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AL JAZEERA

A Challenge to Traditional Framing Research

Magdalena E. Wojcieszak

Abstract / This article examines framing research and the challenges posed to this model by al Jazeera. The study argues that traditional framing scholarship might not be applicable to analyzing al Jazeera and other satellite channels because it presumes the impact of political elites on the framing process, conceives of the media as hegemonic, is idiosyncratic to the American media and power arrangements, and does not account for new information communication technologies. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, is a satellite channel relatively autonomous from domestic media regulations and national power structures, originated in the continuously evolving media landscape and sociopolitical context of the Middle East, and has been considered a counter-hegemonic force in the Arab world that challenges its dominant social discourse and the existing political order.

Keywords / al Jazeera / framing / hegemony / Information Communication Technologies

Introduction

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the debate on the nature and impact of the 24-hour Arabic satellite news outlet, al Jazeera, has been vigorous. Western critics have described al Jazeera as an 'inexcusably biased' 'mouthpiece of Osama bin Laden', criticized it for covering uncontextualized violence, death and torture, accused the channel of hampering the democratization efforts in Iraq, and blamed it for the rise of insurgency and the increase in kidnapping incidents (Abrams, 2003; Darwish, 2001; Kuntzman, 2003). These arguments are linked to the widespread notion of media framing, inasmuch as they pertain to the inclusion of certain issues in al Jazeera's coverage and the omission of others, contain speculations as to what affiliated political groups influence the channel's reporting, and assume al Jazeera's impact on the Arab audience's perceptions of their sociopolitical environment. Framing research scrutinizes precisely these processes of issue selection, elite influence on frame production and the frames' effects on the audience.

This article interrogates and extends this conceptualization of media framing, predominantly the recent explanations of frames in a context of sociopolitical power (Carragee and Roefs, 2004), with regard to the puzzling challenge of discussing al Jazeera. Although this article does *not* posit that the notion of frames is irrelevant in the new media environment or that framing as a method of inquiry has lost its

validity with the proliferation of the new technologies, it argues that the traditional framing model might not be applicable to analyzing al Jazeera and other satellite channels that are relatively autonomous from domestic governments and media regulations. This inapplicability results from the model's implicit or explicit presumptions as to the impact of political elites on media framing processes. Also, framing research has primarily focused on national media and power arrangements and it is thus applicable to analyzing *state* influence on *domestic* media. Furthermore, since this scholarship has developed within the western academia generally and within the North American academia specifically, it has been the American media and political structure that have been studied and the cultural and sociopolitical contexts of foreign media organizations that have been overlooked. Moreover, framing research sees frames as reflecting the interests of established actors and conceives of the media as contributing to the maintenance, reinforcement and legitimization of the status quo.

These theoretical presumptions need to be adapted and modified substantially if they are to be applied to the new Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as certain satellite channels. The beneficial consequences of new technologies for al Jazeera and similar entities include the relative freedom from domestic regulation and the decentralization of the flow of information.¹ This transnationality implies that unlike many of its terrestrial counterparts, al Jazeera – at least on the surface – is not a battleground for discrete national political elites. This semi-independence moreover contributes to the conceptualization of al Jazeera as a counter-hegemonic force in the Middle East, a force that facilitates sociopolitical changes by criticizing and challenging the institutionalized structures and the prevalent social discourse in the Arab world (Lynch, 2006). All these notions counter the presumptions of framing scholars, who see the media frames as being subordinate to the elites and as disseminating meanings that contribute to the stability of the existing political order not to its change (see Hertog and McLeod, 2001).

This article begins by demonstrating that various definitions of frames presuppose an intrinsic relationship between the framing process and the existing power arrangements, how these political pressures manifest themselves in the effects of the media, and why they result in a perception of the media as hegemonic. It concurrently presents that the research on this relationship and its consequences has been primarily conducted with relation to the American media environment. The subsequent part of this analysis suggests the inapplicability of the assumptions of framing research to al Jazeera. By situating the channel within the Arab media landscape and outlining its significance in the region, this article argues that al Jazeera not only defies the presumptions about the necessary influences of state powers on a news outlet but also contradicts the conceptualization of the media as intrinsically hegemonic. The concluding section argues that al Jazeera's framing practices are influenced by newly emerged sociocultural and transnational regulatory forces that, contrary to the assumptions of framing scholarship, cannot be analyzed in terms of domestic influences on domestic media and that have not impaired al Jazeera's political contributions to the region.

