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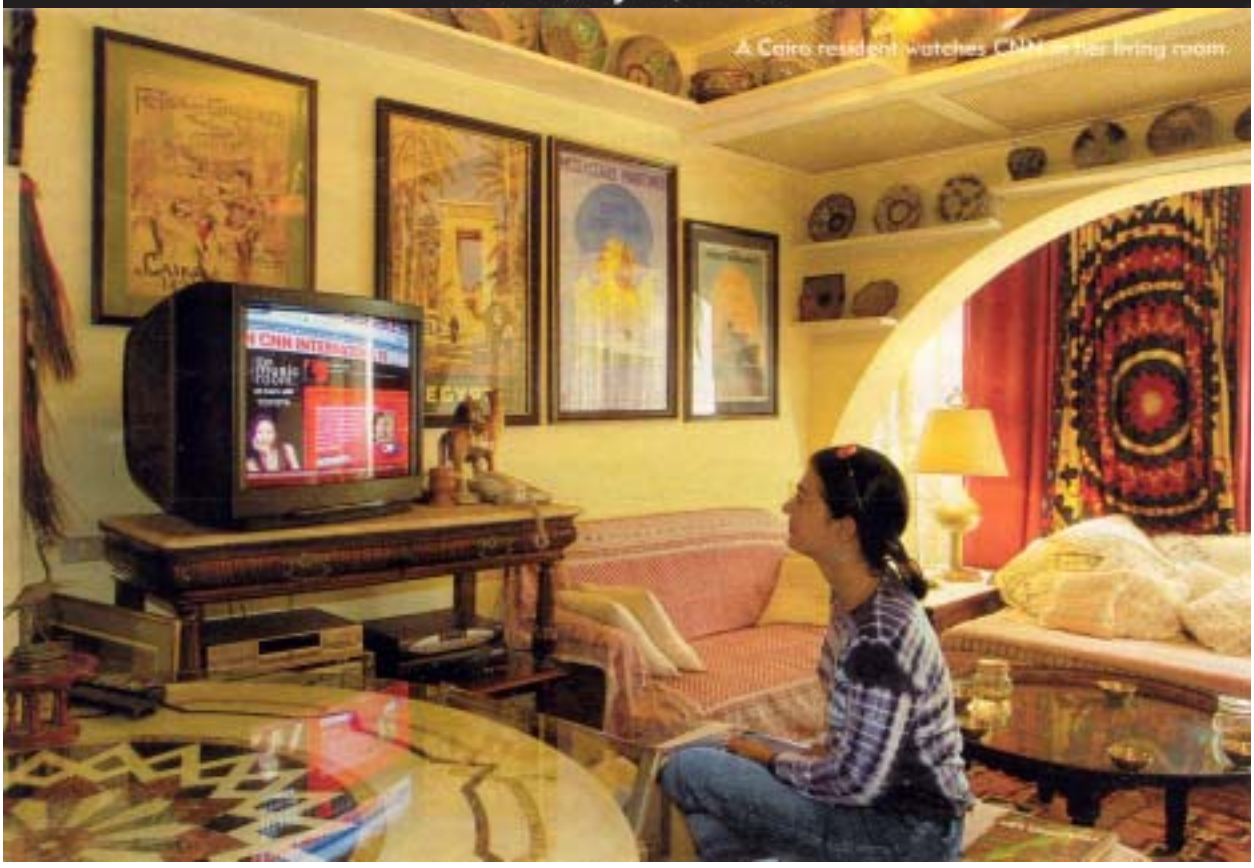

SALAAM, ALL YOU FOLKS OUT THERE IN TELEVISIONLAND

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST, BUT MAYBE THE TWAIN CAN MEET—THROUGH THE MIRACLE OF POPULAR CULTURE

By **Mark Scheffler**

NEWS PRODUCER JAMAL DAJANI recently spent time in the Arab world watching the Middle East watch television. A Jerusalem-born Palestinian who has lived in America the past 27 years, he wanted to touch base with his native land to get a better read on the much-heralded satellite TV revolution. Everywhere he looked, the populace was tuned in to programming from around the world—not just from the region. People had access to Italian sitcoms, French chat shows, the BBC, CNN and "The Bold and the Beautiful." Even bastardized variations on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" had taken root: a show called "Who Will Win the Million?" has achieved huge popularity in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and elsewhere. Still more Western programming is about to arrive, as the U.S. government launches Al Hurra ("The Free One"), an Arab-

language news and entertainment network that will be transmitted by satellite to Middle Eastern states and be our answer to Al Jazeera, the immensely popular Qatar-based satellite network that the Bush administration blames for promoting hatred of America.

