

Reporting the Truth:
Media Perceptions, Preferences, and Practices among Young UAE Nationals

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This report is research prepared for the U.S. Embassy, Abu Dhabi by Summer Intern Keith Urbahn. Observations, comments, and conclusions do not necessarily represent the views of the Embassy or the Government of the United States of America.

Introduction

This report examines the media behaviors and opinions of young UAE nationals based on 535 surveys distributed in shopping malls and educational institutions and personal interviews with survey participants, both of which were conducted in June and July 2004.

Due to time, personnel, and cultural constraints, the study falls short of being a comprehensive analysis of UAE society as a whole. Most of those surveyed were young college students of UAE nationality. Instead of attempting to gauge and analyze the media habits of UAE society as a whole, the study focuses on the survey results from 407 UAE nationals from age 18 to 25.

The great majority (92%) of the 407 surveys were collected at United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain with the help of professors distributing surveys to their students. The obvious implications are that the habits and views of UAEU students strongly influence the overall results. While this is true, an analysis of the survey results of non-UAEU students in the same target group (age 18-25, UAE nationality) reveals nearly identical behavior patterns and opinions.

The makeup of the survey population is not statistically derived to allow exact percentages of survey answers to be linked to the UAE national population in the same age group, but in the face of evidence supporting larger trends, broader conclusions about perceptions of the media in the UAE can be made.

This report attempts to answer questions regarding popular preferences of newspapers, Internet news websites, radio and television news stations, differences in opinions about media across gender, the success of recent U.S. efforts to compete in television and radio markets with Al Hurra and Radio Sawa, and why some news sources are considered more "credible" than others.

Characteristics of Survey Participants (Fig. 1)

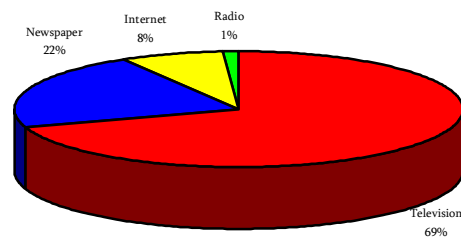
Gender			Students/Other		
Male	197	36.8%	Student	481	89.9%
Female	338	63.2%	Other	54	10.1%
Age			Home Emirate		
Under 18	16	3.0%	Abu Dhabi	256	47.9%
18-25	467	87.3%	Ajman	12	2.2%
26-33	32	6.0%	Dubai	41	7.7%
Over 33	12	2.2%	Fujairah	61	11.4%
Nationality			Ras Al Khaimah	74	13.8%
UAE	443	82.8%	Sharjah	44	8.2%
Arab (Arabic speaking)	92	17.2%	Umm al Quwain	6	1.1%
Language Ability					
Arabic and English	438	81.9%			
Arabic Only	95	17.8%			
English Only	0	0.0%			

The Freedom to Choose: Analyzing Preferences

The United Arab Emirates is a unique country among those in the Arab world in terms of its media environment: the UAE's relative press freedom, its plethora of publications, television and radio stations, and its internet penetration rate are unmatched in the Arab Middle East. Given the freedom to choose from such a vast selection of easily accessible and varied media sources, what do young UAE nationals pick?

Answering the question "What is your primary source of news?" and choosing from radio, newspaper, television and Internet, the overwhelming majority of survey participants chose television (69%). Women read newspapers, surf the Internet, and listen to the radio for news less than men on average, instead choosing television as their primary source of news. The meteoric rise of 24-hour pan-Arab media giants Al Jazeera

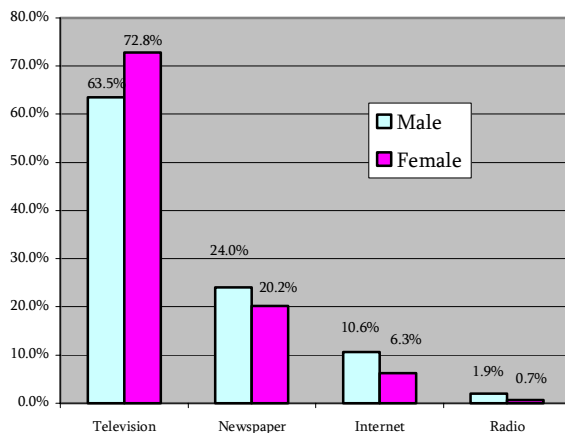
A TV Nation: Primary Medium of News (Fig. 2)



and Al Arabiya now allows any viewer in the Arab world with a satellite dish to access Arabic news anytime. Among students and individuals I talked with, many expressed the view that none of the local newspapers (the second most popular form of media) was free from the influence of government and believed that Al Jazeera, and to a lesser extent, Al Arabiya, were less inhibited by government views than newspapers. This perception, along with its accessibility nearly anytime, anywhere, are probably the largest of factors leading most young Emirati citizens to choose television as their primary medium of news.

