

# Direct Satellite Broadcasting in Asia and the Middle East: History and Implications

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## Abstract

Over the past decade Direct Broadcast Satellites (DBS) have become the standard means for delivering radio and television programs around the world. Rapid technological developments have made DBS receivers accessible to the ordinary individual in many regions, including the developing countries of Asia and the Middle East. This allowed citizens of these countries to be exposed to a large variety of programming as an alternative to the usually drab material offered by national, government run broadcasters. While this might have represented a welcome change to the average person, it introduced a myriad serious policy issues to the governments concerned. This paper traces the historical development of DBS technology, and identifies the major players in the Asia and Middle East media market, including STAR TV, MBC, and Orbit. In addition, it attempts to illuminate some more serious policy issues and challenges, including the free flow of information, national sovereignty and regulation of DBS transmissions, and suggests possible directions for future research.

## Introduction

Direct broadcast Satellites (DBS) have emerged as the standard means for transmitting radio and television programs and data of all kinds around the world. DBS services are no longer the sole domain of news and program exchange among national broadcasters, or signal relay between large organizations around the globe. Rapid technological developments in satellite systems and in digital signal compression have transformed DBS decoders and receivers into ordinary household appliances available to the average person in many societies, including those in the developing world. However, the unprecedented proliferation of DBS technology has raised many developing policy issues especially with regard to control of information flow and national sovereignty.

This article traces the historical development of DBS technology and examines its current status. In addition, it will attempt to identify the major players in this field, focusing on those most influential in Asia and the Middle East. Finally, a discussion will be offered of the policy implications of DBS technology, followed by recommendations for further research. All this is done in the context of the internationalization of information markets and the communication industry, especially television. The internationalization of television is a process which is based on the following:<sup>1</sup>

1. Internationalization of television takes place when the same television signal becomes available simultaneously in at least three countries. This goes beyond unintended spillover effects, and more into a situation where the broadcaster is intentionally targeting a larger audience spread over many national borders.
2. Internationalization of television is also a part of a much larger process whereby capital and investment funds flow easily across frontiers. This factor is critical since it highlights the ways in which open markets make it possible for funds to flow easily across national borders. Such funds move into both software (programs) and hardware (broadcasting equipment).
3. Internationalization of television draws together television producers, executives and regulators in a process of intensive negotiation and competition. With the international free flow of investment and technological change, these actors can no longer treat broadcasting matters merely as a national concern, and are forced to deal with matters on an international level, so much so that television has become part of the diplomatic arena.

All of these factors are part of a developing process which points the way to the internationalization of broadcasting. Interestingly, this process has been going on for many years in the newspaper publishing, film, music, and advertising sectors. One reason why the transition of these media to the international arena did not receive much attention is that these were not perceived as politically significant by regulators around the world.

### Development of Direct Broadcast Satellites

As a technology, the development of communication satellites was the result of continuous advancements in the field of rocketry and microwave engineering<sup>2</sup>. The capability to project a television signal via satellite from space on an entire continent began with the launching of Telstar 1 in 1962 in the United States. The need for the satellite to maintain a stationary orbit over a particular area of earth necessitated the launch of the Syncom family of satellites in 1963<sup>3</sup>. They were among a generation of satellites classified as geosynchronous because of their ability to maintain a continuous signal over the segment of the earth to which they are dedicated<sup>4</sup>. With geostationary satellites, a single satellite could now be used to beam a continuous signal over a large geographical area.

During the 1960s and the 1970s it was theoretically possible for anyone in the United States, with a dish (satellite receiving antenna), to receive signals transmitted via a satellite covering the North American continent. However, two related technological problems prevented this from becoming a reality: 1) the satellites of the time transmitted at very low power; and 2) this required a 15-18 meter antenna to capture a signal of reasonable quality.<sup>5</sup> The cost and size of such a device prevented the adoption of this technology by ordinary individuals. In addition, in the 1960s and 1970s anyone who wanted to receive or send signals via a satellite dish needed to apply for a permit from the Federal Communications Committee (FCC), the government agency in charge of regulation of broadcasting in the USA. Besides the technological and legal hurdles, no incentive existed for the average consumer to desire access to satellite technology. There were no television programming services intended specifically for home reception via satellite. These factors limited the usage of satellite dish antennas to governments and a few large business organizations.

