

THE CNN OF THE ARAB WORLD OR A SHILL FOR TERRORISTS?

How Support for Press Freedom and Political Ideology Predict Credibility of Al-Jazeera among its Audience

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Abstract / This study surveyed Al-Jazeera viewers through a survey posted on the network's Arabic-language website to examine how credible Al-Jazeera viewers judge the network. Not surprisingly, Al-Jazeera viewers rated the network as highly credible on all measures. They rated CNN and BBC high on expertise, but ranked them low on trustworthiness. Consequently, BBC and CNN were also rated low on other credibility measures. Local Arab media were judged lowest on all credibility measures. Those who were younger and who relied heavily on Al-Jazeera were more likely to judge the network as credible.

Keywords / Al-Jazeera / credibility / local Arab media / political ideology / press freedom

Al-Jazeera's supporters hail the satellite news network not just as their most trusted source of news, 'The CNN of the Arab world', but as a political and cultural phenomenon transforming the Arab region (Fahmy and Johnson, 2007b; Fouda, 2001; Lynch, 2006). Al-Jazeera has been praised for its hard-hitting and independent style of journalism, its refusal to regurgitate the official line of Arab government officials and its commitment to accuracy and balance while at the same time showing an Arab perspective on the news (el-Nawawy, 2003; el-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002; Schleifer, 2001). On the other hand, its critics accuse the network of flouting Arab customs and politics, of cozying up to terrorists such as Osama bin Laden by providing a forum for Al-Qaeda views and for slanting news against the US. Al-Jazeera has alternatively been accused of working for Al-Qaeda, the CIA and Mosad (Israeli intelligence), depending on whether the criticism comes from the western or the Arab world (Kim and Jang, 2004; Miles, 2005; Osborne, 2004; Zayani and Ayish, 2006; Zednik, 2002).

Recent media credibility studies have focused on the credibility of a medium, be it delivered in an online or a traditional form (e.g. Flanagin and Metzger, 2000; Johnson and Kaye, 1998, 2000, 2002; Kioussis, 2001). Such research leaves an impression that credibility is inherent in the medium itself. But as attitudes toward Al-Jazeera demonstrate (Al-Jaber, 2004; Auter et al., 2004b; Johnson and Fahmy, 2006), perceptions of credibility reside in audience members themselves and different audiences can hold wildly different perceptions of a source's credibility.

The debates over credibility of Al-Jazeera demonstrate that more attention needs to be spent on source credibility, the extent that people judge individual news organizations as credible. Similarly, while studies have explored demographic and political factors that influence media credibility, more attention needs to be focused on audience-centered measures, such as the ideology of the individual and the degree to which individuals support press freedoms.

This study surveyed Al-Jazeera viewers through a questionnaire posted on the network's Arabic-language website to examine how credible viewers of Al-Jazeera judge the network. More specifically, this study examines the degree to which watchers of Al-Jazeera rate the station on depth, accuracy, fairness, believability, trustworthiness and expertise. This research also employs a path analysis to examine the degree to which support for press freedoms, ideology, demographic and political measures and Al-Jazeera reliance predict credibility of the network.

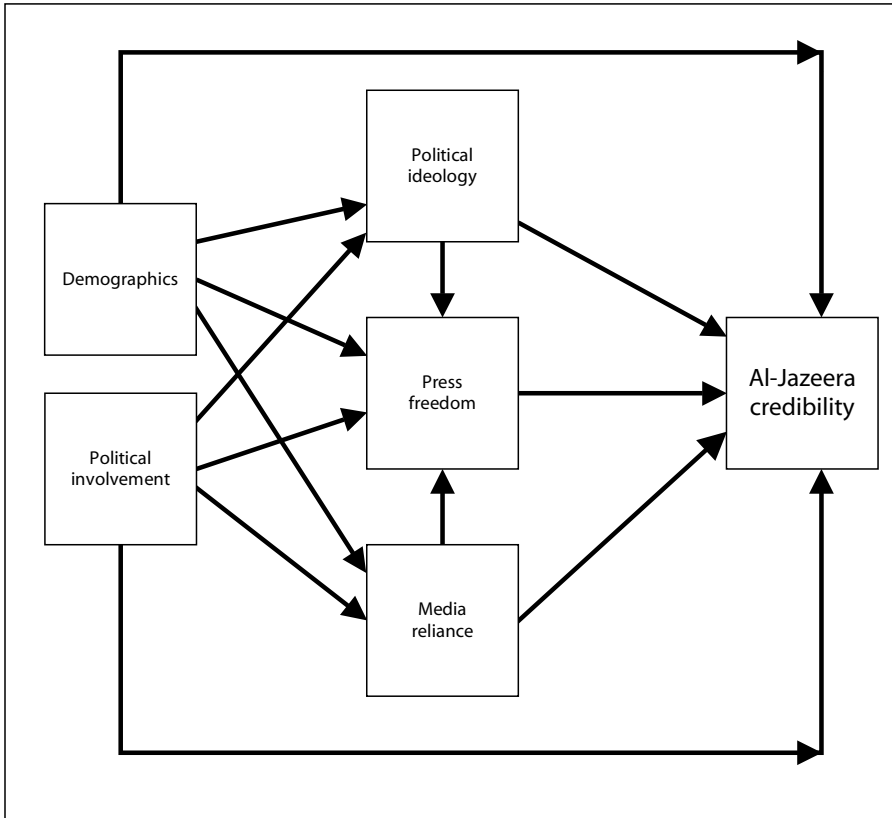
The path analysis model (Figure 1) predicts that demographic and political characteristics will influence Al-Jazeera reliance, ideology, support for freedoms of the press and credibility of Al-Jazeera. Reliance on Al-Jazeera will impact ideology, support for press freedoms and Al-Jazeera credibility. Ideology will influence both support for freedoms of the press and Al-Jazeera credibility. Finally, support for press freedoms will impact perceptions of Al-Jazeera credibility. Therefore, this study examines the direct impact of demographic and political factors on the credibility of Al-Jazeera and their indirect relationship through ideology, reliance and support for press freedoms. Reliance on Al-Jazeera will impact credibility directly and indirectly through its relationship with ideology and support for freedoms of the press. Ideology will predict credibility directly and through its relationship with support for freedoms of the press, and support for press freedom will be directly linked to the credibility of the Al-Jazeera network.

