

Sieb, P. (Ed.) (2012). Al Jazeera English: Global News in a Changing World. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-0-230-34021-3

Reviewed by

Bradley C. Freeman

Assistant Professor of Broadcast & Cinema Studies
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information
Nanyang Technological University
Republic of Singapore

Al Jazeera English brings together several authors to tackle diverse issues all related to the global news channel now known to many viewers around the world -- Al Jazeera English. This book is the first, as the editor notes in the introduction, “to be devoted to the work of AJE” (p. 2), though certainly not the first to deal with the phenomena surrounding Al Jazeera. It is a welcome addition to the literature as this channel and its Arabic predecessor continue to represent intriguing topics for research inquiry.

If you are wondering how and why the channel came into being, chapter one is a good place to start as it provides an insightful look at the “Origins of Al Jazeera English.”. This chapter will make good assigned reading for any course that deals with global journalism, political economy, television news, or even media management and marketing. The chapter does a good job to set a tone for the book by settling issues about how AJE (Al Jazeera English – as opposed to the name Al Jazeera International, nomenclature that is important to distinguish) came to be – and introduces the players and issues involved. The chapter benefits from being first in that it raises a few concepts that then appear again in following chapters. It is however

too brief (this is arguably true of some other chapters as well). Chapter two is a case in point with its title “Nature of the channel’s global audience” it sets out to examine the global audience for the network, but it ends up touching rather on issues mentioned in chapter one – and covering items that will come up in other chapters (e.g., distribution issues). Chapter three “Content: The messages of AJE’s news” can be summarized by one of its sentences: “In its years on air AJE has emphasized new parts of the world through its Southern news perspective, broadened the range of elite sources invited to express their views on air, and documented civilian suffering, anger, and protest on the ground in its coverage of wars and catastrophes” (p. 52). Chapter four addresses the issue of “The politics of distribution in the United States,” specifically in light of AJE’s Arab Spring coverage.

Chapters five and six take on the task of investigating how AJE both covers and fares in Africa and South Asia. The authors work diligently to weave AJE into the narrative. Here AJE is used a springboard to discuss the paucity of coverage in and about the Global South. The writing in both of these chapters has a unique locus and stays more focused on their titles than previous chapters in the book. In both cases they are more about the regions than necessarily AJE. Their assessments are similar claiming that AJE has so far failed to make a big splash. However, the refrain of AJE as champion of the Global South viewpoint is conveyed in both chapters.

Chapters seven and eight are quite interesting, as here we are treated to a Rashomon-style presentation with Palestinian and then Israeli viewpoints offered about coverage of Gaza in 2008-2009. Chapter seven is really a report on Gaza’s oppression, wherein AJE’s presence and coverage plays a supporting role in the narrative: “AJE has also fairly shown the other side of the Palestinian struggle as being one of resistance, rather than terrorism” (p. 135). Chapter eight introduces the Israeli perspective on AJE and Gaza coverage and also raises the conciliatory media model that we will read about again in the chapter that follows. The author conducts a review and reports that “AJE failed to meet the criteria of peace journalism and reconciliatory media and perhaps even violated several articles listed in its Code of Ethics” (p. 156). The framing and terminology used within these two chapters may be considered by some readers to be problematic, but the writing serves to highlight the difficulties with the relationship of the

close neighbors. These two chapters are perhaps the strongest in the book (based in large part on the commanding subject matter) and will no doubt be required reading prior to discussions in political science and journalism classrooms.

Chapter nine covers original ground, pun intended, as el-Nawawy looks at a controversy that any New Yorker would have been hard pressed to avoid in 2010 – the planned building of the “Park 51 Mosque” in downtown Manhattan. The chapter adds to our understanding of the concept of media’s “conciliatory” function by employing a scale along with a qualitative textual analysis examining AJE’s coverage of the mosque story. Contrary to chapter eight’s assessment, here the author finds that the “AJE network has a great potential to play a conciliatory media function, especially when it comes to highly charged and controversial issues” (p. 179).

