

# The Layalina Review

## On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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## Mutual Interests and New Media

At the Soref Symposium organized by the Washington Institute, former Under Secretary James K. Glassman emphasized the importance of mutual respect and mutual interests in public diplomacy, specifically related to the public diplomacy of the Obama administration.

Glassman suggested that too much emphasis is put on negotiation and not enough on strategy. "Public diplomacy, which I would define as the use of words, images and non-violent deeds in order to understand, inform, engage and (most of all) influence foreign publics, as opposed to foreign officials, is not a policy either," he argues.

Referring to his tenure, Glassman explained how he focused on "reducing threats and promoting freedom by emphasizing a war of ideas against violent extremists." He reiterated that the most important factor in dealing with extremism in the Muslim world is pursuing mutual interests.

Glassman noted that for a strategy to be successful there needs to be a clear definition of what "our interests" are. Once interests are defined, a structure and a strategy are needed to carry out the government-wide public diplomacy and strategic communication effort, he added.

Glassman reiterated on his blog that the best way to engage and communicate strategically with foreign populations is through new media. He calls it, "Public Diplomacy 2.0, or Strategic Communication 2.0."

According to him, PD 2.0 exploits three sets of tools: 1) social-networking technology, 2) public-private partnerships in which the USG is often merely a catalyst, and 3) interagency coordination. New media would promote engaging in real conversations and dialogue, which in turn would reflect confidence in US values,

ideas and policies.

Glassman continued to explain that this method is a counter-strategy to the extremists who, "hate PD 2.0" since, "their ideas can't stand the challenge of criticism and exposure."

Lee Hudson Teslik explains for the Council of Foreign Relations how Elliott Schrage, Vice President of Global Communications and Marketing for Facebook, believes that new media is really about communications and outreach.

"To some extent," Schrage argues, "Facebook and the tools associated with it are incredibly valuable, perhaps even more valuable for people who have clear messages or clear issues that they want to address." Schrage hails the example of the Obama presidential campaign generating almost six million supporters on Facebook as a means of communicating Obama's policies, positions, and campaign activities.

According to Schrage, Facebook and other social networking sites are pivotal in creating authentic opportunities for people to change their perception of the world and of populations. "The information they get is culled not by some distant, remote editor, but by the editing skills, or by the opinions and ideas, of their friends," he comments.

## Obama to Address Arab World from Cairo

President Obama has chosen Egypt as the location of his address to the Muslim World on June 4 of this year, seeking to repair the ties that were severed between President Bush and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, reported Reuters.

The prospect of this upcoming speech has elicited much speculation about how

the Muslim world will perceive it. The Washington Post claimed that it will be compared to a similar speech Condoleezza Rice made in Cairo, urging Mubarak to end attacks on pro-democracy demonstrators; this push for democracy led Mubarak to boycott visiting the White House during Bush's entire second term.

According to Reuters, this speech will not have the same focus on building democracy but will strive to be more conciliatory in nature. Chris Phillips of The Guardian feels as though the selection of Cairo, under a corrupt and authoritarian regime, would undermine Obama's message of reconciliation and change, though White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs assured that "the scope of the speech is bigger than where the speech was going to be given or who's the leadership of the country."

Amnesty International has raised concerns about systematic torture in Egypt, along with the death of prisoners and unfair trials that have marred the human rights record of

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the Arab country. The organization stresses that Obama should use this opportunity to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and human rights issues, notes Reuters.

Many analysts have wondered why Cairo was selected over other Muslim capitals. According to Global Voices, the Egyptian blogosphere is divided. Zeinobia, of the Egyptian Chronicles, wrote that, "Cairo is the true choice as the heart of the Arab world indeed with its weight and history in the region, it would be the perfect place to address the Arab Muslim world despite the fact that its regime is considered Pro-American." Marc Lynch, of Foreign Policy, claims that it was simply chosen through the process of elimination.

