Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
Asia Program

KUALA LUMPUR CALLING

AL JAZEERA ENGLISH IN ASIA

EDITED BY MICHAEL KUGELMAN

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INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL KUGELMAN

Al Jazeera, a Qatar-based, Arabic-language satellite news channel, is arguably one of the Middle East's—and the world's—most influential news sources. Established in 1996, Al Jazeera is credited with defying media censorship and expanding the margin of press freedoms across the Middle East. Though it receives much of its funding from the emir of Qatar, the station has been widely recognized as an independent news voice in the Middle East. Many communications analysts also believe that the channel's broadcasts—particularly those depicting Arab and Muslim suffering around the world—have shaped public opinion on a variety of issues, especially U.S. foreign policies.

Al Jazeera is perhaps also the world's most controversial media organization, having gained notoriety for its critical tone toward Arab regimes and U.S. and Israeli policies in the Muslim world. The U.S. government has assailed Al Jazeera for airing video messages from Osama Bin Laden and for broadcasting coverage perceived as anti-American (former U.S. defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously lambasted Al Jazeera as "terror TV"). The station's feisty reporting has also irked many Mideast governments—which have not hesitated to ban Al Jazeera from their countries.

THE BIRTH OF AL JAZEERA ENGLISH

Given Al Jazeera's tumultuous history, the 2006 launch of Al Jazeera English (AJE) has attracted a fair amount of attention. This 24-hour English-language satellite news channel is independent of the Arabic-language channel, but part of the broader Al Jazeera network (which features sports and children's programming in addition to news) and a

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beneficiary of the Qatari emir's financial largesse. AJE has boldly declared its intention to "reverse the flow" of information (which it contends has traditionally moved from the West to the East) by training its cameras on the underreported regions of the non-Western world. In the words of AJE journalist Riz Khan—who, like many of AJE's reporters and managers, previously worked with Western media organizations—while American news channels "show the missiles taking off, Al Jazeera shows them landing."[1]

Is the world tuning in to this new channel? According to recent estimates, the station now reaches 113 to 120 million homes worldwide—more than twice the number of households that receive Al Jazeera's Arabic-language news channel, and almost half the number of homes that get CNN International, a network that has existed for several decades.[2] The station is available through satellite or cable television. AJE's programming can also be viewed on the Internet via the website YouTube.com, where AJE has a dedicated page, as well as on the station's own website, english.aljazeera.net. According to AJE's own data, the channel is now available in at least 60 countries. This global reach is enhanced by its decentralized structure; Al Jazeera English's broadcasts emanate from four different "broadcast centers" around the world. Over every 24-hour period, one center airs AJE's coverage live for a block of time before handing the live broadcast over to the next center. One broadcast center is in Doha, Qatar, where the Al Jazeera network is headquartered. Two others are in Washington and London. The fourth broadcast center is located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Dateline Southeast Asia

Al Jazeera English's top management often refers to Asia as an "important market" and a "key" area for the broadcaster's growth. Not surprisingly, AJE has a major presence in Asia, with dozens of bureaus. Much of this footprint is found in Southeast Asia. In addition to the Kuala Lumpur (KL) broadcast center, there are bureaus in Jakarta, Manila, and Sydney, with Bangkok perhaps to follow. AJE can be seen in Malaysia, Indonesia, New Zealand, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines.

Al Jazeera's decision in late 2004 to establish an AJE broadcast center

in Malaysia generated an immediate buzz within Southeast Asia's media sphere. Some wondered if AJE's arrival portended an assault on press restrictions in the region, which, like the Middle East, is no bastion of journalistic freedom. A Malaysia-based media expert, writing in *Asia Times*, noted that Al Jazeera "has challenged traditional barriers of press freedom in the Middle East," and has "forced outlets subservient to draconian Arab governments to either change or risk being ignored." Given this track record,

> Who's to say al-Jazeera can't become the same inspiring equipoise in Asia? In places like Malaysia, which consistently lands in the basement of press freedom indices, and where the variety of print and broadcast media eerily mirrors the choices on an old Soviet-era supermarket shelf, a stronger challenge to the status quo is sorely needed.[3]

Others hoped that Al Jazeera's ability to circumvent government-erected press barriers would mean more and better coverage of some of Southeast Asia's underreported and sensitive stories, such as violence in East Timor, the insurgency in southern Thailand, and rebel activity in the Philippines. According to one early observer of AJE, writing in December 2006, the new station had already "aired detailed reports on East Timor and treats the Thai insurgency as a running story[,] not as a special feature to be focused on briefly and forgotten for weeks at a time, as tends to be the case on CNN and the BBC."[4] Other early AJE features included stories on racial tensions in Malaysia and an interview with a member of the Indonesian extremist group Jemaah Islamiyah—not typical fare for the region's cautious media.

Yet even with this giddy talk about shattering press restrictions and illuminating forgotten stories, there was no shortage of naysayers. In the weeks before launch, some pointed to the irony of AJE basing a broadcast center "in a media neighborhood virtually locked down by the ruling party."[5] Censorship, some observers contended, was a strong possibility. Other skeptics noted that AJE's impact could be limited in areas of Southeast Asia where English is not understood, or in non-Muslim parts of the region. Still others argued at the time that the arrival of a fresh, non-Western media voice would not be a novelty: Asia-based Western or Western-run media (such as the *Far Eastern Economic Review*,

Asiaweek, and *Asian Wall Street Journal*) were declining, while new local independent media resources promoting non-Western perspectives (such as blogs) were proliferating.[6]

Perhaps Kavi Chongkittavorn, a leading Thai journalist, put it best in April 2006: the Asian television news scene is "already overcrowded," and AJE "will be judged solely on its performance."[7] Approximately two years after AJE's launch and the establishment of its Kuala Lumpur broadcast center, how can Al Jazeera English's performance in Southeast Asia be judged? In an effort to answer this question and others, the Wilson Center's Asia and Middle East programs hosted a half-day conference about AJE's Southeast Asia operations on April 7, 2008. The objective was to provide context for AJE's arrival in Southeast Asia; to assess its impact so far; and to consider its future prospects in the region. Each of the essays appearing in this volume was prepared for this conference. The geographic focus, both at the conference and in this collection, is on the Muslim-majority nations of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Al Jazeera English In Southeast Asia: An Overview

In the first essay, **Marwan M. Kraidy** of the University of Pennsylvania examines Al Jazeera English's struggle to establish an identity—and how Asia fits into this struggle. Unlike Al Jazeera's Arabic-language channel, which comfortably regards itself as an Arab medium targeting an Arabic-speaking audience, AJE awkwardly seeks to reconcile its status as an English-language global network with its relationship to the network's Middle East regional brand. AJE's main challenge, Kraidy writes, "resides in the fact that the Al Jazeera brand's strong association with the Middle East, the Arabic language, and the Islamic religion hinders its claim to be a truly global, English-language channel not narrowly associated with any region of the world." Marketing itself as a global, English-language news channel also forces AJE to compete with the likes of media powerhouses CNN International and BBC, both of which enjoy "potent brand identities." Kraidy asserts that the BBC, with its perceived impartiality, its "public service journalistic tradition," and lack of association with the United States, is a particularly formidable rival for Al Jazeera English. Yet he acknowledges that AJE's financial backing from Qatar's emir puts the

station at an advantage over both CNN and the BBC, which must accord "the utmost consideration" toward their bottom lines. And at a time of high global energy prices, this source of funding is particularly fortuitous.

How can AJE stay true to the Al Jazeera regional brand while simultaneously developing into a global media force? According to Kraidy, Asia is the answer. "With its large population of Muslims and its high number of English speakers," he explains, "Asia emerges as a compromise between Al Jazeera's regionally based brand heritage and its ambition to become a global player." Yet the channel's presence in Asia may create additional challenges. Kraidy says that while anecdotal evidence points to AJE's popularity in Southeast Asia, the region is known for a lack of "accurate audience ratings." The dearth of such ratings may dampen advertisers' enthusiasm for the channel and "sap the morale" of reporters, who cannot know if many people are watching.

Ohio University's **Drew McDaniel** provides some historical context for AJE's foray into Southeast Asia, tracing past interactions between governments and media in Indonesia and Malaysia, two countries rife with ethnic and linguistic diversity. Following independence, state-controlled media policies were implemented in both nations to promote national unification. However, as non-state communications technologies—particularly satellites and the Internet—began entering each nation's media space, exerting state control over media became difficult. "The fundamental problem faced by governments in Malaysia and Indonesia," McDaniel notes, "was that these [non-state] alternatives were much more popular than state-controlled media." Consequently, audiences for the countries' state-run broadcasters dwindled, and the efforts of Jakarta and KL to promote national unification grew imperiled.

Today, satellites and the Internet remain prominent in both countries' media environments—and these technologies enable Malaysians and Indonesians to watch Al Jazeera English. The Indonesian satellite packagers IndoVision and Astro Nussantara offer AJE, as does the Malaysian satellite provider ASTRO. Yet McDaniel sounds a note of caution. The popularity of Internet- and satellite-delivered international news services in Indonesia and Malaysia has been driven by their independence from "centralized information control." Because this independence makes government officials "uncomfortable," he concludes that tensions between these media organizations and governments "seem unavoidable."

Kuala Lumpur Calling

However, this uneasiness about non-state-controlled media has not stopped the Malaysian government from guaranteeing editorial independence to Al Jazeera English, part of a satellite media network with a strong tradition of independence from state control. This pledge, says **Trish Carter**, was a critical factor governing AJE's eventual decision to base its Asia broadcast center in KL. Carter is a New Zealand journalist who previously served as AJE's first Asia-Pacific bureau chief. She recounts her experiences preparing the KL broadcast center for launch—a challenge, she writes, "that is unlikely to be repeated in my professional life."

Carter's initial fears about a lack of AJE commitment to Asia were put to rest by two incidents that occurred during the pre-launch period. One was the pronouncement made by Wadah Khanfar, the Al Jazeera network's director-general, that Asia was AJE's second-most important market, after the Middle East. "This showed prescience on his part," Carter notes, given the region's influence, its growing links with the Middle East and Africa, and its "significant and broad-based" news stories. The second time she was assured of AJE's commitment to Asia was when she presented pre-cut stories from Beijing, Manila, and Papua New Guinea to senior editorial staff in Doha. The editors were "impressed" by these "broad-based" stories from Asia. "It was the view of the senior team," she recalls, that after the Middle East, Asia (along with Africa) had "the biggest range of stories to offer, with the type of pictures that breathe life into bulletins." She knew then that news from the KL broadcast center "would be in demand."

AJE's emphasis on Asia-based reportage did not make Carter's job of setting up the Asia-Pacific bureau any easier. When she first arrived on the 60th floor of Petronas Tower 2, the towering KL skyscraper that would house the new broadcast center, she found no bank account, company registration, equipment, or staff. She writes of the "painstaking and difficult recruitment process" necessary to attract top talent to a "yet-to-be established international news channel" with "more conspiracies and rumors surrounding it than were useful." Another challenge was finding local reporters willing to uphold the Al Jazeera network's spunky brand of journalism. According to Carter, Asian journalists are more cautious than their Western counterparts. Often working in a "culture of censor-

ship," they repeatedly consider the impact their material will have on their country and government. Many prospective KL staff, in their job interviews with Carter, said their first "port-of-call" for any news story would be their ministry of information. Indeed, she says, government officials in Asia "casually assumed" they would be advised of potentially sensitive material prior to its airing on AJE—and they would register "genuine puzzlement, surprise, and hurt" when rebuffed.

Despite these travails, Carter writes fondly of her time in KL. In Asia, she concludes, people "want their stories to be told," and "our cameras and correspondents were almost universally welcomed." Carter's emphasis on people, and on the human element of news coverage, is echoed by her former colleague **Veronica Pedrosa**. In her essay, Pedrosa, an AJE presenter at the KL broadcast center, explains that AJE's editorial policy is driven by the question, "Is it news?" News, in this case, is defined as anything that affects people—including "in areas kept deliberately in the dark." In Southeast Asia, according to Pedrosa, news is the food shortage in West Timor; the plight of Hmong tribes in Laos; conflict in the southern Philippines and Thailand; and protests for electoral reform in Malaysia. These, she declares, are otherwise "neglected stories" that AJE has covered extensively. She accords special attention to AJE's reportage on the Malaysia protests.

Malaysia: The Kuala Lumpur Protests

Several of this volume's contributors portray this AJE protest coverage—and the response it sparked—as an indication of the station's growing ability to influence media environments, public opinion, and even governments' hold on power. On November 10, 2007, political opposition groups and a variety of civil society actors staged demonstrations in downtown Kuala Lumpur. The protestors, marching peacefully, were calling for electoral reform and better treatment of the country's ethnic minorities. Riot police soon moved in and crushed the demonstrations with water cannons and tear gas—a response captured live by AJE cameras.

Soon after AJE aired this coverage, the KL bureau received a phone call from an irate viewer—Zainuddin Maidin, Malaysia's information

minister. He was livid about AJE's reportage and demanded that it be more "balanced." Pedrosa describes what happened next: Maidin, after being informed that 22 of his government colleagues had refused to comment about the police's harsh response, agreed to submit to an on-air interview. The minister, speaking live, "insinuated" that the AJE journalist reporting on the story "had been acting," and that "there had been no clashes" between protestors and police. Yet even while he spoke, AJE ran footage of these very "clashes." In a bizarre and rambling tirade, Maidin also accused the network of portraying the country as undemocratic. "We are not Pakistan, we are not Myanmar," he shouted.

Thanks to bloggers and other independent media, word spread rapidly about AJE's coverage of the protest and of its interview with Maidin. Droves of people flocked to YouTube to view the footage. In KL, says Pedrosa, AJE's reportage became "the water-cooler story of the week"—particularly because no other television network broadcast footage of the police crackdown. She excerpts a story from Bernama, Malaysia's state news agency, which warns that "Malaysians should not be easily taken in by what was shown in [sic] the Al-Jazeera satellite television station particularly on issues smearing Malaysia's image and reputation." In fact, many were indeed "taken in," and as of this writing, hundreds of thousands of people had watched the AJE footage on YouTube.[8]

What conclusions emerge from this narrative? Pedrosa suggests that AJE dealt a setback to the Malaysian government's ability to control the media. She reveals that local newspaper editors met with government officials to inform the latter how difficult it had become to publish "farcical non-reports" about the protests, when AJE was providing clear proof of what actually happened. Carter asserts that the incident demonstrates how the presence of an international news channel makes more difficult the efforts of governments to manipulate news coverage on state-sponsored channels. And McDaniel reasons that by "creating a fuss" over AJE's protest coverage, Malaysia's government "unwittingly" helped raise public consciousness of the channel.

Several months after the demonstrations, Malaysia held parliamentary elections. Many members of the ruling National Front coalition—including Maidin, the information minister—lost their parliamentary seats, denying the coalition its two-thirds majority for the first time in several decades. The University of Southern California's **Shawn Powers**

and **Mohammed el-Nawawy** of Queens University of Charlotte argue that AJE's coverage of the 2007 protests, by undermining the government's credibility and strengthening the political opposition and other antigovernment forces, played a crucial role in helping produce this electoral outcome. Their essay is supported by the results of focus groups and interviews they conducted in Malaysia in 2007 and 2008, as part of a six-country study of the views of Al Jazeera English viewers.

Malaysian government credibility was weakened on both the global and local stages. Internationally, the channel's protest coverage "exposed" the fragility of Malaysia's political system—a fragility the government had sought to hide in order to maintain the global perception of the country as a "safe haven" for foreign economic investment. Domestically, the coverage rendered moot the government's contention that it used the "utmost restraint" in its response to the demonstrations. Powers and el-Nawawy, drawing from their survey data, illustrate how dramatically Maidin's buffoonish behavior diminished Malaysian public views of the government. "Maidin's performance," they write, "was seen almost universally by the Malaysian citizenry as a disgraceful representation of the country's policies." Their interview subjects professed shame and embarrassment over their minister's "inarticulate defense" of the forceful police response.

The Powers/el-Nawawy essay also highlights a second protest that took place in KL, on November 24, 2007. This time, images of the rally—which promoted equal rights for ethnic Indians—were plastered across local newspapers and beamed on local television broadcasts. Significantly, however, this domestic media coverage focused on the damage protestors caused to public property, whereas AJE's coverage emphasized the protest's democratic objectives and the police response—which once again was heavy-handed.[9] Soon after the November 24 protest, five leading organizers were arrested. These arrests—a story covered extensively by AJE—convinced many Malaysians that the government was not ready to address the concerns of ethnic minorities. As a result, Powers and el-Nawawy argue, the arrests "became rallying points for opposition parties to the ruling coalition." In effect, AJE's coverage amplified the grievances of the country's opposition. Additionally, the station provided background and context that "helped mobilize opinion" against the government. "Simply put," they write, the news channel

"became an actor on behalf of the oppositional and nongovernmental forces" in KL, which in turn helped unify sentiment against the ruling coalition.

Powers and el-Nawawy intimate that AJE may also have scored a victory for press freedom in Malaysia. One focus group participant, speaking in January 2008, described "a new freedom of speech" lacking previously. Yet perhaps the essay's most telling quotation comes from the director of Media Prima, Malaysia's state-run media conglomerate. Reflecting on the impact of AJE's protest coverage, he admitted to the authors in early 2008 that "we will lose our audience to AJE" if more coverage is not dedicated to "sensitive political issues." He claimed that the minister of information "understands that things must change."

