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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Viewing and avoidance of the Al-Jazeera satellite television channel in Kuwait: a uses and gratifications perspective

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Employing the uses and gratifications perspective, this study examined factors that motivated Kuwaitis to watch or avoid watching the Al-Jazeera satellite channel and their relationships with political interest and trust in government. Viewers obtained several gratifications that included opinion leadership, free marketplace of information, and surveillance. Those who avoided watching Al-Jazeera did so for partisanship, biased coverage and political apathy. The relationships between gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera with political interest and trust in government revealed that those who were very interested in politics were more likely to watch Al-Jazeera for its opinion leadership and surveillance functions. Importantly, the results of this study showed that trust in government was negatively associated with Al-Jazeera's role as a free marketplace of information, its credibility in news presentation, and Kuwait's image in the Arab world. The results of this study support and reinforce our understanding of the various postulates of the uses and gratifications theory. Satellite television networks such as Al-Jazeera have created a free marketplace of ideas and information that would eventually engender citizens to speak for themselves rather than allow authorities to speak for them. Furthermore, these networks have become open forums for average Arabs to express their ideas and exchange views.

**Keywords:** Al-Jazeera TV; Kuwait; uses and gratifications; international communication; Arab media

During the First Gulf War in 1991, Cable News Network (CNN) introduced Arab audiences to a format of news and events coverage they had never before experienced. CNN televised sensational live videos of bullets and rockets illuminating the night sky over Baghdad, along with unedited live images of armed forces' movements accompanied by instant military analysis and information reported directly from correspondents embedded in the battlefield. CNN's coverage prompted the eagerness of Arabs to own satellite dishes and view information and content inaccessible in government-controlled Arab media (Ayish and Qassim, 1995; Ghareeb, 2001; Semati, 2001; Zureikat, 1999).

Many wealthy Arabs saw in satellite technology a promising market and thus many privately owned and business-based television channels began to transmit their

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signals. Presently, three types of Arab satellite television networks exist: private, government-backed, and government-owned. The majority of private networks like Arab Radio and Television (ART) and Orbit are encrypted. Although they present fine combinations of Arab and foreign channels, they face financial challenges because a majority of Arabs can access numerous unencrypted satellite channels. Government-backed networks are structured to operate independently, like Al-Jazeera, which the Qatari government finances but does not interfere in its affairs, therefore setting a model that parallels the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (Sakr, 2002). Finally, the government-owned networks are largely local television channels, operated by Arab Ministries of Information broadcast as satellite television channels to ensure governments' political presence in terrestrial media (Amin, 2002).

According to Ayish (2002), three types of news coverage and political programming exist in the Arab world today. First is the government-controlled television model, which includes the Syrian Satellite Channel (SSC). This model has maintained the old traditional priorities and style of programming guided by authoritarian operational structures. Second is the liberal commercial television model, represented by the Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel (JSC). This model emulates a Western style of journalism, presenting critical and pluralistic views of society. Last is the reformist government-controlled television model, which includes the Abu Dhabi Satellite Channel (ADSC). This model evolved when governments in the Arab countries perceived that more audiences were turning to the new independent and private satellite television channels. If the state governments were to appeal to audiences and compete with the private channels, they needed to account for objectivity, newsworthiness, and freedom of expression (Ayish, 2002).

### **The Al-Jazeera satellite television channel**

Named after the Arabian Peninsula 'Al-Jazirh Al-Arabia', Al-Jazeera broadcasts 24-hour news and political programs. Acting upon its slogan 'the Opinion and the Other Opinion', Al-Jazeera strategically tries to present itself as a provider of varying opinions by revealing many sides and perspectives in news stories. The channel also endeavors to distinguish itself in talk shows that carry on-air controversial debates designed to expose sensitive social and political Arab-related topics (Ghareeb, 2001).

