

## Al-Jazeera - An Island Of Controversies

Mei Hwa Fu

University of Birmingham

### Introduction

Foreign correspondence has traditionally been within the purview of news agencies known as the big five (AFP, Reuters, AP, TASS, UPI), disseminating news as it happens across the globe (Rantanen & Boyd-Bareet, 2004, p.38). Media technologies and globalisation, however, have vastly changed the media landscape with the emergence of international satellite media conglomerates such as Cable News Network, Fox News Channels, MSNBC and others - a near monopoly predominately enjoyed by American media organisations (Seib, 2004, p.448).

It was around the turn of the 21st century during the US led war against Afghanistan that a new satellite network from the Middle-East was catapulted from obscurity to global prominence. While the war saw the military supremacy of the US, it likewise started a war of a different kind - a media war of public opinions, an alternative voice from the Gulf competing alongside that of larger Western media conglomerates (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.44).

This article discusses the objectivity and credibility of this voice known as

'Al-Jazeera', which means 'an island' in Arabic (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.28), the first privately owned 24-hour Arabic satellite TV network. This paper inquires if Al-Jazeera's style of coverage and programming breaches the notion of fair and balanced reportage. It further raises the question of perspective in global TV news.

The US-led war against Afghanistan was a much debated topic with varying opinions amongst Muslim countries while the rest of the world tries to make sense of the horrific 911 terrorist attack orchestrated by Muslim extremists. The image of Osama Bin Laden, whom the US believed to be the mastermind of the Twin Tower attack, was flashed across TV screens on October 7, 2001 shortly after America launched an attack on the Taliban regime of Afghanistan (<http://www.september11news.com/OsamaSpeeches.htm>) - (Osama Bin Laden Speeches, Al-Jazeera TV, on October 7, November 3, and December 26, 2001). The footage amazed the world with many in a state of disbelief wondering how the footage got on the airwaves (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.143).

The exclusive footage was distributed by Al-Jazeera,

(<http://www.september11news.com/OsamaSpeeches.htm>) - (Osama Bin Laden Speeches, Broadcast on Qatar's Al-Jazeera TV, on October 7, November 3, and December 26, 2001, Osama Bin Laden's AL-Jazeera TV Broadcasts - Editor's Comments) a relatively unknown satellite TV network stationed out of a small but oil rich Gulf state - Qatar. Since its first airing, Al-Jazeera has continued to provide global media with exclusive coverage of Al-Queda and its leader, Osama Bin Laden, as well as provide news from the Middle-East to Arab audiences worldwide.

The constitution of Al-Jazeera was conceived quite unexpectedly some time in November 1996, when a disagreement over editorial independence between the Saudi-owned Orbit Radio & TV Service and the BBC News Service (Arabic TV Division) resulted in an abrupt termination of the liaison (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.31). Owing to the success of BBC Arabic radio network, the management of Al-Jazeera saw the potential of a vast 14 million Arabic television audiences and promptly recruited the BBC's Arabic TV service editorial staff (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.31).

While Al-Jazeera is government funded by the Emir of Qatar, it operates as a private media enterprise. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, a British-educated prince, is an advocate of modernity as evident in his rule over the military and the country's economic infrastructures (<http://news.bbc>

[Co.uk/2/hi/world/middle\\_east/country\\_profiles/791921.stm](http://www.Co.uk/2/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/791921.stm)) - (Media). Unlike other Arabian Gulf monarchies, he lifted censorship of the press in 1995 and since then, the press has been relatively free from state intervention.

Al-Jazeera claims to be an independent network supporting democracy, one that maintains the balance of a free press serving the public's right to know and abiding by its ethical accountability and professional conduct (<http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2006/11/2008525185733692771.html>). Its non-traditional and provocative style of programming seeking 'not only the opinion but the other opinion', however, often draws criticism from many sides and has, at one time or another, been banned by many Arab governments - Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen - to name a few (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, pp.113-142).

