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US media at 'all-time low'

Al-Jazeera forum: Arabic-language media can take over as the world's premier news source because trust in US media fell during its 'shameful' coverage of the war in Iraq, a conference heard today. By Julia Day in Qatar.

Arabic-language media have an unprecedented chance to take over as the world's premier news source because trust in their US counterparts plummeted following their "shameful coverage" of the war in Iraq, a conference heard today.

The US media reached an "all-time low" in failing to reflect public opinion and Americans' desire for trusted information, instead acting as a "cheerleader" for war, said Amy Goodman, the executive producer and host of US TV and radio news show Democracy Now!, at a news forum organised by al-Jazeera.

Newsweek's Paris bureau chief, Christopher Dickey, said the US media were dying because of cutbacks and weren't interested in covering the world outside America.

But other delegates questioned whether Arabic media were up to the challenge.

"The US media have done a shameful job of reporting on the Arab world. With the rise of al-Jazeera and independent media there is a chance for the Arab media to react back, but instead what we get is a clash," said Ethan Zuckerman, the co-founder of Global Voices Online and research fellow at the Berkman Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School.

"I would urge everyone involved with new Arabic media not just to report on this [Arabic] world more fairly and accurately, but to report on the whole world more fairly and accurately. I challenge al-Jazeera and the new Arabic media players to do a better job than the US in covering the rest of the world," he said.

Ms Goodman said in the run-up to the Iraq war a study of NBC, CBS, ABC and PBS newscasts over a fortnight recorded 393 interviews on the conflict, of which only three reported the anti-war movement.

"This is a media cheerleading for war and does not represent mainstream opinion in the

US," she added.

Ms Goodman said she believed the policy of embedding reporters with coalition forces was "a total failure for independent journalism ... western audiences need to see the other side of the story - from communities and hospitals".

"If people in the US had a true picture of war - dead babies, women with their legs blown off, dead and dying soldiers - they would say 'no'," she said.

"There is nothing more important than the media - it is more powerful than any bomb or missile and we have to take it back ... we need a media that is independent and honestly showing us the images, the hell, ugliness and brutality of war, not selling us war."

Mr Dickey, the Middle East regional editor and Paris bureau chief at Newsweek magazine, said US media were "dying".

"After 25 years as a foreign correspondent I know what the US wants from the rest of the world: to forget about it."

"There's this idea that the US media is controlling the agenda. In fact the US media is dying. Resources, money and staff are being cut back. Twenty years ago Newsweek had 25 staff in Paris, today it has one: me," said Mr Dickey.

He added that the gap between what the US and Arabic media reports was widening. with American reports being "all about victory and the Arabic being all about victims".

Faisal al-Kasim, host of al-Jazeera's The Opposite Direction show, said that as a result of a perceived failure of western media to reflect the full picture more people were turning to Arabic media.

"Even Arabs who live in the west are giving up watching western networks and tuning to Arabic networks instead," Mr al-Kasim said.

However, concerns were aired at today's conference about the ability of the Arabic media to operate independently.

Lawrence Pintak, a director of the Adham Centre for Electronic Journalism and a former CBS foreign correspondent, urged delegates against thinking that Arabic media were allowed the freedoms to which western journalists were accustomed.

"I am concerned that someone from the US or Europe who doesn't know the Arabic world will think that all is goodness and light when we know that is not the case," he said, citing the beating of journalists during the Egyptian elections and the detention of journalists in Yemen and Morocco.

However, Mr Pintak there was a "great sense of possibility" about journalism in the Arabic world, likening it to the interest in the profession in the US following Watergate.

Concerns were also aired about the ability of al-Jazeera's soon-to-launch English language station, al-Jazeera International, to reproduce the success of its main Arabic network across the world.

"We might as well buy a new channel in the US," Mahmud Shammam, the bureau chief for the Dar Al Watan newspaper and Newsweek Arabic.

"[Al-Jazeera International] will not have Arabic characteristics and that's a big challenge." Hugh Miles, a journalist and United Nations media consultant, said al-Jazeera was massively popular in north Africa but because conspiracy theories about its agenda were rife, the new English-language channel would be watched very carefully.

"If al-Jazeera International is perceived to be biased or insensitive to Islam - on the Danish cartoon issues for example - there will be a loss of faith in the al-Jazeera brand," he said.

"The Arabic service has done a tremendous job in establishing al-Jazeera as a trusted name. It would be a terrible shame to see that image jeopardised."

But the director of al-Jazeera's research centre, Mostefa Souag, attempted to allay fears about the new channel, saying the network's managing director, Wadah Khanfar, has confirmed its editorial stance "will not be far away" from its sister station.

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