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## Engagement as an emerging value on the television channel Al Jazeera. Comparative analysis of AJA and AJE (2016-2020)

**Abstract**

This paper will conduct a comparative analysis of engagement strategies in Al Jazeera's Arabic and English channels. Methodological triangulation is used through literature review, content analysis, in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. We study the channels' policies as seen in two turning points: the formation of the engagement strategy in 2016 and the team restructuring in 2018. Engagement is no longer just a marketing strategy to turn the audience into a key player in content production. Platformization and the search for a comprehensive, international strategy emerge as challenges for the coming years.

**Keywords**

**Engagement, social networks, communication, journalism, Twitter, television, digital platforms, journalism, communication.**

### 1. Capturing the user's attention

#### 1.1. Engagement as a fundamental element in hybrid environments

In the complex, hybrid (Chadwick, 2013) and liquid (Bauman, 2000) ecosystem in which digital media are located, efforts to drive audience engagement has stood out in recent years within media strategies (Newman, 2016, 2020). While there is still no consensus on the conceptualization of the term in the studies from the 1990s (Dhanesh, 2017; Shen, Hongmei & Jiang, 2019), engagement is gaining ground in communication research and digital media.

Within the processes of journalistic innovation (Paulasen, 2016), user participation (Hujanen, 2016), the emotional charge of information (Beckett & Deuze, 2016), empathy between journalists and users (Glück, 2016) and, above all, audience metrics in news production processes have been at the forefront (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). The rise of social networks and their effect on mediated communication in today's societies, as well as mobile communication, artificial intelligence, virtual reality and transmedia strategies, have driven the search for experiments and innovative answers.

In this context, engagement is intricately linked to user interaction and participation, thus taking on ethical dimensions (Mussico, 2017) linked to social networks (Campbell & Lambright, 2020) and more abstract ones (Wenzel & Nelson, 2020). There is no consensus on terminology (Alonso, 2015; Rossini, 2013; Tarin, 2013; Ballesteros & Díez, 2018; Bernal & Donoso, 2017; Ballesteros Herencia, 2019). The definitions come from different fields and range from the assimilation of engagement with interactivity or consumption to more

complex concepts linked to psychological engagement (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Devin & Lane, 2014; Motin & Leitch, 2012; Men & Tsai 2013; Travaglini *et al.*, 2020). Dhanesh (2017) summarizes them in two main conceptualizations: (1) as communicative interaction manifested in clicks, likes, views, actions, comments, tweets, recommendations and other user-generated content; and (2) the dichotomous notions of engagement as control based on transactional modes of communication (public information, bidirectional asymmetry, dissemination of organizational messages) and engagement as online collaboration based on participatory modes of communication (dialogue, co-creation of content, etc.).

The search for engagement with the reader is one the main challenges faced by legacy and digital native media during the last 25 years. At this stage, media managers no longer seek empathy with the audience for purely economic reasons (García Orosa, 2018), but, above all, to generate short- and long-term engagement. This goal has become such a driving force that some authors called this the age of engagement (Morehouse & Saffer, 2019).

Within this context, journalism has seen seismic changes (Rashidian, 2020) with transformations in norms, roles, everyday practices (Spryridou *et al.*, 2013) or daily news circulation (Carlson, 2020).

Engagement permeates every phase of journalistic production and even triggers the appearance of new professional positions such as conversation editor and interaction editor, which affect the role of the journalist (Berganza, Lavín & Piñeiro-Naval, 2017; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, Mick, Oller Alonso & Olivera, 2007; Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Although still in a nascent stage, some engagement strategies advocate opening the newsroom to the reader through meetings and chats and by creating exclusive communities for members in which they not only have more voice but even a vote on some questions (e.g., *Eldiario.es*) (García-Orosa & Pérez-Seijo, 2020). The media are exploring new ways of relating to the user, aimed at increasing reader loyalty by creating a sense of belonging and rewarding readers with a more participatory, horizontal interactivity with the newsroom (for example, *Tortoise Media*), or even through co-production, calling on users to participate as blogger or expert sources (for example, *De Correspondent*). Communication directors are focused on new audiences, the search for new languages and narratives (crossmedia, transmedia, 360°), social networks, mobile communication and robotic communication (García-Orosa, 2019). The strategies are differentiated, and a key element lies in the value of the community through participatory strategies and thematic specialization in different degrees of development based on individual organizations (García-Orosa, López-García & Vázquez-Herrerros, 2020). These trends are also common in information sources (García-Orosa, 2014, 2018), a role initially played by the relationship with the user.

