

News Television in the Arabian Gulf ... Period of Transitions

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Abstract: Television news in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) is undergoing three transitional currents. First, the Arab 24-hour news channels, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, are re-inventing themselves. The first is developing a *raison d'être* in line with its newly realized 'global' image while the second is answering the changes in a dynamic rich business oriented society. Second, government channels are undergoing an extreme make over. Television stations in Dubai, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia are radically changing their look and feel. Third, broadcasting regulations, at least in Kuwait and the UAE, have allowed the birth of various channels dedicated to news and business. This paper attempts to answer the following questions: Are these changes merely cosmetic, affecting design and graphics? Is the legal change echoing a political stance or diffusing a social unrest? Are the changes the latest fad in a society of interrelated cultural and tribal codes? Using a combination of historical, political economy research and participant observation, this paper describes these shifts, analyzes their processes, and interprets their implications on the regional and international media landscape.

Key words: Arab, News, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, Regulation

The Arabian Gulf's broadcasting industries are undergoing a period of tumultuous and unparalleled change. Various layers of closely interwoven transitions ranging from political 'opening' to economic boom, from the emergence of internal security concerns to the advocacy of the right to know, are combining to direct this Gulf-based media through its moving sands.

Whenever transitions are discussed in professional circles, it is inevitably coupled with a set of adjectives so overused as to have become clichés. It is almost always 'slow', 'gradual' and 'discontinuous'. These default descriptions have become so proverbial that they have virtually lost their meaning. When applied to the Gulf television news industries, the adjectives are met with their antonyms 'fast', 'rapid' and 'unexpected'. These descriptions reveal the nature of these transitions, elusive like a desert mirage and uncertain like its sands. Nevertheless, transitions mean that strategic directions are

inevitable. The questions explored in this paper revolve around the nature of transitions that are shaping television news in the Arabian Gulf? What is the nature and extent of these transitions from three primary angles: pan Arab news channels, national Gulf channels, and the regulatory framework for news operation in the region?

In this paper, the Arabian Gulf refers to the six states that form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an organization whose members are Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman.ⁱ Newly formed Kingdoms, Emirates, Sultanate or states were eager to assert their independence and sense of nationhood. Traditionally, GCC broadcasters are government-owned and concerned with the image of the statehood; most often equated with that of its ruler, a monarch. This translated in a policy where the ruler's image and achievements took priority over any other programming policy. Rulers are constantly praised, their image regularly screened and most often associated with any signs of development such as airports, highways and oil refineries.ⁱⁱ

In the early 1990's, the introduction of commercial satellite receivers spearheaded a movement of competition between local and transnational satellite broadcasters. While penetration of receivers was slowed by various bureaucratic and legal procedures, the 1991 Gulf War uncovered the extent of satellite unofficial penetration and the GCC countries needed to adopt and adapt this new technology to maintain an eroding audience. For instance, by establishing the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) in London, Saudi Arabia pioneered private pan Arab satellite broadcasting in the 1991. In less than a decade, transnational satellite broadcasting became the main source of entertainment and information. The growth of satellite channels challenged the national stations on the basis of their popularity, funding and growth. National stations could not assume access to every single household. Similarly, their over reliance on state funding

put their audience accountability under further scrutiny. In the Gulf where rulers are personally involved in the programming and financing of the stations, this absence of core audiences was reason for diminishing funding. While these factors play a driving force in the changing media scene in the Gulf region, other contributing factors made this change inevitable.

In this paper, the media landscape is analyzed against a backdrop characterized by a liberalization of political leadership, intricate security concerns and an unprecedented economic expansion. Of course, any type of empirical research into phenomenon needs to be conducted from a specific perspective; a theoretical 'lens' must be adopted through which the objects under scrutiny can be observed. This work benefits from the author's participant observation and personal contacts in newsrooms across the region. Inspired by political economy, these transitions conform to spatialization as an entry point. The structures, typically news businesses and policies, are overcoming the constraints of space and time. In this process, these changes are transforming our understanding of what is global, historic and irrevocable. Factors of politics, security and economy set the stage for the discussion of the undergoing transitions in the Gulf news industry. These factors contextualize a broader social reality that news refracts.

