

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Arab Satellite TV: Equal Time ^[1]

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

So what is the difference between Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya? After spending a day earlier this week at the former's headquarters in Doha that seemed a fair question to put to Saleh Nejm, Al-Arabiya's assistant general manager (a job to which he was recently promoted after a stint as head of news). Al-Arabiya is a mere 21 months old (though it is an offshoot of the longer-established Middle East Broadcasting Center, or MBC). It took to the air only a few weeks before the beginning of the Iraq war, going head-to-head with the better-established Al-Jazeera (founded in 1996) at a crucial moment for the region.

Both stations draw significant criticism in the west, where they are often seen as pretty much the same. Not surprisingly, Nejm, an Egyptian who worked in the West for 14 years including stints at the BBC and Radio Netherlands, sees some significant differences between the two.

"The thing that clarifies the difference is the slogan each channel uses. Al-Jazeera says 'the opinion and the other opinion'. We say: 'news every minute.' So, we are a news channel. Al-Jazeera is dealing with the news, but its theme is opinions – putting different opinions on the air. We broadcast about 16 hours of news a day. I think they broadcast something like 10-1/2 hours of news per day. So, we are a news station. They are a mixture." That distinction, he says, was a conscious programming decision made when Al-Arabiya was being prepared for its launch.

Al-Jazeera executives would probably dispute that analysis, but from a viewer's perspective it is hard to deny that Nejm has a point. It is often said that Al-Jazeera is the CNN of the Arab world, but from a television perspective it more closely resembles Fox.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to program a TV news network. The first, the traditional way, is to focus on set-piece newscasts in which an anchor sitting behind a desk tosses to reports from correspondents in the field. This is pretty much the way CNN has always operated. An alternative is to use field reports as a springboard for discussions (expert or otherwise) about the news. This is, largely, the format used by both Fox and Al-Jazeera. Like Fox, Al-Jazeera's news 'wheel' devotes much more time than Al-Arabiya (or CNN) to talk shows and analysis. Neither of these is necessarily a better or worse way to run a television network, they simply represent different approaches.
