

# **Ownership and management models of state-owned versus privately-owned Saudi news channels**

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## **Introduction**

The idea for this research was triggered by one event in 2019, when the researcher attended a training course entitled 'Professional project management' held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The instructor addressed a variety of vital Saudi Arabian projects in many fields that had failed as a result of bad management, despite the abundant budgets allocated to such projects. This concept meant that vast budgets do not necessarily improve methods and management strategies, particularly in the Saudi media field - the subject of this research - and therefore required to undertake further study and investigation.

With regard to the broadcasting sector for example: Television broadcasting began in 1956 in Saudi Arabia. Television became very important for Saudis in terms of transitions in mass media, and in the expression and formation of political, social and economic trends; furthermore, television was the fastest and most prevalent media tool to appear in Saudi Arabia.

In 1991, Saudi Arabia witnessed a new stage of satellite broadcasting, after CNN channel broadcast, when it covered the Gulf War. This was the beginning of a new stage of dealing with, and obtaining, the news for Saudi people and their government. The approach towards news in Western channels such as CNN and BBC, presented Saudi audiences with new methods and styles of watching and understanding what the real meaning of news was (Omer, 2009).

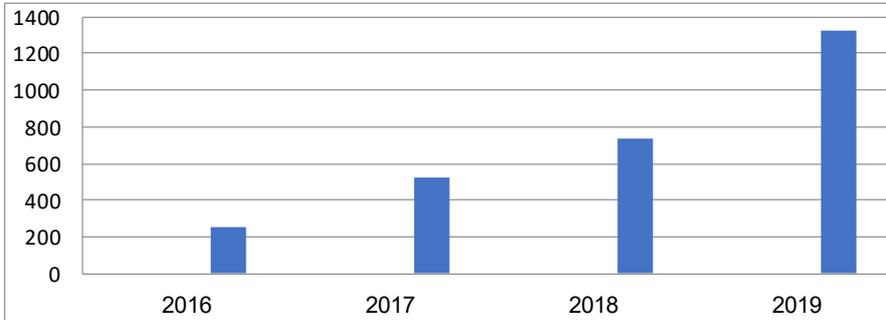
This situation inspired many Saudi elites and encouraged them to start thinking about investment in 'space' with support from their government; as a result, Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) became the first private Arab television channel in 1992, launched from London, in a new age of Arab media (Yassine, 2013).

Saudi government realised the importance of television as means of 'controlling' the populace, and an ideal form of communication in order to connect the country's policies and objectives through the quickest and most powerful method. Saudi Arabia has introduced regulations and controlled the administration of television institutions and corporations for a long period. Therefore, the study of media management and ownership models can improve the understanding of the intricate and interwoven relationship between media and politics manifested in Saudi Arabia: the media are regarded as a pivotal tool in combating the so-called 'cultural intrusion' or 'cultural imperialism' perceived as a threat to traditional Saudi culture. The vast investments in the television sector - both private and public - have triggered a heated debate about cultural globalisation, and whether the new privately-owned channels (such as *Al-Arabiya*) constitute a fresh attempt to reverse the cultural flow from North to South, and thus give the Saudi audiences a new voice in regional as well as international television markets.

### **Rationale:**

The debate regarding cultural globalisation through mass media has been intensified since the 1990s, with the rise of satellite channels such as Cable News Network (CNN). According to the annual report released by the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) in 2020, the number of satellite channels in the Arab world reached 1,320, with thirty-five Arabic language news channels, available to a large number of Arabic-speaking viewers (audiences), not only across the region, but

also to the global Arab Diaspora, despite the diversity of the channels' public information policies and the nature of their ownership - whether public or private (Arab States Broadcasting Union [ASBU],2020).



**Figure (1) Number of Arabic Channels in the last years**

There have been discussions regarding the impact of satellite technology on the political scene in the Arab world, for some scholars such as (Armbrust, 2012); Kraidy (2009) argue that recent studies apply a technology deterministic approach in which they equate the rise of satellite news channels to a vibrant public sphere; moreover, Sakr (2007) arguments against the viability of any political reforms in the absence of genuine public broadcasting services and freedom of speech.

It is here that the issue of media ownership and policy plays a major role in the analysis of the current Arab media landscape; this study seeks to contribute to the emerging debates about the topic of media ownership and management, despite the lack of specialized studies and researches on this topic.

#### **Research problem:**

This study seeks to investigate the impact of ownership models as well as business models on the media production process, within Saudi news channels; similar to any media organisation and news channels, particular regulations support the work of these corporations. The revolution in broadcasting technologies led to vast changes in media production techniques and practices, especially for smaller crews and simplified post-production activities, in addition to huge changes

in restructuring the television production environment facilitating development of the independent production sector, with considerable organisational changes. (Quinn, 2007).

