



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Coming up next on TV: big risks worth taking

By Elizabeth Guider

Nov 20, 2007

NEW YORK – Hassan Assiri and Mohamed Gohar are brave men. They are part of a growing contingent of producers in the Mideast, and around the world, who are pushing the envelope.

I'm not talking about technical bravura or story line sophistication but rather folks who take to heart the requirement of broadcasters to be socially responsible.

Such a media mandate is so diluted -- if not quietly derided -- in the U.S. that most viewers can only conjure up the Jerry Lewis telethon or NBC's Green project or at best MTV's 25-year AIDS awareness campaign as examples of such American efforts.

Just to say I was going to New York to participate this past weekend in a TV festival about social responsibility in broadcasting elicited mostly blank stares from folks in Hollywood.

But elsewhere in the world, from the Caribbean to Cairo, Brazil to Burma, there are broadcasters or single producers, often backed by NGOs, who are doggedly telling stories with embedded messages about societal problems from AIDS to political corruption and everything in between. And they're beginning to make a measurable impact.

Take Assiri, who for his pains in putting together a drama called "Aswar" in Saudi Arabia has had to flee to neighboring Dubai to escape death threats. Clips from the 30-episode serial give a whole new meaning to "Desperate Housewives": Unlike the polished sophistication of such American dramas, Assiri's show is a crude but unrelenting look at violence against women in Saudi-land.

"Aswar," which means "confines," was made three years ago, but no broadcaster in the region would dare pick it up until satcaster MBC finally aired it in April. (Check out Dish Network stateside.) It was widely watched across the Arab region.

Speaking on a panel Saturday, Assiri said he continues to focus on women's issues despite the pressures. But on that very day, one of the actresses from his latest effort, "Moses' Sisters," sent him a text message pleading to be cut from the completed episodes. Her Saudi

family has leaned on her for baring her "private parts" -- meaning her face.

In Egypt, Gohar produces a series titled "The Station," which dramatizes the lives of employees at a local TV outlet and also makes points about repression and political corruption in that country.

The BBC World Trust, a nonprofit arm of the BBC, is involved in this and another dozen such programs, from Sierra Leone to Afghanistan.

"Politicians, when they see something in an entertainment show, can rationalize and say, 'Surely, this is not about me,' " Gohar told participants at the International Academy-sponsored seminar. That's why he mostly gets away with such shows.

Gohar also has worked with D.C.-based NGO Search for Common Ground on a reality concept that sounds like a cross between "The Simple Life" and "Wife Swap."

Titled "The Bridge," it involves two Americans and two Egyptians who switch countries and lives for a few months. The program, which is designed to foster cultural understanding -- and also be funny -- will air in the U.S. on Hallmark Channel.

Teen-targeted "Wettin Dey" (What's Up) in Nigeria and "Detective Vijay" (a "Columbo" type who is HIV-positive) in India both deal with AIDS. They have measurably helped change attitudes and behaviors in those countries, and they are hits. Perhaps not on the ratings level of "CSI" but on another, life-affirming and in some cases life-saving level.

There should be more.

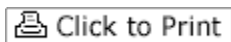
[Latest news »](#)

Links referenced within this article

Latest news »
<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/news/index.jsp>

Find this article at:

http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/features/columns/e3ie3ee16106869ea729c3fec2bbdef9649



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.