

Contemporary Gulf Studies

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Haydar Badawi Sadig
Editor

Al Jazeera in the Gulf and in the World

Is It Redefining Global Communication Ethics?

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Editor

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FOREWORD

In the West at present, the super-charged political atmosphere has generated press coverage that no one even suspects of cohering to past standards of objectivity or equal time. The press is largely partisan now, and news coverage is equally opinion and campaigning and core-audience gathering. Truth is not an issue. Alignment and advocacy have won the day.

In the East, powerful forces—economic, political, and religious—arrange the frames by which news is organized and produced. Mega-corps typically bow to state mandates. The voiceless? Their whispers are overwhelmed by party, promotions, and sheer power politics. The circumstances are tragic, with the loss of public confidence, the loss of honest questions posed by public servants and filtered through an open, inquisitive debate.

This book points to the possibilities that the Al Jazeera Media Network represents. *Al Jazeera in the Gulf and in the World* is media history, analysis, conceptual footing, and hope.

There have been many books and essays written about Al Jazeera, due to its place as the first independent Arabic and English news channel in the Middle East and North Africa, and due to its central place in the coverage of conflicts in this part of the world, especially coverage of the US-led invasion of Iraq (twice). The perspective it has offered has been unlike that of other major news services, especially BBC World, CNN, and government-controlled channels sponsored by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Some have complained about the carnage it has not shied away from reporting, especially images of dead bodies—both civilian and military—but others have appreciated its gritty realism. Compared to Western media outlets, the channel neither beats the drum for Western intervention in the region

(unlike even venerable news organizations in the US such as *The New York Times*), nor takes the position that the status quo in the Middle East should remain. It has taken strong positions against tyranny, promoted democracy, and even had its own reporters tried for “crimes” against some of the region’s governments. Sometimes it has likely overstepped the accepted boundaries of neutral reporting, failed to exhibit “objectivity” in its reports, and been legitimately censured for its work. But there is no doubt that Al Jazeera has been a force in the region’s politics that cannot be ignored.

In this context this book makes an important contribution. It is not just another historical survey of Al Jazeera’s accomplishments or failures, but an ethical analytical approach to an important phenomenon in today’s global media environment. The authors do not set up Al Jazeera as the answer, but they do set the essential questions in a fresh, contemporary light.

One problem that has cropped up in this environment has been the issue of “whose ethics?” The ethical systems best known worldwide, as a result of the publishing power of Western organizations, the significance of Western wire services and global television services, and the role of Western universities in educating media practitioners and ethicists, has been Enlightenment ethicists with a decidedly Western bent. This book helps correct that by advocating more cosmopolitan approaches to ethics, more indigenous understandings, and more Enlightenment-free analytic methodologies (if that is possible). Chapters on truth and human dignity provide rich theoretical challenge. Chapters on gender and the voiceless probe the aspirations and the barriers of this ambitious project. The chapters together provide new understandings of how we might evaluate the roles, reporting, and impact of non-Western media organizations. For that we must be grateful, as this Middle East network revives standards of social responsibility in today’s complicated era of public cacophony.

This is an important book for anyone interested either in global media or in the application of ethical perspectives to the practices of journalists and journalistically focused organizations. It should provide new means to understand institutions and the application of ethical perspectives on developments that will be crucial in recasting media institutions and practices in the twenty-first century.

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FOREWORD

In ethics, I tend to adopt the questioning approach. For instance, my two *Ethics for Journalists* texts (Keeble 2001, 2009) comprise simply a series of questions. Do you consider undercover “sting operations” unnecessarily invade people’s privacy? When a government wages war, should journalists automatically give it their support? And so on. This strategy has definite benefits. While it does not rule out taking an opinion, it’s sceptical of all dogma. It helps show the reader that on ethical issues there is not just one “right” attitude, there is this other one, and then this one too. And, by the way, there is also this completely different approach. The questioning empowers the reader, leaving them to decide. Moreover, it becomes a powerful tool in teaching. Rather than simply spouting off a response, students are encouraged to *hear* and take seriously views they might otherwise reject. It’s a way to confront prejudice; it helps develop skills in creative listening and empathy. And questioning is less confrontational and so encourages more constructive dialogues.

