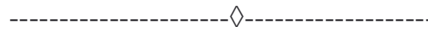




## **Gulf Research Meeting 2010**

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### **Workshop 9**

#### **The Development of the Media in the Gulf Region**

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## Workshop Description

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. It 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? The above questions become multiplied in relation with the rising phenomenon of religious broadcasting where, again, the Gulf is the hub of it.

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 demonstrated that groups with perceived 'extreme', 'conservative' or 'radical' views have greatly exploited the new media. What is seen as the 'extreme media' is only part of a broader and far more complex media-scape that also is comprised of mild conservative religious media which in turn competes with rising entertainment media---all of which competes with the news-focused channels. The content of different media outlets, news, religious, entertainment, sport and foreign 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 analysed 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 programmes and talk shows.

Religious broadcasting in the area is not limited to 'Islamic channels and broadcasting'. Rather it has expanded to include Christian and Jewish broadcasting which would equally merit research. Part of this broadcasting has evolved as a response to internal factors and changes that have taken place within their own certain settings. Yet other parts, especially Arabic-Christian broadcasting has, arguably, emerged in response to the dramatic rise of Islamic broadcasting. Television channels (the focus of the this workshop) as well as radio stations have been established in the past few years promoting Christian or Jewish ideals, again claiming a divinely-inspired and superior value system that is second to none.

Religious broadcasting--- Islamic, Christian and Jewish--- offers a new phenomenon that is still as yet under-researched. Some of this broadcasting would insist on the 'non-political' nature of the issues discussed and promoted on their media outlets. Yet others would have no such limitation. But in total these channels and programmes comprise a truly new phenomenon in the area given their number, capabilities, audiences and outreach.

### **Research questions**

The various strands of this emerging religious broadcasting promote a certain worldview *vis-à-vis* the surrounding and conjectural issues under discussion. The proposed workshop will examine the themes and perceptions that are heavily advocated by this broadcasting, allocating these perceptions 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 version of religion found in this form of broadcasting, also merits examination.

Alongside the mapping of the contours of this religious media scene, a number of research concerns deserve scrutinising. One underlying question is to examine the interplay between an arguably 'charged regional political and religious atmosphere' as propitious as imaginable for religious messaging and content, and the religious broadcasting itself. In the case of 'Islamic broadcasting', and given the fact that the 'Arab street' is largely dominated by movements and discourses which are shaped or influenced by 'political Islam', the question is how much of a role does religious broadcasting really play compared to other kinds of broadcasting in communicating values and promoting certain social and cultural ideals that correspond to the existing 'political and cultural' projects advocated by these political Islam movements. Is there a mutual spiralling 'feed-in' process between the dominant 'religious atmosphere' and religious broadcasting? Central to this process, and as applicable to Christian and Jewish broadcasting as it is to Islamic ones, is the examination of the socio-

political and cultural claim embedded in all religious advocacies of ethical superiority and higher moral ground, constantly being emphasised in the discursive deliveries of these religious broadcasters.

Within the above context, the proposed workshop intends to undertake the following:

1. The mapping out the 'religious-broadcasting-scene' and the exploration of the main contours of this broadcasting.
2. Analysing local and regional political, social, economic and ownership contexts of this broadcasting, and how these contexts impact the output and discourse.
3. Stimulating research on impact and influences on audiences, and on content and theme analysis of programming.
4. 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.

The papers submitted to the workshop are encouraged to relate to and further research on the following:

- Methodologies and approaches of researching three types of religious broadcasting (Islamic, Christian and Jewish), in particular content and audience research. Strong proposals that focus on methodologies of audience research will be given special attention and priority.
- Analytical historiography of religious broadcasting, focusing on one specific dimension(s), outlet or context.
- Analysis of ownership and the economies of the religious channels.
- Analysis of socio-cultural and political setting of religious channels.
- The dynamics of the Gulfan setting in shaping Islamic religious broadcasting in the Middle East.
- Specific case studies of certain religious channel, Islamic, Christian or Jewish, or certain religious programme (material) on a mainstream channel.
- Specific content/theme analysis over a certain period of time of a given channel or programme.
- Ethnic and/or sectarian-owned and expressed religious broadcasting.