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# Youth, Media and Culture in the Arab World

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# Youth, Media and Culture in the Arab World

## **Abstract**

'Traditionally, Arab society dealt with youth in a superficial and slightly condescending manner', an Arab columnist wrote recently, 'offering the occasional sports club and scout troop, a usually underfunded and dysfunctional government ministry or organization for youth issues, and a correspondingly noncredible occasional speech by a highranking official stressing that youths are the promise of the future' (Khouri, 2005). In light of this somber diagnosis with which many analysts of the Arab world would concur, it appears paradoxical that, today, Arab youth is at the center of some of the most important and controversial debates, from the impact of Western modernity on gender roles and social relations to consumerism and radical political violence. The scope of these debates transcends the borders of the 22 states making up the Arab world in a post September 11, 2001, environment where Arab youth has become a site that is contested both internally and externally. Young Arab women and men are simultaneously subjected to competing and oftentimes conflicting messages from their parents, educational and religious institutions, the vibrant Arab satellite television industry, 'public diplomacy' from the USA, Iran and others, and the interlocking economic, technological and cultural forces of globalization.

## **Disciplines**

Communication

# Youth, Media and Culture in the Arab World

Marwan M. Kraidy and Joe F. Khalil

## INTRODUCTION

'Traditionally, Arab society dealt with youth in a superficial and slightly condescending manner', an Arab columnist wrote recently, 'offering the occasional sports club and scout troop, a usually underfunded and dysfunctional government ministry or organization for youth issues, and a correspondingly noncredible occasional speech by a high-ranking official stressing that youths are the promise of the future' (Khouri, 2005). In light of this somber diagnosis with which many analysts of the Arab world would concur, it appears paradoxical that, today, Arab youth is at the center of some of the most important and controversial debates, from the impact of Western modernity on gender roles and social relations to consumerism and radical political violence. The scope of these debates transcends the borders of the 22 states making up the Arab world in a post-September 11, 2001, environment where Arab youth has become a site that is contested both internally and externally. Young Arab

women and men are simultaneously subjected to competing and oftentimes conflicting messages from their parents, educational and religious institutions, the vibrant Arab satellite television industry, 'public diplomacy' from the USA, Iran and others, and the interlocking economic, technological and cultural forces of globalization.<sup>1</sup>

The central role the media play in the life of young people is widely acknowledged by scholars and policy-makers. Media and information technologies are instrumental in both youth cultural consumption and production; as such, they shape the dynamics of youth culture. In acknowledgement of this context, the exhaustive United Nations Youth Report 2005, states that '*... it is impossible to undertake an effective examination of youth cultures without exploring young people's relationship with the media*' (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005: 82, emphasis added). Like youth in other parts of the world, young Arabs are avid users of mobile telephones and text-messaging, the internet, satellite television and popular music.

Aggressive advertising campaigns and synergies between telecommunications and media companies promote these media consumption activities. The explosion of commercial television genres has contributed to the creation of a 'hypermedia space' (Kraidy, 2006a) by activating interactive multimedia uses for television, the internet and mobile telephony. As the development of this commercial hypermedia space has intensified debates about the socialization of youth and children, these communication possibilities have empowered youth expression in new ways. The multifaceted and complex relationship between Arab youth and media may, therefore, be difficult to comprehend through traditional research approaches that focus on one type of media (television, internet, etc.) or one issue (violence, sexuality, etc.).

This chapter attempts to provide a comprehensive view of Arab youth and media that is multidisciplinary, historically informed, and conceptually based. It follows a top-down approach based on both secondary sources and on fieldwork at Arab media organizations. To meet this objective, we have organized the chapter into three main sections: The first focuses on socio-cultural de-traditionalization, treating issues of changing cultural values and social norms. The chapter's second section narrows down on the consumerist imperatives of the commercial Arab media environment, and discusses topics such as advertising, multimedia synergies and product placements. The third section discusses the political implications of media directed at Arab youth, ranging from local FM radio stations to US propaganda in the context of the so-called 'war on terrorism'. Our analysis will focus on established and emerging trends in the relationship between Arab youth and the media, dwelling on key case studies while referring to a diverse range of examples (institutions, genres, medium). By analytically linking old and new media in the lives of children and young people, we hope this chapter provides a comparative perspective on an area of research that suffers, according to at least one authoritative account, from 'fragmentation, small sample

groups, non-comparability and a Western cultural focus' (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005: 84). Because of this chapter's broad scope which covers numerous countries, several media, and a variety of social and political issues, some degree of generalization is inevitable. We hope that readers will make use of our references to access scholarship about specific Arab media issues.

The existence of tensions between global media-oriented youth culture and local traditions is beyond dispute. However, Arabs experience this clash in particularly acute form, for several reasons. First is the generational gap between contemporary Arab youth and their parents. According to the United Nations Population Fund, around 34% of the population of Arab countries is under the age of 15, and the median age for the Arab region is 22.<sup>2</sup> There is variation between states, but young people make up between one-third and one-half of national populations. While intergenerational differences are a universal phenomenon, in the Arab world these differences ride a wave of fundamental and far-reaching changes that have occurred over the last 30 years in the political, economic, cultural and educational structures of most Arab countries. These include the opening up since the 1960s of higher education to most Arabs, the transition from traditional desert culture to hyper-modern, oil-fuelled, media-saturated economies in the Gulf countries, the rise of political Islamism, and the major political and military upheavals experienced by Arabs in the last few decades. Especially important in shaping social and political developments in the Arab world is what Eickelman (1998) called the combination of 'mass education and mass communication'. Chances are that a 40-year old Arab father today grew up in a world where there was only one state television channel, which did not air advertisements, was the first in his family to obtain a university degree, and has had a decently paid job with a government agency. His 10-year-old son, however, was born amidst the Arab information revolution, can choose between more than 200 satellite

