Overview

BBC Arabic TV launched in March 2008. But for a brief (1994-96) partnership with the Saudi channel Orbit, it presents the BBC’s first foreign language television station.

Rather than presenting a stand-alone TV channel, BBC Arabic tv is intended to function as part of an innovative tri-platform service, combining radio and the internet.

The first stage of our research on the channel has the following aims:

- To locate the channel within the field of Arabic satellite television news channels, that have multiplied in the last decade. This entails comparing and contrasting BBC Arabic tv with the other existing news channels, both in terms of content of broadcasts, but also format, style of presentation and so on. A principal point of comparison is with Al Jazeera - the most prominent Arabic news channel, and also the most popular.

- To examine the aims and objectives of BBC Arabic and how it seeks to function as an agent of public diplomacy.

- To locate the channel within the history of the BBC as an international broadcaster.

In exploring these issues we focus upon three themes: participation, appeal and impact.

Participation

In one respect BBC Arabic tv presents a quite typical news channel, offering a standpoint that accords with traditional BBC new values.

However, from the moment of its launch, BBC Arabic tv has sought to foreground the participatory nature of its output and activity. In his opening comments the presenter Tony al-Khoury introduced the new channel by stating:

It is a media service that considers you part of it, and gives you the chance to participate in an interactive way and to express your opinion … Every week we interact with millions of people through programmes and dialogues, using the most modern techniques of production and
broadcasting. We will look with you at issues form all perspectives and give you the chance to interact with us, not only through news reception, but also through making it.

More substantively the emphasis placed upon participation is evident in programmes such as: ‘Point of Debate’ - that provides a forum the audience to debate particularly issues; ‘To the Point’ - a interview / discussion programme with an ‘expert’ or prominent figure; and ‘Enquiry Commission’ - in which a panel of ‘experts’ address a particular issue. (Indeed, talking about ‘Pointing of Debate’ the head of BBC Arabic, Hosam El Sokkari, has identified the programme as embodying BBC Arabic’s role, in offering ‘a platform, not to advocate political views’, rather, ‘their input [the audience’s] will be our input’ - a process which will allow BBC Arabic to ‘reinvent the world’ (‘Setting the Arab news agenda’ conference, SOAS, May 2008)).

BBC Arabic tv has not introduced discussion and debate to Arabic television news. Since Al Jazeera’s launch in 1996 the channel has sought to provide a forum for open discussion and debate (that was previously absent from Arabic tv news) as most famously perhaps in the programme ‘The Opposite Direction’. What is interesting about BBC Arabic is the type of issues presented for discussion - aspects of Arabic society and culture that are little surveyed or discussed elsewhere in the Arab media, including on Al Jazeera - as in for example: the relative importance of religion and ethnicity, women’s employment, women as political leaders, and racism in Arab societies.

Our research seeks to locate the type of issues raised by BBC Arabic tv as source for discussion and debate in terms of the channel’s objectives. At the same it seeks to assess how providing such a forum can be seen to address criticisms of the channel, or scepticism about its role, as in the case that the channel simply presents another version of the west instructing a non-western Other about the world and the latter’s place within it, or, that the channel possess an agenda that seeks to promote a particular set of values the reflects its funding by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Appeal

How then to understand the appeal of the channel? As the channel has only recently been launched audience research is limited. One feature of the channel’s appeal we wish to highlight is the terms in which it provides a forum for discussion and debate of the type just outlined. How though can the terms in which such a forum appeals to audiences be understood?

Drawing upon psychoanalytic conceptions of the voice and the gaze as objects of desire, we examine how providing such a forum functions as both an aural and visual lure. In regard to the former, this takes the form of hearing (multiple) voices engaged in discussing the type of issues the channel has sought to promote. At the same time, we examine how the on screen staging of these debates constitutes a lure in visual terms

Impact?
What is ultimately at stake with BBC Arabic is the channel’s impact. And yet, as the channel has only been operating for a few months, it is difficult to make any long term pronouncements about what this impact has been or might be. (At the same time trying to establish at any stage precisely what the impact of the channel has been is likely to be problematic).

What can be considered at this stage though is the relationship between the media and politics in Arab societies, and the context this presents for the type of impact the channel might make.

Marc Lynch (*Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, 2006) points to a significant contrast between contemporary western and many (although not all) Arab societies, in regard to the relationship between media and politics. In the former the media is understood as closely bound up with the functioning of politics, and is located as playing a key role in shaping and directing political debates (and even coming to eclipse the functioning of more formal political processes), in a relationship that might be visualised in the following terms:

![Political-media relationship diagram](image)

In contrast, in many Arab societies - those in which democratic politics remain significantly limited - the relationship between media coverage and the functioning of politics is much more dislocated. Whilst satellite news channels may have proliferated in the last ten years, bringing a new openness to the discussion of political questions, the impact on the politics of these societies has remained relatively muted.

![Satellite politics disconnect diagram](image)

Not only is there a distance between the sphere of media (in the form of these news channels) and politics, there is an uncertainty about the nature of this relationship and what might develop out of it. It is in this setting that BBC Arabic tv has appeared, a setting that raises significant questions about the nature of the impact BBC Arabic tv might and can make.

**Research progress**

At present resent we are developing a working paper which will develop into a journal article.
As highlighted, BBC Arabic tv is still in its infancy, and as the channel develops further questions and issues will arise which this initial research will provide a platform from which they can be addressed.