

Audience Prism: Perceptions of Al-Hurra Television's Role in Political Reform among Arab Audiences

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Abstract

This article offers insights from extensive focus group interviews conducted among the viewers of Al-Hurra in Morocco. The audience-based evidence suggests that Al-Hurra faces a huge challenge: to achieve its stated goals, it needs to be a credible media voice in a crowded marketplace of ideas; to be credible, the broadcaster has to reconsider its audiences' needs and perceptions, and better engage with the Arab "Street." The present study addresses the issue of Arab audiences' perceptions of Al-Hurra, and, by extrapolation, the broader U.S. public diplomacy campaign in the region.

Keywords

Al-Hurra, international broadcasting, propaganda, media audiences, media effects, Arab media, terrorism, Middle East

In the minds of Arab audiences, the U.S. sponsored Al-Hurra Television (Al-Hurra) hardly promotes political reform in the Arab world and has no discernible “positive” influence on the region’s public opinion, according to insights from extensive focus group interviews conducted among Al-Hurra viewers in Morocco. This article presents the main findings of that study which addresses the issue of Arab audiences’ perceptions of Al-Hurra, and, by extrapolation, the broader US public diplomacy campaign in the region. The U.S. government’s launch of Al-Hurra had the intertwined goals of waging a media war on Al-Qaeda and Islamist extremists (e.g. Rugh, 2004; Mahmood, 2006), curbing the waves of anti-Americanism (e.g. Levine, 2005; Snyder, 2005; Baylouni, 2007), and ultimately promoting democratic values in the Arab world (e.g. Phares, 2005; Sharp, 2005). In 2004, the Bush administration issued a directive to set up Al-Hurra, an Arabic language television station to complement the administration’s public diplomacy campaign in the Arab world. The station came about as a response to the post 9/11 terrorist threat, the abysmal reputation of the U.S. government policies in the Arab world, and the perceived anti-Americanism talked up by news media outlets like Al-Jazeera Television.

For U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, the post 9/11 political climate giving rise to Al-Hurra has been tense. A number of polls have repeatedly indicated that Arab citizens were more sympathetic to Al-Qaeda than to the U.S. with “generally more antagonism in Muslim countries toward the West than vice versa” (Wike & Grim, 2007, n.p.). The U.S. image continued to slip further despite the positive impact of Obama’s election as president (WorldPublicOpinion, 2010). For most U.S. policy makers, setting up this new television channel exhibited a belated awareness of the new “war of ideas” raging in the region. The Arabic language broadcaster was one way of addressing the pensive question of “why do they hate us?” To borrow Congressman Henry Hyde’s blunt question: “how is it that the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue allowed such a destructive image of ourselves to become the intellectual coin of the realm overseas?” In short, Al-Hurra was the Bush administration’s media response to the radicalization of the “Arab Street,” a radicalization due in large measure to Al-Qaeda’s jihadist propaganda.

The administration’s strategic goals were never sacrosanct, nor was there a

unanimous embrace of Al-Hurra's mission. A policy critique of the station emerged even before the station was off the ground. Some critics viewed the station as the latest bidder in the long history of international broadcasting and propaganda (BBG Hearing, 2005). Their argument stemmed from the principled belief that propaganda is inherently unethical and counter-productive. Some called for shutting down the station because, as Kraidy (2008) puts it, "Al-Hurra cannot compete with the vibrant mix of historically resonant, creatively produced, and locally meaningful programming offered by the leading pan-Arab channels" (Kraidy, 2008, p. 6). A long-time Arab expert and former U.S. ambassador to the region, William A. Rugh believed the whole policy was misguided because the new station had to compete in a crowded media market, and that U.S. officials should be more accessible to Arab television instead (Rugh, 2004). In an updated assessment, Rugh (2009) concludes that the main trouble with Al-Hurra is its unsuccessful attempts "to use information and advocacy journalism" (p. 4).

