

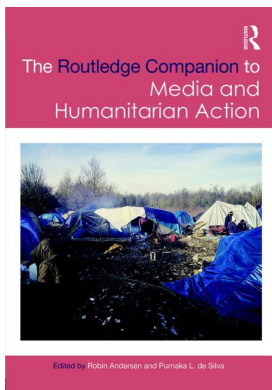
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### **The Al-Jazeera Effect**

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### 3

# THE AL-JAZEERA EFFECT

## News Media Coverage of Global Humanitarian Emergencies

*Yehia Ghanem*

Since the late 1980s and until 1996, when Al-Jazeera was born, I always felt that Egypt's *Al-Ahram*, the oldest and the most prestigious newspaper in the Middle East and Africa, was the only voice in the wilderness crying out against humanitarian catastrophes, be they man-made conflicts or natural disasters. Indeed, we were in the middle of all wars, from the first Chechen one to the Serbo-Croatian and Bosnian wars, and the war in Afghanistan between the Taliban and Northern Alliance. Even though I was a war correspondent from the late 1980s until 1993, I hardly knew the pivotal role media could play in directing and redirecting humanitarian relief to disaster stricken areas. I realized the media's importance only after I received a note from the Supreme Committee of Humanitarian Relief in Egypt informing me that I was to be decorated as "Man of The Year" in recognition of my efforts to raise public awareness to the horrors and agonies the Bosnians were suffering. At that time, satellite television channels were newborns in the West and totally unknown in the Middle East. I received the award at the pinnacle of *Al-Ahram's* success: we had a daily circulation of 1.3 million including the international edition, 1.7 million for the weekly Friday edition, and readership was up fivefold. *Al-Ahram* was at the height of its influence, setting the agenda for local television and to a certain extent for many TV stations in the Arab world. In the second half of the 1990s my war coverage was syndicated to at least 20 leading newspapers across the Arab world, which multiplied the paper's impact. It is worth mentioning that *Al-Ahram* was one of the few Arab media outlets at the time that covered wars in the Middle East.

*Al-Ahram's* prominence in conflict coverage remained almost unchallenged until Al-Jazeera was born in 1996. After that I started seeing colleagues from the channel in the same conflict zones that I covered. During those years, I saw that war reporters from Al-Jazeera would be essential to the programming, and that the channel would focus on covering conflicts more than other news topics. However, Al-Jazeera's coverage of both man-made and natural disasters came to distinction later on, at the beginning of the new millennium. Below, I outline

the reasons for this shift, and follow the development of Al-Jazeera from a single channel to a giant network, which accounts for the evolution of its conflict coverage.

### **Phase I: 1996–2001 “The Opinion and the Other Opinion”**

For at least half a century until 1996, the Arab world in particular and the Middle East in general had a media style that could only be characterized as monotonous speech controlled by dictatorial regimes that used media to consolidate their powers. Even in the 1990s when they had to allow private media, tyrannical regimes controlled them by controlling their crony businessmen who owned the media outlets. The main goal of Al-Jazeera from day one was to break the monopolies maintained for so long by dictatorships in the Middle East. The way the new channel did that was by introducing a vanguard logo that heralded a new era in the region, not only in media but also and more importantly, in political life. The logo was “Introducing the Opinion and the Other Opinion.” In a region where one and only one opinion was voiced, that of the regimes, the open debate began to transform the previously controlled and heavily censored Arab media. This new political discourse shook up many dictatorial regimes and pushed them to effect some positive changes. During the years 1996–2001, the channel provided a platform for a multiplicity of differing voices in the Middle East, and in return earned the growing trust and credibility of the peoples in the region. As a consequence, Al-Jazeera and Qatar also became targets of animosity from many Arab leaders.

In his book, *Al Jazeera English: Global News in a Changing World*, Seib Philips argues that AJE, born in 2006, was first among its sibling networks to bring voice to the “voiceless” through its unique focus on the developing world in good times and bad. In contrast, I argue that this trend started on the first day that Al Jazeera’s Arabic channel broadcast in 1996.