The first satellite home reception had not come into full use until 1979 when the FCC dropped its licensing requirements for all domestic satellite dishes. In 1980 home satellite systems were placed on the market for a retail price of approximately \$10,000.<sup>6</sup> This marked the beginning of what was later termed the television-receive-only (TVRO) industry in the United States. A

TVRO dish refers to a stand-alone satellite receiver that enables its owners to capture various satellite signals, not necessarily intended for their reception. In most cases, the signals captured by TVROs were being transmitted from a program distributor (e.g. television network headquarters) to a program exhibitor (e.g. local television affiliate). In this paper, TVRO differs from Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) in that the satellite signals beamed via a DBS service are especially designed and intended for home reception through a small antenna.

### Direct Satellite Broadcasting Today

Currently, several hundred communication satellites circle the planet. The technology is such that DBS service can bring programs from stations and nations around the world directly to individual TV sets regardless of their locations.

Communication satellites can be distinguished according to their functions. The fixed satellite system (FSS) carries telephone, data and radio signals from one point to another or to many other ground stations. A broadcasting satellite system (BSS) transmits radio and television signals from a number of originating program services to other terrestrial broadcast to cable transmitters.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, direct broadcasting satellites (DBS) beam radio and TV program signals from originating stations directly to homes, via high-powered satellite transmitters. DBS thus allows people within the area covered by the satellite broadcast signals, to receive programs through their terrestrial transmission of a local station.<sup>8</sup> DBS has been defined by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) as radio-communication service in which signals transmitted or retransmitted by space stations are intended for direct reception by the general public.<sup>9</sup> Direct reception may occur either through an individual rooftop dish or a community antenna.

It is expected that DBS systems would provide many of tomorrow's viewers with over 400 channels containing a variety of local and international programs, if and when they become economically viable.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the economic reasons, the development and application of DBS had not caught on in the United States because satellite television is regarded as a complication in much of cable-connected North America.<sup>11</sup> However, DBS systems are more advanced in Europe and Japan, which have a more favorable economic and political climate that permits the development of the technology.<sup>12</sup>

Broadcasting via DBS brings with it issues of international broadcasting,

since the signals can be received across national borders. This is especially true in the case of Europe, Africa and Asia, where many countries are located in close geographical proximity. International broadcasting from satellites has created controversy because governments have no effective control over the signals from other countries' satellites, whose programs might not be suitable for audiences in their own countries who could, nevertheless, receive these signals by simply installing a small dish antenna.

There are three basic reasons for this controversy. The first is the conflict over whether the flow of information should be unrestrained as a basic human right recognized above all political principles. Secondly, there is the question of national sovereignty, that each nation may choose either to exercise control or to allow information to flow freely within its borders. The third reason encompasses the other two, but claims information management as being essential to survival and growth.<sup>13</sup>

### **Direct Satellite Broadcasting in Asia and the Middle East**

Asia is the world's most populous continent, containing over two-thirds of the earth's people. It is characterized by a high degree of multilingualism, with some countries supporting several hundred dialects. Asian broadcasting systems are primarily national, government-controlled, and financed through some combination of taxes, license fees and, increasingly, advertising. However, introduction of DBS has brought some significant changes in the broadcasting environment in Asia.

There are at least 11 communication satellites orbiting Asian skies.<sup>14</sup> Until recently, there has been neither significant discussion nor conflict on satellite broadcasting in Asia. Satellite broadcasting in Asia has been dramatically changed since the introduction of Star TV of Hong Kong in 1991. Heated discussions among several Asian nations erupted over the issue of transnational television as Star TV started its broadcasting via DBS in 1991.<sup>15</sup> The next section will give an overview of the major satellite broadcasters in Asia and the Middle East: STAR TV, CNN, MBC, ART and ORBIT.<sup>16</sup> This will be followed by a discussion of the main policy issues arising from the profusion of this technology in this region.

