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## A voice for the voiceless?

### A quantitative content analysis of Al-Jazeera English's flagship news

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#### ABSTRACT

Al-Jazeera English is the first English-language satellite news channel broadcasting globally from the Middle East. The channel aims to redress the balance of news flows, and the present article presents a comprehensive, quantitative content analysis of the channel's news. The article finds that the channel airs more news items from and about the global South than the global North, and that the South is covered in more in-depth news formats, with more correspondents on the ground. Furthermore, it documents that male, independent elites are the most frequent and authoritative news sources on Al-Jazeera English. The article concludes that the channel represents a potential contra-flow of English-language satellite news, through its explicit Southern agenda, but that it continues the political bias and elite orientation characteristic of mainstream international news.

#### KEY WORDS

Al-Jazeera English ■ news contra-flows ■ news geography ■ news topics ■ news sources ■ quantitative content analysis ■ satellite news

#### The Al-Jazeera phenomenon

The launch of Al-Jazeera English on 15 November 2006 was met with high expectations. Years of success and controversy had made its Arabic sister-channel, Al-Jazeera Channel, one of the world's best-known brand names (Brandchannel.com 2004). Al-Jazeera Channel has repeatedly been portrayed as challenging major Western international news channels and an alternative contra-flow in global news. Since its launch in 1996, the Arabic channel developed from an obscure Arab news channel to a well-organized multi-channel global news network (Zayani and Sahraoui, 2007). In addition to the two news channels broadcasting in Arabic (Al-Jazeera

Channel) and English (Al-Jazeera English), the Al-Jazeera Network has also launched a variety of specialized channels covering sports, children's programs, documentaries and political meetings.

Al-Jazeera English (AJE) broadcasts news in English to a global audience 24/7. The channel is headquartered in Doha (Qatar) with broadcasting centers in Kuala Lumpur, London and Washington DC. It employs 1200 staff and 600 reporters of more than 45 nationalities, in 50 countries and 25 bureaus.

Researchers have characterized Al-Jazeera English as the first viable, well-funded news channel with a radically different take on international news (el-Nawawy and Powers, 2008; Painter, 2008). According to the official Al-Jazeera English website, the channel is concerned with: 'balancing the current typical information flow by reporting from the developing world back to the West and from the southern to the northern hemisphere. The channel gives voice to untold stories, promotes debate, and challenges established perceptions' (Corporate profile, English.Aljazeera.net). Further, the channel 'will set the news agenda, bridging cultures and providing a unique grassroots perspective from underreported regions around the world to a potential global audience of over one billion English speakers' (Corporate profile, English.Aljazeera.net).

AJE aims to balance the information flow between the South and the North – a flow that historically has run *from North to South, from rich countries to poor*. To *balance, report back* and *challenge* mainstream Western international news, the channel has employed a number of editorial strategies.<sup>1</sup> First, Al-Jazeera English aims to cover the world without a domestic agenda, as a *truly global* news channel, in contrast to Western national and international news media that have become increasingly domesticated and localized in their coverage of international issues. Secondly, AJE aims to report forgotten stories from the *perspective of the voiceless* – the global South, the underprivileged, the subaltern, the underdog, and the disenfranchised. To find and cover the stories of the voiceless, the channel has a policy of hiring local correspondents, instead of sending in Western correspondents. Additionally, AJE has an extensive network of bureaus and correspondents around the world, particularly in the global South where its competitors are scarcely represented. Thirdly, the channel intends to cover the *other opinion* in international news, those diverging, oppositional, controversial views and voices that are rarely invited onto mainstream news media programs. To do this, AJE highlights the competitive advantage of being part of the Al-Jazeera Network.

The present article examines how Al-Jazeera English's intended editorial distinctiveness is expressed in its daily news coverage. With the

channel's editorial agenda and strategies as a point of departure, this intervention maps news geography and news sources on AJE to examine whether the channel counters dominant news flows. The article argues that a thorough content analysis is imperative to analyze potential contra-flows in satellite news. By looking beyond directionality and investigating what is *contra* in the contra-flow, this intervention presents the first comprehensive, quantitative content analysis of the Al-Jazeera English's news. In doing so, the article contributes to the theorization of satellite news and news flow studies, and adds to the empirically grounded studies of non-Western news channels.

### **Al-Jazeera channel as a news contra-flow**

The growth of non-Western regional satellite news channels has encouraged the use of the concept of news contra-flows, but there continues to be few empirical mappings of the phenomenon. The Arabic Al-Jazeera Channel serves as an illustrative example here: in contrast to the media interest in the Al-Jazeera phenomenon and the body of literature stating that Al-Jazeera Channel is an important contra-flow in global news (see, among others, el-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002; Miles, 2005; Samuel-Azran, 2008; Seib, 2005; Thussu, 2007a; Volkmer, 2002), there has been a striking lack of systematic, empirical research on *why* Al-Jazeera constitutes a contra-flow of news and *how* different or alternative the channel has been.

The contributions of Iskandar (2006) and Sakr (2007) represent rare efforts to investigate whether Al-Jazeera Channel could be characterized as an alternative news channel (Iskandar, 2006), and thus a counter-hegemonic contra-flow (Sakr, 2007). Iskandar (2006) concludes that Al-Jazeera Arabic increasingly represents a mainstream Arab satellite style with regards to the approach and programming, and finds that the discourse of Al-Jazeera as 'alternative' is outdated and irrelevant. Sakr (2007: 129) finds that Al-Jazeera was not launched with the intention of being counter-hegemonic, but rather based on a widely accepted model of pluralistic reporting governed by newsworthiness (such as in the BBC). After world politics polarized from September 11 to the war in Iraq, however, the channel was gradually perceived as representing the alternative media and threatening Western interests (Sakr, 2007: 129).

