

AL JAZEERA: A REVERSAL OF PERSPECTIVE



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Initially launched as an Arabic satellite news channel, Al Jazeera has now expanded into a network with several outlets. Al Jazeera is available in more than 250 million households (Villarreal, 2011) in more than 100 countries. Its reach is second only to CNN's 260 million (Turner Press, 2011) and BBC's 303 million (BBC Press Release, 2010).

Al Jazeera was launched in 1996 by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani "with the goal of providing the sort of independent news that the region's state-run broadcasters had long ignored (Doherty, 2011)."

Al Jazeera's vision is "to introduce to the Arab world free reporting that is distant from propaganda, and at the same time to give the Arab world the opportunity to express opinions," Al Jazeera's former director general said in an interview (Interview With Wadah Khanfar, Director General, Al Jazeera, 2006).

Edward Said in his groundbreaking work "Orientalism" argues that, historically, the western perspectives on the east were "almost totally ethnocentric," in which the west denied the east the permission to narrate its own story (Said, 1979). The birth of Al Jazeera broke the pervasiveness of one-sided representations of the Middle East in the media dominated by the western world. At the same time, Al Jazeera gave a voice to the oppressed populations under the despotic regimes of the Middle East. These changes could be characterized as "a reversal of perspective" in the media landscape of the Middle East.

Funding Model

Although independent, it is owned by the state of Qatar through the Qatar Media Corporation, headquartered in Doha, Qatar. Al Jazeera cannot survive and function without state funding because it is enormously difficult to generate sustainable funding in the Middle East

market. According to a recent report, “only 5 percent of the satellite market comprised of pay-TV households” in the region (The Report: Qatar 2010, 2011).

Al Jazeera launched “Al Jazeera Sport” channel in 2003 in order to bolster its revenues and viewership. Al Jazeera Sport became a FIFA licensee 2009. In 2011, it secured broadcast rights to 2014, 2012 and 2018 FIFA World Cups (Al Jazeera Sport buys broadcast rights to 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups™, 2011).

Additionally, Al Jazeera’s venture into the global market through Al Jazeera English—the English version of the Arabic-language news network—has provided it with various revenue streams.

From regional to global power

Al Jazeera enjoyed monopoly in the Middle East’s media landscape from 1997 to 2003. Its competitive edge came from its fearless and relentless critique of the states operating in the region. This is the reason why Al Jazeera was—and still remains—highly unpopular among region’s rulers (Miles 2005). It was for the same reason it was unpopular with US administration (Al Jazeera's Global Gamble, 2006).

According to (MacFarquhar, 2010), “The one country that Al Jazeera never touched was its patron, Qatar (p. 76).” Perhaps, this is the reason why Al Jazeera has been able to enjoy unprecedented press freedom in the region: Qatar has a native population of less than 2 million, and it is hardly a regional news priority for Al Jazeera.

Other states in the region have launched satellite news channels, which have not been as successful as Al Jazeera—primarily because they are perceived as instruments of state propaganda. In 2003, members of the Saudi royal family launched Al-Arabiya as a competitor to tackle Al Jazeera’s criticism of the royal family. Similarly, in 2004, Bush administration

launched Al Hurra in an attempt to offset Al Jazeera's coverage of the Iraq invasion. Al Hurra was dubbed by the critics as the "Fox News in Arabic" and was noted for its pro-American bias (Seib, 2008, p. 30). BBC Arabic, launched in 2008, is also there in the picture, "yet much like Al Hurra, BBC Arabic has failed to establish itself with Arab viewers (Hasbani, 2009)."

Al Jazeera expanded its global presence by launching Al Jazeera English, which competes with BBC and CNN. Because of globalization and the Internet, popular international channels like Russia Today, France 24 and Nile TV are also in the picture.

Satellite TV is the story in the region

"Broadcasting [in the United States] is a multifaceted, regulated industry now entering a period of maturity in which expansion will be slower and challenges greater" (Vogel, 2011, p. 25). Media organizations in the Middle East and United States function in very different contexts. The nature and the maturity of institutions and laws are vastly different in the two regions. According to (Zayani, 2005), "We need to be more sensitive to how identical technologies can have vastly different impacts in different regions (p. 204). The role of the media gatekeepers is not as influential in the Middle East as it is in the United States: Satellite television broadcasters are typically free-to-air and require no subscription fees. On top of it, "a locally manufactured dish antenna" is available for less than \$100 (Zayani, 2005, p. 204). This means that one only needs to buy a dish to watch satellite television. In addition, a single dish is shared among many households, which mostly have a joint family system. Moreover, in public places a single dish can serve multiple customers.

Lack of scientific data on audience research leaves us with poor qualitative and quantitative estimates on satellite penetration in the area. The viewer statistics of the region that are available are misleading because of complex social, cultural and technological variables. "It

is extremely difficult to do any kind of census in the Middle East and that is to do with cultural considerations as well as technical considerations,” said a member of staff at Al-Jazeera (Miles, 2005, p. 66).

In a region fraught with uncertainty and tumult, journalism has a painfully personal sense. News that is not filtered by the local state-controlled television stations— or by one-sided western media networks— remains significant. Al Jazeera’s power to transcend national boundaries through satellite television, coupled with relevant pan-Arabic programming, has made it an enormously important force in the region.

Story outside the region

Al Jazeera is accessible on cable, satellite, IPTV over ADSL, smartphones and the Internet (Release: AJE Distribution unveiled, 2006). Despite global success, Al Jazeera has not gained distribution on any major cable or satellite systems in the United States. Part of the reason is that the channel was demonized by the Bush administration in 2004 (Al Jazeera's Global Gamble, 2006) as “a source of ‘hateful propaganda’ coming from the Arab world.”