### **STAR TV: An Overview**

STAR TV (Satellite Television Asia Region) began with an ambitious plan to beam a variety of programs to 38 Asian countries which fall under the footprint of the broadcasting satellite, AsiaSat I. Hutchinson Whampoa, the parent company, owns one-third of AsiaSat I, the satellite in geostationary orbit

above Singapore, that beams STAR TV signals. With a potential audience of 2.7 billion viewers in the continent, the commercial goals of the company were met with much enthusiasm by the Far East business community.

The number of receivers of STAR TV is increasing rapidly, exceeding the expectations of experts. According to STAR TV, 105 hotels in 13 countries provided its programming to 37,500 rooms in 1992. At the end of June 1992, 3.75 million households in India, 1.19 million in Taiwan, 270,000 in Israel, 150,000 in Hong Kong and 11,000 in Korea were receiving STAR TV.<sup>17</sup> As of February 1993, STAR TV estimated that at least 11.3 million households or about 45 million viewers could tune in.<sup>18</sup>

The primary channels offered by STAR TV are the following:

*Prime Sports: 24 hours of sports programming.*

*BBC World Service Television: 24 hours of news and public affairs programs.*

*STAR PLUS: A variety of American and British shows, primarily drama, sitcoms, talk shows, etc.*

*Channel V: 24 hours of music programming with an accent on Asian audiences.*

*Chinese Chanel: A Mandarin language channel targeting expatriates across Asia.*

*ZEE TV: A Hindi language channel targeting speakers in India and the Gulf.*

The primary target audience for STAR TV is the 2 billion people in Asia who understand English. STAR TV does not scramble its signal. Thus anyone can receive STAR TV once a receiver is installed. Since STAR TV is not a pay television, acquiring advertisers is crucial. STAR TV claims that advertisers paid it \$14 billion in 1992. The major advertisers include Kodak, Coca-Cola, Sony and Mitsubishi.<sup>19</sup> STAR TV charges \$1,500 for a 30-second primetime advertising spot, which is far less than the local television stations' rates.<sup>20</sup>

As the number of receivers of STAR TV increases, the number of newspapers that carry its program listing has also increased. Currently, about 150 newspapers print the STAR TV schedule of programs, in 15 countries in Asia. Several countries, including Taiwan, Thailand, Korea and several Gulf countries publish magazines exclusively devoted to STAR TV programs. Encouraged by its enormous success, STAR TV plans to broadcast in several languages including Hindi and Arabic.<sup>21</sup>

Recently however the network has been the target of many debates in Asia because of the looming political, economic, social and cultural consequences. Criticisms were directed at the network on many counts, primarily for seeming to endanger local traditional cultures with a profusion of unwanted foreign programming. Cultural imperialism scholars have for long lamented the dominance of the international marketplace of ideas by Western multinational media conglomerates. The critique points that authentic, traditional and local cultures in many parts of the world are slowly eroding as a result of the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial media products, mainly from the United States.<sup>22</sup>

### **Cable News Network**

No discussion of international broadcasting is complete without an examination of the global broadcast news service known as Cable News Network (CNN). The network became so large and influential that no one was surprised when Ted Turner, the American entrepreneur and founder of CNN, was called the prince of the global village by Time magazine. However, it took most of the 1980s for CNN to achieve acceptance as a legitimate network.

Turner started this operation when he invented the concept of "superstation" by using a satellite to distribute the signal of his weak, independent station in Atlanta, to a national cable audience in the United States. This move, some argue, has largely shaped the cable system in the US into what it is today.

Currently, CNN with two domestic round-the-clock services in the United States, is a global service pieced together from the two, plus some additional material and a part-time Spanish-language service for Latin America and the North American Spanish-language market. The network which has more overseas bureaus than any of the US commercial networks, signed agreements with more than 100 broadcasters around the world for use of CNN material, and earned a reputation for importance without precedent in the history of global communication. CNN has grown so much in scope and influence that it became the news medium of choice for world leaders like Bill Clinton, Boris Yeltsin, John Major, Fidel Castro and King Hussain, just to name a few.

