

### **Question 1: The Link between Culture and Media**

Media and culture have a definite connection, but which one affects the other more? Many would say that the media is created by society and changes as society changes. Others would say that the media changes and affects society. It's most likely a combination of both, both changing as a result of the other. The film "Control Room" looks at two forms of mass media, U.S. news and the Arab news station, Al Jazeera. The two forms of news exist to fill the surveillance roles of mass media in their markets. We can look at the way in which these mass media news sources affect society by looking at the way that their messages are sent and received. First, they collect information from the environment which comes in the form of video, interviews, pictures, etc. Then they decode, interpret, and encode the message to send out. Then through their various forms of media channels they send numerous identical messages to the masses. The intended audience decodes and interprets the message received. It is during the decoding of the message that the audience's ideas, thoughts, and culture are affected. Likewise, it is the audience's feedback to these decoded messages which changes the media.

When an audience receives a message from the mass media, their interpretation of that message begins to shape their entire being. Right at the start of "Control Room" we see a few men sitting in a coffee shop in Iraq watching President Bush declare war on Iraq. While you see the concern and fear begin to mount in these men, you also begin to hear their thoughts about what they just saw and interpreted. After viewing this mass news media message, their whole world turned upside down, and they wanted to talk about it.

Throughout the film we see the constant barrage of media messages that Al Jazeera was showing to the people of the middle-east. The American tanks and troops, the dead and wounded Iraqis, the terrorist footage of captives, all lit up the screens of the viewers of Al Jazeera. They also saw the messages from President Bush and other Americans. Near the beginning of the film Hassan Ibrahim described the people viewing this attack as another Israeli war, or a war in which the Americans wanted oil and Arab land. Just by hearing this sentiment of the war we can see that even the first displays of mass media concerning the war had a huge cultural impact. People's views about America began to change.

What about the U.S. media? They, as well, presented an encoded message to the people of America about the war. Their message was encoded differently than Al Jazeera's and likewise was received differently by the people of the U.S. Throughout the war, the U.S. media was in a controlled state, while Al Jazeera showed all of the horrors of the war. This definitely affected U.S. culture in that their sentiment of the war wasn't even near that it would be if they saw the images from Al Jazeera. Would the citizens of the U.S. even want to see those gory images?

Feedback to news organizations is shown by continued support of viewers. If a mass media news agency has no viewers then there is no reason for advertisers. With no advertisers, there is no income. With no income, there is no profit. It is definitely very important to mass media news agencies to have viewers. Therefore, many times they will change their programming to suit their "customers". Americans don't want scenes of burnt flesh and dead bodies during their news. There might be a mention or two of it, but

not the whole time. The people of Arab nations might think differently. Maybe it's because they are *in* the hell that Al Jazeera depicts?

It's fair to say that both the media affects culture as well as the culture affecting media, especially in the sense of news. It is during the decoding of the mass media news messages that the audience's ideas, thoughts, and culture are affected. Likewise, it is the audience's feedback which changes the news media.

## **Question 2: The Environment and Its Shaping of the Media**

The societal and political environment of a nation or a group of nations does have a large effect on the outcome of the media. Ever since the dawn of media, it has been affected by the society surrounding it. Just looking at the five “news values” in the textbook brings light to this statement. Timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence, and human interest all have a deep connection with the society that is being spoken to. Therefore, many times a news agency will adapt the way in which it displays the news. Modern news agencies want to appear fair and balanced in their reporting of events, but many times this is not the case. “Control Room” compared the way in which the environment affected both U.S. and Arab media by contrasting the cultures that both medias were in, the way they both displayed the war, and through the personal thoughts of Lt. John Rushing.

“Wake up! There is a war around you. Something is happening in the world. You’re still sleeping. Wake up! This is the message of Al Jazeera,” states Al Jazeera’s Samir Khader. In this statement alone, this shows that Al Jazeera is not afraid to sugar coat their message. The Arab world is riddled with war and destruction and Al Jazeera was in the middle of it when the U.S. decided to go to war with Iraq. The start of the film wanted to show what exactly Al Jazeera is known for in the U.S., an Arab news network that shows the horrific images of warfare. As Khader states elsewhere in the film, “We have the pictures, so we show them... We want to show that any war has a human cost – we focused on that.”