But Dajani believes things are going in the wrong direction. It is the U. S. that needs more information about Middle Easterners, not so much the other way around, and he thinks we could take a lesson from the Islamic world, where the exposure to multiple points of view gives people a broader perspective than is generally available in mainstream U.S. media.

"[Americans] are entrapped in their own media bubble," argues Dajani, who lives and works in San Francisco. "Most people just know ABC, CBS, Fox and so forth."

To help diversify the airwaves, Dajani and co-producer David Michaelis are translating newscasts and cultural programs from such places as Abu Dhabi, Beirut and Damascus into English for American TV viewers, giving them access to an Arab perspective that has rarely been telecast stateside. Their broadcast, called "Mosaic," draws its content from 16 different Arab countries and is shown on the Link TV channel (it is also online).

Though the programming is gradually expanding to reflect a wider swath of Arab culture, the half-hour show's primary focus is on news, which, as it turns out, reflects something of the culture as well: Broadcasts from the region don't flinch at showing bodies of dead soldiers and civilians.

"In the Arab world, they look at life and death in equal visions," says Dajani. "So whenever you have death and destruction, the cameras are there and you see it unedited. Americans save all this for Hollywood—people getting killed and maimed. They pay money to see it."

A customer browses through a Baghdad shop selling satellite receivers for television.

Dajani and Michaelis are just two of the entrepreneurial types on both sides of the Atlantic who are working more or less below the radar to improve relations between West and East through cross-cultural exchanges.

These efforts to use TV, books and film to try to bridge cultural divides and alter uninformed perspectives come at a key time. Even as discussions at the leadership level revolve around "clashes of civilizations," suicide bombers and Great Satans, the avenues of cultural exchange remain open. American interest in the Middle East—and Middle Eastern interest in all things American—has increased significantly and is no longer relegated to the corridors of academia or wonky think tanks in Washington.

According to Borders, sales of books by and about the Arab world increased more than 100 percent after 9/11. It's still hard for Americans aged 18 to 24 to find Iraq on a map (85 percent can't, according to a 2002 National Geographic survey), but Rai, a kind of North African rap music sung in Arabic and French, is starting to emerge in nightclubs in major American metropolises. And Arab film festivals—hoping to capitalize on the cultural climate that has led to cinematic breakthroughs from India and Iran—are sprouting up across the U.S. Chicago, for example, has a two-year-old Palestinian film festival that falls in April.

Such receptivity to the outpourings of other cultures is old hat to the Arab world. While the bullets were flying during the Lebanese civil war (from 1975 to 1990), "We were watching 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty,' " says John Sinno, the Lebanese-born president of Seattle-based Arab Film Distribution. "You get this [impression] that the Arabs hate the U.S. But they have been consuming American cultural products for ages, and they pretty much dominate."

Sinno calls himself an "activist distributor" and says the goal of his company is to work with festivals, universities and movie theaters to popularize films that more accurately portray what goes on in the Persian Gulf region. "There's a branch of books and films on terror, and I could probably distribute quite a bit of them," he says, "but I just feel like that's not what I want to do. I'm trying to educate, to bridge people."

Can a movie do the work of a diplomat? Can a TV show take the place of a coup d'etat? As far as the Middle East is concerned, it's still a wait-and-see issue. "Whether you could get something like the counterculture of the '60s in a contemporary Arab or Islamic context is hard to imagine, but not impossible," says Michael Hudson, director of Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. "There are certainly signs that, considering the political, social and economic crisis that the region is in, the people, especially younger people, will look in other directions."

One thing that impressed Dajani when he was examining Middle Eastern viewing habits was the freedom with which average citizens got things off their chest on phone-in shows. Callers bombarded the news programs to proclaim their opinions— some weren't happy with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak; other were raging against American or even their own country's foreign policy.

The other thing that made Dajani take notice was how the younger generation was embracing the sexually charged entertainment of American pop culture via MTV. Soaking up all the revealing clothing and pierced navels, they seemed to be, in turn, ever so slightly pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior and dress throughout the predominantly Muslim sector of the world. To Dajani, it seemed as if Arab youth would some day be getting their spiritual advice from Snoop Dogg instead of an austere Islamic cleric.

As he surveyed this scene, Dajani was flabbergasted by how Middle Eastern democracy seemed to thrive on the airwaves and nowhere else.

"When people express themselves on TV [call-in shows], they can hide their identity," he observes. "But if they come out and do that in their own respective countries, they would, within days, if not hours, be thrown in jail."

Given time, though, Dajani believes the small screen could serve as both a window and mirror in the region. By seeing other cultures, he says, people will be better situated to assess their own, and eventually turn up the pressure for democratization of their regimes.

But some think a diet of Julia Roberts movies and McDonald's food is far from enough to stir rebellion. Many in the Arab world view anything from the U.S. with a mix of curiosity and cynicism.

