

Al Jazeera in Central European media: 9/11 and the “Arab Spring” compared



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ABSTRACT: This article presents a study of Al Jazeera perceptions in Central European print media based on a quantitative content analysis. The research compares two year-long periods, which cover the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the “Arab Spring” — two sets of events that drove global attention to the region of Middle East and North Africa and beyond. Building on previous research in this field, the authors analysed 94 different newspapers for perceived affiliations to terrorism, using Al Jazeera as a source of information or the structure of genres in texts mentioning the station among other variables. Special emphasis is put on the case of Libyan revolutionary events.

KEYWORDS: Al Jazeera, 9/11, “Arab Spring,” print content, Central Europe, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Libya



INTRODUCTION

Arabic cable news station Al Jazeera started broadcasting from Doha in 1996. It did not, however, gain immediate attention in non-Arabic speaking countries. Early mentions can be traced back to 1998, when Saddam Hussein chose the station to condemn the bombardment of Iraq (Operation Desert Fox). Two years later, Al Jazeera was recognized for providing news service from Ramallah during the second Intifada (Pfisterer, 2012, p. 82). In Central Europe, its first mention on Czech media can be traced to the summer of 1998, when *Lidove*

*noviny*¹ cited a media analysis originally printed by *The Economist* (*Televizní...*, 1998). Only after 9/11 did the Al Jazeera brand become much more visible in the region and beyond.

By then, numerous governments had already criticized it. Regionally, the Arab governments usually forbade the airing of various talk shows, many of which gave screen time to members of exiled political dissent. Discussions of topics like sex, polygamy, corruption, women's rights and Islamic fundamentalism were regular targets of government criticism. Al Jazeera is thought to be the first Arab media outlet to allow space for the views of Israeli representatives during the second Intifada and beyond (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2003, p. 29). The Government of Qatar received regular complaints from Arab governments regarding Al Jazeera (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009, p. 82). It is worth mentioning that even today, government-owned national TV broadcasters are the primary competitors for satellite news stations with a pan-Arab reach in an environment where TV remains the prime source of news for 78 per cent of Arabs (ACRPS Arab Opinion Index 2012/2013, p. 9). As of May 2014, three Al Jazeera journalists remain detained in Egypt for more than four months, awaiting trial. The charges include "spreading alarming news" (Al Jazeera English, 2014a).

Internationally, it is well known that Colin Powell (The U.S. Secretary of State between 2001–2005) demanded that the Qatari ruling family tame the channel's editorial policy during the early stages of NATO's Afghan² campaign. Donald Rumsfeld (The U.S. Defence Secretary 2001–2006, among other positions) called Al Jazeera "propagandistic and inflammatory," while others labeled it a mouthpiece of terrorism (Meltzer, 2012, p. 664). Similarly, representatives of Western governments (for example, Tony Blair) criticized Al Jazeera heavily during the Iraq campaign. While *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* framed it as a project whose aim was to rebuild the country, Al Jazeera articulated it in terms of conflict and strife using a mostly negative tone (Howard & Hussain, 2013, p. 91). In 2003, the coalition's military jets even bombed the channel's office in Baghdad (Seib, 2005, p. 603).

In the series of anti-regime uprisings in early 2011, the Arab world witnessed an unprecedented set of events. The media played an immensely important role in the process. Al Jazeera's stations became important sources of information from within the countries involved. Before the revolutionary wave, the Jamahyria regime granted Al Jazeera permission to operate, enabling them to cover underreported local issues in Libya. Following the outbreak of the anti-regime uprising, Al Jazeera adopted a pro-revolutionary approach, accusing the regime's forces of using violence while depicting the protesters as peaceful (Behr & Sasnal, 2012, p. 27; Pfisterer,

¹ A traditional newspaper with a liberal conservative background. By then, it was the seventh biggest daily in the Czech Republic.

² Al Jazeera was the only international broadcaster present in Afghanistan by 2001.

