

AMS Feature Interview: Nart Bouran, General Manager and Head of News, Sky News Arabia

This interview was conducted S. Abdallah Schleifer on June 4, 2012 and was condensed and edited by AMS managing editor Stephanie Thomas.

AMS: I have a sense of déjà vu and that's because I interviewed you in 2003 you as the leader of Abu Dhabi TV's incredibly successful war coverage of the US invasion of Iraq. You were, if I may quote myself, in an interview we did with you for *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, "journalism's own stealth bomber." Your incredibly professional clandestine build-up of capacity to go all-news and all-out when the war broke out made Abu Dhabi TV number one in the battle for best coverage—not just pan-Arab best coverage, but global best coverage. Now you're back in Abu Dhabi. This has me a little nervous. We all knew the invasion of Iraq was coming, but you prepared for it. Now you're the head of a new Arab satellite channel. Are you preparing for an Israeli invasion of Iran?

Bouran: (laughing) I don't know how many times I've been asked the same question. It's pure coincidence because the agreement between the two parties, Abu Dhabi Media Investment Corp and BSkyB, really started way before any of these things happened, even before Tunisia. I've been on board since March 1, 2011, and they had started the process at least three or four months before then. But certainly a lot has happened since then, and it's a very, very interesting time, and it's changed a lot of things in the way things are covered. It seems like every time I come back to the region there's a new step, a new threshold that's been passed of what can be done, and what can be said, and how things can be covered. I hope that I can bring a similar kind of skills or professionalism, but certainly the rules have changed. I don't know what's going to happen in the future, but it's certainly very interesting.

AMS: I'm talking about Iran and the fact that the drums are beating again in Washington for US backing for an Israeli attack on Iran before the elections.

Bouran: Who knows? There's a certain tension in the air but what exactly that translates to in terms of an event that is coverable is not yet clear. If the future holds some kind of further escalation I don't think it's going to be the same kind of coverage that you could possibly prepare for like when we knew that there was a ground invasion of Iraq. This one is a complete unknown, if it does happen.

AMS: It's nearly a month since the launch of Sky News Arabia, and several writers who comment on Arab media suggested that after the launch it would be rough sailing, given that the field is incredibly crowded. But you were confident at the time that you would, stretching my metaphor, reach the shore. How do you read the field one month after the launch?

Bouran: Before we launched it was very difficult to explain the channel to people without showing them exactly what we were about and what we were trying to achieve and what exactly the look and feel of the channel was going to be. After we launched, a lot of the reaction that I got was "Oh, OK, now we understand what you were talking about." And that's basically more to do with the way we've set the whole channel up. We are extremely capable from a

technological point of view, we have the ability to go live from pretty much anywhere in HD—we're fully HD—and our use of apps and our archive app is something to be very proud of. There's only one certain way of measuring success, but at least we've delivered what we promised we were going to deliver. We didn't say it was going to be this type of channel and it turns out to be a completely different thing. Time will tell how people react to it. But certainly what we have been successful at, I believe, is the fact that we delivered exactly what we said we were going to deliver.

The other great comment that we've been getting is that we look like we've been on the air for a long time, which is a fantastic comment. Also the fact that we went live straight to 24 hours right from the first minute—we didn't do the usual six hours, twelve hours and then 24 hours—this also shows that we were very confident in what we were doing. I'm not going to go into the success of particular stories, but I believe that there are some stories that we're very good at and we're very competitive. And the beauty about social media is you feel the love or the hate very, very quickly because people comment on things immediately and you know what people like and what they don't like more or less instantaneously. So in a sense that's been a positive reaction, and everything we've been getting back has been positive.

Now I've always said the challenge is going to be maintaining it. We're all running here on adrenaline and everybody's working more than they should and more than they have to, so it is going to be about keeping this up in the future. But we have a system and we have the procedures in place to be able to continue this for a long period of time and sustain it. In fact the way we've been going live and breaking news—as we said that's what we were going to be about, breaking news—we've been successful.