television channels saturated with commercial messages, surf the internet and use his mobile telephone to vote for his favorite reality television contestant or to request his favorite music video. According to World Bank figures, the number of television sets per 1000 people in the Arab world is around 200, double that of low-income countries (for example in sub-Saharan Africa), but much smaller than the number in high-income countries, which is above 600 (UNDP, 2004). Internet penetration in the Arab region ranges from 30% of the population in the United Arab Emirates to close to 0% in Sudan, with Lebanon at 10% and Saudi Arabia below 3% (UNDP, 2004). Experiences of this generational gap are different from one Arab country to another, but the emerging regional youth culture, much of it revolving around hypermedia space, creates a sense of shared community among those who partake in it. The intergenerational gap is widened not only by the newly available technologies, but by the behaviors and vocabularies that youth culture develops around rituals of consumption and technology use, which tend to be exclusive of adults.

The global youth culture, to which some young Arabs gravitate with various degrees of belonging determined by language ability, socio-economic class and geographical location, navigates contemporary hypermedia space through rituals of consumption, like wearing the same clothing brands, listening to the same pop artists, eating the same fast-food and watching the same movies. Thus, the global, media-driven, consumption-centered youth culture reproduces itself through the ritualized consumption it promotes. This process does not necessarily lead to cultural homogenization. It mostly results in various forms of cultural hybridity embodied in so-called 'world music' or in branded mix-and-match clothing styles which indicates that global youth culture is a hodge-podge of international cultural influences.<sup>3</sup>

In the Arab world, this hybridity exacerbates intergenerational conflict because it hinders value transmission according to the postfigurative (hierarchical and strict) model

by introducing horizontal value transmission between young people worldwide and within the Arab region.<sup>4</sup> This accelerates socio-cultural change to the extent that it reduces parents' influence on their children in favor of increasing their exposure to peer and foreign cultural influences, and increases the appeal of religiously couched, anti-popular culture arguments espoused by many Arab Islamist groups and political parties.

At the same time, global culture is locally appropriated by the Islamists, creating a different hybrid where local themes are grafted onto global forms: examples include Sami Yusuf, a British-born Muslim with Azeri origins, who has emerged as a creator of 'Islamic music videos', or, more generally, the advent of Islamic television. In the past, the notion of Islamic 'programs' on Arab state television were limited to short (few minutes) segments that reminded Muslims of prayer time five times a day. An exception to this trend was state television in Gulf countries, which routinely featured live broadcasts of sermons, religious talk shows and scripture readings. The advent of satellite television paved the way for fully dedicated religious channels, mostly based in Saudi Arabia with studios in Egypt and Dubai. For example, in 1998 the Saudi-owned Arab Radio and Television (ART) established 'Iqraa' (Read) as an Islamic channel appealing to women and youth worldwide. Until then, Saudi Channel One was the main religious channel, with 50% religious-oriented programming. Iqraa's appeal rests in its 100% religious programming emulating entertainment television with several male and female 'born-again' preachers, and live interaction with audiences. The trend set forth by 'Iqraa' was soon followed by Al Majd (the Glory) and Al Risala (the Message). The first grew in 2002 out of a Saudi-owned Islamic publishing house to include seven television and radio satellite channels Al-Majd channel, a Kor'an channel, a science channel, a historical channel, a news channel and two children's channels. The second, Al-Risala, was established in 2006 as part of the Rotana network with a youth focus. It has a slick screen appearance

and features a mix of prayer, talk shows and music.

These channels helped create two types of religious star: the *tele-muftis* and *tele-dai'a* (or preachers). Starring in his Al Jazeera show titled *Al Sharia wal Hayat (Islamic law and life)*, the Egyptian mufti Yusuf al-Qaradawi issues religious opinions known as *fatwas* and discusses general social and political issues. Traditionally, the *dai'a* is a born-again Muslim who dedicates his life to religious preaching. Satellite television gave *dai'a*s like the Egyptian Amr Khaled superstar status. Khaled's charisma, trendy clothing, and 'modernist' Islamic discourse focusing on youth has led to over-the-air skirmishes between him and more established religious leaders, like al-Qaradawi. In addition to filling a market niche, mainstream Islamic media are seen as an antidote to the radical and sometimes violent media underground, largely restricted to the internet. Also, by adopting 'modern' media technologies and styles to spread their message, Islamic media indicate that as 'the cultural logic of globalization' (Kraidy, 2005), hybridity can sometimes operate as counter-logic. In other words, hybridity can reflect intercultural relations with various distributions of power.

Unlike the family-focused, living-room based, fixed-time radio listening or television viewing of the past, the new hypermedia space is based on personalized, interactive and mobile communication devices and practices. Therefore, it weakens the bonds of collective social life on Arab children and young people, contributing to the transformation of their cultural identities by changing the sources they use for 'identity work' (Ziehe, 1992). Although selecting foreign, regional (Arab) and local elements for identity construction existed before the advent of hypermedia space (e.g. see Havens (2001) and Kraidy (1999)), the environment permits a proliferation of cultural sources of identity. Also, the interactivity of text-messaging and internet chatting, for example, challenges the traditional, top-down model of socialization by making young Arabs active cultural producers. These

developments reflect an intergenerational leap, since the media world of previous generations of Arabs consisted mostly of daily newspapers and state television channels. These were culturally policed in order to promote national identity and unity, and technically limited to the one-way, non-interactive, transmission of information. The combination of an ever-increasing number of cultural sources of identity with the interactive possibilities of hypermedia presents two challenges.

