

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS WITH THE SHORENSTEIN CENTER
EXPLORING: THE MEDIA AND POLITICS FRONTIER

UNEDITED TRANSCRIPT

Friday

October 14, 2011

Nye Conference Center

Taubman Building, Fifth Floor

Harvard Kennedy School

MR. JONES: Rebecca MacKinnon is a former Shorenstein Fellow who came to us from CNN. She was a terrifically serious and effective correspondent, bureau chief in China and so forth. And she might even still be at CNN, I think perhaps, if they hadn't told her to make her reporting dumber. I think that was--

MS. MACKINNON: My expertise was getting in the way.

MR. JONES: Expertise was getting in the way. Well, try to do something about that, Rebecca. When Rebecca was here she was clearly casting for something that would really engage her mind and imagination and she found it in co-founding Global Voices, which was a visionary website that basically put together people who were serious about the world, in countries all over the world and made them into a community. It is something that has been an enormous success and grown in power, influence and usefulness over time. She is now -- let me see how many titles you have here, Visiting Fellow at Princeton Center for Information Technology, Policy and, well, she's really one of the deep thinkers of our time in this kind of area.

But she comes from not only a journalistic background of her own, but my wife and I wrote a book about the Bingham Family some years back and it included Rebecca's grandfather who was also a terrific journalist himself. So, Rebecca.

MS. MACKINNON: Thanks very much. Just to clarify because I know the people who are giving me my current fellowship would appreciate this, I'm currently a Fellow at the

New America Foundation in Washington, D.C. I'm no longer at Princeton, just wanted to clarify that.

MR. JONES: Sorry.

MS. MACKINNON: They appreciate being named. But I'm here to have what I think will be a very stimulating conversation with Abderrahim Foukara, who is the Washington, D.C. Bureau Chief for Al Jazeera. And before I launch into my first questions for Mr. Foukara I just want to set the scene with my own experience kind of directly with Al Jazeera and interacting with Al Jazeera when I was on the ground as a reporter and seeing how people were reacting to Al Jazeera, vis a vie, my own reporting for CNN.

And actually ten years ago this week I was in Peshawar, Pakistan in northwestern Pakistan reporting for CNN in the wake of 9/11 and the United States had just recently started bombing in Afghanistan. And a week or so, ten years ago from today, Walter Isaacson who was running CNN at the time wrote a memo to producers and it leaked almost immediately to the press in which he said it was perverse to focus too much on the casualties and hardships of people in Afghanistan in the wake of what had happened in New York. And of course this got into the Pakistani press and into the press around the Islamic world and people were not very impressed by that. And it of course made it much more difficult to operate as a CNN correspondent in that region.

But it also was I think part of the dynamic that was happening in the Muslim world at that time, where audiences were turning to Al Jazeera and viewing it as the credible source and these types of incidents with CNN and others were kind of shifting the credibility of global media in the Muslim world away from things like CNN and towards Al Jazeera. And I just experienced that on the ground in a very personal way. So I thought I would put that in that context. And we will of course return I think to Afghanistan and Iraq later in our conversation.

But I do want to start with the Arab Spring. And one of the interesting things that Mr. Khanfar who was recently, until very recently running Al Jazeera said was that Al Jazeera has played the role of really liberating the Arab mind is one thing he said at one point. And created the idea that when you have a right you should fight for it. And that this was a role that Al Jazeera played in kind of pointing out injustices and hardship around the

Arab world and kind of politicizing people in many ways. What's your own experience with the role that Al Jazeera played in the Arab Spring even happening?

MR. FOUKARA: The way I look at it is that this was an investment that started to be made about 15, 16 years ago when Al Jazeera was created. And the investment was in a political and media environment across the region that was obviously dominated by governments. We're talking about censorship and information control. And that's basically what was prevalent at that time. Each government in the region controlled the television and the radio airwaves in that country. And therefore what people in each individual Arab country saw, they saw the activities of the president on the king, for example. They didn't see if there was an opposition, that opposition never had a face. People didn't see it.

So the first investment that Al Jazeera made was obviously to give that opposition in various instances a face so that people within each individual country began to know that there was a different narrative from the narrative that they were hearing from their own government. I would say that in particular what epitomized this investment was one show called Peshawar Moacas on the Arabic channel, or Crossfire. And the way I usually like to identify Crossfire is if you can think back to when Crossfire on CNN was really feisty and married that together with Jerry Springer and you begin to get an approximation of what the Peshawar Moacas was.