2012, p. 67). The Gaddafi regime reacted by blocking all communications tools, including cell phones, television and the internet. However, citizen journalists were still able to provide raw footage from inside the country in many different ways, relying heavily on social networking sites to disseminate their message (Ali & Fahmy, 2013, p. 64). Al Jazeera aired an abundance of such materials and thus became an important source of information. It also re-emerged as a focus for political debate. While Gaddafi labeled it “a tool of Mossad and Zionism;”³ Nancy Pelosi and John McCain — prominent figures of Democratic and Republican parties in the U.S. — “praised Al Jazeera’s role as a catalyst in the Arab Spring” and Hillary Clinton (as widely reported) claimed that it represented the “real news” (Youmans, 2012, p. 65).

Al Jazeera’s competency in this regard was no coincidence. Due to its long history of problems with distribution channels, the Al Jazeera Network has always been keen to innovate in the field of broadcasting methods. Al Jazeera’s YouTube Channel enabled live coverage in English and Arabic, a policy that was only altered recently. The Arabic and English Channels still provide more than 50,000 videos each. The online streaming services have been rerouted to Al Jazeera Network’s own player on their respective websites as well as to services like Livestation.com. Dedicated apps providing the stream can be downloaded on various platforms for both mobile telephones and connected TV’s (Al Jazeera English, 2013). In the context of “networked journalism” (Jarvis, 2006), the social media platforms are used heavily to promote both online content and broadcasting. According to Bruna (2013, p. 5), Al Jazeera had a social media team of 20 employees working in 9 different languages in 2011.

Al Jazeera aims to address both regional and global markets. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it is recognized for a Pan-Arab approach. It is important to mention that its program offerings extend beyond news. Al Jazeera Sports (currently BeIN Sports) is one of the biggest Arabic sports broadcasters (Al Jazeera Sports, 2014) and the JCC offshoot consists of four different programs for children (JCC, 2013). The station claims to reach approximately 40 million viewers while Arabic broadcasting can address up to 300 million Arabs worldwide (Allied Media, 2013). As for other regions, Al Jazeera Balkans went live in 2011 and Al Jazeera Turk started up in 2013. Early in 2013, the Al Jazeera Network announced that Al-Jazeera America — an English speaking channel with a US-based editorial office and own editorial line — would start broadcasting later that year, with 12 offices around the USA, including ones in New York, Detroit and New Orleans (Al Jazeera America, 2014). Despite the extensive launch campaign, the station failed to attract viewers and averages only 19,000 of them in primetime as of March 2014

³ This rhetorical figure is not untypical in the Arab world, especially because the Network provides occasional space for Israeli official positions regarding the Palestinian issue.

national than when it contained Al Jazeera's visual identity (Brown & Youmans, 2012, p. 185).

King and Zayani undertook a content analysis of 200 different English language newspapers from all over the world. With a sample of 400 articles, they analyzed two equally long time periods before and after the launch of Al Jazeera English in late 2006. Research questions were aimed at the perceived affiliation of both Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Jazeera English to terrorism and violence in four macro-regions. Other areas covered the tone of Al Jazeera mentioning, page placement of the mentions and other variables. They found that the degrees to which newspapers associated Al Jazeera English with terrorism were very similar in North America and Europe, but significantly lower than in Asia (including the Middle East). In Europe, 11 per cent of mentions associated Al Jazeera with terrorism (King & Zayani, 2008, pp. 34–36).

As mentioned above, a substantial body of literature is devoted to the relationship between Al Jazeera and the ruling Al Thani family. Zayani posits that topics covered by Al Jazeera do not usually match the agenda of Qatari foreign policy (Zayani, 2005, p. 13). This, however, was definitely not the case during the "Arab Spring." Qatar was a prominent supporter of the revolutions, lobbying in the Arab League for international intervention in Libya and Syria and even sending hundreds of ground troops to Libya in clear violation of the UNSC Resolution 1973 (Al Arabyia, 2011). This supports the perception of Al Jazeera as an enhancement to Qatari public diplomacy (Seib, 2012, p. 195). After more than 15 years on air, the "soft power" (see Nye, 2004) argument is further supported by the fact that, despite the formally private form of ownership, the network simply does not work as a business model. Various studies (see for instance Zayani, 2005; Pintak & Ginges, 2009; Figenschou, 2014) have shown that the Qatari royal family subsidizes the channels beyond initial launching loans, not to mention their huge investments in new stations (500 million USD) to acquire Current TV early in 2013 (see Sherman & Palmeri, 2013) and other accompanying costs. The replacement of Director General Wadah Khanfar with Sheikh Ahmed bin Jassim Al Thani in September 2011 is regarded as detrimental to the journalistic credibility of Al Jazeera Network and as a move to cement its place in Qatar's public diplomacy apparatus. Referring to the above-mentioned Al Jazeera Network editorial values, Figenschou coins the term *strategic contra flow* when describing the organization's relationship with the country's Government (Figenschou, 2014, p. 164).