First, although the media provide some of the most significant components for building youth identity, the construction of Arab youth identity is complicated by the paucity of indigenous cultural production, including books, cinema and, to a lesser extent, television. While the hypermedia space involves numerous media and information technologies, television remains the dominant medium, and television, even when in the Arabic language, is permeated by Western ideas and values. In other words, sources from which young, especially middle-class, English-speaking, Arabs draw on when defining their identity tend to be influenced by Western, mostly US, popular culture and its focus on individual identity and consumerism (Khalil, 2005). This is a reflection of the crisis of Arab cultural production at large, detailed in the *Arab Human Development Report 2003*, which was written by Arab intellectuals and researchers under the aegis of the United Nations Development Programme and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. Chapter 3, 'Knowledge production in arab countries', gives a view of the crisis: Arab countries, with 5% of the world's population, produce 1.1% of the world's books, a figure that falls below 1% if we only consider literary books. With a potential audience of 270 million Arab speakers in 22 countries, only 1000 to 3000 copies of a novel are usually published (UNDP, 2004: 77-78). Theatrical and cinematic production, in spite of the famed Egyptian cinema and the emergence of high-quality Syrian television drama, mirrors this situation. Battered by censorship, undermined by widespread illiteracy

and hindered by the lack of funding, Arab literary and dramatic creative talent is unable to thrive.

Profiting from state-private cooperation, television drama has raised the profile and the income of writers in countries like Egypt and Syria and to a lesser extent Lebanon and the Gulf countries. But this trend has been thwarted, since television officials prefer the low-risk, high-yield strategy of format adaptation. Hence, the wave of reality television, game-shows, music videos and other formats imported from North America or Europe dominates Arab entertainment television, most starkly transnational satellite television. These shows present 'Western' formats that are adapted and reproduced in Arabic by Arab directors, actors and participants, and are often embedded in synergistic strategies including advertising or sponsorship deals, in addition to audio music and music video deals. As we explain later in this chapter, this mixing of worldviews has frequently triggered controversy for promoting commercialism and Western-style social relations between females and males, and for sapping putative Arab or Islamic identities.

Differential access to the new Arab hyper-media space is the second problem. The advent of a commercial media environment tends to exclude those Arabs who are not desirable targets of advertisers. It is well known that the focus of the overwhelming majority of Arab media products are the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which includes Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Television programmers and other 'content providers' focus mostly on Saudi Arabia, by far the largest and wealthiest Arab market. Program previews and promotions on most satellite television channels, for example, give the time of a particular program in 'Saudi Arabia Time' in addition to GMT or the time of the location of the channel. With the growing financial importance of mobile phone toll calls or text messages in the context of voting in reality television programs, requesting music videos or sending love messages on music

channels, the Arab media industry's focus on the oil-rich Gulf countries is increasing and reshaping production and programming decisions.

The rising importance of the markets of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates exacerbates the socio-economic gap between poor and rich Arab countries as the Arab public sphere becomes increasingly dominated by the desires, interests and voices of the wealthy. Poor young Arabs with bleak employment prospects and restricted social conditions are reduced to watching advertisers cater to a select golden Arab youth as they flaunt designer clothes, hip mobile phones and extravagant lifestyles. While this is to some extent true of commercial media worldwide, the large income differences and the speed with which the Arab media shifted from state-controlled monopolies to companies motivated by a mixture of commercial and political interests further complicate the situation. Highly popular reality television programs, which include participants from many Arab countries, mirror the inter-Arab cleavage with the Gulf countries on one side and everyone else on the other. Both alliances between contestants on these shows and audience voting patterns fall into this pattern in which differences in social class and sub-regional identities overlap.

The paucity of indigenous cultural production and differential access to the media, the two problems discussed above, indicate that the commercial media environment contributes significantly, both vertically and horizontally, to segregation of the Arab population. Vertically, it isolates young people from their parents. In addition to a communicative universe replete with logos, words, symbols and icons that are Western inspired and unpalatable to their parents, privileged young Arabs are increasingly spending leisure time surfing the internet, chatting on mobile phones, playing video games or watching youth-specific programs on television. These relatively solitary activities are transforming Arab social relations and older media consumption habits that had been based on communal listening or viewing followed by

group or family conversations (this follows a similar trend towards individual usage in the West; for example, see Livingstone and Bovill (1999)). Horizontally, the new commercial media environment discriminates between young people on the basis of social economic status. The focus on the wealthy Gulf countries and the upper middle class in major cities like Cairo, Damascus or Beirut risks exacerbating class divisions both within and between Arab countries. The media's exclusion of large segments of the Arab population who are not relevant to advertisers raises a set of important questions about political participation in Arab societies, to be discussed later in this chapter.

### **ARAB YOUTH BETWEEN GLOBAL CULTURE AND LOCAL AUTHENTICITY**

In the new communication environment that significantly overlaps with a global, media-driven youth culture, young Arabs have found a new space of socialization that is deeply permeated by 'foreign' cultural and social values, a process that started several centuries earlier with missionaries in the Levant but that is more recent in the Gulf region. The Arab world is similar in this respect to other parts of the world where youth media culture now competes with traditional family-based social structures in the socialization of children and young people. This process, which is embedded in a larger trend of 'detraditionalization' (Heelas *et al.*, 1996), is accelerating the creation of hybrid cultural forms and identities (for example in Lebanon; see Kraidy (1999)) in processes where youth cobble together social identities from a reservoir of resources in which youth media culture looms large. What makes the Arab countries distinct is that it is a region in which public discourse is consumed by concerns for identity and authenticity, within a field defined at one end by Islamic piety and religious identification (and that includes Christians such as Egyptian Copts and Lebanese Maronites)

and at the other end by Arab nationalism and political identification. The current geopolitical upheavals rocking the Arab region, such as the invasion of Iraq and the protracted conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, have intensified concerns about identity at a time when the USA has made it a policy to change the political, economic and culture structures of Arab countries. At the same time, the issue of political reform is a permanent fixture in Arab public discourse and is perhaps the only area where secular liberals agree with Islamist activists.