Factors of Politics, Security and Economy

While this paper is not concerned with an evaluation of the political situation in the Gulf region; however, it is important to highlight the transitions that are conducive to a new media environment. There transitions are threefold: increased citizen participation, the emergence of a new leadership and transition of power.

There is ample evidence about an emergence of a democratic dialogue in each of the GCC countries. For instance, parliaments in Kuwait and Bahrain have been sites for serious dialogue concerning the media. At the time of writing, both Kuwait and Bahrain

are debating new press laws. Similarly, other countries have taken steps to increase participation of social constituents in the decision making process. In fact, the largest country in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, has held municipal elections and developed arenas for dialogue on some of the controversial issues such as women and minority rights.

In spite of the differences in the definition of the political system in each country, the GCC countries share a common understanding of leadership based on a monarchy and tribal relations.

As the rulers were aging, the transition of power became a serious issue both on the national, regional and international level. The objective is what newspapers refer to as “smooth transition of power” – a recurring headline. The main concern is a continuity maintained only through the ascent to power of a well trained heir. During the past two years, new rulers appeared in the United Arab Emirates (2004), Saudi Arabia (2005) and Kuwait (2006). In the case of UAE, the current president Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan has been in positions of governance since 1982, while King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has served as de facto regent since 1985.

As a result, the GCC is emerging as a society leading a ‘managed change’.ⁱⁱⁱ Media, particularly news, is one facet where a new group of leaders are administering this change. The cases of Qatar and the UAE stand out in this regard. On June 27, 1995, the Deputy Ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, deposed his father Emir Khalifa in a bloodless coup. Later, Emir Hamad and his father reconciled in 1996; the same year that he established Al Jazeera television. This political transition gave birth to a global medium that has changed the media landscape not in the Arabian Gulf but in the world. A later part of this paper will be dedicated to this “little match box which makes all the noise”^{iv}

Deputy ruler of Dubai, UAE, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rached Al Maktoum is another breed of Gulf leaders who believe that “there is no quicker path to comprehensive development than cooperation in the fields of IT and communication”.^v Consequently, the establishment of an internet and media free zone provided much needed infrastructure to attract, support and maintain a news industry in the region. The case of Dubai’s media city will be detailed in this paper for its regulatory innovation as a hub for Pan Arab and international media.

There is a direct relationship between secure borders and a flourishing media. Internal or external threats challenge freedom of expression and communication development. Media starts to serve political interests and is rarely left independent. The last three decades witnessed three major wars that threatened the security and the stability in the Gulf.^{vi} The northern borders of the region came under various threats: the export of the Islamic revolution during the eighties and Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in the early nineties. In spite of the current war in Iraq, the northern borders, particularly, neighboring Saudi Arabia and Kuwaiti borders have come under no direct threat. Since the mid nineties, The Kingdom of Bahrain has accommodated the Shiaa Islamic requests while Yemen has been reunified; the eastern and southern borders are stable. With a large military presence, the region enjoys an American security umbrella. Yet, there has been a discovery of an ‘enemy within’ the borders. This has been true in the case of Kuwait, Yemen, Qatar, and especially Saudi Arabia. Since the end of Desert Storm in 1991, Saudi Arabia has become a primary target of terrorist actions and recruitment. The US military presence in the Kingdom, the domestic demand for political and economic reforms added to unemployment are some of the proclaimed root causes of these terrorist operations. International pressures as a result of the events of 9/11 and the

subsequent American occupation of Iraq has heightened tensions in the Kingdom. The relationship between news media policies and the 'enemy within' will be discussed later.

The economies of the GCC countries have witnessed a tremendous growth in a post September 11, 2001, environment. In 2006, the economic boom in the GCC is set to enter its fourth year due primarily to high oil prices. New studies by the Washington-based Institute for International Finance (IIF) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the group's GDP is expected to reach \$600 billion.^{vii} Therefore, it is important to highlight some of those growth areas which have a direct impact on the changes taking place in television news industry.

The first factor is related to a change in the investment 'mentality' whereby a large portion of GCC foreign investments was repatriated. Familiar to more westernized business culture, those Gulf investors requested structures to support their investments; for example, Bahrain introduced its Financial Harbor while UAE established Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC). These structures are also coupled by an interest in diffusing and receiving information. Perhaps the introduction of a franchise of CNBC in Arabic is a solid example of that interest. At the time of writing this paper, three other regional Gulf-based business channels are under preparation. As detailed later in this paper, the major transition in Al Arabiya is closely related to the need for business news.

