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The US media benefited from Al-Jazeera's unique capacity to report from inside Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries inhospitable to, or untrusting of, western media and broadcast these materials to a wider western audience; and they were also keen to rebroadcast video releases delivered to Al-Jazeera from Osama bin Laden given the huge public interest in these. Content-sharing deals with Al-Jazeera and other non-western networks, therefore, increasingly complexify the tendency to characterize the media in bipolar terms of 'mainstream' and 'alternative' ... So called 'contra-flows', or 'reverse flows' of media products from disadvantaged and former colonized countries to diasporic and mainstream audiences in former colonizer countries have long been observed in entertainment media — soaps, pop music, cinema - but these emergent flows have yet to be fully explored in respect of contemporary developments in news media and other forms of factual television (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen 1998; Volkmer 2002). Al-Jazeera as well as other 24/7 global news networks such as CNN broadcast content originating from outside western countries and cultures, and thereby expand, or at least inflect, to some appreciable degree the range and breadth of views on world events. To what extent this truly constitutes a 'global public sphere' (Volkmer 1999, 2002), however, remains more debatable.

Much depends on how or in what ways content originating elsewhere becomes replayed, reappropriated and repositioned by the receiving medium and this demands careful empirical analysis (Azran 2004). Nonetheless, the broadcasting media environment today is reconfiguring and the Internet with its profusion of different journalism sites and so called 'blogospheres' renders the control and containment of ideas and images increasingly difficult (see Figure 1). And here, as we have already heard, Al-Jazeera as well as other emergent regional and global networks are beginning to make themselves felt in the new media environment and have disseminated images and ideas that western governments and interests may prefer to see controlled and censored ...

Adel Iskander and Mohammed El-Nawawy argue in their study of Al-Jazeera that this Arab-based network has been no less than a 'hurricane in the media landscape' and they coin the phrase 'contextual objectivity' to make sense of its particular journalistic stance and presentation. The latter, they suggest, seeks to provide 'objective' news reports, dissociated from obvious partisanship and political interests, while nonetheless recognizing and responding to its target Arab audience and its cultural expectations. This dualism of journalistic identity, summed up in the authors' use of the image of the Minotaur, half beast, half human, is not peculiar, they argue, to Al-Jazeera — it has just become more visible when viewed from the taken-for-granted standpoints of the West:

Contextual objectivity, the perpetual tension between the decontextualized message of the news deliverer and the nuanced and coloured perceptions of the receiver of news messages, can be witnessed on virtually every news bulletin of war on every media outlet in the world today, not the least CNN and Al-Jazeera. It permeates every story, and has become increasingly emblematic of the struggles for the construction of mediated messages.

(Iskander and El-Nawawy 2004: 321)

In a context in which Arab views and evaluations predominate and where scenes of bloodshed and oppression have long emanated from occupied Palestine, it is not surprising that gruesome images from the invasion of Iraq would figure prominently in both Al-Jazeera's presentation as well as their audience's evaluations. Al-Jazeera undoubtedly represents a significant development, both regionally and internationally, in terms of global and diasporic news flows and contra-flows and implicitly, sometimes explicitly, challenges western news claims to 'objectivity'.

A further development also underlines the increasingly porous nature of today's media ecology where government attempts at propagandistic control and containment of controversial war images have not gone unchallenged. A spate of critical and oppositional TV documentaries and independent films has made it into the mainstream media and distribution outlets. Most notably perhaps are the television programmes, books, films, videos, DVDs and website of the US director/producer Michael Moore.

