Chapter 7
Challenger or lackey?

The politics of news on Al-Jazeera
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Conceptual versus geographical issues

Judged by appearances alone, few media outlets in the global South demonstrate contra-flow in action as effectively as the Al-Jazeera satellite channel. The headline 'Move over CNN: Al-Jazeera's view of the world takes on the West' (Cassara and Lengel, 2004) is fairly typical of countless examples portraying the Qatar-based 24-hour news channel as an influential challenger to a Western monopoly on international television news. If the significance of a particular source of contra-flow is measured in terms of this kind of brand awareness, then Al-Jazeera's high profile is not in question. The channel had been operating for just five years when it soared to international prominence in late 2001, after the US government responded to the 9/11 suicide attacks by bombing Afghanistan. As the only television station already in Afghanistan since 2000, Al-Jazeera had unique access to footage that was much in demand by Western media organisations. Thereafter, its coverage of events in Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory in 2002 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 elicited strong reactions, especially from interest groups in the US. Although it was still broadcasting only in Arabic at this time, these reactions were strong enough to turn Al-Jazeera into a global household name. An advertising industry website reported in January 2005 that a poll of nearly 2,000 advertising executives in 75 countries had identified Al-Jazeera as the world's fifth most recognised brand (Clark, 2005).

Al-Jazeera also fits media theory's concept of contra-flow as it applies to a reversal of old imperialist imbalances. By identifying the obstacles that developing country news organisations face in trying to establish a foothold in the world's core media markets, Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992:138–9) high-lighted the imperial powers' legacy of deep structural inequality in media as in other fields. If contra-flow occurs when countries once considered clients of media imperialism have successfully exported their output into the metropolis (Sinclair *et al.,* 1996:23), then Al-Jazeera offers a textbook example of the empire 'striking back'. The peninsula of Qatar was part of the Ottoman empire from 1872 to 1914, coming under British tutelage through treaties signed with the local ruler in 1916 and 1934. Oil concessions made to Western companies under these arrangements determined the region's development from then on, since they obliged Gulf rulers to delineate their areas of influence in deserts that had previously been as open as the high seas, and served to strengthen the power of those rulers vis-à-vis other inhabitants (Said Zahlan, 1989:17–20). Thus, instead of becoming part of a wider regional entity when British troops later withdrew from the Gulf, Qatar emerged in 1971 as a very small independent state. With a few notable exceptions, its early television programming was

imported either from Egypt or the West (Graham, 1978:295). Al-Jazeera was launched 25 years later, through the initiative and financial support of Qatar's third post-independence ruler.

For the contra-flow concept to have explanatory value in respect of a phenomenon like Al-Jazeera, it has to refer to changing power relations in the production and dissemination of media messages and not just superficial changes in the geography of media flows. Directional change alone can only tell part of the story; as Thussu points out (2000:206–7), television flows from the periphery to the metropolitan centres of global media and communication industries may simply follow the pull of migration and the presence in these centres of migrants from the global South. Contra-flow as a category has more analytical purchase when it relates to programming from the South that is appreciated not only by migrants in the global North but by host communities too. Portuguese consumption of Brazilian soap operas shows that such appreciations occur (Nash, 1997).

Yet even then there may be a sense in which contra-flow potential remains unfulfilled if programming is inspired by imported models or is financed by regional hegemons, like India or Saudi Arabia, and thereby entrenches existing hierarchies. In other words, contra-flow in its full sense would seem to imply not just reversed or alternative media flows, but a flow that is also counter-hegemonic (Sakr, 2001:149–53). Theories of hegemony suggest that counter-hegemonic media practices are liable either to be incorporated into dominant structures or marginalised in a way that neutralises the threat they pose to the status quo (Hall, 1977:331–2).

Since Al-Jazeera qualifies instantly for contra-flow status purely on grounds of prominence and provenance, this chapter examines its performance against the stricter measure of whether or not it is counter-hegemonic. Counter-hegemonic contra-flow would, for example, reject unfair practices such as those reported in some US networks during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The US group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) monitored the nightly newscasts of ABC, GBS, NBC, CNN, Fox and PBS over a three-week period in March-April 2003 and found they were dominated by official voices that were also pro-war. Only 3 per cent of these newscasts' US sources were identifiably anti-war, whereas 27 per cent of the American population as a whole opposed the war at that time (Rendall and Broughel, 2003). Other studies have recorded self-censorship among respected US journalists in the name of patriotism (Jensen, 2005:83) and examples of US reporting which, under a veneer of impartiality, helped to legitimise 'partisan political interests and goals' (Gasher, 2005:210–11).