These trends have been particularly salient in television (Worldwide, 2019; Harford, Shedd & Mortensen, 2018; Broadcasters' Audience Research Board BARB, 2018; Newman, Reports of Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 Reuters). The TV audience receives special treatment (Ling & Chiang, 2019; Kroon, 2010; Hayes, 2017; Reinhard & Amsterdam, 2017) with differentiated experiences. For example, France 24 allocated a space to Facebook questions from the public during the programme *France 24 Talk*; the BBC did the same on *Point of View* and *Dialogue Tonight* programme; whereas Sky News Arab allowed Facebook and Twitter fans to ask questions and opine on the show's topics.

## 1.2. Context

Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) was launched in 1996 as the first independent news channel in the Arab world dedicated to providing comprehensive news, analysis and live discussions, and is one of the most influential news channels in the Middle East (Eliades, 2006). Its global network is expanding, and its role has increased, especially since the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2010 and gradually moved to Egypt, Libya and other Arab nations (Al Jazeera Network, 2018).

Al Jazeera English (AJE) was launched on November 15, 2006, as part of Al Jazeera Media Network, one of the world's leading media corporations, spanning news, documentary and sports channels. Its English-language news and current affairs channel broadcasts 24 hours a day. According to its website, it broadcasts to more than 310 million households in more than 100 countries and has more than 3,000 highly experienced employees of more than 70 nationalities (Al Jazeera Network, 2018).

Both channels implemented a novel engagement management strategy in 2016 when they chose technological innovation and engagement as a means to broaden and diversify the audience. Another turning point arose in 2018 with the restructuring of the channels' teams.

On another note, it should be noted that Qatar has advanced internet infrastructure, with significant growth in the digital market (Dubai Press Club, Dubai Media City, 2016). Regarding social networks, Facebook and WhatsApp are dominant, with 81% and 80% of the population using each, respectively. YouTube, Pinterest and Twitter clock in at 55%, 42% and 35% respectively. Internet and smartphone utilization is growing rapidly in the Arab world according to Dennis, Martin and Hassan (2019).

### 1.3. *The Study*

In this context, the study purports to analyse two channels with the same parent company, but different audiences and strategies: AJA and AJE. As such, the study will allow us to shed light on how one parent company chooses to apply different strategies based on different target audiences and the teams of journalists who work on each programme analysed herein. It is especially relevant because in 2016 AJA and AJE embarked upon a new stage of innovation in which one of the main points was engagement with audiences. The main research question is:

RQ1. What are the new engagement strategies in the debate shows on Al Jazeera Channels (AJA and AJE)? (RQ1)

From this first question there arise others:

RQ2. What goals do the channels seek to achieve by generating audience engagement?

RQ3. In what ways do the channels' policies resemble or differ from one another?

## 2. Methodology

This study expands upon an existing line of research on Al Jazeera (Satti, 2020; Negredo-Bruno, 2013). The main objective is to monitor and identify recent engagement trends in the debate programmes on AJA and AJE, observing how digital and technological developments and the fusion of traditional and new media are being addressed.

Methodological triangulation was used to compare the results. Data extraction was performed by means of content analysis, interviews and non-participant observation. In the first case, all the debate programmes of the two Al Jazeera channels broadcast in 2018 and 2019 have been analysed (Table 1).

To answer RQ1, this descriptive study employs a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) of Al Jazeera's debate programmes and in-depth interviews. The analysis consists of several categories and thematic analyses, such as: basic information about the programmes, the main areas and topics covered, the presenter or host, information about the guest and the audience, the use of technology, the use of social media and the interactivity within the programmes.

The study has two types of samples:

- 1) Sample of analytical study (sample of debate programmes).
- 2) Sample field study (interviewees).

The analysis period includes the 2016–2018 programme cycle and traces the development of some existing programmes or the launch of new programmes up to 2020. Some of the selected programmes began airing in the Al Jazeera programming cycle in on the occasion of Al Jazeera's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in November 2016, such as *Eye of Al Jazeera*, *Scenarios* and *The*

*Rest for Story*, as a new programme format. The analytical sample study included the 16 debate programmes on AJA and AJE: *Behind the News, Today-Interview/Special, From Washington, Without bounds, The Opposite Direction, Witness on The Era, Eye of Aljazeera, Scenarios, Rest of the Story, The Harvest, Inside Story, The Stream, Talk To Al Jazeera, The Big Picture, Upfront* and *Head to head*.

