

# How 'coronavirus escapism' altered Middle East screen habits

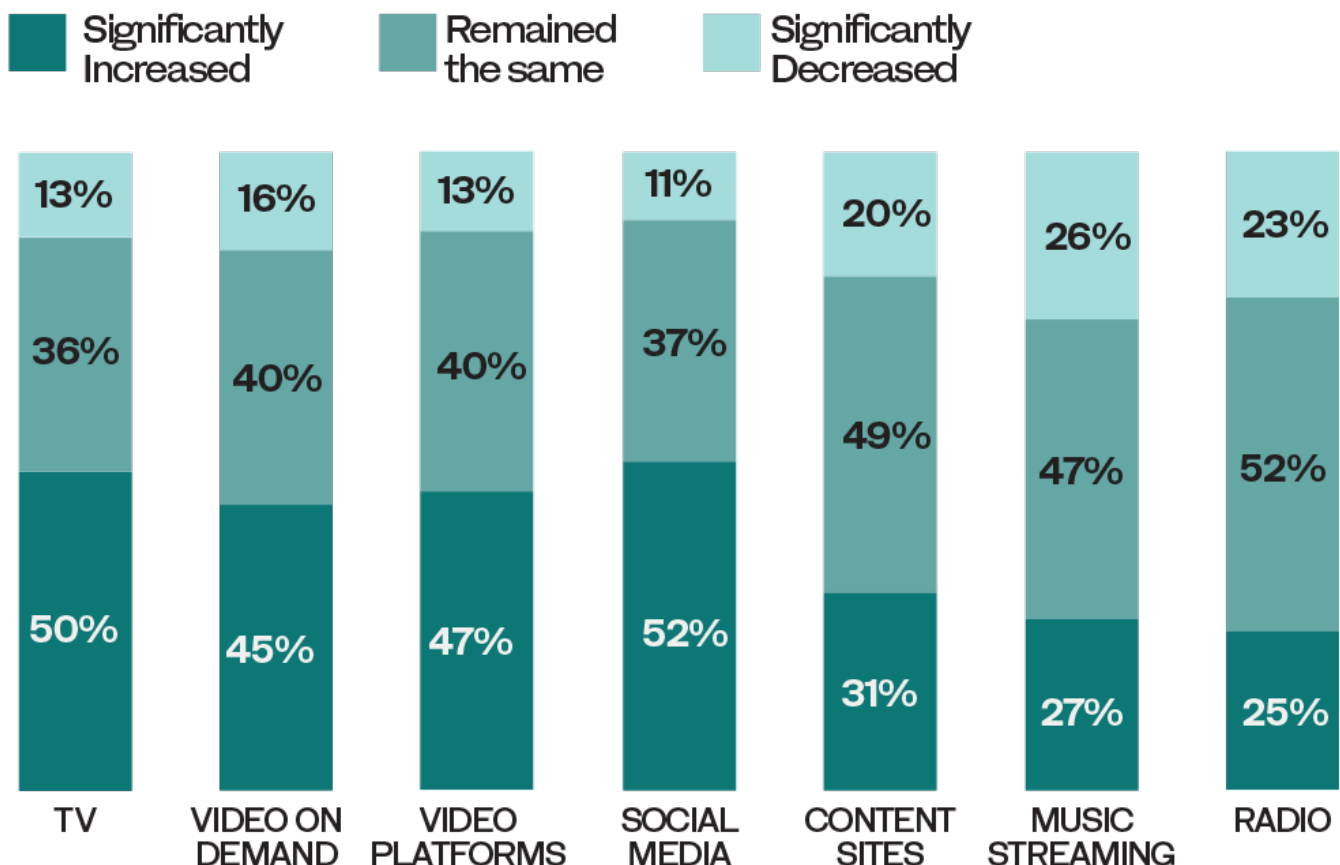
Thu, 2020-09-24 22:26

DUBAI: Temporarily transporting your mind away from the humdrum routine of reality to the more exciting universe offered by television has proven an extremely popular activity during the coronavirus pandemic.

Since March 1, unplanned closures of schools, offices, entertainment services and other public spaces across the world have resulted in more and more people spending extended hours at home in front of screens.

With few sources of accessible entertainment beyond the world of TV shows and movies, streaming services and television networks have predictably experienced an extraordinary surge in viewership in the Middle East, leveraging the opportunity to draw millions of customers into a COVID-free world of leisure.

