Background

1. Under the terms of the Agreement the Trust has a duty of oversight of the World Service. This includes conducting an annual performance review and independent research. In the latter the Trust pursues one or two cross-cutting themes or services each year through rigorous research and analysis. The programme of research is intended to complement the extensive data gathered by the World Service itself. In 2007/08 it covered the BBC World Service Afghanistan stream and the English Language Core Service radio.

Trust’s World Service research 2008/09: Editorial Review of BBC Arabic TV

2. In November 2008, the Audience and Performance Committee (APC) chose BBC Arabic TV as the focus of this year’s research. The BBC Arabic TV service is key to the World Service’s strategy. It operates in a strategically important region which presents great challenges to international broadcasters. The Arabic TV market is both highly competitive and emotionally charged.

3. Reconciling audience needs, including emotional engagement, with BBC values of accuracy and impartiality is recognised by World Service management as the key challenge facing the service. Research indicates that audiences in the region rank emotional engagement equal to or higher than credibility and speed. The way it meets this challenge is crucial to both its success in the region and to the perceptions of the BBC worldwide, including among opinion formers in Britain and the USA.

4. The Trustees felt that it was important to gain an enhanced understanding of this strategic service and the editorial challenges it faces. In addition, the research aimed to identify, within its limits, any editorial standards or oversight issues that may need follow-up. In particular, it sought to answer the following key questions:

   a. Does the service meet the needs of its target audience, achieving the relevance and emotional connection required without compromising BBC values?
   b. Is there any evidence that raises concerns about standards of accuracy and impartiality?
   c. Does the service have an appropriate range of stories and treatments?
   d. Are the standard provisions for ongoing editorial oversight of the service sufficient?

BBC Arabic TV – facts and figures

The BBC Arabic TV service (“Arabic TV”), launched in March 2008, is the first Grant In Aid funded vernacular TV service, now joined by BBC Persian TV. It is key to the World Service’s strategy, approved by the BBC Governors and the Foreign and

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1 Clause 64
Commonwealth Office in 2006.

BBC Arabic TV, which transmits from London, operates in a strategically important region, the Middle East and Arabic speaking North Africa (“MENA”), and poses a great challenge to international broadcasters. The service receives approximately £25 million in funding, employing about 250 staff.2

Accurate audience figures across all of the MENA region are known to be difficult to obtain, but immediately following its launch, BBC Arabic TV reached approximately 12 million people in the markets surveyed. This translates to a weekly reach of 23% in markets surveyed, compared to claimed reach of 75% for Al-Jazeera and 73% Al-Arabiya.4

BBC Arabic TV viewers tend to be marginally older, and are more likely to be male and in employment than the MENA regional average. They are however younger than the BBC Arabic radio audience.

Following the closing down of the first, commercially funded BBC Arabic TV service in 1996, the Arabic satellite news market was shaped by the creation of Al-Jazeera and later Al-Arabiya. These two stations are now BBC Arabic TV’s main competitors.

The key questions were tackled by gathering evidence from various sources, including: audience research, interviews with management and staff, reviewing complaints and familiarising ourselves with the schedule and output.

5. Independent qualitative research was used to better understand the needs of the target audience and whether the service meets them, and to ascertain viewers’ thoughts on standards of accuracy, impartiality and the range of stories and treatments. The Trust commissioned Opinion Leader (“OL”) to conduct qualitative research among opinion formers6 in six countries: Iraq, Egypt, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (“SA”), Lebanon, Tunisia and Kuwait. These were chosen to cover markets with both relatively free and relatively state-controlled media as well as audiences that are either homogeneous or heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity and religion. The research took the form of 36 in-depth interviews with current and future opinion formers. The research focused on opinion formers because of their influential status and ability to comment on wider issues such as impartiality,

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2 Due to a degree of integration across the three platforms, exact figures for BBC Arabic TV budget and staff are difficult to separate entirely from BBC Arabic’s combined radio, TV and online.

3 Iraq, Syria (urban), Lebanon, Egypt (3 cities, educated only), Israel (3 districts, Arabs only) and the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE and Qatar); Source: Quantitative Audience Measurement, D3 Systems

4 Source: Quantitative Audience Measurement, fieldwork in March-April 2008, D3 Systems

5 ibid

6 Opinion formers were defined as people in positions of influence including: senior managers in the public and private sector, university lecturers, politicians & government advisers, heads of NGOs, entrepreneurs, senior managers in cultural organisations and journalists/commentators
accuracy and the challenges BBC Arabic faces regarding emotional engagement. In addition, a focus on opinion formers allowed for making best use of the independent qualitative approach with a limited sample size. The OL research was designed to complement existing World Service quantitative research which looked at the broader target audience. The sample was chosen according to the following criteria: 60-40 male-female split; aged between 20 and 50; interested in regional as well as international news; viewers of BBC Arabic TV and competing channels. The research was carried out in February and early March 2009.

6. **World Service and BBC Arabic TV management and staff were interviewed in order to gain an overview of the service, to explore the challenges it faces and to gain an understanding of its compliance with BBC editorial values, complaints process and editorial oversight.** During the research 11 face to face interviews with senior managers, presenters and editors from BBC Arabic TV were conducted. The following took part:

- Nigel Chapman, Director, World Service (2004 – 2009)
- Sanjay Nazerali, Controller MC&A, Global News
- Hugh Saxby, Head of Governance & Accountability, Global News
- Jerry Timmins, Head of Africa and Middle East Region
- Hosam El Sokkari, Head of Arabic Service
- Mariita Eager, Executive Editor, Africa and Middle East
- Hany Elkonyayesi, Strand Editor
- Salah Negm, News Editor
- Faris Couri, Strand Editor
- Sam Farah, Presenter, Nuqtat Hewar
- Hasan Muawad, Presenter, To the Point
- Tony El-Khoury, Presenter, Harvest of the Day/ The World This Evening and News Bulletins

7. In addition a number of front line, output-creating staff who deal with the challenges Arabic TV faces on a daily basis were contacted. Six email responses or phone calls from producers and correspondents in the field and one response from a broadcast journalist based in London were submitted.