I Say 'Frame', You Say 'Power'

Lippmann (1922: 11) recognized that the real environment is too big, too complex and too distant for direct acquaintance, and thus individual understanding of it is thwarted, if not impossible, unless mediated. Given that 'We are not equipped to deal with . . . so much variety, so many permutations and combinations . . . we have to reconstruct [the environment] on a simpler model before we can manage with it'. Frames can be regarded as these simpler models provided to the audience to facilitate the understanding of reality. It follows that frames are inevitably only a partial representation of the broader sociopolitical environment and that reporting requires arbitrary decisions as to what aspects of reality to represent. This is where the concern of ideology and power enters the framing production process.

Consequently, a major part of the framing research undertaken in western academia has presumed the existence and stressed the importance of political influences on media reporting. Some definitions of frames have explicitly considered their impact of power forces on frame construction, whereas their presence of these forces can be inferred from other definitions. Frequently, a media frame is captured as 'a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration' (Tankard, 2001: 100). This understanding of the framing process implies an underlying ideological practice. Alternate definitions also see framing as an '*ideological* contest over . . . the scope of an issue [and] over matters such as who is responsible and who is affected, which ideological principles or enduring values are relevant, and where the issue should be addressed' (Pan and Kosicki, 2001: 40; emphasis added). Similarly, framing may be conceived of as 'the selection of a small number of attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when an issue is discussed' (McCombs and Estrada, 1997: 239).

Those definitional guidelines have influenced subsequent scholarship. Thus, the research that examines how political actors sponsor frames, how journalists employ them and how the audience interprets them, has conceptualized framing as connected to the notions of power and hegemony. Also, since this theoretical background has developed primarily within the western academia, scholars have generally scrutinized two central stages of the framing process, production and effects, with relation to the American media and institutional political powers.

Power within Production

The process of frame production can be captured by a question that already presupposes the existence of ideological contests and external political pressures: for what purpose is an issue framed and who influences a given frame (Choi, 2004)? According to Entman's (1991) definition, framing refers to selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in order to promote a problem definition, causal interpretation, normative evaluation and/or treatment recommendation. Journalistic practices of issue selection, exclusion and evaluation are closely scrutinized by political actors who attempt to influence these practices in order to promote

themselves and their agendas (Miller and Riechert, 2001). Researchers posit that in order to increase their impact, individuals or groups apply their resources in the process of a so-called frame sponsorship (Gamson, 1988). And since the success of this process depends on the amount of available resources, a frame's ability to dominate news discourse is contingent on the cultural and economical assets of the sponsor, the sponsor's knowledge of journalistic practices and the frame's resonance with the broader political context. Thus, framing contests routinely favor political elites, whose resources are likely to be unmatched and, as a result, media frames reflect the interests of the existing power structure (Page and Tannenbaum, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). Generally, as Pan and Kosicki (2001) summarize the extant studies on frame production, decisions as to how an issue will be framed and what aspects of it will be included and emphasized involve intense ideological contests that transmute journalistic practice into a political process.

Identifying pressures on frame production has, for the most part, occupied scholars within the American academia. Thus, this process has been researched primarily with relation to the sociopolitical reality of the US, and the conceptualizations of political elites influencing journalistic practices demonstrate domestic pressures impacting domestic media outlets. Scholars have demonstrated that the American news media is centralized in news gathering (Tuchman, 1978), shaped by concentrated ownership and by market pressures (Bagdikian, 1985; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McManus, 1994) and that it gives more credibility to officials who consequently have a greater power to propagate their opinions (Patterson, 1993). Specific examples of nationally centered research include the analyses of framing of Bill Clinton's health care reform (Pan and Kosicki, 2001; Skocpol, 1997), the 'lean and mean' frame employed by the media in the coverage of a General Motors plant closure (Martin and Oshagan, 1997, cited in Reese, 2001) and the forces and rationales behind framing Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an 'axis of evil' by George W. Bush (Choi, 2004).

