

Courting, Criticism, Censorship and Bombs

*The Bush Administration's Troubled Relations with
al-Jazeera Channel from September 11 to the War in Iraq*

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Abstract

On the eve of the conflict in Iraq, the US administration tried to re-establish more friendly relations with the Arab media. This article reviews American public diplomacy and communications strategies towards the Arab satellite networks, with particular emphasis on the Qatar-based al-Jazeera Channel, and considers the degree to which American strategies succeeded. The American experiences with al-Jazeera during the war in Iraq were similar to their experiences during the war in Afghanistan. The main finding is that the US administration lacks a comprehensive communications strategy towards al-Jazeera: In both conflicts the US administration started by courting the channel, giving exclusive interviews and participating in debates, but when war started friendly relations came to an end. When al-Jazeera focused on the ugly face of both wars, the American administration reacted with criticism, threats and attempts to silence the channel.

Key Words: al-Jazeera channel, US administration, war in Iraq, public diplomacy, arab satellites and media at war

Introduction

As Jon B. Alterman wrote in 1998, in his book *New Media, New Politics?*:

For the US government, which often enjoys more support among Arab governments than among Arab populations, a more open [Arab] media environment is a mixed blessing. On the one hand the United States supports human rights in general and freedom of expression in particular, and the new technologies are likely to prove a boom to free expression. On the other hand, the public opinion in much of the Arab world has been turning against the United States in recent years, and the new technologies can facilitate stirring up anti-US sentiments.

During the War in Iraq, this dichotomy posed a major challenge for an American administration facing low public support in the Middle East while, at the same time, an increasing number of popular Arab networks portrayed the ugly face of the American-led war in Iraq. This chapter reviews American public diplomacy and communications strat-

egies towards the Arab satellite networks, with particular emphasis on the Qatar-based al-Jazeera Channel, and considers the degree to which American strategies succeeded. The chapter is based on interviews with editorial staff at al-Jazeera Channel, Al Arabiya Channel and Abu Dhabi TV conducted in October 2003, and on my analysis of the debates on US public diplomacy towards the Arab and Muslim worlds.

The American Image Problem

The concept of public diplomacy involves efforts to inform and influence populations in other countries – to win their hearts and minds by means of informational activities, educational and cultural exchange, and international broadcasting. It is not a new concept in American foreign policy. Whereas traditional diplomacy is a government-to-government exercise conducted between officials, public diplomacy is broadly aimed at the international public. Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first American president to identify a foreign target audience, creating the Office of War Information during the Second World War. In 1942, the office set up the Voice of America. In 1950, President Truman set up the Campaign of Truth, aimed at legitimising US involvement in the Korean War, and in 1951, he established the Psychological Strategy Board, responsible to the National Security Council, to advise international anti-Communist propaganda (Thussu, 2000:31). The United States Information Agency (USIA), established in 1953, was responsible for American public diplomacy campaigns.

During the four decades of the Cold War, the Soviet block and the US battled to influence each other's domestic populations, and those of third world countries, through international broadcasting. Owing to high rates of illiteracy, and weak national domestic media, radio became a crucial medium through which to reach the people of third world countries (ibid:36). Heil Jr (2004) argues that international broadcasters have employed three principal styles of international radio: propaganda, or policy-laden, radio (prevalent during World War II and the first two decades of the Cold War, examples being Radio Moscow and Radio Tirana); fact-based, news and information radio (examples being the BBC and VOA); and youth-oriented or entertainment radio (examples being Radio Sawa and Radio Farda) (Heil Jr 2004). The International Broadcasting Act of 1994 brought VOA and all the rest of the non-military international broadcasting under the nine-member Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and established the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB) as the administrative arm of the BBG (Honley, 2004). The Middle East was a particular target for Western broadcasters, owing to the region's geo-strategic importance as the source of the world's largest supply of oil (Thussu, 2000:36); US policymakers have focused on the Middle East for decades, carefully monitoring VOA programming to the region (Alexandre, 2001:80). VOA Arabic broadcasting to the area increased with the escalation of hostilities leading up to the Gulf War in 1991. Arabic programming was increased to 17 hours per day and culture and music were dropped for an all-news programming (ibid.:81). After the war, however, the VOA Arabic service was neglected, and according to the Independent Task Force on Public Diplomacy the popularity of the VOA Arabic programme has been remarkable low in recent years (compared to other US broadcasters) because of increased competition from Arab broadcasters (Independent Task Force Report 2002).

US public diplomacy activities have four main functions: exchange of persons to build mutual understanding; provision of general information about American society and American perceptions of world politics; the advocacy of policy on issues of imme-

diate concern; and the provision of advice on public affairs. The first two functions perform a support role somewhat removed from day-to-day policy concerns, whereas the latter two are closely related to the formulation and execution of foreign policy. Whereas the first two represent a long-term idealism – seeking to create mutual understanding – the second two demonstrate the realism in US foreign policy and the need to act immediately. In 1999, the USIA was abolished and its functions were transferred to the State Department. The funding of American public diplomacy dwindled from the mid-1990s, and by 2001 the US devoted only \$1,1 billion a year to public diplomacy – less than four percent of its annual international affairs budget (Council of Foreign Relations 2002).