Besides broadcasting to an audience of world leaders and several million ordinary viewers outside of the United States, the latter mostly in hotel rooms and scattered cable systems, CNN was a fixture in newsrooms and government offices around the world. It is unrivaled in terms of extended live coverage of dramatic world events. The uniqueness of CNN is that it combines the drama of

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unfolding world events with a distinctive ability to cover them with a global telecommunication system and unlimited air time. With 19 overseas bureaus and working relationships with virtually every broadcaster in the world, CNN brought the promise of real-time global communication closer to Marshall McLuhan's famous "global village".

### **CNN World Report**

A unique contribution from CNN to international news flow is the introduction of CNN World Report. In an apparent response to complaints of US dominance in global information flow, CNN invited every broadcaster in the world to submit a weekly three-minute report on any topic of its choosing. The network promised to run them without editing, and in the process to challenge the Anglo-American standards of global TV journalism.

The result was a program lasting more than five hours a week with material submitted by 100 broadcast organizations, some professional and critical, some amateurish and propagandistic. CNN sent tapes of the entire production to organizations that could not watch it live, creating the world's largest exchange of broadcast journalism. Contributors were encouraged to use material from the program for their own broadcasts. In return, CNN gets several advantages including occasional breaking stories in far away places and news production teams around the world that could be called on as needed in places where the competition had no resources.

### **Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC)**

The Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) began the first Arab-language satellite television operation on September 18, 1991. The goal of the service is to provide a television channel for the Arab World from the Gulf to northwest Africa, and for Arabs who live in or visit Europe. MBC is an entertainment-oriented service that also provides public affairs programming and a 30-minute evening newscast. Since it first started operating, MBC has shown an increasing desire by Saudi Arabia, to maintain a strong presence in the world of Arab media. Abdullah El Masry, Executive Director of MBC's Board stated, "through MBC we hope to prepare the air for reconciliation in the Mid-East to be a bridge of understanding".<sup>24</sup> MBC's studios in London are equipped with state-of-the-art production equipment, and as a British-based television service, MBC is licensed and regulated by the Independent Television Commission (ITC).

MBC hopes to become an Arab version of the major American networks.<sup>25</sup> MBC news head Steven Maney stated, "when they hired me, they said: Steve,

we want CNN in Arabic".<sup>26</sup> MBC also became the first Arab news service to open a correspondent office in Jerusalem. "Israel is there, and we have to deal with it," said Walid Al-Ibraheem, one of MBC's owners.<sup>27</sup> MBC's ability for global news coverage was further enhanced when its owners purchased the United Press International (UPI) wire service for a reported \$3.9 million in June 1992.<sup>28</sup>

The majority of MBC's capital comes from Salah Kamel, a prominent Saudi banker, and Walid Al-Ibraheem, the brother-in-law of King Fahad, who have invested in MBC through their company World Space Corporation, based in Washington, DC.<sup>29</sup> MBC began operations with a working capital \$300 million and an annual budget of \$60 million.<sup>30</sup> The service is commercial, and the owners hope that sponsorship will provide a valuable opportunity for advertisers to reach a pan-Arab world audience.<sup>31</sup>

### **MBC Programming**

MBC broadcasts consist mainly of family-oriented programming like films, children's programs, drama and music. In addition, MBC provides daily feature shows, international news, sports and current affairs. Daily transmissions begin at 2:00 p.m. (GMT). The childrens programs include cartoon adventure series and educational programs. Adult programs are broadcast in the afternoon and they include documentaries which emphasize Islamic culture and art, as well as sports and science programs and a daily drama series.

The main newscast is broadcast at 6:00 p.m. (GMT), followed by the evening feature film. The early evening consists mainly of magazine shows, business and sports. There is a daily program that interviews the world press, highlighting the principal events of the day. Evening programming continues at 9:00 p.m. (GMT) with more drama and variety shows, plays, interviews, and music by popular Arab stars. The evening is concluded with the late news at 11:00 p.m and a reading from the holy Qur'an.

MBC estimates its audience at 5,000,000 Arabic speaking viewers across Europe and 100 million in the Arab world. In the first month of transmission, MBC had more than 250,000 viewers who were able to receive the service directly via satellite. In addition, some of MBC's programming is rebroadcast on terrestrial transmitters in some Arab countries, as is the case in Kuwait, increasing the opportunity to reach a wider audience.

