

# Al-Jazeera English

## A conciliatory medium in a conflict-driven environment?

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#### ABSTRACT

Launched in November 2006, Al-Jazeera English (AJE) stands out amongst its competitors and is considered by many an anomaly when it comes to its journalistic code and identity. AJE is neither dominated by geopolitical nor commercial interests, and is the first of its kind to have the resources, mandate and journalistic capacity to reach out to typically ignored audiences throughout the world. This study argues that AJE's model of journalism offers an alternative to today's mode of news journalism that continues to encourage stereotypical attitudes towards cultural 'others'. Not only has AJE's programming represented a fresh break from the traditional news agenda, but audiences around the world found AJE to work towards a conciliatory function, based on a typology of a conciliatory media developed here. These findings point to the possibility of a global news broadcaster that can bring diverse audiences together and encourage dialogue, empathy, responsibility and reconciliation.

#### KEY WORDS

Al-Jazeera English ■ clash of civilizations ■ conciliatory media ■ contra-flow ■ mediatized recognition ■ peace journalism

### Introduction

Global media organizations have become an increasingly studied and scrutinized factor in international politics. Far removed from the initial introduction of satellite news, today audiences around the world have access to dozens of 24-hour news broadcasters, each with its own 'spin' on current events. The proliferation of satellite news has come both in the private and public sectors, and along with other media of news consumption, has created an environment where most viewers can tune into a broadcaster that describes news in ways they find to be culturally,

politically and ideologically agreeable. As a result, news broadcasters today are more likely to harden existing opinions and attitudes, encourage stereotypical thinking of cultural 'others', and create increasingly isolated public spheres (Hafez, 2007). Amongst this hardening media environment, one news organization stands out: Al-Jazeera English.

Launched in November 2006, Al-Jazeera English (AJE) is considered by many an anomaly when it comes to its journalistic mission and identity. It stands out from its competitors in that it presents a challenge to the existing paradigms guiding international news broadcasters. It is dominated by neither geopolitical nor commercial interests, and is the first of its kind to have the resources, mandate and journalistic capacity to reach out to typically isolated and ignored audiences throughout the world. It both represents a challenge to 'the myth of the mediated centre', while also providing a test case for examining the conciliatory potential of a global satellite channel (Couldry, 2006: 186).

Based upon a news production study of AJE, as well as a survey of AJE audiences in six countries, this study argues that AJE's model of journalism offers an alternative to today's mode of news journalism that continues to encourage stereotypical and counter-productive attitudes towards cultural 'Others'. AJE's programming represents a fresh break from the traditional news agenda of other global news giants, such as CNN International and the BBC World Service. Here we present three findings that point towards AJE's ability to function as a 'conciliatory media', a concept developed and outlined below: (1) Journalists and news production employees of AJE approach news topics in a way that focuses on providing a voice to the voiceless, an approach that results in the 'mediatized recognition' of many underrepresented groups in the global media; (2) viewers of AJE in Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America all found AJE to work towards a conciliatory function, based on a typology of a conciliatory media developed and outlined here; and (3) the longer viewers had been tuning into AJE, the less dogmatic they were in their cognitive thought, a finding that provides evidence of the possible benefits of such conciliatory media. Collectively, these findings point to the possibility of a global news broadcaster that can bring culturally and politically diverse audiences together and encourage dialogue, empathy, responsibility and reconciliation.

### **The rise of mass-mediated conflict**

The end of the 20th century witnessed dramatic changes in the structure, scope and depth of media across the globe. Not only have the number of

media outlets expanded, especially in newly developing countries, but the legal and physical constraints that had previously limited the ability of media organizations to speak freely about sensitive politics have changed, resulting in a proliferation of information in many previously closed societies. Technological change has given people and institutions the ability to instantaneously broadcast local events to the world, while simultaneously watching and learning about far away events and cultures (Price, 2002).

Moreover, this expanded role for media in society presents newly formed challenges, especially in the context of international conflict. While media technologies have always played a role in international conflict, today's network society has dramatically increased the ways in which media technologies are utilized in conflicts, the number of media organizations producing and disseminating information during conflict, as well as the means to better monitor and understand mediated communications from afar (Castells, 1999). It is along these lines that Seib (2008: 175) argues that 'the connectivity of new media is superseding the traditional connections that have brought identity and structure to global politics'. Tumber and Webster (2006) describe the changes in terms of a move from the traditional forms of 'industrial war' towards mass-mediated conflicts, or 'information wars', placing the varied media outlets and technologies at the center of discussions of how to best navigate and understand contemporary international conflict. In short, they argue that the military assets alone no longer govern the outcome of international conflict, and success and failure are increasingly dependent on controlling the flow of information and the associated 'hearts and minds' of the global citizenry. Accordingly, media organizations are often being treated as actors within international conflicts, able to shape and refine opinions of people and even governments.

Furthermore, today's expanded access to and competition within the global information sphere have made increasingly clear the different and often competing ways in which the mass media present international events. In 1991, at the outset of the first Gulf War, CNN dominated the global news flow with its live coverage of the conflict and advanced presentation style. Carried both globally via the CNN satellite channel, as well as rebroadcast by many local and regional news providers, CNN's coverage controlled the narrative through which most saw and thought about the conflict. CNN's domination of the world's understanding of the conflict, and their dependence on the US military for access and information, resulted in a relatively large coalition of supporters for the invasion, both amongst governments and people in the region (Sakr, 2001). While counter-narratives existed, they were obscured, and did not

carry with them the weight of live and sensationally dramatic images of the Coalition's victory over Saddam Hussein.

