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Mohamed A. Satti
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5688-7307
msatti@hotmail.com
American University of Kuwait

Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Jazeera English Websites: Agenda-Setting as a Means to Comparatively Analyze Online News Stories

Abstract

This study seeks to investigate similarities or differences in the content of news stories published on Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) and Al Jazeera English (AJE) websites. Guided by agenda-setting theory 2,400 online news stories were analyzed. Findings indicate that on fewer than 8% of the time do AJA and AJE display the same news story on their websites. Since Al Jazeera's target audience differs depending on the language, the study argues that AJA and AJE set the agenda for two sets of news consumers. This is fairly significant as Al Jazeera seeks to play a greater role in news dissemination to a global audience. Al Jazeera deliberately seeks to highlight a certain news item, such as the almost daily coverage of the crisis between Qatar and four other Arab countries in the summer of 2017, thereby actively engaging in agenda-setting. Findings also indicate that AJA publishes more news stories pertaining to the Arab world than AJE. AJA's coverage of the African and South American continents is relatively low compared to the Arab region, thereby directing audience's attention to events and issues closer to Al Jazeera's home base of Qatar. The study also argues that news consumers play a significant role in determining the news items displayed by news outlets.

Keywords
Agenda-setting, Al Jazeera Arabic, Al Jazeera English, online news stories, Qatar Gulf crisis.

1. Introduction

This study examines the websites of Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) and Al Jazeera English (AJE) in order to determine the similarities and/or differences in their news coverage. Specifically, the researcher examined the section entitled 'Latest News' on each website to consistently compare news articles on the two websites. This also provided a convenient and organized way to compare similar news items. The research was guided by agenda-setting theory in an attempt to analyze Al Jazeera's display of news on its websites.

It is particularly relevant to engage in an assessment of Al Jazeera's display of its news stories at this juncture since the organization has come under scrutiny by a number of Arab countries which have accused it of being biased. The crisis that erupted between Qatar on the one hand and Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the other hand in the summer of 2017 centered on a number of points, chief amongst them is the question of

Al Jazeera's subjective coverage. This study will therefore analyze whether the websites of AJA and AJE set a particular political agenda in the way they display their news items.

At its inception, one of Al Jazeera's overriding objectives was to foster news flow from the Global South (which refers to developing countries) to the Global North (which refers to developed countries) (Najjar, 2007). This is a significant undertaking since news production and dissemination had been previously monopolized by news outlets in developed countries. Al Jazeera thus takes its role in the production and distribution of news seriously as it seeks to establish a trusted voice among global media players. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how a media entity uses mediated messages to inform individuals about certain topics, especially since media set the agenda based on a number of factors some of which might be political or religious (McCombs & Funk, 2011). The examination of these messages in both Arabic and English will offer fresh perspective that might be useful in helping us better understand how Al Jazeera operates.

2. Review of Literature

Founded in 1996 at the behest of, and with funding from, the Emir of Qatar, Al Jazeera first began transmitting its programming in Arabic (Miles, 2005). It quickly made a name for itself and became widely watched in the Arab world (El-Nawaway & Iskander, 2002). Al Jazeera started its English-language service in 2006 and the network has established itself as an international media player with a lineup that typically contains news, talk shows, documentaries and sports (Al Jazeera, 2017). The Arabic website was established in 2001, with the English-language website following suit in 2006 (Al Jazeera, 2017). Since its establishment, Al Jazeera has developed from a modest startup channel to a multinational news organization with a worldwide presence (Zayani & Sahraoui, 2007).

Presenting the news in different languages to different target audiences lies at the heart of this research project, since the researcher's main objective is to conduct a comparative analysis of Arabic and English language news stories and to assess their appearance on Al Jazeera's websites. This is pertinent since over the years Al Jazeera has been accused by a number of entities of being biased in its coverage. For instance, the network had a running feud with the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush regarding its coverage of the war in Afghanistan (Jasperson & El-Kikhia, 2003). Al Jazeera has also been accused of providing a platform to former Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and to Israeli government officials among others (Hanley, 2004). But by providing a platform to all, Al Jazeera was adamant in adopting an approach that granted access to its airwaves to a wide range of entities (El Mustapha, 2011). Despite the network's intentions, it was Zayani (2008) who noted that "the identity of Al Jazeera remains elusive for its publics" when analyzing its corporate communications strategy and its news dissemination approach (p. 220).