### **Orbit Satellite Television and Radio Network**

Launched on May 25, 1994, Orbit Satellite Television and Radio Network (Orbit) is the Arab world's first fully digital multi-channel Direct-to-home Pay-TV

satellite service, able to provide high quality sound and picture at all times.<sup>32</sup> The aim of the Orbit service is to provide socially responsible programming that reflects the interests, tastes, and political and religious sensibilities of the Arab World's distinctive culture.<sup>33</sup> The network is geared towards an audience of educated, well-traveled and affluent professionals for whom culture, entertainment and up-to-date information have become a necessity. Orbit's President and Chief Executive Alexander Zilo stated, "It is a niche market, with the most potent, affluent demographics in the world. They travel more than six weeks a year, have studied at Harvard and Oxford and take Western-style entertainment for granted".<sup>34</sup> Currently, the network provides 28 channels of television and radio programming in English, Arabic and French.

Orbit transmits from the \$45 million Sapienza center in Rome, Italy, a 10,000 square meter fully digital production, post-production and transmission system that is integrated from the acquisition of programs through to individual subscriber billing. Production and post-production are digital, and completely compatible with the transmission system. Post-production facilities include three studios, fifteen edit suites, and two non-linear audio post-production suites.<sup>35</sup>

The transmission medium is digital, utilizing MPEG 2<sup>36</sup> standard compression and encryption. This is available on both contribution and distribution systems, and enables Orbit to maintain high levels of security and consumer transmission integrity. The network currently consists of earth stations in operation in Rome and Scanzano in Italy, Maadi in Egypt, and Atlanta and New Jersey in the United States. The current satellite footprint covers all of the Middle East and North Africa. As the Orbit service grows, the network plans to expand to include a total of thirteen earth stations which will enable its transmission to cover Europe and the United States by the end of 1995.

The primary Orbit programming includes the following:

*Al Oula*: 24 hour Arabic movie channel.

*Al Thania*: An original collection of regional and international entertainment programming.

*Orbit News*: Daily live news coverage from ABC, NBC, and CBS.

*Super Movies*: 24 hour American movie channel.

*BBC World Service Arabic Channel*: News and public affairs programming in Arabic.

*Orbit-ESPN Sports Channel*: Round the clock live sports coverage.

*Music Now*: A collection of music videos from around the world.

*Egypt 1 and Egypt 2:* Two channels dedicated to Egyptian entertainment programming.

*The Fun Channel:* Dedicated mainly to children's programming.

Orbit is owned by a Saudi based consortium of investors called the Al-Mawarid group. It is managed by a team of experienced professionals headed by Alexander Zilo, Orbit's director and Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Zilo and his team were previously responsible for setting up STAR TV in Hong Kong. Zilo was hired by the Al-Mawarid group shortly after he resigned from STAR TV in 1993.

Prior to launching Star TV and successfully selling it to Rupert Murdoch's group, Zilo worked for Viacom. He later moved to CBS where he became their director before heading ABC's operations in Asia for 10 years. Exploiting his extensive experience and contacts, Zilo's strategy has been to anticipate any competition and close deals with a wide range of important program providers, including Columbia-Tristar, Time Warner, Entertainment Channel and ABC News.<sup>37</sup>

When asked about the difference between Star TV and Orbit in terms of targeting strategy, Zilo said, "Unlike Star, we will not be carpet bombing 38 countries. We are producing programming for the Arabic-speaking world, with a production center in Egypt and independent production in Jordan and Morocco. We have purchased an extensive catalog of films, drama and sitcoms in Arabic and scoured archives, including movietone for newsreel on Arabic affairs never before shown in these territories".<sup>38</sup>

Orbit is planning to export its Arabic programs to the US later this year, targeting communities with large Arab populations. Orbit is also supplying four radio channels, two English and two Arabic, and three BBC World Service radio relays in English, Arabic and French.

