Meeting the Needs of Multiple Audiences: An Examination of the Aljazeera and

English Aljazeera Websites from the Public Relations Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Five years after the inception of the Aljazeera satellite news network in

1996, the organization created a companion Arabic Web site

(www.aljazeera.net), effectively increasing its reach to any reader of Arabic with

Internet access worldwide. While a fairly stable entity, Aljazeera.net has faced a

number of challenges over its short history. Some mirror those of the parent

organization such as criticisms from many governments about its reporting as

well as struggles to move to an advertiser-funded model. Other problems have

been unique to the web experience including difficulties with video streaming,

hacker attacks, and the challenges of developing a foreign language (English)

version of the site.

This essay will review the past, current status, and future prospects of

Aljazeera's companion Web sites from a public relations perspective. It will deal

with the Web site's startup, its link to Aljazeera TV, the difficulties with video

streaming, and the challenges with English Aljazeera.net.

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RESEARCH

What is commonly known as the "Arab World" is a region that stretches

from the shores of the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf and consists of 22 nations.

Broadcast media came to the region relatively late, with many Arab countries

about 20 years behind the West in the development and distribution of broadcast

radio and television. In the 1970s, television systems in the Arab world were

constrained by three major problems. First, the insufficient local program

production led to external program importation, mainly from the United States

and Western Europe. Second, close government scrutiny and control led to

prohibitive working environments. Finally, shortages in human and financial

resources led to dull and low-quality local programming.

News on these predominantly state-run TV channels has been until

recently characterized as particularly lackluster and consisting of "protocol news"

heavily laden with government propaganda. Newsgathering and reporting – as

defined in the Western sense – were not central to the government-run newscast

model. The primary purposes of such news organizations were to improve

dissemination of information about national government, and to control access to

and formatting of incoming foreign news.   Newscast formats were bland and

monolithic in both content and delivery. Political news dealing with leadership

speeches, official visits, and protocol activities was always topping Arab world TV news agendas. In many cases, video of state events essentially unedited with no commentary or detailed moment-by-moment breakdowns of a ruler's event schedule would be the primary focus of such "news." Anchors were essentially readers and a newscast generally consisted of long items dealing with leadership news and short item dealing with regional and international developments. TV's visual potential was used in a very limited fashion and news packages not at all.

In the 1980s, however, advances in satellite and telecommunication technologies gave rise to a direct broadcast satellite revolution in the region. Arabs both rich and poor obtained satellite dishes (even in countries where they were banned), and used them to tap into global media satellite broadcasts that were beyond the direct control of their countries' governments. Faced with the competition of international television news that had been so carefully censored in the past, Arab governments determined that it would be better for them to compete by creating their own satellite channels or bringing their broadcast operations over to DBS. This created the added benefit – and challenge – of most state-run Arab media becoming transnational – crossing regional borders. This created an interesting phenomenon that promised to disturb power dynamics and public opinion in the region. Although government-run TV had now achieved the technology to get their message on the same dish as their global competitors, their television news was still predominantly used for propaganda. Most investment was in technologies, but some channels began to establish networks of reporters and correspondents.

As a result, many Arab viewers began to see several types of direct broadcast channels available on their satellite dishes – those that belonged directly to their home government, broadcasts from other governments, and ones considered to be privately controlled.   The face of Arab television news was changing, and at the forefront of this change was Aljazeera Television.

The home of Aljazeera is the small Gulf State of Qatar. Although Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), its constitutional monarchy is has a more liberal political system than other countries in the Gulf States. Government control of media has varied since the establishment of the monarchy. The Department of Information was created in 1969. It was replaced by the Ministry of Information and Culture in 1972. In 1975, a separate department was added to the ministry – the Qatar News Agency. The press and publication law, which considered the first official censorship from the government to control the media and populations, was issued in Qatar In 1979. It was aimed at regulating the relationship between the state and press establishment, printing, publishing and distributing houses, libraries, bookshops, artistic production sale outlets, and publicity and advertisement agencies. For example the law banned many newspapers and books from access to the country because they did not agree with the government's political, economic, or religion perspective.

In 1995, while the Emir of Qatar, Shaykh Khalifa bin Hamad ath-Thani, was visiting Geneva, Switzerland, his then 45-year-old son, Shaykh Hamadi bin Khalifa ath-Thani, disposed his father in a bloodless coup. The new emir

ushered in a wave of liberalizations in government and society. Censorship was essentially lifted in 1995 when a new – much more liberal – Press and Publications law was enacted – a law which is periodically reviewed and updated even today.