For the US, September 11 called into question the old model of public diplomacy, as the terrorist attacks illustrated the extreme consequences of a widespread American image-problem in the Arab and Muslim worlds. After an initial outpouring of public sympathy, discontent with the United States has grown around the world. According to Leonard and Smewing (2003), recent polls¹ in countries in the Middle East and in the Muslim world revealed three important findings. *First*: there exists a fundamental distrust of American foreign policy and the accounts of the motivations behind it, which translates into antipathy. El-Nawawy and Iskandar consider feelings of a conspiracy to be so dominant in the region that they claim conspiracy theory is ‘a key to understanding the political culture of the Middle East’ (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002:60). *Second*: there exists a perception that western policy aims at a ‘clash of civilisations’. This idea is frequently referred to in the Arab media, and there is evidence from polls to back up the idea that the Islamic world feels itself threatened as a civilisation. Western opinion polls and newspapers echo this cultural suspicion and fear of a clash. It must be emphasised that neither set of interviewees believes there has been a ‘clash’ so far: they fear one in the future. *Third*: opinions about the US are complex and contradictory, for in Middle Eastern attitudes to the US there is also a desire for a deeper relationship and further engagement with what many see as a highly successful and desirable society. Remarkably high numbers of young people in the region express a desire to move to other countries in order to seek economic success, clearly indicating their dissatisfaction with current conditions and future prospects in their home countries (Leonard and Smewing, 2003:35-45).

Context: A New Arab Communications Environment

The American image-problem reflects a general discontent with US policies in the Middle East – where US support of Israel is continuously criticised and the US-led war on terror is seen as an important part of the problem. Majorities in ten out of eleven Muslim countries surveyed opposed the war on terrorism (Kohut, 2003). These public perceptions, I will argue, exist within a regional communications environment that has several important new aspects.

First: the regional media environment is more open than it was previously. The growth of new and comparatively free transnational Arab media, such as newspapers, satellite channels and the Internet, makes it possible for American officials to speak directly to large numbers of people in the Middle East. For years, a strongly censored state-monopoly media had dominated Arab media, which showed monotonous commentaries on images of state leaders smiling and shaking hands and avoided critical debate, live coverage and dissident voices for fear of provoking the authorities. Television had

been the most heavily censored and controlled medium (Schleifer, 2001), but since the mid-1990s this picture has changed. An increasing number of Arab satellite networks have broken taboos, addressing sensitive issues, broadcasting controversial debates, giving a platform to oppositional voices, and providing 24-hour live coverage of news. The Arab satellite networks are by far the most popular media in the Middle East (Levy and Bugingo, 2002). As regards freedom of speech, al-Jazeera in particular has 'raised the bar in terms of what can be talked about' (Zayani, 2003, interview by author) and, to remain competitive, other satellite channels have had to address the same controversial issues as al-Jazeera (ibid).

Second: the regional communication arena is an arena of conflict. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network turned to al-Jazeera to reach their two target groups – the Western news media and the Arab masses (Hoffman, 2002). Through several speeches broadcast on the Arab network, bin Laden and his supporters repeatedly claimed that the world was divided into believers and infidels. Bin Laden claimed that the US, Israel and the US's allies among the Muslims were the enemy, and that he was fighting to liberate Jerusalem and the Arab Peninsula from these occupiers (Vogt and Heger, 2002:171). The message of bin Laden and his sympathisers was, to some degree, supported by some young Arabs opposed to terrorism as such, but who nonetheless experience humiliation, exclusion, suppression and suffering caused by what they see as American 'arrogance and power' (ibid: 183). Because of its potential appeal to Arab youth, bin Laden's propaganda has had to be countered by Western news management responses.

Third: an important long-term political effect of the new Arab media environment is the emergence of what has been labelled a new Arabism or a new Arab public sphere². There has been increased interest in international affairs, which often takes the form of an Arab-world-versus-the-rest-discourse rather than investigating conflicts between Arab states (Alterman, 1998:56). In recent years, al-Jazeera has played the most prominent role in mobilising and politicising the public in the region. In particular, its coverage of the second Palestinian intifada sparked pro-Palestinian demonstrations and increased awareness of international and regional affairs (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002:56). Al-Jazeera entered the international media scene at the time of the Afghanistan war. It was the only foreign news network permitted to broadcast from Taliban-controlled areas, and was thus able to challenge the western media's framing of the conflict, providing a critical Arab perspective on the War on Terrorism.