Today, rather than having a single network dominating the international newsscape, satellite news broadcasters have popped up around the world, each with a slightly different take on international events. Narratives guiding the public's understanding of events are increasingly and more easily contested, and thus the 'battle' to control the flow of information has become intense, particularly during times of conflict. As competition over the airwaves has increased, it has become especially difficult to discern under what circumstances particular broadcasters have influence, and among what audiences. With a plethora of news organizations broadcasting information around the world, it has become much easier for audiences to tune into the organization that is oftentimes aligned with their opinions and worldviews, a change in the newsscape that calls into question whether news organizations are actually educating audiences or rather providing people with information that is simply used to further their pre-existing opinions and attitudes.

### **War journalism and a 'clash of civilizations'**

Coverage of today's conflicts is dominated by a style of 'war journalism'. Mass media are both structurally and institutionally inclined to offer 'escalation-oriented conflict coverage' (Kempf, 2002: 227). As Tehranian notes:

the world's media are still dominated by state and corporate organizations, tied to the logics of commodity and identity fetishism. Such media generate political or commercial propaganda that constructs hostile images of the Other while creating a 'global fishbowl' whereby the excesses of the world's wealthiest are on tantalizing display to the vast numbers of desperately poor. (2002: 48)

Along the same lines, Shinar (2003: 5) argues that the media's professional standards, which thrive on drama, sensationalism and emotions, are more compatible with war than with peace: 'War provides visuals and images of action. It is associated with heroism and conflict, focuses on the emotional rather than on the rational, and satisfies news-value demands: the present, the unusual, the dramatic, simplicity, action, personalization, and results'.

Similarly, Wolfsfeld highlighted several reasons as to why media principles are contradictory to peace principles:

A peace process is complicated; journalists demand simplicity. A peace process takes time to unfold and develop; journalists demand immediate results.

Most of the peace process is marked by dull, tedious negotiations; journalists require drama. A successful peace process leads to a reduction in tensions; journalists focus on conflict. Many of the most significant developments within a peace process must take place in secret behind closed doors; journalists demand information and access. (1997: 67)

Moreover, Thussu (2003: 117) argues that the continuous demand for news in an environment that is dominated by 24/7 satellite television had led to 'sensationalization and trivialization of often complex stories and a temptation to highlight the entertainment value of news'. Knowing that audiences are likely to tune in more often in times of conflict, news media have little incentive to locate and focus on areas of cooperation in conflicts, and often overstate the proclivity for 'violence to break out at any moment' in order to maintain viewership and audience attention.

Rather than speaking to and informing a multiplicity of audiences, today's broadcasters are often mostly targeting particular segments of people, relying on cultural mores and political and historical myths in contextualizing international events (Hafez, 2007). This reality was made especially clear in the run-up to the 2003 war in Iraq, where American and British media relied on a narrative of national security in justifying the necessity of invading Baghdad while many Arab satellite broadcasters framed the invasion in terms of another example of Western imperialism and colonialism. Recent scholarship found that news media, including new news media (websites) continue to cover war in terms of reflecting the 'dominant national frames' as well as the 'dominant national public discourses' (Volkmer, 2008: 94). Thus, despite the cosmopolitan hopes of an increasingly global media, media today continue to reflect and speak to particular 'national discourses', with little regard to each other.

This phenomenon can be explained using el-Nawawy and Iskandar's (2003: 38) concept of 'contextual objectivity', a term used to describe the necessity of television and media to present stories in a fashion that is somewhat impartial yet sensitive to local sensibilities. Applied in the context of Al-Jazeera's coverage of the war in Iraq, el-Nawawy and Iskandar acknowledge bias, but argue that it is an audience-centered bias that does not deviate from the facts of the event and is no greater than the Western-tilt that is seen in most American media. Put simply, they argue that all media deviate from the standard of objectivity by framing the facts of a given situation in ways that are socially accepted and expected amongst their particular audiences. Moreover, in their multinational content analysis of six networks' coverage of the war in Iraq, Aday, Livingston and Herbert found significant evidence to substantiate the existence of such contextual objectivity in both Western and Arab media outlets:

When a network ran an unbalanced story, it was inevitably in the direction consistent with its culture of origin, with Al Jazeera's violations of the objective norm being critical of the war and the American networks slanting toward a more positive view. (Aday et al., 2005: 17)

Thus, in times of war, today's mainstream media often tailor their coverage in ways that construct an ideologically aligned narrative that reinforces the attitudes and opinions of their target national or regional audiences. This has resulted in 'a de facto adoption of Samuel Huntington's theory' of an inevitable 'Clash of Civilizations' (1993, 1996; Seib, 2004: 76), presenting an additional obstacle to the media's ability to facilitate reconciliation and peace-building through televised news. Moreover, it represents 'a serious threat to peace in the globalized world of the 21st century' (Hafez, 2000: 3). Today's rise in dependence on international media that likely foster attitudes of fear and hate of cultural 'Others' underscores the necessity of an approach towards studying the role of media in conflict through the lens of collective identity: 'When media representations enter into fields of conflict structured by deep-seated inequalities and entrenched identities, they can become inextricably fused with them, exacerbating intensities and contributing to destructive impacts' (Cottle, 2006: 168).