Furthermore, the existence of an Arab perspective of the international conflicts in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) has been portrayed as a challenge to major Western media (el-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003;

Figenschou, 2005; Miles, 2005; Thussu, 2007a). Still, there has been a lack of research on how these channels have influenced the global public sphere, and how the Arab perspectives have influenced Western media. One exception is Wessler and Adolphsen's (2008) examination of the utilization and framing of the Al-Jazeera Channel, Abu Dhabi TV and Al Arabiya Channel coverage in major Western international news channels during the first phase of the war in Iraq. They find that although CNN, BBC World and Deutsche Welle used Arab footage, the Western media tended to distance themselves from the editorial decisions of their Arab colleagues when the Arab satellite coverage was addressed directly. They conclude that during the war in Iraq the existence of a contra-flow from the Arab world was recognized, but its appreciation by and incorporation into Western TV news programs was only limited (Wessler and Adolphsen, 2008: 458).

### **Analyzing news contra-flows in a localized satellite news landscape**

Today, the global media scene can no longer be characterized as a one-way flow of information from the West to the rest, given the rise of new, non-Western satellite channels (Curran and Park, 2000; Rai and Cottle, 2007; Thussu, 2007a). There has been an unprecedented growth of more localized transnational satellite channels since the mid 1990s and the number of regional and international satellite channels prominently broadcasting news has grown to more than 100 (Painter, 2008; Rai and Cottle, 2007; Wessler and Adolphsen, 2008). This diversity and complexity of the contemporary global news media has contributed to a renewed interest in the concept of news contra-flows. Hafez (2007: 57) holds that the radical growth of new television markets in Latin America, North Africa and the Middle East, 'is currently the primary factor changing media systems – and its relationship to globalization is ambivalent'. Another indication of the growing diversity and complexity is found in Albizu's (2007) mapping of broadcast languages on satellite channels, where he documented that more than 900 satellite channels in languages other than English can be received in the US and other wealthy regions such as the EU (Albizu, 2007: 258).

In their empirical mapping of the reach, access and ownership of satellite news channels, Rai and Cottle (2007) identify the structural limitations in the global news ecology. They conclude that only a few of the contemporary satellite news channels are in fact global in reach, ownership and access (Rai and Cottle, 2007). Aware of the structural limitations in the global news system, newer satellite channels have been

targeting specific national, regional or geo-cultural audiences. Researchers have identified a growth in localized transnational channels, particularly in recent years. Global media events are covered differently around the world. The growth in satellite news channels could be understood as a desire for influence in the global public sphere and as a strategy to broadcast diverse perspectives on global events. Further, this development has been facilitated by technical developments and the deregulation of broadcasting and telecommunication sectors (Painter, 2008: 10).

Both governments and private corporations have acknowledged the plurality of voices and the need to broadcast their perspectives on global events. In Asia, the world's largest and potentially richest media market, the boom has been largely commercially driven. The pan-Asian Star Network, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, has influenced the satellite boom in Asia to the extent that researchers have talked about the 'Murdochization' of Asian news (Thussu, 2007b, 2008). In addition to the private corporations, India and China have both launched state-financed channels (Painter, 2008: 12). In the Arab world, in contrast, regional governments and politicians and entrepreneurs with strong ties to the ruling families, own and control the new satellite channels (Sakr, 2007). These channels are established to target regional and international audiences, but differ markedly from the cosmopolitan ideal types that theorists have associated with CNN and other global networks (Rai and Cottle, 2007).

Today, numerous news channels subsidized by their respective governments are contesting for English-speaking audiences worldwide. Among others, France24 (2006) ('worldwide news with French eyes'), Russia Today (2005)('the Russian point of view'), Deutsche Welle TV ('German and other positions on important issues'), Chinese CCTV 9 ('your window on China and the world'), Iranian Press TV (2007) ('unbiased reporting of controversial global news'), and Al-Jazeera English (2006) ('news from the South to the North'). Another prominent example is the Spanish-language Latin American news channel, Telesur (2005), launched under the catch phrase 'Nuestro Norte es el Sur' ('Our North is the South'). In addition, government-sponsored satellite news channels compete for regional audiences, particularly in Arabic (with Al-Hurra Channel (US) and BBC Arabic (UK) as the most prominent examples), and in Farsi (BBC Persian [UK]).

Is it still valid to discuss media flows and contra-flows in today's complex global media landscape? Researchers have increasingly argued for a more empirically grounded approach to the examination of international news coverage in general (Cottle and Rai, 2008; Hanusch and Obijiofor, 2008; Rai and Cottle, 2007), and of news contra-flows in particular

(Iskandar, 2006; Painter, 2008; Sakr, 2007). Extending these arguments, the present article argues that directionality alone has limited explanatory value in the contemporary satellite landscape. To go beyond directionality, the article applies content analysis to examine the editorial distinctiveness of Al-Jazeera English and investigates whether the channel's news profile represents a contra-flow to existing mainstream international news.<sup>2</sup>

### **Methodology: operationalizing satellite news contra-flows**

At most times, Al-Jazeera English broadcasts from one of its four news centers, so that Kuala Lumpur anchors from 04.00–08.00 GMT, Doha from 11.00–17.00, London from 20.00–22.00 and Washington DC from 23.00–02.00 (Painter, 2008: 28). At certain times of the day, it links up news centers to co-anchor the news shows. The program selected for analysis, the *NewsHour* at 18.00 GMT is the flagship news program for the channel, linking up the Doha headquarters with the London broadcasting center and the Washington broadcasting center (the Kuala Lumpur broadcasting center is not included due to the time difference). This makes *NewsHour* a particularly interesting program to analyze in order to discuss the channel's coverage of world events.