As Fig. 3 shows, very few individuals use the Internet as their primary source of news, despite the UAE's reputation as "the most connected nation in the Middle East."¹ Notwithstanding the fact that women have access to the Internet at UAEU and across much of the Emirates in homes and in Internet cafes, they tend to use it significantly less than men.

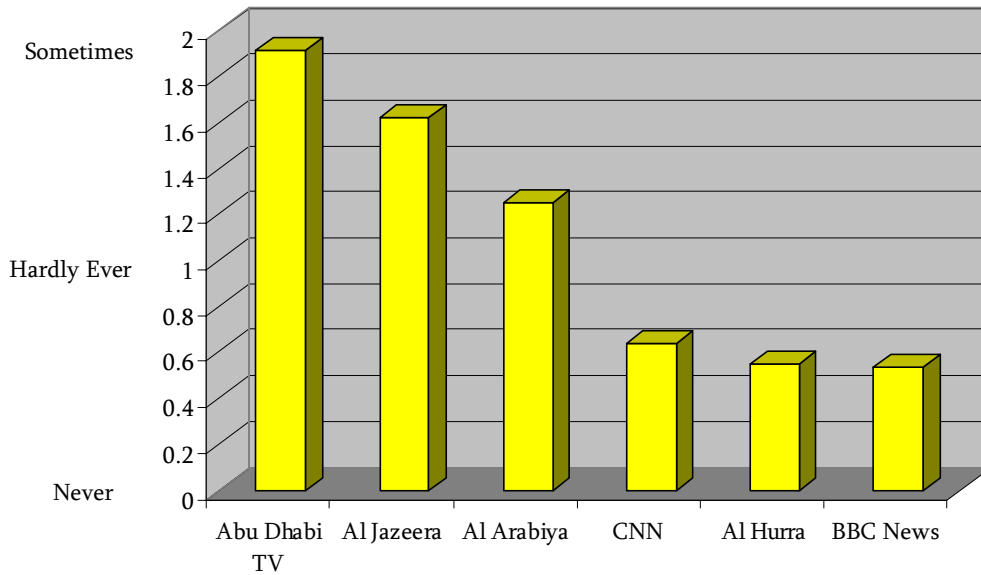
Primary Medium of News by Gender (Fig. 3)



The most popular channel among respondents proved to be Abu Dhabi TV, followed closely by Al Jazeera. For comparative purposes, the Average Frequency Rating (AFR) describes a television channel's relative popularity by aggregating scores based on how often a channel is watched (never = 0, hardly ever = 1, sometimes = 2, always = 3). The AFR of BBC and CNN (English-speaking news) was calculated based only on respondents who could speak both English and Arabic (see Fig. 4)

¹ International Telecommunication Union, World Telecommunication Indicator Database, June 2004.

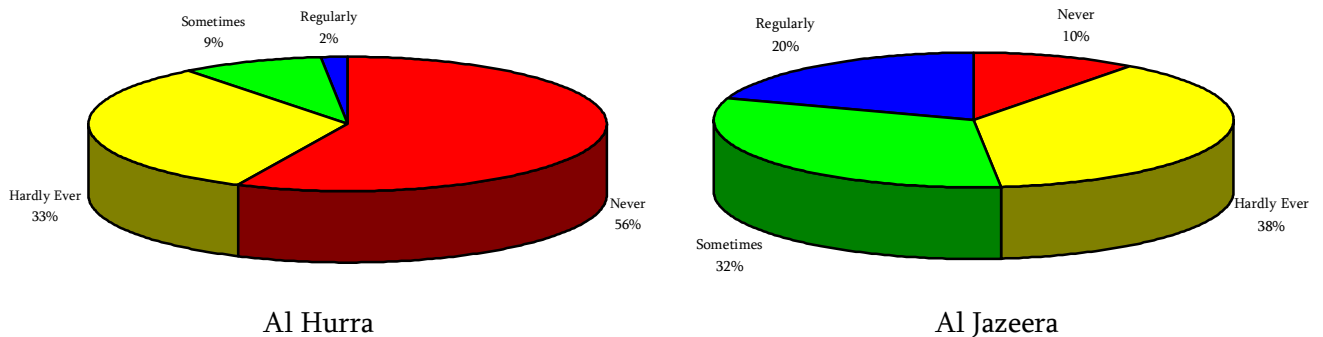
Average Frequency Rating (Fig. 4)