### **Theorizing media and conflict – can media facilitate reconciliation?**

In the face of this challenge, scholars have argued for a new form of journalism – peace journalism – as a means of 'de-escalation-oriented conflict coverage' (Kempf, 2002: 9). Lynch and McGoldrick (2005: 5) define peace journalism as that which takes place 'when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report and about how to report them – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict'. Galtung (2002), a pioneer in the field of peace journalism studies, argues that media in times of conflict should focus on conflict transformation, a move that requires journalists who are empathetic and understanding; able to provide a platform for all parties and voices to express themselves, and to focus on the negative impact of violence, such as damage and trauma. Similarly, in his study of the role of media in the build-up to and falling apart of the Israeli–Palestinian Oslo accords, Wolfsfeld (2004: 5) notes that it is the responsibility of reporters in the war zones 'to provide as much information as possible about the roots of the problem and to encourage a rational public debate concerning the various options for ending it'.

Wolfsfeld explains that, at times, encouraging rational deliberation amongst alienated groups can encourage all parties to refrain from escalating violence and engage in thoughtful consideration of ways to end the conflict.

It is also important to note that peace journalism authors are not calling for journalists to sanitize their coverage of conflicts, nor focus solely on calls for peace and cooperation. Rather, advocates argue that journalists describe violence in terms of its political, economic and social motivations, rather than a natural or inevitable consequence of otherwise uncontrollable events. By exposing violence as either a dire or irresponsible choice for dealing with an existing conflict, peace journalists can encourage non-violent responses to conflicts that are otherwise viewed through a highly politicized lens (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005).

A major weaknesses in the peace journalism literature is a failure amongst peace journalism scholars to consider the roles that collective identity – religious, ethnic, national and transnational – can have on the propensity for groups to either take to violence or consider non-violent solutions to conflicts. This oversight is especially problematic given the growing area of scholarship examining the role that media – especially electronic and new media – can have on the constitution and wherewithal of collective identities (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998). This oversight is particularly important given that the current War on Terror, as with the Cold War before it, exemplifies the importance of examining the role of media not only in their coverage and investigation of the material aspects of war, but also in the construction and propagation of the underlying ideologies that are so influential in shaping the socio-political environments that can result in conflict (Lewis, 2005).

One way that scholars could integrate the role of identity into the concept of peace journalism is through the use of the concept of the ‘politics of recognition’. Developed by Taylor (1994), the politics of recognition draws from the Hegelian concepts of consciousness and the ideal reciprocal relationship and suggests that personal and collective identities are shaped and impacted both by social recognition and validation, and, perhaps more importantly, by misrecognition or non-recognition:

A number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need, sometimes the demand, for recognition. The need, it can be argued, is one of the driving forces behind nationalist movements in politics ... The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, as the people or the society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (Taylor, 1994: 25, cited in Cottle, 2006)

In his discussion of the necessity of incorporating the concept of identity politics into the maintenance and growth of contemporary civil societies, Taylor (1994: 36) argues for the need to recognize all legitimate and legal groups and to engage them in open dialogue without any political or social restrictions: 'Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it'. Similarly, Wolf warns against the non-recognition or misrecognition of various groups:

The harms most obvious in this context are, at the least, that the members of the unrecognized cultures will feel deracinated and empty, lacking the sources for a feeling of community and a basis for self-esteem, and, at the worst, that they will be threatened with the risk of cultural annihilation. (Wolf, 1994: 75–6)

Simon Cottle (2006: 173) offers an approach grounded in the 'mediatized recognition' of oppressed or marginalized groups in order to better understand the role that media can play in the processes of cross-cultural reconciliation. Placing the concept of *recognition* at the heart of the media contribution to reconciliation, Cottle argues that the capacity of media to recognize isolated, denigrated and discriminated cultural 'Others', on their own communicative terms, becomes central in determining how, when, and what function the media play in negotiating cross-cultural tensions. Moreover, expanding upon the deliberative necessities of a transcultural dialogue, Cottle (2006: 172) points to the importance of new media to counter the 'rationalist bias within much contemporary theorizing'. Cottle notes that new media – televised media in particular – are able to increase exposure to and acceptance of diverse methods of communication, like non-linear storytelling and performative communication, as well as the distinct cultural meanings and values of perceived 'Others'.

While rarely discussed in the context of peace journalism, the concept of mediatized recognition may be helpful in explaining precisely how and why news media can play a constructive role in the cultural and political conflicts. For Cottle (2006: 167), media are a critical means by which cultural antagonisms can be outlined and negotiated in contemporary conflicts: 'In today's mediatized societies it is probably inevitable that the media will be seen as a key, possibly principal, means by which cultural differences and agendas can be publicly recognized and acknowledged'. Howard (2002: 9) agrees, arguing that media that make an effort to provide equal recognition to all social and political groups, particularly the ones that have often been underrepresented and marginalized, can contribute to the peaceful integration of these groups



into the overall structure of the civil society: 'With this recognition emerges a journalism that is sensitized to conflict resolution techniques, and seeks to maximize understanding of the underlying causes and possible solutions'.

### **The typology of a conciliatory media**

'Conciliatory media' is a term that is coined in this study and is defined as any news media that work to meet a number of criteria, outlined in detail below, when covering issues of collective social importance. By doing so, such media can deviate from the 'war journalism' style that has dominated today's post 9/11 mediascape and instead contribute to creating an environment that is more conducive to cooperation, negotiation and reconciliation.

Research has shown that audience members will try to get more information from the media to enhance their understanding, particularly during times of conflict. Therefore, we argue that a conciliatory media can help alleviate tensions grounded in stereotype and myth and enhance a global understanding of events in ways that encourage open-mindedness among audiences.