The qualitative content analysis of the selected programmes shown in Table 1 is based on various categories and variables such as:

- 1) Programme objective (News/News-opinion, analysis, public figure feature);
- 2) Programme format (In-depth interview, round table, debates, talk show, interactive);
- 3) Programme agendas (political, social, economic, cultural, technological, etc.);
- 4) Type of broadcast (live or pre-recorded);
- 5) Broadcast frequency: daily, weekly, fortnightly or monthly;
- 6) Programme duration;
- 7) Presenters/hosts;
- 8) Guests and audience;
- 9) Technology and multimedia used on the programmes (video wall, reports, short document ary, video clips, graphics, virtual reality, immersive reality) and the programmes' presence on Al Jazeera network websites;
- 10) Social media used on the programmes and the programmes' presence on social networks and websites;
- 11) Forms of interactivity (e-polls, phone calls, posts and tweets, e-mails and others);

The interviewers sought to interview every relevant group (presents, producers, journalists, Head of news and programming departments, Social Media Officer, Technologists Officer, Administrative (General Director), Head of Divisions and Centres related) and were conducted in person in 2018 and 2019 at the Al Jazeera headquarters in Qatar.

The interviewee sampling was intentionally designed to collect broader and deeper information and explanations about the scope of the study. As such, the interlocutors on the debate programmes are the appropriate people to describe, research and talk about.

The interviews mainly focused on the following analysis variables; new trends in production, the use of technology in television production, the use of social media in production, interactivity and the new skills needed to meet and cope with changes in television production.

The questions aim to answer the main variables of the field study. The main questions are:

- What are the major trends in Al Jazeera's debates programmes?
- What changes and displacements have arisen in the production of Al Jazeera debate programmes due to their use of new technologies?
- How have AJA and AJE incorporated social media into their TV debate shows?
- What types of interactivity does Al Jazeera use in its debate programmes?
- What are the main characteristics, skills and functions of the interlocutors on Al Jazeera's debate programmes?
- What roles do the modern newsrooms of AJA and AJE play in promoting new methods of programme production?
- What are the repercussions of the use of new trends in Al Jazeera's debate programmes?
- How do journalists, presenters, producers and others implement these trends in television production?
- What kinds of new skills do presenters and production teams need to use new technologies effectively?
- What would you suggest to improve the form and content of TV news programmes?

In 2019, three additional in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data following several changes, including the creation of the Digital Newsroom (DNR), which is responsible for curating the online presence of the news and the programming.

Lastly, researchers at the Al Jazeera Media Network HQ in Doha, Qatar provided field observations in April and May 2018 by attending meetings and taking notes on the production processes of debate programmes. New data was obtained through informal interviews with production teams, observation of the interviewees in their workplaces and log-keeping of actions taken, participation in meetings, attendance of programmes, consultation of internal documents, accessing internal web and social network data for each channel.

The research subject (the debate programmes) was selected for its great relevance to the network from its onset, and especially in the current stage in which the programmes are usually broadcast during prime time and attract advertisers (Al-Kinani, 2012; Nader & Mikhael, Monitoring Talk Shows in TV, 2015; The future Today Institute, 2020).

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### **3.1. *The age of engagement***

The results show how each channel strives to increase engagement and introduces changes in the field of news by incorporating audience actions and metrics in the various phases of the production process.

The first point to be considered when assessing the strategies is the context and the information ecosystem in which these two channels' debate programmes take place.

As such, it should be noted that the topics on AJE's debate programmes are much broader than AJA's due to the diversity of the prior's audience (more than 310 million households in 100 different countries and three regions) and its three headquarters located on three continents in Doha, London and Washington, D.C. This fact, however, makes it difficult to broadcast live on AJE, *The Stream* being the channel's only live broadcast, and elicits a different engagement strategy as described below.

AJA seeks to further enhance interaction to allow the audience to participate more effectively in the different stages of production, according to Al Jazeera producers. The availability of interactive elements on AJA depends on the type and purpose of the program, and their presence varies from programme to program, depending also on the objective (Zubaidi, 2018). Moreover, today's audience wants to be part of the story and participate in TV production (Moussaoui, 2018).

