

The Role of Al-Jazeera (Arabic) in the Arab Revolts of 2011

Between faithfully reporting an event, and attempting to actively shape it lies a hornets' nest, and the media organization oscillating between the two extremes is sure to feel its sting. Adhering to the camp of factual reporting or the camp of event shaping may not be the safest option

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in the current revolutionary environment that is the Arab World. The worst option remains to actively ignore, obscure and misinform – a pattern that can be observed in most Arab state media.

A television station is assumed to have an impact on current events, indeed, it is its *raison d'être*. But the effect could come as a matter of fact, or it could be intentional. There is little doubt that it was Al-Jazeera's clear intention to affect – a decision it is currently paying dearly for.

Neutrality vs. Objectivity

Let us consider words such as “neutrality” and “objectivity” before we delve into Al-Jazeera's role in the freedom revolts of the Arab world, which erupted shortly before the beginning of 2011, a role important enough to lead Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to acknowledge - with grudging admiration - on March 5, 2011: “Like it or hate it, it is really effective. In fact, viewership of Al-Jazeera is going up in the United States because it is real news.”

A person's heart is only really neutral at

death. If a person did not favor one of two sides: Hosni Mubarak, or the crowds in Tahrir Square for example, he would be confused at best, at worst psychologically ill. In journalism however, relative neutrality is essential. The reporter endeavors to expose different points of view, in an effort to remain faithful to the information, and to better describe the bigger picture. This increases his credibility, which in turn helps him retain a large audience, whose hearts and minds he can affect, thus contributing in the making of the event. Objectivity is yet another tool to increase impact. In the coverage of clashes between Gaddafi's forces and their opponents by Al-Jazeera and other stations, a clear attempt was made to lessen the impact of news of opposition losses by also drawing attention to Gaddafi's corruption. This amounts to direct participation in the psychological warfare of the Libyan revolution/civil war.

The Age of Arab Revolts

The rules of journalism were clearer before the age of Arab revolts (in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman...). We used to advocate that media should not campaign, except against smoking, or in favor of human rights. But we soon discovered that media is quick (and happy) to slip into campaigning mode. After all, corruption is no less damaging than smoking, and freedom does not lie outside human rights.

In the time between the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts, Al-Jazeera embarked on a strange campaign. On the evening of January 23, 2011, it devoted the entirety of its main newscast to the Palestine Papers, leaked confidential documents detailing a number of



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concessions that the Palestinian Authority had allegedly agreed to make to Israel. For four consecutive days, Al-Jazeera allotted many hours to a multitude of programs and interviews surrounding the issue. The campaign adopted a strident tone, and an oddly theatrical staging, which lessened its impact. Many noted that the presenters' body language was far from their customary coolness, and that the tone of their voices was frighteningly similar to the tone of 1960s Arab state broadcasters when declaiming rousing political statements. The Palestine Papers revealed little of note and resulted in an opposite effect to the one expected: The Palestinian Authority ended up receiving support from people who would not have defended it otherwise.

Two things quickly came to Al-Jazeera's rescue: First, its great slogan: Al-Ra'i wa-l-Ra'i al-Akhar (the opinion and the other opinion). Since the start of the coverage, Saeb Erakat, chief negotiator of the Palestinian Authority, had made several appearances on Al-Jazeera, and had successfully disproved many points, using a strong offensive style when necessary. Al-Jazeera also hosted a number of Palestinian Authority officials, who served to balance the picture a little more. Second, the Egyptian revolution: On January 25, the third of four days that Al-Jazeera dedicated to the revelations of the Palestine Papers, Egypt rose against its rulers. Al-Jazeera quickly relegated the Palestine Papers to a special online website, and got ready to cover the Egyptian uprising.

The story of the Arab revolutions began in Tunisia. Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, sparking a wave of protests, which intensified following his death on January 24, 2011. Ten days later, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia's autocratic president, stepped down and fled the country.

