
ADDRESSING A REGION? THE ARAB IMAGINED AUDIENCE AND NEWSWORTHINESS IN THE PRODUCTION OF *AL JAZEERA ARABIC*

By Julian Matthews and Maiya Al Habsi
School of Media, Communication & Sociology University of Leicester

Authors' final version of:

2018. Addressing a region? The Arab imagined audience and newsworthiness in the production of *Al Jazeera Arabic*. *International Communication Gazette*.

Abstract

Based on a production study of *Al Jazeera Arabic*, this paper examines news professionals' visualisation of the Arab news audience and its importance for their ideas about newsworthiness and an ideal news agenda. In applying the concept of the imagined audience to *Al Jazeera*, it uncovers a view of Arab news consumers as constructed as (i) heterogeneous in character and origin and as sharing (ii) a 'mindset' and an experience of (iii) voicelessness. Further, it shows that these understandings help to grasp the specifics of journalists' news making practices, including their efforts to prioritize potential stories for an ideal news agenda that demonstrate relevance for, or interest to, these imagined news consumers in addition to those stories that address their perceived 'powerlessness' in the Arab region. The paper concludes that these ideas mark clear boundaries around the countries and the issues that *Al Jazeera* seeks to report on.

Key words: Imagined audience, news production, news agenda, newsworthiness, *Al Jazeera Arabic*, Arab journalism

Introduction

This paper explores the process where professionals' ideas about the news audience shape others about newsworthiness in the pan-Arab news broadcaster, *Al Jazeera Arabic* (*Al Jazeera* from now onwards). As such, it aims to add an original contribution to existing scholarship that prioritizes the importance of professionals' views of audiences in news work. Situated against older claims about the absence of this knowledge in the production process, these studies suggest views of news consumers remain important for news making cultures and the related processes that underpin the manufacture of news programmes (Matthews, 2008; Cottle, 2000; DeWerth-Pallmeyer, 1997). Further, recent developments in journalism in fact reveal the relationship between news organisations and their audiences as growing closer (Harrison, 2006) and studies often attribute this outcome partly to the emerging online news environment (see Allan, 2006). Elsewhere others argue that understandings of audiences have always been important for the production of the many differentiated news programmes that populate the news marketplace (Cottle, 2000). Audiences serve to structure the foundations of news outlets into elite, mid-market and lower market positions it is argued (Sparks and Campbell, 1987) and ideas of audiences further sustain modern competitive struggles within these news strata (Firmstone, 2008). What is more, it makes sense to suggest that those understandings used to explore programmes also operate in the international news ecology and hence the focus placed on *Al Jazeera* in this paper.

Whilst the role of an imagined national audience has been observed to shape national news providers' outputs (e.g. Clausen, 2001), this paper is interested in the under researched role of the imagined audience in the production of global news provision. The pan-Arab broadcaster *Al Jazeera*, provides an example of a programme that is active in differentiating itself from its national and international competition (Krichen, 2010). As previous studies of *Al Jazeera* explain, the broadcaster produces reporting according to what has been seen as the imagined needs of a disempowered Arab news consumer (El-Nawawy and Iskander, 2003). What is understood less well, nonetheless, is the form that these views take and how they serve the broadcaster's wider organisational goals. Drawing upon an ethnographic study of the newsroom in Doha (Qatar), this paper will explore the professional views of the audience that are employed in *Al Jazeera's* news operations. First, however, it will discuss further the theoretical developments of the imagined audience concept and its growing importance for understanding contemporary news journalism.

The imagined audience

Studies of the professional views of the audience in journalism speak to an academic interest in the factors that shape news reporting. Seen from inside production, views of the audience are introduced as socially constructed forms of knowledge (see Berger, 1963) that underpin the 'accomplishment' of making news (DeWerth-Pallemeyer, 1997; Matthews 2009). In the process to understand the production of news, this knowledge is often grouped with, but rarely connected to, other professional knowledge used in the production of news (e.g. news values, professional ideologies etc.) and labelled as 'professional culture'. Aligned in this way, these collective micro level influences compete to explain the production of news products alongside other more macro influences, such as political pressure, economic constraints, organisational structures and processes or the influence of wider culture (societal norms and values – including religion, see Schudson, 2005 for a review). This

compartmentalized view of the imagined audience, separated from other micro and macro influences, appears to be an unhelpful way to understand its place in production and the process of making news.