"American pop culture is a global commodity, but the strong affection for that is qualified by the fear and anger over [U. S. governmental policies]," says Mark Linz, director of the American University in Cairo Press. Charges of cultural imperialism and a U.S.-centric worldview on the part of Americans remain sticking points.

Such mistrust is rampant as the $62 million Al Hurra network gets off the ground. Many predict the network will have a hard time winning viewers.

But the idea behind cross-cultural exchange is that when Colin Powell and Mubarak can't soothe relations and temper egos, perhaps cartoons can.

"Our main objective is to bring audiences an understanding of Middle Eastern culture in a manner far removed from United Nations hallways and news broadcasts," says Oussama Jamal, a Lebanon native and president of the Fine Media Group, a 3-year-old Chicago-based production company. Jamal aspires to be the "Arab Disney" by creating animated films featuring characters drawn from

Islamic history. His company's cartoons have already been screened in public schools, and it is looking into the possibility of theatrical releases.

That there's an aspiring Arab Disney out there gunning for the big screen probably doesn't make Michael Eisner lose much sleep, but pre-9/11, the idea that Arab-themed animated movies could even have an inroad, much less an audience, in America seemed about as likely as a wet T-shirt contest in Saudi Arabia. A big factor in the spread of these cross-cultural efforts is the Internet.

Haifaa Al-Mansour, who calls herself the "first Saudi female filmmaker," lives in a country that has no movie industry or theaters and traditionally relegates women to the fringes of society. She shoots her short films around her hometown of Al-Khobar with a digital camera and posts them on the Internet for film festival programmers and critics across the globe, thereby transcending national boundaries and evading censors.

Her second film, "The Bereavement of the Fledgling," is about a farm boy named Abdul whose mother wants a better future for him in the city of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital. Abdul's father tries to discourage any thoughts he may have of abandoning the land of his ancestors, but his mother secretly sends him off to the city in the middle of the night, and he never returns. It's a fairly common—and, at 12 minutes, fairly short—tale of the inner and outer conflicts that come with leaving home. But Abdul's story also reflects Saudi Arabia's struggle: The volatile mix of petrodollars, Islamic funda-mentalism and MTV has led to intense friction between tradition and modernism.

Al-Mansour says she is trying to push the issue of gender roles to the forefront of the rigidly patriarchal Saudi society. A recent World Bank report warned that marginalizing women has stunted growth in the Middle East. "No country," it states, "can raise the standard of living and improve the well-being of its people without the participation of half its population." Al-Mansour hopes those dynamics are changing. "I hope that the fact that I am trying to bring a little change all by myself would give confidence to other Saudi women to start taking control of their careers and achieve what they want to."

Like Al-Mansour, Amin Al-Ayouty hopes to transform social attitudes through storytelling. But he seeks to educate the Arab world in the ways of the West. He translates books from English into Arabic for the Middle Eastern marketplace, including Charles Frazier's "Cold Mountain" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved."

Al-Ayouty believes social transformation comes in the form of cultural exchange, not Molotov cocktails. "Democracy is gaining ground in the Arab world," says the now-retired Cairo University professor of English literature. "There's a permanent conflict between secularism and fundamentalism, but my definite belief is that the Middle East is marching forward, not backward."

Trying to break down walls via the printed word is an uphill battle in the Arab world. While the Korancommands people to read, and Islamic culture has an illustrious literary history, reading today in the Middle East is all but extinct. A best seller is a book that has sold just 5,000 copies.

In spite of this, American literature has long been a fixture in the region, in both translated editions and in English. Arabs have paged through "Huckleberry Finn," "For Whom the Bell Tolls" and the drop-out epic "On the Road."

"There's an interest in existentialism and rebellion and iconoclasm" in the Middle East, says Saadi Simawe, an Iraqi native who now chairs the English department at Grinnell College in Iowa. "People are suffering from dictatorships and from colonialism, so of course they identify with the writers who are rebellious."

In translating "Cold Mountain," Al-Ayouty says he was trying to bring the particular experience of the Civil War to Middle Easterners' "hearts and understanding." "It's selling very well," says Iman Fouzy, a staff member of the Arabic Book Program at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. "It was a very pleasant surprise for the Egyptian reviewers. 'Where were you hiding this Charles Frazier, this genius writer?' they all said."

Other popular titles Fouzy says, include "The Politics of Religion in the United States" by Michael Corbett, and "The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality" by John Esposito. Thomas Friedman's "The Lexus and the Olive Tree" was out of stock in two months.

"The American experience of life is vastly different from the experience of any other people," Al-Ayouty says. "But this shouldn't be looked upon as a cause for any schism. There are always venues for understanding each other."