The film shows numerous clips from Al Jazeera depicting the charred bodies of civilians killed by American bombs. They even show videos of dead American soldiers,

a completely taboo thing for American media. Al Jazeera considers it a duty to show the effects of war, and they did that quite well during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. This is definitely in high contrast to American media, which is very controlled. They are not allowed to show pictures of dead soldiers or even graphic depictions of civilian death.

While Al Jazeera was showing the stark realities of war, the U.S. media was reporting on Jessica Lynch and the mysterious “deck of cards”. This is really all they had to report on because that’s all the U.S. military was giving them. So hour after hour, Americans were given the same stories and really didn’t have much information on the war. Even after the government of Iraq fell, both medias were showing different messages. Many U.S. news agencies were talking about freedom for the Iraqi people while Al Jazeera was showing a lawless nation without a government and full of looting.

The U.S. doesn’t want to see dead people and destruction of a far off and distant war. As Hassan Ibrahim said, “Watching the war in America is like watching a movie.” Besides, it would be considered “un-American” to show dead U.S. soldiers here in the U.S. This was even evident in the U.S. leaders in their attacks towards Al Jazeera. Donald Rumsfeld was shown talking about Al-Jazeera many times in a very negative light. As one of his quotes says, "We have been lied about, day after day, week after week, month after month for the last 12 months in the Arab press."

It seems like both sides pigeon-hole each other into boxes of one-sidedness. However, there is one shining light in the film that cuts through it all. It’s Lt. John Rushing. This is when we see the truth between environment and media influence. He talked of his personal struggle of viewing an American life worth more than an Iraqi’s. He described being utterly disgusted when Al Jazeera showed video clips of U.S. soldiers dead on the

battlefield. Conversely, when video came on the next day of dead Iraqi civilians, he wasn't nearly as disgusted. He was disturbed that the Iraqi casualties had not affected him as much as the images of the fallen soldiers. This, in itself, shows that a society will always treasure its people with more worth than another society's people. A society's media will always treasure its political, economic, and societal environment over others. It's just natural.

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### **Question 3: How do the media influence users?**

Anyone who critically looks at their media consumption can easily say that it has affected them at one point in their life or the other. Most people go to the mass news media for its surveillance, interpretation, and linkage functions. Unless it's entertainment news, most people are not watching it to be entertained, but to be informed. Using the pull model, we see people's uses and gratifications of news media in the form of cognition and social utility. While the news is stimulating, it's typically not used for diversion or withdrawal; it's a way of connecting to worlds that are very different from our own. Since we go to the news agencies to base our beliefs on the world, they have a great amount of influence on us. Many people will go to only one news source for their information, many times not getting the whole picture. In "Control Room" we saw the media's affects on it's listeners by the way the different sides of media told the story of the U.S. invasion. We also see how they both lose their claims of "fair and balanced" by displaying unintentional propaganda.

Al Jazeera was obviously upset at the onslaught of the U.S. invasion. They kept showing video after video of charred civilians. The people of Iraq believed the U.S. was attacking Iraq for oil and to occupy Arab land, to kill Arabs, to take mosques. Al Jazeera wanted to display the dismay of the Iraqi people, rather than just the political messages of President Bush. As one Iraqi was quoted after his family was hit by a U.S. "smart" bomb, "Do I have to pay for this (American) democracy with six lives?" he asks. "My brother and his children are dead."

The U.S. Media's message to American's was primarily that of the White House and Pentagon. They conveyed the same message to the American people over and over. The

people were told that the U.S. was going into Iraq because of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. These continuous messages affected many of the American people. This gave people a cause for the war. The American media did however show plenty of dissenters of the war, especially when the WMDs were nowhere to be found. Nevertheless, during the initial onslaught of media concerning the war, they only showed what the government was giving them.

This leads to media being considered a propaganda tool to sway the masses into certain beliefs. The U.S. military was trying to distract journalists with the story of Jessica Lynch from what was really going on with the war. They kept using the excuse that they didn't want to endanger battlefield operations. While this was a tool of propaganda, Al-Jazeera's constant presentations of wounded civilians and U.S. tanks rolling in could be considered just the same. Likewise, the U.S. invasion of Baghdad and the tearing down of the statue of Saddam was completely set up by the U.S. military as a media "show" and propaganda tool for Americans.

