

Perspectives

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Alhurra: Today, Tomorrow and Beyond

by Brian T. Conniff

Alhurra, like all modern media networks, is in a constant state of evolution. Unfortunately, much of what is written about Alhurra is inaccurate and/or out of date. As the station has matured, its editorial team has developed ground-breaking programming and its journalists have consistently provided professional newscasts and features reflecting the high production values expected of a U.S.-sponsored broadcaster. What is true in 2010 is that Alhurra is finding its place in the competitive media market of the Middle East. If the Arabic-television network had not been launched six years ago, the U.S. would be looking to create it today. Let's consider a few contemporary facts in the region as well as some on-air developments to frame Alhurra's role.

First you need to examine the media environment. There is a deficit of free media in the Middle East. According to the Freedom House report entitled, "Freedom of the Press 2010" (pg.9), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has the world's lowest level of press freedom. The report states that no Middle Eastern country or territory had a free media, with the exception of Israel. (pg. 9-10). The reality is that the news media in the region is strongly influenced by governments or political agendas, either directly or indirectly. As the Freedom House report states, "Although transnational satellite television and Internet-based platforms for information dissemination have had a positive impact, media environments in the region are generally constrained by extremely harsh laws concerning libel and defamation, the insult of monarchs and public figures and emergency rule" (pg. 9). In fact, last month Alhurra's camera crews in Egypt had tapes confiscated when they reported on an opposition party demonstration.

In spite of the challenges in the media environment, Alhurra has carved out a niche for itself—providing objective and accurate news, covering topics rarely seen on other local channels, and reporting on the U.S. and its values more comprehensively than any other Arabic-language news channel.

Alhurra provides a forum where experts and advocates can air issues freely and challenge the stereotypes and taboos in the region. The rights of women, freedom of speech or human rights are often deemed too controversial or taboo to discuss comprehensively in the media. Alhurra has two programs Musawat (Equality) and Hunna (Women's Views) that are dedicated to promoting women's rights. They cover topics such as women in politics, the impact of Saudi religious police (Mutaween) on Saudi society, spousal abuse, and the rights of women in Islam. One viewer wrote that "[Musawat] brought up things I am scared to death to talk about... finally we have an Arabic TV that makes sense."

"The United States' channel Alhurra, and specifically its program 'Eye on Democracy' has become a defender

for the human rights of the Arab citizen, the rights of Arab women, and the rights of some ethnic and religious minorities and civil society," added the Iraqi website Al Nnas.

In fact, Alhurra's Eye on Democracy tackles topics of Internet freedom, Islam and democracy, human rights, and the democratic role of NGOs in the Middle East. The program's profile of Abdul Kareem Alkhiwani, a Yemeni journalist and human rights activist, imprisoned for fighting corruption within the Yemeni government helped to fuel the debate that eventually secured the journalist's release from prison.

As a voice for the voiceless, Alhurra produced an acclaimed documentary, Konoungo: The Darfurian Exile, and was one of the first Arabic-language media outlets to cover

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that humanitarian crisis. Within the documentary UN workers and refugees discussed the lack of interest in Darfurian refugees from Arab governments and press. Given that Sudan's President Omar Hassan al-Bashir received the support of fellow Arab leaders against the international indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC), few regional media, if any, have covered the issue.

With correspondents dedicated to covering the White House, Congress, Pentagon and State Department, Alhurra provides comprehensive coverage of events in Washington, better than any other Arabic-language channel. Its weekly program, Inside Washington provides viewers with a look at the political process through in-depth interviews with experts and policy-makers, including people such as Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and columnist Thomas Friedman.

Alhurra regularly provides more thorough coverage of events involving U.S. foreign policy to the Middle East than any other channels in the region. Alhurra carries events live that are not carried by the other pan-Arab networks, such as President Obama's speech to the UN on Sudan and Secretary of State Clinton's remarks at the annual State Department Iftar dinner last month.

But Alhurra's coverage of America is more than just Washington. Each week reporters cover stories from across the country, including a twice-weekly in-depth segment about America on Alhurra's flagship program, Al Youm (Today). Alhurra also produces the acclaimed

documentary series Americans, which profiles the American people through their history and culture. Alhurra's also developed a five-part series dedicated to the history and lives of Arab-Americans that was praised by the Arab media.

