Al-Jazeera on Tunisia

Reporting in the wake of the Arab Spring

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1. Introduction

“Can we trust the media?”
The question is a familiar one to those who have followed current events recently. From the election of Donald Trump in the United States, to the “Brexit” referendum and the 2017 French presidential elections, information has been a central theme. Where do we get our news? Who controls news content and who holds news outlets accountable?

An informed public is a vital component of democracy, as defined by Robert Dahl in “Democracy and its Critics” (1989, 111-112):

One might object, I suppose, that enlightenment has nothing to do with democracy. But I think this would be a foolish and historically false assertion. It is foolish because democracy has usually been conceived as a system in which ‘rule by the people’ makes it more likely that the ‘people’ will get what it wants, or what it believes is best, than alternative systems like guardianship in which an elite determines what is best. But to know what it wants, or what is best, the people must be enlightened, at least to some degree. And because advocates of democracy have invariably recognized this and placed great stress on the means to an informed and enlightened demos, such as education and public discussion, the objection is also historically false.

If information is a pillar of our democratic society, we should be mindful about who is distributing it, and why. This does not mean rejecting information, even if we know it has a slant. In fact, knowing the bias of a source makes its information more valuable, because we know its weakness and can compensate for it correctly with another perspective. Therefore it has seldom been more relevant to uncover the preferences and affiliations of the networks which deliver us our news.

Areas which are particularly interesting are those where we rely heavily on a few sources. A large audience and a cornered market can give a network an immense influence in shaping discourse on a topic. An outstanding case of this is the Al-Jazeera news network, which has established itself as a regional perspective on the Arab world to English-speaking audiences. It is frequently quoted by other major networks on events in the Middle East, giving it considerable opportunity to affect the global narrative on developments in the region. In the wake of the “Arab Spring” uprisings which in 2010 and 2011 swept across North Africa, toppling dictatorial regimes in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in quick succession, there has been growing interest in following events in this part of the world. The role and reporting of media
in these revolutions has been providing a topic for study for researchers since then, such as in studies by Haider (2016) on the representation of former Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi in media and Adegbola (2016) on the role of American networks.

The reporting of Al-Jazeera in the beginning of the revolutions has been explored by Baskan (2016), among others, but how has its viewpoint evolved? How has it positioned itself in relation to new governments in the Arab world?

By investigating Al-Jazeera’s reporting in a period following the first free elections in Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, this study seeks to reveal, at least in part, its perspective on the fledgling democracy.

The paper will begin with a statement of purpose, followed by a background motivating the object of study and its context and giving a brief timeline of events. Then the theory, method and materials will be discussed, after which the data will be presented and analysed.

2. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the bias of news outlet Al-Jazeera English when covering the events of the Tunisian political crisis of 2013-2014 regarding Ennahda, the biggest party in the ruling coalition, and its opposition.

This is to be done using a method inspired by political claims analysis and framing analysis, combining the quantitative variable of coverage given with the qualitative variable of framing to uncover implicit preferences for certain actors over others.

The reasoning behind this research context is that it constitutes a least-likely case in relation to the hypothesis, covered in the theory section, to enable some generalisation of results to a wider context.

The research question of this study is: does Al-Jazeera show a bias toward either Ennahda or its opposition in its reporting during the period of the Tunisian political crisis?
3. Background

3.1. Al-Jazeera English

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani replaced his father as Emir of the small gulf nation of Qatar in 1995 (Miles 2005, 14). His rule began with sweeping reforms, some with a promise of democracy. Some of these changes were a partly elected municipal council, a new constitution and the emancipation of women in a country where one man, benevolent though he may be, is all-powerful (Miles 2005, 16-19). The reforms did, however, make life better for many Qataris and ensured the Emir’s popularity. Qatar has taken on an impressively influential role on the political stage of the Middle East through its forward-thinking rule and by maintaining good relationships with key actors in the region (Hounshell 2012; Baskan 2016).

Most importantly for this study, the changes also included abolishing state censorship of the media in Qatar and launching Al-Jazeera in 1996 (Miles 2005, 32-33). The Arabic language channel was given access to a transponder to send out a satellite signal and heavy financial backing from the government (Miles 2005, 58, 67).

Al-Jazeera English was launched in 2006 (el-Nawawy and Powers 2010) and gained world-wide attention for its often controversial coverage of U.S. actions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Miles 2005). It faced accusations of bias and of fostering extremism, particularly for portraying Americans in Iraq as an invading force (Lukin 2006), focusing heavily on civilian casualties. The original Arabic language channel also infamously aired an interview with Osama bin Laden in 1999 (Miles 2005, 52). The criticisms have come from “within” as well, against the Arabic channel, as regional governments worry about its influence on domestic politics. It often hosts political dissidents on its popular talk shows, aired throughout the Arab world by satellite signal (Miles 2005, 40).

Despite this, the network quickly established itself as the voice of the Arab world; a different perspective on the Middle East than the one of Western media. Being “on the ground” means it is frequently the only outlet reporting directly on events in the region and is often quoted as a source by other major news organisations, a tradition which started with its unique access during the war in Afghanistan (Miles 2005, 170). Some studies have suggested that Al-Jazeera provides a voice for populations, especially in the “global South”, which do not attract much attention by other major news networks (Figenschou 2010; El-Nawawy and Powers 2010). The network’s position as a source of information to the English-speaking world on Middle Eastern
events makes Al-Jazeera English an interesting topic of study, especially in the wake of the recent upheaval of old power structures across the region.