Al-Jazeera had not been allowed inside Tunisia for years. Citizen journalists helped alleviate the vacuum of information. While Al-Jazeera obtained no scoop, it was, however, the first to feel the real pulse on the street. It is important to understand what went on in the

minds of reporters in Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar. These reporters, many of who were Tunisian, all considered Tunisia a police state. Ben Ali's regime, which subsisted mainly on tourism, was deemed oppressive, and opposed to real development. Many production companies had often proposed television features about life in Tunisia, within the context of Hadith As-Sabah, the morning talk show, which regularly featured segments about daily life in different Arab countries. Al-Jazeera refused to air the Tunisia features, feeling the bright picture they depicted was inappropriate for a country that forbade any political coverage. Al-Jazeera was quick to take a stand supporting

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Tunisian protestors and their demands. As demonstrations intensified, the station dropped its regular scheduling and opted for an open news cycle, which broadcast news and images from Tunisia as they came in online. The Tunisian audience followed their revolution on Al-Jazeera – the station was already popular in Tunisia before the revolution, due to the absence of trustworthy local media. During the revolution, the Tunisians lifted banners praising Al-Jazeera.

The Tunisian revolution succeeded with astonishing speed. 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 Al-Jazeera's impact: it was superficial. The Arabic speaking Al-Jazeera station was simply closer to the hearts of many Arabs because the latter related to its employees as one of them. This was the case, for in Al-Jazeera's newsroom one can find reporters and producers from

every Arab country - with a fair distribution and representation – who are all impassioned about Arab and Islamic issues. They use the term umma (nation) a lot. Some apply it to signify the Islamic umma, others to mean the Arab umma, but most of them use it interchangeably.

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The majority comes from a middle class background, even though their good salaries in an affluent oil-producing country now allows them to send their children to foreign schools and to join the ranks of the upper middle class.

Cautious Conclusions

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 also the closest media to their hearts and minds.

With the Egyptian revolution, things were more difficult for Al-Jazeera, as it was far from being the news channel of choice of the Egyptian household. In 2009, a poll, conducted on 27000 viewers by an American company at Al-Jazeera's behest, revealed that the channel was practically absent from Lebanese and Egyptian screens. The cause was clear: Both countries had many channels and TV stations which covered local news with a great degree of freedom and professionalism. However, freedom of information in Egypt had received a painful blow from the state security apparatus soon before the parliamentary elections, two months before the revolt of January 25. Strict

restrictions had been placed on privately owned television stations, although the written press had been relatively less affected. Al-Jazeera undoubtedly gained some ground in Egypt during that period, although I do not have exact numbers. But the Egyptian public did not need Al-Jazeera to comprehend the farcical nature of the parliamentary elections that took place only two months before the downfall of Mubarak: the ruling national party had secured more than 95% of the seats. To the historian we say, if only one cause is to be considered as the spark that set the Egyptian revolution aflame, let it be the farce of the elections.

The previous elections in 2005 were equally fraudulent, laden with threats and violence. The falsification however was not complete: the Muslim Brotherhood won 20% of the seats, with members who ran as independents, since the party was legally forbidden to participate in the political arena. The Egyptian people grudgingly accepted the elections, whose results greatly pleased the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the most recent elections were a blatant insult to the Egyptian people's dignity and intelligence. As a consequence, Mubarak's regime lost the support of the Muslim Brotherhood, which it had enjoyed for five years.

During the past five years, Al-Jazeera had allocated a lot of its airtime to Egyptian topics, despite the channel's absence from Egyptian screens. The station's coverage had been strongly criticized on many occasions, especially after the broadcast of two hour long documentary about torture practices in Egyptian police departments. The documentary led to a number of Egyptian talk shows attacking Al-Jazeera and attempting to discredit it. Shortly after the end of filming, the documentary's producer Huweida Taha had been arrested, and her tapes and laptop confiscated. She later managed to smuggle out a copy of the material. To make a long story short, Al-Jazeera broadcast tens of hours of documentation on Egypt, more than was produced about all other Arab countries combined. I do not recall a single hour that was not in some way critical

of the regime. Even the documentary entitled *As-Saqf al-'Ali* (the High Ceiling), which praised the relative freedom of privately owned media

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in Egypt, still alluded to the police's contempt and disrespect for the Egyptian people.

