

**THE ROLE OF THE NEWS MEDIA IN
CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE**

Last Spring, the students of my *International Media* course explored the differences between various media systems around the world. I encouraged them to think about the many ways media production reflects the complexity and diversity of culture in different locations. As an instructor and former documentary filmmaker, I took active steps to bring documentaries and international film footage into the classroom as a way of documenting various mediated realities.

One of the most memorable films we watched during the class was the documentary *Al Jazeera: Voice of Arabia* (2002). In the U.S. context, where access to Arab networks is restricted both in the mainstream media and on cable, the chance to take an inside look at Al Jazeera was unprecedented for many of my students. Partnering with the Center for Race and Ethnicity this Fall, I organized a larger-scale screening of the film to give more people at Rutgers an opportunity to peek into this Arab network often referred to as “the voice of the Arab world.”

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Rutgers Students and Community Members Screen the Documentary
Al Jazeera: Voice of Arabia

On November 17, more than one hundred undergraduate students gathered in the Graduate Student Lounge, to view the documentary film *Al Jazeera: Voice of Arabia* (2002), which looks at the first non-stop Arab news network through a collection of newsroom discussions, interviews, and news footage. The screening gave way to a fascinating discussion about the various social, cultural, and religious experiences of Arab citizens today and spurred a debate over the question of whether Al Jazeera gives voice to a pan-Arabic regional identity. Students from a variety of Rutgers courses and disciplines attended. Members of *Gender, Race & Ethnicity in the Media*, *International Media*, *Global News, Media and Government* (Media studies), *Sociology of Race Relations* (Sociology), and *Islam in Africa* (History) were present. The film provided a platform for instructors of these courses to further students' understandings of issues of race and ethnicity in the media.

The undergraduate audience itself fully reflected the diversity of the Rutgers student body. In their comments, students self-identified as second or third generation Americans—the children and grandchildren of immigrants from various countries. They came from various ethnic and religious backgrounds and with different degrees of exposure to the media in the Arab world. A

student of Moroccan heritage said “I like to watch Al Jazeera because I see veiled and unveiled women, I feel there is a greater diversity than in the American media and I identify more with these diverse representations.” Another student explained that as an American, he likes being exposed to different ways of viewing the world and watches Al Jazeera coverage everyday online. On the other hand, some other students knew little about the Arab world and came to learn more or widen their horizons.

**AL JAZEERA: AT THE
CROSSROADS OF
DIFFICULT DIALOGUES**

Al Jazeera's stated goal is to present “the view and the

opposite view,” and as a result, multiple voices are present in their coverage. This mission has placed Al Jazeera in the middle of difficult dialogues inside and outside the Arab world.

The first difficult dialogue exposed in the film is the relationship between Al Jazeera and the political elites of some Arab countries. Prior to the creation of Al Jazeera in 1996, most news networks in the Arab world were state controlled. As an independent Arab voice, the Al Jazeera network has criticized numerous Arab governments for the censorship that often results from state-controlled news. In the documentary, Al Jazeera talk-show host Faisal



VOICE OF ARABIA

A film by Tewfic Hakem



al-Qassem of “The Opposite Direction” highlights these tensions. Unaccustomed to the level of criticism al-Qassem levies at his guests, an Algerian minister dramatically storms off the set.

Another difficult dialogue emerges between Al Jazeera and the U.S. government. The documentary shows how Al Jazeera can act as a diplomatic space for dialogue when various U.S. officials are invited to discuss foreign policies issues. However, it also illustrates how these ties can be tenuous when actions of the U.S. government – ranging from the allegedly unintentional bombing of the Afghan branch of Al Jazeera four months after its creation to Colin Powell asking the network to tone down its coverage of U.S. affairs—create frictions.

In the midst of all these tensions, Al Jazeera is often regarded as the “voice” of the Arab world, and is positioned as mediator between the Arab world as a whole and member countries and constituents. For instance, during the Afghan war, only Al Jazeera journalists were allowed to film the war on the ground, and their images were circulated to newsrooms all over the world.