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to examine Al Jazeera's impact in Central Europe during two periods within a single decade. These time periods were chosen with respect to 9/11 and the "Arab Spring" — two major events (or rather sets of events) that brought global attention to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and to Al Jazeera

itself. The first period (Period 1) extends from August 1, 2001 to July 31, 2002 while the second period (Period 2) takes into account August 1, 2010–July 31 2011. A small amount of verification data was also collected for 2013 (Period 3).

The researchers used various national databases to conduct a systematic content analysis of newspaper coverage of Al Jazeera in four Central European countries — Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The unit of analysis was any mention of Al Jazeera published in any part of the newspapers, with respect to national language specifics (for instance *al-Dzsazíra* in Hungary). As the keyword is highly specific, the given results were of high relevance in all countries. For Period 1, the searches yielded 665 articles in all four countries together. In Period 2, 820 articles were taken into account.

Due to minor problems with data digitization in Period 1 — the researcher in Poland did not have online access to all data from 2001 — a small part of the data gathering was conducted from traditionally archived materials. For this reason, the researchers cannot state definitively that every usage of the term Al Jazeera in all four countries was included in the analysis but, that said, the vast majority was certainly covered. In the two main periods, the research relies on the entire body of collected articles, not on a randomly chosen set of samples. For Period 3, 120 pieces of verification data were chosen randomly with a respected randomizing tool.⁴

Altogether, the data stems from 94 different media outlets, with the majority of articles coming from daily newspapers in all the countries in question (*SME, Pravda, Novy Cas* from Slovakia; *Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita, Polska. The Times* from Poland; *Magyar Nemzet, Nepszabadsag, Nepszava* from Hungary; *MF Dnes, Lidove noviny* and *Pravo* from the Czech Republic among others). The data was examined in the context of independent and dependent variables, some of which were suggested in previous research materials that focused on Al Jazeera in newspapers (see King & Zayani, 2008) and other media formats (Figenschou, 2010). Independent variables included the name of the newspaper, country of publication, type of newspaper, date of publication, page location, headline indicator and article genre. Dependent variables included the reason for mentioning Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera as a source of information, airing of a videotape by Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera as a medium etc.); source relevance (Al Jazeera is not a source, Al Jazeera is the main source, Al Jazeera is one of two main sources, Al Jazeera is one of more sources); the main source in the article (various news agencies etc.); the tone towards Al Jazeera (neutral, positive, rather positive, rather negative, negative); affiliation to terrorism; attribute (none, Qatari, Arab, Pan-Arab), comparison to CNN. Main topic of the article and main “Object Al Jazeera” (if a certain person has reason to mention Al Jazeera) were covered with more than 35 respective variable values each. Two other variables were envisioned but omitted due to lack of data.

⁴ The tool available at www.randomizer.org was used.

The different characteristics of all respective markets and the number of texts in each of the four countries were not the same (for instance 119 texts for Slovakia and 294 texts for Hungary in Period 2) so relative measures were used throughout the analysis.

HYPOTHESES

Based on preliminary findings, three hypotheses were proposed for the purposes of the research. In light of the “Arab Spring” events and the associated media discourse, the researchers hypothesize a shift in the media perception of Al Jazeera in Central European media. That would also include a parallel transformation in the media’s approach to dealing with materials connected to the Al Jazeera Network. Following the findings of King and Zayani (2008), the perceived affiliation of Al Jazeera to terrorism was estimated to be significantly lower in Period 2 than in Period 1. As the brand became much more prolific after 2001, various other differences were anticipated. A thorough analysis will establish baseline attitudes towards the network.

