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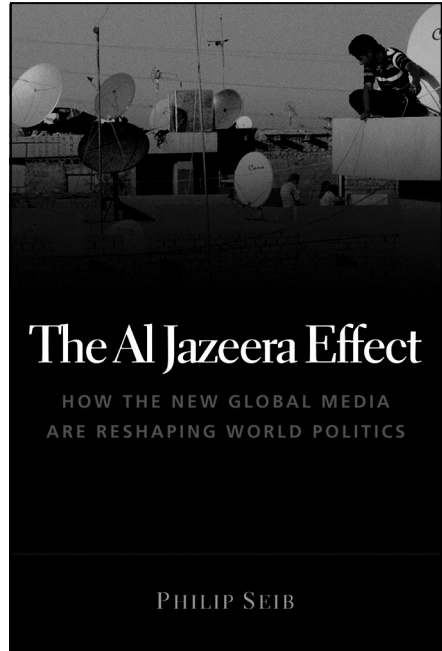
‘Rewired’, yet reflects old world media order

The Al Jazeera Effect: How the new global media are reshaping world politics, by Philip Seib. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008, 225 pp. ISBN 978-1-59797-200-0

THIS BOOK puzzled me at first. Not that it’s badly written and organised. It’s clear, concise and informed. Nor is it laden with fantastic theories cooked up by desk bound academics claiming they understand the world which perhaps exists beyond their air-conditioning. According to Philip Seib:

The battle for hearts and minds in the Middle East is being fought not only on the streets of Baghdad but also on the newscasts and talk shows of al Jazeera. China’s future is being shaped not solely by Communist Party bureaucrats but also by bloggers working quietly in cyber cafes. (p ix)

Seib’s analyses seemed grounded



in facts as I knew them and appeared mostly right to me. But how did a US-based academic have the time and resources to collect, comb through and evaluate diverse information from such distant and disparate locations? I have traveled and worked in many of the places Seib writes about, and trust me, their languages, politics and cultures are not easy to penetrate.

Perhaps the key was indicated at the end of the Preface. Seib said that some of the book’s material had been printed earlier in *Strategic Insights*, an electronic journal produced by the Center for Contemporary Conflict at

the US Naval Postgraduate School and *Military Review*, the professional journal of the US Army.

US military support for humanities research can unlock resources that Australian and New Zealand academics can only imagine. This didn't say the conclusions were wrong, but it might tell us a little about how assumptions were framed and perhaps help explain how information was obtained.

Seib's book sweeps through the Middle East and Asia, where newer media are challenging the old, often state controlled information channels. It constructs a strategic analysis of what he called 'the al Jazeera effect'; the 'rewiring of the world's neural system' by more accessible and interactive media.

Satellite television introduced a new era of political diversity, as different kinds of discourses reached mass audiences, he said. Governments could jail some bloggers and knock some satellites off the air, but the flood of information and the intellectual freedom it fostered was relentless. New media were changing the relationship between the public and news providers, Seib wrote.

Such trends had however, been comprehensively explored elsewhere. An Australian-based Palestinian, Ali Abusalem took three years and a PhD

thesis to examine how al Jazeera was affecting ideas about democracy in the Arab street. Abusalem, who fluently speaks and writes Arabic, took surveys to people in Egypt, Syria and Palestine. Working around sometimes hostile, often interventionist authorities, Abusalem found that al Jazeera was changing attitudes.

Drawing on secondary sources, Seib deduced that the 'ability to get lively and relatively independent content' had profoundly changed politics in the Middle East. Seib wrote that governments found it easier to control a few leaflets printed on a basement press and distributed on street corners. 'In China and many countries, the flood of new media is intrinsically democratic and governments can only do so much to stop it.'

However, he noted that information and truth were not necessarily the same thing. The media were being 'weaponised' in Middle Eastern wars to inflame public sentiment. An example was made of Farfour the mouse, a character on Hamas Children's television, who was martyred by an Israeli soldier.

But both sides engaged in this process of audience manipulation. Seib might have written more about how Western countries, particularly the United States were applying soft power on the internet, through

cultural products which included Western constructs of news.

The internet, he said, had become a 'hospital laboratory for fraud and other deception' for groups such as al Qaeda which was using it to create a virtual community, Seib said. Al Qaeda, is in truth, a criminally violent state that relies on media technologies to constitute a global 'homeland'.

This idea is not new. Sri Lankan Kasun Ubayasiri's PhD thesis examined in detail how the terrorist Tamil Tigers deployed an internet-based network of newsletters, media releases, and community groups to construct their own virtual nation, Tamil Eelam. Ubayasiri crossed the Sri Lankan border into Tiger country to find out what the Tamil Tigers were thinking. Ubayasiri however published on the internet rather than in American text books.

Seib's insightful book unconsciously reflects the old international media order where knowledge was authenticated by publication in the West, most recently the United States. Such publications were the wellspring of American soft power, exercising influence through groups like the Arab-US Association of Communication Educators, which helped underpin this book.

But as Seib observed, new media allowed local interaction and global

publication by those otherwise excluded by metropolitan authorities. Online journals and ebooks could be expected to progressively challenge academic paradigms, which privileged American perspectives, in the same way Al Jazeera broke Western monopolies on international news.

When that happens, the world's neural system really *will* be rewired.