In this context, Arab media targeting young people play a balancing act, on the one hand respecting established traditions, but at the same time introducing new ideas both for commercial reasons and also as a social and political imperative. Commercially, Arab media entrepreneurs are cognizant that the consumerism and sexualized semiotics of global youth culture offer tremendous profit opportunities. They also know that young Arabs are alienated by the often poorly produced programs that state channels offer them, preferring an informal and interactive style, a situation in which they are similar to Western youth (e.g. Buckingham, 2000). Socially and politically, there is a general sense that the status quo is untenable, and some reform-minded media owners infuse the new communication environment with their ideas about reforming Arab societies. Nowhere is this search for a balanced recipe mixing tradition and modernity, entertainment with a social message, more visible than in the case of the Rotana media conglomerate.

The history of Rotana mirrors that of its owner, Saudi Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal, a 'forward-thinking' member of the Saudi royal family and a Lebanese citizen by virtue of his Lebanese mother. Bin Talal is a successful global investor whose media holdings have included the satellite channel of LBC and Murr Television, a now-defunct Lebanese station, in addition to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, CNBC and Star TV. In 1995, Bin Talal acquired 25% of Saudi-based Rotana Audio Visual Company, which specializes



in the production and distribution of Arab music. Bin Talal's interest in music production increased over the years and so did his shares in Rotana, from 48% in 2002 to 100% in 2003.<sup>5</sup>

Bin Talal's plan to build a media empire that integrated music production and distribution led him in 2003 to acquire the music channel of the Arab Radio and Television (ART) bouquet. Rebranded Rotana, it expanded into a network of four music channels, one movie channel and a religious channel called al-Risala. Valued at over US\$1 billion, Rotana has more than 2500 music videos and 5000 recorded live performances. Bin Talal is now capable of producing, distributing and marketing any singer in-house. While Kingdom Holding (Bin Talal's major company) and Rotana music are based in Saudi Arabia, Rotana television is based in Beirut. Rotana's four music channels do not follow MTV's tradition of using video jockeys (VJs) in the programs; instead the VJs are charged with tying different programs or sequences together. For instance, on the Rotana Khaleejiyyah, specializing in Arabian Gulf music, the VJs recite poetry as interludes between sets of music videos. Except for Rotana Clip, which carries audience requests, the three channels have regular programming that is primarily youth oriented. By 'translating' the MTV VJ tradition for an Arab audience and inserting poetry (a highly popular literary form in the Arab world) between songs, Rotana effectively localizes elements of the global youth culture.

Another localization strategy is visible in one show that addresses youth culture directly, *Rotana Café*. Following a wave of youth-oriented magazine shows that started in 2001, *Rotana Café* showcases the latest Rotana music videos and reviews international movies, gossip and fashion trends. Presented by Lebanese, Egyptian, Saudi and Kuwaiti teenagers, this daily one-hour show is set in a relatively large studio resembling a café. It is characterized by a relaxed attitude where presenters casually interact with a handheld camera while answering inquiries from callers about the most recent celebrity

rumors. The framing of the program as a coffeehouse with free-wheeling and informal dialogue echoes the traditional role of the coffeehouse as a micro-public sphere in Arab and Ottoman culture.<sup>6</sup> However, unlike the male-only coffeehouses that still exist in Arab cities, the program features both genders as presenters and guests, illustrating a subtle process of localization, which entails grafting local themes and traditions onto the global music television genre, a process resulting in the partial transformation of these local themes and traditions.

Rotana's business strategy illustrates how Arab corporations profit from hypermedia space. Rotana's commercial viability rests to a large extent on what industry insiders call value-added services (VAS). These are available in the form of web downloads, short message services (SMS) displayed on a lower third ticker, multi-media services (MMS), ring tone and web downloads. In addition to being profitable, these services stimulate demand for programming and increase the prospects of synergy with other services. The Rotana Clip channel is a VAS flagship, since it features a number of interactive activities: chatting, MMS and SMS. Rotana Khaleejiyyah received as many as 50,000 SMS messages during its first 3 days on the air.<sup>7</sup> Through promotional clips, Rotana contributes to cultivating text messaging as a way of life for young Arabs who use Rotana's on-screen ticker to send messages to each other, including love messages or simply to inform friends that the sender will be late to an appointment.

Rotana's mantra of maintaining a conservative identity compatible with Saudi traditions but also introducing Bin Talal's relatively liberal views makes this channel a hybrid space in which traditions overlap with modern technologies. The choice of Lebanon, the Arab world's most culturally liberal country, as its major site of operation, reflects this policy. While Rotana's VAS indicate that the channel is cognizant of and cultivates hip trends among Arab youth, Rotana's commitment to Islamic religious practices is a clear indication of its commitment to tradition. During the holy

month of Ramadan, presenters dress more conservatively and music videos are carefully selected. Throughout the year, programming is interrupted for prayer five times a day for 5 minutes as slick graphics overlaid with video footage of pilgrims praying in Mecca calls viewers to prayer. When the Saudi King Fahd died in 2005, Rotana paid tribute to its Saudi ownership by broadcasting mourning music for several days. At the same time, Rotana programs reflect relatively progressive views on women's rights, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and terrorism.

