

MERIA

CONTESTING THE STATE MEDIA MONOPOLY: SYRIA ON AL-JAZIRA TELEVISION

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The influx of independent satellite TV stations in the Arab world has undermined the ability of governments to control what people watch and consequently to control what they think. This article takes the al-Jazira satellite TV station and its coverage of Syrian politics as a case study. It analyzes the content of sample news and programs that have tackled issues considered sensitive to the Syrian regime, and illustrates how these programs may be forcing the government to change its discourse.

Satellite TV stations are subtly challenging the state's monopoly over the means of persuasion and information in the Arab World. Not only is government media rendered less relevant by the new satellite channels, but also the introduction of freer and more independent sources of information may be an additional tool for civil society in its struggle with states over such issues as the freedom of expression, human rights and democracy. This is apparent from the way people are excited about the programs of these stations. The Qatari-based channel al-Jazira has emerged as the leading source of news and the most candid forum for debating issues. Other credible sources of information include the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), Arab News Network (ANN), and Abu Dhabi Satellite TV station. Although none of these TV stations are totally independent, they enjoy a higher degree of autonomy from their sponsors. Al-Jazira and ANN are the only all news stations, but Al-Jazira's programs have brought high-level newsmakers and high-sensitivity issues before the public far more than those of ANN.

Al-Jazira's coverage of Syrian politics exemplifies how satellite TV is changing the conditions of communication between citizens and states in the Arab world and increasing the space for civil society, creating more moments in television that are not as

controlled by states. The significance of the Syrian case lies in the fact that the Syrian regime is highly authoritarian and still maintains total control of information and communication. I examine al-Jazira's reporting of several issues considered highly sensitive according to the censorship policies of Syria's ministries of information, culture and guidance: political opposition in Syria, succession, and the impact of the peace process on the regime's survival ability. I will analyze the content of sample news and programs that have tackled issues considered sensitive to the Syrian regime, such as the three shows *Akthar min Ra'i* (More than One Opinion), *al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis*, (Opposite Directions) and *Bila Hudud* (Without Bounds), to suggest that these programs may be forcing governments to change their discourse.

In a recent article, Jon B. Alterman suggested that in order to understand the impact of satellite news channels on the Arab world, researchers will have to study, among other things, "how the satellite television stations cover news, how they compare to terrestrial stations' coverage of news, and how both have changed over time."⁽¹⁾ This article addresses precisely the gap mentioned by Alterman.

SYRIA'S STYLE OF COMMUNICATION

As in many Arab countries, the media in Syria is controlled and managed by the state. Media workers are considered government employees, and those in higher positions are required to be loyal party members. William A. Rugh classifies the press in Syria as a "mobilizing press." The mobilizing role of the media, he says, is to communicate the desires of the leadership in pursuit of its goals of development, industrialization, and enhanced legitimacy. The behavioral characteristics of the mobilizing press, according to Rugh, are, no criticism of policy, sanctity of leaders, and non-diversity of views.(2)

Although the Syrian Constitution (1973) guarantees the citizens' right to free press and expression, the state has had a virtual monopoly over the press since the Ba`thist military coup of 1963. After the coup, the military authority closed down all independent newspapers. It passed several restrictive articles under the State of Emergency that has been in effect since the military take-over. Article 4b gives the state the right to control newspapers, books, radio and television broadcasting, advertising, and visual arts. It may also confiscate and destroy any work which might be threatening the security of the state.(3) Till very recently, Syria has had three major national Arabic newspapers, al-Ba`th, al-Thawrah, and Tishreen, and one in English, Syria Times. All these papers, in addition to the radio and TV, are controlled and managed by the Ministry of Information. In 1998, Syria launched its satellite TV station.

Starting in 1974, the Syrian media became a vehicle to promote the cult of President Hafiz al-Asad. Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, minister of information from 1974 till his death in 1983, invented Asad's cult in order to deflect the attention of the Syrian citizens from the economic and security challenges which faced the regime.(4) The government tightened its control over the

media after its violent confrontation with the armed Islamist opposition began in 1979.