By making available space or air time for expression of grievances, the media encourage an essential part of the healing process. During the period of reconciliation and rehabilitation, the media can also serve to empower groups that had previously been voiceless. (Gardner, 2001: 306)

Drawing from a case study of Australian media coverage of the Howard government's treatment of illegal immigrants, Cottle (2006: 183) isolates seven characteristics of media that best serve a function of reconciling cultural antagonisms: (1) 'image to the invisible'; (2) 'claims, reason and public argumentation'; (3) 'public performance and credibility'; (4) 'personal accounts and experimental testimonies'; (5) 'reconciling the past, towards the present'; (6) 'media reflexivity'; and (7) 'bearing witness in a globalized world'. The first characteristic, 'image to the invisible', speaks to the capacity of a media to expose an event or act that had previously been 'hidden' by governments and corporations. The 'claims, reason and public argumentation' function is similar to that described by proponents of 'deliberative democracy', where public officials and opinion leaders describe and defend their decisions in the public sphere, opening them to challenges and questions. The third characteristic, 'public performance and credibility', speaks to the ability of the media to interview or challenge a guest live, where the responses are de facto authentic, unable to be censored or scripted. Space for 'personal accounts and experimental testimony' is important in that

'former Others are enabled to put their individual experiences into the public domain', including conversations that allow for 'stories and personal accounts of pain, suffering and injustice' to 'fragment reductionist stereotypes of the collective Other'. Similarly, a media that creates space for communications that 'reconcile the past' with an eye to the present 'assist in the public process of acknowledging the deep trauma and hurt', contributing 'to an ongoing process of reconciliation and cultural accommodation'. The media reflexivity quality refers to a media's ability to examine, praise and criticize both other media coverage, as well as one's own, in a process that pedagogically encourages more critical approaches of media consumption among viewers. Finally, perhaps as a summary of the previous characteristics, a media's ability to 'bear witness in a globalized world', where content focuses on the dynamics of historical and contemporary injustices, 'can help dismantle historically anachronistic images of the Other' and change the 'consciousness and politics of understanding that condition our responses and ability to interact with today's globalized world'. Needless to say, Cottle (2006, 167–84) proposes these characteristics as an ideal, arguing that the more media are able to approach news with such criteria in mind, the more effective the process of recognition is, and thus the higher the media's ability to lessen antagonisms between different cultures.

Drawing from the existing academic scholarship on peace journalism and mediatized recognition (Cottle, 2006; Howard, 2003; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005), we suggest an 11-point typology, outlining the precise characteristics of a media that can serve a conciliatory function, as follows:

- Providing a public place for politically underrepresented groups.
- Providing multiple viewpoints on a diversity of controversial issues.
- Representing the interests of the international public in general, rather than a specific group of people.
- Providing firsthand observations from eyewitnesses of international events.
- Covering stories of injustice in the world.
- Acknowledging mistakes in journalistic coverage when appropriate.
- Demonstrating a desire towards solving rather than escalating conflicts.
- Avoiding the use of victimizing terms, such as martyr or pathetic, unless they are attributed to a reliable source.
- Avoiding the use of demonizing labels, such as terrorist or extremist, unless they are attributed to a reliable source.
- Abstaining from opinions that are not substantiated by credible evidence.
- Providing background, contextualizing information that helps viewers fully understand the story.

We argue that when a media organization embodies such characteristics, it can work towards debunking cross-cultural stereotypes, creating a general culture of tolerance, injecting a multicultural knowledge into the public sphere, and working to produce reconciliation among cultural antagonists. While this is an idealized media form that can be hard to find in today's mostly commercially driven media, it can be argued that Al-Jazeera English satellite channel has adopted many of the characteristics included in the conciliatory media typology and thus may prove to provide a conciliatory function when it comes to covering politically and culturally divisive issues.

### **A history of Al-Jazeera English**

Al-Jazeera English (AJE), a subsidiary of Qatar's Al-Jazeera Arabic network, represents a new form of transnational media that has the declared purpose of revolutionizing the global newscape. Launched on 15 November 2006, AJE, the world's first global English-language news channel to be headquartered in the Middle East, is already accessible in over 180 million households worldwide, and has also agreed to provide distribution (often-times free of charge) via multiple video sharing websites, making it accessible to anyone with a connection to the World Wide Web. With over 25 bureaus worldwide, AJE is hyped as 'the voice of the South'. Ibrahim Helal (2008), AJE's deputy manager for news and programs, suggests:

The 'South' here is not meant to be geographical. It is symbolic. It is a lifestyle because in the West, you have a lot of South as well. In Britain, you have South. In Europe, you have South. The South denotes the voiceless in general.

The network promises that it contains the technological capacity and the ideological wherewithal to provide new and productive fora for cross-cultural communications.

According to its proponents, AJE presents a tremendous opportunity for a new direction in the discourse of global news flow. With its declared promise of giving a 'voice to the voiceless', AJE's launch and growing popularity represent a new style of media structure and content that provides an important test case for existing research regarding transnational media organizations and media and conflict scholarship more broadly.

Addressing AJE's mission, Nigel Parsons (2008), the former AJE managing director, said:

This was a chance, a blank piece of paper to do things differently. And I do think that we have shaken up a very tired old industry. I do think we have raised the bar. Everyone said that there was nothing different to do or be done. I think to a large measure that we have achieved what we have set out to do. We do provide more analysis. We do provide more depth. We do cover untold stories.