Rotana reflects a wider trend across the industry, staying within the socio-political bounds of the Saudi mainstream while introducing new elements from both the global media industry and global youth culture to luring audiences. In the following section we analyze several youth media 'sites' to explain how commercial and socio-political concerns overlap and shape Arab youth media to various degrees. Located on a continuum of most to least commercialized, we analyze one Lebanese television program, *Mini Studio*, followed by a discussion of MBC 3 and Space Toons, a satellite channel dedicated to youth entertainment, and Al-Jazeera Children Channel, a recent venture launched under the mantra of 'edutainment'.

## ARAB YOUTH BETWEEN CONSUMERISM AND EDUCATION

Arab media have become increasingly commercial in the past decade. Lebanese media were the early Arab pioneers in producing commercially viable television programs. The mushrooming of private television stations in the 1990s in the absence of an adequate regulatory framework revived Lebanon as the most dynamic Arab media market for some time, a role Lebanese television held in the 1970s when it exported drama series to the emerging Gulf government television channels.<sup>8</sup> It is in this context that *Mini Studio*, following a French tradition of children programs, was launched by Murr Television in 1992, first in Lebanon only, and

later in the Arab world when MTV began satellite broadcasting in the late 1990s. The program moved to LBC in 2002. This daily half-hour show follows a magazine format featuring a regular group of performers and guest characters, with various parts, such as storytelling, songs, cartoons and games.

The show went through several stages. First, it focused on a simple magazine format with various segments, such as storytelling, gadgets and birthdays. It featured children as a studio audience. It emphasized a European 'feel', both in terms of the way the characters were dressed and the song lyrics in French and English. In the second stage, it maintained the previous elements with a focus on younger performers, as well as including children as actual talent. A main change was the inclusion of product placement as well as segment sponsors. The performers/hosts plug products either by using or distributing them to the studio audience. In addition, the show expanded into ancillary productions: plays, video cassettes and CD song compilations. As a result of this commercial success, the television and advertising industries dubbed the show as 'Mini Market'. After being launched on a pan-Arab scale first through MTV in 2000 and currently through LBC, *Mini Studio* adapted to this new demographic by including English as a second language for songs and dialogue. Producers of the show selected, supported and promoted an all-singing-and-dancing children band under the name Kids' Power.<sup>9</sup>

*Mini Studio* was a pioneering Arab television program for children. Culturally, it blurred the language barriers, as its performers crossed between Arabic, English and French, reflecting the Arabs' colonial past and the current multilingual landscape where English has become a global language, permeating youth media culture. Economically, this show revolutionized the ways the advertising industry targeted children; it introduced systematic product placement, with members of the audience shown on camera using products placed in the show and advertised during commercial breaks. This helped spread the notion that children's television in the Arab

world can be a profitable business, a lesson that was not lost on the Middle East Broadcasting Center as it was expanding operations by essentially becoming a network. A key element in that expansion is MBC 3, a channel exclusively dedicated to children and young people.

Almost 15 years after its launch, the Middle East Broadcasting Center moved to create a multicasting platform for the Arab family. Moving from a traditional, one-channel, general audience approach, MBC now has two channels targeting young people: MBC 2 offers Western movies that attract both youth and their parents, and has been particularly successful in Saudi Arabia, where movie theaters are banned. MBC 3, launched from Dubai in 2005 to preempt the launch of the Al-Jazeera Children Channel, focuses exclusively on children and youth. During the afternoon, MBC 3 features young VJs who introduce the shows, comment on them and interact with the audience via telephone. Program offerings are primarily from the USA and the UK, broadcast in English, but also include Arabic-dubbed shows licensed from Space Toons, another Arab channel.

Taking advantage of the facilities provided by Dubai Media City, Space Toons was launched with a large library of children's programs in Arabic. Its Syrian owner, Fayez Sabbagh, has a long history of dubbing and distributing various Asian and European cartoons in Arabic. Space Toons broadcasts cartoons back to back in Arabic with commercial breaks in-between, eschewing program presenters common on Arab television. Space Toons soon grew into a media hub for children's programming. In addition to supplying MBC 3 with programs, Space Toons is carried by the Orbit pay-television 'bouquet', which brings in additional income as well as access to pay-for-television audiences. It also branched into Space Toons English, broadcasting original versions of its dubbed Arabic programs. Finally, and most interestingly, Space Toons ventured into producing its own Arabic cartoons in the forms of vignettes dealing with religious themes, such as 'Rihlat El Hajj', about the Muslim pilgrimage, and

Ramadan issues. This is another example of 'localization', where local themes are grafted onto global formats to create culturally hybrid programs.

A venture of this scope is viable because it is integrated in a media conglomerate with three types of ancillary business: a magazine targeting parents and children, commercial representation and advertising of toys, and a website which ties in all these activities by offering online games and downloads. Following the logic of integration, the magazine carries television program schedules, the toys are featured in the programs, and the website functions as a gateway to the Space Toons brand. While this company is a case study of the commercialization of children and youth media culture in the Arab world, some of its rivals propound a radically different vision of the role of the media in the socialization of children and young people.