Note: The notes on the interviews with BBC Arabic TV management and staff were not added to the appendices for reasons of confidentiality. Where some are quoted by name it is with their agreement.

8. **Audience and other research conducted by the World Service provided the context and background to the OL findings.** Existing research commissioned by the World Service was reviewed to gain an understanding of the service, its target audience and the markets it operates in.

9. **In addition, complaints reports and external sources were checked for any evidence that might raise concerns about BBC Arabic TV’s**

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7 More details on the recruitment, criteria and methodology of the research can be found in BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
standards of impartiality, fairness and accuracy. Since content analysis was outside the scope of this research, other means were used to gain assurance on BBC Arabic TV’s performance. The complaints logs and Arabic TV’s quarterly complaints and comments reports were reviewed, alongside summaries of independent studies by Chatham House and the Open University and reactions to BBC Arabic TV in regional media provided by BBC Monitoring and the internet.

10. To inform the interviews with staff and the analysis of the qualitative research, the research team familiarised themselves with BBC Arabic TV’s schedule and output. They spent two days with an Arabic translator to sample content and get a feel for the service. The two days viewed were 8 December 2008 (earliest date available on AutoRot⁸) and 8 January 2009 a month later and during the Gaza conflict. News bulletins and a number of special programmes were all sampled⁹.

11. The Israeli military offensive in Gaza took place in December 2008 and January 2009 during the course of the research. It proved to be a useful test case for BBC Arabic TV’s performance in upholding the BBC values of accuracy and impartiality since any significant Israeli-Palestinian story is highly sensitive, controversial and closely scrutinised.

12. Following the conflict, the BBC’s decision not to broadcast the Disasters Emergency Committee (“DEC”) Gaza appeal attracted widespread criticism in the MENA region. For this reason it was decided to delay the launch of the independent research (OL) by two weeks so as not to skew the results. This approach was successful as the DEC issue did not dominate the interviews during the course of the OL research.

Executive summary

13. Does the service meet the needs of its target audience, achieving the relevance and emotional connection required without compromising BBC values?

14. Achieving a strong emotional connection will always remain a challenge for BBC Arabic TV and may limit its mass appeal and potential reach. However, management believe that impartiality and accuracy must always take priority over emotional engagement. While BBC Arabic TV meets the needs of its audience in terms of providing relevant, trustworthy news on a variety of topics, emotional engagement, which the mass audience in the MENA region particularly value, is difficult to achieve. The objectivity of the service and the neutrality of its presenters, while less emotionally engaging, are seen as an advantage by many opinion formers interviewed (OL). On further investigation, a number of ways in which the service can build more emotional engagement without compromising BBC values were identified. Some of these have already been recognised and instigated by BBC Arabic TV management.

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⁸ BBC’s automated video replay system
⁹ Nuqtat Hewar, To the Point, The Commission, Open Agenda, The World This Evening
15. **Is there any evidence that raises concerns about standards of accuracy and impartiality?**

16. There is no evidence that would raise concerns about general standards of accuracy and impartiality. If anything, there may be a tendency amongst staff to be over-cautious in upholding BBC values.

17. Coverage of the recent Gaza conflict was the first major test faced by the service. It took place during the period of the review. BBC Arabic TV appeared to perform well in terms of balance, fairness and impartiality.

18. The BBC decision not to run the DEC Gaza appeal clouded an otherwise positive first year for the new channel, but it now appears that its effects have died down. It drew accusations of bias from the audience, caused some interviewees to boycott the BBC and led to at least one programme not being transmitted. On a positive note, despite the testing nature of the issues staff were faced with it appears that BBC values were engaged with and adhered to.

19. Some senior staff say that while the majority of their staff have no problems in adhering to the BBC’s journalistic values they have to actively manage a minority of reporters, especially those working in the field, in order to minimise the risk of personal views affecting their work. From the available evidence, this approach appears to be successful in ensuring accuracy and impartiality on air, but management should make a special effort to target additional training at addressing issues editors identify as part of the World Service training plan.

20. Within the scope of this research it was not possible to identify bias in any particular reports. BBC Arabic TV is likely to be subject to intense scrutiny and criticism in any area of conflict in the MENA region. However, a combination of evidence from a number of different sources (audience research, complaints reports and regional media) points to sensitivities around BBC Arabic TV’s coverage of Lebanon and Iraq. These two countries were isolated cases and both face significant ethnic, political and religious polarisation, including violent conflict. The partiality of some viewers could of itself help explain criticism of BBC Arabic TV’s coverage rather than any failure to meet BBC values. However, given the importance of these values it is essential that management are particularly vigilant in those instances where there is evidence of concerns.

**Recommendation:** Management should make a special effort to target additional training at addressing issues editors identify as part of the World Service training plan.

Management should continue to be vigilant in monitoring coverage and pay particular attention to those instances where there is evidence of concern from audiences.

21. **Does the service have an appropriate range of stories and treatments?**
22. BBC Arabic TV has a good range of stories and treatments for its budget. However, there is scope for improvement in a number of areas including variety of content and visual appeal. Bespoke documentaries remain on both the management and the audience wish list but are not possible under the current budget.

**Recommendation:** BBC Arabic TV should follow through with its intention to introduce more non-political subjects and enhanced visuals.

23. **Are the standard provisions for ongoing editorial oversight of the service sufficient?**

24. Provisions for ongoing editorial oversight appear sufficient with regular editorial meetings, team discussions, checking of stories before they go on air and monitoring of live output. All new staff undergo bespoke training. In addition senior management appear to take a very hands-on approach to oversight in spite of the language barrier with output.

25. While complaints handling appears to be working reasonably well the system could be made more rigorous and transparent. In particular, all complainants should be responded to and advised of the full complaints procedure. Ideally, all complaints should be translated and logged on a central system as this would assist management oversight. However, this could have significant resource implications.

