

Ahmet M. OREN

Chairman of Ihlas Holding

We are a major television and newsgathering organization based in Istanbul, Turkey, and I'd like to give you a brief summary of what we are experiencing in the region.

We are a major producer and major consumer of news, mostly in the Middle East and in Turkey. When we started in 1993 as a regional news agency, there were no pan-regional news channels with which we could work. Local channels had a completely different news agenda from us and from the rest of the international news media.

But today, almost all major pan-regional news channels are our customers. During the recent Iraqi war, we served some 300 media companies from out of Iraq. And today, we produce around 3 hours of news video per day covering the region. All this is partly because the regional channels have a high demand for our international news service.

We are seeing major trends in the Middle East, in the Arab world. Regional satellite channels : Regional footprint and increased competition... The major new element in the picture is direct-to-home satellite TV. Yesterday we watched a little clip about Iran and how the satellite dishes are popping up there.

Previously, "international" meant just the Western media. But now, regional satellite TV model seems to have proved viable politically and economically in the region. Protocol agenda is dying. Discussion programmes are breaking taboos.

Alternative, underground media like web sites, e-mail distribution lists, discussion forums, web logs, chat rooms, you name them, are growing increasingly. And everyone is becoming a player. Political groups, clandestine organizations, private citizens, everybody is taking part.

When we talk about freedoms in the region, let us not limit ourselves to the situation during wartime or just to the current events. And also let's not tie the subject to the news media only. Dramas, entertainment for women and children are also part of the media. And we need to talk about freedoms in that respect too.

I'll quickly go through some of the elements that are impacting the regional media. Emergence of a very new element : The audience... Audience is so keen on providing feedback on the content and style. This is new. We cannot ignore the feedback through which the audience is shaping the output of the media – at least partially.

Audience can become an important source of news. For example, during the recent war in Iraq, our news editors were keeping a close eye on discussion forums where sometimes news emerged quicker than some of the other more traditional sources. Overall, this is very positive in the name of participation and it is a very critical element of democracy.

- Emergence of a pan-regional news agenda : Satellite TV and the Internet are unifying the news agenda of the region. News is now more relevant and more real.

- Local monopolies are broken down : Official and semi-official outlets are fast losing their relevance.

- News at the speed of light : Increased competition, wider newsgathering, Internet, mobile communications, audience feedback... It is all taking place very quickly.

In the way of summarizing all this, I have two suggestions to conclude: First of all, we all have to accept the current situation; there is no turning back. Economic independence is one of the key elements of a free media.

Briefly that is the contrast between funded vs. market-driven media. Advertisers will shape the media in the region.

Secondly, I'd like to touch upon the importance of responsible, educated media. I don't believe that everyone with a digital camera or tape recorder qualifies as a journalist. That's why I believe regional media powerhouses should organize training seminars and events and form a permanent structure to bring the regional media together and help them face their professional challenges together.