Reflecting a long-term media rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the Saudi-owned MBC 3 was rushed into being to 'scoop' the imminent launch of the Qatari-owned Al-Jazeera Children Channel. While the two channels compete primarily for the Gulf Cooperation Council countries' audience, they reflect two different philosophies of youth media, with the former being a commercial station and the latter proclaiming a public service mission. For that reason, the Al-Jazeera Children Channel, launched on September 9, 2005, jointly by Al-Jazeera and the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, is worthy of a detailed examination. The Qatar Foundation, publicly financed by the Qatari state and headed by Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser Al-Missned, wife of Qatar's ruler, owns 90% of the venture, which broadcasts from Education City in Qatar.<sup>10</sup> The channel came on the heels of the flagship Al-Jazeera, Al-Jazeera Sports, Al-Jazeera live (public affairs) and the impending launch of the English-language Al-Jazeera English.<sup>11</sup>

Most distinctive about the new channel is the fact that it is 'a private company but with a public service mission and is publicly funded', in the words of Jean Rouilly, CEO of

Lagardere International Images, a subdivision of the French conglomerate Lagardere, which was instrumental in setting up the channel technically.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Al-Jazeera Children Channel is not a commercial channel, but, as Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer al-Thani, chair of the board of Al-Jazeera, explains, a 'bright alternative to the current trends in television broadcasting where children are exposed to violent and inappropriate material on a daily basis' (Ohrstrom, 2005). However, the new channel eschewed the didactic style of Arab educational or development television programs, aiming to provide what executives called 'educational fun'<sup>10</sup> while inculcating values such as tolerance, open-mindedness and freedom of expression. In press statements, the new channel espouses the concept of 'edutainment', through which it 'opens up avenues for the Arab children to ... learn about different ... cultures ... [and] help them develop positive self-esteem, respect their traditions and values, and appreciate people around them and develop a passion for learning'.<sup>12</sup>

The declared commitment to local production expressed in statements by Al-Jazeera Children Channel executives makes the channel distinctive, at least until actual programming grids prove otherwise. The channel's programming grid comprises around 40% of original programming, amounting to 6 or 7 hours a day out of the 18 to 19 hours of transmission (Ohrstrom, 2005). According to channel director Mahnoud Bouneb, the channel will broadcast 18 hours per day, out of which 6 hours are live, 3 hours are commissioned abroad and 4 hours are produced in the channel's studios.<sup>13</sup> The locally made programs did not shy away from controversy. Within 1 month after launch, *Sehha wa Salama (Health and Safety)* broached the issue of female genital circumcision, and other programs featured children opining on relatively sensitive social and political issues (Ohrstrom, 2005). This is within Al-Jazeera's overall spirit to broach taboo issues.

An article published on the Aljazeera.net website provides a rationale for the channel. Titled 'Al-Jazeera Children

Channel ... A reading of the notion and a critique of the vision', the article argues that the new channel fills an important gap in Arab media because 'there were ambitious projects aiming to care for children, but they did not show children a real interest and dedicated themselves to talking about hobbies and movies ...' and carries a stinging indictment of Arab media as 'media that jump at the peels in the absence of an essence ... are ... in all their forms sterile' (Bouqanoun, 2005). In contrast, Al-Jazeera Children Channel would advocate that Arab children should have a voice and be productive members of their societies: 'We must address Arab children in an interactive manner', the writer says, 'so as to transform them into instruments of knowledge and give them a productive capacity so that they express their opinions on issues that interest them and contribute to the foundation of a better future' (Bouqanoun, 2005). The new channel would thus contribute to educational reform throughout the Arab world by empowering children and young people and focusing on self-criticism and engagement in intercultural dialogues. The author also underlines the fact that the channel was created out of 'a strong political will', widely assumed to be that of Qatar's influential first lady, and that because of this support it was going to be viable.

For all these promises, the Al-Jazeera Children Channel still faced numerous problems. First, setting it up was a long affair that exceeded its budget. Plans called for a fully digitized, completely 'tape-less' operation from production to transmission. However, software and budgeting problems, along with varying visions of several key actors, undermined this aim.<sup>14</sup> Second, from the very first days of broadcasting, the new channel attracted criticism for delivering less than what its launchers promised. Because of the Al-Jazeera legacy, the channel faced skepticism even before its launch. In a column titled 'The children of Al-Jazeera', Ibrahim al-Ariss (2005), editor for television and cinema at the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*, hoped that the channel will not promote extremism, and that 'language lessons not be to learn

how to write *takfiri* statements ... and that program guests not be from outside of the era'.<sup>15</sup> Six weeks later, a columnist in the same newspaper poignantly criticized the station for 'putting amateurs in charge' and for having young adult talk-show hosts who knew less than their children guests about the topics under discussion (Amin, 2005). While these critiques are at least partially valid, more time is needed before a systematic appraisal of the channel's performance can be conducted. It is also important to note that the channel's avowed public service mission makes it a unique children-oriented media institution in the Arab world.<sup>16</sup>

The sudden interest of leading transnational Arab broadcasters to youth channels needs careful assessment. Arguably, the need for specific demographics to attract advertisers is important, but it cannot solely explain the surge of interest. MBC 3 can be understood as an attempt to prepare loyal adult audiences for its flagship channel as the MBC network reinvents itself as the one-stop channel for the Arab family. In addition, MBC 3 is free to air, with no costs incurred by the viewers. Furthermore, MBC 3 has been seriously attempting to present itself as a Gulf-based channel. Unlike Al-Jazeera Children Channel, its road shows have focused on the Arabian Gulf. While the use of English programs is attributed to a scarcity of Arab children's productions, it also reflects a multilingual audience. The choice of 'Space Toons' as a name for another children's channel reflects the growing pervasiveness and acceptance of English by Arab audiences, itself a symptom of media globalization. But if these channels' programs are revealing about the social and commercial dimensions of Arab youth, other media take on a more political dimension, whether directly as in the case of the US-funded 'public diplomacy' stations Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra television, or in the case of reality television shows that were politicized by viewers and appropriated in street demonstrations, most notably in Beirut. The following section of this chapter examines how Arab youth popular culture intersects with Arab political life.

