



REDEFINING TV NEWS

Having grown up in the West Bank, **Dr Nabil Al Khatib** joined **MBC Group**, today one of the most successful media groups in the Arab world, in 1993 and ran their Jerusalem bureau. One year after MBC launched **Al Arabiya** in 2003, he was appointed Executive Editor of the news channel. Rather than be radical and populist in order to be popular he made a different editorial choice – and is reaping the rewards

If you ask me, how is the media scene changing in the Middle East, I would say the main change is having the media game 'upside down'. In the research I conducted some 18 years ago I found that Arabs were subject to the flow of information from abroad because they didn't have their own modern media, and their media was subject to heavy censorship by their governments.

Now I can say that the flow of information of news from abroad, from outside the Arab countries, is minimal in effect and influence compared with the news produced in the region. The establishment of MBC in London in 1991, then when BBC Arabic tried incorporation with Orbit, and then Al Jazeera - these were all steps forward, and happening parallel to new media

platforms like blogs and online that helped Arabs talk to each other, away from censorship.

Do news channels targeting the Middle East have any influence?

No. For news most people would rely specifically on either Al Arabiya or Al Jazeera, or they would go for online journalism or for blogs. I don't think they are not succeeding because of the Arabs being cautious of channels from abroad but they compete with already existing stations who combine entertainment and news or who specialise in news, and they are trying to compete using the same tools.

For a viewer to change his loyalty to a station he needs to feel that there is an added value. I claim personally as a researcher in this field that they offer nothing new.

“The main challenge is verifying the content”

You need to offer more freedom of opinion, they should feel more free than us to offer the kind of news and information that we cannot always broadcast because of the restrictions in the Arab world but they don't do that.

So now Arabs rely mainly on news produced in the Arab world?

The situation now is that most of the Arabs rely on news produced in the Arab world or for Arabs by Arabs. But I would like to clarify one thing. We as Arab media are all relying on international news wires for pictures and text copy.

So the news agenda of the Arabic speaking satellite channels is set by international news agencies and not by their own resources – which is a worrying picture. Why am I so cautious about international news agencies?

Because the bureau chief of AP for example, sitting in Jerusalem, is looking at news not necessarily as we need to look at news as Arabs or Israelis, but his editorial choice is based on the demands of his clients and the interests of a totally different audience – for example the American audience.

In principle I don't disagree with him on his view but I tailor things to a different audience, that's why the product should be different. I will look at how the situation in Iraq is affecting the simple Iraqi and I don't cover much the details of the American troops in Iraq.

So why, if there is a choice, do people watch Al Arabiya?

Let me tell you that some years ago news in the Arab world didn't contain lifestyle news or health news – you'd see mainly and only global politics and macro politics news, like so-and-so was killed in Iraq, Rabin said so-and-so, and Arafat replied so-and-so.

Then Al Arabiya appeared in 2003 and started to redefine the definition of TV news for an Arab viewer. Now, after five years of Al Arabiya, an Arab viewer expects that when he watches TV he does not only get bad news, but also other news that's interesting to know, about lifestyle or health.

If I am telling people about a discovery that will make a difference to their lives, like a breakthrough in cancer, probably they will like it more than anything else, especially if you produce it in a nice way. No news agency is offering this news as a package so we need to produce it from scratch which is costly and requires creativity.

Secondly, Al Arabiya tried to cover local societies of the Arab world. We wanted to give an ordinary Moroccan the feeling that we are making him a better citizen by informing him about the situation in his country - simple news about what's happening in health and education. For an ordinary citizen of Tunisia, his son's education and job are much more

important than following in detail what's happening in Gaza. Yes, he is emotionally in association with what's happening in Gaza but the thing that will not let him sleep soundly is the worry about his son. Realising what is possible in those Arab countries where our audiences are, and realizing what is the real socio-economic and political level of development of those societies and the realities of the political systems and trying to be pragmatic enough to address the real concerns of the public in those countries, this is something that has created loyalty to Al Arabiya.

How do you gauge the success of this editorial policy?

After five years we see that in Iraq the rating of Al Arabiya increased sharply. It's easy to be radical and populist in order to be popular but we chose the difficult way of trying to be liberal and rational and at the same time informative.

In the very conservative society of Saudi Arabia a moderate channel like Al Arabiya is the third most viewed channel, among even the entertainment channels. The reason is the content – lifestyle and human interest stories and information about local societies that they can't get anywhere else.

In terms of the societies we cover, the focus is on the Gulf, the Levant area and North Africa but we can be received anywhere in the world. And at the end of the day, it is a TV business so we need to have a clean, beautiful screen, beautifully produced stories.

Do you use consumer-generated content in your output?

Yes, when our office in Teheran was shut down by the authorities we like other international media were left with what was coming via Twitter, YouTube and the internet. The video quality was not the main challenge – it was how to verify the content. We established an Iran desk inside the newsroom in Dubai with colleagues who are experts on Iran and who have contacts with eye witnesses and activists in Iran,

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to verify the information by double-checking any piece of information against various sources.

So the so-called citizen journalism helped us at least to pinpoint that there is something happening. The experience of Iran shows that in any closed place there are now people who can get information out. Personally I am concerned that ethical values and the verification should not be compromised.

What about new developments regarding delivery?

We'll be putting more emphasis on media offering via internet by adding live streaming. For the last two years we have already had a so-called video forum where citizens from different Arab countries can share with us amateur videos – we publish them on our web site with captions.

There are also some projects relating to news gathering, we are currently experimenting with a new software that can be installed in your mobile and which allows you to upload a video to a specific FTP server and then into our broadcast server in minutes and it can go to air after verification or approval by the editor.

Have you felt the effects of the worldwide downturn?

We cover some 60% of our expenditure from direct advertising, so we got worried how the advertisers would be reacting. But to our surprise no serious cancellations came in, 8-10% only. But we are trying to find cheaper ways of production with the new technologies that are available - this is where we are trying to focus. Even if the crisis continues, at least we will make sure that we will not be hit and we don't have to fire people. For the remaining 40% we rely on MBC, our mother company, until we reach the breakeven - hopefully by our 10th anniversary.

Nabil Al Khatib, thank you. ■

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