

Viewers Vs. Broadcasters 1 – 0

The much anticipated World Cup has been a bit of a fizzle here in Jordan. Not in relation to the people's fervor, however, but from the lackluster broadcasters who, as **Mohamed Madi** argues, simply do not understand the culture of the game or what people want from it.

Flags fluttering from cars, national shirts and traffic jams when matches finish. These are just some of the signs of World Cup fever in Jordan. Even though Jordan did not qualify for the competition, it seems, nevertheless, that every single male between the ages of seven and 77, and a sizeable number of females, have been glued to their television screens ever since the tournament began on June 12. Or not. Unlike almost all other countries, World Cup football was not available on free-to-air channels in Jordan. Instead, those wishing to watch the world's most anticipated sporting event had to stump up the cash to pay for a satellite subscription, or go to watch the match in a café, where prices are often extortionate.

Compounding this, Al Jazeera Sport, the network with exclusive rights to broadcast the FIFA World Cup 2010 in the Middle East, was allegedly sabotaged five minutes into the opening game, and then again several times in the following days. In truth, many viewers in the Middle East were sabotaged well before the tournament started by the failure to get any matches shown on free-to-air television, even the ones that featured the tournament's only Arab team, Algeria.

World Cup football is a public good, which in economics refers to a good that is non-rivalrous and non-excludable. Non-rivalry means that consumption of the good by one individual does not reduce availability of the good for consumption by others; and non-excludability that in which no one can be effectively excluded from using the good.

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This is the case in most European countries, such as the UK, France and Spain. Admittedly, most of those countries regularly feature in the com-

petition itself, which is an added imperative for free-to-air rights.

This lack of choice became all the more damaging when the Al Jazeera footage went down. No one knows the full story yet, but it may turn out that Al Jazeera could be partly to blame. Gimmicks like 3D or high definition (HD) viewing, fledgling technologies that take up much more bandwidth than normal broadcasting, have been blamed as a possible cause of the Al Jazeera outage. These are unnecessary – people just want to be able to watch the games in peace wherever they wish.

How would free-to-air broadcasting change consumer habits here in Jordan? The Al Jazeera debacle, and its subsequent decision to air games on its free-to-air channels, was still nothing like what would be the case if a law were enacted to ensure that an event of this magnitude is aired for free.

The uncertainty over how long the free football would continue detracted from the enjoyment of the viewing, and the guarantee of paid-for viewing that would allow people to plan their match day viewing with ease.

As for how to fund the purchase of broadcasting rights, there are several existing models. Many European countries charge a licence fee, which is paid for every year. In the UK, for example, this fee equates to about JD150 per annum, cheaper than equivalent satellite packages. In return for the licence fee, channels like the BBC produce a quality of programming that is arguably the best on the planet, especially

in areas like wildlife documentaries and entertainment shows, and this allows them to set up their own dedicated studios in South Africa with a high standard of output.



However, other Arab broadcasters, such as Syrian and Egyptian state channels, purchased the rights to show some matches on free TV without charging a licence fee. The way this works is by purchasing the feed from other channels, showing the footage and then attempting to recoup the fee through lucrative half-time advertising. Jordan's state-owned JTV didn't purchase the rights to any games, which left Jordanian viewers with the choice of Al-Jazeera or nothing.

Of course, World Cup expenditure in cafés could be offered as an economic argument in favor of getting people to watch matches outside their homes. However, this argument is limited because even if the World Cup did broadcast on free-to-air channels, many would still choose to watch it in cafés for the social atmosphere. If this were the case, it wouldn't be as expensive as it is now, with many cafés charging upwards of JD10 just for the privilege of entering them during games.

Al Jazeera's troubles this year should serve as a warning shot for the future. However, as long as FIFA and broadcasters continue to see the World Cup as a cash cow instead of as a major cultural event on the world horizon, this situation can be sadly expected to continue. ■