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EDITED BY MICHAEL KUGELMAN



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NEW MEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF PROTEST: A CASE STUDY OF AL JAZEERA ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

SHAWN POWERS AND MOHAMMED EL-NAWAWY

Since its launch in November 2006, Al Jazeera English (AJE) has been the subject of much discussion in the popular press. AJE is the English-language counterpart of Al Jazeera Arabic, a news channel that has stirred controversy for its independent and critical zeal. Like Al Jazeera Arabic, AJE was launched with hopes of providing a voice to the “voiceless” and to the “global south.” The station has promoted a similarly ambitious mission of “setting the world’s news agenda.”¹

While the two are technically separate news organizations, AJE is still overseen by Wadah Khanfar, the director-general of the Al Jazeera network. In addition, several of AJE’s high-level staff positions were poached from the Arabic side in an effort to maintain some editorial consistency across both stations. More recently, Khanfar has merged the editorial boards of the English and Arabic sides and called for further collaboration between bureaus in an effort to increase consistency in the network’s approach to covering international events. Khanfar declares that AJE “will provide the same groundbreaking news and impartial and balanced journalism to the English-speaking world.”² Indeed, given Al Jazeera Arabic’s groundbreaking approach to critically examining events in the Middle East, the move to tie AJE to Al Jazeera Arabic’s operations and brand is an important one, as it adds credibility to AJE’s goal of “bearing witness in a globalized world.”³

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Additionally, given Al Jazeera Arabic's history of promoting democratic discussion and accountability in the Middle East, some have suggested that AJE—with its ambitious mission—may have a similar impact in promoting democratic deliberation and governance throughout the world. Drawing from the test case of AJE's work in Malaysia, this paper examines the impact that AJE has had on the Malaysian political environment thus far, and offers some insight into discussions of the possibility of an "Al Jazeera effect." More specifically, we argue that AJE's coverage of racial tensions in Malaysia and the Kuala Lumpur protests in November 2007 had a significant role in triggering political discussions, collaborations, and actions—mostly via interpersonal and new media networks—that would eventually result in the most dramatic political change in Malaysia since its independence from Great Britain in 1957. Moreover, this paper argues that AJE's role (along with that of active online politicking) in Malaysian political change offers another telling example of how new media technologies, organizations, and netizens are weakening the ability of the nation-state to control the flow of information, a consequence of which is liberal and democratic reform.⁴

THE AL JAZEERA EFFECT

Narrowly speaking, "Al Jazeera effect" is a term used to describe the consequences Al Jazeera's news coverage has had on the policies and opinions of governments across the world. The term includes references to the impacts that Al Jazeera's style of journalism has had on other media outlets in the Middle East; to actual changes in government policies; and to the waves of public sentiment moved by Al Jazeera's coverage of particular events.

Historically speaking, the term is a metaphorical reference to the "CNN effect," a concept that was popularized in the 1990s to describe the impact that international media (CNN in particular) were having on public opinion and foreign policies. During the 1990–91 Gulf War, "CNN emerged as a global actor in international politics," inspiring other international news organizations, such as the BBC, NBC, and Star, to follow and establish their own international satellite news net-

works. By acknowledging the impacts that images of the massacre at Tiananmen Square, as well as of the humanitarian crises in Somalia and Bosnia, eventually had on Chinese and Western governments, scholars suggested that satellite news organizations had the potential to become powerful actors in the international political environment.⁵ Indeed, regardless of discussions about the existence of a formal “CNN effect” or “Al Jazeera effect,” it is impossible to deny the structural changes that emerging flows of information—including those facilitated via satellite news television—have on traditional notions of state and citizen power.⁶