Indonesia: Divergent Perspectives

Might AJE's reportage in Malaysia—and its dramatic effects—be replicated elsewhere in Southeast Asia? More broadly, could AJE help facilitate political change around the region? Powers and el-Nawawy do not address these questions directly. However, the authors, noting the channel's considerable resources—both human and financial—throughout Asia, contend that "it is hard to imagine" that AJE's coverage "will not challenge government and local media to perform better."

Pedrosa might agree. She asserts that AJE is making a name for itself in Indonesia. She conveys the impressions of Step Vaessen, AJE's Jakarta correspondent, who declares that in a country where CNN and BBC keep a low profile, and where local media—despite official claims to the contrary—are still susceptible to self-censorship, AJE has filled a vacuum with little-covered stories on corruption, poverty, and West Timor's "famine." While Indonesian media do examine this latter story, they "do not really show the complete picture." Vaessen also reports that AJE has received praise from Indonesians about its "more balanced" coverage of former president Suharto's final days; by contrast, Indonesian editors said "they were not allowed" to be critical of Suharto in their reports. For the first time, Pedrosa says in relating Vaessen's views, "people in Indonesia can frequently watch stories about their own country on an international channel," and "they really appreciate this."

This rosy outlook diverges sharply from that of **Atria Rai-Tene**, an Indonesian journalist with Trans TV, one of Indonesia's major television stations. In the last essay, she argues that talk of AJE's "impact" in Indonesia is overstated, because most Indonesians cannot access the station, and many who can are not interested in its programming. Penetration rates of both pay television and the Internet—presently the prime means of accessing AJE in Indonesia—are quite low (2 and 20 percent, respectively).[10] Yet she contends that even these low numbers do not tell the full story. For example, not all pay TV providers in Indonesia offer AJE. The number of Indonesian households subscribing to a pay TV provider which actually offers AJE is barely 1 percent of Indonesia's 56 million total households. Additionally, most Indonesians with Internet access use a dial-up connection—which is slow and not conducive for AJE's streaming video. Another issue hampering AJE penetration in Indonesia is language; relatively few Indonesians understand English well enough to follow its broadcasts. Finally, government media policies exacerbate AJE's access barriers. In 2007, Rai-Tene explains, Jakarta introduced new broadcasting regulations that confine foreign broadcast content to short-wave radio and cable television—thus relegating AJE to the realm of pay TV for the foreseeable future.

What accounts for the low rate of pay TV penetration in Indonesia? In Rai-Tene's view, most Indonesians cannot afford it. Additionally, they shy away from pay TV because of its lack of "strong local content." Indonesians, she argues, prefer local news (particularly crime reporting) to international news; audience ratings "usually decline" during foreign news segments and increase only with the return of the domestic news. This means that when presented with an opportunity to watch an international news station such as AJE, Indonesians opt instead for local fare or for *sinetron*, Indonesia's wildly popular soap operas.

According to Rai-Tene, AJE is "hardly used as a reference" by Indonesian policymakers, government, or other "prominent society leaders." With the exception of some "hard-line Islamic publications" and "middle-class Islamic groups," the country's citizenry largely eschews AJE and looks instead to CNN and BBC World. One media analyst, Roland Schatz, has taken this issue of AJE as a non-reference even further, concluding that journalists across Asia rarely cite the network. Speaking at the Wilson Center conference, Schatz, of Media Tenor (a

firm that monitors global media content), presented data gathered from articles published in newspapers across Asia in late 2007. The data demonstrated that AJE was cited by these periodicals considerably less than were CNN or the BBC. Why, Schatz asked, is the station "not the main news source for Asian media"—particularly given that AJE accords considerable attention to news in Asia? The answer, he asserted, may lie in the nature of AJE's coverage. According to Schatz's content analyses of AJE, the channel emphasizes terrorism, "catastrophes," and international conflict. Such coverage generates a "negative tone" that may not be "for Asian ears"—hence the disinclination of Asian media to cite this coverage.

Continued Challenges

While Schatz's perspective is controversial—Pedrosa and Carter argue that AJE *avoids* such sensationalistic coverage—it is salient nonetheless. It is clear from Schatz's findings and Rai-Tene's contribution that despite its major presence in Southeast Asia and its accomplishments in Malaysia, Al Jazeera English is still very much a work in progress and has yet to attain the household-name status of CNN or the BBC. Here, Kraidy's comments about AJE's identity struggles are particularly germane. On the one-year anniversary of AJE's launch, Nalaka Gunawardene, a Sri Lanka-based media observer, lambasted the station for functioning too much like the BBC. "To so blatantly imitate the BBC while all the time claiming to be different is simply not credible," he said, echoing the views of those who question the inclusion of so many former BBC journalists (and Western nationals) within AJE's ranks.[11] Other challenges remain as well. Some AJE staff harbor a strained relationship with the Al Jazeera network, which is often attributed to clashes over autonomy (though Carter insists that she faced little editorial interference while based in KL). Several high-profile resignations—which Kraidy addresses at some length—have added to AJE's woes and fueled speculation that the station is in crisis.

In fact, the Arabic-language news channel is dealing with internal turmoil as well. According to the *New York Times*, geopolitical considerations have compelled Qatar's rulers to cool down the station's notori-

ously fiery tone. For example, in light of Sunni Muslim Gulf nations' collective fears about a resurgent Shia Iran, the Qatari royals have decided that the network cannot afford to alienate Saudi Arabia by running coverage critical of it. This new policy, the *Times* notes, "is the latest chapter in a gradual domestication of Al Jazeera," and demonstrates how Arab media no longer enjoy the freedoms introduced by Al Jazeera a decade ago.[12] Ominously, in February 2008, information ministers from 21 Arab League members signed a charter prohibiting broadcast material that "defame[s] political, national and religious symbols." While defenders liken the accord to a standard regulatory regime such as the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, critics suspect Arab governments want to constrain the freedoms of the region's freewheeling satellite television broadcasters.[13] Al Jazeera has publicly denounced the charter, though important questions arise: Will the changing media and geopolitical environment in the Middle East produce a more mellow Al Jazeera? Could such a shift extend to AJE as well, and would the English-language channel then avoid touchy topics—even in Southeast Asia?

Not An "Accidental Witness"

It is unclear how all this will affect AJE's operations. Yet perhaps, as Kraidy writes, AJE's internal troubles represent "normal developments in the historical trajectory of an institution." He concludes that ultimately, the network "has blazed a new trail, first in the Arab world and now globally."

In the context of AJE's work in Southeast Asia to this point, it is hard to disagree with this assessment. The channel has produced stories about humanity's struggles that go beyond the headlines—and often in locales that receive scant media attention. For example, a July 2008 AJE segment examined a border standoff between Thailand and Cambodia near an ancient temple. Other media have covered this story, but have largely focused on the military build-up and diplomatic tensions. By contrast, the AJE piece addressed an unexplored angle—how poor local Thai villagers near the disputed area subsist on trade with Cambodians over the border, and how this trade ceased during the border crisis.[14]

In their essays, both Pedrosa and Carter speak of how AJE journalists seek "to bear witness" to news events that directly impact humans, and then to report on these events in ways that provide context and tell the larger story. In doing so, Pedrosa writes, AJE avoids "being a kind of accidental witness" who films the latest car chase or announces the latest salacious celebrity gossip and "call[s] it news." When viewing AJE clips such as the one on the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, this philosophy comes alive—and no longer sounds like mere journalistic idealism.

It is also notable that despite being denigrated as a BBC clone, AJE is lauded by Southeast Asians for evincing a worldview that differs from the major (and Western) international news channels. Rai-Tene, probably this collection's biggest skeptic about AJE, reports that in Indonesia, the station "is more sensitive" to local audiences than are Western media, and viewers look to it for more balanced news on topics such as the war in Iraq.

Finally, AJE's work in Southeast Asia does not go unnoticed, and has in fact been recognized as some of the world's best. Hamish MacDonald, an AJE correspondent in Kuala Lumpur, won a prestigious British Royal Television Society Award for Young Journalist of the Year based on his coverage of the 2007 protests in Malaysia. And in June 2008, AJE earned the award of Best 24 Hour News Program at the Monte Carlo Television Festival (beating out BBC News, among others), while the channel's Tony Birtley received a Best News Documentary nomination for his work reporting from inside Burma during that country's crackdown against antigovernment protestors in 2007. While AJE may not yet be a global media heavyweight in the class of CNN or the BBC, it is clearly no lightweight in the field of international media.

So how can one assess AJE's performance in Southeast Asia? This volume's contributors present a mixed picture. On the one hand, the Pedrosa and Powers/el-Nawawy essays argue that AJE has distinguished itself by covering stories that many Southeast Asian media do not. By doing so, it has challenged local media in Malaysia and Indonesia to be bolder in their story selection. AJE's reportage, writes Pedrosa, "has empowered the media in these nations to test the limits of freedom of expression." On the other hand, Rai-Tene and McDaniel underscore AJE's poor penetration rates and suggest that the station will continue to face brutal competition in a tight market—a market that includes not

just CNN and the BBC, but also Southeast Asian competitors such as the Singapore-based Channel NewsAsia. Furthermore, Rai-Tene points out that key factors—such as Indonesia's growing number of Internet users and pay TV providers—that might boost AJE's future prospects are the very factors that would also benefit AJE's competitors.

Several contributors point to the fact that AJE's audience, while small, is nonetheless influential. The Malaysian government's condemnation of AJE's protest coverage proves that, in McDaniel's words, the station "reaches a sizeable portion of politically engaged opinion leaders." And Pedrosa's essay reports that Indonesia's president is a proud AJE viewer.

The Case For More U.S. Distribution

The 800-pound gorilla present at the Wilson Center conference and lurking in these pages is the simple fact that AJE can hardly be seen in the United States. "Why is it," Pedrosa asks, "that in the United States, where freedom of expression is so important that it is enshrined in the Bill of Rights, Al Jazeera English is finding it so hard to get carriage?" Despite housing a broadcast center in the nation's capitol, Al Jazeera English is largely inaccessible to Americans—except via the Internet. Only two U.S. cable providers offer it in their packages—one in Toledo, OH, and one in Burlington, VT. Presumably, providers believe that customer demand would be low for the station. In all likelihood, some cable companies—undoubtedly influenced by political and ideological views propagated by certain interests—also associate AJE with the Al Jazeera network's alleged anti-American tendencies, and fear that customers would rail against such leanings.

By using AJE's work in Southeast Asia as a case study, one can put such concerns to rest and bolster the argument for putting the channel on every American cable provider's basic package. First, AJE is not a redoubt of anti-Americanism. While it may interview members of Jemaah Islamiyah, it also speaks with Scot Marciel, the U.S. State Department's point person on Southeast Asia. In Asia, AJE covers stories about corruption, education, health care, and rising food and energy costs—themes of interest to Asians and Americans alike that have little to do with anti-American sentiment.

Additionally, it is likely that cable providers in the United States will find growing numbers of viewers for AJE. The station's launch has coincided with an evolving trend in international journalism toward less foreign reporting and leaner foreign bureaus. As a result, Americans often criticize today's international news coverage for being superficial and insufficient. By contrast, AJE is a well-funded international news operation blessed with dozens of worldwide correspondents. Many of its news bureaus are located in developing countries (such as the Philippines and Indonesia) with small Western media presences. Significantly, AJE was one of the world's only international broadcasters to report extensively from Burma during the 2007 antigovernment protests. And as Powers, el-Nawawy, and Pedrosa write about in detail, AJE provided exclusive television footage of Malaysia's 2007 protests and the violent response.

AJE already has an interested audience in the United States. The channel's material posted on YouTube reportedly enjoys heavy traffic from U.S.-based viewers, while more than 60 percent of the AJE website's six million weekly hits are estimated to come from the United States.[15] So if there are American cable channels dedicated exclusively to gardening and golf, why not also AJE? Cable television is flush with niche offerings that many people watch avidly, but that others click right by while channel-surfing. At the least, as Carter stated at the conference, AJE is "another consumer choice" people in the United States "should be able to have."

Al Jazeera English is in many ways a news channel of contradictions. It seeks to make a global name for itself while reflecting a regional brand. It aspires to set itself apart from CNN and the BBC even while significant portions of its broadcast team are comprised of former journalists from those networks. It aims to be bold when the parent network is seemingly lowering its profile. Most ironic of all, the station purports to give "a voice to the voiceless" and to champion the world's marginalized—but those watching are largely drawn from a small global elite of English-speakers with the resources to connect to the Internet or to afford pay television. Yet there is little contradictory—and much to commend—about its mission to illuminate the world's forgotten stories and to offer in-depth and alternative perspectives on those that are widely covered. "Terror TV" it is not—and those who argue against carriage in the United States should take note.

Notes

1. See Paul Farhi, "Al Jazeera's U.S. Face," *Washington Post*, November 15, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/14/AR2006111401363.html.

2.Sean J. Miller, "Al Jazeera English looks at news through a different lens," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 10, 2008, http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0710/p20s01-wogn.html. The higher end of the viewership estimate can be found in Richard Hazeldine, "Taiwan: Al Jazeera English TV Makes Debut in Taiwan," *Taipei Times*, July 16, 2008, www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2008/07/16/2003417617.

3. Ioannis Gatsiounis, "Al-Jazeera to tone it down for Asia," *Asia Times Online*, December 3, 2004, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/FL03Ae01.html.

4. Imran Imtiaz Shah Yacob, "Will Al-Jazeera Change Malaysia?" *Asia Sentinel*, December 8, 2006, http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?Itemid=34&id=297&option=com_content&task=view.

5. Ibid.

6. Ioannis Gatsiounis, "Western media fade, new media rise in Asia," *Asia Times Online*, May 3, 2007, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IE03Ae01.html.

7. Sarah Stewart, "Al-Jazirah Promises Fearless Reporting With Asian Perspective," Agence-France Presse, April 2, 2006. Accessed via Lexus-Nexus.

8. YouTube possesses a vast trove of AJE reportage on the KL protests. One clip of the November 10 protest can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q6558tY58E&feature=related. Maidin's interview is available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfpYZ4IGenY.

9. AJE's reportage of the November 24 protest can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m96FCTKHNA8.

10. Rai-Tene calculates the penetration rate of pay TV in Indonesia by comparing the number of homes with pay TV (640,000) to the number of homes with televisions (30 million).

11. Nalaka Gunawardene, "Al Jazeera English is one: Getting better at imitating its rival BBC World!" Moving Images, Moving People blog, November 16, 2007, http://movingimages.wordpress.com/2007/11/16/al-jazeera-english-at-one-getting-better-at-imitating-bbc/.

12. Robert F. Worth, "Al Jazeera No Longer Nips at Saudis," *New York Times*, January 4, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/04/world/middleeast/04jazeera.html.

13. Shaden Shehab, "Regulation or Restriction?" *Al-Ahram*, February 21-27, 2008, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/885/fr2.htm.

14. For one representative AJE clip of this story, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIXrtSwl4XY. Compare this coverage with Sopheng Cheang, "Thais,

Cambodians in Standoff," Associated Press, published in *Washington Post*, July 18, 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/17/AR2008071702551.html.

15. This estimate comes from AJE's managing director, Tony Burman. See Jalal Ghazi, "I Want My Al Jazeera—Vermont Town Debates Access," New America Media website, July 11, 2008, http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=1fff593b6c52eefa41f7b516fc63ab87.

AL JAZEERA AND AL JAZEERA ENGLISH: A COMPARATIVE INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

MARWAN M. KRAIDY

This paper presents a preliminary comparison between Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English (AJE). Since the two institutions are a part of the same network, and since the Arabic channel is older and enjoys a stronger institutional identity than its English-language counterpart, this comparative analysis does not consider the two channels as distinct entities. Rather, Al Jazeera's flagship and its English channel are analyzed as "cousins" who demonstrate "family resemblances" even when they differ in significant ways. The paper focuses on the two channels' institutional identities; on the competitors the two channels face in their respective media environments; and on the fraught relations between Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English within the Al Jazeera network.

It is difficult to compare Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English. There are many superficial differences between the two channels. The first went on the air in 1996; the second was launched in 2006. The former emerged in a nascent pan-Arab media environment in which it pioneered a new brand of journalism: a confrontational editorial line that infuriated most Arab regimes, and, a few years later, the United States and other Western governments. The latter is trying to penetrate a global English-language news market saturated with powerful players like the venerable BBC, CNN, and Sky News. Al Jazeera's audience is regional, consisting of viewers whose first language is Arabic, while AJE's audience is in theory global, comprising viewers worldwide, but especially in the global south, where English is most likely a second language.

Unlike Al Jazeera, whose structure is straightforward and centered in Doha, Qatar, with many international bureaus, AJE has four broadcast centers in addition to dozens of offices and correspondents worldwide—a structure that poses extreme logistical challenges. It is clear that differences between the two channels in institutional development, scale, and language make them difficult to compare.

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And yet, similarities between Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English are equally obvious. Both channels are bankrolled by the emir of Qatar, even if the details of sponsorship are secretive; and they are both headquartered in Doha. The two channels, to restate the obvious, carry the same logo and approximately the same name. Institutionally, both are channels in the same network, and from a marketing point of view, Al Jazeera and AJE are part of the same brand. There are overlaps on the channels' supervisory boards, and both technically report to Wadah Khanfar, the network's director-general. Officially, bureaus are supposed to cooperate—for example, the editorial boards are expected to meet, and correspondents for the two channels in the same locations are supposed to help each other.

