

The Middle East between Fiction and Reality: TV News and their Effect on U.S. Perspectives

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Abstract

Television and news programs exaggerate the real life events and political situation in Middle Eastern countries. This exaggeration affects the way people in the United States look at the Middle East. This problem is a product of the policies of news stations in framing their news reports and to the limited resources American people have as a window to that region. This article explores the influence of U.S. news and Al-Jazeera news in shaping the perspectives of the people in the United States toward the Middle East.

Keywords: TV news; Middle East; U.S. perspectives; Media; Reality

Introduction

With the changing political image in the Middle East, the region became the focus for many news stations due to the increased interest in following the news of those countries. But the international society, specifically in the western part of the globe, has limited resources to be informed about the recent updates of the Middle East. Limited resources was not the only reason for this lack of connection, but rather the several closed communities which did not have any opportunity to travel and see other parts of the world allowing the few international channels to contribute in shaping their perspectives as they like.

In an attempt to highlight this problem, the researcher conducted this narrative qualitative study to describe the effect of the international broadcasting of news on foreign public opinion toward the Middle East, and to state how positive or negative these effects might be.

The following questions constituted the central focus of this research study:

- How does exposure to Al-Jazeera news affect the perspectives of people in the United States toward the Middle East in contrast to other U.S. stations?
- What media sources are perceived as reliable when considering following the news of the Middle East?

In approaching the interrelated questions above, the paper had several sections. The literature review section presents an examination of the effect of media on people's worldviews throughout framing the news reports and a short description of the status of Al-Jazeera as a sample of the International channels that include Middle Eastern news in its programs. The methods section describes the participants who were interviewed. The results and discussion section offers an in-depth analysis of how American viewers have responded to Al-Jazeera news versus other U.S. channels, and how its programming is attached to, or detached from, the reality of the events taking place in that region. The

discussion section provides a future view of what might be the effect on the next generation and the change they can impose in their society through the different perspectives they have.

Media Language Use and Personality

Several research studies suggested the link between language use and psychological correlates [1]. This relationship is not applicable to the production of human beings only, but also to their reception of language in their surroundings. Media plays a great role in affecting people, and that affect takes its shape according to their unique individual personalities. This is one of the issues that should be the focus of educational institutes which acts as a place to prepare students to be leaders in the futures. The new generation should be ready to accept others and open to other cultures. One of the ways to achieve that is by fostering media education in each classroom, if not in every lesson. Cultural communication tools represented by media, should be utilized to be parts of lesson plans to present the importance of cross-cultural issues [2]. In this way, students will develop their communicative skills to contribute to globalization and also will have the ability to evaluate language of media in the future.

Images of the Middle-East and Western Perspectives

In times of wars and conflicts, the role of news media accompanies several factors such as "the political context of the conflict, the resources, skills, political power of the players involved" [3], and the relationship between the news station and the region in question. All these factors suggest that media has the power in shaping the images of any nation. But trials to expose reality to the images of the Middle East are very humble. There still exist the myths associated to the Middle Eastern countries portraying them as backward countries and unorganized. Keeping those images without correction limits the chances of perceiving communities in this region culturally and politically. What makes the situation worse is the increase of political orientation within media scope, which leads to an increase in the cultural disorientation of the audience.

That doesn't mean to blame media alone for assigning misshaped images to the Middle East. Governments of regions, actors, and political figures are all partners in the growth of this problem because they cross images and representations of that kind in movies and news reports without taking any action against them.

News framing

People focus on news reports in an extraordinary way in times of crisis or war. With this focus, media will have the greatest effect on public opinion on various issues. News stations, aiming at getting the attention of larger audience, frame their news reports in various ways to fulfill their purposes.

Framing news is the process of setting "particular events within a broader context," [4]. Those frames trigger other thoughts within the audience. Those thoughts will activate other frames creating the perspective of the viewer. Those frames operate on the level of the word, metaphor, or the scene of the event. TV news stations make use of Framing by utilizing this phenomenon to make certain sides of the story bigger or smaller. In that way, if media language "paints the Arab and Muslim worlds as uniquely prone to political violence, then, it is not merely choosing one facet of a narrative to highlight; it also helps ensure that facet is the most readily available to the audience" [5]. In that way, news reports shape the understanding of the larger categories those events define.

Al-Jazeera as an international station

As a paradigm of new media influence, Al-Jazeera "affects global politics and culture, particularly by enhancing the Islamic world's clout" [6].

