

CV

NAME

Mahmoud Bouneb

DATE OF BIRTH

February 1955

CAREER

Mahmoud Bouneb holds a Masters degree in Literature and Civilization from Sorbonne University, France. In 1979 he embarked on a series of high profile media roles - the positions varied from Press Advisor in Iraq to Head of Communication and Press at the League of Arab States' office in Ottawa, Canada. Mahmoud then moved to Europe where he was Editor in the International Department at the Swiss Radio and TV Corporation, then Chief Editor of Arab programmes for Dutch International Radio and TV NOS, and later Head of the Arab Service at Swiss Radio International, where he stayed for more than seven years. In the late '90s, he moved to the Middle East and became Advisor to the Chairman of the Board of Al Jazeera Channel and President of Qatar Radio and TV Corporation. In 2003, he was appointed Executive General Manager for Al Jazeera Children's Channel which he launched in 2005. Following on from this success, Bouneb launched Baraem TV (meaning 'buds'), the first free-to-air Arabic-speaking pre-school channel, in 2009.

MEDIA USE

He reads newspapers every morning, during the day the radio is on in the background. Monitors JCC and Baraem output, plus competitors, Reuters are always on. Surfs the global newswires for latest news

FAVOURITES

Likes to watch movies, read books and listen to music



THE LIFE OF KIDS

Mahmoud Bouneb, veteran broadcaster with over 30 years experience of international journalism and media, is making headlines again. He is the man behind the first Pan-Arab 'edutainment' channel addressing an audience between 7 and 15 years old, and also the first pre-school Arabic television for children between the age of 3 and 6. As Executive General Manager of **Al Jazeera Children's Channel (JCC)** and the **Baraem** pre-school channel he has set his sights high – not only regarding programme quality and geographical reach but also from a communication point of view, making people understand what these two channels are really about

How did JCC come about?

Everything you see here at JCC and Baraem and in the Qatar Foundation is inspired by Qatar's First Lady, Sheikha Moza. Before JCC there were very few productions for children, mostly animation dubbed into Arabic, and the kids used to be passive viewers. So the vision of Her Highness was to launch the first 'edutainment' channel, and she was closely involved in the feasibility study in the beginning. I am grateful to her for bringing me from the news and current affairs worlds to the world of TV for children, and we are all grateful to her for her dedication and involvement in the past five years to make this kind of TV successful.

Wherever we go in the Arab world to show our movies we win golden awards. We brought on board the best TV directors who never thought that one day they would work for children, and we said to them 'We have a very low budget, we have beautiful ideas, if you have better ideas let us know, and we want you to produce short movies, 35 minutes, on kids, families, different issues.' It's

not about politics, it's not about games, it's about the life of kids.

How long has the channel been going?

We spent two years making feasibility studies in the Arab world and worldwide, and in September 2005 we launched Al Jazeera Children's Channel (JCC).

But we knew that one day we'd have to split the channel into two because targeting kids from 3 to 15 is difficult to achieve. So we reshuffled JCC to target kids from 7 to 15 and launched Baraem on 16 January 2009 - it is a unique channel targeting pre-schoolers in the Arab world free-to-air.

Where is your audience?

We broadcast on three satellites - Arabsat and Nilesat cover the whole Arab world but also parts of Northern Europe and Asia, and then Hotbird. In the UK we are on BSkyB with JCC, Baraem hopefully following next year. It is essential to bring our offer not only to the children of the Arab world but also to all the Arab speaking kids throughout the world. We want to reach the Arab speaking community in North America as soon as we can, as soon as we have the content which may feed one channel and bring a credible offering to viewers on the East coast of the US and in Canada.

Any audience figures?

We did a market penetration study two years after our launch. We brought three neutral people together – an academic from the University in Beirut, a former BBC guy and a former ABC Australia guy – and we explained to them our mandate, and they then spent six months touring the Arab world to see where we are. What I can say is we are among the top three covering the market - MBC3 which is the children's channel of the MBC Group, Spacetoon which is a channel broadcasting from Dubai, and JCC.

