

Accent and Prejudice:
Israelis' Blind Assessment of Al-Jazeera English News Items

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Abstract

To examine the interplay between ethnic bias and source credibility, we designed a blind experiment in which 112 Jewish-Israeli students rate the credibility and professionalism of videos broadcast by CNN, BBC, Fox News, and Al-Jazeera English (AJE) after removing identifying details. We then compared the results to a control group ($N = 99$) who viewed the videos untouched. Both the experiment and the control group rated AJE's material significantly lower on credibility and professionalism in comparison to the other networks' materials. Findings highlight the pervasive ethnocentrism of international news viewership and offer support for the "hostile media perception" theory.

Al-Jazeera English (AJE) broadcasts of the Arab Spring won major awards in the United States (including the Peabody and the Columbia Journalism awards) and praise from Hillary Clinton, who even told the US Congress that "viewership of Al-Jazeera is going up in the United States because it is real news" (Maher & Corcoran, 2011). A recent US-based study (Youmans & Brown, 2011) examined whether this "Al-Jazeera moment" was translated into viewers' openness towards the network. The researchers examined the perception of the same AJE-produced news material when viewers watched the material accompanied by either the CNN logo or the AJE logo. The viewers who viewed the video with the CNN logo ranked it more credible, leading the researchers to conclude "there remains substantial prejudice against AJE among segments of the American public." Building on these findings, we studied the extent to which viewing AJE news material devoid of any visible identifiers ("blind assessment") affects the perceived credibility of these materials. This methodology is borrowed from experiments in marketing studies, where scholars often eliminate brand-name features to understand the "branding effect" on product-purchase decision-making (Acebron & Dopico, 2000; Richardson, Dick, & Jain, 1994). In this study, this methodology is applied to examine whether viewing AJE material devoid of its conspicuous logo (a decorative representation of the network's name written using Arabic calligraphy) and other identifying brand elements affects perceptions of the items' credibility and professionalism, the two main conditions for audience trust of a news source (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; McGuire, 1985).

We designed an experiment in which we eliminated branding features from eight videos (one item produced by each network, for each of two news events) produced by AJE and its three main competitors in the international news market: CNN, Fox News, and the BBC. The source manipulation method included obliteration of all logos and subtitles using blocks of colors identified with each network, as well as meticulously selecting videos for analysis with voice-over narration to ensure that viewers were not affected by the studio, or by the anchors' appearance (which might convey information on the identity of the station). We then asked Jewish-Israeli students ($n = 112$) to rate the professionalism and credibility of the items. We compared the results to the ratings of a control group ($n = 99$) who watched the original videos untouched. For the sake of comparative analysis, we carefully selected two news events that reached the top of the global news agenda of the day and were therefore reported by all the networks on the same date. More importantly, we selected events where all the networks relied on similar footage, which originated from the same external news sources — Google Earth, archive photos and hotel security cameras — rather than footage obtained by one of the networks studied. The first event was the assassination of Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh in January 19, 2010 in a Dubai hotel (possibly by the Israeli national intelligence agency Mossad) where all the networks relied on the same hotel security camera footage. The second event was Hillary Clinton's warning of "Iran's mounting military power" on February 15, 2010 and Israel's Prime Minister's Netanyahu concurrent visit to Russia in an attempt to persuade the Russian authorities to join sanctions against Iran, which triggered discussions about Iran's uranium enrichment program by all the stations that day. All the networks relied heavily on similar images of Iran's nuclear facility from Google Earth and archive images of Iran's nuclear facilities. Both events had particular saliency for an Israeli audience.

The reason we selected Israeli subjects for our study is that Israel belongs to a group of Western countries whose relationship with AJE can be described as “skeptical”. Coverage of the AJE's launch by this group, which includes the US and Canada, used the most negative tone in comparison to all other regions in the world (King & Zayani, 2008). AJE also faced campaigns that questioned its credibility (in the US), restrictions on its broadcasting license (in Canada), and government restriction on its access to events (in Israel). Nonetheless, AJE is available on cable television in all these markets. Whereas AJE's relationship with its US and Canadian markets has been the subject of several studies (Meltzer, 2012; El-Nawawy & Powers, 2010; Samuel-Azran, 2010; Youmans & Brown, 2011; El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002), this is the first study to address Jewish-Israeli viewers' perceptions of AJE. We do not claim that Israel serves as a case study for all Western countries, as AJE was well-received by many European countries (i.e., UK and Scandinavian countries). Rather, Israel represents the group of Western countries that have demonstrated suspicion towards the station since its launch.