This economic boom has impacted various sectors; primarily real estate and retail. The first has recorded milestone changes to accommodate various investments. It is only during the last three years that foreign ownership of residential units has been permitted in UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. In an effort to attract both foreign as well as Arab tourists, these countries have encouraged the building and sale of units on artificial islands. Perhaps the magnitude of these projects can be best illustrated by the Palm project, a series of man made islands in the shape of this Arab tree that can be seen from

the moon. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has engaged in extensive efforts to promote religious tourism and, to that end, has devised time share investments in compliance with Islamic law. The need to receive information about tourism and real estate has prompted the opening of at least two channels, Al Iqariat and Mishkat specifically, to serve this audience niche. While their programming is more promotional than news, yet, they do offer various information oriented programs.

Additionally, the retail sector has also witnessed some growth as Gulf citizens and expatriates look for ways to use their disposable income. Shopping malls, leisure and entertainment facilities have become an essential part of the Gulf lifestyle. In the past five years, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman have taken various steps to increase the experiences of their residence. Pioneered by Dubai in 1995, shopping festivals became a yearly event in most of the Gulf countries. Usually, these are month long televised activities including entertainment acts and attractions. This interest in lifestyle left its mark on the television industry with the establishment of specific channels such as Citrus TV, whose mission is lifestyle news and information; or Sema Dubai which acts as the emirate's promotional channel. Just consider the advertising figures of 2005; more money is spent advertising real estate in the UAE and Saudi Arabia than any other market sector US\$89.2 million was spent in the UAE compared with US\$54.4 million in Saudi Arabia.^{viii} This puts real estate ahead of evergreen advertising categories such as cars and banking. This background of economic boom and need for various types of information serves as one angle for examining the transitions taking place in the news industry.

Gulf Based Satellite News Channels: Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya

The satellite boom of this decade has triggered the establishment of various Gulf based news channels. From the international franchise of CNBC focusing on business news to the Kuwaiti-funded, UAE based El Iqariat (the real estate channel), a number of satellite channels are worthy of analysis. This paper is concerned with the two pan Arab television news leaders: Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. With their 24-hour news format, both channels account for more than 50% of Saudi viewership, the largest population in the region. Analysis of the channels' mission statements and public discourse sets the stage for a thorough analysis of their 'transitions'.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Arab media particularly Al Jazeera has been under increased scrutiny. At least six books directly dealt with the birth and growth of Al Jazeera, while many articles tried to decipher its mission, describe its audience and (dis)-credit its claims. As noted earlier, the channel started broadcasting in late 1996. In a way, Qatar became the patron of a dissolved venture between the BBC and Saudi owned Orbit satellite platform. Broadcasting for almost two years until April 1996, the BBC Arabic version contributed indirectly to the establishment of Al Jazeera. Logistically, it trained Arab journalists in the traditions of television news, teaching them the language of 'exciting' television unavailable, until then, in the Arab world. At the same time, the computer software and organizational aspects of mounting a pan Arab news satellite channel were designed and tested. In a word, a channel was ready for relocation; Qatar's new approach to information and media provided an ideal spot for the start of the channel. Benefiting from a US\$150 million grant from the Emir of Qatar, Al Jazeera started spreading its mission across the region.

With their motto 'the opinion and the other opinion', Al Jazeera tried to live up to its patron's acknowledgement that "some discomfort for government officials is a small price to pay for this new freedom." But Al Jazeera started causing more than just

discomfort. 'From the ocean to the Gulf', as its promotion claims, an audio-visual ripple effect began capturing an audience already hooked to satellite dishes, each new crisis in the region increased the channel's dominance on the news sector. Over the past five years, the channel grew from a regional channel to a global news source.