Assessments are mixed as to whether Al-Jazeera's own reporting has avoided or replicated practices like these. It is commonplace for the station to be credited with offering an alternative to dominant news agendas and news reporting available from the West, through its Arabic-language television channel and two websites, one in Arabic and the other in English. By late 2006 that alternative was also due to include an English-language television channel under the name Aljazeera International *(sic)*. But the exact nature of the alternative it has offered has been hotly contested. Indeed, some strands of Arab opinion, far from agreeing that Al-Jazeera challenges the West, have accused it of serving a Western agenda in Arab states. The remainder of this chapter weighs evidence for and against three conflicting interpretations of Al-Jazeera's performance. Drawing on

this evidence, it concludes by considering how far Al-Jazeera can qualify as a counter-hegemonic source of contra-flow.

Thesis One: challenging 'the West'

The notion of Al-Jazeera 'taking on the West' was so widespread less than a decade into its existence that the station's name had become almost synonymous with ambitious media innovation on behalf of the global South. When Telesur, a Latin American television network majority-owned by the Venezuelan government, started up in 2005 as a self-professed 'counter-hegemonic media project', its ambition to compete with CNN and other global giants instantly prompted comparison with Al-Jazeera (Hearn, 2005). As for African countries, forced onto world leaders' agenda by the Live 8 campaign of 2005, the UK's Foreign Policy Centre recommended creation of a pan-African broadcaster that could emulate the pan-Arab AlJazeera in enhancing transparency and improving links between home countries and the diaspora (Fiske de Gouveia, 2005). Similarly bold assessments of Al-Jazeera's significance were emblazoned on the covers of two books on the channel, one by Hugh Miles (2005) subtitled 'How Arab TV news challenged the world' and another by Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar (2002) with the subtitle: 'How the free Arab news network scooped the world and changed the Middle East'. For such assertions about a challenge to be justified, it needs to be demonstrated that Al-Jazeera consciously pursued a distinctive news agenda and that this agenda was knowingly obstructed in countries where globally dominant media are based.

Looking first at the news agenda, Al-Jazeera staff's occasional admissions of shortcomings in their performance are the corollary of the station's declared criteria for gathering and disseminating news. These have become more explicit over time. The original motto of 'Opinion and Counter-Opinion' was amplified some years later with explicit references to pluralism, professionalism, freedom of information and democracy. The English-language version of the organisation's Code of Ethics, formally adopted at an international media forum in Doha in July 2004, prioritised the 'journalistic values of honesty, courage, fairness, balance, independence and diversity'. It stressed accuracy, transparency, proactive avoidance of propaganda and the need for solidarity with journalistic colleagues who may be subjected to harassment or aggression. The Code's express purpose was to enable Al-Jazeera to fulfil a 'vision and mission' worded as follows:

> Al-Jazeera is an Arab media service with a global orientation. With its motto 'the opinion and the other opinion' it acts as a forum for plurality, seeking the truth while observing the principles of professionalism within an institutional framework.
>
> While endeavouring to promote public awareness of issues of local and global concern, Al-Jazeera aspires to be a bridge between peoples and cultures to support the right of the individual to acquire information and strengthen the values of tolerance, democracy and the respect of liberties and human rights.
>
> (Al-Jazeera, 2004)

The bridge metaphor in this mission statement points to a desire for two-way, not one-way, media flows. Jihad Ballout, head of Al-Jazeera's public relations until August 2005, confirmed this purpose when he said it was time for information to pass from East to West, on a communication bridge that had previously 'always been unidirectional—i.e. from West to East' (Miles, 2005:417). The same metaphor also prescribes a mission of presenting the news from more than one side. Time and again after 2001, in the face of allegations that they were a mouthpiece for al-Qaeda terrorists, Al-Jazeera representatives insisted that any clip screened from tapes of Osama bin Laden or other advocates of violence against Western targets had always been followed by comments from US officials (Sakr, 2004:158).

In late 2003, Washington bureau chief Hafez al-Mirazi repeated that Al-Jazeera had never broadcast a Bin Laden tape without first inviting an American official or commentator to the Washington studio to reply to the tape 'immediately' and 'point by point' (Lamloum, 2004:50–1). Responding to criticism from political players, Al-Jazeera managers and editors cited the diverse sources of complaints as proof that they were successfully maintaining balance. They consistently justified the decision to show gruesome images of war victims by saying that viewers in countries involved in conflict have a right to know about casualties on all sides (Sakr, 2005:151). According to Ahmad al-Sheikh, appointed editor-in-chief in 2004, a failure to report 'the ugly face of war' could imply that Al-Jazeera was shirking its duty to be honest (Reuters, 2004).

