News media have become an integral part in any discussion of globalization and global politics today. Since CNN’s coverage of the Gulf War in 1991, satellite news networks have sprung up across the globe at an incredible pace. In regions where the freedom of the press has not always been a privilege, satellite news networks have made waves, particularly in the Middle East. This chapter is a brief overview of the rise of global media, a summary of the debates surrounding the influence of contemporary international news broadcasters, an introduction to a recent broadcast giant – Al-Jazeera English – and an examination of its influence amongst audiences across six countries.

More specifically, we discuss the broad question of whether the news media, particularly global news networks, contribute to shaping public opinion about current events. In doing so, we present the various arguments surrounding the “CNN effect” and the relationship between today’s expanding global news media and the “global public sphere.” We also test the impact of Al-Jazeera English – whose mission and identity are different from its Western counterparts – on the global mediascape. Our findings show that the broadcast news media are more likely to reinforce already existing opinions and attitudes regarding politically salient topics than to change opinions, but that viewing Al-Jazeera English may have a positive impact on facilitating less dogmatic and more open-minded thinking amongst its viewers.

The CNN effect and beyond

During the last decade of the twentieth century, several communication scholars attributed much power to the news media role in constructing a mediated reality about
current affairs on both local and global levels. In this context, Chris Paterson (1998) argued that “mass media are almost wholly responsible for shaping that reality, and among mass media international television news agencies are especially influential (for they alone provide contemporary visual representations of most of the world to the entire world)” (1998: 82). According to Paterson, this strong media impact could be applicable on a global level, where “The globalization of television news is producing an international public sphere, but one dominated by mainstream Anglo-American ideologies conveyed in the texts of internationally distributed television news” (1998: 95).

Along the same lines, Ingrid Volkmer (1999: 1) argued that “The media, in their function of shaping, sustaining and diversifying global stratification, influence a worldwide formation of ‘communities’, ‘identities’, ‘democracy’ and other forms of social organization.” Volkmer noted that some news channels play a remarkable role in formulating a ‘global media sphere of ‘political news’ and ‘political information’ … Their activities mediate the diverse global ‘worlds’ of ideas and create a new mediating sphere with various models of participation: symbolic, representative or real” (1999: 224).

One news channel in particular, Cable News Network International (CNNI), stood out thanks to its wide reach and impact on the global political scene and thanks to its role in setting new standards as a pioneer in the global 24-hour news reporting. “CNNI has reshaped the conventional agenda of international or ‘foreign’ news and created a platform for worldwide communication … [Moreover, it] has altered the focus of global news in an interrelationship of changing political centers and peripheries, and has given a new meaning to news, journalistic values, the setting of a global agenda” (Volkmer 1999: 2). In this context, a CNNI reporter was quoted in Volkmer (1999: 154) as saying that “The fact that television is becoming more powerful was attributed especially to CNN’s worldwide political influence.”

CNN’s coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, which was the first war where coverage of the conflict was instantaneously broadcast into millions of homes, highlighted the enhanced role played by news networks in today’s networked society and led many scholars and media analysts to coin the phrase “CNN effect” (Robinson 2002: 1). “Since then the phrase has become the generic term” (Robinson 2002: 2) that refers to the tremendous power of the news media, particularly satellite channels, in shaping the audiences’ opinions about current events and even accelerating the political and diplomatic processes by providing a platform through which political leaders can communicate with each other via television. This media power has been subject to fierce debate by media scholars and critics. “Debate has not only centered on the role and impact of CNN but also on the impact of the news media in general upon both foreign policy formulation and world politics. In other words, the CNN effect is not synonymous with CNN” (Robinson 2002: 2).

Within the perimeters of the debate around the “CNN effect,” some communication scholars such as Volkmer (1999) have gone as far as arguing that CNNI, by setting new journalistic standards and affecting the domestic and international political processes, has contributed to the formulation of a “global public sphere”
in a way that has given “a homogeneous global shape to diverse news events” (1999: 6). According to Volkmer, “CNNI has inaugurated a market-force-oriented process which shifts global communication onto a new level by mixing the conventional reference-system of national news presentation, with its ‘home’ and ‘foreign’ news … with a global juxtaposition of the ‘internal’ and the ‘external’, a substantial new inter-relationship which can shape political action” (1999: 3).