Power within Effects

Studies on the effects of frames have also presupposed and emphasized the presence of ideology, thereby implicitly associating framing with media hegemony and with reinforcement of the status quo. Specifically, frames are constructed by journalists in a process of selecting and packaging various aspects of reality and applying certain symbols or terminology to those packages (Gamson, 1992). When delivered to the audience, they produce meanings, organize experience, orient interpretations and suggest specific understanding of the issues and events covered. Moreover, since choosing particular stories automatically obscures others, the media frames act as 'mobile spotlights' that might distract attention from some elements of reality (Gitlin, 1980: 49). It follows that frames support certain interests over others, structure the recipients' understanding of their sociopolitical environment and shape the public debate surrounding social and political issues in a way that potentially limits it by trivializing opposing views (Hallin, 1989; Reese, 2001). According to this conceptualization, media frames, as imprints of power, are central to the imposition of

meanings. Indeed, Hertog and McLeod (2001: 144) admit that 'ideology and frames are related in important ways' and Gitlin (1980: 10) explicitly problematizes this relationship stating that 'Those who rule the dominant institutions secure their power in large measure directly *and indirectly*, by impressing their definitions of the situation' (emphasis in original). Since the effects of these definitions include the maintenance of the established political order, media generally and media frames specifically are related to hegemony (Herman and Chomsky, 1998; Gramsci, 1992).

The research on the effects of frames has also been primarily limited to the American society and its sociopolitical situation. Examples include studies on the increase of public cynicism toward American politics as a result of strategic framing of the electoral process (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997), research on the effects of framing of anarchists' protests on viewers' perception of protesting groups as legitimate and effective (Hertog and McLeod, 2001; McLeod and Hertog, 1999) and analyses of the impact of the 'innocent victims' frame in coverage of the former Communist states on the increase of the American public support for the arms race during the Cold War (Herman and Chomsky, 1998). Studies that have focused on frames used in news stories about international issues have also interrogated them in relation to the American media (e.g. Bennett and Paletz [1994] and Kellner [1992] on the Persian Gulf conflict; or Meyer [1995] on the nuclear weapons issue), or have compared American and foreign news coverage (e.g. see Bantimaroudis and Ban [2001] on the Somalia crisis in *The New York Times* and *The Manchester Guardian*).

The Power of New Technologies, the Power of Al Jazeera

The review in the preceding section suggests that the framing scholarship sees political elites as pressuring journalists to include politicians' agendas and definitions of issues in the news media. If this process is successful, frames affect the audience's perceptions of the sociopolitical reality in ways that favor established actors and institutions, further reinforcing their power since 'their sponsorship of frames . . . increase[s] the stability of . . . those . . . structures' (Hertog and McLeod, 2001: 142). These assertions imply that frames are associated with media hegemony. Although this notion has been primarily studied and demonstrated in the North American context, it has become widely accepted. Both the presumptions and the conclusions of this framing model, however, are differently relevant and potentially ungeneralizable to the international information sphere generally, and to al Jazeera specifically. This is because the channel operates within geopolitical reality where restrictions and influences are transnational, and thus escapes the notion of state influences on national media. Also, the continuously evolving Arab media landscape, within which al Jazeera emerged, is dramatically different from the relatively stable media system of the US. Moreover, as a satellite channel semi-autonomous from domestic regulations, al Jazeera has instigated numerous reforms in the Arab world, and has thus been conceived as a counter-hegemonic force.

