

Different view of things

Comparison: Al Jazeera International vs. Al Jazeera Arabic

When Walter Lippmann wrote his preface for “Public Opinion” in 1921, he had not yet entirely digested the horrors of the First World War. He saw a relationship between the information that people were provided with to form their own opinions, and the resulting behavior: “Those features of the world outside which have to do with the behavior of other human beings, in so far as that behavior crosses ours, is dependent upon us, or is interesting to us, we call roughly public affairs. The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationship, are their public opinions. Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters.”

For us citizens of the World Wide Web, the following scene Lippman describes is unforgettable: “There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived. No cable reaches that island, and the British rail steamer comes

but once in sixty days. In September it had not yet come, and the islanders were still talking about the latest newspaper which told about the approaching trial of Madame Caillaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting on behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies.”

Media shape the image of the “others”

One could say that such oddities may happen anywhere, without saying anything in particular on media effects. But Lippman continues to say: “But their plight was not so different from that of most of the population of Europe. They had been mistaken for six weeks, on the continent the interval may have been only six days or six hours. There was an interval. There was a moment when the picture of Europe on which men were conducting their business as usual, did not in any way correspond to the Europe which was about to make a jumble of their lives. There was





Walter Lippmann

“The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined. Man is no Aristotelian god contemplating all existence at one glance.”

a time for each man when he was still adjusted to an environment that no longer existed.

All over the world as late as July 25th men were making goods that they would not be able to ship, buying goods they would not be able to import, careers were being planned, enterprises contemplated, hopes and expectations entertained, all in the belief that the world as known was the world as it was. Men were writing books describing that world. They trusted the picture in their heads. And then over four years later, on a Thursday morning, came the news of an armistice, and people gave vent to their unutterable relief that the slaughter was over. Yet in the five days before the real armistice came, though the end of the war had been celebrated, several thousand young men died on the battlefields.

Looking back we can see how indirectly we know the environment in which nevertheless we live. We can see that the news of it comes to us now fast, now slowly; but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself.

It is harder to remember that about the beliefs upon which we are now acting, but in respect to other peoples and other ages we flatter ourselves that it is easy to see when they were in deadly earnest about ludicrous pictures of the world. We insist, because of our superior hindsight, that the world as they needed to know it, and the world as they did know it, were often two quite contradictory things.

We can see, too, that while they governed and fought, traded and reformed in the world as they imagined it to be, they produced results, or failed to produce any, in the world as it was. They started for the Indies and found America. They diagnosed evil and hanged old women. They thought they could grow rich by always selling and never buying. A caliph, obeying what he conceived to be the Will of Allah, burned the library at Alexandria.”

Less than 100 years later, after the experience of television, Internet and blogs, the question about the real progress of our knowledge of “the others” poses itself. The causes for the outbreak of World War I are generally circumscribed with the kind of nationalism that Europeans would have a hard time to imagine in the year 2007. Not least because, between now and the time when Walter Lippmann wrote his book in 1921, the Second World War took place.

Yet what are the reasons for the current fears after the events of 9/11 and the subsequent alleged “War of Terror”? Maybe the lessons learnt from the First and Second World War were too much fixated on Transatlantic relations; maybe the German view of the last war’s global impact was limited to Field Marshal Rommel’s, without taking the actual effects on the people in the region from Egypt to Iran seriously.

Surprised by the Tsunami of Islamist terror

Sixty years later and the world community has gone through the experience of 9/11, the attacks in Madrid and London, the consequences of the Danish cartoon controversy as well as Pope Benedict’s lecture at the University of Regensburg. A region is pushing into the people’s awareness whose language, culture and religion, despite the television age and the Internet, are utterly incomprehensible in the First and Second World. The correspondents in the European TV stations reported from Jerusalem, and occasionally they were in Baghdad, Riyadh or Cairo – but they were just as unprepared for the ‘Tsunami’ of the actual or alleged Islamic threat as the rest of the European and North American population. Why? Because we do not speak Arabic? Because only few of the correspondents working from Jerusalem, Baghdad or Beirut speak Arabic?

