

## Media, Identities, and Immigrants: Arab Satellite Television in Italy

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### SAŽETAK

*The field of global media has recently seen the publication of several books on the relationship between the media, belonging, and migrants. This research focuses on the complex cultural positioning of communities, who, for a variety of reasons, move to a new country and inhabit the new culture. This article first maps some theoretical and empirical investigations on the issues of immigrants, and their use of the media. Furthermore, the specific context of the Arab media revolution within and outside Arab countries is presented, and I particularly focus on Al-Jazeera satellite television and an imaginary it offers. I explore, through ethnographic research and in-depth interviews, the use and consumption of Al-Jazeera satellite television by young Arab Muslim immigrants who meet at the Islamic Cultural Institute of Milan, Italy. I argue that Al-Jazeera represents an original media project which tries to break free from direct control of Arab governments to the media - despite the financial support it continues to receive from the Emir of Qatar. However, the overwhelming enthusiasm surrounding the experience of watching independent news channels should not always be seen in the light of a common desire to identify and unite within the notion of umma.*

Ključne riječi: media, migrants, Al-Jazeera satellite television, independent news channels, umma

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## Introduction

Issues of identity, media, migrations, diversity, and nationalism in Europe have resurged radically following the major political changes that have come about since 1989, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, the end of the Cold War, the arrival of a large number of migrants to Europe, and the so-called global context of the “war on terror”. These events have further triggered the need for cultural integration in Europe and also contributed to the rise of new identities – as new categories of insiders and outsiders are shaped in response to the presence of migrant “others” within European societies. Cultural diversity has always been characteristic of Europe, but the rise of migration and communication has led to different types of cultural and social experiences and formations.

Many scholars, in thinking about whether the media may help in constructing *Europeanness*, forget to note that the identity and even the geo-cultural scope of Europe is far from clear. At the heart of the debate about *Europeanness* are questions about what political, economic, and cultural (religious) values the imagined Europe should have, as envisioned by diverse individuals and collectivities. For example, it is becoming increasingly evident inside some member states of the European Community (EC) that non-whites and non-Christians are considered “outsiders”, who should not really belong (Welzer, 2005; Amin, 1989).

As Europe keeps fortifying its physical borders (Chambers, 1994), and redefining its cultural boundaries, the attempt to understand the identities of non-European minorities within this restricted space becomes a (media) policy imperative. Scholars and policy-makers alike are struggling with questions such as: what should be the model- “assimilation”, “integration”, or “multiculturalism”; what do these terms really mean? What implications do the immigrants have for the role of the nation-state and national media as barriers of national cultures? Do they find their place within the national media space, negotiate it, modify it, or undermine it? Or do they rather go beyond the national media, finding in the media globalization opportunities to construct cosmopolitan or “transnational” identities? The paper starts from the argument that any discussion of the impact of global media on a national scale requires particular attention to the contextually sensitive realities of sub-national communities, such as migrants. Globalization has not only transformed the ideal of a homogeneous national culture within the boundaries of the nation-state, it has also affected the notion of migration, media, citizenship, and belonging. As global communications allow populations across the globe to communicate, among themselves they further transform the nation as an imagined community that offers the singular position where people live their lives and where identities and communities are singularly constructed (Anderson, 1991). There is a particular type of heterogeneity within European societies that is a consequence of the movements of populations but also the product of the movement of images and words, narratives and information. However, we have to continue creating a framework for the analysis of those media cultures.

The emergence of satellite technologies and the Internet in particular has increased the possibility of conveying information beyond European national

boundaries – and one should not think here only of usual, by now common-sense Western media examples, such as CNN, or Disney.

A good example of the impact of media globalization can be seen in the Middle East, where the notion of the state has been challenged by the recent advent of satellite television and the Internet. Thus, a number of transnational television channels globally have been created in the past few years, taking advantage of the recent developments in satellite technology and the liberalization of national broadcasting systems. Many of these channels seek to target ethnic groups beyond their national borders: CBC TV, Greek Cypriot Satellite Television broadcasts in Greek; Zee TV broadcasts in Hindi across Asia; Med TV targets the Kurdish population in Europe; MBC, Al-Jazeera, TRT, Al-Arabiyya and others broadcast in Arabic across the Middle East and North Africa and are watched by Arabs around the world; and TRT-INT targets the Turkish population across Europe.

