Sattelite Channel

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Testing Time for Al-Jazeera

Never has any Arab-owned media venture attracted so much Western attention as Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel, broadcaster of 24-hour news and current affairs from the tiny Gulf emirate of Qatar. Al-Jazeera was just five years old when it soared to international prominence in late 2001 through its presence inside Afghanistan and access to the videotape of Usama bin Laden. Yet media coverage of Al-Jazeera itself, as a newsworthy institution in its own right, long predated the September atrocities and subsequent US air strikes on Afghanistan. Indeed, the very uniqueness of Al-Jazeera's output in Arabic provides an insight into the unusual power relations that have produced such a prolific stream of suicide attackers from Arab countries.

Free, open and constructive dialogue among people of diverse political persuasions is rare on Arab television, because governments impose tight censorship. As most commentators point out, this censorship is self-evidently not imposed on Al-Jazeera. Even those who have never watched the station have grasped why its programme titles – like 'More than One Opinion', 'The Opposite Direction', or 'Without Bounds' – are so significant in a region where television channels are uniformly treated as organs of the ruling elite. In most Arab countries it is the information minister's job to ensure that state television expresses one opinion, follows one direction and stays well within bounds. As for privately owned Lebanese or Palestinian channels, or most pan-Arab satellite stations, these remain subject to legal constraints and political imperatives that prevent them from giving airtime to a full range of political views.[1] The stormy talk shows, viewer comments and critiques of government policy that have become hallmarks of Al-Jazeera have gripped audiences across the region because they are unprecedented on Arabic-language television. While reaction to such programming has been predictably hostile from those with a vested interest in continued censorship, a school of thought is finally growing in the Arab world that draws a link between the censorious and autocratic nature of local rule and the rise of extreme and violent forms of protest. This view, expressed for example by Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak, the UAE minister of higher education, attributes the extremism of suicide bombers to 'the way Arab countries are ruled'.[2] When the minister said a 'giant step' was needed to 'change political life in the Arab world', he seemed to be echoing calls from every quarter for the opening up of political, cultural and media channels through which grievances can be openly articulated and remedies hammered out, without the process ending in a jail sentence or other sanctions for those involved.

Bias or balance?

With conduits for authentic Arab public opinion in very short supply, Al-Jazeera's management and staff have had to find their own way in a lonely part of the institutional landscape. While other television channels conform to the expectation that owners will dictate content (on the grounds that 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'), Al-Jazeera's unusual ownership and funding formula leave viewers confused about whether its content is 'balanced' or 'biased'. Al-Jazeera is not under the thumb of an information ministry because Qatar no longer has one. The station was launched with a five-year loan and set out to become self-financing through sales of advertising airtime, royalties from exclusive film footage and the leasing out of facilities and equipment in its many bureaux around the world. Officials angered by what they perceive to be bias against them consequently have few levers to pull to influence future coverage. There is little to be gained from remonstrating with the Qatari government, which disclaims editorial responsibility for Al-Jazeera. Pressurizing advertisers to stay away merely reduces one source of Al-Jazeera income.

Arab ministers have demonstrated their displeasure over the years by boycotting the station, closing its offices or withdrawing accreditation from its correspondents. Measures like these reinforce existing pro-establishment imbalances, since those in power already have ample access to the production side of media outlets under their control. What they do not have is control over the reception side, since they cannot guarantee to command the attention of viewers. Those who decline to appear on Al-Jazeera forego an opportunity to put their points to an audience recently estimated at 35 million. But the price of making points on Al-Jazeera is a readiness to see them challenged. The station's managing director, Mohammed Jassem al-Ali, believes it is Al-Jazeera's appetite for controversy and clashing perspectives that 'respects viewers' intelligence' and makes for 'interesting television'.[3] Unlike the many perennially loss-making Arab television stations, Al-Jazeera is obliged to make 'interesting' television and diversify its income in order to survive. It has done this in the past by making full commercial use of facilities in Baghdad, especially during the US and UK air strikes on Iraq in 1998, and by providing intensive coverage of the Palestinian uprising that erupted in September 2000. Given the dominant US television channels' euphemistic reporting on Israel, which glosses over Israeli annexation of Arab East Jerusalem, expansion of illegal settlements in occupied territory and assassinations of Palestinian political figures,[4] Al-Jazeera's engagement with the Palestinian experience of occupation could be seen as effectively redressing a long-standing imbalance in international coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

'With us or against us'

