

Saudi Arabia's Media Influence

By Paul Cochrane

October, 2007. When Saddam Hussein's forces rolled across the border into Kuwait in 1991, Riyadh kept the Saudi population in the dark for three days before realizing that most Saudis had tuned into CNN to find out what was going on with their Gulf neighbor.¹ This rude awakening was the beginning of a fundamental turning point in kingdom's media strategy which until the early 1990s, had been largely confined to newspaper ownership.

Over the past seventeen years the Saudi establishment has used its deep pockets to influence the region's media and minds, morphing from an approach that paid off and intimidated media that ran negative reports on the kingdom to become one of the Middle East's most influential media owners.²

¹ Marwan M. Kraidy, "Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the Changing Arab Information Order," *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007), 139-156, p. 141.

² See Said K. Aburish's *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), p. 216

As a result of the 1991 Gulf War, individuals close to the royal family decided to internationalize the kingdom's media presence, launching the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) in London, backed by the then Saudi king's in-law, Walid Ibrahim.³

“In the first Saudi era there was more of a tendency to buy individuals,” said As'ad AbuKhalil, a politics professor at California State University, Stanislaus, and author of *The Battle for Saudi Arabia*.⁴ “Before 1990 there were competing ownerships of Arab media – Libya, Iraq, UAE and Saudi Arabia. These were the major contenders. Ever since that time it is fair to say the media came entirely open for Saudi Arabia and the multiplicity [of media outlets] reflects the multiplicity of princes [that own media outlets].”

The Arab Radio and Television Network (ART) came hot on the heels of MBC, founded by Saudi mogul Saleh Abdullah Kamel in 1993, with a line up of entertainment, music and sport.

ART was followed in 1994 with the then Rome-based Orbit Communications Corporation (the Orbit pay-per view network is now based in Bahrain), a subsidiary of

³ MBC's shareholder list has never been revealed. It is widely assumed that the Saudi royal family has a stake in the network led by chairman and CEO Sheikh Waleed Bin Ibrahim Al Brahim. In 2002, the network moved operations to Dubai's Media City and production houses to Beirut, as well as expanding entertainment to MBC 2, MBC 3, MBC 4 and MBC Action MBC also owned United Press International (UPI) from 1994 until it sold the news service in 2000 to Reverend Sun Myung Moon's News World Communications.

⁴ AbuKhalil also has a popular blog – www.angryarab.blogspot.com

the Saudi Arabian Mawarid Group, which ran a BBC Arabic Television channel from 1994 until 1996 when it was abruptly pulled off air.⁵

In the same year that Orbit pulled the plug on BBC TV Arabic (which is set to restart soon, this time funded by the British taxpayer), ART's Kamel bought 49% of the Cayman Islands-registered satellite channel Fada'iyya Al Lubnaniyya (the Lebanese Satellite Channel, LBC International), the pan-Arab version of the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) TV channel.⁶

In 2000, Kamel sold his shares to the world's now thirteenth richest man, Saudi prince Al-Walid Bin Talal, for \$100 million. Bin Talal is the Rupert Murdoch of media ownership in the Middle East, with his Kingdom Holding companies owning the region's largest music label (Rotana Records), six music TV channels (Rotana Clip, Rotana Music, Rotana Gulf, Rotana Cinema, Rotana Tarab, Rotana Zaman), and a stake in Lebanese newspapers *An Nahar* and *Ad Diyar* in addition to his stake in LBCI (Bin Talal, incidentally, is the third largest shareholder in Murdoch's News Corp., with 5.46% of voting shares).⁷

Prince Khalid bin Sultan is also a shareholder in LBC and owner of pan-Arab

⁵ Showtime Arabia, the region's other leading pay-TV network, established in 1996, is not Saudi-owned. Kuwaiti company KIPCO has a 79% stake and the CBS Corporation has the remaining 21%.

⁶ Marwan M. Kraidy, "Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the Changing Arab Information Order," *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007), 139-156, p. 143.

⁷ Bin Talal announced in August that Rotana is to be merged with LBCI, although the two institutions will remain financially independent - LBCI and Rotana to Merge Prior to Listing on Dubai Stock Market - 10 Aug 2007 - http://www.ifpexpo.com/News_show_news.asp?id=2909

newspaper *Al Hayat*. Due to his position as Assistant Minister of Defense for Military Affairs, bin Sultan's role as a shareholder is significant as he can be considered a state actor, and consequently able to exert certain pressure over LBC to pander to the Saudi establishment.