It has been speculated that Al-Jazeera is used by Qatar as a political tool to further its influence in the region, threatening to unleash a dissident voice on the populations of its Arab neighbours or promising to rein it in (Hounshell 2012)(Baskan 2016).

In the beginning of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, Al-Jazeera took a pro-revolutionary stand, airing and replaying footage of street vendor Bouazizi’s self-immolation, the catalyst of the Tunisian uprisings, and devoting much of its reporting to the anti-government protests in the North African countries (Baskan 2016, 87). In light of this, it is interesting to see how Al-Jazeera’s reporting has evolved in the years following the uprisings.

3.2. Tunisia and the Ennahda party

The wave of uprisings that would become known as the Arab Spring began in Tunisia following the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on the 17th of December 2010 in protest against harassment by municipal officials.

The protests of the Tunisian revolution led to the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on the 14th of January 2011 and Constituent Assembly elections were held on the 23rd of October the same year (The Guardian, 2013-10-25). The Ennahda (Renaissance) party won enough seats to secure it a place as the most powerful party of the legislative assembly.

Although the Ennahda political party was newly formed, it had been present since the 1970s as a political movement, first called Jamaa and then Mouvement Tendance Islamique (MTI) (Cavatorta and Merone 2013). It was inspired by the political islamism of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as well as by ideas of the Iranian Revolution (Cavatorta and Merone 2013). The movement was repressed under the rule of Ben Ali, who feared its influence in the majority Muslim country.

3.3. Context

This section will give a brief timeline of the events of 2013 to early 2014 in Tunisia. This turbulent period begins with the assassination of an opposition politician and ends with the signing of the country’s new, post-revolution constitution. This period has been chosen as the context of this study due to time constraints, making the entire period between the first elections in 2011 to the passing of the constitution, during which the Ennahda party was in power, unfeasible for the present research. The chosen limitation is strategic in that it is a period of major anti-government
protest, with Ennahda support suffering from the killings of two opposition members. This means that the hypothesis of this study, which will be detailed in the theory section, of Al-Jazeera positively framing the Ennahda government in its reporting is least likely to be true for the chosen period and the results can more easily be generalised to the rest of the party’s time in power.

The timeline used has mainly been based on timelines by *The Middle East Journal*, which in turn is collected from various news sources. For the purposes of charting the events of the time period, considering the varied sources and peer review, the journal is deemed suitable for this purpose. The events will be summarised below and a full timeline can be found in the appendix.

At the start of 2013, Tunisia is ruled by a coalition government dominated by the election winner Ennahda. The country is still recovering from the change of power that followed the Revolution, and there is frustration over a continued lack of improvement in living standards, one of the central themes of the uprisings.

On the 6th of February opposition politician Chokri Belaid is shot and killed by unknown assailants outside his home, the first such occurrence in Tunisia, triggering a political crisis in the country (*Middle East Journal*, 67/3). There are anti-government protests by demonstrators blaming increasing violence and insecurity on the ruling Ennahda party, revealing a rift between secularists and islamsists in particular (*MEJ*, 67/3).

To calm tensions, Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali of the Ennahda party proposes an interim technocrat government which is to rule until new elections can be held, but is opposed by his own party and he resigns from his post on the 19th of February (*MEJ* 67/3). In the following months there is disagreement over a draft post-revolution constitution and there are protests against the government. In July, another opposition politician, Mohamed Brahmi, is shot in a similar fashion to Belaid, leading to more demonstrations and accusations that Ennahda might have orchestrated the killings of the vocal government critics (*MEJ* 68/1).

In September, Ennahda agrees to step down in favour of an interim government, which it does in early 2014, as a new constitution is passed by the Constitutional Assembly (ANC) on the 26th of January (*The Guardian*, 2014-01-27).
4. Theory

4.1. Previous Research

This section will briefly outline previous study in the relevant fields for this study, before the main theoretical basis for this study is described.

As detailed in the introduction, “mainstream” media is vital for an informed public (Rød and Weidmann 2005). This despite the rise of alternative, internet-based information sources, which in researched cases have proved to be more heavily biased than traditional news outlets (Baum and Groeling 2008). It is important, then, to keep these news outlets accountable (Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston 2014) by revealing the inevitable slant in their reporting, as Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) do in their study of U.S. daily newspapers and Lukin (2006) does in her research into Al-Jazeera’s reporting on the Iraq war. This is not in order to avoid bias, which is inevitable, but to be aware of it.

Baskan (2016) has been an invaluable and well-researched source on Al-Jazeera’s actions in the initial phases of the Arab Spring, and Cavatorta and Merone (2013) on the background of the Ennahda party in Tunisia.

A work which examines media in connection with protest events is Karamshuk et al (2016), a quantitative study of media content during protests in Ukraine 2013-2014. Benford and Snow (2000) have also been influential in understanding the role of media in social mobilisation, as well as in using frame analysis to do this. Their work is based on the pioneer of frame analysis, Goffman (1974). The frame analysis developed by these scholars has been central to the method of this study.

