Al-Arabiya's July 2007 decision to conduct a full-length exclusive interview with the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert. As to the accuracy of allegations that Al-Arabiya comes under Saudi government pressure to cover certain events in a certain way, the channel's own general manager has confirmed that it does. Abdel-Rahman al-Rashed, an American-educated Saudi and scathing critic of Islamist militants, who took up his post at Al-Arabiya in 2004, described the level of pressure as 'annoying' (Shadid 2006). Al-Rashed's own acceptability to the US State Department in its efforts to promote political and social reform in Arab countries was demonstrated by his inclusion on the board of the Foundation for the Future, a US-backed initiative to pump money into Arab civil society projects.

2. Business alliances behind Rotana and LBC-Sat

Rebranding and expansion at Rotana, another prominent Saudi-owned satellite television network specialising in popular music and film, also coincided with the aftermath of 9/11 and can be seen to reflect contacts between leading US and Saudi political personalities. Rotana is owned by Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a major global investor with significant holdings in US firms such as Time Warner, Disney and News Corporation, who was advised on one of his earliest major US investments by the Carlyle Group, a Wash-

ington DC-based private equity firm. By 2006 Carlyle's assets had grown to \$75.6bn. However, at the time of Alwaleed's crucial \$590m investment in Citicorp in 1991, Carlyle had existed for just four years and had recently appointed the future US president, George W Bush, to the board of one of its acquisitions. During the 1990s Carlyle was involved in Saudi defence contracts, partly through its purchase of Vinnell, a firm that helped to build up the Saudi National Guard (Doward 2003). Unconfirmed reports suggest that, although Alwaleed was the named buyer in the Citicorp deal, at least some of the money came from his uncle, the Saudi defence minister, Prince Sultan bin Abdel-Aziz (Briody 2003: 58). Sultan's son and Alwaleed's cousin, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, was Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the US for more than 20 years until his departure in 2005, during which time he was known for his association with the families of George W Bush and US vice president Dick Cheney (Unger 2007). Al-Waleed's father, Talal bin Abdel-Aziz, is one of 45 sons born to the founder of Saudi Arabia and thus a half-brother not only to Prince Sultan but also to the late King Fahd, and Fahd's successor, King Abdullah. Talal differed with his relatives over governance in the kingdom as a young man but later reintegrated into the ruling family. Alwaleed bin Talal's Kingdom Holding Company is a major owner of assets in Saudi Arabia as well as overseas.

Whatever Alwaleed's contacts with his uncles, his contacts with US-based business are considerable and his media holdings, which include the Rotana enterprise, are tied up with his Saudi, Lebanese and US interests. Among the latter, Alwaleed's association with Rupert Murdoch's US-based News Corporation has had both a personal and a business dimension. Murdoch, the primary shareholder in News Corporation, created Fox News Channel as a News Corporation subsidiary in 1996, in collaboration with Roger Ailes, a former media consultant for Republican presidents from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan and George Bush Senior. During the 2000 US presidential election contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore, Fox News became the first network to declare a victory for Bush in the state of Florida, after putting Bush's cousin, John Ellis, in charge of the station's monitoring of the ballot count (Iskandar 2005: 156-57). At around the same time, Murdoch announced to 360 guests at an award ceremony in New York how 'very proud' he was to have Alwaleed as a shareholder in News Corporation, commending Alwaleed for sharing News Corpo-

ration's 'vision' and for his status as a 'citizen of the media world' (Saudi Economic Survey 2000). Alwaleed repaid the favour in 2004 and again in 2005 by increasing his stake in News Corporation and pledging to stand by the Murdoch family against any potential threat to their control over the company (Teather 2005). In December 2005 Alwaleed stressed his commitment to lubricating US-Saudi relations by donating \$20m each to Georgetown and Harvard Universities and \$15m to establish centres for American studies at universities in Cairo and Beirut. Asked how he had felt when the mayor of New York had rejected a donation he tried to make immediately after 9/11, Alwaleed said his "love and admiration to the United States was never diminished" (quoted in Murphy 2005).