While several scholars have debated how much stock to put in Al-Jazeera coverage, this is one of the first studies to examine the credibility of the 'CNN of the Arab world'. While news organizations fear that eroding media credibility could reduce public support for press freedoms, little attention has been paid to the effects of attitudes toward press freedom on attitudes of media credibility.

Source Credibility

Source credibility became a focus of the early persuasion studies, as researchers examined how the characteristics of speakers influenced the persuasive influence of a communication message. Specifically, studies by Hovland and associates (Hovland et al., 1949, 1953) explored how the source of information affected the persuasiveness of messages in winning support for the Second World War. Hovland et al. found that two main factors influenced the credibility of a source: expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise referred to the degree to which audience members considered someone qualified to know the truth of a topic, while trustworthiness was measured by the degree to which the audience perceived the person was motivated to tell the truth about that topic. Other studies have developed a host of other factors that could influence source credibility, including how dynamic, composed

FIGURE 1

Conceptual Model of Al-Jazeera Credibility

Note: All coefficients are expected to be statistically significant

and sociable the speaker is (Metzger et al., 2003). However, trustworthiness and expertise have remained strong predictors of source credibility.

Studies have suggested that different news organizations are rated differently for credibility. For instance, the Pew Center (2006) reported that people were more likely to believe 'all' or 'most' of the information they received from CNN (28 percent) and *60 Minutes* (27 percent) than the three networks NBC, ABC and CBS (22–23 percent). While Pew found that most sources had declined in credibility from 1998 to 2006, a few sources such as the Associated Press and Fox News saw believability ratings remain steady.

Credibility in Other Nations

Only a handful of credibility studies have been conducted outside the US, and these studies either focused on credibility in that country (Kim and Johnson, 2005; Park,

2006; Taylor and Napoli, 2003; Wilson and Howard, 1978) or did a cross-cultural comparison, examining credibility scores in one nation with the US (King et al., 1985; Pratt, 1982; Starck, 1969; Yoon et al., 1998).

The most comprehensive cross-cultural credibility study is the World Internet project by UCLA (Lebo, 2004), which compared 10 nations on how reliable and accurate they perceived the Internet. Scores tended to be higher in countries with fewer press freedoms (Korea, Hungary, China and Singapore) than in predominantly western countries with a freer press (Japan, Germany, Sweden and Spain). The US and Great Britain finished in the middle of the pack, ranking sixth and fifth respectively. Internet scores were higher for more repressive regimes, indicating that people in those countries do not trust their national media and use the Internet to seek out more reliable sources outside their country.

Studies of media credibility in the Arab world suggest that until recently the Internet was considered more credible than the heavily censored Arab state-run news channels (Al-Makaty et al., 1994; Johnson and Abdulrahim, 2000). However, with the development of independent satellite news services such as Al-Jazeera, perceptions of Arab media have changed (Ayish, 2004; Cherribi, 2006; Mellor, 2005; Wilkins, 2004). Indeed, Amin (2003) has noted a shift in preference of Arab audiences from state-run channels to western media and more recently to trans-national Arab satellite news. Results from the Arab world and elsewhere suggest, not surprisingly, that the more the state controls the information sent out to the people, the less the people will trust the media.

Credibility and Al-Jazeera

Credibility is not inherent in a source, but rather it is a perception held by audience members (Berlo et al., 1969; Schweiger, 2000). Therefore, different audiences can reach different conclusions on how credible a source is, particularly for a source like Al-Jazeera.

Arab governments and US officials criticize Al-Jazeera and label it as an unreliable source at best, and an irresponsible and dangerous source at worst. Arab governments, which are used to government-controlled media that parrot the official government stance, criticize Al-Jazeera for negative coverage of Arab leaders and for covering taboo topics such as sex, polygamy and government corruption (Dresner, 2006; Kim and Jang, 2004; Nisbet et al., 2004; Zayani and Ayish, 2006). Al-Jazeera is branded as supporting western governments and being an agent of the CIA because it presents the views of western leaders, and was the first Arab network to interview top Israeli officials. On the other hand, western governments and journalists have accused Al-Jazeera of presenting the news, particularly the news of the Iraq War, from a pro-Arab perspective (Kim and Jang, 2004; McKay, 2004; Zayani and Ayish, 2006). Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld accused Al-Jazeera of 'working in concert with terrorists' because it broadcast an exclusive interview with Osama bin Laden shortly after the 9/11 attacks and for frequently airing tapes by Al-Qaeda intermediaries. The network has also been accused of ignoring journalistic values of taste by showing graphic coverage of the Iraq War

and of the Palestinian uprising (Fahmy and Johnson, 2007a; Osborne, 2004; Zednik, 2002). Al-Jazeera scholar Mohammed el-Nawawy contends that criticism from both the Arab and western world demonstrate that Al-Jazeera is a credible source of information. 'The common understanding in the news business is that if you anger both sides, you must be doing something right' (el-Nawawy, 2003: 15). However, even Al-Jazeera supporters criticize the station for not scrutinizing the Qatari government with the same fervor of other Arab nations (el-Nawawy, 2003; el-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002).

But Al-Jazeera has won a loyal following among its 50 million Arab-language viewers as the first Arab news source to offer Arab viewers an uncensored 24-hour news service that has provided them a chance to voice their opinions through live phone-in shows, as well as hear the perspectives of opposition leaders, dissidents and intellectuals (el-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002; Hanley, 2004; Zayani and Ayish, 2006). Ironically, the network has achieved credibility by adopting western-style journalistic techniques and values that has earned it the title of 'the CNN of the Arab world'. Most of the reporters initially recruited by Al-Jazeera were from the BBC's Arabic television service, and they brought with them the BBC's editorial spirit and style (el-Nawawy, 2003). They have employed BBC and CNN as models in developing news-gathering techniques, such as seeking out multiple perspectives on the news, relying heavily on video and slick graphics and emphasizing fast-paced, sleek delivery from reporters and anchors, as well as creating news shows such as *The Opposite Direction*, based on *Crossfire*. Indeed, Al-Jazeera has created affiliations with CNN and other American networks as well as with the BBC (Sharkey, 2003; Zednik, 2002).