The material on which this study was based was recorded every second day over two periods of two months (October–December 2007 and May–July 2008). Sixty newscasts are included in the study.<sup>3</sup> The news item most often distinguished by an introductory statement from the studio is the basic unit of analysis.<sup>4</sup> As recommended by Lombard et al. (2002), multiple coders (the author and two research assistants) coded a total of 1324 news items. The coders were carefully trained in operationalizing the codebook, and an intercoder reliability test, testing measurement consistency, was assessed by recoding 10 percent of the news items. Intercoder agreement ranged from kappa 0.89 at categories *region* and *news format*, to *main source visibility* 0.87, *presence on the ground* 0.85, *main source* 0.80 and *subsidiary sources* 0.78, to *main topic* 0.68.

With its launching date as recent as November 2006, empirical studies of AJE's editorial line are few. To address this lacuna, a quantitative approach was selected to study the overall structures of the channel's news broadcasts and discuss to what extent the channel is countering dominant characteristics of international news documented in the news flows literature.<sup>5</sup> In examining whether Al-Jazeera English typifies a satellite news contra-flow, two sets of research questions were employed. The first research question highlights news geography. News flow studies have documented that international news reporting has been characterized

by regionalism (cultural and geographical proximity) with more attention given to the local region than to the rest of the world. Another stable pattern has been that the global North (Europe and North America) have been prioritized and covered worldwide. In contrast, in its ambitious editorial agenda Al-Jazeera English aims to cover the world *from the South to the North*, to be a truly global channel. To examine how this is reflected in the channel's daily news coverage, the article asks: *Does Al-Jazeera English cover the South more profoundly – more frequently, in more in-depth formats and with a larger presence on the ground – than the North?*

The second research question in this quantitative content analysis concerns news sources, because studying what is *contra* in contra-flows also involves mapping who is permitted to speak in the news. News flow studies have documented an elite domination in international news, where government officials predominate in the framing and interpreting of the world. In its editorial strategies Al-Jazeera English, on the other hand, has explicitly stated that the channel will be a 'voice for the voiceless' and reflect 'the other opinion'. To measure to what extent alternative sources get invited on Al-Jazeera English to interpret world events, the article asks: *Does Al-Jazeera English interview grassroots sources and independent elite sources more extensively – more frequently and in more in-depth formats – than sources representing the establishment?*

### **The Al-Jazeera English news geography: emphasizing the global South**

News flow studies have documented that the international flow of information has been overwhelmingly one way, North/West to South/East, a geographical pattern Al-Jazeera English aims to reverse. Therefore, this article firstly examines whether the channel covers the South more frequently than the North and in so doing represents a truly global channel. An analysis of the geographical emphasis in *NewsHour* finds that the South – that is Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America – is the location of 61 percent of the total 1324 news items. The North – that is Europe and North America – is the location in 38 percent of the news items (see Figure 1). These findings correspond with Painter's (2008) analysis of one week of Al-Jazeera English newscasts. He finds that Al-Jazeera English had more coverage of the developing world (with particular emphasis on the Middle East, and less from Europe and the USA) than BBC World and CNN International (Painter, 2008: 29).<sup>6</sup>

There have been previous attempts to establish media with an orientation towards the developing world, most important among them

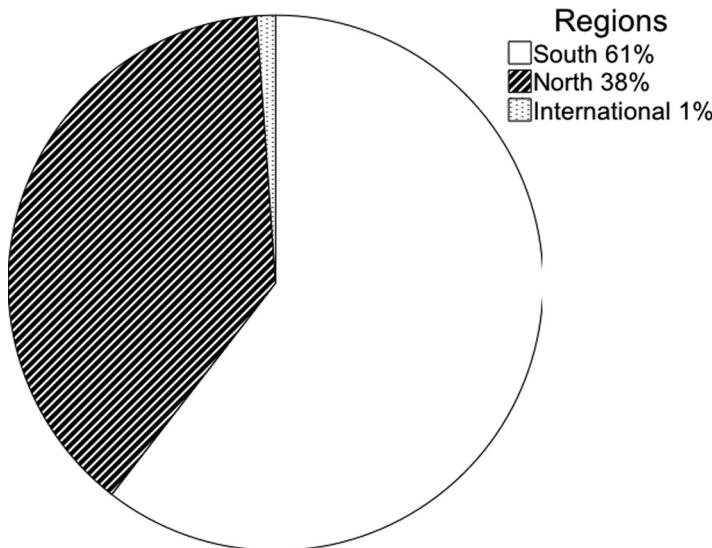


Figure 1 *News geography: South–North*

being the Inter Press Service (IPS) (Boyd-Barrett and Thussu, 1992: 137). About two-thirds of IPS reports pertain to the developing world (Giffard and van Horn, 1992) and IPS has gained credibility for its coverage of Third World issues, particularly of Latin America. Still, the news agency has struggled to establish a sizeable market with limited financial resources, few correspondents, and scattered coverage of international news (Giffard, 1998). In general, the Southern world regions (with the exception of the Middle East) have remained largely invisible in international news, and news flows between developing states have been minimal (Boyd-Barrett and Thussu, 1992).

International news has frequently been criticized for being ethnocentric and narrow (Sreberny and Paterson, 2004: 8). If we break Al-Jazeera English's coverage down to world regions, Europe and Asia are the most covered regions, closely followed by the Middle East, each region accounting for about one-fifth of locations (see Figure 2).