Al-Jazeera was launched in November 1996 in the Gulf state of Qatar. To many it seemed as if Al-Jazeera had resurrected the BBC Arabic news channel that was dropped from Orbit, a multichannel pay-TV network backed by the Saudi ruling elites, for broadcasting a documentary criticizing the Saudi royal family (Sakr, 2005). The BBC Arabic channel folded and the staff were given jobs in Al-Jazeera. Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the ruler of Qatar, was reported to have watched and appreciated the BBC story on the Saudis, and he became the benefactor of Al-Jazeera. Although Al-Jazeera has been able to cover about 15% of its costs through advertising, the Qatari government remains the main financial provider. However, the government does not interfere in the internal affairs of Al-Jazeera, thus setting up an autonomous body in the Arab world much like the BBC.

Al-Jazeera is available to Arab populations across West Asia and North Africa along with Arab expatriate communities in Europe and North America that make up nearly 310 million potential viewers (Sakr, 2005). There are no credible audience

studies and thus no objective data available on the actual number of viewers for the various Arabic channels. Some recent surveys indicate a weekly audience of nearly 45 million viewers for Al-Jazeera (Jamal, 2001).

### **Research objectives**

State governments in the Arab countries in West Asia (Middle East) have controlled their media for a long time, yet recently, many satellite television networks have emerged and started to challenge government-owned media in audience viewership. It is important to investigate how Arabs' motivations for watching television differ throughout this transitional period for Arab media. It will be heuristic to determine why Arabs watch political content or avoid it on satellite television. It will be worthwhile to find out if Arabs watch satellite television because the new networks are able to appeal to audiences and are free in presenting and discussing issues (Tunstall, 2008). Some scholars have posited that people might avoid Al-Jazeera because they are not accustomed to this kind of open and liberal media. Others have argued that people employ selective exposure techniques to avoid contents not relevant to their beliefs and values for consistency purposes.

In particular, this study is interested in understanding the appeal (or lack of it) of Al-Jazeera. Arabs maintain mixed feelings toward Al-Jazeera. Those who support Al-Jazeera claim that the network is the clean air they breathe for its serious presentations of journalistic work, which stand for newsworthiness, objectivity, and credibility (Al-Sayeq, 2000; Miles, 2006). According to many, Arab satellite television channels began to consider broadcast media as a serious business after Al-Jazeera infused a competitive spirit into them to present vivid, lively, and reflective coverage of news and programming (Rasheed, 2001; Miles, 2005). On the political side, Arabs now witness how people from different backgrounds openly and dramatically present their points of view (Saraj, 2001). For many, Al-Jazeera respects the minds of Arab citizens because it introduces a variety of opinions and leaves it up to them to judge issues (Abeed, 2000; Rampal, 2007).

Yet there are those who stand against Al-Jazeera and believe its discussions and coverage of news are poisonous and create a divided Arab opinion that is indifferent toward pan-Arabism ('General manager', 1999). Critics question Al-Jazeera's motives in its invitations to Israeli officials to discuss issues in front of Arab viewers (Abdullah, 2000). Others have criticized Al-Jazeera for its management of talk shows. These critics pointed out that Al-Jazeera focuses on displaying negative Arab news such as governments' malpractices to garner audiences (Ulian, 2001). Critics also charged that Al-Jazeera organizes talk shows consisting of screams and offensive language to incite emotions rather than intellect (Al-Mawari, 2001; Al-Romaihee, 2000). Nofel Al-Jenabi argued that Al-Jazeera's chaotic talk shows would eventually create Arab citizens who feel negative and conflicted toward discussing issues and the variations in opinions in public (Al-Jenabi, 1998).

This study is confined to one important Arab country, namely Kuwait. We will examine the uses and gratification derived from regular viewers and non-viewers of Al-Jazeera in the state of Kuwait.