The American Response:

American Public Diplomacy from September 11 to the War in Iraq

The American administration realised it needed a presence on Arab satellite television, not only to improve its image and sell 'America' to the Arab youth, but also to influence the political thinking of the Arab world in this new regional communications environment. Debates on public diplomacy in the US after the terrorist attacks revealed a simplistic understanding of the roots of anti-American sentiments. There seemed to be an assumption within the Bush administration that America was hated by enemies who know no better and because there is a 'misunderstanding' of what America is about (President George W. Bush 2001 in Leonard and Smewing 2003). The American administration launched several public diplomacy campaigns shortly after September 11 to 'rebrand American foreign policy [and] rebrand diplomacy' (Colin Powell, Secretary of

State, 2001 in Council of Foreign Relations 2002). These were led by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, former advertising executive Charlotte Beers. Beers' strategy can be summed-up in marketing terminology: to build a brand (America), and sell this brand to a target audience (the Arab 11-year old), by using an emotionally appealing message (freedom). The target group was the sceptical majority of young people with strong reservations about aspects of American policy, whilst at the same time admiring and respecting aspects of American life and culture. US Congress allocated \$255 millions for public diplomacy in 2002-2004 under the framework of the War on Terrorism, and \$75 million from the budget for fighting natural disasters, to the Arabic and Central Asian service of the Voice of America (Power 2003). After September 11, public diplomacy again became an important part of American foreign policy.

The administration was soon to initiate several short-term information campaigns. They immediately established a 24-hour media centre, The Coalition Information Centre, and created a network to coordinate press briefings in Washington D C, London and Islamabad. This temporary information network later became a permanent, fully-staffed Office of Global Communications to coordinate the American foreign policy message and the American image abroad. The administration also initiated multimedia rooms to communicate American values, published an information booklet on Al Qaeda in 36 languages, and set up a series of websites on terrorism (in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu and Pashtu). The number of Arab exchange students to the US was increased, and networking with former exchange students was intensified. In addition, Under Secretary Beers' new exchange programs for Arab and Muslim journalists aimed to increase their knowledge of American society and to establish closer ties with news sources in-country.

Several long-term projects were initiated to support the production of programmes to be broadcast on the Arab media and on American-funded international media broadcasting to foreign audiences. Opinion polls revealing that many Americans and Muslims shared core values such as faith, family and learning (see for instance the Arab American Institute 2002), led to a \$15 million 'Shared values' campaign aimed at convincing the moderate Muslim majority that the US is a multicultural and religiously tolerant society³. The campaign included five mini-documentaries on 'Muslim Life in America' in which American Muslims talked about their daily lives. The strategy was to use the credibility and third-party authenticity these pro-American Muslims could add to the initiative.

Another long-term project was the revival of Voice of America Arabic to attract younger audiences. The network had been neglected since the Gulf War of 1991, and its daily programmes were reduced to seven hours on a 'barely audible short-wave signal', heard only in a 'standard, classical Arabic that is rarely spoken on the streets of the Middle East' (Pattiz in Boehlert, 2001). In 2001, only two percent of the audience in the region listened to the channel (ibid). In March 2002, the Bush administration relaunched VOA in a new commercialised Arabic pop-music version: Radio Sawa (Radio Together). In order to attract Arab youngsters, who are often fond of American popular culture, Radio Sawa gave airtime to both Arab singers and western artists. In between the music were brief news bulletins in Arabic – using moderate westernised terminology and an American slant on events – as well as features and daily questions and opinions from the audience.

The US administration also wanted to improve their performance on the popular Arab media. American spokespersons and high-ranking politicians were interviewed on al-Jazeera and other major Arab networks. For the first time, the American administration spoke directly to an Arab mass audience. Senior American politicians such as President

George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and former Ambassador to Syria Christopher Ross, were accessible to the major Arab networks. The US administration wanted to 'get out there...to exchange...to get in interviews' (Beers, 2002).

Very soon, however, a mixed message started to emerge. Within the first months of the terrorist attacks, the US in turn courted, criticised, tried to censor and (unintentionally or not) bombed the Kabul office of al-Jazeera (Hoffman 2002:87). From early October 2001, American authorities started trying to influence and control al-Jazeera's coverage of the war by pressuring the Qatari authorities to rein in the network, claiming that its version of the conflict was distorted. The US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, accused the network of being 'a mouthpiece of the terrorists', of 'fabricating footage of civilian sufferings' in Afghanistan, and of 'airing terrorist propaganda' (Levy and Bugingo, 2002). At the same time, Condoleezza Rice persuaded American networks to agree to be cautious when broadcasting the speeches of Osama bin Laden and other controversial material from al-Jazeera. All the major mainstream American networks and newspapers signed the agreement (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002:178), this self-censorship raising broad criticism from international media and human rights groups. Many communications strategists regarded the manner in which the US authorities dealt with al-Jazeera at home and abroad as harmful to its public diplomacy campaigns: this was not the first time foreign regimes had tried to silence al-Jazeera, but the American attempts were strongly condemned as proof of American double standards towards the region and as proof that the USA defended freedom of speech only as long as it was not critical (Boehlert, 2001).

Did the American Strategists Win Arab 'Hearts and Minds' in Time for the War in Iraq?

