

What's Happening

I N T H E W O R L D ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 11, NO 7 MARCH 2011

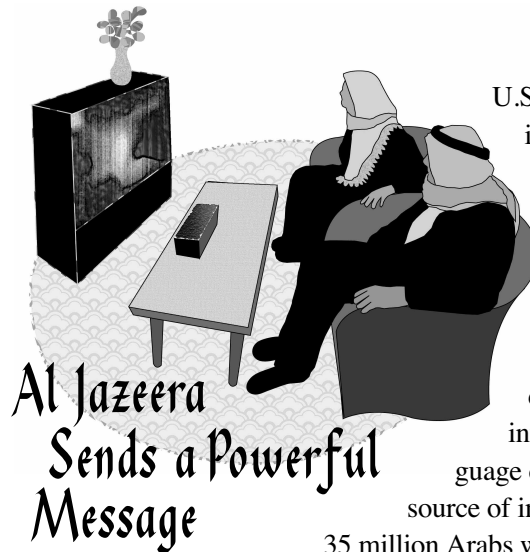
Since December 2010 protests have brought down the autocratic leaders of Tunisia and Egypt. The protests quickly attracted hundreds of thousands of protesters. Although the governments controlled the media, citizens were still able to get news from one television station. It was the Al Jazeera Satellite Channel. People credit it for having brought information and hope to protesters.

Al Jazeera began 15 years ago. In 1994 the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) had started an Arabic-language news channel. Its broadcasts went through a satellite network in Saudi Arabia. Not even two years later, though, the BBC shut it down because of a dispute with the Saudi government. That left 250 Arab journalists unemployed. The government of the tiny Arab country of Qatar hired many of them and created Al Jazeera.

The new station modeled itself after CNN and other international news channels. It began broadcasting 24 hours a day. It promotes itself as the place for "opinion and the counter opinion," and it has reported news and addressed sensitive issues in the Arab world and elsewhere. That is different, because many Arab governments do not have free media or encourage the free exchange of ideas. The media simply offer the governments' points of view.

One program, "The Opposite Direction," is surely the most controversial show ever on Arab television. Every week this talk show's host invites people with opposing views to discuss an issue. The guests are often politicians, experts in a field, and sometimes even Islamic militants. Viewers also can call in and ask questions. This type of discussion is unusual in the Middle East. Some Arab governments have complained, and several of them even temporarily removed their ambassadors to Qatar in protest.

Western governments also have criticized Al Jazeera at times. The U.S. complained when Al Jazeera broadcast videos from Osama Bin Laden after the attacks on September 11, 2001. In fact, the



U.S. bombed two of its offices because it felt that the station was connected to terrorists. Over the years, though, that has proven not to be the case at all.

Broadcasts from Al Jazeera have spread far and wide. Before Al Jazeera began, Arabs depended on Western media for information. Now the Arabic-language channel has become the primary source of international news for more than 35 million Arabs worldwide. In addition, it began

an English-language news channel in 2006 that reaches more than 100 countries, including the U.S.

Al Jazeera has changed the nature of information in the Middle East. It has become the national channel for all Arab countries, and it has provided a way to express public opinion for the first time. Many Arabs have said for years that it would lead to a popular revolution. Now that prediction has come true after the overthrow of the leaders in Tunisia and Egypt.

As the protests in Egypt grew, Al Jazeera's Arabic-language channel sent constant live videos and reports about the angry crowds. The Egyptian government did not want information to get out, so it jammed Al Jazeera's satellite. It also broke into the station's office in Cairo, where it stole and set fire to equipment. It arrested reporters, shut down the office and officially banned Al Jazeera's journalists from the country.

In spite of the government's efforts, Al Jazeera continued to broadcast. It set up video cameras on rooftops and filed reports by phone 24 hours a day. It sent them out through its English-language channel, and also sent out images that citizens from other locations had put on Facebook and YouTube. In the U.S., MSNBC used Al Jazeera's broadcasts in its own reports for American viewers to watch.

Just days before President Mubarak resigned, Egyptians in Cairo chanted "Long Live Al Jazeera!" In the era before Al Jazeera most of Egypt's citizens would not have known about the protests. Instead the information they got from Al Jazeera's broadcasts gave them strength. Their protests succeeded, and the movement toward democracy there is underway.

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Since December 2010 protests have brought down the autocratic leaders of Tunisia and Egypt. Hundreds of thousands of people protested. The governments controlled the media, but citizens still got news from one TV station. The Al Jazeera Satellite Channel brought information and hope to protesters.

Al Jazeera began 15 years ago. In 1994 the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) had started an Arabic-language news channel. It broadcast through a satellite network in Saudi Arabia. Not even two years later, though, the BBC shut it down. That left 250 Arab journalists unemployed. The government of the tiny Arab country of Qatar hired many of them and created Al Jazeera.

