

Where's the difference?

First long-term, comparative analysis of Arab TV news and International TV networks

Research Links:
www.ipsos.com/where/MiddleEast.aspx
uscpublicdiplomacy.com
www.alarabiya.net
www.aljazeera.net

Contrary to conventional wisdom about democratic deficits, most countries in the Middle East seem to suffer from a problem of national identity. More than three-quarters of a century after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire from whom most of them emerged, these states have been unable to project a national identity that is both inclusive and representative. None of the countries of the Middle East are homogeneous; they consist of numerous ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic minorities – a diversity that is reflected in Middle East media.

Trends in Arab media

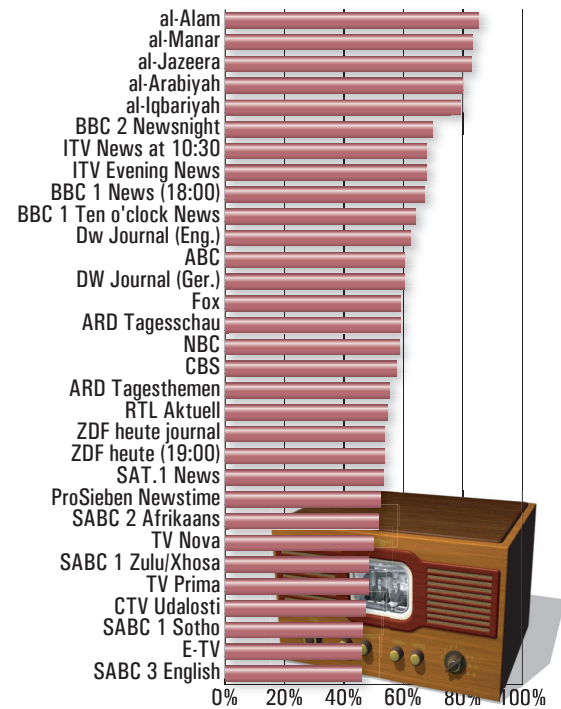
Al Arabiya beat its major competitor **Al Jazeera** by 1.4% in the Ipsos-Sat TV research survey for the most watched TV channel in Saudi Arabia. Founded as recently as March 2003, the Dubai-based TV network is already establishing itself as one of the most credible 24 hours news channels. **Al Arabiya** is not yet recognized as a top international opinion-leading medium but is fast en route to this status.

The Qatari-owned **Al Jazeera** has been experiencing contrasting fortunes. Founded in November 1996, it grew to become one of the most popular Arabic news channels in the Middle East. Within the **Media Tenor** Ranking, it placed third in 2004 with 269 quotations, thanks mainly to its coverage of the war in Iraq. In that year, **Al Jazeera** outscored the more established media like **BBC**, **Le Monde**, **NZZ** and even **CNN**, which received just 103 citations and saw its position plummet from 2nd place in 2003 to 13th place in 2004. But in 2005, **Al Jazeera** too saw its leading position in the **Media Tenor** Ranking disintegrate when it failed to even place among the top 20 most cited international media. This year, **Al Jazeera** appears to be making a small comeback, thanks to its screening of new videos of Bin Laden.

A balanced view of the Iraq elections

But more significant was the unexpected role played by Arab media networks over the last 18 months. Nobody in the western world would have imagined that Arab networks would cover the first free elections in Iraq in a much more positive light than, for instance, the European TV media. European media reportage was driven mainly by questions of security and the legitimacy of election, giving the impression to European viewers that the election would neither take place on its scheduled day and nor will it properly fulfill its function. Meanwhile, readers and viewers

Issue focus (Share of issue-oriented statements in political coverage)



Share of all statements about politicians/political parties

Source: Media Tenor
 01.07.2004 – 30.06.2005

Basis: 245,332 news stories
 from 31 TV news shows/magazines

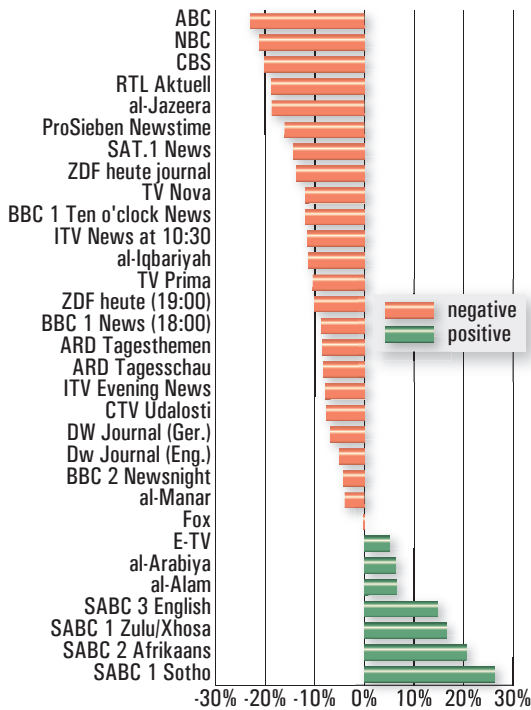
of Arab media received a totally different picture of the situation in Iraq: 71% of all the statements on the legitimacy of the ballot vote carried by Arab media contained positive evaluations. And while the Arab media gave as much platform to Iraqis themselves as it did to its journalists in portraying the situation in Iraq, European media sourced Iraqi protagonists in just 26.3% of their reports.