The study is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing debate on whether international news networks promote its viewers to develop a cross-cultural perspective. Whereas earlier studies found that CNN may convey a supra-national perspective of events to its viewers in the Balkan (Volkmer, 1999; Fluorney & Stewart, 1997) and thus contribute to cross-cultural sensitivity, the AJE November 2006 launch triggered a shift in research focus to the question of whether international networks originating in non-Western countries have a similar effect in inducing a cross-cultural perspective in their Western audiences. Thus, the study will contribute to our predictions of the success of AJE and its copycats, which have reversed the traditional unilateral flow of information from the West to the non-West (Thussu, 2007) and seek to convey a supra-national perspective of events to the average viewer in the West. Studies on this issue to date have produced partial and highly contradictory results. To illustrate, whereas El-Nawawy and Powers' (2010) empirical analysis found that AJE has the potential to function as a conciliatory agent among its loyal viewers in the US, Youmans and Brown's (2011) study in the same country found that AJE's logo heightens prejudice and reinforces stereotypes.

The study also aims to contribute to source credibility studies that examine the interplay between messages and their perceived credibility. One of the central debates in this field is whether predictors of credibility are more likely to be associated with the receiver or with the source. Whereas early studies indicate that a source's perceived professionalism and trustworthiness should be the focus of source credibility evaluations (Dholakia & Sternthal 1977, Harmon & Coney 1982; McGinnies & Ward, 1980), others assert that credibility perceptions are related to audience characteristics. Based on several audience studies, scholars (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001) found support for the “hostile media perception” theory, which posits that partisans from opposing sides of an issue are more likely to view media coverage as biased against their position regardless of the actual stance of media source. Obviously, this effect helps explain the findings of Youmans and Brown's (2011) study, which revealed a “logo effect” and bias against all AJE materials. The present study examined the role of blind assessment of news materials in reducing the “hostile media perception” effect.

Finally, findings of the present study have practical implications for decision-makers in the media industry. Before entering the US market, several AJE employees stated that the organization considered using a new name in the US market to increase its chances of success (Samuel-Azran, 2010). For media decision-makers contemplating entry into Western markets, the findings of the present study may shed light on potential sources of antagonism that may undermine market penetration efforts.

International News: Cross-Cultural Perspective or Ethnocentrism?

The advent of transnational news networks, and most notably CNN's cross-border broadcasting of the 1991 Gulf War to a “global audience,” triggered a debate on the influence of transnational connectivity on the national “public sphere” in receiving countries. Building on Castells' (1996) famous “global network society” theory, which argues that global information networks yield new social structures, communication scholars have argued that the national public sphere consequently expands to assume a supra-national perspective and, as a result, international networks in crisis regions (e.g., Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey) can illuminate the perspective of the opposing culture/nation to viewers on both sides of the conflict (e.g., Fluorney & Stewart, 1997; Volkmer, 1999).

In contrast, critics of the “global public sphere” theory (e.g., Schlesinger, 1999; Sparks, 1998) emphasize the continued importance of the local arena perspective in the reception of international network materials, recalling that global networks are often forced to localize content in various regions (e.g., MTV Asia, CNN

Europe, etc.). Domestication arguments also extend also to the manner in which local producers edit news from international news agencies to align with local agendas (Cohen, Gurevitch, Levy, & Roeh, 1996). Furthermore, a study of the reception of international news by audiences in seven countries found that foreign news reception depends on national and cultural aspects such as the audience's perception of the status of their own nation in the world (Jensen, 1998).

The debate over the existence of a "global public sphere" re-emerged in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 and the rise of Al-Jazeera as global provider of exclusive images from the battlefronts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Volkmer (2002) argued that Al-Jazeera manages to communicate a cross-cultural perspective to Western audiences. This was supported by findings of a post-9/11 study by Michalsky, Preston, Gillespie, and Cheesman (2001), which found that British-Muslims who watched contradicting reports of events on Al-Jazeera, CNN, and BBC subsequently "made up their own version of the story". Furthermore, Azran (2006) found that left-wing bloggers often imported stories from Al-Jazeera to compensate for what they saw as biased coverage of the Iraq war by Fox and CNN. Similarly, Johnson and Fahmy's (2009) study revealed that Westerners who visited Al-Jazeera's English website were more likely to perceive it as being a credible if they had previously visited an Arab nation. These studies, however, provide anecdotal evidence of Al-Jazeera's reception in specific sectors that proactively seek Al-Jazeera's broadcasts due to political or ethnic considerations, whereas Al-Jazeera aims to gain credibility in the general population. Thus, to examine reception in Western markets, studies should aim at other, wider, target populations. Accordingly, this study examines AJE's reception in a convenience sample of secular Jewish-Israeli students whose makeup is more representative of the general population in Israel and could thus shed better light on the chances for AJE broadcasts to gain success across the general population.

