

# notes

## internacionals

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## THE AL-JAZEERA MOMENT

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**A**pril 2011: *"The Telegraph"* reports from Washington that senior aides to President Barack Obama lavish praise on Al-Jazeera television, readily confess that during the Egypt uprising Al-Jazeera English was basically all they watched to try to make sense of what was going on, and let it be known that the President was one of those glued to the screen.

Four weeks before, on Capitol Hill, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, addressing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had gone even further, delivering what sounded like an advert for Al-Jazeera: "Viewership of Al-Jazeera is going up in the United States because it's real news", she said. "You may not agree with it, but you feel like you're getting real news around the clock instead of a million commercials and, you know, arguments between talking heads and the kind of stuff that we do on our news".

Coincidentally, in yet another show of the special relationship bonding the US and the UK, David Cameron admitted he was also a fan. According to *"The Telegraph"*, the British Prime Minister told friends that he considers Al-Jazeera to be essential viewing because it is "the only network that gives the texture of what the Arab Street is thinking". (*"The Telegraph"*, 26 May 2011)

All this is quite remarkable, considering both countries operate global trade-mark networks such as CNN and the BBC, which rightly claim a global coverage and a global au-

dience. And it is a far cry from the post-9/11 years, when Tony Blair allegedly dissuaded George W. Bush from bombing Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Doha, Qatar. At the time, the channel was not just widely mistrusted, but positively hated by the President's entourage for being invariably the first to receive and broadcast taped messages from Osama Bin Laden. Donald Rumsfeld, for one, is credited for describing its coverage of US operations in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004 as "vicious".

Now, the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 are being hailed as the "Al-Jazeera moment", just as coverage of the 1991 Gulf War was said to be the "CNN moment". But many believe that the current significance of Al-Jazeera is even more profound, and go as far as to say that the network has not just reflected what has been happening, but has actually encouraged revolution by creating a wider perspective of movements which were essentially local.

### Before and after 9/11

Al-Jazeera (literally, *The Island*, meaning the Arabian peninsula) was launched in 1996, following the closure of the BBC's Arabic language station, a joint venture with a Qatar media corporation. Initially an Arabic news and current affairs satellite TV channel, Al-Jazeera has expanded since into a network with several outlets, including its Internet operations and specialized channels in several languages.

Initial capital was provided by the Emir of Qatar, and shares were held by private investors as well as the Qatar government. According to Hugh Miles, author of *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Is Challenging the West*, the Emir was convinced that a free press, under the form of a satellite channel, was an essential ingredient to his vision of the emirate as a centre for commercial development and progress. Much of the staff came from the 250 journalists displaced by the recent closure of BBC Arabic.

While other broadcasters in the region would systematically avoid material embarrassing to their home governments, Al-Jazeera –despite its autocratic mentor-- was designed as an impartial news source and platform for discussing issues relating to the Arab world and for presenting, true to its slogan, not just “the opinion”, but “the other opinion” too. It did not take long for Al-Jazeera to surprise local viewers with lively and far-ranging talk shows and live call-in programs, and to shock local conservative sectors. It also led to official complaints and censure from neighbouring governments, some of which jammed Al-Jazeera’s broadcasts and booted its correspondents. There were also commercial repercussions, such as pressures on advertisers to avoid the channel –notably from Saudi Arabia. Miles points out, however, that the range of complaints

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was such, that it helped cancel out allegations of bias.

Al-Jazeera was the only international news network to have correspondents in Iraq during the Operation Desert Fox bombing campaign in 1998. Its exclusive video clips were in high demand by Western media –a pattern that was to become a regular one in the following years.

Al-Jazeera’s 24-hour broadcasting came in January 1999. The network was now employing 500 people, its annual budget was \$5 million and, however controversial, it was rapidly becoming one of the most influential news operations in the region. By 2000, its estimated viewership was 35 million, ranking first in the Arab world.

But Al-Jazeera gained world-wide attention following the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York’s twin towers, when it was the only channel to cover the invasion of Afghanistan live from its office there. It also came to attention of many in the West during the hunt for Osama bin Laden, when the station aired videos it received from him and the Taliban. Some criticized the network for it, considering that it meant giving a voice to terrorists, whereas others sided with the station in considering that new footage of the

world’s most wanted fugitives was definitely newsworthy. In any case, the rest of the world’s TV networks were eager to acquire the same footage.

Through its Kabul office, Al-Jazeera was able to offer the world better material on the war than its competitors, at least until the office was destroyed by US bombs in 2001. By that time, Al-Jazeera had already opened offices in other potential trouble spots, well ahead of the future conflicts.

By 2002, the channel and its website were attracting unprecedented attention from viewers looking for alternatives to embedded reporting and military press conferences. Al-Jazeera had reached the 45 million-viewers mark.