Over the years, Al Jazeera television has been found to dedicate more time to covering news stories from the South than those from the North (Al-Najjar, 2009; Figenschou, 2010). In effect, it has become regarded as a news contra-flow channel (Miles, 2005; Thussu, 2007) and has thus successfully challenged the hegemony of western media (Seib, 2008). This has enabled it to provide a voice to the underprivileged and the disadvantaged, and its policy of hiring local instead of foreign reporters has enabled it to cover stories that western media outlets did not (El-Nawawy & Powers, 2010; Figenschou, 2010). At its establishment, serious doubts were cast about whether Al Jazeera could compete with other more established transnational media entities, but over the years, the network has steadily set the pace for effective journalism in the Arab world, fostering a climate for debate, discussion and reporting (El Mustapha, 2011). Carpenter (2017) stressed that in choosing to broadcast in English, Al Jazeera has been able to place itself at the intersection of "globalization and journalism" (p. 65).

Al Jazeera's willingness to cover controversial topics in the Arab World has made it a trusted name in news to viewers in places such as Britain, much more so than well-established competitors such as CNN and the BBC (Miladi, 2006). Seib (2008) opined that beginning in 2003, Al Jazeera's continuous coverage of a host of events meant that Arab viewers were no longer reliant on western news outlets for breaking news and for information. Moreover, El-Nawawy and Powers (2010) commented that as a global media player, Al Jazeera was successful in bringing together a diverse set of audiences from around the world to engage in discussion and debate. However, Nasr (2014) noted that the Al Jazeera coverage of news items is not without controversy, and although the network touts itself as free and fair in its reporting of issues, its lack of criticism of Qatar cannot be overlooked. In addition, Al Jazeera's coverage of revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen during the Arab Spring was delivered with a hint of subjectivity (Nasr, 2014). This hint of subjectivity was echoed by Elena (2016) who noted that Al Jazeera took the side of the democratically-elected Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

Needless to say, subjectivity in news coverage defies the very essence of journalism and what journalists seek to do. The principal functions of the media are: to act as a watchdog; to inform the public of the truth i.e. facts; and to present a wide range of key issues (McChesney, 2004). But these functions are closely intertwined with how objective the audience perceives the media system to be. Johnson and Fahmy (2008) in their study concluded that Arabic-speaking news consumers rated Al Jazeera higher in credibility than the BBC and CNN. It is with the above in mind that an analysis of Al Jazeera's online coverage should be conducted in order to determine whether the network is engaged in agenda-setting of the news. It should be noted however, that online news coverage has given Al Jazeera another means through which to reach a global audience. News organizations in general are keen to explore the power and reach afforded to them by the internet. As Douai and Ben Moussa (2016) stressed, publishing news stories online provides more capacity through archiving and greater interactivity with news consumers.

3. Research Question

To this effect, this study aims to answer the following question: How and why do the news stories on AJA and AJE differ?

4. Theoretical Framework

In their groundbreaking study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) stressed that the media is largely responsible for "influencing the salience of attitudes" of its consumers (p. 177). This agenda-setting function of the mass media plays a crucial role in what is perceived to be important news. As such, a news item that is relegated to the background by the media might not garner enough attention by viewers and readers. Prominence and importance of the issue play significant roles in our understanding of agenda-setting. In addition, some scholars (such as Fahmy *et al.*, 2011; and Schultz *et al.*, 2012) commented that media outlets might highlight some aspects of a news item while ignoring others. As Perry (2002) noted media may sometimes refer to particular issues rather than to individual events. This selection of issues arises out of several "pressures:" those of interested elites, those of public opinion and those related to real-world events (McQuail, 2010, p. 515).

