

*2009 Clissold Lecture  
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**Hiding From The World: The Media's Retreat from Global News Coverage**

Thank you very much. I appreciate the introduction. I appreciate the invitation.

I feel honoured to join the group of journalists who have been invited to give the Clissold Lecture.

I have long admired the University of Western Ontario, and I'm enjoying this opportunity to visit your campus.

The added personal touch for me is that my wife Jane graduated from Law here; my brother Pat teaches here; and my daughter-in-law Maddi studies here.

A few years ago, I spoke at this university as the Editor in Chief of the CBC. I was asked to speak about the CBC's coverage of the Ethiopian famine in 1984 and 1985.

The Ethiopian borders were closed then to foreigners. And Brian Stewart and I were the first North American journalists to get in to cover the story.

It was a remarkable time when Canadians from every corner of the country seemed engaged and involved in global issues.

When I was visiting this university a few years ago, I was proud to be representing Canada's public broadcaster. And today I am equally proud now to be standing in front of you – as a Canadian journalist, still – but on behalf of another proud public broadcaster, Al Jazeera English.

It's a network I hope will soon become part of the Canadian media family.

I currently live in Doha, the capital city of Qatar. It's a quiet place....nothing as racy as Dubai or Abu Dhabi. In fact, it reminds me a lot of London, Ontario....although it's 40 Celsius today in Doha. And that doesn't remind me of London, Ontario.

Qatar is a tiny country, that sits right beside Saudi Arabia. It juts onto a peninsula in the Persian Gulf. That's what Al Jazeera stands for in English: "peninsula".

I live in a condominium overlooking the Gulf, right across from Iran. In fact, from my balcony, after several glasses of wine – inspired by Sarah Palin and her proximity to Russia – I sometimes imagine that if I squint I can actually see Iran. And speak Farsi, all at the same time. But I'm not sure I can.

We live in a very challenging world....in what I suspect historians will one day judge as a defining period in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. The centres of global power are shifting.

In historic, even epic terms, the ground is moving beneath our feet.

Power is shifting from the West....from the United States....to China, India and other parts of the developing world where the world's new 21<sup>st</sup> century economy is taking shape.

After the rise of the West...for the past hundreds of years...it's now "*the rise of the rest*", as one writer put it.

That doesn't mean we're entering an anti-American world. But we are moving into a post-American world, one defined and directed from many places and by many people.

For Canadians – living in perhaps the most multicultural nation on earth- this will have special resonance. But that will only happen if we strengthen, not weaken, our connections to the wider world.

The world's current financial crisis is not helping. Its aftershocks are having a devastating effect on many news organizations, including here in Canada.

At a time when coverage of the world is more important than ever – and "global" is becoming the new "local" – our window on the world is increasingly being closed.

Throughout North America, and Western Europe, journalists are being laid off. Media companies – many of them still quite rich – are cutting back. International coverage and investigative journalism are at risk.

Last year – 2008 - surveys of American news media indicate the percentage of news devoted to international stories was the lowest in more than 20 years.

This, sadly, comes at a time when people have never been more in need of fearless, independent, public-service journalism – particularly coverage of the world.

My message today is to urge that we do what we can to halt this slide. In adversity, there is opportunity, and I think there is an opportunity for Canadian journalists to step in and help fill the vacuum being left by the retreat of the world's media's monoliths.

But to work out the road ahead, we need to clearly understand the road that brought us here.

This century is only nine years old but it has had a very rocky ride so far. For many of us, the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath have defined this first decade of the 21st century. But that is not how this stage of history was expected to be.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we survived two world wars and many smaller ones.

We survived the twin scourges of fascism and communism.

We lived through a potential nuclear catastrophe during the Cold War.

Given this, much of the world had hoped the beginning of this new century would be marked by relative peace and stability.

Even better, many thought, it would be an opportunity to finally deal with the many pressing North-South issues that had been evaded during decades of East-West tensions.

The conditions seemed right. The world was weary from the battering it took throughout most of the 20th century. It appeared more inter-dependent than ever before. And so vulnerable and small.

In much of it, an information and technology revolution had begun which promised unprecedented access to places and ideas that up until now had been closed.

At the centre of this – or at least this is what many journalists hoped - would be the world's proliferating news media. In theory at least, they would spread high-minded ideas and, perhaps, even a semblance of democracy to all corners of the planet.

For example, if there were only three major all-news television networks at the end of the 1980s – CNN, Britain's SKY TV and Canada's CBC Newsworld – there were hundreds of channels worldwide a decade later.

