



A FABULOUS PROJECT

When veteran TV producer **Fran Mires** was asked by the US Broadcasting Board of Governors to set up **Al Youm** for MBN's **Alhurra TV**, she knew that creating a live daily three-hour show for the Middle East that broadcasts simultaneously from Dubai, Cairo, Beirut, Jerusalem and the US would prove her biggest challenge yet – so what motivated her to come onboard?

My expertise is launching TV shows, the language is not that important in terms of getting the project off the ground, I have done it in Spanish, in English. This venture really drew on everything that I have done over the last 20 years, it is a huge and fabulous project. I felt that if I could do this, I could do anything. Not only is it in the Middle East, not only is it pan-regional where the human dynamic is so challenging but I also had to construct this five country play – Beirut, Dubai, Jerusalem, Cairo, the United States – and put that together to have perfect TV every day, live three hours with no commercials. It took me 16 months from getting the phonecall to launching on 8 March 2009.

I immersed myself in the Middle East, gathering information, hiring all the people in the show - 130 people in five countries, made the decisions with my top management which countries to do the show out of, set up the infrastructure in all of the countries in order to do so, vendors and then physical locations, create sets in these countries, make the signature graphics, creating the music, getting it ready to connect.

What's the reason behind creating this programme?

I would say that all channels need to create something new and something exciting and Al Youm for Alhurra was that entity. To keep alive and to keep moving forward you have to spend the time, money and energy to show your viewers that you are moving in the right direction. That is the single reason Al Youm was created.

Al Youm is modeled after the American morning show format – how did that translate?

The format is patterned after the NBC's Today Show or ABC's Good Morning America show which are live three hour shows in the morning. I had to take that concept but to programme for an Arabic audience, so eliminate things that I did not think would translate. Our programming has 40% of hard news, the other 60% is softer news – information about health, nutrition, parenting, education, women's issues and some

entertainment. The signature of our features is that they are accented with music, with detail. When viewers in Dubai are looking at a Cairo story and vice-versa, that still has to be relevant to them. That's hard to do.

But you broadcast in the evening?

Yes, that's when TV viewing in the Middle East is at its peak. This is a prime time show, there is an expectation for serious news because we are in the Middle East. In the Arab world, there are so many different news channels that do the hard news. We are all covering from a news perspective much of the same. Some people call it news fatigue. In Al Youm, we are doing our job and doing that, but we are also doing a lot of human interest stories, they are touching a chord and people are responding to stories that affect their lives. People are looking for programming that is more relevant and personal to the viewer. I think that's what you are going to start seeing across.

How do you cope with broadcasting simultaneously from five countries in three continents?

That is a challenge every day. To keep everybody on track, I set up a grid – everybody is working in their respective time zone on a grid interfacing with Washington. The executive team is in Washington working with the other bureaux. Every bureau has a senior producer, assignments editors. I have an editor-in-chief worldwide, it all funnels through that and that organizational tree works pretty well. It's a constant ebb and flow, we start as early as 4.30 am in Washington and the show is live from 12 to 3 EST which is 11pm in Dubai etc, 9pm in Cairo and so forth, Sunday through Thursday.

The remit of what you cover is wide. What is unique about your content?

Because we are independent television funded by the US government, in the Arabic language, we have no boundaries. We can go into Egypt and cover whatever journalistically we feel

needs to be covered, the same in Israel, and the whole region. We are not subject to any of the issues that a local or another satellite TV channel might have because of who owns them. We are called Alhurra which means freedom, we have freedom to cover journalistically as we see fit, as the news dictates. And in Al Youm, because we have these five studios, we can act and discuss across the region, and we have found this has given us an edge that our competitors don't have.

Who is your target audience?

In terms of geographical reach, Alhurra is pan-regional literally from Morocco to the GCC. We do have an Alhurra Europe stream and Alhurra Iraq. But for Al Youm it definitely is the entire Middle East, and it is very broad. We have that unique edge that a family can sit and watch, there is something for everybody. We are not targeting decision-makers, we are targeting the people of the Middle East. For the 40% of hard news in our output, we speak in classical Arabic, for the rest of the show we speak in an Arabic that's easy for everyone to understand.

And the reaction from the viewers?

It's too early for viewing figures but we get emails, comments on Facebook, and another measurement for us is that we have a lot of guests. When we first began there was 'Oh, you're going to have a hard time getting guests on this show', but we've actually had tremendous success.

What about impact in your target area? There are some that suggest that only Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya have any measurable impact.

Clearly Alhurra is new compared to established players like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. They are Arabic channels and it is natural that they are going to have a bigger viewership than us. Alhurra is not competing against Al Jazeera, we are there to do a top notch job as journalists in the Middle East, and if you do a good job you will get more and more viewers by the day.



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WWW.ALHURRA.COM

How do you market Al Youm?

When we launched we had an advertising campaign to get the word out. What has been a very good tool for me is having so many high calibre guests on the show across the region - different media have picked up on it and that's got people to watch.

These days multi platform is the holy grail for broadcasters – what are you doing in that respect?

We launched on Facebook in August, I have something like 3,000 viewers already in a couple of months. Right there, they are talking about the show, what they like, what they didn't like. I think Facebook is fantastic as a social media. People can just speak their mind. We are going to be on Twitter as well.

Looking ahead, where is Al Youm going?

I always say to my staff that we have only just begun. We have had a great start, but it is only a start. I would like us to do award-winning really amazing stories and series that will be talked about for months and years. We haven't done that yet, that's coming up.

Fran Mires, thank you. ■