Source credibility

Early studies of source credibility were prompted by the successful propaganda campaigns of the Second World War. These studies paid special attention to source features. Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) found that that the two main factors that influence perceived source credibility were expertise and trustworthiness. These results was supported by studies that found that perceived source expertise, including knowledge, education, intelligence, social status, and professional achievement (McGuire, 1985; Hass, 1981), and perceived source motivation tell the truth about a topic (Dholakia & Sternthal 1977; Harmon & Coney 1982; McGinnies & Ward, 1980) were highly important in evaluations of source credibility. Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1969) identified additional factors that influence source credibility, including the speaker's dynamic delivery, composure, and affability. More recent studies focus on the impact of the medium (i.e., internet versus television) through which the message is transmitted (Cheong-Yi, 2006; Flanagan & Metzger, 2000; Greer, 2003; Sundar, 1998).

However, several studies found that variables predicting credibility are more likely to be associated with the receiver rather than with the source. Gunther (1992; see also Salmon, 1986; Sherif & Hovland, 1961) found that a respondent's own group identification — whether religious, national, or political — proved to be the strongest predictor of her perceptions of media credibility. Similar studies found that other demographic variables such as age, education, and gender mediated perceived channel credibility (Abel & Wirth 1977; Gunther, 1992; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Westley & Severin, 1964). Other strong predictors supported by numerous studies include political involvement (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 2004) and issue involvement, such as support or opposition to a war (Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006). Such evidence supports the "hostile media perception" theory, which posits that individuals with high issue-involvement or those belong to a specific group will typically view media coverage of their group or issue as biased against their position or group (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). This explains why the same news item, may be simultaneously perceived by two opposing groups as biased.

One of the predictors of media credibility that has been frequently reported in the last three decades of research, which this study aims to examine in particular, is the correlation between elevated consumption of a specific media source and a high level of trust in that source. Rimmer and Weaver (1987) found that individuals who typically watch television two or more hours a day are more likely to rate the credibility of TV news high than individuals who watch less than two hours of television a day. In a study analyzing perceived media credibility among US residents, Kioussis (2001) found that those who consume newspapers or television more often are those who rate the credibility or believability of these media higher. These findings extend to internet consumption: Greer (2003) found that Internet reliance proved to be the sole

predictor of online news story credibility. Other studies found that reliance on blogs has emerged as the strongest predictor of blog credibility (Banning & Trammell, 2006; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Kim, 2006). More recently, Jakob (2010) found TV consumption significantly related to trust in the media, and heavy viewers were more likely to trust the media. In line with the key role of the interplay between news consumption and perceived source credibility, the present study specifically focuses on the interplay between news consumption levels and perceived news credibility.

AJE: Reception, credibility and motivations

AJE was launched first as a website (<http://english.aljazeera.net>) on February 16, 2003, the eve of the war in Iraq, to provide news about the war to English speakers, from a “non-Anglo-American” perspective. In November 2006, AJE’s 24-7 television channel was launched and became a great success. According to AJE’s website, whereas the declared target was to reach 40 million viewers upon its launch, it reached 80 million viewers on its launch date, including viewers in major European countries. Currently, AJE television channel is available to over 130 million viewers in over 100 countries.

However, since its launch the channel has faced strong resistance in North America and Israel. King and Zayani’s (2008) examination of the global press coverage of AJE’s launch revealed that the tone of the coverage was most negative in North America and Israel. Moreover, major US cable and satellite providers refused to carry AJE at the time, and providers that carried AJE in several cities faced local opposition and threats, mostly from conservative and Republican groups (Samuel-Azran, 2010). Currently, the channel’s major distribution deals are in the New York area (where it is available to 2 million homes through Time Warner Cable since August 2011, its greatest success so far), Washington DC, and two regions in Vermont and Ohio, far from its original target of signing nation-wide distribution deals with major cable and satellite providers such as Comcast.

In Canada, although AJE encountered opposition from local Jewish organizations concerned that the channel would broadcast anti-Semitic content, it was eventually launched in 2010 after the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) approved a request by Ethnic Channels Group Ltd. to carry the channel. In Israel, AJE can be viewed on YES, the smaller of Israel’s two cable providers, which has close to 500,000 subscribers. Interestingly, AJE is positioned within the group of this cable provider’s international news channels (CNN, BBC, SKY, and Franc24) and not within the group of Arab channels, thus AJE broadcasts are also likely to be viewed unintentionally by Israeli viewers who zap through the international channels. However, in 2008, the Israeli government restricted Al-Jazeera’s access to battle zones and press conferences due to the channel’s involvement in a series of what were considered anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli incidents, including broadcast of a caricature that appeared on the channel’s website depicting Israel’s former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert as Hitler, and its broadcast of telethons throughout the Second Intifada on behalf of what Al-Jazeera Arabic termed “martyrs” who committed deadly attacks against Israeli targets. Israel also accused AJE of one-sided coverage of the 2009 Israeli military operation in Gaza (Cast Lead).

