Keen Observers: How Jordanian Journalists of Today and Tomorrow see Al-Jazeera's Coverage of the Arab Spring of 2011

This Study is submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master's in International Journalism Studies.

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DECLARATION

I hereby that this material, which I submit for assessment on the programme of study to the award of MA in International Journalism Studies, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the works of others. save as and to the extent, such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: ----------------------

Mohammad Mahroum

/ 09/2011
ABSTRACT

The study aims to identify opinions and points of view of journalism students and professional journalists in Jordan regarding Al-Jazeera Arabic news channel’s coverage of Arab revolts. To achieve this objective, the researcher conducted a field survey through distribution of a questionnaire on a random sample of journalism students at Yarmouk University and Petra University. He also conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of professional journalists working in Jordanian media institutions in order to see their opinions and points of view on this coverage. Then, the researcher compared between opinions and points of view of the tow samples.

The researcher found out that Al-Jazeera enjoys a high level of watching by the sample before and during the Arab revolts events. The respondents believe that Al-Jazeera’s coverage was comprehensive and in-depth at a large scale, and that the channel did not exaggerate in broadcasting the revolts events as it relies on live and direct coverage. Moreover, opinions and points of view of the study sample indicate that the Al-Jazeera’s technological potential and staff have contributed to providing outstanding news coverage of events, and Al-Jazeera has been able to employ its human and technological potential in a highly professional manner level.

Journalism students’ and journalists’ opinions and points of view indicate that Al-Jazeera’s coverage of Arab revolts played a big role in identifying the principles and demands of revolts and expressing the aspirations of Arab people who are eager for freedom, justice and democracy. The channel has also big impact over international position towards Arab nation and regimes. Their opinions show that Al-Jazeera has met the desires of Arab nation during its coverage of the revolts. The researcher has also found out that there is no significant difference between opinions and points of view of the students and journalists, and that they were almost the same.

Key words: Al-Jazeera Arabic News Channel, Arab Revolts, News Coverage, Professional Journalists, Journalism Students.
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Preface

The aim of this study is to explore the views and opinions of expert viewers – professional journalists and journalism students in Jordan – regarding the coverage of Al-Jazeera Arabic news channel of the Arab revolutions. This chapter deals with background, aims, objectives, research question of the study. We will begin with hypotheses of the study, followed by a brief discussion on the significance of and the rationale for the study.

1.2 Background

Most governments in the Arab world used to control their own countries’ press systems for well-documented reasons – keeping people in the dark, robbing them of the ability to try to change their government, etc. But with the launch of Al-Jazeera satellite news network in 1996, that changed, as there was, finally, a television network that largely functioned as they are expected to function in the West – try to be fair and accurate and cut through government misinformation. For example, Al-Jazeera has led Arabic media revolution that encouraged a free press and freedom of expression in the Arab world for the first time after decades of absence, and has led to breaking the Arab government’s dominance over the media (Tamimi 2006; Flew 2007, p.182). Many Arab governments considered Al-Jazeera their first enemy because of its broadcasts news and talk shows discussing issues and topics that are considered taboos in the Arab world, as well as its criticism to the Arab regimes. Some Arab governments have forbidden the channel from working on its territory. Al-Jazeera has been forced to close several offices in the Middle East and to withdraw their reporters and correspondents (El-Nawawy and Iskandar 2003, p. 29).

But in the Western world, Al-Jazeera has been widely criticised because of perceived bias in its coverage of a number of events at the global level, such as the war on terror in 2001, the war on Iraq in 2003, and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The channel has been accused of providing news coverage against the West, and that it has relations with extremist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban Movement in Afghanistan. U.S. President George W. Bush’s Administration considered Al-Jazeera an enemy of the American people and government, and condemned its way coverage of events, and that it has exclusive interviews with al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Taliban leaders during the war on terrorism,
accusing it of "television terrorism" or "being Bin Laden's TV," (Mekay 2004 cited in Johnson and Fahmy 2010). This led to the distortion of Al-Jazeera's image in the West and the United States in particular, where cable television service companies stopped Al Jazeera service (Plunkett and Halliday 2011).

In the beginning of 2011, the Arab world has witnessed unexpected historic events. These events are exemplified in the revolution of many Arab peoples against their dictatorship regimes that ruled people in some Arab countries for thirty years and more. The revolutions started from Tunisia to Egypt and then moved to other Arab countries like Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. Some of these revolutions have succeeded, as in the case of Tunisia and Egypt and, as of this writing, possibly Libya, but in the other Arab countries these revolutions exposed to the brutal repression from the security forces and armies as in the cases of Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, which led to the killing of thousands of civilians because they demanded their freedom and their basic rights.

Al-Jazeera channel has emerged on the Arab and global media scene through its coverage to these revolutions. The channel attracted the attention of the political analysts, journalists and intellectuals in the Arab world and the international world who discussed its coverage to these revolutions through criticism and analysis in the Arab and the world press. These articles and news analysis confirmed that the coverage of Al-Jazeera was wide, in-depth and comprehensive and contributed in putting Arab revolutions in the forefront of the agenda of the Arab and global audiences. Also, the coverage of Al Jazeera put the international satellite news networks like CNN and BBC in an embarrassing situation where Al-Jazeera was able to transfer the course of the events of revolutions to the Arab and global audience directly and on time (Walt 2011).

