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The “Presumed” Influence of US International Broadcasting: Understanding Arab Audiences’ Responses to Al-Hurra Television

Aziz Douai

Despite the significant relevance of the “cultural imperialism” framework to our understanding of how communication flows influence “militarization,” war and hegemonic foreign policies, critical theorists have not adequately investigated how foreign audiences have responded to the recent wave of US international broadcasting. To address this gap, this article investigates how foreign media audiences interact with international broadcasting by analyzing Al-Hurra’s reception among Arabic speaking audiences. Using a critical media audience reception framework, this article situates Al-Hurra within the larger context of US international broadcasting emanating from the Cold War as a strategic weapon to influence the attitudes of foreign publics. Specifically, these field research-based findings indicate that audiences’ “negative” and “hostile” perceptions of Al-Hurra messages curtail the influence of the broadcaster’s impact on Arabs’ attitudes toward political reform. Finally, the study also proposes a loose “taxonomy” that can be used to understand the complex reactions of foreign audiences to US international broadcasting.

Keywords: Public diplomacy; media effects; international broadcasting; Al-Hurra television; cultural imperialism; militarization; media imperialism

Introduction: Al-Hurra, War and Cultural Imperialism

The US sponsored Al-Hurra Television, launched in 2004 to influence Arabic-speaking audiences, is part of a long and contentious history of international broadcasting in which the media have consistently been deployed as strategic weapons of psychological influence. According to Monroe Price,¹ international broadcasting is “the elegant term for a complex combination of State-sponsored news, information, and entertainment, directed at a population outside the sponsoring State’s boundaries. It is the use of electronic media by one society to shape the opinion of the people and leaders in another.” From Voice of America and Radio Liberty to Radio Marti, the insinuation of US broadcasters in the mediascapes of other states has legally been questionable as it borders on violating other nations’ sovereignty, and might breach international laws and regulations. Despite this legal quagmire, US international broadcasters have continued to

target foreign audiences, whether they explicitly identify their sponsoring government, or operate in a clandestine fashion.

Moreover, international broadcasting’s traditional association with Cold War propaganda, psych ops, and contemporary “public diplomacy” has revived what Nancy Snow and Philip Taylor² describe as the “propaganda state” since the launch of the so-called Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Domestically, a “climate of fear” characterized the public “debate” regarding the US invasion of Iraq in which US mainstream media failed to critically assess the Bush administration’s rationale.³ Abroad, the US military’s “hard power” was mobilized alongside its considerable “soft power” arsenal to wage this GWOT and topple the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein.⁴ Al-Hurra became a chief instrument to wield the US “soft power” and “public diplomacy” in the Middle East. The station’s “propagandistic” task included selling the war on Iraq to Arab viewers, promoting democracy, and ensuring that the US worldview is heard in a large endeavor to win Arab “hearts and minds.”⁵

This synergistic relationship exposed clearly how public diplomacy involves deploying the US media and cultural might to support the military and policy interventions abroad, a salient issue in critical communication scholarship. Since the late 1960s, Herbert Schiller, Armand Mattelart, and Dallas Smythe, among other theorists, have contended that US-based transnational media corporations (TNMCs) were structurally linked to the expansion of US imperialism, capitalism and domination of countries of the South. They described the onslaught of US mass communication exports in the Third World as “cultural imperialism”⁶ and “media imperialism.”⁷ Similar to the actions of US-based corporations and TNMCs, US public diplomacy and Al-Hurra are clearly promoting US hegemony in the Middle East in what may be described as a state-sponsored cultural imperialism project.⁸

Despite the significant relevance of the “cultural imperialism” framework to our understanding of how communication flows influence “militarization,” war and hegemonic foreign policies, critical theorists have not adequately investigated how foreign audiences have responded to this wave of US international broadcasting. Critical analyses of the latest US international broadcasting, specifically Al-Hurra Television, included Marwan Kraidy⁹ who recommended shutting down this station because it constituted a “push” media that is akin to propaganda.” The Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California released findings that were also critical of the station’s implementation of its professional mandate describing it as an “identity crisis”: “Is it a news channel or a propaganda tool? Is its primary commitment to solid journalism or to serving political purposes? And how does the audience see it?”¹⁰ What remains missing in existing research is whether international broadcasting and public diplomacy should be considered a form of cultural imperialism. To address this gap, this article investigates how foreign media audiences interact with international broadcasting by analyzing Al-Hurra’s reception among Arabic speaking audiences. Using a critical media audience reception framework, this article situates Al-Hurra within the larger context of US international broadcasting emanating from the Cold War as a strategic weapon to influence the attitudes of foreign publics.