Regionally, the channel witnessed the second Palestinian uprising, which erupted in September 2000, and covered the Israeli invasion of Palestinian towns and refugee camps in Spring 2002. The suicide atrocities of 9/11 triggered U.S. air strikes on Afghanistan. Al Jazeera again found itself in the limelight. With positions on both ends of the struggle, Al Jazeera was able to give an account of life under Taliban. Regardless of the criticism against its broadcasts, the pictures and the sounds of its reporters were re-transmitted internationally. The war in Iraq in 2003 brought several challenges to the channel. Internally, Al Jazeera was competing against its own bias, news standards and ethical dilemmas. This time war was on the Arab world, but unlike the Palestinian case, the Arabs were divided. Perhaps the removal of Jassem El Ali for alleged conspiracy with the Iraqi regimes tells some aspect of these internal challenges. Politically, the channel had to maintain its independence while carefully managing the politics of access dictated by the various parties: the coalition forces, the Iraqi regime, the Kuwaitis and the Jordanians. On the Arab scene, Al Jazeera had to compete for the hearts and minds of the Arabs. The war has intensified competition with Al Arabiya, at the time a new 24 hour news channel. But also Al Jazeera was competing against a number of channels dedicated to covering the war primarily, Abu Dhabi TV and LBC Sat. While the performance of Al Jazeera during the recent war in Iraq warrants further study, it has managed to emerge as a global news source.

Almost ten years after its establishment, Al Jazeera is undergoing various transitions on two main levels. First, the channel has become an international brand. Initially, it was

concerned with pushing the envelope of traditional Arabic news coverage. At the forefront were the Palestinian uprising and the prospects of peace. Later, the channel positioned itself on an Islamic agenda as it became Bin Laden's preferred, perhaps only, media outlet. It carried his message to the Arab world and relayed it to international broadcasters. With the Iraqi war coverage, Al Jazeera emerged as the fifth most influential global brand behind Apple Computer, Google, Ikea and Starbucks.^{ix}

This global brand recognition required two specific transitions related to content and form. The content now is supervised by an Al Jazeera veteran, Palestinian Wadah Khanfar. Al Jazeera has become a school in journalism where after 10 years, a journalist rises through the ranks to manage the channel. It places the channel amongst various global media institutions which depend on fostering their own philosophies of programming. First, the channel underwent a major change in its look and feel. It played on the same themes of the peninsula, water, Islamic calligraphy but the channel became more edgy, fast paced and it re-emphasized its hard colors of yellow and red. It relocated to new studios and adopted an international look comparable to international channels such as the BBC and CNN. In contrast, female news anchors started appearing in veil. It is not clear whether this is encouraged or respected by management, but it surely provides a converging point between the forces of globalization and traditionalization.

The second is a transition from a news channel to news provider to a multicasting network. Initially, Al Jazeera was a 24 hour regional channel; but its access to exclusive footage, primarily during the war in Afghanistan, has turned the channel to a news source. Al Jazeera became an exclusive provider of footage through broadcasting deals with other companies, according to Pravda "Al-Jazeera received \$20,000 per minute for Bin Laden's speech." (Politiken; 2006). During the Iraq war, there was serious collaboration with CNN dispatching senior Middle East analyst, Octavia Nasr, to

collaborate between the two channels. The latest transition in Al Jazeera has been multicasting; the channel's realization that it can capitalize on its brand name to launch various channels. In one year Al Jazeera moved from one news channel supported by a website to five channels, with various interactive services. In the past two years, Al Jazeera sports broadcasts two services covering Arab and international news and games; Al Jazeera Live, a channel similar to C-Span, broadcasts conferences and events in real time without editing or commentary. Finally, Al Jazeera Children's Channel was launched as an outlet for youth edutainment.^x The year 2006 is witnessing major additions to this network. First the addition of Al Jazeera international is perceived as a global channel providing an alternative to western based English news. Second Al Jazeera, in Urdu, will tap into a niche audience of global presence. At the time of writing, Al Jazeera is debating various horizontal and vertical integration plans. In short, Al Jazeera has news as its trade, with its targets the neglected markets.

The nineties started the wave of private Arab satellite channels with the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) broadcasting from London in 1991. The channel has boasted a very strong team of independent journalists, who were trained and managed by news veterans of British ITV. The channel was soon a success both as a fast paced visually appealing news format, as well as a non-governmental pan Arab news source. MBC is part of ARA Group owned by Saudi Sheikh Walid El Ibrahim, a relative of the Saudi King. This Saudi linkage was instrumental in the channel's growth as well as editorial policy. In fact, the channel was endorsed by Saudi businesses while its programming respected Saudi taboos and policies.