As preparations for launching Aljazeera International in English advanced in 2005, claims to a news agenda aimed at redressing global imbalances in the flow of information became much more frequent. Nigel Parsons, the new channel's managing director declared: 'We're the first news channel based in the Mideast to bring news back to the West' (AP, 2005). Parsons told a London audience that feedback from visitors to Al-Jazeera's English-language website, first launched in March 2003, had revealed 'mass disappointment' over dominant news organisations' 'dereliction of duty' in covering the Iraq war. People came to the English-language site, he said, because they were looking for 'the other side of the story' (Parsons, 2005). A channel hosted and financed by the state of Qatar had a particular advantage in presenting more than one side of any story, Parsons continued, because Qatar was far too small a country to project a domestic agenda onto the international scene. Thus, for Aljazeera International, every news item would effectively be a 'foreign story'. According to Parsons, the channel would not copy existing channels. It would make a unique contribution by offering more analysis of events behind the news and giving viewers more of a voice on air.

Parsons' declared objectives articulated practices already adopted by Al-Jazeera in Arabic. Giving the public a voice was the message behind an advertisement for the channel that started running in 2002, in which the slogan 'The right not to remain silent' accompanied a picture of a protest demonstration. During the Israeli siege of Palestinian towns and refugee camps in the spring of 2002, Al-Jazeera allocated an hour-long slot every day to Palestinian callers who wished to communicate their plight to the outside world. Significantly, it was one of Al-Jazeera's Palestinian correspondents, Walid al-Omary, who, after finally penetrating an Israeli blockade of Jenin, dispelled mounting fears that, amid the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian houses, hundreds of Palestinians had been killed (Miles, 2005:191). When Palestinians then feared losing their daily slot on Al-Jazeera, the station responded with a new open discussion format,

called *Minbar Al-Jazeera* (Al-Jazeera Pulpit), which it described as a 'platform for people without a platform'. From its inception, Al-Jazeera's live phone-in programmes provided audiences with a means to air their views.

Perhaps in response to criticism of the channel for ignoring Qatari affairs, the Qatari foreign minister took calls from viewers when he was interviewed live for 50-minutes on the weekly programme *Bila Hudud* [Without Limits] in June 2005.[1] Ahmad Mansour, the presenter, pressed the minister about a range of contentious issues, including Qatari relations with Israel. With the introduction of Al-Jazeera Live in April 2005, opportunities for public access to the airwaves were further increased. Jihad Ballout likened the project to C-Span in the US, which serves those who wish to influence public policy. He pictured Al-Jazeera Live as a means of bringing uncut parliamentary debates and press conferences into Arab homes.

Taken together, the ideals and aspirations of different elements in the Al-Jazeera network clearly aimed at an alternative approach to the ones shown earlier in this chapter to have been adopted by some US-based commercial media groups during and after the invasion of Iraq. However, mounting a challenge is one thing and making it effective is another. It became obvious during the 1990s that Al-Jazeera faced hindrance in a large number of Middle Eastern states.[2] But it took rather longer for the obstacles it faced in Western countries to become equally clear. In November 2005 the UK's *Daily Mirror* claimed to have seen a secret transcript of a conversation in which British Prime Minister Tony Blair, dissuaded US President George W.Bush from bombing Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Doha. As Wadah Khanfar, Al-Jazeera's director general, told an Italian news agency, the transcript, if true, would undermine claims that earlier US military attacks on Al-Jazeera offices in Kabul and Baghdad were accidental (AKI, 2005).

Basic news-gathering is fraught with difficulty for journalists, who risk physical attacks and imprisonment, not only by authoritarian Arab regimes but by supposedly democratic Western governments as well. When a US bomb destroyed Al-Jazeera's Kabul office in November 2001, the office was empty at the time. But when a US missile hit Al-Jazeera's Baghdad bureau on 9 April 2003, reporter Tariq Ayyoub was killed and a crew member, Zuhair al-Iraqi, was injured by shrapnel. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) estimates that a total of 75 journalists and media staff were killed in Iraq in the two years after the US-led invasion. So it cannot be said that Al-Jazeera was singled out when it lost a technician, Rashid Hamid Wali, during the filming of clashes between US troops and gunmen in May 2004. Yet few other news organisations had as many personnel imprisoned or interrogated by Western institutions in connection with events in Afghanistan and Iraq.