Because of these seemingly contradictory aspects, the relationship between the two channels is difficult to describe, its contours not readily discernable, its implications for the two channels and the mother network difficult to analyze. Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English clearly belong to the same family. And yet, they are too dissimilar to be brothers. The most appropriate metaphor would be to think of them as cousins who do not really like each other but because of family ties have to learn to live together. From this perspective, how do the two channels compare in terms of institutional identity, competition, and their relative status within the Al Jazeera network?

Institutional Identity

In their 2007 book *The Culture of Al-Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant*, Mohammed Zayani and Sofiane Sahraoui explain that Al Jazeera's success is premised on a combination of factors, including flexibility and the promotion of employee initiative, independent thinking, and self-growth. But most importantly, Al Jazeera's success resides in the channel's organizational model, which was initially built by its founding director, the Qatari Mohammed Jassim Al Ali, as a family business. But the model has evolved as the channel has grown in size, reputation, and complexity.

Al Jazeera's core "Values and Beliefs" are its "instinct for breaking the news … a combination of the precision of the BBC and the speed of

CNN;" its alternative brand of journalism, "publicly funded, but independent-minded;" its tolerance for difference, hence its slogan "the view and the opposite view;" and most importantly, its "Arab orientation."[1] The latter issue is articulated succinctly and eloquently by Zayani and Sahraoui:

> People relate to Al Jazeera because it both shares and stages the malaise and sorrow of Arabs. Al Jazeera emerged in an environment marked by a succession of wars and crises and during a time marked by the spirit of defeat and disappointment. As such, Al Jazeera is the channel of Arab disenchantment, articulating what people want to say but cannot say with a rare sense of audacity.[2]

This encapsulates Al Jazeera's identity and offers a nuanced rendering of what "Arab perspective" means when it comes to Al Jazeera. After all, can any media institution transcend its cultural and political context? The biggest challenge Al Jazeera English has faced—even before its launch—is the expectation that it would do precisely that: transcend the context in which it developed.

AJE's identity is more difficult to discern. Leading up to its launch, the network framed its new channel as a competitor to BBC and CNN, but with a "global south orientation." The extent to which the channel's coverage reflects that orientation depends on what is meant by "global south." In the Arab world and Middle East, AJE's coverage tends to be similar to its Arabic-language counterpart. There are differences in tone between the two, but these reside mostly in AJE's use of standard English journalistic terminology—which to some comes across as less harsh than Al Jazeera's Arabic tone. Some shows, such as Jasem al-Ghazzawi's, on Iraq at least, are similar in tone if not in production style to those on the Arabic channel, featuring tough exchanges over the U.S. military occupation of Iraq. But the English channel has had difficulties spreading coverage equally around the world. Some observers have complained about a disproportionate focus on Africa, while the channel's audience center of gravity is Asia.

Because of its global scope, it is much more difficult for Al Jazeera English to establish a "brand" identity. The main challenge for the new channel resides in the fact that the Al Jazeera brand's strong association with the Middle East, the Arabic language, and the Islamic religion

hinders its claim to be a truly global, English-language channel not narrowly associated with any region of the world. However, with its large population of Muslims and its high number of English speakers, Asia emerges as a compromise between Al Jazeera's regionally based brand heritage and its ambition to become a global player.

Most importantly, Al Jazeera English, even before it went on the air, had to contend with a fraught ideological situation. Though many leading newspapers, including the *Guardian* in Britain, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (the London-based pan-Arab newspaper), and *La Tribune de Genève* in Switzerland, welcomed it as an alternative global news voice, others were less enthralled. In the United States, for example, coverage of the impending launch focused on a single question: would AJE have the same editorial line as Al Jazeera? It would not be an exaggeration to say that the dominant frame of this U.S. coverage was the contested notion of "anti-Americanism." This focus, in addition to business calculations undoubtedly connected to the ideological atmosphere, has to this day prevented AJE from getting cable distribution in the United States. All the hype surrounding YouTube.com and AJE's effective use of that website notwithstanding, the English-language station has been unable to become an audible voice in the United States and much of the West. Recent staff departures, especially that of David Marash, the lead Washington, D.C. anchor, illustrate this dilemma: in a recent interview, Marash said he left AJE because it went from being "authentically cosmopolitan" to "authentically Arab."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Al Jazeera English is well-followed in East Africa and Southeast Asia, but these are regions in which accurate audience ratings are not systematically available. The implications of a lack of reliable research on audiences are twofold: On the one hand, it limits advertisers' enthusiasm for the channel and creates a reluctance to commit advertising spending budgets. On the other hand, it saps the morale of reporters who cannot ascertain whether they are being watched by a significant number of people. For these reasons, the paucity of audience ratings data has consequently forced AJE—even before its inception—to walk a tightrope when it comes to its identity and its relationship to Al Jazeera. Former AJE managing director Nigel Parsons expressed this well in pre-launch interviews when he said "we are not completely divorced," a strategically ambiguous statement that

reflects ambivalence about the Al Jazeera English brand.[3] Ambivalence and brand are a contradiction in terms, which has made it very difficult for the new channel to establish itself.

Competitors

A comparative analysis of how Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya—Al Jazeera's Saudi-funded nemesis—react to breaking news provides a clear view into what Zayani and Sahraoui refer to as the former's "instinct" for breaking the news, which involves dispatching a reporter and securing a satellite news gathering device to the scene of the event. At Al Jazeera, this is done promptly in a way that delegates decision making and takes advantage of individual initiative and trust within the organization. By contrast, at Al Arabiya, the process is mired in a more rigid bureaucracy. The authors correctly state that this is due to the fact that, according to a producer who spoke to them, the word "budget" is not heard at Al Jazeera (at least not during the producer's tenure with the network). Meanwhile, according to Zayani and Sahraoui, Al Arabiya's managers have to watch the bottom line. The authors could have emphasized that Al Arabiya, like other Saudi-owned media institutions, tends to follow an overly cautious approach to covering the news. Besides, the notion that the bottom line trumps competitiveness at Al Arabiya is not evident, since Al Arabiya's main objective is arguably to counter Al Jazeera, and not to make a profit. Nonetheless, Al Jazeera clearly enjoys a large pocketbook.

Al Jazeera English's competitors are formidable institutions. Both the BBC and CNN are global household names with potent brand identities. Both channels have a global infrastructure of reporters and remain the news sources of record for the international Anglophone elite. Of the two, CNN is probably the less impressive rival to AJE because of the Atlanta-based network's association with the United States. In a polarized global geopolitical environment where majorities in many countries hold negative views of the U.S. role in the world, an association with the United States can be a liability—no matter how international CNN International is. Besides, Al Jazeera English's network of international reporters (which is poised to be in-

creasingly shared with the Arabic-language Al Jazeera) rivals CNN's.

The BBC is a more powerful competitor of AJE's for several reasons, chiefly because it is a venerable institution that defined news norms and practices before its competitors even existed. Globally, the BBC is also perceived to be a more impartial source of news than CNN, because of its public service journalistic tradition and because it is not closely associated with the United States. AJE's niche advantage over CNN and BBC is its financial backing by the emir of Qatar. In a context of high and still-rising energy prices, AJE theoretically enjoys a more secure financial footing than its competitors. CNN especially, and increasingly the BBC, have to give the utmost consideration for the bottom line, which is less of an issue for Al Jazeera English's management and staff.

A Convoluted Family Affair

Approximately two years ago, Al Jazeera issued a press release stating that the channel was changing its name from "channel" [*Qanat*] to "network" [*Shabaka*] and would feature sports, children's programming, and live current affairs, in addition to the Arabic- and new English-language channels. The new English channel, which had been trumpeted for months as "Al Jazeera International," was re-named "Al Jazeera English" in the 11th hour. Rumor had it that a wing represented by Wadah Khanfar, the network's director-general, was behind the change of name to prevent the English-language station from gaining excessive importance at the expense of the mother ship.

What was the deeper reasoning behind this move? Essentially, the word "international" would connote that the new English-language channel was somehow more important than the original institution by making the latter look provincial. The word "English" is less of a threat in that regard because it only reflects the new channel's language. In this way, Al Jazeera English would not be perceived as the network's flagship, a status that belongs to the original, Arabic-language channel. This contrasted sharply with the pronouncements of Parsons and other AJE executives, who had been proclaiming the channel's editorial independence from the Al Jazeera network.

Another issue is the resentment felt by many Al Jazeera staffers toward

their newborn cousin. Some of the "founders" were concerned that the channel's brand, built under various pressures over 10 difficult years, was going to be diluted by a bunch of highly paid Brits and Americans who knew and probably cared little about the channel. Others were concerned about the new channel succumbing to pressure from Washington and consequently changing its editorial line. Others still were infuriated by the reportedly higher remuneration packages and additional perks that AJE staff were getting. To make matters worse, because of resource pressures and the bottom line, the two staffs were expected to cooperate to avoid redundancies and to create a level of synergy. These causes of resentment continue to this day and are one factor behind recent staff departures at AJE.

What about the allegations made by Marash that Al Jazeera English is under pressure from Doha to reflect a "Middle Eastern" perspective? There could be some truth to this. Even before it became a network, Al Jazeera had recurrently witnessed power struggles between different cliques, mostly the religiously oriented wing close to the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand, and the secular Arabists on the other hand (Khanfar is closer to the latter). There are recent examples of Al Jazeera programming—interviews on talk-shows such as *Bila Hudud* [No Limits] and *Al-Shari 'a Wal Haya* [Islamic Law and Life]—being quite propagandistic in favor of the Muslim Brothers. Does this mean that the Islamic wing is ascendant within the Arabic channel? And is this ascent, if it is there, affecting the margin of maneuver of AJE?

Other problems within Al Jazeera have included tension between news and programs. Whereas the former relies on largely anonymous teamwork, the latter has promoted a star system whereby star program hosts become guardians of fiefdoms that have direct connections to the Qatari political elite, and therefore are not accountable to the institution itself. Repeated pressures on the channel to rein in its editorial line have also had their effect, and its journalists have recently wondered to what extent free speech would be tolerated. There have been several frictions between members of Al Jazeera's editorial board and staff members, many of whom feel their margin of freedom has been shrinking. These problems risk spreading to AJE, and David Marash's recent departure might be interpreted in terms of management not allowing a star anchor to outshine the channel itself.

Though troublesome, these are normal developments in the historical trajectory of an institution. Ten years after the launch of Al Jazeera, the en-

terprise is no longer the exciting new kid on the block that is revolutionizing Arab television journalism. Rather, it is a complex network of channels, each with its own internal considerations, a large Arab media conglomerate in a regional industry that is far more competitive than it was 10 years ago. Added complexity comes from its venturing into the select club of English-language global news networks. The network is discovering that revolutionizing global news is a more arduous task than shaking Arab television news. Nonetheless, as an institution, the Al Jazeera network has blazed a new trail, first in the Arab world and now globally.

Notes

1. Mohammed Zayani and Sofiane Sahraoui, *The Culture of Al-Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant* (London: McFarland & Company, 2007), 61-62.

2. Ibid., 66.

3. In May 2008, the Al Jazeera network named Parsons managing director for business acquisition and development.

AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN AND MALAYSIAN MEDIA

DREW MCDANIEL

Southeast Asia consists of 11 nations divided into two groupings—insular or island Southeast Asia (which includes Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Timor-Leste, Singapore, and the Philippines), and mainland Southeast Asia (which includes Thailand, Myanmar [Burma], Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam). This region, although located in a compact corner of the vast continent of Asia, is made up of diverse nations that are politically and culturally complex societies. The region is bounded by mainland Asia to the north and Australia to the south. Importantly, the Malay-Indonesian archipelago makes only a narrow channel between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, forcing transit between East Asia and South Asia to travel through Southeast Asia. From the days of sailing ships onward, areas along the route had contact with many passing cultures. This feature ensured that those living in settlements along the way had a wide exposure to the rest of Asia, Africa, and eventually Europe. Thus, in a way, these countries experienced an early form of globalization, and the region rapidly became important in the spice trade that grew after the European arrival. International trade has remained the principal engine of economic development up to the present day.

The following essay focuses on two key Islamic nations of Southeast Asia: Malaysia and Indonesia. Malaysia is the 14th leading U.S. trade partner, while the United States is Malaysia's top trade partner. As is well known, Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population and its 225 million residents make it the world's fourth most populous nation.

Both nations have pluralistic societies, though their reasons for diversity are quite different. Indonesia's diversity arises from the fact that it is scattered across 13,000 islands that stretch some 1,600 miles from east to west. The country's residents represent perhaps more than 100 different ethnic and language groupings. The largest of these is the Javanese, who

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represent the majority on the island of Java, the traditional geographic and political center of the country. In the outer islands encircling Java, a mix of various ethnic groups can be found. Even though Indonesia is predominantly Muslim, about 9 percent of Indonesians are Christian, and a bit less than 1 percent are Hindu (mostly on the island of Bali).[1]

Malaysia's population is made up of three main groups, not counting a small proportion of indigenous aboriginal peoples. The largest group is Malay, which today accounts for approximately two-thirds of the country's 27 million or so residents. Malays have comprised the largest segment of residents of the Malay Peninsula since records have been kept. Meanwhile, at present, Chinese make up roughly one-quarter of the total population, and Indians (mainly Tamil from South India) are about 10 percent. The Chinese minority has settled in the Malay region for centuries, but there was a surge of immigration from China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. British colonial authorities were glad to recruit Chinese labor for jobs in tin mining and timber harvesting. However, within decades, many of the Chinese immigrants relocated to cities, where more lucrative employment and entrepreneurial opportunities could be found. Similarly, in the early 20th century, Indians came to what was then known as Malaya as indentured workers tied to rubber plantations.[2] Colonial policy did not encourage integration of the immigrants because the latter were considered mere guest workers who would eventually return home.

The British immigration policy produced an unstable political and social environment after independence—one that ultimately proved disastrous. On May 13, 1969, celebrations surrounding Chinese political party victories over the main Malay political party triggered communal riots that racked the country for several weeks. Hundreds were killed in the violence, though the exact numbers remain in dispute. In the aftermath, a new set of regulations and laws were brought into effect aimed at creating a kind of affirmative action agenda. At the time of the riots, Chinese Malaysians held 80 percent of domestic investments in the country, and the much larger Malay population owned less than 15 percent, thus creating a structural imbalance in wealth. As part of the new policies, Malays were to benefit from a system of preferences in fields such as education and economics.[3] A crucial aspect of these new policies was that media were made the primary tool for national unification.

Media Policy Trends

In principle it should have been easy to carry out a unification mandate, because since colonial times both nations had enforced strict state media policies. Electronic media were owned and operated directly by their respective governments. After Malayan independence, all official radio services were the responsibility of Radio Malaya—later Radio Malaysia, and later still Radio Television Malaysia (RTM).[4] To the present day, RTM has been administered as a department of the Ministry of Information. Likewise, Indonesian broadcasting was the responsibility of Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) and, with the introduction of television, Televisi Republic Indonesia (TVRI).[5] The rigorous oversight maintained by the two governments simply continued practices that colonial governments had enforced, and these policies were justified on the basis of the need to achieve national integration of each nation's ethnically heterogeneous population. Interethnic and regional tensions had risen in the post-independence era, and the fledgling governments were absorbed by the difficulties of finding their footing while also holding fractious populations intact.

Strict control of electronic media became a much greater challenge as time passed, because technologies for delivering these media evolved in ways that afforded greater control and wider choices to audience members. This trend began in the 1970s with the arrival of consumer videotape and broadcast satellite technologies. As it happened, Indonesia and Malaysia were peculiarly susceptible to the broad adoption of emerging new media because both nations enacted policies that produced unintended consequences for state information control.[6]

A major reason for Southeast Asia's trade growth was its involvement in the manufacturing of electronic products through the late 20th century and into the 21st. Technical advances gave impetus to a growing global demand for consumer equipment built from parts manufactured in Southeast Asia. Even today, one can open any computer, DVD, TV set, CD player, electronic game, or radio and likely find components such as integrated circuit chips, memory devices, or transistors, marked as "made in Malaysia" or another Southeast Asian country. Demand for these parts rose sharply in the 1980s and 1990s, during which time Malaysia became the world's largest producer of integrated circuits

and air conditioners, and a leading manufacturer of many other types of consumer durables. This pattern was paralleled by manufacturing in Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and, to a lesser extent, the Philippines. Because the goods originated in Southeast Asia, they became available immediately in domestic markets at very favorable prices, making such items as VCRs a common household appliance across the region from an early date.

Moreover, Indonesia began pioneering satellite technology in 1976, when its own domestic satellite network became operational. Called Palapa, it permitted the establishment of a national voice and data system within a few years, something that could not practically be achieved using conventional terrestrial copper or fiber optic technology. It was the first domestic satellite system in a non-industrial nation and one of the earliest constructed anywhere in the world. In addition to telephone services, the satellite system provided a national system for television, relaying TVRI broadcasts across the archipelago. Not only did this bring television to even the remotest corners of the country, it also brought foreign television to anyone with a satellite-receiving station. Because the Palapa system had excess channel capacity, transponders were leased to television systems in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. To capture these international channels, local shops began selling home-built receiving setups for as little as a few hundred dollars. By the time officials discovered that many thousands of these consumer satellite stations had been installed and were producing growing audiences for state television competitors, it became politically impossible to suppress or restrict their sale.

