

## Why the West does not understand Al Jazeera

The complex relationship between the western world and the Arab television channel Al Jazeera, began in these past years, under the global spotlights of post 9/11; shaping itself around reactions instead of interpretations. In the midst of strong emotions following the attacks on the Twin Towers, those that had accused this television station of mobilizing terrorism, like those who had cited it as an example of free expression against the intersecting pressures of the American and Arab governments, have both shown to react to Al Jazeera instead of trying to interpret it. It is with this attempt to classify Al Jazeera for or against someone or something, that we have come to devalue the role that the network is playing in Arab societies and globally.

The relationship between the western world and Al Jazeera has therefore been constructed on an initial plane of polarization, which immediately passed onto a plane of contents, as if these were to oscillate between opening to the West<sup>1</sup> and the violent taking of sides, with regards to its politics and its values.

Two considerations disprove this supposition: The first is the centrality of the theme of the “West”. From the analysis of the network programs it is evident that the heart of the of Al Jazeera narratives is certainly not the West, but it is the Arab world.<sup>2</sup> The second is the modality with which this theme is confronted. If one looks, for example, at the news coverage of events like the Presidential elections in the US in 2004, it is evident that the strategy of the channel is not to attack, but to explain. “From Washington” (*Min Washington*), an analytical program from the American capital, hosted by Hafez Al Mirazi, is, with respect to the inflammatory talk shows which have made Al Jazeera famous in all of the Arab world, a placated show that tends to analyze instead of raising polemics.<sup>3</sup> This intelligent editorial strategy does not apply the television model of the aggressive talk show (effective in the Arab world, which has always been a prisoner of information dominated by taboos and forced silences) to the shows about the US elections, which are rather understood and framed within the mechanisms of the American cultural politics. Furthermore, a survey done in 2002 by Gallup (an American company who is a leader in the field of opinion polls) reveals that, on a sample of television spectators of nine different Arab countries, the audience of the Qatar network is the most open and most favourable to the West.<sup>4</sup>

What emerges from the Al Jazeera content is not an “anti” mentality, but rather a different vision from the narration of the West (whose monopoly we are culturally used to). Perhaps what disturbs us is the fact that the network interprets current events in light of its values. It is the global scale affirmation, of the Arab point of view, lacking only a short time before, so displeasing, that it is turned into something negative and defined as “anti-Americanism”; when in reality it is about “Arabism” in the positive sense.

This misunderstanding, with regards to the content, heavily conditions the first impact with Al Jazeera, but at a deeper level it is the question of the network’s structure that impedes one to interpret it in its real dimension: as an innovative phenomena for the Arab societies and for the global media system. The analyst, used to “western” parameters which are applied when studying media<sup>5</sup> sees a series of ambiguities with Al Jazeera: ambiguities in its structure, founded on editorial independence and on financial dependence; in its philosophical nature of free media, however, deprived of juridical attributes that fix this principle beyond time and space; in its open and democratic media broadcast, where the society which it reflects is, in fact, authoritative. Its fragility is based on these apparently contradictory attributes,

which are to a certain extent the strength of Al Jazeera; visible if one tries to analyze this television station in the specific context of the politics and media of the Arab world, rather than insert it inside frameworks matured inside the western cultural bubble.

Let's try to reflect on one of the central questions in the ambiguous interpretation that the West tends to give to Al Jazeera: the confusion in the ownership structure of the network between "public" financing and private statute. Al Jazeera in fact, introduces a rather dissonant concept for western analysts: it is possible to declare it an independent and a commercially oriented tv channel, while financially it remains in the hands of the government. Al Jazeera's capital derives from a state subsidy, which cannot even be defined as public, since it is not generated by a tax that is paid like a monthly fee, but it is entirely derived from economic resources allocated by the government. On the other hand, the first point that must be made has to do with the difficulty that is faced inside a *rentier* state model (like those of the Gulf area)<sup>6</sup> when trying to distinguish between Royal family patrimony and the patrimony of the state. This differentiation is, in fact, quite unclear because it was introduced quite late in the local context—only in 1950—due of external pressure and not as a result of an internal request.<sup>7</sup> The presence of the government (that is, the Royal family) within Al Jazeera does not only translate in the direct financing of the channel, but also in the position that it occupies inside the board of management of the network and in the methodology with which its members are chosen. The president of the channel is in fact, Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani (member of the Royal family), while the rest of the six administrative counsellors are chosen from among the bigwigs and the experts in media - who are not necessarily Qatari—directly by the government.<sup>8</sup>