And it was a simple and clever gimmick, if you will. You invite two people who represent two different ends of the spectrum on any given issue. It could be political, it could be social, religious, what have you, and you let them debate it. You let them shout at each other and sometimes throw things at each other. And people found that, apart from being liberating as a program, it's a taste of something new that they had not experienced before. And if you fast forward to what happened in Tunisia, I mean, we heard before that revolution are unpredictable. And I think for all the things Dhar or other people from Al Jazeera have been saying about the role that Al Jazeera played in those things, we did not see Tunisia coming. Nobody did.

Things started in Tunisia and we covered them as unrest in Tunisia, reminiscent of previous unrest in Tunisia. Nobody thought that it was actually going to culminate into the toppling of the president. But once Tunisia happened, again, based on the strength of

historical precedent, we knew that if it happened in Tunisia, the next likeliest candidate would be Egypt. And if you are Arab you know that if it happens in Egypt it is going to happen everywhere else in the Arab world. The second in terms of investment, the second biggest investment that Al Jazeera had made was actually in the infrastructure of Al Jazeera in Egypt.

Egypt being the most pivotal Arab country. All eyes have always been on Egypt in the region for all sorts of different reasons. And therefore that led Al Jazeera to heavily invest in the infrastructure of Al Jazeera. So that when things began to shake in Egypt, despite all efforts by the Mubarak governments to shut down Al Jazeera, to fiddle with its satellite frequencies and prevent it from getting the picture to Egyptians and to Arabs outside of Egypt, Al Jazeera was well equipped to actually circumvent that. So there was some massive and decisive investments that were made. That was the second one of the.

The third one that was made was the marriage with social media. A lot of money, even before Tunisia, had happened. A lot of money had been invested in how to deal with the issue of social media. A special department had already been in place so that when the pictures started coming in from Tunisia and then from Egypt and later on from Libya and other parts of the Arab world Al Jazeera was ready to deal with that.

MS. MACKINNON: I mean, speaking of social media, it's been my observation that Al Jazeera has been much more comfortable in its relationship with social media than those American news organizations have been, been much more kind of uncomfortable with how to deal with citizen media. Why do you think that is? Why has Al Jazeera been more quick to embrace the use of social media and more symbiotic relationship between journalists and people contributing reports from the street than, say, some of the Western broadcasters and newspapers?

MR. FOUKARA: I mean, as a lot of people know, Al Jazeera had by that time had a long history of confrontation and conflict with Arab governments. It had been hassled in almost every Arab country from the Gulf to the Atlantic. And when you have a massive story, such as Egypt, which is really the bread and butter of your coverage, that at the same time there are serious constraints and impediments by the Government of Egypt on how you cover it, if they let you cover it at all. Obviously social media becomes a major second

option to you. We've always known that social media, relying on pictures for example, coming to you from inside a country like Syria, we've always known that that is a process fraught with editorial danger. Because you get these pictures. You don't know who is actually sending the pictures. You don't know how representative, how truly representative the pictures are of what is actually going on inside a country like Syria. But you don't have a choice.

So the decision is, or was at least in the case of Syria initially, the decision was quite -- it was quite an adventure, if you will. But not covering Syria would have been extremely detrimental to the coverage of the region as a whole. So Al Jazeera probably has had much more of an incentive than CNN or MSNBC or Fox or BBC even in terms of resorting to social media. But as I said at the outset, the infrastructure was already there even before Tunisia happened. And that was another big incentive to rely on social media on the part of Al Jazeera more than other networks.

If I may just make one qualitative difference in terms of what social media have done and what Al Jazeera has done. To me when things started happening in Tunisia and they culminated in Ben Ali fleeing the country a lot of people started calling it the Facebook revolution, the Twitter revolution, what have you. And fine, if you want to call it that, I don't have a big issue with it except that the people who really made that revolution happen, they made it happen over 30 years. I mean, there were strikes, labor strikes, there were people who were detained, there were people who were tortured, there were people who were killed.