According to one estimate, 21 members of Al-Jazeera staff were arrested and released without charge in the weeks following the invasion of Iraq (O'Carroll, 2004). Of these, cameraman Salah Hassan, arrested in November 2003, said he was beaten, verbally abused and held in solitary confinement (O'Carroll, 2004; Miles, 2005:321–2). A Sudanese assistant cameraman, Sami Mohieddin al-Haj, whom Al-Jazeera had sent to Afghanistan to cover the US-led bombing, was arrested in December 2001 and transferred to Guantanamo Bay, where he remained without any formal charges laid against him. Taysir Allouni, Al-Jazeera's Syrian-born correspondent in Spain, who interviewed Bin Laden while he was stationed in Afghanistan, was arrested in Granada in September 2003, charged with membership of a terrorist group and, after being bailed

and rearrested, was sentenced in 2005 to seven years in jail. Suhaib al-Samarrai, an Iraqi cameraman working for Al-Jazeera, was detained by US forces in November 2004 and held for two months, including three weeks in the maximum security section at Abu Ghraib (AFP, 2004). Arthur Neslen, who worked for Al-Jazeera's English-language website in 2003–04, was detained by British special branch officers at Waterloo station after attending the European Social Forum in Paris. The officers questioned him about his employer and wanted him to provide information about other Al-Jazeera journalists and his work contacts (Neslen, 2004).

With suspicion of Al-Jazeera employees so widely reported, and few US or European media analysts able to understand the channel's Arabic-language content, Western publics were given the impression that this content was consistently partisan. Fouad Ajami, an Arab American, used a lengthy *New York Times* feature in November 2001 to accuse Al-Jazeera of 'Hollywoodiz[ing]' news, inflammatory coverage, and 'virulent anti-American bias' (Ajami, 2001). Much of Ajami's description dealt with talk shows rather than news. Yet charges of anti-Americanism against Al-Jazeera presenters, not just their guests, spurred US institutions to review their relations with Al-Jazeera. The New York Stock Exchange briefly banned the channel's reporters from its trading floor in 2003, even though they had been broadcasting daily from that vantage point for several years.

It also proved difficult for Al-Jazeera to get any of its journalists embedded with US or British troops during the invasion of Iraq. The US-led coalition would only embed reporters who had press accreditation with the authorities in Kuwait or Bahrain, which was denied to Al-Jazeera (Schleifer, 2003). Amr al-Kahky, the one reporter who was able to get accreditation because he had a Kuwaiti press card, was finally embedded just before the war began. But even then he was excluded from the morning briefing given by the commanding officer of the unit he was embedded with. According to Kahky, his complaint was countered first with the excuse that Al-Jazeera 'had a reputation' and then with a decision to replace the morning briefing with one-to-one interviews. 'It was very obvious to me', Kahky said later, that Coalition troops 'generally had a very biased attitude towards Al-Jazeera.' Other journalists did not share that attitude, he added. Colleagues in 'Reuters, BBC, AP Wire Service and others' were very supportive (ibid.).

Al-Jazeera's English-language website, which was due to be launched in March 2003, was kept out of action for six months by hackers. The original US hosting service, Data Pipe, a brand name of Hoboken Web Services, said in March that it would cease hosting the site from the end of that month (Timms, 2003). The same electronic onslaught that crashed the English site hobbled the Arabic one too. Then US-based Akamai Technologies, brought in to help protect against hacking, cancelled its contract just as Data Pipe had done, refusing to say why (Allan, 2004). John William Racine, who later admitted diverting traffic to a site called 'Let Freedom Ring', was sentenced to 1,000 hours of community service and a fine of $1,500 (BBC, 2003). Al-Jazeera staff remained convinced, however, that the extent of the hacking pointed to a well-resourced operation. In 2005, a civil defence group responsible for patrolling the border between Arizona and Mexico refused to let Al-Jazeera film a documentary in their area, saying it was 'the world's most prolific terrorism television network' (BBC, 2005).

