The Al Jazeera Phenomenon
The Al Jazeera Phenomenon
Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media

Edited by
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Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of a great many individuals and institutions. I am particularly grateful to Sharifa Al Rawi, Nahawand Al Khaderi, Richard Bukholder, Sofiane Sahraoui, Abdelkader Daghfous, Mohamed Krichene, Mariam Wessam Al Dabbagh, Suzanne Gyeszly, Karen Peterson, Muhammad Ayish, Julie Stoll, Robert Webb, Laura Harrison, Jihad Ali Ballout, Anthony Collins, Khaled Al Hroub, Ann Lesch, Nidhal Guessoum, Ahmed Guessoum, William Gallois and Ronald Sheen.

I would like also to express my thanks and gratitude to the Social Science Research Council for supporting this project and for providing the framework within which international collaboration can thrive. Special thanks go to Graig Calhoun, Seteney Shami, Mary Ann Riad, Laleh Behbehanian, and Nazli Parvizi from the SSRC. Particular thanks are also due to the American University of Sharjah for granting me release time to complete this project.

Finally, my deepest appreciation is to Sonia for her support and patience during the time I was working on this project. I dedicate this book to her, to Aymen, and to my parents.
I

Introduction—Al Jazeera and the Vicissitudes of the New Arab Mediascape

Mohamed Zayani

Few phenomena in the Arab world are arguably more intriguing than Al Jazeera—a pan-Arab 24-hour satellite news and discussion channel beamed out of the tiny Gulf peninsula of Qatar. Its immediate success took the Arab media scene aback and even stunned Al Jazeera itself. Advertising itself as a forum for diverse views, focusing on issues of broad Arab concern and broaching controversial subjects, Al Jazeera has in no time managed to acquire a leading role in the Arab media scene. According to a 2002 report on Middle East communication published by Spotbeam Communications, “Al Jazeera is center-stage in the modernization of Arab-language broadcasting.”¹ Not only has the network left a permanent mark on broadcasting in the Arab world, but it is also developing the potential to influence Arab public opinion and Arab politics. At the same time, Al Jazeera is highly controversial. Both inside and outside the Arab world, the network’s coverage has been regarded with skepticism. In official Arab circles, Al Jazeera has acquired a maverick image and even prompted diplomatic crises. Since it catapulted to international prominence during the war in Afghanistan, the network has sparked a much publicized controversy, garnered much loathing and attracted considerable criticism. Away from the enthusiasm of those who champion it and the bitterness of those who criticize it, Al Jazeera remains not only a phenomenon that is worthy of exploration, but also one which begs for a better understanding.

AL JAZEERA’S NEW JOURNALISM

Al Jazeera is a relatively free channel operating in what many observers perceive as one of the regions that are less inclined toward freedom of expression. What made this venture possible was the initiative of Qatar to liberalize the press and do away with censorship, an initiative
which gave Al Jazeera a free hand to operate more than it had an enduring effect on Qatari media as a whole. Upon taking power, the Emir of Qatar—who is keen not only on nurturing free speech but also on flirting with democracy—lifted censorship of the media by disbanding the Information Ministry, which was responsible for media censorship. Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani, Chairman of the Board of Al Jazeera, explains the rationale: “The Ministry of Information ... is the Ministry that controls the news media, be it television, radio or newspaper ... We don’t see that a Ministry of Information has any positive role to play in future media projects.”

Seen from this vantage point, the key to the channel’s success is the relative amount of freedom available to the people who work at Al Jazeera. As such, Al Jazeera enjoys an unprecedented margin of freedom which makes it a haven for free speech in the Arab world. In fact, it is popular precisely because it openly discusses sensitive topics and tackles controversial issues. It ventures into a realm of open discussion rarely attempted by other broadcasters in the region. Its talk shows unabashedly tackle such unmentionables as government corruption, the human rights record of Arab regimes, the persecution of political dissenters, Islamic law (or Sharia), the (in)compatibility of Islam and democracy, and Islamic fundamentalism.

To some extent, Al Jazeera fills not only a media void but also a political void. In the absence of political will and political pluralism in the Arab world, Al Jazeera serves as a de facto pan-Arab opposition and a forum for resistance. It provides a voice for Arab opposing views and a high-profile platform for political dissidents many of whom live abroad. In a way, Al Jazeera has instituted the right to have access to the media for representatives of the region’s myriad opposition groups. This has branded the network as one which questions authority and challenges the common political discourse. Projecting an unspoken reformist agenda, Al Jazeera does not shy away from covering political and social issues over which Arab governments prefer to keep quiet. In some of its programs, Al Jazeera tactfully welcomes criticism of governments and the hosts of its talk shows often challenge their guests if they are apologetic for their governments. Al Jazeera has also led the way in exposing Arab power abuses and giving an outlet to a pervading disenchantment with non-democratic and autocratic governing systems in the region. In doing so, it has instilled what may be loosely described as a culture of accountability. Leading figures and policy-makers have suddenly become accountable and answerable to their public.
It should come as no surprise that the network’s frankness has angered most if not all Arab governments. Accordingly, the Arab States Broadcasting Union has denied Al Jazeera—the odd man out—access to the Pact of Arab Honor for not abiding by the “code of honor” which promotes brotherhood between Arab nations. While theoretically this move is impelled by the urge to meet standards of broadcasting propriety, in reality it is politically motivated. Al Jazeera is deemed a threat to the very hegemony and ideology of Arab regimes whose “survival instincts ... continue to pre-empt any liberalizing impulse of satellite TV.” The rhetoric of the network has, indeed, rankled some Arab governments who are unaccustomed to opposition. Naturally, Al Jazeera has been regarded with suspicion by Arab governments who complain that its programs bruise their sensitivities and threaten the stability of their regimes. For a few Arab statesmen and leaders, Al Jazeera is out there to undermine the reverence with which they are treated in their own media, criticize them, challenge their wisdom and undermine the very legitimacy of their regimes.

Sure enough, Al Jazeera’s insistence on challenging the culture of political restraint and showing little inhibition in its broadcasting about Arab states has prompted reprisals. In fact, some governments have denied Al Jazeera permission to open a bureau or closed its bureaus temporarily. While some Arab states have rebuked the network, others have banned its reporters or refused them visas. Even in Palestine, the Ramallah office of Al Jazeera was closed after Al Jazeera broadcast an unflattering image of Chairman Yasser Arafat in a promotional trailer for a documentary on the 1975–90 Lebanese Civil War, showing a demonstrator holding a pair of shoes over a picture of the Palestinian leader in a sign of contempt, thus silencing a media outlet that had provided extensive coverage for the Palestinian intifada against Israel and has helped put the Palestinian issue on the front burner. Likewise, Arab states—including so-called moderate governments—have complained to the Qatari foreign ministry about Al Jazeera. Qatar’s relationship with some of the Gulf states, namely Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, has been strained because of what the channel telecasts. Other countries such as Jordan and Egypt have either broken or threatened to break diplomatic relations with Qatar at times for being criticized by Al Jazeera, thus causing occasional diplomatic crises. But the Emir of Qatar has resisted pressure from Arab leaders to bring back Al Jazeera to the straight and narrow of the region’s conformist tradition—and that has
made a difference. According to the aforementioned Spotbeam Communications report on Middle East communication, Al Jazeera’s “strength is that it is not cowered into self censorship.”

**THE SPECIFICITY OF AL JAZEERA**

Interestingly enough, the official stand toward Al Jazeera does not match its popularity with a large segment of Arab viewers. The network has gained as much popularity among Arab viewers as it has garnered loathing and attracted criticism from Arab governments. According to a 2002 Gallup poll on the Arab and Islamic world conducted in nine countries, Al Jazeera is widely watched—albeit with interesting nuances between regions. In the Persian Gulf region and in Jordan, Al Jazeera is by far the preferred station for news (56 per cent in Kuwait and 47 per cent in Saudi Arabia); in the Levant, viewership of the network is relatively high (44 per cent in Jordan and 37 per cent in Lebanon where it vies for first place with a Lebanese channel); and in the Maghreb, Al Jazeera is fairly popular although not the preferred channel (20 per cent in Morocco, with two local channels faring slightly better). The poll’s findings that viewers in such countries as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon are most likely to turn to Al Jazeera first to catch up on world events suggest that, by and large, Al Jazeera is regarded positively in the Arab world.

The poll attributes the success of the network to a variety of factors. A high percentage of the viewers included in the poll turn to Al Jazeera because they feel it is always on the site of events, which in turn gives it direct and instant access to information and an instinct for airing breaking news. Not only does Al Jazeera pursue aggressive field reporting, but it also has come to claim a unique access to information—information which may not otherwise be available. For instance, during the so-called War on Terrorism, Al Jazeera has been a vital source of information, providing news and reports from Afghanistan and Iraq. Many tapes have found their way to the network featuring figures ranging from Osama bin Laden to Saddam Hussein, to Palestinian activists. Although access to such material raises questions about the significance of Al Jazeera’s trustworthiness in the eyes of groups like Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Saddam Hussein’s regime and various Islamic “opposition” groups, Al Jazeera has proven to be a window on a part of the world that is all too often alien to the West. Over the years, Al Jazeera has come to provide
comprehensive coverage of news and events that matter to the Arab and Muslim world. Part of the appeal of Al Jazeera according to the Gallup poll is its commitment to daring live unedited news as well as its tendency to broadcast uncut, live pictures. Particularly in times of turmoil, viewers are subjected to live feeds and unfiltered news on Al Jazeera. Likewise, its current affairs and talk show programs are aired live without screening out embarrassing questions or controversial statements. Viewers are drawn to Al Jazeera also because it offers intrepid reporting, candid talk, timely debates and vivid commentaries. Last but not least, the poll suggests that Al Jazeera is valued for the honesty and fairness of its reporting. As such, it aims at journalistic objectivity by presenting news and balancing it through a narrative and/or by inviting guests who represent different perspectives.

While such an opinion poll is suggestive, it does not capture the rich dynamics Al Jazeera sets up in their full complexity. Beyond the findings of this Gallup poll, one can venture a number of explanations for the relatively wide appeal of Al Jazeera. The network is popular partly because it is attentive to political news and caters to an audience that is politically conscious, that cherishes reliable political news and that craves intelligent political debates. Naturally, the geo-political situation of the Middle East has made politics an important component of media programs. Regional developments, tensions, crises and wars over the past few decades have enhanced such an interest. Being a major component of TV programs, political news has done much to develop the Arab viewers' political instinct. In fact, the media coverage of politics has contributed further to what Muhammad Ayish calls “the politicization of Arab viewers.”

Al Jazeera has capitalized on that, providing food for an audience that is hungry for credible news and serious political analysis. One of the aims of Al Jazeera, as its former managing director Mohammed Jassim Al Ali explains, is “to bring the Arab audience back to trusting the Arab media, especially the news ... We treat them as an intelligent audience, rather than the conventional idea that they will take whatever you give them.” Al Jazeera is popular partly because it takes the viewers seriously with its content and programming. In the not so distant past, large audiences received programs but were unable to make direct responses or participate in vigorous discussions. However, the viewers’ expectations of media have changed. Arab viewers are no longer seen as consumers in a one-way communication stream. Through interactive debates with live phone-ins,
Al Jazeera has helped initiate a new kind of viewer experience. The kind of debate championed by Al Jazeera is something new in the Arab world where public political debate is considered subversive. What is particularly interesting about Al Jazeera is its ability to expand what people in the Arab world can talk about.