Hypothesis 1: During the 10 years between 2001 and 2011, a significant shift has occurred in the perception of Al-Jazeera among Central European media.

The researchers expected that, among other factors, the founding of Al Jazeera English would play a significant role in the way Al Jazeera Network content is used. It was expected that the prospective restraint of using Al Jazeera Network as a source has lowered, especially due to the varying contexts of international politics and, most importantly, the existence of Al Jazeera English. A broader variety of topics, reaching beyond just the MENA region and Afghanistan was expected to be mentioned along with Al Jazeera. This would provide a more stable distribution of mentions throughout time.

Hypothesis 2: Central Europe’s print media use Al-Jazeera as a relevant source for a broader variety of topics more often in Period 2 than in Period 1.

The third hypothesis is connected to Period 2 exclusively. While compiling the research materials, it appeared that the media’s agenda was often connected to the situation in Libya. Obviously, the researchers expected the number of texts dealing with the “Arab Spring” to be high. However, the data was not collected with the aim of covering the events as such, but only through the “filter” of being mentioned in the context of Al Jazeera or being directly linked to it. Overrepresentation of the Libyan uprising in the data was hypothesized, with the accompanying agenda-setting effect of Al Jazeera.

Hypothesis 3: In texts that examine the “Arab Spring,” the uprising in Libya is strongly overrepresented.

FINDINGS

Period 1: 9/11

In Period 1, 665 pieces of data published in 168 days were analyzed. This represents an average of 4 articles a day in which Al Jazeera was mentioned. Most of the texts (91 per cent) came from dailies. The newspaper with the most mentions overall was the Czech *Pravo*, with 70 texts. In other countries this included *SME* in Slovakia (52 texts), *Gazeta Wyborcza* (40 texts) and *Nepszabadsag* (54 texts). The most common reason for mentioning Al Jazeera (35 per cent of all cases) was the airing of a videotape. By that time, Al Jazeera had aired multiple videotapes featuring Osama bin Laden or other Al Qaeda affiliated terrorists. Whenever Al Jazeera published a new videotape, the frequency of mentions soared. Highest numbers (27 and 28 texts) were achieved on October 8, 2001 and November 5, 2001, on days that Osama bin Laden took responsibility for the 9/11 attacks and criticized the UN via videotapes. The pattern of mentions was almost identical in all four countries (see Figure 1). The other sharp peaks, including December 28, 2001, April 16, 2002 and June 24, 2002) are also connected to videotapes or Osama bin Laden.

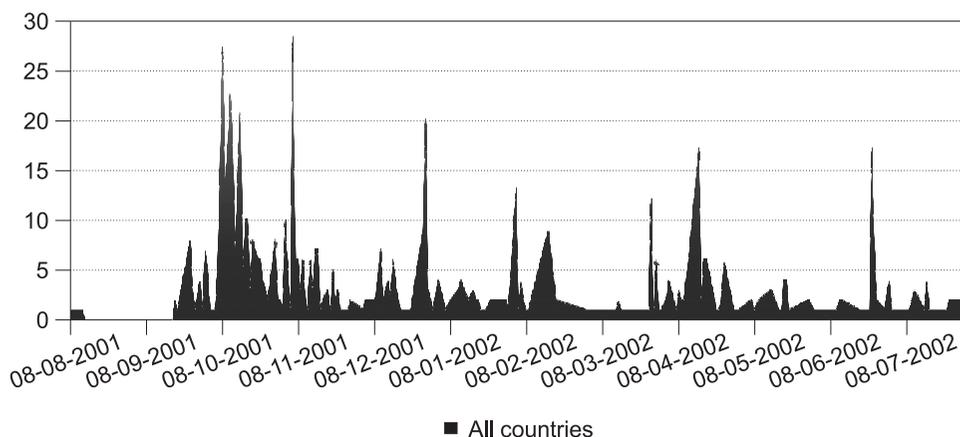


Figure 1. Text frequency distribution in the period of 9/11 analysis (based on 665 texts analysed) (in number of pieces)

Source: authors.