Along these lines, the term has become a metaphor for the larger social and political impacts that new media technologies—satellite television, SMS messaging via cell phones, and the Internet—are having on long-standing governmental and cultural policies and traditions. In this sense, the Al Jazeera network functions as an example of how new media technologies—in this case satellite television—can transcend the traditional influence of laws of individual nation-states and consequently impact local, regional, and international public opinion on social and political issues.⁷ A prominent example is Al Jazeera’s coverage of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Contra to CNN International and BBC World, Al Jazeera focused on the civilian and social consequences of the war, taking an explicit stance against its legality and proposed benefits through its relatively one-sided coverage. As Al Jazeera English’s Riz Khan puts it, while American news channels “show the missiles taking off, Al Jazeera shows them landing.”⁸ Marc Lynch partly attributes this colored coverage of the war to the strength and scope of Arab public—and governmental—opposition to the American-led war.⁹

Lynch’s viewpoint touches on yet another consequence of the proposed Al Jazeera effect: a more pronounced connection between Arab public opinion and government policy. Historically speaking, Arab media have largely been unidirectional, created or controlled by the government and broadcast to the people. The Al Jazeera model of programming—interactive, controversial, and relatively uncensored—has created a broader space and efficacy for the expression of public opinion. The result has been an enhanced Arab public sphere, more pointed public opinions, and a means by which opinions can be discussed across borders. As Mohamed Zayani has observed, news broadcasts by Al Jazeera

have translated “into popular pressure on Arab governments to step up their efforts to act on certain issues and to alter their tame policy.”¹⁰ For example, in 2000, Al Jazeera’s coverage of the second Palestinian intifada sparked public protests across the Arab world and “united Arabs behind a single issue for the first time since the early 1970s,” a fact that was widely noted by governments in the region.¹¹ Thus, in this sense, the Al Jazeera effect is not a reference to the influence that any particular media broadcaster has. Rather, it is a metaphor for the changed dynamics of power and influence that new media technologies, when combined with active and interested publics, are having on traditional structures of power.

Both the proposed Al Jazeera and CNN effects are related to the concept of the “demonstration effect.” Based on Samuel Huntington’s observations of how democratic changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union fed off of each other in a synergistic manner, the demonstration effect proposes that images and news of democratic protest and liberal reform in relatively closed societies can enhance similar democratic movements abroad when broadcast across borders. Through satellite television, citizens can become more informed about and encouraged by changes elsewhere and begin to press for change at home. Accordingly, elites become trepidatious over the downfall of autocrats abroad and in response become more conciliatory or reactionary at home, either of which can spark mass mobilization.¹²

In the case of Eastern Europe, no country could effectively shut out the tide of information that undermined regime credibility, raised social expectations, and eventually helped to end communist rule. More broadly, Huntington notes that changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union not only reinforced one another, but were also noticed by rulers and citizens across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This increased visibility, facilitated by the growth of international communication technologies, allowed for the demonstration effect to take hold on a global level.¹³

THE POLITICS OF PROTEST

Public protests can play a particularly potent role in the context of the demonstration effect, and thus also in the proposed Al Jazeera effect. Media

theorists have observed that the media can enhance democratic movements by acting in a “triggering role,” whereby the media play a more direct part in the promotion of democracy by acting as a conduit of democratic information and protest. This usually occurs when popular protest or opposition-group demands have been mounting among the citizenry, and the media offer favorable coverage for the opposition in ways that encourage the dissemination of its message throughout the country. In Latin America, the media has played a triggering role in both Brazil and Paraguay, where, as pressure to democratize intensified among the public, the local press “[were] decisive in sharpening democratic and social demands.” The triggering role of the media can be most important during the intermediate and late stages of transition away from authoritarianism, when antiregime movements have already been formed and overall support for the regime has begun falling.¹⁴ Importantly, these conditions can be found in several countries in Southeast Asia, and Malaysia in particular.

Yet the concept of a “triggering role” of the media requires further elaboration. Obviously, not all media coverage of protests and dissent helps further democracy or build civil society. The Western world’s coverage of the Danish cartoon affair—characterized largely by a focus on the violent nature of the protests, and on the perceived incompatibility between Islam and modernity—illustrates how media coverage of public protest can in fact sometimes be detrimental to democratic deliberation.