“ We are the only children's channel in the world which has a talk show ”

How do you produce/source your content?

For JCC we are about 60% in-house today. We have co-productions in Malaysia, Canada, Korea, the UK, France, the Arab world. We also buy content on the world market - today with Baraem about 2,000 hours per year. We are very strict regarding what we buy, we have a workflow that takes care about technical and editorial validation. For the pre-school channel it was from day one clear in our mind that it is about early awareness, early learning, about shapes, colours, language, behaviour, relationship, interactivity with the environment. For Baraem we have the ambition to reach 30% in-house production by the end of 2010. For the pre-school you can find content worldwide. On JCC it's difficult because we consume more than 800 hours per year on this channel, so we have to accept certain content that doesn't fit with our strategy of entertainment and education.

Does content from a different cultural background work in the Arabic world?

The content on the international market is not made for children of the western world, it is to make children happy. On the international market we can find challenging content, but we have a problem with the fiction - the dubbing. The dubbing kills the content. When you take an American or British series and use an Arabic voice for a blonde, blue-eyed young person it will not look credible. We are doing all our dubbing into classical Arabic. But we don't have a problem of civilization compatibility, if I may say so, because we have our validation process that determines if this is good for us or if this is not good for us. And believe me, we do not censor. We are the only Arab children's channel, and the Secretary General of the UN said the only children's channel in the world, which has a talk show. We have dealt with the Jihad problems, with

Palestine, with Israel, the economy, politics, but from the child's perspective. We address the child as a citizen – when you are 13 or 14 you are a citizen, even if you cannot vote. We are a public mission TV with a public vision with a public interest, we are rooted in our culture, we are promoting our identity, we are open to other cultures and other identities, and we don't have any kind of special dogma in the content we produce.

In Europe kids are on the computer all day long – is that happening here as well?

What you see in Europe in the kids' world, you have about 85-90% of it here, it's the same. For online, we have to diversify our offer, we have to make it look nice but useful also. We are not an entertaining web site – it should be accessible when needed. We worked with Microsoft and brought teachers together around the table to discuss what kind of content they want to see on a web site or a web platform. If you can give them a tool to make their life easier and their relationship with the kids transparent this is a value added to their curriculum.

How do you tell people that JCC and Baraem are out there?

This is the main challenge. You know when you have a public mission and you want to inform about the public mission it's very different from a commercial approach. Without the media we cannot survive, we have to win awards, we always have to make that extra effort that is going to bring the credibility to our offer. I can tell you, in the beginning people did not understand the point about JCC: 'What is this channel? What more do you want to present for children?' It is a public mandate, we have to build a future for our children which is better than our present. The present of the Arab world is ugly, it's sad, it's full of challenges and full of nonsense on the political, social and cultural front – is this the world that we want our kids to inherit? I don't think so. This is why we try to bring the touch of beauty, of change, of ambition, of naivete. One of our programmes is

Ad-Darb, a tournament of joy, fun and excitement ▶



Nadhra Ala, an hour-long debate show ▶

“ You cannot make TV like this for \$10m ”

"Talk to me", it's just 23 minutes of talk with a child. It's amazing how little we listen to our kids. The Arabs, the English, the Americans, blacks, whites – we do not listen to our kids, we do not know them.

What about the future?

JCC is not a conventional channel, and it should remain non-conventional in its relationship with its content, with the talents that we are dealing with, in our financing. Without the support of government this kind of offer will stop immediately and it will be replaced by a very commercial offer. And even a commercial offer is not sustainable.

I have to give you just two numbers: we have a budget today for two channels of \$115m a year. The turnover of the commercial market, satellite TV for Arab children, is less than \$60m among eight or nine channels. So if you become a commercial channel, you will fight for \$10m, and you cannot make TV like this for \$10m. Our ambition is to stay true to our mission, make very good TV and become a successful and sustainable corporation.

Mahmoud Bouneb, thank you. ■

WWW.JCCTV.NET
WWW.BARAEM.TV