

AL-JAZEERA AND US WAR COVERAGE



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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the horrific September 11, 2001 events and the ensuing “war on terror”, Al-Jazeera has become a major player on the global news scene and a global household name due to its exclusive positioning behind enemy lines in Afghanistan and Iraq. Throughout the war, news networks worldwide including the United States (henceforth US) media empires CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN and even the conservative Fox News added Al-Jazeera - a network that was often referred to as an entity that “speaks the enemy’s language” - as a regular source for images of civilian and military casualties from the battlefield. The astonishing fact is that between the horrific events of September 11, 2001, and September 4, 2004, the day the US-installed Iraqi interim government shut Al-Jazeera in Iraq indefinitely, the five major US stations mentioned above re-presented 2732 news items from Al-Jazeera (Lexis-Nexis news archive, 2009). The unprecedented use of information from the warzone provided by Al-Jazeera is significant since it marks a transformation in the way war is being reported in the US. Whereas US reporters traditionally struggled with the Pentagon’s censorship of events in the battlefield, Al-Jazeera has bypassed these restrictions, disrupting the power-balance between the Administration and journalists by securing access to events traditionally kept away from the camera’s eye.

Already on October 6, 2001, the eve of the war on the Taliban forces, the then anonymous Al-Jazeera was the only source that had secured a place behind enemy lines due to its exclusive positioning in Kabul and Kandahar. This was not only a matter of luck; while the US networks maintained no bureaus in Afghanistan (due to local viewers’ lack of interest in the Afghan civil war) and the Taliban expelled the few Western journalists who remained in Afghanistan before the war began, Al-Jazeera was allowed to stay in the battlefield due to its strong ties with the Taliban. While the US Administration argued that these ties involved links to terrorists and tried to brand the channel a mouthpiece for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, Al-Jazeera insisted that they are a legitimate source

that formed these links throughout years of coverage of the Afghan civil war. In light of Al-Jazeera's strong presence in Afghanistan, on the eve of the war two of America's leading channels - CNN and ABC - signed content exchange agreements with the channel.

As the war on terror progressed, it became obvious that Al-Jazeera's arrival onto the global news scene with its exclusive access to events was not coincidental. On the fourth day of the war in Iraq (February 22, 2003), Al-Jazeera distributed graphic images of dead US soldiers and prisoners of war which reached audiences worldwide, including the news media in Australia and the United Kingdom, the US's closest allies. The global spread of these non-traditional images was one of the reasons that US networks CNN and CBS decided to show glimpses of the brutal deaths despite the US Administration's protests.

A year later, in April 2004, Al-Jazeera again frustrated the Pentagon when it aired exclusive "controversial" images of Iraqi victims in the US army battle against Muqtada Al-Sadr's militia in Fallujah.

As a result of these journalistic scoops and their resonance, Al-Jazeera has become a brandname in the US. In 2004 Al-Jazeera was nominated by the Webby Awards team (the "Oscar" equivalent of website design) as one of the five finalists for the "best news Web sites" award, along with BBC News, and *National Geographic*. That year it was also voted by the annual Manhattan-based Brandchannel.com Readers' Choice Award survey as one of the top five global brands, after Apple, Google, IKEA and Starbucks and before Coca-Cola, Nokia, Nike and Toyota. In 2006 the same audience survey selected it as "the most impactful news channel in the world". That Al-Jazeera has become a topic of interest in the US can also be illustrated by the success of the 2004 documentary film *Control Room* (which followed the Al-Jazeera team throughout the early days of the war Iraq). In its opening weekend at the prestigious Film Forum Cinema in New York, every performance was sold out (Usher, 2004).

Al-Jazeera's ambition to expand its presence in the West is ever-growing. Not content with reaching Western audiences solely through re-presentation on Western media, Al-Jazeera has pushed to foster *direct* contact with Western viewers. Already in November 2001 it added English subtitles to its broadcasting 12 hours a day in the United States and Europe. In February 2003, during the early days of the Iraq War, it launched an English news website, which allowed surfers worldwide to access Al-Jazeera directly without the mediation of Western media. According to *Alexa* 2009 global statistics (Alexa, 2009), Al-Jazeera's Arabic website is one of the most popular 1000 websites on the web, with 15.7% of its traffic coming from the US (significantly more than any other country on

the list). A further move to win a Western audience took place on November 15, 2006, when it launched a 24/7 television channel in English. The channel proudly declared its aim as “emphasizing news from the developing world, without an Anglo-American worldview” as well as “revers[ing] the [North to South] flow of information” (Al Jazeera, 2009).

What is the significance of this unprecedented rise of an Arab news channel into US consciousness? Nine years into the war on terror, most globalization scholars are certain that the arrival of Al-Jazeera’s images into the heart of the American news scene signify an “information revolution”, where the Arab perspective penetrates Western discourse. They assert that Al-Jazeera’s popularity in the West marks the weakening of the US hegemony on information in favor of a more cross-cultural, transnational discourse. They also claim that Al-Jazeera’s success proves that under globalization the boundaries between center and periphery become blurred as even a network originating in the peripheral Qatari Emirate can influence the politics of “the dominating center”. The result: A world where cultural differences between nations gradually melt and understanding of the other side’s perspective increases as cultures become relativized to each other.