**Recommendation:** BBC Arabic TV should work to make its complaints system more transparent and rigorous. All complainants should be responded to and advised of the full complaints procedure, including the possibility of appeal. Additionally, management should consider how, within current funding arrangements, significant improvements could be made to the logging and translation of complaints and advise the Trust of its conclusions.
Findings

*Does the service meet the needs of its target audience, achieving the relevance and emotional connection required without compromising BBC values?*

Achieving a strong emotional connection is especially valued by a significant part of the audience in the MENA region but will always remain a challenge for BBC Arabic TV and may limit its mass appeal and potential reach. However, management believe that impartiality and accuracy must always take priority over emotional engagement. BBC Arabic TV meets audience needs by providing relevant, trustworthy news on a variety of topics and its more neutral tone, while less emotionally engaging, is valued by many of the opinion formers interviewed. In addition, a number of ways in which the service can build more emotional engagement without compromising BBC values were identified. Some of these have already been recognised and instigated by BBC Arabic TV management.

Emotional connection will always remain a challenge for BBC Arabic TV, limiting its mass appeal.

26. **The primary goal of BBC Arabic TV is to provide a high quality news channel grounded in BBC values.** While the service aims to reach more than 25 million viewers within five years it prioritises sound journalism over mass appeal in the MENA region. The independent research (OL) showed that the BBC is seen as a respected, intelligent news provider targeting well educated and “elite” viewers.

27. **Audience engagement is considered especially important in the MENA region.** One of the BBC Arabic TV editors said that “the Arab psyche is more emotional than the Western one” and the importance of emotional engagement, while not quantifiable, was frequently emphasised in audience research. In some cases, research indicated that parts of the MENA audience may rank emotional engagement equal to or higher than credibility and speed.

> “We want a news channel that is the voice of the Arab street… on the Arab street they don’t just want news, they want to express their opinions and have their opinions conveyed; they want to express and they want to explode.” (A quote in qualitative research, September 2008)

28. There is a spectrum of emotional engagement ranging from overt empathy with the audience, ‘recycling’ their own views back to them, to offering engaging stories with which the audience can identify and more interactivity. While BBC

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10 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1

11 The Arabic TV Audience (August 2007); Perceptions of BBC Arabic TV in MENA region (July and September 2008), AMRB

12 Perceptions of BBC Arabic TV in the MENA region, (July and September 2008), AMRB
Arabic TV can never compromise its editorial values through the former, it can make some progress on the latter.

29. **A number of BBC Arabic TV’s competitors are seen as having a strong emotional connection with audiences in the MENA region.** In particular, on the highly popular Al-Jazeera channel, presenters often identify with the audience, acting as their champions and advocates. Use of emotionally charged, “on your side” language and pictures is said to be common. The OL research found that for a minority of participants emotional engagement equals emotion shown by presenters towards the incident they are reporting, for example, dressing in black to mourn victims of war.

“You watch Al-Jazeera for its defiance.” (Saudi Arabia, Cultural Organisation, Male)

30. **Such an approach is not compatible with BBC editorial values of accuracy and impartiality.** In fact, management refer to Al-Jazeera’s use of emotive language and editorially loaded pictures as:

“The kind of emotional engagement we don’t do.” (Jerry Timmins, Head of Africa and Middle East)

31. **Some parts of the audience do not always appreciate the BBC’s neutrality which can disconnect them from the channel.** The independent research (OL) showed that BBC presenters and reporters are sometimes seen as “detached” and “cold” showing no empathy with news stories.

“The BBC is respected but not considered attractive. We pay the price for being neutral” (Hasan Muawad, Presenter, To the Point, BBC Arabic TV)

32. **BBC Arabic TV’s necessarily limited emotional connection with viewers may lower its appeal to the mass Arab audience and its potential reach but management see this as a price worth paying.** Adherence to BBC editorial values constrains BBC Arabic’s ability to meet expectations of emotional engagement among a part of its audience and consequently limits its appeal and potential reach in the MENA region.

“BBC Arabic’s job lies in dispassionate thoughtfulness shedding ‘light not heat’ and so empowering audiences to take a better informed and considered view of the world around them.” (Nigel Chapman, Former Director, BBC World Service)

**BBC Arabic TV is seen as providing high quality journalism and analysis. Opinion formers value its credibility, neutrality and accuracy.**

33. Previous research showed that audiences wanted accuracy, credibility, impartiality, breaking news, insight and emotional engagement. According to more recent work, they value Arabic TV’s freedom of expression, variety of

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13 Interviews with management and staff
14 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix I
15 BBC Arabic TV pre-launch research: The Arabic TV Audience (August 2007)
16 Perceptions of BBC Arabic TV in MENA region (July and September 2008), AMRB
programmes and high quality. The independent research (OL) confirms that the channel has earned the respect of the opinion former audience for its professional journalism, analysis, freedom of speech, coverage of international news and taboo topics.

“It provides you with the news no matter what the consequences are.” (Saudi Arabia, Journalist, Female)

34. The majority of opinion formers interviewed in the OL research deemed BBC Arabic TV to be trustworthy, credible and objective and many said they valued its neutral style. Some particularly appreciated that it allows viewers to make up their own minds.

“I like that the BBC is objective in its approach to subjects.” (Lebanon, Journalist, Female)

“...in addition to the credibility of news that is adopted by the [BBC], it is also accurate in conveying the news.” (Iraq, Academic, Male)

For many participants BBC Arabic TV’s relative lack of empathy with the audience is seen as an advantage, suggesting they value credibility and impartiality more than emotional engagement. They feel that BBC Arabic TV portrays the news objectively, in a “calm and neutral manner” while Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera present their own points of view with presenters displaying “high temper and tone”.

“BBC Arabic is neutral (...) especially compared to other channels, which exaggerate the news or cover one side of the news.” (Kuwait, Journalist, Female)

“ BBC Arabic TV is distinguished by being a neutral channel and consequently can gain the trust of the Arab viewer.” (Egypt, Journalist, Female)

Some opinion formers interviewed in the OL research feel that BBC Arabic TV gives them the “freedom to watch a channel that does not use exaggerated tone, religious orientation or political stance to distort content.”(BBC Arabic TV: Report, Opinion Leader)

35. This is connected to their impressions of the BBC as a whole, imbued with a heritage of trustworthiness over 70 years of BBC Arabic Radio service.