The American campaign faced several challenges in its first year. One of the major problems was that none of the American politicians participating in Arab TV programmes spoke Arabic – indeed, very few American diplomats and spokespersons in the region were fluent in the language. Furthermore, America's supporters in the region lacked the credibility to risk speaking up for their Western ally, and largely kept silent. Al-Jazeera offered translators, but in a war of words it turned out that not having efficient spokespersons with extensive knowledge of either the language and regional culture or of strategic communication, constituted a serious obstacle. Former American Ambassador to Syria Christopher Ross, who was fluent in Arabic, became the only successful American spokesperson on al-Jazeera in the first phase of the war on terror. Even though Ross made a generally good impression on Arab viewers when participating on debates and talk shows, he admitted to difficulties when he was 'thrown on panels where the other extreme [was] very extreme' (Ross 2002). Ross and other American officials claimed that al-Jazeera was biased and negative about American policies in the region. An example often quoted to explain the challenges American officials met on al-Jazeera was Condoleezza Rice's interview in October 2001. Although Dr Rice was invited to discuss the war in Afghanistan, the channel advertised the interview by repeatedly playing pro-Israel statements she had made earlier, so that she lost 'hearts and minds' before her interview was broadcast. When accused of bias, al-Jazeera, which claims to present 'the opinion and the other opinion', says the channel cannot control what their guests say, or intervene if their guests give each

other a hard time (Ballout, 2003, interview by author). At the same time, the channel spokesmen say that by focusing on the Palestinian issue they were helping American officials to understand what is important for Arab viewers, '...so perhaps [they] want to concentrate on these points' (ibid.). al-Jazeera says they give everyone a chance to express their opinions. At the same time, they defend the channel's right to be critical towards American politicians on key issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in order to prove to their audience that they have not become 'a tool for American propaganda' (ibid.).

Another challenge for the American campaigns was that although the President himself gave an interview on al-Jazeera, most of the American officials in Washington had made it their policy not to talk to the channel. As a result, al-Jazeera's Washington bureau complained that the Americans denied them access. Even though Arab and Muslim correspondents had been identified as an important group to influence by Under Secretary Beers' office, and Beers had held closed press briefings for them, a push-down mentality still dominated Washington's communication with the Arab press. Another problem emerged in the drive to recruit more Arab students to the USA and to intensify the networking with former exchange students. At the same time as the administration wanted to strengthen the ties between the US and the Arab world, several Arab students had their scholarships withdrawn after the terrorist attacks, others had problems obtaining visas, and yet others felt discriminated against in the passport controls when entering the US.

The results of the 'shared values' campaigns were also disappointing. The mini-documentaries, 'Muslim life in America', were never aired to a broad Arab audience, since most major Arab networks either demanded too high a price for them or rejected them as political propaganda. Consequently, the State Department cut back its distribution, and put the campaign on hold (Weisman, 2003). The most successful project in the public diplomacy campaign was Radio Sawa. This radio station quickly gained a broad audience among young people in the region who liked its music and fresh style. Even so, critics claim that its positive effects are limited, as most of the listeners only listen to the music, turning to the regional news media for news updates (Fandy, 2003).

The supporters of Under Secretary Beers' revitalisation of American public diplomacy labelled her strategies as innovative and fresh approaches to a difficult task. Beers was also credited for providing better training for diplomats, and for introducing sharper market research tools. Her critics, however, doubted that marketing was the right background for her job. They claimed that her inexperience in negotiating the bureaucratic corridors of Washington delayed the necessary campaigns, and that there was a cultural problem between Beers and the bureaucracy (Teinowitz, 2002). In one of her last public speeches as Under Secretary, Beers asked for patience and sustainable investment in the engagement of the target audience. She described her job as 'pretty big' and admitted it was 'a bit daunting' (Beers, 2003). Only weeks before the war in Iraq, Charlotte Beers had to resign from her position.

A New War – American Authorities and al-Jazeera During the War in Iraq

On the eve of the conflict in Iraq, the Bush administration tried to re-establish more friendly relations with the Arab media. Once again recognising the importance of speaking to the Arab public through the transnational Arab media, the US administration gave the networks access to interviews with high-ranking politicians; Secretary of State Colin

Powell, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice – among others – gave extensive exclusive interviews on al-Jazeera in February and March 2003.

The administration attempted to convince viewers of the need to invade Iraq. Since most of the mainstream American news networks had left the war zone, and because all major American networks had video-sharing agreements with al-Jazeera and other Arab networks, the US administration realised that the transnational Arab media would be an important source for international Baghdad war coverage. Improving American relations with the Arab networks was again a high priority in the last weeks preceding the war. Efforts to strengthen ties with al-Jazeera were helped by the decision to place the million-dollar American Central Command (CENTCOM) in the tiny country of Qatar; placing the prestigious press briefing centre in here gave al-Jazeera access to the events at the centre, and assisted Central Command media officials' access. Before the war, exchanges between the staff at the briefing centre and al-Jazeera headquarters were so friendly that several US media officials reportedly barbequed with al-Jazeera's news director (Perlez and Rutenberg, 2003), but as soon as the war started history repeated itself, and the US administration again sent mixed messages to Arab media and viewers. They courted, criticised, harassed, and eventually bombed al-Jazeera's Baghdad bureau.

