



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

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### Workshop 10

### *Media in the GCC*

#### Workshop Directors

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#### Abstract

In recent years, the media industry in the Gulf area has been attracting more investment, providing varied communication and marketing services, offering freer platforms for social and political debates and creating more challenges to local and regional identities. The Gulf area is now without a doubt the hub of Arab media. The diverse nature of this media reflects a broad array of various owners and players, states or private sector entrepreneurs, driven by different, and sometimes opposing, interests and goals. The plethora of Arab media in the Gulf has raised numerous questions. One of the most important debated questions is ownership issue and the implications of state, semi-state and/or private-owned media on the sustainability of this media and its effect on the nature of media content and its delivery. Has this ever-growing industry empowered non-state actors to provide media and communication services that are free from government control? Or is the media scene, however large and diverse, still under direct or indirect governmental control? Related to this issue of media freedom is the profitability and existence of markets that could sustain this media and ensure its independence. But even if there were sustaining media markets, would they really guarantee media freedom from the heat of state control? Also, a frequently debated question that pertains to current Arab media is its impact on shaping public perceptions. With relatively cheap technologies, either in satellite broadcasting or internet streaming and blogging, it has become easy for groups or even individuals to launch media enterprises reaching out to audiences beyond all previous thinking. This is surely a positive development benefiting freedoms at large and enabling previously deprived voices and groups to make their messages heard.

Yet this free access and use has nevertheless offered space for wide-ranging discourses that differ fundamentally in the nature of their promoted message. Although the terminology is problematic in this context, examples of these discourses along with their media platforms include political versus apolitical, moderate versus radical, and conservative versus liberal. Such discourses are moulded and delivered by various kinds of channels: news, entertainment, sport and religion-focused ones, to point at the most prevailing trends. The content of different media outlets hugely affects not only local and world outlooks, but also self-perception and identity. The news channels also play a central role in reporting Arab-foreign and Arab-Arab conflicts, contributing immensely to the creation, or enhancement, of certain beliefs and understandings of the issues at hand. In a broader timeframe and over the past two decades, the rise, role and influence of satellite broadcasting in the Middle East has become an expanding field of media research. This broadcasting varies in form, substance, scale of operation, nature of ownership and outreach. While the most influential mainstream television broadcasting is news-focused, entertainment and religious broadcasting have been no less significant. Mostly functioning against a public backdrop marked by sustainable authoritarian governments, political instabilities, wars and pervasive foreign military interventions, this diverse broadcasting has emerged as a somewhat unique platform for the expression of public views and opinions that would have otherwise been less heard if not totally disallowed. Although, research approaches have analyzed various aspects of this broadcasting, most of the research has focused on the novelty of the phenomenon and the provision of venues for a Habermasian public sphere within a Middle Eastern (and mainly Arabic) setting. The penetrations of hitherto low ceilings of expressions and the breaking of many taboos have been acknowledged as part of the greatest achievements of the news-broadcasting in particular. The role and effect of leading news channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, in particular, has been widely discussed, crediting these channels with leading a revolution not only in Arab media but, for some analysts, in Arab politics as well. The general scene and format of Middle Eastern, and specifically Arab, media has thus dramatically changed. Relatively less focus, however, has been given to the substance and discursive contents that have been emerging with the mushrooming of countless broadcasting outlets, large and small. Or at least certain discourses of this broadcasting, including religious discourses, have not entertained as much attention and research than they really merit. In the midst of this uncontrolled wave of expansion and the technical ease and relative low cost of launching a satellite channel dozens of purely religious channels have appeared. Equally important, the mainstream networks, such as Al-Jazeera Network, MBC Group and Dubai Media Incorporated among many others have their own religious programs and talk shows. Another important media-related area of research that is still under examined and keeps changing is the capital investment in Arab satellite broadcasting. Although enormous capital has been and is still invested in the creation and operation of transborder TV stations, detailed and credible studies that explore the interrelation between the money, the politics and the profit are still rare to find. A spectrum of ownership and motivation starts from huge state-sponsored projects and spans over to small-scale and one-man-show stations. A further under-researched aspect of satellite broadcasting in the Middle East is the study of foreign channels that transmit to Arab countries in Arabic. Over the past few years, we have witnessed the emergence of American, Russian, British, French, Iranian, Turkish and soon Chinese, all broadcast in Arabic targeting Arab audiences. The literature and studies undertaken on these foreign outlets are scant, leaving