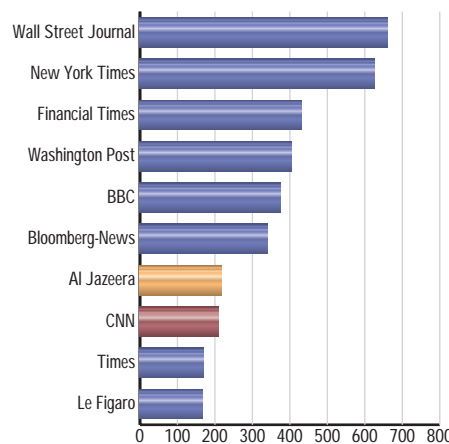
Luckily, there are satellite stations and a variety of television stations in Arab countries. During the first Iraq War, the European media had the impression that, without CNN, there would not be any footage from the Middle East. The regional answer to this is known to many as **Al Jazeera** – and even that illustrates how limited our view on the Arab media world is. In fact, with their broadcast stations **NILE TV, LBC, Al Manar, Al Ikhbariya** etc. it is far more pluralistic than that.

Neither does it come as a surprise that **Al Jazeera** was quickly “classified” – the reproaches against **Al Jazeera** are so well-known that even people outside



of media sciences are able to recite them at the push of the button. It is generally stigmatized as an organ of international terrorism, since it is purportedly nothing but a relay station for Bin Laden videotapes. In addition, its chief editor Ahmed Sheikh takes every opportunity to cement the cliché (**Weltwoche**, 47/06) that he, as a Palestinian, rather based his news selection criteria on the fight against Israel (and therefore also against all other states that are on Israel’s side) than on basic journalistic criteria. The latter would be to provide information, so that the audience, which is not trained for in-depth research, can largely form its own opinion.

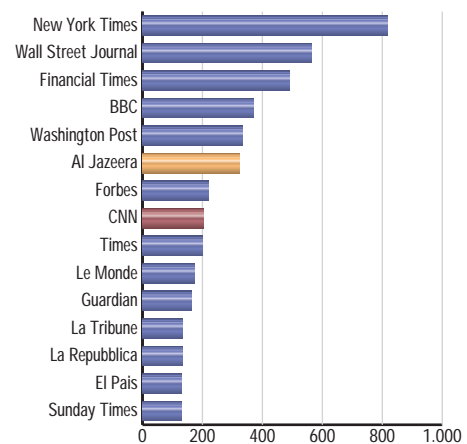
1) Most frequently quoted international media in Germany



Quotations in 39 opinion leading German TV and print media

Source: Media Tenor 01/01 - 12/31/2005 Basis: 30.454 quotations in 39 opinion leading German TV and print media

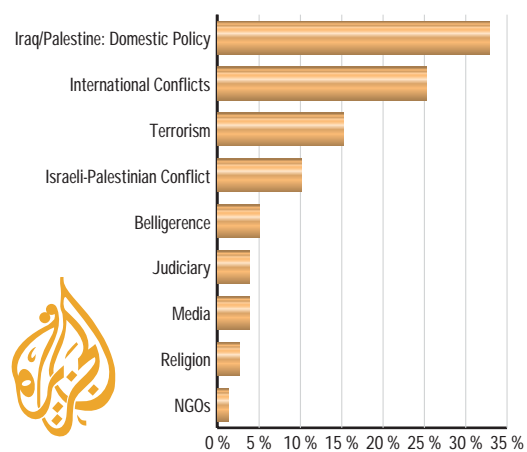
2) Most frequently quoted international media in Germany



Quotations in 39 opinion leading German TV and print media

Source: Media Tenor 01/01 - 12/31/2006 Basis: 44.655 quotations in 39 opinion leading German TV and print media