Given this background and Al-Jazeera's loss of US advertising after 2001 (Sakr, 2004:153–4), it was hardly surprising that Nigel Parsons, discussing plans for Aljazeera

International in July 2005, predicted difficulties for the new channel in attracting advertising from US firms. There were also concerns about distribution, following a 2004 decision by the Canadian authorities to impose unprecedented restrictions on cable and satellite distribution of Al-Jazeera. By ordering distributors to monitor the channel for 24 hours a day and requiring them to alter or delete 'abusive comments', the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission effectively rendered distribution of Al-Jazeera in Canada uneconomic (Brown, 2005). Thus even some of the minority of Arabic-speakers in the West were to be denied access to the channel. It is true that Al-Jazeera found appreciative audiences in places like Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan, as well as moral support from international advocacy groups defending press freedom and journalists' rights.[3] Yet, in light of the obstacles it faced in North America, Europe and the Middle East, it would seem that headlines about Al-Jazeera 'taking on the world' put an unjustifiably positive spin on actual events.

Thesis Two: serving 'the West'

Strange as it may sound to Western ears, a portrayal of Al-Jazeera as challenging dominant Western media corporations is not universally accepted in the Arab world. As noted earlier, some Arab commentators have taken the view that, far from serving as a source of contra-flow, Al-Jazeera was created to reinforce a world order in which US and Israeli designs are imposed on the Arab region. According to this version, US hegemony is maintained through the preservation of corrupt and inert Arab dictatorships that depend on US military backing for their survival. Media liberalisation in these circumstances is seen as deception, giving a false impression that political reform is under way so as to distract attention from deep structures of political repression in individual Arab states.

Jordanian-born Salameh Nematt, who reported the Iraq war for *Al-Hayat*-LBC from Washington in March 2003, has put on record his total disagreement that Al-Jazeera acts as a bridge for communication between East and West. Asked to discuss the bridge analogy at a conference on Arab media in Berlin in 2004, Nematt said he had every respect for Al-Jazeera journalists but that Al-Jazeera as an institution was nothing more than a continuation of Nasser's radio propaganda machine, *Saut al-Arab* [Voice of the Arabs]. Just as *Saut al-Arab* was created to mobilise the masses but ended up giving them a false expectation of imminent victory in the 1967 Arab—Israeli war, so Al-Jazeera was focusing too heavily on pan-Arab causes and had inspired false hopes that Iraq could resist the US invasion. According to Nematt, Al-Jazeera justified its lack of coverage of countries like Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia by saying that the governments of these countries placed too many obstacles in the way of its journalists. Instead, it concentrated on two sets of images: dead Palestinians and dead Iraqis. By doing this, he said, it sabotaged Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and the creation of a stable and united Iraq (Nematt, 2004).

Various manifestations of Nematt's argument that crop up in Arab political discourse incorporate the basic allegation that Al-Jazeera is a double bluff. That is to say, it provides an outlet for the expression of rampant anti-Americanism in a way that serves American interests because it prolongs Arab weakness and the regional status quo. For example, Israel is said to have benefited from heavy media exposure of Palestinian

militancy and Arab hostility because this allegedly furnished a rationale for persistent Israeli crackdowns in the Occupied Territories and other measures attributed to security concerns.

The ruler of Qatar is meanwhile said to have enjoyed special US protection from the wrath of Saudi Arabia as a reward for pursuing diplomatic contacts with Israel.[4] Such Byzantine accounts of who benefits from Al-Jazeera, and how, carry weight with Arab intellectuals because of the striking ambivalence of US-Arab relations. The Bush Administration of 2001–04 purported to push for democratisation in Arab states while remaining deeply fearful of political Islam or any popular force that might destabilise unelected Arab governments and squeeze the supply of Arab oil. Complicated explanations for Al-Jazeera's existence, like those summarised here, are not to be confused with allegations often heard in Arab circles that Al-Jazeera is a Zionist channel because it gives airtime to Israelis, or is in the pay of the CIA because it interviews US officials. Rather, despite blatant internal contradictions, they contain an arcane logic that always comes back to entrenched US power over Arab affairs. Mohammed El Oifi, of the Institut d'Études Politiques in Paris, explains how some critics see Al-Jazeera as

> part of the global mediascape created by the American administration to contain the hostility of people in the Middle East against American hegemony and to legitimize the setting of American troops in the Gulf…. Advertising itself as a channel that presents the opinion and the other opinion, Al-Jazeera seems to be part of the American recipe for a media liberalism that is capable of producing political moderation.
>
> (El Oifi, 2005:68)

It must be said, in defence of the 'American hegemony' argument, that the government of Qatar, which created and funds Al-Jazeera, is closely allied to that of the US. Washington led the way in recognising the government of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani when he came to power through a palace coup in 1995. That recognition mattered greatly because the ousted emir, Sheikh Hamad's own father, was canvassing support for his reinstatement from other Gulf States. The US, meanwhile, had realised after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 that it should stop trying to balance Iran and Iraq against each other and put resources instead into preserving the independence of Gulf Arab oil producers against these two powerful neighbours (Indyk, 2004:105–7). Qatar's 1992 defence pact with the US provided for prepositioning of US equipment. Its huge Al-Udaid air base was built up for US use, leading US Central Command to establish a forward headquarters in Qatar in 2002 (ibid.: 108). The 2003 US-led attack on Iraq was managed from a newer Qatari installation at Al-Sayliyah, the largest prepositioning base for US military equipment in the world (Bodi, 2005).