In the light of its failure to penetrate the U.S. market, Al Jazeera turned to the Internet because “anyone on it can be a global publisher or a broadcaster of self-produced content, with no need to obtain a government agency license or to navigate a labyrinth of corporate gatekeepers (Vogel, 2011, p. 47).

In 2006, Al Jazeera launched its live stream on YouTube where its branded channel has become top news channel on the site (See Exhibit 1). It currently has more than 246,000 subscribers and has had more than 325 million video views. CNN, on the other hand, has less than 60,000 subscribers and has had less than 352 million video views. In addition, live streams of Al Jazeera are available on the Al Jazeera website and on www.livestation.com/aje. Al Jazeera

also became first news organization to release some of its footage under Creative Commons license (Bull, 2010, p. 461) (See Exhibit 2). Al Jazeera, like most media giants, has strong presence on Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites. It has also launched smartphones apps for various platforms.

In the U.S., Al Jazeera is only available 24/7 in four locations: New York, Washington DC, Burlington Vermont and Toledo Ohio (Calderone 2011). Al Jazeera's entry in the U.S market will definitely boost its revenue stream. Funding remains Al Jazeera's Achilles heel because it is dependent on state-funding. Al Jazeera is currently running "Demand Al Jazeera" campaign through social media (Facebook and Twitter) and a dedicated website (See Exhibit 3) to persuade media gatekeepers in the United States.

Whither now?

From being called "mouthpiece-of-Bin-Laden" (Josh Rushing, 2007, p. 155) to being awarded with Columbia University's highest journalism award in 2011, Al Jazeera has come a long way. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also came out to praise Al Jazeera: "Viewership of Al Jazeera is going up in the United States because it's real news," she said.

Al Jazeera's marketing campaign in the United States should highlight these accolades and tributes. Also, Al Jazeera needs to run its marketing campaigns on university campuses and urban areas in the United States. Personalized marketing campaign tends to break mental and cultural barriers.

As its global stature grows, Al Jazeera will eventually gain financial independence from the state-funding; however, it should not lose its anti-state character, which is its real edge.

Exhibit 1

Al Jazeera Live channel on YouTube

http://www.youtube.com/user/AJazeeraEnglish?ob=0&feature=results_main

www.youtube.com/user/AJazeeraEnglish?ob=0&feature=results_main

YouTube

Al Jazeera English Subscribed

246,904 subscribers 352,673,939 video views

Featured **LIVE NOW** Feed Videos

Search Channel

About Al Jazeera English

Award-winning international news and documentaries. With over 70 bureaus in six continents, the channel is increasingly being recognized as the leader in global current affairs for today's global village.

- Al Jazeera English Website
- News
- Features
- Opinion
- Demand Al Jazeera in the USA

Created by AJazeeraEnglish
(Block User) (Send Message)

Latest Activity Mar 8, 2012

Date Joined Nov 23, 2006

more ▾

Al Jazeera English Live
by AJazeeraEnglish 6 months ago

Exhibit 2

Al Jazeera Creative Commons Repository <http://cc.aljazeera.net/>

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Al Jazeera Creative Commons Repository. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for "About Al Jazeera", "About the Repository", "Gaza footage", and "Contact Us", along with a search bar. Below the navigation bar is the Al Jazeera logo and the text "ALJAZEERA | Creative Commons Repository". To the right of the logo is a language dropdown menu set to "English" and the Creative Commons logo. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column is titled "Featured Videos" and contains a video player showing a group of people on a street. The right column is titled "Using our video?" and contains text explaining the license requirements, including attribution to Al Jazeera and the requirement to leave logos intact. Below this is a section titled "About our repository".

cc.aljazeera.net

About Al Jazeera About the Repository Gaza footage Contact Us search...

English

ALJAZEERA | Creative Commons Repository

creative commons

Featured Videos

Using our video?

Let us know! You can send us a message through our [contact form](#).

According the license, you must attribute the footage to Al Jazeera (but not in any way that suggests that we endorse you or your use of our work).

You are required to leave our logos intact, reference this website and the license itself.

About our repository

Exhibit 3

Demand Al Jazeera Website: <http://www.aljazeera.com/demandaljazeera/>

The screenshot shows the Demand Al Jazeera website. At the top left is the Al Jazeera logo and the word "ALJAZEERA" in large blue letters. Below this is a navigation menu with links for News, In Depth, Programmes, Video, Blogs, Business, Weather, Sport, and Watch Live. A search bar is located on the right side of the menu. The main headline is "To the last drop" with a sub-headline: "Residents of one Canadian town are engaged in a David and Goliath-style battle over the dirtiest oil project ever known." Below the headline is a large image of an oil pipeline. A blue banner across the middle of the page reads "DEMAND ALJAZEERA IN THE USA". Below the banner is a live video feed showing two news anchors, a woman and a man, with a "LIVE WASHINGTON DC" label. To the right of the video feed are social media sharing buttons for Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Below the video feed is a text block that reads: "Five years since Al Jazeera English launched, the channel is still only available in a handful of US cities: New York, NY; Washington DC; Burlington, VT, Toledo, OH, and Bristol, RI. We know Americans want to watch, as 80,000 people have already emailed their TV providers. But we need you to keep the pressure up by contacting your cable/satellite carrier to Demand AJE." Below this text is a list of five numbered items: 1. Tweet w/ #DemandAlJazeera / #DemandAJE. 2. "Like" us on Facebook and share AJE articles. 3. Share extensive US media coverage of AJE. 4. Find your TV service provider and Demand AJE. 5. Read more facts and figures about the channel. At the bottom of the text block, it says "AJE is broadcast to at least 250 million households in 120 countries."

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