

Not all viewers of Arab TV networks develop anti-American feelings

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Despite the fears of some Americans, Arab television networks such as Al Jazeera do not promote anti-American feelings among all their viewers, according to a new study.

Research based on surveys of nearly 20,000 residents of six Arab countries suggests that while watching networks like Al Jazeera fuels anti-American [feelings](#) in some viewers, it actually reduces such sentiment in others.

The results suggest that it is too simplistic to blame the Arab media for stoking resentment and hatred of America, said Erik Nisbet, lead author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"Arab [TV viewers](#) aren't getting a single, unified anti-American message from networks like Al Jazeera," Nisbet said.

"Viewers interpret the messages they get from Al Jazeera through the lens of their own [political identity](#)."

Whether Arab TV networks inflamed anti-American passions depended on how those surveyed defined their main political identity – specifically, whether they saw themselves primarily as Arab nationalists, Muslim nationalists or as devoted primarily to their own country, Nisbet said.

Nisbet conducted the study with Teresa Myers, a post-doctoral researcher in communication at Ohio State. Their research was published online today in the journal *Communication Research* and will appear in a future print edition.

The researchers used data collected between 2004 and 2009 by Zogby International and Shibley Telhami, a professor at the University of Maryland. Telhami and his colleagues conducted surveys of 19,036 residents across six Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates.

They focused on the participants' use of transnational Arab media, their political identity, various demographic controls, and whether they had a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the [United States](#).

For television use, the researchers examined how many days per week participants viewed various transnational channels, and which ones they chose as their favorites. Their emphasis was on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, the two dominant networks in the region that present an Arab perspective on the news.

In general, the study found that for those who had an Arab nationalist political identity, the more they watched Al Jazeera, the more likely they were to have an unfavorable view of the United States.

In comparison, for those with an Arab nationalist identity, watching more of the competing network – Al Arabiya – actually reduced anti-American sentiment.

That makes sense because Al Arabiya is a more moderate voice compared to Al Jazeera, and is usually less critical of the United States, Nisbet said.

The effects were different for those whose political identity was mostly tied to their countries (such as Egyptian, Moroccan, and so on).

For them, more viewing of Al Jazeera led to more favorable views of the United States – just the opposite of what occurred in Arab nationalists. There were no clear trends for how viewing of Al Arabiya affected those with state-centric political identities.

Arab residents who held a Muslim nationalist political identity tended to have the most unfavorable views of the United States, and viewing of Arab TV networks did little to change that in either direction.

"Overall, we found that a person's political identity was key to determining how watching [Al Jazeera](#) or Al Arabiya influenced individual opinions about the United States," Myers said.

These results suggest that the United States has both opportunities and challenges in using public diplomacy to build support for the United States in the Arab world, Nisbet said.

"People who have an Arab political identity may be most persuadable because their opinions are most likely to reflect what they see on television," Nisbet said.

"In other words, positive coverage of the United States on Arab TV may help build favorable opinions among this group."

Those with a nationalist identity may also be persuaded by positive messages about the United States on Arab television, the results suggested.

On the other hand, Islamic nationalists tend to have a negative view of the United States that may be resistant to change, regardless of the

messages they see in the media.

"If Islamic nationalism grows, it may be increasingly difficult for the U.S. to positively influence public opinion over time," Myers said.

In this study, about 28 percent had a primary political identity tied to their country while about 9 percent had an Arab nationalist identity.

"From a policy perspective, that means about a third of Arab residents would respond to more pro-American messages," Nisbet said. "The key is communicating messages that resonate with their political identities."

About 28 percent of those surveyed had a Muslim nationalist identity, and they will be hard to persuade regardless. The remaining 40 percent had mixed nationalist identities, and there are no clear findings about how they react to viewing Arab television, he said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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