

Control Room shows its hand

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Even the most earnest and truth-seeking of documentaries carries its own bias. Jehane Noujaim's *Control Room* announces itself as a new perspective on the Iraq War. It doesn't advertise that it is tailored for Western viewers, or that it seeks to sway a certain demographic. However, Noujaim's attempt to reach and influence a Western audience is revealed through editing choices and interview selections. In my argument I will first discuss some of the smaller editing choices that disclose the film's intended audience. Much of this will revolve around how the filmmaker taps into classically Hollywood motifs to make the film both something the movie's American audience will find both familiar and surprising. Then I will look at how the interview content is aimed at influencing the audience, particularly in terms of Samir Khader's interviews. Finally, I will look at the selection and placement of the Josh Rushing interview clips to see how they are supposed to move the intended audience towards transformation.

One telltale sign of *Control Room*'s target audience is the amount of time the filmmaker devotes to correcting one particular view of the station. No large effort is made address the theory that Al Jazeera is, for instance, a Mossad front. But much is made to correction the conception of the station that one might have if he or she only heard about it from, say, Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfelds' oft repeated statement that Al Jazeera broadcasts are "vicious, inaccurate and inexcusable" (Baxter, 2005) is put to the test when the audience sees a functioning newsroom full of intelligent, truth-seeking people. This is a direct attempt to address about the Bush Administration's assesment the station. Another clue that this film's primary target is a Western (and particularly American) audience is the fact that most of the film is in English, and anything that's not in English is originally subtitled that way. The first few shots of the opening montage also indicate who the filmmaker is aiming at. The movie opens with a glaring red

sunset which is followed by shots of a third-world-looking city. This seems like the typical opening to a Hollywood movie set in the Middle East. It's a set of images that a Western audience immediately knows what to do with. They could easily expect a typically Hollywood story to follow. Al Jazeera's Deema Khatib picks up this theme when she mentions that the real war played like an American war movie: you already know who the "good guys" are and who will win.

Having set up the stereotypical Hollywood beginning, *Control Room* goes on to both fulfill and defy that expectation. It fulfills the expectation by presenting the required unlikely hero. Al Jazeera acts as the small, gallant protagonist, courageously working to bring truth and freedom to a world in desperate need of both. The purpose of Al Jazeera "is to educate the Arab masses in something called democracy" says Samir Khader, one of the station's senior producers, "To shake up these rigid societies, to awaken them, to tell them: Wake up, wake up, there is a world around you, something is happening in the world, you are still sleeping, wake up." Any American who's grown up on stories of the revolution and the Founding Fathers would certainly be expected to root for this guy.

There are also villains: the Arab governments are briefly mentioned as disliking Al Jazeera for threatening their power. Certainly more could have been made of this point. Criticism of the American government and military is nothing new in the Arab media. One of the things that makes Al Jazeera special and different is the fact that is also lobbies criticism at Arab governments. As Mohammed el-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar explain in their review of *Al-Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East*, "Its hard-hitting journalism has targeted **Arab** regimes as well as the Israeli and American governments. The station has addressed political, social, and religious issues that would never have been permitted by most **Arab** and Muslim governments." (el-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002) However the filmmaker chooses to focus on how the American government has reacted to Al Jazeera. *Control Room* challenges the audience's preconceived notion of Hollywood war movies by establishing the American military as the aggressor, rather than the hero. Much effort is spend on building Al Jazeera's case against the American government, from verbal attacks by Rumsfeld to allegedly deliberate military attacks against the station. The Noujaim's focus on American resistance to Al Jazeera further indicates that America is the intended

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audience for this film. First, because it would probably be of more interest to that audience than the actions of Arab governments, which aren't as relevant to their own lives. Second, because an American audience would presumably be able to change the actions of their own government via democracy. In this set up the film's American audience and the film's subject end up on the same side: the side of free thought and democracy. By using these values as a common ground, the filmmaker completely reverses the American government's stance on the relationship between Al Jazeera and the American people. It pulls the audience away from what are presented as power-drunk, arrogant figures like Rumsfeld and Bush and closer towards the noble, idealistic, charismatic Al Jazeera staffers.