“The [BBC] dates back years and years. It has deeply established roots and has covered very important events, including those in the Middle East. Thus, any listener or viewer seeking credibility would watch BBC.” (Saudi Arabia, Journalist, Female)

36. While the OL study interviewed a limited number of opinion formers, its findings are borne out by research conducted by the World Service, which also praised BBC Arabic TV for being neutral and unbiased.

17 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
18 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
19 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
20 Perceptions of BBC Arabic TV in MENA region (July and September 2008), AMRB
While there will always be constraints in BBC Arabic TV’s ability to meet the challenge of emotional engagement in the MENA region, there are a number of ways in which it can improve its connection with the audience.

37. There is scope for BBC Arabic TV to adopt elements of emotional engagement without compromising BBC values of impartiality. Some elements have already been embarked upon by management but there is still more potential for enhancing emotional connection with viewers:

- BBC Arabic TV can use personal story-telling techniques that build bridges between local concerns and global stories to help build emotional engagement. A good example of this is the way BBC Arabic covered the news of the establishment of a formal border between Lebanon and Syria through a story of a family living in a house straddling it.\(^\text{21}\)

  “I like topics which build bridges between different people.” (Saudi Arabia, NGO, Male)

At least one BBC Arabic journalist in the field who was spoken to as part of the research recognised this technique of “personalising each and every story” as a way of engaging with the viewers.

- Marketing can help reinforce the connection between BBC Arabic and its viewers. For example, promotional films for BBC Arabic TV are already specifically targeting the issue of emotional engagement by portraying mini-stories showing how individuals are linked to the outside world and to global news.

- BBC Arabic TV can never be an advocate for the causes its audiences feel passionately about but it can become the trusted source they turn to for credible information. Arguably, such a relationship of trust built up over time can itself be a form of emotional engagement as audiences form a personal connection to BBC Arabic TV, turning to it as a trusted provider of accurate and impartial news.

  “BBC Arabic is like an old man, wise and deep.” (Kuwait, Academic, Male)

- Introducing a broader range of topics would also help build engagement by covering issues relevant to everyday lives. See paragraphs 52 and 53 below.

- Treatments and visual appeal could be enhanced. BBC Arabic TV can sometimes appear quite static and old fashioned with seated presenters, a preponderance of talking heads and a limited range of visuals. The OL audience research confirmed this view. In addition, the research found significant appetite for live coverage placing the viewers in the midst of the story and allowing them to feel a personal connection to the news in this way.\(^\text{22}\). It is clear that the costs of filming and live satellite links will continue to limit Arabic TV’s live picture-richness but even small changes such as

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\(^{21}\) BBC Arabic TV, 8 December 2008

\(^{22}\) BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix I
enhancing the location map used in a lot of two-ways with a photo of the correspondent or the interviewee would be a step in the right direction.

• More interactive programming can help build a connection with the audience. BBC Arabic TV is already appreciated for its openness to dialogue and discussion that some participants feel makes the channel “close to the viewer”.

“It gives the Arabs a chance to represent themselves” (Saudi Arabia, Journalist, Female)

In particular the programme Nuqtat Hewar (Talking Point) is seen as highly accessible to viewers23. (See box below). The plans to introduce more interactive elements into the news should be welcomed.

Case study: Nuqtat Hewar (Talking Point), combining emotional engagement and impartiality

Nuqtat Hewar is BBC Arabic TV’s popular interactive multimedia programme.

The presenter plays a crucial role acting as moderator with the audience who participate via emails, text messages and phone calls as well as pre-recorded webcam contributions and vox pops from around the Arab world. It is broadcast live on radio, television and online. The first 50 minutes of the 90 minute programme are simulcast on radio and television after which the presenter is seen walking from the TV studio to the radio booth where he continues the debate.

Each Nuqtat Hewar focuses on a single-issue. The topics are largely driven by the news agenda although producers aim to get a mix of political and social topics, including controversial subjects such as sex and religion. Each issue to be debated is drawn from audience discussion on the website prior to the programme going on air. Contributors are selected from the same source.

Nuqtat Hewar deals directly, live on air, with the fundamental question of how to encourage emotional engagement while retaining objectivity.

“It is a huge challenge. It is something we constantly think about at Nuqtat Hewar – the contributors are unknown, unscripted and the programme goes out live. We are always aware that powerful emotions of anger and sympathy may be at play. But there are also many checks and balances.” Sam Farah, Presenter, Nuqtat Hewar

As well as following a number of rules: no rambling, no going off topic, no personal abuse, Nuqtat Hewar educates the viewers in the art of debate24. For example, the presenters light-heartedly challenge the contributors when they make generalisations (“Can you share your statistics?”; “Are you sure all Lebanese think like that?”) or personal comments (“You can say there is corruption but don’t call them all thieves”). Programme makers’ experience suggests that audiences learn and accept

23 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
24 Interviews with management
the red lines with remarkable ease. Nuqtat Hewar succeeds in combining emotional engagement with BBC values. It achieves “the highest level of awareness and appreciation” of all BBC Arabic programmes. In the OL qualitative work, Nuqtat was widely praised and described as an enticing programme that highlights opposing views of the same topic. The participants saw it as both lively and dynamic. The presenter, Sam Farah was praised for combining credibility and professionalism with a familiar style.

“I think that the idea of the Nuqtat Hewar programme which is shown on the BBC Arabic TV station is great.” (Iraq, NGO, Female)

“There is a program called Nuqtat Hewar which you do not see on any other Arabic Channel because it would be banned. It is presented by Sam Farah who is highly credible and professional. He is a gentleman. He has a simple style where he makes you feel as if you are sitting at a coffee shop with your friends and not watching TV.” (Saudi Arabia, Cultural Organisation, Male)

**Recommendation 1:** BBC Arabic TV should continue to pursue the path it has already embarked upon in building emotional engagement. It can be enhanced without compromising BBC values through more engaging story-telling techniques, increased marketing to connect with the viewer, a broader range of topics, more visuals and more interactive engagement with the audience beyond the realms of Nuqtat Hewar.

