

A NEW KIND OF FUSION

Now in its seventh year of broadcasting, UK-based **Islam Channel** reaches over 160 countries – in the UK alone it's attracting over 2m viewers. The channel's mission has remained the same – to bridge the gap between faiths and eradicate misconceptions – but it is positioning itself now more in the mainstream and going international with localised content, as CEO **Mohamed Ali Harrath** explains

We are now a year and a half into our new 5 year strategy which sees us moving Islam Channel more into the mainstream. We are trying to be more inclusive and appeal to a wider audience. That's reflected in our programming, for instance in our series about leading politicians we started with Tony Benn. During our first few years of broadcasting, we emphasised the Islamic side, now we are emphasising the Anglo-centric side and our mission is to bridge the gap between the two. We are creating a new phenomenon orientated towards Islam and Anglo-centric at the same time. This kind of fusion did not exist before. If we create something that everyone feels they have a stake in, I think we are there.

Who are your viewers?

Our viewers are of all faiths and backgrounds, non-faith as well. When the UK Minister for Security, Baroness Neville-Jones, wanted to announce her new policies she chose to appear on the Islam Channel - it is an achievement to be the medium for a Minister of State to announce strategy. When Muslims want to voice their concerns, they come to us; when politicians want to connect with the Muslim community, they come to us. Many activists, whether Muslims or non-Muslims, connect to us. Many faiths appear on our channel to explain their views. We are playing a unique role, I don't see it played by anyone else. The other mainstream channels don't have time to talk about faith. For

them, religion is something that happens in the mosque or in the church, whereas people of faith are active outside their mosques and synagogues.

You are making an impact in South Africa – how did that come about?

In sub-Saharan Africa the main DTH service is Multichoice. The decision about who is included on their DSTV bouquet is a purely commercial one based on how many extra viewers/subscribers any new channel will bring them. We are the only Islamic channel on their bouquets and very effective in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria, Kenya. We also worked in Nigeria with the British Council on climate change, "Climate and Faith".

Which platforms are you on?

We currently broadcast on seven satellites, we will be on more by the end of this year. We are using DTH as well – in sub-Saharan Africa that's DSTV, in the UK we are on Sky and since April of this year on FreeSat. We are on Hotbird in order to reach the Arab and Somali communities within the UK and mainland Europe and on the W4 satellite in order to reach the western African communities in the UK. We are trying to reach every community through the platforms which are popular with them. We are also working on launching on Virgin Media.

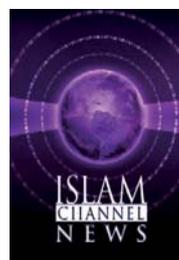
What is the basis of your funding?

People subscribe to the channel on a voluntary basis, we have a very good response to that. Other sources of income are sponsorship and advertising. We created a loyalty card which people can use in shops, restaurants and so on - that is also providing some income. And we plan to launch our own debit card.

Your name – Islam Channel – must sometimes lead to misconceptions?

We have been advised many times to change the name. I said, no, we won't change the name. We have to combat the image in people's minds

“It's the level of ignorance that creates conflicts”



that anything to do with Islam has something to do with terrorism and extremism. It's the level of ignorance that creates conflicts. I think we have to clarify the picture and the image here and now, that's a job we have to do. Some think that if you are a Muslim, you are oppressed, others think if your religion is Islam you are an oppressor.

In October you will host again the Global Peace & Unity event in London. How are you involved?

At the beginning the event was organised by the channel; now it is completely independent and organised by a foundation that we set up. It's a hugely successful event in terms of attendance and unique in that scholars of different schools of thought and politicians of different parties share the same platform. It's becoming international now. We have already booked the venue in Cape Town for next year, we have an invitation from Nigeria and also the UAE. Our formula is quite successful: we are saying 'Look, there is a lot of ignorance, the reality is we have to bring people together to eradicate prejudice'. The less prejudice you have the further away you will be from conflict. There is nothing better than promoting peace and mutual respect and understanding between cultures and faiths and to me that's a basic tenet of the faith I believe in. And there are plenty of people out there who believe this too.

And the outlook?

We are going to establish ourselves in the States quite soon, and in Malaysia as well. Getting the content to New York or Kuala Lumpur is easy – the difficult bit is getting into homes. Our intention is to have an international element produced in London and then create local content so that we are international and local at the same time.

Mohamed Ali Harrath, thank you.

www.islamchannel.tv