## MEDIA CONSUMPTION IN MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA



Source: CG Ramadan/COVID-19 Research

A prime example is Netflix, which saw its best quarter yet for subscriber growth, adding a record 15.8 million subscribers worldwide during the first few months of the pandemic.

In the UAE alone, the streaming service reported a 26 percent increase in viewership during the month of March, according to the country's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority.

Similarly, MBC's Shahid OTT audiences grew threefold during March and April, with the Shahid VIP segment reporting 10 times the audience growth.

Another example is the STARZPLAY streaming service, which recorded strong growth in the number of unique users from 2019, peaking at 141 percent in April 2020 at the peak of the pandemic.

"Compared with March 2019, the number of STARZPLAY app installs in March 2020 increased by 328 percent and in April 2020 by 486 percent. Content consumption in March 2020 increased by 230 percent over the same period in 2019 and in April 2020 by 340 percent," Maaz Sheikh, CEO and co-founder of STARZPLAY, told Arab News.

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"The entire industry benefited during the stay-at-home period and especially during Ramadan, as consumption picked up with more people spending time at home."

Additionally, the Orbit Showtime Network (OSN) streaming service reported a 900 percent increase in consumption of content across all genres between March 1 and April 26.

With their timely launch of the Disney Plus channel in March, original Disney movies made up 75 percent of the top family films viewed during the same period.

"We've seen strong engagement numbers over the past few months. Saudi Arabia specifically saw an average of over five hours of engagement per subscription, per day. Over 50 percent of new downloads have come from Saudi Arabia, followed by the UAE and Kuwait," Zahra Zayat, senior vice president at OSN, told Arab News.

"We felt from what our numbers showed us that people were hungry for content and they were just grasping everything that was put in front of them."

A 35 percent increase in screen time was also reported across OSN's linear channels, with news channels specifically seeing a 250 percent increase in viewing time.

Yet, despite the initial spike, the pandemic did not generate a consistent demand for news, says Zayat.

“The increase was stronger and larger in other areas and genres almost as if people got tired of watching the news and had this fatigue from hearing about the pandemic,” she said, noting the news viewership continued to drop during the summer months.

However, with a larger audience leaning towards “binge-worthy” and “comfort” TV content, spending long hours plonked in front of a screen has quickly become what may be a temporary or long-term habit in many households.

According to Dr. Saliha Afridi, clinical psychologist and managing director of Lighthouse Arabia in Dubai, the trend can be attributed to the fact that many people have chosen television “as their go-to item for distraction and numbing from difficult emotions” during the pandemic period, and more specifically during lockdowns.

“By watching TV, they are transported into the lives of other people and dissociated from their own worries or sadness, creating temporary relief,” she told Arab News.

Afridi said that many streaming networks retain audience engagement through sophisticated algorithms, such as automatically starting the next episode, which draw in binge-watchers.

However, the impact of binge-watching on viewers during the pandemic can go one of two ways.

“For people who have addictive tendencies and use TV, which is a socially sanctioned addiction, their addiction is most likely worsened during the pandemic where there aren’t many opportunities to do anything else other than stay home and watch TV as a source of entertainment,” said Afridi.

“Others, who are hungry for social connection, outdoor physical activity, traveling, and other entertainment will most likely prefer that over TV once going outside with ease is a possible option.”



Zahra Zayat, senior vice president at OSN. (Supplied)

Moreover, the pandemic has also created new habits when it comes to popular viewing times.

OSN saw a 100 percent jump in viewings between the hours of 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. during the first six weeks of the pandemic, during which many countries in the Middle East were under tight lockdowns and quarantine.

“Historically, the peak time would start at 8 p.m. until 1 to 2 a.m. However, during this time, the peak period was starting at 6 p.m. and ending at 5 a.m. the next day ... so our engagement went up by more than 11 times ... with the maximum appetite coming from Saudi Arabia,” said Zayat.

She said some of the most popular titles were all-time favorite series, including “Game of Thrones,” “Grey’s Anatomy” and “Westworld,” which drew in old and new fans.

Titles like “Aladdin,” “Avengers: End Game” and “The Lion King” also continued to top the most-viewed content on the streaming app.

However, a rise in views was also reported in some of the less popular categories during the pandemic, as some viewers proved more inquisitive and ventured out to genres such as reality TV, cooking shows and documentaries.