The goal of this study with regards to previous research, then, is to further contribute to the uncovering and understanding of how news organisations portray the actors they report on.

4.2. Main Theory

The main theoretical inspiration for this study comes from “Filtering revolution: Reporting bias in international newspaper coverage of the Libyan civil war” by Matthew A. Baum and Yuri M. Zhukov (2015), which singles out the news network Al-Jazeera as an interesting case to study:
Recent research has shown that - even in very repressive regimes - censorship does not apply uniformly to all types of political unrest (Stein, 2013). For instance, the highly authoritarian regime in Qatar - which in November 2012 sentenced a poet critical of the regime to life in prison (New York Times, 2012) - allows satellite television station Al Jazeera to flourish, free from state censorship.

The choice of this article as the source of the main theory for this study is also motivated by its relevant context: the Arab Spring uprisings. It is a recent study, inviting further investigation into its new theory on the reporting bias of media based in non-democracies.

In “The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers”, Galtung and Ruge (1965) lay out the principles which free media will follow in turning events into news. The aim of these is to maximise readership, therefore prioritising those events which are novel and unexpected. Events which conform to the status quo are less interesting in this media capitalism, especially the greater the distance between an event and the intended news audience.

With this in mind, the authors of “Filtering Revolution” (2015) present a hypothesis for the reporting of media based in democracies versus that based in non-democracies when faced with protest events in a foreign country. They investigate the case of Libya in 2011, when the government of president Muammar Qaddafi was overthrown in the series of political upheavals that would come to be known as the Arab Spring, starting in Tunisia and affecting the Arab world as far afield as Syria and Yemen. The authors, Baum and Zhukov, predict that media organisations based in democracies will follow the principles presented in Galtung and Ruge, whereas those based in non-democracies will tend to report more extensively on events that favour the status quo. Their reasoning is that non-democracies have greater control over their media, which will report according to government interests. These governments will likely feel threatened by events in which power structures are changed through popular uprisings, as they suggest that such change is possible elsewhere.

This raises the question of how Al-Jazeera reports. If the claim is true that it operates free of state censorship, what is its narrative? Does it have a bias in its reporting on protest events, and if so, what is it? Is the status quo/anti-status quo dichotomy explored in Baum and Zhukov’s study suitable for understanding the network’s motivations? Baum and Zhukov acknowledge that special state interests may allow media in non-democracies to favour anti-status quo actors, making it appear as though the reporting is following free press patterns.
Baum and Zhukov find in their study that the division between status quo/anti-status quo is indeed a suitable explanation for the difference in international reporting between media in democracies versus non-democracies on the events in Libya. In fact, media in democracies did not quite follow the pattern predicted by the principles in Galtung and Ruge, but reported much more on events favourable to the opposition in Libya (i.e. anti-status quo) in the same way that media in non-democracies preferred events where the Qaddafi government made gains.

Studies on Al-Jazeera’s relationship with its host, Qatar, and its reporting during the beginning of the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia have shown that in this period the news outlet had an anti-status quo bias, favouring the opposition over the sitting ruler, Ben Ali (Baskan 2016), as was mentioned in the background section.

Two scenarios present themselves in light of the background on Al-Jazeera’s reporting in the beginning of the Arab Spring, combined with the theory:

1. Al-Jazeera will report favourably on the Ennahda-dominated government. Based on the theory, the reason could be either because it prefers the new status quo, legitimised by the first free elections, or because special interests lead it to continue supporting the opposition that toppled the old government.
2. Al-Jazeera will follow the pattern of free media, with no discernible bias in the framing of either Ennahda or its opposition.

The hypothesis is that the first scenario will be true. According to the theory, Al-Jazeera, being based in a non-democracy, should favour the new status quo. The background on Al-Jazeera and its pro-revolution stand in the beginning of the Arab Spring also suggests this. Nothing in the background or theory predict an opposition bias, although the patterns of free media, favouring novel events, could result in slightly more coverage of the opposition. This will be discussed in the analysis.

In conclusion to this section, it is important to define what is meant by reporting bias. The term is loaded in that it is often equated with dishonesty. There is a distinction to be made between these, however. In this study, bias is a deviation from the free media patterns of Galtung and Ruge (1965) to instead favour events and describe them based on a preference for one or more of the actors involved. It is to be noted that some bias is to be expected of most media sources, whether it is intentional or not, and that uncovering it should not be seen as a “witch hunt”, but as an aid to transparency in the sources that we use for our news.
5. Method

5.1. Political Claims and Framing

In order to achieve the goals of this study, an analysis based on the amount of reporting will not suffice considering the geographic limitations and the focus on a single news outlet. Snyder and Kelly (1977) divide reporting bias into two categories, selection and content, the former of which is explored in Baum and Zhukov (2015). For the case of Al-Jazeera, a single news network, it is more appropriate and relevant to investigate the contents of reporting rather than the selection of events to become news, for three reasons. The first is that a study of reporting bias based on selection requires a considerable number of units of analysis in order to give valid results, which the proposed study does not allow. The second is that there may be no significant or detectable reporting bias based on selection alone for Al-Jazeera’s reporting in this case, but this does not exclude the possibility of bias in the way that events are reported. Thirdly, and most significantly, the purpose of this study is to uncover the story that Al-Jazeera is telling its audience about the actors of the Tunisian political crisis, which can not be achieved using a purely quantitative approach. The tool of analysis used in this study takes its inspiration from two methods: political claims analysis and frame analysis, both of which will be described below and their advantages in the present case explored.