Further, Al Hurra has become an object of intense academic scrutiny and research since its launch. In one of the first studies to provide a systematic analysis of Al-Hurra, El-Nawawy (2006) found that "respondents' attitudes toward US foreign policy have worsened slightly since their exposure to Radio Sawa and Television Alhurra" [sic] (p.199). Equally significant is the issue of credibility and the fact that Arab viewers are less inclined to perceive the channel as "credible" source of news (El-Nawawy, 2006). Part of the problem for Al-Hurra is the disconnection between ideals and reality; between preaching free speech and democratic values, on the one hand, and cultural values and policy realities in the Arab world, on the other (Baylouni, 2007). Funded by a BBG grant, the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California (USC CPD) conducted a systematic study of the station, arriving at some interesting conclusions (USC CPD Report, 2008). The USC CPD study found that Arab audiences perceived Al-Hurra to be biased, seeing it as the latest propaganda arm of the U.S. government. More importantly, respondents in that study revealed that the station did not connect with the "Arab Street." Focusing on Lebanese youth, Dabbous and Nasser (2009) discovered that Al-Hurra's low viewership and credibility, in comparison to Al-Jazeera's and Al-Arabiya's, hamper its role as a public diplomacy tool.

While the low credibility of Al-Hurra among Arab viewers has been documented

elsewhere, the current research focuses on this broadcaster's role in promoting political reform in the Arab world. The article provides an audience-centered and in-depth examination of Arab viewers' perceptions of Al-Hurra, capitalizing on two theoretical insights from media audience research. First, accumulated empirical evidence strongly suggests that audiences are active agents, and that their agency is central to understanding the complex question of media influence (e.g. Ang, 1990; Morley, 1980; Livingstone, 1998). Audiences consume the media in various ways, and with diverse motivations geared to gratify different needs. Unrelated to this theoretical view is a second shift toward examining the importance of audience perceptions of media influence (as opposed to "actual" effects) and their potential audience impact (e.g. Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Perloff, 2002). The "influence of presumed influence" is based on a growing realization that audiences tend to exaggerate the media's negative influence on other people while minimizing negative influence on themselves, a theory known as "Third Person Effect" (Davison, 1983; Perloff, 2002). Working through this theoretical framework of indirect media effects, this article provides an intricate, audience-centered analysis of Al-Hurra based on these inter-related research questions:

RQ1. How do Arab viewers assess Al-Hurra's role in covering political reform?

RQ2. How do those viewers assess Al-Hurra's potential influence on 1) their own attitudes and 2) Arab public opinion at large?

Rather than an exclusive focus on credibility, this study is concerned with Al-Hurra's perceived influence on Arab public opinion. Field research-based findings provide a "thick description," building up a close reporting and synthesis of viewers' responses.

Method

To address the above research questions, the researcher chose to pursue a critical, ethnographic investigation of Al-Hurra viewers in Morocco. Ethnography's strengths, the experiential, reflective and critical-based insights, bypass the constraints associated with a positivistic view of media audiences (Rabinow, 1977; Morley, 1980). This approach underscores the "interpretive relation between audience and medium, where this relation is understood within a broadly ethnographic context" (Livingstone, 1998, p. 2). As focus

group interviews simulate audiences' natural conversations, they have the potential to yield useful and reflective insights into viewers' attitudes and media consumption habits (Morley, 1980). According to Kreuger (1988), focus groups are "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Kreuger, 1988, p.18). They have been a staple of communication research since Merton and his colleagues used them to interview radio listeners about their listening habits for the first time in the 1940s (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 365).

Focus Group Participants

The researcher organized seven focus groups interviews in a mid-size town in the northwest of Morocco in 2007. A convenience sample of self-reported Al-Hurra viewers yielded seven focus groups interviewed in Morocco. Each focus group was composed of six to eight Al-Hurra viewers, of whom 68.8 per cent were between 20 and 30 years old, including both males and females. During the recruitment process, the researcher paid special attention to recruiting viewers/participants representative of different social groups and professions. Screening questionnaires were distributed to five "recruiters." "Recruiters" were asked to distribute these screening questionnaires among their acquaintances. Out of more than 400 screening questionnaires, only 60 participants who were both willing and eligible took part in the study. They came from different social and professional backgrounds, including school teachers, public servants, administrators, students and other professionals. Significantly, it was very difficult to find and recruit Al-Hurra viewers from the "uneducated" or illiterate segments of the population, which is a significant discovery (Douai, 2010).