Later that year the US was confident enough about Al-Udaid and Al-Sayliyah to pull its troops out of Saudi Arabia and relocate them in Qatar. Against this background, it is not far-fetched to see the Al-Jazeera project as an attempt by Qatar's ruler to burnish his Arab nationalist credentials by financing a media outlet for denunciation of US policy in the Middle East. Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland has reconciled close Qatar-US relations on one hand with US fury at Al-Jazeera on the other, by describing

Al-Jazeera as a 'buffer' for the government of Qatar. It was helping them, he said, to withstand a lot of Arab anger arising from their role in the Iraq war (Telhami, 2004).

In discussing whether Al-Jazeera serves Western media hegemony, it should also be noted that it originated from a model developed by the British public service broadcaster, the BBC. Qatar's ruler, Sheikh Hamad, educated at Sandhurst military academy in the UK, watched the Arabic television news service that the BBC ran for the Saudi-owned pay-TV service Orbit, starting in 1994. Sheikh Hamad appreciated the fact that BBC journalists had interviewed him after he seized power in Qatar in 1995. When Orbit objected to BBC coverage of Saudi Arabia and the contract was ended in 1996, BBC-trained Arab journalists became available to help launch Al-Jazeera (Sakr, 2005:148–9).

The potential for Western influence to be exerted through recruitment choices became much more obvious as appointments to the English-language Aljazeera International were announced during 2005. Nigel Parsons joined Aljazeera International as its managing director after spending 30 years working for organisations based in the UK, New Zealand and Italy, during which time he became a director of APTN. Parsons proceeded to build up a team that included former employees of the UK's ITN, BBC and left-wing weekly *Tribune,* and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He brought in Steve Clarke who, besides directing news output at the Saudi-owned satellite channel MBC, had previously produced *Littlejohn,* the Sky News show presented by Richard Littlejohn, a columnist for Rupert Murdoch's tabloid daily the *Sun*. Riz Khan, senior anchor at CNN International and host of its show *Q&A,* was hired to present a similar style programme daily from Washington. The veteran UK broadcaster, Sir David Frost, was snapped up after he retired from the BBC in May 2005.

A senior executive of Aljazeera International, privately acknowledging the large number of what he called 'white faces' in top positions, cautioned that many Europeans had grown bored and disillusioned in their former working environments and were eager for a more innovative news agenda.[5] Arab staff, in contrast, tended to judge appointments to the English-language channel in the context of management decisions already taken under US pressure. One such decision was the removal of Al-Jazeera's first managing director, Mohammed Jassem al-Ali, in May 2003. Ahmad Chalabi, leader of the US-backed Iraqi National Congress and a favourite of the Bush administration at that time, had accused Al-Jazeera under al-Ali of colluding with the government of Saddam Hussein (AFP, 2003). Later that year British journalist Yvonne Ridley was sacked from Al-Jazeera's English-language website, allegedly after protesting at the removal of two cartoons in response to US complaints (Bradley, 2003). Her departure followed Arab press reports that a committee representing the CIA, FBI, Pentagon and Congress had urged President George Bush to insist that the Qatari government should order Al-Jazeera to moderate its television output or be closed down.

Qatari compliance with US demands for the taming of Al-Jazeera surfaced openly in 2004. After meeting US Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the White House in April 2004, Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, said he would instruct Al-Jazeera to be more professional and avoid 'wrong information' (BBC, 2004). In May 2004, Al-Jazeera journalists underwent a training course paid for by the Media Outreach Center at the American Embassy in London and run by Search for Common Ground, a non-governmental organisation specialising in conflict transformation.

