

Sex, money and power: reporting America for Al Jazeera (guest blog with audio report)

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Zeina Awad

It has been said that the two aspects of life most often lied about are sex and money – a stereotype that [Zeina Awad](#) co-host of Al Jazeera English's flagship American current affairs programme, [Fault Lines](#), knows all too well. (This report by Polis intern, Lauren Maffeo – there is an excellent [audio package](#) about Al Jazeera based on this event [here](#) by Uli Neumann from [News and Grooves](#)).

Speaking at Polis/LSE to coincide with the London launch of “[No Woman's Land – On the Frontlines with Female Reporters](#),” a collection of articles written by 40 female media members to which Awad has contributed, she offered her take on covering the United States for a global news outlet—one that included reflection on the elite's resistance to speaking about money, an acknowledgement that the United States is more than the bright lights of New York City, and the evolving role of women in media.

Awad's work with Fault Lines has garnered mixed reaction from the public that she covers. She still hears producers on the phone occasionally saying, “No, it's...Al...Jazeera...not Al Qaeda.” Her work on a forthcoming documentary about the now infamous 1 percent—and the unwillingness of America's elite to discuss their incomes—prompted her to ask the question of why the connection between wealth and power is often eschewed, “yet it is a society where people so easily talk about emotional things.”

Her work on another forthcoming project regarding arguable civil rights infringements resulting from changes in the voting process in certain states questions the ways in which African-Americans are still discriminated against. 22% of African-Americans in Tennessee don't have photo IDs, preventing them from exercising their right to vote.

She looks forward to covering the U.S. election and hopes that Al Jazeera will be a news source to which Americans will turn for unbiased information.:

“I think there's been an awareness in the U.S. that we're just journalists trying to cover stories...it can become the de facto station that people in power turn to.”

With 40% of online Al Jazeera traffic coming from the U.S. and after a year there she likes it a lot:

“It's such a fascinating country and I have learned that it's not New York, DC, San Francisco. It's not. I love the Midwest—it's one place I fell in love with. You go to a place like Iowa and Wisconsin, and they're different. Then you go to Tennessee, and it's a completely different America. A lot of times, people are surprised that their story matters enough to be covered by an international news outlet. It creates an interesting dynamic.”

Having honed her skills at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and as a producer at the BBC before joining Al

Jazeera, Awad—who received her Master’s in Comparative Politics from the LSE — concluded on an optimistic note regarding the current role of women in news. Her work in “No Woman’s Land” examines the correlation between societal sexualisation and how it applies to journalism. While acknowledging the fact that it is still a problem, specifically citing the worries that come with aging as a woman onscreen, she also argued that as someone who is very used to seeing women in positions of power within news, the profession “has been feminised” in a way that previously impossible.

“Human beings are complicated, and [discrimination] is part of that. But I think any changes in the [news] industry positively impact men and women alike, and we have made much progress.”

Speaking as someone who aims to follow in Awad’s professional footsteps following the completion of my MSc in Gender, Media and Culture, the various arguments of academic work discussing the negative discourse surrounding women as the subjects and auditors of news played in my head throughout her talk.

Statistics on the role of women in news reveal a trying path for aspiring anchors. According to Jennifer Siebel Newsom’s documentary [Miss Representation](#), women and girls are the subject of less than 20 percent of all news stories, and as of 2003, women comprised 15 percent of top executives and 12 percent of board members amongst Fortune 500 communications companies a lack of women in [positions of executive authority](#).

But Awad’s optimism is important to consider alongside these statistics. The 2009 White House Project Report: Benchmarking Women’s Leadership found that despite these low numbers, public comfort with female leaders has reached a fortunate high. 96% of those surveyed are comfortable with a woman as the head of a newspaper, and 95% as the head of a major film/entertainment studio.

Similarly, a 2008 [Pew Research Center study](#) found that the public rated women above men in five of the right character traits they value in leaders (honesty, intelligence, creativity, outgoingness, and compassion). These figures reveal a vast discrepancy between public support of women in positions of power and the numbers of women who occupy these positions.

In the era of Oprah and the number of prominent female faces in news ranging from Diane Sawyer to Lara Logan, it is easy to forget the progress that still needs to be made.

It begins, however, with women like Awad sharing their professional experiences and allowing those who wish to follow in her footsteps to visualise themselves in her position. If the public support for female leaders exist, the time to make good on it is long overdue.

This report by Polis intern, Lauren Maffeo

You can download an [audio file of this talk here](#) – recorded by Uli Neuman, who present the [News and Grooves show on LSE Pulse Radio](#)

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