

THE BIG LEAGUES

OK, IT'S NOT A HIP YOUNG STARTUP—BUT WITH ITS ACQUISITION OF THE FORMER ATV, ARAB TELEMEDIA GROUP IS POISED TO BE A MAJOR FORCE IN A CREATIVE JORDAN.

Words by Anas Almasri. Photography by Joseph Zakarian.

WITH HUNDREDS OF FREE-TO-AIR Arabic satellite channels, new local players have a tough time getting noticed by Arab viewers. But Arab Telemedia Group, a 26-year-old Jordanian TV production company, is confident that the two channels it will launch later this year will make their mark. The first channel will feature variety entertainment; the second, news and analysis.

“We’re working toward positioning ourselves in the big five [Arab satellite brands],” says Talal Awamleh, AT Group’s owner and CEO. Preparations for the launch have been ongoing for the past year, and judging by the group’s expansive offices and production facility in Um Al Summaq, the company has put considerable financial investment into quality.

So what’s new? For a start, the channels will be focused on Jordan.

“They will be channels from Jordanians, for Jordanians, about Jordanian issues,” says Awamleh. There’s a trend in the Middle East, he explains, toward more localized programming—he cites the example of MBC 1, a popular satellite station that carries programming aimed specifically at the Saudi market.

The entertainment channel will air Jordanian TV dramas, as well as game and talk shows featuring mostly Jordanian participants. The news channel will cover in-depth local as well as international news—from a Jordanian point of view, station officials said.

In comparison to Saudi Arabia, which has by far the highest advertising spending in the Middle East and is therefore an attractive market for media channels, Jordan is tiny. So how does AT Group plan to recoup the investment it’s making?

“It’s a very simple equation,” says Awamleh. “First, we have an edge over other channels: we are content producers. We can provide content for our channels at much cheaper rates.”

Buying content, he explains, represents the biggest single cost for most TV channels.

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“Second, TV advertising in Jordan gets less than 5 percent of the total advertising spending, which in 2008 alone was around JD215 million. The average TV spending in the Arab world is 25 percent, and we believe that our channels can capture this much from the total spending [in Jordan]—at the minimum.”

Awamleh attributes the weak expenditure on TV advertising in Jordan to the absence

of quality local programming that Jordanians would want to watch. For decades, Jordan’s only terrestrial TV has been the government-run Jordan Television, a station that no doubt holds great sentimental value to many Jordanians, but which has lost most of its viewership to other stations from overseas.

Awamleh believes AT Group’s offerings will fill this gap and convince advertisers to allocate more of their spending—which now goes primarily to print and outdoor media—to television.

The entrance of privately-run TV channels will undoubtedly ruffle the media market in Jordan, by reallocating advertising expenditure away from the print and outdoor advertising outlets that have for years been thriving. It will also create competition. In fact, Awamleh contends, this has already begun.

“The terrestrial TV station is watching out for us. They have begun improving their studios, their content, and are trying to be more creative,” he says.

And the competition will not just be between AT Group and the incumbent: once the ground is broken, other investors will likely follow AT Group’s example and start new channels, opening the door for a whole new level of growth. ■

(OPPOSITE) AT GROUP OWNER AND CEO TALAL AWAMLEH, IN THE CHANNEL’S MASSIVE STUDIO.