More specifically, the *Al-Jazeera effect* is described as a gradual weakening of the “old system” of the nation-state in the West in favour of cross-cultural dialogue. It is argued that thanks to the wide distribution of Al-Jazeera’s images, US discourse has finally opened up to a non-Western perspective and that the Qatari stations’ footage can “enforce political pressure on national politics and provide a communication realm, which would otherwise not be possible on a national level.” (Volkmer, 2002, p. 243). Books published on Al-Jazeera in the last few years illustrate the argument: From *Al-Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East* (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003), through *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That is Challenging the West* (Miles, 2005) to *Mission Al-Jazeera: Build a Bridge, Seek the Truth, Change the World* (Rushing, 2007), and until the recent *The Al-Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics* (Seib, 2009) where the *Al-Jazeera effect* argument is summed as follows:

...Al-Jazeera is a paradigm of new media’s influence. Ten years ago, there was much talk about “the CNN effect,” the theory that news coverage—especially gripping visual storytelling—was influencing foreign policy throughout the world. Today, “the Al-Jazeera effect” takes that a significant step further ... “The media” are no longer just the media. They have a larger popular base than ever before and, as a result, have unprecedented impact on international politics. The media can be tools of conflict and

instruments of peace; they can make traditional borders irrelevant and unify peoples scattered across the globe. This phenomenon, the Al-Jazeera effect, is reshaping the world. (Seib, 2009)

However, based on a comprehensive empirical analysis, this book calls for a paradigm shift in the perception of the Al-Jazeera effect. The analysis presented in this book reveals that the global clout of the Qatari station actually makes it an agent that strengthens the bond between the US media and the Administration and minimizes media dissent against the US Government actions during wartime. This is a result of the US Government's success in persuading the US networks that they are fighting an "information war" against Al-Jazeera, and that the Arab network is a deviant source (without substantial proof). The book reveals how, as a result of this perceived information war, the US media has developed new tactics of sovereignty protection such as the systematic self-censorship of legitimate and newsworthy war images from Al-Jazeera without regard to basic principles of professionalism. This includes the self-censorship of events considered newsworthy throughout former conflicts, such as the accidental bombings of innocent citizens. These newsworthy images have been considered "contaminated" throughout the war on terror due to their Arab source and as a result the overall criticism of war has been significantly reduced. The analysis also reveals that in the rare cases that Al-Jazeera did manage to enforce images on the US networks, the US media reformatted the counter-hegemonic material from Al-Jazeera in a manner that demonized both the message and its messenger.

The book argues that the media globalization idea in general and the Al-Jazeera effect in particular is a myth that blinds us from seeing the true direction war coverage is taking in an interconnected world. Through the case study of Al-Jazeera's interplay with US media it reveals that when mainstream society feels threatened by [counter-hegemonic] globalization processes, local debate becomes even more *centralized* and *ethnocentric*.

This two-part book consists of 10 chapters. The first part provides the historical and theoretical context for the analysis. The second part consists of an empirical analysis of Al-Jazeera report transmission by US media. Chapter 1 reviews the media globalization argument, particularly the assertion that the Al-Jazeera effect is similar to the (perceived) overwhelming influence of the BBC World News and CNN International cross-border broadcasting on international discourse. Chapter 2 presents the argument that the emergent global news order in light of Al-Jazeera's dominance resembles an information war between

the West and the non-West. Chapter 3 further contextualize the Al-Jazeera-US media interplay by examining the traditional media-Administration nexus in the US during wartime and the treatment of non-Western news sources before September 11. Chapter 4 examines the various discourses regarding Al-Jazeera's credibility.

Through empirical analysis, Chapter 5 examines the re-broadcasting and framing of Al-Jazeera's material throughout the war in Afghanistan. The chapter is divided into two parts: The first examines the representation of Al-Jazeera's images of US military actions (military frame), the second the representation of Al-Jazeera's images of Afghani civilian casualties (humanitarian frame). The analysis reveals that although Al-Jazeera was the only news source behind the enemy lines in Afghanistan, the US networks mostly aired consensual images of precision bombing, rejecting graphic images and reports on civilian casualties. Chapter 6 examines the US media's framing and treatment of Al-Jazeera's videos of messages from Osama Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda leaders. Chapter 7 examines the re-broadcasting of Al-Jazeera material throughout the war in Iraq. Illustrating Al-Jazeera's ability to *enforce images* on the US networks, it tracks how the US stations "explained" these images to their viewers by distracting their attention from the content of the images and building a whole new media frame to attack Al-Jazeera's credibility. Chapter 8 extends the analysis into the virtual world. On September 1, 2003 Al-Jazeera launched an official English-language website designed "to fill a niche for English speakers who want to get the other side of the story, the Arab perspective" (Associated Press, 2003). This chapter explores the resonance of three randomly selected reports from English Al-Jazeera.Net throughout the US occupation of Iraq on Western websites. It illustrates the potential of the web to promote a genuine cross-cultural dialogue, albeit on a small-scale. Chapter 9 examines the reaction to the newly-launched Al-Jazeera English channel in the US. It focuses on the unwillingness of US cable and satellite carriers to provide Al-Jazeera English to their viewers and the pressure of the anti Al-Jazeera lobby. Based on the above analysis, Chapter 10 draws a new map of practices in US wartime reporting post September 11.