## POLITICS, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE MEDIA IN THE ARAB WORLD

Because of the current geo-political juncture, myriad issues related to Arab mass media have been politicized between the Arab world and the West, especially the USA, but even more significantly, within the Arab world itself. Since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the USA and some allied forces, the Arab satellite news channels have been the sources of anxiety among Western, mainly American, politicians and military leaders. Most of this anxiety and anger have focused on Al-Jazeera, with some accusing the channel of cooperating with Al-Qaeda and the Iraqi insurgency. While a detailed discussion of these important issues falls beyond the scope of this chapter, American perceptions that Arab media are hostile to the USA has triggered major initiatives under the public diplomacy umbrella, including Al-Hurra television, Radio Sawa, and *Hi Magazine*. Unlike Al-Hurra, a news and public affairs television channel for Arabs of all ages, Radio Sawa was consciously conceived as a blend of news and entertainment targeted at Arab youth, hence its relevance to this chapter.

Radio Sawa is the brainchild of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the body responsible for American international broadcasts referred to as 'public diplomacy' by their proponents and 'propaganda' by critics. This station offers a format that appeals to youth by focusing mostly on music, a sharp departure from Voice of America's Arabic service's blend of news, current affairs, documentaries and music. The station was officially launched in March 2002, and by late summer 2002 it was reaching more Arab listeners than had the Voice of America (Boyd, 2002). Indeed, Sawa is the only (relative) success story in the US public diplomacy initiative towards the Arab world, considering that *Hi Magazine* was shutdown in December 2005 and the status of Al-Hurra television is in question as of this writing, with the channel facing high-level staff departures in the wake of several surveys showing it with less than 1% of the Arab television news audience. Radio Sawa's

success is partly due to the recognition by its overseers of the power of popular culture to reach young Arabs.

Sawa's great innovation was a station format that mixed Arabic and English-language pop music with short newscasts every hour. How this radio station was received is perhaps best described in the numerous stories of taxi drivers in Arab capitals listening to Sawa music and switching to another channel when the newscast began only to move the dial back when the new hour of music came in. Arabs liked the music and listened to it, but the newscasts were not credible because listeners knew it was a US government service. However, the innovative format was soon emulated by other stations, including Marina FM in Kuwait, the first private FM station in that country and one that is rapidly gaining listeners. Although innovative, this format is not unprecedented in the region, as some of the music video satellite television channels mixed Arabic and Western pop several years before the advent of Radio Sawa.

If Radio Sawa showed Washington policymakers that young Arabs can be reached by mixing politics with popular culture, the emerging hypermedia space gave young Arabs new opportunities for self-expression and participation in public life. The wave of reality television and music video programs and channels is evidence of the rampant commercialization of Arab hypermedia space. But these programs also provide Arab youth with the tools to participate in public debates. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way the rituals of reality television were 'recruited' in what Western observers called the 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon.<sup>17</sup>

The series of street demonstrations that occurred in Beirut in the wake of the assassination of Lebanon's previous Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri were perhaps the first major Arab political event in which the emerging hypermedia space played a visible role. Demonstrators used mobile phones and text-messaging to mobilize and organize supporters, exchange crucial tactical information, and take pictures that could be easily transmitted out of the area of

the demonstrations. Young people played a pivotal part in the demonstrations, with university student organizations as the leading organizational force. There was clear media savvy among the young demonstrators, who used color-coordinated clothing and painted Lebanese flags on their faces like football fans worldwide. More importantly, several media friendly 'spectacles' were organized, including a gigantic human Lebanese flag made by 10,000 people holding green, red and white cardboard squares, the Lebanese colors. Most interesting were the signs that demonstrators carried, which included words, phrases and slogans from reality television, such as 'Addoum, Nominee', which called for the sacking of Lebanon's pro-Syrian prosecutor general.

On March 14, 2005, when approximately 1 million demonstrators filled Beirut's central Martyrs Square to protest at Hariri's assassination and to demand the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, many signs featured pictures of despised politicians and security officers with 'nominations' to be voted out of the 'show', a clear appropriation of reality television for political activism. One sign in particular illustrated this appropriation. It featured a photograph of Lebanese president Emile Lahoud, a major ally of Syria whose mandate was unconstitutionally extended by Syrian fiat, with the word 'nominee' above the picture and the words 'Vote 1559' underneath it. *Star Academy*, the Arabic-language adaptation of a format owned by the Dutch format house Endemol and known in the UK as *Fame Academy*, has been the Arab world's most popular and controversial reality television show. Every week, audience members call dedicated four-digit mobile phone numbers to vote for one of two nominees they wish to save from expulsion from the show. In the demonstrator's sign, '1559' is an ironic appropriation in that it refers to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, which called among other things for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

This overlap of politics and popular culture is indicative of a larger trend in the Arab

world where political activists increasingly appropriate elements of youth media culture. This can be seen on several levels. First of all, the use of mobile phones and text-messaging to mobilize support for a reality television contestant and to forge alliances with like-minded viewers has been transferred to the organization of political demonstrations. Second, the hip sartorial style of reality television and music videos is employed by demonstrators to attract the attention of television cameras, something that young Lebanese excelled at in the Beirut demonstrations. Third, as the sign we analyzed indicates, the vocabulary of reality television is widely understood in the Arab world, and is thus an effective tool to express a political agenda. Finally, activists who protested against the authoritarianism of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, against Syrian control of Lebanon, or supported women's political rights in Kuwait have become adept at adopting short, memorable and media-friendly slogans like the ones that permeate youth popular culture.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship that Arab youth have with media and information technologies is highly complex. In addition to the economic, social and cultural challenges faced by youth in developing countries, Arab youth and children have to contend with the radical politicization of their relationship with media and culture. Whereas children and youth worldwide are at the center of debates about education, consumerism and socialization, in the Arab world the youth and childhood are also a political site of struggle where hot-button issues such as terrorism, Arab-Western relations, and Arab governance play out. The corporations and governments that compete to win over this demographic are not only Arab, but include transnational corporations and the American government.