Research Protocol

Prior to the focus group meetings, participants were informed that Arab language satellite news channels were the object of study, rather than exclusively focus on Al-Hurra. On several occasions, including prior to every focus group discussion, the researcher repeatedly assured study participants that their identities would be concealed and that their responses would be kept confidential. The purpose of those assurances was to encourage forthcoming opinions, frank discussions, and alleviate any apprehension or anxiety. All participants completed a questionnaire investigating their media

consumption habits immediately focus group discussions. Most of the interviews were held in public spaces such as *cafes*. All interviews were conducted in Moroccan Arabic dialect and the researcher moderated the discussion sessions. Throughout the seven focus group discussions, the following questions were debated:

- 1) How do you think Al-Hurra news television cover Arab politics in general? (e.g. objective, helpful...)
- 2) How do you think its programming promote political reform, like transparent elections, fighting political corruption, and women rights in the Arab region (if you think it does)?
- 3) How do you think Al-Hurra Television programs influence you in general? (e.g. It makes me think that political reform in the Arab world is urgently needed, or not needed at all/ large influence/ positive or negative influence)
- 4) How about Al-Hurra Television's influence on others/Arab public opinion in general? Would you say that Al-Hurra Television influences others more than you?
- 5) Do you think Al-Hurra Television programs reflect the U.S. democracy promotion agenda? If you think it does, how does it achieve that goal? If not, why not?

Transcription

All interviews were recorded, and participants were informed that recording the interview was necessary as the researcher would need to transcribe and analyze the transcripts. Without exception, all participants expressed their consent and the interviews proceeded. The moderator took extended notes about the interviews process, the main themes, and conclusions. After all the focus group interviews were completed, two Moroccan graduate students were hired to transcribe the focus group meetings. The graduate assistants were financially compensated for the transcription. The researcher compared the transcriptions to the taped interviews and was satisfied with the quality of the transcription. The transcriptions were used, in combination with the personal notes and observations of the researcher, in the analysis of the focus group interviews. The following analysis is a synthetic rendering of viewers' responses.

Findings

The complexity of media influence requires novel ways of dealing with audience perceptions. Audience perceptions of international broadcasters, like Al-Hurra, provide insights into the political and social influence of foreign media in the Arab world. This article addresses two main research questions related to Al-Hurra's influence on Arab audiences:

RQ 1: How do Arab viewers assess Al-Hurra's role in covering political reform?

RQ 2: How do those viewers assess Al-Hurra's potential influence on 1) their own attitudes and 2) Arab public opinion at large?

These research questions allow for analysis of how audience perceptions affect the larger issue, U.S. democracy promotion in the region, as well as Al-Hurra's role in the public diplomacy campaign. A majority of respondents did not believe the station was enhancing political reform in the region. Further, participants underscored what they perceive as strong linkages between Al-Hurra's and the U.S. government's agendas, which hurt the station's credibility. For these viewers, Al-Hurra exerts very minimal influence on political attitudes and values in the Arab world. Study participants disagreed with the proposition that the station positively affected their attitudes (or those of the "Arab Street") regarding political reform in the region. A detailed synthesis of Al-Hurra viewers' responses constructed in snapshot narratives sheds light on the above findings:

1. Perceptions of Al-Hurra's Coverage of Political Reform:

While perceptions of Al-Hurra's role in political reform in the Arab world were not homogenous, a majority of its viewers did not believe it was promoting political reform in the region. Viewers observed that the confluence between Al-Hurra's and the U.S. government's agendas hurt the former's credibility. Respondents' perception of how the station covered the political reform agenda in the Arab world revealed an acute awareness of the issues involved in the channel's history and association with U.S. policies. Discussions frequently problematized the cornerstone concerns that Al-Hurra viewers had with political media coverage, including objectivity, diversity, professionalism, elitism and credibility.

Among the respondents who rarely viewed Al-Hurra, one respondent pointedly raised the issue of the channel's "objectivity." Recognizing that all news media served certain "ideological agendas," the respondent argued, was leaving Al-Hurra in the awkward position of serving the ideological agendas of the United States. The purported claim that the station was covering local politics and the U.S. "push" for political reform in the Arab world rang hollow. For this particular respondent, Al-Hurra's programs were neither "professional" nor "objective," especially when covering the violent conflicts in Iraq and Palestine. When it came to other domestic issues directly pertaining to political reform, such as the status and participation of women in the political sphere and the potent issue of "values," Al-Hurra did not recognize that socio-cultural values differ from one society to another. Arab societies' values were not identical to those of the West, the respondents observed. On issues of "political conflict," "regional problems," "educational reform," and "women," Al-Hurra programs did not reflect the local and real "facts" because those programs fell outside their local reality, according to these viewers.