The digital platforms and instruments through which engagement with the audience is sought are summarized below in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 1:** Forms of Interactivity and Engagement on AJE.

| Programmes                | Tweets | E-mail | Online Surveys | Phone Calls | Social media on the programme | Social Media                                   | In-studio Audience | Online Interactivity |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|----------------|-------------|-------------------------------|--|--------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Inside Story</i>       | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | No                            | Twitter<br>Facebook                            | No                 | Interactive website  |
| <i>Talk to Al Jazeera</i> | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | No                            | Twitter<br>Facebook                            | No                 | Interactive website  |
| <i>The Stream</i>         | Yes    | Yes    | No             | No          | No                            | Twitter,<br>Facebook,<br>YouTube,<br>Instagram | No                 | Interactive website  |
| <i>The Big Picture</i>    | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | No                            | No special pages                               | No                 | Interactive website  |
| <i>Upfront</i>            | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | Yes                           | Twitter and Facebook                           | No                 | Interactive website  |
| <i>Head to Head</i>       | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | No                            | Twitter<br>Facebook                            | Yes                | Interactive website  |

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 2:** Engagement elements on AJA.

| Programmes                      | Tweets | E-mail | Online surveys | Phone calls | Social media on the program | Social media                | In-studio audience | Online interactivity    |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Behind the News</i>          | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | Not used                    | On the official AJA account | No                 | Non-interactive website |
| <i>Today-Special Interview/</i> | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | Not used                    | On the official AJA account | No                 | Non-interactive website |
| <i>Eye of Al Jazeera</i>        | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | No                          | On the official AJA account | No                 | Non-interactive website |
| <i>Scenarios</i>                | Yes    | Yes    | No             | No          | Limited use                 | Twitter page                | No                 | Non-interactive website |
| <i>The Harvest</i>              | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | Not used                    | On the official AJA account | No                 | No website              |
| <i>From Washington</i>          | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | Not used                    | Twitter and Facebook page   | No                 | Website                 |
| <i>Without Bounds</i>           | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | Not used                    | Twitter and Facebook page   | No                 | Website                 |
| <i>The Opposite Direction</i>   | No     | Yes    | Sometimes      | No          | Not used                    | Twitter and Facebook page   | No                 | Website                 |
| <i>Witness on the Era</i>       | No     | Yes    | No             | No          | Not used                    | Twitter and Facebook page   | No                 | Website                 |
| <i>Rest of the Story</i>        | Yes    | Yes    | No             | No          | Used                        | Twitter and Facebook page   | No                 | Website                 |

Source: Own elaboration.

Tables 3 and 4 show how interaction during programmes has been drastically reduced and mostly replaced by engagement through social networks (Al-Zubaidi, 2018), which extends the programme beyond the space–time limits of its broadcast. Nonetheless, the differences between the two channels are noticeable.

AJA generates engagement during programmes (synchronously with television broadcasting) and fosters interaction on social platforms through comments, voting and sharing multimedia messages (Abu Malek, 2018). The Al Jazeera producers we interviewed indicated that AJA seeks to further enhance interaction to allow the audience to participate more effectively in the channel’s various stages of production. The availability of interactive elements on AJA depends on the type and purpose of the program, and their presence varies from programme to program, depending on the programme’s objectives (Alzubaidi, 2018).

The channel’s wide array of programmes includes some with little interactivity such as *Behind the News*, *Witness on the Era* or *Today-interview/Special interview*, none of which allow for much interaction with the audience or make use of online surveys, phone calls, tweets, emails or the like. Such programmes typically lack an in-studio audience and offer no interactivity on the website. They also tend to lack specific profiles on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube beyond the official AJA accounts.

There is another group of programmes that make interesting but limited uses of engagement strategies. Take, for example, *Eye of Al Jazeera* with its immersive content, *Scenarios* with its face-to-face audience and its own social networks strategy (Krichen, 2018) or *Without Bounds*, which asks the public to use social media to send questions for the programme’s guests to answer.

At the other extreme, some programmes have a unique audience engagement strategy. For example, *Rest of the Story* integrates a tailored strategy in every stage of production. During the broadcast, interaction is allowed through social networks, and, on some occasions, immersion is used to increase the feeling of presence. *Platform Al Jazeera*, one of the first interactive programmes on AJA, is entirely dedicated to the audience expressing their opinions on important issues. The interactivity in the programme is carried out across several stages: pre-production and post-production on the website which then informs the preparation and production of the broadcast.

In 2016 this strategy was bolstered with the launch of new, purely interactive programmes (Dirbashi, 2018; Moharar, 2018) such as: *Your Newsletter*, which features content generated by the audience through text, photos, graphics and videos with two specialists who comment on the audience-chosen topics; and *Career News*, a programme which elicits the audience’s opinion by involving them in the selection of topics and guests.