Over the years, the Syrian government has developed a long list of taboo topics deemed embarrassing or threatening to the regime. For instance, the government does not allow criticism of the following topics:

- the president and his family
- the ruling Ba`th Party
- the military
- the legitimacy of the regime
- the sectarian question

Subjects usually censored by the Ministry of Information include: the government's human rights record, Islamic opposition, allegations of involvement of officials in drug-trafficking, the activity of Syrian troops in Lebanon, graphic description of sex, materials unfavorable to the Arab cause in the Arab-Israeli conflict.(5)

The government also has not tolerated any independent source of information, which is considered threatening or critical of the regime. A case in point is the crackdown on all independent Lebanese newspapers in Lebanon, right after the Syrian military intervention in that country in 1976-7. The Syrian military closed down seven newspapers and one magazine in Beirut. Moreover, human rights organizations documented the arrest, expulsion, and even assassination of prominent journalists by the Syrian security forces. One prominent Lebanese journalist, Salim al-Lawzi, the editor of al-Hawadith, was abducted, tortured, and killed. His right hand, the writing hand, was badly mutilated, reportedly to warn others against angering Hafiz Al-Asad.(6)

Nonetheless, the Syrian government has not succeeded in maintaining total control over the dissemination of information. Syrian citizens have turned, before the age of satellite television, to western radio stations. Popular among them were BBC's Arabic service, Radio Monte Carlo, and to lesser extent the Voice of America. Another radio station that has succeeded in attracting some audience was the Arabic service of the Israeli radio. Syrians have tuned to Israeli radio

more for its daily broadcast of Um Kalthum songs than to its news.

Recently, Syrian media, especially newspapers, has been allowed and sometimes encouraged to launch criticism and attacks against corrupt officials in the bureaucracy. These intervals of criticism tend to correspond with campaigns to fight corruption, usually with the blessing of the late Asad himself. There are two reasons for this shift in the Syrian media. One is the increased inability of the Syrian government to control the incoming information about corruption and abuse of power, especially through the new technology, and second, the instinctive desire of Syrian journalists to probe and test the limits set by the censors. For example, it was reported that one of the official newspapers, *al-Thawra*, had a 35 percent drop in sales after it sacked its independent-minded cartoonist, Ali Farzat, who is known for challenging the limits of censorship.(7) He was later allowed to resume his work there.

While the Syrian government has strived to maintain its strict control over the dissemination of information, its efforts have come under increased pressure from two new sources, the satellite TV stations and the Internet. Government's initial reaction to the new technology has oscillated between attempts at control and toleration. The authorities have been less successful controlling the receiving satellite dishes than restricting the Internet. The proliferation of the regional satellite TV stations in the late 1990s has changed, for good, the rules of control and censorship.

AI-JAZIRA SATELLITE TV CHANNEL

Al-Jazira Satellite Channel (JSC) was not the first satellite TV station in the Arab world, but soon became the leading source of political news and programs. The first satellite broadcasting came to the region on December 2, 1990, with the launching of the Egyptian satellite channel. This channel was transmitting an average of 13 hours of daily programs including news, entertainment,

religious and health programs to the Middle Eastern, Northern African and European countries. Later, it increased its broadcast to 24 hours. It was followed by the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) in 1991.(8) MBC was the first truly pan-Arab TV station transmitting news, family, cultural and entertaining programs throughout the Arab world and Europe. Both its staff and programming reflected the pan-Arab nature of the channel. MBC introduced communication across the world through its programs, which resembled those of CNN. One successful example was the widely popular show, *Hiwar ma`a al-Gharb* (Dialogue with the West). This program was pioneering in allowing the Arab public to call and communicate their opinions live and with a certain degree of freedom. Despite the title of this program, the show provided a forum to several Arab political personalities and governments to talk to one another. Unfortunately, the program discontinued over disagreement about its direction and cost.(9)

Other Gulf countries launched their satellite channels between 1992 and 1994. It was no accident that the Gulf Arab states were the first to transmit through satellite, for they were financially better off than the rest of the Arab countries. Wealthy states were not the only ones to move to satellite broadcasting in order to reach a wider audience. Other Arab countries including Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria entered the competition as early as 1993. In 1994, more TV channels joined the array of government-owned and controlled stations. These included the privately owned Arab Radio and Television (ART) and Orbit, oriented toward entertainment and owned by Saudi individuals.(10) Both channels operate out of Italy. By early 2000, almost all Arab countries had joined the satellite wave.(11)

Al-Jazira network was founded in Qatar on November 1, 1996, broadcasting only six hours. By mid-1997, it had increased its broadcasting hours to 12 hours and to 24 hours in February 1999. It employs about 350 editors, anchors, and technicians, and it has about 30 correspondents in major capitals

around the world.(12) What distinguishes al-Jazira from other satellite TV stations in the region are the following factors:

First, it is the only 24-hour station dedicated to news, news analysis, talk shows, and documentaries. Other satellite channels, such as MBC, don't specialize in news coverage and analysis. The only exception is the Arab News Network (ANN), owned by Sumer Al-Asad, a son of Rif at Al-Asad (the brother and sometime rival of Hafiz Al-Asad), and Saudi individuals; it has yet to prove its competence in the competition with al-Jazira. ANN, which is based in London, seems to face serious economic difficulties. Since the beginning of 2000, Abu Dhabi's satellite TV station has aggressively entered the contest with al-Jazira. What makes an all-news satellite TV station so popular in the Arab world? The obvious answer is the novelty of the idea for a highly politicized audience hungry for credible news stories, something the governments' stations do not offer.