A connection was suggested between Al Jazeera and terrorism or terrorists in 51 per cent of the cases overall. Osama bin Laden (31 per cent) or other Al Qaeda officials were most commonly regarded as the “Object Al Jazeera.” Most of the arti-

cles discussed a topic connected to the events following 9/11 and the Afghan war. While the military situation in Afghanistan was the subject of substantial coverage in Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland, the Slovak media did not refer to the topic while mentioning Al Jazeera. Beyond that, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was subject to relevant coverage mentioning the station. A total of 96 texts mentioning the station were published on the front page, with more than half originating in the Czech Republic. Al Jazeera was mentioned 42 times in article headlines, with the least number of mentions originating from Hungarian newspapers. Overall, 90 per cent of the articles were about “the global South.”

Despite their persistent implication of a link between Al Jazeera and terrorism, most of the published texts had a neutral tone towards the network. Unlike the timeline distribution, these statistics were rather country-specific. Hungary (93 per cent) and Czech Republic (84 per cent) had a significantly higher number of neutral texts than Slovakia and Poland (68 per cent in both cases). This finding correlates with genre distribution in the respective countries (see Table 1). The two countries with higher numbers of opinionated articles yielded a lower count of news items and a higher count of analytical texts, longer texts dedicated to Al Jazeera and columns. If any judgment of Al Jazeera was present, it was negative or rather negative in 58 per cent of cases. Polish print published the biggest number of in-depth texts comprising more than 1000 words. The Slovak media was the most critical of the four.

Table 1. Text genre distribution in the period of 9/11 analysis (based on 665 texts analysed) (in per cent)

	CZECH REP.	HUNGARY	POLAND	SLOVAKIA
News	67	71	45	27
Analysis	8	1	7	0
Report	0	5	6	26
„Briefly”	12	16	9	19
Column	6	5	6	15
Personal profile / Medallion	1	1	0	0
Interview	3	1	1	1
Other	0	0	0	2
Paper	3	2	26	10

Source: authors.

The number of texts considering Al Jazeera as a source of information is relatively high in the light of previous findings — 33 per cent of pieces of news saw Al Jazeera cited as a source. Again, the results were country-specific. Slovak media rarely relied on information provided by the station. Up to 85 per cent of texts had a different reason for mentioning Al Jazeera. The majority of mentions in the Czech media were not source driven either. If Al Jazeera was used as a source, it would mostly be in conjunc-

tion with other valuable sources and was rarely the primary citation. On the other hand, Polish and Hungarian media (especially *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita* and *Nepszabadsag*) were enthusiastic about using Al Jazeera as a source of information. Al Jazeera being cited as the main source of the information in the article was actually the most common of all source elaborations in Hungary (42 per cent of all source uses).

The particular attribute used before the term “Al Jazeera” provides an interesting insight into media perceptions. The name of the network was accompanied by an attribute in 79 per cent of the texts. In most cases (61 per cent of all the texts) within all four countries, Al Jazeera was considered a “Qatari” station, the highest proportion of such descriptions coming from the Czech Republic. “Arab” was the second most popular attribute and used most often in Poland. A very low number of mentions (57) compared Al Jazeera with CNN — the highest count of articles using the term “Arab CNN” came from the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Period 2: the “Arab Spring”

In Period 2, 820 pieces of data from 216 days were analyzed — the number of days Al Jazeera was mentioned within the period was higher by 28 per cent when compared to Period 1. The average number of published articles a day remained roughly the same. On the other hand, the number of texts originating from dailies dropped slightly (82 per cent). *Magyar Nemzet* published the most texts (57) featuring a mention of Al Jazeera. The highest number of texts was very similar in each country (46 texts for Slovak *SME*, 50 for *Gazeta Wyborcza* and 55 for *Pravo*).