As you know, Ben Ali had touted Tunisia in the same way that the Chinese had been doing as an economic success. The only difference obviously is that the Chinese, the Communist Party in China did offer the Chinese a high standard of living. Turned out that Ben Ali, who was going around saying that the standard of living in Tunisia approximated the standard of living in Belgium, turned out that to be a complete lie. So all those things percolated into the revolution. What social media did in the case of especially Tunisia and Egypt was, if you will, to provide the dots for the revolution. People used those media to organize and give us people outside of Tunisia and outside of Egypt an idea of what actually was going on on the streets of Sidi Bouzid or Midan Al-Tahrir in the case of Egypt.

What Al Jazeera did was to actually help connect those dots. Because if you take the coverage of Tahrir Square, people had a platform in Tahrir Square to actually discuss the mechanics of the revolution. They had a platform to discuss with each other where they were going with those dots, where they were going with the protests, what they hoped to achieve. They, through the use of Al Jazeera, they mobilized in a way to out maneuver the Mubarak regime. And I think that was the qualitative difference.

Did Al Jazeera create the revolution in Egypt? I think that's nonsense. It didn't. We at Al Jazeera would like to think that it did. But in my eyes, the prime role that Al Jazeera did was to actually enable people inside Egypt and Tunisia and elsewhere to talk to each other and strategize.

MS. MACKINNON: Now, there has been a lot of speculation over why Mr. Khanfar left Al Jazeera and there's also been discussion about Al Jazeera's overarching sort of editorial and geopolitical agendas, given its ownership by the Royal Family of Qatar and there has been some criticism, both by activists in the region and others about different emphases in coverage of different countries. So for instance, Bahrain, Al Jazeera has been criticized for going lightly on the government and going lightly on the human rights abuses against people involved with the uprisings there. And it has also been pointed out that Al Jazeera has been extremely pro-Libyan rebels and was sort of cheerleading for the rebels and, you know, a lot of media around the world I guess has been doing so. But these have just been cited as examples of how Al Jazeera's coverage, at least to some extent, has mirrored a little bit the geopolitical preferences, let's say, or allegiances of the Royal Family in Qatar. What's your response to that?

MR. FOUKARA: Well, I mean, what I usually say to that is that -- just as a reminder, the Qatarese, the pump hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars into the network. And by the way the network has become an empire. It certainly became an empire under Wadah. You have the Arabic channel, you have the English channel, you have a documentary channel, you have the Mubashir channel, which is an Arab C-SPAN of sorts. This is a major media empire. And the Qatarese, when they pump all that money into it, clearly they want to get something out of it. This is not a charity. And as you know, no media, no news outlet is a charity. You fund it because you want to get something out of it.

What do they get out of it? An awful lot. This is a tiny country that sits right next door to some very powerful players, Saudi Arabia is one of them, for example. And yet in the space of 15 years it has become a major regional player, thanks in no small measure to Al Jazeera. So let's just get that established. Mubarak, other than what he has actually stated in public, I don't know if he has -- if he had any other reasons for stepping down. There were all sorts of reports that, you know, the WikiLeaks revelations showed that the Americans had leaned on him to change coverage and so on. If you want to believe that, you believe.

I would just say as a matter of principle if you're any news outlet with the kind of clout that Al Jazeera has in that part of the world and with the kind of strategic interests that the United States has in that part of the world it is almost inconceivable that you would not have constant conversation with Al Jazeera if you're the U.S. Government. And that certainly has been the case. I was actually in Doha, this was two years ago. And I was absolutely flabbergasted when Hillary Clinton showed up for a meeting with the editorial board of Al Jazeera, Wadah included. And I sat in on that meeting and, you know, concerns were raised by Hillary Clinton and her team.

So all I'm saying is that if you are in that position it is almost inconceivable that you would not come under a certain amount of pressure to go in that direction or to go in that direction. Did Wadah go in the direction that the Americans wanted him to go? He says no. We'll never know, I guess, the truth of that. But I find it totally normal for a government such as the Government of the United States to want to have that kind of conversation with Wadah and Al Jazeera.

Bahrain, you could look at Al Jazeera as an adjunct of the Qatar Government, but you could also look at it as a news outlet that has caused them, as a government, a lot of headaches. I mean, if you look at the number of governments in the region that have at one point or another had problems with the Qatari Government, even going as far as severing diplomatic relations because of Al Jazeera, you begin to get, you know, an idea of how much problem -- how many problems Al Jazeera actually dragged the Qatari Government into. If you look at the complicated relationship they have had with the U.S. Government, especially under George Bush, and you think why would they put themselves in a position

where they have to suffer so many major headaches unless they got something out of it, unless they expect to get something out of Al Jazeera.

