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❖ In conversation with Dr. Adel Iskandar

Dr. Iskandar is one of the most authoritative academic voices on Arab media. He is the co-author with Mohammed El-Nawawy of AL-JAZEERA: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East (Westview Press). Dr. Iskandar is a visiting scholar at the Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University in Washington. He spoke to Global Media Journal book editor, Dr. Antonio Castillo.

Castillo: AL-JAZEERA: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East is a seminal study of Al Jazeera and began a whole genre in the academic and non-academic world. In the last few years Al Jazeera has been watched, studied and written about.

Iskandar: *When the book came out, it was the only information available about Al Jazeera. Even in the process of compiling resources and seeking out information about the network, it was still in its formative and embryonic period. As the earliest study on the network and one to be published in the climate of the 9/11 attacks, we had to deal with the burden of getting things right from the outset, and being able to give a reasoned forecast about the future of Arab media. These were both delicate matters during a highly galvanized political environment. Up to that point, the first people in the West, or non-Arabic speakers to be precise, who took note of Al-Jazeera and the ripples it was making in the Arab world, were journalists and reporters who came into direct contact with the station. Many journalists around the world began asking questions: who are these guys? They were colleagues who were doing things differently. So early exposés about the station grew out of media practitioners' curiosity rather than scholarly research. It was within this context that we began working on the book as an attempt to document this intriguing newborn in the international communication environment. Today we have a plethora of books and as my friend and colleague Marwan Kraidy says, it has become an industry in itself. Ten years after the launch of the station, there are more book-length volumes about Al Jazeera than all other news organisations in the world combined. Furthermore, it has produced an endless number of articles in the scholarly literature and popular media. Such is the influence of the network, its ambitions, and its galvanizing effect.*

Castillo: Is it the case Al Jazeera broke a sort of international media hegemony?

Iskandar: *To a certain extent definitely, at least in terms of international journalism: Al Jazeera broke the hegemonic nature of international journalism. This has been one of the roles of Al Jazeera from its conception. The major problem has been within international journalism that has become hegemonic at a variety of levels. At one level is occupational hegemony. This is hegemony of professionalisation where it became more about the procedural aspect of journalism rather than content. Occupational responsibilities trump responsible occupationalism. It is also noteworthy that the station became the first major international news broadcaster from the Arab world or the global south/east to assert its presence in the global media marketplace. Obviously, such a question requires a close analysis of what hegemony means in the international media sphere, whether we are speaking about neoliberal economic media policy ad institutions that uphold it or discursive hegemony, or political hegemony etc. There is much in common between these, especially in purpose. In some instances, Al-Jazeera amounts to a counter-hegemonic medium and in other conditions it is quite mainstream."*

Castillo: Al Jazeera was indeed a turning point in the transformation of international journalism in the Arabic world.

Iskandar: *Yes, it revolutionised news broadcasting in that region particularly in the context of journalism. Prior to the mid-1990s which heralded the rise of satellite broadcasting, most televised news in the region was very bland, very mundane and deeply hierarchical. The state sponsored, funded, and delivered information via news and through ministries of information. This system ensured stringent censorship regulations. This forced Arab audiences to become increasingly reliant on and trusting of foreign broadcasters than the regional or international.*

Castillo: It seems until then the Arab public was almost exclusively reliant on news organisations such as Voice of America, Radio Montecarlo and the BBC World.

Iskandar: *I have a personal experience during the first Gulf War. While under Iraqi military occupation in Kuwait, then-phenome CNN was unavailable domestically. The only news not provided by the Iraqi government was available via radio from BBC World service Arabic, and Radio Montecarlo and Voice of America. It was an entire era that depended on foreign broadcasting. The Arab state media offered meaningless, official government rhetoric. The news constituted little more than press releases from the ministries of information.*

Castillo: It easy to see this. For example the first 15 minutes of the Arabic television news broadcast on SBS at 11.30am is just about the official ceremonial activities done by the government.

