

Press or propaganda? A Study of Al-Jazeera

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To many Americans, Al- Jazeera is associated with terrorism, with Donald Rumsfeld calling the network's reporting "vicious, inaccurate, and inexcusable" (Lavin, 2006 ¶5). Indeed, Americans have been fed this sentiment by many top officials in the government and media alike, associating Al-Jazeera with Al-Qaeda (as many Al-Qaeda tapes are shown on the network first, then disseminated to other networks). Al-Jazeera has been known as a "mouthpiece of terrorism", and is inherently against the United States in its "War on Terror".

Recently, Noujaim made a documentary called *Control Room* that documented the United States' war in Iraq, mainly in the views of the Al-Jazeera news network. As Faulth points out, "One of the first words spoken in Jehane Noujaim's captivating documentary is 'propaganda'. This is fitting, since the question of who is controlling the truth goes to the very heart of her film, which follows events at Al Jazeera, the largest Arab news network, during the war in Iraq" (Fauth, nd ¶1). Indeed, the film makes the viewer wonder if the American government has a totally fair and objective view of Al-Jazeera. *Control Room* argues that Al-Jazeera offers fair and balanced reports on all of its subjects, while American officials feel that it is nothing more than a forum for terrorist views.

After watching *Control Room*, I came to the conclusion that Al-Jazeera was in fact a fair and balanced network under unfair attack by other countries, and that the American government was wrong to condemn the network that stood for the same values that are found in the bill of rights. I intend to show that the American government is attacking Al-Jazeera to control the flow of information in a time of war, and replacing the news with pro-war and pro-western propaganda. I will look at a brief history of Al-Jazeera and the ways in which the network appeals to its viewers, and then

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look at scholarly reports on the credibility of the network's reporting. Finally, I will look at the history of American journalism and propaganda during wars, and how it relates to Al-Jazeera and the current war in Iraq.

History of Al-Jazeera

Establishing any kind of television network is difficult and expensive, requiring significant investment. The Qatari royal family initially provided the \$150 million needed to establish the network (Miladi 2006, 949). Though it was funded by Qatar and is based out of Qatar, Al-Jazeera is not under its influence (949). Al-Jazeera started broadcasting from the city of Doha in 1996, and is carried by four different satellite signals in the area (949). The network now has reporters all around the world and boasts a lifespan longer than the failed BBC equivalent set up through Saudi Arabia (949).

The Culture and Appeal of Al-Jazeera

Many people worldwide use television for different reasons, for entertainment, information, or persuasion (usually a mix of two or three). In fact, Al-Jazeera plays a major part in the culture of not only just television viewing, but in Arab culture overall. According to Miladi, many viewers consider Al-Jazeera the "CNN of the Arab world" (Miladi, 2006, 950).

Even immigrants from the Arab nations can find Al-Jazeera carried in European countries like Great Britain. They see it as a way to keep in touch with their cultural roots and heritage. Arab news channels like Al-Jazeera are "seen to offer news from within the Arab world to Arab audiences in Britain, and also to maintain a cultural link with people back home" (951). So even in European countries, Arab audiences are able to get news from their native region not only for information, but as a way to maintain their way of life in a foreign land. This helps create a common Arab identity even in other countries through the satellite Arab stations. Miladi calls this the "emerging transnational Arab public sphere, where people feel connected to their countries of origin wherever they might be" (953). Matar confirms this finding, saying that "...respondents, particularly those of the first migrant generation, said they mostly watch news, particularly accounts on satellite Arabic television, to 'connect us to the homeland', to 'relieve the tediousness of exile' and to 'emphasise the importance of the ancestral language for next generations'" (Matar 2006,1037).

But what is it about an Arab news channel that can carry so much cultural significance? I'm sure that if Americans were to live abroad, they would not long so much for CNN if they had access to other credible news stations. Civil liberties aren't necessarily guaranteed in all of the countries in the Middle East, so free programming is a representation of freedoms that people long for. Miladi talks about the appeal of Al-Jazeera, explaining that "Its programmes appeal to a hunger within Arab audiences for democracy and freedom of expression, suppressed by decades of state control on all media outlets in most Arab countries, with a few exceptions such as Lebanon" (Miladi 2006, 952). So, to Arab audiences, Al-Jazeera stands not for terrorism and propaganda, but instead is an expression of democratic ideals, showing a longing for the freedoms that Americans find in everyday news programming.

It would appear that Al-Jazeera is a leader of the discourse of freedoms and Arab culture. To Arabs, "Al-Jazeera is perceived as filling this gap and thus plays an important role in broadening the debate about what should be broadcast in terms of news from an Arab perspective, and what should be discussed in relation to the concerns of Arab people. This opens the door to greater freedom of expression in its broadest sense" (959). While other countries might use state-run networks to express government views, Al-Jazeera is seen as a genuine Arab product free from governmental influence.

