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Book Review: Al Jazeera English: Global News in a Changing World

Managing Editor



Although *Al Jazeera English* has yet to receive the attention accorded to its Arabic-language elder sibling, it is in many ways the more interesting of the two. It seeks to redefine global news coverage by focusing on areas that are traditionally neglected by most news organizations, and its potential audience is many times larger than that of the Arabic channel. This is the first book to thoroughly examine this channel's coverage methods, effects on its audience, and its place in the world of mediated geopolitics. **Paul Brighton** finds that although some of the material is out-of-date, it serves as a timely reminder of the evolution of alternatives to the hegemony of the global news channels.

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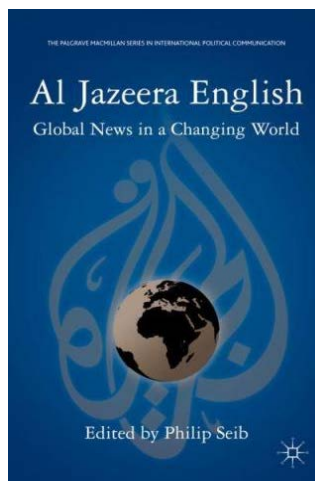
Al Jazeera English: Global News in a Changing World. Philip Seib (ed). Palgrave Macmillan. April 2012.

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Gosh, it can be difficult writing academic books about fast-developing areas like global television news channels! Such is the slow turnaround that a book landing in a reviewer's in-tray late in 2012 or early in 2013 had to be signed off by its author or editor around mid-2011. And that is probably at the more expeditious end of publishers' timetables. Which is probably fine if you're writing a study of Aristotle or a biography of Mr Gladstone; but when you're editing a collection of chapters about a rolling news channel which finds itself at the forefront of reporting a major, unfolding global news event, it sure can make life tricky.

As you will recall, Ben Ali of Tunisia and Mubarak of Egypt had duly fallen in good time to make the cut in June, 2011; but Gaddafi had yet to be toppled, let alone captured and killed; and Saleh of Yemen was also holding fast. As for Assad...well, I can sympathise strongly with the editor of this collection, because what will his status be by the time you read this?

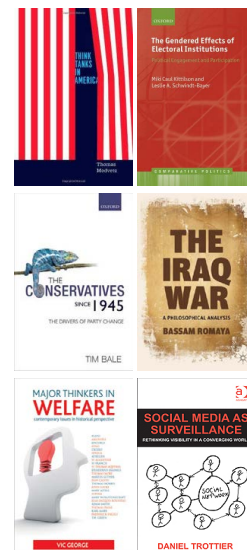
Not that the book particularly suffers from this: it remains a useful study. But it already reads more like a snapshot of coverage of the early optimism of the Arab Spring than a reflection of the altogether more nuanced and complex picture two years in.



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The pitfalls are again apparent in the book's laudable efforts to assess Al Jazeera English's equally admirable intention to focus more of the world's attention on Africa. However, the irony is that the very media whom Al Jazeera English seek to outperform in Africa coverage – the likes of the BBC and CNN – are now racing to be the first to bring us news of the so-called 'new front' in the 'war on terror': Mali and the neighbouring Saharan countries.

"AJE [Al Jazeera English] would bring voice to the formerly 'voiceless' through its unique focus on the developing world in good times and in bad, in periods of conflict and crisis and of birth and renewal. In doing so, AJE cast itself as 'the Channel of reference for the Middle East and Africa'."

The Africa chapter rightly accuses the more traditionally dominant news channels of focusing on Africa only in terms of famine, war and coups. AJE is now facing the difficult task of standing by its founding principles at a time when other channels are doing precisely what AJE accuses them of: but on a scale that has not been seen for many years.

There is a lot of useful research in the book on the subject of viewership. Who watches the channel? Perhaps more importantly, who is *able* to watch it? In the UK, access is less of an issue, as it is an option on Freeview: so it stands as good a chance (at least in theory) of being seen as anyone else. However, as the book informs us, the picture is much patchier in the USA. Percentages of the population who can readily access the channel remain low. Moreover, the political context is much more of a contested area. The Bush administration of 2001-9 was overtly critical of, and arguably hostile to, the original Al Jazeera's reporting of Iraq and Afghanistan. AJE did not start broadcasting until November, 2006. But there was a clear change in tone as the Obama administration took over. Hillary Clinton in particular had some positive comments to make on the channel. "The cold war that existed between the Bush administration and Al Jazeera has totally ended. Now it's a professional relationship between an aggressive government and an aggressive news organisation."

However, one issue that is touched on several times but never fully addressed is that of AJE's relations with the Qatari regime. The original Al Jazeera was set up in 1996. It was one of the first acts of the current Emir, after he seized power from his father. The Emir and the regime bankroll the operation and can do so almost without financial limit. Very soon, as the Arab Spring began, and even before, questions were being asked as to how the channel would react to reform movements not just in places like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, but in comparable kingdoms and emirates such as Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The book chronicles the obvious annoyance of these regimes when the channel aired items dealing with regime corruption, authoritarian responses to pro-democracy movements, and the like.

However, the book never quite gets to grips with what would happen if the station applied the same approach to its own host country. It is taken as read, across several chapters, that this would simply not be possible: but it is an issue worth further research and explanation; especially as Qatar will increasingly intrude onto the world's news agenda as the 2022 World Cup approaches, and as the Arab reform movement continues to play out.

Despite the inevitable march of news events, which play havoc with the stately pace of the world of academic publishing, this is a timely book, with a range of interesting approaches to the topic. The balancing chapters on Israeli and Palestinian views of AJE's coverage of the conflict of 2008-9 not surprisingly end up being as much about the issues that were fought over as the media coverage itself. However, this collection will have served a useful purpose if it serves as a timely reminder of the evolution of alternatives to the hegemony of the global news channels.

Paul Brighton is Head of Department of Media and Film at the [University of Wolverhampton](#). He grew up in Wolverhampton. He attended Wolverhampton Grammar School, and won an Open Scholarship to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He got a First in English and, after postgraduate research at Cambridge, worked for the media. He was a BBC Radio presenter for twenty years, before becoming Head of Broadcasting and Journalism at University of Wolverhampton. His book "News Values" was published by SAGE in 2007. He is now Head of Media, Film, Deaf Studies and Interpreting; and his next book "Original Spin: Prime Ministers and the Press in Victorian Britain" will be published by I.B. Tauris. [Read reviews by Paul.](#)

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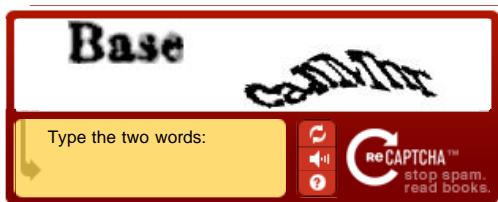
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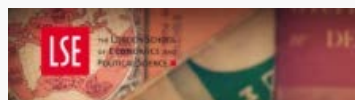
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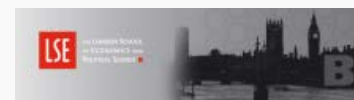
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