Within the EU, some scholars note that there is a growing concern about the cultural withdrawal of immigrant groups into their home culture and a decreasing readiness to integrate into the host culture (Morley, 2000). Recent developments in media technology, rather than the wider social and economic reasons, are often blamed for the supposed isolation of ethnic minorities in a cultural enclave that prevents them from interacting with the host society. Such fears indicate a serious lack of understanding of how immigrants use the media to negotiate issues of identity and difference. Ethnographic case-studies are necessary if we want to understand the specific and particular experience of mediation, identity and community.

It seems to me that Muslim immigrants' identities in Europe, in particular require empirical research. To the populist and main-stream European imagination, Muslims present, a particular kind of a challenge. Remembered in a series of historic encounters with Europeans, like the siege of Vienna in 1683, they have returned mostly as immigrants from the former colonies of European empires. Turks, Surinamese, Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Indonesians, Indians and Pakistanis have found employment and in many cases acquired citizenship among Europeans.

Islam and Muslim immigrants' identities are increasingly associated in the mainstream European media and the popular imagination with a barbaric and uncivilized culture, as well as, with terrorist cells linked globally by elusive criminal masterminds. Islam in France, for example, has been historically constructed as a forceful threat to the ideal of secularism that has informed French society since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Islam is often seen as incompatible with a secular, modern society because it is mostly understood in its extreme interpretations. The affair headscarves in France [*l'affaire du foulard*] encapsulates the predicament (see Thomas, 1998). In Germany, Islam is equally subject to the stereotypical representations that breed fear of religious fundamentalism despite the fact that only a tiny fraction of the 2,000 mosque organizations are affiliated with militant groups (Robins, 1996). The prominence of Islam in Germany has a lot to do with the massive migration of Turkish Muslims (2,1 millions) since the 1950s. Slovenia has been recently swept by fear of Muslim foreigners. In 2003 and 2004 there was a heated debate over the proposed referendum in Ljubljana on whether the city

should allow a mosque to be built for its 15,000 Muslims. The most prominent politicians either distanced themselves from the controversy, or made uninformed public statements. For example, Andrej Umek, a member of the SLS, the Slovenian People's party, claimed that "if we allow the mosque to be built, we'll add it consciously and unconsciously to the infrastructure of Al Qaeda" (in Delo, 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2004).

I have tried to understand the rising *islamophobia* in the West, which was strong even before the terrorist attacks on New York and London (Thomas, 1998). *Islamophobia*, however, has been influencing different public debates and even current scholarly research on Muslim diasporas (North Africans, Turks, South Asians and others) that portrays Islam only in its most stereotypical manifestations such as the "veil", female genital mutilation, Islamic fundamentalism, etc. The anthropologist Swedenburg (2000) argues against using the same old markers that only perpetuate the stereotyping of Islam and suggests a reorientation of research interests to help situate the appeal of Islam - particularly among younger Muslims in Europe. Swedenburg argues for an academic research of Islamic popular culture expressions in Europe. Hip-hop, for example, among North Africans in France, and South Asians in England should be understood, Swedenburg suggests, as the creative part of attempts to produce new spaces of resistance. Young hip-hopers borrow critically from their own cultural and religious heritage to deal with racist violence and feelings of exclusion in Europe. He shows how ethnic (Muslim) hip-hop songs revolve around issues of police brutality against minorities, poverty, and gang-gang violence. Bands like IAM in France and Cartel in Germany use their music while playing on Europe's growing fear of Islam. My own work in the past has also been focusing on Palestinian refugees in Beirut, Lebanon, and their transformations of perceptions of the West. Morley (2000) also calls for a scholarly focus on the specific role of the media revolution in the Arab world. My attempt here then is to contribute some understanding to how young Arab Muslims, in Milan, use satellite Arab television stations, if at all.

The paper is divided into three parts. First, I offer some theoretical and empirical investigation into the issues of immigrants, and their use of media, as argued by media scholars, such as Morley (2000), Naficy (1993), and Gillespie (1995).