For one thing, the imagined audience recognized here has been obscured often in the traditional large-scale renderings of news organisations. For the most part, previous efforts to capture news making have produced a homogenized picture of a production process explained through the ideas of ‘gatekeepers’ or organisational structures and processes (see Cottle, 2000 for a review). Views of audiences are dismissed as unimportant fictions in studies that follow their interest to chart the assumed importance to news making of professional ideologies and bureaucratic routines, for instance (e.g. Altheide, 1976; Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1980; Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). For others, its absence in these studies can be explained as an artefact of their research designs. Dewerth-Pallemeyer (1997:xii) suggests these studies overlook the implicit (‘tacit’) understandings of the news audience that are deeply entwined within the organisational processes highlighted. It is clear too that we need to acknowledge how explicit knowledge of the audience exists and is used to differentiate news products. For example, particular alternative forms (Atton, 2002) and popular forms (Conboy, 2002) are shaped according to the different imaginings of the audience their journalists use (from those audiences deemed to be outside of the political or the cultural mainstream to those considered as the everyday ‘person on the street’). Moreover, other developments point to the increasing importance of the audience for news organisations’ continuous operations.

For example, recent accounts identify how these views are being utilized as part of broadcasting organisations’ efforts to combat the economic and technological changes affecting them (see Born, 2004; Harrison, 2006). Audiences’ needs and preferences are being used specifically, it is suggested, to revise the content and the style of their news programming in context of their changing market positions (ibid). New technology, in actively shaping and providing new platforms for news delivery at the same time, has also played a part in shaping new types of ‘audience orientated’ and ‘service minded’ news (Deuze and Paulussen, 2002). Analysis of technologically informed news practices in addition shows how journalists in their managing of user generated content and their use of social media (twitter / blogs) (see Allan, 2006) now engage in new interactions and exchanges with their audiences (or those now labelled as ‘prosumers’ by Bruns, 2008). In acknowledging this developing relationship more generally, studies have charted the constructed ideas of audiences as central to professionals’ efforts to create forms of news and in the process to deal with wider influences that shape their news making practices.

A group of ethnographic studies of news production have acknowledged the imagined audience as an integral part of the production of different news genres or ‘forms’, for example (e.g. Matthews, 2010; Cottle, 1993; Harrison, 2000; Clausen, 2001). Uncovered in these studies are the different types of audience construction that fit with the configurations of the genre of news being produced (Harrison 2000; Matthews, 2009). These, it is suggested, operate within the newsroom to constitute differentiated production cultures and values (Matthews, 2008; Min, 2004; Wieten and Pantii, 2005). Studies of regional news provide a pertinent example of the importance of the imagined audience. At play, these ideas shape the local news agenda (Berkowitz, 1991) and inform how its stories address and speak to the local audience (Aldridge, 2007; Cottle, 1993). Consequently, a view of the audience can be seen to underpin characteristics of different news forms and in turn explain how they are produced in response to wider pressures affecting the production process (Soffer, 2013).

Described in one ethnographic account, for example, is how the construction of the imagined audience was essential for the production of news workers' visualisation of their news product. This provided a set of core ideas that connected news treatments with journalists' practices, the corporate environment and the much wider social – political – cultural context at that time (Cottle, 1993). Similarly, revisions to the traditional critical political economy approach have argued that these types of connection must be studied as part of any contemporary rendering of cultural production (see Murdock and Golding, 2005). Journalists' views of audiences then are not only seen as important for developing an understanding of news production, but these can reveal the process by which news products are shaped in context of wider influences. Such insights have yet to be explored more fully and specifically in studies of international news however – a point that is of direct interest to this paper.

Audiences, practices and international journalism

Studies often discuss the process where journalists apply understandings of a 'national audience' to 'domesticate' the reporting of international affairs (see Clausen, 2001). Still, no published work appears to explore this process in international news. How audiences feature in these providers' efforts to position themselves in relation to their national and international competition is overlooked within comparative analysis (e.g. Kuhn and Nielsen, 2014; Benson, 2013) and within other commentaries focused on their role in spreading 'dominance' or in offering 'visibility' in the global public sphere (e.g. Thussu, 2003; Volkmer, 2003). Although constructions of the news audiences do not feature explicitly in this research, these can be located in the process of producing different versions of news, as is shown in the case of the reporting of the pan-Arab broadcaster, *Al Jazeera*.