As part of the training, Al-Jazeera staff were encouraged to choose a new vocabulary when reporting suicide bombings, Palestinian casualties and hostilities in Iraq. It was after this that the channel adopted its Code of Ethics, sharing it with about 100 media professionals at an international conference in Doha in July 2004. One clause in the code pledged that Al-Jazeera would 'give full consideration to the feelings of victims of crime, war, persecution and disaster, their relatives, our viewers, and to individual privacies and public decorum' (Al-Jazeera, 2004). One of the channel's best-known presenters said this clause belonged to a 'code of the meek' (Qassem, 2004). After the July conference it emerged that the consultancy firm Ernst & Young had been retained to advise on selling the Al-Jazeera group to private buyers. It was unclear whether Qatar's ruler was using the prospect of privatisation to deflect further US pressure or whether the venture really would be exposed to the market censorship pressures that often accompany commercialisation.

Despite such obvious impact of US pressure, US officials themselves do not appear to have regarded Al-Jazeera as a conduit for US control over Arab affairs. On the contrary, a former media adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq alleged even after the changes that Al-Jazeera journalists were in 'cahoots with terrorists' and suggested that Qatar's funding of Al-Jazeera constituted 'state sponsorship of terrorism' (Smith, 2005). As for criticism of Al-Jazeera for focusing on pan-Arab issues at the expense of local ones, programmes to refute this are too numerous to list. Obvious examples include Al-Jazeera's December 2003 documentary on atrocities in Darfur, screened before the crisis there had captured the world's attention. They could also include the channel's extensive coverage of the US presidential election campaign in 2004, which staff at the Washington bureau described as an opportunity to educate Arab viewers about the practice of democracy. It was US Democrats who had doubts about such intentions, as shown by their refusal to let Al-Jazeera display its banner at their Convention.

Thesis Three: an Arab force in Arab politics

Had the US government regarded Al-Jazeera as a benign influence in Arab affairs, it would have had no call to launch the Arabic-language television station al-Hurra with state funding in early 2004. Al-Hurra's creation might even be cited as evidence of Al-Jazeera's success as a credible source of counter-hegemonic contra-flow. But here another set of questions must be asked as to whether Al-Jazeera, by self-consciously articulating a rationale for its own existence based on building bridges, moved from being a transparent media outlet to becoming a political actor in its own right. This was the path taken by, for example, Inter-Press Service (IPS), which succeeded in putting development concerns on the UN agenda but, in doing so, morphed from news agency to pressure group (Thussu, 2000:252).

In classic models of representative democracy, the media are theorised as part of a triangular relationship that also includes government (or sometimes politicians generally) and the public (or electorate). In a democratic system, all three forces theoretically have the means to set the political agenda—through investigative journalism and inclusion of under-represented sources in the media's case. In practice, as Gaber has argued (1998:409), at different times and in different societies, politicians have gained

ascendancy over the media as agenda setters. Nevertheless, whoever is in the ascendant, this three-way model contrasts starkly with a non-democratic system, where the media are routinely subordinate to the control of ruling elites, and where elections are either non-existent or rigged. By contrasting the three-way model with what has traditionally been a one-way model in Arab political systems, it becomes possible to visualise Al-Jazeera as playing one of two roles. Either it has thrust its way between Arab rulers and the Arab public and helped to form the beginnings of a three-way political system by providing an unprecedented medium through which governance can be monitored and public opinion expressed. Or, conceivably, as a government-sponsored vehicle for alternative media content, the station has been a foreign policy plaything of Qatar's political leadership. If the latter, then Al-Jazeera could be said to have reinforced a long-standing, one-way model in which Arab political agendas are determined principally by ruling elites.

Those Arab media commentators who have described Al-Jazeera as 'the only political process' in the Middle East, have seemingly opted for the first of these two conflicting assessments. Muwaffaq Harb, director of al-Hurra, takes this line. He says that, where the mosque once served as a primary forum for information and views, Al-Jazeera has now 'hijacked' that role (quoted in Kinninmont, 2005). Similarly, Al-Jazeera's own M'hamed Krichen has quipped that the channel is 'the most popular political party in the Arab world' (quoted in Lamloum, 2004:17). But Hazim Saghiye, a columnist for the daily *Al-Hayat,* sees the same situation in a negative light. For him, it is a cause for concern that Arab satellite channels have become the 'sole, or virtually sole, instrument for politicization' (Saghiye, 2004).