Not surprisingly the Qatari-backed Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) has been at the centre of controversy since its launch in 1996—with Al Jazeera English (AJE) following in 2006 to rival BBC World and CNN International. As Haydar Badawi Sadig and Catalina Petcu outline in their opening chapter, providing a detailed historical background, its reporting has attracted both acclaim and serious criticism. According to Tal Samuel-Azran (2010, p. 13), Al Jazeera’s (AJ) images have posed the greatest challenge to Western news hegemony in the history of global media, confronting the dominant Western perspective on an international level, sometimes even forcing images on Western stations that portray a non-Western point of

view. While its journalism has been praised by many for its professionalism and truth-telling, its bureaus have still been bombed by the US and the UK during the assaults on Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, while a number of Arab states have imprisoned journalists, closed the network's offices and jammed its signal. And since June 2017, Saudi Arabia and its allies have imposed a blockade on Qatar, citing its alleged support for terrorism and calling for the closure of Al Jazeera.

Thus, a central question becomes: To what extent does Al Jazeera's journalism reflect the internationalization of Western-style notions of professionalism linked to corporate, advertising-based or state-sponsored media? Or is it best seen as the propaganda arm of the Qatari state? The station is often compared with the BBC. Perhaps not surprisingly given the employment strategy of the new channel—with journalists laid off by the BBC being charged with launching the operations in 1996. Yet the sponsorship of media organizations by governments, it is argued, does not mean that they become timid mouthpieces for the state. Advanced capitalism (at both the national and the international levels) is a highly sophisticated economic, political, cultural and ideological system for it is able not only to promote dominant interests through professionalized reporting. But factional disputes amongst the elite also mean that dominant media are often the site for controversy. Does this help explain the operations of both the BBC and Al Jazeera?

Clifford Christians, in his fascinating, theoretically rich chapter, argues that a journalistic morality based on conventional, Western notions of objective truth is no longer defensible. In its place, he places a theory of truth that is substantive enough to be international in scope and relevant to the operations of Al Jazeera which he defines as *aletheia*: namely, uncovering the authentic, disclosing the genuine underneath. He links to this a notion of anti-propaganda, reflected in AJE's *Code of Ethics* which addresses the propaganda issue in this way: "Distinguish between news material, opinion and analysis to avoid the pitfalls of speculation and propaganda." Acting on that standard, AJE is mandated to avoid propagating a specific political stream or party.

Al Jazeera in the Gulf and in the World is valuable because it really does embed an eclectic questioning—its chapters synthesizing the results of many international academic studies of Al Jazeera while also drawing on a range of frank and revealing interviews with journalists. And some of those in Leon Barkho's chapter on editorial policies and practices do appear to confirm the station's close integration into the operations of

the Qatari state. An AJA editor goes so far as to say that the station relies on an editorial line “which is unwritten and implicit. It is subject to exaggeration and discretion. It is often connected to the wishes and desires of the sponsors and financiers who may even interfere in the selection of a word or phrase.” Similarly, according to a former editor: “The danger comes when the sponsor uses the broadcaster to achieve his ends. Many editorial decisions originate with the owners of capital. This is dangerous.”

In this context, a new question arises: To what extent do the revelations in the WikiLeaks US embassy cables of 2011 challenge Al Jazeera claims over professional autonomy (Chatriwala 2011)? In one cable, Joseph E. LeBaron, US Ambassador to Qatar, is quoted on November 6, 2008, saying: “Al Jazeera is a vital component to the USG’s strategy in communicating with the Arab world.” While LeBaron is later quoted on February 10, 2009: “Al Jazeera Board Chairman Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani has proven open to creative uses of Al Jazeera’s airwaves by the USG [United States Government] beyond straightforward interviews.” Moreover, the US Embassy in Doha and officials from Washington used a range of direct and indirect methods to ensure Al Jazeera’s compliance such as placing speakers on news programmes, supplying information approved by the US government, providing US training for Al Jazeera’s journalists and demanding editorial distortion of aired programmes. Perhaps most controversially, they secured Al Jazeera’s agreement to check first with US officials before airing “sensitive” programmes; engaged in constant, personal visits to Al Jazeera’s headquarters, developing close personal contacts with staff, and went over the head of the Managing Director to ensure that “objectionable content” was removed and never repeated.