Al Jazeera provides a useful example of the process. The broadcaster has been earmarked as unique in the way it produces reporting that purposefully challenges the established form and the format of other news coverage in the Arab region, for instance (Ghaddbian, 2001). Significant to this effort is its covering of events and issues not found elsewhere (Pintak, 2009) and the presentation of these in a different (westernized) broadcasting format and style (Rinnawi, 2012). The focus of its programming makes a more specific challenge to the established reporting of Arab politics in the region. Sharp contrasts with other news providers are observed in *Al Jazeera's* questioning of established discourses on policy and other issues (El-Nawawy, 2002), in its (ii) enhancing of the visibility, the participation and the accountability of different Arab politicians (Lynch, 2006) and in its (iii) encouraging of the representation of different ethnic and political views (Al-Khanbobi, 2011). In sum, *Al Jazeera* is operating with a different construction of the Arab news audience that underpins the production of its 'liberal commercial' news form and one that purposefully differs from those 'traditional government-controlled' national reporting in the Arab region (Ayish, 2002).

Studies suggest *Al Jazeera's* coverage is focused on addressing the unfulfilled needs of the Arab audience (El-Nawawy, 2002). As these views are grasped mainly from the analysis of news content however, more detail is required on the actual understandings and the practices that are used by *Al Jazeera* journalists. Elsewhere nonetheless, a grasp of the 'audience' is emerging within other research on Arab media. Focusing on the notion of 'Arab identity', other studies discuss journalists summoning these views to differentiate their Arab-based reporting from western news (e.g. Valeriani, 2010). Surveys of various journalists add that

these various constructions of an Arab identity form in part from news organisations' mediation of the political and cultural complexities in the region (Pintak and Ginges, 2009; El-Nawawy and Strong, 2012) – a process that is being exemplified in the particular case of *Al Jazeera*.

Given these insights into the importance of the potential of the imagined Arab audience within news making and the specifics of the market position, the aims and the reporting of *Al Jazeera*, this paper will offer an original discussion of the imagined audience used by this broadcaster. It will report on original ethnographic research into the news making process in the *Al Jazeera Arabic* newsroom (in Doha, Qatar) and build its discussion of the views used in production according to the narrow focus of the following questions:

- What are the origins of the imagined audience construct used in *Al Jazeera*?
- Whom do journalists imagine as the audience of *Al Jazeera*?
- How do the ideas of the audience inform other ideas about news making?

Method

This paper reports on data collected on *Al Jazeera*. *Al Jazeera* is unique Pan-Arab broadcaster that developed originally from a terminated contract between other providers in 1996 (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003). Presently, it forms part of larger network (*Al Jazeera Network*) that includes *Al Jazeera English* and is observed from within this network as acting as the radical brother of the two (Figenschou, 2013). It is well documented that *Al Jazeera* has made an impact on other Arab broadcasting, on western broadcasting (in the region) and on recent – Arab Spring – uprisings (Seib, 2012). In addition, it has received criticism for its relationship with the Qatari government and Islamist groups and more recently for its inability to reflect the pluralism of perspectives that are encoded in its motto (Kessler, 2012). The study on which this paper is based, it is important to note however, not only predates some of these events and criticisms (2010- 2011), but was focused solely on examining the construction of the imagined audience.

At the time, field observations of the Doha newsroom (in Qatar) and interviews with its *Al Jazeera* news workers helped the study to chart the prominent ideas used in the news making process. The news observations were conducted across news days over two periods, and these witnessed the production of various *Al Jazeera* news programmes. Specifically, the period of 1st to 30th December 2010 hosted observations of the newsroom setting, editorial meetings and instances of journalists' daily work and others focusing on the functioning of the interview desk followed in a later period (20th-25th, April 2011).

In addition, the study included semi-structured interviews over both observational periods to complement, and allow for the assessment of, the data gathered from the news observations. Nineteen journalists and ten producers (both junior and senior in each case) were interviewed and these interviewees were selected on the basis of their actions in the news making processes being observed at the time. The ages of the interviewed news workers fell between 30 and 50 years old. Further, details gained on their professional histories revealed that most had worked in other countries before joining *Al Jazeera*, and these included news organisations based in: Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Eritrea and Yemen. Although it was impossible to interview the General Director and the senior staff of the *Al Jazeera* organisation during the research period, the study used published testimonials from these individuals as a substitute when

deemed as appropriate. Nonetheless, all of the other recordings of the interviews were transcribed and translated. When this process was completed, the interview material was analysed in combination with that collected from the field observations. The purpose of this practice was to identify dominant themes in the verbal construction of the news audience and the observed role it plays in connection with prominent news making ideas.