In the case of Bahrain, for all the criticism on the blogosphere about why Jazeera supported the Libyan rebels and it didn't support the protesters in Bahrain, that may be a legitimate criticism. What people often do not know is that the extent to which the Bahraini government went in trying to prevent Al Jazeera from being there on the ground to cover the events in Bahrain does to a large degree explain why the coverage of Al Jazeera in the eyes of its critics was not adequate in Bahrain. You compare that coverage with the coverage of Libya, yeah, sure, the coverage of Libya was much more extensive.

You have to remember that the Libyan rebels from day one have Benghazi under their control and in Benghazi Jazeera was welcomed with open arms, not so the case with Bahrain. You could argue--

MS. MACKINNON: You could have used more social--

MR. FOUKARA: Right.

MS. MACKINNON: --media coverage coming out of Bahrain.

MR. FOUKARA: Right, yeah. You could argue that the Government of Qatar itself came under pressure from the Saudis, for example. I wouldn't be surprised one bit if they did. And you could also argue that the Qatari Government did have some reservations about the way Al Jazeera wanted to cover events in Bahrain. It's very likely that those pressures did exist. I don't know exactly if those pressures did exist how they translated in the relationship between Al Jazeera and the Government of Qatar. Did somebody from the government pick up the phone and talk to Al Jazeera and say do not cover it? That, in my experience, that's not the way they do business. That's why they have the board of governors that acts as a buffer between the government and the station.

I think that the problem that a lot of people make, the assumption that a lot of people make, including people at Al Jazeera, is going around saying Al Jazeera is a 100 percent independent television channel.

MS. MACKINNON: Of course it is not.

MR. FOUKARA: But it's not. There is no such thing as a 100 percent independent channel. But it is one of the most independent channels that the region has certainly had.

Where does the coverage of Bahrain fit into that? I'm not sure I can tell you with certainty the mechanics of why other than the teams, our teams were not given access to Bahrain, why the coverage of Bahrain was so fundamentally different from the coverage of Libya. And if I may just add one more thing. Because you get a lot of criticism about why did Jazeera cover Libya this way? Why did it cover Syria that way?

I mean, if you look at what Gadhafi has done, if you look at what Bashar al-Assad has done, okay, fine, there are certainly flaws in the coverage of Al Jazeera, no doubt about it. There have always been flaws. But if you put those flaws next to the things that al-Gadhafi or Bashar al-Assad or any of the other autocrats have done over the years and certainly in recent months, I mean, hell, if you want to accuse me of siding with the rebels in covering events in Libya and Syria when hundreds, thousands of people are being slaughtered, fine. I mean, that's a price that Al Jazeera should be willing to pay in terms of its reputation.

MS. MACKINNON: I think what you've said just now or earlier in your comments is key, that you have to remember that the owners of any media outlet have an agenda and are seeking to gain something.

MR. FOUKARA: Absolutely.

MS. MACKINNON: And that it's important that the audience be cognizant of where the ownership of any media outlet is coming from and have options and alternatives.

MR. FOUKARA: Absolutely.

MS. MACKINNON: And I guess one of the interesting things now, I mean Al Jazeera has been tremendously successful and very influential in the region. But it has kind of hit a crossroads where there is now a proliferation of media in at least parts of the Middle East and in Egypt now there is more independent television and more competitors and so on.

MR. FOUKARA: It has also hit the Arab Spring itself.

MS. MACKINNON: Do you think it's good actually if more competition, both, kind of at the national level and the regional level appears so that people maybe aren't entirely dependent on whatever the Al Jazeera's owner's kind of preferences are.

MR. FOUKARA: Absolutely. I mean, I think competition can only be good, if not for Al Jazeera, certainly for the public. This is a public that has been dominated for the last 15 years by the narrative of Al Jazeera the prism of Al Jazeera, which is fine, but I think that the

more choices people have the more interesting their take on what is going on in their region becomes. But it's also -- competition is also good for Al Jazeera because one direct result of lack of competition is obviously complacency. And when you become complacent you begin to say, well, I don't have to work hard for it. I have the audience anyway. Why should I bother?

