

After Egypt: Can Al Jazeera English Leverage its 'Moment' into an American Audience?

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Abstract: With its news coverage of the Arab uprisings, the Qatar-based global news network Al Jazeera English (AJE) made major journalistic waves by scooping global media. International praise of AJE's reporting led some to analogize it to "CNN's moment," when the then nascent network established a global media presence with coverage of the first Gulf War. Even in the United States, where AJE's audience was small, it became the news source of reference for Egypt's events. The network and its supporters began to push for wider American distribution. At the same time, AJE critics raised their voices in protest. Using data from an online experiment, this study gauges how Americans view and assess AJE after the network's new found recognition. The findings suggest that there remains substantial prejudice against AJE among segments of the American public. The average respondent gave more credit to CNN International for an AJE-produced news clip edited to look like a CNNI, a boost not given to AJE when the clip carried AJE's logo. This prejudice against AJE was highly correlated with conservative political ideology and anti-Arab sentiments.

Key words: Al Jazeera English, United States, Egypt, news media, prejudice, bias.

Introduction

Al Jazeera English (AJE)¹ entered the competitive global news field in late 2006, claiming to give a "voice to the voiceless" as the "world's first English language news channel to have its headquarters in the Middle East." AJE nonetheless did not position itself as an Arab network merely broadcasting in English – a natural assumption given the prominence of its older, Arabic language sister channel. Rather, AJE declared and maintains a "global" identity, contending in its public materials that it covers regions under-reported by western media giants CNN International (CNNI) and the BBC (Painter, 2008). Despite filling a gap in the global market for televised international news, AJE did not receive a welcome reception in the United States. This position

¹ For ease of reading purposes, Al Jazeera English is referred to as "AJE" and Al Jazeera's flagship Arabic channel is shortened to "AJ."

as media outlet *non grata* persisted until the early 2011 uprisings in the Arab world, when AJE's coverage was acclaimed even by Western media giants (Kristof 2011; Ferguson, 2011). With its coverage of Egypt in particular, AJE distinguished itself from competitors to become a central source of information for American observers, media, and interested members of the public. This study considers how Americans received and evaluated AJE in the weeks after the Egyptian protesters deposed the long-time ruler, Hosni Mubarak.

As of early 2011, AJE reached upwards of 250 million households in more than one hundred countries. This reach continues to expand; in December 2010, AJE received a downlinking license for carriage in India, the largest English-language TV market in the world. Yet AJE has struggled to gain access to television audiences in the United States. By early 2011, AJE was only fully² available in cable systems in Washington, DC, Toledo, OH, and Burlington, VT, or roughly 1.7 percent of American households. Significant obstacles stand in the way of American TV market penetration, in which cable is still the dominant means of distribution. AJE, as a network, was painted as a terrorist-affiliated network by the George W. Bush administration (Miles, 2005; DiMaggio, 2008: 241; Marash, 2007: 47). This led some to speculate that US carriers refuse to include AJE in their offerings "out of fear of alienating themselves from advertisers and angering the Bush administration and other American political leaders." (Dimaggio 2008: 246). Despite efforts to position itself as a global media destination, many in the United States continued to associate AJE with Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and America's adversaries in the "war on terror." Even in the absence of the heavy criticism of AJE by American policymakers and opinion leaders, the majority of Americans do not demonstrate an interest in global news – another hurdle (Khamis, 2007: 48). Cable carriers also see the news market as saturated, questioning the value of adding yet another network to the mix. The cable industry is inclined to suggest the decision is a purely commercial, apolitical one. Following talks between AJE and Comcast, the country's largest cable carrier, reports cited an anonymous insider source who claimed that not carrying AJE "is strictly a business decision" (Wilkerson, 2011).

² Some of AJE's programs, including its hour-long news bulletin, are carried on various public and local access channels, as well as by Pacifica radio, in a patchwork of places around the country.

