University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (ASC)   Annenberg School for Communication

2008

Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English: A Comparative Institutional Analysis

Marwan M. Kraidy
University of Pennsylvania, kraidy@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers

Part of the Communication Commons

Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English: A Comparative Institutional Analysis

Disciplines
Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

AL JAZEERA AND AL JAZEERA ENGLISH: A COMPARATIVE INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

MARWAN M. KRAIDY

This paper presents a preliminary comparison between Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English (AJE). Since the two institutions are a part of the same network, and since the Arabic channel is older and enjoys a stronger institutional identity than its English-language counterpart, this comparative analysis does not consider the two channels as distinct entities. Rather, Al Jazeera's flagship and its English channel are analyzed as "cousins" who demonstrate "family resemblances" even when they differ in significant ways. The paper focuses on the two channels' institutional identities; on the competitors the two channels face in their respective media environments; and on the fraught relations between Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English within the Al Jazeera network.

It is difficult to compare Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English. There are many superficial differences between the two channels. The first went on the air in 1996; the second was launched in 2006. The former emerged in a nascent pan-Arab media environment in which it pioneered a new brand of journalism: a confrontational editorial line that infuriated most Arab regimes, and, a few years later, the United States and other Western governments. The latter is trying to penetrate a global English-language news market saturated with powerful players like the venerable BBC, CNN, and Sky News. Al Jazeera's audience is regional, consisting of viewers whose first language is Arabic, while AJE's audience is in theory global, comprising viewers worldwide, but especially in the global south, where English is most likely a second language.

Unlike Al Jazeera, whose structure is straightforward and centered in Doha, Qatar, with many international bureaus, AJE has four broadcast centers in addition to dozens of offices and correspondents worldwide—a structure that poses extreme logistical challenges. It is clear that differences between the two channels in institutional development, scale, and language make them difficult to compare.

Marwan M. Kraidy is associate professor of communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

And yet, similarities between Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English are equally obvious. Both channels are bankrolled by the emir of Qatar, even if the details of sponsorship are secretive; and they are both head-quartered in Doha. The two channels, to restate the obvious, carry the same logo and approximately the same name. Institutionally, both are channels in the same network, and from a marketing point of view, Al Jazeera and AJE are part of the same brand. There are overlaps on the channels' supervisory boards, and both technically report to Wadah Khanfar, the network's director-general. Officially, bureaus are sup-posed to cooperate—for example, the editorial boards are expected to meet, and correspondents for the two channels in the same locations are supposed to help each other.

Because of these seemingly contradictory aspects, the relationship be-tween the two channels is difficult to describe, its contours not readily discernable, its implications for the two channels and the mother net-work difficult to analyze. Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English clearly be-long to the same family. And yet, they are too dissimilar to be brothers. The most appropriate metaphor would be to think of them as cousins who do not really like each other but because of family ties have to learn to live together. From this perspective, how do the two channels compare in terms of institutional identity, competition, and their relative status within the Al Jazeera network?

INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY

In their 2007 book *The Culture of Al-Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant*, Mohammed Zayani and Sofiane Sahraoui explain that Al Jazeera's suc-cess is premised on a combination of factors, including flexibility and the promotion of employee initiative, independent thinking, and self-growth. But most importantly, Al Jazeera's success resides in the chan-nel's organizational model, which was initially built by its founding di-rector, the Qatari Mohammed Jassim Al Ali, as a family business. But the model has evolved as the channel has grown in size, reputation, and complexity.

Al Jazeera's core "Values and Beliefs" are its "instinct for breaking the news … a combination of the precision of the BBC and the speed of

CNN;" its alternative brand of journalism, "publicly funded, but independent-minded;" its tolerance for difference, hence its slogan "the view and the opposite view;" and most importantly, its "Arab orientation."[1] The latter issue is articulated succinctly and eloquently by Zayani and Sahraoui:

> People relate to Al Jazeera because it both shares and stages the malaise and sorrow of Arabs. Al Jazeera emerged in an environment marked by a succession of wars and crises and during a time marked by the spirit of defeat and disappointment. As such, Al Jazeera is the channel of Arab disenchantment, articulating what people want to say but cannot say with a rare sense of audacity.[2]

This encapsulates Al Jazeera's identity and offers a nuanced rendering of what "Arab perspective" means when it comes to Al Jazeera. After all, can any media institution transcend its cultural and political context? The biggest challenge Al Jazeera English has faced—even before its launch—is the expectation that it would do precisely that: transcend the context in which it developed.