Beginning in 2002, Alwaleed pursued a concerted effort to make certain kinds of popular music and Arabic films readily available to young people in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, in a series of moves that were described by people involved in their implementation as aimed at softening conservative resistance to social reform (Dagher 2006) and "chang[ing] the ideas of the youth about terrorism" (Wise 2006: 55). Rotana, having started life as a recording label in Saudi Arabia in 1987, was acquired by Alwaleed in stages, starting with 25 per cent in 1995, 48 per cent in 2002 and 100 per cent in 2003. From the mid-1990s Alwaleed had also been involved with another Saudi investor, Sheikh Saleh Kamel (one of the founding partners in MBC), in a pay-TV network called ART. ART owned 49 per cent of LBC's satellite arm, LBC-Sat. In 2003, Alwaleed reduced his holding in ART to 5 per cent and paid a lump sum to take over ART's share of LBC-Sat, just ahead of LBC's launch of the reality TV singing competition *Star Academy*, a project with obvious spin-offs for the owner of the Rotana record label. At the same time he took ART's music channel and placed it under the Rotana brand, as the first of what were set to become six Rotana channels, based in the Lebanese capital Beirut, transmitting music and film free-to-air 24 hours a day. Alwaleed was not afraid to highlight the synergies created by unregulated cross-ownership of a music label and music TV network as well as film libraries and films channels. In an interview at the end of 2005 he boasted that Rotana controlled 80 per cent of all the Arabic music played and 60 per cent of all the Arabic movies shown in the Arab world (Hussain/Cousins 2005). Rotana moved into film production with a feature film released in 2006. A socially-aware comedy, its cast included the 2005 Saudi winner

of LBC's *Star Academy*. In 2007, it was announced that Rotana and LBC would merge resources. LBC had previously teamed up for news operations with the newspaper *Al-Hayat*, owned by Prince Khaled bin Sultan, brother of the former Saudi ambassador to the US and another son of Saudi Arabia's defence minister.

3. Security considerations behind Al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV

Analysts of Saudi politics have suggested that the Saudi ruling elite came under strong pressure after 9/11 to give 'cast-iron proof' of its allegiance to the US, even at further risk of undermining its own internal legitimacy and regional credibility (Ménoret 2005: 209). The above account of MBC and Rotana activities offers evidence that the elite's leading media entrepreneurs used their resources to prove their allegiance by bringing a diet of music video and US-made, US-inspired or pro-US media output to Arab viewers. Not all examples of Arab media owners' political and economic loyalty to US interests are that obvious, however. As a news and current affairs channel that remained remarkably outspoken for at least ten years after its inception in 1996, Al-Jazeera clearly stands in marked contrast to MBC and Rotana. Even so, there is every reason to situate Al-Jazeera in the context of the Qatari government's relations with the US, not least because these relations are remarkably strong. Qatar built its huge Al-Udaid airbase specifically for American use after signing a defence pact with the US in 1992 (Indyk 2004: 108). When a new government came to power in a palace coup in Qatar in 1995, Washington led the way in according it diplomatic recognition. This was the same government that created Al-Jazeera in 1996 and welcomed US Central Command when it established a forward headquarters in Qatar in 2002, as part of preparations to invade Iraq. The US-led invasion itself, roundly rejected by Arab public opinion, was managed from a newer Qatari installation at Al-Sayliyah, reportedly the largest pre-positioning base for US military equipment in the world (Bodi 2005). After the invasion the US was so confident about future use of Al-Udaid and Al-Sayliyah that it moved to lessen internal resentment against Saudi Arabia's ruling princes by pulling its troops out of Saudi Arabia and relocating them in Qatar. Qatari officials were meanwhile uninhibited about talking to Israeli representatives,

opening an Israeli trade office in Doha, and discussing the supply of Qatari gas to Israel (Da Lage 2005: 57f) – initiatives favoured by Washington but extremely unpopular in the wider Arab world. In 2002, the Qatari foreign minister declared that his country's relationship with America was its "first consideration" (Miles 2005: 10).