It would seem that it would be in America's best interest to support Al-Jazeera if America wants to win the media war in the Middle East, as Al-Jazeera stands for the values that the United States is trying to almost artificially install in the region. Al-Jazeera could be used as a catalyst for the people to get used to the freedoms of a democratic society. Historically, "Al-Jazeera has been viewed as promoting debates on human rights and democracy, exposing political corruption, and to a large extent has 'raised the ceiling of political and social debate throughout the Arab world', hence explicitly advocating and preparing the pan-Arab public for democratic change" (959). Indeed, these are the very same values and expectations of an American free press that is enjoyed within this country.

As I have shown, Al-Jazeera is considered by many to be a free and democratic network, but is concerned with the issues facing the Arab nations. Some countries might confuse this with having a certain bias in news covering issues facing conflicts with the West. But, as it is pointed out, Eastern and

Western news networks have "the deepest imaginable cultural differences" and thus target their points "subtly or blatantly, to the biases of their discrete audiences" (Hickey 2002, 43). So Al-Jazeera will target Arab audiences with issues important to them while Western journalists might cover a different side of the same issue. But this is more due to cultural differences of their definable audience, not necessarily as a blatant bias. While subtle biases may exist (can any reporting ever be truly unbiased?), it would be wrong to say that this means that Al-Jazeera is *against* the Western countries and their policies, or that they are less credible for covering different stories. They are simply covering issues important to their audience.

The Credibility of Al-Jazeera

U.S. government officials have blasted Al-Jazeera as being a biased, Al-Qaeda mouthpiece with no legitimate news (Associated Press, 2006 ¶7). However, according to many sources- Arab and Western alike- Al-Jazeera is just a credible news source as any other news network, if not more so. For example, in the opening days of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq many Arabs watched CNN and BBC news. But as Matar describes, "In subsequent days, however, many favoured Arabic channels, such as Al-Jazeera, for their more varied analyses and wider range of viewpoints, including people 'outside the loop' of the mainstream Western media" (Matar 2006, 1031). This shows that many people in the vicinity of the action thought Al-Jazeera's coverage was on par if not superior to the Western networks, or was just more relevant to their lives by being regionally close. Matar found that respondents to her study frequently stated that "We find in Al-Jazeera a way to vent our feelings and emotions. It is the most objective and balanced of all the channels..." (1032).

It is apparent that many Middle Eastern people watch Al-Jazeera because they feel that the news coverage is more accurate and relevant to their region. Miladi summarizes this best, saying

Al-Jazeera is successful because it covers the kind of topics that others do not: everything from human rights abuse in the Arab countries and debates about democracy, to women's rights in Islam and the Palestinian intifadah, with wide coverage of uncensored news and current affairs from around the world, debate programmes, special

documentaries, and one-on-one interviews with personalities of opposed opinions, most of whom would not get a hearing on any other Arab station (Miladi 2006, 952).

It is not hard to imagine that Western news networks would hardly if ever run lengthy stories about Arab democracy, debates, and other things that most in the region would find newsworthy. Instead of seeing Al-Jazeera as an agenda setter, many Arabs find that it is the voice of the Middle East, talking about issues they want to hear about.

As stated above, it can be argued that Al-Jazeera is a more credible news source in the Middle East than conventional news sources because Al-Jazeera is stationed out of the Middle East. For example, Al-Jazeera was allowed to stay in Afghanistan during the first days of the war even though the Taliban kicked out all other Western journalists, based on the fact that they were used to the network's presence in the region (Hickey 2002, 40). It is obvious that a reporter who is stationed in the country itself would be more credible than a reporter exiled to the borders reporting off of speculations (and perhaps even secretly reporting from Al-Jazeera sources).

Some even find Al-Jazeera a credible network not only in the Middle East but abroad as well. For example, many people of Arab descent who live in Western countries like to watch news about the Israel-Palestinian conflict, but complain of the Western networks' focus on Israeli suffering. So many will watch Al-Jazeera to hear the other side of the story, and find the coverage "... more credible and truthful version of the events and their aftermath" (Matar 2006, 1028). So ironically it is not Al-Jazeera that gives unbalanced reports, but rather the news sources of the very government that is accusing Al-Jazeera of being unbalanced and not credible. Instead of Al-Jazeera being the source of propaganda, it is possible that there is propaganda from some source about Al-Jazeera itself.