Al-Jazeera's Coverage – Controversy and American Criticism

A major media development during the war in Iraq was the increasingly important role of transnational satellite networks in the Arab world. The Arab networks' narrative of the conflict was very different from those of its US counterparts. Neither Arab nor American broadcasters provided a comprehensive, balanced and complete picture of the war. In my opinion, the main difference between the mainstream American networks and the major Arab networks was that while the former focused on the technologically advanced nature of the American military, the latter tended to focus on human suffering and the destruction inflicted on Iraqi civilians. This came about partly as a consequence of different degree of access. The American networks had good relations with, and access to, the American-led invasion forces (through embedded reporters and unilaterals), while the Arab networks had better contacts on the ground and with the Iraqi authorities. Their access to Iraqi civilians was better because most of them spoke Arabic and because of common cultural, religious and historical references. Furthermore, the networks attempted to communicate with different audiences: the American networks provided an American perspective of the war tailored to an American audience, while the Arab networks covered the war from an Arab perspective adapted to an Arab audience⁴.

For al-Jazeera, covering the war in Iraq represented a much-needed potential source of income. The station was funded for its first five years by the Emir of Qatar, but was afterwards required to be self-sufficient. Despite its huge audience, the channel suffered from what they consider an undeclared economic boycott by major advertisers in the Gulf region and was still dependent on the Emir. During the war in Afghanistan, sales of footage to other television networks were an important source of income, and the conflict in Iraq was seen as another chance to increase revenues (Whitaker, 2003). The network had around 40 people working inside the war zone during the war: seven correspondents in the Baghdad bureau, one unit in Basra, one in Mosul, several reporters in strategic locations around the country, and one reporter embedded with the Ameri-

can troops (Ballout, 2003, interview by author). Unlike the war in Afghanistan, where it had exclusive access to the Taliban-controlled areas, however, al-Jazeera was not the only Arab satellite network inside Iraq. Abu Dhabi TV and Al Arabiya Channel had both established offices inside the war zone to compete for exclusives and the best footage.⁵

Al-Jazeera quickly positioned itself as an alternative source of information to Arab viewers and international media, correcting and challenging news reported by western media and American officials. On the very first day of the war, the channel corrected the Coalition forces' claims that US-led forces had captured Umm Qasr, the port city south of Basra. al-Jazeera's correspondent in Umm Qasr reported that the city had not fallen, and that he could still hear pockets of resistance. The channel's presence on the ground in the south of Iraq gave them many exclusives in the first days of the war. While American and British military spokespersons repeatedly declared that strategically important cities in the south had fallen and that the invasion was progressing as planned, al-Jazeera's reporters in Umm Qasr and Basra reported continued resistance. Similarly, when British military spokesmen in Basra reported a large Shiite there and that a whole Iraqi brigade had surrendered, al-Jazeera's reporter inside Basra reported that he saw no demonstrations, denied any such uprising, and interviewed the commander of the Division that the Coalition claimed had surrendered.

The turning point in the relations between al-Jazeera Channel and the American administration came on the fourth day of the war, March 23, when al-Jazeera broadcast a report by Iraqi television showing pictures of at least four dead US soldiers and interviews with five others captured in Nasiriya. The report provoked sharp condemnations from American authorities, and marked the beginning of very tense relations between the American administration and the news channel⁶. The US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, claimed the video violated the Geneva Convention governing the treatment of prisoners of war – specifically the provisions banning the exposure of prisoners to public curiosity and humiliation. Lt Gen John Abizaid at the Central Command in Qatar declared that airing the video was 'absolutely unacceptable', and called the images 'disgusting' (Abizaid in Getlin and Jensen, 2003). Al-Jazeera, on the other hand, argued then – and still maintains – that the Geneva Convention does not cover the media, but applies only to dealings between nations and international organisations. The channel claims that it was their professional duty to broadcast the pictures; that they had news value (the pictures made headlines in international media), that they had relevance (because their context was a war that American officials presented as a 'clean war'), and that they came from a reliable source (al-Jazeera mirrored a report broadcast on Iraqi television, and claim they did not stage the events) (Ballout, 2003, interview by author). According to al-Jazeera, the story of the dead and captured Americans was one of its best from the war in Iraq (Shouli, 2003, interview by author). The ethics of showing pictures of frightened and humiliated POWs, were satisfied by withholding the footage, on request from American authorities, until the families of the POWs were informed. They maintain that 'the fact that the soldier is afraid; that's an offshoot of war, that's not al-Jazeera's making' (Ballout, 2003, interview by author) and assert that American accusations represent double standards and hypocrisy. Al-Jazeera had broadcast pictures of dead people and prisoners of war before (in Chechnya, Bosnia Herzegovina, Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq), but this was the first time they were criticised for doing so. What is more, al-Jazeera spokesmen pointed out, when western media showed pictures of Iraqi POWs 'kneeling, being kicked, their sacred head gear being pulled off and stepped on by American soldiers', nobody reacted (ibid). In al-Jazeera's view, these double standards result from a feeling among Americans that

their POWs were more deserving of dignity, or more important, than Iraqi POWs. They argue that pictures of Iraqi POWs were valuable to the US because they tallied with American propaganda, while pictures of American POWs challenged the official version of what had happened (ibid).