In their work on the relationship between media and civil society, Jeffrey Alexander and Ronald Jacobs outline news media’s capacity to “trigger violent reactions, dislodge powerful people and motivate the formation of social movements” through the creation of mediatized public crises. Arguing that media influence stems from media’s “construction of common identities,” Alexander and Jacobs suggest that “media events, which attract larger audiences than any other communication media, have tremendous potentials in terms of media power, because they erase the divide between private and public, and also because they dramatize the symbols, narratives, and cultural codes of a particular society.”¹⁵

Essential to Alexander and Jacobs’ conception of media events is the incorporation of mediatized narratives into the images and facts of a sequence of incidents, whereby media “perform” a story over time to meet the expectations of a particular audience. “Media events serve the legitimation needs for societies (not necessarily states) ... they provide

the cultural grounds for attachment to the ‘imagined community.’” In this sense, imagined communities are formed through the progression of connecting individual sentiments to collective narratives of current events, a process that places news media at the center of the social change process. Mediatized public crises differ from traditional conceptions of media events in that they “tend to increase the distance between the indicative and subjunctive” (that is, the “is” and the “ought”), exposing social ills and creating space and a sense of exigency for civic action to overcome the social pollutants. For example, drawing from Elihu Katz’s research on media power, Alexander and Jacobs contend that media are important “for actively constructing common identities and common solidarities,” suggesting “that the media is concerned not only with the diffusion of information to a mass public, but also—and this is particularly true for media events—with the dramatization of civil society and the creation of a common cultural framework for building common identities.”¹⁶

It is precisely this type of “mediated public crisis” that has recently been witnessed in Malaysia. In the course of just a few years, new media technologies, including the Internet and increased satellite television service, have transformed the way Malaysians consume information about national politics and culture. The following case study explores how new media networks, built through growing social disenfranchisement, and triggered by a series of protests covered extensively and dramatically by AJE, resulted in Malaysia’s largest political upheaval in over 50 years.

AL JAZEERA ENGLISH ARRIVES IN KUALA LUMPUR

One of the most intriguing aspects of Al Jazeera English—an attribute that sets it apart from its international competitors—is its innovative and modern approach to the physical constitution of a global news network. Rather than relying on a principal bureau out of which most of the news is broadcast, AJE relies on a rotating broadcast-bureau structure, where the broadcast and editorial responsibilities are handed off between four main bureaus, or broadcast centers. The four broadcast centers are located in Doha (Qatar), London (United Kingdom), Washington, D.C. (United States), and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and each has its own segment of

the day when it is responsible for what viewers see when they tune in to AJE. While the Doha bureau makes geographical sense given its proximity to the network's headquarters, and London and Washington, D.C. make sense given their propinquity to historic levers of power and major international events, the decision to place its Asian broadcast center in the capital of Malaysia seems unusual, given the number of alternative media hubs for news and international events in the region. Singapore, Jakarta, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Tokyo each enjoy access to important parts of Asia, and each has a different regulatory environment and pool of journalistic talent.

There are a number of explanations for the decision to place AJE's Asian broadcast center in Kuala Lumpur. It is important to note that the bureau is located on the 60th floor of the world-famous Petronas Towers, a location that would be the envy of any news organization. Some have speculated that the emir of Qatar drew on his oil connections with Petronas oil (owned by the Malaysian government) in order to secure a relatively inexpensive lease. Moreover, AJE received assurances from Malaysia's prime minister that the government would not interfere with the organization's broadcasts, assurances that have so far been proven true.¹⁷ The decision by the Malaysian government—and the Petronas oil company—to court AJE is also an interesting one. Given the strength of Al Jazeera's brand as a modern news organization with strong Muslim roots, the Malaysian government may have agreed to house AJE's Asian broadcast center in an effort to simultaneously demonstrate the stable business environment offered by Kuala Lumpur and to appeal to domestic constituencies calling for a closer relationship between the Malaysian government and the Islamic faith.