Al-Jazeera does not deny that it presents the news from an Arabic perspective. For instance, its Iraq War reporting focuses on the suffering brought upon civilians by the war (Hickey, 2002) and contains more criticism of the US conduct in the war and less of Iraqi officials than other news agencies (Ayish, 2006; Kolmer and Semetko, 2004; Wicks and Wicks, 2004; Zayani and Ayish, 2006).¹ However, Al-Jazeera officials argue that they embody their motto: *The opinion and the other opinion*. Their talk shows, such as *The Opposite Direction*, are popular because they take on controversial issues and allow views to call in freely and express their views without restriction. The goal of these shows is to present the audience with all viewpoints and to let them decide (Al-Kasim, 1999; el-Nawawy, 2003; Snow and Taylor, 2006; Zayani and Ayish, 2006).

A handful of studies have specifically examined the credibility of Al-Jazeera (Al-Jaber, 2004; Auter et al., 2004b; Johnson and Fahmy, 2006) and not surprisingly, its viewers have considered it a credible source. For instance, Auter et al. (2004b) surveyed Al-Jazeera viewers through the Al-Jazeera website, and found overall credibility was approximately 3.9 on a five-point scale. Scores were highest for 'reporters are trained well' (4.48) and 'accurate' (4.22). Scores were lowest for 'news stories do not contain too much opinion' (3.17), 'watches out for your interests' (3.55) and 'unbiased' (3.65). Thus, Al-Jazeera scores were highest on providing an accurate, complete account, but viewers seem aware that the news is presented from a particularly Arab perspective. Similarly, a study of western Internet websites showed that stories from the Al-Jazeera English-language website were frequently

reprinted and were therefore considered a credible source by online news creators, especially those who created blogs and alternative news websites (Azran, 2006).

Credibility and Press Freedom

Few studies have examined the relationship between attitudes toward press freedom and media credibility, despite the belief that low credibility scores could jeopardize journalists' rights. As Blake and Wyatt (2002) noted, journalists fear that if the media fail to prove themselves trustworthy, then the public would be willing to support the government stripping away free press protections.

Surveys have suggested that support for media credibility and press freedom have both eroded in recent years. Pew Center (2006) found that the majority of people do not believe what they see in the media and that media credibility scores have been declining. For instance, credibility scores for CNN have dropped 14 percentage points since 1998. Similarly, respondents said they believed *The Wall Street Journal*, the most trusted print source, only 26 percent of the time, down from 41 percent in 1998.

The public has also showed limited support for press freedom. The First Amendment Center (2006) found that on the general question of whether Americans enjoy too much or too little freedom, the plurality indicates the press has the right amount of freedom (47 percent), but those who say it has too much freedom greatly exceeds those who claim it has too little freedom (40 vs 10 percent).

Support has been mixed for the notion that credibility is directly linked to freedom of the press. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) reported that those who judged the media low in credibility were more likely to agree that the media abuse the First Amendment and that newspapers sometimes have too much freedom of the press, a finding supported by other credibility studies (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1985; Gaziano, 1988).

More recent studies have questioned the link between credibility and free expression. When Blake and Wyatt (2002) used General Social Survey data to explore the relationship between confidence in the press and civic tolerance between 1980 and 1987, a relationship only appeared during certain years and even then the link between the two measures was small. Together, the authors contend that these findings suggested that support for freedom of the press is more tied to judgments about balancing free speech rights against other rights, than to credibility.

One reason why support for freedom of the press has not predicted credibility in the US is that the press freedoms, enshrined in the First Amendment, are taken for granted in the West. Perhaps support for press freedoms is a stronger predictor of credibility in parts of the world where the press enjoy few liberties.

Few scholars will argue that before 1980, Arab media enjoyed few freedoms. Arab governments held a monopoly over television, believing that broadcasting should serve as a government operation designed to promote national development goals (Cherribi, 2006; Nisbet et al., 2004). Television stations operated within ministries of information and were funded by the government. Employees were viewed as part of the government bureaucracy and thus enjoyed few press freedoms (Ayish, 2002; Boyd, 1993; Kalb and Socolovsky, 2004; Rugh, 1987, 2004).

Scholars agree that the coming of satellite television and the Internet has transformed Arab broadcasting in the 1990s (Cherribi, 2006; Fahmy, 2005; Lynch, 2006; Mellor, 2005; Miles, 2005), but they disagree on whether these changes have brought more freedoms.

Ayish (2002) argues that the traditional government-controlled television system has been challenged by a reformist government-controlled television pattern and a liberal commercial pattern represented by Al-Jazeera. The rise of satellite news stations such as CNN and BBC have spurred Arab governments to encourage increased professionalization of news operations within a continued government monopoly. Stations such as the Abu Dhabi Satellite Channel have moved away from the traditional model of an anchor giving long items dealing with government leadership news, to a more western style of broadcasting with state-of-the art technology, advertising revenue, a wide range of news and public affairs programming shows, along with entertainment and family-oriented offerings. Also, several Arab countries have opened media-free zones where media supposedly are able to operate without legal restrictions.

But while new Arab satellite news stations such as Abu Dhabi TV may look like western news outlets with bureaus in major Arab and international cities, field reports and live studio or satellite-relayed interviews, the governments still greatly influence content. Censorship laws may have been modified, but criticism of government actions and discussions of religious, sexual and political corruption remain taboo (Fahmy, 2004; Miles, 2005; Sakr, 2002). Sakr (2000, 2002) has argued that broadcast stations operating in the media free zones are still subject to censorship, but are free from financial restrictions, such as taxes, customs duty and building restrictions.

Perhaps because press freedoms have been restricted in Arab nations, this may explain why they enjoy greater support in the Arab world than in the US (see, for example, Fahmy and Johnson, 2007b). The Pew Global Attitudes Project (2003) found that majorities in predominately Muslim countries place a high priority on having the right to criticize the government.