The *NewsHour* at 18.00 GMT is co-anchored from the Middle East (Doha), Europe (London) and North America (Washington), and the regional bias of international news may explain the high number of stories from the Middle East and Europe. Considering the fact that AJE aims to 'follow the sun' in its reporting and highlight those regions where potential audiences are awake and watching, and the intended emphasis is on the regions falling under each of the co-anchoring bureaus,

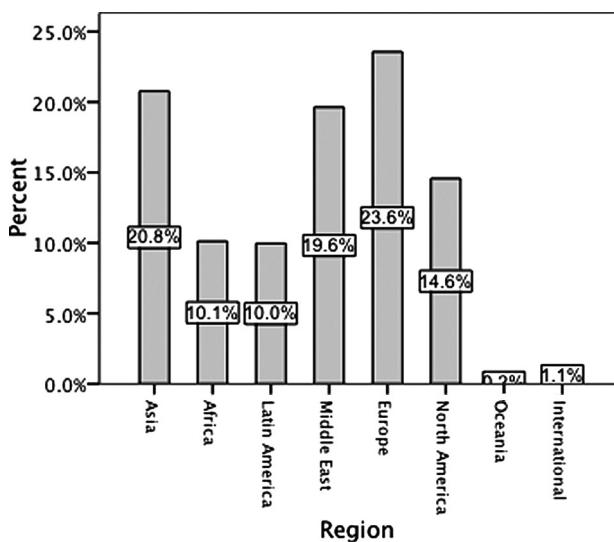


Figure 2 News geography: world regions

the relatively high number of Asian stories is more unexpected. The global time difference may influence these findings however: at 18.00 GMT, it is 14.00 in Washington DC, 15.00 in Buenos Aires, 19.00 in London, 21.00 in Doha and Nairobi, and 02.00 in Kuala Lumpur. Although the Kuala Lumpur news center is closed and the regional audience small during the *NewsHour*, the high number of Asian stories most probably reflects the number of news stories accumulated from the region over the course of a long day. Moreover, the relatively limited reporting out of North America (15%) is interesting as Washington co-hosts the *NewsHour* and because North America has been historically overrepresented in international news, although this finding may also be influenced by the time difference, as it is still early in the day in North America when the *NewsHour* is aired. A notable paradox in the channel's flagship news is the fact that not a single news item in this quantitative study is located in Qatar. This could signal that the channel is truly global in its approach, as emphasized in the channel's editorial strategies. Alternatively, it could strengthen claims that Al-Jazeera Network is a foreign policy tool for Qatari authorities (Da Lage, 2005), and that the limited coverage of domestic Qatari affairs is the result of self-censorship. The least covered regions are Latin America and Africa with 10 percent of the stories broadcast originating in each, while Oceania is almost ignored in the sample (only three news items out of the total are located in Oceania). These findings, documenting

that the channel reports more frequently from the South than the North, correspond with the channel's agenda.

In mainstream (Western) international TV news, news from the South has largely been covered in briefer news formats, from the main newsroom. Consequently, reports from the South have largely provided only fragmented glimpses of distant suffering (Chouliaraki, 2006: 187). As demonstrated by Chouliaraki (2006, 2008), the audience of international TV news has therefore mainly been invited to identify and engage with news stories that involve the West and Western suffering, while the South has remained at the bottom of the international news media's hierarchy of human lives. It is therefore interesting to map the kinds of news formats AJE chooses in its coverage of world events (see Figure 3) and to examine whether Al-Jazeera English covers the South in more in-depth news formats (offering reflection, discussion and background information) than the North. The categories grouped as 'Brief news' in Figure 3, include anchor news (a brief news item, read by the news anchor in studio, often as a voiceover to bureau or archive footage) and public statements (transmitting highlights from public appearances such as a press conference, a speech or a television address). These are the quickest and most cost-saving news formats, as they are frequently based on the products of international news agencies. In contrast, 'Packages' represent longer news reports or interviews selected, edited and explained by an AJE correspondent. More reflective news formats, grouped under 'Analysis' in Figure 3, include studio interviews (live guests interviewed in the studio or interviewed by studio anchors through a satellite link) and stand-ups by Al-Jazeera English correspondents (where an AJE correspondent updates, explains and analyses news events). This third kind of news format provides more in-depth coverage of the issues and opens up the news for analysis and discussion. Such formats are more time-consuming and expensive in production, and may therefore signal the priority given to a news story. The geographical distribution of news formats could thus provide nuance, and modify or strengthen the frequencies presented above.

Figure 3 illustrates that on the Al-Jazeera *NewsHour*, the relative distribution of news formats is fairly equal around the globe. On a closer inspection, however, the global South is not only covered more often than the global North (in 801 of the total 1324 news items), it is also covered in more in-depth news formats. These differences are most apparent in brief news items: 32 percent of the total news items from the South are brief anchor news and public statements, compared to 45 percent of all news items from the North. Further, 42 percent of all news items

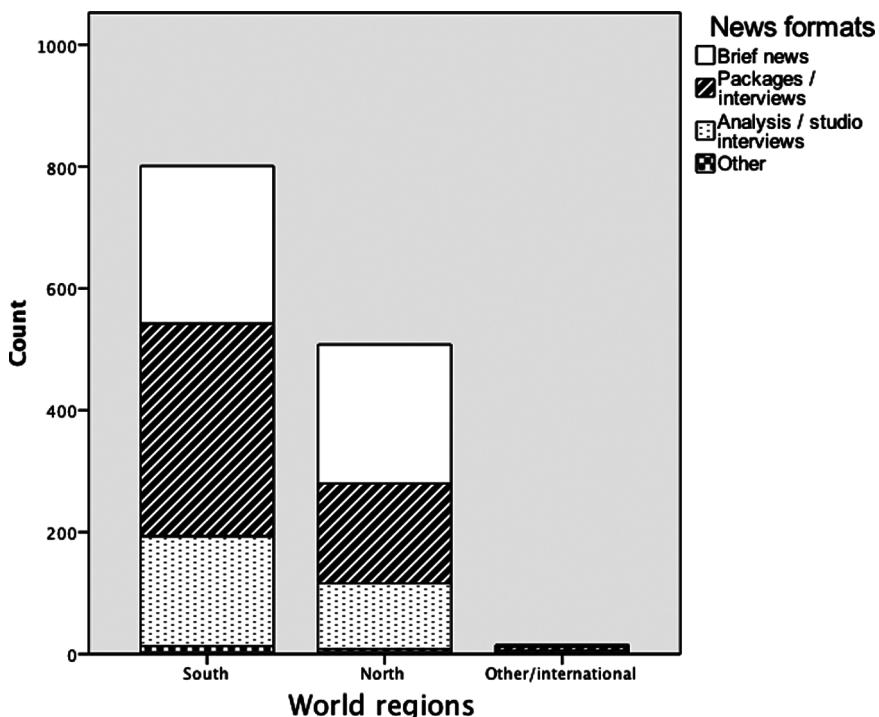


Figure 3 News geography: news formats

from the South are packages/interviews, while 31 percent of the news items from the North come in this format. The more reflective, analytical news formats, such as studio interviews and analysis by Al-Jazeera English correspondents and guests, account for 24 percent of the total coverage of the South and 22 percent of the total coverage of the North.