It is important to note that the Malaysian government maintains tight control over its domestic media environment. The 1984 Printing Press and Publications Act (PPPA) requires all forms of print media to obtain annual licenses from the prime minister's office. These licenses can be revoked at any time, and there is no means of public oversight. Indeed, the PPPA presents much more than an idle threat. In 2006, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi used the law to "prohibit the publication, distribution, or possession of any materials related to the Danish caricatures," a move that resulted in the suspension of the licenses for two different Malaysian newspapers.¹⁸ It should also be noted that even

foreign publications are subject to censorship in Malaysia.

More importantly, the government's heavy-handed approach to dealing with the Danish cartoon affair reinforced widespread fear and, thus, self-censorship amongst Malaysian media outlets. "Self-censorship has been entrenched by a history of political interference in media coverage of issues considered by the government to be against the national interest or 'sensitive.'"¹⁹ Indeed, in July 2006, in response to increased apprehension regarding the "Islamization" of Malaysia, the prime minister banned reporting on race or religion altogether. Sadly, Malaysia's restrictions on broadcast media are even broader. The 1988 Broadcasting Act gives the minister of information expansive discretion to determine "who can own a broadcast station and the type of television service suitable for the Malaysian people."²⁰

On top of these restrictive laws and a media environment that encourages the widespread sanitization of the news, most Malay broadcast and print media are owned or controlled by Media Prima, a media conglomerate that is closely linked to the largest political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Simply put, the media environment of Kuala Lumpur is one that by all indications would seem to be contrary to Al Jazeera's history and mission to "adhere to the journalistic values of honesty, courage, fairness, balance, independence, credibility and diversity, giving no priority to commercial or political considerations over professional ones."²¹

AJE's decision to choose Kuala Lumpur is especially interesting given the network's record of working within unkind media environments. The history of Al Jazeera's news coverage in the Middle East is a story of governmental hostility toward the network and its journalists that has not only made in-depth and on-the-ground reporting difficult in some cases, but also spilled over into diplomatic consequences for the government of Qatar. During its 12-year tenure, the Al Jazeera network has at one point or another been shut out of almost every country in the Middle East.²² Its journalists have been imprisoned, tortured, and killed, and its headquarters has allegedly even been discussed as a possible target of a U.S.-led military strike. And while the organization has been able to persevere despite the onslaught of Arab and Western government hostility, essential to its success has been the legal safe haven of its broadcasting home, Doha. To place one of the broadcast centers in

Malaysia, a country that is openly hostile to Al Jazeera's style of reporting, certainly seems out of place.

MEDIATING CHANGE

Despite outward appearances, Malaysia remains a relatively segmented and heterogeneous society. There are three primary ethnicities: Malay (65 percent), Chinese (26 percent), and Indian (8 percent). Malaysia's political history since independence in 1957 has been one dominated by ethnic Malay interests. Chinese and Indian interests have been represented only through the filter of the ruling political coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), which is dominated by a pro-Malay agenda at the expense of the economic and social well-being of Chinese and Indians living in Malaysia.

Yet, despite divisions, open discussion of the status of racial and religious affairs is thoroughly discouraged. Prime Minister Badawi has suggested that "in this country all of this is secure and the nation understands that religious issues should not rightly be brought up. This is not on the agenda for discussion." He added that "no one should even attempt to test the government's resolve on this issue."²³ However, despite the government's efforts to quiet dissent, there have been a growing number of political opposition groups forming and organizing around their particular religious and/or ethnic interests. Of primary symbolic importance are a growing number of ethnic Indians taking root in Malaysia. Despite their growth in numbers, there is limited Indian representation in the Malaysian parliament or government. Prior to March 2008, only one ethnic Indian had ever served in the Malaysian parliament.