Credibility and Political Variables

Researchers have largely ignored the effects of most political variables on traditional measures of credibility. However, Johnson and Kaye (2000, 2002) reported that most political variables only weakly predicted online credibility. This is in line with other studies that suggest that television use is a weak predictor of political measures such as interest, knowledge and participation (Chaffee and Frank, 1996; Kanervo et al., 2005).²

Credibility and Media Use

Past studies suggest that how credible one views a medium is strongly related to how often one relies on it (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1985; Johnson and Kaye, 1998, 2000; Wanta and Hu, 1994), with relationships proving stronger for reliance measures than general use ones because media use taps behaviors while

reliance measures examine attitudes toward individual media (Rimmer and Weaver, 1987). Similarly, research indicated that people judge their preferred medium as the most credible (Carter and Greenberg, 1965; Rimmer and Weaver, 1987). Consequently, most studies suggest that television, the most relied upon news medium, is also judged as the most credible one (Metzger et al., 2003). However, the rise of alternative news sources such as Fox News and the Internet have caused broadcast news credibility scores to slide in recent years (Pew Center, 2006).

Studies by Fahmy and Johnson (2007a) and Auter et al. (2004a, 2005) reported Al-Jazeera watchers to be extremely loyal. Auter et al. found more than a third watch Al-Jazeera at least five hours a day and another 16 percent watch it four to five hours a day. Not surprisingly, then, Auter et al. (2004b) found that heavy viewing of Al-Jazeera correlated with higher levels of credibility. Similarly, Johnson and Fahmy (2006) discovered that reliance on the English-language Al-Jazeera website was the strongest predictor of credibility of the satellite network.

Credibility and Demographics

Credibility studies have found a paradox. Males with high education and income are the heaviest information consumers. Yet this group is less likely to find the media credible (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1985; Mulder, 1981; Robinson and Kohut, 1988). On the other hand, women, as well as those who are younger and less educated, are more likely to judge television as credible (Metzger et al., 2003).

Auter et al. (2004a, 2005) reported that the average Al-Jazeera viewer tends to be young, highly educated and overwhelmingly male and Muslim. They found that 44.2 percent were between the age of 25 and 35, and 46.4 percent had a bachelor's degree. The plurality (35.9 percent) earned the equivalent of less than US\$15,000 a year. Nearly all of the viewers (96.5 percent) were Muslim, and more than nine in 10 were males (92 percent).

Based on earlier demographic studies conducted in the US, it would appear that characteristics associated with heavy Al-Jazeera use (i.e. being a male with a low income) would not be linked with a high credibility of that source. Indeed, Johnson and Fahmy (2006) discovered demographics had little influence on credibility. Young users of the English-language Al-Jazeera website judged the satellite network credible, but no other demographic variable proved significant.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study examines how credible Al-Jazeera watchers view the satellite network and poses the following research questions:

RQ1: To what degree will Al-Jazeera viewers perceive the satellite network as an expert source, as well as trustworthy, in-depth, accurate, fair and believable?

RQ2: Will Al-Jazeera viewers judge the satellite as significantly more credible than CNN, BBC and their local Arab media?

Based on the path analysis model, the following relationships are hypothesized:

H1: The credibility of Al-Jazeera will be significantly predicted by (a) attitudes

toward press freedom, (b) political ideology, (c) reliance on Al-Jazeera, (d) political variables (level of political interest and political activity) and (e) background characteristics (English proficiency, gender, age, education and income).

H2: Attitudes toward press freedom will be significantly predicted by (a) political ideology, (b) reliance on Al-Jazeera, (c) political variables (level of political interest and political activity) and (d) background characteristics (English proficiency, gender, age, education and income).

H3: Political ideology will be significantly predicted by (a) political variables (level of political interest and political activity) and (b) background characteristics (English proficiency, gender, age, education and income).

H4: Reliance on Al-Jazeera will be significantly predicted by (a) political variables (level of political interest and political activity) and (b) background characteristics (English proficiency, gender, age, education and income).

Method

An Arabic-language survey examining the credibility of Al-Jazeera for its viewers was posted on the Al-Jazeera website (www.aljazeera.net). The hyperlink was posted for three weeks – from 21 September 2004 to 12 October 2004.

The questionnaire was first written in English and then translated into Arabic and once more back-translated into English. Back-translation was done to ensure accurate translation and cultural compatibility with the Arab culture. The questionnaire was then pre-tested to ensure valid and reliable data were collected. The online questionnaire was completed by 731 respondents.

The survey's respondents were Al-Jazeera television viewers who seek more information from the Al-Jazeera Arabic website. Using an online questionnaire proved to be the preferred method for this study as it allowed us to directly survey Al-Jazeera viewers who spoke Arabic. Attempting to select a group of Al-Jazeera viewers through traditional means would be almost impossible because of the limited degree of freedom enjoyed in the Arab world (Ayish, 2002; Boyd, 1993; Kalb and Socolovsky, 2004; Rugh, 1987, 2004). This study's respondents, therefore, can be classified as a purposive sample of Al-Jazeera viewers who have access to the Internet. Results therefore may not be representative of the larger population and care must be taken not to generalize the results to the population at large.

Dependent Measure

Credibility

To answer the research question examining predictors of Al-Jazeera credibility, a summated index measuring media credibility was made up of the following six items: believability, fairness, accuracy, depth of information, trustworthiness and expertise. The response options for each item was a five-point scale that ranged from 'not at all' to 'very'. The reliability of the credibility index is .90.

Independent Measures

Demographic Variables

A set of background questions were used for descriptive and comparison purposes. This study specifically examined associations between perceptions of Al-Jazeera credibility and gender, age, English proficiency, education and income.

Political Involvement

Measures of political activity and political interest were also employed. Respondents were asked to rate their level of political activity and their level of political interest on a scale that ranged from 0 to 10.

Ideology

Respondents were asked to report whether they politically viewed themselves as 'very liberal', 'liberal', 'independent', 'conservative' or 'very conservative'.