On the other side of the debate, scholars such as Piers Robinson (2002) and Eytan Gilboa (2005) are more cautious and conservative in attributing power to the global news networks, particularly CNN, whose influence on the political scene, they argued, has been overstated and exaggerated. It can be argued that such cautious approach to media power has started in the early years of the twenty-first century which have witnessed a complication in the global political environment, coupled by a proliferation of media technologies, particularly satellite television. “Despite the radical claims of some, new communication technologies have not transformed world politics and media-state relations” (Robinson 2002: 129).

Robinson did not totally rule out the influence of media coverage on politics, but he argued that the media ought to be perceived as one of several factors that affect political decisions rather than a main cause for such decisions. In other words, the politicians, according to Robinson, base their final political decisions on several considerations, one of which is the media coverage (2002). “But in no way [can] media coverage drive or compel policymakers into taking action where they would have otherwise not” (Robinson 2002: 71).

Kai Hafez (2007) has taken an even more conservative approach, compared to Robinson, in his criticism of the global impact of satellite news channels. He described the global media system as a “utopia” (2007: 13), and argued that the “CNN effect” is a “myth” (2007: 51). “There are many ‘CNNs’, but no complete global programme. Through the proliferation of satellite programmes in the last decade, CNN has lost its elevated position and is now merely a decentralized variant of an American television programme, whose country of origin remains easily recognizable in its agenda and framing. CNN tends to be a mixture of characteristics of the American system and the target system of the specific window; it is thus at best a multinational but not a global programme” (Hafez 2007: 13).

Hafez questioned the role played by satellite television channels in trying to homogenize the global public sphere. He argued that there is not enough evidence to show that satellite television has played a significant factor in changing people’s cultural norms and values or their domestic social fabrics. “How is one to interpret the fact that while nowadays a significant chunk of humanity has the technology to access foreign broadcasters at its disposal, it almost never makes use of it? People’s media habits and how they organize their lives are not changing as radically as has frequently been assumed” (Hafez 2007: 2–3).

According to Hafez, “the media follow rather than lead. The true strength of the media consists not in its capacity to influence politics, as evoked in the ‘CNN effect’, but in the affirmation and legitimation of national politics” (Hafez 2007: 54). To further illustrate his point, Hafez argued that the differences in news agendas and
viewing habits of satellite news channels such as Al-Jazeera Arabic and CNN have reinforced the argument that the impact of such networks is local at the nation and state level rather than global. “... Given the differences in these networks’ world-views, one would also have to reflect upon whether CNN and Al-Jazeera [Arabic] are not in fact merely the harbingers of an ever more divided media world, characterized not by more, but by ever less cross-border exchange” (Hafez 2007: 3).

Satellite networks, according to Hafez, have the ability to cross national borders, but this ability is curtailed, to a large extent, by the cultural nuances and the social and historical intricacies that characterize and identify each society (2007: 75). Hafez argued that the news content provided by satellite channels is often “domesticated” (2007: 173) to serve the interests and address the concerns of particular culturally and politically aligned audience members rather than the general interests of the global audience at large. “Who could expect global media diplomacy from such provincial systems?” (Hafez 2007: 173). Hafez's argument is drastically different from that of what Robinson referred to as the “radical technological optimists [who predicted that the news networks would] erode people’s identification with the state and instead ‘mold a cosmopolitan global consciousness’” (Robinson, 2002).

**News in a New Media Ecology**

As it turns out, neither prediction of the news media as creating a new “global public sphere,” nor their “affirmation and legitimation of national politics” offers a compelling explanation for today's highly complex news media environment. Contemporary news broadcasters operate in an over-saturated media environment that presents a new set of challenges for global news networks, as well as those that study these networks. Whereas CNN was the only game in town during the first Gulf War, today there are hundreds of satellite news broadcasters available via satellite across the globe (Cottle & Rai 2008). Moreover, the rise of the Internet society presents an additional challenge for global news giants, as audiences have an added means of consuming information that, at its very core, can provide information faster, with more depth and tailored to meet the needs of its users. As a result, news organizations are adapting to today’s changed media ecology. Whereas traditional media of old were integral to the formation of national identity, today’s successful new media systems are focused on community and network forming, oftentimes across borders.

