

**Phillip Seib (2008). The Al Jazeera Effect. Washington D.C.:  
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Information has always been central to modern geopolitics. The United Kingdom's control over transatlantic cables used for transferring news and information to North America was central to their ability to convince the American public and its leaders of the need and just in joining their efforts against the Central Powers in World War I. During World War II, radio was seen as so central to the outcome of battles that radio transmitters were often the first target of any military operation, even before attacking centers of political, industrial or military power. In both wars, the ability to control the content and flow of information was as important as the use of force in the overall outcome of the conflict (Taylor, 2003).

For much of the 20th century, the ability to control information has been in the hands of powerful nation-states. Yet, with the advent of geosynchronous satellites, first launched by the US government in 1965, the ability of governments to exclusively control information came to a slow but profound end (Price, 2002). Twenty-five years later, CNN, the world's first privately owned and operated international broadcaster was credited with helping foster the collapse of the Soviet Union and the international embarrassment of the Chinese government with Tiananmen Square. In the decade that followed, CNN was an increasingly ubiquitous feature of global politics, presenting the 1991 Gulf War to the world in the most hygienic and awe-inspiring

fashion. In Bosnia, Somalia and Kosovo, commentators argued that the international network's coverage was critical to motivating Western governments towards intervention, and thus a so-called CNN effect was prophesied. The theorization of a potential CNN effect was a watershed moment for conversations of geopolitics and statecraft because it was the first widespread acknowledgment by policy-makers and the public alike that governments were no longer in control of the flow of information (Gilboa, 2005).

Philip Seib's (2008) *The Al Jazeera Effect* is a timely and thorough update to the debate regarding the role of information in international conflicts and politics. Importantly, the book is not about Al Jazeera, per se. Rather, Seib (2008, 175) uses the Network's name metaphorically to reference the broader consequences of new media on contemporary politics: "To varying degrees throughout the world, the connectivity of new media is superseding the traditional political connections that have brought identity and structure to global politics. This rewiring of the world's neural system is proceeding at remarkable speed, and its reach keeps extending even farther. It changes the way states and citizens interact with each other and it gives the individual a chance at a new kind of autonomy, at least on an intellectual level, because of the great availability of information. This is the Al Jazeera effect." Thus, Al Jazeera, the path-breaking and first and only global broadcaster located in the "global south," is a reference here for the new and alternative forms of information that are altering the process of and actors involved in modern political decision-making.

The book touches on many parts of the current debate, from the relationship between new media and democracy, terrorism and virtual states, while talking about current trends, such as the proliferation of satellite news channels and current political developments in the Middle East in the context of perceptions of a so-called clash of civilizations. Seib astutely presents his findings as a beginning to a conversation that is ongoing and at its earliest stages. Most examples of the democratic or peaceful uses of new media technologies are quickly countered by examples of the risks that new mediums of communication create in today's increasingly connected yet divisive world. Throughout, however, there is a tone of optimism, citing examples such as [bitterlemons.org](http://bitterlemons.org), an online magazine that offers Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints of issues of mutual concern, as a widely popular and a terrific example of the potential of new media

platforms to become means of fair political arguments, rational discourse and, eventually, reconciliation (Seib, 2008, 11). To a certain extent, Seib's optimism is grounded in the argument that enhanced transparency, fostered by the proliferation of new media technologies, will better enable citizens everywhere to make better decisions, be it in the voting booth or at the local market. Connecting transparency to more global thinking, Seib suggests: "Media can also discourage internal conflict by fostering transparency and giving those who might be caught up in disorder a chance to see a preferable world outside their own borders and experience" (Seib, 2008, 9).

For example, Chapter 3, "The Internet Surge," is a hopeful analysis of the rise of citizen journalists, networked journalism and the use of new and social media for political dissent in totalitarian and autocratic states. Indeed, it is an ideal contextualization of the debate currently raging between Clay Shirky (2009) and Evgeny Morozov (2010) regarding the use of new and social media tools in Iran and other politically unstable or contested countries. Shirky, a leading social media guru, and many others, argue that the use of new media technologies and platforms in Iran in the aftermath to the contested elections of 2009 provide a powerful example of how new media trends are challenging traditional governments and fostering democratic change. Morozov, a leading thinker on the political implications of the Internet, argues that governments, including the Iranian government, are adapting to the era of new media quickly and even using the technologies, and the enhanced level of transparency that they provide, to track and sometimes crack down on dissident political discourse.

For Seib, there is a certain presumption that the emergence of new media outlets and voices will encourage productive debate and discussion in previously closed societies, an argument that is backed up by the work of Marc Lynch (2006) and others. Yet, the value of such debates remains an open question. Some scholars, especially those close to the politically active blogosphere in Egypt, for instance, argue that the appearance of debate fostered via the increasingly contentious political talk shows and news simply foster an appearance of democratic discourse, rather than the real thing. Pointing to little real liberal reform in recent years, and even increasingly closed off and state-regulated media environments, critics argue that such mediums simply open the safety valve of pent-up political activism, allowing for the appearance of

democratic discourse just enough to dampen the perceived urgency of real, physical political protest and change (Shapiro, 2009; Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Hafez, 2005).