The problem is that so far we have not seen that kind of competition. You have Alarabiya, the other channel which is funded by the Government Saudi Arabia which has its own audience and Al Jazeera cannot compete with it over that particular type of audience, because they do a lot more infotainment that Al Jazeera does. But Alarabiya cannot either compete with Al Jazeera over its audience. We have seen some movement in Egypt. We have seen some movement in Egypt, even before the fall of Mubarak. There were certain times when Egyptians just did not watch Al Jazeera and Jazeera could not compete with Egyptian television at certain times.

But in times of big crises, in times of war, whether you are talking about Haraza or Lebanon or anywhere else in the region. You get a mass exodus of viewership back to Al Jazeera.

MS. MACKINNON: So we're going to go to Q and A very shortly, so if people feel like lining up. I'm just going to ask you one question while people get assembled. You very recently had a quite contentious interview with Donald Rumsfeld, speaking of Al Jazeera's relationship with the last presidential administration in which you sort of challenged him really to apologize for the civilian casualties in Iraq and he got quite upset that you did that and kind of accused you of being too contentious and said it was something about your nature, basically, that caused you to be contentious. And it was a fascinating interview but I thought -- I felt that, you know, I mean obviously Al Jazeera's relationship with Donald Rumsfeld in particular has been rather complex, shall we say.

But it was also very interesting just kind of in terms of the clash of journalistic cultures that I think in the United States, you know, kind of officials expect that journalists are going to come on and be relatively respectful and not kind of challenge them too much unless it's a specific show where everybody expects it to be that way. And of course you are in a way kind of representing your audience, who are very angry about civilian casualties.

And civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, I mean, having been in the region recently myself, continue to be a huge issue for people. And certainly it seems to me kind of from your perspective had you not challenged him you would have disappointed your audience tremendously. Anyway, so I'm just wondering if you could comment on this and in terms of the role and expectations.

MR. FOUKARA: Sure. I mean, he, after the interview he conveyed his displeasure about the, well, he conveyed his displeasure to me directly after the interview and during the interview. But he also conveyed it through a friend of his who had helped us get the interview with him. So I wrote him a letter, to Rumsfeld, after the interview and I explained to him, I said, I realize that you felt that I dealt with you disrespectfully, I beg to disagree. I didn't find anything disrespectful that I said to you during the interview. But I would have been, you know, derelict in my duty as someone doing this interview for people in the Middle East not to have pressed you hard on certain issues, namely the issue of civilians and the killing of civilians in Iraq.

But look, there were two things. One is that I was doing the interview for an Arab audience, essentially, although the interview ended up airing on Al Jazeera English for a worldwide audience too. The other thing was that I was trained, as you know. I was originally the product of BBC. That's how I was trained to conduct an interview. And the interviewing culture in Europe generally, in Britain in particular, it's much more aggressive than it seems to be here in the United States, at least over the last two or three decades. And it's funny because after the interview when he expressed his displeasure to me and I went back and I watched the interview, there was one time when I kept asking him the same question three or four times and it just took me back to a very funny interview that Jeremy Paxman had done with a government minister at that time in the U.K. when I was still living in the U.K. And he asked him exactly the same question 14 times and at the end the minister said, I'm sorry, what was the question again?

(Laughter)

MR. FOUKARA: So there were many different dynamics going on in that interview. But I also have to say that what touched off that particular ethos really, initially, was that he -- at one point he told me you are going to have to learn how to listen. And that is one of the

worst things that a politician could tell a journalist. Because journalists, we journalists, as you know, we don't think of ourselves as anybody's students. We've been around. We've been in this job for a certain period of time and all we're doing is asking questions on behalf of our audience. And for politician to tell me and my audience that we have to learn and listen usually doesn't go down well.

MS. MACKINNON: It's pretty patronizing. So we'll go to questions and we'll defer to Alex.

MR. JONES: Just a quick one. Could you talk to us about the situation with Al Jazeera English getting on cable television in the United States and what the impact of the Arab Spring has been on that?

MR. FOUKARA: Well, I mean, it's been an uphill struggle and I think it was expected right from the outset that it was going to be an uphill struggle. And for those who don't know, just as a reminder, now Al Jazeera English is on cable in New York City. That's been the latest station. It's on cable in the Washington D.C. area and it's on cable in Toledo, Ohio, and Vermont. And I think that's the extent of that. I'm sorry? In Cambridge, Cambridge, Mass.