Serving as a 'voice to the voiceless' is a concept that is unfamiliar amongst many Western news media networks. Helal (2008) argues:

The AJE way of journalism is a bit different from the West because we tend to go faster to the story and to go deeper into communities to understand the stories, rather than getting the [news] services to give us the information ... We try to do our best to set the agenda by searching for stories others cannot reach or don't think of.

Moreover, Helal (2008) suggests the nature of AJE's stories and the angles they focus on contribute to their standing out as a network compared to Western news media:

We were in Myanmar exclusively during the tensions last year. We covered Gaza from within Gaza by Gazan correspondents. We looked into why Gazans are united behind Hamas despite the suffering. These kinds of stories are not easily covered by other media. It's not an accusation [against other media]. It's about the elements of perceiving the knowledge, the know-how when it comes to covering the story and producing it. It's not there in Western media, but we have invested in people by bringing more than 40 ethnic backgrounds and nationalities ... [into] the staff.

Early research on the content, ideological underpinnings and operation of AJE all indicate that its approach to and production of news differ significantly from that of other major transnational media organizations like CNN International and BBC World. Content analysis points to a repeated and thorough effort at producing programming that has more depth than most contemporary televised news, as well as an agenda that emphasizes issues of particular importance to those living outside the post-industrialized Western world (Schatz, 2007).

Originating from the 'Global South', AJE demonstrates what Naomi Sakr (2007: 116) describes as a 'contra-flow' action. Sakr cites Sinclair et al.'s (1996) definition of contra-flow as a situation where '... countries [that were] once considered clients of media imperialism have successfully exported their output into the metropolis' (Sakr, 2007: 116). According to Sakr (2007: 117), 'contra-flow in its full sense would seem to imply not just reversed or alternative media flows, but a flow that is also counter-hegemonic'. Addressing the counter-hegemonic issue, Waddah Khanfar (2007), Al-Jazeera's director general, explains:

Our philosophy of reporting is a human sentiment paradigm rather than the power center. We shift away from the power. Our relationship with power is always to question power, rather than to give power more domain to control. We have to empower the voiceless, rather than to empower the pulpit ... or the powerful only.

AJE has a news agenda that aims at 'redressing global imbalances in the flow of information' (Sakr, 2007: 120). According to Parsons (2008),

AJE is 'the first news channel based in the Mideast to bring news back to the West'. Moreover, AJE focuses less on 'breaking news', oftentimes of little significance to a majority of the world's citizens, and the 'soundbite culture' that characterizes many of its Western counterparts. News items on AJE 'are generally longer and snappier [than its Western counterparts] while documentary-style shows abound ... its stories seem to introduce more angles than would be the case with "conventional" all-news networks' (Battah, 2007).

With an initial budget of over US\$1 billion, mostly coming from the Emir of Qatar, AJE has opened up four broadcasting centers (in Qatar, the UK, Malaysia and the United States) and 21 supporting bureaus in Africa, Latin America and Asia, parts of the world that have often been marginalized or altogether neglected by the mainstream Western media. Thanks to its sizable and remarkably market-independent resources, AJE is not subject to the economic pressures that have resulted in a decline in the quality of many of the Western media (McChesney, 2000). Even the BBC World Service, though publicly funded via a grant-in-aid by the UK's foreign and Commonwealth Office, relies on some commercially viable programming to sustain its budget. According to Kieran Baker, AJE's regional news editor for the Americas, cited in Hanley (2007: 24), 'This station [AJE] may be the last bastion of public broadcasting'. Along the same lines, Naheda Zayed (2008), AJE's news editor in Washington DC, observes: 'We are not driven by the dollar or constrained by commercialization pressures as many other news networks. And this gives us great liberty in the way we approach our stories'.

According to AJE's Code of Ethics (<http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2006/11/2008525185733692771.html>), AJE presents 'diverse points of view and opinions without bias or partiality'. Moreover, it aims to 'Recognise diversity in human societies with all their races, cultures and beliefs and their values and intrinsic individualities in order to present unbiased and faithful reflection of them'. Plus it aims to 'Acknowledge a mistake when it occurs, promptly corrects it and ensures it does not recur'. AJE's corporate profile further expresses its unique mission:

The channel gives voice to untold stories, promotes debate, and challenges established perceptions ... The channel [sets] the news agenda, bridging cultures and providing a unique grassroots perspective from underreported regions around the world to a potential global audience of over one billion English speakers. (<http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2006/11/200852518555444449.html>)

Given its aims, resources, structure and size, AJE provides a breath of fresh air and an interesting case study for examining the role of mass media in negotiating cross-cultural conflict in the 21st century.

## Method

In order to evaluate AJE's conciliatory potential, we conducted an investigation into AJE's news production process through interviews with 31 AJE journalists and other news-related staff. These interviews took place at each of AJE's main broadcasting bureaus: Doha, Washington DC, London, Kuala Lumpur, as well as in Jakarta. In addition to measuring the effectiveness of AJE's alternative approach to news production, we conducted a cross-sectional survey on a purposive sample of audiences of global news in Malaysia, Indonesia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Kingdom and the United States. A purposive sample is a type of non-probability sample that 'includes subjects or elements selected for specific characteristics or qualities and eliminates those who fail to meet these criteria' (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006: 91–2). Purposive samples are a type of non-random sampling and thus are not meant to be representative of the population. Yet, 'randomization may not be a practical or desirable way to collect evidence about some research questions' (Merrigan and Huston, 2004: 43). Given the relative dearth of information on AJE viewerships, and its relative youth as an organization, we feel that this purposive sample provides some interesting insight into AJE's ability to function as a conciliatory medium, as well as its potential impact on how viewers view the world. Drawing from existing research, each of the countries were chosen due to their ability to signify existing cultural perspectives in the context of growing resentment between different 'Islamic' and 'Western civilizations'.

