

Perspectives

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Al Jazeera: A Culture of Reporting by Dr. Abderrahim Foukara

Following the First Gulf War in 1991, CNN ran a self-promotional ad in which Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak praised the American cable network for beating even diplomatic channels in delivering news of the outbreak of the war to liberate Kuwait.

This glowing tribute to CNN from the leader of a major Arab country, which was in fact part of the international coalition that eventually ejected the Iraqis from Kuwait, could be seen as a prelude to the advent of the age of satellite TV in the Arab world.

Although satellite TV was established in the region then, it was clear that CNN's ability to shape international perception of the war captured the imagination of Arab political elites, thus focusing their attention on the huge political dividends that could be reaped from satellite TV, if used creatively.

A phenomenon virtually unprecedented in Arab broadcasting was just a few years away. In 1996, Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel launched its programming initially from the BBC's turf, London, and subsequently from Doha, Qatar. The channel has since largely expanded its coverage and burnished its audience credentials through powerful reporting of seismic events in the region and worldwide. Not least of which is the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which delivered what seemed at the time as the coup de grace to any remaining hope for better relations between the United States and the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Al-Jazeera has been so successful in creating a new political discourse that the thirteen years since its inception seem like an eternity in which the impact of CNN's First Gulf War coverage on Arab perception constituted but an instant. Although this hyperbole highlights the position that Arab satellite TV has entered in America's political and cultural life, it should not make us overlook the influence of American TV on politics and culture inside the United States.

In light of its almost unassailable financial strengths and popularity, American TV has not fallen prey to complacency when it comes to foreign networks' ability to access the American market. Call American audiences parochial, insular or culturally arrogant, they still seem largely unprepared to let foreign channels compete with their domestic counterparts for the attention of the average American household. Even Western channels such as BBC have made but a dent in the American media scene despite their

sustained efforts to compete for the hearts and minds of American viewers. The general feeling in the United States is that American TV both reflects and provides an "American sensibility" more much so than any foreign outlet ever could. American viewers -- particularly outside the East and West Coast elites -- seem to feel very comfortable with the American version of the "truth," as reflected on American TV coverage of international and domestic news.

Likewise, Arab channels like Al-Jazeera derive their home audience strength from these same dynamics. Arab audiences are increasingly wary of the "bias" of foreign channels and therefore have more trust in their own channels. This trend stems from the fact that the latter are broadcast in Arabic and Arabs feel that they provide and reflect a distinctly "Arab sensibility."

Therein lies one of the great paradoxes of the Arab and American media scenes: the truth can bring us together but

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can also tear us apart, depending on how we see it in a world where perception is profoundly impacted by what we view on our television screens.

In my personal experience, although many Americans consider Al-Jazeera a tool of anti-American propaganda, one great advantage Arab news channels such as Al-Jazeera have over many of their American counterparts is the breadth and depth of their foreign affairs coverage. Watch-

ing Al-Jazeera over a period of twenty-four hours can be a great educational experience, not just on life in the Arab world, but also on life in other parts of the world.

This is an advantage which results from a variety of factors, of which I will mention three. First, Al-Jazeera is funded by a government, Qatar's, as opposed to private or commercial money. Consequently, it gives the channel greater latitude in dealing with the pressures of advertising which, by chasing certain profitable demographics, often

turns a serious information agenda into an “infotainment” agenda.

Following the economic downturn, corporations were the first ones hit and could no longer afford to maintain big bureaus abroad (security for correspondents, cost of living, translators, etc.) Consequently, major networks have long since been closing foreign bureaus and withdrawing resident correspondents. Instead, they resort to “parachute journalism,” which means dispatching US-based reporters for short spells abroad when important news breaks.

The downside of this is that these reporters do not have the background, sources, or cultural sensitivities of correspondents who would have been stationed in their respective areas of coverage for extended periods. On the other hand, Al-Jazeera, financed by the government of Qatar, follows the news where it leads, regardless of the cost benefit analysis that other networks must apply.

