

Watching religiously

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new survey of the boom in religious broadcasting in the Middle East reveals how the small screen is becoming an increasingly important battlefield in the struggle for people's hearts and minds.

The report, by the Cambridge Arab Media project and Cambridge University's Centre of Islamic Studies, follows a conference earlier this year and provides an overview of the little-studied but sprawling network of satellite television stations now operating in the region.

Since the 1980s, the number of satellite channels in Middle Eastern countries has burgeoned, from none to almost 500. In turn, the range of religious programmes available to viewers has become far wider than

ever before, offering them alternative ideas not just about faith, but society as a whole.

Researchers believe that television is, as a result, becoming an evermore influential means of social engineering in the Middle East. While a handful of the channels in question, such as al-Jazeera, are internationally recognised, the majority address specific, niche audiences and are unknown to the vast majority of Westerners.

The report compiles the findings and observations of numerous academics, first presented at the Cambridge conference in January. It examines the religious voices and opinions which are emerging, the audiences they attract, and the influence that they may be having on people's identities and views.

The majority of stations considered are Islamic, but the document also covers Christian and Jewish outlets. In some cases, it finds that they are a force for unity, often in troubled states such as Lebanon, Israel and Iraq. Equally, however, it charts cases where Islamic "televangelism" has become a riposte to longer-standing, mainstream religious broadcasters.

"These channels are often political tools which promote a particular vision of a social and political order," Professor Yasir Suleiman, Director of the Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge said. "The research covered in the report suggests that the presenters and participants in religious programmes are not simply arguing over the rightness and wrongness of their ideas, but claiming and contesting the authority to speak for Islam itself."

The review highlights a number of cases where clear efforts are being made, through television, to claim audiences on behalf of a certain religious and political ideal.

This is not a feature of Islamic channels alone. Some Christian broadcasters in the [Middle East](#) were found to be using television to preach and defend their faith in the face of perceived marginalisation in the Arab World; not least in the case of al-Hayah, a channel which explicitly tries to convert Muslims to Christianity and has moved studios several times for fear of attack as a result.

As the report also finds, however, the drive to influence viewers is not always an attempt to turn them to political extremism. More commonly, studies in a wide range of countries found that audiences were being encouraged to pursue a more pious and ethically sound lifestyle, although opinion differed widely from station to station as to what that might entail.

Rather than trying to engender direct political change, therefore, many researchers found cases where television programmes were trying to effect a "re-Islamization of society". Analyses of the al-Nas network in Egypt or the Iqra' Channel in Saudi Arabia, for example, did not find that viewers were being encouraged to make political judgements as a result of religious broadcasts, but rather to focus on their individual and ethical behaviour in accordance with Islamic teaching and for the sake of a greater social good.

Perhaps more surprisingly still, in some of the most troubled countries studied, this effort to encourage society to rediscover its religious identity is also used in an attempt to unite it. In Iraq, where there are now multiple Sunni and Shi'ite broadcasters, researchers found neither attempting to win over viewers from the other, but observed: "There was instead a kind of virtual reconciliation where sectarian political sentiments were present but not directly expressed. All channels tended to respect national unity."

Curiously, a similar picture emerges in Israel, where Jewish

programming was aimed largely at progressive or secular Jews rather than the right-wing Orthodoxy which tends to dominate national politics. The most popular channel, Hidabroot, appeared to convey the message that regardless of audiences' political or religious preferences, all had a common, Jewish identity which deserved respect.

Further work, examining the nature of audience these channels generate and the impact their content is having, is now being planned. "We hope to launch this second phase of the project in the future, but it will need careful planning and project funding," Dr Kahled Hroub, Director of the Arab Media Project said.

The full report is a joint publication by the Cambridge Arab [Media](#) Project and the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies. The research project behind it was also supported by the International Development Research Centre in Canada. Copies can be downloaded for free from: www.cis.cam.ac.uk/Reports.htm

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