AMS: Hafez Al Mirazi, a veteran Arab TV news channel anchor, talk show host, journalist, and Director of the Kamal Adham Center which is the publisher of our journal, suggested in an interview that the moment for pan-Arab news channels has passed, and that the action—particularly here in Egypt—is in the flowering of national (or from a pan-Arab perspective, you would say local) independent satellite channels strongly oriented toward news and public affairs programming—that's the future.

Bouran: I agree with that and I disagree to a certain extent. The growth and improvement of local channels is going to happen and it's actually a good thing, it's a positive thing. It's positive for two reasons—a successful pan-Arab channel complements local channels, and the stronger they both are, the better they are in terms of quality and depth, and what they do and what their agenda is—that's actually a very strong combination. We're probably not going to be able to compete with a local channel on the Egyptian elections, unless we bring something exclusive. So in a sense, local channels make it more challenging for us, as a pan-Arab channel, to produce something which is different. But I don't think it's one or the other; they complement each other. I honestly believe that if you look at the combination of strong local channels—whether they are coming up in Egypt, or in Libya or in Tunisia or anywhere else—that along with breaking-news, 24-hour, pan-Arab international channels—that combination is going to be very, very good.

I also think from a commercial point of view it's quite important because we keep talking about the size of the pie, saying it's not big enough for all these players. And yet one of the main ways

to improve the size of the pie is by creating strong local channels where the big commercial entities are obviously not going to advertise. But a small, successful local channel is going to attract advertising from their local supermarket chain. There's no way that these local advertisers are going to come to me and advertise on a pan-Arab channel, but they will on a local channel. We're going to a different level of advertising and commercial opportunity that didn't exist before. So in a sense, it clarifies things a little bit more, it separates things a bit more: What's an international, regional player? What's a local player? And both of them being strong at the same time is a good thing, not a bad thing. It's all part of the reorganization of the structuring of the media business in the region.

AMS: In the long term, I believe you're correct. But one of the curious things is that it hasn't really happened here in Egypt. Dream TV is a local independent station but most of their advertising is coming from the various business interests of its owner. And the same could be said for ON TV, another very important local TV station. And then I know a very exciting new channel, 25TV—not to be confused with 25 Misr which is the Muslim Brotherhood channel—which was set up by Mohamed Gohar of Video Cairo Sat. Very exciting programming and a growing audience, but they haven't gotten that advertising. There may be some political reasons for it.

Bouran: I think we're in flux at the moment. I don't think we're there yet. If they're not commercially successful at the moment that doesn't mean that they won't be in the future. But it also means that it's the survival of the fittest. If people start TV stations because they have agendas and that's why they want to do it on a local level that's not a recipe for success. It's going to be that the best are going to float and the best are going to be the ones that are going to be successful in the future. Otherwise things are going to be challenging for a very long time. And then you translate the pan-Arab business model into a local business model which doesn't really work. So it's going to take time.

AMS: Are you embarrassed by the idea of working for Rupert Murdoch—not exclusively for Rupert Murdoch, you've got a good 50 percent of Arab interests in there. But Rupert Murdoch, who besides being allegedly the father of 21st century press scandals, often sounds like a Likudist when talking about the Arab-Israel or Palestinian-Arab conflict.

Bouran: Well, Abdallah, to be perfectly honest, we know what we are and we know who we are. We know exactly who owns the company and we know exactly what it is that we need to do. We're a fifty-fifty joint venture between B Sky B and Abu Dhabi Media Investment Corp. There is a percentage of the Murdochs in B Sky B, so if you talk about mathematics and who owns what then that becomes a minority stake. But even with that, the way we are set up, we have the Board of Directors, with the chairman of the board being from ADMIC, with two B Sky B board members, along with the management team that we have here. We have an independent management team that operates and reports to our board, we report to no one else, and therefore, as I say, we really know who we are and who we're working for and we've got absolutely nothing to hide.

In terms of our relationship with Sky News, Sky News is a reputable channel, they are our sister channel, and therefore we know what they are. There's 20 years of award-winning journalism

behind it and to have a partner like that is actually a very positive thing. They're a UK channel, we are a Middle Eastern, Arabic channel, and therefore there are synergies that we have between us, with sharing experiences and exchanging a little bit of material. But if you look at the editorial decision making which rests with myself and my team, and if you look at the management of the channel which is an independent board of directors—with all those things put together, it's very clear who we are.

