

ALHURRA TELEVISION
FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH PROJECT

Critique of Editorial Content

in order to
Enhance News Judgment
and
Build Journalistic Excellence

October 2008

MBN's mission is to broadcast news which is consistently accurate, authoritative, objective, balanced and comprehensive. MBN strives to serve as a model of the free marketplace of ideas and a free press in the American tradition...

-- Middle East Broadcasting Networks Code of Ethics

Report on research focus groups in Columbia, MO and Washington, DC
on the editorial quality of Alhurra Television news programming.

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Methodology

- Researchers obtained from Alhurra DVD's of news reports. The perimeters: The lead correspondent report on both the Pan Arab newscast and the Iraq stream newscast on the Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings of two arbitrarily selected weeks (July 14 and July 21, 2008).
- Researchers translated the 12 stories into English.
- Researchers selected four stories of the 12 for viewing by focus groups. Selection was based on clarity of content, likely familiarity of American audiences via American newspapers and television coverage, and importance to the Arabic speaking world.
- Researchers produced translation with subtitles and printed text of the four stories.
- Focus group respondents in Columbia, Missouri (middle America) and Washington, DC (news capital of the world) reviewed and discussed these stories. Focus groups facilitator: Professor Kent S. Collins, chairman of the Radio-Television Journalism Faculty, Missouri School of Journalism.
- Focus group respondents included working journalists from America, experienced journalists from the Middle East, journalism scholars, and a linguistics scholar. (See "Profiles of Focus Group Respondents" in this report.

Executive Summary

This executive summary addresses five issues:

1. It acknowledges recent criticism of Alhurra news content.
2. It suggests that the shortcomings of Alhurra news content are episodic and not pervasive.
3. It outlines ways to further strengthen editorial control at Alhurra Television.
4. This report describes some weaknesses in journalistic ‘storytelling’ techniques.
5. And it notes the extreme difficulties inherent in the fast-track development of a television operation.

Despite recent criticism in the American media and politically biased criticism in the Middle East, Alhurra Television does most things right most of the time. This is born out by critical review of Alhurra news stories and newscasts.

The research focus group respondents in Columbia, MO and Washington, DC were asked to critically review a series of news stories. (See profiles of respondents on page 9.) Respondents were not asked to offer praise – there was an expectation of high quality in most things most of the time. That high quality was acknowledged by the respondents in the process of finding lapses that need to be addressed in Alhurra newscasting.

Here is the summary:

- Correspondents in the field need more detailed direction from newsroom managers in the Springfield, VA headquarters. (See the example of the World Court indictment of the president of The Sudan.)
- Correspondents need to discuss with newsroom managers in Springfield, VA the limitations in the field, and how additional Alhurra resources must be assigned so as to report stakeholders and elements of the story not accessible to the assigned correspondent. (See the example of the exchange of combatant remains and POW’s.)
- Newsroom managers must approach correspondent reports as only one part of the bigger story, and then make editorial adjustments to ensure comprehensive, unbiased coverage. (See example below of the Obama visit to the Middle East.)
- Newsroom management should establish a regular and rigorous review of each newscast. This review should include a cross-section of Alhurra journalists and managers. This review should result in written critique distributed to all journalists.

Respondents in both locations were remarkably alike in their evaluations of the Alhurra content. They reported that *individual* stories (a correspondent’s report) often lacked sufficient balance and thus could be perceived as delivering a biased message, even if subsequent stories on the same subject did provide balance in total. But the respondents – professional journalists -- insisted that these failings could be corrected by:

- the addition of more sources (especially the citizenry) in the individual correspondent's story.
- reduced reliance on government and official sources in the individual correspondent's report.
- and more sophisticated scripting in which the anchors clearly tell viewers that there is team coverage so as to report all sides of the story and/or clear scripting for the anchor to read to indicate the first story is followed by other stories to cover other sides and other stakeholders in the subject matter.