In the second part I focus on the specific context of the Arab media revolution within and outside the Arab regions.

In the third part of the paper, I explore, through ethnographic research and in-depth interviews, the use and consumption of Al-Jazeera satellite television by the young Arab Muslim immigrants that socialize in Islamic Cultural Institute of Milan, Italy.<sup>1</sup> I've chosen Milan's Islamic Cultural Institute as a site of my research because I wanted to uncover the connections between the cultural orientation of young Arabs, on the one side, and the role of an Arab Satellite television station Al-Jazeera in their lives. Following the popular and populist arguments that understand and define Al-Jazeera only as a community-binding tool, and a unifying force for Arabs in diaspora, it would be obvious to assume that young unemployed immigrants who don't yet speak fluently Italian, might seek refuge in a channel that ties them back to their home countries, their culture, their language as well as to other Arabs abroad. I employed the ethnographic approach here that generally

focuses on the importance of human action and the construction of meaning, since it allows the researcher to describe activities and record informants' own statements, perceptions, and ideas. Albeit limited in scope, my ethnographic research aims at understanding the world from the point of view of the subjects of research through an engaged participation in their everyday lives and practices (Abu-Lughod, 1993).

### **Media Identities and Immigrants**

The field of global media has recently seen the publication of several works on the relationship between media, belonging, and migrants. This research focuses on the complex cultural positioning of communities, who, for a variety of reasons, move to a new country and inhabit a new culture. Ang in particular has conducted a pioneering ethnographic audience research on the impact of global flows of media products, and she argues that local cultures everywhere are implicated in this process of appropriation of these flows within their local contexts (Ang, 1999).

In a way, immigrants have always been at the fore front for using media technologies in order to collapse the time and space distances between them and the homelands that they have left behind. While radio, video recorders and films served once as a primary tool to keep in touch with the culture of origin, it has become common-place now to find personal diasporic web sites where not only images of the homeland are represented, but critical information about either the homeland or new-homeland is relayed to family and friends both in text and video.

Kolar-Panov's research on the use of VCRs and video letters among the Croatian and Macedonian communities in Australia in coming to terms with the brutal ethnic fragmentation of Yugoslavia is a good case in point here (Kolar-Panov, 1997). Panov unveils the role of media technologies in the framing of immigrants' cultures, but in this case the close homeland connections displayed by these communities were strongly dictated by the horrible events they were receiving about their country of origin.

Naficy, in his rich ethnographic work *The Making of Exile Cultures* (1993), explores the way in which Iranian exiles in Los Angeles make use of television programs both to reflect on their existence in a new culture and to nostalgically remember the Iran they left behind. Naficy analyzes the different programs that are produced within the Iranian community in L.A. as well as the pirated tapes that come from Iran. In doing so, Naficy aims at uncovering the liminality of the exile community and the syncretic space it inhabits, located as it is between the American everyday context and the mythologized Iranian past. Syncretism, in this respect, becomes an essential concept to understand how immigrants are able to adjust to the external forms of the new culture while retaining for a long time the homeland cultural value systems. As Naficy argues, syncretism represents both a resistance to and an appreciation of the new, foreign culture.

Gillespie's work *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (1995) offers a careful account of the place(s) that television and videos occupy within a Punjabi community in Southall, London. Of particular interest in terms of diasporic media analysis is Gillespie's focus on the so-called 'second-generation migrants' –

young people of Punjabi origins who were born in London. Indeed, the younger audiences investigated in this research are located (and do locate themselves) at the crossroads of difference: the socio-cultural context of their public sphere oftentimes diverges from the private cultural environments they experience at home.