And we do have something new that we've started at the channel that nobody else has which is an independent editorial advisory committee of very well-known personalities, respectable personalities from the Middle East and from Europe. These guys are our board of trustees. They are there to make sure that we maintain our editorial balance and the editorial standards that we set for ourselves as a company from day one. So again, it's a new system, it's a new concept which I think is also a testimony to the shareholders knowing exactly what they want and who they want to be and what exactly they expect from us. It's an independent channel that concentrates on breaking news on everything that's happening around the world.

AMS: You had a journalist in Damascus.

Bouran: We planned for someone to be there during the launch, which happened at the same time as the elections. So we applied. They gave us visas and we went. Unfortunately, those visas expired two weeks later and we had to leave. Even without having a correspondent there we've been able to maintain balance and make sure that all voices are heard from an editorial point of view. But we certainly would like to go back again and we've applied for visas and they've been relatively positive. So if that happens, we'll take the opportunity to go back in and report. We're covering all sides of the story, it's not one or the other.

AMS: And that includes Bahrain?

Bouran: We do cover Bahrain. We want to be able to have a presence over there as well in the future. We have twelve regional bureaus and we have two international bureaus and certainly part of the plan is to have a bureau in every city. But it's a matter of prioritization. The next two that we opened were Sanaa and Juba. We certainly are very aware that we need to cover the region, cover the Gulf more, and that's exactly part of the plan, our expansion plan.

AMS: Describe for the Adham Center the young journalists working for Sky News Arabia. Who are the journalists of the future? What are their skills? They're all young, right?

Bouran: The average age of the whole organization is 33. I won't tell you my age, but I'm certainly the one who ruined the graph. But it's a fantastic question because it was playing in our mind when we were recruiting people. What sort of journalist do we want working for us? And that's great for the Adham Center to keep in mind. What we need to make sure that people understand is that this is no longer about standing in front of a camera or looking good. It helps, but that's not what it's all about. You have to be a full journalist; you have to be a complete journalist. You have to be able to get the idea of social media from a news gathering point of view and from an output point of view. How do I make use of social media in order to gather news and at the same time how do I make use of it to make sure that *my* news—what I saw and

witnessed—gets to people as quickly as possible? We're looking for people who can write for the website, who can blog, who can tweet and who also can come up on camera and do a package when they need to. So in a sense we're really recruiting multimedia journalists and not TV journalists.

A lot of times when I see our PR guys write "A channel..." I say no, we're not *just* a channel, we are Sky News Arabia, a multimedia platform that distributes and gathers news in every single way that's possible. It's a matter of getting context into news as well. Just because you tweeted I-don't-know-how-many characters, that doesn't mean that you don't have to get under the story and know exactly what's going on, because your other editor is going to want you to do a two-minute package or write a story for the wires. So it's about getting that type of mentality and getting that type of journalist. The younger generation that have had four or five years of experience in whatever they were doing seems to fit the bill a little bit more at the moment.

AMS: Is multilingualism also on your list?

Bouran: Actually, it's been a bit challenging. I would have thought English was a little more widespread in the region. We did look for multilinguals because you still have to read the wires, you have to read the *Washington Post*, you need to read all these other sources of news. I think we've been probably more successful than others. But it is something for the future generation of journalists to remember. You can't neglect Arabic; Arabic is very important and you have to do it really, really well. Being bilingual, or having even more than two languages, is very important. And doing it properly as well, because you get all these people with a lot of experience and their English is fantastic and their Arabic is not as good—or the other way around. I think it's something about the culture of the Arab journalist. It's not one or the other, but you really have to be good at both of them.

AMS: Is there a role for investigative journalism at Sky News Arabia?

Bouran: Because we're concentrating on breaking news the quick answer is to say that investigative reporting, in the traditional way, is probably not there. But if there's a story worth telling and if it takes some investigation then we'll do it. I think investigative reporting, one-hour talk shows, is actually a little old-fashioned and there's nothing that you cannot do either with a long piece on your website or a link between online and broadcast to get the full picture. We're living in this time where nobody watches an hour of TV anymore and you have to cater to that.

AMS: Thank you, Nart.