Press Freedom

To test the relationship between Al-Jazeera credibility and press freedoms, a press freedom index was computed. The index was composed of two measures. The Cronbach alpha testing the reliability of the press freedom scale was .64. Respondents were asked to state their level of agreement with statements dealing with the following: whether the Arab media should be allowed to publish free from government control and whether the Arab media should be allowed to freely criticize their governments. The five-point scale ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

Al-Jazeera Reliance

A reliance index was also computed. The index was composed of two measures. Respondents were asked to assess their level of attention paid to Al-Jazeera television in the past three days and assess their level of reliance on Al-Jazeera television for information. Response categories ranged from 'a lot', 'considerable', 'some' to 'little' and 'not at all'. The Cronbach alpha testing the reliability of the reliance scale was .77

Data Analysis

Frequencies and means were run on the six credibility measures. The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether perceptions of Al-Jazeera credibility can be explained by support for press freedoms, media reliance, ideology, political involvement and demographics. A series of four hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the path model (see Figure 1). The model predicts that demographics (age, gender, education, English proficiency and income) and political involvement (interest and activity) will influence political ideology, support for press

freedom and media reliance and lead to higher credibility of Al-Jazeera. Political ideology and media reliance are predicted to influence support for press freedoms and credibility of Al-Jazeera. Support for press freedoms will then predict Al-Jazeera credibility. This study, therefore, examines the direct impact of demographics and political involvement on credibility. And it also examines their indirect relationship through ideology, reliance and support for press freedoms. Ideology and reliance are also examined to predict Al-Jazeera credibility directly and through their relationship with support for press freedom.

Results

Respondents: Demographics and Characteristics

A total of 646 usable responses were analyzed for this study. Geographically, respondents completed the survey from 53 different countries, with 97.6 percent of the respondents indicating backgrounds from 20 Arab countries and two Muslim countries (Afghanistan and Pakistan).

Overall, the respondents represented an international and highly educated elite background. Two-thirds (67.6 percent) reported they have lived outside their native country, more than half (55.5 percent) indicated having lived at least one year abroad. Twenty percent reported that they visited the US, and the majority (86.6 percent) reported they were at least somewhat proficient in the English language, with 62.7 percent reporting they were proficient or very proficient. The majority (50.5 percent) indicated at least a university degree and almost an additional 30 percent reported they had graduate degrees.

This study found that 47.2 percent of Al-Jazeera viewers were between 25 and 35 with a mean of 32 years. Males greatly outnumbered females (89 to 11 percent). The vast majority (95 percent) reported they were Muslims, 3 percent reported they were Christians and less than 1 percent reported they were Jewish.

In terms of income, 55 percent reported an annual income that ranged between US\$1001 and US\$25,000. Almost one-fifth (19 percent) indicated an annual income of less than US\$1000. A few of the respondents (3.6 percent) indicated an annual income of more than US\$100,000.³

Respondents reported they were attentive to, and relied heavily on, Al-Jazeera television for news (mean = 4.52 and 4.7 respectively). The mean scores were between the 'a lot' and the 'considerable' response categories.

Respondents most strongly agreed with the statements that Al-Jazeera increases press freedom (mean = 4.07) and presents all views and opinions on an issue (mean = 4.01). Respondents also strongly agreed the Arab media should be allowed to publish free from government control (mean = 4.5) and should be allowed to freely criticize their governments (mean = 4.73).

On a scale from 1 to 10, the freedom of the press in the Arab world scored low (mean = 2.82) and the freedom of the press in the US scored average (mean = 5.35). In other words, respondents were more likely to disagree that the press in the Arab world enjoys much freedom. Results show the freedom of the press in the

US, although average, is perceived to be higher than the freedom of the press in the Arab world.

Media Credibility

The first research question asked to what degree would Al-Jazeera viewers perceive the satellite network as an expert source as well as trustworthy, in-depth, accurate, fair and believable? Research question 2 explored whether respondents would judge Al-Jazeera to be more credible than CNN, BBC and local Arab media.

Table 1 shows responses concerning credibility measures for Al-Jazeera, BBC, CNN and local Arab media. Overall, respondents rated the credibility of Al-Jazeera higher than CNN, BBC and local Arab media. The mean scores for believability, accuracy and depth of information and trustworthiness and expertise of Al-Jazeera television news were higher than 4.0, which corresponded with 'considerable'. Only the score for fairness dipped below 4 (3.77). Although the mean scores for the expertise of CNN and BBC were high (mean = 4.06 and 4.2 respectively), all the other mean scores were much lower. BBC fairness and trustworthiness, for example, had a mean of 2.62 and 2.73 respectively, which were between the 'somewhat' and the 'not very' response categories. CNN scored even lower for fairness (mean = 1.91) and trustworthiness (mean = 1.97). The mean scores were between the 'not very' and the 'not at all' response categories. The local Arab media scored the lowest on all the six credibility measures. One respondent wrote:

The Arab media are a mouthpiece of the ruling party, or the government in their respective countries. They are free ONLY when it comes to demonizing/criticizing Israel. Many of the honest journalists CANNOT publish any article that criticizes the government, because of the fear of imprisonment, or some form of punishment.

Predictors of Al-Jazeera Credibility

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the credibility of Al-Jazeera would be significantly predicted by (a) attitudes toward press freedom, (b) political ideology, (c) reliance

TABLE 1

Respondents' Mean Responses to Questions Regarding Credibility Measures of Al-Jazeera, BBC, CNN and Local Arab Media

	Believability	Fairness	Accuracy	Depth of information	Trustworthiness	Expertise
Al-Jazeera	4.36	3.77	4.30	4.32	4.28	4.55
BBC	3.06	2.62	3.33	3.49	2.73	4.20
CNN	2.35	1.91	2.78	2.89	1.97	4.06
Local Arab media	1.55	1.55	1.65	1.65	1.57	1.78

Note: 1 = not at all; 2 = little; 3 = somewhat; 4 = considerable; 5 = very much.

on Al-Jazeera, (d) political variables (level of political interest and political activity) and (e) background characteristics (English proficiency, gender, age, education and income). As shown in Table 2, credibility of Al-Jazeera can be predicted by demographics – age ($\beta = -.126, p < .019$) and media reliance ($\beta = .326, p < .000$). Reliance on Al-Jazeera is a positive predictor of credibility. The more the viewers rely on Al-Jazeera, the more likely they are to judge it as credible. Results also show younger viewers are more likely to view the television channel as credible than older viewers. Further, data analysis also suggests credibility is not directly related to political involvement, political ideology and support for press freedom (see Figure 2). Therefore, of the five hypothesized paths, only two measures, demographics and Al-Jazeera reliance, significantly predicted Al-Jazeera credibility. The five measures only explained 13.3 percent of the variance in Al-Jazeera credibility.

