

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

The Oscars and Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

The Oscars wrapped up a bit before 7am over here and I crawled off to grab a few hours sleep after the school bus picked up my teenage daughter. Neither of us usually gets up at three in the morning to watch television, but the Oscars are something rare: a cultural moment we can share with the rest of America, in real time. We almost missed it because of a problem with our satellite dish, and because I had not noticed that the long-time holder of the ceremony's Middle East broadcast rights, MBC2, had lost the telecast to a new rival channel, One TV. Luckily the repairman showed up Sunday both to fix our reception and to add One TV to our channel list.

I spent a good chunk of yesterday phoning friends who work in TV out in the Emirates trying, without success, to figure out how much One TV paid to get the Oscars away from MBC. An inattentive viewer, however, might not even have noticed that MBC has lost the rights. MBC was airing so much pre and post-Oscar programming that its lack of the ceremony itself seemed almost a minor issue.

All this is a useful reminder that at this moment when 'America' is deeply unpopular in this part of the world, much that is 'American' remains both much desired and difficult to escape.

MBC and One TV are perfect illustrations of this. Both stations are based in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, are seen throughout the region and compete for viewers with steady streams of American fare. One TV offers "CSI", "Law and Order", "The Sopranos" and (I swear I'm not making this up) "The Bold & the Beautiful" against MBC's longtime line-up of "Seinfeld", "Frazier", "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer" and Oprah. On both stations the shows air with subtitles. The ads during the commercial breaks, however, are entirely in Arabic.

And that only covers the free-to-air channels. If one is willing to shell out \$30-\$60 a month there is a lot more American TV buzzing around the ether. While it is true that American shows have long been a fixture here, the current fare is a far cry from a generation ago when Egyptian TV's only English-language series were five year old episodes of "Falcon Crest" while the Saudis offered decade-old reruns of "CHiPS".

The latest twist in the programming war, however, is news. About a month ago MBC launched a new channel, MBC4, to which it moved all of its American series. The long-established MBC2 channel became an all-English-language-movies station. Faced with the need to fill hours of extra airtime every day on MBC4 programmers opted not for more reruns, but for news. As weird as this may sound, viewers around the region can now catch ABC's "Good Morning, America" and "World News Tonight" and CBS's "The Early Show" and "CBS Evening News" every single day. MBC4 also shows "60 Minutes", "48 Hours" and "20/20".

The Oscars, I understand. "Friends" I understand. But "Good Morning, America"?

"There's a lot of interest in what is being said in America and this interest does not lie with the people watching 'Friends'," a long-time, and well-connected, Gulf observer said. "It lies with people who went to school in the States and important people in the government. They want to know what this congressman is saying to that congressman and what's on the agenda over there."

He pointed out that the market for American broadcast news had been established by the pay-service Orbit, which offers a 24 hour news channel cobbled together from the three US broadcast networks and Fox. Orbit News proved that elites would pay to see "Face the Nation" and "Fox News Sunday", he said, so why not see if people would watch "World News Tonight" if it was offered for free?

All this is a sign that public diplomacy is not just about what the government does, and may not even be primarily the government's doing. It is a reminder to our politicians that they are addressing the world, even when they think they are talking only to the folks back home. It is proof, if we needed any, that the public diplomacy paradigms of the Cold War need to be rethought in the 21st century.

grr