So what are the gratification factors obtained from viewing of Al-Jazeera? Or, what are the reasons others avoid being regular viewers of the channel? This study also presents an opportunity to test if some attitudes and beliefs that shape media

use are then related to the gratifications obtained. For example, a Gallup poll conducted in 2002 in Kuwait revealed that Kuwaitis are interested in current political affairs and international relations. In addition, trust with the rulers is an important and sensitive issue in Kuwait and much of the Arab world. How do these factors relate to gratifications obtained?

Accordingly, the research questions are:

- RQ1. What are the perceived gratifications derived by viewers of Al-Jazeera?
- RQ2. What are the reasons for the lack of viewing of Al-Jazeera?
- RQ3. What are the relationships between political interest and trust in government with gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera?
- RQ4. What are the relationships between political interest and trust in government with factors for non-viewing of Al-Jazeera?
- RQ5. With respect to political interest/trust in government and demographics, what differentiates those who view Al-Jazeera from those who do not?

### Theoretical framework

The uses and gratifications perspective investigates the various needs media fulfill and the specific gratifications people derive from them. To operationalize those questions, scholars have classified reasons for media use and gratifications into methodologically distinctive categories consisting of cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and escapist gratifications (Tan, 1985). Greenberg (1974) clustered statements people supplied about their reasons for television viewing into: relaxation, companionship, habit, passing time, entertainment, social interaction, information, arousal, and escape.

People use media to satisfy different needs: surveillance, entertainment, correlation, cultural socialization, and personal identity (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). On the other hand, Rosengren (1974), indicated that the use of media is affected by individuals' needs, motives, behavior patterns, media consumption, daily problems, and characteristics of society. Over the course of time, people develop certain expectations about which media and contents fulfill their needs and desires (Katz et al., 1974). Accordingly, this theory acknowledges people as active processors of information and alerted recipients of content who deliberately select media options and purposely apply techniques of exposure to receive calculable satisfaction.

Scholars have linked interest in politics with the purposeful use of media for politics. People might watch political content to feel safe about the world they live in, understand political correctness, and for consistency reasons. Individuals who were found to be interested in politics used media to immune themselves against others in arguments, reinforce their beliefs about political candidates (McLeod & Becker, 1974), and to obtain information for discourse with others (Kaye & Johnson, 2002).

Researchers also attempted to discover reasons why people avoid media political content. McLeod and Becker (1974) found that people avoided watching politics on television for its alienation and partisanship factors. More recently, Marghalani, Palmgreen, and Boyd (1998) found that Saudis avoided satellite television because it included 'counter-culture content'. Saudi respondents said they avoided satellite television because it reflected 'media imperialism' and 'Western culture'. They also cited the 'lack [of] Islamic religious content' as a reason for avoidance. Saudis believed that satellite television neither provided programming consistent with their

Islamic values nor telecasted times of prayers or Islam's important religious occasions such as Ramadan and Hajj.

Some researchers have criticized the uses and gratifications perspective for its focus on individual psychological origins while ignoring the social origins of media use and expectations, arguing that this partial view interferes with a full and complex explanation of media use patterns and behaviors (McQuail, 1985; Weibull, 1985). McQuail, for example, states '... the approach is actually rather insensitive to the essence of cultural variations' (1985, p. 7). Weibull (1985) argued that researchers should also consider many social factors affecting the variations of media uses and gratifications, including the availability of media outlets to audience, type of media, volume and content, gatekeepers, social pressure on media outlets, and media policy. In fact, in countries and cultures like the Arab world, researchers particularly need to incorporate new motivations for use, and other social and political components to research in uses and gratifications.

## Method

### *Population and sampling*

The State of Kuwait is located in Southwestern Asia, situated between Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Arabian Gulf. It consists of 6880 square miles and is populated by roughly two million people, among whom about 900,000 are Kuwaiti citizens. Oil is the main driving economic force in the country (*CIA: The world factbook*, 2004).