Iskandar: *Exactly, it is about what the president or the monarch had done that day. It was preposterous and the most of the audience were aware of this. I am using the past tense here, although these newscasts are still ubiquitous in the region since not all ministries of information have been abolished and the state runs national media. However, the past tense is justified because the broadcasts are now perceived as relics of the past as are the regimes that run them. This is a result of growing disenchantment on the part of Arab audiences and a rift developed between viewers and broadcasters. In this milieu, enter Al-Jazeera. While not the first satellite station in the region, Al-Jazeera became a major wedge in the relationship between national broadcasters and the public because the station recognised, acknowledged and communicated to rather than at the public. Prior to that, one could argue that a mediated public in much of the Arab world didn't exist. Prior to Al Jazeera, the objective of the national media was to demobilise the public. With Al Jazeera, all of the sudden, you have a unique circumstance whereby the broadcaster is taking cues from the public about what should be covered. So, they go to the street of Cairo, Beirut, Bagdad and try to gauge pulse of this public and based on that begin to address issues of public interest. For Al-Jazeera, that constitutes a good story.*

Castillo: This is a complete reverse of the traditional top-down approach, is that right?

Iskandar: *Al Jazeera was listening to the public. More than their predecessors. They intentionally started targeting the basic orthodoxies within the region. This meant that Al Jazeera began questioning, for example, the notion of monarchy and began looking at cases of corruption and refusing to take interviews of Arab heads of states. It started uncovering the most pressing issues and most egregious state violations. Even more importantly, Al Jazeera's journalists tried to find opposition parties and leaders in places where some didn't exist or have been completely ostracised: many of them were in exile or underground. What it did was to reveal an important part of the Arab social landscape ... political opposition. But it is indeed a top-down approach because its driven by constitute audience needs might be. By attempting to get at the grassroots underlying dimensions of a story, Al-Jazeera's attentiveness to public interest meant that the station was perceived as an opposition party in itself. But one must not rush to judge and describe the network as an expression of participatory communication. There are too many cogent critiques of the network's operations that suggest otherwise. Nonetheless, I have described the ambivalent space in which Al-Jazeera finds itself as a modality of "mainstreamed alterity."*

Castillo: It seems Al Jazeera is a unique network in every considerable way.

Iskandar: *It is not only unique in terms of news coverage, news selection, the kind of people that interview, but also the formatting. Televised political debate didn't exist in that particular form. Before Al Jazeera, there were talk shows with guests who often agreed. On Al-Jazeera, contrarian opinions and brinksmanship are the bedrock of the station. In fact, Al-Jazeera institutionalised in Arab television the abrasive, volatile and provocative talk shows. This is the case of the very popular talk show called 'Opposite Direction.' The show juxtaposes two individuals who completely disagree in every conceivable way. It is a very lengthy program, with only minor commercial interruption. It is theatrical. But, when it comes down to political discourse it is not theatrics, because we are talking about things that affect people's lives. They are truly substantive and*

meaningful issues that have relevance to the public. The role of the moderator is to not simply facilitate, but to prod and agitate the guests. Some time ago, two Iraqis guests were invited, one Sunni and the other one Shia's which turned into a spectacle in gladiator-style debate antics. The fierce discussion, including profanities, was broadcasted live and uncensored around the world. This format, while adopted from similar Western shows such as CNN's Crossfire, is unique in its own right and its political and intellectual capacity. While some argue such programs are little more than political sensationalism and do not foster middle-of-the-way constructive dialogue that produces consensus and solutions, these shows remain the most popular on Arab news television and have spawned both imitators and spoofs alike.

Castillo: The motto of Al-Jazeera is the "opinion and the other opinion" and just occasionally the network refers to the concept of objectivity. Can you explain this?