### **Phase II: 2001–2007 “The World vs. Us”; Time to Cover Wars**

In 1999, I was assigned to cover the brutal war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I quickly found that contrary to conventional wisdom this war was not an internal one, but could only be understood in the context of the regional conflict where all Great Lakes area countries, namely, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Tanzania, were involved directly by having combat troops inside the DRC. At that time, Al-Jazeera was still in Phase I, focusing on expanding freedom of expression in the Middle East. Of course, the DRC conflict appeared on Al-Jazeera screens but mostly through the work of news agencies. It was not until after the 9/11 attacks that Al-Jazeera leapt onto the international stage with extensive and intense field reporting, offering a unique perspective on the global war in Afghanistan. Its coverage was distinct because it offered on-the-ground reports from war zones and it was very close to the humanitarian side of conflict news. This was Al-Jazeera’s moment. The network was no longer only important as a regional game-changer, its presence as an international broadcaster took off. The Afghanistan war coverage was unique for many reasons, one of which was the ability of Al-Jazeera’s six crews to gain access to the most dangerous and important sectors on the frontlines of the conflict. These places were out of reach for other international Western networks. Also, unlike all competing networks covering the Afghanistan war, Al-Jazeera had almost exclusive access to many of the most influential sources involved in the conflict. Al-Jazeera’s logo came to be seen on the screens of all international networks, as it became the exclusive source of news. Most experienced media professionals understand that such a major development does not happen overnight. It was clear that the management had been crouching for such a leap for years by properly staffing and training their teams,

waiting to capitalize on the right event. Al Jazeera's unique coverage was applied to wars that followed the war in Afghanistan, especially the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the war against Lebanon in 2006, and later the war in Gaza.

Coverage of those wars represents the apex of Phase II, and the shift in focus to "Us, the Arabs & Muslims versus the World." During this time, major changes in the structure and organization of Al-Jazeera were in play, shifting the core of the channel work from a newsroom-based focus to a field-based operation. This was likely one of the reasons the channel management named Wadah Khanfar, a field reporter who headed the Baghdad bureau in September 2003, as the new Managing Director of the channel. He later went on to become Director General of the network that was comprised of more than ten channels. Khanfar was far better suited to lead such a powerful network during this new phase.

Coming from a field operation background, the management team with Khanfar at the helm realized that a new type of journalism would need to reflect the peripheries of power and focus on the humanitarian dimensions rather than serve as stenographers to the centers of powers. In other words, the channel became aware of the necessity of being *humanitarian centered* rather than *power centered*. In order to better grasp the new paradigm that Al-Jazeera chose in Phase II, we have to remind ourselves of the fact that most media firms are funded either by States or by corporations, and that is why they have always revolved editorially around these centers of power. They are more seriously influenced and driven by States' policies or by profit, both of which translate into power and are not necessarily in the best interests of the public (Klaehn 2008).

Explaining how Al-Jazeera managed to wiggle itself out of the mold of simply reflecting state power, Wadah Khanfar admitted in an interview for this article that Al-Jazeera is indeed funded by Qatar, and saying that Qatar is certainly not a charity:

"However, and for the sake of accomplishing that vision of 'human centered paradigm', we decided to establish a separation between the State's interests and the network's interests, something that necessitated very powerful field operations," Khanfar said. "We believed that magnifying field operations and minimizing the role of news agencies is the way journalists can best interact with people on the ground, achieving authenticity and by doing so, building and enhancing credibility."

Seib (2012) describes Al-Jazeera English as a contradiction in terms: of an Arab government-financed channel, yet a pioneer of borderless journalism with a reputation for covering Arab revolutions. Translating that vision into reality led to the vast expansion of the network from 12 overseas bureaus in 2003 to 34 in less than two years, and to 80 by 2011. Soon after the network had more than 83 bureaus covering over 105 countries, and cemented a reputation for setting tough standards for its bureau chiefs. Among these standards was the policy that bureau chiefs had to be part of the societies they reported on, so better to reflect their cultures and social fabric. In addition, it was time to move from a "News Conference" style of journalism to one characterized as the "Impacts and Outcomes of News Conferences" on public lifestyle. It means the impacts that power centers have on people's lives. The difference in journalism is between power-centered and humanitarian-centered reporting, and it is what distinguished Al-Jazeera, along with other things, from most of the other networks.

Arriving at the core of the subject matter for this article—how Al-Jazeera covered global humanitarian emergencies—we can say confidently that such coverage was the focus from the very start. During Phase I, humanitarian crisis can be defined as the situation in which

the distressed peoples of the Middle East had been deprived of freedom of expression for so long. Al-Jazeera relieved their distress by providing them with a platform to make their voices heard.