By considering the world region in which news items originate, regional variations in news formats become apparent that could provide further nuance to the results presented above. Three world regions are more frequently reported in brief news items than in news packages: Europe, North America and Latin America. In the European context, the fact that Europe is mainly covered through brief studio news items modifies the previous finding of Europe as one of the most covered regions on the *NewsHour*. The other extensively covered regions, Asia and the Middle East, are reported in greater detail. Of the stories originating in Asia, half are news packages. The Middle East has the highest number of news analysis items. These formats open up for background and analysis and offer expert insights into the issues discussed.

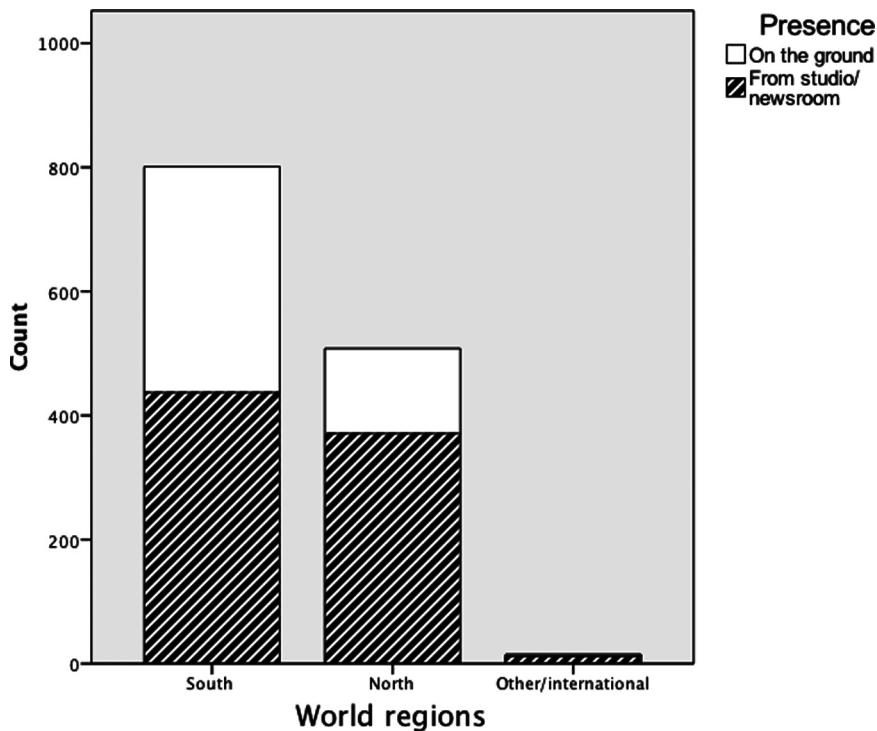


Figure 4 News geography: presence on the ground

From the 1990s, international broadcasters globally have had to close down their foreign bureaus and reduce the number of foreign correspondents, particularly in the Southern hemisphere (Hamilton and Jenner, 2004; Ricchiardi, 2006; Utley, 1997). Al-Jazeera English on the other hand has had a strategy of operating an extensive network of bureaus and correspondents around the world, particularly in the global South where its competitors are scarcely represented. It is therefore an informative exercise to map where AJE sends its correspondents, and to investigate whether the channel has a greater presence in the South than in the North. In total, Al-Jazeera English correspondents were present on the ground in 38 percent of the 1324 news items in the sample. The channel has a greater presence on the ground in the South than in the North. In the *NewsHour* coverage of the South, Al-Jazeera English correspondents are present where the events unfold in 45 percent of all the news items. In their news stories from the North the channel is present on the ground in 27 percent of the stories (Figure 4).

Corresponding with the relative importance of world regions on AJE, the channel's correspondents were first and foremost traveling in Asia, where correspondents were present on the ground in half of the stories reported from the region, closely followed by the Middle East and Latin America. The majority of these news items are packages on political developments. By contrast, in the stories from Europe and North America, just over a quarter of all news items were covered from the field. The relatively limited presence on the ground in North America and Europe is an unexpected finding considering the fact that Al-Jazeera English has broadcasting centers in both Washington and London, and that these cities traditionally have boasted a heavy concentration of international correspondents.

Studies have criticized the typical news story from the South for highlighting political coups and crises, natural disasters and violent conflicts (MacBride, 1980; Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985). Al-Jazeera English aims to challenge traditional perceptions and biases and it is therefore relevant to ask whether news items on crisis and conflict are more prominent in the channel's coverage of the South than its reports from the North. When mapping Al-Jazeera English's news focus, the first finding is that AJE laid the most emphasis on politics, which was the main topic in over one-third of all the news items. The second most popular topic was armed conflict, which was the primary topic in one-fifth of all news items. The remaining categories covered were legal affairs (13% of coverage), the economy (9%), ecology (7%), and aid and social affairs (3%). Other categories, such as culture, science and religion, topics that could provide nuance and extend hard world news<sup>7</sup> received minimal coverage in the *NewsHour*.