Popular pan-Arab newspaper Al Hayat wrote, "(Americans) relates real stories about thousands upon thousands who immigrated to America in pursuit of the American dream...As this series shows, the Arabs have become a fundamental component of this beautiful, splendid American mosaic, which brings together different nationalities, religions, colors, and sexes based on the criterion of American citizenship...This series is an attempt by Alhurra to present the history and reality of the Arab Americans. It refutes allegations circulated by the ideological Arab media that Arab Americans are persecuted, mistreated, and discriminated against."

Alhurra also helps place events happening in America in proper context. For example, the recent threat of Pastor Terry Jones to burn the Quran was covered extensively in the Middle East. However, only Alhurra used this as an opportunity to illustrate that Pastor Jones' views are the exception and do not represent the views of a majority of Americans. Alhurra rather, demonstrated the American principle of religious freedom interviewing representatives of all faiths and describing their reaction to the controversy, putting the debate in perspective and opening up interfaith dialogue, going beyond the mere stereotyping promoted by media outlets with an agenda. A viewer from Dubai wrote to Alhurra and thanked the network for "hosting moderate and responsible Muslim, Christian and Jewish representatives to discuss the seriousness of burning of the Quran in Florida." He also thanked the host for his professionalism in covering this sensitive topic.

Over the past few years, the Middle East satellite television marketplace has grown to more than 600 channels. Despite this crowded and competitive media environment, Alhurra has carved out a niche for itself as a reliable source of news and information about the Middle East and America.

An important hallmark of its growing reputation as a credible news source is that other Arabic media outlets frequently quote Alhurra news stories and high profile interviews. Recent citations of Alhurra have appeared in newspapers and wire services such as Alghad (in Jordan); Azzaman (in Iraq); UPI (in Arabic) and the Palestine Telegraph; as well as English press including AFP, AP, Reuters, Los Angeles Times and the Christian Science Monitor.

According to international research firms such as ACNielsen, Alhurra has consistently had a weekly reach of approximately 25 million for the past three years (comparable to that of NPR in the U.S.). Alhurra's audience regularly exceeds that of all non-indigenous Arabic news television channels (BBC Arabic, Russia Today, France24, Deutsche Welle) in the region combined. However, Alhurra's prime purpose is not to attain the largest audience in the Arab world, but rather to be an alternative source of news and information.

According to these surveys, an overwhelming majority of Alhurra's viewers state that the network contributes to their understanding of current events including 80 percent in Syria; 83 percent in Kuwait and 70 percent in Morocco. When asked if Alhurra contributes to their understanding of U.S. policies; 80 percent of Alhurra's viewers in the UAE said that it did and that was echoed by 75 percent in Oman and 64 percent in Iraq. A majority of Alhurra viewers in Egypt state they watch Alhurra regularly for news,

demonstrating the channel's value as a reliable source of information.

Audience measurement is not the only indicator of success. One way to measure impact is to look at the stories on Alhurra that resulted in a change. Alhurra was also the first network to bring to light the lack of medical care and insurance for Iraqi soldiers who were injured while serving their country. This issue had never been addressed in the media prior to the Alhurra report. Following the broadcast, the first ever medical hospital dedicated to wounded soldiers was established in Iraq.

Then there was the story of Saef an eight-year old boy who lost his parents and his leg following a bombing in his town. Alhurra told his tragic story and one day after the channel broadcast that report, the Iraqi Minister of Work and Social Affairs personally arranged for Saef's move into an orphanage where the Ministry would pay for all of his medical care.

For generations, families in Iraq have been living in houses passed down from their parents, especially in poorer areas of the country. So when the Iraqi government threatened to destroy the homes of any family that did not have proper documentation of ownership, Alhurra's instant coverage of the story brought the Iraqi government to reverse its decision, saving the homes of countless families.