And this gave rise to high expectations.

Famed American journalist Walter Lippmann once wrote that the press should be "like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision."

As we entered the 21st century, the worldwide information explosion raised hopes that journalism's noblest goals were actually attainable.

But this was premature. The turbulence of this decade, not its tranquility, has defined this period. In many cases, the news media have been passive, at best, or even complicit, as world events spiraled out of control.

The list of challenges has been long:

- Growing conflict in the Middle East.
- Spreading religious and political extremism.
- Increased worries about climate change.
- Immigration and vanishing borders.
- The specter once again of potential nuclear conflict.
- And – of course – the current financial meltdown that threatens to deepen poverty and despair in many developing countries.

As a consequence, many in the world's industrialized countries have turned inward.

Instead of greeting this new century with openness and hope, they have become more protective of what they have and more fearful that in this uncertain future they may lose it.

The response by the world's news media to these events has been mixed, even contradictory:

- In the developing world, there have been aggressive efforts to *expand* coverage of the world. They have been alternatives voices to the Anglo-American monopoly of CNN and the BBC that has long dominated the world of international journalism. The most notable example has been in the Middle East with the creation of the Al Jazeera network and its newer competitors, a development that is inspiring similar initiatives in Africa and Asia.
- In contrast, many of the world's largest commercial news organizations – still rich by most measurements – have gone the opposite way. They have mirrored their sense of the perceived public mood by *reducing* world coverage. Reacting to pressure from shareholders, they have drastically cut back their international bureaus, and shrunk the relatively small amount of space and airtime they still devote to 'foreign news'.

The late CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite gave a somber warning shortly before his death. He said that pressures by media companies to generate ever-greater profits threaten the very freedom the U.S. was built upon.

He said today's journalists face greater challenges than those from his generation. No longer could journalists count on their employers to provide the necessary resources, he said, "to expose truths that powerful politicians and special interests often did not want exposed."

Instead, he said, "they face rounds and rounds of job cuts and cost cuts that require them to do ever more with ever less."

In the full sweep of history, one could argue this is precisely the time when understanding other cultures is a necessary prerequisite to truly understanding your own.

If information is power, ignorance can be dangerous.

As recently as July 2007, a national public opinion poll in the U.S. indicated that as many as four in ten Americans still believed Saddam Hussein was directly involved in the Al Qaeda attacks on 9/11 - even though all evidence points to the contrary.

As a justification for reducing costly international coverage, it has been irresistible for some media companies to blame the victim – in this case, the audience – as in '*...people don't actually care about foreign news*'.

But this is self-serving. It tries to absolve journalists and programmers from blame for boring or confusing their audiences. There is considerable research in North America suggesting that superficial coverage of the world is the most important contributor to public apathy.

What is also being ignored is another crucial role of news organizations: to provide news they believe the public *needs* to know to become better informed citizens.

There used to be a time when major American media companies were motivated by a sense of public duty. They maintained strong, well-resourced news divisions as a form of '*pay-back*' for access to the public airwaves and the immense profits this produced.

This was perhaps best summed up in the 1950s in the United States when Bill Paley, founder of CBS, was once quoted as saying, in effect: "I make money on Jack Benny so I can afford to do the *best news*."

So what is the *best news*, the news the public *needs* to know? Well, we know what *isn't*. A consistent drumbeat of '*good guys, bad guys, those who are with us and those who aren't*' is cited by many in surveys as a major negative in the coverage of world affairs.

Beyond labels and name-calling, the public needs to know – and, arguably, *wants* to know - who these leaders are and how they gained power. And what can we learn from this?

Turning the world off may be therapeutic to some, but it is no long-term solution. The long march of history shows us that.

There are signs that interest in global news coverage is increasing in the developing world, in Europe and perhaps in Canada - but not yet, it appears, in the United States. And this is ironic given the ubiquitous international influence of the world's last remaining superpower.

So what's going on? Why would one of the world's most educated and sophisticated countries – with so much at stake in major international issues - be seemingly so disinterested in world affairs?

In June 2002, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press published a revealing analysis that offered a clear answer. It suggested that the media, not their audience, should take the rap.

The survey offered powerful evidence that broad interest in international news is most limited by the public's lack of background in this area. They simply don't understand why these stories are important.

A similar survey taken in Canada in 2003 for CBC News showed similar results. A majority of those surveyed felt that 'the news' in all media was often confusing and superficial, ranging from 'just so much noise and static' to outright 'incomprehensible'.