Al-Jazeera English's coverage of global affairs seems to be an answer to the repetitive critique of mainstream international news as both inadequate and superficial (Sreberny and Paterson, 2004). Thussu (2008), among others, argues that international satellite news is increasingly presented in an entertaining manner, as 'global infotainment' (2008: 8). In contrast, Al-Jazeera English emphasizes hard, political news and ignores the global celebrity culture. In fact, only three of the total 1324 news items analyzed in this article are 'celebrity' news stories. These were: one item about the funeral of fashion designer Yves St Laurent; one item about a record launch by the Indonesian president; and one item about a fashion collection designed by the Thai King.

A closer examination of the kinds of political news that are reported from the different regions, however, reveals some differences: Internal political crisis is the most frequent political news story to originate in the

South, while political processes such as election coverage and results are covered more frequently from the North than the South.<sup>8</sup> Armed conflict is the second most covered news topic on the *NewsHour*. In this category, there are noticeable differences between the South and the North. Stories about armed conflict constitute over a quarter of all news items out of Asia, Middle East, Africa and Latin America. In contrast, in the stories from Europe and North America armed conflict was the main topic in 12 percent of the total coverage.<sup>9</sup>

To sum up, Al-Jazeera English airs more news items from and about the global South than the global North, with 61 percent of the total 1324 news items concerning Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. Further, on Al-Jazeera English, the South is covered in longer, more in-depth news formats, with more correspondents present on the ground than is the case for its coverage of the North. When mapping the kinds of stories that are reported from the South, however, news items from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East are more frequently about political crisis and violent/armed conflict, than the stories originating from North America and Europe (where legal affairs and the economy are emphasized). These differences may reflect the situation on the ground, and, arguably, if Al-Jazeera English had not covered these stories it would not have fulfilled its mission as an international news channel. To some extent however, these tendencies may signal that Al-Jazeera English maintains the mainstream news criteria they aim to counter.

### **Source selectivity: in the words of global elites**

In addition to the over-exposing of the global North, news flow studies have documented that world events are told through officials and elites. International news events have largely been interpreted and commented on by elites and government officials, while ordinary people on the ground, particularly in the South (the ‘subaltern’ [Spivak, 1988]) are ignored and spoken for. Two of Al-Jazeera English’s strategies to counter mainstream Western news media presented in this article, involve the channel’s selection of sources: to be a ‘voice of the voiceless’ and to invite the ‘other opinion’ to express its views. The following analysis highlights whether the channel interviews ordinary people (‘the voiceless’) and independent elites (‘the other opinion’) more extensively than the elites representing the establishment.

When mapping Al-Jazeera English’s use of news sources, the first finding is the fact that Al-Jazeera English, like most international media, is elite dominated (see Figure 5). Elites are the main source in 43 percent of the news items, while only 11 percent of the total number of news items

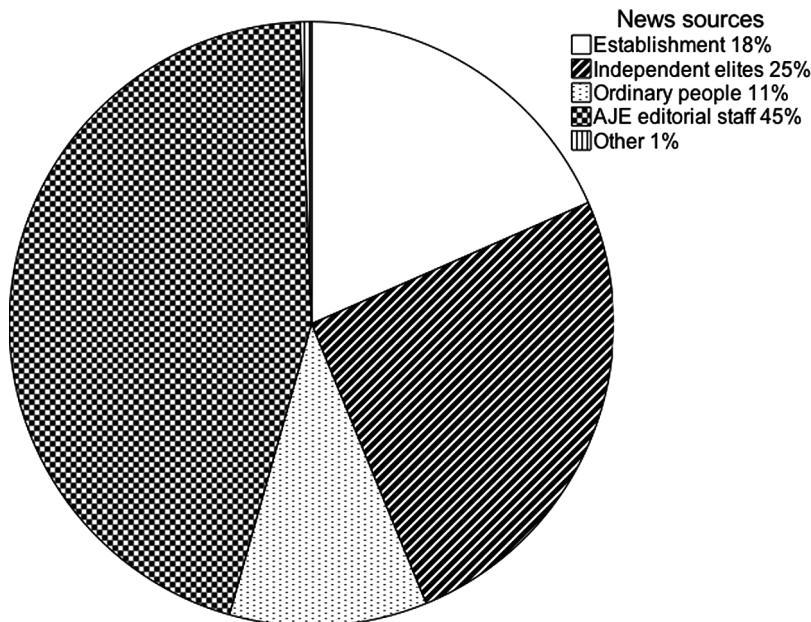


Figure 5 *News sources: overview*

has ordinary people as the main source. Do the elites interviewed represent the establishment or (more) independent elites? 'Independent elites', such as the political opposition, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media or cultural personalities and analysts/academics, are autonomous elite sources. They are therefore often used to interpret news events, reflect on the consequences of the news events, question the status quo, suggest alternatives and criticize power. 'Establishment sources' on the other hand, such as government officials, diplomats/ambassadors, military/armed forces, business leaders and religious leaders, are more obliged to defend the status quo. Government officials are the most frequently used news sources on Al-Jazeera English (and constitute the main source in 14% of total news items). Still, independent elites as a group are more frequently used as main sources (in 25% of news items) than the elite groups that represent the establishment (18%). Examining whether AJE chooses different sources when it reports from the South compared to its reporting from the North, reveals that there are more ordinary people used as main sources in the channel's stories from the South (13%) than from the North (8%). This reflects the channel's aim to be a 'voice of the voiceless' (underprivileged groups in the South). The relative distribution between establishment sources and independent sources, however, is more equally distributed globally

(with 19% to 25% in the South and 17% to 25% in the North). Together, independent elites and ordinary people, two groups of sources that potentially represent and voice alternative perspectives on the news, are the main source in over one-third of all the studied news items.