The advent of Al Jazeera has not only changed the viewers’ expectations, but also altered some media practices in the Arab world. Overall, Al Jazeera has instilled a competitive drive in some mainstream Arab media and accelerated the institutionalization of new trends in programming. Certain programs, or at least program formats, which are typical of Al Jazeera have been injected into many Arab satellite channels in bandwagon fashion as is the case with talk shows with viewer call-ins. Al Jazeera is also nudging competitors toward live interviews and is pushing some channels to display a new savvy for finding stories. Some Arab satellite channels such as Abu Dhabi TV have tried to emulate Al Jazeera’s free style in news broadcasting. Recently, the Arab media scene has also seen the proliferation of news channels, the most prominent being the Dubai-based Al Arabiya. Even state media establishments can no longer ignore what pan-Arab stations like Al Jazeera are doing and have, indeed, become more aware of the need for more appropriate programming. Al Jazeera’s programming has challenged the restrained coverage available on state media which has no other choice than to follow suit and even send reporters to the scene for fear of losing audiences. Not only have Al Jazeera’s professional standards informed many other channels, but the mobility of some of the network’s staff has also helped dissipate such journalistic practices. In February 2004, the network set up a Media Center for Training and Development aimed at instilling its journalistic values into journalists and media institutions throughout the region.14

AL JAZEERA AS A PAN-ARAB CHANNEL

Al Jazeera distinguished itself by its attempt to reach out to a large Arab audience, discussing issues that are pressing in the Arab and Muslim world, in general, and the conflict-ridden Middle East, in particular. Dealing with a wide range of issues that touch the Arab world—such as the Anglo-American bombing of Baghdad in operation Desert Fox, the plight of the Iraqi people under the decade-long sanctions, the Palestinian intifada, the war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq—Al Jazeera has managed to carve a niche for itself.
Not only are Arab issues prominent on the network's news and discussion programs, but the very issue of Arabness is paramount. According to Suleiman Al Shammari, Al Jazeera plays off and even feeds an Arab nationalist trend in its viewers. Through some of its programs and talk shows, "the channel promotes an Arab nationalist discourse wrapped in a democratic style which makes it easy for viewers to palate." But Al Jazeera is no Sawt Al Arab. It may be vaguely reminiscent of the heyday of Nasser's Arab nationalism but, as David Hirst rightly points out, it is very different for "neither in style nor content can Al Jazeera be compared to Cairo's Voice of the Arabs ... but some regard it as its closest successor." The pan-Arab overtones are not only subtle, but different and less contrived. Al Jazeera has come to play an important role in broadening pan-Arab interaction. As such, it projects an inclusive identity which crosses national boundaries.

This new notion of Arabism manifests itself to a certain degree in the very image the network projects of itself—its staff, its language, its name, and its location. Al Jazeera employs people from various Arab nations. Its staff, some of whom came out of the BBC Arabic service, are Arabs from almost every corner of the Arab world, with no apparent domination of any single group. Although there is no deliberate policy of diversification when it comes to personnel decisions, the network has an exceptionally diverse workforce. Naturally, the lack of a dominant group gives the network a pan-Arab ring. Equally important is the language factor. Al Jazeera, which broadcasts exclusively in modern standard Arabic, has gone a long way to creating a kind of connectivity between Arab viewers. Likewise, the name of the network has pan-Arab overtones. In Arabic, the term "Al Jazeera," which literally means "island," is closely associated with and even connotes the word "peninsula"—the likely allusion in the minds of most Arab viewers being not so much to the peninsula of Qatar itself, the home country, as much as it is to the Arabian Peninsula (Shebh Al Jazeera Al Arabiya). The location of the network is also not without meaning. Al Jazeera may not have been the first private channel to appeal to a pan-Arab public, but it has represented a turning point in Arab broadcasting in so far as it operates from within the Gulf region. In so doing, it is closer to its core audience, breaking away from the previous experiences of offshore media democracy and the myth that one of the conditions for establishing a free media is its location outside the Arab world.
Being close to the events in the region, Al Jazeera has acquired substantial clout in the Arab world by bringing conflicts and issues right into the living rooms of its predominantly Arab audience. In many ways, Al Jazeera has reinvigorated a sense of common destiny in the Arab world and is even encouraging Arab unity, so much so that pan-Arabism is being reinvented on this channel. As a pan-Arab satellite broadcaster, Al Jazeera caters to a transnational regional audience that may be heterogeneous in some ways, but is nonetheless bound by language, culture, history, and to a lesser extent religion and geography. If anything, Al Jazeera has been at the forefront of Arab satellite channels which have brought about “a pan-Arab consciousness” or a pan-Arab “imagined community,” to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term, comprised of individuals who have a sense of belonging to and affinity with other people they have never met and who actually speak the same language but are not geographically limited.

Al Jazeera also helps nurture a sense of community among the Arab diaspora. It does so in two ways: by tapping into Arab figures outside the Arab world and by appealing to Arab viewers outside their home countries. In a number of its programs, Al Jazeera has invited Arab intellectual figures and journalists who live in Europe for instance and political figures in exile. Because its coverage of Middle East issues has more depth and provides a different spin from that of Western networks, Al Jazeera has also attracted viewers outside the Arab world. In doing so, it has enhanced the cultural connection between its Arab viewers overseas and Arab culture. The network is one among many transnational channel which brings Arab countries and their diaspora into an ongoing public argument about timely Arab issues. This is not without consequences. In Europe, for instance, where there is a large Arab immigrant community that is keen on following Arab news, there is an increasing fear that satellite channels like Al Jazeera constitute a serious challenge to Europe’s policy of culturally assimilating immigrant communities.

Tapping into the Arab identity during times marked by Arab disunity, Al Jazeera has emerged as a key opinion maker. For Poniwozik, it is one of three institutions that have the power to influence people: “Among all the major influences on Arab Public opinion—the mosque, the press, the schools—the newest and perhaps most revolutionary is Al Jazeera.” In a way, Al Jazeera is a channel that appeals to the masses and has an overt populist orientation. Naturally, it has acquired some legitimacy through the Arab street.
It has developed the potential to shape public opinion in the Arab world. Arabs all over the world can now have instant access to what is happening in the Arab and Muslim community. Such exposure has helped develop a sense of political awareness among ordinary viewers. Occasionally, this awareness translates into popular pressure on Arab governments to step up their efforts to act on certain issues and to alter their tame policy. In some instances, Al Jazeera has sparked student demonstrations and inflamed public opinion and as a result some Arab governments are finding it more and more pressing to keep pace with popular opinion.

Faced with the discontent and occasional agitation of Arab public opinion—which it contributes to and fuels in some ways—Al Jazeera, much like some other alternative channels, opens up the waves so that viewers can call in and participate live thus venting some of the anger they have. The call-in segments of its talk shows allow viewers to openly criticize certain policies, give their views and express anxieties. Seen from this perspective, Al Jazeera becomes interesting because of what it can do in terms of diffusing—and not just inciting—public opinion. To a certain extent, Al Jazeera can be said to have a cathartic effect, and some of its viewers come to be content with the relief of expressing themselves. If, as Jon Anderson and Dale Eikelman put it, “free expression at the margins provides a safety valve and a new way of keeping tabs on opponents,” then one may argue that Al Jazeera plays a role, jejune as it may be, in the pacification of Arab public opinion. At times, the channel acts as a window through which many muted ordinary Arabs can vent their anger, offering an Arabic and Islamic perspective that can be seen as a shock-buffer between reality and the viewers. To put this somewhat differently, Al Jazeera occasionally plays the role of a preventative medium and an outlet for the disenfranchised public, thus providing a safety valve in what may be described as a suffocating atmosphere in Arab countries. Thus, in some ways, the kind of pan-Arab consciousness Al Jazeera can be said to project and foster is what may be termed, after Bassam Tibi, a “rhetorical pan-Arabism” which does not go beyond such proclaimed themes as harmony and brotherhood.

THE POLITICS OF AL JAZEERA

In spite of the inroads Al Jazeera has made, the freedom of speech this network enjoys is not without constraints. Al Jazeera is suspiciously
silent on Qatar; it offers a sparing coverage of its host country and is careful not to criticize it. Although in a few instances Qatari issues have been covered and although the Minister of Foreign Affairs was, on more than one occasion, given a rough ride on Ahmad Mansour's prominent show Without Borders (Bila Hudud) on issues some of which pertain to Qatar and Al Jazeera, overall, the channel's programs steer clear of issues that bear on Qatar itself. The network, as its critics point out, "is under the thumb of the Qatari royal family, whose policies [it] never criticizes." Jon Alterman concurs: "Qatari issues such as the power struggle between the current Emir and his father, whom he displaced, do not find an outlet on Al Jazeera, nor do critiques of Qatari foreign policy." Furthermore, in spite of the political rows Al Jazeera has caused, it has strangely enough not had an impact on the domestic politics of the host country. It is as if Al Jazeera were an offshore company or a free-zone venture. For some critics, Al Jazeera probes the affairs of other Arab countries to distract viewers from its host's own internal politics and its arrangements with the US—which has its largest military base in the region as well as its Central Command in Qatar. There is a perception that the Qatari political leadership subtly manipulates Al Jazeera for the purposes of controlling Qatari society by ignoring domestic issues—although Qatar is no Egypt with a large population or Iraq with diverse and often conflicting ethnicities and religious sects. In fact, there are fewer than 200,000 native Qatari citizens and they are well provided for by their rich government.

The foregoing analysis leaves a number of questions unanswered: Has Al Jazeera really made the censorship of news and views pointless in the Arab world or is it simply a self-serving endeavor? Does Qatar genuinely believe in what Al Jazeera stands for, including freedom of speech, or is it just using Al Jazeera as a public relations tool to claim a space in the region and play a more important role? What are the politics and motives of Al Jazeera's host country? Is it possible to depoliticize the study of Al Jazeera? Why couldn't Al Jazeera have been a Kuwaiti project, for instance, or a Lebanese media outlet—for, according to William Rugh's classical typology of Arab media, both Kuwait and Lebanon have a "diverse press" characterized by a relative margin of freedom and a certain degree of independence which are conducive to more information and opinion for people to choose from?
For some observers, Al Jazeera has worked a thin line between objectivity and subjectivity:

Unofficially, Al Jazeera's output indicates that it has been given considerable scope. Its staff prioritize stories according to their newsworthiness, not their acceptability to local regimes, and much of Al Jazeera's material is broadcast live. Newsworthiness criteria, however, are subjective, and Al Jazeera's criteria may well reflect the Qatari leadership's agenda.29

Indeed, the international eminence of Al Jazeera has never been at the expense of its national identity. At least in the newscasts, the name of the network is constantly linked with the name of its host country as viewers are repeatedly reminded that the news of Al Jazeera is aired from Qatar. In spite of the pan-Arab current that runs through it, Al Jazeera is first and foremost a Qatari channel—one that is sponsored by and beamed from Qatar. Naturally, one would think that Al Jazeera was created to serve the interests of its host country in one way or another.

Qatar is a small emirate in the Persian Gulf region of 11,437 km² with around 700,000 inhabitants, the majority of whom are expatriates or guest workers, mainly from Pakistan, the Indian subcontinent and other Arab countries. The country has ample energy resources. It is true that Qatar is an oil-rich country with large oil fields, but its strength lies in its vast natural gas reserves, an asset which not only frees it from the chronic dependence on oil so characteristic of other Gulf Cooperation Council states, but also guarantees its economic prosperity beyond the twenty-first century. Since the mid 1990s, the country has witnessed an economic boom that has yielded one of the highest gross domestic product per capita incomes in the world.30

This relatively conservative and fairly devout tiny country is ruled by a "liberal" emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who seized power from his father while the latter was vacationing outside the country in a bloodless coup in 1995. Since then, the Emir has been attempting to transform his country into a liberal constitutional monarchy. Qatar projects an image of a country that is keen on modernizing itself and the Emir has, in fact, brought about liberal reform which includes holding elections for a chamber of commerce, having municipal elections and allowing women to vote.31 Al Jazeera falls in line with the image of the Emir as a modernizer
The Al Jazeera Phenomenon and fits into his vision of political liberalization. When asked about the correlation between the establishment of Al Jazeera and the coming of age of civil society in its host country, Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani commented that

Al Jazeera is going in the same direction as the State of Qatar in its recent developments ... This direction corresponds with the direction of the media, be it Al Jazeera, or lifting censorship on local Qatari newspapers. The two go together in this state ... The direction of Al Jazeera is a natural one that corresponds with the strategy Qatar is taking at this phase.32

The Emir of Qatar himself has argued that before introducing free parliamentary elections in Qatar such a satellite channel is a necessary source of information. For people to be informed politically and otherwise, they must have access to an open medium. Seen from this perspective, Al Jazeera is a showpiece of the Emir of Qatar and a symbol of his resolve to modernize his country.