Hypothesis 2 stated that attitudes toward press freedom would be significantly predicted by (a) political ideology, (b) reliance on Al-Jazeera, (c) political variables and (d) background characteristics. As shown in Table 3, support for press freedoms can only be predicted by media reliance ($\beta = .179, p < .000$). The more the viewers rely on Al-Jazeera, the more likely they are to support freedom of the press.

Hypothesis 3 stated that political ideology would be significantly predicted by (a) political variables (level of political interest and political activity and (b) background characteristics (English proficiency, gender, age, education and income). As shown in Table 4, political ideology can be predicted by two demographic characteristics: age ($\beta = -.137, p < .007$) and English-language proficiency ($\beta = .198, p < .000$). Younger viewers who are more proficient in the English language are more likely to consider themselves liberals than older viewers and respondents who are less familiar with the English language. Therefore, one of two predicted paths proved significant, explaining 7 percent of the variance.

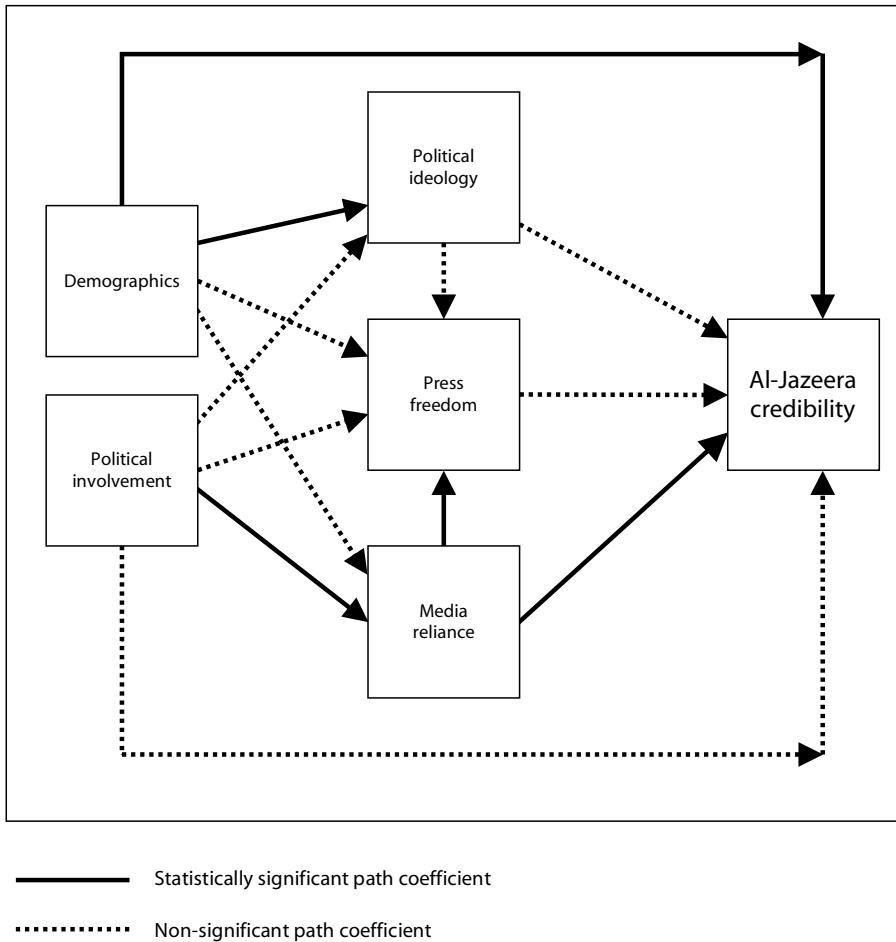
TABLE 2

Regression Analysis Results Examining Predictors of Al-Jazeera Credibility (N = 646)

Demographics	Standardized beta	t-score	Sign.
Age	-.126	-2.36	.019
Gender	-.018	-.371	.711
Education	-.007	-.138	.890
Income	-.001	-.022	.982
English proficiency	-.049	-.879	.380
Political involvement			
Politically activity	.025	.48	.632
Political interest	-.002	-.038	.969
Political ideology	-.048	.962	.337
Press freedom index	.018	.368	.713
Reliance index	.326	6.48	.000

$R = .364$; $R^2 = .133$; adjusted $R^2 = .109$.

FIGURE 2
Model of Al-Jazeera Credibility



Hypothesis 4 stated that reliance on Al-Jazeera would be significantly predicted by (a) political variables and (b) background characteristics. As shown in Table 5, reliance can be predicted by one of the political involvement variables: political interest ($\beta = .136, p < .001$). More politically interested viewers in this survey are more likely to rely more heavily on Al-Jazeera than less politically interested viewers. Therefore, given that the more viewers rely on Al-Jazeera the more likely they are to judge it as credible, results suggest political involvement is indirectly related to the credibility of Al-Jazeera. Only one of two hypothesized paths influenced Al-Jazeera reliance. The variables explained 3.2 percent of the variance.

TABLE 3

Regression Analysis Results Examining Predictors of Support for Press Freedoms (N = 646)

Demographics	Standardized beta	t-score	Sign.
Age	.071	1.289	.198
Gender	-.043	-.851	.395
Education	-.046	-.832	.406
Income	-.030	.525	.600
English proficiency	-.039	.677	.499
Political involvement			
Politically activity	-.002	-.046	.964
Political interest	.025	.462	.644
Political ideology	-.037	-.721	.471
Reliance index	.179	3.53	.000

$R = .209$; $R^2 = .044$; adjusted $R^2 = .021$.

TABLE 4

Regression Analysis Results Examining Factors Influencing Ideology (N = 646)

Demographics	Standardized beta	t-score	Sign.
Age	-.137	-2.716	.007
Gender	.027	.588	.557
Education	-.016	-.312	.755
Income	.001	.017	.986
English proficiency	.198	3.863	.000
Political involvement			
Politically activity	-.071	-1.478	.140
Political interest	.086	1.799	.073

$R = .265$; $R^2 = .070$; adjusted $R^2 = .056$.