When mapping Al-Jazeera English's choice of news sources, another finding is the high number of news items that have no other sources than Al-Jazeera's editorial staff. In as many as 45 percent of the news items, no external news sources are interviewed to contribute to the story. Al-Jazeera correspondents report and analyze the situation in 13 percent of the total news items, while 32 percent of the items are brief anchor news pieces from the Al-Jazeera English news centers. Europe is the region with the highest percentage of news items without external sources, and this reflects the high number of brief studio news items in the channel's coverage of the region.

Another relevant question regarding news sources concerns whether alternative sources are given more authority on Al-Jazeera English than establishment sources? This question can be answered by examining how visible the sources are in the Al-Jazeera English news: are they invited into the studio and interviewed thoroughly, or interviewed briefly and anonymously on the street? Both independent elites and establishment elites are frequently interviewed in reports/packages, more precisely in 46 percent and 31 percent of the items where they are main sources. While the independent elites are interviewed by/in the studio anchor in 37 percent of the stories, elites representing the establishment are only interviewed by the studio anchor in 8 percent of the items where they are the main sources. The relatively low number of establishment sources interviewed by the studio may be a consequence of the limited access to sources in official positions, but could also be a result of editorial decisions and strategies to emphasize 'the other opinion'. Independent elites hold the expertise and independence to reflect on and analyze news events and are therefore suitable studio guests. Establishment elites are most frequently heard addressing audiences (press conferences, public speeches, TV addresses, etc.). This is the case in 54 percent of all the news stories where they are the main source. Ordinary people are never invited into the studio. When ordinary people are invited to speak on Al-Jazeera English, they are interviewed by correspondents in packages nine out of ten times.

Another method of examining the sources' authority is to map the kinds of news formats they are used in. Most important here is the fact that the independent elite sources are more frequently used in analytical news formats (43% of the items in which they are the main source) than elites representing the establishment (16%). Overall, independent elite sources

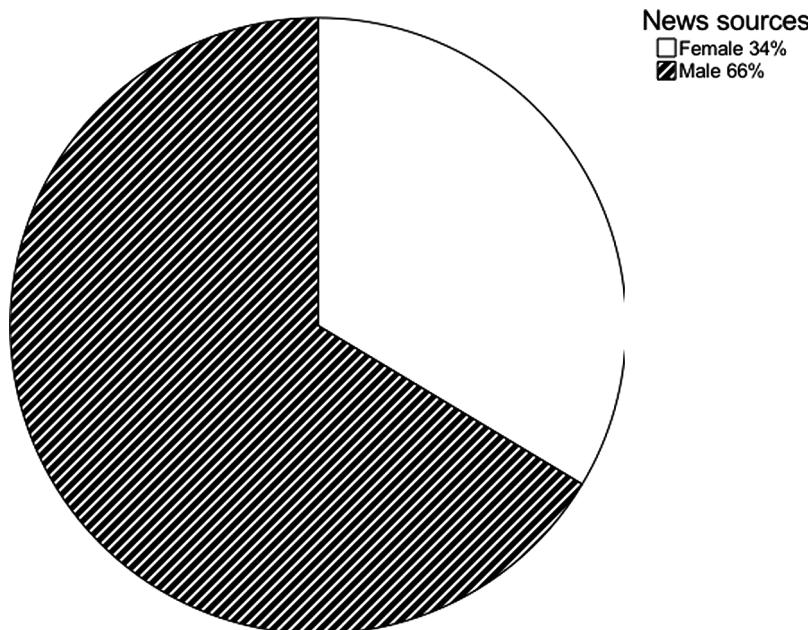


Figure 6 News sources: gender

are given more authority and more frequently invited to analyze news events on the *NewsHour* than elite groups representing the establishment.

Although gender is not explicitly mentioned in the Al-Jazeera English official mission statements, it is relevant to assess the presence of female news sources compared to male news sources. On the *NewsHour*, 34 percent of the news items have women as the main source, compared to the 66 percent that is interpreted by men (see Figure 6). The male dominance is higher for external sources (around 79% compared to 21% female main sources), while there is more gender equality among the AJE news anchors (52% female anchors to 48% male) and the correspondents in the field (43% female correspondents to 57% male).

The mapping of the main news sources interviewed on the Al-Jazeera English *NewsHour* thus reveals that independent, male elites are accorded the highest authority on AJE. These sources are most often invited into the Al-Jazeera studio as they are asked to reflect on and analyze news events in in-depth news formats, and are more likely to represent the 'other opinion' than establishment sources. Al-Jazeera English has explicitly stated that the channel will have a grassroots perspective on world events. But as illustrated above, if the channel has a 'grassroots perspective', this has been voiced by independent elite sources and Al-Jazeera correspondents rather than by ordinary citizens on the ground.

### **Conclusion: Al-Jazeera English's contribution to global satellite news**

Al-Jazeera English's explicit 'Southern agenda' reinvigorates the debate on international news flows. The news flow debate dominated international media research after the Second World War, but as the terminology of international news flows was hijacked for political purposes, the debate quickly became polarized. On the one side, the Western powers, major Western media organizations and researchers, argued for a *free flow* of information. On the other side, the developing world and non-aligned movement, media organizations in the South and the media imperialism scholars, argued for a free *and balanced information flow* and a new world information and communication order (NWICO). In the 1980s and 1990s, the NWICO movement came under severe criticism and the movement faded away. In contrast to previous attempts at establishing international news organizations with a 'Southern' agenda, such as the Inter Press Service news agency, Al-Jazeera English represents the first potentially viable and competitive contra-flow of news and has revived interest in the news flow debate. Al-Jazeera English's global impact will depend on its abilities to access important media markets (such as the US) in the struggle for audiences, reach, distribution and market share, as well as on its ability to set the news agenda and influence other news media.