AJE invested and continues to invest heavily in these markets to gain credibility. Several months before its 2006 launch, Al-Jazeera published a Code of Ethics that pronounced the channel’s commitment to Western norms of journalism (<http://www.aljazeera.com/aboutus/2006/11/2008525185733692771.html>). To gain credibility in the eyes of Israelis, AJE regularly interviews Israeli politicians during diplomatic incidents involving Israeli-Arab affairs. During Operation Cast Lead, it interviewed Israeli Foreign Minister Zipi Livni as well as other senior Israeli officials despite Arab protests that Muslim leaders are not accorded similar treatment on Israeli television. To gain credibility in the eyes of US and Canadian viewers, AJE executives established one of its four main global news centers in Washington DC, and recruited senior staff such as Sir David Frost (BBC), Dave Marash (ABC) and Riz Khan (CNN and BBC), who already gained credibility based on their work in major Western networks. AJE’s executives also recruited a major Manhattan-based public relations firm that ran a high-profile “Demand Al-Jazeera” campaign (<http://www.aljazeera.com/demandaljazeera>), to persuade potential viewers in North America to “give the network a fair chance” by viewing its broadcasts once without bias.

AJE also worked hard to distinguish itself from Al-Jazeera’s Arabic-language operations in light of the latter’s problematic reputation in the West. Scholars who compared the English and Arabic Al-Jazeera websites broadly concur that the websites generate distinct outputs and reflect distinct broadcasting norms, and, more specifically, AJE tends to provide a more balanced version of political events. HaLevi (2007) found that Al-Jazeera Arabic is much more aggressive in its reporting of US affairs than the “sanitized”

English version. Similarly, Youssef (2009) found that, throughout the war in Iraq, the Al-Jazeera Arabic website disseminated propaganda-like reports of Iraqi civilian casualties, whereas AJE presented a more balanced version of the same events. Kraidy (2008), who analyzed the political economy of Al-Jazeera's Arabic and English websites, attributed the differences in the outputs of the Arabic and English versions to AJE's ambition to comply with the more critical standards of Western viewers.

Hypotheses

Our hypotheses are based on several comparative empirical studies establish that AJE actually adheres to similar journalistic norms in comparison to the main Western news networks (Loomis, 2009; Melles & Muller, 2012), and on Youmans and Brown's (2011) study that revealed bias against AJE material when viewers were exposed to the AJE logo. The hypotheses are:

H1: Viewers who watched the redacted videos will award higher credibility ratings to Al-Jazeera's videos in comparison to the credibility ratings awarded by the control group.

H2: Viewers who watched the redacted videos will award higher professionalism ratings to Al-Jazeera's videos in comparison to the ratings awarded by the control group.

Methodology

Materials and Procedure

For our analysis, we used a convenience sample of 211 students of a private college in the center of Israel: 137 women (64.9%) and 74 men (35.1%), whose ages ranged from 18 to 49 (Mean = 26). The experiment was conducted in December 2011. Participants agreed to participate in the study in return for 5 bonus points on their final course grade. All the participants were secular Jewish-Israelis. Participants were told only that the experiment "is about news". The study was conducted in a lab containing 20 computer stations separated by partitions. Participants were seated at the stations and listened to the videos' audio using headphones. In the first stage of the experiment, participants completed a preliminary questionnaire comprising several sections. The first section contained demographic information, such as gender, religious affiliation, country of birth, etc. To examine preliminary views about international news networks, we asked participants to complete a questionnaire comprising 48 items on the perceived credibility and professionalism of various channels (12 identical items regarding each of four channels; Six items addressed perceived professionalism and six items addressed perceived credibility). The questionnaire was adapted from Gaziano and McGrath's (1986) credibility scale. Participants expressed their agreement with each item on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included "CNN/AJE/BBC/Fox News is accurate in its reports.", "CNN/AJE/BBC/Fox News separates between facts and rumors.", "CNN/AJE/BBC/Fox News can be trusted.", and "CNN/AJE/BBC/Fox News is a fair news producer." Internal consistency of the items concerning credibility was BBC (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$), CNN (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$), Fox News (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) and Al-Jazeera (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$). Internal consistency of the items concerning professionalism was: BBC (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$), CNN (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$), Fox News (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$) and Al-Jazeera (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).