The journalists in the focus groups noted that some Alhurra stories failed to use the best practices of modern journalistic production/storytelling. Best practices of television news production/storytelling include – but are not limited to -- use of interesting video (visuals), diverse on-camera sources, and compelling story construction. Here are some best practices (examples to follow in the next section of this report):

- Video should show the people impacted -- people in cafes and in their workplaces and their homes.
- Video should not be confined to officials sitting at conference tables.
- Video should be in the streets, where the action is, not in news conferences. (News conferences are NOT news stories. News conferences render short soundbites to incorporate into stories about IMPACT ON OR REACTION FROM THE CITIZENRY.)
- On-camera sources must include more sides of the story. Too often in the stories viewed by the focus groups and by the researchers, the official or government side dominates.
- On-camera sources must include the citizens, their joys, their fears, their opinions.
- On-camera sources must include unbiased analysts – *unbiased* – who put the story in perspective to enhance understanding. (“What does all this mean...?”)
- Compelling story construction can cause all the above to happen logically and naturally.
- Compelling story construction means highlighting point of view of those impacted. Who of the citizenry (school children, small business people, soldiers, families) will be hurt and who will be helped by the news of the day?
- The best practices of compelling story construction includes – for example -- opening the story in the shop of a family who will benefit from more police and military security, and shopkeepers hurting because of extortion and crime in the neighborhood.
- Compelling story construction best practices includes using the story to create a public forum with both sides of an issue going point-counterpoint.

Best practices in modern television news storytelling/production are in italics in the examples below.

For example:

The story on the World Court indictment of the president of The Sudan included only government officials and government supporters. While representatives of the Darfur community have offices in Khartoum, their representatives were not interviewed or mentioned. Opposition parties were not interviewed or mentioned. The diplomatic community in the capital city were not interviewed or mentioned. This story was all about government denial.

Admittedly, there were other stories subsequent in the newscast with information from The Hague, Washington, DC and New York City. But those do not provide the balance needed in the first story as cited above. Producers should have scripted and anchors should have written more detail -- even if only one sentence -- about the content of the reports to come from The Hague, Washington, DC, and New York City. That inclusion would have indicated to viewers that complete and fair reporting was to be in the aggregate.

Additionally, the lead correspondent needed to note briefly the details of the crimes in question and the outrage of many countries and groups worldwide at the situation in Darfur.

This failing could easily have been addressed by more rigorous editorial control early in the reporting process.

This story ignores the people impacted, and thus fails to be a story compelling to the average viewers of the region. There are no visual or scripted references to the people of Darfur or the people on the streets of Khartoum. This story needs man-on-the-street interviews. And if the man-on-the-street is too fearful to voice an opinion, then the correspondent is honor-bound to report that in the script.

This story content is simply government officials contesting the charges, and government-influenced sources posing questions that serve to weaken the seriousness of the World Court charges.

Compelling story content requires inclusion of the Darfur combatants and refugees.

For example:

On July 16th, Alhurra led the newscast with a story about Israel and Hezbollah executing an exchange of POW's and body remains. The story exhibited an Israeli tilt, at least in large part because the correspondent had no access to Hezbollah territory across the border, and thus had little involvement of Muslim and Arab sources. It was not a one-side story. But it was not in balance. Viewers received far less information about reaction in the Muslim/Arab world in this individual correspondent report.

The fact that the first story might have been followed by another story providing balance does not absolve the correspondent of the first story from acknowledging in more detail the Hezbollah side.

The shortcomings in this story could well have been alleviated in several ways: Assigning the correspondent to make more reference to the other side, or simply making

crystal clear in the scripted anchor introduction ('anchor lead-in') that Alhurra was providing team coverage with multiple reports to address all sides. (Television producers often address such issues of balance by leading the newscast with a short voice-over video of both sides with a well-referenced anchor script; then rolling multiple packages for the details.) These are issues of newscast producing, and thus, newsroom management editorial control.

News production and storytelling best practices require more involvement of the Israeli and Muslim/Arab people. Where are their voices? A 'spokesman' for the families of the Israeli POW/KIA is a weak substitute for the mothers and brothers of those on both sides of border.

Is there relief in Israeli tonight? How do shopkeepers – not politically-charged protesters -- in Beirut or the West Bank react to the exchange of prisoners and remains?

The story has various soundbites with officials-in-charge and two politicians at the Knesset. But, where are the people of Israel and the Muslim Arab world?

For example:

Senator Obama visited several locations in the Middle East in July as part of his presidential election campaign imaging. On the newscast of July 23rd, his visit to Israel was reported by a correspondent in a 4-minute report that includes several 'sound-bites' of Israeli officials and from Mr. Obama. The second story in the newscast showed Mr. Obama in Palestine, with only a 'voice-over' format, no 'sound-bites' with Palestinian officials and precious little details. That's not balanced. That leaves the impression of bias.