Findings

What are the origins of the imagined audience construct used in *Al Jazeera*? As is recognized in other case studies of news organisations (e.g. Kung-Shankleman, 2000), wider discourses promoted within the *Al Jazeera* organisation underpin aspects of how its journalists come to understand their audience and their programme. At the time of this research, the *Al Jazeera* organisation rallied behind the motto - ‘opinion and the opinion of others’ – the meaning of which is offered in the comment below:

Al Jazeera as an Arab media service affiliation is globally oriented with a motto of “opinion and the opinion of others”, a pluralist platform seeking truth and abiding by the principles of professionalism, within an institutional framework. Seeking to raise public awareness of issues of concern to the public, it aspires to be a bridge between peoples and cultures and enhances the human right to knowledge and the values of tolerance and democracy and respect for human rights and freedom (*Al Jazeera* website, 2011).

This research showed that ‘this motto’ is employed by *Al Jazeera* to brand and distinguish its programmes’ relationship with the Arab people and region in contrast to the relationships forged by other news outlets. Specifically, journalists explain the reporting of important issues and those differing opinions as part of a unique effort to meet the ‘cultural rights’ that are presently denied to many Arab people. Similarly recognized is how these efforts to champion ‘Arab issues and voices’ are deployed to defend themselves against criticisms of *Al Jazeera*’s susceptibility to economic and political pressure (from Emir and the government of Qatar) and the competitive efforts from other (national and pan-Arab) news providers in the region. *Al Jazeera*’s described practice to report ‘truths’ that are lacking in the Arab region or what it describes as its ‘sacred narrative’ (Krichen, 2006) also defy, from the journalists’ perspective, the hegemony of the policies and the media agendas of western democratic countries, which have dominated the Arab region historically as is suggested here:

Al Jazeera is clear that its mission came in light of the existing world order, which was built on pillars of culture and a western view and attempts to impose a particular pattern of behaviour, heritage, civilization and information on the Arab World. It came to the Arab World to tell it truthful news (Journalist 4, December 2010).

As is shown, these ideas serve to differentiate *Al Jazeera* and its news operations. How then these general points connect specifically with ideas about the *Al Jazeera* audience and its news making will be explored next. From reviewing the evidence, it will be suggested that a shared construction of an imagined *Al Jazeera* audience is used to justify this institutional view and the production of news coverage for those who, it is suggested, require ‘truth’ reported for them.

Diversity, political mindset and ‘voicelessness’ of Arab people

Whom do journalists imagine as the audience of *Al Jazeera*? Details on the audience emerge from the organization's mission to 'speak truth' to Arab people. Truth is spoken it is believed, in contrast to the untruths or the omissions made by western and Arab news outlets, and to those who require it. Hence, an imagined audience develops from this positioning of the programme and one that bears little relevance to simple demographic considerations of those who potentially watch. *Al Jazeera* finds its 'audience' in those who represent and symbolize repressed peoples in a region much in the same way that Benedict Anderson (1983) discusses the construction of the 'imagined community'. To wrought detail from this abstract geographical view, the news organisation mobilizes several combined characterisations of the Arab audience that reflect its mission statement, including an audience with, (i) a heterogeneous character and origins, (ii) a common mindset and (iii) a general voicelessness.

Born out of a desire to challenge the relationship that other news providers maintain with their audiences, the idea of the *Al Jazeera* audience is focused on addressing the experience of the Arab people. These ideas first express an aim to create inclusivity between the programme and the people. *Al Jazeera* aims then to speak to all Arab peoples in the geographical region. Yet this process, it has found, involves addressing difference, specifically the 'unfulfilled needs' of a heterogeneous people that inhabit the region as is explained here:

We realized in the channel that the Arab World is characterized by diversity and multiplicity, and that its paramount importance is not to be biased toward one culture, ethnicity or religious identity to the detriment of another (Krichen, 2006).

Inclusive reporting therefore must speak to the demands of an audience that is categorized as holding different cultural, ethnic and religious identities – a point that will be addressed later. Further refining this view are assumptions made about those who are willing and able to engage at this level. When asked to explain their ideal news audience for instance, journalists mention a wider occupational category of 'an educated Arab elite'. It is reasoned that these audience members possess what Bourdieu (1989) describes as the 'cultural capital' to be fully interested in the detail of politics. Hence, journalists see them as employed in the likely occupations of '...researchers, human rights activists, politicians, university teachers and journalists' (Journalist 10, December 2010). In effect, the political content of the programme is constructed to speak directly to their, educationally shaped, interest in news events.