Several factors were outlined by DeFleur (2010) in setting the news media agenda. These are: impact (the number of people whose lives were affected by the event), proximity (geographical closeness of the event to the news consumer), timeliness (getting news to the consumer quickly), prominence (whether well-known personalities were involved in the event), conflict (the fact that struggle garners more attention), currency (long standing issues receive greater public attention that those that tend to fade away quickly) and bizarre (an unusual event taking place). In addition, Wanta and Hu (1994) examined how individuals

received and processed media messages through three main factors: credibility (of the mass media outlet), reliance (how individuals depend on mass media for news and information) and exposure (the greater the exposure to mass media, the greater the exposure to agenda-setting effects). All the above factors play a key role in the way that media outlets make editorial decisions regarding display of news items. Other factors such as previous awareness of a news topic either through prior exposure or through education increased agenda-setting effects (Hill, 1985) or whether news consumers were better able to recall news stories on television than on online sources (Conway & Patterson, 2008) perhaps owing to the linear nature of news delivery on television also are significant when dealing with agenda-setting theory.

Traditionally, the agenda set by the media influenced decision making of those in political power. As such, media agenda plays an influential role not only in decision making but also in policy implementation (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Nonetheless, there is the urgency to clearly distinguish between the priorities of the media, the public and to be mindful of how policy is enacted (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). In more recent years however, changes in the media environment have meant that news delivery is no longer exclusively dominated by traditional media. Bloggers and citizen journalists among others are contributing more voices and are therefore also setting the agenda in society (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009).

5. Method

Daily observations of the websites were conducted. This was done at approximately 24-hour intervals to ensure consistency in data collection. The researcher specifically observed news stories under the 'Latest News' section of each website. This section was available in both the Arabic and English websites and was clearly labeled as such (the researcher's fluency in both languages facilitated data collection). The first 10 news items on each website were recorded and comparisons between the two sets of articles were carried out. Data was collected from AJA and AJE websites during the same time and over three time periods, each 40 days long. The data collection periods were: July 7-August 16, 2017, October 15-November 24, 2017 and February 21-April 2, 2018. These data collection periods were deemed necessary by the researcher in order to obtain some insight of how AJA and AJE display news stories over a period of time. The fact that data collection was spread over several months allowed a greater observation period to access what Al Jazeera considered to be necessary news content to its audience. Comparisons between news stories collected on AJA and AJE was conducted to determine the extent of similarity and/or difference by reading each article in its entirety. No opinion editorials and no feature stories were examined.

Thus, data for this study was collected by observing and noting text on AJA and AJE websites using textual analysis. Smith (1990) and Atkinson and Coffey (1997) were of the opinion that written texts play a significant role in spreading messages in society. Silverman (2003) pointed out that texts on their own do not represent organizational routines clearly but are only social productions. The use of textual analysis is thus important in order to collect and to make meaning of data gathered. Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000) added that textual analysis is used in communication research to "interpret the characteristics of a recorded or visual message" (p. 225). The news stories published by AJA and AJE on their websites constitute communication messages and the objective of this study is to compare the messages that Al Jazeera displays on its websites in two different languages. It was Hignett (2005) who commented that data collection from documents is useful since it represents "meaningful constituents of the social world" (p. 120). The intention was therefore to make meaning of news stories on AJA and AJE by comparing similarities and/or differences which were identified by reading news stories on each given day.

6. Findings

The observation period yielded a total of 2,400 articles (1,200 from AJA and 1,200 from AJE). The most significant finding was that over the 120-day data collection period, 189 similar news stories appeared on both AJA and AJE on the same day, at an average of 1.5 news stories per day. This means that AJA and AJE display common news stories on only 8% of the time. One such instance in which this occurred was on July 7, 2017 with a story pertaining to protests at the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany. In the very first week of news coverage –July 7 to July 13, 2017 in which 140 news stories were analyzed– 14 similar news stories appeared in both AJA and AJE. During the same one-week period, 33 news stories pertaining to the Arab world were covered on AJE, compared to 37 news stories that covered issues related to the rest of the world. In comparison, AJA had 50 stories in which the Arab world was covered and only 20 stories in which the rest of the world was covered. In total 1,314 news stories dealt with the Arab world (831 on AJA and 483 on AJE) compared to 1,118 stories that covered non-Arab world stories (369 on AJA and 749 on AJE). Over the course of the data collection period, AJA consistently had more news articles than AJE covering the Arab world. On July 8, 2017 for example, AJA had eight news stories that covered the Arab world, while AJE had only three. Similarly, July 30, 2017 had seven news stories about the Arab world on AJA but only one on AJE. Another example was August 16, 2017 which had seven news stories about the Arab world on AJA compared to only two on AJE and on April 1, 2018 AJA had eight news stories on the Arab world compared to only four on AJE (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparing the number of news stories about the Arab world on AJA and AJE.