But does not such evidence of secret Al Jazeera/US collusion sit awkwardly alongside reports that UK Prime Minister Tony Blair allegedly had to dissuade President George W. Bush from bombing AJ’s Qatar HQ at a meeting on April 16, 2004, during the US-led assault on Fallujah in Iraq (Norton-Taylor 2006)? Details of the alleged conversation appeared in a memo which was leaked by David Keogh, a civil servant at the Cabinet office, and Leo O’Connor, a research assistant, to former Labour MP Tony Clarke. Both Keogh and O’Connor were charged under the Official Secrets Act 1989 (designed to discourage and criminalize journalistic probing into the secret state). Keogh was found guilty on two counts of making a “damaging disclosure” by revealing the memo and was sentenced to six months in jail and ordered to pay £5000 in costs to the

prosecution. O'Connor was sentenced to three months in jail. But does not the case highlight the fact that so much current diplomacy and military strategy occur covertly—together with the threat of state repression for journalists who dare to raise issues about the growing power of secret states globally?

In another chapter, Haydar Badawi Sadig and Catalina Petcu draw on the social responsibility theory, a massive body of previous research and new interviews with (often clearly idealistic) journalists to ask the question: To what extent does Al Jazeera keep itself accountable to its crucial mission to give voice to the voiceless? They quote Mohamed Al-Mukhtar Al-Khalil, manager of Al Jazeera Net website, saying he employed local journalists in Somalia, the Philippines, South Sudan, Afghanistan and so on with the purpose of telling the stories of oppressed people. In a similar vein, Mhamed Krichen, a member of the editorial board from 2004 to 2010 and currently senior anchor at Al Jazeera, argues that AJ gives voice to the people, citing as an example the position the station took on the 2011 Egyptian revolution: “We were on Mursi’s side because he was elected by the people; our biases are only for freedom values, democracy, respecting people’s choices, respecting the polls/elections, and despite the fact that it is still considered a bias, it is a justified one.” Sadig and Petcu conclude that AJE does fulfil its remit, challenging the Western monopoly of mass media and, in the process, altering the direction of the North-South flow of information. “Many would argue that this has positively influenced public opinion and government policies in the interest of society.”

But in keeping with the challenging approach of this text, another chapter, by Hala Guta, cites research by Figenschou (2013, p. 117) which concludes that AJE can hardly claim to be the voice of the voiceless. Rather, it ends up being the voice of the “male independent elites such as oppositional politicians, representatives from international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media or cultural personalities, analysts, academics and channel staff.” Guta herself draws on a content analysis of AJA’s news output to show that women’s issues are underrepresented, constituting only 1.5% of the total stories aired. Sources quoted in the news are mainly elite men with women numbering just 16% of all sources quoted. Excluding elite women and the channel’s editorial staff, the percentage drops to 1.8%. At the same time, the literature suggests that Al Jazeera, through its talk shows, has broadened the debate about women’s issues in the Arab World and brought to the public sphere issues that have previously been taboo and private.

Finally, in a world too often plagued by warfare and all its appalling consequences—death and destruction, poverty, the refugee crisis, joblessness—and where dominant media too often side with the warmongers, it is not surprising that reporters and academics have identified the need for a journalism that promotes understanding and cooperation, focusing rather on human suffering and the humanitarian aspects of conflict. Guta's chapter on Al Jazeera's coverage of conflict then asks the question: To what extent can the station be said to promote Peace Journalism? There are no simple answers. The very concept of Peace Journalism is subject to fierce debate. Here, Guta builds on Galtung and Ruge's seminal theorizing (1965) whilst also incorporating Hanitzsch's stress on the organizational constraints on journalists (2007) to present a picture which is somewhat mixed. In its hard news bulletins, AJE's coverage is characterized by a focus on direct violence with less attention paid to issues of structural and cultural violence, normally stressed in the Peace Journalism model. However, Al Jazeera adopts a humanitarian frame highlighting the high human cost. And according to Guta, this framing process is the result of a deliberate strategy based on an ethical position to side with the vulnerable and the oppressed.

