

Al Jazeera: Leading The Citizen Media Revolution

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/02/25/al-jazeera-leading-the-citizen-media-revolution/

2011-2-25

We take it for granted now, but coverage of the uprisings in the Middle East this year would hardly have happened at times without social media. Put aside the silly debate about whether Twitter 'caused' revolution and look instead at how it helped tell the story.

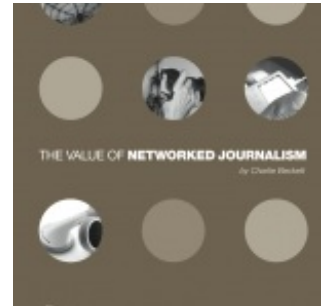
Perhaps most important is how social media helped inform people in the region, [catalysing dissent in neighbouring countries](#). But it's also significant in the way that it amplifies, deepens and changes coverage for the watching world.

Of course, it varies. In Libya at the time of writing, there is relatively limited citizen media production compared to Egypt or Tunisia, but it is still a vital channel for images, voices and information to the outside. Watch [this video](#) by Al Jazeera and see how dependent it is on citizen-produced media to tell the story of what is happening inside Libya (AJ have struggled to get people in there, just like everyone else). Also note how careful the reporter is to [qualify the provenance of the material](#).



And remember, the outside view matters in these situations. Any support, tacit or otherwise, for dictators like Gaddafi depends in part on global public opinion. Instead of the so-called CNN effect, we now have the Al Jazeera or YouTube Effect.

We have already shown how news organisations are now routinely using user generated content in their coverage in [our report](#) published last June. (You can access the pdf by following the links [here](#)) It showed how Sky News, for example, is aggressively hunting for imagery from social media sites whenever a major incident kicks off.



At POLIS LSE we heard from a social media operative at Al Jazeera in Doha on how they do the same. Interestingly, social media is mined for material, but it is also seen as a space to market the channel.

Al Jazeera's Qatar-based 14 person team devoted to social media serves the English and Arabic website and newsroom teams. I was surprised at the lengths they went to verify the material and to confirm the identity and location of, for example, any Tweet-based information. It was similar to the [Line of Verification](#) approach outlined on this [blog](#) by the BBC's Interactive Assistant Editor Matthew Eltringham.

Al Jazeera also use social media as a marketing tool, a way of expanding their audience and reach to new regions. You probably know that you can't get Al Jazeera through Cable in the States but significant amounts of people tuned in to the live stream online as an anti-dote to the depleted bureaux and half-hearted engagement by the US TV networks. AJ set up online 'meet up' groups to push the Twitter hashtag #DemandAlJazeera.

They also paid for promotional Tweets, which is something I suspect the BBC isn't allowed to do.

As a media organisation, this has been a [break through moment for Al Jazeera](#), in the same way that CNN's coverage of the first Gulf War gave it pre-eminent global media profile. The Arabic service was already established as the key TV voice in the Arab world thanks to it's coverage of the so-called War on Terror (remember those DVDs from Osama Bin Laden?). But this has made the English version of Al Jazeera the default alternative for anyone who senses the limits of their 'own' national TV channels.

Of course that focuses our attention even harder on the editorial values at AJ. Let's come back to that another time, but it's clear that they see themselves as the voice of the people in the region. They overtly take the side of the protestors against these regimes. And their use of social media and citizen generated content gives them the ammunition and credibility in that campaign.

We'll have a much more detailed report on our event on Al Jazeera's use of social media later but for a wonderfully detailed dissection of how broadcasters are using social media have a look at [this fantastic slideshow by Kathryn Corrick](#).

And we'll be taking up these issues at the [POLIS International Journalism Summer School in July – details here](#).

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science