Airtime afforded to critics of US policy on Al-Jazeera may seem at odds with close ties between Washington and Doha. But there is good reason to be cautious about judging these relations on outward signs alone, since history has shown that what may appear to be points of contention between the US and its Gulf allies can sometimes mask underlying accord. CIA testimony which emerged in 2003 revealed that the Arab oil embargo of 1973, which quadrupled the price of oil, had been approved by Henry Kissinger as US Secretary of State, as part of a bargain in which Gulf oil producers promised to invest petrodollars in the US and buy US arms.² Harboured suspicions of a similar quid pro quo, several commentators inside and outside the Arab world argue that, despite its reputation for hosting anti-American firebrands as interviewees and talk show guests, Al-Jazeera ultimately helps to safeguard the US military presence in Qatar by diverting attention away from it and boosting the Qatari ruler's credentials as an Arab nationalist (for variants of this argument see El Oifi 2005; Telhami 2004). If the US ultimately controls the flow of Arab oil by giving unelected rulers US military backing, it can do no harm to that level of control if a semblance of media liberalisation disguises deep structures of political repression in individual Arab states.

In fact conspiracy-style explanations, albeit slightly persuasive in this case, are unnecessary when it comes to demonstrating that Shaikh Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani, a cousin of the country's ruler, looks to the US when discharging his duties as Al-Jazeera's chairman. US preferences have undeniably played a part in management decisions. Mohammed Jassem al-Ali, Al-Jazeera's first managing director, was removed in May 2003 after Ahmad Chalabi, leader of the US-backed Iraqi National Congress and a favourite of the Bush Administration at that time, accused him of colluding with the government of Saddam Hussein (AFP 2003). Yvonne Ridley was sacked from Al-Jazeera's English-language website after apparently protesting at the removal of two cartoons in response to US complaints (Bradley 2003). In April 2004, after meeting the vice president, Dick Cheney, and defence

secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, at the White House, Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, said he would instruct Al-Jazeera to be more professional and avoid 'wrong information' (BBC 2004). The very next month, Al-Jazeera journalists underwent a training course paid for by the Media Outreach Center at the American Embassy in London, at which they were taught new vocabulary for reporting suicide bombings, Palestinian casualties and hostilities in Iraq. In July 2004 the channel adopted a ten-point Code of Ethics, in which it pledged to "give full consideration to the feelings of victims of crime, war, persecution and disaster, their relatives, our viewers, and to individual privacies and public decorum". Thereafter, plans to launch Al-Jazeera's English-language channel began to attract increasing attention and investment, as preparations took more than two years, from the formal announcement in October 2004 to the opening in November 2006. Al-Jazeera English was a very different project from its Arabic-language counterpart, looking to some like 'Bob Geldof TV' or a 'UN video service' (Pintak 2007) and to others like a 'steadfast' attempt 'not to connect situations in developing world countries with the power of multinationals headquartered in G8 nations' (Rattansi 2007). June 2007 saw a shake-up of Al-Jazeera's board that was again widely regarded as the result of US pressure: it removed Wadah Khanfar, the network's director-general, said to have personal sympathies with the Palestinian Islamist resistance movement Hamas.

In the light of adverse US reactions to Al-Jazeera's Arabic channel, it may not be surprising that the state-owned and government-run Abu Dhabi TV, which switched to 24-hour news during the invasion of Iraq, reverted to general programming afterwards. Its decision was officially attributed to a concern to restrain costs, but the emirate's ample and rapidly rising oil revenues implied that other reasons were more important. Media professionals in Abu Dhabi believed the most likely reason was fear of souring relations with the US through graphic reports on violence in Iraq that would inevitably occupy a large part of extensive news coverage. By withholding advertising from Al-Jazeera because of its reports from Afghanistan during US bombing raids in 2001, giant US companies such as General Electric and Pepsi Cola had already shown the financial risks awaiting any Arab channel intent on getting close to certain news stories (Sakr 2004: 154).