Best journalism production/storytelling practices require the journalists involved in this story (either the correspondent or the news editors in Springfield, VA who can assign additional resources to the story) to ask, "Who cares?"

Senator Obama's trip to the region is important to Mr. Obama, the American political scene and the American media. But do the people of the region care? Does his visit impact their lives? Again, this story needs to go inside the households and cafes to ask, "who cares?" It needs to give context to Mr. Obama's visit and to his value to the people who will watch this story on Alhurra television. The construction of this story as is would satisfy only an American viewer, not a viewer in the Middle East.

Verbatims

(Selected responses of focus group members in support of the Executive Summary.)

EXAMPLE # 1

WORLD COURT INDICTS SUDAN PRESIDENT

“The war crimes are never explained! Why is he being indicted? Just how serious and rational are the accusations against Al-Bashir? The story needs to answer those questions.”

“This is only about the government, about Al-Bashir’s government. It is about its reaction and point of view. It needs more stakeholders interviewed.”

“Too much assumption that the viewers in the rest of the Middle East know what is going on in Sudan and Darfur. The story is weak because it is not comprehensive.”

“Even if other stories in the newscast give detail, this first story needs to at least mention that the Sudan president could be arrest, or sanctions could be put on his government.”

“If the reporter cannot go to Darfur, then the producers must use file tape to show the refugees there.”

“The entire script is written in a way that gives credibility to the government position, without challenge.”

“Maybe the story from The Hague should have led the newscast – been first.”

“The video is just ‘wallpaper.’ Not properly referenced. We don’t know what we are looking at as we hear the words.”

EXAMPLE # 2

ISRAEL AND HEZBOLLAH EXCHANGE POW’S AND BODY REMAINS

“Where is the balance between the Israeli side and the Lebanese/Arab side of this story? It’s lopsided.”

“Too many officials; too many suits.”

“Considering that this newscast is targeting the Arabic speaking audience, why is this story leading with the Israeli side of the story? This must create a disconnect with the viewers.”

“This is a story of great emotion on both sides. But the storytelling is void of emotion. It needs families and regular people to speak about this event.”

“The story is biased in favor of Israel.”

“There is not value in the soundbites with the two Knesset members.”

“Israeli’s in flag-draped coffins. The Lebanese guy is in handcuffs. Injustice.”

“Story construction is weak – jumbled.”

“Not as good as it should have been.”

EXAMPLE # 3

SENATOR OBAMA TOUR

“Arab viewers must be insulted. Abbas part of the Obama story is only a footnote.”

“This is a pro-Israel report. It is not even-handed.”

“If you have a correspondent covering the Israel side, then you need a balance with a correspondent covering the Palestinian side.”

“The story misses the point. His visit is not most important. The story should be about how people in the region react to him.”

“Considering the audience for Alhurra, the visit to Palestinian leaders should have been first, and then visit to Israel second in the newscast lineup.”

“The story makes Obama seems like the voice of all of America.”

“Visual monotony. Boring. Formula video.”

Profile of Focus Group Respondents

In Columbia, Missouri

- Veteran news anchor at the local NBC affiliate television station. Approximately 40 years old; female; American born. Well known in the community civil life. Adjunct instructor in journalism education.
- News director of the local CBS affiliate television station. Approximately 40 years old; male; American born. Extensive experience as an investigative reporter and producer for television stations in Florida and Minnesota.
- Professor emeritus of journalism at the Missouri School of Journalism. Veteran newscast anchor and news director. Approximately 80 years old; male; American born. Nationally recognized figure in American journalism.
- Student in the masters degree program at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. Approximately 28 years old; male; Iraqi born; Kurdish ethnicity. Experienced in his home country as a newspaper and magazine journalist.
- Professor of linguistics at the University of Missouri. Approximately 50 years old; male; Iraqi born. Faculty member on leave from the University of Baghdad. Member of the Iraqi Translators Association.
- Graduate student at the Missouri School of Journalism. Approximately 25 years old; male; American born. Experienced as a television reporter, writer and producer. Specialty is religious affairs reporting.
- News director of the mid-Missouri National Public Radio affiliate. Approximately 40 years old; female; American born. Extensive experience in radio and newspaper journalism in America and Europe.