The method of political claims analysis is a way to quantify what actors in a protest event context are doing, what they want and how they justify these acts and wishes. The method was developed by Koopmans and Statham (1999) to operationalise the aim of analysing the roles of all involved actors in a protest context in a systematic way. The unit of analysis includes not just an identification of the actor, but also the way in which the actor’s wishes are expressed, at whom the wishes are aimed, what the contents of the wishes are and the actor’s justification of these wishes. These combined constitute a “claim”.

A full claims analysis is redundant at the smaller scale of the present study, but it provides the inspiration to construct a tool of analysis which is able to combine the qualitative with the quantitative within the articles analysed. That is, the qualitative contents of the articles supported by a quantitative variable. This quantitative variable will counter the disadvantage of having only one “coder” reading the articles, as this subjectivity of interpretation is the main weakness of the proposed study.

The other source of inspiration for the method comes from frame analysis. This is a considerably more qualitative method, charting the ways in which actors speak about
an issue to portray it and the other actors involved in it in a specific way. The groundwork for this approach was laid out by Erving Goffman (1974) in “Frame Analysis: an essay on the organization of experience”, and more recently by Benford and Snow (1999) in the area of social mobilisation.

The “framing” of an issue is the way in which its aspects and actors are related to values, institutions or other actors. These associations can reveal implicit biases in actors speaking about the issue. For instance, in the context of popular uprisings, one actor might wish to emphasise the legitimacy of the current government by referencing a past election in which it won a majority of votes, thus linking the government to democracy and the will of the people. Another actor could “frame” the same issue differently by emphasising the government’s ties to a former colonial power and letting the demonstrators represent popular will. This subtle way of portraying actors by linking them to things which are widely seen as positive or negative rather than directly describing the actors themselves lends the speaker a perceived impartiality, something which is especially valuable to media actors. This makes frame analysis useful for this topic of study.

To achieve this combination of qualitative and quantitative, two variables for analysis have been chosen: 1. the amount of attention given to Ennahda versus its opposition in the articles, or coverage, and 2. their respective framing. The combination of the two lends a strength to the results which would not be achieved by either variable alone, by combining the high reliability of the first variable with the greater validity, for the purposes of this study, of the second.

The first variable is measured simply by counting the number of sentences which mention either the Ennahda party and its allies or opposition to Ennahda. A sentence which includes both is coded twice; one for each. Sentences which are quotes from actors affiliated with either side are also counted. One difficulty can be in determining to which side certain actors mentioned in the articles belong, such as a government figure whose party affiliation is not mentioned. In these cases the sentence is not coded, even if the coder knows the actor’s affiliation, as it is the article’s portrayal that is interesting for the study. One exception has been made in the coding of opposition to Ennahda, which is mentions of Salafist/Jihadist/other religious extremist groups, often in connection to an act of terrorism. The articles portray these as separate from both Ennahda and its largely secular opposition, and coding them would require creating another, distinct category redundant to the aims of the study. Coding them as opposition would likely skew the data and obscure the framing of political and popular opposition.

The framing variable will be described more in depth with examples in the results, but simply stated links positive framing with claims of legitimacy and negative
framing with blame. The choice of these associations was made to operationalise the variable to create more systematic, reliable results. To limit the variable to this extent has the drawback of potentially missing some of the framing in the articles, but the risk of researcher bias in having a single coder makes it essential to motivate the results of this variable in another way. In a study with two or more independent coders, the similarity of their respective coding lends their results an immediate legitimacy. For this study, motivating the results of the framing variable requires a simpler and stricter operationalisation in order to minimise the effect of having a single coder.

5.2. Material

The articles used in this study can be found through the media retriever Factiva. By limiting the search to between the dates of 2013-02-06 (the day of the Belaid murder) and 2014-01-26 (when the new constitution was passed) the articles fall into the time period for the political crisis that is the focus for this study. The search word entered was “Tunisia”, and a news filter was applied to include only articles published by Al-Jazeera English.

This search yields 123 articles, out of which 69 are coded and used in the study. Out of the remainder, 4 are doubles of already coded articles and 41 articles contain the search word “Tunisia” but are not about the country, such as articles about football or political events in other North African countries. The last 9 articles concern terrorist attacks in Tunisia, but do not contain mentions of the actors studied and could therefore not be coded.

Four of the articles identify the contributor: Yasmine Ryan for two articles (Al-Jazeera English, 2013-08-22 and 2013-08-24), Hashem Albarra in one (AJE, 2013-08-03) and Robert Joyce and Mohamed Mdalla as joint authors of the fourth (AJE, 2013-12-16).

6. Data

6.1. Coverage

This data section, divided into three parts, will first go through the results of the two variables of coverage and framing separately and then combine the data in the third part.