Similarly, STARZPLAY streaming services saw a significant increase (20 percent) in the number of total viewing hours, particularly among Saudi unique users, who reported a rise in the number of hours per user, from 11.83 hours in January 2019 to 18.06 hours in May 2020.



A spike in consumption of family content such as Disney classics and Warner Bros. favorites was reported, with Arabic content also growing five-fold in popularity across the MENA region during the first few months of the pandemic. (Reuters/File Photo)

A spike in consumption of family content such as Disney classics and Warner Bros. favorites was reported, with Arabic content also growing five-fold in popularity across the MENA region during the first few months of the pandemic.

“We have also seen a growing appetite for DC content in the region, especially box sets. As per our recent viewership analysis, 42 percent of our viewers are binging on DC shows,” said Sheikh, referring to a notable interest in crime-scene investigation shows among DC fans in Saudi Arabia.

The top three most viewed shows among STARZPLAY viewers were “Vikings,” “Power” and “The Big Bang Theory.”

However, while OTT platforms and TV channels may seem to be thriving during the pandemic, one downside has been a drop in advertising revenues during the second quarter of the year, which coincided with the month of Ramadan.

According to media investment company Group M’s mid-year report for the MENA region, which forecasts the future of investments in the Middle East, TV ad spending across all countries will be down 29 percent in 2020 compared with 2019.

Overall, the average time spent on news and movie channels during the first period of the pandemic and Ramadan had risen by 30 percent, while

entertainment channels saw an increase of between 20 and 30 percent.

Yet, despite the growth in TV content consumption in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco, investment in the sector dropped by 30 percent compared with last year.

This can only mean one thing: As the pandemic hits somewhat of a plateau, with many offices and schools reopening, the main focus for many TV networks and streaming services is to keep their large “quarantine” audiences hooked and subscriber behavior up – that is unless another wave of infections hits this winter.

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# Fatah and Hamas agree to hold general elections in Palestine

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Thu, 2020-09-24 22:46

AMMAN: Palestine's two main political parties, Fatah and Hamas, have agreed to hold general elections within the next six months, they announced on Thursday.

A press release issued after a meeting held at the Palestinian Embassy in Istanbul said the two delegations had reached "a unified vision."

"We agree that the vision has matured and we plan to move ahead with a nationwide dialogue with the participation of all factions under the patronage of President (Mahmoud) Abbas to take place before the first of October," the statement said.

Jibril Rajoub, secretary general of the Fatah Central Committee, told Palestine TV that the heads of all factions will meet soon in Ramallah and that that meeting will be followed by the issuance of a presidential decree announcing the elections.

The official Palestinian news agency quoted Rajoub as saying that the elections will take place at three stages within six months. "We will have legislative elections, followed by presidential elections and then elections for the Palestine National Council wherever possible."

Hamas' spokesman in Gaza, Fawzi Barhoum, said the meeting in Istanbul confirmed the basis of a new initiative aimed at forging a policy course "based on unity and power-sharing."

Najeeb Qadoumi, a member of the Palestine National Council, told Arab News: "The meeting reflects the feeling among Palestinians that the Palestinian cause is in being liquidated based on the American-Israeli vision and that only through unity and the legitimization of elections can we stand up to this conspiracy against the Palestinian cause."

Gaza-based activist Wael Alloush told the Ramallah-based Ajyal radio station: "The last time elections were held was in 2006. It will be an important but new activity for many Palestinians."

Ammar Dweek of the Independence Commission on Human Rights said that external pressure has forced Palestinians to unite. "The situation has matured for elections because everyone realizes they will be totally isolated without the legitimacy of elections," he said.

Hazem Kawasmi, a member of the board of Al-Marsad (the Arab World Democracy and Electoral Monitor), told Arab News that he has suggested to President Abbas that elections should be based on two constituencies – national and Jerusalem. "The idea is that this would be a one-time activity that will highlight the issue of Jerusalem," he clarified.

Kawasmi expects that Israel would be strongly opposed to that idea, but said,

“We will have to fight it on the diplomatic and public relations fronts.” Jamal Zakout, who was the assistant to former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, told Arab News that he is still skeptical that elections will take place.

“Everyone is waiting for the results of the US elections,” he said. “Then they will decide for sure whether or not to have elections here.”



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## [French tourists to return to Egypt](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-24 22:29

CAIRO: Egypt is preparing to welcome French tourists again in October after a seven-month halt amid the coronavirus pandemic.



Three Egyptian governorates began receiving tourists and international flights in July.