But the kind of widespread cable availability that the channel continues to hope for, obviously it hasn't happened. When Egypt happened and a lot of attention was focused on the coverage of Al Jazeera English in this country and how positive it was and how comprehensive it was and so on, executives came from Doha and I think at that time Jazeera English had received within one week of coverage something like 40,000 tweets of support, 10,000 e-mails of support within one week. So they literally traveled around cable companies with hard copies of that support to convince people that it's high time they reconsidered their position.

And some of them, some of the cable companies, you know, were convinced that we're close to a breakthrough, but others didn't seem particularly swayed by the hard copy, the number of hard copies of support. The consolation obviously, this is like slow release, the consolation is that Egypt has changed, the coverage of Egypt has changed the dynamics and that now it's only a matter of time before we get to that stage where more and more states will pick up Al Jazeera English on cable. I hope that's not too much wishful thinking.

MS. MACKINNON: Just one quick note before we go to the next question. For those people watching on the webcast, I know there are a number out there, if you do have questions that you want to pose through Twitter just use the hash tag hsc25 and we'll see it on the screen there and we can try and work those into the mix. Gentleman here.

FROM THE FLOOR: I'm Phil Balboni. I'm the CEO and founder of Gobal Post. Alex actually asked the very question I was going to ask. But I'll do a little follow-up and then I have another question. Having started a cable news network before my current company I know how hard it is to get on cable in the United States. So please don't feel badly, it's a long, long process and you may or may not every actually succeed. But maybe you've drawn some conclusions from this experience about what it says about American media and particularly television.

And the second part, you referenced the hundreds of millions of dollars that the Government of Qatar put into your network. I would be interested if you could say a little bit more about the economics and how important you believe it is, the scale of investment in your network, how much that translates into the success you've been able to have out in the streets around the Arab world.

MR. FOUKARA: In terms of the success in the Arab world it's self-evident that this is a channel that a lot of people feel is very close to their concerns and aspirations. Al Jazeera obviously looks at the world for its audience through a prism that they can ostensibly relate to. But there is also the fact that right from day one Al Jazeera has been controversial, not just in the West, it was controversial in the Arab world as well. There were a lot of people who just did not like it, either governments or people who were close to the governments in the region who felt that the coverage of Al Jazeera was subversive.

FROM THE FLOOR: Particularly during the Iraq war.

MR. FOUKARA: Particularly during the Iraq war. And in some way the fact that it has been controversial has worked to sort of reinforce its popularity among ordinary Arabs. And if you travel anywhere in the Arab world and you ask people what is Qatar most associated with in your mind nobody says CENTCOM, everybody says Al Jazeera. So it's a very -- it's a very clever equation if you will, having CENTCOM and Al Jazeera, but nobody associates Qatar with CENTCOM, everybody associates it with Al Jazeera. My sense is that

when it was launched it was never launched as a business enterprise. It does not make money. Or if it does make money it's not enough to actually support it. So the bulk of the money actually comes from the pocket of the Emirate, it comes from the Government of Qatar itself.

And I think that's how they meant it to be. They meant it to be more of a political enterprise than a business enterprise. They meant it as something to generate prestige and political clout for them as a country and as a government. And it has done that. I mean, if you look at the various crises that Qatar now mediates in or has mediated in it's quite impressive. When the Lebanese fight among each other they go to Doha to negotiate. When the Sudanese fight among each other they go to Doha to negotiate. And the recent wave of revolutions in the Arab world, you mentioned Libya for example, again, that has certainly consolidated the clout the Qatarese have garnered over the last 15 years. A billion dollars, two billion dollars, that's really small change in terms of the political prestige that it has got for them.

I attended a dinner where the U.S. Ambassador to Qatar spoke a few months ago. And he was talking about how measuring the power of a country has changed nowadays. And he gave the two examples of Qatar and Egypt. Huge country, 80 million people. And yet you have a small country like Qatar, not even one million people, which, in some cases actually has a bigger political clout than Egypt does. So they are lucky that they have obviously a lot of gas. But it's not just gas. There is also a lot of vision that they have invested in and I think their original vision of establishing a channel to get them political clout has been tremendously successful.

MS. MACKINNON: Okay, a gentleman here.