Al Jazeera also fits in with Qatar's attempt to play an active role in regional politics and to achieve regional influence. Thanks to satellite technology, transnational television flow has given this small country some influence. Qatar is trying to extend its regional influence and to have an impact. As satellite media is becoming more and more pervasive, major Arab countries cannot effectively dominate smaller ones. Traditionally, Saudi Arabia has had considerable influence on the Gulf countries. This influence, which can be seen in the political and religious spheres, has also been extended to the media sphere. Seeking to influence what is written about it in the Arab press, Saudi Arabia, as Boyd puts it, has succeeded in positioning itself as a de facto owner of foreign-based media outlets.33 Through semi-private, technology-conscious, Western-oriented, foreign-based media ventures in Europe, Saudi Arabia has managed to claim considerable clout in the regional mediascape and to exert an influence on Arab media. The Kingdom has, in fact, created a whole media empire and acquired considerable weight in TV broadcasting. It sits on well-established media conglomerates such as Orbit Communications, Arab Radio and Television (ART), and the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), which is part of ARA Group International, a media conglomerate that includes a number of radio and television companies beamed throughout the Arab world—not to mention print media, as Saudi Arabia puts out a plethora of publications, the most prominent of which are the London-based Al-Sharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat.34
Being neither a big country nor a regional power, Qatar naturally felt the supremacy of neighboring Saudi Arabia—"Gulf Big Brother," as David Hirst calls it—in the region and was keen on getting out of its shadow. Under Sheikh Hamad, Qatar sought a somewhat independent voice. Thanks to the popularity and wide reach of Al Jazeera in the Arab world, Qatar managed to acquire an increasingly influential media force—at least one that is hard to ignore. The network helped to give Qatar prominence which is disproportionate to its size, military power and economic strength.

Yet the key to Qatar's newly-acquired status is not simply the country's sponsorship of Al Jazeera, but also its development of regional relations. Qatar has exercised active diplomacy primarily by playing a mediating role in regional disputes. For example, Qatar has been involved in mediating efforts in the civil war in Sudan as well as the dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Qatar has also played a significant role in the attempted rapprochement between Iran and Arab states and between Iran and the United States. More recently, it has initiated talks between the United States and Libya and mediated the release of Moroccan prisoners of war who were held captive by the Polisario Front. Qatar has also been open on Israel. This is evident not only in the low-level trade ties Qatar has had since 1996 with Tel Aviv (namely the establishment of an Israeli trade mission in Doha), but also in the various talks it has been holding with Israeli officials at the highest levels and the prospects of raising the level of representation between the two countries.

It is doubtful whether Qatar's diplomacy has achieved a great deal. Nor has Al Jazeera done much for its host country beyond giving it a limited diplomatic presence and heightening its regional and international profile. In fact, Al Jazeera's function as an instrument of Qatari foreign policy is hard to discern as Al Jazeera's political discourse is often incompatible or at least out of sync with Qatar's foreign policy. As Gary Gambill points out,
The hard-line approach one often senses in Al Jazeera is not compatible with the soft approach that characterizes Qatar's foreign policy; at the same time, it is not at odds with it. For Olivier Da Lage, the ensuing ambiguity is a calculated risk and a political strategy that serves the interests of Qatar well.38

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AL JAZEERA

Tightly connected with the politics of Al Jazeera is its political economy. Al Jazeera has been financed with a yearly budget of $30 million. In 1995, the Emir of Qatar, Sheik Hamad Al Thani, signed a decree launching an independent news channel to be financed initially by the government. Accordingly, in 1996, the Qatari government provided Al Jazeera with a five-year $150 million loan which, theoretically, was due for repayment with Al Jazeera’s fifth anniversary. Seen from a global perspective, there is nothing out of the ordinary about the ownership of Al Jazeera. If anything, the Emir’s media venture corresponds with an interesting global trend favoring a marriage between media ownership and politics. For example, the Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, is both a political figure and a telecommunications entrepreneur. Likewise, Silvio Berlusconi, Italy’s Prime Minister, is a pioneer of commercial TV and publishing in Italy. In the Middle East, the Lebanese Prime Minister, business tycoon and media baron Rafiq Al Hariri, owns the satellite channel Future TV. Al Jazeera can be said to epitomize this new trend which is characterized by the politicization of media ownership.

At the same time, Al Jazeera fits in with a deep-seated regional tradition. In the Arab world, the media in general, and satellite channels in particular, operate under a patron who is either the government or some rich owner who in many cases is associated, in one way or another, with the ruling elite or the government. Most television systems in the Arab world are subsidized by the government partly because they need a great deal of money and partly because Arab governments have a stake in the media. Historically such monopolies go hand in hand with centralization; they help maintain a country’s unity, preserve a centralized system of government and exercise control over the people. TV also serves as a propaganda tool, an extension of state power and a mouthpiece for state policies, and control of such an apparatus ensures that dissident voices do not have access to the public. Even though the effect and popularity of state TV are declining, governments have been reluctant to relinquish
their influence on the media. In fact, some have sought to maintain such influence through partial government ownership (as in the case of Egypt) or private financing (as is the case with Saudi Arabia).39

Who owns what in the Arab media is an entangled issue and a subject of inquiry in itself.40 Still, the patterns of media ownership in the Arab world point to some contradictions. On the one hand, governments are ideologically inclined to more commercialization and privatization; on the other hand, they still conceive of media as a state-controlled public service. The outcome is an interesting marriage of the two models: the public and the private, the ideological and the commercial. As it is, a network like Al Jazeera is both private and public. To overlook the interconnectedness of these two aspects is to ignore the specificity and complexity of the new patterns of ownership and financing in the realm of Arab media.

It goes without saying that the lifeline of any media outlet is advertising, which in turn depends on viewer numbers and profiles. Not so with Al Jazeera as advertising is tied with political considerations and succumbs to outside pressures. During the first few years of its existence, Al Jazeera did not get into the full swing of airing commercials. For one thing, big companies and potential large advertisers in the region have been wary of advertising on Al Jazeera partly because of the maverick image the channel has acquired among Arab and Middle Eastern governments. Many Arab marketers and companies have boycotted Al Jazeera for fear that dealing with a network which broadcasts sensitive programs and controversial material may trigger a backlash from governments in the region. Advertising agencies are indeed unwilling to lose advertising revenue in other Arab countries. The main pressure has come from neighboring Saudi Arabia which, given its size, is the major purchasing power in the area and has joint projects with international firms and multinational corporations who have been reluctant to advertise with Al Jazeera for fear of losing access to the media of Saudi Arabia, a country that represents an important market and controls most of the advertisement agencies in the Gulf region.

However, Al Jazeera seems to have survived this de facto commercial boycott. Anecdotal evidence credited to some officials in Al Jazeera suggests that the network is starting to break even thanks to its earnings from cable subscriptions, advertising, sales of programs and documentaries, and from renting equipment and selling satellite time to other networks.41 Recently, the network has benefited from
sales of rebroadcast rights of unique footage to Western networks especially during the war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq. It is believed that the channel is close to or at least has the potential of being self-financed, but even so, only operational expenses are covered by its income from advertising, subscription fees outside the Arab world, sales of copyrights, and sales of programs and services. The channel is still receiving financial assistance from the government to cover the cost incurred by capital investment, namely funding new projects, including an English language website, a documentary channel, a sports channel and an English language TV service.

But not all analysts are optimistic about Al Jazeera’s financial prospects. Deprived of commercial autonomy—as more powerful governments in the region have bullied advertisers—and dependent on government handouts, Al Jazeera illustrates the fragility of some of the leading media outlets in the Arab world. At least in the Gulf, the willingness of states to provide funding for the media is tightly connected with oil prices. In times of crisis or when budgets are tightened, funding for the media will probably be the first to take a cut, although the argument is not readily applicable to Qatar, being one of the wealthiest countries and enjoying one of the highest gross domestic product per capita incomes in the world. Still, some observers find the financial picture far from encouraging and have doubts about Al Jazeera’s ability to meet the big challenge of financial security, particularly in the light of its envisaged expansion. Judging by the paucity of advertising, Sharon Waxman believes that “the network is still quite far from achieving financial solvency.” Barbara Demick concurs. In her view, there is a sense that “imitators are likely to come along, perhaps better financed and equipped that might eventually drive Al Jazeera out of business.”

However, this type of business-oriented analysis misses the heart of the issue; in such a perspective media success means numbers, and in the case of Al Jazeera numbers do not add up. This is not to say that money and profit are not important considerations for the network, for, at least in its initial conception, Al Jazeera should eventually gain financial independence from the state of Qatar. Although relatively successful, Al Jazeera is not profitable. Al Jazeera claims that it would like to be profitable, but insists that profitability should not be at the expense of its raison d’être, which means that the financial stakes of Al Jazeera cannot be discussed independently of its goals, which in turn are intertwined with the politics of its host
country. So far, Al Jazeera depends on the Emir of Qatar financially but also politically. Being the pet project of the Emir, Al Jazeera is more of a one-man vision than a deep-seated institution, which in the words of Louay Bahry means that any serious domestic change in Qatar, such as instability in the ruling family or even change of government—though currently unexpected, always a possibility—would impact Al Jazeera. Without strong support from the Emir and political will to continue this media experiment, Al Jazeera could fall prey to external pressure to curtail its daring style. Over time, such pressure could leave it weakened, resulting in a loss of appeals to Arabs outside Qatar.

**SOME SHORTCOMINGS**

Despite its funding from the state, Al Jazeera has been envisaged since its inception as an “autonomous” network with editorial independence. Of course, autonomy and independence are relative concepts for, after all, Al Jazeera is governed by a board of directors that is chaired by Sheikh Hamad bin Thamir Al Thani, a member of Qatar’s ruling family. Still, the idea of a TV channel that is government-financed and yet independent is altogether new to the region. This independence and autonomy lend Al Jazeera a great deal of credibility and creativity. At least in the Arab world, it is perceived by many viewers as a credible source of news. It must be said that Al Jazeera provides a rare case of the funder not interfering with and intervening in editorial policy. Nonetheless, some find the link between this source of the news and the government somewhat uncomfortable. Al Jazeera may claim independence, but the network has only relative independence; it is not government-controlled, but is nonetheless government owned. To what extent state funding affects the independence and editorial decision-making of the network remains a pressing issue.