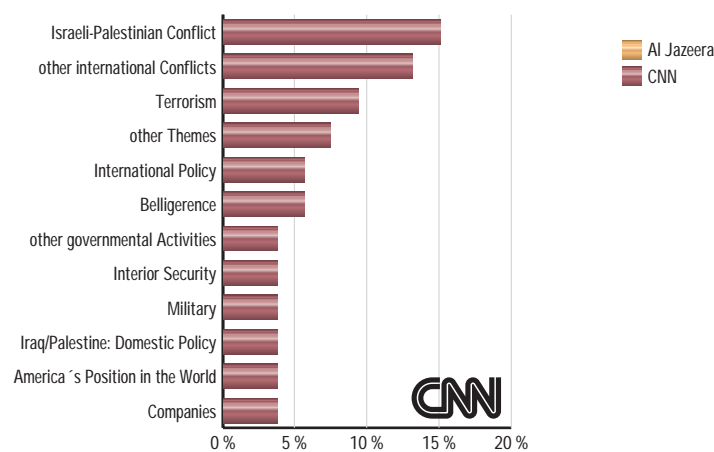
3) Topical structure of the Al Jazeera quotations



Share of all quotations

Source: Media Tenor 04/01 - 12/31/2006 Basis: 82 quotations in 39 opinion leading German TV and print media

4) Topical structure of the CNN quotations



Share of all quotations

Source: Media Tenor 04/01 - 12/31/2006 Basis: 58 quotations in 39 opinion leading German TV and print media

Al Jazeera among the “most frequently quoted” foreign media in Germany

Is he doing justice to his work with those comments, or is it simply one of the common overstatements in the daily struggle for attention? Most of the journalists used to work for the **BBC** previous to joining **Al Jazeera**. Have they forgotten where they came from and are now negating the editorial trade that they have exercised for decades? The continuous content analysis of **Al Jazeera** prime time news – which, since November 15th, 2006, is also represented with its own English-language programming in the “West” – shows that it does much more than to simply play Bin Laden tapes.

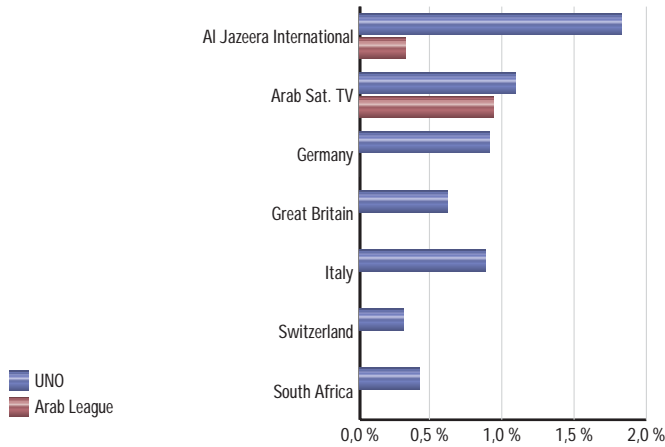
The graph listing the foreign media that are most frequently quoted by the German opinion leading media illustrates **Al Jazeera**'s special position: No other news source from the Arab region raises as much attention as the station from Doha. While the **New York Times** continues to be the main source for exclusive foreign news, **Al Jazeera** has recovered despite increasing competition from the print and TV segment. In 2003, subsequent to the second Iraq War, allegations of the station's one-sidedness had become so strong that, for a few years, the German media tended to quote more from **Al Arabiya**'s news programs.

Yet in 2006, the tide turned in **Al Jazeera**'s favor. Almost on par with the **BBC** and far ahead of **CNN**, the 39 opinion leading German media referred to **Al Jazeera** stories 324 times. German news channels such as **N24** (188 quotations) or **NTV** (76) would

be more than happy with that figure. Looking at the charts on the following page, however, it becomes obvious that the German opinion leading media view neither **Al Jazeera** nor **CNN** as a relevant source for information beyond the typical topics of ‘terrorism’ or ‘international conflict’. News from the station's home country, Qatar, or from its rapidly developing neighbors UAE or Bahrain did not appear to be important enough for the German media to seek out **Al Jazeera** news.