The second factor for the success of al-Jazira is its professionalism. Since its launching, al-Jazira succeeded in recruiting a highly professional staff and crew.(13) The real competitions for the new station were not the governmental stations, but the two giants, CNN and BBC. Both CNN and BBC gained the educated and the well-to-do audiences in the Arab world during the second Gulf war. CNN was a major instrument in the communication/miscommunication between the United States and Iraq President Saddam Hussein during Desert Shield/Storm in 1991. By the time the United States resumed bombing against Iraq in December 1998, al-Jazira had replaced CNN as the main source of news on the crisis, and it was al-Jazira--not CNN--that aired the two speeches of the Iraqi dictator during the bombing.(14)

What most Arabs appreciated about al-Jazira's coverage of the resumed American hostility against Iraq was the station's condemnatory tone toward the American attack. The channel questioned the timing and the rationale for the attack and highlighted the catastrophic impacts of the

sanctions on Iraqi citizens, reflecting popular Arab opinion about the US bombing. Al-Jazira has also presented a very compassionate, and yet professional, coverage of the Palestinian intifada that began in September 2000. Several analysts have commented on the role of al-Jazira and other Arab satellite TV stations in spurring "mass action and giving it a pan-Arab nature, by beaming directly into people's homes images of both the horrors experienced by the Palestinians and of solidarity activities elsewhere."(15)

Third, the interactive provocative programs of al-Jazira provide Arab audiences with a way to express their views on the airwaves. There are two aspects for the inclusion of the Arab public in the communication process. First, the station has become a forum for all political sides to debate issues. It has not excluded any political force, from Islamists to Communists, and especially those who are in opposition to their government.(16) Another way to engage the Arab public is by taking their phone calls. Almost all talks shows encourage viewers to express their opinions by questioning guests or commenting on the issues under discussion. For example, in one program regarding the Syrian-Israeli peace talks, Sami Haddad, the host, took a call from Dr. Mansur Abd ad-Da'im of Syria, who said, "I would like to convey to you the voice of the Syrian street. The Syrian people warns the Syrian leadership against this act of betrayal, or they will face the fate of [the assassinated Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat."(17)

Fourth, the most important reason for the popularity and success of al-Jazira is its willingness to discuss sensitive and controversial issues, and its bravery in breaking taboos. Muhammad Jasem al-Ali, al-Jazira's chief editor, says, "Other TV stations hold too many taboos. We don't have any taboos, our audience have a right to the truth and a right to voice their opinion publicly."(18) The station's news editors have relatively more independence and freedom to report any worthy story.(19) Concurrent topics and themes for its news and

programming include: human rights and democracy in the Arab world, political oppositions, the peace process between supporters and opponents, political Islam, the sanction on Iraq, and Arab unity or disunity.

The frank discussion of these and similar topics has made al-Jazira the most credible and respected news source for the Arab public. Simultaneously, it has enraged almost every single government in the region. The list of governments that protested or took punitive actions against al-Jazira or its host country, Qatar, included, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco.(20) Thus, the channel has succeeded in gaining a higher degree of trust among the Arab public more than any other source.(21)

Several observers have criticized al-Jazira itself for various reasons, including its selectivity in the countries and individuals it criticizes, its use of sensationalism at the expense of informing the public, its heavy management of live programs, and its tacit promotion of normalizing relations with Israel by including Israeli officials and experts among its guests.(22)

CONTESTING COVERAGE

Al-Jazira's coverage of Syrian politics has been wide-ranging. Notably, the channel has moved toward progressively more assertive coverage of Syrian politics. This coverage has pushed what the Syrian government considers redlines and taboos. Al-Jazira's coverage of the Syrian polity has included three types of issues. First, indirect reference to Syria under topics such as democracy, human rights and Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab world; second, direct discussion of the Syrian-Israeli peace process; and third, reporting Syrian domestic developments. In each one of these areas, the coverage challenges the notion of taboos for the Syrian authority.