As the years passed, more and more alternatives to state-controlled electronic media emerged. Most popular among these in Southeast Asia were direct-to-home satellite services such as STAR TV as well as video CDs (VCDs)[7] and DVDs containing all sorts of material not allowed on government channels. After 2000, numerous Internet technologies arose such as online newspapers, streaming audio and video, blogs, and social networking sites. The fundamental problem faced by governments in Malaysia and Indonesia was that these alternatives were much more popular than state-controlled media, and audiences for RTM, RRI, and TVRI shrank markedly.

Paradoxically, alternative media that competed against government

channels in Malaysia were actually encouraged by a government initiative to capitalize on the country's high-tech industries. It was a highly ambitious information technology project termed the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). This scheme was launched in the mid-1990s with the aim of attracting foreign direct investment for capital-intensive IT projects. It was also intended to propel Malaysia into a role of regional if not global leadership in information and communication technologies. The "corridor" had both physical and conceptual aspects. The MSC's boundary encompassed an area south of the capitol, Kuala Lumpur, in which advanced technologies would be concentrated. It was also a set of policies that provided a foundation of support for high-technology industries. The government found, however, that in order to draw in investments from abroad it was necessary to guarantee open access to the Internet. This was especially true of investments from major firms in the United States and Europe. Therefore, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was forced to pledge that there would be no effort by the Malaysian government to restrict Internet access.

Malaysia's open Internet policies gave a green light to groups wishing to establish online alternative information sources. One of the most successful of these was *Malaysiakini*, an online newspaper with no printed version. This award-winning news site gained enormous popularity during the sensational trials of ex-deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in the late 1990s. Malaysiakini offered coverage that was in striking contrast to information provided by state media, and for a time there were as many readers of *Malaysiakini* as there were of the *New Straits Times*, the leading government-aligned English-language newspaper.

In the end, new technologies caused audiences to become so fragmented that state media in Indonesia and Malaysia could no longer reach the whole of each nation's citizenry. This, of course, severely limited the state media's ability to promote national unification as intended. To counter this trend, both countries hitched their media policies to neoliberal economic reforms that swept across the region at the end of the 20th century. In Malaysia, new private commercial licenses were only issued to members and allies of the ruling political parties, individuals who could be depended upon to unquestioningly support government policies. A slightly different tack was taken in Indonesia, where private licenses were only granted to corporations that awarded significant stock

holdings to the children of Suharto, the country's president until 1998. Because these private stations could broadcast a greater proportion of popular programs (such as soap operas and situation comedies) than state media, the former's audiences grew swiftly, drawing listeners and viewers away from government channels.

Current Issues In Indonesian Media

In the post-Suharto period, major reforms in government and law occurred in many fields. As part of this reform process, major new regulations were issued for media. These laws have had the effect of reshaping both print and broadcasting in the country. After 2000, the number of authorized national television channels, which had increased following Suharto's ouster in 1998, continued to grow, and as of the date of this writing 11 are on the air or authorized for transmission. All of these channels are headquartered in Jakarta, but they relay their signals across the country via satellite. Signals are picked up from satellites and rebroadcast in major cities by relay transmitters owned by the originating channel.

In addition, direct-to-home satellite packagers IndoVision and Astro Nussantara include in their extensive set of subscription services not only the 10 or so Jakarta stations, but many international channels too. For example, IndoVision carries Al Jazeera English (AJE) and Astro Nusantara offers Al Jazeera "International" (Al Jazeera English) in their basic lineups. The channel is also available from cable systems that operate in Indonesia's largest cities.

One of the purposes of much of the legislation enacted after 1999 was a decentralization of Indonesian governance, moving power away from domination by Jakarta and Java. This was one of the chief motives of the new Broadcasting Law of 2002, which required Jakarta TV channels to form networks based on affiliations with local stations, rather than relaying broadcasts through their own relay transmitters. Not surprisingly, the private Jakarta stations opposed this move because it meant that they would have to share advertising revenues with affiliated stations and cover the costs of networking their signals. The Jakarta stations dragged their feet in preparing for this new rule, and when the December 2007

deadline for conversion to a network system arrived, none of the stations had a network system in place. This put regulatory agencies in a quandary, and finally after a short delay, the decision was made to postpone the implementation deadline. Thus, the decentralizing concept remains in limbo.

Current Issues In Malaysian Media

Meanwhile, Malaysia has had to face its own policy implementation trials. This country, unlike Indonesia, banned the use of home satellite receiving systems from the time of their introduction. The prohibition against home satellite setups was effective in Peninsular Malaysia, but not in East Malaysia, where thousands of illegal home satellite receiving dishes gradually came into use. It was easy for residents of East Malaysia on Borneo to slip across the Indonesian border to purchase satellite apparatus for cheap prices. Because authorities could not censor channels available by satellite, this posed a big challenge. In response, an exclusive license was granted for a domestic satellite provider in 1996, and once again to a corporation owned by investors closely aligned with the ruling coalition. Known as ASTRO, this system today offers 26 basic channels plus a wide variety of additional packages such as sports, movies, and news. Even today, ASTRO's ties to the government remain strong, and more than one-fifth of the corporation's shares are directly held by the government's own investment arm. Channels are subject to censorship, which is accomplished by delaying all programs so that content can be inspected. For instance, CNN International and BBC newscasts are delayed so that they start several minutes after the hour. Al Jazeera English is one of six channels in the news package; like all news channels, it is subject to censorship.

Authorities' efforts to manage content on the Internet have not been very effective, due to the openness afforded the Internet under Multimedia Super Corridor stipulations. Officials have used varied approaches to bring information providers like *Malaysiakini* into line, but the results have been only marginally successful. What is proving to be a major problem for policymakers is the proliferation of outlets for user-generated information content. Within the past year, most of authorities'

attention has centered on Malaysian bloggers and on social networking and information-sharing websites. For example, AJE's coverage of a November 2007 rally by a civil society group, Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH)—which showed police use of water cannons to mow down protesters—has been available on YouTube.com since the news channel first broadcast it. As of this writing, viewers of the footage on YouTube numbered in the many tens of thousands. Incidentally, the coverage outraged Malaysia's government, and Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin delivered a bitter on-air attack on AJE for its reports on the rally.

Major Unresolved Issues

There are several overarching issues that remain to be dealt with in both countries. As suggested above, while the issues may be the same in the two countries, the way they play out is rather different in each. The political contexts of the two countries impose different requirements and will force each nation to respond in sharply different ways.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, as is true across most of the world, media fragmentation continues to become more pronounced as time passes. Satellite channels available internationally are growing in numbers. The number of channels available from Malaysia's ASTRO in various package combinations has doubled and tripled in the past decade. This has meant that Kuala Lumpur cannot possibly censor all channels as it would like and must concentrate on the channels that present the greatest risk to government information control. In addition, new information sources on the Internet such as YouTube are impossible to monitor and regulate effectively. This has caused problems elsewhere in Southeast Asia. For example, YouTube was shut down in Thailand by the interim military government for several months in 2007 over videos that were deemed insulting to the Thai king. Eventually, a deal was struck that allowed the resumption of service, but the likelihood of future problems remains high.

From a policymaking point of view, the main problem with media fragmentation is that getting a government message to its citizens is no longer as easy as it had been. Not that it was particularly efficacious pre-

viously; there has always been evidence that Indonesian and Malaysian publics received government information campaigns with skepticism. In any case, governments will have to craft innovative methods of information dissemination. Efforts to control by censoring cannot succeed in an environment where information providers number in the hundreds and thousands.

There remains the problem of technological development and its differential impact across the two nations' societies. The oft-mentioned "digital divide" is only one aspect of this issue. Certainly, digital technologies are accessible to different segments of societies with varying degrees of ease. The regional divisions of Indonesia remain a foremost problem; the complexities of information delivery and reception in Papua are not at all the same as those in, say, Aceh or North Sulawesi. Malaysia's ethnic pluralism is at once a great challenge and an important strength. But the way that politics have been tied to ethnic divisions in Malaysia complicates efforts to identify solutions to the problem. Once again, any difference in access or ability to use technologies creates information "haves" and "have nots." This consequently makes unifying messages, as well as development programs intended to help raise economic prospects for Malaysia's poorest citizens, difficult to deliver equitably across the nations' geographic expanses.

Finally, language representation in the media continues to present serious questions for policymakers. Both nations emphasize their national language in the media, but messages in such languages cannot address whole national populations. And the segments of society that do not receive the messages in the national language are ones that are critically important to national objectives. For instance, in Malaysia, television ratings show that programs in Bahasa Malaysian are seen almost exclusively by Malay viewers; typically only 2 or 3 percent of the audience are Chinese or Indian. At the same time, practically no Malay viewers tune in to any of the Chinese or Tamil language shows. So programming in the national language cannot reach the economically important urban Chinese audience and must be duplicated by programs in another language. The only telecasts that have good representation among all ethnic groups are in English. It must be kept in mind that there is near universal facility in the national language among all Malaysians, including those of Chinese and Indian descent. The Chinese and Indian avoidance of

Malay programming is not due to a lack of facility; it is a matter of personal choice.

Al Jazeera English And The Media Environment

In summary, international news services delivered by Internet or satellite technologies have enjoyed popularity in both Indonesia and Malaysia, and their audiences seem sure to grow as access to them widens. What appears to drive their popularity is their independence from centralized information control. In the two countries, this independence tends to make political leaders uncomfortable, and so tensions between international news channels and state officials seem unavoidable.

At first glance, Al Jazeera English might seem unlikely to have much impact in either Indonesia or Malaysia, since the channel's audiences in these countries are so small. In Malaysia, only slightly more than one-third of homes have access to ASTRO, and not all of these have a subscription to the news package. There is even less access to AJE in Indonesia, where the price of TV satellite services is beyond the reach of most residents. Also, language is a factor that limits the size of the channel's audience; although English is widely spoken in Malaysia, it is not in Indonesia. Yet the vigorous criticism by Malaysian officials of AJE's coverage of the November 2007 BERSIH rally shows that the government is acutely sensitive to the news content of the channel. The reason for this is that although Al Jazeera English reaches a small viewership as compared to over-the-air channels, it reaches a sizeable portion of politically engaged opinion leaders.

Of course, the reach of AJE has been extended by Internet-sharing websites such as YouTube. Although YouTube was the victim of government blocking in neighboring Thailand, neither Malaysia nor Indonesia would be eager to employ this tactic. Malaysia's government still appears committed to upholding its promise not to interfere with the open Internet, even though the Multimedia Super Corridor's priority has been downgraded in the post-Mahathir era. And in Indonesia, the old ways of strict policymaking are out of favor.

Al Jazeera English has entered a crowded field of satellite news channels, including a few that originate in Southeast Asia. For example,

MediaCorp's Singapore-based Channel NewsAsia is already a major regional competitor. All the same, the furor over AJE's BERSIH coverage has, really for the first time, raised public consciousness of the news channel. Ironically, the government unwittingly contributed to this by creating a fuss over the story. In the end, however, whether or not Al Jazeera English becomes an influential news source depends on its ability to cover stories that provide an alternative perspective on events in Indonesia and Malaysia. Viewers are likely to seek out this channel from the wide array of other news media only if it succeeds in branding itself as a dependable alternative to mainstream media.

Notes

1. See M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

2. Malaya and Malaysia refer to two different entities. Under British rule, Malaya was a protectorate comprised of Federated and Unfederated Malayan states. At independence in 1957, both groups of states were brought together to create the Federation of Malaya. Then, in 1963, Malaya was joined by Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo to form the unified state of Malaysia. Two years later, Singapore branched off from Malaysia and became independent.

3. A more complete description can be found in Barbara Watson Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

4. See D. O. McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay World* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1994).

5. Philip Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000).

6. For a more detailed discussion see D. O. McDaniel, *Electronic Tigers of Southeast Asia: The Politics of Media, Technology, and National Development* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 2002).

7. VCDs are similar to DVDs, but they use a different format scheme in order to create video files small enough to be recorded on compact discs. These were very popular in Asia but not in Europe or North America.

AL JAZEERA IN ASIA: THE ORIGINS

Trish Carter

The two big questions that some of the Western media asked me when I was confirmed as Asia-Pacific bureau chief for Al Jazeera English (AJE) were:

- Would I have to wear a burqa?
- Would I have to convert to Islam?

Collegial support was, at best, qualified. Other associates were unequivocal—doing business with so-called "Terror TV" was the biggest mistake of my career. It was like I had somehow become unpredictable and defective.

Their problem, of course, was that the Al Jazeera brand was the *enfant terrible* of the international media world. And AJE was, at that point, due on the air in six months' time.

But the hard sell was irresistible. Four broadcast centers around the world; the promise of fearless reporting; no ratings imperative; no centralized control; the highest ethical standards; state-of-the-art facilities; and strategically placed smaller bureaus.

I left New Zealand on a cold winter's afternoon and arrived in Doha 24 hours later. This would be the first of many visits there to hammer out the channel's editorial vision and launch plan.

Planning And Strategy Development

I met my new colleagues that first time at 8 a.m. the following morning.

Trish Carter is a New Zealand journalist and the former Asia-Pacific bureau chief for Al Jazeera English.

We immediately began to talk about the challenge that is unlikely to be repeated in my professional life.

What kind of stories would we do? Distinctive coverage, yes, but what did that mean? We agreed we wanted to produce compelling stories through the lives of people everywhere, especially from parts of the world that had been ill-served by other media. We wanted to own the premise that news is about the people involved, not about the process or the event itself. We wanted to lose the instinct that if it is somewhere you know, it is more of a story than somewhere you do not know. There was quick unity on these points, though implementation was not as straightforward.

We wanted to be known as the on-the-ground news gatherers. Everyone agreed. If our main focus was to seek out and cover different perspectives of news through grassroots reporting, and bring those stories to the Western world, then we would not be doing that by consistently standing on the rooftop of an international hotel or by covering a story from a permanent live position.

If we wanted to be ideas-driven and focused on finding the story at the beginning of the chain rather than following up at the end, then we needed to believe our rhetoric and bring freshness to our craft.

The early schedules were developed with this in mind—a half hour of news and a half hour of non-news program material. This was followed by the Newshour link-ups around the world.[1] This format helped give the correspondents some space. One of the very big attractions for the correspondent hires was the promise that they could do the kind of work they enjoy—more travel to do more stories and less rooftop reportage.

We assured ourselves that we would not rush down the "breaking news" mode because that is what others were doing. And there was a bit of chest-thumping about how live television is all too often about beating the competition rather than about telling the story properly. All of which is true in theory. And sometimes the channel was as guilty of this malpractice as was everyone else.

The debates raged fiercely and sometimes heatedly for weeks on the most basic but profound news protocols. What words would we use? What of the ethics of news? How much of the horror of war or famine would we show?

There was the technology which was problematic and difficult, the style,

the endless versions of the formats and schedules, the distribution. The merits of centralized control CNN-style, versus broadcast center autonomy.

On that latter point, I remain convinced that at some future time Al Jazeera English will take all editorial control back to Doha. It is a fact that the word "autonomy" never sits well at media head offices anywhere, particularly when applied to broadcast centers. And broadcast centers inevitably regard headquarters as arbitrary and autocratic.

Any such move will not be revolutionary. It will be incremental. Doha will begin to make more of the significant editorial and management decisions for the broadcast centers. Organizationally, the existing structure will remain intact. Over time this might evolve into a scaling back of the broadcast centers, whereby the latter feed their material into Doha—what the organization might regard as a more streamlined, cost-effective approach. Where practicable, this will also include integrating Al Jazeera Arabic bureaus with AJE.

Commitment to Asia

We wanted to be the most authoritative English-language channel on Middle East affairs, and also the authority on stories from the developing world. But with an estimated 40 percent of the coverage focused on the Middle East, what prominence would Asia get?

Two things happened in the pre-launch period that settled my concern about the Al Jazeera company's commitment to Asia and the amount of bulletin time stories from Asia would get. The director-general of the network, Wadah Khanfar, declared that outside of the Middle East, Asia was Al Jazeera English's second-most important market. This showed prescience on his part. Asia is the developing world. It has a significant Muslim population, particularly in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation. As a region, it is highly influential. Governments there can frequently be at odds or in conflict with their Western counterparts, and today are not afraid to say so. There are developing relationships between countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Editorially, Asia is the breaking news region of the world. But even without the earthquakes, floods, and tsunamis that have become the defining news events from Asia in recent years, the other stories from the region are signifi-

cant and broad-based. They would say otherwise, but I think the director general's comments initially came as a surprise to some of my British colleagues with the company, who were used to a more Euro-centric approach to news.

The second thing that reassured me about Asia's prominence on AJE was the "show and tell." We were required to take our pre-cut stories to Doha to present to the senior editorial team. The Kuala Lumpur (KL) broadcast center's first batch of stories came from Beijing, Manila, and Papua New Guinea. It was a brute of a meeting.

The editorial team was impressed by these broad-based stories from Asia—it saw the scope of what was on offer from the region. It was the view of the senior team that outside of the Middle East, Asia, along with Africa, had the biggest range of stories to offer, with the type of pictures that breathe life into bulletins. That meant the news output from the broadcast center in KL would be in demand, and Asia would be well-represented on AJE's news bulletins. If I could bring together a team that could consistently deliver on stories, then ultimately we would be successful. I began to feel confident that in Asia we were on the right track.