*Cairo is the true choice as the heart of the Arab world indeed with its weight and history in the region, it would be the perfect place to address the Arab Muslim world despite the fact that its regime is considered pro-American.*

*Zeinobia, Egyptian Chronicles.*

Whatever the reasoning behind the choice, the Egyptian press has been highly supportive of the upcoming speech. Osama Saraya, editor in chief of Ahrām Daily, wrote, "The selection of Cairo stresses the fact that...Egypt is the heart of both the Arab and Muslim worlds and is the voice of reason and wisdom that helped the region overcome crises," reports the LA Times.

In the same piece, Mohamed Ali Ibrahim of the government-owned Al-Gomhoreyya newspaper suggested that "Obama's anticipated address proves that Washington wants to open a new page with Arabs and Muslims and starts with the biggest country that holds the keys of the Palestinian question and has bridges with all factions as well as Israel."

According to Saraya in the Jerusalem Post, "The American president wants to mend what the previous American administration had spoiled when it insulted more than 1 billion Muslims by repeatedly attacking Muslims and stigmatizing Muslims with terrorism."

Some are not as optimistic. Mohammed Habib, deputy leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most powerful opposition group, claims that Obama's trip will be "useless unless it was proceeded by real change in the policies of the US administration toward the Arab and Islamic world," and added that, "the US administration is attempting to recruit all the Arab states...to implement its permanent agenda that favors the Zionist entity," according to the Associated Press.

Obama is facing pressure to outline the current administration's policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during this speech. Muslim Brotherhood blogger Abdulmonem Mahmood argued, "If Obama really wanted to prove that he is a man of change, then he has to be just on all issues, including his country's blind support for Israel at the expense of the Palestinian cause," reports Global Voices.

In contrast, Shannon Bell of Right Pundits claimed, "Obama's outreach speech to Muslims in Egypt will be another memorable slap in the face to the Jewish people" and that this speech would "pull back one hand from the Jewish people while extending the other to Muslims all over the world."

Whatever the outcome, Obama's speech is intended to bridge the rift between the US and the Muslim world and establish the administration's policy towards the Middle East.

## Debating an Uncertain Future at the Arab Media Forum

The eighth annual Arab Media Forum concluded on May twelve after two days of workshops and discussions on the recent developments in the world of Arab media.

Under the slogan, "Arab Media: Weathering a Period of Crisis and Change," this year's forum brought together over 1,000 preeminent Arab journalists and media specialists from all across the Middle East, according to Emirates Business 24-7.

The two-day forum, which was also attended by renowned American journalist Seymour Hersh, addressed a range of issues from the current global financial crisis to the rise of new media sources and other alternative forms of communication.

One of the most contentious issues discussed was the proliferation of fatwa programming on satellite TV, continues Emirates Business 24-7. In a workshop entitled "From Terrestrial Fatwa to Satellite Fatwa," Abdul Hamid Al Ansari, Professor of Islamic Studies at Qatar University, expressed his view that "the proliferation of such satellite channels comes from the increased demand from viewers for authentic counseling. These channels also make it convenient for them to receive such advice from their homes, instead of seeking it personally from a Mufti."

This topic also was addressed by Jameel Al-Theyabi, managing editor of the pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat's Saudi Arabia and Gulf Cooperation Council, who lamented that "media privatization has led to the proliferation of outlets and chaos on the air," according to The Huffington Post. For Al-Theyabi, "the most dangerous aspect of the trend [is] presenting ill-qualified, self-appointed experts to provide advice to the uninitiated."

Some defended the legitimacy of the fatwa programs. Fahad Al-Shimeimri, chairman of Al-Majd TV in Saudi Arabia, referred to fatwa shows as "the first line of defense against violence and terrorism." He defended the preachers on his station and their abilities to communicate effectively with audiences.

In his keynote address, American reporter Seymour Hersh praised the professionalism and diversity of the forum, reports WAM. Hersh mentioned Al-Jazeera specifically, “stating that Al-Jazeera news feeds have truly exposed the world to happenings in the Arab world that otherwise would have remained uncovered in the West, such as the Israeli incursion into Gaza in January 2009.”