Other respondents echoed these observations regarding the channel's "objectivity" and "professionalism." The two traits were "inseparable" in the sense that "professionalism" presupposed certain levels of "objectivity," "impartiality," and "neutrality." Without these steps, "objectivity" would be merely empty talk. When one respondent asserted that "objectivity" implied "diversity" of opinions and viewpoints, another interviewee was quick to rebut that critique. The respondent went on to clarify that Al-Hurra's political shows had in fact featured people from different political stripes, including members of the Egyptian "Muslim Brotherhood." Overall, however, a majority of respondents argued that Al-Hurra did not invite "the other opinion" and was thusly limited to "a one-sided debate." Unlike Al-Jazeera, some respondents stressed, Al-Hurra was consistently hostage to the U.S. worldview in not presenting alternative views that might be distasteful to the U.S. administration. Some openly accused the channel of "having no faith in [the idea of] difference."

Very few respondents dissented from the above bleak assessment about lack of opinion diversity on Al-Hurra shows. Some minor disagreement among respondents was teased out only after much probing. One dissenting respondent interrogated the absolutist definitions of "professionalism" and "objectivity" that his colleagues had emphasized.

Further, these dissenters argued, all journalists were using the same “techniques” in handling news gathering and dissemination, whether they were working for Al-Hurra, Al-Jazeera, or CNN. The way a piece of information was presented and “marketed” differentiated Al-Hurra from Al-Jazeera, or at Hezbollah’s Al-Manar reports.

Many responses indicated that “objectivity” in covering Arab issues had not been expected of Al-Hurra due to the preconception that it was a U.S. government “mouthpiece.” Here, respondents closely associated “objectivity” with credibility. The fact that Al-Hurra was “sponsored” by the U.S. government was frequently reiterated, underscoring their suspicion of government-owned media. That suspicion rationalized research participants’ claim about Al-Hurra’s perceived lack of credibility: it was only “natural” that Al-Hurra would seek to “promote” its sponsor’s interests in the region. Many respondents reported that the U.S. sponsorship of Al-Hurra constructed an emotional “wall” or “barrier” standing in the way they consume its programs. “Lack of credibility,” other respondents concurred, was due to the station’s “predetermined agenda,” an agenda that was tightly “aligned with the Bush administration’s policies” in the Middle East. A predominant majority of respondents across all the interviews considered the embryonic relationship between Al-Hurra and U.S. foreign policy as undermining the former’s credibility.

“Elitism” was another frequent critique leveled at Al-Hurra during almost all focus group interviews, particularly in reference to those shows dealing with political reform in the region. While submitting that news media were generally “elitist,” one respondent argued that regular Moroccan viewers would not benefit from such programs. For her, the channel’s discourse dabbled in topics of little pertinence to the ordinary citizen; that is, Al-Hurra was, once again, “out of touch” with reality. For instance, debating “globalization” or “freedom of thought” would not have much resonance with Arab citizens’ daily concerns, but would only entrench Al-Hurra’s “elitist” reputation. Furthermore, a different respondent added, Al-Hurra’s viewer needed to have a certain level of political knowledge and possession of “mechanisms for analyzing [its] political discourse.” When probed about the nature of those analytical “mechanisms,” the respondent indicated that Al-Hurra, Al-Jazeera ...and other news channels are part and parcel of the larger conflict in international politics, a conflict that he related to

Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis. For this respondent, Al-Hurra's viewers needed to be aware of such issues in order to comprehend its coverage of political reform in the Arab world.

Charging Al-Hurra with "elitism" was a matter of consensus across all the interviews, albeit with different rationales. While most respondents (97%) were adamant that Al-Hurra's main audience consisted of members of the educated elite, one argued that the structure of Moroccan society contributed to this elitism. The fact that a regular Moroccan household would not afford more than one television set meant that "prioritization" regarding which television programs (or channel) to watch must take place. Most family members would likely settle on entertainment programs, or, sometimes, "educational documentaries." Similarly, other viewers argued that, aside from its political biases, documentaries should be considered the station's strongest suit. These different audience interpretations raise significant doubts about the station's programming choices and offerings, particularly their relevance and competitiveness in the cluttered media market.