Iskandar: *At the difference of the USA journalism, objectivity has no real roots in Arabic journalism per se. There is no true transliteration of the word objectivity in the Arabic language. Instead the term is translated literally to the word "mawdoo'yah" which a contrived term. That doesn't mean the idea itself has no roots in Arabic literary or cultural circles. In fact, Arab scientific endeavour have long expressed ideas of factuality and truth but this rarely crossed over into the realm of media. Because of this uneasiness with the idea, it seems a new conceptual approach emerged in the region. This is what I refer to as 'contextual objectivity'. There is an inherent contradiction between the standards of journalism practice, the way it is conceptualised and how audiences judge what they deem to be appropriate or desirable. Audiences are not meant to be objective. They are by definition subjective. And they make up their minds based on that subjectivity – if they engage with something that they disagree with and they do it solely to combat it or to create a space of disagreement. And within that we start seeing the formula of contextual objectivity taking shape. It is an expression of that struggle and it happens everywhere; in every news organisation there is a constant desire to articulate what the audience might perceive and what it is that you want to deliver to them in a meaningful and conceivable way. Since journalists are responsible to the public to begin with; they try to gauge what the audience wants. This poses a problem in the sense that journalists are not audience researchers. They don't want to run focus groups, look at opinion polls to figure out how people feel. What they want to do is to deliver a story that the audience will perceive as vital and of public interest. This is the reason that the public is constantly being re-imaged in the eyes of the journalist. In some way it is justified. So, every news organisation regardless of the political leaning can turn to the public to justify what is news. For example in Fox news channel, many of their employees believe wholeheartedly that they are working in the public good. So while objectivity is held in high regard among most journalists, there is much scepticism about its meaning and currency in today's global news environment. With contextual objectivity, Al-Jazeera has inadvertently and perhaps even accidentally stumbled upon an approach that gratifies both its organizational "ethical" responsibilities and its commitment to audience subjectivity.*

Castillo: Now, all news organisations are intrinsically – whether by design or default – part of the process of determining what constitutes national identity and this is precisely the origin of national broadcasters. Is this the case of Al Jazeera?

Iskandar: *Up until recently, the notion of national broadcasting has been dominated by national identity discourses and the Arab world is not an exception to that. Arab identity is very unique because it is diffuse. Even Arabs have a hard time in comprehending what constitutes and comprises 'Arabness'. The idea of identity and media has been around since the 1950s and 1960s. And obviously the work of Benedict Anderson is noteworthy here. Much of his observations about linguistic and vernacular patterns are consistent with the development of broadcasting and mass media in the region. Incidentally, one of the prime contributors of Arab nationalism, which in some respects defied state nationalism, was a transnational radio broadcaster called Voice of the Arabs whose sole objective was to produce a sense of Pan-Arab identification. As an outfit of the Egyptian post-revolutionary state in the 1950s and 60s, Voice of the Arabs was serving the political motive of spreading anti-imperial sentiment throughout the region and inviting publics from Morocco to Yemen to embrace pan-Arabism. Today, some argue, we have another Voice of the Arabs in Al-Jazeera. This time a hybrid state-public-private network who again, (whether is doing by intention or consequence) [are] producing and reproducing a sense of pan-Arab national identity. Interestingly, most media organizations attempt to 'walk the walk' as well as 'talk the talk'. In Al-Jazeera's case, to be an Arab enterprise, the station must reflect its audience's demographic. So Al-Jazeera's staff are Christians, Muslims, Sunni, Shia's and within that nationalities – at least 15 different Arab nationalities represented from technical staff, editorial to reporters to managers. And then you have political affiliation. Their employees are Marxists, capitalists,*

entrepreneurs, Trotskyist, Islamists of various denominations etc. This diversity creates ferment inside the organisation. The same pattern occurred with the launch of Al-Jazeera English satellite channel. While trying to reach a global audience, their staff hail from every part of the world and the station manager has encouraged assigning reporters (sic) to field stories from their places of origin. This nativist approach to news coverage and the image of a diverse media endeavour serve to either negate individuated nationalisms or promote other forms of transnationalisms, of which pan-Arabism is one. "

Castillo: How does it work after Al Jazeera began broadcasting in English language?

Iskandar: *When Al-Jazeera developed and executed their English service, there was a process of 'repacking identity.' So here we have an Arab satellite company broadcasting in English, with transmission centres in Kuala Lumpur, London, Washington, DC and with a headquarters in Doha, Qatar. Rather, the majority of the staff as I said, are not Arabs. However, the stations' managers [must] be able to both establish a connection and distance between the two language services. This connection they argue, is enshrined in their special news formula. These can be condensed into several branded principles; critical coverage from a variety of perspectives, fearless journalism, conflict coverage that tells a complete, whole story, speaking truth to power, extensive coverage, and offering engaging television. Despite the generalizability of these principles, the station's sole challenge will be to situate, understand, and communicate effectively with a vast global audience and communicate a convincing case for a global public good. Early indications seem to show a degree of success in accomplishing this. With limited audiences in the US due to a blackout of the station from cable packages, the network must rely on an English-speaking audience east of the Atlantic. The network must also contend with every English language satellite news station in the business, from BBC, to CNN, to France24, Deutsche Welle etc. Although disadvantaged due to staunch competition by notable predecessors, the station's \$1 billion start-up cost has alleviated much of this as they now boast one of the most extensive networks of bureaux worldwide. This will certainly improve their prospects in the long run.*