4. Impacts of the Pentagon's agenda

It is relatively easy to see why supporters of the Bush Administration's interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq would want Arab television content to be consistent with positive narratives about liberation and vaunted American values of private property and individual freedom. As an Iraqi expatriate at MEMRI explained to a News Corporation journalist in 2004, exports of Western culture are 'the most effective weapon'. He said: "You'll have a whole new generation coming up in the Middle East that is absorbing enormous amounts of Western culture [...]. Don't try to tell them all the time to be liberal and democratic. Continue to get these programs to them. It's more effective than speeches by the State Department and the president saying 'democracy will come'." (quoted in Labash 2004)

Treating American films and sitcoms as a 'weapon' against forces opposed to US intervention accords more or less with the marketing campaign that Charlotte Beers led during her brief tenure as US Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs between October 2001 and March 2003. Beers was keen for US institutions, including Hollywood studios and the Discovery channels, to work with MBC, LBC and Al-Jazeera and offer them content (Abu Fadil 2004: 182f). This approach seemed to indicate that US officials were interpreting anti-Americanism among Arab populations as a "communications problem and not as a reaction to [US] policies" (Nederveen-Pieterse 2004: 51). According to Nabeel Khoury, deputy director of the US London embassy's Media Outreach Center, if there was a US-Arab communications problem the fault lay with Arab news channels acting "like young people who sometimes rush to judgment and may need to exercise more self-restraint".³

The Pentagon under Rumsfeld did more than urge Arab news channels to exercise self-restraint. It even appeared to disregard international law, in the form of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, under which journalists are to be protected like other civilians in time of war. Al-Jazeera first fell victim to US bombing in November 2001, when US forces striking Afghanistan hit the Kabul office of Al-Jazeera, killing no-one in the office but causing great alarm to the BBC correspondent next door. Journalists who probed the incident at the time suspected that Al-Jazeera had been deliberately targeted to silence its reporting from Afghanistan (Wells 2001).

Ron Suskind, a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, confidently repeated the accusation in 2006, in his book, *The One Percent Doctrine*, and in a July 14 interview with Amy Goodman of the independent US broadcaster Democracy Now. Alleging that there had been 'great animosity' towards Al-Jazeera because of its reporting in November 2001, Suskind described the Kabul bombing as part of a 'secret interchange' between the US government, Al-Jazeera and the emir of Qatar. In December 2001 US forces arrested Sami Mohieddin al-Haj, a Sudanese assistant cameraman whom Al-Jazeera had sent to cover the war on Afghanistan. Al-Haj was sent to the US detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, where he remained six years later, without any formal charges being laid against him. He eventually went on hunger strike in protest at his plight.

With the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the Pentagon made no secret of the risks facing non-embedded journalists who attempted to cover the war. Veteran BBC war correspondent Kate Adie, interviewed by Irish radio that month, revealed that a senior officer in the Pentagon had informed her that any independent satellite uplink positions detected in Iraq would be 'targeted down'. According to the officer, Adie said, journalists "know this ... they've been warned".⁴ US military attacks affecting journalists in Iraq had dire consequences for several working with Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. In April 2003 a US missile strike on Al-Jazeera's offices in Baghdad killed Tariq Ayyoub, a correspondent, and wounded Zuhair al-Iraqi, a member of his crew. The missile struck even though Al-Jazeera had taken care to inform the US military about the location of its office, in order to avoid a repetition of what had happened in Kabul. As staff from the nearby Abu Dhabi TV bureau worked with their Al-Jazeera colleagues to help the victims to safety, Abu Dhabi TV also came under US attack. Although US military representatives denied that the missile strike that killed Ayyoub had been deliberately aimed at Arab reporters, a Pentagon spokeswoman warned news organisations that a war zone is 'a dangerous place' and they 'should not be there' (BBC 2003).

In the weeks after the invasion, one estimate suggests that US forces arrested 21 members of Al-Jazeera staff and released them without charge (O'Carroll 2004). Of these, cameraman Salah Hassan, arrested in November 2003, said he was beaten, verbally abused and held in solitary confinement (Miles 2005: 321f). This was a moment when Rumsfeld was accusing Al-

Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, by name, of reporting untruths. In December 2003 he said US troops in Baghdad had evidence that these channels were cooperating with Iraqi insurgents attacking US troops. "How it happens is for time to tell, but it happens", he declared (Middle East Times 2003). In March 2004, two journalists working for Al-Arabiya were shot near a US military checkpoint in Baghdad while covering the aftermath of a rocket attack on a hotel. Ali Abdel-Aziz, a cameraman, died at the scene and Ali al-Khatib, a correspondent, died in hospital the next day. US Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, the US military's deputy director of operations, said the US soldiers who carried out the shooting had been exercising their right to self defence, whereas Al-Arabiya's lawyer said the journalists had been speeding away from the soldiers, not towards them (AP 2004). When four private military contractors were killed in the Iraqi town of Falluja in April 2004 and US troops tried to recapture the city, US fury at Al-Jazeera's coverage was such that President Bush, in conversation with Tony Blair, was later reported (in a confidential memo obtained by the Daily Mirror) to have proposed bombing the channel's headquarters in Doha.

No such bombing took place. But in May 2004, Rashid Hamid Wali, an Al-Jazeera technician, was shot by machine gun fire in Karbala, while filming clashes between US forces and followers of the Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr. His producer, Saad Ibrahim, told CNN that Wali, who was on the fourth floor of a hotel, had been hit by fire from a passing US tank. It was under mounting pressure of the situation in Iraq that Al-Jazeera's management invited media representatives from around the world to attend the organisation's first International Media Forum in Doha in July 2004. By engaging with colleagues in other media, and publicising its intention to adhere to a Code of Ethics, Al-Jazeera sought to establish its legitimacy by joining 'the world's mainstream broadcasting organisations' (according to managing director Wadah Khanfar, quoted in Spanswick 2004: 17). Expansion into English-language broadcasting took this exercise in international legitimisation a stage further, bringing large numbers of non-Arab journalists, with experience in news organizations based in Europe and the US, into senior positions within the Qatari-run network. US military commanders meanwhile pursued a two-pronged approach to Arab reporting from Iraq. While shooting and incarceration of journalists by US troops continued (affecting Reuters and AP among others), the message to the public was to

refrain from watching certain channels. When an Arab journalist attending a press conference in Baghdad in April 2004 asked Brigadier General Kimmitt what viewers should think about the US occupation in light of television images of carnage among civilians in Falluja, Kimmitt's answer was: 'Change the channel' (quoted in Tilley 2004).

5. Hollywood distribution and co-production deals

When set against events in Arab countries in 2004, whether carnage in post-invasion Iraq, extrajudicial killings of Palestinian political leaders, or atrocities in Darfur, that year's expansion into light entertainment programming by MBC and by Dubai TV's parent company, Dubai Media Incorporated (DMI), offers a stark contrast – as does the addition of channels to Rotana's music TV and film network. Arab viewers, depressed and fatigued by scenes of real life violence on television, may well have wished to 'change the channel'. But, with national television still largely under government control and overshadowed by pan-Arab networks, scope for local creativity and relevance in entertainment genres remained severely limited (Sakr 2007: 109ff). In developing MBC4, for example, MBC's management claimed to have discovered a large and avid following among young Saudi women for subtitled imports of the Oprah Winfrey Show. It was in response to this, they said, that MBC4 schedules were developed around the same audience, with the introduction of more US-made versions of lifestyle reality programmes like *Starting Over* or the American series of *Supernanny*, with Arabic subtitles. Public relations director Mohammed al-Mulhem made no apologies for flooding the schedules with US imports. He said MBC4's intention was to "expose the modern Arab woman to the best of what the West has to offer".⁵ Taking a rather different view of the same expansion, in a market research report written a year later, Booz Allen Hamilton interjected a cautionary note. Acknowledging that "viewers in the [Arab] region are increasingly drawn to foreign programming", the report blamed the "scarcity of high-quality local content" for "further strengthening the popularity of Western and Western-inspired content and shaping the long-term viewership preferences in the region" (Booz Allen Hamilton 2006: 11).