Al Jazeera in the New Arab Media Landscape

With few exceptions, production and dissemination of information in the Middle East was controlled by the state and the audiences received the majority of their information from governmental sources. Governments, aware of the crucial role that media play in public opinion formation and political mobilization, established a monopoly over mass media. State control and censorship particularly influenced television because of its power to reach both literate and illiterate audiences. This is especially important in Arab countries, where the aggregate literacy rate in 2000 was 38.7 percent, and where broadcasting images have consequently had a greater impact than distributing the written word (Sakr, 2001). News coverage was further encumbered by custom, privacy laws, respect for authority and agreements between governments and Arab television stations that obliged the latter not to broadcast any reports before they were transmitted by official news agencies (Quinn and Walters, 2004). Professional journalism was rare and gatekeepers selected topics motivated 'mainly by existing political, social, and cultural arrangements [and] news dealing with leadership speeches, official visits, and protocol activities was always topping Arab world TV news agendas' (Ayish, 2002). As a result, news services were more government propaganda machines than independent sources of information (Ayish, 2002; Saad, 2004).

Clearly, the presumption of state influence on media practices and the conclusions as to the frames' role in maintaining the status quo could be generalized to such journalistic practices. In the turbulent 1990s, however, transnational television proliferated in the Middle East and substantially altered the relationship between the media and state elites. As Al-Hail (2000) writes:

No longer constrained by geographical boundaries, technological limitations or the scarcity of radio frequencies, the new delivery systems of satellite, cable and video allow the universal, and virtually instantaneous, distribution of television and film productions. The only potential barriers left are those of state regulation, and even then it is unclear how they are going to stop (should they wish to) the bombardment from above (satellites) or from below (video piracy and smuggling).

Al Jazeera, set up in Qatar in 1996, has been the most prominent product of this 'satellite revolution' (Lynch, 2003: 61).² As a transnational channel benefiting from new technologies, it is relatively independent of domestic regulations and is not a battleground for a given state's institutionalized political elites. Al Jazeera thus circumvents the relationship between news outlet and national power structures previously prevalent in the Arab world and presupposed by the framing research. This semi-independence of al Jazeera has facilitated dissemination of information critical of governments, instigated cultural and sociopolitical changes in the region and ultimately rendered the despotic Arab regimes the net losers in the process (Saad, 2004). Numerous scholars have therefore considered al Jazeera as a counter-hegemonic force in the Arab world. All these notions counter the presumptions of the traditional framing scholars, who see the media frames as dependent on the existing political powers and as 'valuable for maintaining social order' and for advancing stability rather than change (Hertog and McLeod, 2001: 142).

Counter-Hegemonic Practice

The very premise behind establishing al Jazeera as an independent satellite station dedicated exclusively to news and current affairs was to contribute to the democratization of the region. In other words, al Jazeera was to be counter-hegemonic, inasmuch as it was to challenge and transform authoritarian societies in the Middle East. It was launched as a state-financed satellite channel, but has not resembled the state-owned and directed national channels of the rest of the Arab world (Schleifer, 2001).³ This is partly because the emir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who had been committed to transforming Qatar into a liberal constitutional monarchy, announced the end of media censorship and abolished the Ministry of Information and Culture as a branch of government. As part of his program, he granted start-up funds for al Jazeera and staffed the station with BBC-trained professionals, who had been rendered jobless by the closure of the BBC Arabic service (Sakr, 2001; Schleifer, 2001).

As Sakr (2001: 55) writes: 'If the dominant themes of satellite channel ownership in the Middle East in the 1990s were the protection of vested interests and observance of editorial taboos, Qatar's Al-Jazeera Satellite channel gave a very definite impression of breaking the mould.' It approached its democratizing mission by instigating debates on controversial topics and revealing the misdeeds and malfeasances of various Arab heads of states. The channel has targeted corruption within monarchical regimes, scrutinized abuses within national militaries, served as a forum for various national opposition movements and as a voice of dissent for minority groups in the region. Al Jazeera has 'invariably stepped on many toes, which are particularly sensitive in authoritarian political cultures where anyone in authority rarely has his toes stepped upon' (Schleifer, 2001), and thus has 'led virtually every Arab government – as well as the United States – to lodge complaints' (Lynch, 2003: 64). This approach to journalism and to the media's role in society differs from the one evidenced to date by western framing scholars. Focusing on the exclusion or marginalization of controversies or radical groups from the coverage, these researchers have generally concluded that the media transmit the dominant ideology and reinforce its acceptance by the members of society (Hackett, 1984; Hallin, 1989; McLeod and Hertog, 1999).

