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Living in the Satellite Bubble Palestinian-Americans in Chicago

Despite the more than one hundred US channels available to them, Palestinian-Americans in Chicago are choosing to beam in their news via satellite. Over the past few years, Arabic satellite networks have become increasingly popular among the Palestinian immigrant population in the US and have even been considered to be virtual portals to daily life in the Middle East, keeping immigrants updated with the latest news broadcasts in the Palestinian territories and Israel. Moreover, the satellite dish has become relatively affordable and is available through most local satellite providers. A brief ethnographic survey carried out in 2001 among the Palestinian-American community in Chicago showed that there was a clear preference for Arabic satellite news channels over American channels. The most popular satellite channel among the community was the Al Jazeera news network for its continuous coverage of the second *intifada* and for the latest news on the Middle East. Given these findings, how do Arabic satellite news channels such as Al Jazeera shape the way Palestinians in Chicago stay informed on news in the Middle East? And are Arabic satellite news channels regarded as superior substitutes for mainstream American news channels by Palestinians in Chicago?

For many Arabs living in North America, Al Jazeera is an important news source for issues in the Middle East and is tuned into regularly. According to Al Jazeera's managing director, Jasim Al-Ali, the network's list of 200,000 subscribers in 2002 in the United States and Canada was growing by 2,500 weekly.¹ For Palestinians in the United States, Al Jazeera is one of many Arabic satellite channels that provides them with news on the current situation in Palestine and Israel. In Chicago, where the number of Palestinian-Americans living in the metropolitan area in the year 2000 totaled 5,602² (17% of the total Arab population in Chicago), the number of satellite subscribers is also high. In opting for Arabic news sources, Palestinian-Americans feel that they are able to avoid the disturbingly common misrepresentations of Palestinians and of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that are conveyed in mainstream American news broadcasts. And in effect, these immigrants have created a protective 'bubble' to shield themselves from the distortions in the American media, relying solely on satellite networks for accurate accounts of the *intifada*. The abundance of channels helps keep the Palestinian-American viewer tuned in to the various perspectives and public opinions in the Arab world, and offers a large selection. At the same time however, it is clear that Arabic satellite networks alone offer a limited perspective and constitute only one viewpoint on issues in the Middle East.

In the ethnographic survey of 2001, thirty interviews were held with Palestinian-American families of varying religious groups and class backgrounds in Chicago to assess their television habits and viewing preferences. During this period, an effort was made to regularly moni-

Many Palestinian-Americans in Chicago feel that the American media rarely offer a Palestinian perspective and turn to Arabic news channels, most notably Al Jazeera, for news that they feel accurately portrays and reflects their views. Until an Arab perspective is regularly included in the mainstream American media, Palestinian-Americans will continue to exclude American news channels from their daily television habits.

tor the reliability of the alternative media sources that were being commonly used by the Palestinian-American community (channels were monitored as often as possible throughout the course of the research). This permitted the monitoring of specific programmes referred to by the interviewees. The majority of Palestinian-American families interviewed were bilingual and were comfortable watching the news in both English and Arabic, but nonetheless preferred watching the Arabic news channels. From the interviewees' responses it appeared that Palestinian-Americans occasionally watch American television channels for entertainment purposes but rarely for the news. They relied primarily on Al Jazeera for news on the Middle East and the *intifada*. They felt that Al Jazeera played a unique role in keeping the community up to date with the *intifada* through its daily reports, and liked the fact that the station also hosts heated talk shows and programmes that encourage international audience participation and involvement by phone, fax or e-mail. The interviewees did indeed find it necessary to refer to additional international news sources, in both Arabic and English, to keep themselves updated on international news broadcasts. The American news channels, such as CNN or Fox News, were occasionally viewed but seldom regarded as reliable sources of news. The interviewees felt that the American media was generally biased in favor of Israel and that it rarely offered a Palestinian perspective. They find it frustrating to watch the mainstream American news and as a result turn to Arabic news channels for news that they feel accurately portrays and reflects the views of Palestinians.

For the Palestinian-American viewers in Chicago, having both western and Arab news broadcasts available to them at the click of a button appears to be greatly beneficial, but this is not the case. Palestinian-Americans in Chicago are growing less tolerant of American mainstream news, and are beginning to increasingly isolate themselves and their political opinions from the surrounding mainstream. In essence, these immigrants are refraining from publicly voicing their disagreement with the interpretations of the American mainstream on issues in the Middle East, thus preventing themselves from becoming a collective voice capable of effecting any change. Until an Arab perspective is regularly included in the mainstream American media, Palestinian-Americans in Chicago will continue to exclude American news channels from their daily television habits. Both Palestinian-Americans and the American mainstream media need to make an effort to bridge the gap that exists between them and to engender a much-needed environment for more representative global communication.

Notes

1. El-Nawawy & Iskander Farag, *Al Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East* (Washington D.C: Westview Press, 2002)
2. US Census Data 2000.

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