Alhurra's evolution has been constant since it first went on air, six years ago. In order to better connect with the Arab street, Alhurra launched Al Youm. This daily three-hour show originates from four Arab countries simultaneously, including Dubai, Beirut, Cairo and Jerusalem, as well as Alhurra's headquarters outside of Washington, D.C. The program looks into human stories that go beyond the headlines.

Reaction to Al Youm has been extremely positive. Egyptian website El Bashayer noted that the program brought excitement and boldness to Alhurra, resulting in a broader audience. It went on to say that what sets it apart from other satellite programs is that it comes from five cities at the same time.

Last month, Alhurra launched three vibrant new programs and revamped the weekend schedule to bring a new look and feel to the network. The new programs highlight investigative reports from the region as well as untold stories from the U.S. One of Alhurra's new programs includes the best stories from the archives of the critically acclaimed U.S. program PBS NewsHour, translated into Arabic.

We understand that communication is not a one way street; it is a dialogue between people. Alhurra has made forays into this realm with Alhurra and the People, a daily segment that asks the same question to people from across the U.S. and the Middle East to see the commonalities, as well as highlight the different perspectives. Questions such as 'can democracy be achieved in the Middle East,' or 'what are important values to teach the next generation' help to build bridges and encourage conversation. These questions and answers are also placed on Alhurra and the People's Facebook page.

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These steps are important to building a dialogue, but New Media can help us more effectively engage and interact than any other medium. People around the world, including the Middle East, are demonstrating that they are consuming and producing content in very different ways than they did in the past. Alhurra has established itself on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, as well as their Arabic-

language equivalents.

The network needs to continue to evolve in the marketplace to suit the consumption habits of its audience. Alhurra will integrate New Media tools and platforms into its newsroom so it can aid the network in the development of stories, enhance the depth of our sources/contacts and provide analytic tools to help Alhurra track interest in its content.

Alhurra is not the same channel that started in 2004. This is reflected in the programs, professional presenters, caliber of guests and how programs are received in the region. Alhurra has become a reliable source of news and information for indigenous and international media organizations and is consistently cited as a source of news by other media outlets. Having a credible voice in the Middle East is critical to the future of building bridges among cultures and fostering a better understanding of people.



Brian T. Conniff is President of the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, Inc. (MBN), broadcasting news and information in Arabic to the Middle East and Europe. As President of MBN, Mr. Conniff oversees the operation of the popular radio network Radio Sawa, as well as, three television channels: Alhurra, Alhurra-Iraq and Alhurra Europe. According to international research firms such as ACNielsen, Alhurra and Radio Sawa have an unduplicated weekly reach of an estimated 35 million people in the Middle East. Sponsored by the U.S. Government, MBN's mission is to broadcast accurate, timely and relevant news and information about the region, the world and the United States to a broad, Arabic-speaking audience, and, thereby, advance freedom and democracy in the Middle East and long-term U.S. national interests.

Prior to joining MBN, Mr. Conniff was the Executive Director of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the U.S. Government agency that oversees all U.S.-funded, non-military international broadcasting. The BBG is headed by a part-time, bipartisan board of governors. As Executive Director, Mr. Conniff served as the agency's senior management official responsible for implementing the policy decisions of the BBG. He directed the agency's strategic planning, budget formulation and allocation process, and provided oversight and coordination of all U.S.-funded international broadcasting entities.

From 1999 to 2002 Mr. Conniff served as the acting director of the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). In this capacity Mr. Conniff was responsible for the day-to-day management of bureau activities, including the operations of the Voice of America, Radio and TV Marti, and a worldwide engineering and transmission network. During his tenure, IBB made the transition from a radio-based organization to a multi-media enterprise, significantly expanding the use of the Internet and television. This modernization of the BBG's delivery systems resulted in significantly increased audiences for U.S. international broadcasting.

Before joining the BBG, Mr. Conniff was the Inspector General for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty from 1989 to 1995. Mr. Conniff previously worked for the U.S. Information Agency and the U.S. General Accountability Office.

Perspectives is a monthly opinion piece authored by leading practitioners and academics in the fields of public diplomacy and Arab media. The publication provides a forum to contextualize and analyze salient topics, concepts and developments that are of interest to the public diplomacy community as well as to Arab media followers. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc.

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