Kuwaitis are permitted to own satellite dish receivers. The rate of satellite dish penetration is high, about 90%. This study was a sample survey using a telephone directory published in 2003 that included the telephone numbers of all Kuwaitis. The study was conducted between October and December 2003. Using the telephone book as the sampling frame, a total of 1587 telephone numbers were selected using a random sampling method. Of the 1587 phone numbers called, 490 (31% participation rate) consented to participate in the survey. All respondents were Kuwaiti citizens.

Since Kuwaiti social custom does not permit men to interview women (Muhammad, 1999), speakerphones were employed to distinguish respondents' voices as either being male or female before an interviewer would pick up the phone and start interviewing. The interviewers were required to consist of couples, one female and one male so that the male interviewer could survey male respondents and the female interviewer could talk to female respondents.

### *Questionnaire*

A structured questionnaire was prepared that had items relating to viewership of Al-Jazeera, perceived gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera (for regular viewers only), and reasons for non-viewing of Al-Jazeera (for non-viewers only). The motivations and gratifications outlined in uses and gratifications studies (e.g. Perse, 1994a, 1994b; Marghalani et al., 1998) served as some of the sources for the questionnaire items. Extended interviews with about 50 Kuwaitis yielded many other motivations and gratifications that were then included in the questionnaire. For example, one of the questionnaire items was: 'I watch Al-Jazeera channel because it provides me with uncensored information'. These were recorded on a 5-point scale

from 'strongly agree' (5) to 'strongly disagree' (1). See Table 1 for other examples of questionnaire items on this scale. Similarly, reasons for non-viewing of Al-Jazeera were also obtained with questions such as 'I avoid watching Al-Jazeera channel because ...' and recorded on a 5-point scale with 'strongly agree' (5) and ending with 'strongly disagree' (1). See Table 2 for examples of questionnaire items on this scale.

Table 1. Perceived gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera ( $N=407$ ).

'I watch Al-Jazeera Network because ...'	Descriptive		Factor loadings			
	Mean	S	1	2	3	4
<i>Factor 1: opinion leadership</i>						
It is a credible source of news	2.21	1.13	0.78	0.17	0.18	0.02
It provides me with information about what is going on	2.36	1.78	0.69	0.02	0.21	0.02
It helps me make up my mind about the important issues of the day	2.78	1.43	0.57	0.17	0.41	0.13
I use its discussions of issues as ammunition in discourse with others	2.80	1.29	0.52	0.37	0.15	0.37
It helps me judge what kind of job the Arab government officials are doing	2.95	1.34	0.50	0.40	-0.02	0.49
<i>Factor 2: free marketplace of information</i>						
It provides me with uncensored information	3.06	1.33	0.12	0.83	0.18	0.02
The channel is free to discuss any political issue	3.11	1.30	0.02	0.81	0.25	0.15
It shows the real work of Arab political rulers and governments, including their misconduct	3.00	1.17	0.39	0.52	0.02	0.44
It covers news and issues that Arab political leaders and governments try to hide	3.22	1.25	0.31	0.49	0.25	0.41
It gives different political points of views the chance to exist	3.17	1.22	0.34	0.47	0.19	0.10
<i>Factor 3: surveillance</i>						
It keeps me informed about the current issues and events	3.64	1.08	0.34	0.15	0.76	0.02
It discusses issues and presents news in exciting and thrilling ways	3.85	1.14	0.02	0.26	0.70	0.20
It presents news events with thorough and in-depth analysis	3.17	1.21	0.42	0.18	0.65	0.13
It presents discussions about important issues that grab my attention	3.61	1.31	0.35	0.29	0.54	0.20
It is an excellent source of news	2.90	1.26	0.51	0.15	0.54	0.24
<i>Factor 4: image of Kuwait in the Arab world</i>						
I want to watch how Kuwaiti guests on the channel perform	3.10	1.29	0.02	0.26	0.14	0.77
I am interested in knowing what other Arabs think of Kuwait	3.04	1.43	0.02	-0.02	0.40	0.67
Eigenvalue			7.1	1.4	1.3	1.1
Variance explained			41.65	8.17	7.08	6.01
Alpha (reliability score)			0.79	0.81	0.83	0.65

Table 2. Reasons for non-viewing of Al-Jazeera ( $N=83$ ).