American critics also claimed that al-Jazeera was inciting Arab people by showing raw and graphic footage. Secretary of State Colin Powell accused the channel of portraying American efforts 'in a negative light' (Powell in al-Jazeera.net English 2003), to which al-Jazeera responded that its editorial priority was to focus on the aftermath of the attacks and to 'put more concentration on the sufferings of the people after the attacks', and 'the human side of war...those people who were wounded, who became homeless or were seeking refuge anywhere' (Shouli, 2003, interview by author). Critics claimed that the gruesome close-ups of Iraqi civilian casualties sent out a daily message to the Arab public that American soldiers were ruthless killers, that only resistance to USA could win back Arab pride, and that the Iraqis were fighting a pan-Arab battle for self-respect – but al-Jazeera maintains its policy was not to infuriate either Arab or western viewers but to reflect the realities on the ground. Al-Jazeera emphasises that the realities of war are by definition ugly, and that if they had edited out these graphic pictures they would not have been faithful to their audience or to history – to al-Jazeera no wars are clean (Ballout, 2003, interview by author). By contrast, American networks largely avoided showing civilian casualties, according to a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Analysis by this study of coverage by ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox early in the conflict found that while about half the reports from embedded journalists showed combat action, not one depicted people hit by weapons (Sharkey, 2003).

American officials also claimed that al-Jazeera was too close to the Iraqi government and intelligence service were too close, and that the channel functioned as a propaganda tool for the Iraqi regime: for example, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld said that al-Jazeera 'obviously' was 'part of Iraqi propaganda and responding to Iraqi propaganda' (Rumsfeld in Getlin and Jensen, 2003) and Secretary of State Colin Powell accused the channel of presenting a 'distorted' version of the war by magnifying 'the minor successes of the [Iraqi] regime' (Powell in al-Jazeera.net English, 2003). Al-Jazeera insists that it had to deal with the Iraqi regime as the legitimate internationally-recognised government of the time, and that their relations served al-Jazeera's own interests in getting better access to information. According to the Deputy Editor in Chief, Syyed Shouli, the channel had to cooperate with Iraqi intelligence to be able to work inside Iraq, because 'in third world countries like Iraq the power lies within the intelligence' (Shouli, 2003, interview by author). Furthermore, the channel spokesmen say that their staff have to comply with government regulations wherever they work (be it in the US or Iraq), and that they therefore had to work under Iraqi Ministry of Information regulations.

To prove its independence, al-Jazeera emphasises that there was constant tension between its staff and the Iraqi authorities during the war, asserting that the authorities never trusted the channel, monitored it closely, criticised and harassed its staff, and threatened to close down its Baghdad office. At the start of the war, the Iraqi information minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, assaulted correspondent Diyar Al-Omari in the al-Jazeera office, angered by the live footage broadcast from Baghdad (Al-Omari, 2003, interview by author). As an Iraqi himself, Al-Omari felt that he was under particular pressure from Iraqi authorities and intelligence during the war, and he described working conditions as extremely hard (ibid). Later, the Iraqi authorities expelled al-Jazeera correspondent Tayseer Allouni from Baghdad and banned Al-Omari from fil-

ing reports because both had breached Ministry of Information regulations. In protest, the network stopped covering the war inside government-controlled Iraq until an official explanation from the authorities was obtained. Tallouni and Al-Omari were allowed to continue their work two days later, on April 4.

Allegations of close ties between al-Jazeera and the Iraqi intelligence increased after the war, when British media alleged that the former chief executive of al-Jazeera, Mohammed Jassem al-Ali, had been forced to resign for cooperating with the Iraqi secret service. Al-Jazeera categorically denies these allegations. According to the channel, al-Ali resigned because his secondment from his former position in Qatar television had ended, and it emphasises that al-Ali is still involved in al-Jazeera as a member of its Board of Directors (Ballout, 2003, interview by author).

Al-Jazeera says they wanted people to see the realities of war as their reporters on the ground saw them, and that what happened on the ground did not reflect American accounts of the conflict. Through of their coverage of the war, al-Jazeera undermined American and British propaganda versions of the conflict and corrected reports that claimed American and British troops met no resistance, that they were greeted as liberators, and that there were few civilian casualties. But the channel has faced broad criticism – and from Arab voices too – for being as biased in their coverage as its American counterparts. Al-Jazeera, and other Arab media, have been accused of sensationalism (by showing only the most grotesque Iraqi casualties), of only interviewing people tending to criticise the US, of debating with rather than interviewing American guests, of accepting Iraqi and other Arab government statements at face value with little probing into their accuracy, and of highlighting the failures of the US and British forces (Khouri, 2003).

Attacking the Messenger

According to several members of al-Jazeera staff, there was (and still is) an institutionalised culture of suspicion towards al-Jazeera within the US military (Welsh, 2003, interview by author). They experienced all types of pressure and criticism during the war – from public statements to harassment on the ground – because they were airing certain messages and reporting from places ‘where the Americans would not like [them] to be’ (ibid). They maintain that the pressure came from ‘all the way up, from President Bush himself, to the American soldier on the street’ (Ballout, 2003, interview by author). This negative view of al-Jazeera also prevailed in non-governmental American circles during the war. One day after the channel broadcast the video of the American POWs, the New York Stock exchange and NASDAQ revoked the press credentials of Ramsey Shiber and Ammar Sankari and banned them from covering live from the market floor (the reporters got back their accreditation in early May.) On March 25, the al-Jazeera English-language website covering the war was hacked and pushed off the web; the US-based host-company said it could no longer continue to host al-Jazeera’s sites, and visitors to them were redirected to another website displaying a pro-war message. All these incidents reinforced the channel’s feelings of being under attack.

