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Mirror on the Wall:

Who is the Best Communicator of Them All - Al Jazeera or Al Hurra?

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The United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (USACPD) report, issued summer 2004, stated that “The best public diplomacy practitioners ensure that messages reflect the cultural sensitivities of audiences.... Public diplomacy messaging must become more strategic and responsive, and at the same time must properly reflect the values and attitudes of target audiences.” While the USACDP made this pertinent condition for effective public diplomacy, it did not verify how well the marketing communication of the Congress-financed-Al Hurra TV channel performs against these pre-requisites.

The USACDP report was issued at a time when Al Hurra TV seeks to enhance its share of voice in the Arab world where key aspects that affect the channel’s brand image especially those conveyed in its corporate communication, ought to be evaluated within the context how they are likely to be processed by the Arabs. And since in the US and even in the Arab world, Al Hurra is considered the anti-thesis of Qatari-state-owned Al Jazeera, such evaluation is best be done in comparison with the corporate communication of Al Jazeera. Ironically, both TV channels are owned by very close political allies, where the US maintains in Qatar one of its largest military bases outside the US. Yet both governments hardly

see eye to eye when it comes to how the US perceives Al Jazeera's reporting of the US policies in the region. This loss of hearts only surfaced in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the US and since Al Jazeera started airing Osama bin Laden tapes. Al Jazeera's reporting on the US-led invasion of Iraq was practically the straw that broke the camel's back and US administration unleashed an all out attack on the Al Jazeera's credibility of reporting.

Marketing communications material on Alhurra (Arabic for "The Free One") introduces it as "a 24-hour channel that broadcasts across the Middle East via Arabsat and Nilesat. In addition to reporting on regional and international events, the channel broadcasts discussion programs, current affairs magazines and features on a variety of subjects including health and personal fitness, entertainment, sports, fashion, and science and technology. The channel is dedicated to presenting accurate, balanced and comprehensive news.

"Alhurra is operated by a non-profit corporation "The Middle East Television Network, Inc." (MTN). MTN is financed by the U.S. Government through a grant from the BBG, an independent federal agency. The BBG provides oversight and serves as a firewall to protect the professional independence and integrity of the broadcasters."

Al Hurra has just celebrated its first anniversary mid last February operates out of Virginia with over 100-strong staff mostly Arabs most of whom were recruited from different Arab TV channels. It has reporters in most Arab capitals. Al Hurra entered an already crowded Arab TV market and is often regarded one of the major US communication mediums for what has become a common cliché 'winning the hearts and the minds of the Arabs'.

Supposedly when it comes to coverage of the US policies in the Arab region, the US administration thinks that the Arabs minds are particularly contaminated by the 'lies' spread by Al Jazeera. Implicit in the words of Mouafac Harb, Alhurra Executive Vice President and Network News Director, is that it is

not only Al Jazeera that spreads lies, but other Arab TV channels are not be immune from this accusation.

When asked in a CBS 60-Minute program on who are Al Hurra's target audiences, Mr. Harb's response was "to steal audiences from TV channels that are spreading lies".

Since both TV channels broadcast Arabsat and Nilesat satellites they have comparable potential reach in terms of the proportion of the Arab homes that receive both Al Hurra and Al Jazeera. As such both TV channels reach about 90% of the homes in Gulf region, about two-thirds of the urban homes in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Morocco and Algeria; over one-third of the homes in Iraq; close to 20% of the homes of urban Egypt.

This is as far as their potential reach is concerned. As for actual viewership the eight-year-old Al Jazeera reports that its audiences are 35 millions. There is no qualification of what audiences mean. Given that Al Hurra is in the thick of the audience race, the term millions is seen as a catchy phrase as well. In its marketing communications released early fall 2004, the headline states that it reaches "millions", but no quantities were given. Incidentally however the 35-million figure given by Al Jazeera sounds like an unattended tape that has been repeating itself for several years.

True that the US and Qatar are faithful political allies to the extent that CENTCOM operations in the war on Iraq were hosted by Qatar, the US has no trust in the media its ally. It is indeed an irony that still puzzles all media observers: Full mutual political trust; complete media mistrust on the part of the US administration.

It is little wonder then why truth and credibility of news reporting are the two major contentions in the communication of both TV channels. Both use invariably very different communication concepts, the implications of which could have very different perceptual implications on their audiences. Still variations in their marketing communications go even farther as far as the way they identify their broad base audiences. Again, with implications that touch some fundamental aspects, which the 2004 report of the

United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy touched upon, but failed to detect in grading the marketing communication of Al Hurra. Reference is made here to..." messages reflect the cultural sensitivities of audiences... and at the same time must properly reflect the values and attitudes of target audiences."