	Descriptive		Factor loadings		
	Mean	S	1	2	3
<i>Factor 1: partisanship</i>					
It portrays individuals who have beliefs that I disagree with	3.98	1.16	0.78	0.02	-0.15
It focuses on negative news and issues about Kuwait	4.60	0.78	0.75	0.33	-0.02
I cannot always trust what politicians tell me on television	3.83	1.03	0.69	-0.02	0.42
<i>Factor 2: biased coverage</i>					
Its coverage of news and issues is biased	4.22	1.17	-0.02	0.81	0.02
It has a political ideology and an agenda that tries to impose it on viewers	4.20	0.97	0.31	0.68	-0.16
<i>Factor 3: political apathy</i>					
I prefer to relax when watching television	3.70	1.19	0.02	0.39	0.78
I am not much interested in politics	3.05	1.26	-0.02	-0.36	0.75
Eigenvalue			2.09	1.45	1.16
Variance explained			29.8	20.7	16.6
Alpha (reliability score)			0.75	0.71	0.66

To assess interest in politics, one item was used as follows: 'In general, I'm very interested in politics'. Respondents expressed their attitudes on a 5-point scale with 'strongly agree' (5) and ending with 'strongly disagree' (1). A summated index measuring trust in government (adapted from Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1999) was made up of the following items: 'In general, one can rely on the government to do the right thing', 'government members tell the truth when they appear on media', and 'members of the government put interests of the people over the interests of their own'. Response options ranged from 'strongly agree' (5) and ended with 'strongly disagree' (1). The scale of trust in government yielded a reliability alpha score of 0.73.

To measure exposure to Al-Jazeera, respondents indicated their response to an open-ended question that asked the number of hours he/she spent watching Al-Jazeera on an average day. A respondent who did not watch Al-Jazeera was given a score of zero hours while those who watched the channel were rank-ordered according to their exposure (in minutes and hours) on an average day.<sup>1</sup> Information was also collected on demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and income.

## Data analyses and results

### *Sample profile*

The sample consisted of Kuwaiti adults over the age of 18 years. A slight majority were males (56.1%). The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 73 years. The largest group of respondents belonged to the age category of 26 to 30 years (19%) and the age group of 51 years and older was recorded with the least frequency, about 6%.



Income ranged from no income to an income of US\$4001 and above per month. The income range of US\$1200–\$2300 was recorded with the most frequency, about 27%. Level of education ranged from less than high school to post-graduate level. About 7% had post-graduate education, 38% of respondents had an education level of four years of college, 23% of the respondents had two years of college, 21% had completed high school, and 9% had less than high school education. About 83% of respondents reported that they watched Al-Jazeera while the rest reported that they did not watch the channel.

### ***Perceived gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera***

The first research question sought to explore the perceived gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera. All questionnaire items measuring motivation and gratifications were submitted to a factor analysis using the principal components method with varimax rotation. A minimum loading of 0.45 was required to retain an item within a factor. An eigenvalue greater than 1 was required to retain a factor. Table 1 shows the results of the factor analysis along with means, standard deviations of the items and the eigenvalues of the obtained factors and variance explained. Reliability analysis was performed for all the factors and their values are also shown in Table 1. The factor analysis isolated four sets of gratifications: opinion leadership, free marketplace of information, surveillance, and image of Kuwait in the Arab world (see Table 1).

