

Nov 04, 2016 by *Adam Clayton Powell, III*

Alhurra turns nine, claims editorial progress, larger audience ^[1]

WASHINGTON -- Alhurra television celebrates its ninth anniversary on Feb. 14, with a larger audience and claims of editorial progress.

The network's diet of news programming for audiences in the Middle East was widely criticized as editorially weak, lacking credibility and – with its programming originating from studios in northern Virginia – disconnected from people in the Arab world. The criticism was detailed in an evaluation by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy that gained considerable attention.

Nine years later, Alhurra's audience has grown, programs originate from new studios in Cairo, Jerusalem, Beirut and Dubai, and its live news coverage of the Egyptian revolution two years ago has been recognized by major awards.

It was that event in Cairo in 2011 that was cited as a turning point by Brian T. Conniff, President of Middle East Broadcasting, Alhurra's parent company.

"That event was a turning point for the station," Conniff said in an interview last week. "Before, without even watching us, people concluded we were a propaganda arm. But when the Egyptian revolution came almost exactly two years ago, it provided us an opportunity to cover it as a journalistic event."

Other television channels in the region "picked sides," according to Conniff, while Alhurra "called it down the middle."

Anchored from a Cairo studio with a huge window showing spectacular view of the Nile River, the network's coverage doubled its audience to reach a total of eight million viewers in Egypt alone, according to Nielsen.

Alhurra's coverage also won the 2010 Peoples Choice Award, besting Al Jazeera English and Deutsche Welle.

"The Egyptian studio overlooks the Nile," Conniff boasted. "You see the sun setting, so you know it's live. That was a huge game changer for us."

And he said the benefits in Egypt spread to other countries in the region.

"Egypt is an important country," Conniff said. "As Egypt goes, so goes the Middle East. It enabled us to get over the legacy of being viewed as a propaganda channel."

After peaking two years ago, Alhurra's audience numbers "bounced around a lot," according to Conniff, but he said the latest BBG research in October showed the number of viewers was

increasing. Conniff called it “a respectable audience.”

Key to Alhurra’s greater audience appeal was a series of changes that began in 2009, said Conniff, changes that were in direct response to criticism. Conniff cited the USC report’s assertion that the network was isolated from the region.

“We weren’t connected to ‘the Arab street,’” Conniff conceded.

Now, a nightly three-hour magazine program originates live from all four Alhurra anchor studios in the region, in Egypt, Lebanon, Israel and the Emirates. The entire program is repeated, so it makes up 25% of the network’s schedule.

“It’s culture, sports, entertainment, literature, the arts, social issues,” Conniff said. “It is from the region. The anchors and correspondents are from all of those different countries. It was a deliberate attempt to diversify content, faces, accents and geography, and I think it has paid off.”

The introduction of the nightly magazine program has been followed by more new talk shows and other programs from the region.

“We have systematically gone through our program grid,” Conniff said. “New shows include a women’s show from Beirut, ‘Gulf Talks,’ ‘Street Pulse.’”

One new weekly show, “Where Are We Going?” is aimed at young audiences, a priority for Alhurra.

“I don’t think anybody else has done this format in the region,” Conniff claimed. “It takes five young Egyptians and has them interact. They start each show in a coffee shop. They brought to the fore social issues. It’s entertaining, it engages individuals, and it also has a message. It went over really well.”

Last week, “Where Are We Going?” went into reruns on Al Hayat, which Conniff described as “the number one channel in Egypt.”

“Our bug [logo] is on it, and our Twitter account and our Facebook account,” said Conniff. “It gets a lot more eyeballs and it furthers this whole process of us as a channel being accepted.”

That program is part of Alhurra’s drive to reach younger viewers.

“The profile of an Alhurra viewer is the same as others [news channels] – middle aged men, highly educated,” he said. “We are trying to push that down to gain a more youthful audience and more women. They don’t watch news channels as much.”

But Conniff said reaching those younger viewers is critical.

“The future is the youth in the Middle East, and it is coming quickly,” he explained. “They are probably ambivalent about America. They may not have the same ideas their parents have. We are trying to provide them with information, even non-political information.”

That even extends to messages in the channel’s promotion.

“We did a documentary on Arab Americans,” he said. “We don’t do much advertising, but we put up a big billboard in Cairo with pictures of three Arab Americans. People were skeptical that women in the U.S. could be covered.”

Alhurra also features debates that Conniff claimed are not on other networks – for example, Israelis in policy discussions with Arab leaders. And he said it is also important for the channel to include voices that may be unpopular in the U.S.

“To be credible and to have an impact, you need to be given some latitude,” he said, noting Alhurra included remarks by Iran’s president during his visit to Cairo.

“People have come to understand that if U.S.-funded international broadcasting is going to have an impact,” Conniff said, “it has to have the latitude to have that kind of discussion.

For nine years, Alhurra has run two television networks – one for the entire Mideast region, and Alhurra Iraq, also begun in 2004, which focuses on news from Iraq. But there may be expansion in Alhurra’s tenth year:

“If funding comes through,” said Conniff, “we could start a program stream in French and Arabic.”

Still in the discussion stages, the new network would be aimed at Francophone Africa, featuring Alhurra’s Arabic-speaking journalists and Voice of America’s team that serves French-speaking African countries.