Outcomes

Al Jazeera's counter-hegemonic practice has had various positive outcomes. For example, since the majority of al Jazeera's journalists, producers, reporters and television executives have acquired education or training in the US or in Great Britain, they have introduced novel journalistic practices to the station's reporting and increased the overall quality and diversity of its coverage. Not only does the coverage consist of vivid videos, graphic materials, varied delivery formats and in-studio and satellite-relayed interviews, but more importantly it also includes debates, investigative reports and commentaries by independent sources (Ayish, 2002). Al Jazeera has subsequently affected other Arab media, which have 'absorbed more

and more of the “internationalist” mode – they have become more challenging and more exciting, and, in all but a few countries, they have abandoned the practice of simply parroting a government “line” handed down from above’ (Alterman, 1998a).

Covering debates on the sensitive or controversial issues and featuring oppositional representatives of presented positions has exposed an increasing number of people in the region to perspectives on and interpretations of sociopolitical processes that are different to those previously advanced by governmental sources (Sakr, 2001). As Lynch (2006: 2) writes: ‘Where Arab public life has for decades been dominated by the voice of the state, al Jazeera ushered in a new kind of open, contentious public politics in which a plethora of competing voices clamored for attention.’ This has pluralized the marketplace of ideas, not only in the political but also in the sociocultural realms that include religion, sexuality and women’s rights (Alterman, 1998a).

Exposure to and awareness of the multiple perspectives presented in al Jazeera’s coverage has destigmatized dissent, encouraged public dialogue and challenged citizens of Arab states to question the status quo. Al Jazeera has thus contributed to fostering deliberative practices in the region and created a public sphere outside the control of the state. Although the resulting new Arab public cannot substitute for electoral democratic practices, it is contributing to something potentially more important, namely, the beginning of a more liberal, pluralist politics rooted in a critical public sphere (Lynch, 2006).

The revitalization of the Arab public, partly attributable to al Jazeera, has palpably transformed political culture in the region. The channel has provided a platform for the vocal public from which to communicate with policy-makers and served the function of echoing ‘Arab voices against what they perceive to be an ineffective and dysfunctional Arab body politic’ (Badran Badran, cited in Quinn and Walters, 2004: 64). This dialogue has forced many politicians to be attentive to public opinion that they did not consider previously and has facilitated the power of the public to shape government opinion instead of merely being shaped by it (Alterman, 1998a). Al Jazeera has also enhanced the demands placed on domestic media for more freedom of expression, justified the lifting of censorship from the media, and contributed to shattering the state’s monopoly over the flow of information (Al-Hail, 2000). Scholars have therefore recognized the inherent link between the emergence of new technologies and the current drive toward political reform in the Middle East in ‘two simultaneous and related developments: first, the growing importance of satellite broadcasting in the region, and second, the growing awareness of the peoples of the Middle East of civil society issues’ (Amin, 2000). These outcomes directly counter those found by the traditional framing researchers. By focusing on the closed hierarchical structure of the media and emphasizing the reliance of media organizations on political elites, western scholarship on frames considers them as unidirectionally disseminating meanings that aid stability and naturalize the existing political system.

Framing Transnationality – Questions and Concerns

In the concluding section of this article, it is necessary to address several issues pertinent to the foregoing argument. First, it is important to note that this article does not regard the traditional framing scholarship as 'wrong' or 'incorrect'. Extensive research on media frames has revealed the existence of ideological forces behind news reporting, problematized the effects of media coverage and demonstrated how media emphasis on certain concepts or issues affects public opinion and perception of the sociopolitical environment. These findings are invaluable to our understanding of the notions of media effects, media objectivity and journalistic independence. This article argues, however, that framing research might be inapplicable to the transnational media landscape characterized by the implementation of new technologies and that the presumption of cross-cultural relevance of this research – visible in the critique surrounding al Jazeera – is misguided.