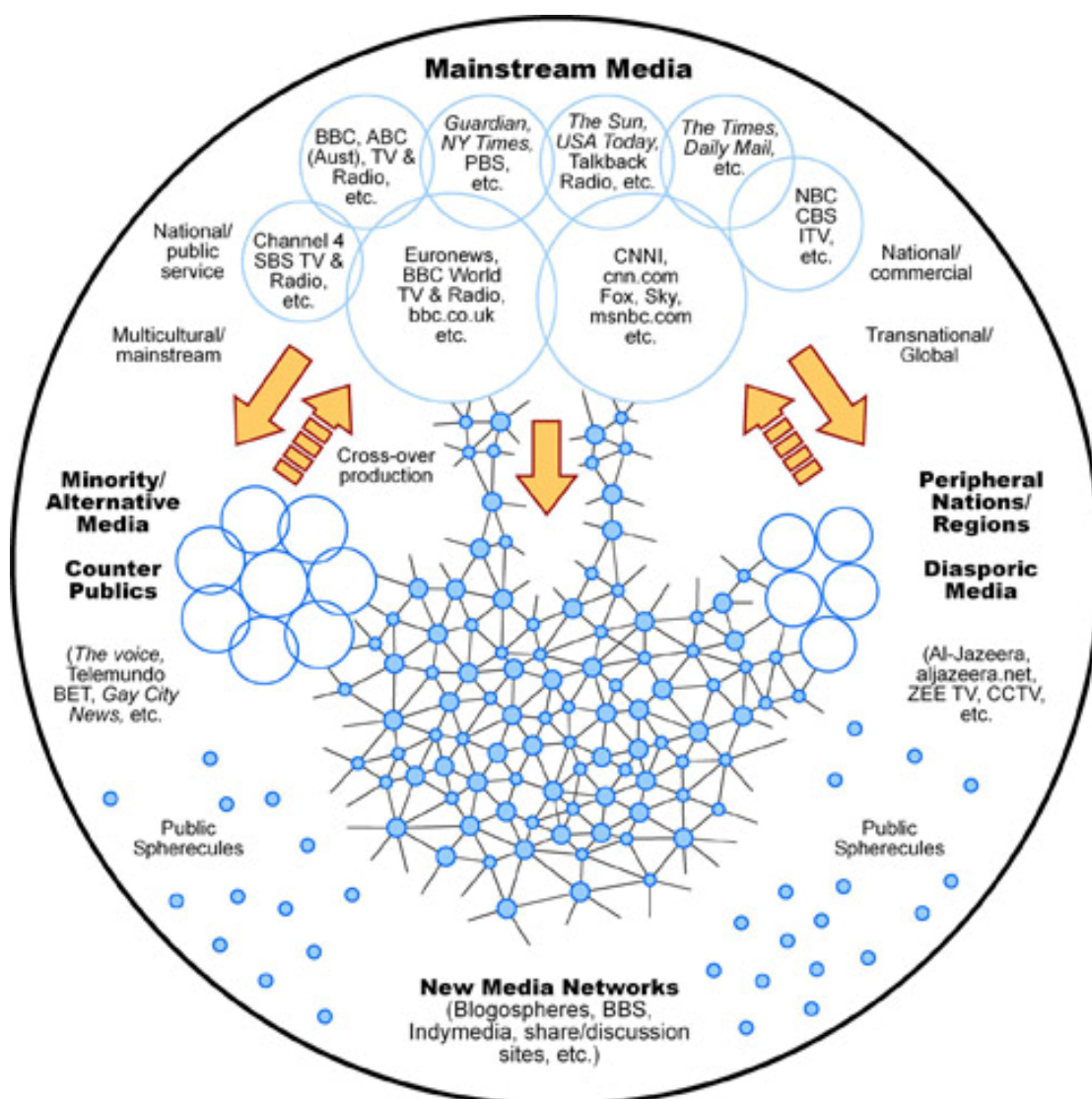
Delivered in the guise of satire, polemical critique and popular entertainment, Moore's productions have proved to be extraordinarily successful in reaching mainstream audiences. Films like *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) have delivered caustic critiques of US culture, politics and economic power and become box-office successes before moving on to generate significant video and DVD sales and replays on major TV networks in different countries. Moore's inimitable style blending genres of journalism and entertainment, evident in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, also contributes to today's transformation of 'visibility' and poses a challenge to the 'symbolic violence', the silences and annihilations, distortions and deceits, encoded within mainstream representations following the events of 9/11 and continuing with the US War on Terror. As the back cover of Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* DVD describes:

Moore uses his characteristically deft humour and uniquely persistent style to launch an unflinching inquiry into the Bush government's foreign policy. Combining rare footage, expert testimony and his one-of-a-kind dogged hunt for answers to tough questions, Moore takes on the burning issues facing America today. His camera turns a skeptical lens on President George W. Bush and his inner circle that ignored the Saudi connection to 9/11 and instead rushed headlong toward war on Iraq.

Cross-over films such as *Control Room* (Director/producer Jehane Noujaim, 2004) have also proved extremely successful in terms of audience reach and in this case provide an inside view of Al-Jazeera's difficult, occasionally dangerous, struggles to broadcast their distinctive news. Popular documentaries such as *Out Foxed* (Director/producer Robert Greenwald, 2004) have also exposed and criticized Rupert Murdoch's US Fox News channel for its overt political agenda setting, shoddy journalistic practices and partisan support for the Bush administration and its global War on Terror. And a number of other hard-hitting documentaries produced in different countries but broadcast internationally and thereby maximizing audiences, have also exposed and criticized the propaganda strategies of the coalition in the lead-up, conduct and post-invasion stages of the Iraq war. Together they point to the existence of meaningful media spaces that can still be found and won within today's increasingly commercialized media sphere.

Current affairs and documentary TV, though under considerable pressures – commercial, political and cultural – arguably remain democratizing assets in the broadcasting repertoire of communicative forms as we have already heard, and emergent contra-flows and commercially successful cross-over films can also occasionally buck dominant marketplace trends (Thussu 2000; McChesney 2003). The struggles over images and ideas conducted in the media today take place in an increasingly complex global media ecology (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Media Sphere (public sphere(s) and public screens)



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