

The rise and rise of Al Jazeera

By [Oresti Patricios](#), issued by [Ornico](#)

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Before revolution started fermenting in the Middle East keen media watchers had heard of Al Jazeera, but the network certainly didn't have instant recall or wasn't firmly fixed in people's minds. In the US few people knew about Al Jazeera given that the network isn't on cable or satellite in the States. This means the only people consuming Al Jazeera were immigrants, media pundits or people with a special interest in the Middle East who found the network's online offering.

But that changed soon after revolution reared its head in Tunisia. The Tunisian revolution came and went very quickly, but it was long enough for people to realise that Al Jazeera English was the first news brand on the scene and was breaking all the big stories. Then came the mother of all insurrections, the Egyptian revolution. Of course Al Jazeera was ahead of international media networks. Born in Doha, Qatar, the once Arabic only news network had long entrenched itself as a premier Middle East news and analysis channel because of its dissenting voice in the region. Before the revolutions of 2011 much of the Middle East news was - at best - moderated by the state with government channels that churned out the propaganda of the day.

What's made Al Jazeera a champion brand is the fact that it has long been a controversial news source by not towing the party line and telling the news as it is. What made it difficult for Al Jazeera to get into the US is the fact that it has typically broadcast news that didn't win the media brand any favour with the White House administration. Soon after the 9/11 attacks in the US Al Jazeera was broadcasting and breaking news on the Afghan wars live from its offices in Afghanistan. That was about the time that George Bush was referring to Al Jazeera as the voice of al-Qaeda.

But Egypt is changing all that. When the revolution broke out in Egypt and it became apparent that the White House would have to make a statement and get its foreign policy types in action, politicians and administrators in the US suddenly started finding a way to tune into Al Jazeera English. More so the media reports that when Barack Obama was watching the news on Egypt he was doing so from two sources. The one was CNN and the other was Al Jazeera English which was being streamed into the White House via a digital feed.

Given that Egypt's troubles with Mubarak have had a significant impact on world markets and with news breaking that Saudi Arabia may be fudging reports of its fuel reserves it looks like Middle Eastern politics is becoming increasingly important which means Al Jazeera is just going to get more and more relevant. This means the cable companies and satellite owners who have been locking Al Jazeera out of the United States may have to reconsider their position. In fact many of them are already doing this.

Al Jazeera is fast becoming one of the most quoted sources for the Middle East, and certainly the channel that other news outlets look to when it comes to understanding what's happening in Egypt. Yes, CNN sent in Christiane Amanpour who did a revealing one-on-one interview with Hosni Mubarak and there was Anderson Cooper who was accosted and beaten by locals, but Al Jazeera's got the street cred. They've been in the region for years, they refuse to pander to local governments and their gritty determination to show the real news against all costs has won them huge respect and huge brand loyalty.

A good example of this is how Al Jazeera continued to break stories and defiantly continued to cover the news of Egypt's revolution despite the fact that its license was revoked by the Egyptian government, its satellite signals were interfered with and security forces from the Mubarak regime raided its offices. Then there's the matter that Al Jazeera's journalists and media workers were singled out for attack because unlike other channels in the region they refused to bow to government pressure.

Despite arrests and threats on journalist's lives Al Jazeera started to drop correspondent bylines which meant that anonymous voices were broadcasting live in a move to reduce the risk for Al Jazeera staff. The network also made strong

use of citizen journalism and had a very reflexive approach which meant they could more easily work around downed telephone lines and other technical difficulties and still get the news out.

The way that Al Jazeera covered events in Tunisia and Egypt was defining for the network and through the effect of social networks, breaking news and being an agenda setting medium Al Jazeera English in particular enjoyed massive growth in global viewership. Growth in viewership can more readily translate into growth in advertising, and will provide a platform for Al Jazeera to expand. Already the network has announced that it will open offices in Turkey and that Al Jazeera Turk is set to launch in about five months. In the US management is aggressively negotiating with cable and satellite owners to get a foothold in that market which up until now has been closed to Al Jazeera.

With Egypt's revolution still fresh in everyone's memory Al Jazeera is using the leverage and reputation it garnered during this event very well to expand its foothold amongst the world's media brands. The network is currently in three American cities but there's increasing pressure from people, including the White House administration, for that to change. Small wonder that conservative media brands like the FOX Broadcasting Company are more than a little annoyed with this move, but they should get used to it. With the Middle East set to play a stronger role in world politics in general and the US in particular, it looks like Al Jazeera's more than here to stay.

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