As for the alternative assessment, Al-Jazeera is often dismissed as an appendage of the state of Qatar. Supporters of this view say that the 'enlightened autocrats' who govern Qatar, a 'rich, small, weak country caught between three potentially deadly neighbours: Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia' (Boniface, 2004), rely on Al-Jazeera's global presence to enable their emirate to 'punch above its weight' in international affairs. Some Saudi princes delight in referring to Qatar's foreign minister as the 'foreign minister of Al-Jazeera' (*Al-Watan,* 2002). There are many disagreements between Qatar and Saudi Arabia that are exacerbated by friction over the content of Al-Jazeera broadcasts. Saudi officials are alleged to have supported a coup attempt by Qatar's ousted emir in 1996, while Saudi Arabia accuses Qatar of supporting Saudi dissidents in exile. In 2002, Riyadh responded to Al-Jazeera panelists' criticism of the Saudi ruling family by recalling the Saudi ambassador from Doha and placing an indefinite bar on entry to the kingdom for Al-Jazeera crews. Saudi Arabia then blocked construction of a gas pipeline and a causeway between Qatar and other Gulf States, ostensibly because of a border dispute.

In view of the detrimental effect of Saudi anger on both the Qatari economy and Al-Jazeera's news-gathering, two points emerge to weaken the argument that Al-Jazeera exists to help the Qatari government set its own political agenda. One is that the government of a small state next to a big one might be expected to play safe and put its commercial interests first. Instead, the leadership in Doha appears to have done the opposite, courting trouble rather than a quiet life. The second point is that any agenda-setting undertaken via Al-Jazeera is supposed to happen under the banner of 'Opinion and counter-opinion', which serves as a constant reminder that politicians are not the only

agenda setters. Far from Al-Jazeera being created as fundamentally different from dominant Western media, the station's first managing director explained in 1998 that it intended to emulate news-gathering practices that were taken for granted in the West. In 'telling the truth', he said, Al-Jazeera was 'not doing anything different from what others do in Europe and the US. Maybe it's unusual in the Third World, but not elsewhere' (Al-Ali, 1998).

Conclusion

Unlike Telesur or IPS, the original Al-Jazeera channel in Arabic was not primarily conceived as a source of counter-hegemonic contra-flow. It was based on a widely accepted model of pluralistic reporting espoused by, among others, the BBC. However, because it broadcast in Arabic and had access to sources that were not available to Western media, Al-Jazeera had an image problem. As world politics evolved and opinions polarised, from 9/11 to the invasion of Iraq, certain groups came to regard Al-Jazeera itself as no less of a threat to their interests than some of the political players represented in Al-Jazeera news bulletins and panel debates. Being allied to the US, the Qatari ruling family was put on the defensive in a way that seems to have altered the nature of the Al-Jazeera project. Talk of Al-Jazeera building a communication 'bridge' came after its crews and their output had been subject to physical, legal and verbal attacks; so too did expansion of the network to include the high-profile English-language Aljazeera International, with its mandate to 'bring news back to the West'. From its initial purpose of delivering news in Arabic according to criteria of newsworthiness widely accepted in the West, Al-Jazeera's role was adjusted to include promoting certain values (Al-Jazeera, 2004) and reporting the 'other side of the story' from that covered by dominant news media (Parsons, 2005).

Changes in Al-Jazeera's purpose and self-image over time cannot be understood in isolation from world politics or the varied and often conflicting assessments of its performance that have been summarised in this chapter. Well before it launched into broadcasting in English, the station was routinely credited by Western observers with having 'taken on the West', even though broadcasters in languages other than Arabic could never have competed for the same Arabic-speaking audience. The station's supposed challenge to Western media was magnified in these reports at the very time when its staff were being harassed, imprisoned and even killed and its access to sources and audiences was being blocked. In the Arab world, meanwhile, smear campaigns portrayed the station as a lackey of US neo-imperialism or a plaything of Qatar's ruler, whereas its actual achievement was to create an unprecedented space for pan-Arab public discussion. To the extent that these depictions misrepresented reality, they suggest that Al-Jazeera's original Arabic-language operation did pose a threat to hegemonic interests and was predictably subject to processes of neutralisation and exclusion.

Notes

1 Sheikh Hamad bin Jasim bin Jaber Al Thani, Qatar's first deputy prime minister and foreign minister, was interviewed on *Bila Hudud* on 22 June. According to BBC International Reports (Middle East) on 24 June 2005, calls to the programme came from Qatar, Saudi

Arabia and the UAE. One caller asked why the programme had been cut from its usual length of 90 minutes.

2 The list includes Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Tunisia.

3 The IFJ, Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters sans frontières are among organisations that have defended the rights of Al-Jazeera journalists.

4 For details on meetings between Qatari and Israeli officials, the opening of an Israeli trade office in Doha and talks about the supply of Qatari gas to Israel, see Da Lage (2005:57–8).

5 Private communication to the author, London, 15 July 2005.

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