

# MEDIA AND THE ARAB WORLD

Much of contemporary history is being written in the Middle East - it is, as some have said, the new frontier. What does this mean for media in the region, asks **Simon Spanswick**, CEO of the **Association for International Broadcasting**: more outside influences in the form of channels beaming programming in, or should Middle East broadcasters be left to their own devices?



**F**or those of us outside the Middle East, it's all too easy to look at the region through a prism that concentrates the view entirely on war, terror and destruction. This skewed view is one that news organisations in the West – not without some justification – have fed to viewers and listeners over the past two decades.

Turn the prism round, however, and look from within the Middle East at the region and a different picture emerges. That of a dynamic region where educational achievement is growing fast, and where poverty is being eradicated – at least in some parts.

Despite 20 years of conflict that's brought death to tens of thousands of people across Iraq, Kuwait, Darfur, Algeria and Palestine, there is now definite hope and optimism. And in no sector is that more visible than the media.

Fast disappearing are the days when state media's news fed citizens a diet of an emir's meetings with fellow emirs. Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya paved the way for a remarkable change in the way people across the Arab world were told about their fellow Arabs, as much as about the rest of the world. As the two most successful pan-

regional news broadcasters, Jazeera and Arabiya have consistently pushed the envelope, stimulating debate in what some observers suggest is something of a social and political revolution.

No longer can the region's rulers hold sway over the mass media – there's choice in what people consume in their homes when it comes to news.

Alongside the locally-produced channels are TV news broadcasts beamed in from abroad: France 24, Euronews, Russia Today, Al Hurra, CCTV and BBC are all available in millions of homes across the Arab world, delivering news in Arabic both about the region and the wider world from perspectives that are different to those of Jazeera and Arabiya.

On radio, BBC Arabic, Monte-Carlo Doualiya, Radio Sawa, Voice of Russia and KBS World also target listeners with Arabic as their mother tongue.

Audiences for these international broadcasts are relatively modest when compared with those of regional channels. This does not mean, however, that they are not part of the region's media mix.

## LET'S MIX IT UP

However, none of us can live by news alone. We need a varied diet that includes music, drama, and

**“Women are also making the running in developing the media”**

entertainment. With more than 500 TV channels available across the Middle East, there should be something for everyone.

Up to a point, yes. A huge number of the channels are, quite frankly, of dubious quality both technically and in content terms. But this results in immense potential, and it's potential that's being seized by local broadcasters and international conglomerates alike.

Bear in mind that the region's population is very youthful: in Algeria, Egypt and Morocco, the three most populous Arab countries, the median age is 26, 24 and 26 respectively.

It's also a region whose population is growing, fast. Some estimate that the population across the Arab world will increase by 40% over the next 20 years – that's another 150m people. No surprise, then, that media companies are developing channels specifically for younger audiences: from Baraem for pre-school audiences to MTV Arabia for teens and young adults.

## WHAT WOMEN WANT

The region's young people are far more literate and better educated than their parents. Educational standards – for women, too – are constantly improving, thanks to colossal investment in schools and universities. Take a trip to

Education City on the outskirts of Doha and see the outposts of American and Australian universities that have been attracted there, close to the 45,000 square metre Qatar Science & Technology Park currently under construction.

Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned is chair of the Qatar Foundation that administers Education City and the Science and Technology Park, as well as Al Jazeera Children's Channel. In 2007, Forbes magazine named the Sheikha one of the 100 most powerful women in the world while The Times of London named her one of the 25 most influential business leaders in the Middle East. But it's her commitment to public service that sets the Sheikha apart from many of her contemporaries among the Arab world's leaders. Her passion about delivering the very best to the whole region's children through high-quality, commercial-free, children's and pre-school television shines through the motivated and enthusiastic staff at JCC, whose headquarters are in Education City.

#### REGULATION IS THE KEY

The Sheikha does not intend to sit back and let things happen. Instead, looking at the lack of effective and relevant regulation of the region's broadcasting industry which is holding back development, she wants action. What is needed is a sensible regulatory framework that takes the best of the west's media regulation and applies it to the very different Arab world. For example, there's a complete and unacceptable lack of both protection of children and of equality of women on the airwaves – two major problems that need to be resolved.

What's definitely not needed is another satellite broadcasting charter from the Arab League. Its attempt to impose some form of regulation on the nascent satellite broadcasting industry in the early part of 2008 ended up being stillborn. It was not designed with the people in mind, but instead was



▲ From top:  
Sheikha Mozah  
bint Nasser Al  
Missned; inside  
Carnegie University,  
Doha; Queen  
Rania; Princess  
Rym al-Ali

an attempt by ministers of Information to protect their rulers from close cross-examination by an ever less respectful TV industry.

It's possible that through the Qatar Foundation – which also supports the Doha Media Centre (its Director, RSF founder Robert Menard, left amidst controversy earlier this year) – a sensible form of regulation will be developed to serve the people, restricting access to pornography and violence on television to adults, in the way that citizens in the west take for granted.

#### ME, TOO

In Jordan, women are also making the running in developing the media. HM Queen Rania has embraced the media revolution, joining YouTube and Twitter, ensuring that she communicates with people not only in Jordan but across the Arab world and beyond.

The Queen's sister-in-law, Princess Rym al-Ali, is also involved in media development in the country. A former correspondent for the BBC, Dubai TV, Bloomberg and CNN, the Princess heads up the newly-founded Jordan Media Institute which aims to raise professional standards in journalism in the Middle East and to turn Jordan into a media hub.

In Jordan, there's a new media city, which aims to be a creative centre, just like the initiatives in Dubai that saw media companies set up in the Emirate's Media City, an hour's drive (depending on the traffic) from downtown Dubai.

Abu Dhabi doesn't want to be left out: its own media city is twofour54. Launched this year, it is already attracting entrepreneurs and established media companies.

#### IT'S COMMERCIAL, TO A POINT

It's often the case that the largest TV companies, whilst commercial, are bank-rolled by the wealthy ruling families of the Gulf States. For example, Al Jazeera Network – including the news and sports channels – is funded by the Emir of Qatar; MBC Group – which

includes Al Arabiya – is owned by Saudi businesspeople believed connected to the Saudi Royal Family; Arab Media Group in Dubai – which operates MTV Arabia – is part of Tecom Investments, with 99.67% of the company owned by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

This means that normal commercial rules do not necessarily apply in Middle East media and the need for return on investment is not a high priority.

The further away from the Gulf States one looks in the region, the more the model changes to one which more resembles the West, with commercial companies run as profit-generating vehicles – Future TV in Lebanon, or Medi-1 in Morocco, for example.

There is a tangible sense of energy in the Arab world's media which reflects the growing dynamism and confidence in the region. It is evident for all to see if you take the time and trouble to look beyond the image often portrayed in the West.

Here media really is a key player: it is media that will help Arabs connect one with another and, ultimately, to the wider world.

#### IN NUMBERS



	Pop. m	GDP, \$bn
Algeria	35.3	129
Bahrain	2.8	43
Djibouti	0.8	1
Egypt	76.5	188
Iraq	31.2	69
Jordan	5.9	22
Kuwait	3.5	106
Lebanon	3.8	31
Libya	6.3	63
Mauritania	3.1	3
Morocco	31.9	85
Oman	2.8	43
Palestinian Territories	3.9	6
Qatar	1.2	100
Saudi Arabia	25.5	370
Somalia	8.5	n/a
Sudan	39.1	52
Syria	20.4	53
Tunisia	10.4	40
UAE	4.9	215
Yemen	23.9	29