	Number of Arab World News Stories	**% of Total**
AJA	831	69
AJE	483	40

Source: Own elaboration.

On eight of the 120 days of data collection, all 10 news stories on AJA were about the Arab world. These days were: July 13, November 9, November 23, 2017, February 25-28 and March 30, 2018. On the first of these eight days, July 13, 2017, five of those 10 news stories were about the crises between Qatar and the four other Arab countries, an indication of how much coverage this crisis received from Al Jazeera, especially when tensions first flared up. On the remaining seven occasions, stories pertaining to the Arab world were generally about unrest in the region, either in Palestine, Syria or Yemen. In total, AJE had 88 stories covering the Gulf crisis while AJA had 77. This represented an interesting finding. The Gulf crisis is a regional issue between Arab countries and therefore it would have been understandable if it received greater coverage on AJA than on AJE, although this was not the case (see Table 2).

Table 2: Indicating the number of times the Gulf crisis was covered on and AJA and AJE.

	Number of News Stories on the Gulf Crisis	**% of Total**
AJA	77	6
AJE	88	7

Source: Own elaboration.

As noted above, only 189 common news stories were recorded on AJA and AJE over the 120 days of data collection. An example of such common news stories occurred on July 21, 2017

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when two articles appeared on the websites of both AJA and AJE. One news article covered the continuing tensions between Qatar and other Arab countries. The second news article dealt with the escalation of violence in Al Aqsa mosque surrounding Israel's refusal to allow (Palestinian) Muslims to pray there. Another point of interest concerned July 21 and July 24, 2017. On these two days, nine of 10 news stories on AJA were about the Arab world, an unusually high number. On both occasions, three of those nine news stories covered the situation with Al Aqsa mosque.

On several occasions, some of the news stories could not be tied to a particular geographical location. For instance, on July 12, 2017 AJA had a story that discussed the dangers of online stalking. Another news story on July 22, 2017 also on AJA warned against the dangers to one's health of consuming heavy meals in the evenings. On August 4, 2017 a news story that ran on AJA discussed the benefits of eating tomatoes in order to fight colon cancer. Incidentally, such 'generic' news stories only appeared on AJA with none appearing on AJE. Another such example was of a news story on February 21, 2018 that reported on the increase in use of robots to undertake tasks previously done by humans.

Not all news stories centered on hard news. For instance, on July 23, 2017 AJA published a story that announced the opening of a jazz festival in Tunisia. Similarly, AJE ran a story on July 18, 2017 entitled 'Hijab-wearing woman among Apple's new emojis.' Another news story published on AJA on July 26, 2017 dealt with how to keep your brain active in old age. Another of the stories for instance discussed the benefits of drinking green tea and the role it plays in combating toothache. Another story advised against consuming more than 200 calories immediately before going to bed at night. An October 16, 2017 story commented on the annual Indian festival of Diwali, explaining what it represented and how it is celebrated. Yet another story on February 23, 2018 pointed out the use of vibrant colors by designers in the Milan fashion show. It must be noted however that the overwhelming majority of news stories in both AJA and AJE were hard news stories. It should also be added that most soft news stories appeared on AJA.

One news story that garnered considerable attention was the August 6, 2017 closure of Al Jazeera's operation in Jerusalem by the Israeli authorities, accusing it of inciting violence and of subjective reporting. AJA ran four news stories out of a total of 10 in its 'Latest News' section. On that day, no other event received as much coverage in a single day during the data collection period. Strangely, AJE did not run the same story on its 'Latest News' section, although it covered the story in another part of its website. On the following day, August 7, AJE ran three more stories while AJA also published a story on the same topic. On the next day, August 8, AJE ran another story on the closure of its Jerusalem office. The continuous coverage that this topic received provided an indication of the importance of this event in the eyes of Al Jazeera.