### **Arab Radio and Television (ART)**

Arab Radio and Television (ART) is owned by Dallah Albaraka, one of Saudi Arabia's largest corporations. It began broadcasting in 1993 both in Arabic and English from its headquarters in Fucino, Italy. Since then, ART has rapidly adopted the American model of owning as much product (programming) as possible. It has already bought up about half the Arabic-language motion pictures ever made, and is making sizable investments in its own original programming. ART is growing at a rapid rate. It has production centers in Jeddah, Riyadh, Amman, Tunis, Beirut, Rome and Cairo. Currently ART has five channels containing a mix of local and international programs. According to its General Manager Milad Bessada, ART 1 produces 60 percent of the

network's output. On ART 2, the network's sports channel, 80 percent is international sport and the rest is produced in house. Sixty percent of childrens programs and 40 percent of music shows are also produced locally.<sup>39</sup> More specialized channels are in the works including ones devoted to drama (as opposed to full featured films), music and comedy. As part of its expansion plans ART has secured transponder space on the new PAS-4 satellite and entered into a joint venture with Multichoice (a European/South African broadcasting group) to introduce Pay-TV, and to launch an international Arabic service in 1996.<sup>40</sup>

The primary ART programming includes the following:

*ART 1:* Variety, round the clock music, comedy, serial and modern cultural events.

*ART 2:* Sports plus exclusive events: Olympics, Super Bowl, etc.

*ART 3 Junior:* Childrens programs, documentaries, films, game shows.

*ART 3 Music:* Twelve hours' modern and classical Arabic songs, festivals and interviews.

*ART 4 Movies:* Twenty four hour Arabic and international movies, plus star profiles and interviews.

## Implications and Emerging Policy Issues

The advent of DBS television in the Arab world raises four broad questions:

1. Who controls the right to information and entertainment - the government or the individual?
2. What is the role of the government in ensuring that the people's interests are served?
3. Is centralized control of the media justified to achieved the government's socio-economic goals?
4. Are media policies necessary to regulate satellite technology?

These questions can be viewed as a tension between two poles. The first is related to freedom of communication, and the second has to do with cultural identity and national sovereignty and prosperity.

## National Development Vs Free Flow of Information

Beset with chronic problems of poverty, illiteracy, and the lack of an adequate industrial infrastructure, many developing countries viewed the mass media as powerful instruments capable of facilitating national development goals. Mass media was viewed as magic multipliers after the era following decolonization. Third World leaders also viewed the mass media as instruments of power, propaganda, and persuasion that could disseminate

their policies and ideologies to millions of people. Free flow of information, they believed, would hamper the socio-economic goals of the mass media and, in turn, that of the government. As a result of these factors, state control of mass media came to be justified in developing countries.

The other issue in this debate relates to the question of national sovereignty brought about by satellite spillover. Frederick notes that information sovereignty relates to the notion that nations enjoy full rights of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the areas of communication and information.<sup>41</sup> The technologies of communication, in this case direct broadcast satellites, transcend national boundaries, and governments have little consistent control to counter signals dispersed from another source. The problem of signal spillover arises when a satellite footprint inadvertently crosses national boundaries without prior consent from the receiving nation, because the signals cannot be exactly confined to a specific geographical area. DBS television from one nation to another without the approval of the receiver is considered a violation of national sovereignty.

United Nations regulations attest that except for spillover effects that cannot be avoided, cross-border television transmission without the prior consent of the governments on the receiving end is prohibited. Yet this principle is constantly violated. For example, it was reported in 1992 that, in violation of UN regulations, Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) beamed its programs via satellite to other countries in the Indian subcontinent and the Gulf states.<sup>42</sup>

The dawning of a new age of borderless television in the Arab World has the potential of threatening the sovereignty of national broadcasting to control television within their own borders. Such issues may sound a bit alarmist at this time, but the long term policy implications of these issues have become significant to planners in the region. While there does not seem to be any coordinated policy efforts to deal with these issues, the response to the spread of DBS receivers by governments in the region has been one of the following:

1. Imposing a complete ban on DBS receivers (e.g. Iran).
2. Imposing some regulations on the import of DBS receivers like levying tariffs or placing size restrictions (e.g. Egypt, Morocco).
3. Implementing a gradual ban on DBS imports while centralizing content distribution through local cable operations (e.g. Qatar, Jordan).
4. Placing no restrictions on DBS imports and ownership (e.g. Kuwait, Lebanon).