The first variable examined in the articles is that of coverage - how many “mentions” an actor receives proportional to the total number of mentions in an article. As
discussed in the method section, this was done by counting every sentence which contains a reference to either Ennahda or its opposition and dividing these between the two. A sentence containing both was counted twice: one for each. Quotes where the speaker is identified as representing either side are also included as mentions, even if what is said does not directly address Ennahda or the opposition.

This variable does not on its own say very much about an article's bias, but must be compared to the framing variable or to the context of the article. For instance, in an article about the inner workings of the Ennahda party, a majority of mentions compared to mentions of the opposition is not remarkable. In a political conflict context, one side being given significantly more “space” in the article, however, could suggest favouritism even if the framing of both sides is neutral. Due to the limitations of this study, a context variable for articles with neutral framing has not been included, but could add an interesting dimension in future studies. Instead, it is the interaction between the variables of coverage and framing which has been analysed in the third part of this data section.

The proportional coverage in the articles can be seen in figure 1 below. In 27 out of 69 analysed articles the majority of the mentions were of Ennahda, and in 32 articles the opposition. In 10 articles both received equal coverage.

![Majority of the mentions in an article](image)

*Fig 1: Proportion of articles by party with the majority of the coverage*

From this we see that the opposition has greater coverage in more articles than Ennahda.

The coverage variable is a comparatively simple one to code, as any uncertainty in the categorisation of a mention is best left uncoded. This is because when measuring
coverage of one actor over another in a news article, what is interesting is only what is apparent to any reader of the article. Therefore, knowledge of an actor’s affiliation needs to be present in the article analysed for the mention to be coded as either Ennahda or opposition.

One difficult case for the coding has been that of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali. He is a member of Ennahda, but in the period studied he is in conflict with his party, often acting in opposition to it. This has been solved by following the principle above of using information contained within the article analysed. In articles where Jebali is described as acting against the wishes of Ennahda, mentions of him have been coded as opposition rather than Ennahda. In other articles, he is a representative of the party. Out of 18 articles in which he is mentioned, he is allowed to represent Ennahda in four, making him an opposition actor in most of the material.

As stated in the method section, mentions of Salafist/Jihadist/terrorist groups have not been coded as they do not suit either category well.

6.2. Framing

This part of the data section will lay out the results of the framing variable. This qualitative variable is more difficult to code than coverage, but gives more valid information in relation to the purpose of research.

Each article has been analysed to determine its framing of Ennahda and of the opposition, with the possible frames being positive, negative and neutral. In order to determine which one fits the portrayal of the actors in the articles in as replicable a manner as possible, a reliable tool of analysis has to be used. As previously discussed, this tool must be stricter than might be allowed in a study with several coders.

The tool of analysis used for this study relies on finding associations in the articles between actors and blame or legitimacy. An assignment of blame indicates a negative frame and a connection to a form of legitimacy suggests a positive framing. An absence of either one or a presence of both are coded as neutral framing.

The choice of blame and legitimacy as determining the framing of Ennahda and the opposition in the articles has been made because it fits the format of news reporting, which is action-focused. The way in which articles like these are written is straightforward, with little descriptiveness or elaboration. This means that an analysis of the framing of actors based on description will yield very little to base reliable conclusions on. Instead, it is more useful to concentrate on actions and associations.
Legitimacy as a way of measuring positive framing is motivated by the contexts of social mobilisation and post-revolution politics. The political order in a new democracy is not given, which makes an actor’s connection to sources of legitimacy very effective in framing it positively. This could be a reference to an election win, such as Ennahda’s in 2011, or to a display of popular will, such as a large manifestation in favour of an actor. On the negative side, a connection with the old colonial power France or the former dictatorial regime is damaging. Negative connections of this sort occur a few times in the articles, and contribute to negative framing in these cases, but the aspect of legitimacy is more suited to defining positive framing than negative. The assignment of blame captures negative framing more accurately.

When looking at blame in the articles, the focus is on the consequences of actions and their motivations. For instance, there could be a mention of a protest but with the addition that it hindered traffic or that the protesters were violent. Conversely, the same protest could be reported but with the focus on harmful government actions that resulted in people taking to the streets.

An example of negative framing in the material (AJE, 2013-11-25): “Since an Islamist-led government took power after Tunisia’s 2011 revolution, trials of musicians and journalists have multiplied, sparking charges from rights groups that the authorities are stifling freedom of expression.” This shows both blame on Ennahda for an increased number of trials and a lack of legitimacy by putting the party in opposition to the democratic value of freedom of expression.

An example of positive framing, through a reference to an election win (AJE, 2013-08-04): “The security force operations came as Tunisia’s moderate Islamist Ennahda party was battling to defend its position as the head of a governing coalition after winning an October 2011 election.”

It can be difficult to motivate a positive or negative framing in articles where both are present for the same actor or for actors with the same affiliation. In these cases it has been deemed best to code the framing as neutral, letting the positive and the negative claims balance each other out, rather than the coder determining which one is stronger. This is again in consideration for the weakness of having a single coder, and because determining the strength of claims would require an extensive, well-motivated second tool of analysis to the benefit of solving a few ambiguous cases. In cases where either the positive or negative claims outnumber the other, it has been possible to determine a frame. It is possible that, for instance, a strong positive claim should be seen as equal to several, more minor, negative claims. It is admittedly a risk to the validity of the variable to determine according to the number of positive and negative claims in these cases, but the variable would also be
rendered far less effective if every case with a combination of positive and negative framing were coded as neutral.

