AL JAZEERA: A REVERSAL OF PERSPECTIVE

Muhammad Ali Hashmi
alihashmi@u.northwestern.edu
Al Jazeera: A reversal of perspective

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.


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/AlJazeeraEnglish?ob=0&feature=results_main
Exhibit 2

Al Jazeera Creative Commons Repository [http://cc.aljazeera.net/](http://cc.alazeera.net/)
Exhibit 3

Demand Al Jazeera Website: http://www.aljazeera.com/demandaljazeera/
Citations & Bibliography

_Al Jazeera's Global Gamble_. (2006, 08 22). Retrieved from journalism.org:
http://www.journalism.org/node/1530

_Interview With Wadah Khanfar, Director General, Al Jazeera_. (2006). Retrieved from pbs.org:
http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/newswar/war_interviews.html


_BBC Press Release_. (2010, 05 24). Retrieved from bbc.co.uk/:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2010/05_may/24/wsnews.shtml


http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/17/us-aljazeera-idUSTRE71G0WC20110217