Individuals who watched Al-Jazeera for *opinion leadership* did so because it provided them with information they needed and reflected the kind of job government agencies do. It also helped them make up their mind about issues, using its discussions as ammunition because it is a credible source of news. As a *free marketplace of information*, Kuwaitis watched Al-Jazeera because it provided uncensored information, freedom to discuss various political issues, and the chance for different views to exist, coverage of sensitive issues on Arab leaders, including misconduct. As for the *surveillance* factor, respondents said that Al-Jazeera kept them informed about current issues through attention-grabbing and thrilling programming, and constituted an excellent and comprehensive source of news. Finally, for the *image of Kuwait in the Arab world*, respondents said they watched Al-Jazeera to see how issues about Kuwait are played out on the network and how Kuwaiti guests presented their ideas (see Table 1).

In order to see which gratification factors had the strongest endorsements by the respondents, we computed averaged mean scores for the factors and ranked them. The original questionnaire items had a scale of 1 to 5 with 'strongly agree' scoring 5 and 'strongly disagree' scoring 1. The averaged mean ranking showed that Al-Jazeera was endorsed most for its *surveillance* factor, followed by *free marketplace of information*, *image of Kuwait*, and *opinion leadership*.

### ***Reasons for non-viewing of Al-Jazeera***

The second research question attempted to discover reasons associated with non-viewing of Al-Jazeera. Questionnaire items were submitted to a factor analysis using the principal components method with varimax rotation. A minimum loading of 0.45 was required to retain an item within a factor. An eigenvalue greater than 1 was

required to retain a factor. Table 2 shows the results of the factor analysis along with means, standard deviations of the items and the eigenvalues of the obtained factors and variance explained. Reliability analysis was performed for all the factors and their values are also shown in Table 2. The factor analysis of the related questionnaire items isolated three main reasons for avoiding viewing Al-Jazeera: its partisanship, its biased coverage, and political apathy (see Table 2).

For the partisanship factor, respondents avoided viewing Al-Jazeera because it portrayed individuals who hold beliefs with which they disagreed, it focused on negative news about Kuwait, and because they did not trust politicians on Al-Jazeera. For the biased coverage factor, respondents said that Al-Jazeera's coverage of the network is biased and that the network tries to impose a certain ideology on viewers. For the political apathy factor, viewers said they were not interested in politics and that they preferred to relax when watching television (see Table 2).

In order to see which avoidance factors had the strongest endorsements by the respondents, we computed averaged mean scores for the factors and ranked them. The original questionnaire items had a scale of 1 to 5 with 'strongly agree' scoring 5 and 'strongly disagree' scoring 1. The averaged mean ranking showed that Al-Jazeera was avoided most for its *bias*, followed by its *partisanship*, and *political apathy* of the respondents.

### ***Political interest and trust in government with gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera***

The relationships between political interest and trust in government with gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera were the focus of the third research question. The correlation analysis revealed that interest in politics correlated significantly with opinion leadership ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and surveillance ( $r = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). High interest in politics also associated significantly with watching Al-Jazeera for Kuwait's image ( $r = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Those who were very interested in politics were more likely to watch Al-Jazeera for its opinion leadership, surveillance, and Kuwait's image.

The correlations revealed that trust in government was negatively associated with the following factors: free marketplace of information ( $r = -0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), surveillance ( $r = -0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and Kuwait's image ( $r = -0.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, individuals who watched Al-Jazeera for a free marketplace of information, surveillance, and Kuwait's image had generally lower levels of trust in the Kuwaiti government.

### ***Political interest and trust in government with reasons for avoidance of Al-Jazeera***

The correlations revealed that political interest associated positively with biased coverage of Al-Jazeera ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Political apathy correlated negatively with interest in politics ( $r = -0.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Finally, trust in government correlated negatively with partisanship ( $r = -0.25$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). So, non-viewers of Al-Jazeera with higher levels of political interest avoided viewing due to its perceived biased coverage. And non-viewers with a higher trust in government avoided viewing due to its perceived partisanship, a negative correlation.