In 2002, MBC relocated to the United Arab Emirates, making Dubai Media City its new headquarter. This also prompted a further expansion through the creation of a western free to air movie channel, MBC 2. It was a matter of time before MBC capitalized on its

news legacy and started a 24 hour news channel. The looming war in Iraq, prompted the speeding of the preparations to mount this channel on the backbone of MBC's extensive network and offices in the Arab world and beyond. With an initial investment of US\$300 million, Al Arabiya launched in time to cover the latest Iraqi war and "to quench the audience thirst for credible, trustworthy, timely, and relevant news."^{xi}

Al Arabiya portrays itself as "an independent, self-empowered, informative and free-spirited satellite channel." (Arabyia, 2006) Its main motto is to get "closer to reality" in an attempt to reveal truths and facts but also to position itself vis a vis its rival Al-Jazeera. The main test for the channel was the Iraq war. At the same time, it was embedded with U.S. forces and present in the Iraqi regime's controlled area. Thus, Al Arabiya was covering both angles of the story, at the expense of having to negotiate subtly its access and coverage. But within a year of its launch, Al Arabiya was facing serious strategic questions; now that the channel managed its launch and position stages, the channel is in transition.

There is ample evidence to the notion that Al Arabiya was born to counter Al Jazeera and, consequently, that it existed to 'balance' news sources coming from the Gulf region. This idea is further supported by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar where media became just one face of this undeclared hostility. On one hand, Saudi Arabia boycotts advertising on Al Jazeera and bans its journalists from establishing an office in the Kingdom. Similarly, Al Jazeera allows Saudi dissidents to use its programs as a launching platform for their criticisms and sometimes flaring messages. Over the years, Al Jazeera made some enemies who were all interested in settling accounts. Al Arabiya was born out of that consolidation of efforts. At the forefront is Saudi controlled through MBC, Lebanon's Hariri Group, a close Saudi ally, and other investors from Kuwait, Jordan and other Arab investors.

Investment is one side of the rivalry. Al Arabiya sought and attracted several key Al Jazeera figures, primarily its founding editor in chief Salah Nagm and its star anchor Mountaha el Ramhee as well as various reporters and producers. This talent drain was added to a resource overload: both channels found themselves competing over a small pool of talented journalists and broadcasting facilities. To establish a 24 hour satellite network required an infrastructure that is scarce in most of the Arab world: satellite uplink, editing facilities etc. In most of the Arab world where newsgathering is still largely controlled by the state, the ability to negotiate access became difficult now that two channels were competing. The declared policies of these channels emphasized their editorial independence; but in most cases than none, a certain level of negotiation was required to gain access. Some of these notorious skillful negotiations took place with the Saddam regime where at several occasions both channels were denied access depending on their bias towards or against the regime.

The coverage of the fall of Baghdad was undoubtedly a turning point in Al Arabiya's history, but also in its direction. The channel underwent a major soul searching during the year and a half that followed its launch. As a result, the channel has taken a new path with a new leadership. Egyptian founding editor in chief, Salah Nagem, was replaced by Saudi Abdul Rahman el Rashed and a team of Palestinian and Lebanese MBC news veterans. Under the leadership of el Rashed, the channel sought a re-positioning of the channel's mission both in terms of content and format. Beginning in spring 2005, an important aspect of editorial change addresses the channel format: a morning show emulates, in more than one way, the U.S. format of morning news shows.^{xii} There has been an increase in the type of interactive programming with more web and call-in access. Similarly, there has been an increase in hard hitting documentaries, some that challenge conventional views about both the Arab world and the West.

The channel became involved in the coverage of the 'democratization process' taking place in the Arab world. Its viewers were drawn to extensive analysis and debate around the Lebanese parliamentary elections, the Iranian and Egyptian presidential elections, the Saudi municipal elections, as well as other 'news' of liberal flair. Interestingly, these were covered using extensive graphics featuring poll results, interviews, and a dynamic analysis only worthy of US electoral coverage. In addition, Al Arabiya was a pioneer non-partisan channel to air political advertising; under the pretext of a public service announcement various ads related to Iraq were aired. Particularly interesting were the announcements in the lead up to the referendum on the Iraqi constitution.