The first category of undesired topics for the Syrian government are the themes of democracy, human rights and Islamic opposition. The fact that Syria is one of the

most authoritarian regimes in the area makes its officials uncomfortable and even troubled by discussing these topics publicly. Over the last three years, the major programs, particularly al-Itijah al-Mu`akis (Opposite Directions) and Akthar min Ra'i (More than One Opinion) and Bila Hudud (Without Bounds), have debated these issues with a tone condemning authoritarianism and human rights violations.

While other TV stations only criticize the Iraqi regime as the archetype of the wicked regime, al-Jazira has consistently denounced other non-democratic governments--including the Syrian regime--in its shows about democracy and pluralism. In one program, the pro-Syrian political analyst, Zuhair Diyab, became the laughing stock of the viewers from several Arab countries when he was making excuses for the pervasiveness of authoritarianism in the area. His exact comment was, "The Arab masses need a hundred years till they become ready to understand and be ready for democracy".(23) When the moderator and other guests and viewers cornered him, he claimed that he was adopting the devil's advocate position.

Another offensive topic for the Syrian regime is the issue of Islamic opposition. Having confronted an armed Islamic movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Syrian government considers this topic a taboo. The Syrian regime calls the Muslim Brothers "al-Khuwan al-Muslimun" (The Muslim Traitors) for leading the opposition against the Asad government, which ended with the regime killing thousands of civilians in the city of Hama in 1982. During the confrontation between the Syrian regime and Islamists, the government issued a law, on July 7, 1980, which not only banned the Brothers but made membership, even former membership, a capital offense.(24)

As part of its programs dealing with active Islamic movements, al-Jazira hosted the leader of the banned Syrian Muslim Brothers for a two-hour interview on the program, "Without Bounds." The format of this program requires the host to take the opposite side to that of the guest. The Syrian

audience and the general Arab audience had the opportunity to hear a very moderate voice advocating democracy, demanding an end to marshal law rule, and insisting that his party be legalized. Views were sharply divided between those who repeated the government accusation about the Brothers and their leader, and those who accused the government of committing gross human rights violations and pleaded for an end to the monopoly over power by Asad's sect.(25)

The second category of coverage is the Syrian role in the Arab-Israeli peace process. While the overall coverage is somewhat sympathetic, discussions of the domestic imperatives and implications of the peace process on the Syria society and regime have sometimes not been appreciated by the Syrian government. The Syrian government wants all the outlets of the Arab media to repeat its lines about the just cause and prudent position of President Asad.

Several programs covered the Syrian-Israeli negotiations, especially during the resumption of talks in late November and early January 2000. In "More than One Opinion," I was one of the guests, and I raised the issue of the lack of democracy in Syria and how this affects the peace process. Syrians don't get to debate their government's policies in the Syrian press or in their rubberstamp parliament. This means Israel is making peace with an authoritarian state that has little accountability to its own people and is bound to experience a change of leadership soon, building peace on precarious footing.(26) Any view that doesn't celebrate the Syrian leadership's handling of the peace process is perceived by the Syrian government to weaken the position of the Syrian negotiator.

The third contest over the dissemination of information between al-Jazira and the Syrian regime is in the area of reporting and analyzing significant domestic political developments. The first such example was in the program, "More Than One Opinion," right after President Asad dismissed his brother Rif'at from his position as a vice-president for national security

affairs. Almost everyone was wondering why Asad kept his brother in this nominal position for so long, while forcing him to stay in exile. The Syrian official media gave no explanation of this decision.

It was Sami Haddad, the host of "More Than One Opinion," who assembled three panelists to discuss the issue. One of them supported the Syrian government, the other was a Jordanian journalist, and the third a Syrian dissident living in Paris.(27) In this program, both the moderator and the guests were very cautious in addressing some of the taboos in Syrian politics, particularly the sectarian question, Asad's strained relations with his brother, and the succession question.

Despite the self-imposed censorship and the actual censorship, reported by some sources, the participants were publicly breaking a taboo on debating such themes.(28) Both the Jordanian journalist and the Syrian dissident disagreed with one Syrian commentator who claimed that Syria was a democratic state, governed by institutions and not individuals.(29) The episode was pioneering in breaking the tacit agreement between a medium controlled by a Gulf state and a Syrian government known for its intolerance and dislike of criticism.