The television industry in the Arab countries has recently witnessed a sizable leap in technological advancement, leading to the proliferation of satellite channels beaming from inside and outside of the region and targeting vast audiences across the world (Chahine et al., 2007). Given this situation, it was imperative for channels owners and management systems to develop whole strategies; indeed, media management is still considered to be a new field, and there is still gap for generally developing up-to-date theories and concepts, particularly with regard to the media (Kung, 2006).

### **Research questions:**

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- (a) What is the relationship between the ownership of the Saudi news channels and their management systems, and how this affects the news production agenda?
- (b) To what extent does the political and economic environment of Saudi news channels affect their management systems and news production?

One of the research strategies to analyse media management is the rationalist approach used in Master's of Business Administration (MBA) management courses and the consultancy field, which is shaped by analysing and evaluating the context and the problems facing media organisations; this approach can help the managers of news channels to understand not only the changing media environment, but also the developments within the media industry (Kung, 2006).

The incorporation of an analysis of the internal and external factors determining Saudi newsrooms and media production is considered necessary in order to propose answers to the above research questions:

(i) internal environment - the organisational structure prevailing in the management culture and resources, as well as a set of organisational relationships, work and tasks, ranked according to administrative levels;

(ii) External environment - the economic and political context of Saudi Arabia - and its impact on news production.

The political economy approach by Murdock (2002) considered the

most suitable theoretical framework for this study. This approach based on five key determinants that control the performance of the media:

- (a) pattern of media ownership;
- (b) sources of news and information;
- (c) development of existing management system and challenge of conversion into a global media industry;
- (d) development of strategies to suppress rival ideologies in favour of the prevailing capitalism pattern; and
- (e) advertising.

Media ownership affects media performance and agenda (Doyle, 2002). Patterns of media ownership vary from one region to another, according to their respective political and cultural context; however, Doyle (2002) argues that the development of technology in the field of media may make state regulations redundant regarding media ownership.

#### **Objectives and Limitations:**

This study expected to critically review and provide an alternative to recent attempts to analyse the relationship between ownership and media output in Saudi Arabia; for instance, Ayish (2002) suggests a categorisation of the pan-Arab news media, particularly satellite TV channels, into three patterns:

- (i) traditional - government-controlled, state-owned;
- (ii) reformist - government-controlled, state-owned, but apparently progressive;
- (iii) liberal - commercial, privately-owned outlets.

William Rugh (2004) also provides a typology of Arab media, based on its political role in each country rather than the geographical division. He develops a classification that divides the media systems into 'mobilisation', 'loyalist' and 'diverse'. Mobilisation refers to the ownership model controlled by a small ruling group; loyalist media group refers to media systems owned by private businesses that remain loyal to the current ruling regime; and finally, diverse refers to systems which allow competing political parties or groups to freely use the media to voice their opinions.

The research hypothesis is that this argument does not hold true in the Arab region, where the state still plays a pivotal role in managing the

information infrastructure. It believed that the analysis of the external factors should be complemented by the analysis of the internal factors, particularly the organisational and business models (Kung, 2000). Given the under-representation of this topic, one limitation is to be able to locate appropriate literature in Arabic and English that can be applied to the chosen Arab country, which is here Saudi Arabia; another is to find appropriate expenditure of the vast budgets in the Saudi media field according to scientific methods.

### **Literature review:**

The Gulf War of 1991 undoubtedly marked a watershed in the Arab broadcasting industry especially in Saudi Arabia; with Saudi audiences tuning in to foreign channels such as the *CNN* and *BBC*, many Saudi businessmen realised the power of television - audiences avoided state media by searching for updates about the war on foreign stations. Saudi audiences were now exposed to a new way of news reporting and a new wave of Western-style programmes: with the advancement of broadcasting technology, audiences opted for owning satellite dishes which facilitated access to a plethora of channels, both in Arabic and in English (Omer, 2009). Saudi businessmen set up several satellite channels, based in foreign cities such as London: The *Middle East Broadcasting* station (MBC) in 1992 (Yassine, 2013), and (Orbit) channels (a TV group operating in the Middle East and North Africa), (ART) group channels (Omer, 2009), and so on. Saudi channels had the priority in this field by establishing the first Arabian, privately-owned channel through the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) from London, in 1991, which later launched *Al-Arabiya* news channel (Ayish, 2011).