The surprising headline in the study was that, contrary to conventional wisdom, a majority of Canadians indicated they want *more* international news, not *less*, and believe more than ever that what happens beyond their borders matters a lot.

But they want '*international made local*' – global stories told in more relevant, local, accessible ways.

By marginalizing international coverage and reinforcing public stereotypes - all on the assumption that the "*public doesn't care*" - many news organizations have created a self-fulfilling prophecy that simply ensures continuation of the status quo.

There is a circular pattern that becomes evident when examining the treatment of international news by many news organizations – particularly the three major U.S. television networks as the most influential medium:

- Coverage is very costly, therefore it is limited.
- Being limited, it is superficial and often confusing.
- Being all of that, the public turns off.
- Since the public turns off, costs are even more reduced.

And the self-fulfilling pattern plays on.

As we scan the wreckage of this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is an issue that urgently needs debate:

*Whose interests should journalists serve in deciding how much of the 'world' will be presented to the public?*

For those of us who believe that this shrinking world is crashing down upon us – in a way that affects everyone's day-to-day life - these are challenging times.

We are now part of a 'news culture' where stories about celebrities like Paris Hilton receive more coverage than staggering tragedies such as Darfur. It is about time that we all reflect on 'why?'.

An August, 2007, Pew survey lists "Tabloid" and "Foreign" news as the areas of *least* interest to the American public over the two-decade period, 1986-2006. Coverage of 'foreign' news has certainly shrunk in recent years, but not so 'tabloid'. It has significantly *increased* across the board.

But in spite of this, public interest in 'tabloid' stories is still small and has not grown in recent years.

So why the increased coverage? The study concludes that the motivation for more tabloid coverage was not to respond to widespread public appetite, but was due to commercial and competitive reasons. In other words, to appeal to smaller "niche" audiences that will improve ratings and please advertisers.

In whose interests are these editorial decisions being made? Is it a mystery, therefore, that surveys in the United States indicate the current credibility of journalists and news organization among the public is lower than it has been in memory?

A survey released last September in the U.S. indicated that American trust in the news media was at a record low. Nearly two-thirds of Americans think the news stories they read, hear and watch are frequently inaccurate.

A similar survey in Canada in 2008 revealed a slightly more positive outlook – 50% of Canadians, not two thirds, believe the news media are often inaccurate.

But distrust here is still growing.

This probably would have come as no surprise to the late Neil Postman. He was the American media and cultural critic who in 1985 wrote his provocative analysis of television, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In that book, Mr. Postman argued that television – particularly TV news-treats serious issues as entertainment. It demeans political discourse by making it less about ideas and more about image. As he put it:

“When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainment, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk: culture-death is a clear possibility.”

Many years from now, when historians reflect on this decade, I believe their judgment of the media’s performance during these years will be harsh.

Looking at the current state of the world, it is difficult not to conclude that disastrous decisions have been made by political leaders in an environment of ignorance and arrogance.

And these disasters were condoned by a public that largely chose to look the other way and a news media that was at various times complicit or incompetent.

That’s certainly not how this decade was supposed to turn out. And as the world becomes more dangerous, this should give us all motivation to set it right.

But not surprisingly, there ARE lessons from abroad.

One of those places is the Middle East. As a Canadian journalist, whose career has mainly focused on how to help people navigate this ever-complicated world, I feel very privileged to be where I am - as Managing Director of Al Jazeera English.

In my 35-year career as a journalist, mainly at the CBC, I've had the opportunity to visit and work in the Middle East often. I have always found it fascinating, but my perspective has been as an outsider-looking-in. But, as a resident of the Gulf, I now see it differently.

The English-language international channel of Al Jazeera has been on the air for three years now. In addition to its popular website, it is broadcast in more than 180 million households in more than 100 countries – which is a level that both CNN and the BBC took many more years to reach. It has received dozens of awards and nominations for its news and documentary excellence from every major TV festival in the world.

It is about to make significant breakthroughs in North America. Within the next few weeks, we expect to get approval from the CRTC to distribute AJE nationwide in Canada.

In the Spring, the CRTC asked Canadians for their view on whether AJE should be broadcast here. There were nearly 3000 public interventions – which is an unusually high number. And 98 percent favoured AJE.

As for the United States, in this Obama/post-Bush era, Al Jazeera English is now being broadcast in more than 20 American cities, and increasing.

And this includes Washington, DC- where, we're told, we're the # 1 News Channel at the Pentagon and the State Department! AJE has a worldwide staff of about 1100 employees, drawn from more than 50 nationalities. It constitutes the most diverse news service in the world.