Some Arab governments, media and political analysts criticized the Al-Jazeera during its coverage of the events of the Arab revolutions, and described it as not objective. Also, it was seeking to implement a private political agenda, especially as it was biased to the Arab peoples against the regimes. Objectivity is considered one of the most important challenges that face the Arab media and journalists during their coverage of events in the Arab world, especially in times of crisis. The objectivity in the journalistic work is a relative issues and not absolute. But, what is the objectivity in the journalistic work. There are many definitions of objectivity,
including the definition Westershahl which indicates that the objectivity is “a meaning of factuality and impartiality, Which “presuppose a neutral attitude and has to be achieved through a combination of balance (equal of proportional time/space/emphasis) as between opposing interpretations, points of view or version of events, and neutrality in presentation.” (McQuail 1998, p.147 cited in Elaujli 200).

1.3 Aim of the study
To explore the opinions and points of view of the Jordanian professional journalists and journalism students regarding the coverage of Al-Jazeera Arabic news channel of the Arab revolutions and to make a comparison between their opinions and views.

1.4 objective of the study
1. To identify the extent of watching Al-Jazeera by Jordanian journalism students and professional journalists before and during the events of the Arab revolutions.
2. To identify the opinions and points of view of Jordanian journalism students and professional journalists about the objectivity of Al-Jazeera during its coverage of the events of the Arab revolutions.
3. To identify the opinions and points of view of Jordanian journalism students and professional journalists about the pros and the cons of Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Arab revolutions.
4. To identify the opinions and points of view of Jordanian journalism students and professional journalists about the role of the advanced technological potentials and high human competencies of Al-Jazeera Arabic news channel in its coverage of the Arab revolutions.

1.5 The main research question
To achieve the main objective of this study, the main research question in this study will be:
How do Jordanian journalists and journalism students see Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Arab spring?
1.6 Hypotheses of the study

1. Watching Al-Jazeera by the Jordanian journalism students and professional journalists with a high proportion during the events of the Arab revolutions indicates that the channel's coverage of the events was extensive, comprehensive and in depth.

2. The advanced technological potentials and the high human competencies of Al-Jazeera played a major role in providing a distinctive news coverage of the Arab revolutions.

3. Al-Jazeera showed a clear bias to the rebellious people in its coverage of the Arab revolutions.

4. There is no big difference among the opinions and points of view of Jordanian professional journalists and journalism students regarding the news coverage of the Arab revolutions by Al-Jazeera channel.

1.7 Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in investigating a new and important subject in the Arab world which is the coverage of the satellite news Arab channels to the revolutions in the Arab countries. This subject is considered one of the critical and fertile issues in the Arab world that were not investigated and examined because the events of revolutions are considered new and sudden events in the Arab world, which stunned the whole world with its spread from one Arab country to another, in addition to the results of these revolutions that led to make reforms in most Arab countries.

The researcher has chosen Al-Jazeera in order to identify points of view of journalists and journalism students in Jordan regarding Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the events of Arab revolts. This is because Al-Jazeera is the first news channel in the Arab world, in addition to its significant role in transferring the proceedings and the events of these revolutions in a contrasting method different from the official media in the Arab countries, which witnessed the outbreak of the revolutions, and the other Arab satellite news channels. Also, Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the events of the Arab revolutions was live coverage all the time what evoked wide debate and controversy in the Arab world in particular and in the world in general. Al-Jazeera's coverage attracted the attention of the international media and political analysts where the international press published articles, analysis and much news about this news coverage.
The importance of this study lies in providing information for observers and people of concern of the Western public about the media situation in the Arab world, and the role played by the media, like Al-Jazeera channel and other Arab news channels regarding the life of the Arab people. Furthermore, the technological development of the media has led to transfer of these events around the world at the moment of occurrence at high speed. Moreover, in certain cases, this development has helped the media make events in the world and start a new war, which is the war of information that began to play an important role in global decision-making by influencing the public opinion.

Further, this study provides information about the level of watching of Al-Jazeera by an important part of the Arab public, that is, journalists and Jordanian journalism students, and it provides their opinions and points of view on Al-Jazeera and its coverage of the events of Arab revolts. It is worth mentioning that there is a lack of surveys dealing with Al-Jazeera watching by the Arab public, since most estimates about viewers of Al-Jazeera in the Arab world depends on limited studies, and not on wide surveys.

In this chapter of the study the researcher reviewed the research objectives of the study and its importance. Chapter tow deals with the research methodology used in the study. In the third chapter the researcher reviews briefly contemporary Arab media, the emergence of Al-Jazeera and its position at the Arab and global levels. There is a brief review of the beginning of the Arab revolutions, its objectives and Arab and international reactions to Al-Jazeera's coverage of these revolutions. The fourth Chapter includes the results of the study and its discussion. Chapter five includes the conclusion.