With each report, the channel has pushed the red lines and reduced the number of taboos. For instance, when Syrian President Asad died, al-Jazira was a leading medium in its coverage of the domestic and regional implications of his departure. It was on this station that several Arab commentators expressed their outrage over the speedy amendment of the Constitution in order to move Asad's son, Bashar, into the presidency. Many analysts registered their opposition to the precedent of the bequest of power in republican regimes.(30)

Another recent example of al-Jazira's distinguished coverage, in comparison with that of the Syrian TV, was the story of Monzer al-Mouseli, an independent member of the Syrian People's Assembly, who dared to raise an objection to the constitutional amendment. Mouseli made headline news during the nomination process of Bashar Al-

Asad. While reading what was supposed to be an endorsement speech, Mouseli reminded his colleagues that they needed to mention the reasons for the amendment, as required by the constitution. His remark, seen as an objection to Bashar's nomination, generated a storm inside the hall. Other members and the speaker of the Assembly shut him up before he could finish. When the Syrian media crew detected a sign of dissent, they ended live coverage of the session and went to the street to show support for the young Asad. Syrian TV resumed its coverage of the Assembly's session to transmit the comments of the speaker who censured Mouseli, and stated that "the respected member's sinful part of his soul led him into error, and he just realized his mistake and repented." This sensational story didn't escape al-Jazira, which reported it as the first news item on its nightly news. It had a full report of what had happened and then interviewed Mouseli to get his side of the story, which was totally suppressed within Syria. The interview was followed by another discussion with Mustapha Abdul'al, the Director of the Center for Pluralism, who described the event as "historic" and was very sarcastic about the session and the obvious lack of freedom of expression in the Syrian Assembly.(31)

RESPONSE AND EFFECTS

Al-Jazira soon became a major contending source of news for many Syrians. Like the rest of the Arab public, Syrians are excited about the new style and substance of the station. While we can't determine the number of Syrians who watch al-Jazira as opposed to the official Syrian channels, there is ample evidence to suggest that it is widely watched. One such indication is the proliferation of satellite dishes seen on the roofs of buildings everywhere in the country, especially in major cities. Another sign is the number of callers from Syria who phone to comment on al-Jazira's programs.

The fact that Syrian audiences are excited by al-Jazira does not mean they approve of it. Nor does it mean they

recognize what it can do for them. To the contrary, some Syrians viewers have complained that al-Jazira's programs are more confusing than illuminating. One viewer from Syria called during an episode of "Without Bounds" which debated the legitimacy of Bashar Al-Asad succeeding his father as ruler of Syria. The Syrian caller felt that the host should not be allowed to challenge the guest, Syrian official Riyadh Na`san Agha, because disputing the government version of the issue only causes "confusion" among viewers.(32) Viewers in Damascus with whom I have spoken say that Syrian audiences are alarmed at hearing vehement contradictory views about such basic issues, being used to hearing only one correct version of the "truth."(33) This confusion has not prevented Syrians from tuning to the stations' programs, however, and even from expressing satisfaction with its coverage.(34)

As for Syrian officials, the rise of al-Jazira coincided with the ascendance of Bashar al-Asad to power in Syria. Bashar has been reportedly leading efforts to modernize the country and oversee its entrance into the information age.(35) Syrian officials have attempted to engage this medium rather than to boycott it. Here are two major observations about their engagement: First, like their counterparts in other Arab countries, Syrian officials approve of al-Jazira as long as it does not step on what they consider sensitive topics or violate what they consider "objective" reporting. On the show, "Opposite Directions," Yasir Nahlawi who is a member of the Syrian parliament and a frequent contributor to al-Jazira, complimented the program but complained that the channel allows "the enemies of Syria and the Arab nation" to communicate their poisonous views on the airwaves.(36)

The second general observation is that the participation of Syrian officials on al-Jazira's programs has revealed their inability to communicate effectively with audiences outside Syria. Here are two examples. In one of the episodes of "Opposite Directions," devoted to discussing the implications of the Syrian-Israeli peace process, the two guests

were Syrian Karim al-Shaybani, who is head of a pro-government party within the National Progressive Front in Syria, and Adli Sadeq, a Palestinian journalist critical of the Syrian government's snubbing of the PLO. Sadeq confronted Shaybani with the lack of democracy in Syria. Shaybani vehemently denied that there is any lack of democracy in Syria. Moreover, he was outraged that this challenge to conditions in Syria was raised on the show and was very uncomfortable with the whole topic and wanted it declared irrelevant to the real topic of the program (the Syrian-Israeli peace process). Sadeq's point, however, was that the peace process will bring greater scrutiny on Syria and hopefully lead to more democracy for its people. The content and style of Shaybani's remarks reflects the propagandist approach used by "official" employees of the ministry of information. His argument sounded as if it were left over from the ideas of two decades ago.