The total sample size surveyed was 597 participants (107 in Indonesia, 107 in Malaysia, 101 in the United Kingdom, 104 in the United States, 118 in Qatar and 60 in Kuwait). We hired research firms that identified AJE viewers and conducted the survey either through CATI (computer assisted telephone interviewing) or in person in Malaysia, Indonesia, Qatar and Kuwait. These research firms used existing achieved samples from both syndicated media surveys as well as free find/referrals. We distributed the questionnaires ourselves in the US and the UK. In the US we distributed the questionnaires in person mostly at the two main Islamic centers in Toledo, Ohio, (one of only two American cities where AJE is carried through cable; the other city is Burlington, Vermont). As for the UK, we distributed the questionnaires in person at the two major mosques in central London. We thought that targeting mosques and Islamic centers in the US and the UK would increase the likelihood that we identify respondents who are familiar with AJE and who have been watching it, particularly given that Al-Jazeera Arabic has been a popular channel among Arabs and Muslims in general. The survey focused on sampling existing viewers of AJE only, though the sample included participants who had both just started watching AJE as well as those who

had been watching since it was first broadcast. Accordingly, the survey data provides an empirical record of the numerous dispositions of viewers of AJE, relative to the participants' dependence on AJE as a source of information, as well as how often and how long they had been viewing AJE.

### Findings and discussion

Included in the final data set were 409 males and 179 females.<sup>1</sup> Among the respondents, 421 were Muslim (72%); 88 were Christian (15%); 17 were Jewish (2.9%) and 59 were people of other religions.<sup>2</sup>

The participants in this survey were asked to rate AJE's success/failure in performing each of the 11 functions mentioned under the conciliatory media section on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 meant 'not at all successful' and 10 meant 'very successful'. A factor analysis test was conducted on the conciliatory media scale, and all 11 items on the scale loaded on one factor. So, it was 'factorially pure'. The conciliatory media scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .93. This scale's mean was 76.48 and its standard deviation was 16.37. The participants in this survey gave AJE a ranking that is more positive than negative (on average, 7 on a scale of 1 to 10) when it came to its performance of the 11 conciliatory functions. This means that the respondents had a favorable perception of AJE with regard to how it performed the conciliatory media functions (see Table 1 for details).

Importantly, a Generalized Linear Model test, using robust standard errors, adjusting for clustering by country as a method of analysis and controlling for respondents' gender, travel and religion, also showed that the more months that viewers had been watching AJE, the more they reported it was a conciliatory medium ( $p < .0056$  with a regression coefficient of .335). Our alpha level for this test was set at 0.05. Thus, the finding that AJE was a conciliatory media is not likely to be based merely on perceptions of AJE or its brand, but rather on the experiences of actually viewing AJE's programming. Combined, these findings demonstrate that audiences around the world found AJE to be effectively fulfilling a conciliatory function in its coverage of global news.

A conciliatory media can create space for the 'mediatized recognition' of stories from groups that have been historically and/or are currently disenfranchised, a process that has been found to be an important step in the process towards reconciling cultural tensions (Cottle, 2006: 173). While not directly stated, this process of mediatized recognition is at the heart of AJE's self-prescribed mission, as well as how many of its journalists feel about the organization's work. Moreover, by providing more depth and context to its stories, as well as reasoned arguments on all sides of an issue, a conciliatory media is likely to induce more open thinking when it comes to considering other people's perspectives.

Table 1 *Participants' responses to how AJE performed with regard to each of the criteria of a conciliatory media*

<b>Participants were asked: Compared to other televised broadcasting news networks, how does AJE rate in each of the following categories (with 1 being not at all successful, and 10 being very successful)?</b>	<b>Average Cumulative Responses (where 0 represents 'not at all successful' and 1 represents 'very successful')</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Providing a public place for politically underrepresented groups	0.764	2.028
Providing multiple viewpoints on a diversity of controversial issues	0.76	1.941
Representing the interests of the international public in general rather than a specific group of people	0.738	2.034
Providing firsthand observations from eyewitnesses of international events	0.786	1.962
Covering stories of injustice in the world	0.757	1.833
Acknowledging mistakes in journalistic coverage when appropriate	0.664	1.872
Demonstrating a desire towards solving rather than escalating conflicts	0.747	2.026
Avoiding the use of victimizing terms, such as martyr or pathetic, unless they are attributed to a reliable source	0.76	2.03
Avoiding the use of demonizing labels, such as terrorist or extremist, unless they are attributed to reliable sources	0.782	2.068
Abstaining from opinions that are not substantiated by credible evidence	0.789	2.008
Providing background, contextualizing information that helps viewers fully understand the story	0.791	1.794