In the third section of the preliminary questionnaire, participants completed general background questions about their perceptions of international news networks' perspective versus the position of Israeli authorities' perspective (sample item: "Suppose international media reported that the IDF killed a Palestinian in the West Bank but the IDF Spokesperson denied the incident. Who would you believe?"). Participants also answered questions regarding their beliefs concerning news values (sample item: "Is it important to you that networks present both sides of a story?").

After completing the preliminary questionnaire, participants were divided randomly into two groups. The first group, 112 participants, viewed news stories in which the network logo and other branding features were redacted from the videos, and therefore participants were unaware of the identity of the news company. The second group, comprising 99 participants, viewed the original, untouched videos. All participants viewed a total of eight TV reports, two reports produced by each of four news networks (BBC, CNN, Fox News and Al Jazeera) on two topics: the Al-Mabhouh incident in Dubai and the Iranian nuclear enrichment program. All four networks reporting on the assassination of Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh relied on the same hotel security-camera footage. On the issue of the Iranian uranium enrichment facility, all the networks relied

heavily on similar images of Iran's nuclear facility from Google Earth and archive images of Iran's nuclear facilities.

After viewing the videos, participants rated the credibility and professionalism of each video on a scale of 1 (*not credible/professional*) to 5 (*very credible/professional*). Finally, after results were analyzed, follow-up interviews were conducted with 67 of the participants who viewed redacted videos, to gain a better understanding of the emerging response patterns.

Results

To examine preliminary attitudes toward the credibility and professionalism of each of news networks (Figure 1), we conducted a one-way analysis of variance with repeated measures (ANOVA) on BBC, CNN, Fox News and Al- Jazeera, ($F(3, 207) = 24.68, p < .001$). Post-hoc (Bonferroni) tests revealed that participants rated the credibility of CNN ($t(208) = 7.19, p < .001$), BBC ($t(208) = 6.22, p < .001$) and Fox News ($t(208) = 6.83, p < .001$) significantly higher than Al-Jazeera's credibility ($M = 2.88$).

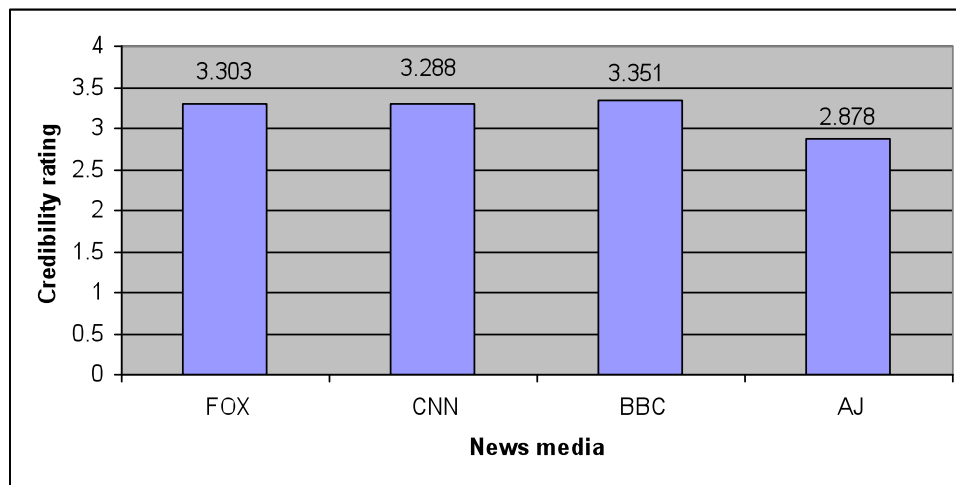


Figure 1. Perceived credibility ratings of news companies.

Participants responded to two background questions designed to elicit their position on reporting by international media organizations versus Israeli authorities. The first question was "Suppose international media reported that the IDF killed a Palestinian in the West Bank but the IDF Spokesperson denied the incident. Who would you believe?" Findings indicated that 55.9% of the sample reported that they would believe the IDF Spokesperson, 17.5% would believe the international media, 12.8% said they wouldn't believe either, and 14.8% did not know. The second question was, "Overall, which in your opinion is more credible: the Israeli media or the international media (e.g., CNN, BBC, The New York Times)? 42.2% of the participants responded that Israeli and international media are equally credible, 35.2% stated that Israeli media are more credible, 17.6% stated that the international media are more credible, and 4% did not know.