Hersh also noted the increasing role of the internet as a positive transformative force in today’s media. “The internet has changed everything in ways we cannot tell. It’s inevitable - we’re all connected now. You cannot commit the kind of crimes that were committed in the last 100 years in this world anymore. The world is watching.”

Another workshop called “The New Media: New Platforms that Change the Scene” focused on the rise of alternative media such as YouTube, blogs and online newspapers, reports AME Info. Among other things, “the panelists debated whether journalistic codes of ethics must emerge from governments or media organizations,” and also what the emergence of these non-traditional sources of information portend for the future of print media.

Ayman Al-Sayyad, Editor in Chief of Wajhat Nazr magazine, argued in favor of the more accessible outlets, stating, “All media should strive to stay updated and find ways to stay relevant in the minds of its consumers.”

The dynamic nature of these user-generated platforms and their ethical standards of journalism were also called into question, notes Magda Abu-Fadil of The Huffington Post. “What’s new isn’t just media but the handling of news, and anyone can be a content creator,” said Sultan Al-Bazei, CEO of Saudi Arabia’s Attariq Communication.

Final impressions of the 2009 Forum seemed to be overwhelmingly positive. According to AME Info, Maryam Bin Fahad, Executive Director of the Dubai Press Club, called the forum a “rare opportunity” for Arab media to exchange differing viewpoints, and testified to its success overall. “The Forum has succeeded in emphasizing the importance of freedom and transparency which act as the cornerstones for the development of the Arab media and in turn for the progress of the Arab world.”

This notion was echoed by Hossom Al-Sokkari, Chairman of BBC Arabia, who

said, “The Forum has achieved its most vital objective of serving as the perfect platform for the Arab media to discuss topical issues.”

*“Media privatization has led to the proliferation of outlets and chaos on the air.”*

*Jameel Al-Theyabi, managing editor of the pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat’s Saudi Arabia and Gulf Cooperation Council.*

The Forum concluded with the presentation of the Arab Journalism Awards. Talal Salman, editor-in-chief of Al-Safir, received the “Media Personality of the Year” award. The awards included twelve different categories for excellence in a particular field.

## New Media in the Middle East

Blogging takes communication to a new level of openness and makes a free form of dialogue between the Arab Muslim world and the West possible, according to blogger and journalist Faisal Abbas to Al-Arabiya.

Citizen journalism and ‘new media’ are filling a gap in public demand for firsthand news accounts in the Arab world, although credibility may be questionable, reports Gulf News.

“[Mainstream reporters] have to figure out a way to make social networking applications and tools part of their newsgathering system,” says Paul Knox of the School of Journalism at Ryerson University to Digital Journal. This might prove to be especially difficult for the Arab world, which according to Gulf News includes “four of the top ten

countries for persecution of bloggers.”

One of the problems facing a transitioning news media in the Middle East is the lack of staff journalists at most of the region’s TV and radio stations which leaves them “stuck without the ability to develop their own new agenda,” Gulf News claims in an editorial.

“Too many TV stations, radio channels and websites have not invested in their own reporting staff...[and] condemn themselves to be mere aggregators,” the article continues.

But the question remains as to whether or not citizen reporting is as reliable as professional journalism. Gulf News quotes one participant in a discussion session hosted by BBC Arabia expressing his fears that new media credibility could be affected by “personal agendas” and the bias of individuals.

Non-traditional news must find a way to “maintain the standards of fact checking and verification...that have really stood the test of time,” Knox continued.

New media journalism was also the topic of a series of sessions at the recent Arab Media Forum in Dubai, according to Digital Journal. There are currently almost half a million Arab bloggers, says Gulf News, although Digital Journal contrarily points out that print media is actually growing in more than one Middle Eastern country.

Gulf News claims that the key to the survival of print journalism in the Arab world must be a commitment to “original content,” or else they “deserve to fail.” The opinion piece refers to a talk by investigative reporter Seymour Hersh at the Media Forum in which he asserts that “no reporter can do his or her job properly unless he or she really understands the subject.”

But as Faisal Abbas points out to Al-Arabiya, “Blogging certainly provides a fresh perspective that is free from establishment control...[although] we must also value and look to maintain ‘traditional’ journalism through which many brave journalists have brought to light critical issues.”