Chronologically speaking, texts were clustered closely together in Period 2. Up to 65 per cent of all Al Jazeera mentions were published between January 25, 2011 and April 4, 2011. As suggested in Figure 2, this period was characterized by longer stretches with frequent mentions of Al Jazeera. Events in Egypt yielded 87 mentions between January 31, 2011 and February 5, 2011 while events in Libya garnered 75 mentions between February 21, 2011 and February 24, 2011. Most Al Jazeera-connected articles were published on February 22, 2011 following speculation about an air raid in Tripoli and Gaddafi’s alleged escape to Venezuela. Again, the pattern of mentions was very similar, with only a few statistically irrelevant country-specific topics (e.g. news about Yemen’s political situation in the Czech Republic — June 6, 2011). The other two spikes with more than 20 texts a day were almost exclusively connected to the events in Libya. Again, 90 per cent of the articles had a connection to “the global South.” The only relevant topic beyond “current events in MENA” would be the publishing of diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks.

Al Jazeera served as a source of information in 62 per cent of all cases (more than 80 per cent in the case of *Magyar Nemzet*), almost doubling the corresponding figure from Period 1. Most commonly, it was regarded as one of many sources used in the article, especially in Poland. The Hungarian print media’s approach was, once again, a bit different; Al Jazeera was used as the main source of information significantly

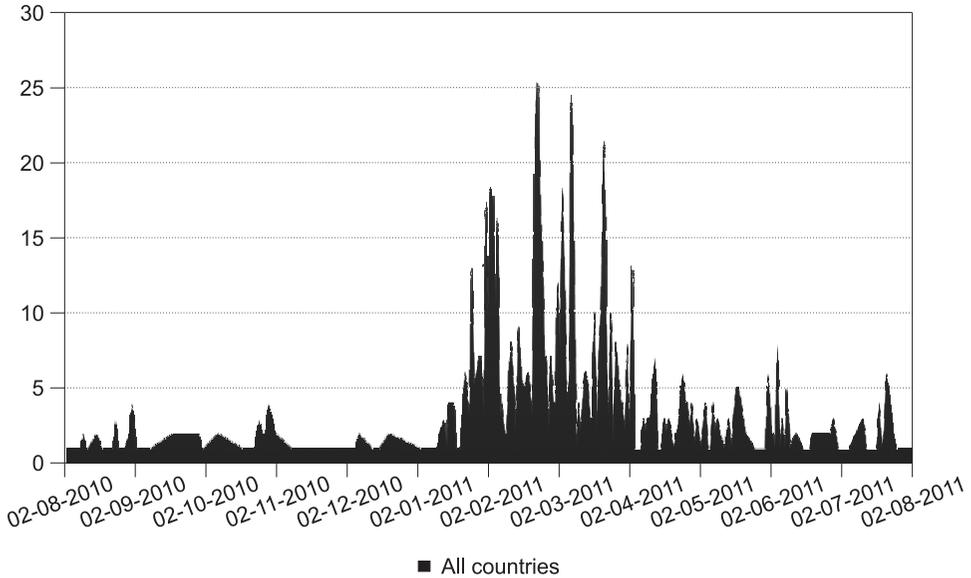


Figure 2. Text frequency distribution in the period of the “Arab Spring” analysis (based on 820 texts analysed) (in number of pieces)

Source: authors.

more than in the other three countries. The Slovak media was quite reluctant to use Al Jazeera as a source of information again (42 per cent of mentions for *SME*, 45 per cent for *Pravda*), being the only country where other reasons for mentioning Al Jazeera prevailed. The presence of Al Jazeera as a source was particularly significant in the context of the “Arab Spring.” Al Jazeera’s role in informing about the anti-regime uprisings accounts for more than 50 per cent of all mentions. Despite the higher count of texts in Period 2, mentions of Al Jazeera on the front page was less frequent — again, more than half of such mentions came from the Czech Republic (typically, *Pravo*).

Fundamental change was observed while assessing Al Jazeera’s perceived affiliation to terrorism. This time, only 6 per cent of the texts made that association. Most of these had a connection to the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011. “Objects Al Jazeera” got rather blurred; no particular individuals were strongly connected to Al Jazeera besides its own journalists. Biased/opinionated articles were a minority, with the highest share found in the Polish media (29 per cent). “Rather positive” and “rather negative” judgements were balanced, yielding a very similar number of articles. Usually, no attribute was appended to mentions of Al Jazeera (65 per cent). If so, “Qatari” and “Arab” would account for most (29 per cent together). Almost no comparisons were made to CNN.