All of the survey participants spoke Arabic, most of whom claim it as their primary language. This can be noted as the primary reason why Arabic-language news agencies were chosen as the most popular sources of news, with the notable exception of Al Hurra, the nascent U.S. attempt to penetrate the Arab television market as an alternative to Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya--both of which have been targeted by USG officials as hard-line, incendiary, and inaccurate.

As both graphs (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) clearly show, Al Hurra is not capturing the attention of young Emiratis. For many students I talked with, it is not that Al Hurra is "U.S. government propaganda" or overtly biased news, but rather that it suffers from a lack of immediate, on-the-ground reporting. Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya often broadcast jarring images of civilian casualties in Iraq and Palestine, whereas Al Hurra, like BBC or CNN, is less inclined to do so both because of their unwillingness to display graphic images and their lack of exclusive footage from the streets.

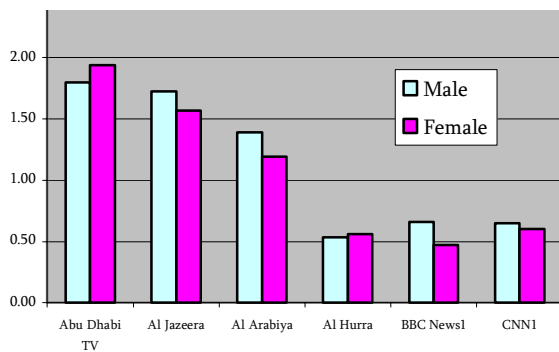
No Comparison: Al Hurra v. Al Jazeera Viewer Frequency (Fig. 5)



English-language news sources were far less popular than Arabic sources with young UAE nationals. CNN was slightly more watched than the least viewed network, BBC. CNN seems to be widely considered the "American viewpoint," and though perceived as perhaps more biased than BBC and unabashedly "in favor of American foreign policy," CNN may be more popular because of an interest to better understand the American perspective.

Differences in television channel preferences between genders are indicative of a greater trend in all forms of media: newspaper, radio, Internet and television alike. Men, on average, watch, listen, surf, and read news more. Men watch Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, BBC, and CNN--all 24 hour news networks--more than females. The only two TV channels that are more popular among females are Al Hurra and Abu Dhabi TV, perhaps because they show programs other than news that are geared towards women.

TV Channel Frequency by Gender (Fig. 8)

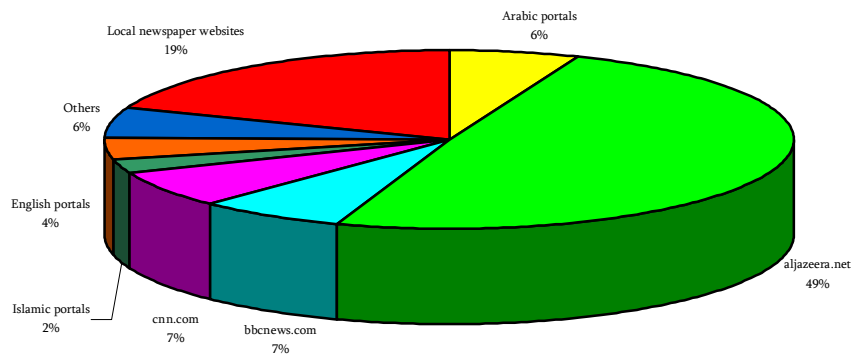


Among those who use the Internet for news (58% do not), aljazeera.net was by far the most visited site. Interestingly, aljazeera.net users tend to be loyal Al Jazeera television fans: they are 2.6 times more likely to watch the TV channel "regularly" than those who do not consider aljazeera.net their primary source of internet news. CNN's and BBC's websites along with their Arabic mirror sites (cnnarabic.com and

bbc-arabic.com) paled in comparison to aljazeera.net among young UAE nationals. The websites of local newspapers such as *Al Khaleej*, *Al Bayan*, *Gulf News*, and *Al Ittihad* were also frequently chosen as most-often visited Internet news sites.