TABLE 5

Regression Analysis Results Examining Predictors of Al-Jazeera Reliance (N = 646)

Demographics	Standardized beta	t-score	Sign.
Age	-.015	-.278	.781
Gender	.055	1.142	.254
Education	0.53	1.003	.316
Income	-.051	-9.29	.353
English proficiency	.025	.480	.631
Political involvement			
Politically activity	-.020	-.406	.685
Political Interest	.162	3.251	.001

$R = .179$; $R^2 = .032$; adjusted $R^2 = .016$.

Discussion

This study surveyed Al-Jazeera viewers through the network's Arab-language website to examine how credible Al-Jazeera viewers judge the network. This research also developed a path analysis model to examine the degree to which support for press freedoms, ideology, Al-Jazeera reliance, demographic and political measures all predict credibility of Al-Jazeera among its viewers.

In a span of just 10 years, Al-Jazeera has transformed Arab politics and culture. Al-Jazeera's supporters say the network has built a strong following among 50 million Arab-language viewers by being the first Arab news source to offer viewers an uncensored 24-hour news service (el-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002; Hanley, 2004). While Al-Jazeera executives don't deny that the station presents the news from the Arab perspective to counter dominant western perspectives like CNN and BBC, they also claim that they present their news in a fair, accurate and balanced manner (Al-Kasim, 1999; el-Nawawy, 2003).

Indeed, Al-Jazeera viewers judge the satellite network as highly credible. On five of the six credibility measures, viewers of Al-Jazeera rated the network more than 4 on a five-point scale. Respondents also said the network presents all views and opinions on an issue. Results support other studies that have found that Al-Jazeera viewers judged the network as credible (Al-Jaber, 2004; Auter et al., 2004b; Johnson and Fahmy, 2006). Indeed, although these studies used different credibility measures from this study, credibility scores seemed to have increased since 2002.

The highest score was reserved for expertise (4.55). Ironically, the network gained its expertise by adopting the western model of news-gathering techniques, such as presenting multiple perspectives on the news, emphasizing slick, polished reports from reporters and anchors, as well as by emulating western news magazine shows. Also, many reporters were initially hired from the BBC (Sharkey, 2003; Zednik, 2002).

The lowest score for Al-Jazeera was for fairness, where it registered 3.77 on a five-point scale. Objectivity is revered as a hallmark of western journalism. Al-Jazeera executives, though they say they present the news accurately and seek out alternate points of view, do not deny that they put an Arab perspective on the news. This is needed to correct anti-Arab distortions presented by western news agencies.

Al-Jazeera viewers clearly applaud the network for presenting an Arab news perspective. Viewers note that the network promotes the belief that the Iraq War has been unjust and increases support for the Palestinian cause, presumably perspectives they support (data not shown). One respondent wrote, 'CNN while on balance is a good station, has a lot of built in bias. Look at the coverage of the Iraq War for example.'

Researchers going back to the seminal persuasion research by Hovland et al. (1949, 1953) have argued that the two main elements of source credibility are expertise, the degree the communicator is viewed as an authority on the issue, and truthfulness, the confidence the audience members have that the communicator will express views they deem most valid.

Al-Jazeera viewers did not question that CNN and BBC are news authorities; both networks scored above 4 on the expertise scale. This isn't surprising as Al-Jazeera is modeled on these two networks. However, while the networks may be

judged as authorities, Al-Jazeera viewers question the authoritativeness of CNN and BBC news reports. Both CNN and BBC recorded some of their lowest credibility scores for truthfulness (1.97 CNN, 2.73 BBC), as undoubtedly Al-Jazeera viewers perceive the networks distort the news by filtering it through a western lens. Consequently, CNN and BBC also score below average on accuracy and fairness.

This research suggests, then, when the source of information is an individual, listeners will judge them on both expertise and truthfulness. However, when the source is an established news agency, the audience will not question the expertise of the news organization, but may not always trust the message it presents. This study, then, builds upon Hovland et al.'s (1949, 1953) original work. They studied individuals rather than organizations and found both expertise and truthfulness explained source credibility.

Because credibility lies in the perception of the audience rather than being a characteristic inherent in the source (Berlo et al., 1969; Schweiger, 2000), our results do not demonstrate that Al-Jazeera *is* more credible than CNN or BBC. Rather our results show viewers of Al-Jazeera *perceive* the network as more credible than its two western counterparts. A study of CNN or BBC viewers would undoubtedly yield different results.

This study employed a path analysis model that predicted that reliance on Al-Jazeera, political ideology and attitudes toward press freedom would be primary predictors of Al-Jazeera credibility. Only reliance predicted credibility perceptions about the satellite network. Reliance was the strongest predictor of Al-Jazeera credibility, a finding that supports several other studies that have demonstrated that the more individuals rely on a source the more credible they judge it (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1985; Carter and Greenberg, 1965; Wanta and Hu, 1994). Al-Jazeera watchers are loyal viewers. This study found that viewers said they heavily relied on the network and paid close attention to it. Auter et al. (2004a, 2005) reported that more than a third of those they surveyed watch Al-Jazeera at least five hours a day and another 16 percent watch it four to five hours a day. Not surprisingly, then, Auter et al. (2004b) found that heavy viewing of Al-Jazeera correlated with higher levels of credibility, findings supported by Johnson and Fahmy (2006).

Al-Jazeera viewers watch the network faithfully because, unlike western sources, it provides an Arab perspective on the news. One respondent wrote:

We have to know first that Al-Jazeera was mainly launched for Arabic viewers. That is why one can find more details and a broader coverage concerning the events occurring in the Arab countries, while CNN focuses more on American news.

Another respondent explained:

When it comes to international issues, even the media in the United States do not show all sides of any international dispute. I watch Al-Jazeera to develop a mature perspective of any international issue.

