

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

TV News is Local in the Middle East ^[1]

Washington, DC--What will happen to news media if freedom spreads throughout the world, a hope articulated by President Bush in his inaugural address?

It will be a world where local television stations with Eyewitness News formats feature "Five on Your Side," "Traffic and Weather Together," and sports, of course, and news about women and kids. News you can use, in other words.


At least that's what seems to be shaping up in Iraq, where more than 20 local TV stations are now licensed to broadcast.

During the last few years the buzz in international broadcasting has centered on the rapid growth of the satellite television market -- and of the influence of such region-wide news and information channels as) [Al Jazeera](#) . But 2005 appears to be a "back to the future" year for the introduction of dynamic local TV stations in markets abroad, where coverage of community news that most directly impacts on local viewers takes precedence.

This would result in the erosion of audience levels for the Al Jazeeras, a ten-strike for U.S. public diplomacy by default.

The U.S. government-funded regional Middle East satellite channel, [Alhurra](#), is now cranking out its local Alhurra-Iraq service 24/7. Accessible by satellite and also via two terrestrial transmitter sites in Iraq that can be picked up from VHF rooftop antennas, its format is a mix of news and information specifically for Iraq, together with programming also seen on its main regional channel.

There is something else that makes this new competition for audience particularly interesting. The number one TV operation in Iraq, with the largest TV audience by far, is [Al Iraqiya](#), which is also funded by the U.S. government. And so here are two U.S.-funded stations vying for TV viewers in Iraq, along with a growing number of other local TV competitors, plus the regional satellite TV channels.

Last spring, a comprehensive two month audience survey in Iraq was conducted that included questions about TV viewing habits. In head-to-head competition, a [Gallup poll](#)  taken last spring showed Al-Iraqiya, the former state-run system now funded by the Pentagon, was received without difficulty by 84% of respondents, followed by the high-profile satellite channels, Al Jazeera from Qatar and Al-Arabia from Saudi Arabia, which registered only 33% each.

The reason for Al-Iraqiya's impressive showing is because Iraqis can see it for free, with a standard rooftop antenna, and its content is locally-produced in-country. Its signal comes via from 27 transmitter locations throughout Iraq, the old fashioned way, as it existed before cable hookups and satellite dishes.

Despite all the hype, most people in Iraq and throughout the Middle East do not have satellite dishes, although many do. Gordon Robison, Director of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy's Middle East Media Project and a former producer-contractor at the "old" Al-Iraqiya under the Coalition Provisional Authority, feels that satellite dishes are a middle-class phenomenon.

"When I would travel around Baghdad," he told me, "satellite stations were always on in restaurants and coffee houses. But when I drove through the country it was easy to see that outside the bigger cities most people did not have satellite dishes."

Robison believes that most surveys that have shown big numbers for satellite channels were "keyed to middle-income people and above in urban areas, who do not represent the bulk of the population."

This observation was validated by the Gallup poll. When asked which channels Iraqis watched during the past week, Al-Iraqiya registered 74%, with Al-Arabia 28%, and Al-Jazeera 27%. Alhurra, whose Iraq service had just begun at the time of the survey, received 6%.

As more local Iraqi TV channels come on line with quality programming responsive to local community interest, regional satellite news channels can be expected to suffer in popularity, especially if things quiet down in Iraq.

One of the consultants who has helped to build Al-Iraqiya's audience is Kristin Whiting, formerly Diane Sawyer's producer at ABC's "Prime Time Live." She introduced "Good Morning Iraq" on Iraqi television, and it is a big hit, especially with women.

"When I suggested a morning show geared toward women, with good looking female aerobics instructors, and segments on health, nutrition and how to do your hair, people at the station looked at me like I was nuts," she told me. "And there I was, an American female in a news room filled with Arab men, telling them what to do. But they listened to what I said, and the program really caught on. Women wrote in and called. They love it."

Can advertisers, who adore audience demographics filled with young women, be far behind?

Stay tuned, in free societies, for Eyewitness News.