Another example of Syrian officials' attempts to take advantage of the newly popular medium is the appearance of Riyadh Na`san Agha on "Without Bounds" right after the death of Asad, to discuss the future of Syria.(37) Agha was introduced as the head of the political office of the president, though he is a more familiar figure for Arab audiences as a TV host of several cultural and literary programs. What worked for Agha was his eloquence and command of the classic Arabic language, but he immediately clashed with the host and lost most Arab viewers when he tried to assert that the succession of Bashar Al-Asad to power was not a command from above but an overwhelmingly popular choice. He had real difficulties communicating with viewers from other Arab countries who were shocked by Agha's logic, or lack of it. One viewer from Egypt described Agha's argument as "an insult to the intelligence of the audience."

Lately, there has been some evidence that the Syrian government is relaxing its control over media. This retreat could be attributed to two factors. First, Syrian channels are losing audiences to other media

(e.g., al-Jazira); and second, the new leader seems to want to lead the country into the information age. A number of measures have been taken which indicate real efforts by the Syrian government to modify its media policy in response to the competition.

The first was the appointment of the new minister of information, Adnan Umran, in the March 2000 cabinet reshuffle. The new minister, a former Arab League diplomat, is known to be reform-minded. During the 9th Congress of the Ba`th Party (June 15-20, 2000), following the death of Asad, Umran criticized the performance of the Syrian media, using harsh language to describe his predecessor and claiming that Syria did not have a true "media policy." He also complained about the decline in sales of Syria's major daily newspapers, almost half of which are returned to distributors.(38)

After his inauguration, Bashar issued two directives regarding development of a "new media discourse." The first directive asked chief editors of print, as well as the audio-visual media, to embark on a "calm, logical, and balanced" style that should "respect the intelligence of the audience."(39) The second instruction was to stop printing and posting new pictures of him, and to stop the use of the phrase "Al-Ra'is al-Khaled" (the immortal president). Such immortality, he said, is only for God. Shortly thereafter, the official Syrian TV station removed the caption "the immortal president" from its screen, and the daily al-Thawra stopped publishing a giant picture of the president as a regular feature on its first page.(40) Later, the ministry of information reshuffled the heads of its major departments, newspaper editors, and the heads of the Syrian radio and TV agency, to reflect the new openness. Another example is an article appearing in the daily al-Thawra calling on Syrian journalists who write for Arab dailies that are a safe distance outside Syria, such as the London-based al-Hayat, to move the debate about media and information in Syria onto the pages of the local papers.(41)

The third important indication that change is afoot in Syria came from journalists

and intellectuals who demanded more freedom of speech and accountability. Ninety-nine Syrian writers issued a statement in early 2001 demanding freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and an end to one-party rule.(42) Later, a coalition of intellectuals calling themselves "Friends of Civil Society" emerged and began holding "discussion forums." Most of the discussions revolve around the themes advanced in the Manifesto of 99. By early January 2001, the Friends of Civil Society issued a new petition signed by 1,000 citizens calling for the restoration of civil society, freedom of the speech and freedom of the press, political pluralism, and an expanded role for women in public life.(43)

In another response to the poverty of its media, the Syrian government authorized the establishment of the first privately owned newspaper permitted in the country in four decades. The owner and editor-in-chief of the new paper is none other than the famous political cartoonist, Ali Farzat. Hungry readers snapped up the first 75,000-copy edition of *al-Dumari* (The Lamplighter) as soon as it appeared.(44) The Syrian government reportedly will allow the nominal legal political parties to publish their own newspapers. But the government also issued statements warning that dissent might constitute treason and indicating clear limits to any opening or democratization process.

While al-Jazira cannot claim full responsibility for all these positive changes, it can be credited with forcing the media inside Syria, as elsewhere in the Arab world, to redefine their discourse so they will not lose what is left of their audiences. Despite the success of channels such as al-Jazira in expanding the communication and dissemination of information, it is clear that they cannot topple authoritarian regimes. As Mamun Fandy succinctly states, one cannot make a causal link between the new technology and political change without examining the role of mediating political institutions. Unless such institutions are nurtured, the political impact of the information technology is likely to be

contained. Moreover, the Arab state "may not be able to shape the discourse, but certainly can set the parameters for the discourse and can change the rules or the game any time."(45) The Syrian case demonstrates that authoritarian regimes are capable of coping with the new technology and expanded public sphere. A case in point is the latest reports about the Syrian regime's crackdown on the activities of dissident groups, using bureaucratic and legal measures to close down the recently proliferating "discussion forums." All forums are now required to get permission to assemble by providing details about the meeting, the topic to be discussed, the speakers and the names of all attendees.(46) Al-Jazira reported the news and discussed it in its program, *Opposite Direction*. The program hosted one active member of the Civil Society movement, Aref Dalilah, and the opposite view was presented by Monzer al-Mouseli who caused the controversy in Parliament last summer. The fact that Mouseli is the one willing to rationalize the government's efforts to crack down on the movement of Civil Society demonstrates how difficult it is for many Syrians to overcome the legacy of living under of authoritarian rule for over 30 years.(47)

