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Review of *The Culture of Al Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant*

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Mohamed Zayani and Sofiane Sahraoui, **The Culture of Al Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant,** McFarland & Company, 2007, 206 pp., $35.00 (paperback).

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I accepted this assignment with trepidation. A dozen books about Al Jazeera line my shelf, all but a few of them in English, and there have been many, too many, articles about the channel. These writings tend to praise or scorn Al Jazeera, frustrating readers seeking thoughtful interpretation. So I braced myself for another expedient recruitment of Habermas for the sake of the "new" Arab public sphere, for yet another rendition of the Qatari-Saudi feud, for one more dissection of alternate news terminologies ["suicide-bombing" or "martyrdom operation," etc.] and for one more description of the pugilistic *Al-Ittijah Al-Mu'akis* [The Opposite Direction]: a knock-off of CNN's *Crossfire* for a longtime considered Al Jazeera's signature program. Suffering from an acute syndrome of Al Jazeera fatigue, I asked myself: What could I learn from one more book about the Qatar-based all-news channel that revolutionized television news in the Middle East, that challenged Western hegemony over global news and became the *bête noire* of the Bush Administration and Arab governments?

Quite a bit, it turns out. *The Culture of Al Jazeera* refreshingly breaks with the increasingly tedious and predictable cottage industry of Al Jazeera studies. To be sure, the book is not without shortcomings, but its innovative conceptual approach, empirical bases and accessible style make it an enjoyable read. What is also distinctive about this study is the fact that the authors are both on the faculty of the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, which makes *The Culture of Al Jazeera* the first monograph written in English and one of two books on Al Jazeera to be written—not including an edited volume—by native speakers of Arabic and residents of the Arab world. While this is significant for the global politics of knowledge production, where the Arab world is often featured as a basket case, it is also palpable in the sensitivity and nuance the authors bring to their analysis.

Written as a narrative, the book consists of an introduction and 13 short chapters without subheadings. It suffers from occasional redundancies and from an excessively cautious rhetorical style, which might have been intentional and perhaps even salutary, considering the intense politicization and research saturation of the subject matter. The authors' chief objective is to explain "why and how Al Jazeera managed to do what it did better than any other media outlet or competing media player in the Middle East region" (p. 1). An organizational culture framework is harnessed to meet this objective, one that is broadly new-institutionalist, even if the authors do not explicitly frame it in these terms. The first few chapters re-hash mainstays of Al Jazeera studies—Qatar's motivation for launching the channel, Al Jazeera's regionally unprecedented margin of editorial freedom, its Afghanistan war scoop, its sympathetic coverage of the plight of Iraqis and Palestinians—including the uncritically accepted idea that Al Jazeera covers the news with "a distinctly Arab perspective" (p. 31), as if any media outlet ever manages to transcend its politico-economic and socio-cultural environment. Also, the assumption that there is a single Arab perspective seems blissfully unaware of the various ideologies, some historically entrenched, others

emergent, that animate Arab airwaves and opinion pages, including Arab nationalism, Islamism, neo-liberalism, and assorted hybrid isms.

It is with the third chapter, "In Search of a Core Capacity," that the book deviates from the standard narrative—journalistic and academic—on Al Jazeera to focus on the channel's organizational uniqueness. If the BBC's core competency is "a commitment to, and record in, the consistent production of innovative high-quality intelligent programming" (p. 43), Al Jazeera does not have any make-or-break characteristic that can be called a core competency. Its success is rather premised on a combination of factors, which according to the authors include flexibility and the promotion of employee initiative, independent thinking and self-growth. But most importantly, Al Jazeera's success resides in the channel's organizational model, the subject of chapter 4, "Unraveling the Business Model." Al Jazeera, the authors argue, was initially built by its founding director, the Qatari Mohammed Jassim Al Ali, as a family business. But the model has evolved as the channel grew in size, reputation and complexity.

Al Jazeera's core "Values and Beliefs" (the title of chapter 5), are its "instinct for breaking the news (p. 60) … a combination of the precision of the BBC and the speed of CNN" (p. 61), its alternative brand of journalism, "publicly funded, but independent-minded" (p. 62)—the authors could have followed up that "public" in this context means the Emir's considerable pocketbook— its tolerance for difference, hence its slogan "the view and the opposite view" and its "Arab orientation." The latter issue is articulated succinctly and eloquently:

> 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 and defeat of 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 (p. 66).

This encapsulates Al Jazeera's identity and provides a partial answer to the book's central question. It also offers a still incomplete but nonetheless meaningful rendering of what "Arab perspective" means when it comes to Al Jazeera.

The book's original contribution can be most clearly appreciated in chapter 7, "The People Organization," a textured exploration of how Al Jazeera treats its employees and the often fierce dedication it has elicited from them, especially in the channel's formative years. Al Jazeera, its employees feel, empowers them professionally, and provides them with job security. Perhaps more importantly, the authors reveal, there is a special feeling associated with working at the maverick channel, one of participating in something unique and historically significant. The flipside is that this comes with high expectations—though supportive and empowering, the working environment is extremely demanding and therefore stressful.