Aljazeera satellite TV was started in 1996 with an initial government grant that was the equivalent of $137 million USD and the mission to speak out to Arab peoples and provide the many sides of stories that affect the Arab World. Despite its government funding, Aljazeera worked under a clear mandate of freedom of speech. The climate in which it worked became even more favorable when Qatar abolished the Ministry of Information and Culture in 1998.   The nation now has government sponsored and privately owned newspapers, radio and TV.

In November 1996, Aljazeera was introduced in Qatar as the first Arab all-news and public affairs satellite channel. Although initially funded by the Qatari government – with only a small amount of revenue coming from advertisers and subscribers – the network has grown by leaps and bounds. Aljazeera quickly became the most popular TV news channel of Arab peoples in the region and world-wide, stealing Arab television audiences from every one of the big television powers in the region. Few in the West had heard of Aljazeera, which operates from cramped and heavily fortified studios in the outskirts of Doha. But when the station started broadcasting video statements by Osama bin Laden and became the only foreign network to broadcast from inside the Taliban, who controlled Afghanistan, its name became familiar throughout the world. In 2001,

the network had an estimated 40 million viewers, including 150,000 Americans.
After the start of the U.S. led war with Iraq, Aljazeera saw its European
subscriber numbers double almost overnight.

Aljazeera's popularity was due in part to several major breaks from the
formatting of traditional Arab TV news programming: a more objective, dual-sided
approach to news coverage; more video of events and the people that were
affected; and a much greater reliance on regularly featured anchors and
reporters – all characteristics of the BBC and other Western media on which it
was modeled. Western-trained newscasters and producers use video and slick
graphics and emphasize fast-paced, sleek deliveries on the part of anchors and
regularly featured correspondents. Whenever possible, video – often live – of
events and the people they happen to are emphasized. The network also
features many talk shows that cover controversial topics, invite guests of varying
opinions, and are hosted by regular personalities. Programs and news such as
these have led Aljazeera to captivate a growing number of viewers and the
network has soared in popularity in a region accustomed to state-controlled
news.

Aljazeera has become very popular by modeling much of its format on
Western news outlets such as the BBC and CNN. Viewers cannot seem to get
enough of the channel. In understanding how and why viewers use the channel,
it is important to first review studies of Arab audience use of and gratifications
from television.

As the network continues to replace government funding with advertiser sponsorship, it has faced several governmental challenges. First, despite claims of its hard hitting, investigative approach to issues that affect the Arab World, critics have complained that Aljazeera rarely if ever trains its eye on the government and social structure of Qatar. While perhaps considering the sensibilities of its host/owner, as many Western media have also been accused of doing with their own, it has indeed angered many governments in the Middle East, considering the needs of its viewers above maintaining good relations with regional leaders. Leaders and governments that often have significant persuasive pull on Arab businesses that may – or may not – advertise on Aljazeera.

In many respects, Aljazeera seems to have taken into consideration the cultural sensitivities of the "Arab Street" – the average person in most of these nations with access (often in coffee houses) to satellite TV news. A diverse tapestry of cultures and beliefs, with several common threads running through, the Arab World is a mixture of beliefs, religions, and political positions. One of Aljazeera's catch phrases, to present "the opinion and the opposite opinion," addresses a common theme among viewers in different nations. Many had to rely in the past on state-run censored media that would only present the government opinion – supplemented by news from the West that seemed to take a decidedly western spin on stories even when presenting both sides. Aljazeera's controversial style, which at times raised concerns with almost every Arab nation, was precisely its strongest tool in attracting its target audience.

Aljazeera was clearly addressing the needs and gratifications of its primary public – the Arab person in the street, hungry for uncensored news from the Arab point of view. Like most news organizations, it had been less successful in pleasing another one of its "publics," the governments and corporations that could affect significant sway over the company's profitability and even its very existence.   Still, poised as it was at the crest of a successful satellite television run, Aljazeera was now prepared to extend its reach and influence through a companion news site on the World Wide Web.