ONE OR MANY: THE VOICE(S) OF ARABIA

During the debate, a central question raised by the audience was “what does it mean to be A VOICE for the Arab world?” As the documentary showcased not only the variety of religious and cultural backgrounds of Al Jazeera journalists, but also a variety of political views on a variety of issues, it became clear to many audience members that Al Jazeera was not merely *the* Arab voice but rather a channel through which a variety of voices can express themselves.

Professor Zakia Salime noted that it is important to complicate and nuance this notion of “Arab voice” simply because not everybody in the Arab world watches or likes Al Jazeera. She explained that, in Morocco for example, the elites traditionally watch French or other western programs. She asked “which voice are we talking about when we say the voice of the Arab world?” and noted that we need to take into account the social divide between classes as well as the cultural diversity of the region.

In keeping with this idea of “voice,” other questions which emerged during the post-film discussion were “how do journalistic values differ around the world?” and “what are the characteristics of Al Jazeera’s journalistic voice?” Several students noted that Al Jazeera’s journalistic practices seemed similar to the Western news networks they knew. They commented that many journalists were dressed in similar ways to their western counterparts and strived for objectivity just like American journalists. Other students countered this portrayal and instead, noted the differences between Al Jazeera’s news style and the Western reporting they were accustomed to—both in positive and negative ways. In spite of the fact that Al Jazeera is the product of the secular ideology of pan-Arabism, one student felt that “Al Jazeera is religiously biased.” Another countered that “Al Jazeera is more self-reflective than most U.S. news media outlets, as it has shows and debates that analyze its own media coverage.

In a scene of the film, a Palestinian journalist reporting on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict says “I am a journalist, but I am Palestinian as well. When I see what happens here, I

I cannot be insensitive to what I see. It is difficult for me to maintain objectivity.”

This sequence triggered an intense debate in the post-film discussion because it raised another important question—what identity should come first

“Which voice are we talking about when we say the voice of the Arab world?”

- Zakia Salime

for journalists, one’s professional identity or one’s national citizenship? Taking up this question, a student said “no one can be objective. We all talk from the view point of who we are”. Professor Deepa Kumar interjected that the value of objectivity itself in journalism is based on U.S. commercial culture. “We used to have a partisan press in the U.S. but with commercial imperatives, newspapers have become afraid of offending potential buyers.” Others added that objectivity in U.S. news also makes the government elites’ standpoints more valuable and



Jill Campaiola facilitates a post-film discussion with more than 100 Students and faculty at a recent screening of *Al Jazeera: Voice of Arabia*



Rutgers faculty and graduate students, who work on the Middle East, North Africa or Arab media met before the event to discuss their shared research interests and stayed throughout the screening. Members of the group were: Mia Kissil (CRE), Lisa Miller (CRE), Toby Jones (History), Andrew Spath (Political Science), Deepa Kumar, (Media Studies), Eric Davis (Political Science), Jill Campaiola (Media Studies), Bridget Gutler (CRE) and Zakia Salime (Sociology).

factual, essentially defeating the whole purpose of objectivity.

As a graduate assistant at the CRE and a researcher of Arab media, I am glad the film and discussion provided opportunities to debunk assumptions, not only about the Arab world, but also about journalistic standards which we often take for granted in the U.S. The event encouraged students to view the Middle East and North Africa as diversified regions, where a variety of political, social and religious views can be expressed. It also allowed them to think about how the content of news in one place can mirror some of the cultural tensions and mores of a region, without necessarily reflecting its 'culture as whole.'

- Jill Campaiola

Register Today! New Course on Race, Ethnicity & Film

In the spring of 2010, the CRE will be sponsoring its second team-taught, inter-disciplinary course. The course, which is cross-listed in comparative literature and journalism/media studies, is called *Critical Issues in Race, Ethnicity and Film*, and is geared toward deepening students' understanding of the ways in which film and media intersect with questions of race and ethnicity. Team-taught by Deepa Kumar, Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies (dkumar@scils.rutgers.edu), and Susan Martin-Márquez, Professor of Spanish and Cinema Studies, (susanmm@rci.rutgers.edu), the course aims to introduce a wide array of undergraduate students not only to key films from the United States and around the globe, but also to different ways of reading and understanding film by using a variety of disciplinary lenses. Registration for this course is by special permission number ONLY; please contact either professor at the e-mails listed for this number, or for additional information about the course.

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- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.