In related news Mohamed Abdel Dayem, program coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Program at the Committee to Protect Journalists, reported on his experience in a panel discussion at the United Nations, in commemoration of World Press Freedom Day.

*“[Mainstream reporters] have to figure out a way to make social networking applications and tools part of their newsgathering system.”*

*Paul Knox, School of Journalism at Ryerson University.*

In his address, Dayem touched on the lack of institutional classification of bloggers. “The silver lining of the aforementioned lack of institutional protections is that internet-based journalists have been able to tackle issues that established media simply will not or cannot cover, like the courageous coverage provided by a small number of Egyptian bloggers documenting - at times supplemented with video footage - the systematic use of torture in Egyptian police stations.”

## Obama: An Honest Broker for Middle East Peace?

Speculation about President Obama’s broad Mideast peace plan featured prominently in recent media. While the details of the president’s Middle East strategy are “likely to be revealed further in a speech he will deliver in Egypt on June 4,” notes the Israel Policy Forum, recent meetings and negotiations have provided a glimpse into what Obama’s policy might look like.

According to Gabor Steingart of Germany’s Spiegel Online, as the Obama administration is hoping to revive the peace process, “part of

the strategy is to distance Washington from Israel.” Steingart cites the recent “outing” of Israel as a nuclear power by US Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller as an example of a possible shift.

“In her address to the UN, Gottemoeller called on a number of presumed nuclear powers to join the [Nonproliferation Treaty],” notes Steingart. “Universal adherence to the NPT itself, including by India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea... remains a fundamental objective of the United States,” she said. Washington had never before named Israel as a nuclear power.

Steingart observes that numerous Washington think tanks have viewed Gottemoeller’s demand as further proof of the Obama’s administration’s willingness to reform its strategy vis-à-vis Israel.

“This policy of détente has led to an increase in tensions with Israel,” continues Steingart. “From his first day in office Obama made it clear to the government in Jerusalem that he would not be continuing George W. Bush’s overly friendly policy.”

Steingart concludes his analysis by suggesting that the US “wants to prove that it can be more than just a lobbyist for Israel, that it can also be an honest broker.”

Jeremy Bowen of the BBC similarly suggests that the US-Israel relationship may be undergoing a transformation. “Tough choices will be required from all sides, and that means there could be some bumpy moments ahead in the relationship between Israel and its best friend,” he speculates.

In addition to potential changes in US policy toward Israel, President Obama’s Mideast plan appears to center on multilateral diplomacy. Sadie Goldman of the Israel Policy Forum says, “The Obama administration has been methodically unveiling a plan for multilateral Middle East diplomacy, which has become one of the pillars of its foreign policy thus far.”

This first stage of this effort is based on “engaging Middle East leaders, listening to their concerns, gauging their mood, and then enlisting their help and support.” Goldman notes that there is an implicit choice in this engagement: “be included in America’s diplomatic efforts, inform the process, and be a part of a regional alignment toward the United States, or be left out and potentially face sanctions or worse.”

As such, Obama is holding meetings with the key regional players. By May 28, he will have met with Jordanian King Abdullah, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Egyptian President Mubarak and Palestinian National Authority President Abbas.

Goldman suggests that Obama believes that ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by creating a Palestinian state is critical to a stable Middle East, and that working with Israeli and Palestinian partners alone is insufficient. “President Obama’s plan encourages his partners not only to be a part of his process, but also to engage other Middle East leaders and encourage them to play ball,” she continues.

*“From his first day in office Obama made it clear to the government in Jerusalem that he would not be continuing George W. Bush’s overly friendly policy.”*

*Gabor Steingart, Der Spiegel.*

In summarizing her analysis, Goldman concludes, “the Obama administration’s multi-party, multi-track diplomacy signals that what they are looking for is a US-led comprehensive deal with a clear end goal - not a process, but a solution.”

On a related note, a recent poll suggests that President Obama may be in a good position to forge ahead with his Mideast plans. According to Reuters, the polling outfit Ipsos reported that Obama’s popularity in Arab countries far surpasses that of the US, “suggesting he could be able to boost goodwill in the region.”