Propaganda

Many are familiar with classic war propaganda, with images of Rosie the Riveter, Uncle Sam, and scathing attacks on the Germans and Japanese. These images helped unite Americans against a common enemy, and inspired all to give their best for their country. But propaganda during wartime can be dangerous as well. According to Harrop's study of war propaganda, "The implications of unchecked war

propaganda are far-reaching. It limits the availability of facts, context and the transparency of political motivations—prerequisites for an informed citizenship, able to fully participate in democratic processes" (Harrop 2002, 311). In essence, war propaganda can go against the very democratic values that America battles for, limiting voices (especially dissenting voices) and the facts needed to make an intelligent decision. Basically, the government can silence all voices except for the pre-approved ideas under the guise of patriotism.

As Harrop points out, "This silence can be achieved through a variety of means, including pro-government media refusing access to minorities or via self-censorship, for example, from fear of losing one's job or social standing" (311). Thus, not only does the government itself make and endorse propaganda, but also the media acts as an arm of the propaganda machine. This "you're either with us or against us" is a powerful sentiment that is echoed subtly through media during times of war, starting from the Spanish-American War (Rodriguez 1998, 285).

The Spanish-American War is famous in history as a time when journalism was a major force in the initiation and continuation of the war, in essence selling the war to citizens for the government (285-286). Even though the government did not officially take over the media, it had great interest in how news of the war was covered. Interestingly, it is found that "...the Spanish- American War provided the United States with an outlet to combine convergent notions of humanitarian sentiment, national greatness, promotion of liberty, and self-interest" (288). It is striking if one is to compare for themselves those goals with the goals of the Iraq war. In any case, the United States needed a way to show this humanitarian action, this national greatness and promotion of liberty, which is why the media was so important to the war cause.

But the United States does not want to leave such an important task up to the "neutral" media. That is why after the Spanish-American War, the government "developed an elaborate public relations machinery—often employing former journalists—to project a positive image of the US military both to the domestic public and internationally and to train military personnel to deal with the media" (Thussu 2002, 204). This means that current and former personnel involved in the media are being used for what is essentially pro-government propaganda, which is aimed now not only at the citizens but also to the international community. One of these media

trained military officers plays a central part in *Control Room* as the main media liaison between the military and the media. Lt. Rushing is charged with telling the world the U.S. government's side of the story, always in a positive light. The government is concerned with their perception in the international community, as it is easier to win a war with international support.

This is shown in the riots of Los Angeles during World War II, where Hispanics are protesting racial discrimination. The government was concerned with how race riots would be perceived internationally, especially with the potential to use these troubles as material for Axis powers propaganda. Thus due to international criticism, the U.S. State Department tried to influence the portrayal of these riots as simply due to the socioeconomics of Los Angeles and not to race problems in the U.S. (Hart 2004, 65-66). The government tried to control the media portrayal of events and instead came up with their own story to tell the international community.

Interestingly enough, the State Department "could do only so much to suppress information about discrimination in the United States. Lacking the same control over the mass media enjoyed by many other governments, they only damaged their own credibility by refusing to deal with stories that would inevitably get out" (66). Because of America's bill of rights and freedom of the press, the State Department had its own propaganda rejected by the international community.

The government has high interest in this state-led dissemination of information, since this information allows the government to conduct business internationally on terms favorable to the U.S. (81). That is why President Truman officially made propaganda and information distribution an official part of the foreign policy process, signing executive orders assigning these tasks to the State Department (82). As Hart put it, "In a world of competing ideologies and newly independent nations, America's global position depended as never before on the nation's ability to 'sell' people around the world on its political and economic philosophies" (82). Still today the U.S. government is trying to "sell" people its philosophies, in its justifications for the invasion of Iraq and its theories about the consequences for Iran and North Korea.

This governmental control of information during wartime continued into the Gulf War as well. Only a select group of journalists were allowed by the military to certain combat areas, and "This strategy,

devised by the Pentagon, helped the US to monitor and censor information about the war before it was broadcast" (Thussu 2002, 204). On its face, this could be an acceptable policy, as it is important not to give away sensitive information to enemy combatants. However as Thussu found, "The military's definition of "sensitive" information also included anything that might undermine public support for military action. It is indicative of the symbiotic relationship between the media and the military that major media outlets complied with these restrictions on their freedom to operate as professional journalists" (204). Again, we see the military putting out propaganda to the world by limiting the facts about the war it is fighting. It appears that the journalists actually bought the fact that the information *was* the truth due to their compliance with the military's policy. In their opinion, they were telling the *unbiased truth*.