Unlike other Arab sources, it provides 24 hours of uncensored news, it is willing to tackle controversial issues and allows viewers to call in freely and express their views (Al-Kasim, 1999; el-Nawawy, 2003). On the other hand, infrequent viewers,

particularly those from the West, may be jarred by its content. For instance, Fahmy and Johnson (2007a) found Al-Jazeera does not adhere to western standards of taste. It has tried to provide a human perspective on the Iraq War by showing scores of bloody, wounded civilians, including children. Al-Jazeera has shown graphic photos from Abu-Ghoraib prison, ones judged too sensitive for western audiences. From the perspective of an infrequent viewer, Al-Jazeera might be viewed as sensationalist, while regular viewers may consider that the network is one of the few sources to provide a true, unvarnished and human perspective on the day's news. One respondent explained that the channel broadcasts 'the reality on the ground. What happens to the rest of us should be shown, since our people are on the receiving end of the bombs and the bullets.'

Attitudes toward freedom of the press did not predict credibility of Al-Jazeera, which supports recent studies that the public develops its attitudes toward press freedom independently from how one judges the credibility of a source (Blake and Wyatt, 2002; Wyatt et al., 1999, 2000). Although attitudes toward press freedoms did not predict credibility of Al-Jazeera, it would be a mistake to suggest this indicates viewers had little support for press freedom. Indeed, respondents strongly argued that the Arab media should be allowed to publish free from government control and that the Arab media should be allowed to freely criticize their governments. While they recognized that little freedom of the press exists in the Arab world (2.82 on a 10-point scale), they believed the US only enjoyed a moderate amount of press freedom (5.35). One respondent wrote:

American news media are in the hands of a few companies and it's in their best interest to keep the truth from the people. In some ways, some of them serve as an indirect mouthpiece of the system. The news is always short, and sanitized, and other points of view are not allowed. SELF-CENSORSHIP is a common practice, especially on TV. One always sees how the US is glorified and the others are either demonized or ignored.

The fact that Al-Jazeera is unfettered by government control may promote more support of press freedom as viewers can compare the uncensored coverage of Al-Jazeera with more tightly controlled content in the rest of the Arab world. Indeed, while credibility scores for western sources BBC and CNN were generally low, they topped scores for local Arab media on every measure. Respondents also disagreed with the statement that Al-Jazeera reduces press freedom, suggesting they see the network as advancing the concept of a free press in the Arab world. One respondent wrote:

Watching all the Arab channels I find press freedom has started to ameliorate in recent years. Thanks to Al-Jazeera – that made clear to the Arab world that Arab media can become well advanced, it is now only a matter of time. Some channels have freed themselves from government ties, for example we now have Al-Arabeya and El-Horra channels.

Past studies suggest that liberals were more likely to consider media credible than conservatives, and that political ideology can indirectly influence media credibility because liberals are more likely to support press freedoms (Gaziano, 1987; Johnson, 1993). However, this study did not find a link between ideology and either credibility or attitudes toward press freedom. Those who were younger and more

proficient in the English language, however, described themselves as liberals. More than half of the respondents rated themselves as independents, which matches results suggested by Auter et al. (2004a, 2005). The fact that English-language proficiency was linked to ideology and that so many considered themselves independents may signify that the liberal–conservative continuum employed in this survey and in numerous studies in the US cannot be applied to the Arab culture. Perhaps future studies should rate ideology through cultural and political questions designed to tap whether respondents follow traditional values or more liberal ones.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to examine Al-Jazeera users' perceptions of the network's credibility through an online survey posted on the Arab-language Al-Jazeera website. In a largely oral society, where it would be difficult to survey by traditional techniques and where people may be afraid to voice their real opinions – for fear of retribution from their authoritarian governments – an online survey posted on the network's website may be the best way to reach viewers of Al-Jazeera who speak Arabic. However, Internet penetration in Arab countries is still relatively low. Because this study relied on a self-selected sample of those who visit the Al-Jazeera website, results may not be representative of all Al-Jazeera users. However, the demographic makeup of this sample closely resembled earlier studies (Auter et al., 2004a), suggesting results are at least representative of Al-Jazeera viewers who visit its Arabic-language website. Further, results from this study were similar to a recent demographic study by Allied Media (2007), except on education where Allied found that most viewers had lower than a college education. This suggests that our sample gathered through the Arab-language website does not differ greatly from the Allied study in which audience members were directly surveyed.

This study used a host of variables to explore what predicts the credibility of Al-Jazeera. Only age and Al-Jazeera reliance directly predicted credibility of the network. Future studies could include other variables, such as confidence in government institutions, which has been linked both to credibility and to press freedom (Wyatt et al., 1999, 2000). Presumably, the less viewers trust their government, and by extension the less they trust information by their government-controlled media, the more likely they are to watch Al-Jazeera and rate the network as credible.

Our results suggested that Al-Jazeera users judged the network as highly credible. This study did not directly explore whether westerners who have viewed Al-Jazeera would differ in their judgments of credibility from those viewers in the Arab world. As credibility is a judgment of the audience and not a characteristic of the source per se, future studies should explore western vs Arab differences in perceptions of Al-Jazeera to determine the degree to which the network captures people's trust outside the Arab world.

Notes

1. Aday et al. (2004) found that Al-Jazeera was no more likely than western sources to present stories about civilian casualties, although such coverage was more critical than western stories.

2. Studies suggest that how television use is measured can greatly affect its relationship with political variables. While general television use tends to be negatively related to political measures, television news use tends to be positively related (Chaffee and Frank, 1996; Kanervo et al., 2005). Also, different types of television news shows may have different relationships with political variables. For instance, when the Pew Center (2007) studied the effects of media use on political knowledge, they found that those who watched the *Daily Show/Colbert Report* and the *O'Reilly Factor* tended to be well informed, those who read television news websites or watched CNN were moderately informed, and those who watched network evening news, local television news and Fox News Channel tended to be poorly informed about politics.
3. Both this study and Auter et al. (2004a, 2005) were based on a similar methodology: posting a survey on the Al-Jazeera Arabic website. A recent study by Allied Media (2007) posted on the Al-Jazeera website also found that most viewers were young (68 percent were between 15 and 39), low income (US\$15,000) and Muslim (96 percent). However, Allied found a closer gender divide (66 percent male) and found viewers were less educated (29 percent had a university degree or above).

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