“Obama received favorable ratings averaging 48% in the region as a whole. Approval ran as high as 58% in Jordan...”

Regionwide, only one in 10 residents thought Obama would have a negative effect on their country,” noted Ipsos.

The gulf between Obama’s popularity and that of the US indicates “there is an opportunity for the president to literally ‘bridge the gap’ where his reposit goodwill lifts the goodwill toward America,” Ipsos said in statement.

## Media Takes Proactive Role in Middle East

In recent years, the media industry has transitioned from a largely state-controlled project into “a number of bold and ambitious private media initiatives, catering to a young, more aware and diverse audience,” writes the Khaleej Times. Consequently, these “competent and professional” media institutions are able to challenge attacks by Western media by “presenting the real picture before the world” due to their increased freedom and flexibility even during the economic crisis.

Networks such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Abu Dhabi TV and English-language publications are published throughout the Middle East. The Khaleej Times cites an A.T. Kearney study, which indicates that the pan-Arab media industry is growing at an average rate of 19% per year, faster than the general economy or its Western counterparts. “The appeal of the sector to investors is expected to continue to grow as Middle East consumers spend more disposable income on [less-regulated] media and entertainment.”

According to Dr. Dirk Buchta, a managing director of A.T. Kearney, the media industry allows nations “to diversify economies and stimulate entrepreneurship, leading to small and medium sized companies providing local job opportunities and long-term sustainability and stability for the region.” Its estimated cost was about \$10 billion in 2007, he added.

Speaking at the Arab Media Forum, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh stressed the importance of Arab media and its relationship with Western media. According to Emirates Business 24/7, Hersh noted, “The Arab media are growing better, and [the West] is following the Arab

world better.”

Neil Hicks, writing for The Huffington Post, stressed the role of the media in expanding democracy and human rights promotion in the region, in line with the goals of President Obama, who made “a point of addressing an Arabic speaking audience directly in an early interview” with Al-Arabiya.

*“The Arab media are growing better, and [the West] is following the Arab world better.”*

*Seymour Hersh, Seymour Hersh.*

The process, according to Hicks, began under former President George W. Bush. “Under concerted and sustained US pressure between 2003 and 2005, despite all the adverse circumstances of the time, repressive Arab governments, including Egypt, made important concessions that benefited and emboldened local activists.” Such processes resulted in more independent newspapers and an emboldened human rights community in various nations.

Nonetheless, “we have a long way to go before the media can get the genuine freedom the media enjoys in [the Western world]. This is essential if governments and people in the region want the media to discharge its social duties and responsibilities effectively,” concludes the Khaleej Times. “A genuinely free media would only help the society it serves rather than undermine it.”

## Al-Hurra Today and Tomorrow

The US-funded television channel Al-Hurra is hoping that the unusual format of its new daily news show Al-Youm will increase its share of the viewer market, reports Keach Hagey for The National. The three-hour program is broadcast live from its hub in Dubai as well as its bureau in Cairo, Beirut, Jerusalem and the channel’s headquarters in Springfield, Virginia.

“I don’t think any country in any language has launched what we have just launched, which is a five-country play, simultaneously by satellite, hooked up live three hours a day, five days a week,” said Fran Mires, the executive producer of the show which began airing in March.

Joaquin Blaya, a member of the BBG, explains that the budget for the Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN) has grown significantly since 2008, “probably by 20%,” mainly because of Al-Youm. MBN’s budget for this year is \$120 million and, according to Blaya, it will continue to increase because of the support of the Obama administration for public diplomacy.

The channel’s vice president, Danny Nassif, believes he has the support of Obama and the Democratic majority in Congress. Although Al-Hurra enjoys a 55% penetration rate in places such as Iraq, The National points out that “Al-Hurra’s most recent figures, taken before Al-Youm was launched, put viewership at 27 million a week, significantly behind Arabic news titans such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya.”