Even if the problem of independence is overlooked, Al Jazeera remains open to criticism. In the aforementioned Gallup poll, objectivity is perceived as the network’s weakest area. While in relative terms—that is, compared with the other channels included in the poll—Al Jazeera is ranked the highest channel with regards to objectivity, in absolute terms, it is perceived as lacking in objectivity. Only about half of the respondents associate Al Jazeera’s coverage
with objectivity, with the highest percentage being 54 per cent in Kuwait and the lowest 38 per cent in Saudi Arabia. Viewers and media commentators alike acknowledge that Al Jazeera has made a breakthrough but remain wary of its agenda and of the politicized discourse it fosters, although the network claims fairness of reporting and denies it has any political agenda—or at least any agenda other than presenting contrasting points of view. If Al Jazeera has become so popular, the network claims, it is not because it defends its theses and advances its agenda, but because it promotes and encourages various views on timely and important issues—in fact, because it has instituted a pluralistic media discourse. Upon the disjunction between what Al Jazeera believes it is producing and what it is perceived as producing there lies a more potent question pertaining to the very conception of objectivity and neutrality in media. For example, one cannot say that Al Jazeera is neutral in reporting the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. This raises the very question of whether and to what extent one can be truly objective when reporting from the Arab world about issues that matter to Arabs the most. The question is not specific to the Arab media.

The debate about the notion of embedded journalists—reporters embedded with American and allied troops, providing live coverage of the military actions during the Gulf War—further complicates the issue. In an episode of Ghassan bin Jeddou’s weekly program *Open Dialogue*, which was occasioned by the seventh anniversary of the network, one of its investigative reporters, Asaad Taha, ventured a perspective that goes beyond the proclaimed motto of “the view and the opposite view.” Criticized on grounds that what he presents is permeated with an agenda that smacks of certain beliefs, thoughts, politics and ideology, Taha—who acknowledged that he did not shy away from being inflammatory (*tahridhi*) on an episode of his documentary program *Correspondents* devoted to the Iraqi resistance—made it clear that he is “adamantly against the notion of neutrality. There is no such thing as a neutral journalist or a neutral media for that matter ... This is not to say, however, that one should not be objective. The journalist can be objective but not neutral ... In fact, he or she must be message-oriented and have an idea for or carry a message to a public that watches the channel and trusts it.”

Seen from one perspective, this statement is not philosophically speaking different from the position some US media took in the same context and the statement some journalists made by wearing yellow ribbons on their lapels. Seen from another perspective, Taha’s position,
which is not all that uncommon in the Arab world, cannot be discussed outside the cultural specificity of Arab media, the lack of media tradition, and the very role Arab media envisages for itself. Still, for many viewers, Al Jazeera is far from being responsible. Sometimes, the network's reporting produces as much emotion and sentiment as it provides factual information.

For some observers, Al Jazeera is neither sober nor analytical and its impact is exaggerated. Indeed, Al Jazeera is not without excesses. There is a certain aggressiveness to the network that is hard to ignore. With instant access to world events, Al Jazeera broadcasts news around the clock. News is fed to the viewers as it comes in, beamed to millions of viewers at such a speed that one is left with too much political information to digest. To watch Al Jazeera is to experience an information overload or an infoglut. With Al Jazeera, one has the impression that too much is going on around the world. There is always something that just happened or something that is imminent and could happen at any time. The tone and direction of the news are constantly ascending. In its attempt to capture everything, Al Jazeera appears to be running away with itself. One often experiences a sense of excess that emanates from the disparate and disjoined aired bits and bites of information. Although some critics feel that with time it will not be hard for Al Jazeera to moderate its excesses, others point to deep-seated problems. For example, the channel does not seem capable of sufficiently removing itself from that which it is reporting—although this is symptomatic of a problem that is not specific to Al Jazeera, namely can an Arab channel reporting on Arab issues remove itself from its Arab perspective? The war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq have made this a pressing issue even for Western media with a long tradition of press freedom.

Beyond that, some of Al Jazeera's political talk shows are often combative leaning more toward sensationalism than toward what Habermas calls "a rational critical debate." For example, in a program like The Opposite Direction real debate risks receding in front of the show aspect—and in fact the debate entertained tends to be less rational than programs like From Washington (Min Washington) or For Women Only (Lil Nissa Faqat). Through such programs, the channel is often perceived as creating a controversy, which it then fiercely pursues. Others find fault with Al Jazeera on grounds that endless debates about the state of the Arab world deepen existing differences between Arabs. Furthermore, some of Al Jazeera's talk shows tend to overshadow and marginalize programs designed to provide
an informative and constructive debate to the public. For example, there is a need for more investigative reporting or programs like *A Hot Spot* (Nokta Saakhina), *Once Upon a Time* (Yuhka Anna) and *Correspondents* (Mouraseloun). This requires considerable funds and is not easy to produce as it entails travel and research. Naturally channels, including Al Jazeera, fall into airing talk shows which are not expensive to produce and do not require as much work.49

There is no doubt that Al Jazeera has played a leading role in an environment marked by the lack of alternative voices and opposing views, earning it the reputation of an Arab parliament on the air. However, the network seems to have fallen into its own trap. In spite of its freshness, newness and alternative edge, the channel has at times had to increase its provocative tone and its oppositional stand, and these have become addictive. Viewers have often been caught in this frame too and supporters of a certain debate have called in to confirm a point made by guests and to deride their opponents. Not only has the channel on occasions slipped into sensationalism, it has also acquired a certain monotony as some of its scenarios become routine and many of its programs lend themselves to the same format. Likewise, a number of its guests keep reappearing with the same line of argument being advocated.

There is also the danger of vulgarizing the kinds of popular programs on which Al Jazeera thrives. Al Jazeera has a lot of responsibility on its shoulders not simply because it is widely watched and has the potential to influence public opinion but also because it has been a trendsetter. As Al Jazeera’s journalism is copied on other channels, so are some of the problems that come with it. Channels have started to compete with each other over who invites the hottest guest and who raises the most controversial issue. While some see in the proliferation of talk shows a healthy development, others remain skeptical. They see in this new frenzy a vent for public opinion to reaffirm the status quo.

Furthermore, the quantum leap Al Jazeera has achieved, which set it apart from other Arab channels, has not been entirely beneficial to it as the lack of real competition, at least in the first few years of its existence, prevented it from evolving and moderating its excesses. In order to continue to be viable, Al Jazeera has to go beyond playing the role of the devil’s advocate—being that which is oppositional, anti and critical. Al Jazeera will have to move away from discussions that verge on fighting. As it is, Al Jazeera gives the impression that it has outrun itself. Al Jazeera has to rejuvenate itself by envisaging a
new role, a new mentality for engaging with pertinent issues and setting up more nuanced objectives. In this sense, the proliferation of new news channels in the Arab media scene such as the Dubai-based Al Arabiya may be to Al Jazeera’s advantage.

**AL JAZEERA AND THE WEST**

Interestingly enough, while attracting criticism from Arab governments, Al Jazeera attracted attention from and gained the respect of the US as a unique and long-overdue experiment. In 1999, *The Harvard International Review* took note of this pioneering network. In May 2001, Ed Bradley profiled Al Jazeera on *60 Minutes*. In the same year, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman hailed it as a beacon of freedom and the biggest media phenomenon to hit the Arab world.

However, the September 11 events were a turning point in the history of the network. Virtually unheard of outside the Middle East and North Africa, Al Jazeera caught the world by surprise during the war in Afghanistan in 2001, being for some time the only foreign news organization with reporters in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. With its logo aired everywhere in the world, it catapulted to international prominence to become a super-station. The broadcasting of the bin Laden videotapes and the airing of graphic images made Al Jazeera part of the news it covered. Al Jazeera’s views and coverage were not very welcome, and the American press adopted a more critical stance toward it. Even those who were not critical of Al Jazeera were suspicious of its intentions. Overnight, the benign image of the network as a promising one and a huge rock in a tepid media lagoon was deconstructed as Al Jazeera started to infuriate Western democratic nations with a predilection for the freedom of the press. For Robert Fisk, the change in perception is specious but hardly surprising: Al Jazeera “is a phenomenon in the Arab world, a comparatively free, bold initiative in journalism that was supported by the Americans—until it became rather too free.”

But what is so jarring about Al Jazeera’s tune? For a number of Western viewers, Al Jazeera stands out for its irresponsible journalism and its lack of professionalism. Its programs are aggressive and its discourse is politically incorrect. For Dan Williams, Al Jazeera has nothing more than “an approximation of credibility,” while for former Downing Street media chief Alastair Campbell Al Jazeera airs lies, plain and simple. The network is derided for what is often
The Al Jazeera Phenomenon
described as its partisan and biased coverage. It is often portrayed as “less than honest,” being more in the business of making stories than getting them. In this sense, Al Jazeera is perceived as lacking in fairness and balance. For Fouad Ajami, “its credibility is hampered by slanted coverage and a tendency toward sensationalism” as it often engages in the “Hollywoodization of news.”55 It is keen on airing grisly footage and is never shy about presenting graphic imagery, which makes it little more than a tabloid:

Equipped with state-of-the-art technology, the station has the feel of a cross between tabloid television and a student-run newspaper that can’t resist the impulse to publish, irrespective of concerns for taste, under the slogan of “freedom of the press.”56

While some dismiss Al Jazeera as tabloid journalism, others point to its excesses:

its reporters are sometimes guilty of over-exuberance. For example, they are inclined to claim that one telegenic student demonstration is representative of a whole country’s “street opinion.” Even Al Jazeera’s supporters say that its success with audiences has caused a strident and highly politicized tone to creep into some of its programming.57

Thomas Friedman has a similar take on the channel: “Sometimes, it goes over the edge and burns people unfairly because some of its broadcasters have their own agendas, and sometimes it hypes the fighting in the West Bank in inflammatory ways.”58

Al Jazeera has also been demonized as a platform for demagoguery. There is a tendency to see in Al Jazeera a mouthpiece or a vehicle through which opponents of the West get their views across. Some find Al Jazeera’s perspective and tone excessively critical of the US and of Israel. For the Bush administration, the network gives too much airtime to anti-American activists and people who are hostile to the US. The Bush administration frowns on the amount of airtime Al Jazeera gives to analysts expressing anti-American rhetoric or criticizing American foreign policy. When asked on CBS’s Face the Nation whether he believed Al Jazeera is anything more than an Arab television station, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld responded that

it puts out television images in Arabic, in the Arabic language and I do not watch it carefully. People who do tell me that it has a pattern of being anti-US,
anti-West and I have also seen pieces of information that suggest that they're influenced by people like Saddam Hussein's regime ... It is unfortunate that people of the world don't see as open and accurate a set of images in Arabic as I think they might and anything that can be done about that is a good thing.59

In spite of the network's claim to unbiased news, and in spite of the "non-generic" character of its viewers—the latter being fairly well-informed and, compared with other news viewers, more open to the West according to a Gallup poll finding60—Al Jazeera, as some perceive it, tends to take the side of the underdog. Some critics argue that Al Jazeera is giving prominence to guests who are keen on chastising the West by toeing an Arab nationalist or Islamist line that is antagonistic to the US and to pro-American regimes in the Middle East. For Zev Chafets, "its occasional interviews with Western statesmen are designed to provide it with a fig leaf of objectivity."61 Al Jazeera has also been accused of being a mouthpiece for Islamic fundamentalists. For Chafets, "it is the most potent weapon in the Islamic axis arsenal."62 While some consider Al Jazeera a channel that is controlled by Islamic fundamentalists, others see in it an outlet for Arab nationalist demagogues. For Ajami,

Al Jazeera's reporters see themselves as "anti-imperialists." These men and women are convinced that the rulers of the Arab world have given in to American might; these are broadcasters who play to an Arab gallery whose political bitterness they share—and feed.63

Last but not least, Al Jazeera is criticized for galvanizing Arab radicalism. According to some critics, it is igniting the anger of Arabs and the fury of Muslims against the US and is inciting public demonstrations, fueling the passions of fundamentalists, and even causing more violence against Americans. The type of journalism the network engages in deliberately "fans the flames of Muslim outrage"64 and insidiously "reinforces existing prejudices."65 In fact, Al Jazeera is looked at by some as a maverick media outlet "moving the masses in uncontrolled ways."66

During the so-called War on Terrorism, Al Jazeera has particularly infuriated American officials. It came under close scrutiny and criticism from the US for its coverage of the war in Afghanistan and, later on, the invasion of Iraq. Overall, Al Jazeera was criticized for what was perceived as irresponsible journalism. Upon transmitting
the famous post-September 11 Al Qaeda videotapes, Al Jazeera was accused of serving as a mouthpiece of Al Qaeda, glorifying bin Laden and presenting him as a romantic ideologue. US officials were also disturbed by Al Jazeera’s replays of its exclusive 1998 interview with bin Laden. Al Jazeera was viewed to be allowing bin Laden to use the channel in order to spread his propaganda and providing him with a platform from which to preach Jihad on the West, in general, and the US, in particular. Accordingly, Al Jazeera was pressured to censor its output on grounds that bin Laden might be using his videotaped messages and Al Jazeera to incite anti-American sentiment and even provoke more attacks on the US. From an American standpoint, bin Laden should not be given the oxygen of publicity and appear unpurged in video again. Al Jazeera was also criticized for rushing to report unscreened material and airing raw footage with no reviewing safety net and no editing process—just to keep astride of the competition in news media. What the US found objectionable was Al Jazeera’s repeated showing of graphic pictures of dead children, wounded civilians and destroyed homes for no other reason than to “to drum up viewership or else to propagandize against the United States.”