As globalization continues to create conditions of “manufactured uncertainty” (Beck 2000) and “ontological insecurity” (Giddens 1990), people continue to turn to the news media to make sense of an otherwise increasingly fragmented world. According to Hjarvard (2002: 70–1), while “the vocabulary of contemporary analysis and theories provide a clear illustration of the ... disembedding role of new media,” contemporary news media in particular have functioned as a “re-embedding social mechanism, i.e. a mechanism that reconstructs and institutionalizes patterns of social interaction and thereby provides trust.”

An important question for scholars of the news media is how do today’s audiences choose between different mediums and sources of news. Hjarvard (2002) argues that
new news media lack a level of influence that was often associated with the media of old. In today’s world of relative social disorder and competing news narratives, it is becoming more difficult for audiences to grasp all of the facts all of the time, and use objective standards to evaluate the trustworthiness of news media. Rather, similar to how consumers choose between brand products that they know little about, they rely on brands to determine which news organizations they trust and don’t trust. “The communication of a brand name plays a much more prominent role in global media, almost to the extent that the presentation of a brand name is equally important as relying on the brand name itself” (Hjarvard 2002: 80). Thus, brands – and symbols associated with media brands – are the essential landmarks by which trust is gauged in today’s decoupled and decentralized media environment.

Importantly, another essential ingredient is the “personification of the message,” in terms of both form and content (e.g. is the message framed in a way that I can relate to?). Thus, questions of identity construction, promotion and identification have become increasingly central to analyzing and understanding how media become trusted means for accessing information about the world.

Along these lines, Bennett’s (2004: 141) research found that “changes in citizenship may account for a large part of the difficulty in delivering standard mass society news format … to audiences whose members are increasingly parsing information in highly personal terms. This identity shift means … that news and information systems cannot simply go back in time to the seemingly rosier days of mass news audiences.”

This past decade has seen the rise of a number of international and regional news broadcasters, most of which have been tethered to a geopolitical power or multinational corporation. Among the mix of news channels, one news network – Al-Jazeera English – stands out as transcending the ‘nation-state’ based paradigm of old while also promising a highly personalized, journalistically sound and culturally connected perspective on global events. Below is a brief synopsis of a study of Al-Jazeera English’s influence in today’s new news media ecology.

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 mediascape. Launched on November 15, 2006, AJE, which is the world’s first global English language news channel to be headquartered in the Middle East, is already accessible in over 110 million households worldwide, and has also agreed to provide distribution (oftentimes 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.” Importantly, AJE is trying to bridge the gap between old and new media paradigms, covering global issues, but always from a “local” perspective.

According to its proponents, AJE presents a tremendous opportunity for a new direction in the discourse of global newsflow. With its avowed promise of giving a “voice to the voiceless,” AJE’s launch and growing popularity represent a new style of
media structure and content that provide an important test case for existing research regarding the influence of transnational media organizations in today’s highly particularized and saturated media environment.

Serving as a “voice to the voiceless” represents a phenomenon that has not been familiar among many Western news media networks. In this context, AJE’s deputy manager for news and programs, Ibrahim Helal (2008), told the authors: “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.” According to Helal, the nature of AJE stories and the angles they focus on contribute to their standing out as a network compared to Western television stations. “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” (Helal 2008).

With a budget of over U.S.$ 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 control and have resulted in a decline in the quality of the many Western media (McChesney 2000).

Thus, AJE represents an interesting test case for media scholars. While encompassing many of the traditional journalistic strengths of traditional broadcast news media, its identity, mission and brand are cloaked in a message that personifies its message to a “global south.” Compared to BBC World and CNNI, both of which are largely considered to have Western agendas, AJE’s agenda is not associated with any particular region or politics but rather a global audience of the historically and currently disenfranchised.

**Method**

In order to evaluate AJE’s influence in today’s new news media environment, 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 to analyze the demographics, worldviews, and cultural, political, civic and cognitive dispositions of viewers of AJE. 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 & Dominick 2006: 91–92). Purposive samples are not meant to be representative of the population. Drawing from existing research, all of the countries were chosen due to their relative levels of viewership of AJE as well as their ability to signify existing cultural perspectives in the context of growing resentment between the “Islamic” and “Western civilizations.” The total sample size surveyed was 597 participants, approximately 100 participants
surveyed at each of the proposed locations. The survey focused on sampling existing viewers of AJE only, though the sample included participants who had 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 that are examined, 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. In order to allow for comparative analysis, the survey also asked participants about their levels of dependence on two other global news networks: CNN International and BBC World.