**Is there any evidence that raises concerns about standards of accuracy and impartiality?**

No evidence that raises concerns about general standards of accuracy and impartiality was found.

38. While the Trust’s research did not include content analysis, a variety of sources were used to check for any evidence that might raise concerns on standards. These included: comments and complaints received, independent studies, interviews with management and staff, reviewing media reaction in the region and audience research (See paragraphs 5,6,7,8 and 9 above).

39. **BBC Arabic TV meets its viewers’ need for accuracy and impartiality.**

Previous audience research suggested that audiences wanted and expected accurate and unbiased news. However, some viewers in the MENA region tend to be highly sceptical of all news media, both domestic and international and assume that all are driven by political interests and agendas. This is known

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25 Quantitative Audience Measurement, fieldwork in March-April 2008, D3 Systems
26 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
27 BBC Arabic TV pre-launch research: The Arabic TV Audience (August 2007)
as “directed media”. To gain confidence in the accuracy of news, viewers compare information from more than one provider – a strategy used by participants to the OL research. Both audience research and the Arab media frequently saw BBC Arabic as an example of directed media given its links with the FCO. However, paradoxically this does not necessarily diminish viewers’ trust in the channel.

“It is backed by the British Government. However, it does not interfere in the channel.” (Iraq, Up and Coming Entrepreneur, Male)

There are no consistent allegations of bias in the regional or international media.

40. **There were no major or recurring complaints and independent studies did not highlight any problems.** No major or recurring complaints on accuracy and impartiality were found when reviewing the complaints logs and reports (except on the DEC issue, see below). An independent Chatham House study consulted found that a balancing contribution or more neutral language could have been used on a number of stories but there was no evidence of consistent bias, inaccuracy or unfairness. Other independent content reviews are commissioned by BBC Arabic TV management on an ad hoc basis. They include a comparative analysis of BBC Arabic TV’s, Al-Jazeera’s and Al-Arabiya’s coverage of Bashar El-Assad’s visit to France in July 2008. This study found that the BBC was the most diversified and most neutral broadcaster among the three.

41. For more on complaints, see paragraphs 61 through 66 below

42. **Management and most staff interviewed appear keenly aware of the need to uphold BBC values of accuracy and impartiality.** Following a series of 12 interviews with management and staff, it appears that BBC Arabic TV has a lively internal culture of vigilance and debate. While, given the scope of the project, no extended periods were spent in the newsroom, editorial staff engage in frequent discussions especially on controversial issues to ensure BBC values were upheld. This is borne out by audience research (both OL and World Service), which consistently rated BBC Arabic TV highly on accuracy and impartiality, and by the relative lack of controversy on coverage of some of the

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28 OU Diasporas Project: Preliminary Report Summary
29 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
30 BBC Arabic TV pre-launch research: The Arabic TV Audience (August 2007)
31 Out of BBC Arabic TV viewers surveyed - 53% considered it accurate, 50% a trusted source, 44% unbiased and objective; Source: Quantitative Audience Measurement, March-April 2008, D3 Systems
32 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
33 Research team surveyed Arabic language media’s reaction to BBC Arabic TV as well as English language sources. Translations were provided by BBC Monitoring.
34 July 2008, based on viewing of 35 half-hour segments of output
35 The Pan-Arab Television Coverage of Bashar El-Assad’s Visit to Paris(12-13 July 2008); Comtrax
most highly scrutinised and contentious issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some managers feel that at times there can even be a tendency amongst staff to be over-cautious. For example, during the Gaza military offensive, Arabic TV editors would not make use of some distressing pictures on grounds of taste and decency and yet one senior manager felt that, with the right health warnings, they “could have pushed the envelope a bit more”\(^{36}\).

43. Amongst the six Arabic TV staff in the field who were contacted during the course of the research there was no evidence suggesting that they let their opinions influence their journalism or compromise BBC values. They drew a distinction between their professionalism as journalists and their personal views.

“I keep my political views at home; cover the story as it is.” (Ahmed Budeiri, BBC Jerusalem-based journalist)

“When I worked for Al-Jazeera I was a militant. I’m really a journalist for the first time in my life.” (BBC Journalist)

Gaza and DEC: Test cases for accuracy and impartiality

Gaza conflict

Israel’s military offensive in Gaza in January 2009 was the first major test of BBC Arabic’s accuracy and impartiality.

Research results (OL) and lack of significant complaints indicate that Arabic TV performed well. The research showed that the BBC was seen as more balanced and credible than Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Egyptian participants in particular felt that it covered Gaza very well.\(^{37}\)

“During the Gaza war, Al-Jazeera distorted the truth so people started resorting to BBC Arabic TV to get the truth of all things happening in Gaza.” (Egypt, Journalist)

A number of opinion formers participating in the OL research, namely those from Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia, went so far as to say that they felt BBC Arabic TV was the only channel that covered the Gaza conflict with neutrality. Comments received by the service itself suggest this opinion was more widespread.

“Your coverage of events in Gaza is excellent.” (Viewer, Sudan)

“I follow the news [on Gaza] only through the BBC, because I find its coverage trustworthy.” (Viewer, Jerusalem)

Even those in Gaza who watched BBC Arabic TV during the conflict rated it high in terms of trustworthiness and impartiality\(^{38}\).

Where coverage attracted criticism it was often from both sides at the same time. For example, during a Nuqtat Hewar programme on Gaza the

\(^{36}\) Interview with a senior manager

\(^{37}\) BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1

\(^{38}\) BBC Arabic Gaza Crisis Survey, in Gaza, Research Summary 11/02/09
presenter was accused by a caller of being pro-Hamas, only to have the other caller interrupt saying this was ridiculous since he was clearly pro-Israeli.

**DEC decision**

In the aftermath of the Gaza offensive, the BBC’s decision not to broadcast the DEC appeal further tested Arabic TV’s impartiality as it affected not just the audience and contributors but also the staff, often in a very emotional way.