Afraid of losing the information war, the US tried to muzzle Al Jazeera. American officials lobbied the Emir of Qatar to tone down the coverage of Al Jazeera, stop the airing of news the US considered unfavorable and curb the anti-American rhetoric; however, Qatar showed a reluctance to interfere in the editorial independence of the channel (although later it agreed to share with the Americans Al Qaeda taped messages before airing them). In the American press, the channel was demonized, so to speak, and there were even calls to eliminate it. Zev Chafets, for instance, argued: “Dealing with Al Jazeera is a job of the military. Shutting it down should be an immediate priority because, left alone, it has the power to poison the air more efficiently and lethally than anthrax ever could.” Sure enough, Al Jazeera has come under attack not only rhetorically, but also literally by the US as a missile destroyed its Kabul bureau. While the US denied that it deliberately targeted Al Jazeera and said that the attack was an accident, others believe that the Al Jazeera’s office was meant to be hit, especially as the same scenario was repeated in Baghdad during the Third Gulf War, this time with a missile attack on Al Jazeera’s office in Baghdad causing the death of Al Jazeera reporter Tarek Ayyoub.
However, this has only increased the popularity of Al Jazeera. According to Faisal Bodi,

people are turning to [Al Jazeera] because the Western media coverage has been so poor. For although Doha is just a few miles away from Central Command, the view of events from here could not be more different. Of all the major global networks, Al Jazeera has been alone in proceeding from the premise that this war should be viewed as an illegal enterprise. It has broadcast the horror of the bombing campaign, the blown-out brains, the blood-spattered pavements, the screaming infants and the corpses. Its team of on-the-ground, unembedded correspondents has provided a corrective to the official line that the campaign is, barring occasional resistance, going to plan.70

Since Al Jazeera aired an interview with captured American prisoners of war in Iraq and showed bodies of dead soldiers, the American media has taken it to task. A string of events have followed: its website was hacked; the US host of the channel’s website removed it from its service; its business correspondents were kicked out of the New York stock exchange; and its Managing Director was sacked and cast as a scapegoat. On a few occasions, its staff in Baghdad faced harassment and even detention, and its former correspondent in Afghanistan Tayseer Allouni has been detained for some time in Spain on grounds that he was serving not only Al Jazeera, but also Al Qaeda.

The US has been defensive because it felt it was losing the “on-air supremacy” in the war of words or the so-called propaganda war; it has been particularly wary about the ways Al Jazeera’s bold coverage of civilian victims can sway Arab and even international public opinion, loosen the coalition, and affect the public support that has been rallied. From the standpoint of Al Jazeera, it comes down to competition—by airing the controversial bin Laden tapes, showing civilian victims, and bringing in guests who are vocal in their opposition to American foreign policy, Al Jazeera is doing what many other news networks would have done in an age of cutthroat network rivalries in which networks fight for every possible advantage in news reporting. The network defended its practices when asked whether or not it was aware that what it airs may incite actions against the United States:

We worry about how we treat the news. We don’t just take any tape that comes to our offices or to the station and put it on air. Before that we have
a meeting to discuss how we should treat the news, and not be subject to the propaganda from a party or organization or group, Osama bin Laden or others. When we aired the tape of bin Laden spokesman Suleiman Abu Geith, directly after that we brought Edward Walker, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, for his comments, and after that a Muslim cleric to talk from an Islamic perspective about bin Laden’s statements, to raise points such as that Islam doesn’t allow you to kill innocent people, that bin Laden will condemn American bombings but at the same time give orders to kill innocent Americans. To air the statements without any comments, without any opposing statements or view points or analysis, that’s when it is propaganda.72

The channel has played down its links with bin Laden and vowed to resist pressure to alter its coverage and to stick to its editorial policy of respect for all opinions and airing of all perspectives. In a sense, the US’s attempt to influence Al Jazeera has backfired. Washington’s criticism of Al Jazeera has only increased its credibility. Not surprisingly, US officials have started to change their approach to Al Jazeera and decided to make themselves available for interviews on Al Jazeera. Chided by Arab reporters for not using Al Jazeera as a channel of communication with the Arab world, the United States has tried to capitalize on the network during the information war. Still, the sense of mistrust persists. With no immediate viable alternative, the Americans have opted to speak through Al Jazeera while launching their “anti-Al Jazeera Radio Sawa”73 and setting up their own Arabic-speaking channel, Al Hurra, in an already media congested region.

For many observers, though, the Americans may have a hard time selling their new channel to the Arab world. According to Marwan Bishara, the US initiative is flawed to say the least: “the rationale behind Al Hurra is based on two erroneous assumptions: that satellite networks are responsible for the anti-Americanism in the Arab world and that once America is more clearly heard, it will be more appreciated.”74 At least so far, the US media strategy in the Middle East has not been all that successful in pulling the rug from underneath Al Jazeera. If anything, the United States is caught up in a somewhat ambiguous relationship with Al Jazeera, at times finding itself almost compelled to take heed of the network it took pains to discredit. This is particularly the case during the race for the White House. Just four days before the 2004 US presidential elections, Al Jazeera aired segments of the first video recording from bin Laden in nearly three years, addressing a message directly to the American
people in what the *Guardian* described as a “twisted parody of an Oval Office address.” Segments of the tape, which Al Jazeera obtained in Pakistan, were also replayed on the major American networks with voice over, followed in many instances by commentary on the extent to which bin Laden’s message can affect the outcome of the elections. Interestingly enough, it is scoops such as this one that have branded Al Jazeera as a “mouthpiece” for the Al Qaeda network. What would have previously been dismissed as pure propaganda and anti-American rhetoric has become, on the eve of the American elections, food for the media industry in the United States. Suddenly, the often-invoked fear that bin Laden’s message might be a coded signal for terrorist action ceased to be a major concern. Notably, as Dana Milbank points out, “the administration raised no warnings about the tape’s airing on television; in the past, the administration had warned that tapes might be used to activate sleeper cells in the United States.” The incident is not without significance. That the United States tolerated the Qatari network where in the past it was highly critical and utterly dismissive suggests that, as far as the media industry is concerned (including the American media), bin Laden sells. In a close race such as the one between George W. Bush and John Kerry, the tape Al Jazeera aired is not without effects. While for some commentators, bin Laden’s speech was unlikely to have a major impact on voters’ choices, for others, it served Bush well. By resurrecting people’s fears of terrorism and reminding them of the grave threats still faced by the country, it presumably gave the incumbent president a boost. Seen in light of the attention Al Jazeera has been getting all along, and especially considering how it positioned itself during the so-called information war, the most important outcome of this instance is probably the crystallization of a new media dynamics. With Al Jazeera, an added significance to the term “information globalization” is arguably heralded whereby relatively small media players introduce an element of contingency, for lack of a better term, in a traditionally structured and well defined environment where media and politics are entangled.

**A NEW(S) MEDIA ORDER**

The tug-of-war between Al Jazeera and the United States is significant partly because it strikes at the heart of what are often perceived as sacrosanct Western ideals and, in fact, puts into question a system
of beliefs the universality of which is often taken for granted. The latter pertains to the perception about the freedom of the American press, the thinness of the liberal discourse on democracy and the assumed Western media hegemony. It also brings to light closely-related issues, namely the specificity of Arab media and the significance of Arab public opinion.

To start with, the attempt to silence Al Jazeera shatters the widely held perception about the freedom of the American press and plays havoc with the liberal discourse on democracy. The idealized role of the press, at least as promoted by the United States, namely covering the story and reporting the news in a fair and balanced way and telling the truth as it is, is subjected to a reality check. The viciousness with which Al Jazeera has been criticized both officially and institutionally—that is, by the American administration and the press, respectively—leads one to raise a brow when it comes from a nation that promotes free speech and cherishes independent journalism—in fact, one which touts itself as the symbol of the free democratic world. Perhaps not surprisingly, many journalists did not shy away from defending Al Jazeera's commitment to the freedom of expression and to the profession. According to Ann Cooper, "it is 'disheartening' to see US officials adopt 'similar tactics' to Arab regimes that have sought to influence the news station's coverage." It is ironic that an Arab news channel would broadcast more freely than the American media. For Saleh Dabbakeh, "it is precarious that the same people on whose image Al Jazeera was built are now criticizing the station for sticking to their rules of the game."

What is sobering about the controversy surrounding Al Jazeera's coverage of the war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq is not only the thinness of the American discourse on the freedom of the press in particular, and liberal democracy in general, but also the questionability of what is perceived as the irreversible hegemony of the Western media. The flawed US foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab world is an important part of the equation. Resentment towards the US runs deep in the Arab world, and the objection to its foreign policy has never been stronger. As some see it, Al Jazeera is often consumed by a populace harboring deep-rooted resentment toward the US for what is perceived as an anti-Muslim, anti-Arab foreign policy. Likewise, there is an increasingly vocal rejection of Western cultural values, although some feel the anti-Western ideological component that runs through the network is a reaction to American hegemony. The popularity of Al Jazeera reflects a frustration with the bias of the
Western media in general and American media in particular. In many ways, Al Jazeera presents a challenge to the Western media. For one thing, the network has put an end to the Western monopoly on both the global production of news and the global dissemination of information. For the first time, America finds itself without a monopoly of live coverage of the war. In fact, networks in the United States and other Western countries have found themselves relying on the reporting of an obscure channel. The images seen on Al Jazeera may be far worse than those presented on Western news channels (whether in relation to the Palestinian intifada, the war in Afghanistan or the invasion of Iraq), but for many Arab viewers it is a viable alternative which offers coverage of the Arab world that has been distorted by the American news media.

It is true that Al Jazeera has a relatively short history and is creating a tradition that is far from being entrenched in the region, but this network has become a player to contend with in the entangled world of news media—one that was able to compete at some point with Cable News Network (CNN)—although Robert Fisk finds it “a lot keener to tell the truth than CNN.” It would be unfair to compare Al Jazeera to the American media partly because the latter, much like the society they serve, have their own specificity. Certainly, the American media are more seasoned and more sophisticated, and Al Jazeera, and the Arab media in general have a lot to learn from the American media experience. At the same time, it is important to remember that the American press has had two centuries to mature and that the process of maturity has been coterminal with the evolution of other institutions. Still, exploring the impact of CNN on the development of the Arab media is instructive.