Al-Jazeera was perceived as anti-American channel until Taliban regime kicked all foreign media representatives, except Al-Jazeera's reporters, out of Afghanistan. So, Western networks had no choice but to use Al-Jazeera's exclusive footage.

And with the Arab Gulf war and the following incidents, Al-Jazeera Television has established itself in the Arab speaking world. It has operated in relative freedom impacting both its media competitors and the politics of the region. With its bias towards some parties, and by airing Islamic extremists' propaganda, Al-Jazeera created a hostile public opinion environment directing the U.S. to sponsor Al-Hurra Television to confront that environment.

Methodology

Participant

Interviews are very helpful to investigate the perceptions and views of people [7-9]. The site of this research study is the International Students and Scholars Office (ISS) at the University of Wyoming, which has two sections: The Administrative Office and the International Programs Office. Two participants were chosen to be interviewed for this study. Both participants work at the International Programs Office of the ISS. The participants were chosen because they are in direct contact with students from the Middle East, and thus have the motivation to be updated about recent events and development in this region. Another reason to choose those specific participants is that they know how it is the case for people who do not work in university communities and who do not have the chance to meet with people from the Middle East. So, they can better explain how their

perspectives have changed because of the nature of their positions, and how their views are different from other ordinary people in the United States.

The male participant is the project coordinator in the International Programs Office. He works with sponsored students and visiting scholars. He works with American students as well in several advising activities. The majority of his students are from the Middle East. Most of the students he works with are undergraduates, but he has graduate students as part of sponsored scholarships, like those of Iraq and Libya.

The female participant is the Study Abroad Advisor for both incoming and outgoing students. She works mainly with students from Western Europe, but because of the nature of the International Students and Scholars Office she works with other students (including those from the Middle East) as well when needed.

Procedures

Open ended questions interview was conducted to obtain the participants' perspective of the Middle East based on the news they follow on U.S news channels and Al-Jazeera. The interview took approximately half an hour. The research was guided and organized by the following categories: perception of news channels, credibility of stations, and importance of cultural awareness. Participants were not offered any compensation for their participation. CNN and Al-Jazeera was singled out in that introductory explanation. The researcher explained that anonymity was guaranteed and that there were no true or false answers.

Findings and Discussion

After examining the data, it was clarified that the participants' perception of the Middle East could be examined according to the following categories:

Perception of news channels

Both participants stated that, in their very limited spare time, they watch BBC, ABC, France 24, CNN, FOX TV, and Al-Jazeera channel. Participants showed that they usually suspect national channels' news of the Middle East because of their "slant" in any event covered: there is no completely objective presentation of anything, everything has its own slant - I think - but.. um.. most of my news media that I follow is of western origin, or is tailored toward a western audience, or specifically American audience. So.. I don't know the degree to which that may color the.. news that we get.

The importance of the context emerged within this category. The remoteness of western channels sounded to create a ground for the suspicion of their news. The female participant formulated this idea in her speech saying that: if you have an American reporter in a Middle Eastern context, the reporter is only gonna see what he or she understands within the culture. So... there's still going to be... some... some slant that's there. Because they're just so much... ah... culturally that we don't understand unless we're from that culture.

International channels, in contrast, had much more acceptance from the participants of this study. The previous context idea was prominent again in the speech of the female participant. She explained that she trusts Al-Jazeera because its reporters are from the identified culture.

I think I would.. may be trust Al-Jazeera a little bit more because.. Al-Jazeera is there. Err... and they are from that culture.

The second male participant was much more indulged with looking at news of the Middle East from various perspectives because of his day-to-day interaction with students from that region. In addition to France 24 and Al-Jazeera America, he seemed to follow radio news as well. He believed that there is no complete objective presentation of news, yet he prefers international channels because they look at events from different perspectives.

On France 24 TV station, they often cover developments going on in the Middle East.. both from a French perspective but also from a French immigrant perspective, and there're a large number of immigrants right now in France.. um.. that are of Arab or a Middle Eastern or South African origin.. um.. especially from their former colonies in Algeria and Tunisia and areas like that where they have the Franca form of the.. North Africa region.. but they'll have often French immigrant guests on their panels.. and so.. I get to hear who still connected to the region and what's going on there even though they live now in France, and so I do feel like I get sometimes their perspective on. And I think Al-Jazeera often does a good job of interviewing locals, but to the degree, I don't know the degree to which their screening the comments that are made.. you know.. in selecting and picking and choosing from the perspectives that they gain.