OBJECTIVE

From its inception, Aljazeera's organizational goal has been to provide the Arab World with an informative alternative to censored state-run media and also the news as provided by dominant western global players such as CNN and the BBC. Aljazeera's approach has at times angered governments in the Middle East and throughout the world. While this in many cases has impressed its core audience, it has often dissuaded secondary audiences, called into question the network's objectivity, and initially affected its ability to obtain support from Arab governments and advertising revenue from Arab businesses.

Several complimentary, but in some cases competing, issues surround Aljazeera's entry into the world wide web and its more recent attempt to expand from only an Arabic audience site to an English site as well. Their goal is to provide Arabic audiences worldwide greater access to news content developed by and fore the network. They would also like to expand their advertiser base.

The English version of the Web site is meant to expand their base further –
bringing their brand of journalism to non-Arabic speaking peoples around the
world, but particularly those who speak English as their primary language – the
West.

From a news editorial perspective, these are challenging, worthwhile
goals. From a public relations perspective, several conflicts arise with secondary
objectives. The primary PR objective is to expand the reach of Aljazeera via the
Arabic and later English Web sites to provide their particular take on the news to
a larger global audience as a supplement to the globally distributed satellite
television news network.

Secondary objectives included to: provide a companion Web site to the
TV network that would both enhance audience experiences and drive traffic to
the station; make a live video stream of Aljazeera's television programming freely
available via the internet, increasing overall program audience; develop a new
medium in which to expand their advertising revenue opportunities; and branch
out into English content to further expand their audience base beyond Arabic
speaking peoples.

<div align="center">STRATEGIES</div>

Aljazeera launched a companion Web site (www.aljazeera.net) in Arabic
in January of 2001 with almost immediate plans to launch a companion English
site. Over 25 people were hired from a number of reputable regional media
institutions to staff the Web site. They were trained to work online and put to

work in five different departments: Editorial, Research & Studies; Monitoring & Analysis: Multimedia: and E-marketing. The original staff of the Aljazeera Web site grew to 60 persons independent of the television news personnel. Of these, 36 were editors, journalists, and researchers. Over the last two years, the organization has grown to about 150 professionals – including the news staff of the English Web site.

Aljazeera partnered with iHorizons (www.ihorizons.com), an Internet and e-business content manager founded in Qatar in 1994 to build its Arabic news site. The company's server software is designed to allow businesses to easily take existing content and modify it for the web and also create new content for a site such as user chat rooms and polling. iHorizons personnel trained Aljazeera's Web site news staff on the Arabic-language based interface and the Web site team began building a rich, multimedia news portal.

An internal department of the Aljazeera Satellite Channel, advertising on the Web site is separate from that on the news service and is handled by the E-Marketing Department. In addition to advertising packages, which include banner ads, sponsorship banners, and newsletter ads, the department offers clients other services. 1) Syndication of Aljazeera content. 2) Aljazeera.net short messages service (SMS) to cell phones. 3) Aljazeera news via phone. 4) Streaming. 5) Interactive financial services. 6) Tourism page.

Although popular with Arabic reading audiences from its inception, after September 11, the Web site's popularity doubled – jumping from about 700,000 page views a day to about 1.2 million page views with more than 40% of them

from the U.S. That increased to 3 million hits per day during the initial phases of the Afghanistan war was over 10 million per day by late 2002. Aljazeera.net ranks top in the Arab World and as tensions in the Middle East mount and the Web site's reputation grows, its popularity has skyrocketed to more than 811 million page views and 161 million visits in 2002 alone.

One of the popular features of the original Web site was the live streaming video of the channels' programs. This service was initially offered as a free, but was limited to a relatively small number of simultaneous viewers. Particularly in times of great news interest, potential web-based viewers of the streaming video were almost never able to connect. In order to improve the quality and allow more people to enjoy the service, an external company (www.jumptv.com) was appointed to develop it and present it to the online audience worldwide on a subscription basis. In addition to program scripts, they do still offer many free streaming audio and a few video clips of stories that previously aired on the channel.

English.aljazeera.net

In part due to the enormous number or requests that began to come in after the network and Web site's coverage of the war in Afghanistan, management decided to launch an English Web site, often non-Arabic readers – and particularly the West – Aljazeera's alternative look at the news shaping the world.

Initially, English.aljazeera.net was supposed to launch in late March of 2003, and hosted by US company DataPipe (www.datapipe.com). The site, which was very streamlined in content, was almost immediately shut down by an intense hacking attacks. Some were in the form of "denial of service" which caused users to not be able to access the site since its host had been inundated with so much junk email and partial computing code that the system overloaded. Additionally, their domain name (along with that of the Arabic site) were "hijacked" so that users would be redirected to U.S. patriotic slogan pages or to porn sites.