In AJE’s case, audience engagement is marked by the very ecosystem and essence of the network. With the fundamental goal of being an international channel and decentralizing both the production teams and the programming’s agenda and guests, AJE has made a name for itself in the ever-important world of TV. However, the relationship with the audience is different because it must target audiences located in vastly different places, time zones and cultures. Thus, the network strives to unite and capitalize on this richness and diversity in its relationship with its audience, without ignoring the fact that this very diversity calls for tailor-made approaches. Engagement is asynchronous, that is, it is not limited by the different stages of production of the debate programmes and functions as an unbound-by-time extension of the same.

In the AJE programmes analysed herein, an in-depth, multi-perspective analysis of that episode’s topic, rather than interaction with the audience, is the main goal (Kubaisi, 2018). The interaction is not focused on the programme (issues or guests in AJA’s case), but rather on the audience’s reaction to previous broadcasts. As most of the programmes are pre-recorded, the interaction occurs through social networks, as seen in Table 4.

Within this framework, AJA's programmes' websites are more effective than AJE's. *The Stream* is the only debate show to have a special YouTube channel in addition to Al Jazeera English's main channel and is the first to combine web communities with a daily Al Jazeera show, thereby fusing a TV format with social media features during production to allow the audience to interact more (Husain, 2018). It maintains a presence on social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and podcasts with rich visual content from social networks, such as video reports, clips, graphics, tweets, photos, vlogs and other multimedia.

The only talk show format programme is the *Head to Head* programme on both AJA and AJE. The show has high levels of interactivity on AJE's YouTube channel. Guests, panellists and audience members share their views and opinions on the program. *Head to Head* also has an associated podcast and maintains Facebook and Twitter pages, with the lion's share of the interaction taking place on the lattermost. Moreover, the show's presenter Mehdi Hasan has an active Twitter page which highlights the two TV shows he hosted (*Up Front* and *Head to Head*). As part of the channel's policy, many of the broadcasters and reporters use their active personal accounts on social media to promote the programmes they host (Alkunaisi, 2018).

### 3.2. Social media

As shown in Table 5, Al Jazeera's presence on social networks is especially important. Prior to 2011, debate and news programmes were unregulated, and social media functioned primarily as a channel of communication with sources of information (Namous, 2016) through a special section for social media focused on fact-checking. Over time, this section became a mini-newsroom for creating social media-specific content.

The organizational structure of this department today includes the following divisions: 1) An editorial division responsible for managing the primary and subsidiary accounts; 2) Monitoring and Fact-checking; 3) Production; 4) Programmes, responsible for analysing the relationship between the social networks department and Al Jazeera's different programmes. To implement best practices in incorporating social media in television production, Al Jazeera established 10 committees in early 2018 to develop their social media strategy (Nasif, 2018): 1) Facebook and Office Management Committee; 2) Twitter Development Committee; 3) YouTube Development Committee; 4) Digital Production Development Committee (digital video in particular); 5) Quality Control Committee; 6) Technical Development Committee; 7) Promotion and Marketing Committee; 8) Telegram and Snapchat Development Committee; 9) Fact-checking and News Gathering Development Committee; and 10) Programme Page Development Committee.

The head of AJA Audience Development summarizes the strategy as such (Khohtali, 2019): 1) Focus on quality, not quantity; 2) Interaction is the foundation; 3) New form and content; 4) Social media should not mirror the channel; 5) The content of the channel responds to the needs of the social audience and follows their habits; 6) Integration of different platforms, especially Facebook and YouTube; 7) Create original content. Moreover, to avoid dilution and promote the brand, some accounts were cancelled.

The best model for the use of social media in debate programmes is *The Stream*, which, informed by the social media community, combines web communities with daily programmes on AJE. The programme incorporates the experience of social networks in the TV show, using Skype video chat to interview guests, such that it combines television, the web and social networks to form an interactive environment.

Regarding content, as seen in Figure 1, the lion's share are live broadcasts, followed by clips or highlights and a focus on social network-specific material.