David Morley's *Home Territories* (2000) is another solid piece of research, where he argues that contemporary flows of media, on the one hand, and populations on the other put forth the need to think about the connection between the two beyond a national frame of reference (Morley, 2000). The result of this conjunction between media events and migrating audiences is the creation of new, diasporic experiences of media that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state and articulate a wide array of cultural, religious, and linguistic practices. Media use by Franco-Arab communities in France is a good example of the attempt to mediate between modernity and tradition, alterity and selfhood, present and past. In this respect, Morley observes how the need to control the inflow of satellite images from Islamic countries has been a central aspect of debates on migration in France. The French Ministry of Social Affairs clearly expressed a national concern about the 'mysterious' use of satellite dishes by Beur populations when he declared that "the various channels broadcast in Arabic could undermine years of literacy classes and other efforts at Gallicising these people... the religious content of certain programmes will probably increase the Islamisation of the banlieues" (in Morley, 2000: 157). Rather than understanding the use of satellite television as a retreat to a nostalgic Islamic past, Morley explores satellite use among Beurs ethnographically.

Furthermore, Georgiou (2000, 2001) looks at the British Greek Cypriot ethnic group living in North London, England and their ethnic media. She claims that the public and communal use of ethnic media is crucial for the construction of ethnic identities and she shows how the media routines in the Greek Cypriot Community Centre in London take place – as there is always the satellite Greek Cypriot CBC (Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation: Public Television broadcasting from Cyprus) switched on.

Robins and Aksoy's research on the Turkish diaspora in London and their use of Turkish transnational television also goes beyond the stereotypical categories of diasporic media research whose understanding of diaspora remains heavily predicated on the logic of identification and collective attachment (2000). The narrative logic of the national, which characterizes Turkish transnational television, the authors claim, is heavily undermined in the context of diasporic viewership. The stereotypical image of collective identification, which immigrants are often associated with, is subverted, not nurtured, by the proliferation of television from the "homeland". According to Robins and Aksoy, Turkish individuals in London are rather critically engaged in negotiating the notion of Turkish culture and identity as it is represented through television from 'home'. In other words, this project casts significant doubt on the prevailing assumption of diasporic audiences as a nostalgic for "homeland."

Furthermore, Robins in his work on Turks in Germany (1996), for instance, shows how especially second-generation Turks, are neither Turkish nor German. They model themselves on the culture either of the sending or the receiving soci-

ety. They follow a third path, building their media identities out of the discrete elements of the host society, their home society, and the “postnational” possibilities made available to them.

### **The Arab Media Revolution**

As argued, the media landscape in the Arab world has seen then some crucial transformations in the last fifteen years with the rise of satellite television, Internet, and the erosion of traditional state monopolies over broadcasting. Much of the debate surrounding this new era has been about viewers within the Arab world receiving an alternative to government sponsored media known for their controlled reporting.

The story of Arab media revolution has indeed been evolving rather silently, particularly in Western media, until the events of September 11th when the political climate dictated an attention to issues of media in the Arab world, and to Arabs living in the West. The results have mostly been simplistic, alarming reports that both mainstream Western media and academics alike have been employing to warn against the role of some television channels in triggering the polarization of the Arab world vs. the West. If Al-Jazeera was proclaimed “*Glasnost In the Gulf*” and “*Al-Jazeera: CNN Of the Arab World*” before 9/11, the recent headlines in the Western press regarding the crucial role Al-Jazeera apparently plays in shaping public opinion in the Arab world read: “*Bush's New War Room*”; or “*News or Propaganda? Courting Controversy*”.

Parallel to these moral panic understandings of Arab media, Arabs living abroad have been heavily scrutinized and their media uses have become of a strategic concern (Tawil, 2004). The popularity of the satellite news network Al-Jazeera within the Arab world and its reach of 35 millions have caused authorities in countries with sizable Arab communities to fear an isolationism within their societies. Such a view, however, remains far removed from the reality of Al-Jazeera usage among Arab viewers worldwide.

Al-Jazeera has indeed filled an important news vacuum for Arabs living abroad who for years had been tuning to the Arabic service of BBC for reliable information about the Middle East in general and their countries in particular (Tawil, 2004). Many of the reporters working for Al-Jazeera today were working for the BBC. Their reputation as more independent and objective journalists has helped this first 24-hour Arab news network in its impressive rise to popularity. Arguably, one of the strongest contributions is its ability to raise taboo topics in the Arab world like sexuality, religious extremism, polygamy, freedom of expression, women’s rights, Arab politics, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Just like Arab audiences within the Arab world, diasporic audiences of Arab origin are invited to examine their own culture from a more critical perspective.