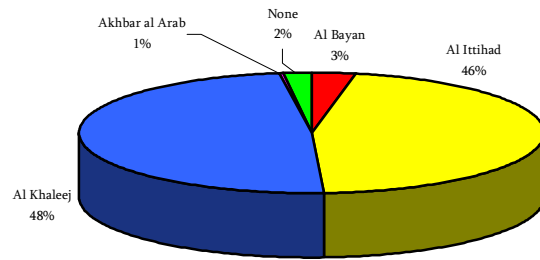
Differences in Internet news site preferences between men and women within the targeted age group of 18 to 25 were negligible. It should be noted however, that only 39.1% of surveyed females use the Internet for news while 63.5% of males obtain news from the Internet.

aljazeera.net v. The World: News Website Popularity (Fig. 7)



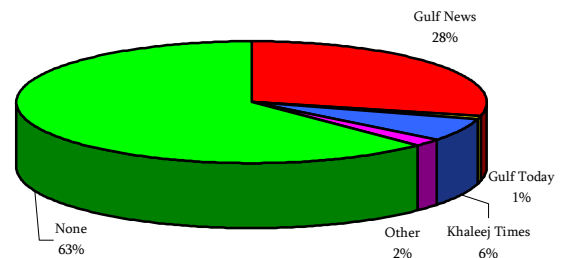
Newspaper readership among young Emiratis is unsurprisingly dominated by Arabic-language newspapers, most notably *Al Ittihad* and *Al Khaleej*, which together were the preferred Arabic newspapers of choice over 90% of the time. Because the vast majority of surveys were conducted in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, the results exaggerate the popularity of Abu Dhabi-based *Al Ittihad* by 20-25% based on circulation numbers. Across the Emirates, both Sharjah-based *Al Khaleej* and Dubai-based and business oriented daily *Al Bayan* are likely more popular among UAE nationals than the results show.

Arabic Daily Preferences (Fig. 8)



Yet what is clear is that there is a great discrepancy between the percentages of Emiratis who do not read Arabic newspapers and those who do not read English newspapers. Only 2% responded that they do not read an Arabic newspaper, while among those capable of reading English papers (82% overall), over 63% do not read them. In the population at large, the percentage of non-readers is likely higher (between 75-85%) because of lack of English-language skills among some.

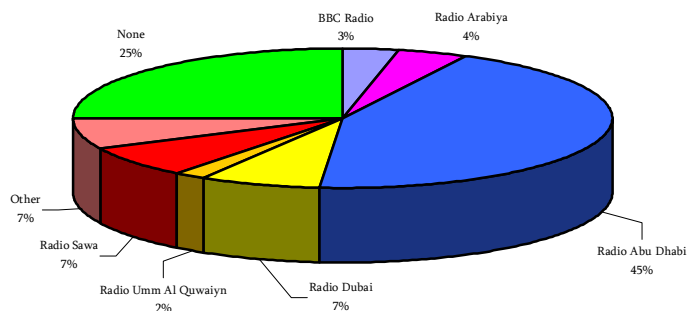
English Daily Preferences (Fig. 9)



Preference differences between genders were insignificant except for the disparity between female and male respondents who do not read English newspapers. Males are more likely to read an English daily (52%) than females (31%), whereas over 97% of both males and females read an Arabic daily.

Similar to the results of newspaper preferences, the most listened to radio stations "for news" are affected by the fact that most of the surveys were completed in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Again, differences across gender were similar with the exception of listeners to Radio Sawa--of whom were 4 times more likely to be males: 16% of males chose Radio Sawa as their primary news source while only 4% of the females surveyed relied on Sawa. It must also be kept in mind that the question was "Which radio station do you listen to most for news?" and Radio Sawa is primarily a music station with only headlines or brief news stories every half hour.