On 1 April 2003, a US plane fired on Al-Jazeera’s Baghdad office, killing reporter Tareq Ayyoub. The attack was called a mistake. But it was around that time that Tony Blair allegedly intervened to stop George W. Bush from ordering the destruction of Al-Jazeera’s headquarters in Doha.

Al-Jazeera English was launched in 2006. Among its staff were journalists hired from British, US and Canadian world-class news operations. It faced considerable regulatory and

commercial hurdles in the American market --for its perceived sympathy with “extremist causes”--, where Al-Jazeera English is practically unavailable to cable viewers, which effectively amounts to a black-out. But there were other markets: tens of millions potential viewers among the non-Arabic Muslims in Europe and Asia, and many others who were interested in news

from the Middle East, from a Middle-Eastern perspective. It turned out a success, and so it extended the influence of Al-Jazeera, and Qatar, well beyond what had been achieved in the previous decade. Interestingly, the BBC launched its own Arabic language station in 2007.

### **“The freest, most widely watched TV network in the Arab world”**

So Thomas L. Friedman defined Al-Jazeera in *“The New York Times”* (12 February 1999). The reason why has to do with the network’s own claim, which is perceived as true by its viewership: Al-Jazeera is the only politically independent TV station in the Middle East.

Practically all the governments in the Middle East possess state-run media and censorship arrangements which enable them to control local media coverage and impact on public opinion. Prior to the arrival of Al-Jazeera, many Middle-Eastern citizens were unable to watch any TV channels other than state-controlled TV stations. This raised recurring international objections regarding press freedom and biased media coverage, but it was Al-Jazeera which actually did something

about it by breaking down their monopoly. It is no wonder that many people saw Al-Jazeera not only as a more trustworthy source of information than government and foreign channels, but simply as *the* news TV channel.

Al-Jazeera's availability (via satellite) throughout the Middle East changed the television landscape of the region and introduced a level of freedom of speech that was previously unheard of. Al-Jazeera presented controversial views regarding the governments of many Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, on Syria's relationship with Lebanon and the Egyptian judiciary. And its broadcasts, which critics accused of sensationalism aimed at increasing its audience share, sometimes resulted in drastic action –for example when, in 1999, the Algerian government cut off the electricity supply to large parts of the country to prevent a program from being watched.

Some observers use the term “contextual objectivity” to describe the station's controversial yet popular approach –a term that highlights the tension between objectivity and audience appeal but which, in the end, makes it indeed the most widely-watched news channel in the Middle East. Some argue that Al-Jazeera has a formidable authority as an opinion-maker. Noah Bonsey and Jeb Koogler, for example, writing for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, argue that the channel's tremendous popularity has “made it a shaper of public opinion. Its coverage often determines what becomes a story and what does not, as well as what Arab viewers think about issues. Whether in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, or Syria, the stories highlighted and the criticisms aired by guests on Al Jazeera's news programs have often significantly affected the course of events in the region.” They add that in Palestine, the station's influence is particularly strong: in the West Bank and Gaza, Al Jazeera “is the primary news source for an astounding 53.4 percent of Palestinian viewers. The second and third most watched channels, Palestine TV and Al Arabiya, poll a distant 12.8 percent and 10 percent, respectively.”

Al Jazeera's broad availability in the Arab world, its operating with less constraint than almost any other Arab outlet, and its being the most popular channel in the region, has been seen as playing a part in the 2010-2011 Middle East and North Africa protests, including the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. “*The New York Times*” stated in January 2011: “The protests rocking the Arab world this week have one thread uniting them: Al Jazeera, whose aggressive coverage has helped propel insurgent emotions from one capital to the next”. The newspaper quoted professor of Middle East studies at George Washington University Marc Lynch: “They did not cause these events, but it's almost impossible to imagine all this happening without Al Jazeera.”

As of 2007, the Arabic Al Jazeera channel, rivalling the BBC in worldwide audiences, had an estimated 50 million viewers. Al Jazeera English had an estimated global reach of around 100 million households.

### Legitimacy, the key to success

In media much as in politics, the key to popular success is perceived legitimacy. And legitimacy is made out of some intangible ingredients, to be handled with care, such as credibility, closeness, and relevance.

Al Jazeera's credibility comes from firmly standing by ideological and cultural positions widely shared by its audience, notably as regards the displacement of Palestinians from their homeland, or the need for foreign troops to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan. Although some observers, such as Marc Lynch, believe that “the notion that there is a common struggle across the Arab world is something Al Jazeera helped create”, others point out that there is actually little a TV channel can create if it is not in synchronicity with the feelings and emotions that make up public opinion at any given moment in time, and that movements such as the re-

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volts of 2011 start to build up, like waves in the ocean, a long time before they surface and break onto the shore. So, it is very much to Al Jazeera's credit that it managed to tune into this energy build up and become a part of it –so that by the time it flooded the streets and squares, it was as only normal that people looked at it not only as a trustworthy news source, not even as *the* but as *their* news source.