But the popularity of Al-Jazeera, particularly during its graphic coverage of the second Palestinian Intifada since 2000 and its recent coverage of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has been interpreted as dangerous. Usually, the Western journalists or scholars alike define Al-Jazeera as an Arab unifying and mobilizing global force.

In these accounts, Al-Jazeera is considered to be creating a political, cultural and emotional bond amongst Arab immigrants that come in the way of integration and/or assimilation within the host society.

To conclude, the impact of the media revolution inside the Arab world is indeed unquestionable and research efforts have been deployed to analyze the intensity of that impact. But less scholarly attention, however, has been directed to the influence of such media on Arab immigrants around the world.

### **A case study: The role of Arab Satellite Television**

The population of peoples who migrated from an original homeland and settled in the EU is estimated to be as high as 8 per cent of the Union's population. One-seventh of all manual workers in Germany and the UK had come as immigrants, and in France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy a quarter of the industrial workforce is formed by immigrants. Since the early 1980s Italy alike has been shaped by various flows of migration. In 1986 the very first, comprehensive immigration law was passed (Law 943) that argued for non-EC workers to have the same rights as EC citizens, including the right to family reunion; but, on a more practical level, it granted the amnesty for 119,000 foreign workers with illegal status. On a social level, Italians showed a more or less general sympathy with the displaced peoples. In this period, migrants could find jobs mostly in the informal labor market (picking tomatoes, working in dangerous and polluted environments) (Guaglione, 1997). Clearly, immigrants were not perceived as rivals at the economic or cultural level (Conti, 2002).

The turning point in immigration policies and social attitudes towards immigrants was marked by the Albanian exodus that started in July 1990. Then, immigration into the country was characterized by numerous other migrations, mostly from the Balkan regions. The metaphors used at this point in the Italian media were transformed and focused on the issue of immigration: from an emphasis on the successful accommodation of incoming immigrants, the mainstream media began to address contemporary migratory movements as a threatening and unstoppable pressure (Campani, 1994). Italy had by then become a "fortress to defend."

Milan is considered as the city that has always acted as a magnet for immigration along with Rome. And yet, the number of foreign immigrants in Milan is relatively low compared to that in other large European cities. Milan has however increasingly fulfilled the role of metropolis - a container for marginalized people, and specifically for the 'new poor'. The city also acts as a centre for areas with more job opportunities. Immigrants from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are the largest communities and they cause the greatest concern among the local population. More recently concern has focused on Albanian and migrants from the former Yugoslavia.

Overall, the integration of migrants in Italy is very often left to different voluntary associations, which provide for the cultural and physical needs of newly arrived immigrants. However, in Milan, there is a broad, undefined, and usually cold attitude of the federalist administration of the city. Despite the large number of muslims in the city only one official mosque has been erected for religious ser-



vices; worship therefore takes place in garages or private homes, which have often been denied the right to proper street signs.

The Arab community I frequently visited in Milan is located at the side entrance of a car body shop, with no outside sign to mark it. The Islamic Cultural Institute of Milan is housed in an old facility that hosts the mosque, a school, a grocery store, a cafeteria, and a common room. Created in 1988, the institute tries to serve as the cultural and social center of Milan Muslim life. The Friday religious service attracts roughly 2200 people, who often do not find enough space inside the mosque and are forced to pray on the outside sidewalk. This institute is located at the center of what has become an Arab neighborhood in Milan and is next door to the main square, Piazza Maciachini, where Muslim public events take place (usually organized by the Islamic Cultural Institute). The pivotal role of this center is based on its social rather than religious role among newly arrived Arab immigrants. Indeed, it gives financial and material help to incoming Muslim families, assists support to Muslims in search of a job, and takes over the very complex administrative applications migrants have to fill out to become legal. It is The Islamic Cultural Institute of Milan thus provides first aid as well as long-term assistance center for Muslims who do not find the needed help within the official institutional frames of the city.