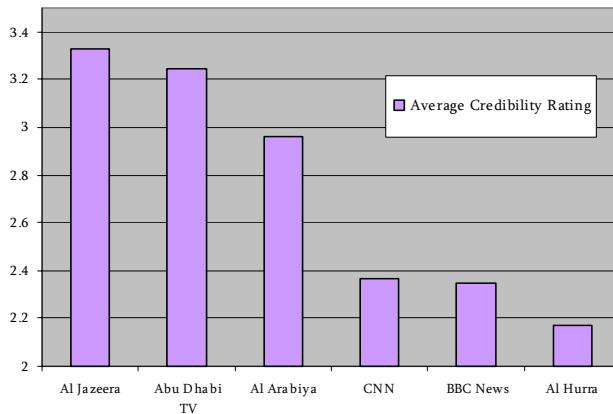
News Radio Preferences (Fig. 10)



Credibility: The X-Factor?

Now with some idea of the preferred media outlets in radio, newspaper, Internet and television among young UAE citizens, we can now examine credibility: what defines it, what develops it, and which news channels have it. Survey participants were asked to "Rate the credibility of each media outlet" based on a scale from "No Credibility" (ranking = 0) to "High Credibility" (ranking = 4) with "Low" and "Fair" ranked as 2 and 3 respectively. Scores for each channel were averaged and are graphed below.

Average Credibility Rating (Fig. 11)

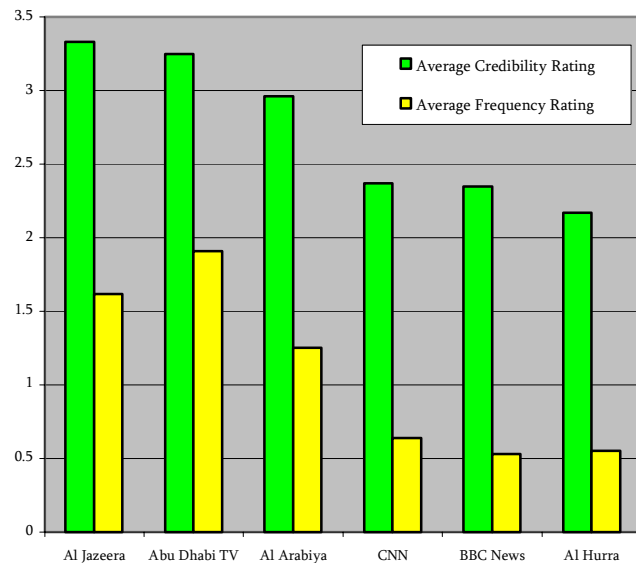


As shown in Fig. 11, there is a direct correlation between perceived credibility and amount of time spent watching a given television channel. Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV once again rank at the top with overall credibility between "fair" and "high." Abu Dhabi TV, though watched more than Al Jazeera, has slightly lower credibility, and while Al Hurra has the lowest credibility of any news channel, it is on the whole watched more than BBC.

These are the only exceptions to the direct relationship between credibility and frequency. They can likely be explained by the fact that Al Hurra and Abu Dhabi TV carry many programs other than news and may be watched more than their competitors regardless of news credibility.

Yet what exactly defines credibility? What constitutes "truth"? Unbiased, non-editorialized reporting? Efforts to get the opinions of all sides? Freedom from governmental manipulation? Upon asking survey participants in interviews what defined credibility and what made one source more truthful than another, there were many differing definitions made up of combinations of the above variables. Most believed that it was "impossible to report a story with perfect accuracy," and that inevitably, any reporter interacts and responds to the story he or she reports, ultimately altering it.

Credibility v. Frequency (Fig. 12)



Many also believed that the reality of government sponsorship and limits on freedom of press were important factors in evaluating credibility. Nearly all recognized that governments control media in the Arab world and that open criticism of the local regime

is strictly forbidden. Perhaps explaining the difference in credibility and viewer frequency between Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, there was the feeling that while the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia influenced both television channels, Al Jazeera was distinctly "more free."

According to many respondents and some Al Arabiya employees I spoke with, Al Jazeera frequently interviews and hosts anti-Saudi regime figures who openly criticize the Saudi government--much to the pleasure of the Qatari government. Many at Al Arabiya acknowledged that Al Arabiya was created with joint Saudi and Kuwaiti support to counter the anti-Saudi/Kuwaiti Al Jazeera.

There was also a perceived difference by some UAEU students that Al Arabiya focused on the Gulf region, while Al Jazeera had better pan-Arab coverage, especially in Israel and Palestine.