Focusing on the issue of media influence, the main research question of the present research is: How do audiences perceive Al-Hurra Television’s influence on Arab attitudes

towards political reform in the Arab world? To answer that question, the study first reviews relevant media scholarship and historical contexts that have enabled Al-Hurra and international broadcasting to exist. Second, it summarizes findings from focus group interviews of Moroccan audiences, and then discusses the implications of these findings. In this respect, the article’s main contribution will be to bring the audience into political economy research and critical media scholarship on militarization and international communications, entertaining the possibilities of audience “resistance” and “rejection” of this ideological warfare.

International Broadcasting: State-sponsored Cultural Imperialism?

Historically, international broadcasting has explicitly implied state and non-state actors’ “attempt to manage the international environment by using the technologies of radio, television, and the Internet to engage with foreign publics.”¹¹ Its ties to war, propaganda and the deployment of mass communication technologies to wield psychological influence over foreign populations have been inextricable.¹² As early as the invention of radio, Guglielmo Marconi announced that his radio invention would help avert “the evils of misunderstanding and jealousy” among peoples and nations, and go “some way towards averting the evils of war”.¹³ Marconi’s optimistic claims were dashed with the Nazis’ realization of the “powerful” effects of this medium in indoctrinating and mobilizing the population. As Taylor¹⁴ explains, Josef Paul Goebbels was quick to recognize that “real broadcasting is true propaganda. Propaganda means fighting on all battlefields of the spirit, generating, multiplying, destroying, exterminating, building and undoing.” Subsequently, the strategic use of the mass communication as a means of mass influence over foreign audiences flourished during the Cold War with the US becoming a world leader in international broadcasting. To combat the Soviets’ “Red Threat” in Europe and other parts of the globe, the US set up Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, and Radio Marti. The United Kingdom’s British Broadcasting Corporation, Germany’s Deutsche Welle, and the former Soviet Union’s Radio Moscow not only illustrate how other nations followed suit in broadcasting their messages and ideologies to international audiences, but they also demonstrate how these communication technologies were part of a fierce ideological struggle and incessant attempts to court world opinion.

Moreover, the “militarization” of communication technologies through international broadcasting corresponded with the advent of mass communication research as an academic discipline that emphasized “uniform” and “strong” effects of the media on audiences between 1945 and 1960.¹⁵ As Christopher Simpson¹⁶ details, communication research had strong linkage with US psychological warfare programs through direct funding and sponsored research, which affected the type of scholarship and production of knowledge leading communication scholars would be engaged in. For instance, government contracts provided important funding for the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, contracting Paul Lazarsfeld and his research team to conduct extensive survey-based studies of the Voice of America in Turkey, Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries. Harold Lasswell’s studies of propaganda had direct application to US psychological warfare programs

as in his contention that, “Propaganda must be coordinated with information and espionage services which can supply material to the propagandists and report progress of propaganda work. That propaganda can be effectively correlated with diplomatic, military and economic pressures was abundantly demonstrated during the [First] World War”.¹⁷ Similarly, CIA funding for the Center of International Studies (CENIS) at MIT allowed Daniel Lerner, Ithiel de Sola Pool and other CENIS scholars to engage in similar research that promulgated the “modernization” effect of communication technologies in developing countries.¹⁸ In *The Passing of the Traditional Society*, Lerner heralded the role of the mass media as a ‘development multiplier’—specifically how radio was spurring social change and national development in Middle Eastern societies.¹⁹

While those “founding fathers” perceived communication as domination through persuasion in what was to become a “dominant paradigm” of communication, other scholars sought to problematize the issue of media influence focusing on the unequal flows in international communications. Several scholars launched a political economic critique of how US media and communication hardware exports dominated global communications to preserve US hegemony over developing nations. Instead of fostering “modernization” and bolstering developing nations’ autonomy, the expansion of US-based Transnational Corporations (TNCs) into the Third World created a new form of dependency on the capitalist West, and, as Herbert I. Schiller put it: “The colonial system, disappearing rapidly as a formal apparatus of domination, lives on and flourishes in an intricate web of economic, political and cultural dependencies.”²⁰ In *Communication and Cultural Domination*, Schiller defined cultural imperialism as “the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system.”²¹ Using other variations, such as “media imperialism,” “structural imperialism” or “dependency” theory,²² this political economy critique of the military-industrial-communications complex “assumed that the economic structures of capitalism were complemented by communications structures and cultural industries.”²³

The cultural and media imperialism critique explicated the “detrimental” effects of the one-way flow of communication from the US/West on developing nations.²⁴ Critical scholars contended that US/Western television programs’ domination of overseas developing media markets meant that indigenous media and entertainment industries face an uphill battle to survive competition from cheaper foreign television programs.²⁵ As foreign television programs propagate Western consumerist lifestyles and values abroad, they would assault indigenous social and moral values of developing nations. Assessing the impact of foreign television programs on Caribbean culture, Gladstone Yearwood²⁶ explains these detrimental effects: “They have helped to diffuse our cultural consciousness. Our horizons have been widened; our world has been broadened; but knowledge of ourselves and appreciation of our heritage and culture have not grown significantly as they should have.” On the news and journalism fronts, the fact that a handful of Western news agencies dominate global news gathering and dissemination meant that developing nations have very little say in how they

are covered.²⁷ To counter the West’s cultural imperialism, developing nations called for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), calls that were rebuffed by the US on the grounds that such an order would violate the “free” flow of information.²⁸