Second, this article does not offer a naive conclusion that the increasing liberalization and civic engagement in the Middle East are attributable solely to al Jazeera. They are rather parts of broader processes of globalization that have introduced transnational media, facilitated the international flow of information and increased the openness of the Middle East. Also, the citizens of Arab states have always been actively interested in politics and the deliberative Arab public was not created by al Jazeera. As Lynch (2003: 69) argues, informal meeting places, such as salons, mosques or coffeehouses, have traditionally been 'sites of unrestrained argument and discussion of public issues, through which information and interpretive frames are spread through society'. Those interpretative frames have usually been critical as Arabs have always exhibited a 'healthy cynicism bred by long experience of official propaganda' and have drawn 'sophisticated inferences from even tightly controlled official media' (Lynch, 2003: 60). Unquestionably, however, given the connection between freedom of expression and democracy, al Jazeera has been a logical ally of the emerging civil society in the Middle East (Schleifer, 2001).

Additionally, this analysis does not argue that political pressures on media frame production have disappeared with the proliferation of new technologies and with the transnationality of the information flow. The easy and erroneous conclusion that contemporarily the role of the state is annihilated or that media regulation is impossible overlooks the 'organic, complex . . . contradictory, often oppressive forms of adjustment that are everywhere occurring' in policy formation and implementation (Price, 2002: 227). In response to the new ICTs, new sociopolitical movements, global political and economic forces and international regulations have emerged, rendering media restrictions into a transnational process, creating novel pressures on international media entities, and continuously exercising control over the flow of information. Sakr (1998) notes that 'Arab-owned satellite channels operating from outside the region are also subject to the licensing regimes of their host countries' and that 'Access to suitable satellites is controlled by a web of international, regional and national bodies and interest groups.'

Consequently, this article acknowledges that al Jazeera's framing practices are influenced by external forces and perhaps to some extent controlled by them. Some

of the pressures result from al Jazeera's criticism of monarchical regimes in the region and manifest themselves in periodic closures of the channel's local bureaus or in restrictions imposed on its reporters. For example, after a guest on a debate program criticized the Jordanian government, Jordan temporarily closed al Jazeera's office in the capital, Amman. After airing critical reports on the Algerian political situation, the Algerian government suspended the activities of al Jazeera's reporter. Similarly, two of the station's correspondents reporting from Morocco had their licenses revoked after covering the indigenous Sahrawi population protesting against Moroccan occupation of parts of the Western Sahara. Also, when al Jazeera covered the Israeli elections and when it aired interviews with Ehud Barak and Shimon Peres, Muslim viewers accused it of being financed by Mossad (the Israeli Secret Service). And when it reported on events within the US from its office in Washington, it was attacked for being financed by the CIA.

In addition to the regional governments, another force influencing al Jazeera's journalistic practices is the US. The current American administration of George W. Bush prompted the closure of the station's Baghdad bureau, advised the ban on its operation in Iraq later imposed by the Iraq interim government and introduced competing Arabic-language media outlets. As part of the battle over the hearts and minds of the Arab audience, the American government funded Radio Sawa in 2002. This music and news radio station aims not only to provide information to youth in Arabic-speaking countries, but primarily to promote democracy and pro-American attitudes. In 2004 the US Congress also funded Alhurra, a 24-hour channel based in America and operated by the Broadcasting Board of Governors. This television station airs two daily hour-long newscasts, sports, fashion and entertainment programs, political talk shows and magazine-type news programs, and is meant to act as a competitor to al Jazeera and to 'promote a more positive US image to Arabs' (McCarthy, 2004: A01).

Further pressures on al Jazeera's frame formation process might come from the consolidated Arab identity (Alterman, 1998a; Lynch, 2006). The expansion of new media has led to an increasing homogenization of language, strengthened ties between the Arabs, solidified an Arab consensus and ultimately led to the emergence of the pan-Arab identity (Alterman, 1998b). Scholars have noted that this sociopolitical movement could become a form of tyranny from below, thwarting serious dissent from widely held opinions, excommunicating those who disagree and demonizing outsiders to enforce internal unity (Lynch, 2006). In other words, the pan-Arabic identity might prove powerful enough to successfully influence the frames prevalent in al Jazeera's coverage. The frames could coalesce around anti-western themes with a specific attempt of meeting the expectation of the broader audience within this new sociopolitical entity (Alterman, 1998a; El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002; Lynch, 2006).