Next, in order to examine our hypotheses, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance with repeated measures (ANOVA), with news network (BBC, CNN, Fox News, and Al- Jazeera) as the first independent variable, and redacted or untouched videos as the second independent variable. Our dependent variables were news report credibility and professionalism (see Tables 1a, 1b). A significant main effect was obtained for news network credibility ($F_{(3, 203)} = 29.821, p < .001$) and a significant main effect for news network professionalism ($F_{(3, 203)} = 227.255, p < .001$) (see Figure 2). Post-hoc tests (Bonferroni) for the main effect showed that Fox news is perceived as more credible than BBC ($t = 3.21, p < .01$), and Al-Jazeera ($t = 7.97, p < .01$). Al- Jazeera is also perceived as less professional than BBC ($t = -4.82, p < .001$) and CNN ($t = -5.56, p < .001$). Thus, H1 and H2 were refuted.

Network	<u>Total</u>			<u>Untouched</u> (N = 99)		<u>Redacted</u> (N = 112)	
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
FOX	3.91	0.67	208	3.93	0.66	3.89	0.69
BBC	2.67	0.63	208	2.75	0.62	2.59	0.63
CNN	2.75	0.74	208	2.86	0.71	2.66	0.76
AJ	2.41	0.71	208	2.43	0.72	2.39	0.70

Table 1a
Network Credibility and Professionalism Ratings by Brand Identification on Videos

Network	<u>Total</u>			<u>Untouched</u> (N = 99)		<u>Redacted</u> (N = 112)	
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
FOX	3.76	0.67	211	3.71	0.70	3.80	0.63
BBC	3.72	0.66	211	3.74	0.63	3.71	0.69
CNN	3.80	0.71	211	3.85	0.74	3.75	0.69
AJ	3.29	0.77	211	3.36	0.77	3.23	0.77

Table 1b
International Network Credibility, by Brand Identification on Videos

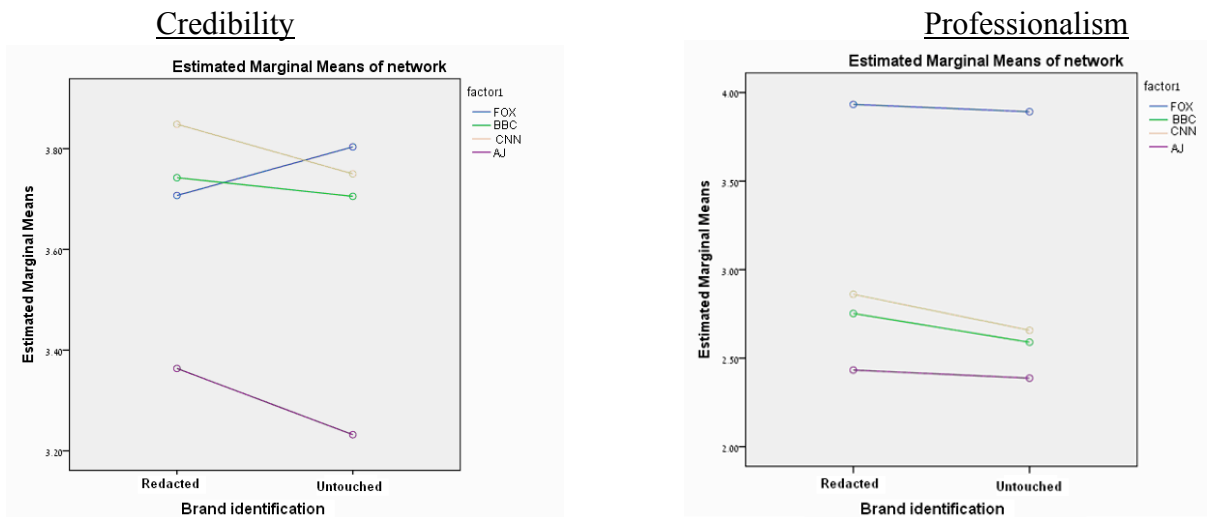


Figure 2. Two-way analysis of variance for repeated measures (ANOVA) with news network as the first independent variable, brand identification (redacted/untouched) as the second

Next, we conducted a three-way analysis of variance with repeated measures (ANOVA), with news network credibility and professionalism as within-subject factors, and group manipulation and news viewing intensity (“heavy viewers” were defined as participants who watch the news more than an hour per day; “light viewers” were defined as participants who watch the news less than hour per day) as between-subject factors. Although no significant effects for professionalism were obtained, a significant main effect for network credibility ($F(3, 195) = 25.44, p < .001$), a significant two-way interaction effect for group and network ($F(3, 195) = 3.08, p < .05$), and a three-way interaction effect ($F(3, 195) = 4.29, p < .01$) were obtained.