Perhaps the theories of Robert Hackett (2007) are useful in understanding the place of both Peace Journalism at Al Jazeera and its promotion of freedom of expression, as examined by Clifford Christians in another chapter. Herman and Chomsky's model (1988, p. 2) stresses the role of corporate media (both national and international) in forming a propaganda system in which "money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public." But Hackett (p. 79) suggests that this model fails to explore adequately "the openings for oppositional interventions within and against the propaganda system" and "does little to identify the scope and conditions under which newswriters could exercise the kind of choices called for by PJ." Hackett goes on to explore the "hierarchy of influences" model of Shoemaker and Reese (1996) and Bourdieu's analysis of the media as a relatively autonomous institutional sphere (1998) to theorize the activities of newswriters within the corporate media to promote Peace Journalism. Shoemaker and Reese identify five layers of influence within the field—firstly, the media workers themselves with their professionally related roles and ethics; secondly, the daily work routines within the newsroom; thirdly, the organizational imperatives

of profit-oriented, hierarchically structured media institutions; next, the extra-media influences such as governments, market structures and technology; and, finally, ideology (see Hackett, pp. 80–1). Bourdieu, on the other hand, suggests that journalism is a distinct field with its own ethos and stresses that individual journalists are “active and creative agents.” Thus Hackett concludes that the hierarchy and field models both suggest some degree of agency for newswriters. “There is indeed a necessary role for dedicated journalists to take the lead.”

Yet an even more radical approach would question these approaches, placing Peace Journalism essentially within a progressive, alternative, non-corporate, feminist tradition that challenges the many myths of professionalism. In its place, the activist reporter sees all journalism as essentially political—given the political economy of the media and its closeness to dominant economic, cultural and ideological forces—and overtly ties their political engagement in society with their journalism (Keeble 2010).

So which is the “right” approach to understanding the extraordinarily complex and influential journalistic operations of Al Jazeera? I leave you, the reader, to decide.

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Praise for *Al Jazeera in the Gulf and in the World*

“*Al Jazeera in the Gulf and in the World* is now the ‘go to’ text for anyone who wants to understand and debate the significance of this challenger to Western domination of international news and global perspectives. Rich with studies and data, the chapters provide alternate perspectives on Al Jazeera, and question its claim to represent the voiceless in an independent manner. A valuable resource for scholars, teachers, students, and global citizens.”

—Stephen J. A. Ward, *Professor and Author*, *Global Journalism Ethics; Radical Media Ethics: A Global Approach; Handbook of Global Media Ethics*

“The Al Jazeera network has established itself as an alternative, even revolutionary voice in a global media scene dominated by Western news agencies. *Al Jazeera in the Gulf and in the World* is a conceptually rich and thoroughly researched exploration of Al Jazeera’s role and impact in international news practice and theory. Addressing the network from the perspective of global communication ethics, the edited collection offers a coherent, lucidly written guide to the politics and ethics of the pan-Arab broadcaster, analyzing the network’s mission, policies, practices, discourses and platforms. Highly recommended reading for all those interested in thinking through how we could inject more universal values into news reporting.”

—Mervi Pantti, *Professor, Media and Communication Studies, University of Helsinki*

“This book is a much-needed addition to the existing literature on *Al Jazeera*, the media giant that revolutionized the Arab media landscape; transformed its features; and redefined its parameters. Unlike previous research on *Al Jazeera*, which focused primarily on its journalistic style, professional contributions, and the debates and controversies around it, this book takes us on an exciting tour of the largely unexplored and mostly understudied “ethical” dimension of Al Jazeera’s practice. From exploring the concept of the truth as an ethical principle to unpacking the ethics of human dignity and analyzing the gender dimension in policy and programming, this book offers a rich and thorough overview of *Al Jazeera*’s positioning in the context of global media ethics. A must read!”

—Sahar Khamis, *Associate Professor, Department of Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park*

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