In order to determine the levels of importance that AJE had on the opinions and attitudes of participants, compared to other international news broadcasters, we drew from Media System Dependency theory. In order to measure cultural and cognitive dispositions, we drew from scales and questions to measure each participant’s level of cognitive dogmatism. Moreover, the survey asked questions about participants’ opinions of the United States culture, people and foreign policies.

**Results and Discussion**

Our findings present an interesting set of answers, and several more questions, in terms of what role news plays in today’s global mediasphere. The first set of results have to do with the impact that viewership of global news outlets had on participants’ levels of cognitive dogmatism, 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 & Fruchter 1956: 356). Our second set of findings have to do with the relationship between how dependent a participant was on a certain source for news and their opinions of the U.S. policies and culture. Our findings demonstrate a nuanced answer to the question of how much influence global news media have in the current media environment. While people today are likely tuning into news programming which they find helps them reaffirm their already existing opinions on current affairs, the news media – when they provide depth and context, draw on experienced but local correspondents, and serve as a microphone for those that have been largely ignored – may be able to foster lower levels of dogmatism, and thus produce a latent but substantial media effect.

First, the results showed that participants that reported they were dependent on either AJE, BBC World or CNNI as a source of information for following global news events or for determining their political behavior were more likely to be considered “dogmatic,” according to an 11-item scale measuring each participant’s level of cognitive dogmatism. While this finding may be surprising at first, a likely explanation is that any viewer who is “dependent” on any particular source of news – global or local – is already, in a certain sense, being dogmatic in the way they approach information gathering. Indeed, this finding confirms previous literature suggesting that “individuals high in dogmatism attempt to avoid information that is inconsistent with their belief systems, and they react to inconsistent information by minimizing or ignoring it”
(Shearman & Levine 2006: 276). Thus, it is unlikely that viewers that were found to be dependent on any particular medium for global news would change their opinions based upon information they gathered via the news media. Moreover, media system dependency, one of the scales used to measure how important particular news outlets were in forming the participants’ opinions and behaviors, may be a poor indicator to measure how viewing a particular news broadcaster can influence someone’s levels of dogmatic thinking.

Another indicator – how many months the participant had been watching AJE – proved to be more interesting. While it was the case that those viewers that were dependent on AJE were found to be more dogmatic, the more months a viewer had been watching AJE, the less dogmatic they were in their thinking. This finding was found to be significant both amongst participants that relied heavily on AJE as their primary source for information and political behavior, as well as those that were less dependent on AJE. Moreover, the relationship was significant regardless of gender, religion or socio-economic status. Since levels of dogmatism are strongly related to how people behave in confrontational situations, as well as levels of political and cultural tolerance (Shearman & Levine 2006), we argue that AJE viewership may be able to positively impact viewers’ behaviors over the long term. AJE may prove to fulfill a socially valuable function in that audiences that tune in for longer periods of time will more likely be receptive to new types of information, arguments and perspectives.

The second set of results demonstrated a strong relationship between the participants’ attitudes toward the U.S. policies and culture and the particular broadcaster they depended on for news and information. Participants were asked how supportive/unsupportive they were of: (1) America’s War on Terror, (2) U.S. policy in Iraq, (3) U.S. policy toward the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, (4) purchasing American-made brands and products; as well as how in favor/not in favor they were of (5) American cultural values, (6) U.S. foreign policy in general and (7) American people. Respondents who were dependent on BBC World and especially on CNNI were more supportive of U.S. foreign policy generally. Moreover, those dependent on BBC World were more favorable of American cultural values, while those dependent on CNNI were more likely to support America’s war on terror. Finally, participants dependent on CNNI were more likely to support U.S. policy in Iraq and U.S. policy toward the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, while those dependent on AJE were more critical of both.