For Western politicians and journalists perplexed about the realities of life in the Arab world, Al-Jazeera has offered a small and inevitably misty window onto pent-up anger and alienation. Some observers, however, especially in the US in the wake of September 11, decided that what Al-Jazeera staff regard as professional and compelling programming was not merely unhelpful but inflammatory. George Bush's stark message to players on the world stage, that '[y]ou are either with us or against us', called for Al-Jazeera's output to be judged on criteria that had not previously been applied to supposedly independent news organizations. In accordance with Mr Bush's polarizing message, Al-Jazeera came under sustained US pressure to show whose side it was on. On visiting Washington shortly before the US launched air strikes on Afghanistan, Qatar's ruler, Sheikh Hamad Khalifa al-Thani, told reporters that his hosts had 'advised' him to have the television channel toned down. Apparently embarrassed by the revelation, senior White House figures took the opportunity to be interviewed on Al-Jazeera. But ill will endured. Zev Chafets, writing in the *New York Daily News*, urged the US military to shut down Al-Jazeera, saying it had the power to 'poison the air more efficiently and lethally than anthrax ever could'.[5] When a US bomb struck the station's office in Kabul on November 13, Al-Jazeera staff were not alone in deducing that it had been deliberately hit. If US policy-makers wanted justification for regarding Al-Jazeera as the enemy, Fouad Ajami regaled them with it five days later, in a lengthy article in the *New York Times*. Describing the station as a 'dangerous force' with a 'virulent anti-American bias', Ajami warned America's leaders not to waste their time pressing its backers for more moderate coverage, and not to give what he termed the 'satellite channel of Arab radicalism' a helping hand.[6]

The problem for Al-Jazeera and its audience, be they admirers or critics, is that it remains one of a kind. For as long as the broadcasting of uncensored, free-to-air news and current affairs in Arabic remain the exception rather than the rule, it is certain to arouse strong feelings and surprise. As an Egyptian veteran of both English-language and Arabic-language television once remarked, Arab audiences react differently to controversial television programming depending on the identity of the broadcaster and the language of the broadcast. The novelty of Arab reporters making programmes according to criteria other than political expediency has yet to wear off. Social scientists from the region note the same shock factor in their field. Path-breaking social science research in Arab states risks being considered sensationalist and disloyal if published in Arabic, simply because the body of uncensored, newly released findings that are accessible to local populations is currently rather small.

Survey results

Meanwhile, the problems of Al-Jazeera's singularity are magnified by misconceptions about media effects. These include the widespread but misplaced conviction that viewers are highly susceptible to propaganda whether or not its content accords with their lifetime's accumulation of experience, knowledge and beliefs. Professor Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland has debunked this notion, using statistical evidence from surveys conducted in five Arab states. Addressing the Middle East Institute's annual conference in Washington on October 19, Telhami said the deep personal preoccupation of so many ordinary Arabs with the treatment of Palestinians had nothing to do with Al-Jazeera. His surveys showed that concern for Palestinians was higher among those who had not watched Al-Jazeera than those who had. What had changed in the last two years, he said, was not Al-Jazeera and the screening of pictures showing 'too much blood'. Radicalization did not result from television. What had changed was the world and, with it, the possibilities for Middle East peace.[7]

For as long as misunderstanding about the shaping of Arab public opinion persists, and with no channel ready to challenge Al-Jazeera on its own terms, the aftermath of September 11 will continue to be a testing time for uncensored television in the Arab world. If, as suggested, Al-Jazeera establishes a presence in Somalia ahead of US action in that country, its distinctive logo and 'Exclusive' label will once again be seen on Western television screens and the royalty component of its revenue base will be further secured. On the other hand, judging from events in Kabul in November, and notwithstanding the US military's insistence that a bona fide news operation would not be seen as a military target, the physical security of an Al-Jazeera operation in Mogadishu or elsewhere may be less assured.

Notes

1. Naomi Sakr, 'Optical Illusions: Television and Censorship in the Arab World', *tbsjournal.com*, no. 5 (fall/winter 2000).
2. Interviewed by Rana Kabbani for a BBC2 documentary in the 'Correspondent' series, 9 December 2001.
3. Quotations reported by *Middle East Times*, 22 November 1998, and *Middle East Broadcast andSatellite* 6, no. 7 (October 1999): 15.
4. See for example Seth Ackerman, 'Al-Aqsa Intifada and the US Media', *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXX, no. 2 (winter 2001): 61–74.
5. As reported by Hatem Anwar, www.middleastwire.com/newswire, 15 October 2001.
6. Fouad Ajami, 'What the Muslim World is Watching', *New York Times*, 18 November 2001.
7. *Middle East Economic Survey*, 5 November 2001, (D)4.

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