Table 1 and figures 2 and 3 below show the framing of Ennahda and the opposition in the 69 articles analysed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ennahda</th>
<th>The Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of frames</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig 2: Proportions of the articles according to their framing of Ennahda*
The opposition is more often framed as neutral than Ennahda is, while Ennahda has more of both positive and negative frames than the opposition.

The claims of legitimacy in articles where positive framing is present are usually references to the October 2011 elections or to an actor contributing to the drafting of the new constitution. Demonstrators in some articles gain legitimacy from a link to the revolution, such as in this one (AJE, 2013-08-03) reporting on a pro-government rally on Kasbah Square, Tunis:

“Kasbah Square was the site of major rallies in the days after autocratic President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was toppled in 2011, with demonstrators demanding a transitional constituent assembly to draft a new constitution - one of the bodies the opposition is now demanding be dissolved.”

It also shows the constitution being used as a source of legitimacy, or in this case as a removal of legitimacy from the opposition. The constitution, and the National Constitutional Assembly (ANC) in charge of drafting it, is often referenced in the articles of this period, closely tied to the democratisation process.

Another legitimising factor is a contrast occasionally found in the articles, between Tunisia and the “Egyptian scenario”, a reference to the removal of Mohamed Morsi from power in Egypt (DW, 2013-07-03). This is significant as it was the Egyptian army which removed Morsi, who was the leader of the islamist Muslim Brotherhood party and won popular elections in 2012 after the Arab Spring overthrow of Hosni Mubarak (DW, 2013-07-03). Parallels to the Ennahda-dominated coalition are
unsurprisingly a theme of the discourse in Tunisia during this time (AJE, 2013-08-22): “Certainly what is happening in Egypt has consequences for Tunisia. In the attitude of Ennahdha, there is a desire to avenge what is happening in Egypt. Maybe, by clinging to power, Ennahdha is trying to show that political Islam has not failed,’ Ben Achour [of the secularist Nidaa Tounes party] told Al Jazeera.”

This is one of the articles in which an author is identified; Yasmine Ryan.

The blame required for a negative framing is more diverse within the material. A common theme in later articles is a blame for unimproved economic conditions (AJE, 2014-01-11): “The outgoing government had levied new taxes to confront massive budget deficit, prompting protests around the country on Wednesday.”

Also present in many articles is violence by protesters (AJE, 2014-01-11): “Riots over Tunisia’s economy have flared in towns around the country, leaving one dead and posing an immediate challenge to the new prime minister and the country’s path to democracy.”

In this case, anti-government protesters are contrasted with “the path to democracy”; a negative frame. However, in cases where violence by an actor is reported it can be difficult to determine whether the blame is simply circumstantial or if it constitutes bias. Simply reporting events which reflect unfavourably on an actor is not grounds for a conclusion of bias. For this reason, also, it is helpful to combine the two variables in this study, as will be discussed in the third part. Looking only at the framing, without coverage, for these cases requires a large number of articles describing similar events with a consistent pattern of frames. To draw conclusions based on just this is difficult using the design of this study, as it would be more suitable to do this in a contrastive study comparing the Al-Jazeera descriptions of protest events with reports by other news networks, to isolate potential bias from the facts of the events themselves, possibly looking at factors such as word choice. What can be said from the present study is that there is just one article of the 69 in which anti-government protesters are described with a positive framing, compared to 11 in which there is direct blame for violence or other disruption. One article (AJE, 2013-08-03) is dedicated in its short entirety to the harm caused by protests:

*Tunisia’s economy is suffering from the political turmoil that has been going on for months. The country does not have a lot of natural resources and it relies on its tourism and agriculture sectors to generate most of its income. These two important sectors have been hit hard during the protests and the country has been losing hundreds of millions of dollars.*
This is one of the only four articles which mention a reporter, in this case Hashem Albarra.

The positive framing of the opposition in the articles is mainly of political actors rather than protesters. The reason for this is also not within the scope of this study, but there is an interesting quote by Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, which could inspire future study into the question: "'The street cannot change an elected government, only a dictatorial one ... We’ll accept correcting the transition path, but we won’t accept an absurd and nihilistic one.'" (AJE, 2013-08-06a)

This quote is absent from a second version of the article (AJE, 2013-08-06b), published with the same time stamp. This happens just once more in the material, where the following sentence is missing from one version of an article (also same time stamp on both): “Street vendors took to the streets after Khadri’s death to express their dissatisfaction with the government.” (AJE, 2013-03-16a) The article reports on the self-immolation of Adel Khadri, drawing parallels with Bouazizi, a fellow street vendor who set himself on fire in an act that set off the Arab Spring protests.

6.3. Combining the variables

In this last part of the data section, the results of the two variables, coverage and framing, will be combined. This is interesting because a combination of a negative or positive frame with more or less space given in an article can give more solid results than either variable on its own. For instance, a pattern of positive framing of an actor together with greater coverage means that two measures of bias are suggesting a preference, thus strengthening this conclusion. In a similar fashion, negative framing with a majority of the mentions in an article reveal a negative bias which the coverage variable alone would have missed.