Nevertheless, journalists have recently recognized political interest emerging within different demographics. *Al Jazeera* has traditionally viewed younger people for instance as uninterested in 'older people's concerns' specifically. It now recognizes, however, a prevalent younger Arab audience that shows interest in 'what is happening in the Arab world...especially after the Second Intifada in Palestine' (Senior Producer 3, December 2010). As well as focusing on 'older Arabs' who watch the programme to learn from an outsider's view of the 'government activities and presidential protocol traditionally censored by their national news broadcasters', journalists see younger Arabs as possessing desires for news of both local and international issues (ibid.). Still, helping to galvanize these characteristics into a recognized group of 'ideal news consumers' in the minds of *Al Jazeera* journalists are additional factors, we find.

An Arab perspective or ‘mindset’ is one of the significant aspects that journalists use to understand and in turn shape the preferred perspective from which news events should be discussed. Of the many things this could signify, the ‘mindset’ is actually conceived as a collective political perspective of the Arab people, the focus of which a producer articulates here:

Arabs have a deep feeling that they have been wronged for a long time since they lost Andalusia. This feeling became even deeper with the occupation of the Arab World by some western countries in the recent past. This feeling makes them feel that *Al Jazeera* represents their voice, presenting, at least politically, what they want (Producer 1, December 2010).

Although conceived as diverse in terms of their identity (and the assumed interests that derive from their gender, age and education), the imagined audience, it is suggested, shares collective experiences that produce inherent political desires. A sense of the political reality that forms from their ongoing lived experiences is prominent to how journalists view this audience. Understood always in context of their national settings, the experience of the audience of *Al Jazeera* is further characterized in terms of the absence of opportunities for them to speak on political matters. This view is expressed in the following comment from a Senior Producer:

Arab media and Arab regimes do not consult people. Where are the Arab countries that enable you to participate in power and choices and allow you to say what you want? *Al Jazeera* works from the premise that the ordinary person is absent from decision-making circles, absent from the traditional and formal media and it focuses on the ordinary person who is reflected in the political and economic decisions that either he benefits from or pays for (Senior Producer 2, December 2010).

Ideas about the diversity, the politics, and the voiceless character of the Arab people scaffold therefore a construction of the audience and the broadcasting of *Al Jazeera* news that emerges from it. These generic understandings inform prominent thoughts about the preferred form of news programme. Up to this point then, we have established that the origins of the imagined audience have grown out of a set of institutional discourses that seek to differentiate the activities of *Al Jazeera*. Uncovered too is the additional conceptual work undertaken by journalists to build a coherent account of the audience. The next section will connect the ideas of the imagined audience to others on news making, in particular the newsworthiness attributed to different story types that are viewed as either relevant for, or as interesting and significant to their imagined audience.

News making knowledge

How do the ideas of the audience inform other ideas about news making? At a general level, we can view the workers in the news making process as physically embodying an observed complexity of the news audience for which they write. For example, an implemented policy within *Al Jazeera Arabic* has been to build and institute a multicultural news team. Employing journalists with different nationalities, ethnicities and religions represented in the Arab world has been a practical measure used by *Al Jazeera* to capture the complexities of political issues and experiences that confront their imagined audience. In addition, it has been employed to negate practices that can unwittingly favour one form over another within news making (i.e. used to avoid claims of bias). Seen practically from the organization’s perspective, a diverse news team can work to produce the desired (i) ‘accurate’ picture of the Arab world and to offer within this (ii) unique and detailed

understandings ‘about the countries, ethnic groups and religions that these people belong to’ (News Director, December 2010). Of course, these claims about what is produced from such diversity should not be taken at face value, but verified with detailed analysis of news reporting which unfortunately is out of the scope of this paper.

Nonetheless, exploring the meanings given to this practice shows that journalists reference the ‘diversity’ in the team to symbolise *Al Jazeera*’s wider effort to address the complexities of the Arab world – a mission on which the programme is founded of course, as is articulated by this producer:

We have different journalists from different religious tribes and various political ideologies within *Al Jazeera*. You can see Muslims (Sunni and Shi’a), Christians and people who do not believe in any religion. There are also journalists following many political ideologies: Islamists, Marxists and others. Everyone has the freedom to express his opinion and offer his suggestions (Producer 4, December 2010).