This practice has been found in the current war in the Middle East. In *Control Room*, we see the group of journalists invited to the American's media headquarters in Iraq, where it seeks to control the information distributed about the war. However, we have found that Al-Jazeera is not necessarily interested in what Western journalists have to tell them. In an attempt to sway public opinion in the Middle East, "and the need to tell moderate Muslims that it is not pursuing a 'war against Islam', the US first considered advertising on Al-Jazeera in November 2001..." (Miladi 2006, 958). However, Al-Jazeera covered the news as they saw it despite U.S. pressure to air its content, opting to air controversial tapes by bin Laden or realistic coverage of war (958). The predominant "you're with us or against us" attitude in Washington prompts American officials to denounce Al-Jazeera as a network of lies and Al-Qaeda propaganda. In *Control Room*, we saw Al-Jazeera pay the consequence for not running the American story in the "accidental" bombing of the station in Baghdad.

Conclusion

We have seen that the American military has constantly used propaganda through media in times of war. From the Spanish-American War through the current War on Terror, we have seen examples of pro-military coverage and information controlling policies set place by the government. We have also seen that to Arabs and Western scholars alike, Al-Jazeera is a credible and balanced news source, perhaps even more so than those available in the West. Also we have found that Al-Jazeera is culturally important to Arabs, and is used not only to

get information but as a way to stay connected to other Arabs and their common interests. Based on these facts, I have come to the conclusion that the American government, in an attempt to control the flow of information and gain international support, has unfairly attacked Al-Jazeera in its attempt to report the truth to those immediately effected by the events in the region.

Al-Jazeera is the unfortunate whipping boy of the military press relations, yet is unwavering in its pursuit to tell the truth to its audience. I believe that is why *Control Room* was made. It wanted to show that Al-Jazeera is a legitimate news network and is not anti-American. In fact, many of the personnel in the movie have many positive things to say about America and its constitution. *Control Room* makes the point that no matter what outside influences try to do, they will continue to search and report on the truth to its audience.

I will acknowledge that some find that Al-Jazeera at times might focus on the Palestinian side of suffering, and the fact that Al-Jazeera tends to repeat old stories in what some may argue is a way of keeping past offenses fresh in the minds of Arabs (Matar 2006, 1031). But as Hickey points out, while some consider Al-Jazeera to cater to prejudices of the Arab world, the U.S. media is also uncritical of governmental policies during wartime (Hickey 2002, 43). Also, Al-Jazeera might report from one side of the issue occasionally, but it also is argued that if they don't tell that side of the issue, nobody else will do so (43).

Still, others argue that the media does not tell biased reports during times of war. Russo studied American news coverage during the Vietnam War and came to the conclusion that the reporting was on average unbiased, perhaps even to the side of biased against the governmental policies (Russo 1971, 542). However, we have seen ample examples listed above to the fact of the media broadcasting pro-government ideas. Also, many would argue that public opinion about the war in Vietnam was so negative because of an inability of the government to control the flow of information (See <http://www.vietquoc.com/whylost.htm>).

Some of my peers expressed concern that certain parts of the film appeared to be staged or acted, such as when the producer was speaking to the camera. However, this should not detract from the overall truth represented in the documentary. Bill Nichols discusses the topic of documentaries that oppose the policies of governments or other hegemonic

institutions in his book Introduction to Documentary. He notes that in the film *The Camera and I*, the workers staged a reenactment of a protest march, and yet they experienced the same sense of community they felt from the first march (Nichols 2001, 150). This parallels the experience of the Al-Jazeera staff and their sense of community, as they work to establish a credible Arab news identity. The main point to understand was the truth that was presented in the documentary, and that was the fact that Al-Jazeera is a credible and free news source under unfair attack.

This makes an interesting point about truth and documentaries. It is hard to establish just what truth is, since it is being mediated through the filmmaker's lens and opinions. Yet even if something is slightly distorted or not totally accurate in a mediated message, it can still convey a message or truth.



This picture says "This is not a pipe", although it is clearly is a picture of a pipe. We assume that the artist is conveying the most accurate representation of a pipe that he can make, but we can't be sure. The reason why we can't be sure is the reason why the artist says "This is not a pipe", which is because this is just a mediated image. We can not assume to know the reasons of the artist, his intention pertaining to the validity of the representation, or the validity of the message itself. So just like we clearly see a pipe in the picture's message despite any flaws, viewers can still clearly see the truth presented in the documentary. We can certainly still interpret the truth mediated by the documentary and, more importantly, make intelligent decisions based on the experiences and impressions left by the film.

Overall, it is proven that the Coalition governments have controlled information and have demonized Al-Jazeera, with America especially having a tendency to put out propaganda through the media in times of war. So what do concerned citizens do? First, I would recommend telling others about *Control Room* and let them come to their own conclusions about Al-Jazeera and governmental

policies. Most importantly though, there needs to be a desire for the truth and accountability for the government and media. Check the sources of information and claims from the government, and perhaps even check Al-Jazeera. As long as Americans demand for the truth, it will be revealed and democracy can work with its citizens making informed decisions.

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