However, No longer the single most common source for daily news among Arab nationals, TV is now at parity with several digital news forms. In 2019, between six or seven out of 10 people get news at least once a day not only from TV, but also from their friends, the internet in general, and messaging platforms and social media applications specifically (Everette et al., 2019).

In the middle East countries, the majorities of nationals across all age and education groups get news every day from television, age: 68% 18- 24 year-olds, 74% 25-34 year-olds, 81% 35-44 year olds, 86% 45+ year-olds; education: 80% primary or less, 80% intermediate, 76%

secondary, 77% university or higher” (Everette et al., 2019, P: 23).

The new generation of Arab politicians and heads of state who wished to reform their political systems, faced external competition from foreign-based channels such as the *BBC*, eventually led to the use of media, particularly pan-Arab and trans-national outlets, for commercial and political purposes. It is estimated that there are more than 500 channels, of which the majority is privately owned, including 22 news channels (Mellor, 2011); furthermore, *al-Jazeera* (Arabic) has marked a new turn in the Arab news industry; although it was classified as state-owned, receiving its funding from the Qatari government, it has a freedom margin, which allows it to integrate different views in its coverage (Karim, 2012).

A new phase of satellite broadcasting followed the 2003 war in Iraq, with the launch of several news channels competing with *Al-Jazeera* (Arabic) such as the *Al-Arabiya* satellite channel, launched by the *MBC* group, to compete with news production in the Arab region (Omer, 2009); moreover, realising the power of news media in influencing Arab public opinion, the USA launched the *Al-Hurra* channel in Arabic, in February 2004, funded by the American Congress (Al-Sayed, 2005), in order to offer an alternative to both *Al-Jazeera* (Arabic) and *Al-Arabiya*. The *BBC* set up its television venture in March 2008, by integrating it with its well-established radio and online services in Arabic. The launching of several new ventures have occurred in the past few years, including *Arabic Sky News* and *Russia Today* in Arabic (Ayish, 2011) in order to offer an alternative to both *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*. The region witnessed the launching of dedicated media cities such as Cairo, Dubai and Amman, which contributed towards media activity and production of various programmes to meet the growing need for political Arab news in answer to the highly competitive media markets (Yassine, 2013), consequently, these developments added more pressure to the Saudi news channels industry, forcing it to reconsider its old management approach and strategies, and paying heed to the demands of its audiences (Alshadookhy, 2009).

The end of 2010 witnessed a new phase of political transformation in the Arab region, particularly after the Tunisian revolution and the development of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, which inspired many Arab people to try to change their regimes; that period also marked a new phase of pan-Arab media, which rapidly extended its coverage across

the region and an increasing number of correspondents on the ground. Moreover, the role of Arab media experienced a notable change during the same period, with several programmes committed to critiquing the existing and former regimes (Yassine, 2013). Pan-Arab channels such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* applied a different agenda, which, for some commentators, was that of their owners, while some state-owned media followed the traditional path of supporting their regimes.

The recent development in the region forced many states to change their political media strategies and management of news channels; for instance, Saudi Arabia recently introduced media legislation to license new organisations, especially in the radio and television sector (Al Tamimi and Co, 2013). The government chose to follow the British model media regulation by separating radio and television services from the ministry of information, in order to function like a public service such as *BBC* in UK. The government also discussed new methods to enhance news services by considering innovative management styles in media productions. It is worth noting that the Saudi media landscape is characterised by the recent proliferation of specialist television channels: Channel Al-Saudia broadcasts all Saudi issues; Channel SBC which broadcasts Saudi entertainments; Al-Ekhbaria specialises in news in an attempt to compete with *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*; a Qur'an channel that provides live broadcasts for all prayer times from Makkah, with Qur'anic recitations; Al-Sunnah gives live broadcasts for all prayer times from Medina, with texts from the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad; Thikrayatt broadcasts all Saudi, Arab and international old productions and two channels that broadcasts sports events.

### **Research Methodology:**

There are four Saudi news channels, *Al-Ekhbaria* TV (state-owned), *Al-Arabiya*, (*Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath*) and (*Saudi 24*) which are (privately-owned), two channels which are suitable for case studies have been selected:

- 1) *Al-Ekhbaria* TV (state-owned)
- 2) *Al-Arabiya* (privately-owned)

The researcher has adopted the classification of Saudi government and private news channels according to the General Commission for audiovisual Media (GCAM) and Saudi Broadcasting Authority

(SBA). In addition, these channels were launched in 2003 and still working until the date of conducting this study (Alshadookhy, 2021). Moreover, these channels have been chosen because, they should offer the foundation for a balanced analysis of privately-owned and state-owned channels.