In 2004-2005 I lived and worked in Lugano, Switzerland. That gave me the opportunity to travel frequently to Milan and interview young Arabs who regularly attend the institute. Most of my interviewees were men in their late twenties and thirties from Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, and Syria. I wanted to learn what role Al-Jazeera really plays in their lives and what it means to them — for instance, whether watching it is understood as a strategy to forge Arab communities, promote integration, and/or assert Arab unity. While such questions may seem rather basic, they are seldom put directly to individuals. A better understanding of the role of television—as explained by participants themselves— can help us to better understand the relationships that exist between identity, media, and the diaspora.

When asked about the role of Al-Jazeera in their life in diaspora, my interviewees downplayed the role of the channel in shaping their social and political identities. Generally, they claimed that Al-Jazeera is popular solely because it is the only 24-hour news network in the Arab world. As one young Algerian puts it, “Al-Jazeera imposes itself on all Arabs because we don’t have any other choice. They offer us news we can’t find elsewhere. Watching home channels is a matter of convenience. We all know what that’s like.” Similarly, a young Moroccan emphasizes the lack of connection he sees between his community life as an immigrant and Al-Jazeera: “Al-Jazeera doesn’t necessarily make us feel connected here in Italy. It is places like this center [the Islamic Cultural Institute] and the mosque that bring us together. Al-Jazeera is just another channel. It doesn’t have much influence on our identities. We’re not so naïve as to be fooled by television.”

While none of the interviewees questioned the popularity of Al-Jazeera, they were not prepared to admit its effect on Arab audiences. Some did however express their admiration for its “objectivity” and “neutrality”. In the words of one of them, “I watch it because it’s the best news reporting available... and Walid Al-Omari [the correspondent from Palestine] is always on the scene before anyone

else.” One person I interviewed claimed that “it is very important... to know that Al-Jazeera is the first independent Arab broadcaster in the Arab world. Well, sometimes I was bothered because I saw the name of Israel on its maps... but you know what, I think in a way ... this is democracy, this is open journalism. And so yes... it’s also important that they also show all these special programs for women...” My informants did not agree with the view that watching home media or a television channel that addresses all Arabs will mobilize them, isolate them or prevent them from becoming an active part of the Italian social and cultural structure.

The fear of immigrants setting up fundamentalist cultural ghettos has been articulated ever since the rise of satellite media technology, but it became more acute with the emergence of Al-Jazeera after September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the image the news channel has acquired in the West as the mouth piece for propaganda of bin Laden, the symbol of anti-American and anti-West propaganda and the platform for Arab demagoguery. Similar descriptions have been actually used by the interviewees, who think Al-Jazeera does not deserve all this attention and publicity. In the words of one Algerian: “It [Al-Jazeera] is not completely unbiased as they say. Why not cover Qatar as extensively as other Arab countries? There are problems there too. Why exploit the Palestinian question? The connections are all clear. It’s not completely free. It is a mouthpiece, not of bin Laden, but a much more sophisticated force behind it.” Some even bought into a common-sense conspiracy theory, and went as far as to identify the United States as that mysterious force supporting Al-Jazeera’s political agenda, even when confronted with the argument that the American government is one of its critics. The point of Al-Jazeera, they said, is to overwhelm Arabs with political problems. A young Egyptian claimed that “Al-Jazeera is sensational and that makes the issues less important than the format of their programs. It’s not serious coverage. It’s just making things worse and they don’t offer any solutions to the problems they raise. We need a television that changes things.”

The critical perspective that defines these views belies the naïve and simplistic argument according to which Al-Jazeera and similar satellite media are consumed passively and uncritically. Whether these views are really accurate and sensible should not be an issue in this context. Even if we agree that Al-Jazeera is what its critics say it is, this analysis does not show that viewers accept the editorial positions of the news channel unconditionally or that they identify with the mass of Arabs who are usually depicted as powerless media consumers.

Arguably, media talk is to some extent part of self-identification. As such it is contextualized. What my informants say about their consumption of the media does not necessarily reflect all its dimensions. But it is certainly important for the dimensions it forms. For example, the fixation with ‘home’ as the locus of diasporic identity is not shared by my informants. I’ve argued before how Gillespie’s work in particular clearly shows the unique media experiences of young British Asians. She writes that contrary to mainstream media users, they have become more adept and creative media consumers by virtue of their exposure to a wider communication landscape that includes minority, mainstream, and global media outlets. Indeed, one can conclude, at least in principle, that the growing popularity

of satellite news is allowing diasporic audiences to compare different and at times opposing mediated realities. The viewers of Al-Jazeera then experience the war in Iraq, the situation in Palestine, or Italian culture, differently from those relying solely on their national television, or even CNN or the BBC. The media experiences of these viewers are much more complex and deserve scholarly attention so that we may better understand the role of the media in the diasporic culture.