A number of news stories on AJA and AJE were about the African continent. In total, there were 305 news stories that covered Africa (155 on AJA and 150 on AJE). Significant attention was paid to Egypt (since it was involved in the Gulf crisis), while Libya, Tunisia, Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe also received varying degrees of coverage, mostly to cover political events such as unrest or elections. For instance, the reelection of Uhuru Kenyatta as Kenya's president in mid-August 2017 was covered by both AJA (five news stories) and AJE (five news stories) between August 6 and August 16, 2017. Similarly, the removal of long-serving Robert Mugabe from Zimbabwe's presidency received considerable coverage, with 14 stories on AJE and five on AJE from November 17-24, 2017. On November 24, 2017, 10 of the 20 stories on AJA and AJE were about Africa, with six on AJA and four on AJE. On no other day did the African continent receive this much coverage (see Table 3).

Table 3: Indicating the number of news stories about Africa on AJA and AJE.

	Number of News Stories	**& of Total**
AJA	155	12.9
AJE	150	12.5

Source: Own elaboration.

AJA and AJE paid less attention to the South American continent. In total only 50 out the total of 2,400 news stories covered South America (5 on AJA and 45 on AJE). The coverage was generally focused on Venezuela's political turmoil. The reelection of Nicolas Maduro as president in late July 2017 received considerable attention with a total of five news stories (one on AJA and four on AJE) published between July 31 and August 12. This coverage included both the election and its aftermath. Coverage of the South American continent was mostly on AJE and covered stories such as the disappearance of an Argentinian submarine and the subsequent search for it in November 2017 and Guatemala moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in March 2018 among other news stories (see Table 4).

Table 4: Indicating the number of news stories about South America on AJ and AJE.

	Number of News Stories	**% of Total**
AJA	5	0.40
AJE	45	3.75

Source: Own elaboration.

7. Discussion: The agenda-setting strategies of Al Jazeera

The display of online news provides the news seeker with additional freedom to look for and to consume articles of their choice. This characteristic is not available in radio and television newscasts for instance and affords the news consumer greater control over what item to read. The 'Latest News' section on both Al Jazeera websites provides convenient access to the top stories at any given time. Evens (2018) argued that it has become common for high quality journalistic content to be available online, since it is cheap to produce and to digitally distribute to a larger number of people.

Over the years, Al Jazeera has constantly tried to deal with accusations of subjectivity. The network's official line has always been that it seeks to cover news events as they occur –that it maintains its objectivity and does not support any particular agenda. It is to that effect that the aim of this study was to examine Al Jazeera's online coverage to determine consistency in reporting of new stories. As stated earlier, Nasr (2014) noted that Al Jazeera's coverage of events during the Arab Spring was not entirely objective. This is interesting, since the network is adamant that it strives for objectivity in its coverage of news items. As such, it is perhaps conceivable that Al Jazeera seeks to set the agenda by prominently displaying some news stories more than others on its websites.

Thus, to answer this study's research question of how and why news stories on AJA website differ from those on the AJE website, data collected covering some 2,400 news stories indicates differences in news items on the two websites. The fact that the Arabic and English language websites do not necessarily place the same articles under the 'Latest News' tab might be explained by the fact that the network perhaps targets a different set of news consumers. This could be further explained by the fact that only 14 percent of users of the AJE website come from the Arab world, compared to 98 percent of users of AJA (Johnson & Fahmy, 2009). Thus, only on 11 days –July 12, 20, 25, August 2, 7, 14, October 30, November 5, November 6, November 12, 2017 and March 14, 2018– did the number of stories about the Arab world on AJE exceeded those on AJA. Of the remaining 109 other days in which data was collected for this study, more news stories about the Arab world were to be found on AJA than on AJE.

The above results indicate that AJA and AJE rarely have the same news stories on their websites. This is very intriguing. The expectation –or perhaps the belief– was that news stories would have been duplicated on the two websites. The fact that that is not the case could be due to AJA and AJE working independently of each other and that they each pursue their own editorial policies. In such circumstances, it seems that the Al Jazeera network truly follows journalistic freedom.