Additionally, political discourse about AJE, often framed within the question of cable carriage, is increasingly polarized. High-profile pundits and various organizations claim that AJE has no place on American televisions, citing allegations that AJ and AJE are anti-American and supportive of terrorists. The Washington D.C.-based media advocacy group Accuracy in Media (AIM) and Fox News program host Bill O'Reilly have challenged AJE's efforts to sign distribution deals with large cable companies such as Comcast and Time-Warner (Loeb, 2011; Kincaid, 2011). AIM launched an online petition calling for cable companies to shut out AJE due to what it deemed propagandistic content.³ AIM calls on "Comcast, and other cable and satellite companies" to "not help to provide Al-Jazeera English the audience and the exposure that they seek" because "America is at war with radical Islam." Smaller local groups have likewise lobbied to have AJE excluded from places where it or its news bulletins are carried, including in Daytona Beach, FL, where a local college TV station carries AJE news bulletins (Circelli, 2010).

There is, however, a vibrant counter-current in the American public wanting to see AJE on US television screens. As AJE became a primary news source for Americans after Arab protest movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and other Arab countries in early 2011, demand for AJE grew. Online viewing, the primary means for Americans to watch AJE, skyrocketed, according to members of the channel's online team. Of those watching online around the world, around half were Americans (Elder, 2011). American public thinkers, columnists (Rich, 2011), and government officials (Kayyem, 2011) began asking why the channel was not available. For the first time in roughly a decade, American officials were *commending* an AJ news division. News reports indicated that the White House was keeping abreast of the protests in Egypt through both CNN and AJE (MacNicol, 2011). Significantly, during a Senate committee meeting on American foreign policy priorities, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted that AJE was gaining an audience in the United States because it was "real news," which she contrasted with American television news. Clinton said, "Al Jazeera has been the leader in that they are literally changing people's minds and attitudes. And like it or hate it, it is really effective" (Radia, 2011; Bauder, 2011). Prominent media figures, from ABC News's Sam Donaldson to MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, have likewise lauded the channel's coverage (Kaplan, 2011).

³ <http://www.aim.org/al-jazeera-english/>

Voices within the mainstream media, including AJE officials, began to refer to AJE's Egypt coverage as "AJE's moment" (Kirkpatrick and Worth, 2011; Burman, 2011; Bauder, 2011). This is a reference to "CNN's moment" during the 1990-91 Gulf War, when advanced technology, 24-hour news coverage, on-the-ground reporting, and stunning visuals took CNN to the fore of international news. CNN has since maintained its position as a global news giant. A "moment" in this sense refers to a turning point in a news network's standing and popularity due to leading coverage of an important event. It remains to be seen, however, whether "AJE's moment" will translate into greater American viewership or carriage through traditional, and still dominant⁴, distribution channels in the United States – specifically, cable. AJE sought to parlay its new online popularity into a grassroots-style campaign to pressure cable companies through demonstrated demand. Using a specially designed webpage, social media, and emails, they generated over 40,000 letters to American cable companies demanding AJE be made available (Bauder, 2011). Student and community groups began letter-writing campaigns asking their local cable operators to carry the station (Buletti, 2011). While previous negotiations with the largest companies failed to produce results, AJE re-entered negotiations in late February with the momentum of heightened, positive publicity. Though no distribution deals have been announced in the weeks after the meetings, such deals take months and are largely carried out in secret. While AJE faces an uphill battle, some industry observers speculate that the cable industry wants to see if interest in AJE sustains beyond the period of Arab uprisings (Wilkerson, 2011).

Despite the new visibility and prominence, criticism that the network is biased and driven by an anti-American agenda continues. For instance, charges of bias at AJE circulated after a *Washington Post* columnist argued that AJE buried the story about CBS News reporter Lara Logan, who was sexually assaulted and attacked in Egypt after the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak (Capehart, 2011; 2011b). AIM put out more material against AJE and re-launched a web-based campaign against the network. AJE's managing director, Al Anstey, says the criticism is based on "misconceptions" and optimistically contends that perceptions can be changed through exposure to the channel: "Those misconceptions are being addressed now with every viewer that's switching us on and sees the content. And I always lay down the gauntlet and say if you watch the content of Al-Jazeera English, those misconceptions, if they apply, are immediately dispelled" (quoted in Robichaux, 2011).

⁴ Trends suggest, however, that cable subscriptions are slowly declining annually, while the number of those viewing online increases.

The present study puts Anstey's claim to the test. The first study to experimentally test the effects of watching AJE on individuals, it will shed empirical light on: 1) how the public evaluates AJE; 2) how their evaluations compare with perceptions of an American competitor, CNN International (CNNI), and: 3) how these evaluations relate to prejudice against Arab-Americans and political ideology. The results suggest that, even in the aftermath of "AJE's moment," a considerable segment of Americans is cognitively predisposed against the channel.

Literature Review

Scholarship on AJE is still emerging and tends to focus on content differences with other news networks, and the macro-effects of the network on global flows of information, intercultural exchanges, and viewers' attitudes towards other cultures. One theme in the research considers the extent to which AJE could subdue "the ongoing discourse of 'clash of civilizations' in favor of a new discourse of 'dialogue between civilizations'" (Khamis, 2007: 49). This research starts with Huntington's contentious notion that global conflict after the cold war will increasingly fall along cultural lines, with the West and Islam being two of the main adversaries (1996).

Communications scholars interested in international relations investigate whether a channel like AJE could be a communicative antidote to Huntington's vision. El-Nawawy and Powers found that AJE can serve as a conciliatory media source by moderating viewers' attitudes towards other cultures, but that viewers seek out news media that affirm, rather than challenge, their predisposed views (2008; 2009; 2010). Their reception study of AJE viewing considered those already watching AJE and correlated their views on conflict with duration of viewership. For AJE to serve as a conciliatory medium, potential audiences – those who would not form self-selected audiences – must be willing to watch with an open eye. This paper seeks to gauge general prejudice⁵ against the network by asking whether Americans will evaluate one report from AJE differently than they would the same report by CNNI, an American news outlet. And, if prejudice against AJE exists, does exposure to its reporting change assessments of the network's credibility, as Al Anstey proposes?

⁵ The term "prejudice" is used literally in this analysis to mean to the use of pre-conceived associations, judgments or presumptions that impact one's evaluation of some given thing. The more popular connotation refers to unfairly negative views of other people or social groups (Dovidio, 2001: 829), but we use the term here in relation to a brand and news network.

Given that AJE is available on few American televisions, as well as the prominent criticisms of Al Jazeera during the years of the George W. Bush administration, it is likely that American views of AJE developed indirectly, from other sources: public officials, opinion leaders, the media, and personal contacts. Why would the American public be inherently opposed to AJE? A different research direction found in the literature revolves around questions of global power and the prospects for the network to stimulate change. Formulated as a “counter-hegemonic” alternative to what is described as the dominant news outlets, AJE may be able to break the western hold on mediated narrative power (Al-Najjar, 2009: 2; Gardner, 2009: 19), even if its formatting and style resembles other western, namely British, news media (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008: 214). This view, it should be noted, found support in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s comments in March 2011 suggesting Al Jazeera was winning the “information war.” Others argue that Al Jazeera is not counter-hegemonic, but “alternative,” because of how AJ has been received and treated by mainstream media, especially television in the West (Tal-Azran, 2010). There is some evidence, however, that major international newspapers, including leading American publications, have represented AJE positively compared with Al Jazeera’s original Arabic service (King and Zayani, 2008).

Whether it is alternative or counter-hegemonic, AJE’s reception and evaluation among the American public play a key role in AJE’s trajectory and global impact. A potential audience that is cognitively resistant – that is prejudiced and does not change its assessments with exposure – inhibits the station’s chance of having counter-hegemonic effects that originate internally, in terms of opinion and social changes within the country. That of course does not preclude global changes in information flows that somehow impact American power externally. This also bears on the question of AJE’s distribution, which determines the availability of AJE to non-self-selecting American audiences. If cable companies rely on public views formed pre-reception in making carriage decisions, they may be missing the true test of AJE’s potential: how TV viewers in general respond to its actual content. Evidence that viewing AJE lessens negative evaluations of the network would suggest that the channel could be carried with less risk of a wide backlash. However, if we find that evaluations of AJE are low and do not waiver or worsen with exposure to actual content, the American public in general will probably not watch AJE with an open mind. This would suggest, in terms of cable carriage, that AJE would likely remain a largely online alternative within the American media landscape. Its contra-flow reach would be limited.

In effect, the Arab uprisings will not have engendered “AJE’s moment.” Prejudice against the station would mean it is unlikely to serve as a conciliatory or counter-hegemonic medium.

A crucial factor in shifting attitudes is perceived credibility of the source. In one of the earliest social science studies on source credibility, Hovland and Weiss tested the effects of source credibility on persuasion and retention of information (1951). Subjects read the same articles. Half were told the articles were printed in esteemed publications and/or written by notable figures. The other half were told they were written by propagandists in questionable publications. They found differences in attitudinal change varied with the respective source’s credibility, which they defined as “trustworthiness” and “expertise” (1951: 636-38). Later scholarship on credibility and persuasion sought to define more carefully the factors impacting credibility assessments and consider other relevant characteristics. Starting with Hovland (1953), audience traits came to be seen as playing a role. In general, perceived credibility of information was increasingly linked to characteristics of the source, message, audience, and medium. This study builds on this work. Specifically, following Hovland and Weiss, we expose participants to an AJE news clip attributed to, and made to look like, either AJE or CNNI. With the only difference being the brand name of the clip being shown, we isolate the source as the key explanatory variable.

This secondary set of research questions concerns audience factors that could explain differences in how individuals assess AJE and CNNI’s credibility. This paper will consider a few possible explanations. First, it is possible that assessments of AJE are linked to general sentiments towards Arab-Americans and the notion that AJE represents an Arab perspective. In other words, viewers’ assessment of AJE would be correlated with anti-Arab views. Second, differential assessments could be explained by political ideology, with conservatives tending to rate AJE lower in terms of credibility. In fact, the most ardent critics of AJE have been conservative political and media figures. This study utilizes an online experimental design to address these questions.

Methods

Participants

Our sample includes 177 Americans recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online survey community, who participated in exchange for \$0.25 or \$0.50. The mean participant

age was 30.29, with a range of 17 to 67. About 66 percent of the participants were female. The average participant (59 percent) lived in a suburb, though 22 percent described their residential area as “urban” and 19 percent as “rural.” The average participant has completed some college coursework. Half of the participants identified as Christian, 17 percent as agnostic, and 13 percent as atheist. The majority of participants (80 percent) were white. Other ethnicities represented include Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders (10 percent), African-Americans (4 percent), Latino/as (4 percent), and Arab-American (less than 1 percent). The mean political ideology on a 7-point scale was 3.45, or moderate. The vast majority of participants (98 percent) do not watch AJE or CNNI regularly. However, CNNI was the most popular source of TV news among respondents (18 percent), followed by Fox News (16 percent).

Procedure

Participants completed the study online. The first part of the study included several questions about their news viewing habits. Participants were then⁶ randomized into one of three conditions: AJE, CNNI, or control. Participants in the AJE and CNNI conditions viewed a news story about the Taliban and its position towards peace talks with the government in Kabul that originally aired on AJE.⁷ The clip did not mention the United States nor depict any American forces or figures. AJE markings were removed and replaced with CNNI branding for the CNNI condition. Those in the control condition did not watch a video. Participants were then asked to indicate how biased and trustworthy they would rate AJE and CNNI and their intention to watch AJE and CNN, all on a 7-point Lichert scale. Participants were also asked “If your local cable company was considering carrying Al Jazeera English (CNN International), would you have a preference or try to influence its decision?”, with 5 options ranging from “I would directly pressure the company in support of carrying Al Jazeera English (CNN International)” to “I would directly pressure the company against carrying Al Jazeera English (CNN International).” Participants first answered the questions for whichever news condition they were in and then the other network,

⁶ This study is part of a larger experiment that included a clip condition administered before the clip condition presented here. All results presented were not influenced by the first clip condition and so we focus here on the procedures relevant to the present paper.

⁷ “Taliban 'rejects' Afghan peace offer,” uploaded to YouTube on June 6, 2010, was filed by James Bays, an AJE correspondent who reported from both Kabul and Baghdad. The video is posted at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZnBrniJGDg>

presented in a brief description as a competing news station. The order of network question presentation in the control group was counter-balanced such that half answered AJE questions first, while half saw CNNI questions first; no differences were found between responses across these two groups, indicating no ordering effects. Participants were then asked to indicate which network they would trust more for news about the Arab world. Next, we gauged Arab-American prejudice using questions adapted from Bushman and Bonacci's (2004) Arab-American Prejudice scale, an 11-question inventory reduced in the present study to six questions under Bushman's guidance. Participants were then asked if they believed "AJE represents an Arab outlook on the news." Three questions about the events in Egypt came next, all answered on a 5-point Lichert scale: Do you sympathize with the Egyptians who protested and overthrew their leader Hosni Mubarak, a long time ally of the United States?; Do you think American foreign policy, including its military presence in the Middle East, is helping to spread democracy to Egypt and other countries in this region?; and Do you think that Al Jazeera as a network contributed to the protests against Egypt's President Mubarak? Finally, all participants answered basic demographic questions, including political ideology, and were debriefed.

Results

The bias questions yielded the most significant differences. As illustrated by Figure 1, the bias ratings for AJE differed between conditions. Those who viewed the clip marked as AJE ranked the station as less biased than those in the control and CNNI conditions, but the differences were

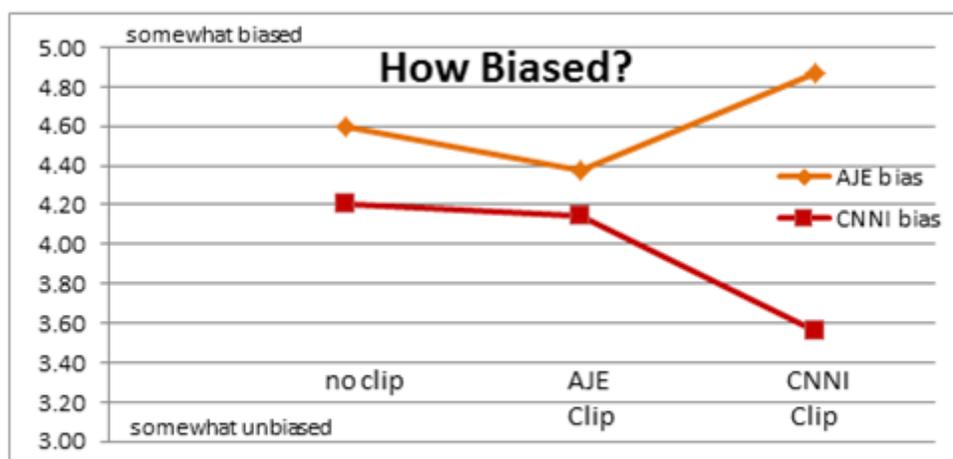


Figure 1. Bias ratings of AJE and CNNI by participant condition (left to right: control group watched no clip, watched AJE clip, watched CNNI-marked clip).

nonsignificant. Bias ratings for CNNI (figure 1) on the other hand differed significantly by condition ($F(2, 174) = 3.70$; $\alpha = .03$). On a 7-point scale (1 = extremely unbiased; 7 = extremely biased), the mean value for CNNI's bias rating was 4.20 in the control group and 4.14 in the AJE group, both in the neutral to somewhat biased range. Participants in the CNNI condition gave an average response of 3.56, on the other side of neutral towards somewhat unbiased. Planned contrasts with a Tukey's correction indicate the difference detected by the ANOVA⁸ lies between participants in the CNNI group compared to the control group ($\alpha = .04$). The difference between participants in the CNNI group and AJE group is marginally significant ($\alpha = .06$) and non-significant between AJE and the control. This suggests that CNNI appears significantly less biased to participants who viewed a clip from AJE attributed to CNNI compared to participants who saw no clip. In other words, the clip boosted perceptions of CNNI.

We also computed a variable of bias difference, subtracting each participant's AJE bias score from her or his CNNI bias score. The mean difference in the control condition was $-.39$. This difference was slightly smaller in the AJE condition ($-.24$) and notably larger in the CNNI condition (-1.31). The negative values indicate that participants consistently rated AJE as more biased than they did CNNI. This difference was especially pronounced in the CNNI-viewing condition. An ANOVA indicates these differences are significant ($F(2, 174) = .001$). Planned contrasts with a Tukey's correction show that evaluations by participants in the CNNI condition differ significantly from the ratings by those in both the AJE condition ($\alpha = .002$) and the control condition ($\alpha = .01$). The difference between AJE and the control is again non-significant.

In terms of trustworthiness, likelihood to watch, and the question of cable carriage, we found no significant differences by experimental condition. We are thus able to compare network evaluations across conditions. AJE ($m = 4.15$, on the untrustworthy side of the 7-point scale) was considered less trustworthy than CNNI ($m = 3.18$, on the trustworthy side of the scale), regardless of condition ($t = 6.70$, $\alpha < .001$). Participants in all conditions similarly reported lower intentions to watch AJE ($m = 4.10$) than CNNI ($m = 4.17$) ($t = 6.70$, $\alpha < .001$). For the question "if your local cable company was considering carrying Al Jazeera English (CNN International),

⁸ Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is a statistical method for testing whether the means of two or more groups are equal – whether the groups are on average different.

would you have a preference or try to influence its decision?”, we again find a significant difference between evaluations of AJE ($m = 2.99$) and CNNI ($m = 2.58$) across conditions ($t = 6.70$, $\alpha < .001$), though both are on the prefer-to-carry side of indifferent.

We found no variance in views towards Arab-Americans linked to the different conditions.⁹ Watching AJE probably did not heighten mistrust against Arab-Americans. The more likely scenario is that mistrust of Arab-Americans in general led to negative perceptions of AJE. We found that, on average, participants agreed with the statement that “Al Jazeera English represents an Arab outlook on the news,” thereby justifying a test of the relation between prejudice towards Arab-Americans and evaluations of AJE (table 1). The Arab-American prejudice measure correlates highly with several of our dependent variables. To gauge this, we combined responses to the six-item index for each participant to create a composite Arab-American prejudice score; the lowest factor loading for any one item was .80.

		bias	trustworthiness	likely to watch	cable carriage
AJE	Arab American prejudice	.31	.41	.38	.50
	ideology	.36	.39	.25	.38
CNNI	Arab American prejudice	non-significant	non-significant	non-significant	non-significant
	ideology	.37	.40	.23**	.20**
All reported correlation coefficients above are $\alpha < .001$; ** = $\alpha < .01$					

Table 1. Pearson's correlations of anti-Arab attitudes and ideology with views towards AJE and CNNI.

As expected, we found a strong Pearson's correlation between Arab-American prejudice scores and perceived bias ($r = .31$, $\alpha < .001$), perceived trustworthiness of AJE ($r = .41$, $\alpha < .001$), intention to watch AJE ($r = .38$, $\alpha < .001$), and opposition to cable AJE carriage ($r = .50$, $\alpha < .001$). That is, as Arab-American prejudice increases, evaluated trustworthiness and intention to watch AJE decreases while AJE bias ratings and opposition to AJE cable carriage increase. Arab-American prejudice and CNNI evaluations on each of these four points are not significantly correlated.

⁹ There is a marginal effect of a condition not discussed in the present paper.

We find similar correlations between reported political ideology and perceived bias ($r = .36, \alpha < .001$) trustworthiness of AJE ($r = .39, \alpha < .001$), intention to watch AJE ($r = .25, \alpha < .001$), and opposition to cable AJE carriage ($r = .38, \alpha < .001$). In other words, as conservatism increases, reported trustworthiness of AJE and intention to watch AJE decrease, while opposition to cable carriage increases.¹⁰ These trends are mirrored in evaluations of CNNI. Self-reported conservatism correlates with CNNI evaluations: political ideology and perceived bias ($r = .37, \alpha < .001$), trustworthiness ($r = .40, \alpha < .001$), intention to watch ($r = .23, \alpha < .01$), and opposition to cable AJE carriage ($r = .20, \alpha < .01$).

Discussion

Are Americans prejudiced against AJE? Can the network's publicity and recognition for its coverage of Egypt overcome this prejudice? The findings that show differential bias ratings between AJE and CNNI based on the same exact news clip suggest Americans are, on average, still unable to fairly evaluate the station. If there was no prejudice against AJE, the reputational change between CNNI and AJE would be equal. Instead, we see no movement for AJE and gain for CNNI. Though we did not see movement by condition for the trustworthiness, likelihood to watch, and the cable carriage questions, AJE was evaluated significantly less favorably on all three vis-à-vis CNNI, regardless of condition and likewise witnessed no movement on these questions. Taken together, these findings suggest that CNNI's evaluations benefited from the clip, while AJE's did not. On the contrary, perceptions of AJE appear to be not only negative, but stable.

Further, the American public's interest in Al Jazeera English – to the extent the MTurk sample is representative – is not substantial. Ninety-eight percent of participants had little or no exposure to the news channel, yet generally find it untrustworthy and are uninterested in watching, even after exposure to a clip that is credible enough to boost CNNI evaluations when ascribed to that network. This does not bode well for the prospects of AJE gaining a *broad* audience in the United States, while CNNI's better evaluations likely resulted from the goodwill of CNNI's brand. This study indicates that AJE faces a long road if it hopes to overcome the negative associations its brand suffered in the years of the George W. Bush administration. Since the

¹⁰ Political ideology and Arab American prejudice also correlate ($r = .38, \alpha < .001$), such that conservatism and prejudice increase in tandem.

Arab-American prejudice score and self-identified conservatism significantly correlate with negative evaluations of the network, and each other, it seems the roots of AJE prejudice run deep.

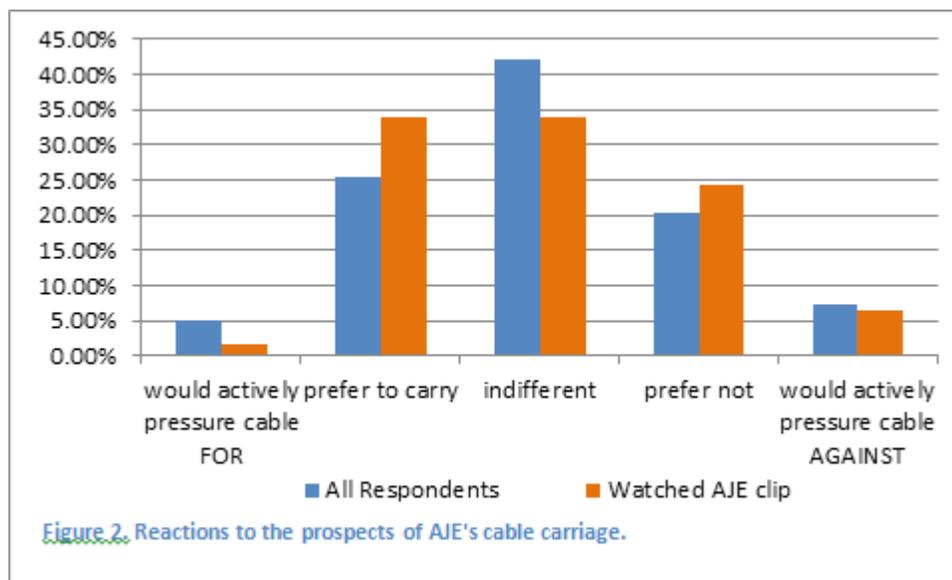
¹¹ Given that CNNI evaluations also correlated with political conservatism, but not with prejudice towards Arab-Americans, and that AJE evaluations were more highly correlated with anti-Arab views than with political ideology, it seems the bigger obstacle to AJE may be a built-in mistrust of Arabs. Thus, “prejudice” against AJE is doubly rooted in ideology and ethnocentrism.

Internal divides in the American political and social spheres that center on ideology and views towards Arabs, Arab-Americans and Islam will be crucial to the question of the network’s future in the country. Specifically, the high correlations between anti-Arab sentiments, ideology, and attitudes towards carriage and likelihood of watching suggest that certain segments of the population will resist viewing AJE with an open mind. There is some evidence to support AJE’s argument that people change their minds when they watch AJE. These correlations also suggest those on the liberal end of the ideological spectrum and those who do not harbor suspicions of Arabs may be more open towards changing their views of AJE with exposure. This study finds there is a market for AJE. However, our findings suggest that public mobilizations against AJE and cable deals would be linked to political conservatism and anti-Arab prejudice.

AJE will serve as a contra-flow within the United States, but its impact will be limited by unfair evaluations and active mobilizations against the network. What does this mean for AJE’s potential to encourage conciliatory, or moderated views towards the Arab world? While El-Nawaway and Powers (2008; 2009) found that dogmatism decreased with how long people had been AJE viewers, their viewers were also self-selecting, meaning they sought out affirmative media in line with their pre-existing worldviews. This study also indicates that self-selecting viewers may not just steer away from AJE, they will unfairly evaluate AJE’s reporting when they come across it. To the extent that this phenomenon is systematic, the reception of AJE may say more about the contentious state of politics towards the Arab world within the United States than it does about the network itself. AJE may be landing right into the particularly post-9/11 problem of political and cultural polarization around the question of US-Arab relations in the United States.