The coding of the variables for each article has been recorded as shown in the sample of table 2.

Table 2: sample of the coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Coverage</th>
<th>Frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ennahda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(46)20130917 Tunisian</td>
<td>5 (mentions)</td>
<td>Negative - accused of imposing press restrictions. Wrongful imprisonment of dissenting voices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>journalists strike over restrictions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data of this variable can be seen in table 3, matching coverage with framing. The table does not include the 10 articles with equal coverage, which contain neutral frames with the exception of three articles that frame Ennahda negatively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>With a majority of coverage</th>
<th>With a minority of coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ennahda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immediately apparent from this data is a pattern in the results for negative framing of Ennahda. In 16 out of the 18 articles in which Ennahda actors are framed negatively, they also receive less coverage than the opposition.

An apparent anomaly in the data is that in three of the four articles in which the opposition is framed positively, Ennahda is framed negatively, and in all four the opposition receives the majority of the coverage. This suggests an opposition bias in these articles, whereas in the remaining 65 articles the opposition has either a neutral or a negative frame, with 9 articles framing the opposition negatively combined with a majority of the coverage, as shown in figure 5 below.
Fig 5: articles where the opposition has the majority of the coverage according to framing

One of these positive frame articles (AJE, 2013-08-22) includes the author’s name, Yasmine Ryan, which is unusual, as contributors are only revealed in four of the 69 articles. Ryan has written one other article, “Tunisia protesters demand end of government” (AJE, 2013-08-24), coded as neutral in the framing of both sides, with Ennahda having the majority of the coverage.

7. Analysis

The data of the coverage variable alone suggests free media patterns in the reporting, as described by Galtung and Ruge (1965). More “space” in the articles is devoted to opposition actors and actions, which is to be expected as they are more likely to break from the status quo and therefore constitute the type of unexpected events that free media favours in turning events into news. The difference between the number of articles where either side has a majority of the coverage is not considerable, with Ennahda having the majority in 27 articles and the opposition in 32. Although it is impossible to completely rule out an opposition bias based on the coverage evidence alone, it is also not possible to conclude a bias toward either side, based on the definition of bias as deviating from free media patterns.

The framing data reveals that Ennahda is framed both positively and negatively in a larger number of articles than the opposition, with both sides receiving more negative frames than positive ones. The opposition is more often framed neutrally than Ennahda is. Using only the framing variable and comparing the framing of the two sides, it could be argued that there is bias against Ennahda, as it has more
negative framing compared to both the negative framing of the opposition and its own positive framing. The argument against this is the greater number of articles portraying it positively than for the opposition. This could lead to a conclusion that there is not enough evidence to establish bias for or against either side.

The combined data of the two variables of coverage and framing show that for the opposition, the division of frames between articles where it has greater coverage and those in which it receives less coverage is fairly even: 9 negative frames in its coverage-majority articles versus 7 negative frames its its coverage-minority articles, and 19 versus 20 for the neutral frames. However, all four of the positive frames of the opposition occur in articles where it has the majority of coverage. This could indicate positive bias for the opposition, but this conclusion would be weakened by the fact that there are only four such positive-frame articles.

The data for Ennahda, when the variables are combined, is more telling. The neutral frames are once again quite evenly distributed, saying little on their own: 19 in coverage-majority articles and 14 in coverage-minority articles. The majority of the negative frames, however, are in coverage-minority articles: 16 out of a total of 18. This indicates a pattern of less attention being given to reporting that is unfavourable to Ennahda. The positive frames show a similar, opposite trend whereby positive frames occur in connection with greater coverage. The numbers for these positive frames have the same weakness as the positive frames of the opposition, though, in that there are few of them: 6 in coverage-majority articles and 2 in coverage-minority articles. This increases the risk of drawing conclusions based on coincidence. The trend of the negative frames and the trend of the positive ones in relation to coverage do, however, strengthen each other and give some basis for a conclusion of bias for Ennahda.

If these results for the coverage and framing of Ennahda in the material are an indication of slight bias, they can be used to interpret the cases described in the data where two versions each of two articles were published. The edits to the articles were again, on their own, inconclusive as the publication time of the different versions are the same. This means that it is not apparent whether the edits were omissions or additions of material. Assuming a slight bias for Ennahda from the data, the content of the concerned sentences becomes interesting. In one, Ennahda leader Ghannouchi is quoted as condemning anti-government protests as illegitimate. In the other article, a sentence mentioning protests by street vendors (which parallel the catalyst of the Arab Spring) has been added or removed. A bias for Ennahda suggests that the latter is a removal of content, as discontent among street vendors lends protests the legitimacy of the revolution that brought democracy to Tunisia. The first case is a matter of interpretation: it could be considered inflammatory if Ghannouchi is suggesting that the people do not have a right to protest, but it could also serve to
differentiate between protests against the old regime and those against the new government by emphasising the democratic legitimacy of Ennahda’s election victory. In either case, the edit directly concerns the legitimacy of Ennahda and the opposition, and its existence can lend some support to bias detected elsewhere in the reporting.