It might be countered that the term ‘Western-inspired’ in this assessment allows for the fact that European companies have played a big part in licensing television programme formats for local Arab production in recent years, even though US studios still lead in exports of film. But this would be to overlook the number of deals struck by MBC, DMI and Abu Dhabi TV’s parent company for the acquisition of all kinds of programming from Hollywood firms. Having established MBC2 as an all-movie channel and MBC4 as an outlet for sitcoms like *Friends* and *Frasier* along with talk shows like *Oprah* and reality TV, Tim Riordan, director of MBC channels, set about signing long-term contracts whereby material for both channels would be sourced from the US. In late 2005 he revealed that MBC2 now had exclusive long-term deals with Paramount, Fox and other studios (Akerman 2005). The economic incentive behind them emerged when MBC also announced that it had signed up Nescafé, Ford, Bounty and others as sponsors for every primetime movie slot on MBC2 (Burrowes 2006). Meanwhile, in screening new reality shows, Riordan had learned from the failed experiment with *Big Brother* to play it safe. Instead of commissioning more local shows, he bought in American versions of foreign formats on the grounds that Arab viewers would tolerate watching foreign behaviour in a foreign setting even though they would not accept the same behaviour at home. Discussing the local acceptability of Fox TV’s *Joe Millionaire* series, in which women compete to woo a millionaire, Riordan told an interviewer: “It’s acceptable in the US version because you’re looking at somebody else’s culture. You’re not bringing it to your own culture” (Robison 2005: 8). He said the same rule applied to the European lifestyle format *Wife Swap*. Deeming Arabisation of *Wife Swap* to be ‘virtually inconceivable’, Riordan bought a ready-made version of the series from the US network, ABC, and renamed it *House Swap* (ibid).

DMI’s expansion into multiple channels in 2004-05 produced a similar boost in content bought from the US. DMI is directly sponsored by Dubai’s ruler, Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashed al-Maktoum. While the revamped Dubai TV channel commissioned many regular local programmes, the newly-created One TV, which started to make a mark in 2005, described itself on its website as a channel for “modern Arabs who enjoy western-style programming”. Its schedules revealed that ‘western-style’ meant Hollywood movies, sitcoms and American versions of reality TV shows, provided under

a deal signed with Warner Bros International Television Distribution for 90 of Warner's latest movies, plus feature films from the Warner Brothers film library, and television series such as *The Sopranos* and *The West Wing*.⁶ Free-to-air in both digital and analogue on Nilesat and Arabsat, One TV was consequently able to promise a blockbuster line-up of 27 movies a week, including titles such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix* and *The X-Men*. Reality shows aired on One TV included *Faking It*, *Extreme Make-over* and others, alongside sitcoms such as *Scrubs*, *Friends*, *Frasier* and *What I Like About You*.

In September 2007 Warner followed its Dubai deal with what Warner's publicity material called a 'long-term, multi-faceted strategic alliance' with two Abu Dhabi companies. News of the partnership said virtually nothing about Abu Dhabi TV, instead highlighting plans to build a theme park, hotel complex and multiplex cinemas and to co-produce video games and films. Nevertheless, Abu Dhabi TV was directly involved in the arrangement, as a subsidiary of one of the two companies that struck the deal. Three months previously, the ruler of Abu Dhabi had issued a law establishing the wholly government-owned Abu Dhabi Media Company, to take over Abu Dhabi TV and Abu Dhabi Sports TV along with three radio stations, a newspaper and three magazines. When the partnership with Warner Brothers was announced, Abu Dhabi was said to have promised \$500m to finance co-production of Warner films, with the possibility of adding to this sum over time (Chaffin 2007a). A leading player in the deal, Ahmad Ali al-Sayegh, appeared to have negotiated it on behalf of both his own company, the real estate group Aldar, as well as the Abu Dhabi Media Company, to which he had recently been appointed deputy chairman of the board (Gulf News 2007). "Hollywood – it's a dream", Al-Sayegh told reporters. "It doesn't matter your income level: in a refugee camp in Palestine, or a big villa in Dubai, [Hollywood] is part of our culture every day" (quoted in Chaffin 2007b).

6. Conclusion

Despite the much-repeated claim that there are now hundreds of Arab satellite channels, the inescapable fact is that pan-Arab television is domi-

nated by a handful of well-funded channels. These channels are steered by members of ruling elites in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, who seek to guarantee their personal security through collaboration with powerful interest groups in the US, irrespective of those groups' policies towards the wider Arab region. The long-standing concern of successive US governments to control access to Gulf oil explains bilateral US security deals with Gulf rulers. Those rulers' dependency on US military protection, especially during recent ruptures in the regional status quo, explains why ruling family members who own or sponsor television channels use them to contain resistance by covering over the legitimacy vacuum in any way they can. The present study revealed how Gulf leaders' ties to the US Administration, having given rise to interwoven geo-strategic, political, business and military imperatives, also influenced the building of programming schedules on the leading pan-Arab television channels.