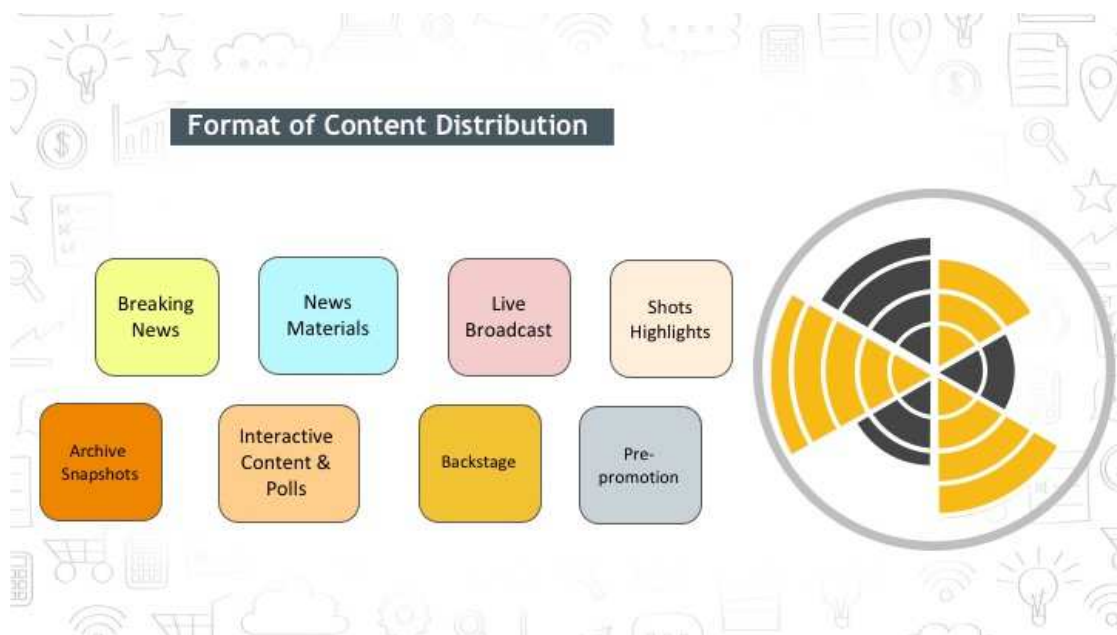
**Table 3:** Presence of AJA and AJE on social networks.

| Social Media Platform | AJA Followers     | AJE Followers     |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Facebook              | 23.5M Followers   | 13.4M Followers   |
| YouTube               | 5.35M Subscribers | 4.65M Subscribers |
| Twitter               | 14.7M Followers   | 5.8M Followers    |
| Instagram             | 3M Followers      | 1.2M Followers    |
| Telegram              | 170K Members      | 6.6K Members      |

(M = Million, K = Thousand).

Source: Created by authors, based on verified Al Jazeera social media accounts, February 2020.

**Figure 1:** Format of AJA content distribution on social networks.



Source: Audience Development Division at Al Jazeera.

One of the future trends in Al Jazeera is to adopt a new vision of convergence of television and digital content. The vision is based on “an audience-centred media approach” so as to allow the viewing public to direct what appears on TV, at times via the numerous trending stories from around the world (Mousa, 2018).

Regarding the use of messaging apps in the television production process, most of the interviewees agreed that WhatsApp is the best tool for them as a team to communicate with others, exchange information, ideas, articles and links. For many, email remains an important means of communicating with teammates, but not with the audience.

Engagement with the user is sought in the different phases of production (pre-production, production and post-production). The table summarizes the dynamics of each phase on AJA and AJE, their objectives, the technology used, the state of development and projections for the future, as well as the roadblocks detected.

**Table 4:** Implementation of Engagement in AJA and AJE.

| Phases         | Goal                                     | Technology used                           | State of development | Projection    | Main difficulties   |
|----------------|--|---|----------------------|---------------|---|
| Pre-production | Audience segmentation                    | Expert systems in artificial intelligence | Mature               | Growth        | Teams' attitudes<br>Fear of potential reaction<br>Language barrier<br>Time-shifting<br>International audiences in different time zones<br>Staff training<br>Technological capacity in different audience countries<br>Focused on social media, low interactivity through traditional media<br>Adaptation of content for mobile devices, not computers |
|                | Measuring opinion states                 |   | Experimental         | Uncertainty   |   |
|                | Know the most relevant topics on Twitter | E-mails                                   | Mature               | Stabilization |   |
|                | Monitoring of previous news              | Google's Vision API                       | Mature               | Growth        |   |
|                |  | Chat (mainly WhatsApp)                    | Mature               | Stabilization |   |
| Production     | Ubiquity                                 | Skype                                     | Mature               | Growth        |   |
|                | Inclusion of audience-relevant topics    | Immersive techniques                      | Nascent              | Uncertainty   |   |
| Post           | Sending personalized messages            | Social media                              | Mature               | Growth        |   |
|                | Conversations with citizens              | Comments                                  | Mature               | Stabilization |   |

Source: Table model adapted by Campos-Domínguez and García-Orosa, 2018.