The study adopts a qualitative approach (Alehizan, 2010), which based on the following methods:

**(i) Document analysis:** according to Al-Theidi (1996) a selection of media policy documents will be examined, together with those relating to the chosen channels: documents are 'any symbolic representation that can be recorded or retrieved for analysis', and are considered to be suitable tools to study and understand cultural issues, without assuming that any kind of document can be used as data; not all data has to depend solely on documents, therefore, reference will be made to secondary material such as policy and organisational reports.

**(ii) Semi-structured interviews:** interviews can be defined as a conversation between researchers (seeking information) and respondents who possess the particular knowledge or information about a certain subject (Berger, 2011), therefore, media experts, editors and journalists will be interviewed in order to identify the organisational strategies and the professional practices within the news outlet (Alehizan, 2010); in addition, qualitative interviewing is strongly enhanced 'by a constructivist theoretical orientation which consider[s] reality to be socially constructed' (Brennen, 2013).

**(iii) Participant observation:** based on observation and field notes to be collected from each newsroom. This approach can be understood as simply one social research method, albeit an unusual one, drawing on a wide range of sources of information. The participant in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions...collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned (Jensen and Jankowski, 2002).

### **Research Design:**

This study uses three types of methodology. The purpose of using multiple research methods is to find appropriate answers to the research questions, and it is believed that the research questions may be answered by analysing material from different sources.

### Semi-structured interviews:

The researcher used interviewing as the main method to get answers to the questions of the research topic. Due to his previous professional experience in Saudi Arabia, he has contacted with the two Saudi outlets above, he did the interviews with media experts, editors and journalists to identify the organisational strategies and the professional practice within the news outlet.

In order to conduct the interviews, researcher took several procedures through three stages for each part:

First, in order to execute the interviews, processes take around two months between 14/5/2021 and 02/7/2021. Researcher traveled to two countries Saudi Arabia where *Al-Ekhbaria* news channel located and Dubai where *Al-Arabiya* news channel located in two phases.

In the beginning, the researcher went to *Al-Ekhbaria* news channel; spend two days 16-17/05/2021 to conduct the interviews with the channel staff. Interviews consist of six of the main important employees, academic and media experts of the channel according to the following schedule.

	Name	Position
1	Dr. Alhmood Abdullah	Former vice Chairman of the broadcasting corporation in Saudi Arabia and an academic professor in Media and communication in Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University.
2	Dr. Dafer M. Alshehri	Media consultant for the broadcasting corporation in Saudi Arabia an academic professor in Media and communication.
3	Hosam Fawzy	Editor of bulletins.
4	Zahran Alzahrani	Director of reporters.
5	Sadon Alshammri	Manager of the news and programmes.

As a second stage to execute the interviews, the researcher traveled to Dubai where *Al-Arabiya* news channel located and did the interviews with channel staff in two days on 03-04\06\2021, interviewees were five of the main staff members in the channel according to the following schedule.

	Name	Position
1	Abdulrhman Al Rashed	Member of the Board of Directors of Al-Arabiya channel
2	Dr.Nabil Khatib	Former executive Editor
3	mohammed Chebaro	Editor-in-chief - news bulletins.
4	Hanan Al-Masri	Correspondent - Gaza.
5	Mohammed Tomaihi	News anchor.

Transcribing and translating phase: all interviews have done in Arabic language to give the interviewees a good opportunity to understand all the questions, and giving their answers after a good understanding, and then the researcher fills out all the interview's answers in Arabic. After that, the researcher translated all the interviews with the help of professional translator who works in a certified translation center located in Riyadh city in Saudi Arabia.

#### **Participant-observation and documents analysis:**

In terms of participants' observations, the researcher uses his strong relationships with Saudi friends who work in the academic field, or in broadcasting media, assisting the researcher to explore participant-observation. About the study analysis, they provided all the necessary documents which he needs to do his documents analysis.

#### **Results:**

This section shall present the findings, following the field interviews conducted in Saudi Arabia and UAE, including *Al-Ekhbaria* and *Al-Arabiya* news channels, following the transcription of all interviews, emerging themes which deal with the main focus of this study shall be extracted, namely, (a) the internal environment, including the organisational structure of the selected newsrooms; and (b) the external environment such as the economic and political context which impacts on news production.