With such ownership and financial structure, it is easy for Al Jazeera's editorial independence to be questioned. In fact, Al Jazeera seems a state run television station, financed by the government, with an board of management that is chosen by the government, but at the same time it demands to be editorially unconstrained. It is difficult to believe in this paradox, and in fact, many have accused Al Jazeera to be liberal and open with regards to everything, except for that which has directly to do with Qatar: the situation of human rights in the country, the discrimination of the expatriates with respect to the local population, the promised legislative elections which never materialized, the commercial ties with Israel, and above all the massive military and commercial presence of the United States on its national land.<sup>9</sup> Al Jazeera defends itself saying that Qatar receives a similar treatment as other countries<sup>10</sup> do, but the fact that it is not very populated and geo-politically less "heavy" than its neighbours like Saudi Arabia, it is assigned less television time as a result.

And yet, the coherence on the choice of "The Opinion and the other Opinion" (the network's slogan) is a strategy that renders Al Jazeera editorially independent from the government that funds it, allowing the latter to gain, in turn, prestige and visibility. The advantage is reciprocal, because the open window of the "satellite parliament", that transforms Al Jazeera in the most democratic "country" in the Middle East, toys with the real country, which has become the strategy of public diplomacy in the hands of the State of Qatar. On the other hand, because it gave birth to this innovative "marketing tool",<sup>11</sup> Qatar is a "prisoner of itself",<sup>12</sup> in the sense that it cannot so easily remove it from the public arena where it had cast it. In a certain sense, Qatar has the obligation to keep Al Jazeera alive. And the paradox that follows is that Al Jazeera cannot do without Qatar, which at this point, is what can guarantee its freedom: or rather "the channel cannot accomplish the task that was assigned to it by the authority of the emirate if its editorial independence is not respected."<sup>13</sup>

Because of this apparent paradox, Al Jazeera's real problem is not so much editorial independence—which is formally guaranteed in order for it to carry out its function as an instru-

ment in the diplomacy of Qatar—as much as its financial situation.

Notwithstanding the fact that the period of government subsidising of the channel was to have ceased after five years that it had been launched, in fact, this never happened. Even now, nine years after the first Al Jazeera program went on the air, the channel is tied to government financing for its survival. Given the situation, it is natural that many observers are asking themselves how it is possible that a channel, which has now become a global *brand name*—the fifth most famous in the world<sup>14</sup>—can find itself in such a fragile economic situation which makes it still financially dependent on the same entity, that from its inception had established a precise timeline for the one time only “loan”. According to market laws, a channel that has collected global scoops, and has sold its images to networks world wide, should be a profitable channel. According to market laws, a network founded with commercial goals, that after nine years of business still does not support itself economically, should either find itself bankrupt or close its doors. However, Al Jazeera’s situation, quite ambiguous in the eyes of the western analyst, finds its reason for being in the particularity of the Arab world. The initial explanation is called Saudi Arabia. This country controls the state of the Pan Arab advertisements. For years Al Jazeera has been suffering from a “de facto embargo”,<sup>15</sup> the reasons for which are easily explained (the freedom with which the network’s programs seem to treat politics in the Gulf regime, especially Saudi), the consequences of which, in terms of an advertising portfolio, and therefore, also in terms of financial independence, are considerable. This tendency is evident if one analyses the advertisement revenue chart provided by PARC (Pan Arabic Research Centre). In 2003, advertisement revenues were a little less than 39 million dollars, while in 2004 they are as much as 49 million dollars. In any case, the amount is paltry if compared with its global success and with its potential. The amounts are to be understood “before discounts”.<sup>16</sup> It is the nature of the advertisements seen on Al Jazeera that demonstrate the malfunction of the Pan Arab advertising market, whose large multinational investors are controlled, through local branches, by Saudi Arabia. Between 2003 and 2004, from among the top fifteen brand names to promote their products on Al Jazeera, Kinder is the only international company that ranks, fourteenth<sup>17</sup> while the principle advertisers of the network are almost all local and often tied to government companies, such as Q-tel, Qatar General Petroleum o Qatar Gas.<sup>18</sup>

The great trade marks of international advertising are barely present, with small investments which diminished between 2003 and 2004. An indirect, but significant consequence, of the “unpleasant” coverage of the war in Iraq, for both Saudi Arabia and the United States.<sup>19</sup> The situation provoked by the advertising boycott generates another great paradox: Al Jazeera is financed by the state of Qatar not only directly, through the “loan” that it continues to confer to the channel, but also indirectly, covering the advertising gap<sup>20</sup> with the promotion of national products and services that are often tied to the government itself. In fact, the government controls the two principal sources of financing for the channel, that is: public subsidiaries and advertising.