Of course, any news outlet that is tied to government money raises questions about the credibility and independence of its news agenda. For most of its viewers, Al-Jazeera is probably one of the most independent news outlets ever seen in the region. A good indication of its credibility is the size of its audience among all Arab demographics, particularly in times of war.

Second, Arabs, due to their self-perceived underdog geopolitical status on the world stage, are much more interested than Americans in how the international scene affects their daily lives. Finally, Al-Jazeera is operated by an Arab intellectual elite acutely aware that the Arab world is at the cross-roads of human civilization, and therefore is pivotal in steering viewership towards programming that tries to examine and explain the complexity of world affairs.

Regardless of how Arabs and Americans see the role and nature of their respective TV news outlets, I would contend that TV’s bridge-building capacity flourishes in times of peace and often flounders in times of war. This dichotomy lies in constraining audience sensibilities and powerful political and cultural agendas.

The events that ensued in Baghdad’s Firdous Square on the day the city fell in the spring of 2003 have become iconic of the fundamental differences in which Arab and American TV stations report the same story. While American television focused on seemingly angry Iraqi civilians hammering at the statue of Saddam Hussein, the lens of Arab television was attracted to a different scene, that of the American GI draping the head of the statue in the American flag.

To that extent, TV plays a crucial role in shaping the perceptions of both Arabs and Americans. Firdous Square sent a crucial and differing message to each audience. To Americans, the picture of Iraqis hitting the statue of Saddam Hussein with their shoes was the ultimate vindication of the Bush Administration’s claim that they welcomed the invasion. To Arabs, however, hoisting the American flag at the top of a statue of an Arab and Muslim “hero,” and using an American tank to bring it down was the ultimate evidence that the colonial West was “at it again.”

No Arab network could have survived the day in the eyes of its audience if it had sympathized with the message of the Bush Administration and showed Firdous Square through a prism similar to that of American networks. The invasion of Iraq was overwhelmingly opposed by Arabs who perceived in it the echoes of past conflicts with an aggressive West.

Can TV outlets ever speak the same language across cultural and political divides, even in times of war? The events of Israel’s latest war on Gaza may suggest the answer is yes. There came a time when both Arabs and Americans saw pictures of the same war through the same lens, incidentally that of Al-Jazeera no less!

While that is certainly a tribute to the unique position that Al-Jazeera occupies in international broadcasting, along with its sister channel broadcast in English, there are other factors to consider in using Al-Jazeera as the central new source. First of which being the ban Israelis placed on international journalists’ access to war zones inside Gaza, making Al-Jazeera’s intrepid crews the uncontested eye on the war.

Secondly, the Israeli military and political establishments seem to have timed the war to coincide with Americans being preoccupied with their own presidential transition, a clever but flawed calculation. In a country where the administration usually provides a point of focus for media coverage on world affairs and their impact on the American national interest, the war also occurred at a time when the departing administration already had a foot out the door and the incoming administration had not fully taken office. As a consequence, the American media’s narrative of Middle Eastern wars, usually different from Al-Jazeera’s, suddenly seemed out of focus while the Arab channel’s appeared sharp to Arabs and non-Arabs worldwide.

In the final analysis, TV per se is neither a bridge-builder nor a bridge-buster. I believe that the battle to close the gap between nations is often fought in the trenches of political action, not by TV programming alone.

The perception issue between American and the Arab worlds will also be determined by what actions Arabs will take not just in the Middle East but also in Washington, where important decisions are made which affect their region and the rest of the world.



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He joined the BBC World Service in 1990 where he served in various departments, including Arabic, English, French and African, and in various capacities, including producer, reporter, anchor and journalism instructor.

In 1999, Abderrahim joined *The World*, a Boston-based co-production of the BBC, Public Radio International and WGBH Boston, again in various capacities including producer, reporter and occasional anchor.

In 2001, Abderrahim moved to DC where he continued to report for the BBC in London but also served as a visiting Senior Editor on AllAfrica.com, the largest provider of African news both in English and French.

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