



# “Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

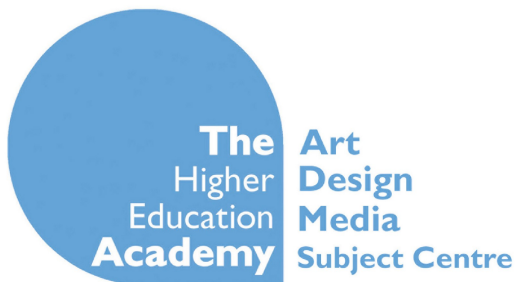
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### **‘Reporting Back’: Al Jazeera English**

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*Al Jazeera English* is the first international news channel headquartered in the Middle East. It is also arguably the first non-western news channel of this scale. With an anticipated reach of 80 million homes from the outset, facilitated by 87 cable and satellite distribution deals, *Al Jazeera English*'s ambitious aim is to be on par with leading international channels such as *CNN* and the *BBC*. Operating studios in Doha, London, Kuala Lumpur and Washington, 18 bureaux worldwide with access to another 42 bureaux of its Qatari parent, the channel lacks the economic limitations usually associated with ‘alternative’ media. During the building phase the gas-rich Emirate’s financial backing enabled the channel to poach high profile staff from rival channels on an impressive scale, prompting indications that Qatar ‘is not short of cash to pursue its global ambitions’ (Financial Times, 15.11.2006: 9).

Size and ambition are only one facet accounting for the channel’s relevance for academic debates. What makes it all the more interesting is that *Al Jazeera English* itself taps into decades of discussions within media and communication studies by claiming to balance ‘the current typical information flow by reporting from the developing world back to the West and from the southern to the northern hemisphere’ ([www.english.aljazeera.net](http://www.english.aljazeera.net)). In an illustrative example of a non-academic institution drawing on academic debates, *Al Jazeera English*'s corporate profile informs staff and viewers that the channel will provide ‘a unique grassroots perspective from underreported regions around the world to a potential global audience’ ([www.english.aljazeera.net](http://www.english.aljazeera.net)).

*Al Jazeera English*, however, is not the only nor the first channel to declare open competition with the well established rivals *CNN International* (CNNI) and *BBC World* as their trade mark. The Venezuelan-based pan South American channel *La Nueva Televisora del Sur* (Telesur) had been labelled ‘The CNN of the South’ more than a year before AJE eventually launched. Its aims sound remarkably similar to those of *Al Jazeera English*. These similarities invited numerous comparisons, especially after Telesur had been labelled ‘Al Bolivar’ by one critic, a play on the South American independence leader Simón Bolívar and *Al Jazeera English*. It is worth noting, in this context, that the original Arabic-language *Al Jazeera*, other than *Al Jazeera English* or Telesur, was not promoted as a counter-hegemonic channel from the outset, but, as Naomi Sakr pointed out recently, shifted towards this role during its 10 years of existence (Sakr, 2007).

The fact that a channel actively uses a certain debate while at the same time being its subject leads to the question whether popular claims of ‘reporting back’ are corroborated or questioned by those leading the debate on the academic side. In other words, does the fact that erstwhile academic concerns of uneven flows of media products have entered the news business contribute to mend the gap between theory and practice? Or does a gap remain between *Al Jazeera English’s* claim to counter dominant news flows and the conclusions drawn in academic debates on media flows?

To address these questions I will briefly turn to some basic theoretical concepts and look at how these themes had been addressed by media scholars. From the very beginning of debates on the unequal distribution of media products, scholars were to a large extent concerned with American dominance in international trade and the ensuing cultural hegemony of which media consumption was taken to be a critical part. In the course of these debates, *cultural* and in its narrower form *media imperialism* was described in a variety of different shades, but the political connotations of the term prevailed in most of the literature. Tomlinson describes cultural imperialism as a concept involving “all the complex political issues – and indeed, the political *commitments* – entailed in the notion of cultural domination” (1991: 22, emphasis in original). From the 70s onwards, these discussions were complemented and challenged by a concern with forms of resistance to hegemonic media messages, notably promoted by the rise of cultural studies and notions of active audiences that relativised any straightforward message-effects relations. This interest in audience activeness was paralleled on a macro level with an acknowledgment of increasingly complex and multidirectional flows of media as regional media hubs such as India, Hong Kong, Brazil or Egypt gained influence in what became referred to as ‘the South’. Themes of globalisation became somewhat more fashionable than media imperialism related theories, but both strands could not help but continue to acknowledge in one way or another that the largest bulk of media output still originates from very few mostly western corporations (Sreberny, 2000; Thussu, 2007).