Next, we conducted post-hoc analysis (Bonferroni) to reveal the pattern of the results. We found that, among the heavy viewers, Al-Jazeera was rated as less credible than BBC ($t(195) = -7.15, p < .001$), CNN ($t(195) = -6.68, p < .001$) and Fox News ($t(195) = -7.09, p < .001$). As for the three-way interaction effect, we found that heavy viewers and light viewers differed in credibility ratings of the networks, but only for Al-Jazeera. While heavy viewers rated untouched Al-Jazeera materials as less credible ($t(195) = 2.07, p < .05$), light viewers showed the opposite pattern ($t(195) = 2.05, p < .05$) (Figure 3).

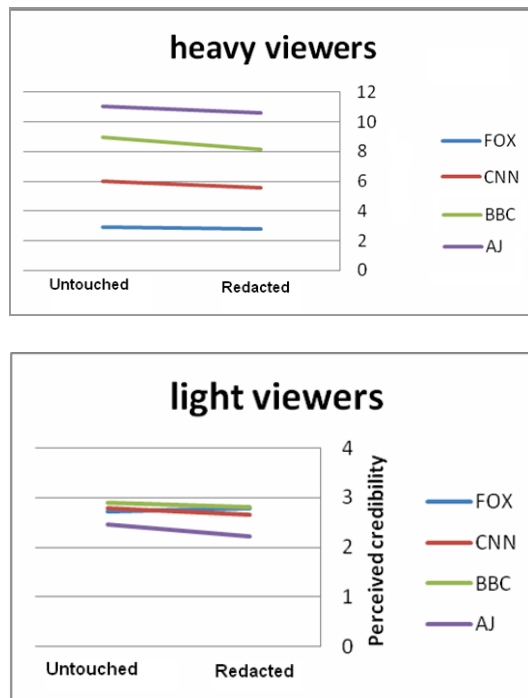


Figure 3. Perceived credibility of international networks, by news consumption

Following these results, we conducted follow-up interviews with 67 of the participants who viewed redacted videos. Specifically, we were interested in whether participants' credibility and professionalism ratings were based on content, presentation, or other factors. The majority of respondents (73.1%, 49 of the 67 respondents) provided similar explanations for their ratings. They stated that the main reason they awarded a lower credibility rating to the first video was the narrator's pronunciation of the Arab names, Al-Mabhouh and Hamas, with an Arab accent, which they thought indicated that he was from an Arab background. They stated that this was a strong indication for them that the video was less credible. A similar explanation was given for credibility ratings of the Iran nuclear enrichment video: interviewees were confident that the narrator's pronunciation of Arab terms, such as the locations of Iran's nuclear facilities or the name of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was a strong indicator of the item's (Arab) source.

Eitan: When I saw the videos I thought that I could identify an Arab accent when he pronounced Al-Mabhouh and Hamas...I do not trust Arab media at all, they always spin events against Israel and spread propaganda...

Other interviewees who awarded a low credibility rating to AJE videos ($n = 16$) mentioned reasons such as “sensationalism”, “gut feeling”, and “bias against Israel in content and presentation” as the main reasons for their low credibility.

When we further asked these interviewees whether they distinguish between Al-Jazeera Arabic and Al-Jazeera English, the majority stated that they were both the same organization, with the sole difference that “Al-Jazeera Arabic spread propaganda against Israel in Arabic, and Al-Jazeera English does it out to the rest of the world in English ...”.

Of the 67 interviewees, 29 heavy viewers reported that their news consumption was based mainly on Israeli channels and did not include Al-Jazeera. When viewing international news, this group typically preferred the Fox News channel, which they believe offers the fairest representation of Israeli affairs.

Discussion and Conclusion

Following a recent finding that segments of the US public are prejudiced against AJE (Youmans & Brown, 2011), we examined whether blind assessments of AJE material affect the perceived credibility and professionalism of its news items. Against our hypotheses, both the experimentees and the control group awarded lower credibility and professionalism ratings to AJE videos compared to the videos of the remaining networks. Source identification had no effect on the perceived credibility of the Al-Jazeera videos.

Professionalism of AJE materials was rated similarly by both groups, and lower than the other networks. Fox News Channel's material was rated dramatically higher on professionalism than the other networks. Many of the interviewees in the follow-up interviews stated that the pronunciation of Arab words (such as Hamas and Al-Mabhouh) on AJE – perhaps the only identifying evidence that remained in the experiment (which obviously we could not eliminate) – exposed the source's connection to the Arab world, which was an indicator of lower credibility and professionalism for the interviewees. The interviewees stated openly that Arab news sources were dramatically less credible and professional. Heavy news viewers stated that their knowledge of the news world actually made them less tolerant towards AJE's materials.