Given that AJE brands itself on showing the “other side” of the war in Iraq and the oppression of the Palestinian people, these findings are not surprising. It is unlikely that a viewer who is in favor of the U.S. policy in Iraq or the Palestinian–Israeli conflict would likely report him/herself dependent on AJE, especially given the Al-Jazeera network’s history of reporting on both those issues. Rather, these findings likely suggest that people seek out news media that reinforce their predetermined ideologies and opinions. In other words, viewers use the media to be affirmed rather than informed. So, for example, the viewers who oppose the U.S. policies in Iraq and Palestine may have been found to be more dependent on AJE because they felt
it would likely provide them with information to further substantiate their already established opinions. Similarly, viewers who support the U.S. foreign policy may start watching CNN since they believe its reporting operates along a similar ideology to theirs.

Importantly, while viewers likely choose to watch international news broadcasters that will tell stories in ways that reinforce their opinions, we found that the more frequently a participant watched AJE, the less supportive they were of U.S. policy towards the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Similarly, the longer a participant had been tuning into AJE, the more critical they were of U.S. policy in Iraq. Thus, while the news media are unlikely to change one’s opinion on politically salient issues, it may often be the case that they do reinforce and deepen already held opinions. These findings seem to provide strong evidence for Hafez’s argument that the media appeal to their particular constituencies rather than to a universal audience. According to Hafez (2007: 25), “When all is said and done, the mass media are not in the least oriented towards a ‘world system,’ but in fact concentrate upon national markets, whose interests and stereotypes they largely reproduce. Moreover, the influence of the media on politics is negligible, particularly in relation to international conflicts that touch upon vital national interests.” While AJE presents a challenge to Hafez’s suggestion that today’s news media concentrate on national markets given its cross-regional and global focus, our findings do support the argument that the news media are more likely to reinforce existing opinion of current events rather than challenge them.

Moving Forward

In terms of news media today, AJE is an anomaly when it comes to its role, 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, mission and journalistic capacity to reach out to ideologically and politically similar audiences throughout the world.

Our results here provide evidence for a number of arguments reviewed in the literature. First, brand recognition and the personification of the message do matter. AJE’s strength in connecting audiences from Bangladesh to Burlington, VT, stems from its ability to consistently approach issues from the perspective of the “global south.” By connecting the inequalities that exist in very different parts of the world, AJE has created a niche perspective, one that the networks’ overall brand – largely created by AJ Arabic news broadcasters – relies on for attracting audiences around the globe. Both in Malaysia and Indonesia, viewers told us that they tuned into AJE at first because they liked what they had seen of its Arabic counterpart when Al-Jazeera Arabic had been dubbed into local Bahasa and rebroadcast on local television stations in the early stages of the 2003 Gulf War.

Second, viewers tune into global media that are likely to further support the already determined opinions with regard to current affairs. Given the number of state-based
and commercially driven news broadcasters available around the world, it is unlikely that viewers will tune into a network that is constantly challenging opinions formed based on years of media consumption and personal experience. Our findings demonstrated that, to a certain extent, viewers’ opinions of pertinent foreign policy issues determined which news broadcaster they were likely to depend on for information. For instance, viewers dependent on CNN or the BBC were more likely to be supportive of U.S. policy in the Middle East compared to viewers dependent on AJE. Moreover, it was not surprising to find that viewers highly dependent on AJE were more critical of U.S. policies towards the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, nor was it surprising that the longer viewers watched AJE, the more critical they were of the U.S. policy in Iraq. These are flagship issues, both tied to the image of the Al-Jazeera network, and the Al-Jazeera network approaches both issues differently than either CNNI or the BBC.

The assumption that viewers seek reinforcement of their views through the media does not rule out the media potential to affect people’s cognitive level of thinking. The fact that the longer people watched AJE, the less dogmatic they had become is a strong indication that the media can affect how people approach new issues where their opinions have not already been formed. What remains to be seen is how decreased levels of dogmatism from viewing AJE will actually impact viewers’ behaviors.

Having mentioned that, we believe that the political situation on the ground may play a bigger role than the media outlets in shaping people’s opinions, particularly when it comes to complicated and highly sensitive problems such as the Palestinian–Israeli conflict or the situation in Iraq. In other words, the news media by themselves are unlikely to have an immediate and drastic impact on viewers’ opinions with regard to old, complicated issues as long as those viewers do not see improvements or changes on the ground.

References