As this suggests, the diversity among the workers is viewed as a foundation stone on which develops an open and equal discussion about the potential reporting of the Arab world in the newsroom. Also, this offers a chance to cover the related understandings and concerns of different constituents of the *Al Jazeera* audience and, in turn allow viewers who ‘come from different horizons to identify themselves with the channel [...]’ (Krichen, 2006). A desire to meet their needs is equally clear in the organisation’s understanding of the events that should be reported. From the outline of the imagined Arab audience offered here, has developed a set of ideas about what issues are relevant. Acknowledging these helps to throw light on the professional ideas or ‘visualization’ (Cottle, 1993) that underpin their ideal news agenda.

Diversity and relevance

As we have heard, *Al Jazeera* journalists emphasize the need to develop a programme that meets a set of constructed ‘needs’ of an imagined audience. Part of this desire emerges from the prominent ideas of the diversity of the audience. As previous studies into news making explain however, there is a complexity to observe in the process where ideas meet the pragmatic constraints or ‘the reality’ of news making (e.g. the constraints of time, labour, resources, funding etc). The rest of this discussion will not comment on the latter. Rather, it will develop a sense of how news workers reference the imagined audience when visualizing an ideal news agenda and the parameters of what Gaye Tuchman (1978) called the ‘news net’. A key concern for *Al Jazeera* and many other programmes is the question of what is relevant for their audience, for example.

Providing important insights into this thinking are those ideas of *Al Jazeera* as an Arab affiliated organisation with a global orientation who ‘cares’ about its audience, outlined earlier. The prominent global stories, for instance, are filtered according to the criteria of ‘topics associated with the Arab world’ and, if these stories are included, then they will have been assessed ‘according to their importance’ (Journalist, 5 December 2010). The journalists interviewed often discussed potential news stories to illustrate this point. On one day, they highlight their treatment of Wikileaks revelations about former Lebanese premier - Rafiq Hariri, which was covered elsewhere in the global news media on that day, for example. As a prominent Arab politician had already voiced a denial about these Wikileaks revelations, a producer described the *Al Jazeera* view on this potential story at the time as: ‘...the WikiLeaks news was of no importance in itself’ (Producer 3, December 2010). As

is revealed in this example, those stories that originate from the west are assessed in context of the constructed needs of the Arab imagined audience. Challenges to them by respected Arab leaders, as in this case, can damage their potential 'legitimacy' as a potential *Al Jazeera* story.

Given this perspective on western issues, journalists describe the most important news for the programme to originate from the (Arab) region. Reported events are seen to have diverse origins and as such they 'could be in Guatemala, in the Sudan or it could be in the Congo...' (Journalist 2, December 2010). Hiding behind the often spoken rhetoric to report on a region in its entirety however, is an acknowledged divide between the countries that occupy the international stage (and are judged as more newsworthy in context of the global orientation of the programme) and those other countries that offer only localized issues or concerns for *Al Jazeera*. Certainly, the interviewed journalists, acknowledged these absences in their visualized news agenda. In reflecting on what is often lacking in these agendas they introduced specifically '...the absence of Eastern Arab issues [and] a focus on the presence of the North Arab African countries issues' (News Director, December 2010).

From what we have heard, there is a complexity to observe in the decisions taken over what events are considered to be germane for *Al Jazeera*. The idea that the agenda reflects the shared perspectives and the influence of journalists that was offered earlier for example, does not fit with the greater value that has been observed to be attached to those issues/events at the centre rather than the periphery of the Arab world. Indeed, relevant issues/events appear to form a potential source of tension for some. This accepted position was a clear source of concern for one of the journalists interviewed, who suggested: 'there are opinions that say, "this matters to Arab viewers and this does not matter to Arab viewers" and my opinion is often contrary to that of *Al Jazeera*' (Journalist 2, December 2010). This example of spoken protest aside, the observations of news making revealed that the production of *Al Jazeera* is underpinned by consensus rather than conflict. Indeed, what we learn from talking with journalists about the process is that they share ideas about the ideal news agenda. As such, stories assumed to be important to address also originate from the news 'interests' of the audience and their collective Arab mindset.

Mindset and news interests

Journalists' attempts to explain the importance of audience interests for their agenda involve them referencing the 'common mindset' and the ordinary individual Arab's lives that shape it. A result of viewing the *Al Jazeera* audience in this way is that the audience is considered to hold a collective interest in listening to perspectives on conflicts between Arabs and 'others', including those recent to Iraq and Afghanistan. Palestine, for example, provides the location of an enduring conflict that is assumed to be of direct interest to the Arab mindset. As an uncontroversial case, it figures prominently on the visualized agenda of stories as the following comments explain:

I think all Arabs see themselves in *Al Jazeera*. *Al Jazeera* represents them all. When we cover the Palestinian issue, we cover all Arabs, because they are all interested in this topic. It is their main concern (Journalist 8, December 2010).