Castillo: It seems that Al Jazeera as in is the case of Venezuela's TeleSur, is involved in a kind of counter-hegemonic discourse.

Iskandar: *Al Jazeera often presents a counter-hegemonic discourse. This discourse is not only against the regional state, but most forms of authority. I don't want to simplify this. I don't want to be seen as a cheerleader of Al Jazeera. But there is something intrinsically unique about the station. It is unique because as a whole it has created an alternative way of doing journalism in the region. By presenting a contrarian perspective the station often seems drawn to dissident voices. However, by adopting the watchdog role of journalism, interrogating power becomes one of the objectives of the station. It is an oversimplification to state that a news organization is clearly counter-hegemonic unless it is a ritualized professional practice. While this is not the case formally with Al-Jazeera, the station is certainly drawn to counter-hegemonic interpretations of world events. So in that capacity, various forms of hegemonic expression often come under attack on their airwaves.*

Castillo: TeleSur in Venezuela has been described in some journalists and academic circles as an 'alternative news media' organisation. Can this be said of Al Jazeera?

Iskandar: *The conceptualization of an alternative media is intriguing one. If you look at the writings of John Downing and others, including Chris Atton, Nick Couldry, you wonder what the characteristics of alternative media are. Al Jazeera by virtue of what they've done so far – at the very least in our public consciousness about them – represents an underlying counter-hegemonic angle, whether they critique the US government in the region or the state apparatus in the Arab world. However, the criteria by which we have conventionally described alternative media seem to meet the properties of Telesur more so than Al-Jazeera. While the prior is firmly and publicly aligned with a political and ideological Bolivarian movement and inspired as well as funded by the Chavez government, Al-Jazeera's political posture is both reserved and unarticulated. Although much of their content may meet the standard of counter-hegemonic treatment, the network is assertively opposed to any allegiance to political or social movements. This poses a dilemma for most definitions of alternative media and journalism due to the complex nature of these institutions.*

Castillo: This is the first criteria, how about the organisation?

Iskandar: *Alternative media are often described as non- hierarchical. For example, think of the Indymedia around the world. Al Jazeera – in its conceptualisation – has been modelled as a mainstream western model satellite broadcaster. So, it seems that from an organisational point of view, Al Jazeera doesn't meet this*

condition.

Castillo: The third aspect is the relationship with a social movement. Can we identify a social movement in the operation of Al Jazeera?

Iskandar: *One may say the social movement is the empowerment of the Arab world. However the relationship between the media and the social movement has to be so intertwined to the extent they can be seen as seamless. This is the case of TeleSur in Venezuela. In this case Al Jazeera doesn't meet the requirement. Al Jazeera is a bizarre case of alternative media and I would go as far as to say that the network obliterates the notion of alternative media which I argue in an essay on the mainstreaming of alterity.*

Castillo: Since its establishment – and especially in the post-September 11 terrorist attack in New York – Al Jazeera has been described as a 'controversial broadcaster.'

Iskandar: *This characterisation has been put very clearly by the current US administration. The American public has no exposure to Al Jazeera and it has been painted as the voice of the enemy. I would say it is almost a schizophrenic relationship. In our book we describe it as a love and hate relationship. It is seen as a network advocating freedom of speech and want to do things right. In one of his pre-9/11 articles, Thomas Friedman said that Al Jazeera was one of the "best things for democratisation for the Arab world."*

Castillo: However after September 11 the whole dynamic changed entirely, right?