As seen above, social networks are at an advanced stage and are predicted to have significant continued growth, but this strategy will see major challenges in the coming years. Although the use of social networks is growing in the Al Jazeera Media Network, particularly after the launch of the digital sector, “There is confusion in decision-making about the fusion or separation of the digital sector and the newsroom, because of the huge growth, not because of the impossibility of deciding,” according to Ashour (2018). This explains the lack of consistent criteria for AJA programmes on social media platforms and the huge differences among them.

Many accounts exist on social media with no strategy, and the teams lack cohesion. In addition, visual materials such as images, thumbnails, cover photos and cards used on both the website and social platforms are not compatible with mobile devices (Kilic, 2018).

#### 4. Conclusions and trends

During the last five years, Al Jazeera has opted for engagement with the public as a fundamental aspect of its consolidation strategy as the first television network in the Arab world and, secondly, in furtherance of its expansion as an international network. The comparison between the Arabic and English channels is especially relevant because it allows us to observe a policy carried out with a common objective but in different ecosystems.

The trends observed fall within the hybrid strategies described at the beginning of this article (Chadwick, 2013) and those identified by international media reports (Newman, 2016, 2020). However, the network's strategy does present some peculiarities.

In both cases, the network is looking to gradually change the news field, pushing engagement beyond the deterministic and technological perspective and dealing with it as a part of the communicative process which can modify other elements therein, especially content. As such, AJA's and AJE's programming seeks long-term engagement with the receiver

through the combined use of equipment and processes of traditional television with new ideas supported by a variety of platforms and technological innovations. Engagement is no longer just an important source of marketing and distribution of programmes (and thus included only in the circulation phase as pointed out by previous studies), rather it has become increasingly relevant in the production phase (which would be considered marketing if such user integration were meant only to learn tastes and emotions and achieve greater sales, and journalism if such information and user participation at different levels of production resulted in higher-quality journalism) (RQ2).

Within this common strategy there are some differences arising not only from the types of practitioners who work at either channel but above all from the scope of coverage and the makeup of the target audience. Two major differences were detected (RQ3): 1) Unlike AJA, most AJE programmes are not live broadcasts, which does not allow for live audience participation; and 2) AJA relies more heavily on social media platforms during production than AJE.

AJA fosters user input in the pre-production phase. Although most information comes from big data on the behaviour and feelings of the recipients, some programmes involve the audience as a pre-production actor, that is, in the proposal and selection of topics and guests.

For AJE, engagement with the receiver no longer represents merely a deeper connection with a source of information (sometimes hard for an international network to achieve) or a marketing strategy like it was in the beginning, rather it is a geo-strategic value the network can leverage to create a worldwide AJE community. Unlike AJA's policy, which attempts to include the audience in pre-production, AJE seeks to consolidate a community around its brand who could then extend the life of its programming through post-broadcast comments and circulation. This particular tactic is determined by the space-time differences between receiver and sender, but, above all, by the interest in increasing and consolidating audiences in different political, cultural and economic systems.

Engagement stands out within a global strategy of technological innovation carried out by AJE and AJA, especially since 2016 with the network's creation of an independent digital sector whose goal is to expand its audience through engagement (Bishr, 2018; Kilic, 2018). To this end, the network has invested in the latest technological advances, diversification of programme formats to reach segmented audiences, integration of social networks in the pre-production and production of debate programmes, as well as user-generated content both in interactive programming (e.g., *Nashratokum*) and in circulation (e.g., *The Rest of the Story*).

Since 2016 Al Jazeera has implemented a hybrid strategy, modifying some aspects of its specific engagement strategies, such as interactivity on the programmes *Nashratokum* and *The New Race* (Abu-Hillalah, 2018), all while maintaining hallmark programmes such as *The Opposite Direction* and *Without Borders*.