There are many of us from the BBC, CNN, European networks and, yes, the CBC in Canada – but many more come from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

The key aspect of Al Jazeera English is its global perspective. Our 'home team' is not in London, Atlanta, New York....or Toronto, for that matter. We have no 'home team'.

As the day unfolds, our broadcast schedule follows the sun: AJE broadcasts from its centres in Asia, the Middle East, Europe and then – finally – the Americas. Our objective is to let "the world report on itself".

We try to cover every story from every side, from as many angles as we can. This is exemplified by our journalistic perspective, which sees the world through the lens of the global South.

In my view, this is in contrast to other international channels, such as CNN and the BBC, which focus on the Western centres of power and inevitably reflect their own national American and British agendas in their reporting.

I'm not being critical when I say this. I respect the BBC and CNN. They know their audience and they serve it well. But their interests, and the interests of their largely Western audience, are not universal interests.

At Al Jazeera, we have our flaws, and we sometimes don't live up to our ambitions. But we think we know where we should be going.

We try to tap into something different. That has been the approach since Al Jazeera Arabic was created in 1996. We are the only international news network rooted in the global South- in the developing world. Most of our news bureaus are located there.

We know there's a large international audience that is tired – and skeptical – of mainstream Western media whose starting point often seem to be the Western centres of power. Coverage of the Middle East is only one example of where our approaches diverge.

In a recent academic study of BBC, CNN, and AJE, it was shown that, in the period examined, 81% of AJE's news items were about the news and stories of the South- Africa, Asia, Middle East, Latin America, etc.

This was nearly double that of the BBC and CNN whose `news` focused more on Western Europe and the U.S.

AJE is firmly rooted in regions well beyond the traditional Western power centres, letting the world tell its own story. As a result, it has quickly become a leading international news service in Africa, key markets in Asia, as well as the Middle East.

AJE provides news and information not available elsewhere and from parts of the world that go unreported. There is also evidence that it serves as a 'bridge' to understand other cultures.

As George Clooney once described it: "Al Jazeera English TV is a perfect example of how we can open up the doors to see what these cultures are and that our differences with them are not so many."

As evidence of this, there was a 2008 American academic study of AJE's impact in six countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

It revealed that in contrast to other channels AJE's viewers ``found it to function as a `conciliatory media'... more likely to cover contentious issues in a way that contributes to...cooperation, negotiation and reconciliation."

AJE is fiercely proud to be a central part of the Al Jazeera ‘family’, and is influenced by that fact.

However, it is also a stand-alone channel within Al Jazeera – separate in staff and editorial direction from Al Jazeera Arabic. AJE is a part of the Al Jazeera broadcast group, but an independent member of it.

In that way, it operates in a similar manner to Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. Just as the Times of London, Sun newspaper, Sky News and the Fox TV network all have independent voices, priorities and brands within one international multimedia company - so does Al Jazeera English.

I’m sometimes asked whether there is ever any interference from the Government of Qatar – which provides most of the funds for Al Jazeera. The answer is ‘no- not a hint of interference’.

Al Jazeera is a public broadcaster in the same sense that the CBC in Canada is, and the BBC in Britain. And, in my experience so far, there has been a solid firewall between the Government of Qatar and Al Jazeera.

In 18 months in my job, I have not heard anything from the Government of Qatar about what they want on Al Jazeera.

In fact, in Canada, where I was Editor in Chief of the CBC for eight years, I had a clearer idea of what that government wanted out of its public broadcaster than I do in Qatar.

Al Jazeera English is available and popular in Britain, and it is regulated by Ofcom, the respected UK body which oversees that country’s media organizations. AJE is required to adhere to Ofcom’s very strict Broadcast Code that deals with issues of impartiality and fairness.

- In three years of broadcasting, AJE has never experienced a significant problem.

AJE journalists are also required to follow Al Jazeera’s Code of Ethics, which is available on our website: [Aljazeera.net-forward-slash-English](http://Aljazeera.net-forward-slash-English). It’s precisely the same type of Code which governs journalistic quality and integrity at the BBC and CBC.

- In three years of broadcasting, AJE has never experienced a significant problem.

Not surprisingly, AJE has special pride in its coverage of the Middle East. Again, the goal here is not to push a line or cater to a bias.

The goal is far more revolutionary: we simply want people to understand the full story, not a narrow one.

At the beginning of this year, AJE gained international acclaim through its coverage of the Israeli-Gaza war.