The common understanding of the Palestinian issue as core to the Arab mindset has become integral to the back-story of *Al Jazeera*'s reporting and therein is offered as a reason for the growing importance of its reporting in the region. In fact, journalists believe that the practice

to satiate this 'audience interest' has been integral to the measured success of their programme over time. Such a belief clearly underpins this producer's decisions over newsworthy stories in this morning meeting discussion (9/12/2010):

Producer 1: From Jerusalem: We have a press conference about those threatened with expulsion from Jerusalem and Ramallah. There is a picket by Hamas to denounce the expulsion of Abutir and there is also the preparation of the celebration of the Human Rights Day by talking about the oldest prisoners and the youngest... These topics are good material to talk about Israel's politics of deportation. We also have, within the climate coverage, the Israeli citizens' takeover of the water springs and turning them into parks with foreign names.

The above comment outlines the newsworthy events preferred on this day. More specifically, it uncovers a process to earmark those issues that relate to the Palestinian issue. Connections like these, it is assumed, talk to an ingrained interest held by the audience in conflicts between Arabs and 'others', which symbolize the region. Other conflicts that divide Arab countries/regions including the most recent uprisings (e.g. Arab Spring) are viewed differently. Some conflicts are considered as less newsworthy by contrast because they serve to segregate common interest into particularized interests according to political difference and religious position. Furthermore, the thought of losing the watching audience from perhaps any indiscriminate reporting of these conflicts informs journalists' efforts to recognize all of their 'politically complexities' when covering them as is described below:

Some news you deal with boldly. For instance, 'two martyrs fall in Gaza' is, without hesitation, news important for the Arab nation and for *Al Jazeera*. But when we say, for example, that clashes have happened in eastern Saudi Arabia between Sunnis and Shiites, or in Bahrain, this issue needs caution and auditing, because it could have negative repercussions (Senior Producer 5, December 2010).

Besides being more multifaceted and thus difficult to report, these stories reveal the role of paternalistic considerations in the ideal news agenda. Applied these views 'protect' the (religious) sensibilities of some but they can also delimit the audiences' ability to know. It follows that 'specific interests', which are derived from an understanding of the Arab mindset, leads the news team to place a range of issues in different countries on their ideal news agenda, including the reproduction of some 'local issues' as has been explained earlier. Relevance and interest are not the only considerations that shape the ideal agenda, however.

Voicelessness and personalization

In addition to the ideas of relevance and interest, the motivation to address the voicelessness of the Arab people in political matters, in addition to their lived experiences in Arab nations, also materializes in these journalists' understanding of the form of the ideal *Al Jazeera* agenda. In practice, this informs the view to visualize the programme in terms of combining both 'hard' and 'soft' political news stories. As dissimilar to outcomes of personalized western media agendas however, the *Al Jazeera* agenda is personalized with 'softer' news to enhance, not deviate from, a focus on Arab politics. On one level, this preferred practice provides, in the minds of journalists, greater opportunities to speak to the interests of 'traditionally diverse' elements within the Arab audience (including women and younger people more recently). Accompanying these changes in style and on another level, there are moves to include the 'ordinary voices' of Arabs. Enhancing the presence of Arab voices in particular, it is assumed, serves to counter their experience of voicelessness in their national

settings. The process to achieve a greater presence involves visualising the ordinary Arab experience in terms of their 'rights' (or lack of) and proposing stories to reflect this view.

In addition to topics on 'rights', newsworthiness follows in an observed need to represent the culture and the agency of Arab people that have been traditionally neglected in the reporting of the Arab region, as is suggested here:

Arabs are disappointed communities. They need hope, to believe in themselves and to see their successful experiences - see the joy and happiness in their dark realities. That is the reason why I do not agree with presenting hard, negative news all the time (Producer 2, December 2010).

Again, it is their desire to include the experience of ordinary Arab people that secures a space for this type of political commentary in stories in the ideal news agenda. Other considerations also play a part in their inclusion. Although justified on the basis of audiences' everyday circumstances in the Arab world, the place of these stories is reinforced further by their ability to enhance the configuring of the *Al Jazeera* agenda. The presence of ordinary people serves to enhance its stylistic balance as is suggested here:

This type of news is important and *Al Jazeera* falls short in this aspect. You must recognize the diversity of the viewer and that not all people like news of death and destruction. Life has variety. *Al Jazeera's* direction is in dealing with political angles. For example, you make a report on the ethnicities in Eritrea and their diversity. I could take up this in order to lead to discussing the political clashes. However, I choose to avoid these and deal with the diversity of dance and music. Maybe some people think I have done something less here. But, I find I have done something more enjoyable (Journalist 1, December 2010).