### **The Origins of Al-Jazeera English**

Before Al-Jazeera International (English) was launched in 2006, a special committee was established to oversee a six-month debate among journalists with the goal of developing a mission statement for the network. That statement reads in part: “We are based in the Arab world but with a global perspective, seeking the truth by giving a platform to opinion and counter opinion.” Because the network’s stated vision is always to provide a global perspective to news from around the world—while based in the Arab world—scholars have investigated the extent to which AJE could address “the ongoing discourse of the ‘clash of civilizations’ in favor of a new discourse of ‘dialogue between civilizations.’” In her important study published in 2007, *The Role of New Arab Satellite Channels in Fostering Intercultural Dialogue: Can Al-Jazeera English Bridge the Gap?*, Sahar Khamis asserts that AJE could reconcile the cultural chasm separating “civilizations.” The following year Mohamed El Nawawy and Shawn Powers published *Mediating Conflicts: Al-Jazeera English and the Possibility of a Conciliatory Media*, and found AJE does serve as a conciliatory media source by moderating viewers’ attitudes towards other cultures.

### **Expanding Coverage to the Global South**

The first step that always needs to be taken to enhance global cultural understanding is a simple one—expanding news and information about people and their societies. From the start of Al-Jazeera English, the network sought to present a fuller picture of the global and alter the lens through which the world had been viewed. As Wadah Khanfar explained with their coverage of Africa:

For instance, Africa has always been pushed aside by world networks; they have always included the continent on their agenda, stereotyped in four major stories: Famines, HIV/AIDS, conflicts and slavery. While not ignoring these important issues, we walked the extra mile by introducing the socio-political and economic realities of Africa to show, among other things, how the continent became what it is, and that the north had historical and present responsibilities to address these issues.

Al-Jazeera’s coverage could always be distinguished from its network competitors like CNN, NBC, CBS, and Fox because it was the one and only network that represented the South, not only geographically but more importantly culturally, socially, and politically. International networks headquartered in the North represent a northern perspective quite distinct from the global South. For decades, the North had been the dominant voice in international news. Northern-based media corporations view the South from perspectives based on their own values. By doing so, most international broadcasts filter the world’s data through a Northern lens. Nowhere was this more evident than in the coverage of the Ebola epidemic. As one media critic put it, behind the “fear-mongering and scare tactics” lie:

very palpable undertones of colonialist attitudes of racism, xenophobia and cultural elitism. Identifying it as a consequence of the North/South divide, an academic term

that “roughly delineates the economic disparities between the countries of the Northern and Southern hemispheres.” To put this another way, the developed, industrialized North assumes a relatively normalized stance that the underdeveloped, global South is both a misunderstood, backward place to be kept at a safe distance and a latent threat due to its political instability, poverty and foreignness.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, the South has always been a topic that revolves around a Northern agenda, and seen as secondary, and therefore understanding its problems has been shallow, superficial and stereotyped. As a result, and being based in the South, Al-Jazeera, though not ignoring the North, has set its own news agenda to reflect realities in the South. Wadah Khanfar explained Al-Jazeera’s attempt to change the perspective: “We believed that if we became powerful in telling our narrative, the North would listen to us.”

### **Al-Jazeera and Humanitarian Crises**

In Phase II, the effect of Al-Jazeera’s news coverage of global humanitarian emergencies became more evident as it expanded and extended its coverage of war and concentrated on the human face and ugly consequences of wars. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, it was obvious that a decision was made that Al-Jazeera would be on the ground wherever there are humanitarian crises: whether man-made or natural disasters. At a time when US news networks were closing down overseas news offices (McChesney and Pickard 2011), Al-Jazeera was expanding its news operations. In order to cover such events effectively the network opened many overseas bureaus, especially in countries where disasters were likely to occur. For instance, at that time there was not much happening in Somalia, but shortly after an office was established a fierce famine hit East Africa and the Horn of Africa, and later on moved to West Africa. The world followed the tragedy on Al-Jazeera, which succeeded in breaking the silence, slammed by international media that failed to cover the story.

### **Partnering with Humanitarian Organizations**

Al-Jazeera also set an important precedent by partnering with international humanitarian relief organizations that approached the network to maximize public awareness about the magnitude and severity of catastrophes. In return, the network had greater access to stricken areas. These partnerships worked full speed during the Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami in 2004; coordination with humanitarian organizations enabled the network to dispatch and place crews in every stricken area, thereby allowing the network to provide more in-depth coverage of the tragedy affecting multiple countries.