When I first joined the company, some recruitment was already underway. Extensive candidate lists, which were many pages long, were handed out on that very first morning in Doha. Understandably, the recruitment focus was on Doha. There was minute discussion about who had been recruited, how many were left to hire, and in what positions. Similar discussions then took place for Washington and London. Asia was at the end. Its list was one page long. The heading, in bold black type at the top of the page, read "Kuala Lumpur." It had one name confirmed on it. Mine.

And so began a painstaking and difficult recruitment process. There was no shortage of applicants. But persuading the good ones to leave existing positions with established broadcasters, to join a yet-to-be established international news channel with no meaningful on-air date, that had a complicated vision, and that had more conspiracies and rumors surrounding it than were useful, was not always an easy task.

The recruitment process was also difficult because in the early stages of the start-up, there were no human resource systems of any use within the company. What systems existed were delinquent. Even the process of getting one legal staff contract sent out to a successful candidate was be-

wildering, shambolic, and extraordinarily complicated. It was a pattern for things to come. During my tenure with the company, HR required endless vigilance and perseverance.

It was clear then that when the company said "start-up," they were not talking green fields. There was simply so little in place. No one in the room verbalized it that first day, but we were all thinking it: The channel would not be on the air in six months.

To Kuala Lumpur

Three days later, I left for KL and my new professional life. On my way out the door to Qatar International Airport I was given U.S. $2,000 in a plain white envelope, a stack of CVs that had already been well-picked over, and a laptop.

I quickly discovered that the computer wrote only in Arabic, and when I finally corrected it, still insisted on writing from right to left.

I was told there was a lease taken on the empty 60th floor of Petronas Tower 2 in KL, one of the world's tallest skyscrapers. That was true. But there was no bank account, few official papers, no company registration or permits in a country where nothing happens unless it is in triplicate, few company policies or guidelines, no equipment, and no staff. Not a frame had been shot. I had no place to live. There was no temporary office.

But I did have a deadline in six months. And an imperative to get up a fully operational international broadcast center, as well as bureaus in Beijing, Manila, and Sydney.

Surprisingly to me, Jakarta at that time was not on the list of bureaus. It seemed perverse to be called Al Jazeera and not have a bureau in Indonesia. I raised my concern about this more than once. I was told it was a simple case of competing priorities and budget in those early set-up stages. Sensibly, it was added later and was up and running by launch day.

A project manager had been appointed to deal with the Petronas broadcast center technical installation. I got started on the rest.

So why was Kuala Lumpur chosen as the broadcast center location in Asia? The decision was driven by operational requirements and cost effectiveness. The Al Jazeera company wanted to be central to Southeast Asia and China. Malaysia has a reasonable infrastructure and a compara-

tively modest cost base. The company was given tax benefits, and by and large Malaysia is English-speaking and is seen as a progressive Islamic society. Critically, the Malaysian government also guaranteed Al Jazeera English editorial independence.

Initially, KL was to have an all-up staff of 50. That was complete nonsense. By the time I left I had done over 1,000 interviews and had nearly 140 staff on board—making up many different regional ethnicities. Worldwide at that time, AJE had over 10,000 applications and had hired over 700 staff.

Culture And Newsrooms

More of the world's financial news is now coming out of Asia. And for years, television channels there have focused their efforts on news and analysis in this category. By its very nature, financial reporting tends to deal with absolutes. This presents fewer risks to media owners for whom media freedoms are an issue. Such an environment produces journalists who can do very good work without putting their heads too far above the parapet. You cannot blame them. If you go too far as a journalist in Asia, you can be taken from the streets, have your I.D. card confiscated from you, have your family harassed, or be imprisoned.

Al Jazeera English needed a different kind of journalist. It also wanted diversity in race, age, and background. This became an interesting balancing act. There can be problems in newsrooms with journalists from different cultures. This is not unexpected when you consider the many differences in history and origin—as well as simple craft issues. But it would be wrong to categorize these issues as mainly television ones.

Fundamental to this is the fact that many Asian journalists in much of Asia work in a culture of censorship. They are nearly always expected, along with their media owners, to consider the impact their reportage will have on their country and government. These reporters see their journalistic role in society as being different from their counterparts in the West. I suspect they are privately aghast by the lack of constraint and what they might perceive as recklessness demonstrated by their Western colleagues on assignment in Asia, irrespective of their editorial role, who generally have little regard for the effect their reportage can have on so-

ciety. And who can of course move on if they so choose, after their tours of duty end.

During the many interviews I did, candidates were asked to respond to a number of fictional news scenarios. For many of them, their first port of call for any response was to go to the government via the ministry of information. They were uncertain what to do or where to go after that.

This is not a purely Asian phenomenon—a February 2008 meeting of Arab information ministers (which adopted the Cairo Charter of Principles prohibiting criticism of Arab leaders and religious figures) is another example. Al Jazeera has strongly opposed this code, saying it will shackle freedom of expression.

In my own area, the Southwest Pacific, recent events in Fiji also give rise to concern. The Fijian public has been warned about speaking against interim government policies, a newspaper publisher has been expelled, and a report on media freedoms commissioned by the Fiji Human Rights Commission recommends actions at odds with human rights principles.

It is apparent that an expanding media market—both in Asia and the South Pacific—will not necessarily guarantee better journalists or better reporting.

Much has been made of the public interest in blogging and citizen journalism that is on the rise everywhere, including in Asia. These serious writers have increasing online influence and an important role in reporting conflicts or humanitarian issues. They do so with courage and commitment. They have few advocacy groups to safeguard their interests. They are vulnerable in communities where there is fear of the consequences of speaking out.

I would like to think the arrival of Al Jazeera English in Asia has helped them and other media, at least morally. After all, when an international channel is bearing witness to an event, it is more difficult for governments to deny, spin, obfuscate, and tailor their news on their state-sponsored channels. The international channel's coverage will not stop these governments, but exploiting the news in this way does become tougher for them.

AJE's coverage of protests on the streets of Kuala Lumpur in late 2007 is a prime example. The Malaysian information minister's denial (issued

live on AJE) of events that saw police deployed with water cannons to subjugate protesters was deceitful, foolhardy, and embarrassing. Little wonder then, with such denial in its senior ranks, that the Malaysian government was so surprised by the March 2008 election results. None of the citizens in the protest footage that day would have been.

I could not become accustomed to how casually government officials and authority figures in Asia assumed they would be advised of any editorial matter that might upset their government well before it went on the air. Or to their look of genuine puzzlement, surprise, and hurt when you said this would not happen. Of course Western governments act this way as well, just not as directly.

Editorial Focus

Media companies in 2008 are more profit-obsessed and confront a more volatile, competitive environment than ever before. Even if moved by more traditional journalistic values, the pressure remains constantly on editors to make their output what the marketers refer to as "news you can use."

Not surprisingly, considering many of us had formerly worked for commercial broadcasters, some of the more vociferous arguments early on at AJE were reserved for discretionary stories. These were stories such as the Oscars; the celebrity adoption stories; the McCartney/Mills divorce (then in its early throes); later the Madeleine McCann story; and coupling, sneezing, or scratching pandas.

Thankfully there was a majority view and it was the right one for the Al Jazeera brand. The commercial news broadcast market is a market taken care of by others who do it very well.

There are plenty of critics who believe AJE is unrelentingly grim and offers no light and shade. It is true on some days the channel can be a hard watch. Yet when I look ahead, I believe that quality news services will be more important than ever. They will provide the understanding and coherence on all manner of issues that will help me form my world view. As I do now, I will get that information from a preferred range of suppliers (including commercial broadcasters), and be better informed because of it.

In short, though, I do not expect the latest Britney, Paris, and Amy tattle, or the equivalent of *National Geographic*, aired on Al Jazeera, and I do not expect *Billboard* or *Hello* magazine will be running a treatise on the six-party talks any time soon.

Editorial Freedom

Every media company has its complexities and difficulties. Al Jazeera English is a particularly tough company. Some things I disliked. Being a Western, white, Christian woman in an Arab company is not easy. There is rivalry between the Arabic and English editorial arms of the company, mainly about power and influence. Yet rarely were there issues in Asia about editorial freedom.

I would not say that AJE is editorially fearless, but it comes close to it. It can be this way because it has no worry about ratings. They are never discussed. AJE accepts some advertising, though not enough to be self-sufficient. These factors make it unafraid to challenge the established voice. Or to decide not to do stories because everyone else is. It is true that how you see news depends on where you are standing—especially if you are the government.

I am frequently asked about editorial interference—was there any and if so what form did it take?

There is a view that the Qatari government has a direct hand in what goes on the air, even down to the level of rewriting scripts. In my experience, this flies in the face of how reputable international television news channels operate. They are a voracious user of material. They require an endless supply of product, produced accurately and quickly. As an independent Western journalist, it is an absurd notion to suggest that you would research a story, set it up, shoot it, script and edit it, and then submit it to your organization's thought police, who would then get back to you once they had debated it internally.

There were stories out of Asia during my time with Al Jazeera English that were sensitive. Every channel has them. For AJE in Asia, it was anything to do with apostasy, or some religious freedom stories. These had to be referred to Doha after the stories were done and before they went on the air. Stories which included homosexuality, women in bikinis, or

some nudity (such as Hindu men bathing in the Ganges), did not find much favor. But this attitude did not stop us from doing these stories. We would not have been worth our salt if it had.

The editorial team in Doha was under much more editorial scrutiny. At times there were some tough and bitter arguments about stories from the Middle East. I had faith in my international colleagues on these occasions that they had held the line.

With the Al Jazeera network being funded by Qatar's huge gas and oil revenues, one could easily assume there are unlimited dollars to burn on stories. Certainly the company does not have the same commercial pressures as other media organizations, but the budgets are fixed, and stay that way. There are strict accountabilities, which are rigorously enforced.

With some exceptions during start-up, the company sat toward the mid-to-bottom end of the global pay scale. It attracted staff by allowing them to do the kind of work they enjoy. This was a powerful motivator.

The End Of The Beginning

It did not take six months before Al Jazeera English went on the air; it took over double that. It was rare to have a day that was anything less than chaotic. And now the channel is reported to be available in 100 million homes in over 60 countries.

The obstacles and difficulties during that time were many and varied and still represent significant challenges for the company. Some of these go back to the original basis on which AJE was founded: the HR policies that were never quite formed; the operating funds that were frequently late; contractual issues that were never quite sorted out; lack of clarity over direction; intra-channel rivalry. Add in cultural differences, and you have a potent mix. These are substantial, and in some cases, unresolved growing pains.

There was no typical day as bureau chief. There was only the sublime and the ridiculous during those first two years. Apart from the editorial pursuits; the continual worry of having teams on the ground in places where journalists are regarded as targets; the mind-numbing end-

less technical detail; the tap-dancing diplomacy with governments and other broadcasters; what seemed like three quarters of the staff getting dengue fever at once; and the pure, unadulterated, adrenaline rush that was launch day, there were plenty of other things to keep me busy:

- Simply put, our whole technology was based on all data being sent rapidly around the world via a double-ring cable. One part of the cable would bring data (that is, stories) into Kuala Lumpur. The other part would send out data from Kuala Lumpur to other broadcast centers. Unfortunately, in Asia this cable lay in the main shipping lanes. It was repeatedly dragged by ship's anchors, sometimes severing it. At times this rendered us virtually inoperable, and Asia was cut off from the rest of the world.
- Particular and quite exceptional detail about a space on the 60th floor of Petronas Tower 2, dubbed the emir's room. It was designed by a New York architect, as was the whole floor. I was told I must have this room in case the emir visited one day. The ceiling was set up like a Bedouin's tent with twinkling lights to resemble the Qatari night sky. The emir, to my knowledge, has not yet dropped by. The room was quietly used for another purpose, but the lights are still in place.
- The fire drills in the Petronas Twin Towers that made you realize that if anything happened in those towers, you would be very lucky to get out unscathed. It is a beautiful and eccentric place for a newsroom.
- The senior Thai military intelligence unit which arrived one day thinking it would like to take photos of my complete technical installation.
- The unexpected meeting with the French "spiderman" who climbs tall buildings around the world. He decided that out of all the offices in the Petronas Twin Towers, he would enter mine one day, after having climbed from the bottom. Unfortunately for him, he also met security, who burst into my office, guns at the ready. He was forcefully arrested and taken away.

In Conclusion

Much has been written about the indifference of the public to international news. It is said that politicians, big business, and influencers of every kind form a small informed nucleus that enjoys access to the elite sources of information it requires, relying in essence on a compliant, complacent public. A lot of this is true.

Nonetheless, my experience in Asia, where our cameras and correspondents were almost universally welcomed, is that people want their stories to be told. There are a multitude of differences between the lives of people in the East and the West. But in so many cases, their stories have a similitude. Asians want corruption exposed. They want their lives made better by improved housing, healthcare, education, and justice. They are troubled by the price of rice, fees, and taxes; how good their crops are; disputes with their neighbors; animus between districts or nearby countries; and suspicion of the West. They worry about their future and that of their families. They always want their governments and officials held accountable. And they will talk to the media about these concerns—even if they sometimes risk their lives in doing so. And it is clear that information—when impartially and credibly conveyed—can have a profound impact on the public viewpoint and on decision-makers. At its zenith it can even help shape foreign policy. But then, that is its allure, and also its menace.

Al Jazeera English says that it has helped reverse the traditional flow of information from West to East, arguing that it has produced material that travels from East to West. This is a good position to take, though market research is needed to validate it. Nonetheless, AJE's arrival in Asia has indeed brought more reportage of more issues not only to viewers in that region, but into Western living rooms as well. Anecdotally it seems to have been well received in Asia. It has been well received in my own country, New Zealand.

On launch day I remember looking up at the bank of screens in the newsroom, while trying to deploy a team to a suspected tsunami in Japan. CNN was on a U.S. domestic story. The BBC was on the opening of Parliament, and AJE was talking to a rebel leader in Darfur. None of those story choices was wrong.

Still, with the advent of AJE, you are now more likely to see Darfur

on CNN and the BBC than you will ever be to see the opening of Parliament on AJE. That is simply the influence of a new entrant to the global media environment and market forces at work. This suggests to me that if news were simply retail, then Al Jazeera English has been very good for business.

Note

1. Al Jazeera English's "Newshour" is an hour of world news, hosted from AJE's broadcast centers in Doha, Kuala Lumpur, London, and Washington, D.C., and linked together live.

WORKING FOR AL JAZEERA: THE REALITIES

VERONICA PEDROSA

When this paper was presented at the Woodrow Wilson Center in April 2008, Al Jazeera English (AJE) was available in only two cable markets in the United States. My understanding is that AJE is closely watched by some government agencies in Washington, D.C., though for most U.S. residents any exposure to the channel is probably gained through accessing us on YouTube.com or on our own website, english.aljazeera.net. Although the paper was presented at a conference about AJE's impact in Southeast Asia, it was apparent that the audience was probably not familiar with AJE's content and programming. Accordingly, my primary purpose was to explain what the channel does and what it is like to work for it.

AL JAZEERA ENGLISH'S EDITORIAL AGENDA, OR WHAT IS NEWS?

Al Jazeera English was launched in November 2006, at a time when international broadcast news was dominated by networks that were centralized operations located physically and culturally in the West.

It is also important to note that for the last few years, journalists have been constantly adapting to the demands of consumers and of new technology, making many more sources of information available to consumers via cable, satellite, digital platforms, and of course the Internet.

The team that set out the founding concepts driving AJE wanted to provide a 360 degree view of the world, to set out a developing world news agenda, and to reverse the flow of news from the North and West so that it instead flowed from the South and East. They wanted to be true to the origins of the Al Jazeera network, located as it is in the South—in the developing nation of the kingdom of Qatar.

Veronica Pedrosa is a presenter for Al Jazeera English's broadcast center in Kuala Lumpur.

The channel's structure was designed to reflect its broader agenda, so AJE has a complex decentralized structure with four broadcast centers, located in Doha, Kuala Lumpur (KL), London, and Washington, D.C. Each broadcast center handles a block of several hours of output to viewers on a single global feed, before handing over the broadcast to the next center. The editorial concept was for each broadcast center to act autonomously. The journalists staffing each broadcast center would have their local expertise reflected in their output. At the same time, when there were developments on stories elsewhere in the world (not in the region housing the broadcast center), the journalists at the broadcast center would decide which of these stories to cover, and how.

The standard of success would be high-quality journalism: accurate, objective, and impartial. AJE would be controversial when necessary and would extend the legacy of the feisty journalism of the Arabic-language network to English-speaking viewers. There was a crucial period for the channel before it launched, in the weeks when we were rehearsing our operations to make sure the complex technology and communications systems put in place were really working. Editorially, this was a time when journalists from a very wide range of experiences and backgrounds found out what AJE was really going to be about.

One early example of how the editorial agenda developed was when the world-famous pop star Madonna planned to adopt a child from Mali. Last minute difficulties came up when it was reported that the biological father said he did not want to give the boy up after all. The international news agencies APTN and Reuters had sent crews to cover Madonna's travails, so access to pictures from Mali was no problem—but now what exactly was the story, if there was to be no adoption?

Several of our journalists, myself included, wanted to cover it by putting together an in-house report (that is, the images would be put together by using the news agencies' pictures, but a journalist in our broadcast center would write a script and provide the voice for the report). These Hollywood celebrity brushes with the developing world often explain why news editors decide they can reduce the commercial risk of covering developing world issues—such stories are seen as easier for viewers to swallow with the celebrity element.