##### **(a) Internal factors:**

##### **i. Working environment:**

Many staff members of *Al-Ekhbaria* news channel are Saudis, although some employees are from Egypt and Sudan (Researcher's observation, between 18\05\2021 and 20\05\2021). The researcher

observed that they were governed by strict bureaucracy at work, which had a negative effect on the news production process; at the time of observation, management wished to give them more responsibilities than they currently had. Women were encouraged to work for *Al-Ekhbaria*, and, in terms of traditional Islamic regulations, they were isolated, since mixed gender work environment is not welcome in Saudi society. A private area was allocated to women, which consisted of a restaurant, rest area and a 'beauty' room. The privacy that this area afforded, allowed women to perform their tasks without being obliged to follow the strict prevailing traditional customs in the presence of men in work place; however, women obliged to wear the hijab outside the dedicated area: for instance, during meetings which usually included male employees, and when reading the news bulletins (Researcher's observation, between 18\05\2021 and 20\05\2021).

The work setting and equipment in Al-Arabiya newsroom, by contrast, is considered as an organisation providing a rapid, dynamic and professional media environment that is common in media situations. Multi-national Arab employees from the surrounding Arab countries work in an environment that allows competition and full equality between men and women. The employees of *Al-Arabiya* believe in the aesthetics of the channel's image, and consider it to be as one of the most important factors for attracting the attention of viewers as Nabil Khatib said (Interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021). They are fully aware of the intense rivalry between *Al-Arabiya* and *Al-Jazeera* news channels are able to successfully accomplish their tasks without the bureaucracy adopted by *Al-Ekhbaria*.

## ii. Channel management and organisational style

There does not appear to be a clear management organisation for *Al-Ekhbaria*, as *Saudi Broadcasting Corporation* (SBA), which was established on 28th May 2012, in order to restructure Saudi satellite television, and adopt new, more efficient methods in media production. It also intended to introduce a professional approach in dealing with the surrounding issues by using new management practices in media and other related work production. The aim was to achieve the following:

- Embodiment of government public policy in all areas and aspects;
- Development and reinforcement of values derived from Islamic law;
- improvement of service performance in radio and television,

serving the national interest, economic and social development, the establishment of ethical rules and spiritual values, and the strengthening of national unity;

- Contribute: towards the deployment of national, Islamic, and human heritage; towards the dissemination of culture; and towards raising the level of awareness (SBA, 2022).

(SBA) is experiencing a new era of development and transformation which includes administrative advancement; this re-organisation is, however, according to personal aspirations and is not subject to a recognised or professional management style (Researcher's observation, between 18\05\2021 and 20\05\2021).

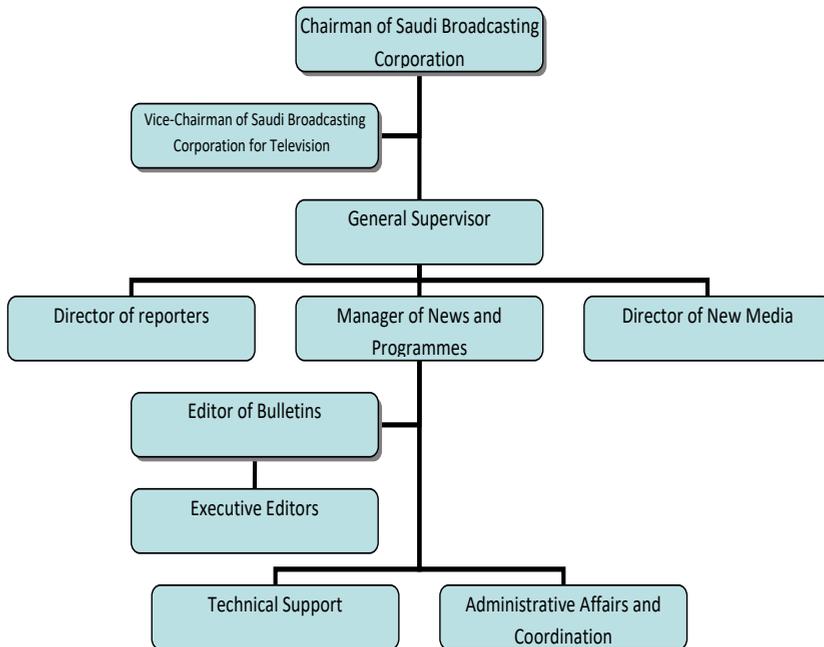


Figure (2) Organisational structure of *Al-Ekhbaria* News Channel

The administrative development, according to Dr. Alshehri is governed by a dedicated division of (SBA):

Administrative development can be measured through the outputs and programmes, news quality, and the evolution of structure, content,

