

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Competition for TV Ratings Heats Up In Iraq—Public Diplomacy Customer Care Consultants Explain ^[1]

TV viewers in Iraq want to laugh and be entertained. Unlike voyeuristic viewers elsewhere in the Middle East, who gravitate more toward pan-Arabic satellite news channels where mayhem matters, TV viewers in Iraq prefer local knockoffs of the "The Newlywed Game," "Saturday Night Live," and lottery programs.

As a result, interesting business models are emerging within TV systems in the new Mesopotamia, which vie for audience share. There are many channels in Iraq, the number of which grows steadily. Several channels have similar sounding names to westerners, such as al-Sumariyah (ancient region of southern Mesopotamia), and al-Sharqiyah (the Eastern), and there are lots of boasts in press releases about who is on top.

To get the skinny from those who chart the daily fluctuations in the battle for hearts and minds in the Middle East, much like experts who are called upon to interpret the stock market, I logged onto Public Diplomacy on-line Help (PDH), which is known to be where many retired Foreign Service officers from the former U.S. Information Agency spend their time as anonymous consultants. You never know who is really on the other end of PDH, because they don't give their real names, and you make up yours as well. But their consultants do provide "the highest-quality service" as advertised, and Public Diplomacy Customer Care consultants are on call 24/7 -- which is especially important when you wake up at 3:00 AM with a question.

"My question is this," I wrote, after giving my chat name as Fred to a public diplomacy consultant who said he was Stanley. "There are lots of TV channels available to viewers in Iraq," I said, "and they each boast about their audience ratings. Then there are the news channels that you hear about most of the time, but what about some of the other programs on Iraqi TV, like sports and movies? What do families like to watch together, and how about young people?"

PDH: Thanks, Fred. Let me see if I understand. You want to know about the most popular TV channels in Iraq, and the types of programs Iraqis most like to watch. Is that right?

Fred: Yes, but...

PDH: Good. I have some excellent data on this, and I think I can help. There's an interesting article in the Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal, by Joe Khalil and Dareen Abu Ghaida, who suggest that the TV satellite channels in the Middle East have their own corporate cultures. They market themselves differently to reach their target audiences and exploit their own competitive advantages. The most important element in success is

promotion, since the channels can be received free of charge.

The authors say that al-Jazeera, the pan-Arabic news channel, "positioned itself as the channel for Arab causes, with its coverage of the Palestinian intifada." It focuses on the "war's victims, Iraqi women and children, mostly on people...victimized or victorious." The political agenda of Al Jazeera, they say, is that it touts itself as "the only channel without a political agenda." But many refute this, saying the channel is beholden to its primary benefactor, the emir of Qatar, and to other Arab stockholders.

Fred: What about TV news channels who claim they're gaining on al-Jazeera?

PDD: There's an interesting book to be published this January by Larry Pintak, "Reflections in a Bloodshot Lens: America, Islam & the War of Ideas." Pintak is Director of the Adham Center for Electronic Journalism, the American University in Cairo. He is critical of some TV viewer polls in the Middle East, saying that polls commissioned by satellite channels that talk about x percent of "of satellite-equipped homes" that watch the channel are misleading. "Such polls," says Pintak, "make no distinction between individuals who paused briefly...out of curiosity while channel-surfing and those who used it as a primary source of information." Pintak, a former CBS News Middle East correspondent, also says that while a satellite channel may claim that most of its viewers feel it is a reliable news source, the "catch" is that it "represents a self-selected sample of the small percentage of the people who regularly tuned into the station, not Arab television viewers as a whole."

Fred: What about the American and British satellite cable channels specifically, the BBC and the U.S.-funded Alhurra?

PDH: Funny you should ask. A BBC insider, who doesn't want to be named, just passed along this observation. "In my view," said the source, "Iraqi viewers now have such a relatively wide choice of Arabic-language program to choose from on Iraqi and pan-Arab satellite TV channels -- around 20 currently on air in total -- that very few will watch American or British channels beamed specifically for Iraq audiences." You should keep in mind, Fred, that my source was talking about Iraq-only viewers, and not those of other Arab and Muslim states. But he went on to say that "Many Iraqis currently seem to crave escapist Western-style reality TV as represented by Al-Sharqiyah (which broadcasts programs in which destroyed family houses are rebuilt, or winning contestants have their marriage expenses paid, as well as comedy shows)."

Fred: Isn't Al-Sharqiyah the satellite channel that broadcasts the Iraqi version of "Pop Idol?"

PDH: No, that's another popular channel, Al-Sumariya TV. And BBC monitoring's Peter Feuiherade makes clear that "Viewers in Iraq are eager for more entertainment and comedy programs, especially those with a local flavour." Competitive audience rating surveys show that news channels have only one-quarter the number of viewers as entertainment channels.

Fred: Does the BBC insider have any information on what's going on at the Pentagon-funded TV station in Iraq?

PHD: That would be Al-Iraqiya. Yes, my BBC source tells me that Al-Iraqiya has "a large audience...because it can be viewed nationwide without a satellite dish. But much of its programming is pre-recorded in Cairo or Beirut, and is seen as either too pro-US or of no relevance to Iraqi viewers." Another popular channel is Al-Arabiya, the first of the pan-Arab

satellite channels, as part of the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), with shareholders from the governments of Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Bahrain, and the Lebanese prime minister.

Fred: I think I've got it.

PDH: My pleasure. And to thank you today, you are eligible to claim a free \$25 restaurant gift card when you enroll in the USIA Alumni Association.