Comparison of international TV broadcasts

Looking at the long-term topic structure, one is not surprised to find that in 2005 **Al Arabiya** and **Al Jazeera** focused on international politics in much the same way as their U.S. TV counterparts. But while **Al Arabiya** focused more on Middle East conflicts and the economy, its rival **Al Jazeera** seemed to tend more in the direction of infotainment, covering soccer with nearly the same volume as international affairs. Since Arab networks as pan-national have to take a different approach to covering domestic issues, reporting about various countries of the Middle East regions takes a much larger slice of their news services than it does the western world. In 2005, 45% of all reporting on **Al Arabiya** and **Al Jazeera** related to International Politics, compared to 22% in the US,

“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.”
 Ipsos Sat

Evaluations of governments, 07/2004 – 06/2005



Share of positive - share of negative stories (%)

Source: Media Tenor
01.07.2004 – 30.06.2005

Basis: 245,332 news stories
from 31 TV news shows/magazines

14% in the UK, 10% in Germany and 9% in South Africa.

Also in contrast with other international TV channels, Arab media reportage of soft news such as accidents, crime and sports accounted 17.8% of all reportage in 2005. Although this trend is very similar to US TV news coverage, it contrasts strongly with German, UK and South African TV channels where soft stories account for 32 to 36% of all news coverage in 2005.

Little room for political manoeuvring

Reporting on politics in the Arab world also differs from other countries. **Media Tenor** Research Institute has found that 80% of Arab TV broadcasting by **Al Alam**, **Al Manar**, **Al Jazeera**, **Al Arabiya** and **Al Iqbariyah** is issue-driven and contains a political content, with the remaining 20% of statements focusing on non-politic issues. News reports on American **CBS** and **ABC**, in the German public broadcasters **ARD** and **ZDF** and South African **SABC** is much less issue-driven (51 to 58%). This shows that the Arab TV news are much more content-oriented when compared to their international competitors, as can be seen in Chart No. 1.

On the other hand, while **Al Jazeera** criticises politicians in very much the same way as US networks **ABC**, **CBS** or **NBC** (with a negative prevalence of 19%), **Al Arabiya** is more supportive of politicians, with a positive 6% average rating in 2005, although nothing like **Al Alam** or the South African networks, who seem to have problems criticising their governments.

The objective of broadcasters such as **Al Jazeera** and its rival **Al Arabiya** is to provide daily news to people with Arab background around the world. As a result, their definition of the 'world' is reduced to the Arab world, very much like their North American and European counterparts who concentrate on their home turf as well. Both Arab broadcasters focus primarily on Middle East issues, accounting for 75,2% of **Al Arabiya** coverage and 66,2% in **Al Jazeera**. The second most covered region by these two networks is Western Europe, with a more-or-less balanced coverage of positive and negative reports. **Al Arabiya** covered more issues on the US (6%), but in a slightly more negative way than its competitor **Al Jazeera**.

Comparable news structures

Bottom line: While American or European media claim that Arab networks are not upholding journalistic standards in their reportage on the war in Iraq, and criticise them for providing Islamic terrorists with an uncritical platform, the continuous content analysis carried out by **Media Tenor** provides a more diverse picture. Most of the five Arab networks monitored by **Media Tenor** Research Institute provide their audience with the same patterns of news selections as can be found in the **BBC**, **CBS** or German networks. The news networks have **more** in common than the journalists themselves believe.

This year's Seventh International Agenda Setting Conference, which will take place from October, 11th – 13th in Bonn, Germany, aims to create the right platform for everyone to come to a better understanding. zb

Basis:

Media / Middle East: Al Iqbariyah, Al Alam, Al Manar, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiyah;

South Africa: SABC 1 News, SABC 2 News, SABC 3 News, E-TV;

Germany: ARD Tagesschau, ZDF heute, ZDF heute journal, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 News, ProSieben, DW Journal (Eng., Ger.);

UK: BBC 1 News (18:00), BBC 1 Ten o'clock News, BBC 2 Newsnight, ITV Evening News, ITV News at 10:30;

USA: Fox News, ABC, NBC, CBS

Time frame of analysis: 01.07.2004 – 30.06.2005

Analysis: 245,332 news stories from 31 TV news shows/magazines were analysed