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 the authors refer to as the former channel's "instinct" for breaking the news, which involves dispatching a reporter and securing a satellite news

gathering (SNG) device to the scene of an unfolding event. At Al Jazeera, Zayani and Sahraoui explain, the process is prompt, and decision-making is delegated to take full advantage of individual initiative within the organization. In contrast, at Al-Arabiya, the process is more convoluted. The authors correctly state that this is due to the fact that, as a producer told them, she "never heard the word budget during her tenure with Al Jazeera" (p. 91) while Al-Arabiya's managers, according to Zayani and Sahraoui, 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 owners' main objective is arguably to counter Al Jazeera rather than making pecuniary profit. The extent to which financial considerations constrain the two leading news channels remains unclear to scholars of Arab media. Both channels, in fact, ride the wave of high energy prices. Qatari natural gas is Al Jazeera's lifeblood; Saudi oil is Al-Arabiya's. Nonetheless, the authors argue that "the absence of money constraints and profit considerations give Al Jazeera an edge over its competitors" (p. 93).

Jamal Demloj, one of the pioneers who moved from the BBC to Al Jazeera when it launched in 1996—later moving on to Abu Dhabi TV and then Al-Arabiya—is the protagonist of the book's most telling story about the importance of individual employee initiative. His last assignment at Al Jazeera, in 1999, was to travel to Kosovo to cover the then imminent NATO bombings. After securing quick approval for his plan and budget, Demloj went to Greece to secure a visa to Yugoslavia, which did not have diplomatic representation in Qatar. After several days of delays in Crete and then Athens, he bribed an employee at the Macedonian consulate in Athens—U.S. $970, rounding the $30 visa fee to $1,000—drove to the Greek-Macedonian border and slipped into Kosovo on March 24, 1999, the day NATO warplanes began bombing raids. Equipped with a camera and an SNG, he ran into flows of Kosovar refugees looking for a safe haven in Macedonia, called Al Jazeera to appear live with footage of the refugees and scooped French TV by a few hours and CNN by a day. A few days later, Al Jazeera's then boss Mohamed Jassim Al Ali sent Demloj a personal fax thanking and commending him for his work in Kosovo. Al Jazeera was then only three years old, and Al Ali's gesture indicates that he indeed treated his staff like an extended family.

But as the channel grew, it experienced growing pains. The fact that Al Jazeera was not able to retain Demloj signals that there are problems within the channel. One of them is 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—mainly from the Bush Administration—on the channel to rein in its editorial line have also had their effect, and "the very perception of the network as a beacon of free speech is starting to succumb to a reality check" (p. 105). There has been friction between members of Al Jazeera's editorial board and staff members, many of whom feel their margin of freedom has been shrinking. And finally, though it is normal for an institution to become less exciting as it grows in size and organizational procedures become formalized, women working for Al-Jazeera told the authors that they encountered limited opportunities for career advancements within the institution. Al Jazeera's treatment of its female staff has not been adequately discussed before, and Al Jazeera's treatment of women on the screen remains open to academic investigation.

There are important issues that the book mentions but avoids to treat systematically. For example, the Saudi-organized boycott of Al Jazeera is not discussed with the depth it warrants. What has Al Jazeera done to circumvent it? And what happened when the Lebanese advertising mogul Antoine Choueiry took over Al Jazeera's advertising representation for some time, only to turn around and represent the MBC group, Al-Arabiya's parent company? A more important issue that is not discussed is Al Jazeera's strategic move from being a "channel" to identifying itself as a "network" with sports, children, current affairs, documentary and English language channels, in addition to two websites. Though the analysis of the relationship of the main Arabic channel with the Arabic language website is insightful, a discussion of what the new name "network" entails goes to the heart of "the culture of Al Jazeera." This would explain why the English-language channel, which had been trumpeted for months as "Al Jazeera International," was re-named "Al Jazeera English" in the eleventh hour. Rumors about Waddah Khanfar, Al Jazeera's general manager, being behind the change of name to prevent the English-language channel from overshadowing the mother ship—even if unverifiable—are revealing about Khanfar's management style. What the subordination of Al Jazeera English to network headquarters would mean to the English-language channel's editorial independence is also unclear. In fact, Khanfar is the only Al Jazeera staffer to be identified and cited at length by the authors, suggesting that Al Jazeera is, in fact, a highly hierarchical institution where the general manager functions as a gatekeeper, which to some extent undercuts the book's main argument.

In the same vein, the book would been stronger had it systematically probed the dynamics between different camps within Al Jazeera, mostly the religiously oriented wing close to the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand, and the secular Arabists on the other hand. There are recent examples of Al Jazeera programming being propagandistic in favor of the Muslim Brothers. Does this mean that the Islamic wing is ascendant in the Arabic channel? And is this ascent, if it is there, occurring at the expense of the secular Arabist wing? And how did the possibility of privatization affect Khanfar and his staff? How did the various camps within Al Jazeera react to the possibility of being bought by Saudi or Saudi-related capital? Did they treat the privatization issue seriously, or did they dismiss it, like many well-informed analysts did, as an unfounded rumor? Though some of these developments probably happened after the book went to press, the authors could have tackled some of the underlying dynamics more vigorously.

On balance, this is an important book with original insights into the operation of the Arab world's leading satellite television news channel. Its institutional focus constitutes a welcome paradigm shift in Al Jazeera studies, and as such, it is highly recommended for readers interested in Arab television and global media institutions.