

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Al Jazeera's Middle East Popularity Wanes as its North American Sibling Wants to Leave Home ^[1]

Worldcasting has obtained exclusive comparative independent television ratings that document a steady decline in Al Jazeera's popularity among viewers in Saudi Arabia over a one-year period. That country is the most important television market in the region; 70 percent of the region's television advertising is spent there.

These consecutive 12-month ratings measure actual daily viewership of Middle East transnational television channels and not only bode ill for Al Jazeera's marquee Arabic channel; they also impact plans for Al Jazeera International, the network's new English-language service scheduled to debut in only two months.

In what can be interpreted as a move to distance itself from the home-based channel, Al Jazeera International stresses that while the new English channel is the "sibling network to Al Jazeera Arabic...(it) is independent administratively, financially and editorially."

In a monthly charting of audience ratings prepared exclusively for Worldcasting by the premier independent Middle East television survey organization IPSOS-STAT, the Saudi government-financed Al-Arabiya surpassed Al Jazeera in audience viewer rankings for the first time in the history of the two channels. IPSOS-STAT says that in 2003 and 2004 "the gap between the two stations was very big" in Saudi Arabia, with Al Jazeera holding a significant lead.

IPSOS-STAT says that the weakening viewership of Al Jazeera is not confined to Saudi Arabia, which is inhabited by some 18 million persons, "most of whom are wealthy with high purchasing power." The trend shows a weakening of Al Jazeera's former lead throughout the region, with Al Arabiya getting stronger, although Al Jazeera is still leading in Kuwait, for example.

Could it be that some Middle East viewers are tiring of Al Jazeera, which is often perceived as a more "radical and Islamic" network? This image of Al Jazeera as a conduit for terrorist videos is currently being reinforced with the video obtained from kidnappers showing Jill Carroll, the Christian Science Monitor reporter who is being held hostage, and the Osama bin Laden audio tape threatening another attack on the United States.

Al Arabiya's content is seen by IPSOS-STAT as more moderate and seemingly more in tune with what viewers want to watch, and Al Arabiya's management is given credit for being "more enlightened and visionary."

However, IPSOS-STAT's continuing monthly tracking surveys are at odds with the findings of

a recent one-time Zogby International poll, which shows Al Jazeera still in the lead.

Although the results of the Zogby poll have been widely reported, most informed observers believe they are deeply flawed, and that the poll's methodology is unfamiliar to reporters whose stories have not addressed the nuances of audience polling.

While IPSOS-STAT shows the *actual* viewing numbers that a channel receives, Zogby reports only audience *preferences* - what people say they prefer to watch, but in fact may not.

Actual viewing numbers are what most advertising agencies and media use in their promotional planning. Zogby also limited its survey to satellite channels, leaving out terrestrial channels such as Al Arabiya, whose programs can be picked up with standard roof-top or television set-top antennas and reach large numbers of viewers with easy, free access. While leading Arab television channels discredited Zogby's findings, Al Jazeera promoted them with a special program featuring Karen Hughes, the U.S. government's ranking public diplomacy official.

The apparent trend away from Al Jazeera comes at an especially inopportune moment for the Qatar-based all-news channel.

Because Al Jazeera International is scheduled to officially launch its service to the United States and Australia in March, it is hurrying to persuade cable television systems to carry its program service and get commercial sponsors to pay the bills at a time when its parent channel is hawking a kidnapper video. The controversial cable channel reportedly is not succeeding in lining up cable channels or advertisers in the United States, the world's largest commercial market.

All this is not lost on those who are putting together Al Jazeera's English channel. At its Washington, D.C., headquarters, where Worldcasting recently visited, executives are doing pre-emptive damage control by distancing themselves from the perceived news biases of the home office in the Middle East. They are emphasizing a new ethical code and independence from its Middle East parent in a region of the world where the novelty of Al Jazeera is rapidly wearing thin.

Archived Comments

Alvin Snyder on January 26, 2006 @ 5:37 pm:

Marc Lynch in his Abu Aardvark blog requested proof of Al Jazeera's declining ratings in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere regionally.

He wrote: "I would love to see these detailed, month by month surveys -- it's exactly the kind of data that should be available to researchers."

And so here they are, all 12 of them, IPSOS-STAT's detailed month by month surveys from which I wrote my piece, with the below link:

Al Jazeera vs Al Arabiya (.xls spreadsheet).

IPSOS-STAT also takes ratings in Iraq, the latest showing Al Arabiya leading Al Jazeera by almost 2 to 1. (spreadsheet #2 - .xls).

I will comment on Marc Lynch's remarks on Jill Carroll's kidnapping at a later time.

marc lynch on February 2, 2006 @ 5:27 am:

Alvin - thanks for posting these. I can't tell from the tone, but I hope you didn't take that comment as a hostile or sarcastic one. It was meant sincerely: I'd love to see them, because the single greatest problem we have in writing about the Arab media is the paucity of reliable survey data. This kind of data is what we need, and I'm glad that you posted them - all authors should do the same!

Jihad Ali Ballout on February 10, 2006 @ 2:38 pm:

Dear Mr. Snyder,

I am writing to you in response to your recent piece • •Al Jazeera novelty wearing thin• • posted in the opinion section of the Middle East Times website on January 25, 2006. A version of this letter has been sent to the editor of Middle East Times.

Your piece was enlightening and reflected a well-researched approach in analyzing the general media landscape in the Arab world, evident through its referencing of the latest poll results from Ipsos-Stat, an international outfit specializing in media related research. It is also indicative of its objectivity on the matter.

One point, however, requires clarification for the sake of accuracy and future research: you refer to Al Arabiya as the Saudi government-financed •", which runs contrary to the facts. Rather, Al Arabiya - similar to its parent company MBC Media Group - is an independent, self-sustained media initiative which prides itself on financial independence. Granted, Al Arabiya, barely three years of age, is not in a position of profit yet, however, any shortfall is being covered from profit generated by the mother company. MBC Group is the first Arab media group to realize and utilize the technology of satellite broadcasting, and could well be the most profitable media enterprise in the region, with 5 FTA channels (including Al Arabiya) and two radio stations catering for a wide variety of Arab audiences. MBC considers every project from a business viability perspective.

The media landscape in the region is both complex and exciting • more needs to be said on the issue and you render a substantial service to it by way of penetrating through the speculation, misperception and misleading information. We hope this article will facilitate a more positive interaction within our global industry, irrespective of cultural differences. An aspect ably demonstrated by your article.

Best Regards,
Jihad Ali Ballout
Director, Corporate Communication
Al Arabiya News Channel

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