In humanitarian crises, media tend to stay for a while and then move on quickly to other stories, although in many cases aftershocks of catastrophe are even more severe and dangerous than the initial event itself. The reason for such media behavior is the obsession with ratings, a point I will return to below. Unlike those flawed news practices, Al-Jazeera has made it a policy to remain even after most other international media leave. For example, in the case of the 2004 earthquake and Tsunami, followed by a relatively smaller Tsunami in 2006, it took the initiative of bringing teams of journalists from organizations across the Arab world to the stricken areas to follow up on the tragic results of the catastrophe for their own local media.

Apart from permanent bureaus providing coverage, in many cases, special assignments must be commissioned to areas where there are no offices. The decision-making process for those

assignments in most networks is relatively lengthy and goes up the ladder to higher management. The process within Al-Jazeera, especially when there are humanitarian emergencies, is short, quick and effective. Both the planning and assignment sections are given a free hand in dispatching correspondents and crews to any humanitarian crises without the need for higher management approval. By doing so, the network has not missed covering a single humanitarian crisis from Haiti through sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America to Asia, up to the North Pole during that row over the melting of the polar ice-cap phenomenon, and also down to Antarctica (South Pole), wrapping up the whole globe with its crews on the ground par excellence. The mission has always been to connect Arabs, who have been ill served by media for so long, with the rest of the world and vice versa.

### **Ratings and Issues of Commercializing News Coverage**

But are ratings, which have become a media obsession, totally ignored by the network? According to many Al-Jazeera officials, the relationship between the network and its audiences is uniquely dialectical. Ratings serve as a detector of the public pulse. However, in many cases the audiences come to Al-Jazeera because they trust its capability of choosing for them. It is a very long and sensitive process of building trust and credibility between the network and its audiences.

One former network director said in an interview for this article, “I have always been opposed to blindly running after the wish list of trending topics and following only those stories with the highest rating. Sometimes stories have to be pushed because they have meanings regardless of their ratings,” the man explained.

I remember being frequently asked during meetings of the planning department: how many Arabs would want to know about seals on the Southern shores of South Africa? My answer was: even if 5%; it remains to be an elite percentage within our Arab audience that deserves to be served by us; and by doing so we can expand these elite. Also, reaching for 5% of an influential audience who can effect positive societal change is not less important than obtaining the interest of 50% from those less capable of making such changes.

In Al-Jazeera, ratings are important but only to a certain extent for it is also part of commercializing media, which in many cases infringes on audience rights. The fact that Al-Jazeera shies away from commercializing news makes sense. Imagine if ratings showed viewers were uninterested in coverage of humanitarian emergencies, what would be the outcome in a profit driven network? Would that negatively impact such coverage? The realistic answer is: yes!

A better way to rate the network’s coverage may be to look toward the public and the humanitarian community that the network serves. Perhaps the best institutions qualified to judge are humanitarian relief agencies. Many international humanitarian organizations frequently praise Al-Jazeera’s news coverage for its role in helping to ease many crises by raising public awareness and mobilizing relief efforts. Al-Jazeera was decorated and re-awarded several times for such roles, especially when it comes to raising awareness of the tragic plight of refugees displaced in many parts of the world. In 2005, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) recognized Al-Jazeera for its coverage of the tragedy of refugees produced by the wave of drought that hit West Africa during 2004–2005. Reporting began shortly before the drought hit, thanks to cooperation between the network

and relief agencies. Such coverage played a key role in mobilizing international efforts to better deal with the tragedy. Aside from Al-Jazeera, there are no other media networks that have such unique and effective partnerships with humanitarian organizations.

### **Wings of the Newsroom**

With tough standards set for its bureau chiefs and correspondents tasked with the forecasting of emergencies, Al-Jazeera, through its partnerships with specialized centers and agencies providing early warning of such crises, empowers itself to fly red flags through its news coverage. This growing sense of the importance of catastrophe-preventive assignments, which rarely exists within heavily commercialized media, was the main reason for the network to create two wings for its newsroom: Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, and Al-Jazeera Center for Human Rights. The latter, launched in 2008, was preceded by a conference organized in Doha by the network attended by most of the important human rights organizations and humanitarian relief agencies. The conference ended with the signing of memoranda of understanding between the newly established center for human rights and these organizations for future cooperation.

The idea for the Center for Studies was to provide background research using groups of experts and analysts who are not under the pressure of news gathering on a daily basis. Their job is to analyze and contextualize events for more in-depth coverage prior to passing this data and information on to the newsroom. The focus of the Center for Human Rights is to train journalists and to educate them on humanitarian law, to better enable newsrooms to tell the humanitarian side of the news. The two centers are actually two wings of the same network newsroom, and do not work independently. They actively contribute in setting editorial policy of the whole network, and in many cases, in formatting and framing news.