*“The same way Radio/TV Marti continues to operate, and Radio Free Europe stays on air, Al-Hurra will continue to exist in some form.”*

*James K. Glassman.*

Mires further comments that Al-Hurra has not been greatly affected by competition from other Western-funded channels that are emerging in the market. She notes that, unlike Al-Jazeera, Al-Hurra is a “totally free medium.”

However, some detractors remain less than enthusiastic about Al-Hurra and its

news program, reports Kebob Fest. The news site criticizes the lack of real news content and information. “Those seeking visual stimulation will also be unsatisfied... regardless of what the anchors chose to wear,” suggests the site. There is “a failed attempt at fast-paced US-style news that comes off as chaotic and incoherent,” it adds.

The news site further notes that viewership remains very low and describes former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy James Glassman as an apologist for the channel’s waste of money.

Nevertheless, Al-Hurra’s last day is nowhere in sight. “The same way Radio/TV Marti continues to operate, and Radio Free Europe stays on air, Al-Hurra will continue to exist in some form.”

In a related story, senior representatives of Al-Hurra have dismissed claims that foreign news broadcasters are irrelevant to Arab culture and society, argues John Parnell for Digital Productions.

The denial follows claims by Saudi Arabian writer and academic Khalid Al-Dakhil who argues that “foreign news channels add no value to the Arab world.”

“There is no merit in that statement,” said Fran Mires. “We interview officials every day and have built up a significant roster of high ranking political figures that appear on the show.”

## Western Channels Continue Expansion in the Middle East

A number of foreign channels, both state-run and independent, have launched Arabic news services in recent years in an effort to reach the wider Arab audience, reports Gulf News. Israel, Iran, Germany, the US, the UK, Russia and France have all been racing to get access to the Arab living room.

Some debated at the recent Arab Media Forum in Dubai that foreign political agenda and propaganda were the driving force behind these new initiatives. However, representatives of the channels staunchly rebuked the accusations.

The representative from the American-run Al-Hurra said the channel was not a

mouthpiece for the US “but not a charity organization either,” while the representative from the BBC pointed out that the group has had an Arabic radio service since 1938.

Nahida Nakad of France24 said the Arab world was “one of the most important places in the world” and events here have repercussions everywhere. “We didn’t set up the channel to convey the French political view, but the French way of thinking,” she said.

The aggressive moderator Diana Moukalled, Production and Programming Manager of Future TV triggered a debate after accusing the channels of being a mouthpiece of the country of their origin, according to The Khaleej Times. “Isn’t Al-Hurra a tool in the hands of the US?” she asked.

Hossam Al-Sokkari from BBC Arabia was asked whether his channel had the same reliability as its main channel, especially in the 9/11 context. “We are not the voice of the British government. We only present news objectively without following political trends,” he said. The discussion also pointed to the lack of public indicators to judge public opinion.

*“We are not the voice of the British government. We only present news objectively without following political trends.”*

*Hossam Al-Sokkari, BBC Arabic.*

Participants said that none of the channels were targeting the youth who represent 60% of the population, or encouraging free dialogue. “Arab viewers require BBC Arabia to deal with issues such as democracy and encourage dialogue but you are cautious and hardly touch upon issues affecting the core of the Arab world,” said Diana.

In concluding the debate, Mohammed Al-Sanousi, Former Minister of Information of Kuwait, said that there was no foreign

cultural invasion through these channels. “We think it is an invasion from the West. We should look at ourselves. We have shortcomings that we need to overcome instead of accusing anyone,” he said.

Eman Ayyad, presenter at Al-Jazeera, explains for AME Info that the demand for news in the Arab world has resulted in the proliferation of representatives from international media organizations to visit the region and cover events as they happen on the ground. She further highlighted the gap between a foreign correspondent and his/her access to the local Arab community.

Robert Worth, Beirut Bureau Chief of the New York Times said, “In both the US and in the Arab region, dedicating a number of years cultivating your contacts with government officials...will enable you access to information and comments for a credible story.”

Alain Gresh, Deputy Director of Le Monde Diplomatique in France, however, raised the issue that while most foreign correspondents who report on news in the Arab world are not Arabic speakers, they have difficulty understanding the culture of the Arab countries.