The BBC attracted severe criticism from audiences and the regional media. The decision led to over 400 complaints and numerous posts on message boards and Have Your Say from viewers, who clearly perceive the BBC as a single brand with evidence of a widespread belief that it was influenced by the “Jewish lobby”. The immediate effect on BBC Arabic TV was the cancellation of The Commission’s planned road show and the need to cancel an entire Commission programme after interviewees pulled out. (The Commission is a single issue programme akin to Radio 4’s The Moral Maze with a panel of experts and witnesses). It also attracted harsh criticism from the Arab media. It remains to be seen how long lasting the impact will prove but it appears that its effects have already died down. There was very little spontaneous mention of the DEC decision in the OL audience research with only a small number of Saudi participants commenting on its negative impact on BBC Arabic’s credibility. The way Arabic TV staff dealt with the DEC decision is reassuring. The issue was covered transparently both in the news and in a special Nuqtat Hewar, with Caroline Thomson, the BBC’s Chief Operating Officer, invited to answer questions live from viewers. On a personal level many Arabic TV Staff were very negatively affected, with some expressing shame in working for the BBC for the first time in their careers. However, it seems that staff who were most personally critical of the decision were also the ones keenest to find voices defending the BBC.

**44. BBC Arabic TV appears to take great care to use appropriate and accurate language.** Editorial staff interviewed stressed that they try to keep close to BBC guidelines but they are adapted to account for linguistic differences between English and Arabic. In particular, BBC Arabic TV is especially careful not to follow language coined by other Arab media, notably never using the word “martyr”. For example, during the Gaza conflict Hamas were referred to factually as “gunmen”, “fighters” or “politicians” instead of “militants”, which has a pejorative connotation in Arabic, or “resistance” used by Al-Jazeera. This is not always palatable to parts of the audience and on occasion does not come naturally to some staff for whom this terminology had been commonplace in their countries of origin or in previous jobs.

**45. Some senior staff say they have to actively manage some reporters, especially those working in the field, in order to minimise the risk of**

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39 Interview with Sam Farah

40 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix I

41 Interview with a senior manager

42 Interview with a senior editor
personal views affecting their work. Senior staff felt that personal views may present difficulties for a minority of staff whose output needs careful checks for often unintentional bias. A senior editor elaborated on this point saying that in the large majority of cases the staff’s professionalism and journalistic training easily overcomes any conflict between stories and personal views. However, he felt that for a minority, especially those working in the field, close to events and away from the newsroom, there can be a risk of straying away from BBC values. Editors know whose output needs to be checked with extra vigilance and additional safeguards are implemented. From the available evidence, this approach appears to be successful in ensuring accuracy and impartiality on air. While there has been a systematic programme of training for all new recruits, and while oversight will need to continue, management should make a special effort to target additional training at addressing issues editors identify as part of the World Service training plan. (For more on training see paragraph 57). Within the scope of this research no bias in any particular reports was identified. However, some comments in the OL research, the complaints reports and stories in the Arab media indicate sensitivities and a degree of controversy around BBC Arabic TV’s coverage of Lebanon and Iraq.

“BBC Arabic’s coverage of Lebanon in May … caused some controversy, with BBC Arabic correspondents being praised and criticised in equal measure.” (Complaints Report, 1st April to 30 June 2000)

“BBC [Arabic] Radio is known for its neutrality, while BBC Arabic TV has changed this [and] has become emotionally connected to specific parts in society.” (Iraq, Up and Coming Entrepreneur, Male)

“They have a problem with lack of neutrality when it comes to interviewing guests, commentaries and news about Iraq and the old regime.” (Iraq, Cultural Organisation, Female)

BBC Arabic TV is likely to be subject to intense scrutiny and criticism in any area of conflict in the MENA region. However, Iraq and Lebanon were unique cases in that they presented a combination of evidence from a number of different sources. Both countries experience significant ethnic, political and religious polarisation, including violent conflict. As in the case of stories about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the partiality of some viewers may help explain their criticism of BBC Arabic TV’s coverage rather than the content in question failing to meet BBC values. However, given the sensitivities, management should pay

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43 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
44 According to complaints reports there were a number of emails about BBC Arabic TV’s coverage of Lebanon in May 2008 “with BBC Arabic’s correspondents being praised and criticised in equal measure.”
45 For example, Al Hayat newspaper, Report by Amin Mubarak: "Diaspora of BBC Arabic Television" 9 April 2008
46 It was not possible to review actual complaints regarding Lebanon due to the way complaints are handled at BBC Arabic TV. For more discussion on complaints see paragraph 66 below
special attention to coverage of and reports coming out of such polarised areas. In addition, a more robust complaints logging system (see paragraph 66) would help management distinguish between criticism and complaints that could be evidence of breaches of core BBC values.

**Recommendation 2:** Management should make a special effort to target additional training at addressing issues editors identify as part of the World Service training plan. Management should continue to be vigilant in monitoring coverage and pay particular attention to those instances where there is evidence of concern from audiences.

**Does the service have an appropriate range of stories and treatments?**

**BBC Arabic TV** has a good range of stories and treatments for its budget. However, there is scope for improvement in a number of areas including variety of content and visual appeal.

46. **BBC Arabic covers a variety of regional and international news**

   The independent research (OL) indicates that some viewers appreciate this and see its ability to provide in-depth coverage across the world as one of the advantages BBC Arabic TV has over its competitors.

   “I regard BBC [Arabic TV] as an international passport that takes me to different parts of the world.” (Saudi Arabia, Journalist, Female)

47. Paradoxically, the prominence of international news is also a frequent criticism of the channel, affecting perceptions of its relevance.

   “BBC Arabic TV is more international compared to Al-Arabiya, which is more regional and closer to us.” (Iraq, Academic, Male)

48. **The schedule provides a mix of straight news, current affairs programmes and documentaries.** The service consists mainly of rolling news, running in 14 half hour slots, making it more of a pure news channel than its competitors. In addition there are two special evening news programmes: The World This Evening, with longer films and explanations, and Harvest of the Day, providing a fast-paced round up of all the main stories. Although some participants in the OL research found this emphasis on rolling news too repetitive, others appreciated being able to be quickly updated on events and saw repetition as a necessary downside.