Iskandar: *The Bush administration shifted gears. Al Jazeera became a nuisance and a problem [by] the virtue of broadcasting Al Qaeda messages and it was described as a mouthpiece for Bin Laden. The campaign of public vilification of the station extended from then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, down to press officers in various government agencies. All the while, the US government played a double-faced game with the network; occasionally fielding officials to communicate with the network (such as an interview then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice gave to the network) while encouraging a media smear campaign against the station. Conversely, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the network was dealing with scepticism of the same kind. Members of the Arab press and officials in various regional governments accused the station of advocating for American, Israeli and Zionist interests and that it was infiltrated by anti-Arab elements who used difference of opinion among Arabs to undermine their collective resolve.*

Castillo: At the difference of the pre-Al Jazeera media landscape in the Arabic world, this network has engaged the Middle East in open and has magnified the political debate.

Iskandar: *Al Jazeera has tried to some extent to adopt the Gramscian notion of 'organic intellectual' by allowing the debate around power and the institutionalisation of power. It is a place where power is discussed and also prodded. There is no doubt that Al Jazeera has engaged the public in something unique which is slowly dissipating from the western media: intellectual debate. This is also a measure of success for Al Jazeeraan in the region and if delivered in the English language station, could hold much promise.*

Castillo: How do you measure this success?

Iskandar: *The only way to assess whether Al Jazeera has been successful in the intellectual debate is by looking at the consequences. Al Jazeera has produced a level of scepticism among audience and practitioners about the basic premises of journalistic practice. It has also brought about a level of scepticism about political structures that are able to produce and reproduce hegemony in society. In addition, it has produced a wide level of scepticism about political motives and political institutions and how they operate in the Arab world. All of this coupled with an open forum for unfettered sophisticated expression which has left audiences with a sense of general engagement and a lasting sense of media literacy.*

Castillo: I would like to take you to another theme; about the current state of journalism

Iskandar: *I believe journalism is transforming completely. If you see the priorities in journalistic practice and the directions that journalism is taking nowadays it is difficult to discuss about journalism anymore. Journalism has become a process of mass production and the intellectual has been taken away from journalists.*

Castillo: And despite this, we still desire to be well informed.

Iskandar: *I would say that the desire to be informed, to comprehend our environment is immutable and intrinsic and journalists are in the position to deliver something that is just as necessary to survival; not just*

for the individual, but also as publics, as civic units, and organic parts of society. Without that it falters. It doesn't falters along the same line of democratic constitution and all that rhetoric. But even more important is how we function as civic entities and as civic participants.

Castillo: This transformation has direct impact on how journalists are trained, for example in the academia.

Iskandar: *We go through a process where we train journalists – within the academic institutions – to produce the level of work that is publishable. Therefore, to get published becomes the only standard for quality. This is problematic because the presence of the so-called gatekeepers. They have the 'providence' to determine what is publishable. Whenever we speak of framing, editorialising, and agenda-setting, this becomes irrelevant when we have people who determine what constitutes publishable material.*

Castillo: So, it seems journalism becomes a process more so than an end or an objective.

Iskandar: *This is the thing. The process is about how to compose; for example the inverted pyramid, the structure and what context you will include: what you will clip and what you won't clip. This becomes purely procedural. It loses semantic and meaning. The second aspect is the rise of objectivity as standard to judge good journalism. Despite its historical roots in the European enlightenment, as an institutionalised practice, the notion of objectivity emerged in the United States. The term has been appropriated and is used more than anywhere else. It is something journalists in the US have internalised to such extent that it has exceeded the status of a utopian ideal. Today, American journalists can speak assertively of objectivity as it was as tangible and material as a cup. It is something that can be measured empirically."*

Castillo: So, where does the problem lie?

Iskandar: *It lies in the origins of objectivity. As Michael Schudson and others have noted, it grew out of an attempt by journalists to protect themselves from litigation. At the turn of the 20th century we saw journalists caught and trial for libel charges and slander. In order to circumvent this legal challenge, journalists created a code of ethics that said, for example, that there are facts in this world and these facts can be identified, articulated and circumscribed; without opinion. In this context journalists become no more than a vessel. You pour anything you want to the journalist and it will come up on the other end. They process information.*

Castillo: So, what makes a journalist a professional journalist?