The new station has been broadcasting 24 hours a day. It calls itself the place for “opinion and the counter opinion.” It reports on news and sensitive issues in the Arab world and elsewhere. That is different because the media in many Arab countries offer only the government’s point of view.

One program, “The Opposite Direction,” is especially different for Arab television. Every week this talk show’s host invites people with opposing views to discuss an issue. The guests are often politicians, experts, and sometimes even Islamic militants. Viewers also can call in. These discussions have caused some Arab governments to complain. A few even protested by removing their ambassadors to Qatar.

Western governments also have criticized Al Jazeera at times. The U.S. complained when Al Jazeera broadcast messages from Osama Bin Laden after September 11, 2001. In fact, the U.S. bombed two of its offices because it felt that the



station was connected to terrorists.

Over the years, though, that has proven not to be the case at all.

Broadcasts from Al Jazeera have spread far and wide. Arabs used to get information from Western media. Now the Arabic-language channel has become the main source of international news for more than 35 million Arabs worldwide.

In addition, it began an English-language news channel in 2006 that reaches more than 100 countries, including the U.S.

Al Jazeera has become the national channel for all Arab countries. It has provided a way to express public opinion for the first time. Many Arabs have said for years that it would lead to a popular revolution. Now that has happened in Tunisia and Egypt.

Al Jazeera’s Arabic-language channel sent constant live videos and reports about the angry crowds in Egypt. The government did not want information to get out, so it jammed Al Jazeera’s satellite. It broke into the station’s office in Cairo, where it stole and set fire to equipment. It also arrested reporters.

In spite of that, Al Jazeera continued to broadcast. It put video cameras on rooftops and filed reports by phone. It sent them out through its English-language channel, and also sent out images that citizens from other locations had put on Facebook and YouTube.

Just before President Mubarak resigned, people in Cairo screamed “Long Live Al Jazeera!” Before Al Jazeera most Egyptians would not have known about the protests. Instead the information they got from Al Jazeera gave them strength. Their protests succeeded, and the movement toward democracy there is underway.

Background Information

Al Jazeera's name means "the island" in Arabic.

Qatar shares a border with Saudi Arabia. It is a peninsula that stretches northward into the Persian Gulf. It has a population of just a few hundred thousand. Half of them are under 18, and perhaps a third of them are members of the royal family.

In the weeks of the protests in Egypt, visits to Al Jazeera's English Web site increased by 2,500 percent. Most of the visitors were from the U.S.

"The Opposite Direction" is live every Tuesday for 90 minutes. A similar show is called "The Other Opinion."

The protests in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Yemen and Bahrain send a message that people are unhappy with autocratic regimes in the Arab world.

People are now referring to the "Al Jazeera effect." It refers to giving a public voice to people who have been without one.

Some people at Al Jazeera suggest that its live coverage actually provided the protesters some protection from attack, since the government would not have wanted the world to see it attacking its own citizens.

During the protests Egypt's state media accused Al Jazeera of "inciting the people."

Before Al Jazeera began in 1996, Arabs used to get their news and information from Western sources like the BBC, Radio Monte Carlo and the Voice of America.

Al Jazeera English is carried by a few small cable companies in the U.S. It has a meeting scheduled soon with the large cable network, Comcast.

Egypt's ruler, President Hosni Mubarak, had been in power since 1981. Tunisia's longtime ruler, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, fled the country on January 14 after 28 days of protests. He had been in power for 23 years.

Without the success of Al Jazeera, Qatar never would have won the bid to host the World Cup in 2022.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Describe what you saw on television concerning the protests in Egypt.

Comprehension:

- Identify some problems that Al Jazeera has encountered in its 15 years of broadcasting.

Beyond the Text:

- What place do you think freedom of the press and freedom of speech have in a democracy?
- Why do governments always try to control the media in times of revolution?
- Why do you think Al Jazeera started a channel in English?

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: protest; autocratic; broadcast; journalist; counter; Islamic; militant; ambassador; overthrow*; to jam; to chant*

High-use: media; satellite; to credit*; dispute*; to model*; to promote*; issue; controversial*; temporarily*; to criticize; primary*; source; revolution; prediction*; constant

Sources

New York Times February 12, 7, 2011

International Herald Tribune February 8, 2011

Multichannel News February 7, 2011

Houston Chronicle February 5, 2011

Times of London February 3, 2011

National Public Radio "All Things Considered" February 3, January 31, 2011

Weekly Standard December 20, 2010

Democracy Now! www.democracynow.org February 2, 2006

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English-Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development
2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies
2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension
Writing Strategies and Applications
Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science

5.7; 7.2; 8.3; 10.11; 11.9; 12.2; 12.3; 12.8