The Second Gulf War in 1991 played a noteworthy role in changing the conception of TV broadcasting in the Arab world, Particularly in the Middle East. CNN established itself as the source of information, providing live coverage and around-the-clock news. Contributing to the success of CNN was the mushrooming of satellite dishes in the region, making it easy to transmit signals to a large and concerned Arab audience. As such, CNN provided alternative news coverage which changed media practices and audiences’ expectations. Its extensive live coverage of the Second Gulf War made clear the power of satellite television to Arab viewers, who have since grown ever hungrier for live, unedited and uncensored news during times when state media have fed them stale news and provided them with a turgid coverage of regional events. CNN's
exclusive coverage of the Second Gulf War, which gave people in the Arab world and beyond a sense of how powerful the media can be, galvanized the development of Arab satellite broadcasting. Over the next few years, Arab channels gradually took over the space traditionally occupied by Western media, beaming a wide variety of programs to Arab viewers who have come to crave more reliable news, uncensored credible information and better programs than those offered by the heavily regulated state media. The legacy of CNN is evident in the institution of not only the genre of 24-hour news broadcasting, but also certain broadcasting practices and standards among Arab satellite channels. Not surprisingly, Al Jazeera’s live coverage of the American bombing of Iraq during Operation Desert Fox kept pace with CNN’s. In Afghanistan, Al Jazeera found itself playing the same role CNN was called upon to play in the Second Gulf War when Peter Arnett was the only Western correspondent covering the war in Baghdad. This pivotal role was no less important during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

However, it would be reductive to see Al Jazeera as merely an Arab CNN. Part of what distinguishes Al Jazeera is its hybridity. Al Jazeera is a phenomenon in the sense that it finds itself caught up, for lack of a better term, between two trends. On the one hand, the channel uses the best technical skills and journalistic practices that the West has to offer. On the other hand, it uses these means and practices precisely to advance ideas and views that contradict and doubt the Western narrative and interpretation of events and issues that are increasingly bringing the Middle East to the center of the world’s news attention. Often enough, Al Jazeera does not tell the same version of the story the American media broadcasts, and when it does, it gives it a different spin. These differences point to a complex relationship of attraction and repulsion whereby Al Jazeera often engages the West in opposition. Therein lies the network’s politics of identity. At the heart of Al Jazeera is a hybridity which paradoxically constitutes its cultural specificity; it is a mixture of the Eastern and the Western, the leftist and the rightist, the religious and the secular, the tribal and the urban, and the local and the global.

Seen from this perspective, Al Jazeera can be said to mark a turning point, symbolic as it may be, in the history of information globalization. Although it airs in Arabic and is targeted primarily at Arab speaking viewers, it has a reach and even an impact outside the Arab world. Al Jazeera provides a counterweight to the images that the mainstream Western media has been feeding to viewers. It is a case
of information flow reversal, whereby information is no longer beamed from the North to the South or from the Occident to the Orient, but the other way around. The West no longer has a monopoly on “credible and responsible media.” The repatriation of some foreign-based Arab media organizations such as MBC from European capitals to Arab countries intended to bring them closer to their customer base, and concomitantly the mushrooming of media cities as production sites in the Arab world—from Cairo with its long tradition in the media and film industry to the fast-growing Dubai which is emerging as the technological hub of the Gulf region—in the wake of Al Jazeera’s success further crystallize this modest trend of a partial reversal of the globalization process. Ali Bayramoglu argues this point at length:

Al Jazeera has become famous not because it engages in professional journalism, but because it is the sign of some type of a symbolic equilibrium between the Occident and Orient. Al Jazeera is a phenomenon insofar as it engenders a certain politicization across Muslim nations and rivals the Western media giants both technically and professionally ... The secret and power of Al Jazeera lie in a vision structured around a context of international Islamic identity. Al Jazeera reflects the on-going process of the politicization of an Islamic identity and in that sense points to the “Other.” In fact, there are two polarities in this struggle. Both of them are caught in a process of globalization which risks becoming even more acute and more dangerous and may border on a more important polarization.83

Another significant realization ensuing from this controversy pertains to the emergence of an Arab perspective and, along with it, a growing awareness of the specificity of the Arab media. Al Jazeera has effectively put an end to an era marked by what may be described as a one-size-fits-all media. Issues now lend themselves to a different perspective—in fact an Arab perspective that has been absent. In this respect, the history or at least the coming to eminence of Al Jazeera is instructive. It is interesting that Al Jazeera enjoyed a privileged position in Afghanistan and earned a certain credibility with the Taliban movement particularly during a time when foreign reporters were expelled from Kabul. Al Jazeera had access to the war zone while other media outlets did not. For some time, it was the only station broadcasting and airing exclusive footage from within Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Al Jazeera’s exclusive images from Afghanistan, which were shown worldwide,
were in part the fruit of a decision, taken two years prior to the war, to open a news bureau in Kabul. CNN received the same offer but declined. The United States, and by extension CNN, lost interest in Afghanistan after the fall of communism and the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Not so with Al Jazeera which had an inherent interest in Afghanistan, at the time controlled by the Taliban, partly because it is a Muslim state in a strategic yet tumultuous region and partly because it continues to be the host of many “Arab freedom fighters,” as they were called then. Before Afghanistan became the center of attention for the whole world, Al Jazeera had exclusive coverage of certain related events. In 1998, it conducted an exclusive interview with bin Laden. It also broadcast the wedding of bin Laden’s son (in January 2001) and covered the Taliban’s destruction of the colossal Bamiyan Buddhas (in March 2001). Again, Mohammed Jassim Al Ali is worth quoting at length:

When we started the channel, we first concentrated on opening offices in Arab countries and Islamic countries. We started with Palestine and Iraq, because these were hot areas and there was news happening. So we opened an office in Jerusalem, with sub-offices in Gaza and Ramallah, and at the same time opened in Baghdad, then moved to other Arab countries. When these were in place, we moved to the other Islamic countries, first Iran and Pakistan, then we tried to get into Afghanistan. We got permission from the Taliban—and at the same time permission was granted to us, it was granted to CNN, Reuters, and APTN … We opened two offices, in Kabul and Kandahar. The others didn’t move in because they didn’t consider it very important and didn’t see much news coming out of there. But for us, it was important because it’s an Islamic country … They are looking through international angles. The difference between CNN and Al Jazeera is that they look first to international news, then maybe to Asian, Middle Eastern specific issues. We look first to Arab and Islamic issues in detail, and after that to international questions.84

In appealing to the sensibility of the Arab-Muslim world, Al Jazeera departed from the exclusive reliance on the Western news agencies. The media are becoming more diverse than ever, the news is no longer limited to that which Western media authenticates and the dominant perspective is no longer one that is Western in essence. A channel like Al Jazeera prides itself on reporting Arab news from the Arab world better than other international stations, which makes it appealing to the Arab-Muslim world.
AL JAZEERA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Is Al Jazeera an agent of social change or is it just a news channel? Are the role and influence of this satellite TV overstated? People in the Arab world may be better informed because of channels like Al Jazeera; but does the increased awareness among the Arab public lead to political action? Can Al Jazeera be a vehicle of political change? Does a network like Al Jazeera enhance or eviscerate democracy? Can such a media outlet bring about real democratic change?

Many viewers perceive Al Jazeera as grappling with democracy and hail it as a herald of democratization. For example, Ibish and Abunimah point out that “Al Jazeera presents the best trends of openness and democratization in the Arab world. It is a long-overdue two-way street in the global flow of information and opinion. It should be celebrated and encouraged.” Likewise, in an interview with Nicholas Nesson, Mohammed Jassim Al Ali observes that what Arabs need is more freedom … In this age, the powerful can no longer control the people … Democracy is coming to the Middle East because of the communication revolution. You can no longer hide information, and must now tell the people the truth. If you don’t, the people won’t follow you, they won’t support you, they won’t obey you … The opportunities for political reform are great … but we have a history, a culture that you can’t change overnight.

However, the experiment of Al Jazeera is fraught with a number of difficulties, chief among which is the perception that the inroads made by alternative Arab media such as Al Jazeera will obfuscate the real need for change. The margin of freedom that some media networks enjoy gives the illusion of democracy and in doing so goes a long way toward postponing real political reform. According to Steven Wu, “if Al Jazeera continues to promote only empty controversy, it will give more authoritarian Middle Eastern governments an excuse to delay liberalization of the media by pointing to Al Jazeera’s excesses.” So far, the Arab public seems to be content with satellite democracy. Added to this is yet another danger, and that is the increasing marginalization of the role of the media in development and modernization. The media discourse is increasingly embroiled in an oppositional ideological underpinning. Such an ideological underpinning seems to reproduce or at least to fall prey
The Al Jazeera Phenomenon

The dichotomous logic as “Us” versus “Them.” Suffice it here to note that Al Jazeera hardly entertains discussions or produces programs that pertain to pressing issues that plague the Arab world outside realpolitik such as sustainable economic development in the Arab world, unemployment and education, to name but a few. In “Mass media in the Middle East,” Kai Hafez prompts us to take a more cautious look at the consequences of the proliferation of TV channels on democracy and public participation in the region:

one of the most important questions leading to prospects of political and societal change in the Middle East is whether old and new mass media of the Middle East will be politically and culturally liberalizing in the age of globalized media spaces. Although some positive aspects of this development are already visible, countertrends are also apparent. It is rather doubtful whether the new indigenous media allow for greater freedom of speech than the state media. The use of the media for participatory development and modernization is less important in current media debates than it was in previous decades. Instead, there is an inherent danger that the discourse on communication and mass media will become an integral part of new ideological debates about a supposed cultural gap between “the West” and “Islam”.88

Part of the problem is that the technical modernization of the Arab mass media has outpaced constructive social roles for the media in modern Arab societies.89 The media boom in the Arab world is facilitated by technological innovation which itself often provides the justification for such media hype. The media has capitalized on technological advancements but has not kept up with other institutional development. To treat Arab media as the fourth estate, and to say that TV leads to political changes is to look at the issue from a narrow perspective, namely that technology and the information revolution it brings about are unquestionably promising and emancipatory. This overstated faith in the impact of the communication revolution in the Middle East is common even among such seasoned media figures as NBC’s Tom Brokaw who comments in a New York Times article, published on the eve of the Third Gulf War, that

as a result of this widespread dissemination of information, the fundamental structure of Middle East politics has been altered, if not over-hauled. Today, political pressure develops quickly and independently from the ground up, not just from the top down, a dramatic difference from a decade ago.90
One should be skeptical about the often ambitious transformative claims for new media as well as the claims about its democratizing potential and its ability not just to increase and widen participation among the various social strata in the Arab world, but to transform social and political organization. Real change cannot be expected solely or mainly from the media sector. Democracy cannot emanate just from the media; the political systems and institutions themselves have to change, evolve and adapt. Short of that, our faith in new Arab media is misplaced.

A comparative perspective can further illustrate the point. In the West, the media are part of an institutional framework; the media evolved in tandem with the developments in various institutions which include politics, economics and the law. Broadly speaking, the role of journalism in Western liberal democracies is to help citizens learn about the world in which they take part, debate their responses to it, and have informed discussions about what action to take and what choices to make—to be able to act better in their capacity as voting citizens. In democratic societies, particularly in the West, media have the power to enhance the interconnectedness between citizens and their government, make the process of governing more transparent, open up the potential for direct democracy, promote citizen participation in government, contribute to the development of political institutions, lead to greater public awareness about and participation in public policy debates, decentralize power, help strengthen civil society, advance civil rights, and potentially project democratic values. This institutional framework within which Western media operate is quasi-absent in the Arab world. Seen from this perspective, it would probably be naive to place high hopes on such alternative media in the Arab world as Al Jazeera or to think that Al Jazeera can and will have immediate effects or lead to dramatic changes in the region. We should not be under the illusion that satellite TV can dramatically change society or revolutionize its institutions. In terms of democracy, the Arab media have so far had little impact on the Arab world, and the extent to which they can effectively introduce significant changes is questionable.