The engagement strategies can be summarized as follows (RQ1):

1. Engagement as content creator. Specific digital content is developed for each social network (Bishr, 2018). Said creation breaks the mould established to date by other sources and media (García-Orosa, 2018; García-Orosa, 2014). Social networks are no longer just an extension of the program, rather the platforms characteristics themselves influence the content (thereby increasing not only engagement but also platformization, as in election campaigns in the United States of America, for example). The perfect example would be *Your Bulletin* (نشرتكم), based on user collaboration and user-generated content, and *News Race* (سباق الأخبار), based on user-selected agendas.
2. Engagement as a differentiating factor to attract previously non-existent audiences for the network, especially in the case of AJE (Salah-Aldeen, 2015).
3. The use of immersiveness as engagement to increase the sense of presence (García-Orosa, Pérez-Seijo, 2020; Janghout, 2018), used only in *Eye of Al Jazeera*.

4. Platformization. Interaction during a programme falls and is relegated to social networks (Zubaidi, 2018) with all the constraints this entails. The type of interaction depends on the social media ecosystem itself rather than the network's planning. In a similar vein, there are also the Facebook initiatives "Journalism Project" and "Google News Lab." In addition, social media has become a primary tool for television production, particularly for interactive programmes, which are based on user-generated content (UGC), and shapes the way audiences interact with the media (Nel, Westlund, 2013). Thus, as the network has strived to foster audience participation in content creation, the platforms and their constraints have become producers.
5. Take for example Media Central (the successor to iNews), the content management system produced by Avid, still under development within Al Jazeera's digitization project, where the network is working with Avid to create a collaborative platform for the gathering and writing of news, scenarios, photos, videos, graphics, files, maps, etc (Moussaoui, 2018).
6. Instagram has become increasingly valuable as its use has increased in recent months.
7. The public as producer instead of deliberator. The launches of interactive programmes which, starting in 2011 with AJE's *The Stream*, made the audience an essential part of the production process.
8. AJA's language advantage. Because 70% of the Arabic world accesses the Internet in Arabic and 31% in English, AJA was able to overcome the region's limited use of social networks (Dennis, Martin & Hassan, 2019).
9. Mobile devices. Today only 53% internet users in the Arab world access the internet on a computer, compared to 73% in 2018, while 96% of internet users connect via smartphones. Likewise, 53% of people in the Arab world who access Al Jazeera online do so from a computer, whereas 96% do so from a smartphone (Moussaoui, 2018). For many journalists, email remains an important means of communicating with teammates, but not with the audience. This trend is in keeping with a study by Llewellyn (2016), which confirmed the various advantages of WhatsApp for the team (speed, ease, low cost, more personal than email, ease of sharing photos and videos, in addition to multi-location deployments and the ability to disable notifications or leave the group).

Therefore, the medium analysed is in sync with the aforementioned international reports which show news outlets incorporating the audience in their news-production processes. Although social networks have a certain weight as discussed in the theoretical section, Al Jazeera's innovations are intricately linked to the makeup of the network's distinct audiences and the space-time characteristics of its broadcasts. Prior to 2011, debate and news programmes were unregulated, and social media functioned primarily as a communication channel with sources of information (Namous, 2016) through a special section for social media focused on fact-checking. Over time, this section became a mini-newsroom for creating social media-specific content.

Al Jazeera's engagement strategies are technology-intensive and change not only how the network relates to audiences but also the content itself. Thus, the platforms also become gatekeepers, mostly in pre-production and circulation; live participation is reduced; tech-focused engagement is outsourced to social networks. Consequently, engagement assumes the networks' ecosystems, constraints and solutions, with specific strategies and content but without specific practitioner skillsets. It is within this framework, then, that user-generated content arises. To paraphrase Dhanesh (2017), engagement revolves around communicative interaction manifested as clicks, likes, views, actions, comments, tweets, recommendations, other user-generated content and, to a lesser degree, collaboration.

Among other challenges that may arise over the next few years, the authors anticipate the following:

- Recovering the engagement strategy, outsourced at present to social networks, and emphasizing once again the audience's relationship with the Internet.
- The network may seek to move from mass to individual communication, as well as from broadcasting to unicasting, given that everyone can send, receive, produce and distribute.
- Organizational and decision-making barriers (Ashour, 2019).

## 5. Limitations

This article presents only a few ideas and conclusions from a larger study. However, despite the extensiveness of this study, it is limited to Al Jazeera. In the coming years, the research group hopes to expand the study to the field of reception, analysing the audience's reaction and interpreting the audience both as actor and target of an engagement strategy. It would also be interesting to extend the study to other areas and channels that would allow comparative analyses with other television networks or digital media.

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