To recap, cultural and imperialism’s fundamental critique is that developing nations’ economic dependency leads to political and cultural dependency on the West. Despite the compelling nature of such an argument, its focus and heft stemmed largely from Schiller’s critique of the flow of international trade in media and information products.²⁹ The list of limitations of cultural imperialism has expanded but can be summed up in three main rebuttals: 1) the diversity and pluralism of the cultures and societies of developing nations (i.e. the local) can challenge the homogenization effects of foreign television programs (i.e. the global); 2) international communication flows are complex and multi-directional as demonstrated by the popularity of *telenovellas* in Latin America and Al Jazeera Television; 3) active media audiences resist the “dominant” readings and ideologies embedded in foreign media texts.³⁰

As cultural and media imperialism theorists trained their critique on the structural relations and macro-level communication effects leading to “dependency,” audience research scrutinized the “micro-level” effects of foreign television programs. From cultural studies, Stuart Hall and others argued that audiences are “active” and “meaning-making” agents whose “hegemonic” or counter-hegemonic “interpretations” and “readings” of media texts depend on their “subject” positions.³¹ Within empirical research, Elihu Katz & Tamar Liebes³² concluded that foreign audiences “decode” *Dallas* and used this show as a “forum” to reflect on their own identities, exhibiting different moral, ideological and aesthetic engagements. Similarly, Kalyani Chadha and Anandam Kavouri³³ conclude from examining South and East Asian media markets that audience’s gravitation towards local programming choices, such as Cantonese and Mandarin soap operas in China, because they seek entertainment experiences that “proximate” and recognize their own culture. As they put it, various economic, psychological linguistic and cultural preferences of Asian audiences for locally or regionally programming have pushed transnational broadcasters such as STAR TV “to localize their programming schedules, replacing Western productions with shows made specifically for Asian audiences in Asian languages.” Using audience reception and empirical “media effects” research, the list of critics who have sought to discredit cultural/media imperialism remains too long to cover in this article.³⁴

Exacerbating the above gaps is critical scholars’ insufficient scrutiny, if not utter silence, regarding the “cultural imperialism” implications of contemporary US international broadcasters, such as Voice of America, Radio Marti and Al-Hurra Television. This curious gap might be ascribed to the fact that these international broadcasters represented state-sponsored cultural imperialism and propaganda, and as such their ideological mission was indisputable. The resurgence of international broadcasting and the “militarization” of global communications after 9/11, however, warrant critical scholars’ vigorous engagement with this brand of international media. In this regard, examining how Arab audiences have reacted to the US sponsored Al-Hurra Television will address some gaps in the cultural and media imperialism critique of post 9/11 global communications.

The “Presumed Influence” of Al-Hurra Television and the War on Terrorism

International broadcasting has been predicated on the theory of media effects, i.e. that using broadcast media will have “large” and “direct” effects on foreign populations. As John Nichols³⁵ explained, most policymakers and researchers blindly believed in the “effects” of international broadcasting to convert foreign public opinion and thus influence foreign governments and political events. Yet, decades of international broadcasting demonstrate that this medium entails the risk of being “dysfunctional” and “counter-productive,” as Nichols suggests after studying the effects of propaganda broadcasts on US Cuban relations. Instead of resolving international conflict, it has the potential of exacerbating it.³⁶ Thus, the capacity of communication technologies to resolve, or to exacerbate, international conflict has provided the policy backbone rationalizing the use of contemporary international broadcasting.

The “dominant” media effects paradigm embodied in the belief that international broadcasting is an “effective” communication tool and “influences” foreign audiences has resurfaced after the 9/11 attacks on the US. In the immediate aftermath of those attacks, voices emerged from both within and outside the Bush administration stridently calling for a counter-communication blitz that could effectively push back against Al-Qaeda’s propaganda.³⁷ Their goal was the eradication of a presumably intractable anti-Americanism raging among large swaths of Arab citizens and in the broader Middle East. Their underlying assumption was that the “Arab Street,” a catch-all phrase that distinguishes Arab public opinion from the ruling elites, had fed a “biased” local media diet that consistently demonized the United States sometimes at the behest of Arab regimes to deflect domestic disaffection.³⁸ The strategic challenge of terrorism, as policy debates fomented, required broader political and policy interventions, rather than narrow military solutions.³⁹