However, there is a strong sense that the difference in news stories that appear on AJA and AJE websites is quite deliberate. It seems inconceivable that the Arabic and English language websites do not at the very least compare notes when it comes to news gathering techniques. Granted that the Arabic-language set of reporters is different from the English-language set of reporters and that they work independently from each other, AJA and AJE must surely be aware of each other's news coverage. It therefore seems that the two websites set the agenda for two sets of people depending on language. This is particularly intriguing, since it was Meltzer (2013) who asserted that the content of AJA and AJE news channels is virtually the same since they report to the same general manger. Fahmy and Al Emad (2011) further asserted that Al Jazeera's online news coverage does not differ whether it is presented in Arabic or English. But from the above results of this study, the content of the AJA and AJE websites is not the same, and I argue that this is quite intentional. The premise that Al Jazeera sets the agenda for two different sets of audiences perhaps explains why more news stories (88) about the Gulf crisis appeared on AJE than on AJA (77) during the data collection period. The Al Jazeera network's philosophy of setting the agenda for two sets of audiences is a further indication of its position as a global media player that seeks greater influence in news flow patterns.

It should be noted that Al Jazeera started as an Arabic-language television news broadcaster. As argued above, it made a name for itself by reporting on the Arab world, particularly covering news items that dealt with contentious and sensitive issues. This was during a time in which the mediascape was dominated by government-controlled media outlets. Hence Al Jazeera's approach was revolutionary in nature. It also ensured that it quickly received considerable criticism and made plenty of enemies in the region. As Miles (2005) pointed out it became common for Arab governments to complain to Qatar's Emir about Al Jazeera's reporting, which they deemed to be hostile. In May 2019 for instance, Sudanese authorities shut down the network's offices and expelled its staff from Khartoum over allegations that its coverage was biased. In other instances, Egyptian authorities have repeatedly arrested Al Jazeera's correspondents, sometimes with no formal charges. Such instances litter Al Jazeera's past, an indication of its turbulent relations with Arab regimes.

McChesney (2004) noted that contemporary media markets are oligopolies, with a handful of players dominating the market. As such, Al Jazeera operates in a highly competitive industry in which barriers to entry are high. The network has made a name for itself in the Arab world and has also become a recognized global media entity. As argued above, Al Jazeera's display of news items on its Arabic website gives greater focus to events in the Arab region, thereby providing its audience with news closer to home, precisely as the audience seeks. Similarly, AJE displays more news items from around the world since the audience is mostly from outside the Arab region and is therefore more interested in global news items. In the theory of news exchange, McManus (1994) stated that news is a product of exchanges i.e. journalists primarily produce news that is of interest to the audience and in return receive attention for content produced. And this is very much in evidence today with Al Jazeera's display of news items on its websites. This is particularly important since audiences have become fragmented and literally spoiled for choices regarding source of news.

In their 2001 book entitled *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Davenport and Beck referred to this very fragmentation of audiences. The authors argued that attention is in short supply therefore organizations need to capture and hold the

attention of customers. It is to this effect that media organizations such as Al Jazeera provide the audience with the news that they want in exchange for attention. Hence the role played by the audience cannot be underestimated. DeFleur (2010) contended that media outlets constantly seek to capture attention. To do so, sensational news items have to be prominently displayed either as front-page news in a newspaper or at the beginning of a broadcast during a news bulletin. Agenda-setting theory is therefore not only about how media presents news but ultimately about how the audience will receive and consume such information and deems it to be important.

In general, analyzing media content may provide insight into culture in a society (Perry, 2002). In the context of this study, the way news items are presented on the websites of AJA and AJE might provide an understanding of how Al Jazeera prioritizes certain topics over others. For instance, at the height of the crises between Qatar and the other countries in summer 2017, AJE had a headline entitled "Qatar-Gulf crisis: All the latest updates" on 27 out of the 40 days in which data was collected between July 7 and August 16, 2017. This provides an indication that the issue was regarded as important and thus listed at the top of the agenda. As Ghanem (1997) noted, constant coverage of an event by media will lead the public to perceive the event as important. Since the issue directly affected Qatar, Al Jazeera's home country, it was particularly deemed significant by the editors and therefore worthy of continuous coverage. Of particular interest though was the fact that more of these updates on the Gulf crisis were published on AJE than on AJA. This was perhaps intriguing, but it could be that Al Jazeera's intention was to disseminate this information to a larger number of its online readers in English, the number one international language. This represents an agenda-setting tactic by Al Jazeera, directing attention to an issue that was making headlines in the Arab world –an issue that Arabs were keenly aware of but one that was of less importance to those outside the Arab region. It is useful to recall that agenda-setting involves repeated news coverage of an item, thus raising its importance level in the public's mind (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