On November 10, 2007, large protests broke out in the heart of downtown Kuala Lumpur. Organized by BERSIH, a coalition of Malaysian opposition political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with the stated aim of reforming the electoral process, up to an estimated 40,000 protestors came out in force in order to draw attention to complaints of government discrimination against minority communities and to call for an end to government corruption and for electoral reform. While the protests began as a peaceful endeavor, Malaysian police quickly tried to quash the protestors and to dissuade people from

joining the demonstrations by using fire hoses and tear gas. The images were stunning, not only for international audiences, but especially for Malaysians. While the Malaysian broadcast and print media failed to cover the protests as anything more than a blip, Al Jazeera English covered the protests live and in detail. While covering them, AJE correspondent Hamish MacDonald was himself physically affected by the tear gas, the consequences of which were jarring for anyone watching. Importantly, earlier that month, AJE had aired a special on its show *People & Power*, which predicted that the escalation of racially related tensions was going to force change—even violent change—in Malaysia.²⁴ Widespread public awareness of the protests, and the police violence that followed, would not have been acknowledged in but a few elite circles had AJE correspondents not been there on the ground to film the events (and in high-definition no less).

AJE's coverage of the protests was significant for several reasons. Internationally, it exposed just how delicate the Malaysian political and social systems are, a fragility that the government had been working to mask for the sake of promoting itself as a safe haven for international economic investment. Domestically, the coverage shattered the credibility of a ruling party that had assured its citizenry that its handling of the protesters used the utmost restraint.

A crucial moment came when the minister of information, Zainuddin Maidin, called AJE to complain about its coverage of the protests. Maidin quickly found himself the subject of a live on-air phone interview for which he was unprepared. He accused Al Jazeera English of “trying to project” an image of Malaysia as an undemocratic country. “We are not Pakistan, we are not Myanmar,” Maidin declared.²⁵ Yet, when asked why the Malaysian police did not break up the protests more peacefully, the minister explained that even the most peaceful public protests were illegal in Malaysia, and thus the police force was justified. Speaking in broken English, and unmistakably perturbed by AJE's decision to broadcast the violent break-up of the protests, Maidin's performance was seen almost universally by the Malaysian citizenry as a disgraceful representation of the country's policies. One Malaysian viewer declared that the interview was “truly embarrassing.” Another added that “anyone could have done a better job than him. There is no way that he will maintain his position as the minister of information after the next election.”²⁶

While some Malaysians expressed concern that the protest and violent images would hurt Malaysia's image abroad, these sentiments were far overwhelmed by the shame felt by Maidin's inarticulate defense of the police's reactions to the peaceful protests.²⁷

The images of the excessive force used against the protestors spread like wildfire. Independent news providers and bloggers posted links to AJE's coverage, and more than 250,000 people watched it on YouTube.com during the first week after the protest. More importantly, a large number of Malaysians saw the images and debated the rally. The large-scale discrepancy between AJE's ample coverage of the protests and the sparser coverage of the Malaysian—largely state-influenced—media resulted in the Malaysian mainstream media's "largest credibility crisis to date."²⁸

The impact of Al Jazeera English's coverage could be seen just 14 days later when a second protest was organized, again calling for an end to the marginalization of Malaysia's ethnic minority community, particularly Indians. The next day, images of the protests were on the front pages of all the domestic newspapers, and local television news carried the protests as well. Importantly, the Malaysian press coverage focused on the damage that the protestors did to public property and the Malay police forces, whereas AJE's coverage explained the purpose of the protests—attaining greater representation and democratic governance—while focusing on the police's use of tear gas and water cannons to "disperse" the protestors.²⁹ Once more, the difference was striking, and Malaysians were once again left wondering about the authenticity of their domestic media sources and the credibility of the governing coalition.

Following the protests, police used the colonial-era Internal Security Act to arrest and detain without trial five leading members of the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), an NGO with a major involvement in the demonstrations. This news was also covered extensively by AJE and the Malaysian blogosphere.³⁰ The arrests soon became rallying points for opposition parties to the ruling coalition and "further fueled the people's distress, especially the Indians, that the government was unprepared to address their concern."³¹ Importantly, the arrests and the protests had now turned the public's attention toward broader issues regarding the efficacy of Malaysian democratic governance, issues that resonated with large segments of the citizenry.

