

Al-Jazeera, Advocacy and Media Value Determinism
Re-conceptualizing the Network's Coverage of the Arab Spring of Revolutions

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Abstract:

This article uses a new theoretical perspective developed by an Arab scholar to investigate the news coverage of the Arab spring in Al-Jazeera (Arabic), in search of a style of coverage that may be qualified as socio-religiously based brand of advocacy journalism. Two news genres, news cast and news report are analyzed to demonstrate that the coverage does not fit “objective” news reporting as defined in journalism literature, but much resembles advocacy style. Rationale for the channel’s adoption of the style is discussed within the theory of “media value determinism,” (MVD).

Introduction

Few non-western news channels have stirred controversy as Al-Jazeera has since its inception in 1994. The extensive coverage of the Afghan

war and the famous airing of the Bin Laden tapes in 2001, compounded by the incessant coverage of the “Spring of Arab revolutions”, have focused global attention on the channel, and brought to it both foes and friends. Of particular significance was its unconventional coverage of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, which some construed more as involvement than objective news coverage and thus, criticized as subjective and unprofessional (Gornall, 2011). Others praised the coverage as reflecting a well-merited role of the advocate of liberal political values. (Talk with the Chief, 2011)

The purpose of this article is to analyze the channel’s coverage of the spring of Arab revolutions to identify the genres that may provide socio-religiously explainable advocacy type of journalistic reporting.

Al-Jazeera: a new Brand of Middle East Journalism

In an article about Al-Jazeera English debut, the New York Times drew the following comparison between the new channel and Al-Jazeera Arabic (Fattah, November 13, 2006):

“In effect, Al-Jazeera International intends to become for the developing world what Al-Jazeera became to the Arab world: a champion of forgotten causes, a news organization willing to take the contrarian view and to risk being controversial”

Though these may not have been the *raison d'être* for the establishment of Al-Jazeera, and Al-Jazeera English for that matter, observations of Al-Jazeera Network during the spring of Arab revolutions, show a style of reporting that begs the question: Is this form of “reporting the forgotten” a reflection of a type of journalism responsive to the needs of political change in the region? Or is it, in the words of NYT, “contrarian” and “controversial”?

When compared to western news channels, Al-Jazeera is, irrefutably, different. Unlike most western news media, it is owned by the state, not commercial; it subscribes to a libertarian editorial policy, yet avoids local affairs under the excuse that it is not a local news station (Galander, 2004); it enjoys wide popularity among the Arab masses, but is abhorred - to say the least- by Arab kings, emirs and presidents. Internationally, while its freewheeling coverage has generated research and academic debate, its reporting of the two recent wars of the region (Afghanistan and Iraq) has infuriated even liberal governments to the point of threat of violent action¹.

Culture, Religion and Values of Journalism: A Theoretical Perspective

The controversy over al-Jazeera’s genre of journalism may be linked to the political theory of media, which underlines ideology of society as the

¹ US army bombed Al-AJazeera offices in Kapool in 2003. In 2004, The British Daily Mirror reported on a memo describing George Bush’s intentions to bomb al-Jazeera During Fallujah insurgency.

basic determinant of media control². Such perspective emphasizes the existence of a direct relationship between economic and political freedoms, and press freedom (Merrill & Lowenstein, 1979). More recent contributions, like William Rugh's study of the Arab Press, have continued the strong politics-media relationship perspective. In his study, Rugh underlined the highly politicized nature of the media and concluded that freedom of the press in the Arab World was contingent upon the type of the political and social structure of society (Rugh, 2004).

Writings like Rugh's, have failed to reflect the unique nature of the Arab media; as most press system typologies suggest a strong correlation between politics and media operations, they downplay such contextual variables like religion and treated its impact as equal to that of norms and traditions of society. The strength of religious beliefs in shaping behavior is nowhere evident as in the Muslim world. Seen as "a way of life," Islam occupies a central place in the life of all Muslims, and remains an ultimate guide of behavior. Understanding Islam as the basic determinant of media-society relationship (and hence of journalistic behavior), will provide a better explanation of media role in this part of the world.

Media Value determinism:

² The most famous of these is Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's "the Four Theories of the Press".