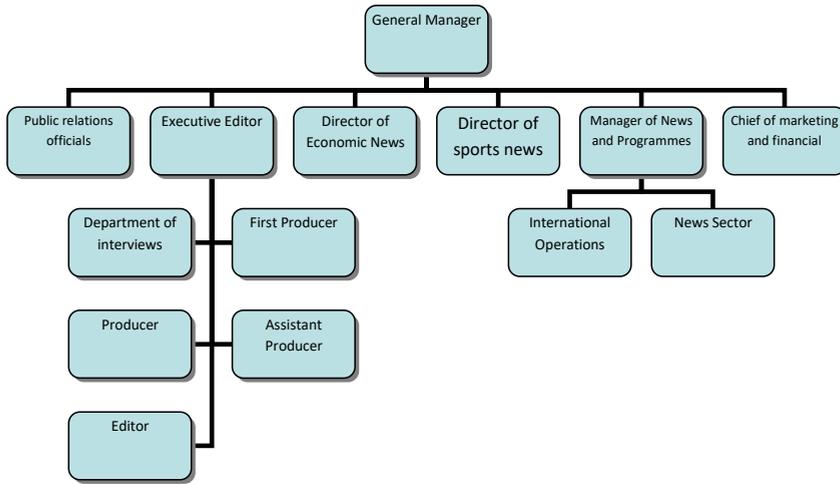
and the extent of demand for advertising, implementing training mechanisms, and so on; many plans began by converting the SBC into various categories of specialised, administratively independent bodies: (i) radio and television (field sector); (ii) audio-visual media commission - regulatory body dealing with permits, regulations, performance monitoring, and supervision of the open offices cable TV; and (iii) the Saudi Press Agency (field staff).

Therefore, developmental steps that are required to find the appropriate and functional features that are better than the previous ones. The conclusion of the convention on the development of media work, particularly with several training bodies, software development, badges, and the creation of an entity to measure the reception rate of the partnership with the private sector, in order to figure out percentages for the development of performance, and attract more sponsors and advertisers, and the establishment of training facilities to develop professional performance centres (interview, Riyadh, 16\05\2021).

The member of the Board of directors of *Al-Arabiya* channel, Abdulrhman Al-Rashed, explained:

The reason for the lack of the possibility to find a professional news channel under state support in the Arab world in general is owing to the fact that State news channels should be managed according to the private pattern [...] under the principle of profit and loss; for example, there is a group of government hotels in Saudi Arabia: one run by a government department which is a failure, and another hotel is administered by the private sector - that is one of the most successful hotels in Riyadh (interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021).

According to Nabil Khatib, *Al-Arabiya* appears to perform professionally, even though the organisational structure of the channel has not changed for more than eighteen years (Interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021); it seems, therefore, that the channel owners have not considered it necessary to focus on the administrative development as a priority.



**Figure (3) Organisational structure of *Al-Arabiya* News Channel**

### iii. self-censorship:

*Al-Ekhbaria* employees practice self-censorship by observing strict employment regulations based on traditional and religious regulations. Dr. Al-Hamood, the former vice Chairman of the broadcasting corporation in Saudi Arabia and an academic professor in Media and communication in Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, said:

Employees of *Al-Ekhbaria* news channel are aware of two meanings for self-censorship; firstly, by believing that all the channel staff members observe self-censorship based on the religious education of Saudi society; and secondly, the channel has specialists, such as the editors and programme managers, who have good skills and knowledge acquired from cumulative experience in this respect. (interview, Riyadh, 16\05\2021)

Self-censorship for *Al-Arabiyya*, on the other hand, does not have a special definition. Dr. Nabil Khatib, Former executive Editor, said:

The Channel, at this point, depends on the fact that its Arab journalists practice self-censorship stemming from traditional culture and society; however, this kind of censorship is inappropriate in the *Al-Arabiya* professional environment, and the channel is trying to change some of the self-censorship practices by addressing them and

reducing their impact on the production of daily tasks (interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021)

Hanan Al-Masri, *Al-Arabiya's* correspondent in Gaza, sees that self-censorship should stem from the journalist himself or herself. She said:

If we talk about ourselves [...] we are human beings, we need self-censorship as we may make mistakes [...] and it is possible that we do [...]. Yes, and I [...do...] practice self-censorship [...] which is prevalent in our societies because of the limited margin of freedom [...], therefore, I think self-censorship is widely practiced in the channel environment (interview, Dubai, 04\06\2021).

#### **iv. assessment and statistics of channel programmes:**

*Al-Ekhbaria* specialises in the news, therefore news programmes and political and economic issues take priority, regardless of any marketing plans, as it does not allow advertising (Researcher's observation, between 18\05\2021 and 22\05\2021).

