

# Researching Media & Communication: Research Report Assessment

## Part 1: Critically Reporting on Existing Research

In her paper ‘*Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials,*’ media scholar and researcher, Tine Ustad Figenschou makes use of analyses into the media relations practices of the Al Jazeera Network in order to investigate the complexities of researching and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies.<sup>1</sup> Here, Figenschou writes within the existing field of research on public relations strategies and interviewing elite informants that is also characterised by the wider context of authoritarian power structures in the Arab Gulf. Furthermore, the paper is informed by similar research into Al Jazeera’s internal structure from contemporaries such as Mohammed Zayani and Hugh Miles.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, in this study, Figenschou highlights that the subject in question is both “under-researched” and steeped in “transnational and global complexity that demands increased recognition and theorisation”, which are notions that have seemingly prompted Figenschou’s desire to conduct her own

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<sup>1</sup> Ustad Figenschou, T. (2010) *Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies*. Media, culture & society. 32 (6), pp. 961–978. doi:10.1177/0163443710379667.

<sup>2</sup> Zayani, M. and S. Sahraoui (2007) *The Culture of Al Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

<sup>3</sup> Miles, H. (2005) *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel that is Challenging the West*. New York: Grove Press.

research into the matter.<sup>4</sup> What's more, Figenschou suggests that Al Jazeera is a "fascinatingly unpredictable and unconventional media organisation" and one that has been "surrounded by controversy" since its inception; ideas that may also have engendered Figenschou's intrigue into this topic.<sup>5</sup>

In order to carry out her research for this paper, Figenschou exclusively employs the methodology of conducting and recording comprehensive interviews with high-ranking staff at Al Jazeera. To adequately inform her research, Figenschou orchestrates sixty of such interviews, all preformed in the English language, that are accomplished over the course of three separate visits to Qatar between 2003 and 2010. These interviews all take place in the Qatari capital of Doha, where Al Jazeera's headquarters are located, and are executed in both public locations such as cafeterias, cafes, restaurants and hotel lobbies, and more intimate settings such as meetings rooms and marketing offices. Figenschou approaches these interviews in a way that ignores the condescending and arrogant attitudes of some of her informants and its questions are formulated in a way that promotes open discussion. Interviews are utilised as the sole methodological approach for this research due to several critical factors: Firstly, Figenschou emphasises the crucial challenge of access into Al Jazeera's newsroom and details the perception amongst its executives that observational fieldwork cannot be performed as it necessarily concerns the scrutiny of 'sensitive' information such as "company strategy, production policy and political matters".<sup>6</sup> As a result of this, interviews are essential for

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<sup>4</sup> Ustad Figenschou, T. (2010) *Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies*. Media, culture & society. 32 (6), pp. 967 & 962. doi:10.1177/0163443710379667.

<sup>5</sup> Ustad Figenschou, T. (2010) *Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies*. Media, culture & society. 32 (6), P. 961. doi:10.1177/0163443710379667.

<sup>6</sup> Ustad Figenschou, T. (2010) *Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies*. Media, culture & society. 32 (6), P. 963. doi:10.1177/0163443710379667.

research into Al Jazeera since researchers are not authorised to observe or investigate any of its internal mechanisms or quotidian procedures. Additionally, the paper highlights the significance of the Arab Gulf context in which the Al Jazeera Network is situated and stresses that the values and organisation of the network are reflective of Arab cultural practices, a notion which Figenschou argues is a contributing factor to a limited access for outside researchers. What's more, Figenschou cites the importance of Qatari political structures as a reason for limited access into Al Jazeera since the network is directly financially dependent on the Qatari Emir (Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani) and is designed in order to "increase [the Qatari governing elite's] own legitimacy" rather than to undertake any sort of democratisation reform, thus its acceptance of outside research is reluctant and highly controlled.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the paper suggests that a lack of relevant statistical data, such as audience figures and funding structures, and a lack of independent, critical social research in the Arabic field of study on media necessitates the use of interview methodology since scholars must turn to media organisations themselves in order to effectively understand the complexities of Arab media. Moreover, Figenschou outlines Al Jazeera's deeply controversial status amongst global media networks and details the extensive regional and foreign criticism of the organisation, including the accusations that it is "pro-Israeli, that it is Arab nationalist and that it is supportive of Osama bin Laden" in order to explain its limited access for visiting researchers since the network conducts its media relations strategies in a defensive and reactive manner that is intended to protect its public image from further erosion.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the limitations placed on access for researchers visiting Al Jazeera is also suggested in this paper to be as a result of the network's

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<sup>7</sup> Ustad Figenschou, T. (2010) *Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies*. Media, culture & society. 32 (6), P. 965. doi:10.1177/0163443710379667.