At this point it is easy to suspect that the advantage to sponsoring a channel that is perennially at an economic loss, besides the one already highlighted of the image, is political and ideological in nature. And still, today Al Jazeera appears to be a development project, with an immediate political spin off rather than an ideological one. Qatar seems to have given itself the mission to supply, through the media, the instruments with which to educate society about “democratic” development, even if this remains a predisposed design in an autocratic way. The point that proves to be difficult to comprehend to western minds is, how can free media actually emerge—with the task of educating and promoting development—from a society that is not free? It is difficult to comprehend how a medium, which originated from

an authoritative regime, and not from the impetus of a civil society, that moreover is very weak, can contribute on the path towards democratic openness. The only political function that is “formally” assigned to Al Jazeera is the mobilising one; understood in its populist (and negative) definition of the agitation of the masses towards the embitterment of anti-democratic characteristics and towards a revolt against the “democratic” model of the West. This fear, often expressed by the Al Jazeera critics, is born out of a cultural incomprehension: the impossibility to conceive that a media born out of an authoritative gene can develop democratic seeds. And yet, in order to analyze the possible impact of the Qatar network, as well as all of the Pan Arab broadcasts on the regional society, it is necessary to shake off this conviction which has matured in a western cultural and socio-political environment, which is extremely different: and accept that the “Arab satellite broadcasting is—in fact—much more than simply a mass medium: it can be an agent of change, and its role is in many ways not comparable to western media”.<sup>21</sup>

Concretely, this means that the all news Arab channels, with Al Jazeera leading the way, could take on some tasks that are traditionally handled by the parties. Some, but not all; for in order to make the mobilising function by the Arab media work in the direction of a democratic opening of societies and governments, it is necessary to have institutions that act; that bring political programs to term, that galvanize political action. If there is no contradiction in integrating inside Al Jazeera programs the informative function (characterized by an attempt to be balanced and pluralist) with the mobilizing function (that has to educate and attract, in order to push towards a participatory action) as long as that the former maintains its characteristics of openness to various points of view) the real problem remains the absence of an institutional territory. That is, if the mobilizing function of Al Jazeera remains only an additional function, while the possibility of translating the virtual mobilisation in an institutional context made up of concrete acts and organisms is missing, then the risk is that satellite mobilisation remains closed in between the screens and the satellites or that it unfolds in a dangerous direction. This is how the initial potential that the Arab media can function as an agent of democratic change, can actually aggravate the situation itself if it does not produce a concrete solution.

And yet, the absence of institutions prevents that the debate started by Al Jazeera on TV will transform into real political action and participation, but this is not something that the network can be charged for. Basically Al Jazeera remains *only* a television station. And this is exactly the point: this is not about cultural differences, as much as the nature of television itself, about its technological configuration and about its financial structure, that guide the medium towards a spectacular function rather than participatory one. In his research on the societies of mass media, the French sociologist Guy Debord highlighted this quite well: “The whole existence of societies in which the modern conditions of production predominate, presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacle. All that had been directly lived went away in a spectacle” while, conversely “the lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle ... The reality comes out of the spectacle, and the spectacle is real”.<sup>22</sup> According to Debord’s reflections therefore, it is the spectacular nature of the mass media, foremost of the television, to draw out participation from the virtual sphere of contemplation, more than in that of concrete action. But this could be a problem for all mass media—implicit in their very own nature—and not an ideological or cultural question relative to Al Jazeera. “Moving beyond spectacle”,<sup>23</sup> as Jon Alterman wishes the Arab satellite channels, would possibly be like going against nature for television, even more so if one looks at the global trend that instead tends to accentuate spectacular characteristics. From this point of view the proposal from sociologist Mohamed Zayani remains precious:

analyze the impact of Al Jazeera on the public sphere<sup>24</sup> and on the making of a Pan Arab public opinion, instead of concentrating on the possibility of bringing democracy through media. Exporting democracy with the media could be a misleading procedure, because it confuses the spectacular nature of the medium with a participatory one. But if Al Jazeera cannot directly change the Arab political view, it can however have an impact on the modality with which these are perceived and debated in the public sphere, exercising on it an action in the direction of an auspicated dynamism.