Another substantial shift was observed with regard to the genres and lengths of the articles. Most significantly, the number of reports was much higher, except in the Czech Republic. More texts (15 per cent) came from weekly newspapers. The

genre component suggests more elaborate journalistic endeavours, including introductory papers (where Al Jazeera itself is usually the topic) and analytical articles. This is confirmed by a larger number of long texts with 500 or more words (40 per cent of all texts). Every fourth Polish article mentioning Al Jazeera was longer than 1,000 words (*Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita*). The Slovak media (thanks mostly to *Pravda*) produced the highest number of columns (see Table 2).

Table 2. Text genre distribution in the period of the “Arab Spring” analysis (based on 665 texts analysed) (in per cent)

	CZECH REP.	HUNGARY	POLAND	SLOVAKIA
News	56	54	32	40
Analysis	13	2	9	2
Report	9	22	32	22
„Briefly”	9	14	5	12
Column	6	2	3	20
Personal profile / Medallion	3	2	3	1
Interview	2	1	1	1
Other	2	1	0	0
Paper	1	1	21	3

Source: authors.

As suggested above, the phenomenon of “the Arab Spring” and the implication of its association with Al Jazeera by Central European print media had to be assessed with a special focus. In the data collation process, uprisings in 6 different countries (Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen) were followed separately, along with four other analogous topics (such as “Media impact on the Arab spring” and others). The analysis yielded a very strong result. Out of a total of 820 texts, 576 (70 per cent) mentions were directly connected to the revolutionary events. Three quarters of those involved citing Al Jazeera as the source of information. Perhaps most importantly, almost 50 per cent of all the “Arab Spring” mentions in all four countries were devoted to a single topic — the uprising in Libya. Out of the total count of all texts, 30 per cent of Al Jazeera mentions served to provide new information on current events in the country. The Libyan topic prevailed in all four Central European states. The long succession of revolutionary events in Libya (including the various military reversals, NATO’s imposition of a no-fly zone and other developments through to fall 2011) did not actually play a strong role in the distribution of mentions, as 90 per cent of them were found in a six-week period between February 21, 2011 and April 4, 2011. More than 20 texts a day were published multiple times about events in Libya — a far greater frequency of mentions than that associated with any other topic. The second-most discussed topic was the uprising in Egypt, which prompted fewer than half the number of articles produced on Libya.

Period 3: 2013

In the last period of our research, the data was collected with the aim of verification. A diverse range of genres remains, including a high number of reports. Longer texts with more than 500 words scored up to 35 per cent. Shorter notices mentioning Al Jazeera were published. While there were fewer citations of Al Jazeera as a source (perhaps due to the absence of a strong MENA topic for Central European media), the medium itself was the reason for mentions in 50 per cent of cases. The terrorism connection further declined to 4 per cent of the articles. Judgments (if present) were balanced, with a slight majority of negative assessments. Attributes were absent in two-thirds of cases. The diversity of topics increased. The largest proportion of articles was devoted to political turmoil in Egypt (24 per cent). This fits with the original pattern. However, almost 20 per cent of the texts were not actually connected to the MENA region. Thus, most of the trends were confirmed and some evolved in the ways hypothesized for Period 2.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, implications regarding Al Jazeera's agenda-driven affiliation to terrorism; according to Zingarelli (2010, p. 76), Al Jazeera aired the videotape because it found it newsworthy witnessed a sharp decline between the two main periods. This was in line with our research hypothesis. The percentage of such mentions shrank from 51 per cent to just 6 per cent, which is even less than King and Zayani found to be typical of European print media (King & Zayani, 2008, p. 33). At the same time, the citing of Al Jazeera as a source of information became a more common trend in Period 2, even more so with regard to certain topics. A slightly higher number of texts adopted a neutral tone while referring to the station (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of the two main periods with each other and with the findings of King and Zayani, 2008 (per cent)

Table 1	Period 1	Period 2	King & Zayani (2008)
Perceived terrorism affiliation	51	6	11
Neutral tone	81	85	56
Source	33	61	not applicable

Source: authors. Data based on 665 texts in Period 1, and 820 texts in Period 2.