One example of AJE's ability to provide space for mediatized recognition comes from an anecdote shared by AJE correspondent Josh Rushing. Among other things, Rushing contributes a series called 'War with Josh Rushing' that examines the consequences of war with a particular emphasis on the environmental, social, economic and political consequences of conflict that are often overlooked. In early 2008, Rushing filmed an episode for his series entitled 'Journey into the Heart of Darkness', where he joined a Vietnam veteran who had been charged with



nine counts of murder in the Mai Lai massacre on a trip back to Mai Lai, Vietnam. According to Rushing, this was the first time a US soldier who had been found guilty by the military of crimes involved in the massacre had ever gone back to Mai Lai. As Rushing (2008) described the experience: 'We introduced him to a survivor, who was shot twice as an 11-year-old boy. His whole family was killed, put into a hole and a grenade fired into the hole. Now he runs a museum there at the site'. The episode was not an effort to tarnish the record of the Vietnam veteran, nor was it to point blame at any particular person or organization. The episode was emotional but civil, creating a mediated space for the Mai Lai survivor to grieve publicly, in front of a soldier who was directly involved in the situation, while also allowing for the soldier to respond to the survivor's grievances. According to Rushing (2008), a former Marine himself:

My question in this episode is how can normally good people – because this is a cross-section of soldiers in the military, particularly if it's a draft situation – do such awful things. They were shooting eighteen-month-olds. They were killing and raping in such a way that war does not justify. There is no order in the military that can legally hold up to justify the things that they were doing. So that's what we are looking at. The psychological side of it. The emotional side of it. I don't care about the politics.

Similarly, AJE is known not only for focusing on the underreported, but also for taking greater risks by reporting in areas that are otherwise dangerous or difficult to get access to by the mainstream Western international news outlets. Myanmar is a case in point. In 2007, after the ruling generals' crackdown on its citizens, Al-Jazeera English's reporting was considered the most credible of any news organization, and won both the CONCENTRA 'Breaking News' award and the Asian Television Awards 'Best Current Affairs Programme' based on its coverage there. According to Mark Seddon, formerly AJE's main UN correspondent, in the midst of the Junta's crackdown, AJE kept five correspondents in Myanmar. More to the point, AJE's coverage was considered to be the most accurate and credible according to Myanmar's citizenry. Demonstrating the point, Seddon (2007), AJE's former UN correspondent recalls:

The British Ambassador to the United Nations actually requested to do an interview with us on Burma. I asked him why and he said, 'Because we know from all of our various sources that people in the country are looking at Al-Jazeera's website as the source of news for what's happening in their country' ... The ambassador wanted to send a message ... He wanted to send the signal that the British were using all of their best offices ... to sign up for much tougher sanctions unless the generals release prisoners, set boundaries and get their tanks off the streets.

When asked if AJE had been successful at representing the political interests of underrepresented groups, Will Stebbins (2008), AJE's DC bureau chief, recalled the network's coverage of the 2007 elections in Argentina, where AJE correspondent Teresa Bo caught on camera evidence of systematic voter fraud for both of the major political candidates running for office. Despite the fact that English-language news is not widely watched in Latin America, AJE's coverage,

caused a sensation in Argentina, had thousands of hits on YouTube.com. Local Argentinean news stations downloaded it from the internet and re-broadcasted it completely and the federal prosecutor in Buenos Aires contacted our correspondent and initiated a criminal case based on the reporting.

No other major international news network covered the story.

AJE's coverage of the treatment of minorities in Malaysia has also been quite telling. On 10 November 2007, large protests broke out in the heart of downtown Kuala Lumpur. Organized by BERSIH, a coalition of Malaysian opposition political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with the stated aim of reforming the electoral process, up to an estimated 40,000 protestors came out in force in order to draw attention to complaints of government discrimination against minority communities and to call for an end to government corruption and for electoral reform. While the protests began as a peaceful endeavor, Malaysian police quickly tried to quash the protestors and to dissuade people from joining the demonstrations by using fire hoses and tear gas. The images were stunning, not only for international audiences, but especially for Malaysians. While the Malaysian broadcast and print media failed to cover the protests as anything more than a blip, AJE covered the protests live and in detail. While covering them, AJE correspondent Hamish MacDonald was himself physically affected by the tear gas, the consequences of which were jarring for anyone watching (Powers and el-Nawawy, 2008).

The images of the excessive force used against the protestors spread like wildfire. Independent news providers and bloggers posted links to AJE's coverage, and more than 250,000 people watched it on YouTube.com during the first week after the protest. More importantly, a large number of Malaysians saw the images and debated the merits of the rally. The large-scale discrepancy between AJE's ample coverage of the protests and the sparser coverage of the Malaysian – largely state-influenced – media resulted in the Malaysian mainstream media's 'largest credibility crisis to date' (Netto, 2007). Moreover, despite an on-air scolding from the Malaysian Minister of Information, Zainuddin Maidin, AJE continued to air video of the government's heavy-handed tactics and was again highly critical of the government two weeks later during a new set of protests (that also turned violent due to excessive police force). Dato Manja Ismail

(2008), director of Malay publications for Media Prima, the state-run media conglomerate, argued that by exposing the way the ruling government was treating ethnic minorities:

AJE's coverage of the protests changed how we cover sensitive political issues here. Before, we could not show such images, or tell such tales of government abuse. Now, if we don't we will lose our audience to AJE. I've told the Minister of Information that, and he understands that things must change.

These stories dovetail well both with AJE's mission to provide a 'voice to the voiceless', as well as our finding that viewers felt that it was successful in providing a space for the mediatized recognition of abuses of power. Along these lines, when asked to elaborate on the potential benefits of focusing on the metaphorically 'voiceless' communities, Marwan Bashara (2007), AJE's senior political analyst, said:

Where you start mobilizing people, as viewers, and they start listening to this ... they start understanding that there is a global language, and that there is a global periphery and there are global power centers. And people start understanding that the suffering in Mozambique or in Zimbabwe is very similar to what you are suffering from in India or Myanmar ... And that's why we're global. We're global not because of our satellite – we can get to everyone ... It's because our themes and our coverage gets to everyone.