As the reviewer read the first few chapters, it seemed a secret about Al Jazeera was not to be revealed. In the chapter discussing the nature of the audience and another on the distribution of its programming – it was not mentioned that Al Jazeera was among the first news networks to offer full live streaming of its content via an IOS (iPad) app. Only a few news networks live stream (RT is another) via a tablet or smartphone – and this is an important way many people are able to watch the channel, but it is not directly mentioned in the book.

The book may have benefitted from a comparative look at other world channels and how the arguments made on behalf of Al Jazeera fare when we take into consideration these other examples of global news channels (chapter five does briefly reference newer African channels, however CNN and BBC get most ink). Channel News Asia out of Singapore, for example, has never been the subject of a campaign or research as to why it is not on cable systems in the States. In much of the writing there is a thread that AJE should simply be available to more people, especially Americans, and further that if it were, America would be a much better place and its foreign policies wiser. The arguments for AJE to be made available in the U.S. seem misplaced –returning to the importance of the Global North as power center. AJE attempts to redefine the question “what is news?” -- in its own way starting to decentralize the flow and importance of news that has historically been dominated by Global North vantage points. On the one hand, the authors in the book highlight the interesting new ways that AJE is working in the

global market, but on the other there does seem to be this notion (in a few chapters at least) that it would all finally click if AJE could just get greater distribution via the standard cable systems in the States. This is one of the themes evident in the earlier parts of the book.

Another theme that does not get enough attention is how regional news networks are starting to gain greater awareness when coverage of news and events in their region gains interest from the wider global audience – and that have historically only been covered by a few foreign observers from the Western countries (Global North) that pioneered electronic news gathering and dissemination (and who have been cutting back on their overseas offices). This is a very interesting movement that AJE is participating in (and the book correctly highlights the Arab Spring of 2011 as helping push AJE to the fore), that transnational workforces (in this case journalists, producers, and presenters) are organizing through media organizations in world cities to create global news products, based on known journalistic practices, but with a decidedly local story-telling vantage point (el-Nawawy touches on this when he states in the opening of his chapter that AJE “represents a challenge to the existing paradigms guiding international news broadcasters” (p. 163). The global village of which McLuhan spoke is perhaps nowhere as clear as in the development of AJE, of global news networks anchored in different parts of the world. The editor touches on this in the book’s conclusion, chapter ten entitled “AJE in the world”, but perhaps could have gone a bit further by offering more comparative analyses and drawing an even bigger picture from which we might frame and understand the themes even better in the multi-chapter book. Chapter ten does a good job in summarizing the book indicating of AJE that “the channel’s ambitions are significant, its achievements to date merit recognition, and its prospects are such that the channel could well become one of the world’s most authoritative sources of news” (p. 187).

Taken by themselves, many of the chapters would make a good start to a stand-alone volume on the subject matter, however when combined the reading does not always flow effortlessly. Some of the chapters appear to have been intended as journal articles and have instead been reimagined as book chapters, in another case the text was (somewhat awkwardly) repurposed from previous journal articles. Some of the chapters read as more biased in favor of the channel and thus lack a tempered vantage point. Readers will also likely feel a sense of *deja*

vu while reading through the book as there is ample redundancy in the pages (e.g., voice of the voiceless, Southern perspective in news). A couple of the chapters arguably fail to carry a consistent theme or stay true to their titles. The book likely will work best when individual chapters are assigned, but reading the entire book cover-to-cover would not be recommended, unless the reader has specific interests in Al Jazeera English (in which case it's a treasure trove).

In the grand scheme of things, Al Jazeera English, as numerous authors note, is still relatively new – so although this book is among the first, it will certainly not be the last to cover aspects related to the AJE channel and its influence. In many ways this book reveals people's images and expectations about Al Jazeera English at its start. We can look forward to future contributions on the subject matter from these and other authors.