There is also a matter of style. Al Jazeera's style has been termed “aggressive” by some, others describe its talk-shows as “screaming matches”, still others make exception of its “heavy emphasis on Arab suffering” under US-backed governments whose definition ranges from “oppressive” to “tyrannical”. But Al Jazeera's style is all about closeness. Closeness to its viewership, based on the credibility that comes from a shared perspective, articulated through a very basic and simple, down-to-earth, text-book democratic means: to give people a voice. This makes perfect sense not only politically, but also in terms of media strategy: to achieve audience recognition and active participation.

Al Jazeera's closeness to its audience comes from airing unhindered live debates with the right speakers, but mainly

from its lively and fresh reporting on the Arab Street and the tools made available to the audience for joining in. To the classic call-in formulae –which are “new” only in the sense that Al Jazeera allows them, whereas regional competitors do not–, the network has added all the tools of the electronic age, notably the Internet and the social networks. This viewer participation has resulted in, notably, a vast amount of User Generated Content (UGC), which Al Jazeera has welcomed and –most importantly– has not hesitated to broadcast alongside its own material. This is what is truly innovative about Al Jazeera: the mix of professional material with amateur material in its regular broadcasts, and the end result of such mix, namely a perceived –and real– increased closeness, the feeling that the news pieces are a shared product and that the narrative of events is something that comes out of a joint venture with the audience. Fidelity, that idealised object of network desire, rests on precisely such a feeling.

And then, there is the relevance of it all. What is and what is not relevant at any given moment in time is obviously a sub-

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jective matter. It depends on how you judge the contents of what is being offered. A network is relevant if what it broadcasts means something to its viewers or not. It has to do with content, of course –with showing everyday life and with dealing with real, street-level problems instead of remote topics, and using everyday language instead of the remote language of remote opinion givers. Relevance has to do with gearing content towards the audience's interests and emotions –with winning hearts and minds. What Al-Jazeera has shown is a particular knack in connecting with both –particularly as of the Tunisian revolution which sparked all the other Arab revolts of 2011.

### **The Arab revolts of 2011**

In March 2011, Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, addressing the Cambridge Union Society, referred to the revolt in Tunisia, which was triggered by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi: “His act took what was an online campaign about what was happening in Tunisia and expressed it in physical form”, he said. “The cables (released by Wikileaks) showed the US would support the military over the Tunisian regime. This changed the dynamic between reformists and regimists.” But Assange played down the role of social media and singled out Al-Jazeera for praise: “Yes, social me-

dia did play a part, although not nearly as large a part as Al-Jazeera.” (“*The Hindu*”, 17 March 2011)

Now, between faithfully reporting an event, and actively attempting to shape it, lies a hornet's nest, and whoever oscillates between the two is sure to feel its sting. Adhering to either camp may not be the safest option –particularly in the revolutionary environment of 2011–, but the worst, no doubt, is to actively ignore, obscure and misinform –which is precisely what most Arab state media did.

The story of the Arab revolts began in Tunisia. Mohamed Bouazizi, a street seller, set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, sparking a wave of protests, which intensified following his death on January 4, 2011. Ten days later, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia's autocratic ruler, stepped down and fled the country.

Al-Jazeera had not been allowed inside Tunisia for years. Citizen journalists volunteered to help alleviate the vacuum of information, which gave the network's reports on Tunisia a distinct street-level flavour. As demonstrations intensified, the station dropped its regular scheduling and opted for an open cycle, broadcasting news and images –often mobile-phone generated and received through social networks– as they came in online. The Tunisian audience followed their revolution on Al-Jazeera, which was already popular before due to the lack of trustworthy alternatives. During the revolution, the Tunisians carried banners praising *their* news channel.

The Tunisian revolution succeeded with astonishing speed. But Aref Hijjawi, Programme Director at Al Jazeera Arabic channel, is adamant: “We will avoid attributing to Al-Jazeera a share in the revolution's success. On the contrary, we are critical of researchers' exaggeration of its role within the revolts. More than its size, it is important to study the quality of Al-Jazeera's impact: it was superficial. The station was simply closer to the hearts of many Arabs because the latter related to its employees as one of them. (...) Al-Jazeera creates neither deep awareness, nor a solid political culture. Instead it allows its viewers to have faith in their own thoughts. It shares their ideas more than it advances new ones.”

For Tunisians, Al-Jazeera was a mirror in which they saw themselves reflected. It helped them believe in the revolution their country had embarked on. It was the closest media to their hearts and minds.