In “Mid-tech revolution,” Jon B. Alterman provides a sober assessment of the potential impact of the information revolution in general and the media revolution in particular:

one can be bolder in predicting the political effects of technological change, namely, that it is unlikely to force a deep restructuring of Middle Eastern
governance patterns. Authoritarianism has predominated in the region for decades and seems poised to continue to do so for years to come. The usual argument about information technology and authoritarianism is that the former undermines the latter by freeing the public from the rulers' grip. Such a notion, however, misunderstands the nature of authoritarianism in the Middle East. It is not merely a top-down system, and it has never been so. Every authoritarian government in the region has to maintain a watchful eye on public sentiment, and it has to balance coercion and cooption—albeit in different measures at different times in different places. Technological developments have made that balancing act more difficult because states lost some of the tools that have helped them lead public opinion—and thus, co-opt their populations—in the past. While most states still maintain an overwhelming advantage over any possible opponent in the public sphere, their ability to control what happens in that sphere is waning.91

Although the state media have been responsive to these new challenges by ceding public space to oppositional voices, the voices that gain access do not significantly threaten the regime, and ultimately such initiatives keep real changes at arm's length.

The fact that several influential Arab satellite TV networks remain under the sponsorship and control of Gulf states raises doubts about the likelihood of any imminent change in existing power structures. The new media are caught up in a conflictual identity in which a liberalizing apparatus feeds off a conservative instinct. It is unlikely that the rise of alternative media such as Al Jazeera will lead to a fundamental change in governance. For Christa Salamandra, the global flow of information is contributing to the construction of Arab localism, while the increasing imposition of new global information technology, including the internet and satellite TV, is producing parochialism. In her view, the new transnational Arab media are by and large inherently undemocratic: "satellite television has worked to strengthen rather than undermine existing regimes as new televisual media have been harnessed by Gulf ruling elites to support and enhance non-democratic power structures in the Gulf Cooperation Council states."92

Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the impact of satellite TV and its potential to influence its viewers beyond the intentions and politics of Arab governments which are heavily investing in the telecommunication industry. Seen from this perspective, it is what Jürgen Habermas calls "the public sphere,"93 as the space within which issues are contested, and the impact of Al Jazeera on that sphere—rather than
how media can bring about democratic changes—that need to be analyzed. One can point out symptoms of a real change. With Al Jazeera has come the growing realization that Arab public opinion matters—albeit a changing Arab public opinion. Until recently, there was an assumption at least that Arab public opinion does not matter because authoritarian regimes in the Middle East region can control their discontented masses. The new media is changing that perception. A channel like Al Jazeera is broadening the form, content and extent of public involvement. As there are more interactive programs, there are more people who call in to express their views and more viewers who are exposed to such a diversity of views.

Al Jazeera has also helped take the Arab media beyond the transmission view of communication to the ritual view of communication. The former is often equated with “impacting,” “sending,” and “transmitting” information for the purpose of control, the latter is usually associated with “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” and with community and communion. What new Arab media like Al Jazeera are producing cannot be reduced to the prevailing paradigm of media as a form of domination (in other words, media as a means of controlling or moving the masses). Viewers are developing interactive habits which make them more than mere passive recipients. This makes communication more problematic than we usually assume; the way the viewers make sense of Al Jazeera and even affect it becomes no less important than the presumed effect Al Jazeera might have on its viewers. To invert the relationship of communication is to assume that Al Jazeera’s relation to its viewers is not one of power pure and simple, but one of a social drama and a complex reality in which a public sphere is constructed rather than being merely reflected. As Kai Hafez put it,

the media’s ability to influence or even manipulate society and politics should not be overstated. Contradictory and sometimes puzzling findings about media effects and media coverage are evident for the fact that the mass media are not omnipotent, but that their products are, in fact manipulated by audiences and the public.

Such an engagement is not only multiplying the number of interactions and making communication a symbolic process in which reality is produced, negotiated and transformed, but also increasing what people can publicly talk about, particularly in a channel like Al Jazeera where there are few red lines and where the controversial
nature of the discussed topics naturally generates a fair degree of involvement. The participation in interpretation that previously occurred in coffee houses and living rooms is now part of what is being broadcast in call-in shows. °\textsuperscript{96} “Al Jazeera TV’s migration of debate-and-discussion formats from salons to the air,” to use Jon Alterman’s words,\textsuperscript{97} facilitates and encourages participation in a public discourse. In turn, the aired debates spur even more debates within a public which considers watching TV a communal activity. In times of crisis, cafés become political saloons. This type of interaction can only broaden the public sphere. More segments of society are now brought into public discourse.

For Marc Lynch, the significance of these changes does not lie in the sheer number of participants who call in to express their views; the new public sphere that is emerging goes beyond the category of the layperson, which is often implied in discussions about the Arab street.\textsuperscript{98} What seems to matter more than the street today is an Arab public opinion shaped by “the consensus of elite and middle-class public opinion throughout the Arab world.”\textsuperscript{99} Many influential and articulate Arab intellectuals, newspaper editors and political figures who may be described as opinion leaders are starting to claim a space on Al Jazeera, among other media outlets, and are actively shaping a public sphere that is thriving within the increasingly influential transnational media. These figures are not without agenda or allegiances, but the sheer variety of the discourse that is being aired on the network is creating a more potent public sphere with multiple interpretations, views and opinions on what is going on in the Arab and Islamic world. This sphere may have excesses—as the debates we see on some of Al Jazeera’s programs are sometimes far from being what Habermas calls “rational critical debates”—but the very development of a media-mediated Arab public sphere may have a lasting effect on Arab political culture.

**UNRAVELING THE AL JAZEERA PHENOMENON**

This project, which is made all the more timely by the latest world developments and the pivotal role that the previously disenfranchised Arab media have started to play regionally and internationally, is motivated partly by a genuine interest in alternative media in the Arab world and partly by the scarcity of academic research in this fast-changing area of inquiry. Existing studies about Al Jazeera, the bulk of which are journalistic in their thrust, are either dated,
descriptive or lacking in depth. Although recently some interesting academic work has been produced, the Al Jazeera phenomenon has not been deeply analyzed, leaving much ground unexplored. Part of the problem is that the network is often either subjected to an idealistic view or seen from a dismissive standpoint. In other words, Al Jazeera is either adored and championed or vilified and bashed. The former view often emanates from an *amour propre* for what Al Jazeera stands for and what it is doing, while the latter view fails to see in the channel anything more than an evil force and a propaganda tool. Assuming that Al Jazeera, much like new Arab media which are going through a period of experimentation, has its merits and its drawbacks, its strengths and its weaknesses, its achievements and its limits, this project seeks to delve in some depth into some aspects of this network which have combined to make it a phenomenon that is worthy of exploration. It also seeks critically to probe the rich set of dynamics it sets in place in the Arab media scene and beyond.

The complexity of the topic at hand requires an interdisciplinary approach that transcends divisional lines and a collaborative endeavor. This work brings together the efforts of scholars with different disciplinary perspectives and various backgrounds. It is composed of nine essays by scholars from the Middle East, the United States and Europe from such varied disciplines as media studies, communication, journalism and political science. While they vary in focus, perspective and methodology, these essays contribute, each in its own way, to the unraveling of this media phenomenon.

The first section of the book is devoted to the politics of Al Jazeera, particularly as they relate to the question of the public sphere. Olivier Da Lage’s essay sets the ground for other contributions by situating Al Jazeera squarely within the geo-political constraints of Qatar and its political entanglement within a fast-changing region. In his view, there is an inextricable though seemingly contradictory relationship between Qatar’s foreign diplomacy and the role it envisages for itself in the region, on the one hand, and its media strategy, on the other hand. Da Lage argues that the pro-American foreign policy of Qatar and the anti-American editorial line of Al Jazeera are two sides of the same coin. Mohammed El Oifi’s “Influence without Power: Al Jazeera and the Arab Public Sphere” takes the analysis further by exploring whether the influence Al Jazeera has acquired over the Arab mediascape is likely to give Qatar long-lasting political gains. For Oifi, Qatar’s attempt to position itself in the Arab public sphere by aligning itself with Arab public opinion while at the same time serving its
own interests and acquiring a soft power by aligning itself with the United States is a combination which may have unpredictable consequences. Focusing more on identity, Gloria Awad provides a semiotic analysis of Aljazeera.net in her essay “Al Jazeera.net: Identity Choices and the Logic of the Media.” More specifically, she examines the cartography of space Aljazeera.net configures and its agenda setting function in an attempt to explore the ways in which the site constructs reality and represents identity.

The second section takes a close look at Al Jazeera’s programs. It opens with Faisal Al Kasim’s reflections on his own controversial program The Opposite Direction and how it changed the Arab mediascape. Set against Al Kasim’s assessment of the contribution of his own program is Muhammad Ayish’s essay “Media Brinksmanship in the Arab World: Al Jazeera’s The Opposite Direction as a Fighting Arena.” Ayish uses the concept of “brinksmanship” to probe the show critically and explore the ways it creates an effect of sensationalism and heightens the drama, and how such media practices contribute to the evisceration of a rational critical debate. Taking us away from the strident oppositional “crossfire” ethos that is the hallmark of Al Jazeera’s prominent talk shows, Naomi Sakr takes a close look at an innovative weekly program on women’s issues. Her essay “Women, Development and Al Jazeera: A Balance Sheet” explores the extent to which Al Jazeera’s For Women Only, among other programs, contributes to overcoming the deficit in women’s empowerment and affects the region Al Jazeera operates in and serves.

The last section of the book is devoted to Al Jazeera and regional crises. Ehab Bessaiso’s “Al Jazeera and the War in Afghanistan” looks at Al Jazeera in the context of the other battle that took place in Afghanistan—the information war. Paying special attention to bin Laden’s communication with Al Jazeera, Bessaiso examines whether Al Jazeera acted as a delivery system or as a mouthpiece for the Al Qaeda network. No less important is Al Jazeera’s coverage of the Palestinian uprising. “Witnessing the Intifada: Al Jazeera’s Coverage of the Palestinian–Israeli Conflict” looks at the extent to which Al Jazeera has helped put the Palestinian question on the front burner and the impact of its intense coverage on Arab viewers and Arab official circles. Extending the conversation, R.S. Zaharna explores the relationship between public diplomacy and media diplomacy. Her essay “Al Jazeera and American Public Diplomacy: A Dance of Intercultural (Mis-)Communication” is concerned with the role Al Jazeera has played in American public diplomacy in the Middle East.
during the information war, and how the Bush administration, which at various points perceived the network as promoting a negative image of the United States, used it as a tool in its public diplomacy initiative to win over the Arab public.
NOTES

Mohammed Jassim Al Ali, Interview with Abdallah Schleifer and Sarah Sullivan, *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, No. 7 (Fall/Winter 2001), <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall01/fall01.html>.


See David Hirst, “Qatar calling: Al Jazeera, the Arab TV channel that dares to shock,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 8, 2001.

It is interesting that MBC’s newly launched news channel “Al Arabiya” derives its name from the other half of the Arabic term for “Arabian Peninsula.” The geo-political consideration is important. Al Arabiya would not have been named so if the mother company, MBC, were still based in London.

Tabar, “Printing press to satellite.”

It is important here to note, along with Lila Abu Lughod, the theoretical difficulties fraught with “the typifying of communities that results from thinking of them as ‘cultures’.” Although one can note trends when it comes to the politicization of Arab viewers, it would probably be an exaggeration to generalize such a trend and to consider the Arab viewer as a type a politicized viewer. See Lila Abu Lughod, “The interpretation of culture(s) after television,” *Representations*, Vol. 59 (Summer 1997), pp. 109–43.


