



GETTING ETHICS BACK INTO THE MEDIA

Mohamed Ali Harrath knows what he is talking about when he speaks about the East and about the West – he has lived in both, speaks the main languages, and has studied cultures and politics in detail.

Founding the **Islam Channel** in 2004 is his contribution towards defusing the tension between the Muslim and the Western world – so how is he doing?

After 9/11 Islam as a religion and Muslims as a community became a topic for discussion for everyone. The channel – an initiative of British Muslims – is a small contribution towards that debate. We are now a 200 strong team, based in the UK. What we want to be is an interface between Islam and Muslims and the West, and we are hoping that it works both ways. We have to accept there is a tension now between the Muslim world and the West, and we have to do something about it. Doing

something about it is to celebrate the common values, and I believe there are plenty of common values. So far at least in the UK I believe we have achieved some success.

Are there similar channels in other parts of the world?

There isn't any other channel doing what we are doing. We discuss issues raised in the West, using the main language of the West – English. We discuss the issues of the day, sometimes with great controversy. We get people involved in that debate – whether they are the leaders of the Muslim community or scholars or the top decision

makers of the establishment. Also, here in the UK we are acting as a melting pot. Muslims in the UK are a recent community, we have only been here for the last 40 to 50 years, and we come from different parts of the world. We help the process of positive integration - what we mean by that is for Muslims to take part in the activities of wider society, but at the same time to be themselves.

Who is your audience?

It is a much wider group than the Muslim community. Of course our core viewers are the Muslims, but increasingly we are seeing a broad spectrum of society watching the channel. Our output is entirely in English – even with Holy Verses or recitation from the Koran we make sure that there is a translation.

What about funding?

Initially we put in some investment, but now we completely rely on our own resources. Although the channel is FTA, we have a scheme of voluntary subscriptions. So our main sources of income are advertising, sponsorship and voluntary subscriptions.

Take us through some typical programming.

Although it is called the Islam Channel, politics is part of the religion, everyday life is part of the religion. We have religious programmes which mainly explain the verses of the Holy Book and the sayings of the prophet – trying to find solutions for the problems our communities are facing and suggesting solutions to the wider society. We also have current affairs programmes where we discuss issues of the day, at international level or relating to the UK. We ask the community to take part in political life – for example to take part in the elections. Taking part is giving them an alternative to violence; they feel they are part of the decision-making process, not only at the receiving end but also contributing.

Do you see your role as helping to integrate the Muslim community into the wider British community?

That is the main role. Often what people mean by integration is in fact assimilation: 'I have to be like you so that we can work together'. We don't want Muslims to lose their identity, we ask everyone to be proud of what he/she is because if people are at peace with themselves, they can make a positive contribution. We call it positive integration. In the UK multi-culturalism is there, it needs to be directed the right way so that we can get the benefits.

How do you market the channel?

This is the fourth year that we are organising the Global Peace & Unity Event – a huge event where you get top politicians sharing the platform with scholars, human rights activists, etc. Part of it is a huge exhibition, and we had musicians performing in English, Arabic and Urdu. In the past nearly 60,000 people attended and it was hugely successful. In March we supported the Muslim Writers Awards in Birmingham – encouraging Muslims to write.

What about the immediate future?

We just relaunched this March with new branding and new programming, 6am to midnight. We are also in discussions to launch in other countries, Nigeria, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the US. In South Africa the discussions are quite advanced now, we are talking about DTH distribution. 80% of programming will come from London and 20% is going to be local programming. So if we borrow the HSBC slogan: "Your local global TV". We are also looking at launching in another language. There are newcomers to Europe who have not mastered the English language, and we want to take care of those as well.

Which platforms are important?

We buy maybe less than 10% of our programming. We are on the web,

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with streaming TV. Sometimes you have up to 5,000 watching at the same time, mostly in the US and Canada, Singapore, Australia. We are in discussions to deliver on mobiles as well.

And looking further ahead?

We are a big channel in the Muslim community, our hope is to move on to mainstream. There is a huge number of channels available that you can watch – so what makes someone come to your channel? I want to be an alternative to what is already there. I believe in the mainstream media we are in desperate need for a liberal, truthful voice – not affected by the interests of media ownership - , and we hope to be that voice. We want to be that shop that you can come to for another angle of the news. If you watch BBC, CNN, even Al Jazeera English, Sky News – I think it's very similar because the people who are working there are basically people with the same training, the same mentality, the same interests. As for entertainment, many families want programmes which can be watched by the whole family and we want to cater for that section of the population as well. Media is a tool, used by different people for different reasons. My aim is to get morals and ethics back to media.

Mohamed Ali Harrath, thank you very much. ■
www.islamchannel.tv