We were the only international English-language news channel that covered both sides of the conflict.

We reported exclusively, from within Gaza...but also from throughout Israel – including southern Israel where the rockets out of Gaza landed.

It is not surprising, therefore, that both of Al Jazeera's channels – Arabic and English- are broadcast in Israel.

And we know that AJE in particular is widely watched.

Praise for AJE's coverage of the Israeli/Gaza conflict came from The Financial Times, The Economist, The Guardian, Le Monde in Paris, the Columbia Journalism Review, The New York Times....and the Haaretz newspaper in Israel.

The Haaretz piece – titled "My Hero of the Gaza War- includes this paragraph:

"My war hero is Ayman Mohyeldin, the young correspondent for Al Jazeera English and the only foreign network broadcasting during these awful days in a Gaza Strip closed off to the media. Al Jazeera English is not what you might think. It offers balanced, professional reporting from correspondents both in Israel and Gaza".

Day in and day out, Israeli politicians speak directly on Al Jazeera – on both its Arabic and English channels – more than on any other network in the world outside of Israel.

That actually was one of the first notable achievements of Al Jazeera Arabic when it was created in 1996 by the Emir of Qatar.

For the first time in history, the Arab world directly saw and heard Israelis - speaking freely, frequently, live and unedited.

That was ground-breaking. Until then, traditional Arab journalism has been limited to state-run propaganda machines, usually serving very narrow interests.

Al Jazeera's hallmark has always been fearless reporting and wide-open debate – regardless of what controversy this triggers.

This often challenges the rich and the powerful. And it has enraged dictatorial Arab governments throughout Al Jazeera's 13-year history.

Its journalists, at one time or another, have been temporarily thrown out of many Arab countries. In fact as recently as last March, at the Arab summit, several governments denounced Al Jazeera for being too critical of the Arab world.

You probably think of Al Jazeera as the hated nemesis of the American government.

In fact, Al Jazeera - until 9/11 in 2001- was widely praised by Western governments, including the Clinton White House in the U.S.. It was seen as the poster child for the strengthening of Arab democracy.

And then it changed.

Shortly after 9/11, in November 2001, the U.S. government attacked the Taliban in Afghanistan. It claimed no civilians were being killed in the bombing. Al Jazeera, not surprisingly, was the only news organization inside Afghanistan. And it had the temerity to report that, yes, civilians were being killed.

It was then that the American government – the gang of Bush, Rumsfeld and Cheney- turned on Al Jazeera.

An irony long forgotten in this saga concerns the first interview Bin Laden gave after 9/11.

It was to Al Jazeera, but it was never broadcast on Al Jazeera. The network's bosses in Doha refused to air the interview because of the restrictions placed by Al Qaeda on Al Jazeera's interview.

A week went by, nothing happened and Al Qaeda got very upset.

It released its video copy of the interview on the internet. And CNN was the first broadcaster to air it. Donald Rumsfeld was asked for his reaction to the interview and he denounced Al Jazeera for being sympathetic to Bin Laden. Go figure.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you today about Al Jazeera English.

I know that all of us are committed to those values which regard the *best* journalism as the heartbeat of any effective democracy--- including ours. Freedom of expression and diversity are at the centre of that. And that's what this issue is all about.

We are very proud of the three-year 'body of work' already produced by AJE. And we are hopeful it will obtain CRTC approval this month.

If the cable and satellite companies cooperate, AJE's goal is to be broadcast in Canadian homes by January.

When that happens, we will be opening a new *news bureau* in Canada – making AJE the only international news channel based here, showcasing Canadian stories to a worldwide audience.

2009 is turning out to be a crucial year in international affairs. Canadians should be in the thick of it. As the centre of global power shifts to new regions and new rising powers, Al Jazeera's 69 news bureaus – or 70...when we open our new bureau in Canada - are intensely tracking those developments.

Many of those journalists are Canadians. We believe that AJE's unique mix of news, current affairs and documentaries will appeal to many Canadians.

We should never forget that there is a profound and genuine interest – rarely acknowledged- on the part of many Canadians towards coverage of the world. There is a deep respect worldwide for the Canadian values of fair-mindedness, inclusiveness and bridge-building.

As a Canadian now working in the middle of the Gulf, I'm humbled by how Canadians and Canadian journalism are held in such high-regard.

But this takes hard work and commitment, and we can take neither for granted.

Canada – and the world – need to be exposed to more perspectives, more diversity and more choice. The windows need to be blown open, not shut closed.

Thank you for your attention. +++++