When it came to the overall trend in Al-Hurra's coverage, many respondents concluded that "generally, [this television channel] is in support of political reform in the Arab world." One respondent, a political activist, expanded on this view by arguing that such support was in synch with the Bush administration's campaign "to combat corruption and despotism" in the region. Supporting political reform in the Arab world, continued the same respondent, was "a principal building-block" in the fight against terrorism and political Islam in the Arab world. Some cautioned that such support for political reform did not necessarily mean positive contribution since Al-Hurra's agenda was to serve foreign interests instead of Arab interests.

2. Perceptions of Al-Hurra's Influence on the Arab "Street":

Viewers' assessment of Al-Hurra's influence, whether on their own attitudes or on Moroccan/Arab public opinion at large, is bleak. Most respondents vehemently disagree with the idea that the station positively affects their attitudes (or those of the Arab "Street") regarding political reform in the region. No positive influence on Arab public opinion was an assessment shared by a majority (98%) of the respondents. Most respondents asserted that Al-Hurra programs had a "miniscule" influence on their

attitudes toward political reform in the Arab world, if at all. A similar pattern emerged throughout their responses to the channel's influence on other viewers, or Arab public opinion at large. Perceived reasons behind its lack of influence were varied. For instance, Al-Hurra programs "cannot in any possible way change the direction of Moroccan public opinion considering that its percentage of viewers is extremely small." Further, the channel has "no credibility because leaders of the (Moroccan) opposition or those who disagree with the U.S. Middle East policies are banished from its guest list."

Further probing questions led few respondents to some paradoxical concessions about the station's influence: "If Al-Hurra has any influence, it would influence a very small minority in (Moroccan) society." "It could not influence the opinions of the majority, or society at large." "It could not imbue them with new ideas, new visions, or influence their thoughts about issues of political reform." One respondent admitted that Al-Hurra's influence could be "very small," rather than having no influence at all, because some of its programs succeeded in reflecting Moroccan reality. Another respondent observed that Al-Hurra's show, "Moroccan Tales," delved into some social issues that local television stations had not broached, and would have some influence on Moroccan viewers. Somewhat paradoxically, the same people who denied that Al-Hurra can influence other people still recognized that generally the news media has a palpable influence on public opinion. Some respondents claimed that they believed Al-Jazeera might have a greater, presumably positive, influence on Arab public opinion.

Al-Hurra's perceived influence on others became linked to the individual viewer's habits, attitudes, and beliefs about the necessity of political reform. Some respondents reverted to the distinction between the "educated elite" and "the masses." They explained that any influence Al-Hurra might have would be greater on those who lacked enough education or those who were unaware of the ideological message of Al-Hurra's role as a stooge of the U.S. administration. The channel would find it very difficult to influence viewers who have some political education and "analytical skills." It was difficult to reconcile such a response with those who also maintained that it was members of the elite who constituted a more likely target for the channel's influence. First, the elite constituted the majority of the channel's viewers, they argued. Second, the "elites" were more likely to be sympathetic to the overall liberal message of the channel. One

respondent explained that for Arab and Moroccan liberals, Al-Hurra constituted “a life-line of support,” partly due to its success in labeling “resistance fighters as terrorists.” The channel voice Arab liberal desires and agendas and thus its influence on liberal circles would be significant.

Hesitation to express a judgment on the perceived influence was shared among a few respondents. Those who refrained from judging the degree and the kind of influence that the channel might exert on other people’s attitudes did so not only because of its perceived small viewership, but also because they did not know anyone who regularly watched the channel. They felt that they lacked enough information to pass such judgment. When probed further, those respondents admitted that if “they” had to talk about shaping and influencing Arab public opinion, they would undoubtedly pick the channel’s competitor, Al-Jazeera, as the main driving force behind the pulse of public opinion. For them, Al-Jazeera accurately reflected, and therefore had more legitimacy to shape, “the [political] pulse of Arab citizens.” In short, the persistent theme seeping out of viewers’ perceptions of Al-Hurra’s influence was this self-

evident conclusion: “small viewership [leads to] small influence” on the “Arab Street.”