The linkage of imperatives, most evident in the timing of decisions about channel creation, network expansion, personnel decisions and the sourcing of programmes, could be seen at various levels. Personal contacts of channel owners played a part, as in the case of Alwaleed bin Talal, owner of the Rotana empire, part-owner of LBC-Sat, associate of the Carlyle Group and loyal shareholder in News Corporation, in turn the owner of Fox News. At the level of managers and editors, the linkage was reflected in explicit pressure to quell or divert opposition by sanitising news bulletins, prioritising music video and light entertainment formats and, in the case of MBC2, MBC4 and Dubai's One TV, airing imported American content around the clock. Anecdotal evidence of large audiences for MBC2 and MBC4 across the region suggested that elements of this content were meeting a need not satisfied on other television channels. At the same time, large audiences for reality TV singing contests demonstrated enthusiasm for these shows' revitalisation of the Arabic music scene. Showing that ruling elites turn to the US for everything from military back-up and investment outlets to education and television programmes is not to pass judgment on whether content from Hollywood companies is (as the Abu Dhabi magnate put it), or should be, 'part of our culture'. What it highlights is that imperialistic US control over oil and armaments in the Gulf is sustained through collaboration with unelected local governments, who deploy the medium of satellite television in a top-down manner for their own ends.

- 1) Personal communication to the author by the journalist in question, Amman, 2 March, 2002.
- 2) Interview with Robert Baer, who worked with the CIA's Directorate of Operations in the Middle East from 1976 to 1997, quoted in Ménoret 2005: 210.
- 3) Remarks to conference on Arab and Western TV Coverage of the War in Iraq (Cambridge, 20 March 2004). Author's transcript.
- 4) Interview with Tom McGurk on the RTEi Radio Sunday Show, March 9, 2003
- 5) MBC press release, Dubai, 24 November, 2005.
- 6) According to a press release issued on behalf of DMI and Warner Bros on 16 June, 2004.

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Abstracts

Although the cultural imperialism paradigm appears passé, and despite allegations that Arab media foment anti-Americanism, US interventions in the Arab world raise the question of whether imperialism theory can help to explain the editorial policies of dominant Arab TV channels. Drawing on ideas about elite collaboration, this paper examines reasons behind the launch and expansion of two Saudi-owned satellite television networks, MBC and Rotana, as well as the Qatari-owned Al-Jazeera network, which added Al-Jazeera English in 2006. It goes on to look at the Pentagon's policing of Arab television news reporting and at Gulf deals with Hollywood studios. It finds that Arab ruling families' dependence on US military backing has been reflected in decisions they make about Arab satellite TV.

Obwohl das Paradigma des Kulturimperialismus überwunden zu sein scheint und trotz der Behauptungen, dass arabische Medien Anti-Amerikanismus schüren würden, werfen die US-Interventionen in der arabischen Welt die Frage auf, ob Imperialismus-Konzepte zur Erklärung der Programmgestaltung wichtiger arabischer TV-Kanäle herangezogen werden können. Anknüpfend an Konzepte zur Elitenkollaboration untersucht dieser Beitrag die Hintergründe der Gründung und Ausweitung der zwei saudi-arabischen Satelliten-Fernsehstationen MBC und Rotana sowie der katarischen Station Al-Jazeera, welche seit 2006 auch in englischer Sprache sendet. Im Anschluss

werden die Interventionen des Pentagon in arabische Nachrichtenproduktionen sowie Vereinbarungen zwischen den Golfstaaten und Hollywood untersucht. Es stellt sich heraus, dass die Abhängigkeit der herrschenden arabischen Familien von militärischer Unterstützung der USA sich in deren Entscheidungen über die Gestaltung von arabischem Satellitenfernsehen widerspiegelt.

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