The station has been criticised for not being entirely objective in its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to Seib (2004, p.107), suicide bombers were glorified as 'martyrs of commando operations'. When questioned on the objectivity of such reports, Al-Jazeera argued that given the context they were in, they reported what they saw and that the public reactions were logical consequences (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.30). In other words, Al-Jazeera knew the cost of such reportage but decided that 'it was important for the public to know'. In this case, Al-Jazeera being Arabic, was influenced by the

public sentiments citing contextual objectivity for its reporting (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.202).

Part of responsible reporting and ethical practices by journalists is the ability to maintain balanced and fair coverage. The notion of 'contextual objectivity' can be a tricky circumstance for many journalists. The cultural, historical and social contexts of an environment often are the reasons of conflicts when infringement of such sensitivities is violated. Media workers when carrying out their duties have to choose between objectivity and their own beliefs. Given such perimeter and dilemma, what constitutes fair coverage? Can the news media be truly objective? (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.27).

While Al-Jazeera did try to provide context and put issues into perspective by offering 'the other opinion', the controversial programming is however debatable. Being an independent press, the seemingly lack of good judgement in the name of freedom of expression can be detrimental to others (Tushnet, 1995, p.6). Can the freewheeling of the press without consideration for others be regarded as good journalistic practice?

As Al-Jazeera gains an increasing following with the Arabic audiences who see it as a network with an Arab perspective, its 'gutsy' and often controversial talk show, 'The Opposite Direction' (Al Ittijah Al Mo'akis'), has also reaped heaps of

protests from other Arab media and governments.

'The Opposite Direction' is fashioned after CNN's talk show 'Crossfire' (<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring02/talkshows.html>) - (No. 8 Spring/Summer2002. Boxing Rings: Al-Jazeera's Talk Shows). The primary difference is its confrontational approach in selection of guests with extremely opposing opinions and in the offensive manner in which questions are asked in a live TV show.

According to writers El-Nawawy & Iskander (2002, pp.118-119), Faisal Al-Kasim once hosted two guests, an editor-in-chief of a prominent Kuwaiti newspaper and the editor of a London-based Palestinian publication, debating on the topic of Iraqi sufferings under UN economic sanctions. Both guests criticised the Kuwaiti Government for supporting the sanctions with many heated pro-Iraqi exchanges from call-in audiences. The episode infuriated the Kuwaiti Information Minister who submitted an official complaint to the Qatari Emir. The Emir replied that Al-Jazeera operated autonomously and that he would not interfere (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, pp.118-119).

In another incident some time in 1997, wrote El-Nawawy & Iskander, (2002, p.133), Al-Kasim invited a known London-based Egyptian terrorist to its show. Al-Jazeera's managing director, Ali-Ali, defended the appearance of an Islamist militant as an 'exercise of

impartiality in news coverage' (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p.133). His defence was that Al-Jazeera was not 'working in the dark', that 'these people live in London freely' and 'they left Britain for Qatar in broad daylight and returned likewise'. In short, he viewed the invitation as legitimate and that the station was merely hearing out the 'otherside' even when the other party was a wanted terrorist.

It is increasingly becoming clear that Al-Jazeera operates on quite different tenets from other media organisations in seeking out 'the other opinion'. The question remains though - Can such pluralistic media representations be classified as democratic debates that give audiences the choice for opposing opinions, or are they just forms of sensationalism?

While Al-Jazeera offers an alternative voice to the Arab audiences, its unconventional approach and style of programming had instigated uproar and mass mobilisation from neighbouring countries. What Al-Jazeera did offer, however, was undeniably the setting up of a more vibrant civil society in terms of initiating debates on contending ideas and issues in a region where speech was curtailed and human rights suppressed (El-Nwawy & Iskander, 2002, p.69).

It is now up to the viewers to decide if such media representations demonstrate Al-Jazeera's claim as an objective and balanced source of news, as indicated in its corporate

codes of ethics (<http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2006/11/2008525185733692771.html>). Time remains the best witness and will judge the legitimacy of this 'voice' that has caused much controversy.

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