It is also notable that three out of the four articles in which the opposition was framed positively, Ennahda was framed negatively, suggesting a clear opposition bias in these articles. This, combined with the anomaly of an author being identified in one of these three, differentiate them from the other analysed articles. This points to a potential problem in the study, which has assumed that the articles all follow the same editorial bias. The overall pattern in the material does, however, still point to a favouring of Ennahda, even when these pro-opposition articles are included.

Returning to the scenarios described in the theory section, it seems more likely based on the data that the first one is true:

Al-Jazeera will report favourably on the Ennahda-dominated government. Based on the theory, the reason could be either because it prefers the new status quo, legitimised by the first free elections, or because special interests lead it to continue supporting the opposition that toppled the old government.

This was also the hypothesis posed in the beginning of the study. In relation to Baum and Zhukov (2015), these results indicate that Al-Jazeera English does not follow free media patterns in its reporting, meaning it confirms the theory that media based in non-democracies will favour the status quo or a special state interest. This fits the background on Al-Jazeera reporting on the Arab Spring, found in Baskan (2016) and Hounshell (2012), suggesting that its pro-revolution (that is, anti-status quo) stance at that time was a result of Qatar’s special interests.

If Al-Jazeera has a pro-Ennahda government bias in this period, it is possible to assume that this is also true for the time before it, after Ennahda’s election victory in 2011. This is because the choice of a political crisis setting means that this is the period in which Ennahda’s legitimacy and right to rule will have faced the most questioning, making it the least-likely case for bias toward the party.

The conclusion of this analysis rests heavily on the relatively small sample of the articles that contain positive or negative framing, and further study is required to confirm the bias of Al-Jazeera English in this period.
8. Conclusion

In researching the reporting of Al-Jazeera English during the political crisis in Tunisia 2013-2014 using the variables of coverage and framing, this study finds indications of bias toward Ennahda government actors over opposition actors in the articles published by the network.

Although it is difficult to draw a solid conclusion from this limited study, it shows that the topic of Al-Jazeera’s reporting, especially on the politics of the Arab world, is an important one to research. Its perspective on the region is an influential one, and knowing, at least approximately, what this perspective entails is helpful for understanding the events that the network reports on. Al-Jazeera, like other networks, may package its news according to set preferences, but until proven otherwise this does not equal dishonesty.

The indications of bias from this study underscore the importance of being aware of the preferences of the media we consume and build our perceptions of the world on. The solution, then, as emphasised in the introduction, is not to shut ourselves off from the information offered to us, but to increase our knowledge about its sources.

Suggestions for Further Study

There is need for continued work within the researched topic. One suggestion is for a contrastive study comparing Al-Jazeera reporting with that of networks based in democracies and non-democracies, partly to strengthen or question its bias for the Ennahda-led government and partly to further determine if its position is explained by Baum and Zhukov’s theory. Another interesting area of study is Al-Jazeera Arabic, as its intended audience lives in, and comes from, the countries affected by the Arab Spring.
References


**News articles**

The following references are for articles referenced directly in the study:

Chrisafis, A., Tunisia elections results indicate that Islamist party has won the most seats. *The Guardian*. October 25, 2011.  


http://global.factiva.com/redir/default.aspx?P=sa&an=AJAZEN0020130318e93g0000e&cat=a&ep=ASE.


http://global.factiva.com/redir/default.aspx?P=sa&an=AJAZEN0020130823e98m0000a&cat=a&ep=ASE.

# Appendix

## Timeline of events 2013-2014:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 6, 2013</td>
<td>Chokri Belaid is shot</td>
<td>MEJ 67 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 19, 2013</td>
<td>PM Hamadi Jebali resigns after failing to implement his new technocrat govt plan</td>
<td>MEJ 67 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 8, 2013</td>
<td>New PM Laarayedh presents new cabinet</td>
<td>MEJ 67 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 13, 2013</td>
<td>Street vendor Khadri dies after self-immolation</td>
<td>MEJ 67 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 2013</td>
<td>A dozen ANC members boycott the Assembly after disagreement over draft constitution</td>
<td>MEJ 67 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 25, 2013</td>
<td>Mohamed Brahmi is shot</td>
<td>MEJ 68 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 30, 2013</td>
<td>UGTT (Tunisia’s largest trade union) calls for the Ennahda-led govt to step down</td>
<td>MEJ 68 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 6, 2013</td>
<td>ANC work on new constitution is suspended and national dialogue to solve crisis to be begun</td>
<td>MEJ 68 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 28, 2013</td>
<td>Ennahda agrees to step down in favour of interim govt</td>
<td>MEJ 68 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 4, 2013</td>
<td>Talks on forming interim govt halted after disagreement over appointment of new PM</td>
<td>MEJ 68 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 8, 2014</td>
<td>Protesters clash with police and are prevented from storming Ennahda offices in town of Kasserine</td>
<td>MEJ 68 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 9, 2014</td>
<td>PM Laarayedh steps down as promised and Mehdi Jomaa is appointed as PM until elections can be held</td>
<td>MEJ 68 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 26, 2014</td>
<td>A new constitution is passed with 200 out of 216 votes by the ANC*</td>
<td>The Guardian, 2014-01-27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>