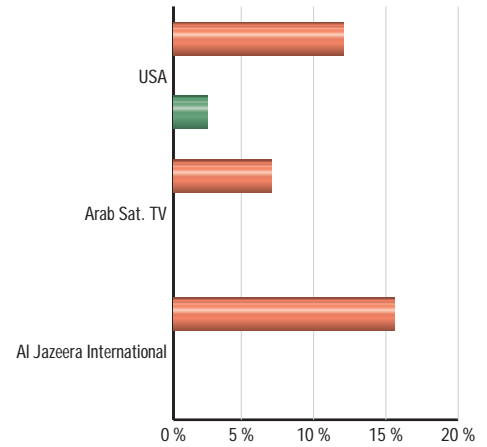
5) Coverage on international organizations



Share of all news stories

Source: Media Tenor 01/29.- 02/22/2007 Basis: 602/3.922/3.492/2.077/903/628/3.499 stories in 30 TV news programs

6) Assessment of George W. Bush



Share of all news stories

Source: Media Tenor 01/29.- 02/22/2007 Basis: 265/43/32 stories in 30 TV news programs

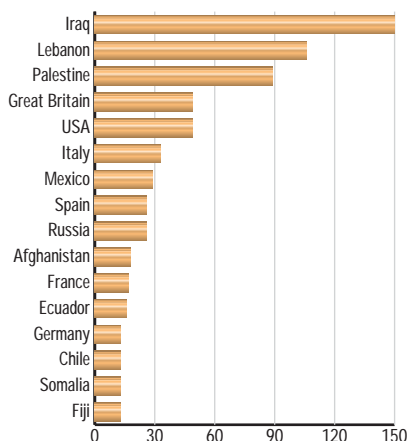
Chance to form your own opinion

At the end of 2006, the station decided to start its own English-language programs and to directly address interested audiences in Europe, America and other English-language regions. It is a unique chance for all who are interested in first-hand information from the region to form their own opinions. Maybe less so about the real world – since all television programs in the world can only provide the tiniest glimpses – but at least compared to domestic news programs.

This was one of the reasons why Media Tenor, on the occasion of the opening of the Media Tenor ARABIC MEDIA INSTITUTE on March 8th, 2007, provided James Wagner, President of Emory University, with the data on the analysis of Arab TV news from the years 2003 until 2006. After all, who seeks information on, for example, the activities of the UN, has better chances with **Al Jazeera** than with the US networks or Swiss television – as is shown by **graphs 7 and 8.**



7) Foreign news coverage in Al Jazeera International



Number of news stories

Source: Media Tenor
11/15/2006 - 01/31/2007

Basis: 902 stories
(some issues missing)

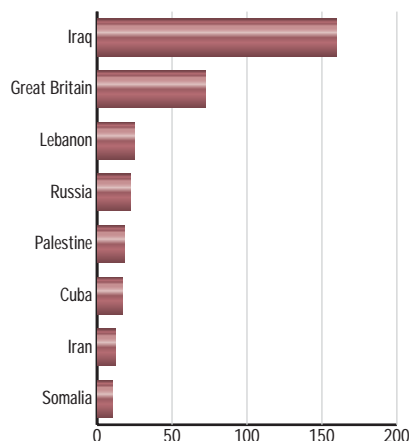
The thesis that the Arab networks practised permanent ‘Bush-Bashing’, which is widely believed to be the case especially in the US, does not correspond to the data of the continuous media analysis: The bar diagrams show that the US president has no reason to complain about his portrayal by Al Jazeera – at least not compared to his assessments by ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox during the same time period.

More foreign coverage than ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox

Less than 10% of Americans have a passport. Against this background, journalists at ABC, CBS, FOX or NBC could argue that there is a good reason for providing a reduced amount of foreign news. Still, one could also argue the other way around: Would a broader range of information not encourage some people to gaze beyond their own navel? An increase in passports might also reduce the willingness to drop bombs onto regions whose hospitality the US has just enjoyed.