But, there are contending views on the benefits of the amount of the 'lighter', and the audience centred, story types in the ideal news bulletins. Against the more conservative thinking on this issue, the other perspective voiced by some journalists (including the one above) points to new innovations along these lines for *Al Jazeera* that would widen the coverage of the Arab world. Specifically, these would examine Arab culture embedded in non-Arab countries such as the '.... Arab presence in Africa, the Islamic presence in America" (Journalist 4, December 2010). Underscoring the importance of geography in these stories would help it is believed to ease the core – periphery tension in news selections, recognized earlier, as well as to meet a desire to continue to make ordinary people visible in Arab political life and to celebrate their communities as is referenced in the organisation's mission statements.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has set out to explore the construction of an imagined audience and its use in *Al Jazeera Arabic*. In common with the findings of likeminded production studies, it has shown that views of the audience are integral to these broadcasters' efforts to assert their position in the Arab news ecology. This paper is first to suggest then that these ideas are represented in its mission statement and its strategy as they help to maintain the broadcaster's market position in opposition to other Arab media perspectives. Such a view sharpens our understanding of the operation of this differentiated news provider, in contrast to existing comparative work on the media system or journalistic field. In addition to identifying audience 'needs' in the organisational strategy, these ideas appear also, it is shown, as an organising principle in the news making processes of the Qatar newsroom.

Speaking to a gap in the literature on news production in (Arab) journalism, this paper has uncovered news workers' definitional work that builds the imagined audience and, in turn, that which helps to organize their news priorities. At first, diversity appears to be a key idea that shapes their understandings of their audiences and their news making roles in the newsroom. Nonetheless, diversity is less significant than a collective Arab perspective that shapes journalists' views. A belief that the Arab audience holds view of 'being wronged' historically, is used to justify the direction in their coverage. A collective idea of the ordinary individual Arab's experience of living in national contexts that delimit information supply and restrict their participation is also important. Moulded in response to these assumed 'realities', *Al Jazeera*, it is suggested, offers a voice to the 'voiceless' (ordinary Arab people) alongside a visibility for the political perspective of their 'common mindset'.

Given these observations, this study has provided the first overview of the relationship between the imagined audience and news making ideas in Arab journalism. As has been discussed, a careful reading of the literature shows that the 'Arab identity' is already acknowledged as shaping the news found elsewhere in Arab region. Still, audience views reflect this idea in a more concentrated form, we can argue. As is shown here these understandings underpin news workers' 'professional visualization' (Cottle, 1993) of the *Al Jazeera* programme and their ideas that privilege assumed relevant issues/events in the Arab world. Although many appear potentially relevant for the programme, news workers veer toward the 'significant' issues/events on the international stage. Assumed audience 'interest' in the conflicts in the Arab world (particularly news of Palestine) reinforce this view. Conflicts invoke both 'interest' and 'sensitively' in accordance with the Arab mindset, this has shown. Sympathy for Arab issues stimulate the reporting of conflicts between Arabs and 'others' and a performed 'sensitivity' to difference is demanded in the reported struggles within Arab nations. These outcomes fit neatly with research findings that compare coverage between *Al Jazeera Arabic* and those offered by other (including western) broadcasters (e.g. Lynch, 2006; Cherkaoui, 2010). Less well recognized, nevertheless, are the human-interest accounts that are favoured to complement the explicit political content and stylistic features in the ideal agenda. Speaking to this absence in the literature, this paper has explained the programme's desire to address the voicelessness of Arab people by including accounts of ordinary Arab voices, lives and communities.

In sum, this paper has shown that ideas of the imagined audience connect both the organizations' mission statements and its news making ideas. In the process, it has helped to direct future research enquires into the practice of news agenda building and to provoke wider questions about the extent to which *Al Jazeera* meets its obligations to cover issues and to represent people and views in the Arab region. This paper has begun the process, but more detailed research is needed into the news practices that shape the representation of issues and news voices alongside the language/image selections that position news consumers to reported events, actors and contexts. By exploring these with the ideas of the imagined Arab audience in mind, research will be able to compare the view of *Al Jazeera* explained here with collected evidence of the ideological and dialogical openness or closure in its reporting of the Arab world.

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