While a systematic content analysis is beyond the scope of this project, these stories, along with AJE's reputation and mission, provide substantial context for understanding why participants felt that AJE was fulfilling a conciliatory function based on the criteria developed here. By examining international news through the lens of the South, highlighting abuses of power and connecting stories of the disenfranchised from around the world, 'several important steps towards conflict resolution can occur: the [conflicting] parties may be educated about each other's point of view; stereotypes are challenged; and initial perceptions can be re-evaluated and clarified' (Botes, 1996: 7).

Respondents' perception of AJE as a conciliatory medium was supported by another major finding in our study. A Generalized Linear Model test showed that the more months the respondents reported watching AJE, the less dogmatic they were ( $p < .0066$  with a regression coefficient of  $-.214$ ). Dogmatism is defined as 'a relatively closed cognitive organization of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality, organized around a central set of beliefs about absolute authority which, in turn, provides a framework for patterns of intolerance and qualified tolerance toward others' (Rokeach and Fruchter, 1956: 356).

To measure the respondents' dogmatism level, we used a scale developed by Shearman and Levine (2006), which included 11 items measuring participants' levels of cognitive dogmatism. The scale included

statements such as: 'There is a single way to do most things'; 'It is important to be open to different points of view'; 'I consider myself to be very open-minded'; and 'Different points of views should be encouraged' (Shearman and Levine, 2006: 290–1). The scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .84. It had a mean of 31.72 and a standard deviation of 9.87.

Previous research has demonstrated a positive correlation between levels of dogmatism and confrontational behavior in conflict situations (Shearman and Levine, 2006). This finding was significant amongst both participants who relied heavily on AJE as their primary source for information and political behavior, as well as those who were less dependent on AJE. Moreover, the relationship was significant regardless of respondents' gender, religion or travel outside their countries.

Moreover, levels of dogmatism can be described as a gateway variable controlling the relative impact that new information – especially information provided via the global news media – can have on opinion and behavior formation:

The relatively closed nature of high-dogmatic individuals' cognitive systems leads to the processing of information in a way that ignores, minimizes, or avoids inconsistencies in beliefs and attitudes. Low-dogmatic individuals, however, do not keep inconsistent attitudes and beliefs isolated or separated, and the open nature of their cognitive systems allows them to see connections between belief and disbelief systems. (Davies, 1993: 698)

Levels of dogmatism are not only strongly related to how people behave in confrontational situations, but also to levels of political and cultural tolerance. While this study does not claim to provide evidence of a cause and effect relationship between AJE's viewership and participants' opinions, the significance of the correlation between the two indicates that watching AJE can be a positive factor in participants' behaviors over the long term. Thus, lower levels of dogmatism associated with AJE viewership may open up viewers to become increasingly capable of navigating issues that have otherwise been seen as irreconcilable. Moreover, lower levels of dogmatism have been found to strongly relate to one's willingness to engage and listen to competing information claims, a consequence that could be helpful in combating perceptions of clash of civilizations (Palmer and Kalain, 1985).

This positive relationship between the length of AJE viewership and a viewers' level of dogmatic thinking is most likely due to AJE's alternative approach to reporting the news. Indeed, by putting questions of culture and identity front and center in its journalistic mission, AJE is able to draw connections between globally isolated audiences that may have previously thought of each other in terms of cultural or 'civilizational' stereotypes.

Given that AJE is still a relative newcomer in the global mediasphere, the extent of its role in conflict resolution is yet to be seen, though presented here are some promising findings.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides tentative answers to Nick Couldry's (2006: 186) call for the 'transvaluing of media studies', where he argues that media scholars jettison 'the myth of the mediated centre and explore more openly how media are produced, circulated, received and (quite possibly) ignored in the contemporary social world'. Pointing out that the increased density in media flows does not necessarily translate into increased media power, Couldry calls on scholars to more critically evaluate the direction of the relationship between media consumption of public opinions. It is in this vein that this study cautiously approaches the conciliatory potential of AJE and its influence.

These findings indicate that AJE must be doing something right. Perhaps it is what Roger Silverstone (2002: 108) describes as today's news media's ability to fulfill 'the need to be heard'. As minorities around the world form diasporic communities in places far from their native environments, they have increasingly come to look towards global media systems as a means to connect with their homelands, hear and identify with their cultural kin, and to have their voices and interests represented in the global commons. Accordingly, today's news media have moved towards the personification of the message, targeting ideologically aligned audiences, regardless of nationality. AJE, by giving a voice to the voiceless and shedding light on parts of the world that have often been marginalized by mainstream global media, has been recognized by its viewers as a channel that can play a conciliatory role in today's conflict-driven environment. The question remains: can AJE's conciliatory function reduce global tensions and contribute to a dialogue rather than a clash of civilizations? Our findings have shown that not only did AJE viewers think that it was effective at embodying the journalistic standards that we identified as essential for a news outlet to cover contentious issues in socially productive ways, but the longer they watched, the less dogmatic they became, thus providing evidence that the concept of a conciliatory media can have tangible consequences for how people approach difficult issues. With these promising findings, we look forward to and encourage broader scholarship that will further develop and study the concept of a conciliatory media.

## Notes

- 1 There were nine missing cases in the gender question.
- 2 There were 12 missing cases in the religion question.

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