The problem of terrorism, coupled with US unpopularity in Arab and Muslim public opinion polls, swiftly morphed into a “crisis” communication issue. The crisis was perceived to be primarily about “message,” as President Bush concluded in assessing US efforts to reach Arab and Muslim audiences: “We are not doing a very good job of getting our message out.” Indeed, the US government and many of its policy wonks felt “outsmarted” and “out-communicated” by hostile, anti-American forces in the region.⁴⁰ The only plausible course of action for the United States, or so claimed the prevalent policy wisdom at the time, was to take this communication challenge to the heart of the Arab world. So, the US established its own media “voice” to counter those media opponents and redefine its image, rather than leave it to the mercy of America’s detractors and enemies. The news media paradoxically constituted a problem and a solution at the same time. Out of this paradox, Al-Hurra was conceived as a communication policy response. The station’s mission is “to provide objective, accurate, and relevant news and information to the people of the Middle East about the region, the world, and the United States. Al-Hurra supports democratic values by expanding the spectrum of ideas, opinions, and perspectives available in the region’s media.”⁴¹

In the context of international broadcasting, Al-Hurra Television inevitably became the latest bidder in modern mass media’s attempt to influence foreign public opinion and the conduct of foreign policy. The station was considered the latest propaganda “weapon” in a strategic arsenal, a centerpiece in the broader campaign of “fighting terror with truth.”⁴² The BBG’s 2002 report reiterates the channel’s stated goal of “advancing freedom and democracy” in Arab and Muslim countries. While the channel’s mission eerily resurrects the Cold War broadcasting legacies, questions about its “perceived” influence on Arab audiences remain germane to Al-Hurra’s strategies, in particular, and the US approach to public diplomacy in general. The present project addresses some of these questions by seeking to understand how Arab audiences have reacted to Al-Hurra broadcasting messages. To analyze Arab audiences’ perceptions of Al-Hurra’s campaign to promote “political reform” and democracy in the Arab world, the article will answer the following research question:

RQ1. How have Moroccan citizens reacted to Al-Hurra Television mission and programming in the Arab world? Specifically, how do these viewers perceive Al-Hurra’s coverage of political reform and US democracy promotion in the region?

This article will thus investigate how Arab audiences make sense of Al-Hurra station’s programming in order to explore the “influence” of US international broadcasting. Using field research work in Morocco, this paper explores the “resistance” of “targeted” audiences to “militarized” communication and propaganda.

Method

In this study, I focus on the “presumed” influence of international broadcasting on foreign audiences. To address the above research question, my analysis draws on field research data gleaned from several focus group interviews of Al-Hurra viewers in Morocco as part of a larger research project on US international broadcasting in the Arab world begun since 2007. These interviews were conducted between June and August 2007.⁴³ While the larger project employed quantitative and qualitative methods, this article reports findings from the focus group interviews, as these findings highlight the “complex” ways in which Moroccan audiences respond to Al-Hurra broadcasts. Specifically, a close analysis of these interviews enriches our understanding of the nature of international broadcasting audiences, the motivations behind their exposure to this type of media programming, and how perceptions of Al-Hurra influence Arab attitudes toward political reform.

Other scholars have elaborated on the advantages of employing focus groups in audience research. First, the focus group environment encourages participants to share their views in a forthcoming manner. It is a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.”⁴⁴ Whether structured or unstructured, the focus group offers a group of five to twelve people, who share

some characteristics, to openly discuss an issue of common interest. A moderator leads the discussion, and the participants are encouraged to respond and reflect on their colleagues’ responses as well as their own. Merton and his colleagues set forth the first formal focus group study to gauge radio audiences’ reactions to a set of programs in the 1940s.⁴⁵ Second, focus groups yield ethnographic accounts that empower audiences and participants, and circumvent the limitations of traditional research. Influenced by the ethnographic bent of anthropological research, the focus group method rose as a response to the limitations of other methodologies.⁴⁶ While survey questionnaires would provide a picture of the respondents’ viewing habits, and their individual attitudes towards both the United States’ policies and its broadcasting, focus groups remain a particularly efficient means of uncovering viewers’ feelings and beliefs.⁴⁷ Finally, through focus groups and in-depth interviews, cross-cultural research can simulate the natural everyday conversations that shed more light on participants’ underlying assumptions.

Given the high illiteracy rates in Morocco’s population, cultural trends can be better understood through personal interaction with respondents rather than the sole impersonal touch of a survey. Furthermore, focus groups assist researchers to get a sense of how the whole “group” as a collective thinks about certain issues. The “group” reaction to the topic of U.S. international broadcasting, instead of being limited to individual opinions, addressed the “face validity” question in media research. Capturing a snapshot of “reality,” a peek into audiences’ attitudes and perceptions, would otherwise elude the mere process of number compilations.⁴⁸

Focus group meetings were held in a public place, and each lasted approximately one hour and a half. A midsize town in the northwest of Morocco was chosen as the site of this field research and data collection. This town provides an ideal site for recruiting participants who represent both the urban and, to some extent, rural inhabitants likely to watch satellite television news channels. Seven focus groups were convened from a pool of Al-Hurra Television viewers. This provides ample materials for the construction of a “valid” picture that explains why and how Moroccan viewers interact with Al-Hurra Television (see Table I).