It is not clear at this point which of these choices would best serve national interest as well as the interest of the people involved. It is clear, however, that whatever choice is made the consequences will not be felt immediately. Satellite broadcasting cannot be dealt with as simply a technical issue; it is also

a socio-political issue and its resolution will inevitably be embroiled in discussions of the New World Information Order and the general cultural and economic relations between the North and the South, the developed and the less developed world, the rich and the poor. Different national domestic considerations have to be aligned, thus creating the need for agreements and regulatory activity. Just as in the 1960s and 1970s the question of news and television program flows marked the political dimensions of what many saw as simply economic and commercial activity (disguised as principles of freedom of information and expression), so too the issue of direct broadcasting by satellite confronted the developed nations with views and demands of others for equitable treatment and fair access to international resources. Consequently, there are very few areas left today that are the sole preserve of one nation alone. Television communication, and international information transfer and telecommunications, are parts of a web of interweaving forces which reaches all corners of the globe. Inevitably, there is conflict at the pan-national level involving two or more countries.

### **National Sovereignty and the Regulation of Direct Satellite Broadcasting**

In today's global media environment, how far can nation states continue to regulate their domestic broadcasting systems in isolation from the penetration of ideologies and technological change? One prominent view suggests that it is no longer possible for individual states to act in isolation from one another. As Dyson and Humphreys put it: "regulation has shifted from being essentially a domestic political process to realizing enduring principles of public service broadcasting policy to becoming a process of statecraft. This transition reflects the new complex international dimension of broadcasting regulations".<sup>43</sup>

Such issues are particularly relevant in the context of the development of systems of satellite broadcasting. Whether intentionally or not, signals from broadcast satellites overcome national boundaries and so reintroduce the question of whether the principle of national sovereignty gives a state the exclusive right to decide which foreign broadcasts may be received by its people, and to what extent other states should refrain from beaming broadcasts via satellites to those states which do not wish to receive them or without their prior consent.

With the support of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC), the question of "prior agreement" or "prior consent" has been seemingly settled within the terms of the 1977 Agreement and Plan. The plan was interpreted by proponents of the "prior consent" principle as reflecting broad international recognition that direct broadcasting by satellite should be based solely on prior agreements between

the parties concerned.<sup>44</sup> In this way, satellite broadcasting systems would, in theory, be restrained from crossing national borders, thus upholding the sovereignty of individual nations.

Yet even this technical solution has done little to alter fundamental perceptions of the meaning of "prior consent". On the one hand, it touches on the concepts of self determination and cultural independence. But on the other, the issue of "prior consent" continues to be part of the struggle between different concepts of the international infrastructure of communications and the role of the ITU and WARC within it. In the words of Nordenstreng and Schiller: "In this historical period, then, the preservation of national sovereignty may be understood best as a step in the still larger struggle to break the domination of the world business system".<sup>45</sup> It appears that with the growing international integration of information and telecommunications markets, the reality of the sovereign state has been further eroded. The effective exercise of sovereign authority over communications matters is thus becoming more difficult, leading to the "conflation of diplomacy and broadcasting regulation activities".<sup>46</sup> Recent debates within UNESCO and the ITU about broadcasting issues illustrate the extent to which international political diplomatic considerations intrude into previously national broadcasting concerns.<sup>47</sup>

The impact of these processes on the conceptualization of the state and the question of state sovereignty has been immense. In recent years, scholarly debate within international relations has downplayed the image of the "realist-sovereign state" in favor of a definition of the state which emphasizes the decreasing importance of formal state boundaries and to the increasing importance of economic and cultural exchange between states. This so-called "interdependence" approach offers an alternative interpretation to that of the "sovereign" state. While the realist model of sovereignty assumes that each nation state makes its own individual calculations of self-interest, the interdependence model emphasizes that in place of a single decision-making body, there may be several layers of collaboration - from the political to the bureaucratic, from public state organizations to private economic actors - all attempting to "manage" or "stir" the links which emerge. Similarly, whereas in the "realist-sovereign" model the bargaining between the state and other states is the focus, in the "interdependence" model the suggestion is that governments counter the loss of autonomous control either by exploiting the network of interdependent relationships in order to extract suitable economic or other rewards for internal consumption, or by identifying the collective policy network with significant policy ends.<sup>48</sup>