Similarly, the channel reacted to aforementioned growth in GCC stock markets, by developing a CNBC like coverage of business news. Visually, the channel started carrying a stock ticker, along with its news ticker. In addition, it also included a lower left side stack containing various exchange and international business indices. The channel began offering more than nine hours a day of stock and business related issues, monitoring the various stock performances around the Arab world with a focus on Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE. Towards this end, the channel expanded its business department by aggressively recruiting the main stars of CNBC Arabiya.

At this stage, the transitions in Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are moving in different directions. While one is going global, capitalizing on its news format in various languages and various areas; the other is emphasizing its local/regional flair, it is implicating itself in social life of its core Saudi audience. Any understanding of these transitions as rigid, fixed, and pragmatic is missing the macro picture of the business of news, timely, adaptable and moderate.

National Channels

As noted earlier, the national channels have long been the official mouth piece of the ruler, their programming, their overall aesthetics and logistics depended on the wishes of the ruler. These national channels are not immune to the transitions taking place in the news industry in the region. The changes are not exclusive and not the same across the spectrum. The following discussion is illustrative of the type of managerial, editorial and aesthetic changes taking place across the region.

Post 9/11 as well as various terrorist acts inside Saudi Arabia focused the attention of both Saudi citizens and expatriates to the need for a reliable source of information. Up until 2004, Saudis relied primarily on foreign news sources to receive news about their country. The growing popularity of Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and other news channels has alerted the need for a home grown Al Ekhbaryia (the news one) an official news channel. While Al Arabiya's Middle East News (MEN) was in charge of staffing, training and scheduling, Al Ekhbaryia is definitely a Saudi channel with a Saudi mission. Throughout 2005, the mission can be defined as assisting the government in its war against the "enemy within": the terrorist groups acting inside the Kingdom. In a country where foreign media find difficulty getting filming permits and journalists are often screened before admittance, Al Ekhbaryia became the news source of footage about Saudi Arabia for various regional and international outlets. Images of Saudi security raids and check points were provided to the international public as an evidence of Saudi government intention to crack down on terrorist factions. In short, the introduction of Al Ekhbaryia to the existing national channels in Saudi Arabia is a clear indication of the shift in national news coverage to counter transnational broadcasting and at the same time become the source of local news for the international community.

The management of national channels in the Gulf region has been at the center of the debate on the indigenization of public employment. Whether Saudization, Emiratization or Bahrainization, policies were enacted to provide preferential access to locals for any government jobs, in countries saturated with foreign expatriates from all nationalities. In the UAE, the case of Abu Dhabi Television (ADTV) and Dubai Television (DTV) provide an insight on the role of expatriates and locals in the transitions taking place. Re-launched in 2000 with a new management composed of various Arab nationals under the Emirati senior manager, ADTV received its 15 minutes of international fame during the last Iraqi war. Its exclusive footage, daring reporters and innovative use of technology turned this general network into a news network by excellence. Since the end of the Iraq war, the channel's popularity has been on the downfall. Its programs scaled down, its packaging aging and a number of its employees were fired. While it is difficult to reduce the channel's demise to any single reason, it is safe to conclude that the channel suffered a managerial clash between its expatriate and its national employees. Job security, promotion and editorial decision making are a few areas where expatriates feel underprivileged compared to their local colleagues.

On the other hand, DTV, which suffered for some time the same symptoms as ADTV, re-launched in 2004. In this regard, a co-habitation between locals and expatriates has been so far maintained. By placing the channel under the property of the semi private company, Dubai Holding, DTV escaped the bureaucratic government direct oversight. This working structure calls for a number of consultants whose job security and pay check are related to their performance in advising and managing the channel. In this structure, nationals and expatriates do not compete but share the responsibilities. In an effort to appeal to both local and expatriate audiences, DTV divided its news structure, local and regional/international newscasts. The overall effect of such policies on the

news industry reflects its overall impact on the channels. As the Gulf moves toward job localization, balancing between the mission and the management, the staffing and the image of a state owned channel is a challenge Gulf television industries must face.