Focus Groups	Al-Hurra Television Viewers
Number of the Groups	7
Size of the Groups	Between 6 and 8

Table I. Convened Focus Groups

The size of the focus groups was dictated by methodological and logistical considerations. Merton et al. suggest that “the size of the group should manifestly be governed by two considerations...it should not be so large as to be unwieldy or to preclude adequate participa-

tion by most members nor should it be so small that it fails to provide substantially greater coverage than that of an interview with one individual.”⁴⁹ Some researchers opt for smaller groups of three people, especially when those participants seem to have a lot of information to share about the considered issues.⁵⁰ While I initially planned to have nine participants, logistics and other scheduling conflicts made it difficult to convene such groups, and I had to reduce the number of participants. A pool of more than 400 potential participants drawn from Al-Hurra viewers completed screening questionnaires. The response rate, those who completed the screening questionnaires and were willing to participate in the study, was low to moderate hovering between 15 and 25 percent. The number of those who were finally selected for the study constituted 15 percent of the initial participant pool.

Focus group interviews included some key questions that sought to probe these viewers’ experiences with and attitudes towards Al-Hurra’s programming. While one of the general questions asked participants about their Al-Hurra’s coverage of Arab politics, other questions focused on Al-Hurra programs’ promotion of political reforms such as transparent elections, women’s rights and fighting political corruption. Then, respondents were asked to compare the perceived influence of these programs on their own attitudes and Arab public opinion. Finally, the moderator/researcher invited respondents to reflect on Al-Hurra programming and the US democracy promotion agenda.

An “interview guide” script was prepared well in advance and the moderator closely followed the guide to keep the discussion on topic. After informing participants that all interviews will be recorded, transcribed and analyzed, the researcher obtained the consent of all participants and the interviews were completed accordingly. The researcher took brief notes about how the interviews proceeded and the main themes and conclusions. Once all the focus group interviews were completed, two Moroccan graduate students were hired to transcribe the focus group discussions. A subsequent close analysis of the responses led to the following findings regarding Al-Hurra viewers’ attitudes in Morocco.

Findings: Foreign “Eyes” on Al-Hurra’s “Presumed” Influence

The focus group data shed light on Moroccan viewers’ attitudes towards Al-Hurra station’s coverage of political reform, and the potential effects of this coverage on Arab citizens’ attitudes regarding the promotion of democracy and political reform in their societies. During the interview discussions, two observations about the nature of Al-Hurra audiences were inescapable: 1) viewers’ high level of awareness of the ideological agenda of the station; and 2) viewers’ “resistance” to and “defiance” of such agenda. First, audiences were savvy enough to discern that the channel was a “tool” of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. There were no dissenting voices that objected to the characterization, raised by participants in the focus group meetings, that this broadcasting enterprise was inseparable from the U.S. government’s larger strategic goals, namely combating terrorism and improving its standing in the “Arab street.” Respondents were not at a loss to define and identify the U.S. political reform agenda that had been brought to the forefront of political and public discourse in re-

cent years. Growing out of those policies, audiences believed that Al-Hurra reflected those efforts. How the station’s programs contributed to this foreign policy agenda, especially promoting issues of political reform or not, was not a matter of disagreement either. Respondents largely concurred that Al-Hurra would not be able to have any vigorous or “positive” contribution to the political reform debate because of its limited reach. The channel’s limited reach translated into limited influence, according to most of the participants. Al-Hurra viewers who participated in the study frequently scoffed at the intentions of the station, denying any influence it might have on their own attitudes, their compatriots, or Arab public opinion at large. They also scoffed at the reform initiatives embedded in the U.S. Middle East policies.

Second, Al-Hurra station was perceived to hurt, not improve the U.S. standing in the Middle East. Audiences were not hesitant to argue that the channel functioned as a new and different tool of control. The U.S. government’s sponsorship had proven toxic to the reputation of the channel, shattering the broadcaster’s credibility from the beginning. Respondents made it abundantly clear that they perceived the channel as a “propaganda” outlet, in the pejoratively popular sense, whose task was to serve its master rather than the target audiences. As long as such a goal was perceived, it was met with willful defiance. Defiance took the form of actually boycotting the channel as some respondents insisted that it was no longer on their television dial. Defiance also took the form of “hostile” viewership among many members of its audience: “I don’t lend any credence to what it [Al-Hurra] says because I know it is out there to attack Arabs and Al Jazeera” was a frequent response. Al-Hurra did not come with a clean media slate; its agenda reflected the agenda of the Bush administration. The source’s lack of credibility leads to the media’s lack of credibility. In the perception of some viewers, Al-Hurra was the media response to Al-Jazeera Television, as well as part of the siege drawn around independent, nongovernmental news sources. The “media agenda” was bogged down by the political agenda; the consequence was that Al-Hurra had had no “fair” chance, or an equal level playing field to compete for its target audience’s “trust.”