AJE's overall coverage of the events—starting with the rising ethnic tensions within Malaysia, to the police violence, all the way to the final protests—constituted a new type of journalism for Malaysians. AJE did not merely cover the events as they took place, but rather provided background, context, and at times opinions that narrativized the events in a way that helped mobilize opinion against the government. Simply put, AJE became an actor on behalf of the oppositional and nongovernmental forces in Kuala Lumpur, a performance that was instrumental in coalescing diverse groups against the ruling coalition, BN.

In an interview with Dato Manja Ismail, director of Malay publications for Media Prima, the state-run media conglomerate, Ismail described how AJE's coverage of the protests had impacted local media in Kuala Lumpur:

“AJE's coverage of the protests changed how we cover sensitive political issues here. Before, we could not show such images, or tell such tales of government abuse. Now, if we don't we will lose our audience to AJE. I've told the minister of information that, and he understands that things must change.”³²

Moreover, the protests served as an additional spark for Malaysian online independent news sites and the blogosphere. The protests, their participating organizations and agendas, and abuse of the protestors all provided fertile and timely content that was craved by an increasingly skeptical Malaysian public. With more and more Malaysians going online, and with the credibility of the Malaysian public media in question, many Malaysians relied on online content to best determine what was going on in Kuala Lumpur.³³ The combination of credible journalism, carried out by a highly respected network (AJE), and circulated through extensive and increasingly relied-upon electronic networks, would prove to be deadly for the ruling national coalition.

The combined impact that new media technologies and AJE would have on Malaysian politics was made clear four months later, in March 2008. Following the protests, BERSIH and HINDRAF helped to further unite Malaysia's minority communities under the mantra of “people power.” Their goal was clear: to remove from power the incumbent coalition that had been responsible for the police abuse and five decades of alleged discriminatory rule. Drawing heavily on their online resources,

HINDRAF and BERSIH, along with other similarly aligned socially active groups, lobbied heavily for a broad, coordinated strategy that would bring together a diverse group of political opposition powers and mount the strongest challenge to BN at the ballot box.

Despite expert predictions to the contrary, Malaysian voters chose dramatic change in the country's March 2008 elections. The ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time since independence, as well as a number of significant state and local elections.³⁴ The National Justice Party, established in 2003 and organized around the goals of social justice and a nonethnic approach to promoting growth, went from having one representative in parliament to controlling 31 seats. A close ally, the Democratic Action Party, under the banner of promoting a secular, multiracial, and social democratic state, went from controlling 12 seats to 28. Importantly, ending the BN's two-thirds majority in parliament was essential to the objectives of ending corruption and pushing reform in Malaysia, because the absence of this majority prevents the ruling coalition from passing constitutional amendments with free will. Since independence, BN has passed over 650 amendments, many of them meant to further entrench the coalition's political strength.

Moreover, the results of the election may have something of a snowball effect on Malaysian media and politics. According to Gayathri Venkiteswaran of the Center for Independent Journalism, a Malaysia-based NGO focused on expanding freedom of the press, "the electoral setback of the BN despite the pro-BN media is a strong indicator of the public rejecting the media's propagandist approach and [of] the need to change the editorial policy."³⁵ In a telling setback for the incumbent coalition, one of the five Indian activists that it had detained as a result of the November protests, M. Manoharan, was elected to a state legislature. In addition, five active Malaysian bloggers also became newly elected parliamentarians. As one Malaysian scholar noted:

"Malaysia has entered a new era of competitive party politics, moving on from five decades of government that has faced down fragmented and impotent opposition by using the power of the state and media manipulation to maintain the myth that voters should support the Government, or risk societal breakdown. The

Government's ethnicized formula of retaining political power has been put on notice and, as such, politics in Malaysia [are] unlikely to be the same again."³⁶

EVIDENCE OF AN AL JAZEERA EFFECT?