According to Nabil Khatib Al-Arabiya's output, on the other hand, has special features to support its marketing strategy; these consist of new ideas professionally delivered and attractive to its viewing public; in addition, the channel's programmes are based on updated items from current news events, and, at the same time, attempts to broadcast new programmes, based on original ideas from its reporters and editors, with a specific marketing strategy that targets Arab viewers, in order to receive high advertising revenue for the channel (Interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021).

*Al-Ekhbaria* also broadcasts a considerable number of programmes and news bulletins. Zahran Al-Zahrani, the channel's Director of Reporters, said:

The channel has 20 correspondents within the kingdom [for local and regional news] and there is a separate news department abroad which focuses on outside [international] issues. The number of news reports reaches 170 to 180 each month; this number rises considerably during *Ramadan* and the *Hajj* period (interview, Riyadh, 17\05\2021)

Hosam Fawzy, the channel's Bulletins Editor added:

It is a difficult issue because originally, the news articles were sometimes local reports and outside reports. It is possible, on average, to receive three local reports and about four outside reports daily [...] so, in total you are talking about 2,000 to 2,500 news items in a year

(interview, Riyadh, 16\05\2021)

*Al-Arabiya*, on the other hand, has a larger number of programmes and news bulletins, fed by a significant team of journalists. Dr. Nabil Khatib said:

There are about 50 correspondents and reporters around the world, and there are 45 editors; approximately 60,000 news reports and 12,000 news items are received in a year (interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021)

**(b) External factors:**

**i. government control and censorship:**

The employees in *Al-Ekhbaria* believe that government ownership has an effect on the management system of the channel, largely by the control it has on all the functional and financial procedures in production and employment, in accordance with the government service systems. The administrative procedures regarding acceptance or refusal of productions, employees' reward schemes and security (protecting equipment and buildings), have to pass strict government rules and processes that take a long time to be approved. Organisational and management functions such as planning, monitoring and programme evaluation are also subject to strict government control, unlike privately-owned channels such as *Al-Arabiya* (Researcher's observation, between 18\05\2021 and 22\05\2021).

Ownership of *Al-Arabiya* does not appear to have an effect on the management system of the channel; the owner does not work at the channel, and leaves all the administrative procedures, such as budgeting for productions and employees' rewards, to the management team, which allows the smooth running of the channel and delivery of good quality media productions which attract viewers and meet their expectations; the majority of the contributors are unknown to the newsroom staff or even the public, except that most of them are aware that the Chairman of the Board of Directors is Al-Waleed bin Ibrahim; this does not appear to have a detrimental effect on the success of the channel (interviews, Dubai, 03\06\2021); in terms of tackling the State's corruption stories, *Al-Ekhbaria* is in no doubt with regard to what is expected of them. The rules are set down by the State, including tackling the corruption in government-run enterprises, following the Saudi Arabian government's establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (*NAZAHA*) in March 2011 (Al Tamimi and Co, 2013), in the wake of the Arab Spring; despite

this Commission, the channel is still subject to production control according to its officials' evaluations.

*Al-Arabiya*, on the other hand, does not adopt any particular strategy to address corruption issues; reporting on these or any similar matters must correspond with what the rulers of Arab countries wish to publish, therefore, there is a certain restriction on media coverage in this field; guidance regarding the exclusion of addressing corruption in state organisations is not given in the *Al-Arabiya* organisation which may have serious consequences; according to Dr Nabil Khatib:

One of the channel's priorities is to create "diversity" in its news coverage, however, consideration must be given to the fact that the channel deals with issues regarding the special characteristics of Arab countries such as confidentiality and the difficulty of obtaining information in the absence of laws protecting the freedom of the press and the right to know - so, in this kind of environment, dealing with state corruption can be classified as a risk (interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021)

The lack of direction and 'freedom' to choose what to publish in the *Al-Arabiya* newsroom sometimes invites intimidation or threats; some of *Al-Arabiya* employees have complained of receiving both serious and minor menaces as a result of reporting certain topics such as terrorism issues. Mohammed Tomaihi, the channel's news anchor, faced a death threat during his broadcast of the programme called 'Death Industry', which reported the issues of terrorism in the Arab world (Interview, Dubai, 04\06\2021); *Al-Arabiya* has lost some correspondents in Iraq and Syria, for instance, Sabah al-Bazi (Alriyadh newspaper, 2011), Mohammed Saeed (alarabiya website, 2013) and Atwar Bahjat (aljazeera.net, 2006), a female reporter.

Employees of *Al-Ekhbaria* do not complain of threats as a result of reporting certain topics such as corruption or controversial political activities and the maximum punishment they could face is a verbal or written reprimand (Interview, Riyadh, 16\05\2021).