AJE's identity is more difficult to discern. Leading up to its launch, the network framed its new channel as a competitor to BBC and CNN, but with a "global south orientation." The extent to which the channel's coverage reflects that orientation depends on what is meant by "global south." In the Arab world and Middle East, AJE's coverage tends to be similar to its Arabic-language counterpart. There are differences in tone between the two, but these reside mostly in AJE's use of standard English journalistic terminology—which to some comes across as less harsh than Al Jazeera's Arabic tone. Some shows, such as Jasem al-Ghazzawi's, on Iraq at least, are similar in tone if not in production style to those on the Arabic channel, featuring tough exchanges over the U.S. military occupation of Iraq. But the English channel has had difficulties spreading coverage equally around the world. Some observers have complained about a disproportionate focus on Africa, while the channel's audience center of gravity is Asia.

Because of its global scope, it is much more difficult for Al Jazeera English to establish a "brand" identity. The main challenge for the new channel resides in the fact that the Al Jazeera brand's strong association with the Middle East, the Arabic language, and the Islamic religion

hinders its claim to be a truly global, English-language channel not narrowly associated with any region of the world. However, with its large population of Muslims and its high number of English speakers, Asia emerges as a compromise between Al Jazeera's regionally based brand heritage and its ambition to become a global player.

Most importantly, Al Jazeera English, even before it went on the air, had to contend with a fraught ideological situation. Though many leading newspapers, including the *Guardian* in Britain, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (the London-based pan-Arab newspaper), and *La Tribune de Genève* in Switzerland, welcomed it as an alternative global news voice, others were less enthralled. In the United States, for example, coverage of the impending launch focused on a single question: would AJE have the same editorial line as Al Jazeera? It would not be an exaggeration to say that the dominant frame of this U.S. coverage was the contested notion of "anti-Americanism." This focus, in addition to business calculations undoubtedly connected to the ideological atmosphere, has to this day prevented AJE from getting cable distribution in the United States. All the hype surrounding YouTube.com and AJE's effective use of that website notwithstanding, the English-language station has been unable to become an audible voice in the United States and much of the West. Recent staff departures, especially that of David Marash, the lead Washington, D.C. anchor, illustrate this dilemma: in a recent interview, Marash said he left AJE because it went from being "authentically cosmopolitan" to "authentically Arab."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Al Jazeera English is well-followed in East Africa and Southeast Asia, but these are regions in which accurate audience ratings are not systematically available. The implications of a lack of reliable research on audiences are twofold: On the one hand, it limits advertisers' enthusiasm for the channel and creates a reluctance to commit advertising spending budgets. On the other hand, it saps the morale of reporters who cannot ascertain whether they are being watched by a significant number of people. For these reasons, the paucity of audience ratings data has consequently forced AJE—even before its inception—to walk a tightrope when it comes to its identity and its relationship to Al Jazeera. Former AJE managing director Nigel Parsons expressed this well in pre-launch interviews when he said "we are not completely divorced," a strategically ambiguous statement that

reflects ambivalence about the Al Jazeera English brand.[3] Ambivalence and brand are a contradiction in terms, which has made it very difficult for the new channel to establish itself.

COMPETITORS

A comparative analysis of how Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya—Al Jazeera's Saudi-funded nemesis—react to breaking news provides a clear view into what Zayani and Sahraoui refer to as the former's "instinct" for breaking the news, which involves dispatching a reporter and securing a satellite news gathering device to the scene of the event. At Al Jazeera, this is done promptly in a way that delegates decision making and takes advantage of individual initiative and trust within the organization. By contrast, at Al Arabiya, the process is mired in a more rigid bureaucracy. The authors correctly state that this is due to the fact that, according to a producer who spoke to them, the word "budget" is not heard at Al Jazeera (at least not during the producer's tenure with the network). Meanwhile, according to Zayani and Sahraoui, Al Arabiya's managers have to watch the bottom line. The authors could have emphasized that Al Arabiya, like other Saudi-owned media institutions, tends to follow an overly cautious approach to covering the news. Besides, the notion that the bottom line trumps competitiveness at Al Arabiya is not evident, since Al Arabiya's main objective is arguably to counter Al Jazeera, and not to make a profit. Nonetheless, Al Jazeera clearly enjoys a large pocketbook.

Al Jazeera English's competitors are formidable institutions. Both the BBC and CNN are global household names with potent brand identities. Both channels have a global infrastructure of reporters and remain the news sources of record for the international Anglophone elite. Of the two, CNN is probably the less impressive rival to AJE because of the Atlanta-based network's association with the United States. In a polarized global geopolitical environment where majorities in many countries hold negative views of the U.S. role in the world, an association with the United States can be a liability—no matter how international CNN International is. Besides, Al Jazeera English's network of international reporters (which is poised to be in-

creasingly shared with the Arabic-language Al Jazeera) rivals CNN's.