### **The Queen's Visit to Africa**

A case in point: the Queen of the United Kingdom was going to Uganda to open the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Kampala in 2007. Her agenda included a visit to an HIV/AIDS orphanage as part of her humanitarian work. All international networks focused on her visit and then the summit. In contrast Al-Jazeera, enabled by its Study Center and after discussions, made the decision that HIV/AIDS in Africa should be the network's focus because it is a disease that is a tragedy for the continent as it struggles against both HIV/AIDS and the profit-driven pharmaceutical companies trying to cash in on this catastrophe. Her Majesty the Queen's visit was just an entrance story to the main narrative, which was HIV/AIDS in Africa.

The two-pronged vision of the network is in-depth reporting and a humanitarian-centered orientation of the news. The Study Center enhances the first whereas the Center for Human Rights reinforces the second.

### **Phase III: 2007–2010, “Us vs. Us”**

By the end of Israel's war against Lebanon in the summer of 2006, the Arab and Muslim world plunged into internal conflicts arising out of racial, sectarian and ideological issues. Being in the middle of that whirlwind, Al-Jazeera entered its third phase: “Arabs and Muslims vs. Arabs and Muslims.” With such diverse newsroom staff within the network's channels:



Muslims, Sunnis, Shiites, Christians of all denominations, the real challenge was how to develop a strict code of reporting and conduct to assure the quality of reporting and not import those conflicts into the newsrooms.

### **Phase IV: 2010–Present, Arab Spring Revolutions and Beyond**

Since its inception in 1996, Al-Jazeera was a virtual revolution in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Arabian Gulf, where media has been controlled and heavily censored by dictatorships or autocratic rulers. Its paradigm vision has always been the humanitarian side of the news. Since popular revolutions are humanitarian and humane acts against inhuman injustice, the network entered the next phase at full speed in terms of exclusive coverage from the Tunisian uprising and Tahrir Square in Egypt in the center, to Libya in the west, to Syria in the east and to Yemen in the southeast. Almost word-for-word, the world followed the Arab Spring Revolutions through Al-Jazeera.

With the apparent failure of all Arab Spring revolutions and the throw back of their countries to the era of dictatorships, injustice, and societal chaos at varying levels, the Arab and Muslim world has entered into an extremely complicated grey phase. It is now an era where visibility is blurred and clarity is scarce, especially with regard to many important issues of life and death, freedom, and economic survival. Long fixed paradigms are being shaken and some even shattered. Traditional alliances are falling and seemingly awkward new ones are on the way in. Who would have thought that Israel would side with Russia on many issues in the region and that Egypt, after the 2013 change of power, would pace up to join them, along with their Arab backers and financiers? Who would have expected to see the Gulf countries backing the counter-revolution in Egypt while supporting the revolution in Syria, then taking the extrajudicial steps (under the tenets of international law) to fight a counter-revolution war in Yemen? The trends nowadays in the Arab world are extremely unstable and definitely unpredictable. As a media organization, this is not a comfortable position to be in. This phase comes with many synchronized challenges, some of which include:

- Sailing in such rough, stormy and changing political weather patterns in the Middle East, how to keep your moral compass pointing in the right direction.
- Al-Jazeera Media Network broadcasts to 310 million unique homes every day. How will it accomplish the migration to a new and much more interactive media world without sacrificing its traditional type of media?
- How to attract the younger generation of below 40 by adopting newer technologies and structures without sacrificing its older audience, and keeping the depth, legacy and heritage that has been built over the years.
- How to marry two concepts without any disruption of either.
- Since its launch in 1996, Al-Jazeera has stayed true to its initial mission. Each new phase never negated its predecessor, and each told a humanitarian story. How can Al-Jazeera redefine itself while continuing the strong humane and humanitarian orientation that it always had?

As a professional war correspondent in this line of journalism for two decades, I hope and expect that Al-Jazeera will negotiate these headwaters successfully.

**Note**

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1. Machado, Mario. 2014. "The Media Covering Ebola: Fear Tactics that Play on Racial, Economic Divides" (October 10, 2014) *The Huffington Post*, available at: [www.huffingtonpost.com/mario-machado/ebola-media-coverage\\_b\\_5899790.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mario-machado/ebola-media-coverage_b_5899790.html)

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