Both sides of the news agencies said they wanted to be "fair and balanced". Both sides say they didn't want to spin things. Even Lt. John Rushing said he didn't want to spin the truth. Fox news in America's slogan was "We report, you decide." We even see Samir Khader getting ticked off that is comrade would choose a political "activist" as an interviewee. As Khader stated, "We want guests who can give us both sides of the story." Contrary to what Fox and Al Jazeera state, we can see both news agencies eventually go against their "fair and balanced" mindset.

We see a sort of blurred line between journalism and propaganda in both agencies. Fox tries to balance the "liberal" media by provide a conservative slant while

Al Jazeera tries to balance “west-centered” media by providing the view of the common people of Arab countries. With these mindsets, the “fair and balanced” ideal kind of goes out the window. In a sense, the audience of these two news organizations has already decided what it wants to hear, and therefore are provided that message. For example, look at the bombings of the major Arab media outlets in the same day. Many were saying that they believed Al Jazeera was targeted by U.S. forces, thus, that was reported.

This “propaganda” almost seems unintentional. A critical viewer of the news can see through it and make judgments based upon knowledge gathered from many sources. The problem is that many people don’t do that and their misguided beliefs often get fortified by their consumption of “choice” news media. The news media also many times ends up being a nationalistic enterprise, Al-Jazeera for Arab nationalism and the U.S. news for U.S. nationalism.

In “Control Room” we saw the media’s affects on it’s listeners by the way the different sides of media told the story of the U.S. invasion. We also see how they both lose their claims of “fair and balanced” by displaying unintentional propaganda. Much of the video shown from Al Jazeera in the film was of U.S. soldiers handling Iraqi civilians very violently. But do the videos show the civilians hiding guns and shooting troops when they least expect it? A large extent of the video shown in U.S. media was that of people praising U.S. soldiers, but did it show the civilian deaths caused by the same men? In the end, it’s up to the user to decide on how the media affects them. What information will the user pull to satisfy their curiosities on the happenings of the world? As Khader states at the end of the film, “People like victory – they don’t like justifications. You don’t have to justify. Once you are victorious, that’s it.”

#### **Question 4: The Nature of Media Controls**

Many people in modern U.S. society would say that the moral degradation of society is caused by growing lack of censorship by the media. What people don't realize is that the media is still highly controlled in the U.S., and in some places, controlled almost entirely. This was the case for U.S. news agencies and the war with Iraq. The American media was only allowed into Iraq by being "embedded" with the troops. They were told what footage they could show and what they could tell the American public. Most of the world's media were actually in Dakar, 700 miles away from Baghdad.

The news media in the U.S. are supposed to be a "free" press with free speech, but many formal controls exist to protect individuals. While these formal controls can be used against the media in concerns of war, it's the informal controls that typically bog down news services. In "Control Room" and other research we see media controls for the U.S. at the national level and controls for Al Jazeera at the international *and* U.S. level.

"Control Room" did a very good job at showing the frustrations of the U.S. media reporting on the Iraq War. The media operations were based at the U.S. Central Command headquarters in Doha, Qatar, and all important information regarding the war was given through this location. We saw the reporters continuously denied specific information about the operations but always assured that the operation of "democracy", "freedom", and the "ending of tyranny" was going well. When the U.S. military gave reporters information, it only appeared to be a form of propaganda when shown in conjunction with what Al Jazeera was reporting at the same time. Look at the deck of cards. It was all the U.S. media had to talk about and the military wouldn't even give

them the cards that they said they would give them. This is a definite example of the informal controls that the military was imposing on the U.S. media.

The Pentagon was a monopoly over the news being given during the Iraq conflict. They weren't in charge of what reporters reported, but they were in charge of what information the reporters had. The reporters, in a sense, became their pawns. The reporters needed something to report on, and they reported on whatever the military gave them. Any embedded reporters were only allowed that "privilege" if they only reported on what they were allowed to report on. In essence, the monopoly of information became an informal control. As far as formal controls go, the news agencies were barred from showing photographs of coffins returned to the U.S. during the war.

But what about Al Jazeera? Al Jazeera is a multi-national news network and therefore doesn't fall under the stipulations of one nation, but of many. Al Jazeera was started by the emir of Qatar and is still funded in part by the emir. The Al Jazeera news service has many times come under fire by different nations for displaying rallying videos from militant groups and being in contact and possibly harboring terrorist groups. Al Jazeera offices in Algeria, Bahrain, and Iraq have all been shut down by their governments due to suspicion of support for terrorist groups. Nevertheless, Al Jazeera is the largest watched news network in the Arab nations and continues to grow. While nations put formal controls on their reporting actions within the nations, people are still watching the news. When it comes to war time, Al Jazeera reports the news dirty and nasty. They show whatever pictures they find and don't have a problem showing the destruction of war. According to Al Jazeera, It's not the nations themselves that control them, but the U.S.