The findings contradict global communication theories such as the “global public sphere” (Volkmer, 1999) and “global civil society” (Castells, 1996) arguments, which attribute to global networks an overpowering impact on local discourse. Rather, in line with Jensen (1998), these findings indicate that ethnocentrism still plays a major role in international news viewing decisions, especially in the case of what viewers perceive as “foreign” or “hostile” media. While the arguments regarding the “global public sphere” were based on an examination of CNN's reception in conflict-zones in the Balkans (Volkmer 1999), the findings of the current study demonstrate that the reverse effect takes place with regard to the reception of Arab-source international news in “skeptical” markets, where such materials are received with ethnocentric bias. More to the point, the current study illustrates that prejudice against AJE does not depend on specific content but constitutes a more pervasive perception that Arab-produced material is biased.

The main significance of the current study is in illuminating that bias of segments of the Israeli population against AJE stems from a bias against all Arab-produced news. This study indicates that changing branding elements such as the AJE Arabic logo or even the channel's name in those markets are unlikely to change viewers' perceptions of the channel's credibility as long as they can identify the source as Arab based on pronunciation. The findings thus support Jensen's (1998) findings that nationality and religion are highly important factors in the reception of international media news items. This argument is strengthened further when we consider that the Israeli participants in the current study believed that the Fox News channel, which former studies identified as pro-Israel (Orgad, 2009), was significantly more professional than all the other channels.

Combined with Youmans and Brown's (2011) results, it is safe to conclude that Al-Jazeera's “moment” of glory” in the West in the wake of the Arab Spring is unlikely to promote greater openness to its representation of events. The findings of the present study identify the boundaries of the Al-Jazeera effect in the West and indicate that its circles of influence and credibility are limited to specific population sectors, including immigrants from Arab countries (Michalsky et al., 2001), alternative media (Samuel-Azran, 2006), towns with a highly progressive agenda (Samuel-Azran, 2010), as well as other loyal viewers (Powers & El-Nawawy, 2009), while large segments of the population remain prejudiced against AJE.

What are possible explanations for Israeli viewers' bias against all Arab media? Beyond the Israeli-Arab conflict, which naturally generates suspicion amongst Israelis towards news representing the other side's perspective, we suggest that the bias against Arab-produced news may be rooted in a long-held conception that Arab media is, by definition, not credible. This notion evolved during the 1967 Six Day War, when Arab

radio gave false reports of Arab victory, despite Israel having crushed the Egyptian army. When Arabs became aware of the falsity of these reports, riots broke in Algiers and Tunis, and the Egyptian cultural center was set on fire (Oren, 2002) and many Arabs began to watch Western stations such as BBC and CNN since they did not believe their own media. As a result, Arab media developed a reputation, even in the eyes of many Arabs, of media used by authoritarian Arab rulers as an instrument of propaganda (Ayish, 2002). For some, the 1996 advent of Al-Jazeera Arabic and other semi-free networks such as the Abu Dhabi channel marked the beginning of free Arab media. However, the current study indicates that segments of Jewish-Israeli society continue to consider Arab media to be unreliable.

Findings of the present study suggest that we should consider of AJE's reception in the context of the "hostile media perception" effect – the theory that people with strong biases toward an issue (partisans) perceive media coverage as biased against their opinions, regardless of the reality (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). This proposal is consistent with findings that showed that when people have prior beliefs that a type of media is biased against their group they will not even bother reading its content before presuming it is not credible (D'Alessio, 2003; Giner-Sorola & Chaiken, 1994). Thus, for source credibility studies, these findings strongly support the highly important role attributed to group identification and allegiance in the evaluations of source credibility (Golan & Day, 2010; Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

Furthermore, the findings of the present study support the idea that high-level conflicts are likely to result in strongly biased credibility evaluations (Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2007). Studies conducted on groups with low and moderate levels of conflict in areas such as sports (Arpan & Raney, 2003) and elections (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998) found no correlation between group identification and perceived bias, possibly because these conflicts do not generate high levels of threat. In contrast, studies of high-level conflicts (interethnic and inter-faith warfare) have found strong correlations between group identification and perceived bias (Matheson & Dursun, 2001). The findings of the current study strengthen the notion that inter-ethnic and inter-faith conflicts — such as the Arab-Israeli conflict — promote a strong bias against sources that reports the news from the rival's perspective.

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