No matter what perspective the reader or viewer happens to share, so long as the US is engaged in active foreign policy, more information about events on the other side of the Atlantic might be helpful. The charts give the opposite impression, however: All four US networks combined do not achieve the same diverse outlook on the world that Al Jazeera International has. This is particularly true considering that the 222 news stories about Iraq that were aired on ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX can even be

8) Foreign news coverage in the US network news



Number of news stories

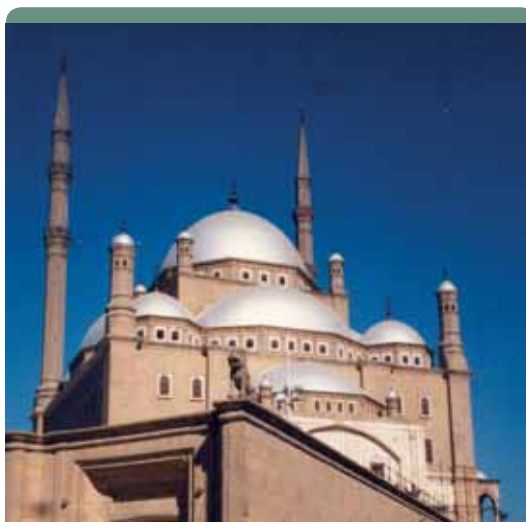
Source: Media Tenor
11/15/2006 - 01/31/2007

Basis: 1.658 news stories
(some issues missing)

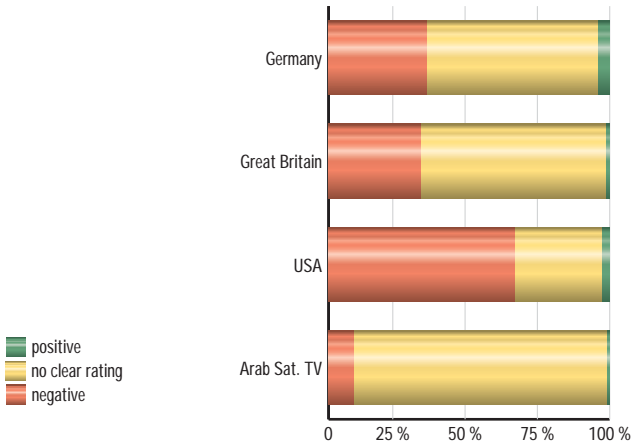
classified as ‘domestic news’. After all, the number of soldiers stationed in Iraq as well as future developments in the region will heavily influence the decisions of US voters at the next presidential elections in November 2008.

More neutral perspective on religion

We have thus come full circle, back to Walter Lippmann and his experiences about news coverage during World War I: “The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined. Man is no Aristotelian god contemplating all existence at one glance.” Journalists aren’t, either. This



9) Assessment of Islam in 18 international TV news programs

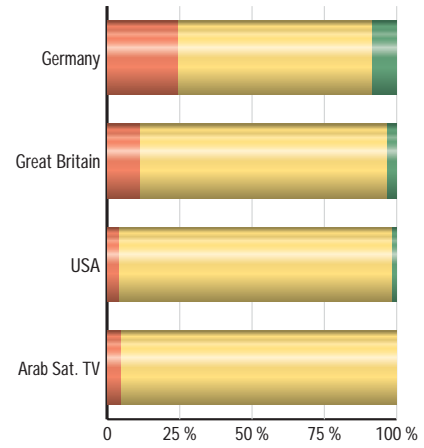


Share of all statements on religion and values

Source: Media Tenor
01/01 - 02/10/2007

Basis: 3.923 statements in 18 TV news programs (*US TV till 01/31/2007)

10) Assessment of Christianity in 18 international TV news programs



Share of all statements on religion and values

Source: Media Tenor
01/01 - 02/10/2007

Basis: 1.704 statements in 18 TV news programs (*US TV till 01/31/2007)

is why it is even more crucial to provide different perspectives on how to achieve the peaceful coexistence of peoples. In democracies, those are the citizens. This is why Europeans are puzzled by the fact that Americans from Boston to LA, from Chicago to Miami are officially kept from getting easy access to the English-language program of Al Jazeera International. Marvin Kalb, popular US anchorman and founding director of the internationally renowned Shorenstein Center at Harvard University, has been calling for free access to Al Jazeera in the US ever since the plans for the English-language service were made public – even if he does not necessarily agree with all of the aired content. Charts 9 and 10 can at least take away one of the many concerns: When Al Jazeera covers Islam or the Christian faith in its news programs, it does so primarily in a neutral way. (rs)