<sup>8</sup> Ustad Figenschou, T. (2010) *Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies*. Media, culture & society. 32 (6), P. 968. doi:10.1177/0163443710379667.

bureaucratic and organisational composition which is noted as being inconsistent, making communicating professionally with media relations staff at the organisation especially difficult for outside scholars. As a result of such limitations to accessing the Al Jazeera Network, Figenschou's research relies exclusively on the methodological approach of conducting interviews to undertake her study.

Thanks to her methodological approach, Figenschou's paper is able to effectively examine the dilemmas of interviewing elite informants in authoritarian societies for a few key reasons: Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the research in question is inherently reliant on interviews for an adequate analysis to be carried out as its subject concerns the complexities of interviewing powerful media elites, thus necessitating the use of this medium in order to fully explore the issue. What's more, Figenschou's decision to approach her interviews in a way that ignores her informants' patronising behaviour also allows her to conduct effective research since it contributes to the perception from some of her informants that she is "naïve and inexperienced", a notion that resulted in the informants opening-up about subjects that they may not have done if they had not discounted her intellectual capacity.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Figenschou's decision to record the audio from her interviews also allows for more effective research as she is able to revisit the content of each interaction multiple times, therefore facilitating a more thorough analysis for her research. As a result of these approaches, Figenschou's paper is able to effectively uncover the challenges to researchers who wish to analyse the interviewing of media elites in the context of authoritarian societies. However, a possible limitation of Figenschou's research may be the financial burden of her research processes. This may complicate the approaches conducted in this study because of the highly

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<sup>9</sup> Ustad Figenschou, T. (2010) *Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies*. Media, culture & society. 32 (6), P. 973. doi:10.1177/0163443710379667.

costly nature of travelling to and lodging in Qatar from abroad over multiple, extended periods of time. Consequentially, Figenschou's research processes may be limited to those who possess the necessary monetary means that allow for such an expensive endeavour.

To conclude, I have chosen this paper to inform my research report because I, admittedly, had very little prior knowledge of the way that media networks operate within the intricacies of the Arab Gulf context and am thus greatly intrigued by the topic. On top of this, I am particularly fascinated by the gender dynamics that are presented by Figenschou's research and am interested in how greatly her informants' attitudes differ from my own more liberal, Western, values. Ultimately, I find this research to be highly insightful and useful for expanding my knowledge of the way that media elites can be interviewed within non-Western, authoritarian contexts.

*1404 Words*

## Part 2: Designing a New Research Project

To construct my own research project that builds upon the study conducted in Figenschou's paper, I would prompt my analysis by first employing the following research question: How do attitudes on gender differ between media elites working at Al Jazeera?

An exploration into such a question may be valuable to the field of study on media and communication as it might provide a greater understanding of the way that views on gender

can be affected by the socio-cultural and political context in which a media organisation is situated. Furthermore, the comparative nature of this research question may also lend it a greater usefulness as it may reveal a more comprehensive understanding of how the personal views of media elites can differ from those of their colleagues and from the agreed line of opinion of a given media network. On top of this, a research project on this subject may also be useful as it might shed light on how media organisations present issues related to gender as a result of the attitudes of its high-ranking staff. Additionally, this research question may also be useful since it can serve to expose certain problematic aspects of Al Jazeera's internal structures regarding misogyny and power. What's more, this research prompt is of particular interest to me personally as it builds upon an aspect of Figenschou's paper that I found to be highly compelling, namely the gender dynamics of interviewing media elites at Al Jazeera.