Translated from Italian by Maria Anna Calamia

- 1 We will use the term “West”, knowing full well that it is a generalization (as Said 1978, teaches us), to indicate the geopolitical entity of Europe and the USA; and at the same time to refer to the set of values that they symbolically promote in front of the whole world.
- 2 Approximately 73 per cent of its journalistic coverage is concentrated on the Arab world (El Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002).
- 3 And to this end, Al Mirazi highlighted: “That’s my style, actually...This is a change for our audience to understand the American political system. We just wanted to know where americans are coming from, why they are taking these decisions. The more education you give for your audience, the more they can appreciate the others and the more they will understand”. Interview with Hafez Al Mirazi, in *Wise*, 2004.
- 4 Lydia Saad, “Al Jazeera Viewers Perceive the West Differently”, Gallup Poll, Tuesday Briefing, April 23, 2002.
- 5 We are referring to those parameters used in media studies in the Western world. Parameters, which among others are economic (the model of public financing through citizens paying of a month fee; a private financial model through advertisement and sponsorships; a public-private mixed model of direct financing by the user via subscriptions, pay-per-view, etc.) that imply a certain ownership structure; but also legal parameters, that is: all the laws that guarantee the free expression of speech through print and television in Europe and the United States and their independence from the government, etc.
- 6 For more information, see Crystal, 1995
- 7 Crystal, 1995
- 8 Source: Al Jazeera Channel, Media Relation Department
- 9 According to Jihad Fakhreddine, a PARC analyst, in fact “Al Jazeera’s weakest point is the ambiguous relationship that ties Qatar with the USA; a relationship that the network strongly avoids touching on and dealing with in its programs”. Personal interview, Dubai, January 2005
- 10 In an episode of the program Without Borders, which aired on November 15, 2000, journalist Ahmad Mansour, interviewed Hamad Ben Jassim, foreign minister of Qatar, openly discussing the question of the relationship between the government and Al Jazeera. In the course of other programs even the theme of US military presence was dealt with, but with a more “neutral” tone. (Lamloum 2004)
- 11 Sakr, 2001
- 12 Da Lage, personal interview, Paris, March 2005
- 13 Lamloum, 2004
- 14 According to research conducted by *Brandchannel*, January 2005
- 15 In the words of Jihad Ali Ballout, spokesperson for the network. Interview found in Della Ratta, 2003
- 16 Source: PARC “Ad Revenues in Panarab Channels 1996–2004”
- 17 Source: PARC “Ad spending on Al Jazeera, 2003–2004”
- 18 Q-tel is in third place, with 4.913 million dollars; Qatar General Petroleum Company is fourth, with 4.163 million dollars; Qatar Gas is fifth, with 3.772 million dollars; Qatar Electric is seventh with 3.175 million dollars; Qatar Airways is ninth with 2.309 million dollars; Qatar Festivals is twelfth with 1.858 million dollars. Source: PARC “Ad spending on Al Jazeera, 2003–2004”
- 19 We do not want to mean a direct intrusion of the United States in the advertising business of Al Jazeera: rather, this is about an auto censoring or at least of the deliberate choice of the investors to not tie their own products to the image of a station that has transmitted “controversial” images like those of the western hostages.
- 20 On Al Jazeera very little time is dedicated to advertising: “If you watch Al Jazeera for more than a few minutes you will notice one of the principal differences between it and other twenty-four hour news networks: how few advertisement there are...Al Jazeera has only about forty to forty-five minutes of advertising each day, compared with about three hundred minutes of daily commercial advertising on Cnn” (Miles 2005). In 2004 this decreased to only 25 minutes per day. Source: Al Jazeera, Moussa Nuseibeh, Head of Advertising.
- 21 Hafez, 2004
- 22 Debord, 1997
- 23 Alterman, 2004
- 24 In the sense that Jürgen Habermas attributes this term (“public sphere”) For more information see Habermas, Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, and Zayani (2005)

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