At first glance, it would appear that transfrontier DBS transmissions exhibit all of the characteristics of a condition of interdependence or, alternatively, domination. In this instance, many apparently sovereign decisions are seriously constrained or made ineffective by the decisions of others as well as by

economic trends and interests. Nowhere is that more evident than in the case of the reactions to the "prior consent" issue. Like international radio, satellite television demonstrates that the state has to adapt its policies to a framework of interdependence; sovereign decisions lose their meaning in the face of those of international bodies and when pitted against extranational trends and interests. National actions no longer appear sufficient, satisfactory or effective.

Some scholars go so far as to challenge the notion of national sovereignty itself. They question the assumptions made about the nature of political systems and the desirability of political sovereignty.<sup>49</sup> Yet it is not clear whether these discussions are precise enough to be applied to the broadcasting/cultural spheres. This can be seen very clearly in the debate about media imperialism and/or cultural imperialism. The basic notion in the debate is that the exports of cultural products are dominated by a few countries, and so one is witnessing "the wholesale transfer of meaning, the generation and shaping of political consciousness with the effect, partially intended, of re-fashioning the world in the intellectual and political image of the exporter".<sup>50</sup>

A similar view is echoed by Jeremy Tunstall which "claims that authentic, traditional and local, culture in many parts of the world is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of...media products from the United States".<sup>51</sup> It follows that any moves to support the culture under attack must necessarily confront the United States or indeed any other culturally dominant nation. Otherwise, the cultural identity of that particular dependent nation is in danger as is, ultimately, its political sovereignty.

In recent years, however, these ideas have been greatly criticized for failing to recognize the difference between the political and the cultural. Some scholars have argued forcefully in favor of uncoupling the issue of cultural sovereignty from political sovereignty on the grounds that this may create a better understanding of the trade of cultural artifacts like books, magazines, recorded music without immediately seeing it as a threat to the political sovereignty of the state.<sup>52</sup>

The lack of fit between cultural and political sovereignty, and the difficulty of defining "national identity" leaves us with a very complex picture of political systems and cultural systems co-existing within an international order. Indeed, one may even argue that in a general sense the political order is no longer fully paralleled by the cultural order. Global satellite broadcasting (CNN, STAR) may be available across frontiers without fundamentally affecting the political sovereignty of those receiving the signals. The fact remains that the separateness of nations is driven by the fundamental economic and cultural forces, from the banking system to the trade in computer games, from

international magazines to the trade in feature films. In today's market driven global dynamics, the real cultural frontiers have long vanished.

## Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

The advent of Direct Satellite Broadcasting has opened up an avenue for re-evaluating the media environment in the Arab world. This paper has shed some light on technology and helped to identify the major media players in the region. As the popularity of DBS channels continues to grow, further research is recommended to arrive at some of the answers from the major issues raised in this article. The media scenario in the region is fast changing and its long term policy implications have to be understood before undertaking any regulatory measures to counter the challenge posed by foreign multi-channel television. The outcome will ultimately hinge on what the audience wants and needs. The following topics need to be examined from both macro and micro perspectives to fully understand the implications of Direct Satellite Broadcasting in the region:

1. What are the cultural effects of DBS programming on local audiences? Is Star TV or Orbit capable of inducing "foreign" values in Arab societies? Does the programming of these channels pose a threat to local traditions, customs and culture?
2. What are the economic consequences of DBS availability on the government's long held monopoly on national media?
3. What are the political consequences of international news coverage of national affairs?
4. If DBS programming continues to be popular, what steps can the government take to restructure its electronic media network? Will competition ensure more programming necessary to improve quality?
5. What concepts of the nation state do we need to utilize in an era when political sovereignty and nationalism are confronted by international economic and political structures?

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