Iskandar: *It is an issue of socialisation. We train journalists so they can feel professional. It is perhaps about education, curriculum, pedagogy or licence requirements. It gives you a document that provides you both authority and/or access to authority. In the United States, there is a certainty that journalism is a profession and to get to that position you have to jump several hoops. The production of good journalism is determined by the upper echelon within the industry. You create a hierarchy and objectivity becomes part of this.*

Castillo: And, the question then is how do they judge a good journalist?

Iskandar: *One, it is a practice that has to be devoid from public opinion. It has to be non-partisan. If a journalist is perceived as implicated or in complicity in the story, they are not eligible. So objectivity is enshrined in the process. There are professional standards you have to meet or otherwise if you can not meet the objectivity standards you can not be rewarded.*

Castillo: Was the terrorist attack on September 11 a possible factor in some of the changes experienced by international journalism?

Iskandar: *I don't think September 11 constituted such a radical transformative moment in our contemporary history. I'm not interested in the transformation of September 11 as a moment of memorialisation that changed the world. When it comes to journalism, it happened that certain characteristics of journalism became more evident as consequence of this major mass-mediated spectacle. Because it was media spectacle it had a very distinct impact on the way journalism is conducted. From the power of simultaneity, to the murky business of war coverage, to patriotism and journalism, to embedded reporting and the positionality of practitioners, etc, etc, September 11 may have shifted some paradigms in the way journalism is conducted. However, I think the most compelling of these is perhaps the idea of a simulacrum as Jean Baudrillard suggested which feeds into a near-fetish about media consumption of the hyperreal. The absurdity of the 9/11 mediatized event has created a near blatant and blind pursuit of the*

absurd by these institutions. Another interesting transformation is what James Der Derian calls the exceptional 'ahistoricity' which suggests the uniqueness of everyday events and a loss of historical continuity and context. On a more positive note, I think 9/11 has aggressively highlighted the word 'international' in international journalism. The shrinking temporal and special spheres in which we live today, the perception of interdependence in the global politico-economic systems, as well as the transnational nature of both the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing events. Perhaps it is fair to argue that rather than the event itself, the coverage and discursive construction of September 11 as the 'day the world changed' may have served as a self-fulfilling prophecy for international journalism as well.

Castillo: It seems that almost immediately after September 11, American journalists embraced completely the Bush administration.

Iskandar: *We began seeing a complete adoption by journalists of not only the political rhetoric of George W. Bush and his foreign policy, but also the absence of any critics of what may have preceded this event. It seems this even happened in vacuum. There was no historical context. And therein lays the problem with objectivity. It's devoid of any contextual background. It is an intrinsic problem. If you are going to report this as a single sporadic event that has no context means you have no foundation. This kind of decontextualization and ahistoricity in much of the US media immediately following September 11 produced omnipresent clichés and rhetorical questions such as 'why do they hate us?' Since little to no background was offered in response to this question, and the mantra of objectivity necessitated a bland response, the only answer was to repeat the question. Instead, we saw a rise in patriotic fervour and furor expressed by American journalists who swiftly abandoned the self-proclaimed standard of objectivity only to be replaced with jingoistic and tacit acceptance of most statements from the administration. This will be recorded in US journalistic history as one of the most deplorable moments of complicity in recent memory the result of which created politically charged broadcast news as a popular genre of journalism. It was during this time and the run up to the Iraq war that Newscorp's Fox News Channel became the most popular cable news channel in the country, outperforming CNN for the first time.*

Castillo: It is the case that September 11 was interpreted and reported as horrific as to the extent that journalists became individually invested in this event?

Iskandar: *True, if you look at the first images after September 11 in all broadcasters there was expression of emotion which is not uncustomary for journalists as human beings. It is allowed but it put a dent in the idea of objectivity. All of the sudden journalists were crying and wearing the American flag pins on their chests. Instantaneously, this structure upon which objective journalism stood on, began to crumble allowing partisan journalism to take root. Audiences sought out the most compelling and patriotic content, and objectivity, a fragile model anyway, was laid to the wayside. It was relegated to the sidelines as more emergent and urgent matters came to the forefront. Journalists like their audiences publicly disavowed their loyalty to the professional value of objectivity and instead became 'humans' who possess subjectivity. And with the collapse of objectivity, so was the demise of nuanced context.*

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