Consistent with previous audience research insights, my close reading of the transcripts and the recorded observations reveal that viewers perceive this US station’s influence in multiple and diverse “ways.” In this article, I propose to approach these viewers’ “ways” of perceiving media influence in loose taxonomies that can normatively be described as “audience eyes.” These normative categories will be used to characterize audiences/participants based on their “expressed” different assessment of Al-Hurra’s perceived influence. Based on my reading of audience responses, the following audience categories or “eyes” describe the station’s viewers: the “politically trained eye,” the “critical/inoculated eye,” the “selective eye,” and the “suspicious eye.” What follows is a narrative description from the audience’s prism on Al-Hurra Television that explicates these audience “eyes.”⁵¹

“The politically trained eye,” the first category of Al-Hurra viewers, refers to those politically savvy respondents who prefer to “qualify” the potential influence of Al-Hurra Television on their own attitudes. Throughout their responses, these viewers indicate that the station’s influence on “other” viewers was similarly “limited.” When asked about how Al-

Hurra Television's coverage of political reform in the Arab world might influence their own attitudes, almost all respondents asserted that it would have scant or no influence at all. Most cited the fact that their little viewing of Al-Hurra programs was the source of its "diminished" influence on their own attitudes regarding political reform and democracy promotion in the region. One respondent explicitly admitted that in his case, "as a politicized citizen," a "political animal," Al-Hurra's coverage of political reform would have absolutely no effect on his own attitudes. In fact, the same respondent stated his belief that public recognition of the channel's status as "a political project of the Republican party in particular, and, more generally, a tool of U.S. vital [foreign] policy interests" would prevent it from playing influential role in the Arab political reform debate. After a probing question about the potential causes for this perceived lack of Al-Hurra's influence, some respondents explained that the Arab viewers' psyche was seared with anti-Americanism sentiments. The failure of Bush's policies in the Middle East seems to lend the viewers "other excuses to reject whatever is 'Bushian.'" Other respondents who seemed to fit with this "politically trained eye" category also argued that the channel's influence on their attitudes was minimal because they had discerned some sort of dishonesty in American calls for such reform. They strongly suggested that their awareness of the pressing need for political reform in their region preceded both Al-Hurra's and the Bush administration's promotion of the idea.

The second main category of audiences I encountered is what I call "the critical and inoculated eye." This category describes those respondents who asserted that they were kind of "immune to" and "inoculated" from Al-Hurra's ideological influence, thus suggesting a sweeping denial of any perceived influence. In this respect, not all respondents seemed to be "political" about dealing with Al-Hurra program's potential influence on the political reform debate in the region. Some claimed that when watching the station's political shows, they apply an unusually "critical eye" because they associate the station with its sponsor. Underlying these respondents' "critical" viewing is these participants' awareness that the channel's source of financing is the U.S. administration. Some responses indicate that this "critical eye" viewership is rooted in their deeply held disagreement with the US democracy promotion agenda. One respondent's answer was revealing in its vehement opposition to such agenda as he explained: "The Arab world does not need political reform. What is urgently needed is more stability and security [in the region]." This respondent continued that there was enough political consciousness in the region, and there was no need for Al-Hurra to raise that consciousness or create a new awareness, and other respondents concurred with this thought. The "inoculation" and "critical" characteristics of these viewers emerged from the lexicon they employ. In response to the moderator's follow up question to probe why these viewers felt they were not being influenced by the station's programs, one viewer half-jokingly explained that he had been drinking "poison." This viewer meant that he had taken an "anti-dote" against the perceived venom of Al-Hurra and that is why audiences were immune from any "negative" influence.

The third category of audiences is "the selective eye," which refers to those respondents who were picky about the type of "influence" that the broadcaster wields. Among the few respondents who admitted to being influenced "somewhat" by Al-Hurra's political reform

agenda, some explained that they were very “selective” in terms of what they watch and stressed the “positive” aspects of such influence. According to one such respondent, Al-Hurra’s coverage felt more effective and influential in specific issues like combating terrorism and improving women’s status in their countries. For him, Al-Hurra’s coverage of those issues “serves [his] needs.” Serving viewers’ “needs” another participant took pains to explain that the station’s programs would not necessarily result in influence because of the “credibility gap” that had been plaguing the station since its launch. Other responses that could be fit within this “selective eye” category further argued that instead of influence there is some sort of “interaction” with Al-Hurra’s programs. The “interaction” was due to their perception that its coverage tended to counter many of the “established definitions” and entrenched beliefs in their society. Yet, another respondent objected to these characterizations and argued that the station had not succeeded in inspiring viewers like him to embrace political reform because it had not proposed “an example to be emulated.”