So how the two media antagonists communicate and which one could be graded better according to the very pertinent USACDP successful public diplomacy yardstick needed for winning the hearts and the minds of the Arabs who are hungry for truth, which the US administration contends that Al Jazeera is denying them whereas Al Hurra is positioned as the savior?

One of Al Jazeera's advertisements states: "Telling the truth is difficult; not telling it is more difficult". Consistent with its slogan "The opinion and the opposite opinion", Al Jazeera's communication does not identify who states who's opinion dominates or whether there is a balanced representation of varying opinions.

There is no doubt in the mind of the US government that Al Jazeera, which was once lauded for being a winning horse that heralded freedom of speech into the Arab media, turned itself after 11/9 into a wild horse that huffs and puffs anti-US opinions, which distort the truth about the US policies in the region.

The body of one recent Al Hurra's print advertisement states: "Because no one owns the truth and because the media can distort some of it or clarify the other some, and because the viewer is not ignorant, there is Al Hurra (The Free One). As you".

In contrast, the headline of Al Hurra's communication does not stutter about who states the truth: "We (Al Hurra) put the dots on the letters". For an Arab, putting the dots on the letters is more than a matter of fine tuning or punctuating a text. It is setting the agenda. It is dictating the sender's opinion; the receiver of the message has no say whatsoever. This not to deny that advertisement was shrewd, especially since the

Arabic words which translate into “We put the dots on the letters” (nada’a anniqat ala alhuruf) was printed without the dots on the letters.

In comparison to the English language that has only letters with dots (i and j), seventeen out of the twenty-eight Arabic alphabets have dots. Probably over ninety-percent the Arabic words contain dotted alphabets. The body of Al Hurra’s Arabic print communication qualifies the headline however by saying that “You (the audiences) own the alphabets, we (Al Hurra) own several of the dots”.

The fact that many media do indeed set the political, social, cultural and economic agenda in a particular society is the contention of some of the more leading media theories in the US. But it is less likely that a media would go about announcing such intentions in its marketing communications. In contrast AL Jazeera’s marketing communications seem to be more in line with what one encounters in some of the leading US media, where a slogan is very discrete about the intentions of setting the agenda.

For instance the New York Times slogan states: “All News that Fits for Print”. It does not state who decides what is to be published. CNN’s trade mark slogan is: “Be the First to Know”. It does state who decide what the audiences should know or who decides who decides what they should know.

Although Al Hurra’s marketing communication is an exception to the rule, it is very much in line with its intended mission, or rather multi missions. Some of tasks are educating the Arabs about democratic values and correct what it considers as a distorted image of US in the Arab world, which the US administration blames on the Arab media. The effectiveness of Al Hurra’s blunt approach in stating its intentions, in terms of impressing its prospective Arab audiences, would need to be evaluated against how apprehensive the Arab general public is towards US policies and intentions in the Arab world.

Al Hurra and its communication consultants in the Arab world are in a good position to understand and appreciate such sensitivities especially since most of those involved are Arabs, irrespective whether they work for Al Hurra or work for communication agencies in the Arab world. But some observers in the US

believe that this high profile communication is needed more to impress the US congress and to prove that Al Hurra is living to the expectation of the people who support keeping the funds flowing in.

Needless to say that such communication may please Al Hurra's supporters in the Washington, but less likely to impress its target audience, it is less that any audiences would appreciate being told bluntly that a media sets, or worse, dictates the agenda. Arab audiences are migrating from their state-owned media which have been setting the agenda for decades. And even if we assume that the US agenda is all for the democratic good of the Arab world, it may be more advisable for Al Hurra to keep a low key in way it intends to send its messages.

In short what is needed is perhaps more appreciation of the sensitivities that might arise for the usage of the Arabic language. Americans, even those who know Arabic may not be fully aware to such sensitivities, but Arabs working for Al Hurra or those who are its communication consultants ought to be on high alert. But just as they seem to be overlooking the sensitivities of the Arabic used in the advertising communication, Al Hurra seems to be breaking another basic marketing rule, which is the appropriate identification of its target audiences.

Again, contrasts between and Al Hurra and Al Jazeera marketing communications extend to include the identification of their target audiences. Al Hurra audiences are referred to as "Arabic-speaking", not as Arabs or the Arab world. As such Arabs do not constitute a well-defined entity. It is the language they speak that identifies them. This definition is part of Washington's lexicon where the Arab world is now diluted into what is commonly known as the Middle East, or The Greater Middle East more recently in the US efforts to initiate political reform in the region.