A second limitation on al-Jazira's ability to continue its contest with authoritarian media has to do with its ability to maintain its independence. One scholar calls this "the paradox of al-Jazira." The paradox is that al-Jazira is relatively independent because it is supported by the government of Qatar, and if it were to be privately owned its relative independence might be curtailed. "The problem comes in assessing whether, in the leap from total state control to market-driven programming, Middle East satellite television will ever function as an independent public service providing outlet for investigative journalism and a widened arena of uncensored policy debates."(48) In fact, managers of al-Jazira have announced that they will move the channel into the private sector within a five-year period. There are two difficulties here.

One, will they be able to find enough advertisers. Two, will they be able to keep their independent approach without upsetting their sponsors, many of whom are likely to come from neighboring Gulf states which are not totally thrilled about the station. Yet as of now, al-Jazira has become a phenomenon, and owes this as much to its own approach as to the failure of the official Arab media.

APPENDIX

Al-Jazira presents a news summary every hour on the half-hour, and four major news hours in the morning, mid-day, evening and night.

The following are the main programs shown on al-Jazira:

A. Live Programs:

| <u>Name of the Program</u> | <u>Host</u> | <u>Description</u> |
|---|--------------------|--|
| 1. More Than One Opinion (Akthar min Ra'i) | Sami Haddad | Three guests debate the most newsworthy issue of the week |
| 2. Opposite Directions (Al-Ittijah al-Mu`akis) | Faisal al-Qasimi | Two guests take opposing views on an issue |
| 3. Without Bounds (Bila Hudud) | Ahmad Mansour | Interviews of prominent figures; the host takes a position critical of the guest |
| 4. Open Dialogue (Hewar Maftuh) | Ghasan Bin Jiddo | Invites Arab intellectuals to discuss a pressing issue |
| 5. Shari`a and Life (Al-Sharia wal Hayat) | Maher Abdullah | Discusses contemporary issues from an Islamic perspective. A regular on the show is Sheikh Youseff al-Qaradawi |
| 6. The Scene of the Incident (Mawqi' al-Hadath) | Hussein Abdulghani | The host is sent to hot spots to file live reports |

*All programs except for "Open Dialogue" (monthly) and "The Scene of the Incident" (occasional) are weekly.

B. The Most Important Recorded Programs:

| <u>Program</u> | <u>Host</u> | <u>Description</u> |
|--|--------------------|--|
| 1. Under Scrutiny (Taht al-Mijhar) | Various | Investigates a political or social story |
| 2. Very Confident (Sirri lil Ghaya) | Yousri Foudah | Reexamines sensational stories |
| 3. Eyewitness to the Era (Shahid ala al-Asr) | Ahmad Mansour | Interviews prominent figures who occupied important roles in the past |
| 4. A Bit of History (Shay min al-Tarikh) | Ahmad Taha | Examines an event or day in history |
| 5. Guest & Issue (Dayf wa Qadiya) | Mohamed Kreshan | A conversation with a guest about an issue in the news |
| 6. The Weekly File (Al-Malaf al-Usbu'i) | Jamil `Azar | Discusses salient news of the week |
| 7. Al-Jazira's Correspondents (Murasilu al-Jazira) | Mohamed al-Bourini | Daily reports from correspondents around the world |
| 8. Hot Spot (Nuqta Sakhina) | Ahmad Taha | A documentary from hot spots around the world |
| 9. Private Chat (Ziyara Khassa) | Sami Kulaib | Interviews prominent figures in their places of residence around the world |
| 10. The Cultural Scene (Al-Mashhad al-Thaqafi) | Tawfiq Taha | Discusses cultural news from around the Arab world |

*All programs except for "Very Confident" (monthly), "al-Jazira's Correspondents" (daily) and "Hot Spot" (monthly) are weekly.