Then, on January 25, Egypt rose against its rulers. Things were more difficult there for Al-Jazeera, as it was very far from being the news channel of choice of the Egyptian households: Egypt, like Lebanon, had many channels which covered local news with a fair degree of professionalism. How-

ever, freedom of information in Egypt had received a painful blow from the state security apparatus two months before, when strict restrictions had been placed on privately-owned television stations before the parliamentary elections. Al-Jazeera undoubtedly gained some ground during that period, though the Egyptian public did not need Al-Jazeera to understand the nature of the elections that took place, where Mubarak's ruling national party secured more than 95% of the seats –a blatant insult to the Egyptian people's dignity and intelligence. This was quite possibly the spark that set the Egyptian revolution in motion.

During the previous years, Al-Jazeera had allocated a lot of airtime to Egyptian topics, and the station's coverage had been strongly criticised on many occasions, especially after the broadcast of a two-hour-long documentary about torture practices by Egyptian police. But Aref Hujjawi is, again, categorical: "The role of Al-Jazeera in mobilizing the Egyptian street was minimal. Al-Jazeera imprinted one idea in people's minds: that everybody believed Egypt lived in the shadow of a regime that defied time. What really galvanized the Egyptian street was the youth of Egypt's middle class. On Facebook and YouTube, 70.000 young men and women set January 25 as a date. And the rest, as they say, is history."

As protests across Egypt grew more heated, the government ordered events to be obscured by all local television stations and interrupted Al-Jazeera's broadcast on the NileSat satellite, the only way to view the channel in Egypt. This represented quite a setback for Al-Jazeera, though it managed to resume its broadcasts through friendly stations. But what kept street action going was the stubbornness of the Egyptian youth, aided by the strong presence of an organized force in the street, the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Jazeera received as much praise from Egyptians as it had from Tunisians, "but it had only reassured the revolutionaries that the channel believed in them and in their struggle. Al-Jazeera was very clear and immutable in its pro-rebellion stance, as opposed to other stations that visibly wavered", says Hujjawi.

When all of the station's reporters were arrested and its offices closed for a couple of weeks, Al-Jazeera sent people from Doha to secretly work as reporters in Egypt and was constantly present in Tahrir Square. As in Tunisia, many of the images broadcast at the time were the work of amateur reporters. With a live 24-hour broadcast based on a mix of professional videos and UGC, phone conversations and studio guests, Al-Jazeera did a great job raising the morale and keeping high the spirits of the revolution's youth. Despite the Islamic tint that usually colours Al-Jazeera's broadcasts, during the revolution and until the fall of Mubarak the station strove to meet the demands of the young protesters by not

promoting any particular party or ideology. Only after Mubarak's resignation, when it emerged that there were few real parties other than the Muslim Brotherhood, viewers noted an increased presence of political Islam on Al-Jazeera's broadcasts.

## Beyond the Spring

Mubarak fell on February 12, 2011. Three days later, Libya rose against its leader, the Libyans also called for Al-Jazeera and Al-Jazeera responded by taking a stance against Gaddafi. The station focused on the news and developing events, and despite interference on the ArabSat satellite, it kept reporting on Libya with the same intensity, with Yemen getting its share of coverage, and Bahrain too. And although the impassionate reporting of events tends to limit the focus to one story at a time, in the end it was quite clear that Al-Jazeera had been the station closest to the street pulse and the emotions of citizens throughout the so-called Arab Spring.

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But this Spring has not only changed the relations between people and their governments, it has also transformed the media.

The uprisings have transformed Al-Jazeera: thanks to its 24-hour news coverage of events in Egypt, followed by round-the-clock on-site coverage of events in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and elsewhere, millions of new viewers flocked to Al-Jazeera. But they came at a cost. The network cancelled several of the controversial talk-shows that had been among the top-rated programmes in the Arab world because, according to Waddah Khanfar, the channel's general director, the decision to cover the Arab popular revolutions round-the-clock made them "superfluous" –by which he meant that Al-Jazeera had made a decision about its future: to concentrate on what it had successfully proved it could do better than its competitors, which is to offer hot live news coverage rather than debate and commentary.

Some revolution. Out went the formats that made Al-Jazeera what it was until the Tunisian revolution. In came the round-the-clock news format that turned Al-Jazeera into a mirror of what was happening in the streets during the Arab Spring and a prime narrator of its global story. And in came too

something that puts Al-Jazeera at the forefront of main-stream news media evolution towards far greater viewer input and interaction: the mix of professional and non-professional materials as normal procedure to convey the feel of reality. In the process, Al-Jazeera has lost some of its vintage audience in the Arab countries to competitors Al-Arabiya and Al-Hurra, but it has gained millions world-wide in a head-on competition for global audiences with the BBC and CNN, and it has become the channel to be watched not only by those interested in the Middle East, like its White House regular viewers, but by those simply interested in international news.

Essential viewing indeed, as David Cameron says.