

Countering the Tide of Media Disinformation: Aljazeera, The Plot thickens

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The launch of Aljazeera International on November 15, the English arm of Aljazeera Satellite Television was hardly an ordinary event.

It was another notable addition to the growing global efforts aimed at counterbalancing American-European domination over world media: deciding on what story is to be told and how, thus shaping public opinion, reinforcing Westerns policies, disseminating its own ideas and ideals, at the expense of the almost entirely neglected and utterly hapless audiences that neither relate nor wish to identify with such discourses.

It's still too early of course, to appraise, in any serious fashion, academic or otherwise, the performance of Aljazeera English, and whether it has lived up to its own ideals and the expectations of its projected audience. However, it must be said that the clash of discourses and the calls for a balanced media is hardly new. This topic is in dire need of urgent and continual discussion.

Clearly, the need for Aljazeera, and subsequently its English service, came from the realization that the presentation of events in Arab countries are far from fair in the mainstream media in the US and elsewhere in the West. Further, the public's opinion of these events is not only scarce, but bits and pieces that they may perceive are often tainted.

But, how much does the average person in the West know about the Middle East's key conflict, that between Israel and the Arabs, primarily the Palestinians? How much of that knowledge is molded by the media, and how much by personal discovery predicated on one's own objective reasoning?

Answers may differ, but it remains true that opinions formed regarding distant conflicts like that of the Middle East tend to be homogeneous in nature, and for the most part fail to deviate from the predominant media narrative espoused by the mainstream.

Further, how much influence do states have on their media, being mindful that ideally the media should be completely divorced of the public sector, therefore being an independent and unbiased critic? While states cannot prevent events or guarantee absolute power for themselves, they've well learned of the value of the media and its ability to forge a favorable climate of public opinion that seems incidentally consistent with that of the state.

Public opinion is moulded in the western mainstream media by consistently pressing particular issues, while repressing others. For example, it is quite rare that a routine attack

by Israeli forces on the civilian population in Palestine makes headline news, but a reaction to such an onslaught, such as a suicide bombing would be the leading story and priority for news outlets everywhere.

In doing so, public opinion is slowly conditioned to think that Palestinian lives are not as significant as Israeli lives, and that Palestinian attacks are far more frequent and brutal. And while these policies are certainly mandated by the upper echelons of any given media institution, they are effective in not only tainting the public's view of events on the ground, but the reporters who compile those facts as well.

Another obvious example is the Iraq war. The US media, and to a lesser degree the British media, though they might allow for a controlled debate regarding the methods and tactics used to win the war, seem in unison regarding the 'admirable' objectives of the war. The BBC hesitates little to use such assertions often infused by Tony Blair such as 'liberating' Iraq, bringing 'democracy' to the Iraqis, and so forth.

In Afghanistan, the picture is equally tainted and dishonest. How often do we hear of a meaningful debate about the true intention of the war on that poor, ruined country? Almost never. Commemorating the fifth anniversary of the Afghanistan invasion, CNN, the BBC, plus numerous media outlets in the West dispatched their reporters to Kabul and various other Afghani towns to examine the situation in that country after years of violent Taleban 'resurgence' and collation 'reconstruction' efforts. They examined the plight of women, education, the health sector, security, drug trafficking, etc. Some of the reports were astounding, indeed. But such a selective examination was clearly a wholehearted embrace of the US government's claim that its war on Afghanistan was motivated by such noble objectives as freeing women from the grip of extremism, improving the plight of ordinary Afghans etc. These objectives were only introduced when the original ones failed, such as the capturing of Osama bin Laden, one that the media had also touted in the early months of the war. It was conveniently dropped by the media, when it was dropped by the military and as an official priority by Western governments. Now, Western journalists freely and often courageously challenge the failure of the NATO led coalition in Afghanistan to improve the lives of the people as the situation there is worsening and drug trafficking, mostly from Afghanistan to Iran to Europe is at an all time high.

It is important to remember all of this, but equally important to truthfully examine the state of the Arab media, especially with the advent of Aljazeera English, regardless of how it wishes to define itself.

The many years of controlled Press in the Arab world has produced two equally alarming phenomena: one restrictive that champions the viewpoint of the authority, and another overtly impulsive that discounts the authority and offers itself as the only viable alternative. Will Aljazeera be that third voice that speaks truth to power, yet neither self-congratulating, nor reactionary? Is that even possible, considering how Aljazeera is itself funded and politically shielded? The debate is hardly meaningful if rashly examined.

It ought to be said however, that without a serious challenge to the prevailing media control mechanism, a reordering of media priorities and a re-examination of the relationship between the media and the state, it's most likely that media distortions will continue to afflict the collective imagination of entire societies, thus shaping their views of themselves, of the world around them, and therefore prejudicing the way they define their views and responsibilities towards global conflicts, whether in Palestine-Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan or

anywhere else.

Ramzy Baroud's latest book: *The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle* (Pluto Press, London) is now available in the US from the University of Michigan Press and from Amazon.com.

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