On Wednesday, France's ambassador in Cairo, Stephane Romatet, told Egypt's Tourism Minister, Khaled Al-Anani, that France will resume tourist flights to Egyptian beach cities in October.

The two men also discussed establishing a mechanism to boost tourist visits to Egypt from France.

In mid-September, EgyptAir raised the number of flights and destinations it operated to 36 destinations after a hiatus of more than three months due to the coronavirus.

On Sept. 3, Cairo Airport welcomed the first British Airways flight since the outbreak of the pandemic with 180 passengers on board.

Egypt announced on June 14 that it will reopen three governorates for tourism and international flights, including the Red Sea resorts in Hurghada and Sharm El-Sheikh, in addition to Marsa Matrouh on the Mediterranean coast.

Measures to contain the pandemic have brought the Egyptian tourism sector to a near standstill. Tourism accounts for between 12 percent and 15 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

Last March, Egypt suspended international flights and closed airports, museums and major archaeological sites due to the pandemic.

However, last May it decided to allow hotels to operate again, with occupancy rates reduced to 25 percent and then increased to 50 percent.



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## [COVID-19 kills an entire Egyptian family after a wedding](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-24 22:24

CAIRO: An Egyptian family died in Damietta governorate after contracting COVID-19 at a relative's wedding.

The mother of the family returned home from her nephew's wedding infected with the virus, and in turn infected her husband and two of her children before she died.

On August 26, pharmacist Mohamed Al-Fangari announced that his mother's death was due to the coronavirus.

Ten days later, he revealed the death of his father, and three days later his brother also died from the virus.

After a few days, Al-Fangari announced that he, too, was infected.

Egyptian media later revealed that he died.

Before his death, Al-Fangari shared several posts on his Facebook page about his family's infection with the virus, asking people not to bully COVID-19 patients.

"We are all confident in God's ability, mercy and justice, and are satisfied with his judgment," he said on his Facebook account. "From the beginning of the coronavirus crisis in February, I have not shied away from my responsibility in front of people, and I have not been negligent with knowledge, advice, or material or moral assistance," he said.

"I swear we have been quarantined in our house since the beginning of March. The only time my mother went out was after the Eid for her nephew's wedding. She got infected from one of her relatives there, and then the infection was transmitted to a large number of family members."

His friends and the people of Damietta bade farewell to Al-Fangari by

spreading condolences and prayers on social media.

The number of new daily coronavirus cases is falling in Egypt, according to government statements.

On Wednesday, the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population reported 121 new coronavirus cases and 16 deaths.

The ministry said the total number of recorded coronavirus cases had reached 102,375, with 91,843 recoveries and 5,822 deaths.



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## [US to provide \\$720 million Syria aid, \\$108 million for South Sudan](#)

Thu, 2020-09-24 21:58

WASHINGTON: The United States said on Thursday it would provide more than \$720 million in humanitarian assistance for the response to the crisis in

Syria and nearly \$108 million for South Sudan.

Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun made the announcement on Syria at an event on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. He said the money would go “both for Syrians inside the country and for those in desperate need across the region.”

At the same event, Acting USAID Administrator John Barsa announced nearly \$108 million for the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan.

Biegun said the additional funds for Syria would bring total US support since the start of the crisis there to more than \$12 billion.

A crackdown by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad on protesters in 2011 led to civil war, with Iran and Russia backing the government and Washington supporting the opposition. Millions have fled Syria and millions have been internally displaced.

In July, the United States imposed new sanctions aimed at cutting off funds to Assad.

To help address the crisis created by the brutal military campaign of the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran, the United States is announcing more than \$720 million in humanitarian assistance to support civilians affected by the ongoing conflict in Syria.

– Secretary Pompeo (@SecPompeo) [September 24, 2020](#)

Syrian authorities blame Western sanctions for civilian hardship in the country, where a collapse of the currency has led to soaring prices and people struggling to afford food and basic supplies.

Washington says its sanctions are not intended to harm the people and do not target humanitarian assistance.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said heavy rains, fighting between armed groups, food insecurity, a deteriorating economic situation, and the COVID-19 pandemic had compounded an already dire humanitarian crisis in South Sudan. He said the funds for South Sudan would go to help South Sudanese in the country and in neighboring states.

In 2018, South Sudan formally ended five years of civil war that killed an estimated 400,000 people, caused a famine and created a massive refugee crisis, but efforts to conclude a peace process have stalled.



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