The al-Jazeera member who experienced the heaviest personal pressure during the war was Amr El-Kahky. El-Kahky, the only embedded reporter from the network, travelled with the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit from Kuwait into Iraq. He says that he was treated differently from his western colleagues; he had no access to the battlefield, because he (and other members of the Arab media) was assigned to the support unit. He

claims that he was kept in the back of the unit to focus on humanitarian aid rather than the fighting, that he was kept out of the informal press briefings given to his western colleagues every morning, and that when he discovered this the group briefings were cancelled and replaced by one-on-one briefings. El-Kahky believes the troops were suspicious of him and did not trust him. Relations improved as they got to know him, but he 'was never treated as an equal' by his western colleagues (El-Kahky, 2003, interview by author). Abu Dhabi TV's embedded reporters felt similar discrimination. They claim that they did not get the same access as their western colleagues in the field and that American military personnel mistrusted them (Bouran, 2003, interview by author).

On April 8, two US missiles struck al-Jazeera's Baghdad bureau killing correspondent Tarek Ayyub and wounding cameraman Zuheir Iraqi. Al-Jazeera spokesmen claim that they had communicated their presence to the American authorities in February, providing their exact locations and coordinates (Ballout, 2003, interview by author). American military spokespersons denied having deliberately attacked journalists, and insisted that the American forces had responded to enemy fire. May-Ying Welsh, producer at al-Jazeera's Baghdad bureau, points out that the al-Jazeera office was not the only media hit by American forces. 'In less than 24 hours they hit all three of the locations [where foreign journalists remained in Baghdad]: al-Jazeera's office, Abu Dhabi's office and the Palestine Hotel' (Welsh, 2003, interview by author). The Committee to Protect Journalists is currently investigating the incidents and a large number of human rights groups and international media have condemned them. This was the second time American missiles had targeted al-Jazeera offices in the war zones. In November 2001 the al-Jazeera office in Kabul was hit only hours before the Northern Alliance took control of the city. Al-Jazeera's base at the Sheraton Hotel in Basra received four direct hits from British forces on April 2 2003 (Ballout, 2003, interview by author). The American and British authorities have failed to offer any official explanation for these incidents but the al-Jazeera staff, their colleagues in the Arab media and most Arab viewers strongly believe that the targeting was deliberate and the result of hostility towards Arab media.

Have the American Information Strategies Succeeded?

American experiences with al-Jazeera during the war in Iraq were similar to their experiences during the war in Afghanistan. In both conflicts the US administration started by courting the network, giving exclusive interviews and participating in debates, but when war started friendly relations came to an end. When al-Jazeera focused on the ugly face of both wars, the American administration reacted with criticism, threats and attempts to silence it. In both conflicts relations froze when American forces bombed the al-Jazeera offices in the field. It seems that the American administration still struggles with the mixed blessing of a more open Arab media environment as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The US administration lacks a comprehensive communications strategy towards the Arab satellite networks and its contradictory policies have led to increased scepticism on the part of Arab media and have fuelled a widespread belief among the Arab public in American double standards. American politicians seem only to value freedom of speech as long as the new Arab media do not use it against them; American officials appear only to care about Arabs when they want their support for going to war; the American military's effort to protect journalists in the field excludes al-Jazeera, which has been targeted twice.

Opinions differ as to how American performance towards Arab satellite networks can be improved. El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2002) suggest that the best way is to increase American participation on al-Jazeera – to increase their presence on the channel, to participate in debates and talk shows rather than interviews, and to study modes of communication on Arab talk shows in order to be better prepared (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002:110). Hoffman (2002) argues that the US should give more support to moderate Arab media in the region to increase freedom of speech as they did in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. He believes the best way to counter more extremist Arab voices is to support moderate Arab voices by giving them a platform to speak from. Hoffman says the US should support the moderate regional media by offering training in journalism, improving media laws and providing technical assistance (Hoffman, 2002:91). For Fandy (2003) on the other hand, the best way to communicate with the Arab public is through the private American networks: he sees Arab viewers as very critical of state-sponsored media, both Arab and American, while the private networks enjoy wide popularity among viewers (Fandy, 2003).

Nevertheless, the American administration's main strategy for the future seems to be to launch a new American-funded satellite network in Arabic, Al Hurra, created to counter al-Jazeera which, according to American officials, is anti-American and difficult to control and influence. Al Hurra, 'the Free One', started broadcasting on February 14 2004. The channel was granted a budget of \$62 million for its first year by US Congress, and has a staff of around 200 Arab and American journalists (Feuilherade, 2004). Its policy is to 'counter the negative images being broadcast right now, the incitement to violence, the hate-radio and the journalistic self-censorship' (Pattiz to Burkeman, 2003); it is aimed at a young audience, and sees its role as promoting democracy and winning over public opinion through independent journalism. Al Hurra was met by broad criticism in the Arab media from the outset, and dismissed as American propaganda TV. It is still too early to judge if Al Hurra will influence public opinion.