The film portrayed the U.S. media and their reports on the war as being “managed” by the military. Inadvertently, it also showed Al Jazeera as being partially controlled by U.S. military. This was done through the event of the bombing of Al Jazeera’s office in Baghdad. This was the infamous attack that killed reporter Tareq Ayyoub. The U.S. also attacked other news agencies on the same day. The U.S. was informed by these news organizations the exact coordinates of their buildings, but they were still bombed. In The defense of the U.S., they believed that insurgents were firing at them from these locations. On the contrary, “Control Room” shows that the Arab news networks believed that the U.S. bombed these places in order to prevent the reporting of U.S. war crimes. Therefore, Al Jazeera believed these attacks happened on purpose, basically a way in which the U.S. could squelch the media opposition. As Khader states, “A small news network cannot hope to combat the forces of the United States. What may one do but 'shut up'?”

In “Control Room” and other research we see media controls for the U.S. at the national level and controls for Al Jazeera at the international *and* U.S. level. It’s hard to tell how far media should be allowed information concerning U.S. warfare. I think most people can agree that the U.S. media was put on a choke chain during the Iraq conflict and were given little information about it. As far as the U.S. attacking Al Jazeera, I guess we’ll never know. In the end, it’s important to see how much government control, whether formally or informally, can affect way in which people react to current events.

### **Question 5: The Future of Media**

After viewing and analyzing “Control Room” one could conclude that the news media is polarized; the U.S. media for U.S. and Al Jazeera for Arabs. While this is definitely not the case, media organizations presiding in different societies and cultures will reflect that culture’s viewpoints in their news programming. Even though the Iraq war news coverage was controlled in American mass media, it was not for Al Jazeera. The wonderful thing is that internet technology allowed the people of the United States to rely on many media resources other than those controlled by the military. Internet blogs and independent news/editorial organizations provided a framework of information not provided by the mass media.

As the mass media continues to have corporate and operational convergence, consumers of news media are going elsewhere for news. We see this massively by the disintermediation via the internet. We are seeing many people’s choices in news going from a push perspective to a pull perspective. The media will continue to change as new boundaries are pushed by the “little man” and technology.

Look at Al Jazeera. According to Wikipedia, they are the only politically independent news station in the Arab countries. While Al Jazeera is nowhere from small, one must appreciate their cultivation from a hated Arab news network to a beloved one. Their viewer-ship is humungous and is estimated at 50 million viewers. Al Jazeera is in a very good position indeed! Just last month, Al Jazeera launched an English 24 hour news station. This is very exciting because this will allow the American people an entirely new perspective on the news. I watched about 45 minutes of it tonight online and learned more about the plight of the middle-east than I have on U.S. news in the last year.

The most peculiar thing about Al Jazeera's new English channel is that it's fronted by John Rushing, the same Lt. John Rushing in "Control Room". It's very interesting to read about what happened to him after the film was released. In short, the military didn't like his comments to media about the film and ordered him to shut up. After being in the military for 15 years, John decided to leave and is now filming documentaries for Al Jazeera and their English channel. He wants to show America in a good light to the Arab people. I'm very excited.

Let's go back to me watching Al Jazeera English online. I'm actually considering buying a subscription to watch Al Jazeera English online. This will be my first step into actually watching television online. As more people are moving to the internet as their primary source of news and entertainment, we will also see an influx of major media moving as well. Also, as the next evolution of the internet, the "evernet", occurs, more and more mass media will be based on it.

I personally read a lot of news online and do not rely on television for my news. I am trying to become less "ethnocentric" and have a much larger world view. Honestly, I can't do that with television news media. Therefore, I've turned to the vast amounts of information online. The media will continue to change as new boundaries are pushed by the "little man" and technology. As people grow tired of the mass media shoving the same things down their throat over and over again through audience control, they will move to the pull method of news. It looks like that is found primarily online and will most likely continue to move in that direction. Thus, this gives many "little" news organizations or independent bloggers/reporters a chance, inadvertently bypassing the consolidated news industry.