FROM THE FLOOR: I'm Richard Sobel. I was a Fellow in '96. And I've taught a course at the Medill School on the Press, the Pentagon and the Public. And some colleagues and I have just done a book on public opinion about the Iraq war, not just in the United States but across Europe and including cases from the Arab world and the Indian sub-continent to try to see how the public affect the decision to join the coalition are willing or not to join. So I'm interested in both sides. This has been a fascinating discussion but largely about how Al Jazeera is communicating or helping to communicate within the Arab world. There has

been a little bit of elusion to how it seemed and how it tries to communicate to the United States or to Europe. So I would like to ask you more about that strategy. How does that play into an approach? And I think that most of the American public and many of the political leaders, to the extent that they know, would see Al Jazeera really as presenting a perspective, distorted perspective, for instance, about the Palestinians or about Al Qaeda. So how do you see the American exposition on Al Jazeera?

MR. FOUKARA: Sure. You know, we're talking about the trials and tribulations of putting Jazeera English on cable in this country and part of the problem and it's not an insignificant part of the problem in my eyes is the Bin Laden tapes that had aired on the Arabic channel. And as you said it's just given this perception to a lot of Americans, to a lot of people in the West generally, that Al Jazeera is and was the mouthpiece of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. In the Arab world Jazeera was seen differently. A lot of people, especially in the initial stages of it and when the decision was made to start hosting Israeli officials to directly appear on Al Jazeera, a lot of people thought that Al Jazeera was a front for the CIA. So the issue of the perception is obviously a very important one.

I consider myself very fortunate in the sense that I was born and raised in that part of the world, but I've also spent a good chunk of my life first in Europe and then more recently in the United States. So that puts me in a position where I can -- it puts me in a better position to try and grapple with the issue of how perceptions, the perceptions of the two worlds are different and where they interconnect or not. I don't think that running a PR campaign in the U.S., you know, over the issue of why we aired Osama Bin Laden, I don't necessarily think that that's going to, first, it's not going to convince a lot of Americans and, secondly, I don't think it's going to necessarily put Al Jazeera on cable.

But I have to say this. One of the things that -- first of all, I don't agree. I never agreed with the notion of putting a half hour long tape of Osama Bin Laden on Al Jazeera and I never agreed with the idea of putting a half hour speech by President Bush on Al Jazeera. It just -- it never made sense to me. But having said that, these were two different narratives at that time. And we were talking about information control, I don't see the point of actually trying to prevent people from hearing different narratives, whether you are talking about Afghanistan or Iraq or any other issue. So to the extent that you give people in the Arab

world an idea of what Osama Bin Laden was actually trying to say, in a way you contribute, despite what the critics may say, to demystifying the man. He stopped being a mystery.

And I think what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, revolutions led by young people who were just sick and tired of that kind of narrative that they were exposed to I think is the ultimate confirmation that the demystifying strategy was a good strategy. I just want to say one quick thing that we talked about before, before the panel. When people in the Arab world and in the West talk about Al Jazeera, they talk about Al Jazeera as if it's a separate development from anything else that happened before it.

And my argument is that without CNN, without CNN, we may not have had Al Jazeera. And why do I say that? I say that because CNN, during the war to liberate Kuwait, shaped the war narrative of that time. CNN was the only international broadcaster allowed by Saddam to continue to broadcast from inside Iraq. And that helped shaped the narrative. I remember a commercial on CNN International at that time in which Mubarak, whether he meant it or he was being facetious, but he said it, he said I learned about the outbreak to liberate Kuwait not on through the conventional channels, but on CNN. And I think those things made a lot of Arabs think, if CNN can do it, why can't we do it? And I think that's the deep background to the creation of Al Jazeera.

MS. MACKINNON: We're running short on time. We did have a couple of questions from the Twitter sphere, so I'm going to insert them and we'll see what else we can do. Just quickly, I'll just give the two questions together and maybe you can just kind of address them together. One question is how much difference is there between the Arabic and English language content on Al Jazeera and the second question is that Al Jazeera has been defined at least in the West by its coverage of crises. That's what we -- that's when we've come to turn to Al Jazeera. Going forward, what will Al Jazeera do in times of peace? Which I think really speaks to this question of what role does Al Jazeera play as countries like Tunisia and Egypt are actually trying to build new political systems.