Discussion and Implications of the Study

Distilled, audience perceptions firmly situate Al-Hurra’s image in a negative branding quagmire; a negative brand saddled with detracting associations that include: lack of objectivity and credibility and “elitism,” in addition to competing in a cluttered mediascape. From this audience prism, negative associations plaguing Al-Hurra raise grave doubts about its success in the U.S. public diplomacy battle waged in the Arab world. This in-depth examination of Al-Hurra audiences in Morocco reveals that this broadcaster has not alleviated the distressed image of the U.S. “brand” among Arab citizens. In fact, it exacerbates the U.S. standing in the region because viewers associate it with negatively perceived U.S. Mideast policies. At the same time, Arab viewers’ preexisting grievances regarding those policies are transferred to the broadcaster, hobbling any prospective tackling of the underlying problems.

In sum, the above conclusions drawn from this rich landscape of audience data

indicate that Al-Hurra audiences could be categorized along viewers' perceptions of the broadcaster. From the "suspicious" to the "selective," the audience make-up is diverse and hostile, but still willing to engage. Despite these findings, viewer perception and reception appear not to have cut through the policy debate surrounding Al-Hurra's viability. What that means is that Al-Hurra has been designed to appeal to the broadest audience in the Arab world, while disregarding the belief-systems, prejudices, and perceptions of those audiences. This research illuminates the shortsightedness of those strategies. No matter how small the viewership, Al-Hurra viewers constitute a diverse bunch with different needs and motivations to be gratified. The channel has not lived up to those various expectations, as the focus group interviews reveal. For instance, Al-Hurra viewers wanted to be able to learn more about the U.S. than about their own countries, local cultures, and local politics. Al-Hurra has not met that need, and the price it is paying is consistently low viewership ratings and very limited influence. People have voted with their eyeballs!

Further, evidence from this project strongly supports the conclusion that Al-Hurra's perceived influence on Moroccan viewers is very minimal, regardless of how positive or negative such influence could be. The prevalent belief about the limited nature of Al-Hurra's influence among its own viewers also raises questions about the viability of this media enterprise. If its own viewers assume that no positive influence may accrue out of its efforts, what to be expected of non-viewers is potential marginalization of the channel in the local media diet. On the television dial, Al-Hurra would be banished into oblivion.

The theme of legitimate news source versus a propaganda tool was constantly raised during the interviews and focus groups conducted in Morocco. The interviewees could not isolate the discrepancies, hypocrisy, and demagoguery perceived to dominate Al-Hurra from its coverage of political reform, Arab women equality, and other pressing political concerns in their backyard. The constant reminders of its perceived "double standards" were frequently raised, irrespective of respondents' political affiliation. For viewers who belonged to the leftist political spectrum, Al-Hurra reeked of an imperialist project despite those viewers' recognition that it was waging the same fight against Islamic fundamentalists in seeking to promote women equality and minority rights.

For those viewers who had clear Islamist sympathies, Al-Hurra was the latest form of Western hostility against Islam.

The competitive media environment contributes to the difficulties hampering Al-Hurra's persuasiveness and credibility as a mass communicator abroad. The U.S. sponsored Arabic language television has never operated, nor will it ever operate, in a vacuous media environment. No longer are Arab viewers hostages to their own state-run media; at their finger tips is a range of relatively independent and private television broadcasts, most notably Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya television stations. The exponential growth of the Arab information environment has made it possible to tune in to Arab broadcasters that are critical of existing political regimes. Simultaneously, relative independence endows those television networks with credibility. Because Al-Hurra faces very credible broadcasters, it has sought to vie for viewer attention by broadcasting what might have seemed "popular" media events in the region.

Al-Hurra cannot beat Al-Jazeera at the "populist" game, and such attempts will only backfire. In 2006, Al-Hurra's coverage of an Iranian sponsored conference on the Holocaust, sometimes described as a "love-fest" for Holocaust deniers such as Robert Faurisson and David Duke, in Tehran illustrates these complexities. In addition to U.S. Jewish groups' outrage at Al-Hurra's coverage, an Op Ed in *The Wall Street Journal* condemned the station for "provid[ing] a platform for Islamic terrorists and help[ing] further Holocaust denial" (Mowbray, 2007). U.S. Representative Steve Rothman, and other members of the U.S. Congress, cried foul, and demanded the resignation of Al-Hurra's news director at the time, Larry Register, a former CNN producer (Cooper, 2007; Rothman, 2007). Outraged at Al-Hurra's airing of Hezbollah leader's speech live and unedited, Mr. Rothman argued that "U.S. taxpayers should not pay to air terrorist tirades" (Rothman, 2007). The bashing of Al-Hurra and Larry Register illustrates that the channel's attempt to compete with local Arab television stations is likely to draw only ire and backlash. A congressional investigation into the television's alleged malpractices recommended further accountability, oversight, and control of live news coverage (Cooper, 2007). Yet, if Al-Hurra is to be a credible media outlet, it has to meet its audiences' urgent needs, rather than kowtow to domestic political pressure. The maxim