### ***Differences in demographics and political interest/trust in government with Al-Jazeera viewership***

Our last question was concerned with finding differences between those who viewed Al-Jazeera and those who did not in terms of gender and age. The chi-square test revealed significant differences. For gender,  $\chi^2 = 9.83$  ( $p = 0.043$ ) and for age  $\chi^2 = 8.93$ , ( $p = 0.003$ ). Data revealed that females were more likely to avoid regular viewing of Al-Jazeera than males. In terms of age, older people were more likely to avoid Al-Jazeera. In general, lower age groups are very interested in politics and this relationship reflected that orientation since Al-Jazeera has a heavy coverage of political news and talk shows.

The independent groups *t*-test exhibited in Table 3 showed that there were significant differences between those who watched Al-Jazeera and those who did not with respect to political interest and trust in government. The test showed that those who watched Al-Jazeera were more interested in politics than those who did not view Al-Jazeera. There was no significant difference between the two groups of viewers on trust in government.

### **Summary and conclusion**

This study investigated the response of Kuwaitis in a national survey, exploring reasons why Kuwaitis watched Al-Jazeera or avoided it, and the relationships between the uses and gratifications with political interest and trust in government. It also compared viewers and non-viewers of Al-Jazeera in terms of demographics and political interest.

In this section, we will provide a rationale and interpretations of the results of our study. Importantly, we wish to place the findings within the theory, particularly in terms of how the results of the study expand our understanding of uses and gratifications theory.

Uses and gratifications theory postulates that individuals actively use the media to satisfy needs that range from surveillance, entertainment, cultural socialization to even reinforcing personal identity. So, according to this theory, individuals functioning as active processors of information and alerted recipients of media content are able to identify media (in a competing media environment) that serve their interests and desires and even develop expectations of which media are best able to serve their needs. The results of this study showed that individuals watched

Table 3. Independent *t*-test of regular viewers and non-viewers of Al-Jazeera on political interest and trust in government.

Viewing Al-Jazeera	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	<i>T</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Interest in politics						
Regular viewers	401	3.56	1.01	4.49	481	0.001
Non-viewers	82	3.01	0.98			
Trust in government						
Regular viewers	401	2.79	0.84	-1.54	481	0.124
Non-viewers	82	2.95	0.83			

Al-Jazeera because it provided them with information they needed and it reflected the kind of job government agencies did in Kuwait and the wider Arab world. It also helped them make up their mind about issues. Kuwaitis watched Al-Jazeera because it provided uncensored information, freedom to discuss various political issues, the chance for different views to exist, and coverage of sensitive issues on Arab leaders, including their misconduct. Finally, respondents said they watched Al-Jazeera to see how issues about Kuwait were played out on the network and how Kuwaiti guests presented their ideas.

The nature of the media in Arab societies, especially the political and cultural dimensions, in the pre-Al-Jazeera era may have provided a direct impetus to people's expectations and use of news media. The media in Kuwait and most of the Arab countries in Southwest Asia were (and still are) predominantly authoritarian, although some changes have occurred recently. Prior to the diffusion of satellite television in the Arab region, political regimes utilized all forms of broadcast media to legitimize political systems, stabilize social order, disseminate dominant ideologies, and illuminate accomplishments of their leaders. Arab governments have always exploited their broadcast media for political purposes, starting in 1952 when a group of military officers, known as the *Free Officers*, seized power in Egypt and started buttressing their national movement and political agenda in that country. A few years later, the *Free Officers* decreed the state's ownership of the press, establishing a centralized hierarchy that increasingly became an example to many Arab socialist and nationalist groups, who seized power afterwards to validate domination of their power and institutionalized their ideologies (Boyd, 1999).

State ownership of media in the Arab countries has produced obsequious forms of media outlets acting as mouthpieces for authority (Amin, 2002). Arab government-controlled news coverage assembles news, speeches, and activities of officials frequently followed by talk shows consisting of one-sided discussions applauding the actions of authorities, as well as lyrics and poetry celebrating the competencies of their leaders. Political programs rarely include analytical discussions of local political and economic problems. They, however, conventionally offer sentimental rhetoric and conspiracy theories aimed at persuading people that Zionists and Western powers act against any Arab effort for development and liberation. This manipulation of events and issues has helped regimes to safeguard dominant ideologies, gain support from the populace, and discourage citizens from contemplating on important issues affecting their daily lives (Taubman, 1998).