## Conclusion

Al-Jazeera represents an original media project to break free from the direct media control by Arab governments - despite the financial support it continues to receive from the Emir of Qatar. Al-Jazeera has tapped into an unexploited market of independent news media in the Arab world. However, the overwhelming enthusiasm surrounding the experience of watching independent news channels should not always be seen in the light of a common desire to identify and unite within the notion of *umma* (Muslim nationhood – joint destiny), but rather as a quest for new and alternative sources of information mainly about the Middle East and North Africa. The widespread fear, therefore, about Al-Jazeera's unifying force is not supported by the findings of this research, since many of the informants refused to establish a connection between their individual and social identities and their consumption of Al-Jazeera's programs. Clearly, Al-Jazeera is conceived simply as another source of information, albeit different from the rest of Arab traditional news sources.

These research findings, though rather limited in scope, can align themselves with Robins and Aksoy's project on the Turkish immigrants in London and their use of Turkish transnational television (2000). The narrative logic of the national, which characterizes Turkish transnational television, the authors argue, is heavily questioned in the context of immigrants' viewership. The stereotypical image of collective identification, which immigrants are often associated with, is subverted and resisted by the proliferation of television from the "homeland". According to Robins and Aksoy, Turkish individuals in London are critically engaged in re-evaluating the notion of Turkish culture and identity, as are Arab immigrants in Milan, Italy, while they watch Arab satellite television channels. Arab immigrants are then invited and encouraged to examine their own culture from a more critical perspective.

## ENDNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Important to note here is that there is an important conceptual difference between Arabs, Muslims, and immigrants. "Arab" refers to the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula and those associated with them in ancestry, language, culture, and religion. Generally speaking, Arabs include Saudis, Yemenis, Jordanians, Lebanese, Syrians, Iraqis, Egyptians and other North Africans, as well as Palestinians. They are united by language and religion, but neither Arabic nor Islam is uniform throughout the Arab world. Muslims are those who practice Islam. Italy's one million Muslims are a highly fragmented group. Immigrants in Italy are a complex phenomenon, and many Muslim immigrants come from North Africa and the Balkan peninsula.
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**Zala Volčić**

## **Mediji, identitet i imigranti: Arapska satelitska televizija u Italiji**

### **SAŽETAK**

U području globalnih medija u posljednje vrijeme teoretičari se bave odnosima između medija, pripadnošću i migrantima. Ovo istraživanje usmjereno je na kompleksnost kulturalnog pozicioniranja zajednica koje iz različitih razloga dolaze u nove zemlje i nastanjuju nove kulture. Ovaj članak u prvom dijelu predstavlja teorijska i empirijska istraživanja o imigrantima i njihovom korištenju medija. Nadalje, prikazuje se specifičan kontekst medijske revolucije u arapskoj kulturi u i izvan arapskih zemalja s posebnim fokusom na Al-Jazeera satelitsku televiziju i sadržaje koje nudi. Metodom etnografskih istraživanja i intervjua istražuje se korištenje Al-Jazeera satelitske televizije među mladim arapskim muslimanskim imigrantima koji se sastaju u Islamskom kulturnom institutu u Milanu u Italiji. Zastupa se teza da Al-Jazeera predstavlja originalan medijski projekt koji nastoji osloboditi izravnog nadzora arapskih vlada usprkos financijskoj potpori koju i dalje kontinuirano prima od Katarskog emirata. Unatoč tome, veliki entuzijazam koji se javlja prilikom gledanja nezavisnih televizijskih informativnih programa ne treba uvijek gledati u svjetlu uobičajene želje da se identificira i ujedini u smislu *umme*.

Ključne riječi: mediji, migranti, Al-Jazeera satelitska televizija, nezavisni program vijesti, umma