The BBC is a more powerful competitor of AJE's for several reasons, chiefly because it is a venerable institution that defined news norms and practices before its competitors even existed. Globally, the BBC is also perceived to be a more impartial source of news than CNN, because of its public service journalistic tradition and because it is not closely associated with the United States. AJE's niche advantage over CNN and BBC is its financial backing by the emir of Qatar. In a context of high and still-rising energy prices, AJE theoretically enjoys a more secure financial footing than its competitors. CNN especially, and increasingly the BBC, have to give the utmost consideration for the bottom line, which is less of an issue for Al Jazeera English's management and staff.

A Convoluted Family Affair

Approximately two years ago, Al Jazeera issued a press release stating that the channel was changing its name from "channel" [*Qanat*] to "network" [*Shabaka*] and would feature sports, children's programming, and live current affairs, in addition to the Arabic- and new English-language channels. The new English channel, which had been trumpeted for months as "Al Jazeera International," was re-named "Al Jazeera English" in the 11th hour. Rumor had it that a wing represented by Wadah Khanfar, the network's director-general, was behind the change of name to prevent the English-language station from gaining excessive importance at the expense of the mother ship.

What was the deeper reasoning behind this move? Essentially, the word "international" would connote that the new English-language channel was somehow more important than the original institution by making the latter look provincial. The word "English" is less of a threat in that regard because it only reflects the new channel's language. In this way, Al Jazeera English would not be perceived as the network's flagship, a status that belongs to the original, Arabic-language channel. This contrasted sharply with the pronouncements of Parsons and other AJE executives, who had been proclaiming the channel's editorial independence from the Al Jazeera network.

Another issue is the resentment felt by many Al Jazeera staffers toward

their newborn cousin. Some of the "founders" were concerned that the channel's brand, built under various pressures over 10 difficult years, was going to be diluted by a bunch of highly paid Brits and Americans who knew and probably cared little about the channel. Others were concerned about the new channel succumbing to pressure from Washington and consequently changing its editorial line. Others still were infuriated by the reportedly higher remuneration packages and additional perks that AJE staff were getting. To make matters worse, because of resource pressures and the bottom line, the two staffs were expected to cooperate to avoid redundancies and to create a level of synergy. These causes of resentment continue to this day and are one factor behind recent staff departures at AJE.

What about the allegations made by Marash that Al Jazeera English is under pressure from Doha to reflect a "Middle Eastern" perspective? There could be some truth to this. Even before it became a network, Al Jazeera had recurrently witnessed power struggles between different cliques, mostly the religiously oriented wing close to the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand, and the secular Arabists on the other hand (Khanfar is closer to the latter). There are recent examples of Al Jazeera programming—interviews on talk-shows such as *Bila Hudud* [No Limits] and *Al-Shari 'a Wal Haya* [Islamic Law and Life]—being quite propagandistic in favor of the Muslim Brothers. Does this mean that the Islamic wing is ascendant within the Arabic channel? And is this ascent, if it is there, affecting the margin of maneuver of AJE?

Other problems within Al Jazeera have included tension between news and programs. Whereas the former relies on largely anonymous teamwork, the latter has promoted a star system whereby star program hosts become guardians of fiefdoms that have direct connections to the Qatari political elite, and therefore are not accountable to the institution itself. Repeated pressures on the channel to rein in its editorial line have also had their effect, and its journalists have recently wondered to what extent free speech would be tolerated. There have been several frictions between members of Al Jazeera's editorial board and staff members, many of whom feel their margin of freedom has been shrinking. These problems risk spreading to AJE, and David Marash's recent departure might be interpreted in terms of management not allowing a star anchor to outshine the channel itself.

Though troublesome, these are normal developments in the historical trajectory of an institution. Ten years after the launch of Al Jazeera, the en-

terprise is no longer the exciting new kid on the block that is revolutioniz-
ing Arab television journalism. Rather, it is a complex network of channels,
each with its own internal considerations, a large Arab media conglomerate
in a regional industry that is far more competitive than it was 10 years ago.
Added complexity comes from its venturing into the select club of English-
language global news networks. The network is discovering that revolu-
tionizing global news is a more arduous task than shaking Arab television
news. Nonetheless, as an institution, the Al Jazeera network has blazed a
new trail, first in the Arab world and now globally.

NOTES

1. Mohammed Zayani and Sofiane Sahraoui, *The Culture of Al-Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant* (London: McFarland & Company, 2007), 61–62.
2. Ibid., 66.
3. In May 2008, the Al Jazeera network named Parsons managing director for business acquisition and development.