An example of the current scholarly doubt of the suitability of western analysis, for understanding the Arab and Muslim media³ is the “media value determinism” theory, which an Algerian communication scholar, with an intellectual orientation towards structuralism, suggests⁴. The author, Abdel Rahman Azze, criticizes western press theories, and suggests an alternative in which media content and role are interpreted within the socio-religious environment. He understands religion as a central force that elicits the values of society as determinants of all journalistic processes (Galander, 2009). Thus, within this perspective, a concept like “objectivity” borrows little from the widely acclaimed western constructs, as it reverts to social values of society to interpret media role. This approach seems more appropriate for the explanation of what would be, to western journalism, unusual journalistic styles. Al-Jazeera is more apt to manifest a style of coverage that reflects religious values that are derived from Islamic tenets like “standing up against tyrants” and “defending the oppressed.”⁵ Measured against western journalistic

³ Though it has spanned several years, the trend of criticism of western conceptualization of media theories took momentum in the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), during a famous conference under the title Islamization of the Human Sciences in 2004. This author presented a paper on the issue in that conference. A pioneer in this respect is Professor Abdel Rahman Azze, who was affiliated to the same university, but currently the dean of the faculty of Mass Communication in Sharjah University, UAE.

⁴ The author is Professor Abdel Rahman Azze. For more details and sources about the theory of media value determinism please visit: <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/>

⁵ Islamic sources are rampant with Qura’anic texts, and sayings and edicts of Prophet Mohamed (SAW) and the rightly guided Caliphs, which uphold values such as speaking the truth in the face of tyrants, straightening the deviant rulers by the sword and standing up to the injustice and tyranny of oppressors.

norms, these values would mean biased reporting, a stark violation of objectivity.

Al-Jazeera, Islamic Values and the Arab Spring

As it crossed from one Arab country to the other, the spring of revolutions has, no doubt, propelled Al-Jazeera to the position of a pan-Arab political force of change. The daily and detailed coverage of the Tunisian revolution diffused tactics of defiance which were soon adopted by the Egyptians⁶. With its coverage of the Egyptian uprising, it was clear that Al-Jazeera has surpassed the role of a news reporting channel. As it beamed from huge screens posted in al-Tahrir square, with blasts of patriotic songs, and fiery pro-revolution commentaries, the channel looked more like a political medium, a sort of “voice of the revolution” reminiscent of the revolutionary 70s.

By the time the Libyan uprising of Benghazi turned into a full-fledged insurgency, the role of Al-Jazeera as a force of political change was apparent. Advancing with the insurgents from the east to the west, the channel was present in every battle, not only to report, but also to provide a platform for the revolutionaries, to propagate, to uplift morale and, in some cases even, to provide direction for the insurgents.

As an overwhelmingly government-owned medium, Arab television is not familiar with adversarial coverage of the “other”; official antagonistic journalism is rare in the region, unless dictated by the politics of differences. Al-Jazeera’s style is, to Arab rulers, intolerable because they believe it is reflective of Qatar’ policies (Al-Jabri, 2012); though Al-Jazeera

⁶ Bou Azizi’ self-emulation was reenacted by several Egyptians few weeks before the uprising in Cairo.

and Qatari officials vehemently deny such policy orientation. Al-Jazeera has incessantly distanced itself from being a mouthpiece of the government of Qatar, and contends it is a seeker of truth and a subscriber to justice and freedom for all (Black, 2011).

As the controversy over the style is not settled, this article suggests advocacy as a style deliberately adopted by the network, but rationalizes the style in the context of the prevalent Islamic values of the region.

Advocacy Journalism

The concept of media advocacy is not new; it has a considerable place in the literature of media role in the developed world, but within the realm of political communication and, to some extent, public relations (Thomas, 1990). As a distinct journalism genre, advocacy has evolved out of several socio-political developments in the US during the 60s and 70s (Kaplan, 2002). The concept refers to the press taking positions on issues and expressing opinions of its stakeholders. It is an intentional decision to support a certain social or political cause, and is distinct from propaganda in that it is a factual report of events, but from an angle that projects a certain point of view.

Though it is fact based, advocacy distinguishes itself from objective news reporting with four main characteristics (table1): a one-sided report of the issue, in which information and sources support the subscribed point of view; a departure from “objectivity” in its classical sense of neutrality; a clear criticism of the other in the news reporting; and a subtle or obvious editorializing in news (Carless, 2000). Elements and techniques of advocacy are explained in tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 1: Characteristics of Advocacy:

	Conventional Journalism	Advocacy Journalism
1	Fact-based	Fact-based
2	Provides all sides of the story	Supports one side of the issue
3	Subscribes to objectivity	Does not subscribe to “classic objectivity”
4	Criticism is left to commentary	Criticism is not confined to commentary or opinion
5	No editorializing in news body	Subtle or obvious editorializing in news

