

Beyond Sound and Vision

NOON SALIH: This last year, after many of us were cooped up at home, it's hard to imagine a world without virtual spaces. It's how we do everything - from meetings, to keeping in touch with loved ones, to getting our news. It's become a daily fact of life.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: An online presence was the only presence and this extended to conferences, art fairs, trade fairs, sporting events, even the Olympics, everything, every event, every show, every experience was suddenly online.

NOON SALIH: That's Alaa AlShroogi, Vice President of Immersive Technology at Expo 2020.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: And, I think, an even more profound shift is that everyone, even the naysayers and the luddites, was online all of a sudden.

So we've moved forward significantly where, you know, grandmothers are ordering their groceries online. This was not the case before.

NOON SALIH: And as the Expo 2020 team were gearing up for the event, they had to figure out how they'd adapt to this new, largely online world.

And so they designed an online version of the event, known as a virtual expo: a fully immersive digital world that takes visitors from any part of the world into the heart of Expo 2020.

Shanghai was actually the first to host a virtual Expo in 2010. And this year, Dubai's 2020 Expo is bringing its virtual offering to new heights.

NOON SALIH: But... this isn't the first time that a world expo revolutionized how it was experienced by audiences.

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DAVID SARNOFF: On April 30th, the National Broadcasting Company will begin the first regular television program service in the history of our country. And now we add radio sight to sound.

NOON SALIH: Here, David Sarnoff, the head of the Radio Corporation of America - or RCA - first introduced television to the world. It was the first visual broadcast of a news event in history: the launch of the New York's World's Fair in 1939.

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NOON SALIH: Today, we're looking at the history of broadcasting world expos and how Expo 2020 Dubai is continuing that legacy, but re-thinking how the public experiences the event.

I'm Noon Salih and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

NOON SALIH: Before its public debut at the New York's World's Fair, electronic television broadcasts had been mostly confined to experimentation in labs. On July

2nd, 1928, the first television station started broadcasting to only the few hundred households who had access. TVs at that time were not cheap.

RON BECKER: So it really would have just been those people who were for whatever reason, interested in and had the money to participate in this, the cutting edge, latest technology of television.

NOON SALIH: That's Ron Becker, professor in the department of media, journalism and film at Miami university in Oxford, Ohio. He says that by this point, in 1939 as the New York World's Fair took place, TVs could cost anything between \$199 and \$600 - that translates to \$11,000 today. Think of these early adopters as the original VIPs.

In today's terms, that would be like someone getting a new iPhone before a public launch.

RON BECKER: The quality of the TV sets were still at the experimental phase as well. So you're not getting real television. You're getting a pretty rough signal.

NOON SALIH: Only hundreds of homes had a TV set - mostly in New York City. And the RCA needed commercial broadcasting to sustain this industry. That's where the 1939 New York World's Fair comes in.

At the fair, the RCA had their own pavilion where they displayed a television set for all members of the public to see. It was a whole spectacle.

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PRESIDENT FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT: And so, my friends, the time has come for me to announce with solemnity, perhaps, but with great happiness, a fact: I hereby dedicate the World's Fair, The New York World's Fair, of 1939, and I declare it open to all mankind.

NOON SALIH: That's President Franklin Roosevelt opening the 1939 world fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens, New York. Over 200,000 people stood in the crowds watching his speech on a hot spring day. The U.S. was recovering from the Great Depression. Many were jobless. Morale was low. And the Expo was the perfect chance to make the world feel like there was hope for the future.

There were many firsts that year.

The New York World's Fair was the first to be about the future. It was the first in America to promote cultural exchange. But more importantly, it was the first to air a news event live on television.

RON BECKER: One of the things that RCA wanted to do with their presence at the World's Fair was to sort of advance their vision for television, which was one of the products and services that they were looking to push forward.

And they had been experimenting with different kinds of broadcasts for a couple of years, and they were wanting to push the government to kind of give the green light for television, which was at the time still at an experimental phase. They wanted to push it into more commercial broadcasting so that they could start making money off of it.

NOON SALIH: The RCA created enormous publicity around the opening ceremony for the world's fair in 1939.

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RON BECKER: They recorded the opening scenes of the opening ceremony. They showed the fairgrounds, they showed the key dignitaries, including President Roosevelt at the time, the mayor of New York, the president of the World's Fair Organization giving their various speeches.

This program was broadcast live to various TV sets that were located in the RCA exhibit at the pavilion at the fair. And it was also sent downtown to NBC's main studios in Manhattan, where it was on broadcast to whoever the few people who would have actually owned television sets at the time.

NOON SALIH: Television was such a novelty at the New York World's Fair that "I was televised" cards were handed out as souvenirs to those who attended.

So...there were those who were curious and excited about this new invention...

RON BECKER: In the public's understanding, television was seen as an outgrowth of radio, which was one of the dominant forms of popular entertainment at the time. So they were aware that something like television was on the horizon, but they didn't really know exactly what it was going to look like. So there was lots of curiosity among people.

NOON SALIH: And there were others that weren't convinced.

At the 1939 RCA pavilion, the television was displayed with a see-through structure so visitors could trust it and see its inner workings.

It also wasn't very appealing at first.

RON BECKER: Television wasn't all that exciting. Its screen was small, it was black and white.

NOON SALIH: But then...after some convincing, on July 1st 1941, NBC finally aired the first commercial in US history. It was a 10-second commercial for a watch company called Bulova.

On it was a large watch displayed on the entire map of the U.S. It made the network \$7.00 in revenue - worth about \$131 today.