Some survey participants also asserted that, despite charges leveled by Western critics of blatant bias and pandering to emotions on the Arab street, Al Jazeera is in fact the least biased of any Arab media outlet because they air the perspective from all sides such as on talk show host Faisal Al Qassim's program *Al Itijah Al Muakis* "Opposite Directions". Al Jazeera makes efforts to air the opinions from both political leaders as well as radical militants, whereas Al Arabiya is less likely to get the views of those who openly criticize the Saudi and Kuwaiti governments or Islam.

There were also more jarring claims made by several UAEU students that while American and Western media are not directly harnessed by their governments, they are "controlled by Jews" who have extensive power in business and government to exert their influence on the way news is covered, especially with regard to news in Israel. In the words of a UAEU student, "Jews control everything in the world: media, money, America...they want to brainwash all Americans."

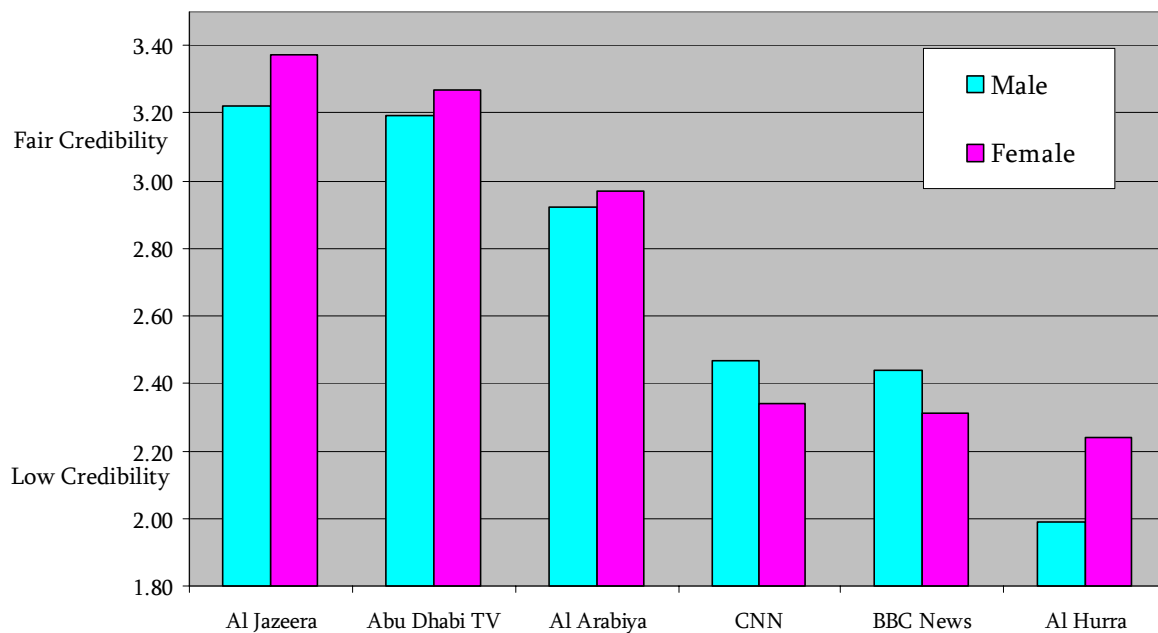
These same students claimed that news coverage over the death of Sheikh Yassin and his "terrorist" label, as well as Western media's refusal to call suicide bombers "*shahidun*" or "martyrs" was "insensitive," according to another UAEU student. Nearly all students in the room agreed. Another remarked that calling them "terrorists" or "suicide bombers" trivialized their struggle and that such labels had the regrettable effect of not "encouraging others to do the same." Some also believed that U.S. forces in Iraq had deliberately targeted Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV reporters to send the message from the U.S. government that "we can control you."

It was clear that for most young Emiratis, the differences between Western news (most visible through CNN and BBC) and Arabic news were stark. Of those who answered the question asking "Overall, which do you trust for more credible news?" 81% of survey respondents selected Arabic over English. Some expressed reluctance to classify media by language or as Arab or Western and preferred to evaluate credibility on an individual basis (6% did not answer the question), but based on interviews, it was apparent that most people felt very strongly one way or the other.

The major reasons for selecting English news were freedom of press, better journalistic ethics regarding multiple sources, less government influence, and overall, a more balanced view towards any issue. Yet the vast majority who selected Arabic news as "more credible" held the same views of greater balance and less bias on the side of the Arab press, though most admitted that there was not the same freedom from government influence as in the West.