In Washington, DC

- Veteran television journalist; now a top executive at a Washington, DC public relations and lobbying firm. Approximately 40 years old; male; American born. Extensive experience in four television markets as an investigative reporter. Also served as press secretary to a former state governor.
- Anchor for a major Washington, DC television station. Approximately 50 years old; male; American born. Extensive experience as a trainer of individual television journalists and for news organizations.
- Graduate student in journalism assigned to the Washington, DC program of the Missouri School of Journalism. Approximately 26 years old; female; Iraqi born. Experienced as a newspaper writer in Iraq and Washington, DC.
- Documentary producer for the Public Broadcasting System in Washington, DC. Approximately 30 years old; female; American born. Experienced in both local and national news reporting.
- Executive producer for television in the Washington, DC bureau of a major international news agency. Approximately 40 years old; male; American born. Experienced working with both American and international journalists in the reporting and producing of news stories and documentaries distributed to news agency clients worldwide.

Recommendations for Further Development
of Journalistic Excellence
at Alhurra Television

The focus group discussions reaffirmed that Alhurra journalists possess the skill sets necessary to produce high quality reporting and high quality television production. But the focus group discussions revealed a recurring – though not pervasive -- disconnect between assignments given to correspondents and news judgment exercised by newscast producers. Restated: Correspondents in Washington, DC and in the Middle East are capable journalists. But they need more direction and critique from newscast producers and newsroom management.

To improve Alhurra journalism, consider these recommendations:

- 1.) Convene discussion groups of Alhurra management and newscast producers in the Springfield, VA headquarters. Present to them sample stories in a manner similar to the presentation to the two focus groups. Encourage their unbridled critique of the stories and their placement in the newscasts. Share with the group the Executive Summary pages only of this report. Result: Greater awareness of the shortcomings of news story presentation, including the infrequent exhibition of bias and imbalance and shortage of sources.
- 2.) Conduct a structured review of written policies and related documents concerning editorial control. Editorial control is exercised in the story meetings, the story assignment function, and the post-newscast critique. Then re-write policies and related documents as management deems appropriate.
- 3.) Conduct Storytelling Best Practices workshops for correspondents, videographers, video editors and producers. These training workshops must include video examples of best practices or of worst practices. Instruction must include ‘story boarding’ of example stories. (How would you report, shoot or edit this story....?)

Important note: For the most part, Alhurra journalists are conditioned to a very different kind of journalism. They were trained to report the stories of the totalitarian governments that owned and operated the media. They were, in fact, propagandists for the messages of the government. Their journalism-of-origin is nothing like the journalism culture of independence and public service in American and most Western countries.

Alhurra, thus, has a competitive opportunity unlike any other television operation serving the Middle East. If Alhurra can transition its correspondents, videographers, editors and producers into the American tradition (as best described as the ‘elements of journalism’), then Alhurra will have a significant competitive advantage over Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and the many other television news operations in the region.

The Elements of Journalism include:

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
- Its loyalty is to the citizens.
- Its discipline is that of verification.
- Journalism must be independent from sources.
- It must serve – at times – as a watchdog.
- Journalism should serve as a public forum for ideas and criticism.
- It must be relevant and interesting (i.e., incorporate best practices of storytelling).
- Journalism must be comprehensive and proportional.

(From the book *The Elements of Journalism* by Kovach and Rosenstiel.)

Final Note

Alhurra Television's fast-track development is unrivaled in American television history. Never before has so much been done so fast: Funding the operation, establishing operations centers in the U.S. and in the Middle East, hiring personnel (difficult-to-recruit key personnel being Arabic speakers with significant journalism credentials) securing vendors of complicated technologies and creating systems and policies. This has been a daunting task, well managed to this point – despite the need for more editorial control.

Clearly, journalism everywhere is subject to criticism and second-guessing and political influence. Compare the current critique of the American media in the coverage of the domestic presidential campaign to the more complicated political, ethnic, religious and nationalistic environment in which Alhurra operates.

That said, Alhurra Television must now take two big steps: radically improve editorial control to eliminate bias and imbalance in coverage, and teach staff the best practices in television news storytelling and production.

End of report.