Ultimately, however, this story was not entertained in editorial meetings at the broadcast centers. It was clear that at AJE, celebrity activities

were not considered news per se, and if we were to cover important issues in the developing world or anywhere else, it would be done absolutely straight: with in-depth reports produced by correspondents in the field and given more context by graphics sequences and interviews in the studio.

It was a moment of clarity. Al Jazeera would only cover a story if the fully-considered answer is "yes" to the question: "Is it news?"

This is such a fundamental question, but it provides a necessary bulwark in the context of the television industry today. All too often, journalists are covering stories about celebrities or about shocking-but-localized crime. The latest technology gives anyone the ability to record an event and to upload it onto the Internet for all the world to see. But asking the question has meant that AJE journalists are reporting on issues that may not get the channel more ratings or more advertising sales, but that really affect ordinary people. These are the issues for which we strive to provide context.

At Al Jazeera English, there is a passionate belief that it is the role of journalists to bear witness. Beyond that—because being in the right place at the right time is not all there is to being a journalist—we also try to provide context and balance. AJE journalists are given the time to, and encouraged to, provide for viewers the history and geography that create conflict, popular demands for change, hardship, hunger, etc.

Bearing witness can be an exceptionally risky business. Much has been made of "citizen journalism" in recent years. Nowadays, anyone can be at the scene of a news story when it happens. Remember the amazingly powerful image of a firefighter bearing the limp body of a small child from the rubble of an Oklahoma City daycare center, which had been destroyed when a federal government building was bombed in 1995? It was taken by a bystander. But just being in the right place at the right time does not make a journalist.

The job of the journalist is to take the risk of actually going to wars or remote, troubled areas hit by natural disasters, and then to provide trusted, balanced reporting even in the middle of such chaos. As well as bearing witness, journalists provide context, tell the wider story, provide balance, and are fair and accurate.

Al Jazeera English In Southeast Asia

The decentralized nature of Al Jazeera English is designed to provide in-depth local knowledge. In Southeast Asia we have chosen to commission extensive coverage of neglected stories like the food shortage in West Timor, the protests for electoral reform in Malaysia, the plight of Hmong tribes in Laos, the conflicts in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand, and the conditions of people in Myanmar. Such stories are considered expensive, difficult, and even dangerous to cover by other international news channels with more centralized structures.

Malaysia

In Malaysia, one important incident that demonstrated the possible impact we are having occurred in November 2007. There were mass demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur to call for electoral reforms. One of our correspondents reported from the scene, and he visibly winced as chemical-laced water discharged from a cannon reached his eyes. Other pictures in his report, taken by Al Jazeera camerapeople, showed ordinary Malaysians being dispersed by water cannon and tear gas.

Within hours of that report being aired, the Malaysian information minister called our news desk, furious over our coverage and demanding more balanced coverage. We explained that we had contacted 22 different government officials to ask for a comment to provide their view, but that none had agreed. He, however, did agree and was interviewed live during the next news bulletin. He insinuated on the air that the reporter had been acting and denied that there had been any clashes. However, while the government official was being interviewed, our producers ran the images AJE crews had taken that showed the clashes.

The short clip of the interview and the original report on the demonstrations were posted on YouTube.com and became the water-cooler story of the week in KL. Everyone seemed to be watching Al Jazeera, because none of the local or international networks showed the pictures of how the demonstration was broken up. Local broadcasters and newspapers repeated the views of the government at carefully choreographed news conferences. Indeed, the next day the information minister followed up his AJE interview with a news conference to denounce Al Jazeera for not understanding Malaysia's culture, and even for being a Western media organization.

Soon after AJE's coverage of the protests, the Malaysian state news agency Bernama ran the following report:

> *CAIRO, Nov 29 (Bernama)—Malaysians should not be easily taken in by what was shown in the Al-Jazeera satellite television station particularly on issues smearing Malaysia's image and reputation.*
>
> *Information Minister Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin said Malaysia was not the only country facing problems with Al-Jazeera for airing negative and adverse reports but also several Arab nations.*
>
> *This was told to him by Egyptian Information Minister Anas Ahmad Nabeeh El-Feky in a meeting with him here on Wednesday.*
>
> *Zainuddin said Egypt also had to face several incidents of distorted reports by Al-Jazeera which highlighted some issues that were inaccurate from what actually happened.*
>
> *"Egypt and several Arab countries are in a similar predicament with Al-Jazeera over certain incidents that happened in their countries. Al-Jazeera showed a distorted scenario of what really happened," he told reporters after meeting El-Feky in his office.*

But the truth was in the pictures. Al Jazeera was on the lips of many Malaysians in those days, as the only broadcast source of on-the-ground reporting on the protests.

A fellow journalist informed me that the editors of the local newspapers had even met with government officials to tell them that it was increasingly difficult for them to put out farcical non-reports about the protest when Al Jazeera English was being beamed to every ASTRO household showing what had really happened.[1]

General elections were held in Malaysia four months later, in early March. The information minister was among many in the ruling party who lost their seats in parliament. The ruling party lost its two-thirds majority in parliament and is in disarray.

Indonesia

Al Jazeera English is also being closely watched in Indonesia by authorities and by local media, according to Step Vaessen, our correspondent there. She adds that more and more ordinary people are watching AJE. She says that for the first time, people in Indonesia can frequently watch stories about their own country on an international channel, and that

they really appreciate this.

CNN does not have a permanent correspondent in Indonesia, and the BBC does not have a cameraman in the country. As such, these networks' coverage of Indonesia is limited to disasters or "big" stories. On average, AJE produces three stories a week from Jakarta about issues like the food crisis, disaster preparedness, corruption, and poverty, and in a different way than typically seen on the local channels.

According to Vaessen, officially there is press freedom now, but in reality most Indonesian channels still shy away from tough questions or critical reporting because there is still a lot of self-censorship.

For example, she says she received positive comments from Indonesians about the tone of AJE reports during former president Suharto's last days, which they considered more balanced than the reports of the Indonesian channels. When she spoke about it with Indonesian editors, they all complained that they were not allowed to really criticize Suharto in their reports. So what was shown on Indonesian TV, for weeks in a row, were stories about Suharto's health condition only, rather than a frank assessment of his rule and legacy.

Vaessen believes that AJE has quite an impact in Indonesia and that the authorities are not always happy. In the first year of AJE's presence in the country, she received several phone calls from the presidential palace asking her to tone down her reports. After she explained to them that the facts were right, the calls stopped. In the end, AJE was the only international channel to land an interview with President Susilo Bambang Yudhyono last November. He had not granted any interviews for over a year, and he has not granted any since. During Vaessen's meeting with the president, the Indonesian leader proudly showed her that he was actually watching AJE in his office.

Vaessen is particularly proud of her coverage of the famine and starvation in West Timor. Indonesian media have now begun to cover this story, but she says they still do not really show the complete picture, and the famine is still there and many children have died.

In general, AJE is quite popular in Indonesia. People can watch it on cable, and both satellite providers in the country carry it. However, most people in Indonesia who do not have a dish or cable cannot view the channel. AJE is considering the possibility of an arrangement with a local 24-hour news channel to carry one of our bulletins regularly, as

is the case in the Philippines, where the ABS-CBN News Channel rebroadcasts one of the bulletins produced from Kuala Lumpur every day.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, our coverage seems to have somewhat galvanized local television newsrooms. Viewers see our stories on cable or on YouTube.com, which in turn has apparently helped local journalists to consider reporting stories that they would not have considered in the past because of self or actual censorship. In a sense, our coverage has empowered the media in these nations to test the limits of freedom of expression.

Conclusion

Al Jazeera English is less than two years old, but our coverage and programming continue to reflect the commitment to bear witness to neglected issues and crises and to give a voice to the voiceless. In doing so, AJE has often incurred the irritation of governments for shedding light on issues they would rather leave in the dark. But the hope is that we can ultimately help to improve people's lives, if not by pushing the decision-makers to change their policies, then at least by better informing everyone; by raising awareness; and by increasing the possibility of constructive dialogue.

The key is to keep asking the question I mentioned earlier: "What is news?" Surely, it is things that affect people, even in areas kept deliberately in the dark. So our job is to shine a light where there is often none, and not to limit journalism to being a kind of accidental witness, by posting the latest thing to happen and calling it news. Unfortunately, that is the case with so much in news bulletins everywhere in the world—like Britney Spears being committed; like a car chase filmed from a helicopter; like a plane crashing at an air show.

At AJE, we are trying to bring these concepts of what journalism can be about, and more, together in our coverage: shining a light, reporting on the effects of events on people, and understanding how geography and history influence perspective. Perhaps the modest impact AJE is having in Southeast Asia is an early sign of the possible progress we are making toward our aim, stated at the channel's launch: not reporting on the mundane or sensational, but reporting on difficult and complex issues which intrude on our comfortable lives.

Postscript

With respect to our hosts, the topic of the April conference on Al Jazeera English in Southeast Asia seems to have an implied underlying narrative: that "out there" in so-called less developed nations, with younger democracies, AJE has the opportunity to provide a necessary challenge to their establishments, precisely because it is not from those particular countries, and nor from a Western nation.

So I find myself asking: why is it that in the United States, where freedom of expression is seen as so important that it is enshrined in the Bill of Rights, Al Jazeera English is finding it so difficult to get carriage? Could it be that Americans find it too difficult to look when a mirror is held up to the world by a non-Western media source? I very much look forward to the day when a conference like this will be held in Kuala Lumpur, to be entitled "The Impact of Al Jazeera English in the United States."

Note

1. ASTRO is a Malaysian domestic satellite provider, and AJE is one of the channels in the provider's news package.

NEW MEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF PROTEST: A CASE STUDY OF AL JAZEERA ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

Shawn Powers and Mohammed el-Nawawy

Since its launch in November 2006, Al Jazeera English (AJE) has been the subject of much discussion in the popular press. AJE is the English-language counterpart of Al Jazeera Arabic, a news channel that has stirred controversy for its independent and critical zeal. Like Al Jazeera Arabic, AJE was launched with hopes of providing a voice to the "voiceless" and to the "global south." The station has promoted a similarly ambitious mission of "setting the world's news agenda."[1]

While the two are technically separate news organizations, AJE is still overseen by Wadah Khanfar, the director-general of the Al Jazeera network. In addition, several of AJE's high-level staff positions were poached from the Arabic side in an effort to maintain some editorial consistency across both stations. More recently, Khanfar has merged the editorial boards of the English and Arabic sides and called for further collaboration between bureaus in an effort to increase consistency in the network's approach to covering international events. Khanfar declares that AJE "will provide the same groundbreaking news and impartial and balanced journalism to the English-speaking world."[2] Indeed, given Al Jazeera Arabic's groundbreaking approach to critically examining events in the Middle East, the move to tie AJE to Al Jazeera Arabic's operations and brand is an important one, as it adds credibility to AJE's goal of "bearing witness in a globalized world."[3]

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Additionally, given Al Jazeera Arabic's history of promoting democratic discussion and accountability in the Middle East, some have suggested that AJE—with its ambitious mission—may have a similar impact in promoting democratic deliberation and governance throughout the world. Drawing from the test case of AJE's work in Malaysia, this paper examines the impact that AJE has had on the Malaysian political environment thus far, and offers some insight into discussions of the possibility of an "Al Jazeera effect." More specifically, we argue that AJE's coverage of racial tensions in Malaysia and the Kuala Lumpur protests in November 2007 had a significant role in triggering political discussions, collaborations, and actions—mostly via interpersonal and new media networks—that would eventually result in the most dramatic political change in Malaysia since its independence from Great Britain in 1957. Moreover, this paper argues that AJE's role (along with that of active online politicking) in Malaysian political change offers another telling example of how new media technologies, organizations, and netizens are weakening the ability of the nation-state to control the flow of information, a consequence of which is liberal and democratic reform.[4]

The Al Jazeera Effect

Narrowly speaking, "Al Jazeera effect" is a term used to describe the consequences Al Jazeera's news coverage has had on the policies and opinions of governments across the world. The term includes references to the impacts that Al Jazeera's style of journalism has had on other media outlets in the Middle East; to actual changes in government policies; and to the waves of public sentiment moved by Al Jazeera's coverage of particular events.

Historically speaking, the term is a metaphorical reference to the "CNN effect," a concept that was popularized in the 1990s to describe the impact that international media (CNN in particular) were having on public opinion and foreign policies. During the 1990-91 Gulf War, "CNN emerged as a global actor in international politics," inspiring other international news organizations, such as the BBC, NBC, and Star, to follow and establish their own international satellite news net-

works. By acknowledging the impacts that images of the massacre at Tiananmen Square, as well as of the humanitarian crises in Somalia and Bosnia, eventually had on Chinese and Western governments, scholars suggested that satellite news organizations had the potential to become powerful actors in the international political environment.[5] Indeed, regardless of discussions about the existence of a formal "CNN effect" or "Al Jazeera effect," it is impossible to deny the structural changes that emerging flows of information—including those facilitated via satellite news television—have on traditional notions of state and citizen power.[6]

Along these lines, the term has become a metaphor for the larger social and political impacts that new media technologies—satellite television, SMS messaging via cell phones, and the Internet—are having on long-standing governmental and cultural policies and traditions. In this sense, the Al Jazeera network functions as an example of how new media technologies—in this case satellite television—can transcend the traditional influence of laws of individual nation-states and consequently impact local, regional, and international public opinion on social and political issues.[7] A prominent example is Al Jazeera's coverage of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Contra to CNN International and BBC World, Al Jazeera focused on the civilian and social consequences of the war, taking an explicit stance against its legality and proposed benefits through its relatively one-sided coverage. As Al Jazeera English's Riz Khan puts it, while American news channels "show the missiles taking off, Al Jazeera shows them landing." [8] Marc Lynch partly attributes this colored coverage of the war to the strength and scope of Arab public—and governmental—opposition to the American-led war.[9]

Lynch's viewpoint touches on yet another consequence of the proposed Al Jazeera effect: a more pronounced connection between Arab public opinion and government policy. Historically speaking, Arab media have largely been unidirectional, created or controlled by the government and broadcast to the people. The Al Jazeera model of programming—interactive, controversial, and relatively uncensored—has created a broader space and efficacy for the expression of public opinion. The result has been an enhanced Arab public sphere, more pointed public opinions, and a means by which opinions can be discussed across borders. As Mohamed Zayani has observed, news broadcasts by Al Jazeera

have translated "into popular pressure on Arab governments to step up their efforts to act on certain issues and to alter their tame policy."[10] For example, in 2000, Al Jazeera's coverage of the second Palestinian intifada sparked public protests across the Arab world and "united Arabs behind a single issue for the first time since the early 1970s," a fact that was widely noted by governments in the region.[11] Thus, in this sense, the Al Jazeera effect is not a reference to the influence that any particular media broadcaster has. Rather, it is a metaphor for the changed dynamics of power and influence that new media technologies, when combined with active and interested publics, are having on traditional structures of power.

Both the proposed Al Jazeera and CNN effects are related to the concept of the "demonstration effect." Based on Samuel Huntington's observations of how democratic changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union fed off of each other in a synergistic manner, the demonstration effect proposes that images and news of democratic protest and liberal reform in relatively closed societies can enhance similar democratic movements abroad when broadcast across borders. Through satellite television, citizens can become more informed about and encouraged by changes elsewhere and begin to press for change at home. Accordingly, elites become trepidatious over the downfall of autocrats abroad and in response become more conciliatory or reactionary at home, either of which can spark mass mobilization.[12]

In the case of Eastern Europe, no country could effectively shut out the tide of information that undermined regime credibility, raised social expectations, and eventually helped to end communist rule. More broadly, Huntington notes that changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union not only reinforced one another, but were also noticed by rulers and citizens across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This increased visibility, facilitated by the growth of international communication technologies, allowed for the demonstration effect to take hold on a global level.[13]

The Politics Of Protest

Public protests can play a particularly potent role in the context of the demonstration effect, and thus also in the proposed Al Jazeera effect. Media

theorists have observed that the media can enhance democratic movements by acting in a "triggering role," whereby the media play a more direct part in the promotion of democracy by acting as a conduit of democratic information and protest. This usually occurs when popular protest or opposition-group demands have been mounting among the citizenry, and the media offer favorable coverage for the opposition in ways that encourage the dissemination of its message throughout the country. In Latin America, the media has played a triggering role in both Brazil and Paraguay, where, as pressure to democratize intensified among the public, the local press "[were] decisive in sharpening democratic and social demands." The triggering role of the media can be most important during the intermediate and late stages of transition away from authoritarianism, when antiregime movements have already been formed and overall support for the regime has begun falling.[14] Importantly, these conditions can be found in several countries in Southeast Asia, and Malaysia in particular.

Yet the concept of a "triggering role" of the media requires further elaboration. Obviously, not all media coverage of protests and dissent helps further democracy or build civil society. The Western world's coverage of the Danish cartoon affair—characterized largely by a focus on the violent nature of the protests, and on the perceived incompatibility between Islam and modernity—illustrates how media coverage of public protest can in fact sometimes be detrimental to democratic deliberation.