Although there are external influences on al Jazeera's journalistic practices, it needs to be recognized that these forces are not the domestic institutional political forces that the western media framing research to date has presumed. Also, they do not always originate within elites, but might emerge from 'below', as in the case of the pan-Arab constituency. Empirical research and sociopolitical analyses are

needed to elucidate the degree to which al Jazeera is susceptible to the pressures of the Arab states, competing media organizations and the pan-Arab public, and also what the potential ramifications of the process are. The outcome of the future studies, however, does not affect this article's central points.

This analysis has suggested that the framing research has generally presupposed the influence of domestic elites on the media framing process, seeing frames as central to the imposition of dominant meanings, reinforcement of the position of the established actors and the maintenance of the existing political order. Therefore, within the 'frame' of the traditional framing research, so to speak, the media have been conceptualized as hegemonic. This research has developed within the western academia and has been primarily applied to the American media and sociopolitical reality. At the same time, however, its presumptions have been widely accepted and extended to the debate surrounding al Jazeera, with critics accusing the station of arbitrary inclusion and emphasis of certain issues over others, speculating as to the political entities influencing its practices, and presupposing wide-scale effects of its coverage.

Despite its prevalence, the traditional western framing scholarship might not be generalizable to al Jazeera and to other media organizations that operate in the transnational sphere, where the production, dissemination and reception of frames differ from these processes as analyzed to date. As a transnational satellite channel that enjoys relative freedom from domestic regulations, al Jazeera escapes the direct pressures from national governments. It has also challenged the authoritarian regimes and the dominant discourse in the Middle East, contradicting the notion that the media are necessarily hegemonic.

This article suggests that scholars should account for the proliferation of the new media and apply the framing terminology and methodology to the modes of production, dissemination and reception of information as they occur in the current transnational media landscape. This will likely prevent presupposing the existence of an intrinsic relationship between framing processes and domestic, institutionalized power structures and will also increase the salience of social movements and other non-elite sociopolitical actors that affect the media. Additional contributions to the framing scholarship might certainly come from researchers embedded within other cultural and political contexts. Developing analytic tools that apply to the media and power arrangements of non-western countries will overcome the current national idiosyncrasy of this realm of communications and elucidate that the framing processes occurring elsewhere potentially differ from those identified to date. These suggested adaptations and developments will not only contribute to the cross-cultural generalizability of the framing research and its potential to explain emerging political and communicative phenomena, but will moreover advance our understanding of increasingly influential international media players, such as al Jazeera.

Notes

1. Al Jazeera is, of course, inescapably linked to the emir of Qatar and to various power structures that influence its framing practices. But, as this article demonstrates, these external forces are different from these analyzed by the Western framing scholars.

2. Among other satellite channels that emerged in the Arab world in the mid-1990s, the prominent private ones include Middle East Broadcasting (MBC), a Saudi-owned channel with headquarters in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates formed in 1991, and the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation's (LBC) satellite station launched in 1996. In April 1998, Egypt's own satellite, Nilesat, was launched, facilitating the emergence of more channels, which include Abu Dhabi Satellite TV (Sakr, 2001). In 2003, LBC was the most watched network in the region, generating US\$93 million in advertising revenue. Al Jazeera was the second most widespread channel, generating US\$66 million in total revenue (noteworthy, only 40 percent from advertising, the rest from equipment rental, cable subscription fees and programs and videotapes sales). Al Arabiya, another 24-hour news channel launched by MBC in February 2003, has been al Jazeera's main competitor, generating US\$300 million in advertising revenue (Quinn and Walters, 2004).
3. Some scholars note, however, that 'Aside from the degree of editorial independence, the very notion of complete government funding of a news outlet negates the notion of alterity' (Iskandar, 2006).

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