The description above of the pre-Al-Jazeera media environment that included types of media available to the audiences, their contents, the gatekeepers involved, media policy, social pressures on the media outlets, etc., brings into sharp focus the many social factors that may affect the variations in media uses and gratifications derived as well as the media content-related expectations of individuals. Al-Jazeera has brought about a significant change in the Arab media landscape. Arab viewers have been watching government media that were not in competition with other media, comprising of personnel who were unenthusiastic and unmotivated to perform well. Arab government-owned broadcast media have presented news and issues in the past in a way that was boring and technologically weak. The popularity of Al-Jazeera suggests that applying technology and excitement to political reporting may be important to Arabs, an assumption that will need to be studied in the future. Politics was made unattractive to audiences by Arab government-owned media

broadcasting organizations and their sycophancy. The news media not only lacked excitement and new technology, but also carried one-sided coverage making it repetitive and predictable. The results of our study suggest that Al-Jazeera has succeeded more than the Arab government media in adding spontaneity and credibility when it invites people of different voices and backgrounds to call and express their opinions, including a change in the types of programming desired. The implications of our findings, as exemplified by Al-Jazeera, are that in countries and cultures similar to the Arab world, it is important for the free media outlets to incorporate new motivations for use and attempt to provide contents that cater to audience gratifications as indicated in the uses and gratifications model.

The relationships between gratifications derived from watching Al-Jazeera with political interest and trust in government further reinforce many of the issues discussed above of the nature of Arab media environment. In addition, these correlations also throw light on the relationships between audience expectations and gratifications received, as revealed in the uses and gratifications literature. Our study results showed that those who were very interested in politics were more likely to watch Al-Jazeera for opinion leadership and surveillance-related gratifications. Importantly, the results of this study showed that trust in government was negatively associated with Al-Jazeera's role as a free marketplace of information, and as a surveillant of the political landscape in the Arab world. These results have a direct bearing on the perceived standing of Al-Jazeera as well as greatly expanding our understanding of the postulates of the uses and gratifications theory.

Our study also indicated that some respondents avoided Al-Jazeera. The results showed that people with certain types of expectations such as a lack of perceived partisanship and a lack of perceived bias were disappointed with Al-Jazeera's news and talk shows and avoided the channel. These results reinforce and expand our understanding of the uses and gratifications theory, especially in terms of the link between gratifications sought and obtained. Several studies in uses and gratifications have showed how the media are employed as sources of entertainment and relaxation. In this study, those interested in such themes avoided Al-Jazeera, which is a news-intensive channel.

In conclusion, the results of this study support and reinforce our understanding of the various postulates of the uses and gratifications theory. Importantly, the study strongly suggests that satellite television channels such as Al-Jazeera have affected Kuwaiti media specifically and the Arab media generally. Scholars contend that the role of Arab Ministries of Information in controlling the flow of information has been on a decline since the influx of satellite television. Arab governments have begun to acknowledge Arab public opinion as increasingly skeptic, questioning governments' policies and demanding reform. Satellite television networks such as Al-Jazeera have created a free marketplace of ideas and information that would eventually engender citizens to speak for themselves rather than allow authorities to speak for them. Furthermore, these networks have become open forums for average Arabs to express their ideas and exchange views (Zahrana, 2001; Chalabi, 2005). For the first time, Arabs in conservative societies can listen to secular explanations on issues and participate in free discussions.

## Notes

1. Respondents who watched for at least 14 minutes got a score of 1; those watching between 15 and 29 minutes got a score of 2; those watching between 30 and 59 minutes scored 3; respondents who watched between one hour and less than two hours had a rank of 4; and those who viewed Al-Jazeera for more than two hours were given a value of 5.

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