The only other political outlet in which the Saudi government has a reportedly direct stake, other than newspapers and domestic media outlets which are subjected to draconian laws within Saudi Arabia,⁸ is MBC's all-news satellite channel Al Arabiya. This network was established in 2003 to counter Qatar's Al Jazeera, a channel Riyadh has disliked ever since it went on air in 1996, rankled by investigative reports on corruption in many Arab countries and the airing of Osama bin Laden video statements. Al Jazeera was seen as so controversial that at one point Saudi Arabia banned men from watching television at cafes to prevent public discussions of what was on.

Although Saudi influence over the region's newspaper business (particularly pan-Arab publications) still remains high, the significance of muzzling print press is not as great as it used to be. Like everywhere else on earth, the Middle East is tuning into TV news rather than picking up a paper.

⁸An investigation by the Committee to Protect Journalists on Saudi Arabia found that: 1) Government officials dismiss editors, suspend or blacklist dissident writers, order news blackouts on controversial topics, and admonish independent columnists over their writings to deter undesirable criticism or to appease religious constituencies 2) The country's conservative religious establishment acts as a powerful lobbying force against enterprising coverage of social, cultural, and religious matters. The multilayered religious sector includes official clerics, religious scholars, the religious police, radical revivalist preachers, and their followers 3) Compliant government-approved editors squelch controversial news, acquiesce to official pressures to tone down coverage, and silence critical voices - http://cpj.org/Briefings/2006/saudi_06/saudi_06_printer.html

“Newspapers are only important in so far as what intellectuals, journalists and politicians are reading. If you go to Arab countries and ask about a [newspaper] columnist, they won’t know who they are, but will know TV anchors,” said AbuKhalil.

The Big Issue:

Saudi Arabia’s takeover of the region’s media is a reflection of what is occurring globally where a handful of multinational companies increasingly dominate the media. This spills over from entertainment into news coverage.

To Saudi Arabia such control is paramount in an era when the media is increasingly pervasive, because Riyadh’s political and economic clout – and the survival of the Royal family – depends on the kingdom retaining its position as a leading player in the region’s power politics. To retain this balance of power – held in the region by the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia against an ascendant Iran and non-governmental actors – informative and potentially damning news on the kingdom needs to be squashed.

Saudi Arabia’s approach to media under its control, and the harsh punishments on those that do not portray a rose-tinted view of the royal family and the kingdom, is mirrored in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which have similarly draconian media laws to retain monarchical power bases. Qatar can be considered somewhat of an exception with Al Jazeera, but when it comes to the channel applying the same exposure to governmental malfeasance and social issues in Doha as it does elsewhere in the region, Al Jazeera comes up short.

Although much of Saudi media ownership revolves around entertainment, as the Managing Editor of Beirut-based *Middle East Broadcasters Journal*, Habib Battah, pointed out: “MBC, Orbit, Rotana – all these companies have a big Saudi stake and are not really about Saudi Arabia, but about appealing to a pan-Arab audience,” that is perhaps the point, with Saudi shareholders - most linked to the royal family - being able to dictate what is, and what can be, aired to a pan-Arab audience, even if it is *only* entertainment.

As Marwan Kraidy of the American University noted: “Entertainment television is an active contributor to shaping what Arab publics discuss and do in both the social and political realms.”⁹

The fact that most channels in the region are not running at a profit is also indicative of certain motivations behind acquiring media outlets. “Channels are set up for different reasons, but one thing they’re not set up for is to make money,” said Hugh Miles, author of *Al Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*. “A channel is a very economic way to influence people. Bang for your buck it’s much cheaper than guns. It is about controlling the discourse, and for Saudis about being in charge.”

Saudi Arabia’s strict domestic media laws have kept a lid on any criticism of the Saudi ruling elite in the country, and the kingdom uses its networks of ownership and informal influence to the best of its ability anywhere else. According to Said K. Aburish, author of *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud*, many Arab and

⁹ Marwan M. Kraidy, “Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the Changing Arab Information Order,” *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007), 139-156, p. 139.

foreign journalists were on the payroll of Riyadh in the 1970s, '80s and '90s to produce positive articles and commentaries, as well as counter coverage that goes against the agenda of Saudi Arabia.

As noted, that started to change in the 1990s – although the practice still allegedly goes on – with the Saudis' acquiring whole networks. Such concentrated media ownership, in addition to Saudis' deep pockets and widespread economic and political influence, affects Arab journalists and the outlets that do not toe Saudi Arabia's line.

“It is now a taboo in Arab culture to criticize Saudi. Even [Lebanon's] Hizbullah media is careful, and in Qatar media criticism has been going down, it has been very sensitive... Whenever the Emir of Qatar meets [Saudi Arabia's] King Abdullah, he always gets complaints about Al Jazeera,” AbuKhalil told *Arab Media & Society*.