   “The news is being repeated to you around the clock. Repeating the news in this manner results in boredom and even abstaining from watching the channel.” (Iraq, Private Sector, Male)

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47 Based on viewing and audience research (OL)

48 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1

49 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1

50 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
“Its 24 hour news broadcast means that you can get the news that you want directly at any time and live the event and, although the audience may get bored, it is a strength” (Egypt, Private Sector, Male)

49. Special programmes including To The Point, The Commission, Open Agenda and documentaries are each screened once a week in a daily early evening slot. They are frequently repeated. The flagship interactive programme Nuqtat Hewar is screened live three, soon moving to five, times a week and repeated on a further two to three occasions.

50. The move to 24 hour broadcasting in January 2009 was praised by participants in the OL research for meeting an audience need. Earlier World Service research showed that audiences in the MENA region expected a news channel to be available 24 hours a day.

[Before the move to 24 hours] “People were compelled to watch other channels because BBC was unavailable for 24 hrs.” (Egypt, Journalist, Female)

“Of course it is better to watch it 24 hrs a day. In the Middle East, some people sleep late and some people sleep early. This means that we can watch the news at any time that is suitable to us.” (Saudi Arabia, Journalist, Female)

51. The OL research found that BBC Arabic is appreciated for its coverage of a variety of topics. Participants frequently referred to the variety of its international news coverage and felt that the output was especially comprehensive with regard to politics. The subjects covered by the special programmes are varied and span a broad range of issues, including taboo subjects other regional media do not discuss, such as: disability, child brides, women’s issues, displaced people, terrorism and religion.

There are however a number of ways in which the service can improve, some of which are already being addressed.

52. A frequently cited weakness is the limited range of non-political content. There is no dedicated business segment and very little sports news. Coverage of social issues and light news is also limited and participants in the OL research felt there was real scope for attracting young viewers through this type of content.

“My wife and children are no way going to watch Arabic TV unless it adds more diverse topics such as shows on fashion, health and festivals” (Iraq, Private Sector, Male)

51 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
52 Quantitative Audience Measurement, fieldwork in March-April 2008, D3 Systems; Perceptions of Arabic TV in the MENA region, AMRB
53 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1
54 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix 1 ; Perceptions of BBC Arabic TV in the MENA region, AMRB
“The viewer’s life is not only based on politics but rather on money, health, sports, social issues such as family issues and religion so it has to be inclusive of all those topics” (Egypt, Private Sector, Male)

“Most Arabic regions consist of young people. Therefore BBC Arabic should be more aimed at younger generations” (Lebanon, NGO, Male)

Some participants in the OL research were disappointed that the extended broadcasting hours did not result in a greater variety of programmes.

“I would like to see more cultural programmes added to the channel now, geographical reports, environmental reports, scientific report…” (Iraq, Private Sector, Male)

53. Management already plan to commission more social and “light” stories. They aim to further increase the variety of content by encouraging staff to come up with structured story proposals through the newly created “Ideas Factory”. However, there is no potential for extending sports coverage given the cost of sports rights and the limited appetite for sports other than football in the region.

54. Regional coverage could be strengthened to the extent its budget allows. Some staff feel that Iran, Iraq, the Gulf and North Africa are insufficiently covered with local political, security and resource constraints affecting the breadth of output. This is confirmed by the OL findings, which showed a number of participants feeling the channel needs to increase its presence across the entire MENA region so that it can show a real understanding of the issues. There is a perception by some that BBC Arabic TV sees the Middle East as one homogenous region.

“It should highlight the differences among Arab communities. It should not deal with them as if they are all one. Saudi is not like Egypt, not like Iraq. Not all Arabs are the same” (Saudi Arabia, Academic, Female)

55. A desire for bespoke documentaries remains. Previous World Service research and the findings of the OL research showed a significant appetite for regional, investigative journalism. Management feels this is a need that cannot be fulfilled for budgetary reasons even though viewers strongly associate the BBC with documentaries. An initial one-off budget allowed for seven specially commissioned documentaries, most of which have been repeated, but there is no budget for more. The gap is filled with investigative elements in the news and discussion programmes as well as documentaries and features bought in

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55 Interview with a senior manager
56 Interviews with managers and staff
57 BBC Arabic TV: Research Report, Opinion Leader, April 2009; See Appendix I
58 Quantitative Audience Measurement, fieldwork in March-April 2008, D3 Systems; Perceptions of Arabic TV in the MENA region, AMRB
59 Perceptions of Arabic TV in the MENA region, AMRB
from BBC Worldwide\textsuperscript{60}. Management laments the fact that these same documentaries are also sold to its direct competitors Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, and also means there is no opportunity to maximise their potential for promoting the BBC brand.

56. Finally, there is a debate within BBC Arabic TV on the degree to which the service should push to investigate stories host regimes do not welcome. After a year on air, there is an ambition amongst many staff to tackle more challenging investigative journalism which may be unpopular with some Middle East and North African governments. Given the censorship and bureaucratic hurdles BBC Arabic TV faces in a number of countries, covering sensitive stories can present an enormous challenge and needs to be balanced against the risks, such as the potential closure of the BBC bureau. While some managers and staff interviewed during the research felt there were no “no go” areas, others felt that BBC Arabic could “be bolder” and take stories “up to the red line”\textsuperscript{61}. Management said that in this area too BBC Arabic TV faces budgetary constraints, given the high costs of investigative journalism\textsuperscript{62}.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Recommendation 3:} BBC Arabic should follow through with its intention to expand its range through the introduction of more non-political subjects.
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\textbf{Are the standard provisions for ongoing editorial oversight of the service sufficient?}
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Provisions for ongoing editorial oversight appear sufficient with regular meetings, intense discussion, checking of stories before they go on air and training. Senior management seem to take a very hands-on approach to oversight.