There was also the widespread belief that even if the Arab media had opinions that influenced their reporting, these opinions were in line with the opinions of most Arab viewers, legitimate, and therefore credible. For example, the discussion of the use of the term *shahid* or "martyr" describing Palestinian suicide bombers, often used on Al Jazeera and occasionally by Al Arabiya reporters on the ground, was not considered a value-laden term. Even though the term may impart opinion on fact by judging suicide bombers as "martyrs," its usage was considered appropriate and credible because of the conviction among many Arabs and Muslims that some suicide bombers are martyrs, not terrorists. Credibility then, does not have to be based on unbiased fact, but rather, can be formed on a shared opinion that fosters a relationship of trust between the media outlet and the viewer, reader, listener, or surfer.

Average Credibility Rating by Gender (Fig. 13)



Differences across gender in ratings of credibility are quite apparent. Women on the whole believed Arabic news television stations to be more credible than men, and men believed CNN and BBC to be more credible than women. As Fig. 12 indicates, males believe Abu Dhabi TV and Al Hurra to be less credible than females, while females on average believe that Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are more credible than their male counterparts.

Among those who can speak both English and Arabic, 86% of females trust Arabic news while 68% of males in the same age group prefer Arabic news. Emirati women tend to distrust English language news more and question Arabic news less--an interesting fact in light of the fact that overall, women watch, read, surf, or listen to their news less frequently than men.

Puncturing the Echo Chamber: Radio Sawa and Al Hurra

The recent attempts to recreate the successes of Radio Free Europe and Voice of America during the Cold War through the establishment of Radio Sawa and a bold venture in television with Al Hurra have been met with various levels of enthusiasm in the UAE and across the Arab world. While Radio Sawa appears to have the ears of many young Emiratis because of its mix of modern Arabic and English pop music, Al Hurra, as the previous statistics show, is not capturing as large an audience as the station would like.

Unfortunately, the survey does not accurately provide a percentage of how many young UAE nationals listen to Radio Sawa because the one question about news radio asks, "Which radio station do you listen to most *for news*?" Only 7% answered Radio Sawa. While Sawa has over sixty reporters around the world and compiles its own news reports, it is not considered a "news station" by most because it only broadcasts brief stories or headlines twice every hour. When UAE listeners want comprehensive news coverage, they switch to Radio Abu Dhabi or Radio Arabiya.

Radio Sawa's news coverage, judging by conversations with survey participants, is considered by and large to be fair. Though nearly all listeners know that it is funded by the U.S. government, they see little effect on the station's reporting of news, which to many seems identical to that of any other news radio station.

Those that work at Radio Sawa however, believe there is a major difference. Sawa uses AFP and Reuters wires only and requires multiple sources for any news story, whereas, according to Sawa reporter Kamal Richa, the other Arab stations rely on Arab wires, which are run by "ideologues with political agendas" designed to appease their governments. Richa claims that Radio Sawa "doesn't use opinion," and that because they are not beholden to political interests, they are "not afraid of contradiction" and will report any story that is credible and has news value.

Al Hurra faces an uphill battle in gaining trust and reporting stories of interest to its viewers. The channel suffers from "low credibility" according to the survey results (average credibility rating of 2.17), and lacks comprehensive on the ground reporting compared to its competitors Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. Hamda, a UAEU student, referring to the modern graphics and polished look of Al Hurra, remarked, "you cannot convince me of truthfulness by using high-quality techniques." Ahmed, one of very few who openly praised Al Hurra, said, "it's fair and represents fact."

Both are undoubtedly ambitious attempts to change the media environment of the Arab world by offering alternative news stations that are supposedly "freer" (hence "Al Hurra,"

"the free one") from the influence of local government, "less-biased," and "more balanced" than other Arab radio and television news

Few, if any in the Arab world object to the creation of media that is uninhibited by government policies and restrictions of freedom of press--indeed, this idea resonates in the minds of nearly all Emiratis and Arabs that wish they could express their political views more openly. But the problem is that for the many Arabs who believe Americans to be occupiers in Iraq, who believe Palestinian suicide bombers to be "martyrs," who believe their governments to be corrupt and without popular support, U.S. media alternatives that deny these prevalent and fundamental convictions will never be considered as credible as their Arab competitors that both acknowledge and sympathize with these issues.