In their work on the relationship between media and civil society, Jeffrey Alexander and Ronald Jacobs outline news media's capacity to "trigger violent reactions, dislodge powerful people and motivate the formation of social movements" through the creation of mediatized public crises. Arguing that media influence stems from media's "construction of common identities," Alexander and Jacobs suggest that "media events, which attract larger audiences than any other communication media, have tremendous potentials in terms of media power, because they erase the divide between private and public, and also because they dramatize the symbols, narratives, and cultural codes of a particular society."[15]

Essential to Alexander and Jacobs' conception of media events is the incorporation of mediatized narratives into the images and facts of a sequence of incidents, whereby media "perform" a story over time to meet the expectations of a particular audience. "Media events serve the legitimation needs for societies (not necessarily states) … they provide

the cultural grounds for attachment to the 'imagined community.'" In this sense, imagined communities are formed through the progression of connecting individual sentiments to collective narratives of current events, a process that places news media at the center of the social change process. Mediatized public crises differ from traditional conceptions of media events in that they "tend to increase the distance between the indicative and subjunctive" (that is, the "is" and the "ought"), exposing social ills and creating space and a sense of exigency for civic action to overcome the social pollutants. For example, drawing from Elihu Katz's research on media power, Alexander and Jacobs contend that media are important "for actively constructing common identities and common solidarities," suggesting "that the media is concerned not only with the diffusion of information to a mass public, but also—and this is particularly true for media events—with the dramatization of civil society and the creation of a common cultural framework for building common identities."[16]

It is precisely this type of "mediated public crisis" that has recently been witnessed in Malaysia. In the course of just a few years, new media technologies, including the Internet and increased satellite television service, have transformed the way Malaysians consume information about national politics and culture. The following case study explores how new media networks, built through growing social disenfranchisement, and triggered by a series of protests covered extensively and dramatically by AJE, resulted in Malaysia's largest political upheaval in over 50 years.

Al Jazeera English Arrives In Kuala Lumpur

One of the most intriguing aspects of Al Jazeera English—an attribute that sets it apart from its international competitors—is its innovative and modern approach to the physical constitution of a global news network. Rather than relying on a principal bureau out of which most of the news is broadcast, AJE relies on a rotating broadcast-bureau structure, where the broadcast and editorial responsibilities are handed off between four main bureaus, or broadcast centers. The four broadcast centers are located in Doha (Qatar), London (United Kingdom), Washington, D.C. (United States), and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and each has its own segment of

the day when it is responsible for what viewers see when they tune in to AJE. While the Doha bureau makes geographical sense given its proximity to the network's headquarters, and London and Washington, D.C. make sense given their propinquity to historic levers of power and major international events, the decision to place its Asian broadcast center in the capital of Malaysia seems unusual, given the number of alternative media hubs for news and international events in the region. Singapore, Jakarta, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Tokyo each enjoy access to important parts of Asia, and each has a different regulatory environment and pool of journalistic talent.

There are a number of explanations for the decision to place AJE's Asian broadcast center in Kuala Lumpur. It is important to note that the bureau is located on the 60th floor of the world-famous Petronas Towers, a location that would be the envy of any news organization. Some have speculated that the emir of Qatar drew on his oil connections with Petronas oil (owned by the Malaysian government) in order to secure a relatively inexpensive lease. Moreover, AJE received assurances from Malaysia's prime minister that the government would not interfere with the organization's broadcasts, assurances that have so far been proven true.[17] The decision by the Malaysian government—and the Petronas oil company—to court AJE is also an interesting one. Given the strength of Al Jazeera's brand as a modern news organization with strong Muslim roots, the Malaysian government may have agreed to house AJE's Asian broadcast center in an effort to simultaneously demonstrate the stable business environment offered by Kuala Lumpur and to appeal to domestic constituencies calling for a closer relationship between the Malaysian government and the Islamic faith.

It is important to note that the Malaysian government maintains tight control over its domestic media environment. The 1984 Printing Press and Publications Act (PPPA) requires all forms of print media to obtain annual licenses from the prime minister's office. These licenses can be revoked at any time, and there is no means of public oversight. Indeed, the PPPA presents much more than an idle threat. In 2006, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi used the law to "prohibit the publication, distribution, or possession of any materials related to the Danish caricatures," a move that resulted in the suspension of the licenses for two different Malaysian newspapers.[18] It should also be noted that even

foreign publications are subject to censorship in Malaysia.

More importantly, the government's heavy-handed approach to dealing with the Danish cartoon affair reinforced widespread fear and, thus, self-censorship amongst Malaysian media outlets. "Self-censorship has been entrenched by a history of political interference in media coverage of issues considered by the government to be against the national interest or 'sensitive.'"[19] Indeed, in July 2006, in response to increased apprehension regarding the "Islamization" of Malaysia, the prime minister banned reporting on race or religion altogether. Sadly, Malaysia's restrictions on broadcast media are even broader. The 1988 Broadcasting Act gives the minister of information expansive discretion to determine "who can own a broadcast station and the type of television service suitable for the Malaysian people."[20]

On top of these restrictive laws and a media environment that encourages the widespread sanitization of the news, most Malay broadcast and print media are owned or controlled by Media Prima, a media conglomerate that is closely linked to the largest political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Simply put, the media environment of Kuala Lumpur is one that by all indications would seem to be contrary to Al Jazeera's history and mission to "adhere to the journalistic values of honesty, courage, fairness, balance, independence, credibility and diversity, giving no priority to commercial or political considerations over professional ones."[21]

AJE's decision to choose Kuala Lumpur is especially interesting given the network's record of working within unkind media environments. The history of Al Jazeera's news coverage in the Middle East is a story of governmental hostility toward the network and its journalists that has not only made in-depth and on-the-ground reporting difficult in some cases, but also spilled over into diplomatic consequences for the government of Qatar. During its 12-year tenure, the Al Jazeera network has at one point or another been shut out of almost every country in the Middle East.[22] Its journalists have been imprisoned, tortured, and killed, and its headquarters has allegedly even been discussed as a possible target of a U.S.-led military strike. And while the organization has been able to persevere despite the onslaught of Arab and Western government hostility, essential to its success has been the legal safe haven of its broadcasting home, Doha. To place one of the broadcast centers in

Malaysia, a country that is openly hostile to Al Jazeera's style of reporting, certainly seems out of place.

Mediating Change

Despite outward appearances, Malaysia remains a relatively segmented and heterogeneous society. There are three primary ethnicities: Malay (65 percent), Chinese (26 percent), and Indian (8 percent). Malaysia's political history since independence in 1957 has been one dominated by ethnic Malay interests. Chinese and Indian interests have been represented only through the filter of the ruling political coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), which is dominated by a pro-Malay agenda at the expense of the economic and social well-being of Chinese and Indians living in Malaysia.

Yet, despite divisions, open discussion of the status of racial and religious affairs is thoroughly discouraged. Prime Minister Badawi has suggested that "in this country all of this is secure and the nation understands that religious issues should not rightly be brought up. This is not on the agenda for discussion." He added that "no one should even attempt to test the government's resolve on this issue."[23] However, despite the government's efforts to quiet dissent, there have been a growing number of political opposition groups forming and organizing around their particular religious and/or ethnic interests. Of primary symbolic importance are a growing number of ethnic Indians taking root in Malaysia. Despite their growth in numbers, there is limited Indian representation in the Malaysian parliament or government. Prior to March 2008, only one ethnic Indian had ever served in the Malaysian parliament.

On November 10, 2007, large protests broke out in the heart of downtown Kuala Lumpur. Organized by BERSIH, a coalition of Malaysian opposition political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with the stated aim of reforming the electoral process, up to an estimated 40,000 protestors came out in force in order to draw attention to complaints of government discrimination against minority communities and to call for an end to government corruption and for electoral reform. While the protests began as a peaceful endeavor, Malaysian police quickly tried to quash the protestors and to dissuade people from

joining the demonstrations by using fire hoses and tear gas. The images were stunning, not only for international audiences, but especially for Malaysians. While the Malaysian broadcast and print media failed to cover the protests as anything more than a blip, Al Jazeera English covered the protests live and in detail. While covering them, AJE correspondent Hamish MacDonald was himself physically affected by the tear gas, the consequences of which were jarring for anyone watching. Importantly, earlier that month, AJE had aired a special on its show People & Power, which predicted that the escalation of racially related tensions was going to force change—even violent change—in Malaysia.[24] Widespread public awareness of the protests, and the police violence that followed, would not have been acknowledged in but a few elite circles had AJE correspondents not been there on the ground to film the events (and in high-definition no less).

AJE's coverage of the protests was significant for several reasons. Internationally, it exposed just how delicate the Malaysian political and social systems are, a fragility that the government had been working to mask for the sake of promoting itself as a safe haven for international economic investment. Domestically, the coverage shattered the credibility of a ruling party that had assured its citizenry that its handling of the protesters used the utmost restraint.

A crucial moment came when the minister of information, Zainuddin Maidin, called AJE to complain about its coverage of the protests. Maidin quickly found himself the subject of a live on-air phone interview for which he was unprepared. He accused Al Jazeera English of "trying to project" an image of Malaysia as an undemocratic country. "We are not Pakistan, we are not Myanmar," Maidin declared.[25] Yet, when asked why the Malaysian police did not break up the protests more peacefully, the minister explained that even the most peaceful public protests were illegal in Malaysia, and thus the police force was justified. Speaking in broken English, and unmistakably perturbed by AJE's decision to broadcast the violent break-up of the protests, Maidin's performance was seen almost universally by the Malaysian citizenry as a disgraceful representation of the country's policies. One Malaysian viewer declared that the interview was "truly embarrassing." Another added that "anyone could have done a better job than him. There is no way that he will maintain his position as the minister of information after the next election."[26]

While some Malaysians expressed concern that the protest and violent images would hurt Malaysia's image abroad, these sentiments were far overwhelmed by the shame felt by Maidin's inarticulate defense of the police's reactions to the peaceful protests.[27]

The images of the excessive force used against the protestors spread like wildfire. Independent news providers and bloggers posted links to AJE's coverage, and more than 250,000 people watched it on YouTube.com during the first week after the protest. More importantly, a large number of Malaysians saw the images and debated the rally. The large-scale discrepancy between AJE's ample coverage of the protests and the sparser coverage of the Malaysian—largely state-influenced—media resulted in the Malaysian mainstream media's "largest credibility crisis to date."[28]

The impact of Al Jazeera English's coverage could be seen just 14 days later when a second protest was organized, again calling for an end to the marginalization of Malaysia's ethnic minority community, particularly Indians. The next day, images of the protests were on the front pages of all the domestic newspapers, and local television news carried the protests as well. Importantly, the Malaysian press coverage focused on the damage that the protestors did to public property and the Malay police forces, whereas AJE's coverage explained the purpose of the protests—attaining greater representation and democratic governance—while focusing on the police's use of tear gas and water cannons to "disperse" the protestors.[29] Once more, the difference was striking, and Malaysians were once again left wondering about the authenticity of their domestic media sources and the credibility of the governing coalition.

Following the protests, police used the colonial-era Internal Security Act to arrest and detain without trial five leading members of the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), an NGO with a major involvement in the demonstrations. This news was also covered extensively by AJE and the Malaysian blogosphere.[30] The arrests soon became rallying points for opposition parties to the ruling coalition and "further fueled the people's distress, especially the Indians, that the government was unprepared to address their concern."[31] Importantly, the arrests and the protests had now turned the public's attention toward broader issues regarding the efficacy of Malaysian democratic governance, issues that resonated with large segments of the citizenry.

AJE's overall coverage of the events—starting with the rising ethnic tensions within Malaysia, to the police violence, all the way to the final protests—constituted a new type of journalism for Malaysians. AJE did not merely cover the events as they took place, but rather provided background, context, and at times opinions that narrativized the events in a way that helped mobilize opinion against the government. Simply put, AJE became an actor on behalf of the oppositional and nongovernmental forces in Kuala Lumpur, a performance that was instrumental in coalescing diverse groups against the ruling coalition, BN.

In an interview with Dato Manja Ismail, director of Malay publications for Media Prima, the state-run media conglomerate, Ismail described how AJE's coverage of the protests had impacted local media in Kuala Lumpur:

> "AJE's coverage of the protests changed how we cover sensitive political issues here. Before, we could not show such images, or tell such tales of government abuse. Now, if we don't we will lose our audience to AJE. I've told the minister of information that, and he understands that things must change."[32]

Moreover, the protests served as an additional spark for Malaysian online independent news sites and the blogosphere. The protests, their participating organizations and agendas, and abuse of the protestors all provided fertile and timely content that was craved by an increasingly skeptical Malaysian public. With more and more Malaysians going online, and with the credibility of the Malaysian public media in question, many Malaysians relied on online content to best determine what was going on in Kuala Lumpur.[33] The combination of credible journalism, carried out by a highly respected network (AJE), and circulated through extensive and increasingly relied-upon electronic networks, would prove to be deadly for the ruling national coalition.

The combined impact that new media technologies and AJE would have on Malaysian politics was made clear four months later, in March 2008. Following the protests, BERSIH and HINDRAF helped to further unite Malaysia's minority communities under the mantra of "people power." Their goal was clear: to remove from power the incumbent coalition that had been responsible for the police abuse and five decades of alleged discriminatory rule. Drawing heavily on their online resources,

HINDRAF and BERSIH, along with other similarly aligned socially active groups, lobbied heavily for a broad, coordinated strategy that would bring together a diverse group of political opposition powers and mount the strongest challenge to BN at the ballot box.

Despite expert predictions to the contrary, Malaysian voters chose dramatic change in the country's March 2008 elections. The ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time since independence, as well as a number of significant state and local elections.[34] The National Justice Party, established in 2003 and organized around the goals of social justice and a nonethnic approach to promoting growth, went from having one representative in parliament to controlling 31 seats. A close ally, the Democratic Action Party, under the banner of promoting a secular, multiracial, and social democratic state, went from controlling 12 seats to 28. Importantly, ending the BN's two-thirds majority in parliament was essential to the objectives of ending corruption and pushing reform in Malaysia, because the absence of this majority prevents the ruling coalition from passing constitutional amendments with free will. Since independence, BN has passed over 650 amendments, many of them meant to further entrench the coalition's political strength.

Moreover, the results of the election may have something of a snowball effect on Malaysian media and politics. According to Gayathry Venkiteswaran of the Center for Independent Journalism, a Malaysia-based NGO focused on expanding freedom of the press, "the electoral setback of the BN despite the pro-BN media is a strong indicator of the public rejecting the media's propagandist approach and [of] the need to change the editorial policy."[35] In a telling setback for the incumbent coalition, one of the five Indian activists that it had detained as a result of the November protests, M. Manoharan, was elected to a state legislature. In addition, five active Malaysian bloggers also became newly elected parliamentarians. As one Malaysian scholar noted:

> "Malaysia has entered a new era of competitive party politics, moving on from five decades of government that has faced down fragmented and impotent opposition by using the power of the state and media manipulation to maintain the myth that voters should support the Government, or risk societal breakdown. The

Government's ethnicized formula of retaining political power has been put on notice and, as such, politics in Malaysia [are] unlikely to be the same again."[36]

Evidence Of An Al Jazeera Effect?

Scholars have correctly acknowledged the difficulty of ever trying to establish clear-cut evidence of the Al Jazeera effect. There are too many factors that influence public opinion and national policy to ever clearly demonstrate that media in general—or a specific media organization—are able to influence public opinion leaders and policymakers.[37]

That said, this case study of protests and political change in Malaysia offers support for several of the theories outlined earlier. For starters, it is clear that AJE, in union with the Internet and blogosphere, is impacting the way Malaysians think of themselves and the world. One viewer said that "AJE provides a cover for others— bloggers, newspapers, politicians—to say what they want. There is a new freedom of speech that was not here before." Another described AJE's coverage as "courageous, mind-opening for most of us Malaysians. They aired images that are not ever allowed on our TVs and without repercussion."[38] There seems to be substantial evidence that AJE's coverage of the protests of November 2007 represents an example of the "decisive triggering role" that media can have "in sharpening democratic and social demands."[39]

The success of the protests—and the coalescing of political movements that followed—can be explained using Alexander and Jacobs' discussion of mediatized public crisis. A mediatized public crisis is an event that allows larger audiences to see, identify, and construct common identities or "imagined communities" with those who are oppressed or otherwise disenfranchised. In this case, through its ongoing coverage of ethnic tensions in Malaysia, AJE had a role in dramatizing a series of otherwise discrete events into a narrative of systemic discrimination against Malaysia's minorities. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, AJE's performance from within the protests, and its narrativization of them, added a significant layer of dramatization of the discrimination for audiences to identify with. Not only was AJE's Hamish MacDonald directly present and physically harmed in the protests, but AJE's portrayal of the protests as

legitimate, peaceful, and democratically inclined helped further broaden the issue from specific discrimination against non-Malay minorities to larger questions of police violence and democratic governance throughout Malaysia. Importantly, it was this broadening of the issue that provided a means for more expansive discussions among diverse ethnic and political groups regarding the nation's political future. This broadening of the issue was critical for political opposition parties, as it helped enable them to recruit larger support to come together effectively and to challenge the ruling coalition in the March elections.

In terms of actually impacting the election, the role of the Internet and blogosphere cannot be understated. Blogs and online independent newspapers were essential in further disseminating images and stories of the protests, as well as in fostering deliberations regarding how to change the ruling coalition's policies (i.e. through electing new parliamentarians). A U.S. State Department report argued: "Weblogs (blogs), text messages, and copies of Internet-streamed videos became the most influential information sources for voters ahead of Malaysia's March 8 parliamentary elections." Moreover, Dr. Abu Hassan Hasbullah, a professor at the University of Malay, found that "70 percent of voters were influenced by blogs," arguing that the rise in Internet influence stems from the mainstream media's refusal to report on "government corruption or on religious and racial tensions."[40] Perhaps even more telling is the fact that five bloggers themselves were able to become newly elected parliamentarians.