In my opinion, Al Hurra will not solve three of the basic problems inherent in the American public diplomacy campaigns. First: American strategists seem to lack understanding of what is important to their target group. There seems to be a lack of political will to internalise the problems and worldview of those critical of the US; to admit that hate of the US cannot be explained by misunderstandings and ignorance alone and that anti-American feeling in the Middle East is rooted in the misery and suffering many people there experience daily. Second: American spokespersons, mostly unable to speak Arabic or understand Arab culture, lack the credibility to make their target groups believe their message and point of view. Although Under Secretary Beers tried to improve credibility by cooperating with Arab American organisations, the effort failed as Arab networks refused to broadcast her campaign. More non-governmental groups and networks such as diaspora groups, NGOs and political parties, could be included in the campaign to communicate more effectively (Leonard, 2002). Finally: American foreign policies towards the region suffer from duplicitous and contradictory communication, and the public diplomacy campaigns, which try to communicate American core values, are weakened by actual practice on the ground (the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq). Double standards in communication can be found on many levels. In the case of al-Jazeera, it may be understood as a symptom of internal struggles within the US administration in which the State Department's efforts to improve relations with the channel are undermined by the military's policies on the ground. According to Leonard and Smewing, American public diplomacy efforts seem to concentrate 'almost exclusively

on broadcasting as loudly as possible its openness and love of dialogue, rather than actually engaging in it' (Leonard and Smewing, 2003:96). At the same time, regional opposition to American policies on Palestine and Iraq seems to be increasing.

Can Public Diplomacy Solve the Image Problem?

There are some historical examples of successful public diplomacy. Germany's and Japan's image-building after World War Two, whereby they changed from aggressive, destructive states to members of western society are often mentioned as examples of success. Other examples are the improved images of international corporations such as Shell and BP, and organisations such as the ANC and the PLO (ibid:4). Nevertheless, experts on public diplomacy and on Middle Eastern policy argue that improving America's image in the Arab and Muslim worlds will be a tough challenge unless the American administration can prove its critics wrong about its intentions and politics in the region (see Zogby, 2004). They claim that American public diplomacy campaigns can only be effective if American policy towards the region, often symbolised by the Palestinian issue, changes. These views are reflected in the Arab satellite channels.

When asked about their views of American public diplomacy campaigns, spokesmen from al-Jazeera Channel, Al Arabiya Channel and Abu Dhabi TV all emphasised that a public relations campaign is not enough – the policies on the ground need to change. According to Salah Nejm, News Director in Al Arabiya Channel, public diplomacy is not sufficient to convince people; he argues that American policy towards the peace process between Palestine and Israel will always be compared to the way the US dealt with Iraq and that, as a consequence, in any instance where American officials need to justify their actions, the comparison will re-appear to undermine their efforts (Nejm, 2003, interview by author). Jihad Ali Ballout, al-Jazeera's official spokesman, also emphasises the Palestinian issue, saying that the key task for the Americans is to understand how important it is to the Arab public. Ballout claims that no campaign will succeed until the Americans gain a better understanding of what is important for the Arab man-in-the-street because 'this goes beyond giving us packaged songs or canned news broadcasts or fast food or Mickey Mouse' (Ballout, 2003, interview by author). According to Nart Bouran, Director of the News Centre at Abu Dhabi TV, appearing on television is not enough: if the American public relations campaign has had any success thus far – and he questions whether it has – then what is happening between the Israelis and the Palestinians is ruining much of the work being done (Bouran, 2003, interview by author). Bouran thinks the whole campaign misses its target as most young Arabs already dream the American Dream and sums up one of the basic challenges facing the American campaigns in a simple but precise observation: The image problem is not that the Arab youth don't like America – it's that they feel that America doesn't like *them*.

Notes

1. The Gallup poll of nine Muslim countries, the Zogby International Poll of attitudes to the United States, the World Values Survey, the Pew Global Attitudes Project, the British Council's Connecting Futures research, as well as interviews conducted by Leonard and Smewing.
2. Arabism, or the Pan-Arab movement, refers to the nationalist notion of cultural and political unity among Arab countries. Pan-Arabism's most charismatic and effective proponent was Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, online version).

3. There are at least 3,5 million Arab Americans living in the US (Arab American Institute) and an estimated 7 million Muslims in the USA (USA Today).
4. It is a simplification and generalisation to talk about American and Arab media or perspectives because there are substantial variations and differences within each category, but to illustrate the main differences in the coverage it is still fruitful to use these categories.
5. Abu Dhabi TV is not a news channel, but extended its news coverage to give extensive coverage of the war; during the war they broadcast news 24-hours a day.
6. Two days later, on March 26, al-Jazeera aired pictures of two dead British soldiers and this report caused strong criticism from British authorities.

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