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 still 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. It also interrupted Al-Jazeera's broadcast on the NileSat satellite, the only way to view the channel in Egypt. This represented a big setback for the Al-Jazeera. Nevertheless, it managed to resume its broadcast through other friendly stations. One could say that the impact of official Egyptian television was still important as the protests intensified, notably when it managed to touch the hearts of many after Mubarak's second speech on February 1, with the image of the old president telling his people that he wants to die on Egyptian soil. But what kept the street ablaze was the stubbornness of Egyptian youth, aided by the strong presence of an organized force on the street, namely the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Jazeera received as much praise from Egyptians as it had from Tunisians, if not more. But it had only really reassured the revolutionaries that the channel of the Arab rebelling masses 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.

When all the station's reporters were arrested and its network offices closed for a couple of weeks, Al-Jazeera sent people from Doha to secretly work as reporters. It was constantly present in Tahrir Square. Many of the images broadcast at the time were the work of amateur reporters. For a few days Al-Jazeera's broadcast resembled radio more than television. With a live 24-hour broadcast, punctuated by scarce videos, phone conversations filled the void left by the dearth of images (and that, despite the regime's intervention on mobile communications). Al-Jazeera had sent its reporters to different cities and towns across Egypt, and they made sure to relay information in any way they could.

Studio guests also inflamed the Egyptian street. Azmi Bechara's contributions were especially noteworthy, with his deep political and theoretical analysis of events based on his historical knowledge, leftist background and firm belief in Arabism. His impact was great in raising the morale and spreading faith in the hearts of the youth of the revolution. Another voice that rose to the forefront during that period was that of Nawara Negm, an Egyptian activist who was interviewed many times by Al-Jazeera. She was close to the core of the youth movement, assertive and harsh as she made her demands and exposed her point of view.

Gains and Losses

Despite the Islamic tint that usually colors Al-Jazeera broadcasts, during the Egyptian revolution and until the fall of Mubarak, the station strove to commit to the demands of the young protestors, by not promoting any particular party or ideology. It kept broadcasting as if it represented the revolutionaries. Only after Mubarak's resignation, did the role of parties become clearer – mostly, it emerged that there were few real parties other than the Muslim Brotherhood – and viewers noted the increasing appearance of the face of political Islam on Al-Jazeera screens as the station kept intensifying its broadcasting.

The fall of Mubarak on February 12, 2011 was a moment of joy at Al-Jazeera. Three days later, Libya rose against its leader. On February 21, Colonel Gaddafi sent his son Saif al-Islam to threaten his people with a civil war. Today, in the middle of March, it appears he has kept his promise.

The Libyans also called for Al-Jazeera, and Al-Jazeera responded by taking a stance for the people against Gaddafi. The station focused its broadcast on the news and developing events. This time, interference took place on the Arab Sat satellite. Al-Jazeera is still reporting Libyan developments with the same intensity, with Yemen getting its share of coverage every now and then, with Bahrain close behind. But this

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style of impassioned reporting of events, which aims at impacting and shaping them, tends to limit the focus to one story at a time. Gulf sensitivities might soon become more evident on Al-Jazeera. But until now, the tally shows that it has been the station that was closest to the street pulse, and the emotions of Arab citizens.

It would benefit Al-Jazeera (Arabic) to assess its losses. It has sacrificed much of its diversity, not only by eliminating all its documentary programs and talk shows, but also by devoting

most of its broadcasts and the bigger slice of its newscasts to the headline of the day. It has lost a large portion of its viewers – who have migrated towards BBC Arabic, France24, Al-Jazeera English, and BBC English – by failing to satisfy their hunger for more diverse and elaborate information. Al-Jazeera's success in the age of revolutions fell short of its triumph during the Iraq War, despite its impact on the revolts.

When the age of revolution is passed, Al-Jazeera will still benefit from strong foundations. It is likely to lose more viewers to local stations which now enjoying more freedom in the countries that have been released from the control autocratic regimes. Even in countries where regimes remain unchanged, a new wind of media freedom is sure to blow – whether strong or soft. Stations there will have the advantage of being local, which will make them more attractive and relevant. However, Al-Jazeera will still profit from a very high ceiling of freedom, long experience, superior funding, and from being the 'Channel of all Arabs'. Add to that – and deservedly so – the characteristic of being the one station that supported the revolutions without reservations.

A television station does not create a revolution, nor does it participate in it, despite what some researchers may think. At most, it is a panel on the highway telling the revolutionaries: You are on the right path.

Translation from Arabic by Joumana Seikaly.