When it comes to noble, intelligent and charismatic representatives of Al Jazeera in this film, you couldn't do much better than Samir Khader, one of the senior producers of Al Jazeera. Khader serves as one of the voices of reason in *Control Room*. No spouting ideologue is he; each of his opinions seem reasoned and logical. He acknowledges America's good qualities while leveling well thought out criticisms where they are deserved. However, in his interviews Khader seemed to be doing more than just talking about the station. He seems to be speaking directly to the American people. Indeed, upon my second viewing of the film I noticed that Khader seems to be saying exactly what he thought an American audience would want to hear and also what he thought an American audience would need to hear. One example is when he yells at his interview producer for finding a highly biased and irrational interviewee who bashes America. Khader's criticism that, "he was just a crazy activist...all nonsense, no logic, no balance" was fair enough. But when he followed that up with, "Not on our news program, we want guests who are balanced," the whole speech felt a little false, like he was pandering to someone. Other things he said, while not as forced, suggested that he might be playing to the American viewers. For instance, his passionate speech about wanting to "shake up rigid societies" was a very stirring way to start the film. It was also a very rhetorically effective choice. For instance, if this documentary is intended for an American audience, who else might Khader have been referring to when he says, "Wake up! Wake up, there is a world around you!"? Another time he says, "Between us, if I'm offered a job at Fox News, I'll take it. Instantly. I will send my children to go to America after highschool, I will pay for them to go, to exchange the Arab nightmare for the American dream." Why does he say these things? What do they

have to do with the subject and message of the *Control Room*? Khader's statements are only relevant if the film is aimed at a Western and American audience. They don't really mean as much to an Arab (or Chinese, or Ethiopian) viewer. But to an American, Khader is saying, "I am acknowledging the positive things about your country." This gives him a common ground with the American viewer, and makes the viewer more willing to listen to what Khader has to say.

If Khadar, Khatib and their ilk represent Al Jazeera in *Control Room*, then Lieutenant Josh Rushing represents America. He starts out toeing the military line, just one of the many American military press representatives. The end of the film finds him questioning much of the American conception of the Iraq War. This transformation appears to be captured as it happens, with Rushing's increasing interaction with the Al Jazeera news team leading to his change of heart over the course of the war. In fact the filmmakers filmed only one 40 minute interview with Rushing, which was then cut and dispersed appropriately throughout the documentary in order to create the sense that we in the audience are watching Rushing transform before our eyes. No attempt is made by the filmmaker to contextualize these interviews. Whether or not this decision accurately captures Rushing's experience in real life doesn't change the fact that for the purposes of this film the transformation is artificial. Such blatant manipulation on the part of the filmmakers is both ironic and appropriate for a film whose characters are in one instance deploring the propaganda and spin of governments and new organizations, and in others admitting to the necessity of propaganda during wartime. Few documentaries can make claims about true impartiality and here "*Control Room*" throws its own into question. Why does the filmmaker employ such outright manipulation if not to influence as much as inform? Notice that Rushing is the only main character who appears to change or come to any sort of realization over the course of the documentary. Meanwhile, in the case of the Al Jazeera staff, the film is more of a journey of discovery for the audience. While Rushing ponders and second-guesses, we in the audience come to find the Al Jazeera staff to be intelligent, articulate, witty and empathetic – a far cry from most Western portrayals of Arabs. Unlike Khadar and his co-workers, Rushing does more than represent his constituents. He also demonstrates the transformation that the filmmaker would like *Control Room*'s Western audience to experience. When Rushing at first argues unconvincingly America's case for attacking Iraq, the filmmaker wants the American

viewership to recognize the illegitimacy of their war. When Rushing recognizes his own double standards regarding dead coalition troops and dead Iraqi civilians, the audience should be discovering and confronting their own biases. And at the end of the film when Rushing discusses the necessity of the Western and Arab perspectives learning to understand each other, the audience should infer that the way to deal with the apparent “clash of civilizations” is through dialogue and understanding, not more violence.

This technique is effective. Reviewer Linda O’Brien remarked, “When I left the theater last year after viewing the powerful film *Control Room*, I remember thinking that if U.S. Central Command Marine Capt. Josh Rushing continued to grow as he had in the course of that documentary, he could someday be a powerful force for understanding in America, and for its relations with the rest of the world.” (O’Brein, 2006) Reviewer Anthony Lane also falls into this trap, when he describes Rushing as, “a U.S. Army press officer, who argues the case for the Coalition while plainly becoming intrigued by the other side of the argument and helplessly befriending Arab journalists.” (Lane 2004) Both reviewers seem to be under the impression that they are watching Rushing’s genuine transformation captured on camera. I think most everyone in the class thought the same thing, considering the surprise in the room when the truth about Rushing’s interview came to light. To what degree this decision on the filmmaker’s part is a betrayal of the viewer is up for debate. It remains, however, an instance of the filmmaker conspicuously trying to influence the documentary’s target audience.

Control Room successfully reports on the Iraq War as seen from the perspective of one of the first successful independent news networks in the Arab world. It also deliberately directs this message at an American audience, which it hopes to influence. Decisions on the filmmaker’s part as to how to put the film together, as well as choices on behalf of some of the interviewees in terms of what to say, all point to this conclusion.

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