In addition to the above categories, perceptions of Al-Hurra’s influence included those who looked at the station’s programs and agenda suspiciously, called audiences with a “suspicious eye.” These “suspicious eyes” willfully deny the channel’s programs’ “effects” or “influence” on their attitudes toward issues of political reform offering several arguments. Most of these viewers emphasized their “very limited” exposure to Al-Hurra’s shows in terms of the small amount of time they spent watching the station. Similar to those “politically” savvy viewers, they revealed their pre-existing feelings of “ambivalence,” if not outright hostility, at the channel’s relationship with the U.S. administration as very likely leading to diminished influence on Arabs’ attitudes towards political reform. Yet, some of those “suspicious” viewers, who adamantly denied its influence, conceded that the mere fact of Al-Hurra Television’s existence could enrich the indigenous media landscape by sharing a different/US worldview, regardless of viewers’ agreement or disagreement with the station’s overall message.

Discussion

The above analysis provoke several lines of thinking about how “target” audiences make sense of international broadcasting, in general, and, more specifically, Arab viewers’ responses to Al-Hurra’s political reform promotion agenda. First, the analysis of participants’ responses gleaned from the focus group discussions identified a set of audience “eyes” to categorize Al-Hurra’s viewers based on their assessment of the station’s influence. While those categories organized respondents’ seemingly “chaotic” and “self-contradictory” revelations, those categories are still useful to comprehend the nature of Al-Hurra audiences. Viewers were savvy and astute about the audience appeals of the station as respondents distinguished between the “ordinary,” regular viewers and the “political,” elitist viewers. If broadcast media tend, by definition, to attract the “regular guy” in employing populist discourse to debate public issues, Al-Hurra did not fit this category and description, according to many respondents. In fact, the station’s discourse was perceived as “elitist” with many

respondents concluding that only a very tiny minority of Arabs would watch the station’s programs, a minority largely composed of “liberals” who might be sympathetic to U.S. policies regardless of the existence of Al-Hurra. The station might provide an “echo chamber” where “liberals” could freely rant against “extremists” and probably against corrupt Arab governments, while muting criticism of the United States. The “eyes” categorization of audiences revealed how politically savvy audiences might consciously “resist” and “reject” media influence. At the very least, this type of viewer feels empowered enough to “resist” media influence, specifically media influence that is perceived to be pernicious and negative. Moreover, these respondents did not even accept the contention that viewers lacking in “political awareness” could constitute easy prey to Al-Hurra’s negative influence.

While being analytical tools, these sets of audience “eyes” can be the basis to set up the taxonomy of Al-Hurra viewers. Above all, those respondents were first and foremost viewers of the television channel, and their diverging levels of exposure to the channel (the extent of time they spent watching its programs) partially account for their diverging assessment, from the “critical” to the “political.” Needless to say, as the result section argued, these categories offer more than an ad hoc classification, as they seek to gauge the perceived influence of Al-Hurra on Arab public discourse. The audience categories also overlap, and they are not exhaustive at all. Box 1 reorganizes these sets of “eyes,” the corresponding viewer types that emerged throughout the focus group interviews.

‘The politically trained eye’

‘The critical/inoculated eye’

‘The selective eye’

‘The suspicious eye’

Box 1. Typology of Al-Hurra Audiences

Second, focus group respondents highlighted the potential for audience “resistance” to ideological messages as they yielded fresh evidence regarding their cognizance of the need for political reform as being distinct from Al-Hurra’s and the Bush administration’s calls for such reforms. Their “objections” were directed at the U.S. democracy promotion project, which seemed to be less than “honest” and lack commitment. Respondents’ “preconceived” notions that the U.S. government was not “serious” about democracy promotion find outside support in the entangled relationship of the U.S. administration and its Arab regimes. Instead of alleviating entrenched “hostility” and “unfavorable disposition,” Al-Hurra exacerbated them. The rhetoric of foreign policy, particularly democracy promotion and political reform, was undercut by reality. Hence, Al-Hurra’s launch appears to have been a self-defeating strategy at best, as shown by focus group responses. According to polling data, a large segment of Arab viewers feel that Al-Jazeera Television represents their own “voice” while Al-Hurra represents a “hostile” voice, a voice of the U.S.