Peanuts in today's advertising revenue, but a big deal at the time.

NOON SALIH: Still, while it was gaining popularity, it took some time for the general public to support broadcast television. And then, when the Second World War started just a few months into the New York World's Fair, many of these large-scale television set sales were put on hold for a few years.

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When the war ended, broadcasting still wasn't as successful as they would have liked. Just over 43,000 units were sold nationwide.

RON BECKER: So it wouldn't be really till 1945, '46, when commercial television finally gets approved and it wouldn't be till '48 and '49, when a more regular system of broadcasting and more regular scheduling would appear. And even then it would be, you know, certainly more than three hours a day, but it would be maybe four or five, six hours a day in the late 40s.

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NOON SALIH: By the late forties, TV broadcasts became a lot more...entertaining.

Live shows had dramatic opening scenes.. Like this one where the host came into the theatre dressed as a knight in shining armor on...horseback. Or ads that rhymed. Like this one for a watch company called Speidel. Others had some...interesting ...humour.

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Hey hey! What's the parade all about? You guys running for President? No! You win a jackpot on a quiz program? No! Strike oil in Texas? No! So what's the celebration all about? We just got a seat on the subway. [laughs]

NOON SALIH: They even brought in live music. Like this one by jazz band - *The Delta Rhythm Boys*. They somehow made taking the subway in New York City fun.

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"You...must take the A-train..*bop bop*..to go to Sugar Hill way up in Harlem..If you...*choo..choo..choo*..miss the A-train.. You'll find you missed the quickest way to Harlem."

RON BECKER: And then, by the early fifties, you see programming expand to more and more of the daily schedule.

NOON SALIH: And later that decade, the public was finally convinced. Almost 86 percent of US households owned TVs.

By that point, it became clear that the official introduction of television at world expo became the first in a series of events that led to TV broadcasting as we know it today.

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NOON SALIH: So that brings us back to today.

Expo 2020 Dubai is not only bringing sight to sound, but also bringing entirely new experiences through the virtual world. And unlike those first tv sets that were only

available to hundreds, the virtual world is far more accessible than ever before: over half of the world's population owns a smartphone.

Here's Alaa AlShroogi again.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: And what we're trying to do here is to go beyond sound and vision, and to go into experience, which is a very different thing. So it's a holistic immersion into this expo that really hasn't existed before in its 170 year-old history.

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ALAA ALSHROOGI: Our theme, of course, is "connecting minds, creating the future," but it's really the ethos of the World Expo to bring people together and to create connections.

So connecting with one another, but also connecting with the expo and everything that it brings to the table, whether that's by contributing a question on a talk or chatting on an interactive tour, you're experiencing all of these things. And sometimes you're experiencing all three of these at the same time, the location, the themes, and the connection moments, and that's when that's when it gets beautiful and it gets really interesting.

NOON SALIH: And Expo 2020 is expanding its virtual experiences in three main ways.

First stop: the virtual Expo website.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: It does host a complete recreation of the site and the pavilions, but it also recreates all the spectacular incredible events that are being put on in terms of performances and ceremonies and musical performances and dance, but not just by Expo 2020, but all our amazing participants as well.

NOON SALIH: This even includes behind the scenes, interactive tours, as well as video interviews with creators and inventors. So that could mean seeing, in real time, what the Sustainability Pavilion looks like. Or what the Pakistani pavilion looks like.

But what's even more innovative this year is the virtual app.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: We have an app that allows virtual visitors to explore a virtual world. And as though they were there in person with all the elements sort of stylistically recreated right down to the little shrubs in the landscaping. We have digital activations that showcase UAE history or celebrate the Expo site.

NOON SALIH: But the really cool parts are the mascots and character-driven quests. We tried one of the app games and it started off with the mascot Salama - a wise ghaf tree, which is also the national tree of the UAE. But there are other characters that guide a player into the virtual world.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: So I'll give you an example: We have a falcon that flies over the UAE pavilion, showing the influence of the bird which is the symbol of the UAE on the design of the building itself. So it's it's the bird in flight and you make the connection between the site, the UAE and just general digital awesomeness.

NOON SALIH: There's also a Minecraft video game that takes players through the expo's sub themes of opportunity, mobility and sustainability. And other games that bring players together from all over the world live.

NOON SALIH: Plus, time travel portals that take us back to past expos throughout history. Including a time travel to iconic structures like the Eiffel Tower, which was introduced at the Paris Expo in 1889. Or even further back before that.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: 1851, of course, the first World Expo, we've recreated in its entirety, the great exhibition and the Crystal Palace, which was really, really magnificent. Like it's, it's just so beautiful and so inspiring. And it's kind of our homage to, you know, the original roots of the World Expo.

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NOON SALIH: Other virtual innovations at Expo 2020 have also been designed to create a comprehensive immersive experience.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: We have tours on social media platforms, called Live at Expo and Live at Expo allows the audience to control where the guide goes, what they do, even you know what condiments they put on their food.

NOON SALIH: And so we went from sound, to adding sight, to adding entire experiences that re-shape how we view the world and interact with it. And while we don't know what happens next, what we know for sure is that, for now, the virtual world is here to stay.

ALAA ALSHROOGI: The first World Expo to be able to do this will be cemented in bits and bytes for generations to come. And it'll be the first World Expo to have a permanent place in the global digital archive. This really ensures that the impact, the learning, the changemaking everything that this remarkable event is trying to do persists even after the doors close.

[OUTRO STING]

NOON SALIH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://virtualexpodubai.com).

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