Lorenzo Trombetta, head of the Middle East Regional Office for the Italian News Agency Ansa, added, “While it was presumed that speaking Arabic to a representative in the local community would bring me closer to my source, you will find that in some cases, speaking English to senior local officials will open more doors as you are granted access to privileged information.”

In related news, The National points out that investing in Arabic-language news channels has been fashionable for Western media outlets lately. The latest western television broadcaster to invest in expanding its Arabic-language programming is France 24, the French international news channel that extended its daily programming by 10 hours.

Christine Ockrent, the chief executive of France 24, says CNBC’s ability to reach more viewers with its Arabic offering than with its English – in part because the Arabic is available on free-to-air satellite – inspired the French channel’s investment in Arabic.

“We believe that for us, as a French channel expressing ourselves in these three languages, we can bring our viewers added value, or at least a difference, a French touch, both in the way we treat information

and particularly in the debates that we want to develop,” she says.

Okrent believes the European perspective on microcredits, education and freedom of expression, among other issues, holds a special interest for the Arab world, which is much more closely linked geographically, politically and culturally to Europe than it is to the US, where media has traditionally dominated the international cable news landscape.

The Arabic service has a team of 36 journalists, but draws on the resources of France 24’s team of 260 journalists, she says. It broadcasts on satellite on Arabsat Badr-4, Nilesat and Hot-Bird, as well as an array of pay providers. It is also available on the internet via france24.com and via mobile phone.

## Moving Beyond Arab Stereotypes

Marwan Karbalan argues for Gulf News that key issues facing the Arab world remain misrepresented in America. While the Obama administration is showing understanding of Arab-Israeli issues, most Americans lack sympathy for the Arabs, mainly due to media representation of the issue, he posits.

*“Winning the hearts and minds of Americans is an Arab responsibility not anybody else’s.”*

*Marwan Karbalan, Gulf News.*

A recent UCLA study asked a variety of Americans a series of questions about the Arab-Israeli conflict and what they had understood from TV news.

When referring to the Arabs, Karbalan points out, “words such as occupation, poverty, desperation and racial discrimination were never mentioned in the news.” Additionally,

the settlements on Palestinian territories are often portrayed as “simply building houses and farms.”

If we try to distribute responsibility for painting this distorted picture in the mind of many Americans, Karbalan argues, the US media may shoulder the greatest part for being unfair in its coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

“We must not forget, however, that the Arab world, which spends billions of dollars on running satellite channels that compete with each other for pacifying and containing Arab public opinion, is also responsible,” he adds.

Karbalan points out that few in the Arab world have in fact thought of buying or even establishing TV networks or other kinds of media in the US with the aim of trying to explain Arab causes in a fair and objective manner. “Winning the hearts and minds of Americans is an Arab responsibility not anybody else’s,” he concludes.

Sameh Hadeeb concurs in Palestine Telegraph that the media fails to present an accurate picture of what goes on in the Middle East and that Hollywood may have contributed to hatred towards Arabs. Reaching over a hundred countries, Hollywood is probably the largest entertainment medium in the world with a capacity to influence people’s perceptions.

Arab American academic and author Jack Shaheen has researched and written extensively about how people of Middle Eastern descent are continuously depicted in negative roles in Hollywood cinema over the past decades. Shaheen describes how out of 900 movies featuring Arabs, “about 12 had positive portrayals of Arabs, 50 offered a balance and the rest depicted Arabs as villainous characters.”

Sharif Nashashibi, chairman and co-founder of Arab Media Watch, a non-profit watchdog which strives to promote objective coverage of Arab issues, argues, “Arab stereotypes in Hollywood allow for the dehumanization of Arabs...So if people time and time again see films that portray Arabs as violent, backward, hateful, fundamentalists, this eventually dehumanizes the Arabs.”

Miriam, whose parents are of Arab descent, says she is an avid movie-goer. “I don’t see any similarities between myself and the Arabs I see in the cinema. I’m a 16 year old ordinary girl living in a western country. But you never see that,” she says.

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