Table 2. Elements of Advocacy

	<u>Elements</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
1	Tone of voice	Voice tone indicates position for or against
2	Choice of news angles	News angle is used to support the point of view of the advocate
3	Choice of images	Photographic techniques are used to convey the opinion
4	Leading Questions	Questions are used to support advocate’s point of view.
5	Use of buzz words	Words that convey images are used (terrorists)

Table 3. Techniques of Advocacy⁷

	Technique	Explanation
1	Declare Position	Acknowledge your perspective up front.
2	No propaganda	Be truthful, accurate, and credible. Don't spread propaganda, don't take quotes or facts out of context, "don't fabricate or falsify", and "don't fudge or suppress vital facts or present half-truths"
3	Limit the opponent	Don't give your opponents equal time, but don't ignore them either.
4	Challenge	Explore arguments that challenge your perspective, ask critical questions of people who agree with you.
5	Embarrass	Report embarrassing facts that support the opposition
6	Simplify	Articulate complex issues clearly and carefully."
7	Abide by the basics	Be fair and thorough
8	Use the neutral other	Make use of neutral sources to establish facts

Media practice advocacy for various reasons: ideological, in defense of a political or social cause or as an obligation to the proprietor. Advocacy may be a temporary obligation; during wars for examples. At such times, patriotic commitment may lead news organizations to suspend journalistic values and practice advocacy. The recent history of war coverage is rich with examples of advocacy. In the 1991 Gulf War, the CNN report on the tragic bombing of al-Amiriyya bunker in Baghdad was compromised as a result of the channel's desire not to provide a stark evidence of condemnation against the US troops (Shard, 2003). In 2003, the Gulf war coverage of Fox news was criticized as being extremely biased;

⁷ Information in the table is based on Sue Careless's address to the Canadian Association of Journalists, April 2000. Available: http://www.nasna.org/downloads/Advocacy_reporting_HO_notes.pdf, 25-02-2011

CNN's reporting was characterized as relying more on human interest stories to avoid broadcasting extremely violent images from the field⁸.

Feature of Al-Jazeera's advocacy:

A close observer of Al-Jazeera during the Arab revolutions may not only detect the features and techniques of advocacy as suggested, but also identify new features of the genre. In its coverage, the channel added a human dimension to the violence and confrontations that took place in the streets and squares of the Egyptian cities. We call this dimension: "humanization of the revolution" as it broadcast romanticized, satirical and faith-based images. To provide a funny escape from the violent events, the channel reverted to the coverage of ceremonies of protesters' weddings, shots of babies accompanying their parents, humor by protesters, and satirical slogans raised by the crowds. Humanization of the revolution also focused on religious and faith-based images like screening of huge crowds during prayers, recitation of Qura'an, and screen-wide shots of mosques, pages of the Qur'an and motivational speeches from Muslim clergy.

Al-Jazeera's "News Report": In Search of a Model of Advocacy

For a close scrutiny of the channel's style of advocacy, this article chose a distinct form of reporting used in Al-Jazeera's newscast during the uprisings. Dubbed by the channel "news report", reporting of the protests deviated from the standard definition of news reporting⁹. "News report" of al-Jazeera looked more like commentary, but was never identified as

⁸ For comparison and further information on the US media coverage of the Gulf war, see the forum on Covering Iraq: American Media Vs the world. Available: http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/covering_iraq.html

⁹ Description and definition of the term abound, a most common would be a "short account of news".

such; it was rather meshed into the news bulletin and announced as “report”¹⁰. This article investigated a convenience sample¹¹ of these “news reports” which covered four incidents that represented the climax of the revolutions in four Arab countries. “News reports” on the exit of Bin Ali, the abdication of Husni Mubarek and Ali Salih, and the killing of Qaddafi, were measured in search of characteristics of what could be identified as an Islamic perspective of advocacy. The investigation focused on four styles which, this author believes, would provide a socio-religious rationale for deviation from western journalistic styles¹². These are the use of poetry, Qura’nic verses, and allegory. The “News reports” were written and read by a certain journalist, Fawzi Bushra, almost instantly after each of the four events¹³. Bushra’s eloquence and deep voice attracted attention and popularized the style during the Arab spring¹⁴. The main focus of the “report” was not provision of new information about the incidents, but rather a lengthy rhetoric comment on the incident, with the footages serving as a visual support to the points being made.

To investigate the presence of the suggested “humanization of the revolution”¹⁵ construct, the article analyzed¹⁵ the content of a convenience

¹⁰ The popularity of these reports was discussed in an interview with the editor in another al-Jazeera program. Please see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygORXiV2Zpw>.