Source: Al-Jazira's website <<http://www.aljazeera.net>>

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NOTES

1. "Counting Nodes and Counting Noses: Understanding New Media in the Middle East," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Summer 2000, p. 359.
2. *The Arab Press* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), p. 31-4.
3. *Middle East Watch, Syria Unmasked* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 109.
4. Quoted in Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.33.
5. For a good summary of censorship in Syria, see "chapter 9," *Syria Unmasked*.
6. *Syria Unmasked*, p. 121.
7. *Ambiguities of Domination*, p. 107.
8. Hussein Amin, "The Third Wave: Arab Satellite TV," *Middle East Insight*, Vol. 14, No.2, March-April, 1999, p. 33.
9. A conversation with one of the anchors, Washington DC, 9 June 1999.
10. Hussein Amin, *ibid*, p. 70.
11. Iraq inaugurated its Satellite TV station with a speech of its leader, Saddam Hussein, in 1999.
12. This information is available on the network web site, at <<http://www.aljazeera.net>>.
13. It was reported that al-Jazira recruited several BBC Arabic news service staff who became jobless after the break of the contract between Orbit, the Saudi-owned channel, and the BBC.
14. Nasser Hussein, "Beyond CNN: The Proliferation of Satellite Choices," *Middle East Insight*, Vol. 14, No.2, March-April, 1999, p. 36.
15. "Arab Reactions," *Middle East International*, No. 635, 13 October 2000, pp. 13-14.
16. One criticism leveled by a pro-Saudi magazine of al-Jazira is that it employed individuals who are Ba`thists and Muslim Brothers, "Satellite Excessiveness," *al-Jadida* (London), 4 May, 1998, p. 9.
17. "More Than One Opinion," aired December 13, 1999.
18. Quoted by the Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought, at Ibn-Rushd@online.de, 2 December, 1999.
19. Maher Abdullah, the anchor of "al-Shari`a wal-Hayat" program, in a conversation with the author, Washington, DC, 27 April 2000.
20. For a recent account of the protest against al-Jazira and Qatar, see Nick Belham, "Seething at Qatar," *Middle East International*, No. 630, 28 July, 2000, p. 17-18, and "Iraq Protests at al-Jazeera," *al-Hayat* (London), 3 May, 2000, p.3.
21. For an intriguing discussion of the question of "trust" in the new technology, see, Mamoun Fandy, "Information Technology, Trust, and Social Change in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Summer 2000, pp. 378-94.
22. See for instance, *Ibid*, p., 286-9, and Edmond Ghareeb, "New Media and the information Revolution in the Arab World: An Assesment," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Summer 2000, pp. 405-10.
23. "More than One Opinion," al-Jazira, aired on 18 October 1999.
24. *Syria Unmasked*, p. 35.
25. "Without Bounds," al-Jazira, aired on 7 July 1999.
26. "More Than One Opinion," al-Jazira, aired on 7 January 2000.
27. Aired on 16 February 1998.
28. See for instance, *al-Jadida* (London), 4 May 1998, p. 9.
29. Participants in this program were, Syrian Analyst Zohair Diab, Jordanian Journalist Salah Qalab, and Syrian writer Soubhi al-Hadidi who lives in Paris. The Syrian who made this statement was Emad Fawzi al-Shu`ibi.
30. Unlike the Syrian TV, which was exulting Asad's qualities during the funeral procession, al-Jazira was providing commentaries about the future of Syria after Asad.

31. "Hasad Al-Yawm," (Today's Harvest) is al-Jazira's nightly news, aired on 26 June 2000.
32. "Without Bounds," al-Jazira, aired on 14 June 2000.
33. A conversation with viewers who watched the interview with the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brothers from Damascus.
34. While Ghasan Bin Jiddo, a correspondent for al-Jazira was reporting from Syria during the funeral of Asad, he told of crowds of Syrians coming to greet him and tell of their liking and respect for the channel.
35. Bashar was formally heading of the Syrian Information Society before he became the President.
36. "Opposite Directions," al-Jazira, aired on 23 May 2000.
37. Aired on 14 June 2000.
38. Al-Hayat (London), 18 June 2000, p.3.
39. Al-Hayat (London), 16 July 2000, p. 1.
40. Ibid, p. 1.
41. Al-Thawra (Damascus) 10 August 2000, p. 1.
42. The statement was published in the two Lebanese dailies, al-Nahar and al-Safir, 26 September 2000.
43. Sami Moubayad, "Voices From Damascus," The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, Vol. XX, No. 2, March 2001, p. 26.
44. Issam Hamza, "Syria's first private newspaper is sell-off," Reuters, 27 February 20001.
45. "Information Technology, Trust, and Social Change in the Arab World," p. 389.
46. "Syria: Volte-Face," Middle East International, No. 644, 23 February 2001.
47. Aired on 13 March 2001.
48. Naomi Sakr, "State Television and Development in the Middle East," Middle East Report, Spring 1999, p.7.