*Al Jazeera English’s* emphasis on contra-flow coincides with a time in media studies where the optimism of resistant readings, polysemic texts and multidirectional flows slowly makes place again for the recognition that the volume of media that is counter-intuitive and positions itself in contrast to the established mainstream of the time is still a small fragment compared to the output of a powerful few. In this context it is the ambitious *size* of *Al Jazeera English*, even more than its content that provokes speculations of two types. First, excitement that a counter-hegemonic news

channel has the economic potential to significantly influence the present ‘balance’ of international news. And second, speculations that given the level of professionalism and scale of the endeavour, the very success of *Al Jazeera English* marks its transition to the mainstream media. These two claims are underwritten by two different basic assumptions. The assumption on which the first type of speculation is based is that size and format are vital to effectively offer an alternative voice in international television, but are in no direct way linked to *what* can be reported. The assumption on which the second type of speculation is based is that international news as a format to a large degree already define not only how but *what* can be said – and that professional journalistic conventions eventually result in very similar outcomes, even if the editorial line differs slightly. In conjunction to the second type of speculation, the most prevalent argument is that the style of *Al Jazeera English* is going to be the same as that of any major news channel and that difference will be reduced to the amount of air time the channel dedicates to the Middle East and the South in general – an argument that *even if* proved to be true would not necessarily challenge claims of providing contra-flow to the established Western media.

To the question of whether *Al Jazeera English* qualifies as contra-flow, and simultaneously the answer to the question of how closely theoretical and practical claims match we have to distinguish between four levels of investigation: ownership, format, content and staff profile.

First, being largely financed by the state of Qatar, the question of ownership prompted both sceptical and affirmative responses with regard to *Al Jazeera’s* and *Al Jazeera English’s* claims of independence. Some argue that the link to the Qatari government and the scarcity of coverage on Qatar indicate a specific political agenda apart from providing a new alternative voice (Zayani, 2005). Others stress that the complications both channels caused for the Qatari foreign policy both within the region (Saudi Arabia banned journalists, other countries closed offices and arrested staff) and with Western powers (it is important to remember that Qatar has a close relationship with the US) did not exactly benefit the Emirate (Sakr, 2007) or point out that Qatar does not carry enough international ‘weight’ to successfully sell its foreign policy aims to an international audience. In this vein, Nigel Parsons, *Al Jazeera English’s* first managing director once stated that Qatar was ‘too small a country to project a domestic agenda onto the international scene’. Thus, for *Al Jazeera International*, every news item would effectively be a ‘foreign story’ (Parsons in Sakr, 2007:120). Of course, while *Al Jazeera Arabic* and *Al Jazeera English* at times do complicate the Emirates’

international relations in negative ways, they are still of strategic value in the long run. The second level of investigation, format, is fairly straightforward in the case of *Al Jazeera English*, which is generally accepted to be modelled on existing international news channels, notably the BBC to which it always enjoyed a close relationship. The question does get more ambiguous when looking at the content presented within this format, although it is frequently suggested, if not generally agreed upon, that *Al Jazeera English* takes, as Charlie Beckett recently put it, a ‘mildly counter-intuitive’ stance ([www.charliebeckett.org](http://www.charliebeckett.org)). Closely related to the level of content is the question by whom and how this content is being produced on a daily basis. *Al Jazeera*’s recruitment policy shows two major developments. First, the poaching of high profile international staff from rival channels and second, a preference to local staff instead of foreign correspondents on the ground. To summarize, in terms of ownership the channel clearly qualifies as counter-hegemonic in relation to Western media, although the same term does not apply in relation to the state of Qatar. The opposite claim could be maintained with regard to format. Here, its conventional approach would hardly justify celebrating the channel as part of a developing counter-hegemonic contra-flow in international news media. The potentially counter-hegemonic quality of both content and professional practices, however, remain open. At the heart of questions of similarity and difference, these latter two are important levels of investigation to assess *Al Jazeera English*’s potential to maintain a margin of difference within the international news business.

I would like to conclude with reference to a scene from *Control Room*, Jihane Nouijaim’s documentary on *Al Jazeera*, which nicely addresses some of the main implications of professionalism with its regional inflections and ethical conundrums as well as gaps between theory and practice. The scene is taken from a conversation between a ‘Western’ media scholar and a journalist of *Abu Dhabi TV*. In the beginning, media analyst Abdallah Schleifer is shown repeating the principle of disinterested, objective reporting by explaining to the journalist that “your heart can be with your people, your soul can be with your people, but as a journalist your primary duty is to get information... otherwise you would be something else, you would be a soldier or a diplomat.” He is being confronted by *Abu Dhabi TV* journalist Al Shammre with a plea for empathetic subjectivism in journalism, reminding him that apart from “representing my station, I am also representing my people”. The conversation culminates in a profound misunderstanding of what it means to continue to report on both sides and ‘smile’ in the face of heart wrenching evidence. Schleifer suggests that to help his people the journalist should provide them with all the information

he can get even if that means interviewing people ‘from the other side’ and having to ‘smile’ while doing so. The scene ends with Al Shammre’s rhetorical question of how he could smile when his people are being killed, outraged at what he perceives to be emotional dishonesty in the name of professionalism.

In a condensed way, this scene exemplifies both the clash between Western understandings of professionalism and non-Western media and the gap between media scholars and journalists, theory and practice. Engaging with this gap in manners respectful of both professions, on the other hand, can only contribute to a better understanding and knowledge of the object of a shared compassion: media.

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