

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The Arab Satellite Song Boom: Is It Too Hot for US Government Broadcasters? ^[1]

There's a boom in the popularity of Arab songs on the most successful channels in the Middle East. The digital music marketplace is very technically advanced, and U.S. government broadcasting isn't keeping pace.

Apart from the news channels which carry on the war of ideas, many in Arab countries would rather watch video clips of Pussy Samir, a singer/dancer, and Boozy Samir (no relation perhaps, but also a singer/dancer), on the "Melody Hits" satellite channel and website, among many others like it.

The popular "Melody Hits" calls itself "the first and only interactive 24-hour music channel in the Middle East." Launched only last September, its music videos are carried both on Egypt's Nile Sat satellite and on the Internet.

The state-of-the-art Arabic channel is "powered by IBM," from the good old U.S. of A, of course, which enables one who logs onto Melody Hits to select music videos, or digital audio songs, of one's choosing, including "Hot Links" to top 40 music videos, top 40 Melody Hits on TV, top 40 songs, Melody Internet Radio, and more than 100 Mobile cell phone videos.

Meanwhile, over at the web site of the U.S. government's Radio Sawa, whose broadcasting debuted more than three years ago, one may listen to the radio facility's audio array of real-time music, news and information programs, but its bare-bones web site contains no retrieval database for those who may wish to cherry pick from a wide range of choices, which today's Internet provides.

Mouafac Harb, news director of the U.S. government's Middle East Broadcasting Networks, Radio Sawa and TV Alhurra, says that funds have been requested to spruce up Radio Sawa's web site capabilities, but that costly additional music licensing rights would need to be obtained. These issues stand in the way of U.S. broadcasting becoming a real player in the sizzling popular market.

There are about a dozen other Arabic music TV channels, such as the Rotana TV Channel which boasts the biggest Arabic music library in the world, featuring 2,439 video clips, plus thousands of "Live Songs in Concerts and Music Festivals," and the Mazzika channel.

Dream satellite TV was launched on Egypt's Nile Sat commercial satellite four years ago with its 24/7 all music format, followed by Melody and Mazzika, which became commercial successes. Two privately-owned Egyptian music radio stations followed, the Arab pop music Najoum FM and music archives and the English language music facility, Nile FM.

Showtime Arabia Music offers ten digital music channels 24/7, including Arabic music, videos and MTV Europe. Orbit whose packages include 20 radio channels, is available on the

Arabsat and Nilesat satellites.

But the brakes have been put on some of the content of music videos which are felt to exceed the limits of good taste. Videos of the 24-year-old performer known as "Ruby," whose real name is Rania Hussein, are not shown on Egyptian TV because they are considered too sexy, reports Brooke Comer, in TBS Journal. Egyptian dancer Boozy Samir's music videos, as well as those of Tunisian dancer/singer Najla, were removed from Melody Hits because of complaints from viewers, not because of government censorship. A satellite viewer named Nancy e-mailed her thanks to the channel.

"I applaud Melody Hits," said Nancy, "for being one of the few channels that actually listen to their viewers. You don't know how much it means to all those who wrote in, and even some of those who didn't. ... I assure you, your channel will be even more popular after this, because of this righteous act." The videos remain available on Melody Hits' web site, however.

Another viewer, Rami, e-mailed his gratitude for taking the racy videos off the satellite channel, noting "Some people say we as Arabs should focus on greater problems like our lazy governments and how the West sees us, but this event truly means something."

Newspaper columnist Gamal Badaway, quoted by TBS writer Amina Khalry, believes that Arab governments permit culture to be portrayed on satellite TV to drive people's minds "away from the horrific hazards of politics and economics. Such hazards would bring governments nothing but headaches." (Al Wafd, 28 October 2004). Khalry in TBS suggests that "Another popular theory adopted by many to explain the Arab satellite song boom is Western imperialism and the cultural colonization of the Arab and Muslim world."

Because the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors committed itself by entering the Middle East pop music market with Radio Sawa, Sawa had better get its web site updated to archive its music and other programs so visitors can listen to the music they want to hear, when they want to hear it, via the Internet. This means that funds will need to be made available for music licensing costs, and for a major overhaul of the web site. Sawa's other programs, including its public information and interview broadcasts, could also be archived for retrieval by today's audiences, who are used to time-shifting that increases station tune-in. Sawa should go a step further and archive music videos too if it wishes to compete in today's marketplace.

This is not to suggest that Pussy Samir or Ruby will need to be called into action. Technology better geared to today's consumer, be it IBM (which powers Melody Hits TV) or whatever, would be just fine.

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As always, when examining Middle Eastern media questions arise about attitudes toward the U.S. and the West. Readers are free to draw whatever conclusions they wish from the fact that on its website, Melody Hits features a flashing banner across the top of its archival page that informs visitors they can "Live and Work in the USA." That calls attention to the Green Card Lottery, in which "Each year, 50,000 immigrant visas [worldwide] are awarded in a lottery held by the US Department of State. The lottery is an official program pursuant to Section 203 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. If you receive a Green Card through the program, you and your family will be able to live and work permanently in the United States."