The Middle East is not a new term by any means, but seems to have replaced all other terms which refer to the Arabs or the Arab world. We must acknowledge however that it is only the US media and government that are perpetuating such an identification of the Arabs. It has become a standard term in

many of the Arab media as well, and this does not happen when Arab media is translating from English language texts. It is written by Arab writers.

The controversy over such identification is not just a matter of language. It has by far more serious implications on the national psyche of the Arabs. Al Hurra's (as well as its sister Radio Sawa) identification of their audiences as the Middle East comes in the thick of a time where Arabs are already experiencing a first-rate national identity crisis.

Arab nationalism (qawmiya), as an identity, is a dream that lingers in the minds of many Arabs; a desire or rather a mirage of being one nation, which seems increasingly far fetched. For practical reasons and given that there no physical Arab nation as such, Arabs grudgingly settle for the nationality of their respective national states, which they refer to as wataniya. Promotion of regional nationalism such as Syrian nationalism (reference to historical Greater Syria) for instance, has met little success since it was advocated by Antoun Saada, a Christian Lebanese, in the early 1930s.

It seems that only the Arabic language accommodates very different meanings for national and nationalist. Such differentiation in the Arabic language appears to have emerged out of political necessities, but they work well nevertheless. It reflects political realism. Yet we notice in a number of Arab countries the term qawni (nationalist, which is usually reserved for referring to the Arab nation) is replacing the term watani (national).

Arabs are the only people in the world with no clear-cut national identity per se. Reducing Arabs to a language ethnicity is at best be degrading. With no well specified identity to hang on to, many Arabs are drifting into the current of the Muslim identity, where Islam is turning into a global identity that provides a refuge of identity security.

A Gallup/ USA/ CNN Iraq-nationwide poll conducted spring 2004 illustrates how powerful this Islamic current is. Sixty-seven-percent of the Iraqis see themselves as Muslims first, 18% see themselves as Iraqis

first, whereas only 12% see themselves as Arabs first. An alarming finding indeed, as it emerges from a country where the US once banked on the most to turn it into a pioneer secular democracy in the Arab world.

In contrast to Al Hurra's identification of its audiences as Arab-speaking, Al Jazeera --although based in the smallest Arab state and ironically the US closest ally in the Arab world-- hammers in strongly the pan Arabism theme. Its main prime time religious talk show talks about the "Muslim nation (al umma)".

In one its advertisements Al Jazeera states the accusations often held against it, where it either whips up the pan Arabism sentiment or goes with the nationalists tide. The ad claims that both views concur that quality news reporting was what Al Jazeera brought to the regional media scene. This is what Al Jazeera claims its most selling theme.

This same advertisement uses a photo of a mass of Arab demonstrators who seem mute and perplexed. Somewhat not in line with the perception of what Al Jazeera does in terms of whipping up public emotions. The headline states: "don't blame it on the media". Indeed this how all Arabs feel: Mute and perplexed. But still some feel that Al Jazeera was the first to provide them with a forum to voice an opinion.

From Al Hurra's perspective, Al Jazeera's forum perpetuates victimization and frustration amongst its audiences without giving them a viable alternative per se. Built into Al Hurra's visual slogan – a herd of Arabian horses galloping freely and gracefully on ice-- the concept of freedom of choice between alternatives. Does this slogan match its corporate communication? Could Al Hurra's contention that it sets the agenda be its selling theme, especially when put within the context that the Arab general public perception that the US has its own political agenda in the region?

I have studied and worked in the United States for most of the 1980s. The freedom I enjoyed while listening to the semi-state funded NPR (National Public Radio) or watching PBS (Public Broadcasting

Service) was and is still unmatched. I used to cherish NPR Chapel Hill everyday it aired BBC World News. A perfect media twins between two political allies, the US and the UK, who have very comparable media concepts of their state-owned (or semi-state owned) when it is comes to addressing their own people, but they go their separate ways in their foreign media services.

I wished Al Hurrah and Radio Sawa had been extensions of PPS and NPR, just as BBC Arabic is an extension of it BBC World Service. All must have their own agendas; they do not advertise that they do. Al Hurra and Radio Sawa may want to check out how BBC Arabic identifies its target audience. Both media are owned by political allies and run mainly by Arabs or Arab Americans or British Arabs, yet they have very different foreign media cultures.