Scholars have correctly acknowledged the difficulty of ever trying to establish clear-cut evidence of the Al Jazeera effect. There are too many factors that influence public opinion and national policy to ever clearly demonstrate that media in general—or a specific media organization—are able to influence public opinion leaders and policymakers.³⁷

That said, this case study of protests and political change in Malaysia offers support for several of the theories outlined earlier. For starters, it is clear that AJE, in union with the Internet and blogosphere, is impacting the way Malaysians think of themselves and the world. One viewer said that "AJE provides a cover for others—bloggers, newspapers, politicians—to say what they want. There is a new freedom of speech that was not here before." Another described AJE's coverage as "courageous, mind-opening for most of us Malaysians. They aired images that are not ever allowed on our TVs and without repercussion."³⁸ There seems to be substantial evidence that AJE's coverage of the protests of November 2007 represents an example of the "decisive triggering role" that media can have "in sharpening democratic and social demands."³⁹

The success of the protests—and the coalescing of political movements that followed—can be explained using Alexander and Jacobs' discussion of mediatized public crisis. A mediatized public crisis is an event that allows larger audiences to see, identify, and construct common identities or "imagined communities" with those who are oppressed or otherwise disenfranchised. In this case, through its ongoing coverage of ethnic tensions in Malaysia, AJE had a role in dramatizing a series of otherwise discrete events into a narrative of systemic discrimination against Malaysia's minorities. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, AJE's performance from within the protests, and its narrativization of them, added a significant layer of dramatization of the discrimination for audiences to identify with. Not only was AJE's Hamish MacDonald directly present and physically harmed in the protests, but AJE's portrayal of the protests as

legitimate, peaceful, and democratically inclined helped further broaden the issue from specific discrimination against non-Malay minorities to larger questions of police violence and democratic governance throughout Malaysia. Importantly, it was this broadening of the issue that provided a means for more expansive discussions among diverse ethnic and political groups regarding the nation's political future. This broadening of the issue was critical for political opposition parties, as it helped enable them to recruit larger support to come together effectively and to challenge the ruling coalition in the March elections.

In terms of actually impacting the election, the role of the Internet and blogosphere cannot be understated. Blogs and online independent newspapers were essential in further disseminating images and stories of the protests, as well as in fostering deliberations regarding how to change the ruling coalition's policies (i.e. through electing new parliamentarians). A U.S. State Department report argued: "Weblogs (blogs), text messages, and copies of Internet-streamed videos became the most influential information sources for voters ahead of Malaysia's March 8 parliamentary elections." Moreover, Dr. Abu Hassan Hasbullah, a professor at the University of Malay, found that "70 percent of voters were influenced by blogs," arguing that the rise in Internet influence stems from the mainstream media's refusal to report on "government corruption or on religious and racial tensions."⁴⁰ Perhaps even more telling is the fact that five bloggers themselves were able to become newly elected parliamentarians.

Thus, in the larger metaphorical conceptualization of the Al Jazeera effect, Malaysia offers an example of how new media technologies can facilitate dramatic political change in semi-authoritarian governments in Southeast Asia and, hopefully, beyond. The Malaysian example may provide an important test case for whether or not Huntington's theorized "demonstration effect" has the potential to take hold and impact democratic movements throughout the region. Interestingly, AJE has recently inked distribution deals in several countries in the region, including Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Indonesia, thereby adding to its global reach—which may currently approach 110 million households worldwide.

With over 130 staff members, a number of exceedingly experienced journalists, seven bureaus throughout Asia, and a relatively significant

budget, it is hard to imagine that AJE's coverage—particularly of local issues—will not challenge government and local media to perform better. And the lesson from Malaysia's 2008 elections, perhaps the nation's most historic political event since its independence in 1957, is that new media, and AJE, matter.

NOTES

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3. For more on Al Jazeera's groundbreaking approach to news in the Middle East, see Mohammed el-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar, *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network That Is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003).

4. In 2007 and 2008, the authors conducted a study of the demographics, worldviews, and cultural dispositions of Al Jazeera English audiences in six countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia. Some of the material in this essay draws on data from that study. Additionally, the authors wish to thank Michael Kugelman for organizing this publication and for the thoughtful comments and revisions he provided for this essay.

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