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Pertinent & Impertinent Surfing the Satellite

How Jordanian TV is a window to the world's soul.

By Nathan Schneider

Satellite TV in Jordan, I discovered on my recent trip there, is a chaotic pleasure. When my American friends talk about watching it, taxiing home after a long day, there's a little dread mixed with the hope of going into the kind of coma that only television can put one. The standard satellite setup, dauntingly, has more than 500 channels shooting out their signals in languages from all over the world. Finding something conventionally decent to watch is next to impossible for all but the practiced viewer. When you find your way around, you can preset your favorite stations and forget all the rest. But for those of us doomed to the full variety, the Jordanian boob tube becomes an obligatory tour of the human universe.

When all you want is *Friends* (or even its Arabic equivalent), prepare to weed through Italian soaps, Iranian talk shows, the Pentagon channel, Egyptian poetry, Russian porn, Mecca 24/7, Italian porn, state-run news, Kurdish divas, soccer, *fútbol*, American rap on Arab MTV, Bollywood revels, false prophets from Holland, German business commentary. When you finally come to Courteney Cox and Jennifer Aniston, they're dubbed in Japanese.

I suppose the price you pay for living in a country that doesn't produce too much TV for its own good is that you're forced to learn about the rest of the world. This learning shouldn't be confused with CIA World Factbook-learning. It's more like what you'd get from a good intercontinental love affair. At the very least, watching the satellite means being subjected to the fact that this planet is crowded and teeming with desires for every kind of stardom. Amidst them all, our little languages and preferences are the tiniest of snowflakes falling in six continents' worth of static.

What if more Americans got this madness on their sets, rather than the endless rolling plains of midwestern accents (dotted by the occasional Telemundo) on spin-off networks of spin-off networks? There isn't much that molds us more than channel-surfing. The average home has more television sets than people, and each person watches close to four and a half hours a day. That's more than 13 years out of a 71-year lifetime.

Of course one can have no illusions that the general run of us will turn cosmopolitan overnight. But there would certainly be some scattered, welcome oddities. Subcultures of teenagers rebelling against their jingoistic parents might develop a taste for Iranian pop music. Doing so, they could even grow up less willing to blow that particular pole of the Axis of Evil off the map. A grandmother in Colorado might stumble upon a lasting loyalty to the Kazakh soccer team, though she'll never understand the sportscasters' language. Even porn can be a cultural ambassador of sorts. It reminds us of certain basic vulnerabilities shared the world over.

And the news, the glorious news in Jordan, sprinkled amidst the rest! The sun never sets on the reach of the BBC, which has turned British colonial know-how into total situation awareness for all. See proof that CNN isn't dumb (it just thinks we are) by watching its international edition. You'll quickly notice how our domestic version pales in comparison even to the Kremlin's English-language propaganda machine, Russia Today.

The up-and-coming crown jewel is none other than Al Jazeera, an island of common sense from the Persian Gulf, which makes up for what it lacks in slick graphics and endless pundits with skilled journalists and commentary by real movers and shakers from



Satellite TV in Jordan

Conduit for *Friends*, porn, and peace.

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all over, whether they be government officials or Taliban warlords. Fearing its willingness to give our enemies a hearing, the leading American cable provider, Comcast, has refused to carry Al Jazeera in the U.S. Only the lucky denizens of northwestern Ohio; Burlington, Vermont; and Washington, D.C. have it on their basic cable.

English is only the beginning. BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera only whet my appetite for the foreign language news on the Jordanian dial that lies beyond my comprehension.

Now, back in the U.S., big-screen and basic cable remind me that the sole purpose of world events is to watch how our presidential candidates gaffe about them. We get opinion in exchange for information, sound bites in preference to perspectives, and partisanship as a cheap substitute for principle. The more stations there are, the fewer our options seem to become. Meanwhile, the free-for-all of what we call free speech has duped us into forgetting that there is any speech uttered beyond our own shores.

I can't help but feel sorry for Joe the Jordanian plumber, who has to trudge through a world's worth of noise to find escape in his own language. But, in the process, his satellite beams down a certain mystical wisdom from its orbit through space, one which his American counterpart doesn't come by so easily: It's a big, bizarre planet out there. • 5 January 2008

Nathan Schneider is a writer in New York City who has contributed to Search, AlterNet, Religion Dispatches, and other publications.

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