Thus, in the larger metaphorical conceptualization of the Al Jazeera effect, Malaysia offers an example of how new media technologies can facilitate dramatic political change in semi-authoritarian governments in Southeast Asia and, hopefully, beyond. The Malaysian example may provide an important test case for whether or not Huntington's theorized "demonstration effect" has the potential to take hold and impact democratic movements throughout the region. Interestingly, AJE has recently inked distribution deals in several countries in the region, including Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Indonesia, thereby adding to its global reach—which may currently approach 110 million households worldwide.

With over 130 staff members, a number of exceedingly experienced journalists, seven bureaus throughout Asia, and a relatively significant

budget, it is hard to imagine that AJE's coverage—particularly of local issues—will not challenge government and local media to perform better. And the lesson from Malaysia's 2008 elections, perhaps the nation's most historic political event since its independence in 1957, is that new media, and AJE, matter.

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AN INDONESIAN PERSPECTIVE: AL JAZEERA ENGLISH, INDONESIAN SOCIETY, AND THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT IN INDONESIA

ATRIA RAI-TENE

Since the fall of President Suharto in May 1998, Indonesian press freedoms have improved considerably. Today, the country's journalists enjoy the freedom to write or report. Additionally, the number of new media organizations—both print and electronic—has increased. One year after Suharto's resignation, the government of Indonesia granted 718 new media licenses. This represents a huge leap from the total of 289 issued over the entire 50-plus-year period following the country's independence.[1]

This new profusion of media is foreign as well as local. A visit to any newsstand in Indonesia reveals a broad range of colorful magazines, saucy tabloids, and hard-hitting newspapers. Examples include *Cosmopolitan*, *Readers Digest*, *GQ*, and *Playboy* magazine. Similarly, television viewers can now choose from a variety of channels and programming. The number of national television channels—including the state-owned TVRI—has increased from 5 to 11 stations. In the last 10 years, the number of regional television stations has reached at least 75. This number will continue to rise; 218 TV station operators have applied for operational licenses over the last 10 years.[2]

Pay television is an important player in Indonesian television. There are currently five pay TV providers in Indonesia. Five others have recently been granted broadcast licenses, and seven more are still awaiting government approval for licenses. Most of these cable and satellite TV providers carry 38 to 92 channels. Their basic plans include both domestic and international news channels. Pay TV offers a variety of international channels, such as CNN, BBC World, Fox News, NHK World, Italy RAI Uno, China's CCTV, CNBC, and Bloomberg. Pay TV also provides a means for viewing Al Jazeera English (AJE).

Atria Rai-Tene is a news producer with Trans TV, one of Indonesia's major television stations.

The Impact Of Al Jazeera English Across Indonesian Society

At present, Al Jazeera English has little impact on Indonesian society at large. Several factors help explain why.

Low Penetration and Lack of Awareness

AJE penetration is still low in Indonesia, a country of 234 million people—the world's fourth largest in terms of population, and also home to the largest Muslim population in the world. Only pay TV subscribers can watch AJE. Yet among the five existing pay TV providers, only three of them—Kabelvision, Indovision, and Astro TV—carry AJE. Furthermore, the penetration of pay television itself in Indonesia is about 2 percent of the total number of households with access to televisions (30 million Indonesian households have televisions, and only 640,000 of them are pay TV subscribers). The number of Indonesian homes that subscribe to one of the three pay TV providers that carry AJE is around 563,000, a fraction of the 56 million total households across Indonesia and a penetration rate of just over 1 percent.[3]

It is apparent from this 1 percent figure that Pay TV has difficulty penetrating the Indonesian market. There are several reasons for this. Indonesian audiences still prefer to watch local, freely available programming with strong local content. Additionally, pay TV is still considered a luxury, and the majority of Indonesians have low purchasing power. Another barrier to the spread of pay TV in Indonesia is the lack of infrastructure to support cable delivery. And, to make matters worse for pay TV, with the issuing of new licenses over the last 10 years there has been an increase in the number of free-to-air channels (these are stations generally available for no charge).[4]

It is difficult to measure exactly how many people are watching AJE in Indonesia, since pay TV programs are not rated by the rating and survey company, Nielsen Media Research. Additionally, basic pay TV packages or plan subscriptions include both domestic *and* international news channels such as Al Jazeera English—and pay TV operators cannot break down data on the number of viewers for each channel in a package. Pay TV data can only reflect the number of subscribers to certain packages or plans.

While there are no exact numbers, the general sense is that the number of viewers watching Al Jazeera English is still very low compared to similar international news channels such as CNN, BBC World, or CNBC. Viewership figures for AJE are likely similar to those for Bloomberg TV and Channel NewsAsia, according to Riza Primadi, news director of Astro TV Jakarta, one of the three pay TV providers that carry AJE.[5] Sources interviewed for this paper acknowledge that Indonesians in general still prefer to watch Western news channels such as CNN and BBC World than Al Jazeera. Part of this preference is based on the fact that AJE is still very new (it entered the Indonesian market in March 2007), and therefore many people are not aware of its existence. It is notable as well that there is no advertising of the channel, other than by word-of-mouth.

Apart from pay television, Al Jazeera English can be accessed via webcast on the Internet. The number of Internet users in Indonesia is currently 25 million, or about 10 percent of the total population (though this number increases significantly every year).[6] Unfortunately, most Internet subscribers in Indonesia use a dial-up connection instead of high-speed broadband. However, dial-up is very slow and makes the viewing of video streaming almost impossible. This consequently hampers the accessibility of AJE.

New Broadcast Regulations on Pay TV and Foreign Content

In 2007, the government of Indonesia introduced new broadcasting regulations that deal with program monitoring, allocation of frequencies, licensing of broadcast stations, and relaying foreign content. In regards to the latter, the new regulations prevent local private radio and television stations from directly relaying foreign broadcast content, confining this content instead to short-wave radio and cable television networks. This certainly contributes to AJE's low penetration, as it prevents AJE's broadcasts from being disseminated on television any other way than through pay TV, to which relatively few Indonesians have access.

The English Language

Language is another reason why Al Jazeera English is not popular in Indonesia, because English is not commonly used in the country. Like most newscasts, AJE's use of the English language is proper and formal. This

makes it even more difficult to understand, because Indonesians generally understand even very little *conversational* English; Hollywood films shown in movie theaters feature Indonesian subtitles.

International News is Not Popular

Free-to-air television channels, including national and regional TV stations, usually subscribe to international news wires such as APTN and Reuters. Based on my experience as a news producer in Indonesia, I can say that international news is not very popular among viewers. Ratings during international news segments usually decline and start to pick up again only when the newscast shows domestic news. Crime stories still dominate ratings. Even petty crimes in one small neighborhood attract viewers. According to Ishadi SK, president of the Trans TV station in Jakarta, the Indonesian press are "still very much inward-looking." Domestic news portions, he observes, are "still bigger than international news … there is more domestic news that is far more interesting."[7]

Granted, there is interest in foreign news when it involves Indonesians living abroad. Stories such as domestic workers being abused, raped, or mistreated in foreign countries like Saudi Arabia and Malaysia always attract much attention from viewers. On several occasions, the Indonesian government has used the Al Jazeera network to disseminate its messages. The 2005 kidnapping of an Indonesian TV reporter and a cameraman in Iraq received a lot of attention in Indonesia. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono made an appeal for the release of the Indonesian journalists on Al Jazeera. In the end, the journalists were released. Similarly, in March 2008, President Yudhoyono gave a statement on a controversial short film, "Fitna," by the Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders. Dino Patti Djalal, a presidential spokesman, points out that President Yudhoyono "extended a special invitation" to both Al Jazeera English and a Dutch TV station "to convey his message."[8]

The only time Indonesian local media have used footage from Al Jazeera was during the Iraq war in 2003. The coverage was taken from international news wires to which the local media subscribed, such as APTN and Reuters. Typically this Al Jazeera footage was broadcast during the initial hours after incidents unfolded, and after that major national stations would send their reporters and camerapersons to the sites in question, because these stations had the financial resources to

send their news crews abroad. One national station, TV7, even relayed Al Jazeera Arabic newscasts with a simultaneous translation in Bahasa Indonesian. For awhile, viewers switched to TV7 because they wanted to see a different perspective of the Iraq war; at that time, Western news channels had been dominating coverage of the war.

Market-driven Programming

Despite the freedom to publish or broadcast and to be free from government control, the media nowadays are actually controlled by the market. It is the readers and viewers who determine what they want to read or see on television. This situation creates fierce competition to win audiences and hence a share of the advertising pie. Undoubtedly, television stations try to win audiences by producing programs that they hope will become popular, or by keeping the already popular programs on the air. Unfortunately, news does not appeal to Indonesian audiences. News can never beat the ratings of entertainment programs. Indonesian soap operas known as *sinetron* are gold mines for commercial television stations. The relatively low ratings of news programs compared to entertainment programs on Indonesian television contributes to the low penetration rates of international news channels—including, presumably, AJE—among TV audiences in Indonesia.

Does Al Jazeera English Have An Impact On The Indonesian Media Environment?

Up to this point, the Indonesian media have not been much influenced by Al Jazeera English. The Indonesian media are entering the 11th year of the reformation era, which began after the fall of Suharto in May 1998. Suharto's ouster triggered wide-ranging political, economic, and social reform in Indonesian society. The political reforms created greater political freedoms, including press freedom. Prior to the reformation era, the Suharto regime imposed tight control over, and censorship of, the political life of Indonesian society. Today, freedom of expression, combined with tight competition and reasonable economic growth and

stability, have enabled and even oblige national TV newsrooms to invest in their own sources of international news coverage. Major news media companies are able to send their reporters to the scenes of prominent international news stories and to subscribe to international news wires.

The September 11 catastrophe and the invasion of Iraq are hard-to-equal events. If events of an equivalent magnitude were to happen again, there is a possibility that TV newsrooms might rely again on foreign broadcasters such as CNN, BBC World, or even Al Jazeera English. However, according to Horea Salajan, an advisor to an Indonesian television station, "they would probably turn more towards [the] Al Jazeera Arabic service than AJE, especially if the events [were to] have an 'Islamic vs Western world' connotation. They would rely on such [foreign] sources as long [as] they [didn't] have [their own footage] available … This happens especially in the first hours of the story."[9]

Again because of AJE's low penetration and lack of awareness among Indonesians, AJE has little impact on already-existing press freedoms. Indonesian press freedom is greatly influenced by local media players and it is expressed and reflected through local media publications and radio and television broadcasts. "Our freedom of expression and freedom to voice our opinion are not influenced by foreign media output," insists the editor-in-chief at Indonesia's RCTI television station.[10]

In reporting news about Indonesia, AJE follows the local media rather than vice versa. In the words of Salajan, "AJE is following the usual foreign correspondents' path: that is to read newspapers and monitor the local media, pitch some stories to headquarters, and if they are interested they make the story."[11]

Al Jazeera English As A Reference And Alternative

Based on my various interviews with Indonesian media specialists, the general impression in Indonesia is that Al Jazeera English is hardly used as a reference by policymakers, government, or other prominent society leaders—because they still look up to more established news channels such as CNN and BBC World. One might find this ironic, since Indonesians often express anti-Western sentiment, but in reality most of them still look up to Western media for references. Additionally,

Indonesians believe that international news channels like CNN represent free and democratic media. However, this does not necessarily mean that Indonesians agree with Western views in general. For example, "I believe Indonesians do not associate Al Jazeera with the extension of terrorist groups despite many claims by Westerners," one Trans TV news producer told me.[12]

One exception is the more hard-line Islamic publications such as *Sabili*, *Hidayatullah*, and *Swara muslims* magazines. These type of magazines, in particular *Sabili*, were banned during the Suharto era and are now mainly distributed through underground networks. These are magazines with strong conservative views on Islam, and they express strong anti-Western sentiment. Such periodicals routinely use Al Jazeera as a reference. Also, explains the editor of an Islamic magazine in Indonesia, "Some middle-class Islamic groups, which in general cannot be categorized as fundamentalist, often refer to Al Jazeera when discussing issues pertaining to [the] Islamic world. For example on the issue of [the] Iraq war, they often refer to 'according to Al Jazeera' instead of CNN, which is a U.S.-based news channel. This also goes [for] Islamic-based publications that trust Al Jazeera as a news source more than … Western news channels."[13]

AJE's coverage of the Islamic world is instructive. This coverage tends to go more toward the victims' side, such as when it covers the Palestinian and Israeli disputes. "AJE tries to expose the human side of the stories, the suffering and the drama people go through," says Salajan. "This type of approach usually works in attracting viewers to see the other side of the war. However, to be fair, other international news channels also do it as well and run similar programs."[14]

Despite its low penetration, Indonesians welcome Al Jazeera English because it gives a different perspective from that of Western media. AJE can project itself as an alternative media that can understand Asia and the Middle East and Islam while maintaining a balanced view. Additionally, AJE is more sensitive than Western media, in terms of its reporting, to local audiences. "Perhaps," theorizes Djalal, the presidential spokesperson, "because AJE is headquartered in Doha and Kuala Lumpur, they are more exposed to Muslims and therefore, have more understanding. They are not dogmatic about it, but they are more willing to understand Islam and more able to communicate with Muslims."[15] In effect, AJE

is often seen as an alternative source of information for those who seek balanced news that is separate from Western media. "People seek out Al Jazeera to see […] well-balanced news of the Iraq war," says Awang Rustandi, a journalism lecturer at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta. "Islamic activist groups in Indonesia also use AJE as their source of foreign news."[16]

The presence of AJE in Indonesia is part of the open policy of the Indonesian government to allow Indonesians greater access to foreign media. AJE provides additional news sources and an additional choice of television station for Indonesian viewers. From this perspective, the presence of AJE is considered good for domestic viewers by providing more choices for news sources. For the media, while AJE means competition for established outlets in Indonesia, its penetration at the moment is still very low and does not qualify as serious competition for existing media.

Does Al Jazeera English Have Prospects In Indonesia?

Al Jazeera English may have some prospects for success in Indonesia, because both pay television and the Internet (the two means of accessing AJE in Indonesia) are expanding. The facts show that there are increased numbers of applications for pay television operators' licenses. Moreover, as stipulated in Indonesia's first broadcasting law (which was passed in 2002), there is no limitation as to how many cable providers are allowed to operate in the country.

Meanwhile, the number of Internet users in Indonesia is rising, and significantly: from only 512,000 users in 1998 to 25 million in 2007.[17] This is certainly a potential market for web-based news material.

Another opportunity to expand AJE coverage is through mobile TV, a service that is becoming increasingly popular. In fact, several cellular operators in Indonesia have started offering mobile TV. This opens up an opportunity of market entry for Al Jazeera English.

To conclude, with the expansion of various means of news transmission and the expanding TV market in Indonesia, Al Jazeera English has the opportunity to expand its coverage and penetration. However, the same can also be said for other news channels, including domestic and other international ones. Therefore, AJE will continue to face compe-

tition to increase its market share as well as its influence in Indonesia.

Notes

1. Jose Manuel Tesoro, "Indonesia: Learning the Ropes of Press Freedom," *UNESCO Courier* 53 (2000): 43–45. Also available from http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_02/uk/connex/intro.htm.

2. USA Trade Online, U.S. Commercial Service, "Indonesia: Telecommunications and Broadcasting," http://0-www.usatradeonline.gov.mill1.sjlibrary.org/.

3. "Nielsen Media Index 2007;" 2006 population figures, Indonesia Bureau of Statistics, http://www.bps.go.id/sector/population/; and Media Partners Asia (MPA), "Asia Pacific Pay-TV & Broadband Markets 2007: The Authoritative Guide to the Future of Broadband Pay TV Content, Distribution, & Technology in Asia" (Hong Kong: MPA, 2007), executive summary available from http://www.media-partners-asia.com/apptvbm07.pdf.

4. See Cable and Satellite Broadcasting Association in Asia, http://www.casbaa.com/c7d_Fact.asp?menu_class=7&leftmenu=4&point=111.

5. Riza Primadi, News Director, Astro TV, e-mail message to author, March 17, 2008.

6. See Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia), "APJII Statistic, Updated February 2007," http://www.apjii.or.id/dokumentasi/statistik.php?lang=eng.

7. Ishadi S.K., President-Director, Trans TV, Jakarta, e-mail message to author, March 16, 2008.

8. Dino Patti Djalal, Indonesia Presidential Palace spokesperson, e-mail message to author, April 6, 2008.

9. Horea Salajan, News Advisor, Liputan 6 SCTV, Jakarta, e-mail message to author, March 25, 2008.

10. Arief Suditomo, Editor in Chief, RCTI, Jakarta, e-mail message to author, March 18, 2008.

11. Horea Salajan, e-mail message to author, March 25, 2008.

12. Satrio Arismunandar, News Producer, Trans TV, Jakarta, e-mail message to author, March 18, 2008.

13. Ade Armando, Editor of *Madina*, an Islamic magazine, Jakarta, e-mail message to author, March 29, 2008.

14. Horea Salajan, e-mail message to author, March 25, 2008.

15. Dino Patti Djalal, e-mail message to author, April 6, 2008.

16. Awang Rustandi, Journalism Lecturer at University of Indonesia, Jakarta, e-mail message to author, March 20, 2008.

17. Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association, "APJII Statistic, Updated February 2007," http://www.apjii.or.id/dokumentasi/statistik.php?lang=eng.

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