The national channels of the remaining Gulf countries reveal slow or cosmetic transitions. Again Al Arabiya's MEN was entrusted with a US\$3.7 million revamp of Bahrain Television (BTV)'s look and feel, including news sets and graphics. At the time of writing this article, MEN is preparing local journalists for a new approach to news including the establishment of a website. Qatar's national television constitutes the standby facility for Al Jazeera and the training site for its national employees. The news of Qatar TV focuses on the local concerns as it lives by the shadow of its sister, Al Jazeera. Both Kuwait and Oman are slowly changing their work in response to the growing competition.

The Legal framework

There is no doubt the development of media regulation in the Arabian Gulf is embryonic to the aforementioned economic, security and political scenes. This 'managed change' has definite origins in economic successes. In fact, Dubai's adoption of free economic zones came after realizing the emirate's oil reserves cannot sustain its growth. Consequently, Dubai started developing as a business, tourism and media center for the region. The same economic imperatives are behind private satellite broadcasting in Kuwait and private radio in both Bahrain and Oman. The relationships are too interconnected and complex to be easily discerned, but the fact remains—the media rules and regulations are changing towards accommodating more private news broadcasters. The following are three case studies that support this argument.

Dubai's success with the free economic zones has led to the establishment of Dubai Media City in January 2001. With a 50 year exemption from personal and corporate

taxation, low operating costs and full foreign ownership, the City appealed to over 850 companies. With a motto calling for the “freedom to create,” news organizations were not reluctant to move to the City with the hope of a “freedom of speech.” In less than four years, Dubai Media City became home to international news bureaus such as Reuters, CNN, and the Associated Press. It also attracted various news ventures, such as the Arabic franchise of CNBC, the Pakistani news television Geo TV, Iranian Saba TV and Iraqi Al Sharqiya.^{xiii}

Apart from two cases involving business malpractices, there has not been any complaint about lack of freedom of speech in the Media City. Media companies have to abide by certain guidance whereby local controversial issues or powerful personalities are carefully tackled. A certain level of self censorship surrounds issues dealing with national currency, the economy and government policies. Journalists, working outside the media free zone, are subject to a combination of penal and Islamic law. On numerous occasions, the media was reassured of its free status but still Reporters Without Borders ranked the UAE 137th out of 162 countries for press freedom in 2005.^{xiv} The existing news organizations and the local authorities have negotiated an unwritten code of conduct whereby both interests are served; the news is reported and the government is not cracking down on the media.

As constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, the Kuwaiti press is private and prospering, but it was not until July 2003 that the government allowed the establishment of the first private Kuwaiti satellite television channel. Broadcasting on the first day of the holy month of Ramadan in October 2004, Al Rai Television offers an interesting case of policy and regulation in the region. First, it is the first case of cross ownership between private press and satellite television transmitting from the Gulf. The newspaper Al Rai has intended to establish its television station in Dubai’s Media City

with preparation starting just after the fall of Baghdad, in 2003. So far no other group has applied for satellite television licensing, but this surely provided precedence. Initially, the channel intended to compete with other Pan Arab channels such as the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) and the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC). Failing to achieve ratings outside Kuwait, the channel turned to Kuwaiti businesses for advertising. The synergy achieved between the channel and the newspapers should prove profitable in a booming Kuwaiti economy. This situation of cross media ownership and a local audience delivered to local advertisers via satellite is a unique case in the region. By applying a similar editorial policy across media, Al Rai manages to balance its independence and the threat of license revocation since the broadcast authorization was granted outside the presence of a broadcast law.

Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman are all updating their press regulation to accommodate the new political, security, economic and technological environment. There seems to be unanimous acceptance to admit the private sector into what is currently an exclusive club of government broadcasters. Bahrain Supreme Privatization Council has allowed private radio broadcast while Oman has granted licenses to private radio and television stations in accordance with its Private Radio and TV Companies' Law of 2004. In sum, the variety of regulatory solution reflects the tendency of Gulf countries to gradually adapt frameworks in accordance with their individual national agendas. From the economic free zones to formal laws, the monarchs in the region are transitioning their media scene toward pluralistic and privately owned systems.

