

William Youmans, **An Unlikely Audience: Al Jazeera's Struggle in America**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, 256 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover), \$9.99 (Kindle).

Reviewed by

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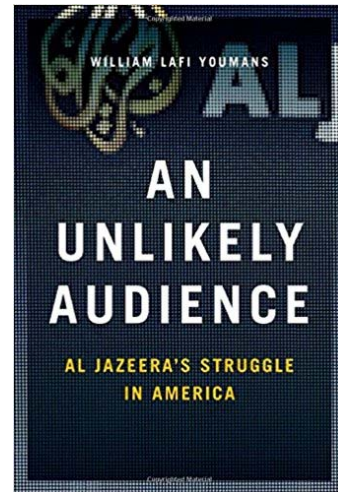
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Combining extensive and longitudinal interviews with Al Jazeera employees and executives, *An Unlikely Audience: Al Jazeera's Struggle in America* sheds light on the trial and error of Al Jazeera network's endeavor to get a foothold in the U.S. news media market. The book is a timely publication that addresses the hot issue of foreign-government-sponsored news media in the U.S. and makes original empirical and theoretical contributions to the rich literature on the political economy of media, the sociology of news production, and comparative media studies.

In the introduction and chapters 1 and 2, the author lays the historical and political background and scaffolds the theoretical framework to help illustrate the obstacles that Al Jazeera faced in the United States. On the global level of analysis, Youmans focuses on unpacking the legacies of media imperialism and U.S.–Arab relations that caused a paradoxical situation for Al Jazeera. Although the rise of Al Jazeera constituted the counterflow of global news, the saturated domestic market in the Global North left little room for foreign news media to grow locally. Although Al Jazeera had a grand goal to deorientalize the media representation of the Arab world, it had to be Americanized to gain U.S. market access.

On the national level, the author highlights the difficulties facing Al Jazeera in terms of U.S. political culture and the political economy of the news media. Due to the particularity of America's political culture, which has a mix of cosmopolitanism and ideological reclusiveness, the general American audience is not interested in international news and seldom consumes televised news from foreign media outlets. On the point of political economy, Youmans argues that the Al Jazeera's derivative channels in the U.S. have the hybridity of a state-sponsored public broadcasting service and private commercial TV. Its political ambition to increase the Arab influence on global affairs and its commercial pursuit to become financially independent from the Qatari government did not work in tandem well. The Qatari government's largess enabled Al Jazeera's fast global expansion and fostered quality journalism distinct from its Western counterparts. Its genealogy rooted in the Middle East offered political relevance and editorial edge that favored Al Jazeera in the competition of international news broadcasting. However, Al Jazeera's public service orientation and its ties with an Islamic state became backbreaking baggage in its effort to enter U.S. TV distribution systems and to commercialize its newscasts.

In chapter 2, Youmans tries to make the case of locality's impact on seemingly borderless news production from the angle of cultural studies. The author delineates the cultural logic of media ports of entry and theorizes the assimilating power of the cities, namely, Washington, D.C., New York City, and



San Francisco, on shaping Al Jazeera's American enterprise. The author should be praised for this fresh theoretical take on "glocalization" of international news media, but it is questionable to foreground the characteristics of the cities and their influence on the development of Al Jazeera while downplaying the subjectivity of the news organization. In other words, the cultural, political, and economic environments and talent pools of these three cities were not unseen factors in Al Jazeera's strategic placement of resources. The cities were chosen to fit a certain media development plan. They were not the determinants that shaped the fate of Al Jazeera in the U.S.

In chapters 3 and 4, Youmans gives a detailed account of Al Jazeera English's efforts to become "Beltway media" by following the media-politics logic. Al Jazeera problematized the lack of access to the U.S. TV distribution system as the lack of political legitimacy. To solve this problem, Al Jazeera made campaigns on two levels. On the high-politics level, it boosted the presence of prominent U.S. politicians on its programs to gain political validation. On the civic-politics level, it sought legitimation through endorsing non-governmental organization events in Washington, DC, and soliciting grassroots support for wider distribution of Al Jazeera English in the U.S. The historical event of the Arab Spring and Al Jazeera's political alignment with U.S. elites on promoting democracy in the Middle East further elevated the channel's political relevance and legitimacy. This demonstrated the dilemma that Al Jazeera English faced: To expand the distribution and audience base, Al Jazeera, which initially posed as a challenger to American mainstream media and a representative of the Global South broadcasting back to "the empire," had to be assimilated into the empire. The adventure of Al Jazeera English in Washington, D.C., can be seen as an international news broadcasting service's trial to gain a footing in the U.S. TV distribution system through a political maneuver.

When the political maneuver failed, Al Jazeera turned to commercial means to gain distribution access. In chapter 5, Youmans depicts how Al Jazeera's bold purchase of Current TV and the hectic launch of Al Jazeera America were quickly bogged down by internal managerial disputes, lawsuits, mounting operation costs, and low viewership. Al Jazeera chose New York City to assimilate to American corporate news media culture and business practice. To abide by the distribution carrier's exclusivity agreements, Al Jazeera geoblocked Al Jazeera English's broadcasting and online access in the U.S. It forfeited the American audience cultivated through its long-standing news broadcasting by Al Jazeera English and dropped its public service function. The American journalistic value and viewpoints inherited from the massive local hiring turned Al Jazeera America into another America-centric cable news outlet and conflicted with the mission of its umbrella news organization to give voice to the voiceless. While Al Jazeera America delved into the business model of cable news media, more and more American news consumers became "cord-cutters." Commercial news media's profit relies on viewership ratings, which Al Jazeera America failed to deliver. Al Jazeera's ill-advised transformation from an international news broadcasting service to a localized commercial cable news channel was short-lived.

To fully utilize the facilities of the purchased Current TV in San Francisco, Al Jazeera started AJ+, a low-stakes spin-off enterprise focusing on online news delivery and young audience engagement. Chapter 6 tells the anecdotes of Al Jazeera testing the waters of the social media-oriented digital news ecology. AJ+ happens to be the "dark horse" of Al Jazeera's derivatives in the U.S. Youmans attributes the survival of AJ+ to the tech talents and the liberal atmosphere of San Francisco, the editorial and

managerial freedom thanks to its low-profile existence on the West Coast, and its fast adaptation to audience demand.

The book's analysis could have been more insightful if Youmans could articulate more clearly that the stories of Al Jazeera English in Washington, D.C., Al Jazeera America in New York City, and AJ+ in San Francisco are stories of three operating models rather than three cities. Al Jazeera English in D.C. stands for the public service broadcasting model; Al Jazeera America in New York City stands for the commercial cable news model; and AJ+ stands for the agile and interactive social media model. The success of the foreign news media in the U.S. is less related to the choice of ports of entry, and more about choosing the right operating model that can afford financial sustainability, grow the audience, and manage the power relations between the foreign sponsor nations and the United States.