Credibility of Al-Jazeera compared to other stations

According to West [10], credibility highlights the effectiveness of media and leads to a strong believing by their audience. In this study, CNN was mentioned as the most incredible national channel. One of the participants said: if I heard something on CNN... I would... probably... research it to find out... how accurate what I heard was, and if I'm getting a little piece of a much bigger story.

It was interesting to infer how people reach to that point because of the way this channel organize its programs. The way they have 24 hour rounds of news seems to have a negative effect on audience to the extent that they start to suspect its credibility. The case is different with Al-Jazeera which is meeting with locals frequently, documenting events in details, and exposing news from other cultures keeping a distant eye of events, which seems to fill a gap created by national U.S. channels. That was clearly stated in a statement said by one of the participants: they see things that may be we don't recognize because they're so much a part from our culture. We're just used to things being a certain way that its hard for us to look at ourselves through someone else's eyes. And I think that.. that may be why Al-Jazeera upsets some people.

Importance of cultural awareness

The participants of this study work in a university campus which is signified by its large international student's population. This unique work environment makes them different in their perspectives and worldviews from other ordinary people in the United States. They have different opportunities to meet with people from other countries, communicate virtually or face to face with representatives of various nations, and travel to those countries and experience their culture. Deep religious training was one of the interesting points which shows how people can understand others by going back to the shared religious roots of different religions.

For me, is my deep history understanding of the region in general from way back which comes to me from my faith training.. my reading of scripture.. since the origin of Christianity is in the Middle East.. and so I read from there some of the deep history of the region and sort of

the color people talk about how.. the religious differences in the region still shape to some degree what's going on.

All these kinds of openness on other cultures have a great effect on their view of facts and realities. As far as media is concerned, they have different perspectives of what news channels show and they do not accept a one direction path for stories.

The discussion of the effect of news of the Middle East on other people's perception of the region led to the exploration of some of the facts that seems to restrict the chances of formulating an idea which is less hostile or negative than what is offered by TV channels. One of these factors is the enclosed community in Wyoming, as a sample case of some communities in the United States. Some old images created in one way or another about the Middle East was another factor mentioned by the participants in addition to the wars and terrorist activities which cover the reality of the cultural status of the Middle Eastern countries. In their future view of the possible changes of this state one of the participants said:

if some of them (students of the university) go and talk to their families a little bit, but so many in Wyoming and in this part of the country.. I think so many people are.. they're living in generations of prejudice and beliefs, and their own way of fundamentalism that they don't recognize..... But getting that through to them is sometimes very difficult. So. I hope that it improves.. and they go out and they talk to people and have different perspectives and I hope that meeting different people on campus, the international students, and seeing that a woman wearing a burqaa' is not a threat, or seeing that someone of a different belief is not a threat to them. I hope that that makes a difference, but it's hard to gage whether that will actually be the case. They need to get out to the world, and they need to experience these things. And they need to recognize that we should instead of trying to judge and perpetuate myths about people, we should recognize that there's a human suffering. Sever suffering in parts of the world. Let's put that passion in that desire to do something positive.. rather than something violent. I hope that's makes a difference with them.

Conclusion

This research study has analyzed the effects of TV news on the perceptions of the people in the United States toward the Middle East. An interview with two participants from the International Students and Scholars Office at the University of Wyoming revealed that Al-Jazeera news of the Middle East has more acceptance among Americans. They stated that such international channels have more credibility than national channels because they are from the culture of the region and they take many of their news from locals.

Three categories emerged from the interviews: perception of news channels, credibility of Al-Jazeera compared to other Stations, and importance of cultural awareness. Those categories demonstrated the effect of TV stations on forming negative images of certain communities and imposing them on populations which might not be able to judge their credibility due to the gap of communication between cultures.

This study implies the importance of media literacy and educating the new generations about different sources of getting information. Multieducation and Themes of international focus should be adopted in every classroom as it may apply to fulfill the goal of achieving globalization and understanding the other.

Appendix

Interview Questions

- What is your name? What is your position in UW ISS?
- How often do you work with students from the Middle East?
- What National TV channel do you watch? What international TV channel do you watch?
- How do you think this channel(s) cover the Middle East politics and events in general?
- What is your perspective concerning Al-Jazeera and CNN news?
- What do you think about Al-Jazeera credibility when dealing with issues and events in the Middle East?
- How do you think political reform is promoted in U.S news and Al-Jazeera news?
- How do you think those TV programs influence other people's perspective in the U.S. regarding the Middle East?

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