The genre makeup was significantly more sophisticated in Period 2 than in Period 1. Al Jazeera was often analyzed in longer texts as opposed to brief mentions in straightforward news items (often with a high incidence of agency sourcing), a tendency often prompted by the airing of videotapes. The data suggests that the brand became much more prolific, as it is not usually accompanied by an explicatory at-

tribute. The perception of Al Jazeera as “Arab” rather than “Qatari” intensified. The general number of mentions reveals that the relationship between the Government of Qatar and Al Jazeera was largely ignored in both periods; a qualitative approach might provide stronger results.

The time distribution of mentions was largely consistent in all four countries, spiking significantly at certain moments and yielding a relatively low total of mentions when no major events occurred in the MENA region. This means that none of the Central European countries have a specific foreign news agenda for the Middle East. Country-specific elaborations include a lasting reluctance to use Al Jazeera as a source of information. The data reveals a larger share of opinionated texts in Slovakia; a high incidence of Al Jazeera sourcing in Hungary; the highest total of long analytical texts published in Poland and the biggest share of front page positioning in the Czech Republic. Although this would be a very preliminary finding worthy of further research it seems that newspapers positioning themselves as liberal-left leaning (such as *Pravo*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Pravda*, *Nepszabadsag*) tend to mention (and, occasionally, source) Al Jazeera more often.

Overall, the media in all four countries share many common tendencies with regards to Al Jazeera. As apparent from the genre analysis in both Period 1 and Period 2, Hungary and the Czech Republic share similar characteristics on the one hand and Poland with Slovakia on the other. A high proportion of plain news articles is typical for Hungary and the Czech Republic. Czech media used agency content the most in both main periods. In Hungary and the Czech Republic, regional dailies published by the same publisher often have common pages, including foreign affairs news. While the number of news articles shrank in Poland and got higher in Slovakia, it was still lower than in the other two countries. As the data probably shows, Slovakia is the only country with an apparent tradition of columns in foreign affairs. Polish media produced the biggest share of reports in Period 2. When combined with country-specific lengthy papers and analytical texts, it indicates the most complex coverage of “Arab Spring” events among the four nations.

Obviously, internal factors beyond the scope of this article played a significant role. None of the countries has a significant Arab or Muslim minority — a variable that could possibly affect the results. Furthermore, hostile views towards Arabs and Muslims were surveyed in the region, which can affect the perceptions of Al Jazeera. Poland even has openly Catholic broadsheet media, something uncommon in the other countries. The researchers hypothesize that social conservatism could have played a role in Period 1, especially in terms of sourcing reluctances. Even now, Al Jazeera is not established as a prolific brand among the public or an everyday source of information for journalists.

Contrary to the hypothesized expectations, the range of topics linked to Al Jazeera is derived from the momentous occurrences in the MENA region (and, perhaps, Afghanistan). The only statistically relevant topic that has no connection to the “South” was the WikiLeaks agenda in Period 2, but the article count was still quite low.

Sourcing Al Jazeera English (which accounts for around 40 per cent of non-southern agenda mentions, according to Figenschou, 2010, p. 91) in multiple contexts has not become part of production routines; Al Jazeera is not used as a source regardless of the agenda. The verification data from Period 3 indicates possible evolution of the agenda scheme, but this has to be validated by further data gathering and research.

The strong agenda-setting role of Al Jazeera for the Libyan uprising was confirmed. Such findings correspond with existing literature, thus highlighting the “Al Jazeera moment” (Youmans, 2012, p. 64; Figenschou, 2014, p. 21). Again, the literature emphasizes the impact of Al Jazeera English in particular. It was not possible to distinguish between various Al Jazeera offshoots in this content analysis — the Central European print barely mentions them (“according to the “Al Jazeera server” at best). Despite this, out of all the MENA-centric agendas that emerged in early 2011, this single topic stood out as the most definitive attribute of the entire phenomenon.

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