¹¹ Two news reports for each revolution were extracted from al-jazeera news archives of the period provided by al-Jazeera Center for Studies.

¹² These constructs are characteristic of Muslim and Arab culture. Please see Abd al-Rahim, Mudathir (2005) *Human Rights and the world major religions*, Volume 5: *The Islamic Traditions*. William H. Brackney, Series editor. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

¹³ Personal interview with Fawzi Bushra, Sunday, June 17/ 2012, Doha. Bushra is an Islamically committed journalist who was close to the Sudanese Islamist politician Hassan Turabi.

¹⁴ For comments on Fawzi Bushra’s news reports, please visit the following YouTube footage titled (in Arabic) *A report by Fawzi Bushra on the abdication of Husni Mubarek* : available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwpNqDYtIzY>

¹⁵ The term was conceptually defined as projecting an emotionally charged-image including images of children, crying persons, humorous situations, caricatures and so on.

sample of Aljazeera’s 6 O’clock news and 8 O’clock “Hasad al-Youm (Wrap-up of the day), during the same period. The following tables and paragraphs summarize the findings of the investigation.

Findings:

The following tables summarize the findings of the analysis of the two news genres

Table 3.
Islamic Tones in Fawzi Bushra’s News Reports of the Arab Spring

News Report target	Use of poetry	Use of Qura’nic phrases	Use of allegory
BA 1	1	12	1
BA 2	0	5	3
HM 1	3	16	4
HM 2	0	12	7
MQ 1	2	9	3
MQ 2	1	11	1
AS 1	1	4	2
AS 2	0	6	2

BA= Bin Ali, HM= Husni Mubarek, MQ= Mua’amar Qaddafi, AS= Ali Salih

Table 4.
Images of “Humanizing the Confrontation” in Reporting the Egyptian Revolution

NEWS			COMMENTARY/ LIVE REPORT	
Type	Humorous images	Faith-based images	Humorous images	Faith-based images
8 O'clock News	3	3	3	5
Hasad al-Youm	2	4	4	3
8 O'clock News	3	3	2	2
Hasad al-Youm	3	1	3	4
8 O'clock News	2	3	2	3
Hasad al-Youm	2	2	1	1
Total/	15	16	14	18
Grand Total	31		32	

Table 3 summarizes the content of Bushra’s “news report” about the four deposed presidents. According to the findings, three styles of Islamic rhetoric were used in the report: poetry, allegory and Qura’anic verses. As shown, in the table, poetry was used 7 times, and allegory 23 times. The “news reports” resorted to Qur’anic verses 75 times; almost double the other two styles.

Table 4 summarizes the reporting of news in two non-conventional formats, namely the use of humor, and the focus of the cameras on faith-based images during the news. The table reports the use of these two genres in both the news and commentary or live report as 31 for humorous images, and 32 for the faith-based images.

These results confirm the presence of a style of news reporting that does not match any conventional genre of news or news reports.

Conclusion: Advocacy Journalism in the Region: a Socio-Religious Imperative

Observation of Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Arab spring confirms the presence of an unconventional style of news coverage. Though the basics of objective journalism were maintained, an inclination towards advocate reporting was noticeable. From a mere bold but balanced reporting of the opposition in the Tunisian case, to a clearer position-taking in the Egyptian, to a down-right denunciation of Qadafi in the Libyan case, advocacy reporting developed in Al-Jazeera from one revolution to the other.

From a western perspective, objectivity refers to a set of constructs that include fairness, balance and impartiality among others. These constructs are reflections of a stable environment in which the media are mirrors of social reality; an environment that invites a fair and impartial media, and leads to a peaceful relationship between the institutions of society. But in places where the relationship among the social institutions is strained and unbalanced, institutions with power deprive other institutions and members of society at large, from every source of vigor and strength. In such a situation, institutions of social power must stand up to their duties of empowering the powerless and invigorating the weak. In places where disparity in the social and political order work against the masses, the media must act as a source of power for people; they should not remain neutral, but must take the side of civil aspirations of the people at large. Values of Islam dictate upon all, individuals and institutions, to stand firm in face of injustice and tyranny. Liberty is central to Islam, for all people were born free. Advocacy of liberty and the utterance of truth in the face of a tyrannical ruler are Islamic to the core.

To a person who belongs to the same socio-religious context, Al-Jazeera's stand during the Arab Spring seems more a commitment to the tenets of the religion and the culture; and may therefore be explained as a pledge to the national aspirations of the people. Objectivity in the scholastic sense may not suffice to rationalize the channel's position; the contextual factors may.

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