## ii. editorial independence:

The instruments which guarantee editorial independence in *Al-Ekhbaria*, can be summed up by two answers from respondents: first, Sadon Al-Shammri, manager of the channel's news and programmes said:

Our editorial policy for the channel is trying to get rid of traditional government patterns [of management] to give us a different story by keeping pace with the new media (interview, Riyadh, 17\05\2021)

Dr. Al-Hamood added the second answer:

...the existence of special departments for news coverage at the channel with all editorial and technical support, in addition, the work environment and the channel's equipment give us the chance to get the scoop. All of these factors ensure editorial independence (interview, Riyadh, 16\05\2021)

*Al-Arabiya's* editorial department, according to Dr. Nabil Khatib, is directed by a set of guidelines in order to maintain a certain editorial strategy:

Editorial independence can be guaranteed on two points: first, code of practice, an organisational structure for the process of production and editorials which does not include any political reportage restrictions *per se*, but there is a role for the editor to ensure that the editorial department observes the channel's editorial policy; second, there is an editorial reference guidebook to direct the editors' decisions (interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021)

The employees of *Al-Ekhbaria* generally believe that there are no media restrictions except those imposed by the management team; with regard to the level of journalistic freedom, Dr Al-Hamood stated:

[journalistic] freedom depends on the regulatory framework of media channels which is derived from the media policy of Saudi Arabia. It also depends on the natural cultural and social contexts of Saudi society; as we are employed by Saudi TV, we should bear in mind that these three determinants influence everything that comes from us, and they are considered as professional borderlines for our work (interview, Riyadh, 16\05\2021)

The same policy regarding the evaluation of freedom applies to *Al-Arabiya*; according to Dr. Nabil Khatib:

Although the margin of freedom in the private channels is bigger than that of the state, freedom is still limited; moreover, because the media in Arab countries is owned by private institutions which are not aware of the historic role [it has played] in strengthening the democratic process. In my opinion, the private sector of the media is influenced by its need to keep an alliance with the government, to

protect its interests and investments in the absence of transparency and democratic mechanisms such as coverage of corruption issues and lack of access to information and freedom to publish [the facts] (interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021)

*Al-Ekhbaria* is not concerned with advertising and marketing at any administrative level, as previously mentioned, as the channel does not have to consider profits from advertising or marketing - all overheads are paid by the government through special annual budgets.

*Al-Arabiyya*, on the other hand, as a privately-owned channel, is very interested in the marketing aspect, and advertising is still one of its most important financial resources.

Abdulrhman Al-Rashed was talking about the Arab news channels' movement in the Arab market and the extent of the seriousness of the competition. He said:

*Al-Arabiya* news channel is not afraid of many competitors because we have a clear vision and specific objectives (interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021).

Mohamed Chebaro, editor-in-chief of *Al-Arabiya* news channel bulletins, praised the channel's work environment regarding advertising:

It does not affect the quality of the reports or the news, but does have an effect on the time of broadcasting the material and the time it takes - sometimes I am forced to stop a news report as a result of advertising, which is according to the time slot that advertisers demand - really, this is annoying, but I need to get my salary to eat (interview, Dubai, 04\06\2021).

### **(iii) Audience and feedback**

According to Al-Hamood, All Saudi channels faced real problems in viewing rates, since the beginning of the nineties, as a result of the fierce competition from other Arab satellite channels; in spite of that, *Al-Ekhbaria* still does not have any mass media measuring tools, but intends to establish a new national company which will provide these services; until recently, the channel has used social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* to measure its audience and viewers and to monitor their opinions, as a positive step towards meeting the competition (Interview, Riyadh, 16\05\2021).

*Al-Arabiya* news channel, in contrast, as Nabil Khatib said does not face problems regarding viewing rates, despite the strong competition

from other news channels, as it allows its audience and viewers to express their opinions through several methods including email, polls and on social media (Interview, Dubai, 03\06\2021).

### **Conclusion:**

The revolution in broadcasting technology all over the world has guided Arab countries to experience many changes in terms of media and satellite technology; these changes have given Arabic channels in general, and Saudi news channels in particular, an opportunity to improve their approach regarding their media delivery; many conflicts and political transformations in this part of the world have made Saudi news channels either government channel or private one face immense challenges regarding the reportage of controversial issues.

Strong debates are being made about the impact of satellite technology on the political scene in the Arab world; this study attempted to assess and understand the issues of media ownership and policies which are considered to play major roles in the analysis of the current Saudi media landscape. It is hoped that this study shall, at the same time, contribute to the emerging debate about the topic of media ownership and management, given the limited studies dedicated to this topic.

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