While Aljazeera worked to alleviate these problems, many of their Western partners dropped out of the venture – some claim due to political pressure from the U.S. government and some American citizens. DataPipe gave notice as the Web site's host. Later, U.S.- based Akamai Technologies (www.akamai.com), a company that claims its serves can stand up to unprecedented traffic, signed on to host the English site – but promptly pulled out of the deal for unspecified reasons. Additionally, some companies like "Yahoo" declined to carry ads for the Aljazeera programming and Web sites, citing concerns about sensitivities over the War in Iraq.

The site was up and down several times, in great part due to an aggressive attack by hackers. Eventually, the site found a new host, but until the situation was resolved, it stayed offline until the fall of 2003 when it reappeared to little fanfare and some criticism.

With the establishment of the English Web site, and at sometime in the future possibly an English second audio translation with the satellite news feed, Aljazeera faces a challenge in trying to attract a new target audience without disenfranchising its existing audience. News from the Arab perspective, if considered to inflammatory by western readers, will result in the site being ignored by many English reading individuals. Truly angry groups may attempt to hack the site – an approach that has been successful in the past. On the other hand, when the cite debuted again in the fall of 2003, it had been criticized by many who like the original Aljazeera site as being watered down and lackluster – not a true representation of news from the Arab perspective.

TACTICS

Aljazeera.net – The Arabic Site

The Arabic Aljazeera Web site covers news, sports, entertainment, technology, health, arts and culture throughout the Middle East and around the world.   Content is available as text, still images, audio files, and video clips. Live streaming audio fed from the network – once freely available on the Web site – is now a pay service available through Jump TV (www.jumptv.com). This change was made because the original free service was unable to handle the crush of interested viewers and Aljazeera could not afford to put more resources into this free service.

The Web site presents in-depth analysis special coverage, book reviews, marketing, and advertising. It also offers user interactivity options, like quick vote

and discussion forums where the users can express their opinion directly without censorship. The Web site originally provided the full script of Aljazeera Satellite Channel's main programs, attached with its audio file within 24 to 36 hours from the time of the first broadcasting. While much of the content on the web is the same as the TV programming, like most TV news Web sites, the services provides somewhat different and sometimes additional content to the satellite channel. Like its parent television channel, Aljazeera.net's focus on war has increased with the increased fighting in the Middle East – and like the satellite news channel, it has often angered governments and "secondary audiences" with its graphic representations and well as a journalistic approach that its detractors claim is unbalanced.

Like the satellite news channel, Aljazeera.net has often angered Arab country leaders with the type of content that it published on the Web site. Initially praised by the U.S. as a beacon of free expression in the Arab World, its reputation with American government officials changed when the network began airing tapes of Osama Bin Laden and the Web site printed graphic pictures of the negative effects of the U.S. lead wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on citizens of the region.

English.aljazeera.net

The initial content of the English Web site – the first time it was launched – was very rudimentary. The level of news coverage and content was nowhere near the amount available on the Arabic site because English.aljazeera.net was a new venture and the overall organization's resources were already stretched

due to its increasing popularity as a result of interest in the Iraq war. Consequently, during the site's brief history, it limited itself to limited text and still photo coverage of the Iraq war.

The focus of the site was somewhat unclear at first. There was a stated goal to "bridge the gap" between news as presented in the Arab World and in the West. It was not destined to be a site, however, that offered full English translations of all stories on the Aljazeera.net Web site or satellite news channel. Although the amount of content carried was dramatically less that the Arabic site, the graphic photos of wounded civilians and wounded and captured American soldiers displayed on both sites resulted in a hacker backlash against the Aljazeera sites.

When the site returned, first abortively in March of 2003 and then later in Fall of the same year, it was greeted with lukewarm praise. With hacker and server problems settled, the staff was able to focus on increasing the quantity and quality of the content. Complaints were raised by critics because its initial second launch consisted mostly of wire stories obtained from other services and a few in-house stories that were not well received by reviewers. Still, the site has slowly built up and now provides a significant amount of original news and opinion – though much less that the Arabic site does. A polling feature exists, and some of the Arabic site content is translated and used, but stories featured on the site do differ in many cases from the Arabic content. Multimedia content has yet to be incorporated. Stories tend to focus or frame events in a perspective that differs from most Western news media and often times

English.aljazeera.net carries stories that Western media do not. The site walks a difficult line between presenting the news from an Arab perspective and alienating much of its English-reading potential audience with its particular editorial slant.