questions of agendas and motives, connection to foreign policy, nature of programming and propaganda among many others yet to be tackled. In addition to all mentioned above, the biggest existing gap in Arab media studies is probably audience research. Despite the wide agreement on the significance and general impact of the hundreds of satellite stations beam to almost every Arab household, empirical studies measuring the exact and directions of impact remain lacking. This workshop will particularly welcome proposals on this area.

## **Workshop Description and Rationale**

The proposed workshop will examine the themes, perceptions and interests that are promoted and advocated by various types of broadcasting, allocating their interests within the wider socio-cultural and political project of their owner. The issue of ownership stands out as central to the analysis of who controls what, how and why for what ends. The argument of any tacit state or semi-state promotion of any political or apolitical broadcasting also merits examination. Within the above context, the proposed workshop intends to undertake the following:

1. Analyzing local and regional political, social, economic and ownership contexts of Arab TV broadcasting, and how these contexts impact the output and discourse.
2. Stimulating research on impact and influences on audiences, and on content and theme analysis of programming.
3. The production of a much-needed framework of analysis and a base of knowledge for further research focusing on the impact of this broadcasting on audiences.
4. Further exploration into the entertainment and sport broadcasting industry and its economic, social and cultural dimensions.
5. The nature and impact of religious-broadcasting and the exploration of the main contours of this broadcasting.
6. The nature and impact of foreign broadcasting.

The papers submitted to the workshop are encouraged to relate to and further research, conceptually and/or empirically, on the following:

- Prevailing discourses and case studies of content analysis and their location and impact on public sphere in the area.
- Ownership, economics and politics of capital in Arab TV satellite industry.
- Various aspects of current broadcasting channels: news-focused, entertainment, sport, religious and foreign.
- Analysis of socio-cultural and political setting of religious channels.
- The dynamics of the Gulf setting in shaping the broadcasting industry in the Middle East.
- Specific content/theme analysis over a certain period of time of a given channel or media operation.
- Ethnic and/or sectarian-owned and expressed broadcasting.
- Methodologies and approaches of researching aspects of TV broadcasting in particular content and audience research. Strong

proposals that focus on methodologies of audience research will be given special attention and priority.

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Dr. Abeer Najjar** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Mass Communication at the American University in Sharjah. Dr. Najjar has considerable industrial media experience in both print journalism and Television production in Jordan. She has been invited to speak at many forums at both professional and academic international conferences. She was also invited to be a member of the editorial board of the Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy. Her Recent Publications include: How Arab is Al-Jazeera English: a comparative study of Al-Jazeera news channels (Global Media Journal, Spring 2009); Othering the self: Palestinians narrating the War on Gaza in the social media. Journal of Middle East Media (JMME) Vol.6, Issue 1, 2010 and Conflict Over Jerusalem: Covering the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict in the British Press. VDM Verlag 2009 (book). Dr. Najjar's research interests include media and political conflict, social media, politics and popular culture in the Arab media. She is frequently quoted on issues related to media.

**Dr. Khaled Hroub** is the Director of the Media Program of the Gulf Research Centre, Cambridge. He also teaches Modern Middle Eastern: Politics and Identity at Cambridge University where he directs the Cambridge Arab Media Project; he is the author of Hamas: Political Thought and Practice (2000) and Hamas: A Beginner's Guide (2006). He publishes a weekly article on current affairs that appears in six major dailies in the Arab world. His forthcoming book is Political Islam: Context versus Ideology (ed.) (Saqi Books), and he is researching a volume on The Politics of Arab Media.