that “the news may be good, the news may be bad, but we will always tell you the truth” not only continues to be a golden standard to be emulated, but it still is a two-way street as well. Credibility in dealing with regional, domestic and international affairs includes purveying and commenting on viewpoints that are anathema to U.S. administration’s ideological standpoints.

The audience-based evidence suggests that Al-Hurra faces a herculean task. To achieve its stated goals, it needs to be a credible media voice in a crowded marketplace of ideas and other media voices. For it to be credible, the broadcaster has to reconsider its audiences’ needs and perceptions, and better engage with the Arab “Street.” While these insights echo and support findings from other empirical studies (e.g. El-Nawawy, 2006), this is the first academic research on Al-Hurra to use a critical ethnographic approaches and focus group studies. As a result of this method, particularly the in-depth discussion and probing questioning of Al-Hurra viewers, the article sought to provide a vivid portrait of the toxic impact of U.S. sponsorship of media outlets in a region leery of state media. Even in examining the “elitist” bent of the channel, the audience –centered portrait casts doubts about the perceived influence of Al-Hurra. The interviews cast the channel as “elitist” because of its programming; yet, even the elite are not likely to fall prey to its influence because they possess enough intellectual and analytical skills to peer through the media fog. The ethnographic approach’s benefits squarely lie in permitting a sample of Al-Hurra viewers to be self-reflective, openly critical, and candid in their assessments of the channel.

While the present study culled important insights regarding Al-Hurra’s viability as a public diplomacy project, the study’s design and context necessarily leaves many limitations to take into account. Among these limitations is the fact that the field research was mostly conducted in 2007 during the Bush presidency. Does Obama’s presidency led to a strategic rethinking of U.S. public diplomacy and Al-Hurra’s mission? How does that affect the findings of this study? These are very legitimate concerns. However, while Obama’s election as president may or may not have improved Arabs’ attitudes toward the United States, Al-Hurra still remains a centerpiece in the US public diplomacy enterprise and strategy. There is no evidence to suggest that the underlying policy rationale for that enterprise has shifted with the new administration. Another potential

limitation of the study is the audience sample and composition. The fact that respondents in the focus groups are overwhelmingly educated and articulate means that they may not be representative of the Arab “masses” and the rest of the so-called “Arab Street.” This claim is evidently true; yet, it should be tempered by the fact that Al-Hurra viewers’ sample was the result of a screening questionnaire. This means that viewers of Al-Hurra tend to be overwhelmingly educated, and as such the focus groups reflect reality. Also, a cursory examination of Al-Hurra television programs and shows indicate that they continue to be geared toward the educated segments of Arab audiences, not the silent and possibly illiterate majority. Not everyone has the political savvy to understand the subtleties of political reform and democratic change in the region. As opinion leaders, educated focus group members reflect the television station’s targeted and most coveted audience.

Finally, addressing the core policy problems in the region can go a long way in softening the roughened edges of the U.S. image, and strengthening the public diplomacy enterprise, a recommendation frequently overlooked in the rush to international broadcasting. While it can be part of the solution to the deterioration of U.S. standing in the Arab world, Al-Hurra still adds a layer of complexity to the U.S. image in that part of the globe. As previously stated, Al-Hurra is partially entrusted with responding to the dictates of the post 9/11’s searing question, “why do they hate us?” Still, policy makers should be cognizant of the confusion that the above question itself perpetuates. A deconstruction of the question that a whole issue of the journal *Arab Insight* carried out found that the question misleadingly implies “a monolithic” Arab or Muslim public opinion. More dangerous is the question’s confounding of “us,” indistinctively referring to the U.S. government and the American people (Elmenshawy, 2007). This article concludes that, on its own, Al-Hurra has not stanching the bleeding of the U.S. image throughout the Arab “Street” and may actually be speeding up its deterioration.

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