Third, neither were the ailments of the Arab world as obscure as they might have been portrayed throughout the Bush administration’s rhetoric, nor were respondents in denial of their existence. Respondents readily shared their low opinion of their government, criticized their educational system for spawning legions of unemployed graduates, and bemoaned the endemic corruption crippling the political process. In fact, a majority of respondents had a lower opinion of their governments than the United States’ government. While Al-Hurra was perceived to do a service in bringing public attention to those pressing political issues, some respondents suspected that its programs portrayed their culture and society very negatively. As one respondent exclaimed, “We know that our reality is bad; yet, we also need to see a positive outlook” on the future. Moreover, their responses indicated that Al-Hurra’s unflattering portrayals of the local political sphere and society did not present solutions they would welcome or cherish. “Letting [them] know that [their] society was backward” was perceived to be a main objective and trend in the broadcast. Political reform was painfully needed, but Al-Hurra’s prescriptions were short of delivering tangible outcomes. When the moderator interjected that it was probably “unfair” to task a broadcaster with finding solutions to some of the most intractable problems in their society, some responses further explained that they would not like to be “lectured” at by a government that did not “respect” or “appreciate” their values. This defensive use of local values was raised also when many respondents put the onus of reform on their local citizens rather than the U.S. or Arab governments.

Fourth, the U.S. perspective permeating the station’s programs was another area of audience disapproval. While many respondents recognized that Al-Hurra’s mission was to promote U.S. policies in the region, to air the U.S. worldview, and to function as a “propaganda” arm of the U.S. government, their distaste for that exclusive focus was palpable throughout the discussions. One respondent used some strong terms to express this bitterness as he explained that “[he] watched Al-Hurra to laugh at [him]self..how they think about us..[and] how they seek to penetrate us.” Respondents frequently mentioned the U.S. invasion of Iraq as one instance of how Al-Hurra was trying to “rewrite” their history with no regard to local memory or viewers’ sentiments. No matter how Al-Hurra was trying to explain the U.S. rationale for militarily invading an Arab country, the perception that it was illegitimate, hostile, and imperialist action was staunchly held among these respondents. Audience “hostility” seems to be grounded in the Bush administration’s own rhetoric and shifting rationale for the invasion of Iraq from ridding the world of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, or upholding the United Nations’ resolutions to liberating the Iraqi people from a dictatorship while alleging the Iraqi regime’s connections with Al-Qaeda in between. Those fluctuations complicated Al-Hurra’s task, as the perceived inconsistencies could only shatter whatever credibility it hoped to build. Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*’s insight that “All war is based on deception” rang truer than ever in the ears of Arab viewers. And Al-Hurra has paid a high price because the station does not seem to have gained sufficient “credibility” in the indigenous media market.

Some limitations deserve to be acknowledged in the present study. One limitation relates to the conceptualization of these audience “eyes” and how to perceive media influence. Dur-

ing the analysis, it has been very difficult to clearly demarcate types of media influence that is detected among Al-Hurra viewers. The proposed "eyes" do not necessarily imply distinct categories that are mutually exclusive and can easily fit into separate entities. In fact, one may argue that the "politically trained eye" may be a subset of the "critical and inoculated eye." The problem is exacerbated by lack of clarity from the data as to whether these audience "eyes" reflect "viewing patterns" or "interpretation" patterns. However, these limitations are not solely due to research design issues. They are part of the inherent reluctance and vagueness media researchers encounter in field research.⁵² In addition, it is difficult to gauge how open are discussions of what many viewers could very well be perceiving as a "hostile" television's influence.

Finally, how do these audience findings relate to "cultural imperialism" and critical theories of communication? This study "complicates" the concept of media influence that the classic cultural and media imperialism thesis promulgates because it demonstrates that foreign audiences are "actively" and "critically" processing foreign media messages. While early audience research has indeed reached similar findings about "active" audiences,⁵³ this field research's unique contribution lies in its focus on audiences of international broadcasting, highlighting that foreign audiences are largely "resistant" and "hostile" to US propaganda. Al-Hurra represents a resurgence of state-sponsored cultural and media imperialism, but contemporary foreign audiences are far more educated, savvy, and critical. This field research investigation concludes that Arab audiences' "resistance" and "rejection" of Al-Hurra's messages are based on their perception that these broadcasts constitute "hostile" media fare to promote US hegemony. For these foreign audiences, Al-Hurra's persisting "credibility" problem⁵⁴ makes it inherently incapable of fostering indigenous and vigorous public debate on Arab political reform because its discourse remains "suspect" and "imperialist." Hence, recent calls to revamp the cultural and media imperialism thesis⁵⁵ should engage both international broadcasting and its "target" audiences. The enormous financial and technological resources available to this state-sponsored "cultural imperialism" have been unable to tame those "hostile" foreign audiences.

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Aziz Douai is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Program at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). Dr. Douai's research focuses on international communications, Arab media and culture and socio-political implications of new media technol-

ogies. He is co-editor of *New Media Influence on Social and Political Change in Africa* (Hershey, PA: IGI-Global) and author of numerous articles.
Email: aziz.douai@uoit.ca