Moreover, the value of such open political debates needs to be further interrogated on another level. In the US, where political and social discourse is often grounded within the context of the benefits of open, democratic political debates, mediated political discourse often becomes scandalized, simplistic and even dangerous. Recent political debate surrounding health care reform, one of the longest and most transparent debates in American legislative history, demonstrates the huge potential for such discourse to become manipulated, divisive and even counterproductive. The case of the U.S. health care reform was so bad that at the end of the discussion, just as the U.S. Senate and House were meeting to finalize the bill, President Obama backed off of his original claim that the debate should take place in the most transparent and public of ways and allowed for the final negotiations to be conducted, for the most part, in private. The rationale was simple: after months of watching Congressmen grandstand on the issue whenever they were in public, pushing invalid and often disingenuous arguments that simply slowed the legislative process, the country was in no need for any further delays in the issue (Volsky, 2010). In short, the marketplace of ideas, similar to the unregulated financial marketplace, had failed. Similar to the need for strict regulations in the financial sector to prevent corporate abuse, perhaps it is the case that the marketplace of ideas needs some basic regulations on what can be said, where and by whom. In the context of international use of new media technologies, such regulations become increasingly difficult to implement and enforce. And, if the marketplace of ideas is not the best way to achieve reform in the US, a country with a robust civil society, perhaps the value of such debates in societies still transitioning towards democracy needs to be reconsidered.

While Shirky, Morozov and others can argue back and forth regarding the particular impact of new media on Persian politics, the main thrust of Seib's argument--that new media technologies alter the process by which political decisions are made today--is of profound importance. While the emergence of enhanced transparency, both of politicians and the citizenry, is a good in its own right, what is still required for the Al Jazeera effect to foster better and healthy democratic discourse is an ethical, educated and engaged civil society. For example,

enhanced transparency of government decision-making still requires an active citizenry to pick through, decipher and contextualize the overwhelming amount of information now available in the public sphere. This process is becoming increasingly difficult as traditional sources of authority, beacons of public opinion, are losing influence while new (internet-based) opinion leaders emerge. This problem is particularly acute in the Arab world. Seib (2008, 17), citing Mark Allen regarding the growth of new media in the Arab world, argues: "knowledge is in spate; a plurality of views undercuts certainties and their emotional securities, but a systematic technique for dealing with contradiction and dissent is lacking. Pluralism is not available." As societies transition into the New Information Age, the risk of new forms of propaganda and hate-inciting communication campaigns is large, as Seib notes in his discussion of the weaponization of the media, as well as his analysis of the Danish cartoon affair. There is an upside, however. As the Internet becomes more and more interactive, with content being co-created by groups rather than by particular people, Al Qaeda and other hate groups are at a disadvantage. Due to their hierarchical structure and need to remain in control, participatory cultures are discouraged, while at the same time such participation is becoming a norm in modern political messaging. As a result, according to Daniel Kimmage (2008), Al Qaeda's top-down media strategy may be its Achilles Heel: "Web 2.0 is about letting users run wild with self-created content and interactivity, [and] Al Qaeda and its affiliates are stuck in 1.0."

Finally, it is important to note that Seib's use of Al Jazeera as a metaphor for the altered landscape fostered by new media is significant. As opposed to the proposed "YouTube" or "Twitter" effects, also references to the impact of new media technologies on politics and society, the focus on Al Jazeera is critical in that it points to the tremendous shift in the direction and flow of global communication, and thus geopolitical influence. In his seminal text, *The Geopolitics of Information*, Anthony Smith (1980) argues that the huge disparity in international flows of news and cultural communication is directly related the political and economic disparities that separate the so-called "South" from the industrialized "North." The Al Jazeera Network, a global conglomeration of broadcasters that produce and disseminate news, political commentary, as well as cultural, sports and children's programming, represents a profound reversal in the flow of communications that were the source of huge animosity towards the West

for much of the 20th century. Al Jazeera represents a critique of Western news and programming, while at the same time embodying a hybrid identity of Western technologies and formats adapted and evolved to meet the culturally and historically constructed expectations of Arab and Muslim societies (el-Nawawy and Powers, 2008). As Seib (2008, 15) notes, Al Jazeera is seen as a "magnifier of shared frustrations and aspirations and as a truth-teller...Al Jazeera is trusted as a chronicler of Arab and Muslim interests." As Muslim populations grow--now 23.1 percent of the world's population--Al Jazeera not only represents the growth of the import of information and mediated communications to modern geopolitics, but also the growing influence, embodied by Al Jazeera's Arabic and English programming, of Muslims around the world.

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