Concluding Observations:

The relationship between Gulf television news and the economic, political and security changes is complex. In addition to financial, ideological and regulatory challenges that news media in developing countries face, Gulf television news have to assert their future

strategic directions in a period of tumultuous and unparalleled changes. By examining the transitions on three platforms –pan-Arab, national and local, I attempted to reveal the nature and extent of transitions. The choice of the word ‘transition’ suggests that these changes are interconnected, complex, contested and, most importantly, incomplete. As noted, the start of these transitions cannot be determined in time or space. Is it the start of Al Jazeera in Qatar or the breakdown of BBC Arabic from the UK? Is it the events of 9/11 or the recent war in Iraq? While these reference points can be justified, the end of these transitions is still unfolding and maybe the media will be in a constant adaptation and initiation status. However, I offer concluding remarks as ‘preliminary observations’ that help should inspire further study.

First, the news industry is pursuing a parallel path of diversification and consolidation. From the birth of multicasting the news oriented Al Jazeera brand to MBC’s diversification as a news broadcaster/provider, the channels in the region are developing niche audiences. The context of news is no exception, as news evolves from a witness to the ruler’s achievement into covering special interests in sports, business, real estate and lifestyle. At the same time, the case of Al Rai’s venture in the television business might be the start of various similar projects where print and broadcast are combined. Every single element of the broadcasting business model – whether funding, programming, production, delivery or audience – is subject to forces of desegregation and fragmentation.

Earlier, this paper referred to an “enemy within” the GCC countries. While the enemy reveals itself in terrorist attacks, there is much to say about the misinterpretation of Islam and the individual freedoms of GCC citizens. The pan Arab channels Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are leading the forums for discussing the ‘managed change’. To a lesser extent, national channels are re-structuring in light of this new mission. By virtue of its status as

the largest and most conservative country in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia is setting a new tone for a more liberal and mutually inclusive dialogue in the region. Its news channel is emerging as a tool for countering the audio visual messages of the “enemy within” – whether video broadcasts, compact discs, audio tapes.

While broadcasting is evolving into a wholly market-orientated system, much control is still in the hands of rulers. Directly or indirectly, those rulers are still bankrolling a media not wholly supported by advertising and that still has an ideological or theological message. Whether a pan Arab or a national channel, it seems that Gulf news stations still need to be a *protégé*, to have a financial supporter, a legal defender and a home for its headquarters. The competition between Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya is not just the competition between two news channels. It also represents the competition between two visions and two states. Finally, it seems that the new rulers have inherited a tribal tradition where the tribe’s poet hails the chief and smears the rival. In today’s Gulf news channels, there are still poets, but they use the television as their platform.

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ⁱ The council was established on May 25, 1980. In this paper, I will overlook the disputes concerning the naming of that part of the world as 'Persian' or 'Arab'; instead I will use GCC and Arabian Gulf

interchangeably. Renamed, The Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf; it serves to increase various cooperation issues between the member states.

ⁱⁱ Typically, national channels would portray clips and fillers showing the monarch inaugurating or overseeing developmental projects.

ⁱⁱⁱ The issue of democracy in the Gulf has been referred to a 'liberalization', 'political openness', 'democratization'. Personally, I prefer the use of 'managed change' or 'managed democracy' because the movement has not gained enough momentum to justify the other labels; at the same time the governments are guiding and controlling this process.

^{iv} President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt jokingly about Al Jazeera; quoted in various books and documents please refer to Zednik, R. (2002) Zayani (2005) and M. El-Nawawy, M. and Iskandar, A. (2003).

^v Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum in Key note speech at Arab ICT Summit, (12, October 2002).

^{vi} The first was the Iran-Iraq war lasting from 1980 to 1988. The second was the Desert Storm in the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991. The third war is still on going from March 2003.

^{vii} Agnew (2006) offers a valuable analysis of the oil revenues and their impact on the Gulf economy.

^{viii} Addington (2005) an interesting review of the main advertising events, figures and campaigns revealed in 2005.

^{ix} This is according to brandchannel.com. Please refer to The Peninsula (2005).

^x For more on youth media in the Arab world, particularly, Al Jazeera Children Channel's concept of edutainment refer to Kraidy & Khalil (2007, under review)

^{xi} Refer to Al Arabiya website <http://www.alarabiya.net/Default.htm>

^{xii} For more on western formats used on Arab television, refer to Khalil (2004b)

^{xiii} At the time of writing this paper, two other emirates announced their plans to build similar free zones: Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah.