

Introduction

Since its inception, *Al Jazeera* and the space the network occupies in the alternative media order have been heavily contested. The network's editorial and journalistic decisions position *Al Jazeera* as an alternative news source and some see the station as a powerful force against global hegemonies. In "Hegemonic No More: Western Media, the Rise of Al-Jazeera, and the Influence of Diverse Voice," Philip Seib argues that *Al Jazeera*'s success signals "an end to the near monopoly in global news that American and other Western media had long enjoyed". (Seib 2005) Others heavily contest the alternative media designation citing the network's structure, organization, and funding; Adel Iskandar argues that much of the alterity that characterizes *Al Jazeera* is manufactured and "resembles the marketing strategy for a corporate brand". (Iskandar 2006)

Situating *Al Jazeera* within the alternative media order has been difficult in part because "the nature and definitions of alternative media have often been contested terrain" (ibid.). Although fluid, most definitions of alternative media focus on the challenge alternative sources pose to existing narratives and journalistic practices. These definitions of alterity stipulate that the media should have some if not all of the following characteristics: connections with social movements, facilitating social communication and change, the ability to instigate activism, challenge to the structures of power, wide participation in the creation of content, positioning outside mainstream media, an emphasis on the social construction of facts, privileging diverse voices, and participation-based organizational values, structure and funding. (See Atton 2003, Downing, and Iskandar)

Judged against some of these criteria – particularly that of permitting grassroots participation and association with social movements – *Al Jazeera* could not be called alternative.

Another challenge to understanding *Al Jazeera*'s alterity is posed by the fact that *Al Jazeera* is a transnational media organization. Much of the scholarship on alternative media does not account for the unique challenges posed by an organization that functions and conceptualizes itself outside of a traditional nation-state framework. In "Al Jazeera: A Challenge to Traditional Framing Research", Wojcieszak argues that traditional framing theories are based on assumptions about the role that media plays in Western nation-states. Because the new transnational media landscape is characterized by the implementation of new technologies that cut across traditional cultural and sovereign boundaries, traditional framing research "may be inapplicable to the transnational media landscape" (Wojcieszak 2007).

On the assumption that *Al Jazeera's* impact on challenging the structures of power merits an assessment of the network's alterity, this paper seeks to explore the conditions under which a transnational media outlet such as *Al Jazeera* might be described as alternative. This analysis begins by demonstrating areas where *Al Jazeera* fits traditional alternative media criteria and exploring *Al Jazeera's* success in challenging structures of power by providing a platform for diverse voices. Following that discussion, the analysis will consider those areas where the network fails to meet current alternative media definitions. This section will demonstrate how certain critical definitions of alterity in traditional alternative media research, such as freedom from corporate or state sponsorship, would necessarily limit an organization's ability to reach a transnational audience. After addressing the conditions which have enabled *Al Jazeera* to enlarge or create public discursive spaces, this article will begin to draw the outlines for a new theoretical framework that will help us better understand *Al Jazeera* and similar transnational media.

Traditional Theorizations and *Al Jazeera*

The literature on *Al Jazeera* demonstrates that the network meets many of the criteria for alterity mentioned above. The challenge that *Al Jazeera* poses to the governments in the Middle East and the United States is a pervasive theme in descriptions about the network. Prior to *Al Jazeera's* establishment, most television media networks in the Middle East region (which scholars consider highly influential in the region because of high illiteracy rates) acted as "mouthpieces" for official government positions. Even satellite networks, which have traditionally been privately owned and generally have more flexibility in airing programming that may offend some sensibilities, have been unwilling or unable to air sensitive political issues such as "uncensored debates or screen footage of angry demonstrations on Arab streets" (Sakr 2005; 84). According to a number of regional media veterans, the huge effort required to create content, secure government support, and generate revenue creates significant disincentives for upsetting governments who can physically shut down networks or pressure advertisers to withdraw funding.

Within such a context, many researchers describe *Al Jazeera's* impact on expanding the public sphere as nothing short of transformative. Under the motto, "The opinion and the other opinion" the network's editors and journalists strive to privilege alternative voices. In "Maverick or Model," Sakr describes how a show called *Under Siege*, consisting entirely of live calls, e-mails, and faxes from members of the public, "became a vehicle for outbursts as much against Arab leaders for their alleged impotence and inertia as against Israel or the USA". By all accounts, providing a forum to individual callers to publicly criticize their leaders is a new phenomenon in the Middle Eastern world. *Al Jazeera* continued airing *Under Seige* even after various governments threatened closure of its satellite offices. The network's dedication to maintaining this show as "a platform for those without a platform" demonstrates a dedication to opening spaces for public debate. By airing programming that specifically targets government corruption and human rights abuses and giving a platform to opposition movements and other dissenting groups, *Al Jazeera* has forced governments to be more accountable for their actions. (Wojcieszak 2007)

According to Wojcieszak, the results of such programming have already motivated “many politicians to be attentive to public opinion that they did not consider previously and... facilitated the power of the public to shape government opinion instead of merely being shaped by it” (Wojcieszak 2007; 122, See Wojcieszak, Sakr, Miles, Zayani). Although the network’s editors and journalists value objectivity and thus are not consciously promoting any specific social movement agenda, the network’s role in spurring interest in politics, vitalizing political discussion, and the adoption of its format by competitors suggest that as *Al Jazeera* and its competitors continue to push boundaries and expand their reach into homes, they will inspire discourse that could perhaps lead to social action.

Failing to make the Theoretical Cut

Despite *Al Jazeera*’s accomplishments in promoting the creation of public discursive spaces, *Al Jazeera* cannot, under the current theoretical framework, be defined as an alternative medium. According to many alternative media academics, traditional alternative media is understood to offer “not simply a symbolic challenge (through its content) to mass communication, but a challenge to the political economy of mass communication itself through its alternative, democratic structures” (Atton 2007; 99). This alternative media definition fundamentally disallows private or state funding because such backing poses systemic and fundamental conflicts of interest. Moreover, alternative media by its very nature opposes professionalism, which intrinsically promotes exclusivity. According to most alternative media theory, mainstream media organizations are understood as “largely monolithic, centered on profit, hierarchical organizations which, by virtue of their professional routinization and codification, are implicitly exclusive” (Downing 1984). In contrast, alternative media content is primarily understood as being “produced and composed primarily by non-professionals” (Iskandar 2006).

Al Jazeera cannot meet the preceding criteria because of the network’s structure, funding, and journalistic values. The organization functions much the way other mainstream institutions operate in terms of how the network plans and puts together its news stories (Iskandar 2006). As the most popular news outlet in the Arab world with over 40 million viewers, the network has its pick of journalists and producers, most of who have been trained by leading world news agencies such as the BBC (Sakr 2005, 87). The competition for trained staff due to the explosion of satellite networks and rising expectations of production quality also contributes to the professionalization of the *Al Jazeera* corps.

Editors at *Al Jazeera* also have a tremendous degree of editorial latitude. According to Faisal al-Kasim, the presenter of the debate show *The Opposite Direction*, he has complete editorial control: “My show is the most controversial show on the network, but no one interferes.” (ibid.) But while editors and journalists can purposely court controversy by airing dissenting views, scholars, writers, and government officials are often the main commentators on *Al Jazeera*’s news shows, which implies that certain elite voices are necessarily privileged while others are not heard. (Kasim 2005)

Despite the editorial latitude of the network’s producers and journalists, the emphasis on professionalism excludes wide, grassroots type of participation. The network places an

emphasis on presentation that is highly reminiscent of and even modeled on its Western counterparts. *Al Jazeera* news programs exhibit show formats and guest selections that would be equally at home on CNN or Fox News. The network's inaugural show also emphasized journalistic "objectivity" and "professionalism" – two concepts that place the organization thoroughly at odds with aligning itself with any specific social movement or radical political agenda.

Moreover, Qatari government support is critical to *Al Jazeera*'s continued success. According to Wojcieszak's research, *Al Jazeera*'s coverage of sensitive and controversial issues in the Middle East has not only "ushered in a new kind of open contentious public politics in which a plethora of competing voices clamored for attention" but also made the network vulnerable to being shut down (Lynch cited by Wojcieszak 2007; 124). Pressure by elites in various countries has deterred advertising on Al Jazeera, and the emir of Qatar has played a crucial role in keeping the network alive financially. Although the emir seems committed to reducing censorship and by all accounts has never interfered editorially, it is understood that "the channel's editorial freedom was the result not of structural economic and political independence, but of 'a grant from upstairs' – a grant that could be claimed back at any moment for whatever reason" (Sakr 2005; 87). Through the lens of traditional alternative media theory, the network's reliance on its Qatari benefactor is fundamentally problematic.

An Alternate Viewpoint

In many ways, the very characteristics which discount *Al Jazeera*'s alterity according to traditional framing theories have been critical to *Al Jazeera*'s ability to widen the public discourse on a range of previously forbidden topics. For example, *Al Jazeera* strives to fill the gap created by state-controlled programs that privilege propaganda. But in doing so, it has alienated many governments. As mentioned before, governments have retaliated against critical reporting by suspending and imprisoning the station's correspondents, shutting down *Al Jazeera*'s local operations, and pressuring companies that seek to advertise on the channel to withdraw their ads (Wojcieszak 2007; 124). Satellite channel owners tend to protect vested interests by avoiding taboo topics because they need revenue to cover production costs and generate profit. *Al Jazeera* has been able to sustain its commitment to objectivity and alternative viewpoints solely because of the Qatari government's support. (ibid 221)

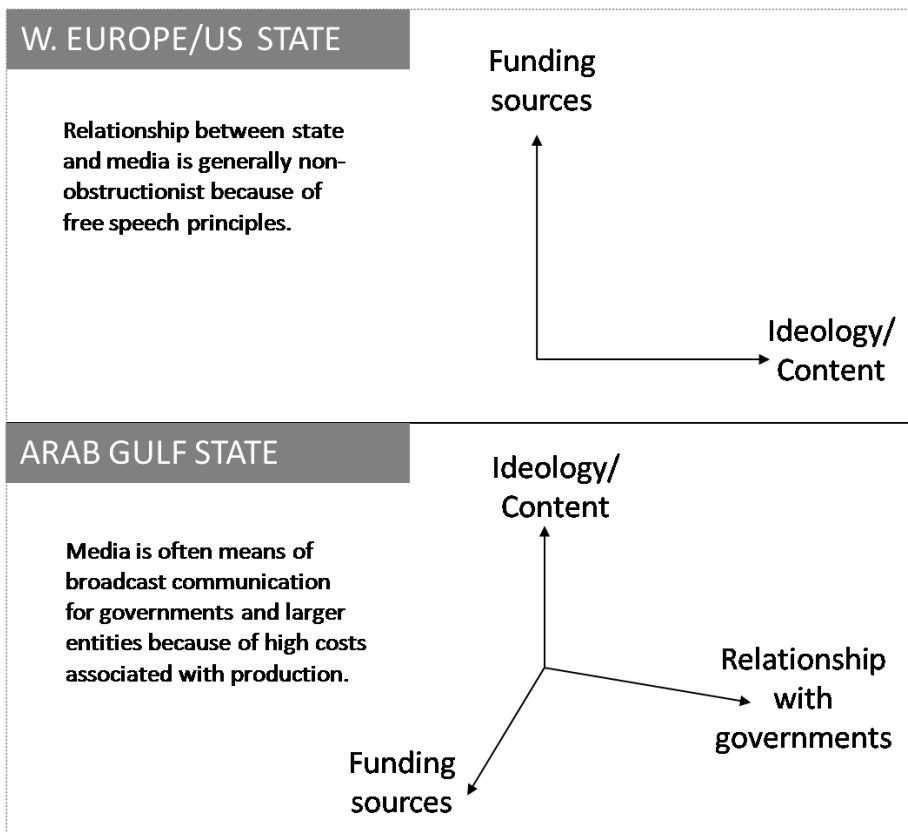


Figure 1 Differences in the Political Economy of Media Penetration - Excluding limited regulations that prohibit certain classes of speech such as those that incite violence, Western European and the US governments tend to assign media with privileged status because of its role in promoting public discourse. Many current alternative media theorizations are predicated on the assumed relationship between states and media and thus cannot be directly applied to socio-economic-political environments without further consideration of these different dynamics.

The obstacles to maintaining this editorial freedom continue to multiply. In spring 2008, all the Arab states except Qatar passed the Arab League Satellite Broadcasting Charter which seeks to regulate satellite media. Hussein Amin, chair of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Cairo says that according to state officials,

“... the Charter calls not for the stifling of dissent or opposing voices but rather for the *responsible exercise of freedom of expression*. (emphasis added) Broadcasters are free to criticize and to report corruption, but they must do so in a responsible way: providing facts to the public, not defaming or libeling public figures and not promoting terrorism or violence, including the violent overthrow of governments.” (Arab Media Society 2008)

The charter’s guidelines mirror many of the criticisms that have been levied against *Al*

Jazeera by state representatives over the years. Given the political climate and increasing efforts to regulate satellite networks, without the emir's support, it would be difficult for *Al Jazeera* to continue operating.

The professionalization of the network is also a critical factor to the network's success. Adopting the "look" and "feel" of Western counterparts lends credibility to the station's journalistic practices. Iskandar points out that "for many Westerners, *Al Jazeera* has become emblematic not only of an alternative voice, but also a "native" voice from the Arab world," but *Al Jazeera* is an accessible and familiar "native" voice because it speaks a visual language that transcends a lack of Arabic cultural and linguistic fluency.

To its Middle Eastern audience, applying the "professionalized" presentation of *Al Jazeera*'s Western competitors and emphasizing "objectivity" places the network on a par with global counterparts such as CNN (Awad 2005; 83). The station's legitimacy and "objectivity" is crucial to its ability to represent alternate viewpoints as valid. The fact that a network with "legitimate" and mostly Western trained correspondents makes certain editorial choices over others lends credibility to the viewpoints *Al Jazeera* privileges. Professionalism also allows *Al Jazeera* to lend issues that are otherwise ignored by mainstream transnational media more legitimacy. The "professionalism" of *Al Jazeera*'s journalistic practices enables the network to compete with other hegemonic news outlets; the network's professionalism lends it a legitimate voice which can highlight how the objectivity espoused by other networks is flawed and problematic.

A New Way Forward

Although critiques of the network's funding and participation model are justified, these criticisms potentially dismiss *Al Jazeera*'s alterity without adequately accounting for the network's accomplishments. This is partly because alternative media theory has mostly been articulated within the confines of singular traditional socio-political state boundaries. *Al Jazeera* exists at a theoretical crossroads because the station's funding, size, and aspirations to become a worldwide alternative medium necessitate navigating a matrix of power that goes beyond traditional nation-state, corporate, and political boundaries.

Some alternative media theorists like Atton and Downing believe that alternative media theory needs new ways to account for broad global dynamics. At the moment, *Al Jazeera* is arguably unique but as transnational news networks proliferate, a theory that accounts for the alterity of transnational media organizations would contribute greatly to an understanding of how mass media continues to evolve. *Al Jazeera* itself excludes certain voices and further study could uncover insights into how to transmit alternative viewpoints in an increasingly corporatized transnational and national media environment.

An updated theory needs to account for the challenges an organization would face in viably representing viewpoints that are underrepresented, marginalized, and demonized to both regional and transnational audiences. It would also have to reconsider the assumed position of media vis-à-vis governments. At present, prevailing media theorizations assume that

states have an interest in protecting media outlets for their role in promoting public discourse, which may be the case in Western Europe or the United States, but not necessarily elsewhere. Many alternative media theorizations are thus inadequate to describe or account for the variety of state-media relationships. State-media relationships are informed by a complex interaction of factors and actors that are contextually specific and that need to be accounted for in any discussion of media alterity.

Al Jazeera is an ideal case study for alternative media theorists because the network already penetrates Western international news hegemony. The network's accomplishments also provide an outline for the characteristics that could define alterity for such an organization. *Al Jazeera* has problematized marginality and objectivity in ways that sensitize actors to alternative viewpoints and interests that they would not have considered before. Consider the US military's relationship with *Al Jazeera*, particularly since the invasion of Iraq. According to Josh Rushing, a former Marine and press officer for US Central Command who is now a correspondent for *Al Jazeera*'s English version, it is in the interest of US officials to participate in discussions that air on *Al Jazeera* because of the network's overwhelming power to sway public opinion in the region. Although the US military kicked *Al Jazeera* out of Iraq soon after the invasion for showing pictures of dead civilians and US soldiers, US officials are now routinely interviewed. Because *Al Jazeera* is committed to providing the "view and the other view," when the US military refuses to participate, it squanders opportunities to defend its position (Rushing 2007).

The fact that the United States complains about how *Al Jazeera* privileges certain voices or perspectives over others is proof that the network is changing the locale of marginality such that previously hegemonic voices are now complaining of being marginalized. This reversal of the global flow of information – which has traditionally run from north to south and west to east – is still nascent but current geopolitics suggests that this phenomenon may occur with more frequency in the future.

Alternative media are fundamentally concerned with representing the interests and needs of underrepresented groups. As Atton said in a 2007 review of "Issues in Current Alternative Media Research," "Alternative media also seek to redress what their producers consider an imbalance of media power in mainstream media, which results in the marginalisation (at worst, the demonization) of certain social and cultural groups and movements." The ability to promote pluralism that transcends hegemonic interests by privileging not only subaltern but other voices is perhaps the most critical component of privileging alternate viewpoints.

As *Al Jazeera* has shown, transnational media in the form of satellite television has both the potential and ability to address the power imbalance and the neglect or misrepresentation of alternative viewpoints that has long existed in international news. Studying the alterity of *Al Jazeera* will not only lead to a deeper appreciation of *Al Jazeera*'s accomplishments but also provide insights into redressing hegemony using new and potent mediums.

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