EVALUATION

Aljazeera.net – The Arabic Web site

Despite difficulties branching out into the English reading audience, Aljazeera has clearly established a strong following among Arabic reading peoples worldwide. Many new findings about their primary audience have been revealed as a result of an online Arabic survey conduced In the fall of 2002. The management of Aljazeera's Web site allowed for an 80-item Arabic survey developed by a Qatari masters student and his professors in the United States to be made available through Aljazeera.net's homepage. The original intent was to leave the survey up for at least a month, but response was so great that over 5300 useable responses were obtained in a two-week period from August 20, 2002 to September 4, 2002. At that point, the survey was pulled down and the data analyzed. It is important to note that while this information can help to provide valuable insight into the Aljazeera online audience, it was a one-time sample and was taken prior to the war in Iraq.

Findings were in some cases confirmatory of expectations about the audience and in some cases quite surprising. Respondents hailed from over 120 individual countries around the world, however the majority, nearly 25% of the

sample, lived in Saudi Arabia (*n*=1215, 22.6%) at the time they responded to the

survey. The next largest groups of respondents lived in the United States

(*n*=386, 7.2%), the United Arab Emirates (*n*=356, 6.6%), Jordan (*n*=304, 5.7%),

Syria (*n*=265, 5%), Egypt (*n*=238, 4.4%), and the Palestinian territories (*n*=206,

3.8%) respectively. Interestingly, only 106 respondents (2%) resided in Qatar,

Al-Jazeera TV's home. Slightly over half (n=2879, 53.5%) of the sample lived in

the country they were originally from, while the remainder lived abroad (*n*=2500,

46.5%). The vast majority of the sample (*n*=4972, 92.4%) were originally from

one of the 22 Arab World countries. Of those originally from an Arabian nation,

3690 (74.2%) were still living in the Arab World at the time of the survey. At the

time of the study, 70.3% (*n*=3782) of the entire sample lived in the "Arab World" –

nations where the predominant language is Arabic (Hejleh, 2001) – regardless of

where they were originally from.

Although ages ranged from 18 to 65 plus, the vast majority ranged

between 18 and 35 with male respondents surpassing female by 10 to one.

They were about equally split between single and married, with almost none

widowed or divorced. The overwhelming majority of the sample was Muslim

(96.5%), with only a very limited number of Christians, Jewish, and other faiths

and belief systems. Half of the group surveyed considered themselves to be

politically and socially moderate with only a few considering themselves to be

extremely liberal or conservative within the context of their culture. Most had an

advanced education, with at least the equivalent of a bachelor's. Many had

pursued advanced degrees as well. The majority of the participants had an

annual household income equivalent to less than $15,000 U.S. dollars (35.9%)

although another 30.4% made between $15,000 and $35,000 USD per year.

Income varies widely in the Arab World and with Arab Diaspora dependent

greatly on the country in which they live.

The survey found that amount of time spent with the Aljazeera Web site

was directly related to fulfilling socialization as well as news gathering needs.

Web users consider the site to be extremely credible. Interestingly, users living

inside the Arab World – but not necessarily within their own nation of origin –

developed stronger socialization feelings for the service than did those living

outside the Middle East.

Aljazeera.net has clearly met its objectives in developing and maintaining

a rich, multimedia Web site offering news and opinion from an Arab perspective,

but free of regional governmental censorship restrictions. Its success can be

seen in the large and demographically diverse Arabic users as well as the many

satellite channels and companion Web sites that have begun to imitate

Aljazeera's style.

English.aljazeera.net

While the Arabic Aljazeera Web site seems to be a stunning success, the

jury is still out on the English Aljazeera Web site. The site faces unique

challenges in trying to speak to an English language public about news and

information from an Arab World perspective. If the quality and quantity of content

continue to expand to match that of the parent Web site, the audience may

continue to grow. However the overarching question that remains is will English

language audiences accept this non-Western perspective to news and

information? And if not, will English.aljazeera.net be subsidized by the parent

company and the Qatari government, or will it simply become an interesting but

failed experiment in cross-cultural journalism.

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