57. Editorial oversight at Arabic TV consists of frequent editorial meetings and discussions, training and a number of checks and appears sufficient. During interviews, management, editors and staff described the procedures that are in place for editorial oversight. These include, as one would expect, numerous daily and weekly editorial meetings including pre-air and post-mortems. Training aims to ensure a professional journalistic approach is adopted. All new staff receive training on BBC values, the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines, the importance of audience trust and technical training. The training takes the form of a 15 day face-to-face, tailor-made

\textsuperscript{60} Including Simon Schama’s The American Future: A History, Michael Palin’s New Europe, History of Surgery and selected Horizons, Panoramas and Newsnight films.

\textsuperscript{61} Interviews with staff and journalists working in the field

\textsuperscript{62} Interview with a senior manager
course run by BBC trainers. It is followed by work-shadowing so that new staff are not left on their own following their induction.53

58. **Senior management appear to take a hands-on approach to overseeing the service by watching output, comparing it with competitors and holding programme reviews**. They commission internal programme reviews and independent monitoring (eg Chatham House) to consider output and compare it to competitors, BBC World, BBC Arabic Radio and online. Headlines and running orders are collated daily and compared with BBC World’s and some programmes are translated and peer-reviewed by other World Service staff. While there is a language barrier between management, some senior editorial staff and output, management seem to put a lot of effort into ensuring that it does not affect the quality of oversight.

59. Implementing a more rigorous complaints process could help strengthen oversight by senior, non-Arabic speaking managers. (See paragraph 66 below.)

60. **BBC Arabic TV, in line with the rest of the World Service, uses its own compliance procedures.** Within the limited scope of this research it was not possible to test the system but staff interviewed said that pre-recorded programmes are signed off by at least two people, more if they cover a controversial issue. Bought in documentaries go through this process several times as they are translated and dubbed. Editors said that all live output is constantly monitored. Management are currently working on tailor-made compliance forms for use at BBC Arabic TV as standard BBC compliance processes, including the generic BBC compliance forms for pre-recorded output, are not employed. Once these are in place, BBC Arabic TV will effectively follow the same compliance standards and procedures as the BBC’s UK services. In the meantime, senior editors ensure that all staff are informed that producers and editors should view and approve all pre-recorded programmes for broadcast. In addition, any issues must be referred to senior editorial staff or management.

### Complaints Process

| Complaints handling seems to work reasonably well. No immediate concerns were identified but the system could be made more rigorous, although this will have resourcing implications. This would improve oversight and ensure that no potential evidence of bias or inaccuracy slips under the radar. It could also be made more transparent, helping build audience engagement. |

61. Having addressed all the key questions posed in the Terms of Reference for this research, it was deemed necessary to also to include the findings on the complaints process at BBC Arabic TV.

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53 Interview with a senior editor
54 Interviews with senior managers
55 Interview with a senior manager
62. In principle, the same internal editorial guidelines and standards apply to the World Service as to the BBC’s domestic services. However, managers interviewed during the course of the research said that the constraints of the Grant In Aid funding mean that BBC Arabic TV, in common with other World Service services, does not have resources for complaints handling such as those available to the BBC’s licence fee funded services. As a result BBC Arabic, and the rest of the World Service, deal with complaints more informally than the rest of the BBC.

63. Audiences seem to be aware that they can comment or complain via:
- Email
- “Contact Us” page on bbcarabic.com
- Phone
- Post
- BBC Arabic Open Space
- Arabic Have Your Say
- Direct contact with managers and programme makers.

64. Complaints appear to be reasonably well channelled. Complaints and comments received are summarised and then translated by a dedicated person from BBC’s MC&A based within Arabic TV. The summaries are passed on to the Executive Editor. They are considered, a decision made on whether they merit investigation and, when necessary, passed on for response by relevant editors or managers. A quarterly condensed report is prepared and shared with the World Service Management Board. This report summarises complaints and comments (both positive and critical) received by BBC Arabic TV, BBC Arabic Radio and online and includes some translated verbatim comments for illustration purposes.

Case study: Open Agenda complaint
One complaint which drew media attention was a reference to Israeli children in an Open Agenda discussion programme about terrorism, broadcast on 17th October 2008. This was investigated internally and the finding was that comments alleged to justify the killing of Israeli children had been taken out of context and did not reflect the content of the debate. However, BBC Arabic TV admitted that it had not challenged an assertion made by a contributor that the Israeli curriculum included a maths problem about killing Arabs. The complainants received detailed responses, which were posted on the World Service audience complaints log, but they were not informed of the BBC appeals process.

There are various ways in which the complaints system could be made more transparent and rigorous, resources allowing (See Paragraph 62).

66 Marketing, Communications and Audiences

65. **Responding to all complaints and publicising the BBC complaints procedure would build audience engagement and make the system more transparent.** At present, it is not evident that all complainants are responded to and those that are, are not informed of the full BBC complaints procedures, including the possibility of appeal. BBC Arabic TV should respond to all complainants and log the responses, given that it is part of the BBC’s policy to respond to all complaints within 10 days and, in addition, that BBC Arabic TV is trying to build audience engagement. All complainants should be informed of the full BBC complaints procedures including the possibility of appeal.

66. **Ideally, all complaints should be translated and logged. This would make complaints handling more rigorous and allow for better oversight and management of information.** At the moment only a very small number of serious complaints which “merited a reply” are translated and put on the World Service complaints log. This means that it is not possible to track the number of complaints on a specific issue, to distinguish between those regarding TV, radio or online output, or between critical comments and complaints. More rigorous complaints logging, with all complaints translated and put on the central system would strengthen oversight and help ensure that no evidence that could raise concerns about standards of impartiality or accuracy could slip through the net. While this has some resourcing implications it is important for management to consider how, within current funding constraints, significant improvements could be made and to advise the Trust of their conclusions.

**Recommendation 4:** BBC Arabic TV should work to make its complaints system more transparent and rigorous. All complainants should be responded to and advised of the full complaints procedure, including the possibility of appeal. Additionally, management should consider how, within current funding arrangements, significant improvements could be made to the logging and translation of complaints and advise the Trust of its conclusions.

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68 As of 10 April 2009, the log included seven complaints regarding BBC Arabic TV for the period from its launch in March 2008. By comparison BBC Arabic as a whole (TV, radio and online) received between 1,500 to 2,000 emails a month in 2008.
Appendices