This media environment (what we referred to as hypermedia space) provided this chapter with several revealing case studies. First, the Al-Jazeera Children Channel is a promising

venture because it has a self-declared public service mission and at the same time it enjoys a secure financial basis. As an initiative of Qatar's Sheikha Moza, probably the Arab world's most powerful and influential first lady, and ample funds from Qatar's vast natural gas reserves at a time when gas is at a record high price, the Al-Jazeera Children Channel transcends two difficulties that have often pre-empted successful children's programs in the Arab world and elsewhere: political backing and financial resources. These two issues are most important because they determine how much support goes to local production. Also, final judgment will have to await the channel's actual performance and the degree to which it fulfills plans that for the most part are still on paper. There are two other challenges that the channel will have to overcome: attracting an audience and having competent management. Success in those areas may stimulate competitors and increase the quality and quantity of children programming.

Second, it is clear that, in spite of the commercialization of social life, the new Arab commercial media environment enhances young people's ability for self-expression and participation in public life. The appropriation of reality television rituals and vocabulary during the 2005 Beirut demonstrations is perhaps the most notable example of how youth media culture contributes to social and political empowerment, but examples elsewhere (Egypt and Kuwait) suggest that this trend can be found throughout the Arab world. The ultimate challenge for Arab youth is translating the pluralism of public life into inclusive governance, taking into account the needs of children and young people in policy formulation and implementation.

Third, religion is important in the study of Arab youth and media as, on the one hand a social, cultural and political force, and, on the other hand, as a field of analysis. Having said this, we should eschew making Islam an independent variable sitting at the center of political, socio-cultural and communication processes in the Arab world. Rather, as the development of Islamic media and Islamic popular culture indicate, Islam

is a differentiated, complex, and unstable category. Increasingly, the Arab media are becoming an arena of competition between various forms of Islam, as in the example mentioned before of Khaled challenging al-Qaradawi's interpretations, or of the variations that are set to emerge between relatively traditionalist Islamic channel, such as al-Majd and Iqraa on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those explicitly 'modernizing' Islamic channels, such as al-Risala. Many analysts of Arab societies, us included, believe that mainstream Islamic media provide an important space for the emergence of modern, i.e. self-reflexive, adaptive, and forward-thinking Islamic values and identities.

In this chapter we have attempted to provide a broad survey of the complex relationship between young people and the media in the Arab world. Socio-economic class, geographical location, religion and linguistic ability are some of the most important differences that shape how young Arabs relate to the media. We adopted a top-down, deductive and mostly theoretical approach in order to accommodate the large variety of issues to be discussed in order to understand Arab youth and media issues. This was partly due to the paucity of actual audience studies in the Arab world, hindered by a variety of factors, including the lack of systematic indigenous research activity and social and religious restrictions on field research. While the advantage of this approach is to account for the breadth of the topic, we point the readers to a variety of readings on Arab media that provide more location- and culture-specific sources.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1 We use 'Arab youth' broadly to include children. We use 'children' only when there are issues where children, and not older young people, are the explicit focus of discussion, such as our discussion of Al-Jazeera Children Channel.

2 The United Nations Population Fund. *Overview: The Arab States*. [http://www.unfpa.org/profile/arab\\_overview.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/profile/arab_overview.htm) [August 2007].

3 For a detailed analysis and critique of this phenomenon, see Kraidy (2005).

4 Here we are using Mead's typology of postfigurative, cofigurative, and prefigurative cultures, which in descending order give more importance to hierarchy and vertical learning. See Mead (1970).

5 See Richard Agnew (2005) and Riz Khan (2005).

6 For a history of some urban coffeehouses in the Middle East, see Kirli (2004).

7 Second author interview with Fouad Tarabay, founding Managing Director of Rotana Khaleejiah, August 2005.

8 For a discussion of a crucial period in the development of Lebanon's television market, see Kraidy (1998).

9 The second author of this chapter was an MTV executive at the time. The show was renamed 'The Kids Power Show' for intellectual property purposes.

10 Al-Jazeera launches children's channel to teach tolerance (2005, September 10). *Daily Star* [Agence France Presse].

11 In fact, Al-Jazeera officially declared itself a 'network', as opposed to a 'channel', in early September 2005. See 'Before launching its children's channel next Friday: Al-Jazeera becomes a network ... for privatization?' (2005, September 6). *Assafir*.

12 Al Jazeera launches kids channel (2005, September 11). Company Press Release.

13 'Before launching its children's channel next Friday: Al-Jazeera becomes a network ... for privatization?' (2005, September 6). *Assafir*.

14 Personal interviews conducted by first author with members of the launching team, November 2005, Paris, France.

15 The word *takfiri* refers to the practice by some radical Islamists to declare Muslims who do not agree with their views non-Muslims, and thus indirectly promote violence against these 'fake' Muslims.

16 There could be an 'edutainment' trend developing in youth media, with Yemen recently announcing a new television service for young people in association with the national university there.

17 See Kraidy (2006b); for a discussion of how reality television entered the fray of politics in Kuwait and Lebanon, see Kraidy (2007).

18 For general references on Arab media, see Boyd (1999) and Sakr (2001). The volume by Eickelman and Anderson (1999) has a broader, Muslim world scope. For analysis of the Arab internet, see Gonzalez-Quijano (2003/2004). For Al-Jazeera, see El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2002) Lamloum (2004). For television and national identity in Egypt, see Abu-Lughod (2005) and Armbrust (1996). For a feminist, Islam-focused analysis, see Mernissi (1992).

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