In order to carry out my research for this project I would need to employ the ethnographic methodology of performing comprehensive interviews with executive staff at Al Jazeera. This method would need to be my sole source of qualitative information for this project due to the opinion-based nature of the topic at hand. To make this approach feasible, I would need to conduct these interviews via an online video-communication website such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. I would undertake this course of action because it would be far too costly, time-consuming, and potentially dangerous for me to travel to Al Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar in order for these interviews to take place in-person. To initiate the process of performing my interviews, I would need to contact Al Jazeera staff professionally and through the appropriate channels of communication, namely through writing a considered email or letter to the Al Jazeera Network's media relations department. This would need to be done in order to establish a credible line of communication with the network that would facilitate a platform for me to explain the exact details of my research's aims and methods. Moreover, a line of

communication would need to be established between the Al Jazeera Networks and I in order for me to arrange the times and dates of my research interviews and for me to be allowed access to communicate with more senior members of staff. As well as this, I would need to consider how many informants might be involved in my research project and would include no more than 10 interviewees, though the exact number would depend entirely on how many senior members of Al Jazeera were willing to participate in the project. I would also need to be conscious of the timings of these interviews as senior staff at Al Jazeera are highly occupied and time-constrained people, thus I would need to make sure that the time and date of each interview is chosen by and agreed upon by each informant beforehand. Further to this point, in order for them to be consistent and to give each participant a fair chance to express their opinion, I would need to ensure that the length of my interviews was the same for each informant and would therefore endeavour to restrict each interview to the length of 45 minutes. On top of this, the content of my interview questions would need to be identical for each participant and would need to contain questions relating to personal attitudes on gender. Furthermore, I would need to make use of audio recording equipment to conduct this research project, either in the form of online software to record the video-interviews as they occur, or through the use of physical recording devices such as microphones. My research would benefit from this approach because it would allow me to revisit each of my interviews multiple times in order to comprehensively analyse their content.

To adhere effectively to codes of practice and to ensure the feasibility of this research project I would need to take into consideration the following practical and ethical factors:

One important practical consideration that I would need to make when conducting this research project is the matter of access. This could be a significant limitation to my research project as

it is not likely that I will be granted access to speak with many high-ranking staff members at Al Jazeera with much ease. However, it may be possible to contact a few Al Jazeera officials and thus I would need to consider adjusting my interviewee sample size accordingly, depending on how many participants I am able to reach. Another practical consideration that I would need to take into account when carrying out this research project is the issue of language. This is because I will need to perform my interviews in the English language and will thus need to make sure that my participants can, both understand the meanings of my questions, and be able to respond to them comprehensively in return. To achieve this, I will need to make sure that my participants have a proficient level of English comprehension before conducting my interviews in order to avoid confusion or the financial burden of a translator. One other practical consideration that might affect this research project could be the content of my interview questions. This could massively limit the viability of my research project, not only because my participants would likely respond to questions in a way that adheres to the accepted Al Jazeera line of opinion, but also because all potential participants are likely to be highly skilled public speakers who are proficient at deflecting undesirable questions. Because of this, I would need to make sure that my interview questions are formulated in a way that encourages my participants to discuss their true opinions openly by building a rapport with them prior to asking more controversial questions. Similarly, I would also need to consider the ethical implications of my interview questions due to the fact that my participants are not likely to wish to expose their true beliefs on gender openly. As a result of this, I would need to be sure that my participants are made aware of my interview questions beforehand and are fully informed of the subject matter under discussion before they agree to take part in the research. Another ethical consideration that I would need to make when conducting this project is that of the cross-cultural nature of these interviews. This might pose a limitation to my research as I would need to consider that I do not personally fully understand the intricacies of cultural norms in

the Arab Gulf, thus I would need to make sure that I remain impartial during my interviews and avoid expressing any opinion of my own since this may affect the responses given my participants.

To conclude, I chose to construct this research project plan around the topic of attitudes towards gender because I believe that my own personal beliefs on the matter may differ greatly from those amongst Al Jazeera's executive staff. On top of this, I am deeply fascinated by the differences of attitudes amongst such media elites themselves and would very much like to uncover what their potential difference of opinion from Al Jazeera's accepted line might reveal about the media organisation's internal structure more widely. Overall, Al Jazeera is an intriguing case and one that this research project may help to demystify, especially in relation to the attitudes of its high-ranking staff regarding gender.

*1325 Words*

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