¹¹ It should be noted that some conservative websites lauded AJE. For example, the Drudge Report site (<http://www.drudgereport.com/>) kept a link to AJE at the top during the Egypt protest coverage in early 2011.

What, then, does this mean for the future of AJE distribution in the US? Is demand among the interested, potentially a growing minority, enough to bring about wider cable carriage? The results suggest viewers opposed to the network would not watch, and that some would actively work against cable deals. Polarization was reflected in the responses about cable carriage.



Compared with those who did not watch the AJE clip, those who watched the AJE clip were more likely to both prefer and *not* prefer the network's carriage on US cable systems. Fewer of those watching the AJE clip were indifferent. While 7 percent of all respondents said they would actively pressure cable companies not to show AJE, not one said the same of CNNI. Groups like AIM will seek to offset AJE's drive to put pressure on the cable industry with their own pressure. Even if AJE gains carriage, many would not watch with an open mind. The more immediate threat to AJE's American market ambitions is that popular prejudices against the station dissuade cable companies from signing distribution deals. Further, due to cable companies' catering to the mainstream, the ideological opposition to AJE may keep the network from the airwaves and, in turn, preclude fair viewing opportunities, thus limiting the potential of increased demand among non-self-selecting audiences.

The best promise for AJE in a politically polarized America where international news followers are a relatively small national market may lie where the network is best available now: online. The near-future of niche audience markets is directly linked to technological changes that enable the proliferation of new channels for even smaller segments of society (Prior, 2007). If American cable is not interested, AJE viewers in America will continue to rely on the internet for access to AJE. AJE has sought to circumvent these traditional gatekeepers through online distribution channels via their website, mobile phones, social media outlets, Livestation, and YouTube. Thus, while the politicization of AJE stands as a stumbling block for cable deals even in such a high-choice media environment, this may unintentionally be pushing the network ahead of the curve when it comes to online distribution. AJE may be well-placed given the trend of convergence between television and the internet, though it remains uncertain how future gate-keeping and audience viewing habits will be structured. The main risk is that this distribution structure makes incidental exposure by audiences less likely, thereby weakening AJE's chances of gaining new viewers. The inability to reach a new audience may reinforce poor US-Arab relations. That is, Americans who mistrust the Arab world would be shut out from the chance to learn more about it via AJE. It seems that, at best, "AJE's Moment" is a limited one in the United States, to the potential detriment of inter-cultural relations.

Limitations

This study is the first to evaluate attitudes toward AJE in an experimental context. It is also the first to analyze American responses to the network. While we hope this offers insight into both the American political climate and AJE's place within it, there are several limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, our sample is not fully representative, even if there is mounting evidence that MTurk provides more representative samples than do the other study pools available to university researchers (Berinsky et al, 2010). We also include just one news story watched in a particular historical context, right after "AJE's Moment." Future studies could consider the effects of long-term exposure over time, and at later dates in the case that reputational changes take a longer time to manifest. That said, this study relies on an audience that has not decided to watch AJE specifically. This design is similar to incidental exposure – those who accidentally tune in – if AJE were available to mass American audiences. Also, it is not yet clear whether public opinion matters in AJE's goals, or whether the development of markets and elite, governmental opinion is most important. There are therefore some limits on drawing general predictions and inferences based on this study alone.

Conclusion

AJE's coverage of the early 2011 uprisings in the Arab world, most notably Egypt, won acclaim, attention, and declarations that it was the network's "moment." This study asks whether AJE can leverage this moment into a broader American audience via increased carriage to become a mainstay in American news media as CNN did following its moment in the early 1990s. Results suggest this is unlikely. The perception of AJE as biased is robust among American viewers in general, and especially among those politically conservative and suspicious of Arabs. We found that the same news segment that boosted evaluations of CNNI when attributed to that network had no impact on the generally negative evaluations of AJE, even though it originally aired on AJE. Since these perceptions correlate highly with the more deeply held constructs of political ideology and prejudice, this "moment" is, at best, limited to a willingly receptive portion of the country. If those who remain prejudiced against AJE mobilize around this view and oppose cable carriage of AJE, it could offset gains in AJE's reputation. This would limit the network's market penetration and therefore the potential for educating or moderating the views of Americans who have little access to news and perspectives originating outside of the country's borders. In sum, AJE's moment may be stolen by those who could benefit the most from watching the network, to the detriment of international relations.

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