Saudi influence is particularly apparent in more media independent Lebanon, which acts as a recruiting pool for many of the region's journalists, editors and staff, and as such, means journalists will not run stories that could jeopardize their future careers, particularly if they aspire to work for the higher paying Gulf and Saudi networks.

“As a journalist today you cannot criticize Saudi – where would you work?” said AbuKhalil.

Equally, as some 40-70% of the region's advertising is spent in Saudi Arabia (estimates differ), networks, TV channels and publications are not going to risk jeopardizing their cash flow by upsetting their prime advertising market in the region's largest economy. Al Jazeera discovered this to their cost.

Al Jazeera was slated to be privatized in 2001, but according to Miles the channel's attempts to raise enough advertising revenues were scuppered by Saudi pressure on major companies to pull advertisements from Al Jazeera or face advertising problems within the kingdom. "The Saudis have cost the channel dozens of millions in profits," he said.

Judging by the fact that the channel is still state-funded and the lack of advertising on Al Jazeera today – largely confined to state-run Qatari companies – Riyadh succeeded in its aims, with Al Arabiya shooting ahead in advertising revenues.

No News is Good News

An inkling of how Saudi influence affects news coverage was given in an article by Ian Richardson, who was charged with setting up BBC Arabic TV's news department during the two-years the channel ran on Orbit:

"During the short life of BBC Arabic Television, there were several angry 'liaison meetings' with Orbit and the guarantees of editorial independence proved to be a sour joke, only barely obscured by a thin smokescreen about the BBC's alleged failure to observe "cultural sensitivities" – Saudi code for anything not to the Royal Family's liking. When it became clear to Orbit and Mawarid that it had, in their terms, created a monster not prepared to toe the Saudi line, it was only a matter of time before there would be a final parting of the ways."¹⁰ As noted earlier, that parting of ways resulted in

¹⁰ Ian Richardson, The Arabic TV "Monster", first published in *The Independent and Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, April 1997. Available at: www.richardsonmedia.co.uk/arabic.html

the channel being completely canned.

Richardson's article was written a decade ago, but his insight regarding "editorial independence" was readily evident in early June this year when the London-based newspaper *The Guardian* broke the story of British Aerospace (BAE) and the British Ministry of Defense paying out some \$2 billion to Prince Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia as a sweetener to secure a \$40 billion arms deal for BAE Systems back in 1985. The story caused a scandal in Britain and garnered coverage in the international media, but received relatively minimal coverage in the Middle East. The story was not given any airtime by Al Arabiya, with coverage largely confined to non-Saudi influenced outlets Al Jazeera and the London-based Arabic language newspaper, *al-Quds al-Arabi*.¹¹

"It was a huge story and should have got a lot of coverage as it affects the whole region, politically and economically. Minimal coverage seems to be a real injustice to the audience," said Battah.

A further example of Saudi Arabia setting the media agenda, according to Reuters' Andrew Hammond, is that "Arab media have largely gone along with a Saudi media campaign against Iran over its growing influence in the Arab world."¹²

AbuKhalil also sees Saudi media - Al Arabiya in particular - as instrumental in stirring up *fitna* (discord) between the Sunnis and Shias, which has been exacerbated by

¹¹ Ian Black. "Latest allegations ignored by a submissive media," *The Guardian*. June 8, 2007

¹² Andrew Hammond. "Saudi media empire tries to counter opposition," Reuters, 9 August 2007

the occupation of Iraq, sectarian divisions in Lebanon, and the need for Saudi Arabia and Western allies to counter Iran's growing influence in the Middle East and what certain commentators and politicians have called "the Shia crescent."

Ultimately, Saudi influence over the media is having a negative effect on journalistic ethics, investigative reporting, balanced coverage and providing substantial information to the Arab public about issues that are important to the region. Furthermore, with criticism and insightful stories about Saudi Arabia off limits to most Arab journalists, the problem is compounded by non-Arab journalists not able to take up the slack due to onerous visa regulations and limited access to sources, particularly for stories that relate directly to the state, which is notoriously secretive in handing out information.

As Aburish summarizes in his book *The House of Saud*: "The ability to influence the Western press comes on top of total control of Saudi internal media and the elimination of opposition within the pan-Arab media. The combined effect produces a false picture which everywhere overlooks, ignores or distorts the House of Saud's misdeeds. In prospect is a world waking up to a country in flames and wondering why things have gone so far without anybody knowing about them."¹³

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¹³ Said K. Aburish's *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), p. 240

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