MR. FOUKARA: I don't think there is any danger that Al Jazeera would be out of work any time soon, because if you look at what's happening in the region, the so-called Arab Spring. I think the so-called Arab Spring, it's trials and tribulations, ups and downs are going to be with us for some time. And when I say some time, I'm talking about the next 10

to 20 years possibly. So I don't see Al Jazeera being put out of business. Although I do see the possibility of more competition for Al Jazeera, more serious competition for Al Jazeera in the region. And in terms of the difference between the Arabic channel and the English channel, there are some overlaps but there are also some fundamental differences. And those fundamental differences are obviously mostly dictated by the respective audiences. One has a global audience. One has a mostly Arabic speaking audience. The Arabic speaking channel knows where its audience is. It's very easy to give its coverage a specific identity. The English channel has so many different -- it covers so many different time zones and so many different cultures, so many different languages and therefore it has been harder to give itself a specific identity, although that's beginning to happen. But I would say that the fundamental difference is obviously the kind of audience that each channel caters to.

MS. MACKINNON: Quick follow up too. This has been I think up until our conversation a fairly American centric day, you know, talking about the future of journalism from an American perspective. Is the future, if we're kind of looking out at the world and where the future of journalism, you know, kind of where the leading edge is that we can see, this is where we're starting to see the future or this is where kind of the world of global journalism is heading, where are you seeing that? Are you seeing it in the United States or in Western Europe or are you seeing it elsewhere and what can you say, just based on your experience about kind of what the non-West and what media trends in the developing world, in the Middle East, in Africa, might teach us about where media is going globally.

MR. FOUKARA: Well, let me talk about power before I talk about that. I mean, I've been in the United States for ten years now. I arrived in the United States about two years before 9/11 and then I've been here since 9/11, so I was able to see two different faces of America, if you will, before 9/11 and after 9/11. And with all the stuff, the financial meltdown and the financial crisis and all those things, I think about, just like a lot of other people, I think about the future of U.S. power. And when I look at it through the prism of what's going on now with the financial crisis and so on and so forth, there is one rationale which says that U.S. power will be increasingly defined by forces outside of the United

States, the Chinese, the Brazilians, the Indians, possibly the Arabs if the Arab Spring turns out to be a success. I'm not sure if it's going to be a success yet or not.

But there is another logic, if you will, and that's the logic of Admiral Mullen who was asked a question about how he feels about the future of U.S. power and should countries in the Middle East continue to depend on U.S. power well into the future. And he said, I realize that this country has problems, but if anybody doubts the ability of this country to recover, they will doubt it at their own risk. So if you look at it through the prism of the first logic, I see the media being, the future of the media being defined no longer by the United States and the media in the United States.

The main rationale behind creating Al Jazeera English was to sort of try and reverse the flow of information. You have it coming from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere and Al Jazeera and I hope that doesn't sound too pretentious. One of the goals of Al Jazeera English is to actually reverse that flow and have information flowing from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere. But to the extent that the future of U.S. power is guaranteed over the next 50 to 100 years, I think the U.S. media have, as we all know, have had this incredible ability to define the narrative. And they will continue to do it provided that U.S. power continues -- that the United States continues to be the powerful country that it has been so far.

MS. MACKINNON: But U.S. media may perhaps have to get used to sharing the narrative defining space with more actors.

MR. FOUKARA: Yeah, I mean, in a country like -- in a region like the Middle East, I mean we are already seeing signs of that. Now it's the Arab media that are defining the narrative more than the American or the European media. But having said that, we should not overlook the power of the U.S. media. I mean we have seen this recently with the issue of the assassination, the alleged assassination plot with the Iranians. We've seen, in this country obviously the prism has been defined by the U.S. media. And to the extent that there are alliances with the United States in the Middle East, for example, in the Gulf, the U.S. media will be able to sort of extend that prism through which to see what the Iranians are accused of having tried to do in the eyes of Arabs in that part of the world.

MS. MACKINNON: Well, on that provocative note I'm afraid we are out of time unfortunately. Thank you, very much.

MR. FOUKARA: Thank you.

C E R T I F I C A T E

This is to certify that the preceding transcript is an

accurate record based on the recordings of the proceedings

taken before: Alex S. Jones

In the Matter of:

EXPLORING: THE MEDIA AND POLITICS FRONTIER

Date: October 14, 2011

Place: Cambridge, Massachusetts

- 11/1/2011

Allyson R. Farley Date

Advance Services