As noted above, one clear indication of how Al Jazeera set a certain agenda took place when its offices in Jerusalem were shut down by Israeli authorities. For three consecutive days staring on August 6, 2017 a total of eight news stories were published on AJA and AJE covering the event. Only coverage of the Gulf crisis between Qatar and the four other countries received more attention during the summer of 2017. Another example that indicates Al Jazeera's agenda-setting tendencies can be seen in the seven-day period from March 4-10, 2018. In that period of time, the civil war in Syria was mentioned a total of 16 times (seven on AJA and nine on AJE). Although the war had started a number of years previously, Al Jazeera still deemed it important to direct its audience's attention to Syria.

What was noticeable though was ways in which coverage of a certain event was in the spotlight for a number of days at a time, after which it received little or most probably no attention at all. Events that were closer to (Al Jazeera's) home such as the Gulf crisis and the closing of Al Jazeera's office in Jerusalem garnered considerable attention and extensive coverage. This is understandable since proximity of an event oftentimes dictates the extent of coverage. It also provides an indication of the kind of news stories that Al Jazeera deems to be worthy of more coverage than other stories. Coverage of the Gulf crisis, the elections in Kenya and Venezuela and the shutting down of Al Jazeera's offices in Jerusalem are all examples of this. This could be indicated by the fact that the Gulf crisis was covered 165 times whiles the entire African continent 305 times. By contrast, only 45 news stories were about South America of which only five were on AJA. More than anything these statistics are telling since they clearly indicate which events –in Al Jazeera's opinion– should be regarded as important and hence deserve our attention.

8. Conclusion and Limitations

This study aimed at comparing the online content of AJA and AJE and to determine whether news stories differed on the two websites. Results indicated that news stories on AJA were rarely similar to those on AJE. This similarity occurred on only 189 occasions from a total of 2,400 news stories. One could conclude that Al Jazeera does not seem to set the agenda for its readers. However, another more consistent conclusion is that since Al Jazeera invariably targets different sets of audiences through its websites, then it does seek to set the agenda. As Johnson and Fahmy (2009) pointed out, readers of AJA are mostly located in the Arab region (and news stories that are about them and target them), while those of AJE come mostly from non-Arab regions of the world. This is brought sharply into focus when one considers the fact that agenda effects are short term (McQuail, 2010). As such, when AJE provides almost daily updates in summer 2017 on the crisis between Qatar and other Arab countries, there is a keen awareness by Al Jazeera that news consumers have short attention spans and therefore need to be constantly reminded of an issue that is deemed to be relevant, especially in a day and age when media outlets constantly vie for consumers' attention.

But there is also an awareness on Al Jazeera's part that news media now has a say in all aspects of global affairs (Seib, 2008). It is therefore consistent with literature and with the Al Jazeera network's agenda-setting strategies –and not surprising– that more news articles about the Arab world are to be found on AJA than on AJE. But this should not come as a surprise since Al Jazeera is an Arab media system and since it actively seeks to engage in news flow and dissemination from the South to the North. Al Jazeera's objective is to disseminate news content and hence its aim of setting the agenda to a global audience.

One limitation of this study is that it examined the 'Latest News' section of AJA and AJE which constituted only part and not all of the front pages on AJA and AJE and therefore other sections were not considered for this study. Additionally, news stories were collected only once a day thus capturing items at a certain time of day. As the 'Latest New' section is constantly updated especially when a breaking news item occurs, data collected at a different time of the day will yield a different set of news stories. Perhaps future studies could include all news stories on the websites to constitute a larger sample size. Groshek (2008) stressed that international agenda-setting is one of the least studied areas due to the complexity of the number of factors to take into consideration such as countries and interests among others. This study therefore aimed at shedding light on an area in media studies that needs to receive greater attention due to the importance of global media systems in worldwide news flow.

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