See James Poniwozik, “The battle for hearts and minds: even before bin Laden’s tape, the US was losing the propaganda war in the Arab world,” *Times Magazine*, October 22, 2001, p. 65.


Bassam Tibi, “From pan-Arabism to community of sovereign Arab states: redefining the Arab and Arabism in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War,” in


See Khaled Al Dakheel, “The tension between Qatar and Saudi Arabia ... is not caused by Al Jazeera,” *Al Hayat*, October 6, 2002, p. 9; and Sakr, “Optical illusion”.


For an assessment of Qatar’s economic development, see Moin A. Siddiqi, “Qatar economic report: the tiny emirate of Qatar is on track to become the Gulf’s new super energy power,” *Middle East*, No. 332 (March 2003), pp. 46–9.


Al Thani, Interview with Abdallah Schleifer and Sarah Sullivan.


For a detailed account about Saudi print media, see Alterman, *New Media, New Politics*, pp. 8–12.

See Hirst, “Qatar calling.”


See Gambill, “Qatar’s Al Jazeera TV.”


On this point, see Sakr, Satellite Realms, pp. 27–65.


Jihad Ali Bailout, Interview with author, February 5, 2003. The issue also concerns other Arab satellite channels. Discussing the Egyptian case in Satellite Realms, p. 39, Naomi Sakr observes that “income from the channels themselves was not the chief motive behind them. They were linked instead to the ruling elite’s determination to present an image of Egypt as a ‘cohesive community’ to viewers at home and abroad. The many components of the satellite project conceived and implemented in Cairo ... were geared to a particular official view of Egypt’s role in the region and internationally, its ability to provide a counter weight to Saudi Arabia and its future economic development.”


See Saad, “Al Jazeera.”


Friedman, “TV station beams beacon of freedom to Arab World,” p. 31 A.


Lydia Saad, “Al Jazeera viewers perceive the West differently,” Gallup Poll Tuesday Briefing, April 23, 2002.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Hammond, “Moving the masses.”


Chafets, “Al Jazeera unmasked.”


Al Ali, Interview with Abdallah Schleifer and Sarah Sullivan.


Fisk, “Al Jazeera: a bold and original TV station.”
Al Ali, Interview with Abdullah Schleifer and Sarah Sullivan.
Ibish and Abunimah, “The CNN of the Arab world deserves our respect.”
Wu, “This just in.”


Lynch, “Taking Arabs seriously.” For more on Arab media and the public sphere, see also Mohamed Zayani, Arab Satellite Channels and Politics in the Middle East (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2004).


A recent Middle East economic report provides even higher estimates. See Moin A. Sidikiq, “Qatar economic report: the tiny emirate of Qatar is on track to become the Gulf’s new super energy power,” Middle East, No. 332 (March 2003), pp. 46–9.


For the text and interpretation of the constitution, see Maghreb-Alchrek, No. 176 (2003).


For an account on the logic of inter-Arab relations, see Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).


Partner, *Arab Voices; Boyd, Broadcasting in the Arab World*.


Deutsh, *Nationalism and Social Communication*.


Hudson, *Arab Politics*.


The Information Revolution in the Arab World.


According to Information & Technology Publishing <http://www.ITP.net>, these sites are: Albawaba.com, Aljazeera.net, Arabia.com, Maktoob.com and Ahram.org.com.


Ibid.


Ibid.


We analyzed ten home pages of the site between February 6, 2002 and April 5, 2002, and ten between February 6, 2003 and April 5, 2003, and we compared the results with those of a similar analysis of the home pages of the site of the BBC News Middle East, in Arabic and in English.

This episode on why Kuwait does not mend fences with Iraq was aired on March 25, 1997. For a detailed account on the Kuwaiti protest, see *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, April 3, 1997.

This episode was aired on February 5, 2002 and tackled the Kuwaiti press onslaught on the Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Musa. It hosted Mr Sayyed Nassar, ex-editor of the Egyptian *Al Musawar Magazine*, and Nabeel Alfadel, a Kuwaiti columnist. As a result, a group of Kuwaiti solicitors lodged a lawsuit against Al Jazeera for defamation. For details on the furor, see the Kuwaiti press published the next day. The transcript of the program can be found on aljazeera.net.

The episode, which was aired on November 8, 1998, focused on the aftermath of the Wadi Araba Accords and hosted ex-foreign minister of Jordan Kamel Abu Jaber and veteran Syrian journalist Mohamad Khalifa. For the Jordanian
reaction, see their press on the next day. All their papers without exception launched a press attack against the program.

This episode on Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian cause was screened on June 25, 2002 and had as guests Dr. Fahd Alorabi Alharithi, a member of the Shura Council, and Egyptian journalist Mohamad Abdelhakam Diab. This particular episode drew heavy criticism from the Saudi press the next day.

See aljazeera.net, August 26, 2003.


Ibid.

David Hirst, “Qatar calling: Al Jazeera, the Arab TV channel that dares to shock,” Le Monde Diplomatique, August 8, 2001.

Unpublished survey carried out by the Saudi Ministry of the Interior.


I. Al Amin, “Arab media from visual to audio: Al Jazeera as a model,” Al Hayat, April 26, 2000, p. 10.

Moran, “In defense of Al Jazeera.”

Ibid.


Al Amin, “Arab media from visual to audio.”


Brian Whitaker, “Battle station: with its broadcast of Osama bin Laden’s video and exclusive footage of the Afghan War, the tiny satellite TV channel Al Jazeera made a huge name for itself,” *Guardian*, February 7, 2003, p. 2.

El-Nawawy and Farag, *Al Jazeera*.


A. Jawad “On the direction that has become no longer opposite.” *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, September 24, 2000, p. 18.


“Al Jazeera evaluation seminar ends with tough trial for *The Opposite Direction*,” *Al Bayan*, May 10, 2000, p. 6.

Al Shammari, *The Opposite Direction*; El-Nawawy and Farag, *Al Jazeera*.

Whitaker, “Battle station,” p. 3.

Al Shammari, *The Opposite Direction*.


Faisal Al Kasim, “Crossfire.”

Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back*.


*The Opposite Direction*, December 24, 2002.

A. Schleifer, “Looks are deceiving.”


Ibid., p. 11.

These titles were adopted by Abu Dhabi TV, Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) and Al Jazeera Satellite Channel, respectively.

Objections were voiced to this author by a number of female media professionals working in the Arab media.


Nalini Visvanathan, “Introduction to 18–19.


Ibid.


This terminology relating to the public sphere is drawn from Nancy Fraser’s formulation in her “Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy,” in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 110–11.


Fraser, “Rethinking the public sphere,” pp. 120, 123.

Ibid., p. 121.

Ibid., p. 124.

Ibid., p. 129.


Discussion of specific programs in this and the following section is based on verbatim transcripts posted on Al Jazeera’s website. The author thanks her husband, Ahmad Sakr, for help with Arabic-English translation.


“From day one most of our editorial staff were from this BBC environment,” Ibrahim Helal told an interviewer in 2001. “Even after five years if we’re in doubt in a certain situation, we convene and ask ourselves, if we were in London now what would we do.” See Sarah Sullivan, “The courting of Al Jazeera,” *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, No. 7 (Fall/Winter 2001), <http://tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall01/Jazeera_sjs.html>.


According to internal estimates compiled by the Pan-Arab Research Centre (PARC), Al Jazeera achieved advertising income of very roughly US$48 million in the first nine months of 2002, compared with levels of US$174 million for MBC, US$133 million for LBC-Sat, US$115 million for Future International and US$74 million for Abu Dhabi TV.


Sakr, “Maverick or model?”
Universal adult suffrage came later to Oman and Bahrain. National Assembly elections in Kuwait in 2003, as previously, were by male suffrage only. By late 2003, legislative elections had yet to be introduced in the UAE. October 2003 saw the Saudi government promising elections but without stating that women would have the vote.

“Qatar appoints first woman cabinet minister,” Middle East Times, May 9, 2003.

Ibid.

First screened on November 24, 2001.
First screened on December 30, 2001.


First screened on February 9, 2003.
First screened on October 5, 1997.
First screened on September 5, 1999 and March 5, 2000.
First screened on August 11, 2002 and August 17, 2003.


“Women and political change in Iraq” was first screened on May 12, 2003. “Women’s defeat in the Yemeni elections” was first screened on May 26, 2003. “Arab women and the Earth Summit in Johannesburg” was first screened on September 2, 2002.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


C. Riess, “Bin Laden’s station puts PM on spot over raids,” Evening Standard, October 9, 2001, p. 3.


White, “Downing Street gives propaganda warning.”
J. Drummond, “Qatari broadcaster emerges as key channel of communication,” *Financial Times*, October 9, 2001, p. 4.
B. Whitaker, “Battle station,” *Guardian*, October 9, 2001,
Ibid.
T. Allouni, Interview with author, April 11, 2002.
Wells, “How smart was this bomb?”
Go wing, cited in Wells, “How smart was this bomb?”
M. Krichene, Interview with author, April 12, 2002.
Helal, Interview with author.
H. Ibrahim, Interview with author, April 7, 2002.
Ibid.
Al Ali, Interview with author.
Allouni, Interview with author.
Ibid.
Y. Al Sholi, Interview with author, April 11, 2002.
M. Al Bourini, Interview with author, April 6, 2002.
Krichene, Interview with author.
Allouni, Interview with author.

James Drummond, “Qatari broadcaster emerges as key channel of communication,” Financial Times, October 9, 2001, p. 4.


Makovsky, “A voice from the heavens.”


However, there is nothing that is specific to Al Jazeera in such a take. The criticism could equally be applied to a number of Arab channels, many of which refuse to refer to Israel by name and use the word “enemy” in their news bulletin because they do not acknowledge the existence of the state of Israel in the first place.

Sharon Waxman, “Arab TV’s strong signal: the Al Jazeera network offers news the Mideast never had before,” Washington Post, December 4, 2001, p. CI.

See Dan Williams, “Al Jazeera ascends to World stage,” Washington Post, October 12, 2001, p. 22A.


Matt Wells, “How smart was this bomb?”, Guardian, November 19, 2001, p. 8.


Ibid.

“Interview with Al Jazeera Washington bureau chief Hafez Al Mirazi,” Middle East Insight (March/April 2002), <http://www.mideastinsight.org/03_02/arab.html>.


Studies conducted by the Pew Research Center (2002), the German Marshall Fund and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (2002), and the University of Michigan (2002) all cite a precipitous drop in support for the United States around the globe, among traditional American allies as well as new adversaries. A British report on American values noted similar findings. See “Living with a superpower,” The Economist, January 2, 2003.

“Interview with Hafez Al Mirazi,” Middle East Insight.


“Interview with Hafez Al Mirazi,” Middle East Insight.


Ibid.


Interview with Colin Powell, The Early Show, CBS, October 10, 2001.


Ibid.

Interview with Hafez Al Mirazi,” Middle East Insight.


Ibid.
International demographic data is available at <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idbsum.html>.
Foreign can mean two things in this case. It can refer to what is external to the region, and thus to American or European content. But foreign can also refer to intraregional differences. Thus, differences in mores between the Persian Gulf and the Mashriq can affect both societies. Anecdotally, we hear reports of Egyptian-produced dramas respecting Gulf sensibilities on male-female relations, and we see a huge audience for the flirtatious style of Lebanese programming in the more conservative Gulf.
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Hirst, David. 2001. “Qatar calling: Al Jazeera, the Arab TV channel that dares to shock.” Le Monde Diplomatique, August 8.