Historically, the global North (Europe and North America) has been prioritized in international news worldwide. In contrast, this article documents that Al-Jazeera English airs more news items from and about the global South than the global North, and in this way aims to be a global channel with a Southern perspective. The fact that Al-Jazeera English covers the South through more in-depth news formats, with correspondents present on the ground, while Europe and North America are reported in briefer formats from the main newsrooms, is another important finding because it may influence how global audiences engage with the news. International broadcasters have reduced the number of correspondents since the 1990s. It may be instructive to follow up these findings and analyze the extent to which Al-Jazeera English's selection of news stories and network of correspondents will have a significant influence on its viewers. How will global audiences engage with foreign news and with each other if they are invited to identify and engage with news stories that primarily involve the South and Southern concerns, while the North is only exposed in fragmented glimpses?

International news has been criticized for being ethnocentric and narrow. As demonstrated in this article, Al-Jazeera English's coverage is also

partly influenced by the regionalism that has dominated international news. Europe, Asia and the Middle East regions where the channel has broadcasting centers are the three most frequently covered regions on Al-Jazeera English, whereas the world regions where Al-Jazeera English does not have broadcasting centers (Latin America, Africa and Oceania) are the least covered regions on the channel. The channel's relatively limited coverage of North America even though the Washington studio co-anchors the *NewsHour*, is the exception to the rule of proximity, but this finding may be nuanced by the time variable as discussed above. Another finding that contravenes the rule of proximity is the fact that in this quantitative study, not a single news item originated in the Al-Jazeera Network's home country, Qatar.

A final point is the demonstrated elite domination on the Al-Jazeera English *NewsHour*, and perhaps more important the implications of the fact that male, independent elites are used most frequently and accorded the greatest authority in the channel's news. This finding shows that Al-Jazeera English continues the editorial strategy of inviting oppositional voices to the TV studios that made its Arabic sister-channel, Al-Jazeera Channel, both famous and controversial, and thus follows the strategy of airing 'the other opinion'. Furthermore, Al-Jazeera English's choice of sources illustrates how the channel's alternative agenda of providing a grassroots perspective on world events comes into conflict with the elite orientation in international news journalism. As a compromise between professional news values and the Southern agenda, Al-Jazeera *NewsHour* emphasizes the situation and problems of the 'subaltern woman', but she is not invited to speak for herself. The subaltern is spoken for and represented by male, independent elites such as oppositional politicians, representatives from international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media or cultural personalities, analysts and academics. A qualitative approach is necessary to examine to what extent these independent elites provide 'the other opinion' – give alternative viewpoints and perspectives, criticize the establishment (or share their elite values), and voice the interests of the voiceless? The answers to these questions will provide new insight into the processes of silencing, 'othering' and representation in the new, non-Western international news.

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## Notes

- 1 These strategies were identified in qualitative interviews with members of the channel management in Doha (September to December 2007) and London (January to September 2008). See Figenschou (forthcoming) for an extensive analysis of editorial dilemmas and strategies in the AJE newsroom.
- 2 Although it is beyond the scope of this article, the quantitative content-analysis approach could be combined with: (1) direct comparison of AJE and the major mainstream satellite news channels CNNI and BBC World; (2) an analysis of other news media globally to map the extent to which AJE's content is used by other news media and how it is framed (cf. Wessler and Adolphsen, 2008 above); (3) an analysis of AJE's global distribution to test its global reach and access (cf. Rai and Cottle, 2007); and (4) an analysis of the extent to which the channel is perceived as a contra-flow by its audience (cf. el-Nawawy and Powers, 2008).
- 3 The sample dates were recorded over a period of four months, in the autumn of 2007 and the spring/summer of 2008. This was done to prevent a few 'hot' news stories from affecting the analysis. The repetition of the main headlines, business figures, the sports news, the weather forecast, and advertisements for Al-Jazeera English programs or external advertisements (in total around 20 minutes per 65-minute program) were not included in the analysis. Due to technical problems there were minor deviations from the original sampling schedule. In such cases, the next available broadcast after the missing date was included, and these alterations are not believed to have had any significant influence on the findings.
- 4 The announcement of a new (although possibly related) topic signals a new item that should be coded separately. On Al-Jazeera English, the channel logo is often used to mark a new item and distinguish news items from each other. In practice, there has been little difficulty in distinguishing one news item from another.
- 5 These characterizations of international news flows are based on studies such as Gasher and Gabriele (2004), IPI (1953), Kayser (1953), Larson (1984), Sreberny-Mohammadi et al. (1985), Stevenson and Cole (1984a, b), Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992) and Wallis and Baran (1990).
- 6 Painter has included Russia and Turkey in his category 'developing world' (while stories from these two countries are coded as European stories in the present analysis). Painter finds that 81% of the news items on AJE are from the developing world compared to 47% on BBC and 53% on CNN.
- 7 It should be mentioned here that AJE offered a number of current affairs programs on these topics during the time of this study, such as *Everywoman* (gender and social issues), *The Pulse* (health issues), *People and Power* (political, economic and social issues from a grassroots perspective), *24* (travel and culture), *The Fabulous Picture Show* (movies and visual culture) and *The Listening Post* (media).
- 8 The political news from the South (37% of the total coverage) highlights internal political crisis (13% of total coverage), politics between nations/diplomacy (11%), election coverage (8%) and other political processes, such as legislation (5%). The political news relating to North America and Europe (37% of total coverage) was on diplomacy (14%), elections (12%), other political processes (6%) and internal political crisis (5%).
- 9 The third largest news topic in the sample, legal affairs (13% of all news items), is also unevenly distributed geographically. From the global North, legal affairs were

the main topic in 21% of the news items, compared to 9% of the coverage out of the South. Further, there are more economic news items originating in the North (11% of coverage) than in the South (4%), and more news items about aid (development aid and disaster relief) from the South (4%) than in the North (1%).

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*Al-Jazeera English: Corporate Profile*, updated 4 September 2008, URL (consulted March 2009): <http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2006/11/2008525185555444449.html>

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