

Al Jazeera and Alhurra Contend with TV Ratings Problems ^[1]

The latest Middle East TV ratings that list actual tune-in of news channels, obtained exclusively by Worldcasting, show business as usual but also some surprises.

Al Jazeera, the Qatari government-owned channel, continues to hold forth in popularity in Egypt. Al Arabiya, funded in part by the Saudi government through a holding company, once again tops others in Saudi Arabia by a wide margin, but it also garnered impressive audience ratings in Iraq, where Alhurra, the U.S. government service, continues to trail its competition, there and elsewhere.

The TV ratings by the independent polling organization, IPSOS-STAT, depict "day before" actual viewing.

In Egypt, Al Jazeera with a 21.26 rating, placed well ahead of Al Arabiya, at a 5.1 rating. But in Saudi Arabia, Al Arabiya, at a rating of 22.23, topped Al Jazeera, which gathered a 17.33 rating. Data from both Egypt and Saudi Arabia were consistent with those from earlier months. Alhurra followed, a long way down.

In Iraq, however, Al Arabiya gathered a whopping 41.29 rating, practically even with leader Al Iraqiya, the Iraqi government channel, and well ahead of Al Jazeera, which received an 18.39 rating. Al Hurra trailed well behind others with its two Iraq channels.

To generate more buzz about its Middle East TV channels and perhaps lift ratings, Larry Register, the recently appointed head of Al Hurra and its counterpart, Radio Sawa, has changed station policy by lifting the previous ban on broadcasting statements from terrorists. With one exception, the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors to whom Register reports, voiced its support of the former veteran CNN producer. But the Chairman of the BBG, Kenneth Tomlinson, has thus far withheld his support of Register, pending further investigation of the facts.

Despite Alhurra's growing pains (it debuted Feb. 2004) it still gets enough of an audience in the Middle East to be listed on commercial TV rating services. Conversely, Al Jazeera's English-language service has practically no audience at all in the U.S., and does not appear in commercial audience rating services even as an asterisk. It can be accessed via the Internet and on a few local cable systems, but major program distributors have shied away from carrying Al Jazeera because of threatened boycotts by sponsors and cable subscribers, over Al Jazeera's distribution of statements by Bin Laden and other terrorists.

While the perception of Al Jazeera vis-à-vis terrorists would appear to be stalling its effort to introduce its service in America, Alhurra appears to be banking on improving its ratings reach in the Middle East by putting terrorists on the air. In television, it's all about numbers.