English Survey

2004 UAE Media Survey
 Conducted by Keith M. Urbahn
 Yale University, '06

This survey is for research purposes on a study of the Arab media and how Emirati citizens obtain and interpret news. The survey results will be analyzed and compiled into a final senior thesis.

Your information:

Age _____

Nationality _____

Occupation _____

Gender: Male ___ Female ___

Home Emirate _____

Do you speak Arabic? Yes ___ No ___

1. What is your primary source of news? Select ONE ONLY.

Radio _____

Newspaper _____

Television _____

Internet _____

2. How frequently do you watch the following television stations?

	Never	Hardly Ever	Sometimes	Regularly
Abu Dhabi TV	_____	_____	_____	_____
Al Arabiya TV	_____	_____	_____	_____
Al Jazeera	_____	_____	_____	_____
Al Hurra	_____	_____	_____	_____
BBC News	_____	_____	_____	_____
CNN	_____	_____	_____	_____

3. Which internet NEWS site do you visit most? (Please print web address)

None _____

4. Which Arabic newspaper do you read most? Select ONE ONLY.

Akhbar Al Arab _____

Al Bayan _____

Al Hayat _____

Al Ittihad _____

Al Khaleej _____

Al Wahda _____

Asharq Al Awsat _____

Other _____

None _____

5. Which English newspaper do you read most? Select ONE ONLY.

Gulf News _____

Gulf Today _____

Khaleej Times _____

Other _____

None _____

6. Which radio station do you listen to most for NEWS? Select ONE ONLY.

Abu Dhabi Radio _____

Al Arabiya Radio _____

BBC Radio _____

Dubai Radio _____

Radio Sawa _____

Umm Al Quwain Radio _____

Other _____

None _____

7. Please rate the credibility of each media outlet.

	No Credibility	Low Credibility	Fair Credibility	High Credibility
Abu Dhabi TV	1	2	3	4
Al Arabiya TV	1	2	3	4
Al Jazeera	1	2	3	4
Al Hurra	1	2	3	4
BBC News	1	2	3	4
CNN	1	2	3	4
Local Arabic newspapers	1	2	3	4
English newspapers	1	2	3	4

8. Overall, which do you trust for more credible news?

Arabic news _____

English news _____

Arabic Survey

استبيان حول الإعلام في الإمارات العربية المتحدة

Keith M. Urbahn

جامعة يال (Yale University)

هذا الاستبيان لبحث علمي عن دراسة الإعلام العربي وكيفية حصوله وقياس الإماراتيين على الأخبار. (سوف يتم تحليل النتائج لبحث أكاديمي.)

الجنس : ذكر _____ أنثى _____	العمر _____
الإمارة _____	الجنسية _____
الوظيفة _____	هل تتكلم الإنكليزية ؟ : نعم _____ لا _____

1. ما هو مصدرك الرئيسي للأخبار ؟ اختر واحدة فقط.

التلفزيون _____
التلفزيون _____
الراديو _____
الجريدة _____
الإنترنت _____

2. كم من الوقت تقضي في مشاهدة القنوات التلفزيونية التالية ؟
لا أشاهد _____

أبوظبي	الجزيرة	الحرّة	العربية	BBC News	CNN
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

3. أي موقع أخباري في الإنترنت تزوره عادة ؟

أكتب عنوان الموقع _____

لا شيء _____

4. أي جريدة عربية تقرأ عادة ؟ اختر واحدة فقط.

أخبار العرب _____ الاتحاد _____
البيان _____ الخليج _____
الحياة _____ الوحدة _____

5. أي جريدة إنكليزية تقرأ عادة ؟ اختر واحدة فقط.

جريدة أخرى _____ Gulf News _____
لا شيء _____ The Gulf Today _____
Khaleej Times _____

6. إلى أي محطة راديو للأخبار تستمع عادة ؟ اختر واحدة فقط.

راديو أبو ظبي _____ راديو سوا _____
راديو العربية _____ راديو أم القيوين _____
راديو BBC _____ محطة أخرى _____
راديو دبي _____ لا شيء _____

7. كيف تقمّ بمصادقية مصادر الأخبار التالية ؟

بدون مصادقية	مصادقية محدودة	مصادقية جيدة	مصادقية عالية
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4

8. عموماً أيهما أكثر مصادقية ؟

المصادر العربية _____
المصادر الإنكليزية _____