

# **Counter-Discourse in Global News Media? How Al Jazeera English Covers Sectarian Violence in Nigeria**

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## Abstract

The discourse of global news networks has been repeatedly criticized for presenting the world in stereotypical ways, relying on the clash of civilizations paradigm as a convenient explanatory framework for the coverage of conflicts, and thereby reinforcing existing power dynamics in the world. This study investigates to what extent Al Jazeera English departs from these practices by analyzing the network's online news coverage in the case of sectarian violence in Nigeria. Assessing the potential of Al Jazeera English to challenge the mainstream news discourse, its online news coverage is compared to that of the BBC by means of a critical discourse analysis. In particular, it is examined to what extent Al Jazeera English assumes a *Southern*, a *human*, and a *Muslim perspective* and in how far it applies a *conciliatory approach* in its reporting of sectarian violence. As it is demonstrated that Al Jazeera English's discourse on recent sectarian violence in Nigeria differs in most respects only marginally from that of the BBC, it is argued that both networks exhibit some characteristics of a mainstream as well as of a potentially challenging *counter-discourse*.

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## Introduction

“Life and Death in the Middle Belt: A Clash of Civilizations in Nigeria” headlined the German weekly *der Spiegel* in a report on sectarian violence erupting in Nigeria in early 2010.<sup>1</sup> An emerging “clash of civilizations”, as evoked by Samuel Huntington<sup>2</sup>, has indeed been a dominant paradigm for explaining the dynamics of international relations and interethnic conflict since the end of the cold war - and particularly since 9/11 -, which has fostered fears among observers of increasing confrontation between the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’, particularly the Islamic world. Although Huntington’s thesis has on various grounds been criticized in the academic community<sup>3</sup>, it has been more readily accepted by the broader public, which was informed by global media networks that applied Huntington’s thesis as a convenient explanatory model for Islamic terrorism, the subsequent ‘war on terror’ and global conflict more generally.<sup>4</sup> Hence, even if the thesis was largely rejected on an academic level, it remains a powerful force in the minds of many observers of world affairs as can be seen, for example, in the headline of *der Spiegel*.

Critics such as media scholar Thussu have pointed out that Western media tends to misinterpret the non-Western world in various ways. Firstly, the dominance of Western media corporations in the global news industry has been seen as responsible for presenting a one-sided picture of non-Western culture and politics.<sup>5</sup> More profoundly, a postcolonial critique of global news media, which is informed by the Foucauldian notion of discourse creating the social reality, considers the output of Western mainstream news media as part of a dominant

<sup>1</sup> *der Spiegel*, “Life and Death in the Middle Belt: A Clash of Civilizations in Nigeria,” *der Spiegel* (2010), <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,670178,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, “The Clash of Ignorance,” (2001), <http://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance>; Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006); Jonathan Fox, “Ethnic Minorities and the Clash of Civilizations: A Quantitative Analysis of Huntington's Thesis,” *British Journal of Political Science* 32 (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, “The Us Media, Huntington and September 11,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2003), Philip Seib, “News Media and the ‘Clash of Civilizations’,” *Parameters* 34 (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Daya Kishan Thussu, “How Media Manipulates Truth About Terrorism,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 6 (1997).

discourse that is often informed by the clash of civilizations paradigm and leaves little room for alternative discourses.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the launch of the Qatar-based Al Jazeera television channel in 1996, which was considered the first independent news network coming from the Middle East, was welcomed by many observers as a counterbalance to the perceived Western-centric bias of Western news agencies covering the region.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, Al Jazeera proceeded to increase its reach and introduced an English-language webpage (2003) and a TV channel (2006). Its self-proclaimed aim was no less than to establish itself as a global news network that “[balances] the current typical information flow by reporting *from the developing world back to the West and from the southern to the northern hemisphere*” (emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> In particular, Al Jazeera English (AJE) envisioned to become the ‘voice of the South’, using the South as a metaphor for the voiceless and underrepresented in the world.

This thesis will scrutinize these broadly stated aims by investigating to what extent AJE provides an alternative to the prevailing discourses on the global South presented by established news networks. Although Al Jazeera has been subject of much controversy including accusations of both anti-American and anti-Arab biases, many scholars commend AJE as an independent and professional news provider from the Middle East with a special emphasis on the non-Western world while disagreeing to what extent the network provides an actual challenge to the established global news networks.<sup>9</sup> So far, AJE has been studied quite extensively in the context of its coverage of Islam and conflicts in the Arab world, yet little has been said on AJE’s perspective on events outside the Middle East. This study aims to

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<sup>6</sup> Abrahamian, "The Us Media, Huntington and September 11."

<sup>7</sup> Mohamed and Sahraoui Zayani, Sofiane *The Culture of Al Jazeera: Inside and Arab Media Giant* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2007), 58, Leon Barkho, "Unpacking the Discursive and Social Links in BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera's Middle East Reporting," *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* 1, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Corporate Profile," <http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2006/11/2008525185555444449.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Naomi Sakr, "Challenger of Lackey? The Politics of News on Al-Jazeera," in *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007). Hugh Miles, "Al Jazeera," *Foreign Policy* 155 (2006), Steve Tatham, "Al Jazeera: Can It Make It Here?," *British Journalism Review* 16 (2005).

contribute to filling this gap by investigating AJE's news coverage of sectarian violence in Nigeria, thus a conflict in the global South outside the Middle East.

AJE's coverage of this conflict seems particularly relevant for examining the network's potential to challenge the mainstream discourse for two major reasons: firstly, while AJE has emphasized to cover Africa more proactively than other networks, no research has yet been conducted to confirm this stated aim; secondly, the conflict's 'intercivilizational' character in Huntingtonian terms allows to test AJE's departure from stereotypical explanatory frameworks that mainstream media has been criticized for. Therefore, it will be examined to what extent AJE succeeds in providing an alternative narrative of events in the South by conducting a comparative discourse analysis of AJE's and the BBC's news coverage on sectarian violence during the period of July 2009 to April 2010. The BBC, in this case, serves as an example of a mainstream news network that will be juxtaposed to AJE's news coverage.

The goal of this comparative media analysis is to investigate how far AJE provides an alternative narrative - or a *counter-discourse* - of news events in the South, which challenges the *dominant discourse* of mainstream news media. In particular, it is aimed to analyze whether the discourse of AJE succeeds in leaving the clash of civilizations paradigm behind. It will be argued that AJE's discourse on recent sectarian violence in Nigeria in most respects, including the use of the clash of civilizations framework, differs only marginally from that of the BBC. While some variations between the two networks' news discourses can be identified, it is not possible to declare AJE's news coverage representing a clear counter-discourse to that of the BBC. Rather, both networks display some characteristics of mainstream as well as of counter-discourse.

This study is structured as follows. In the first section, the theoretical framework will be outlined, which presents the global news media in the context of Foucault's conception of discourse. It will be assumed that mainstream global news networks are part of a dominant

discourse, discussing the possibility of alternative networks presenting counter-discourses. Secondly, AJE will be examined as a potential challenger of the dominant news discourse. The last section covers the empirical part of this study: after outlining the relevance of this particular case study, giving a brief historical account of sectarian violence in Nigeria and laying out the research methodology, a critical discourse analysis of AJE's and BBC's online coverage about sectarian violence in Nigeria will be conducted. Finally, it will be concluded and evaluated to what extent AJE provides an alternative discourse to mainstream global news networks in the context of covering the global South and conflict in Africa in particular.



## Theoretical framework of discourse in global news media

At the beginning of the 21st century, events have arguably “pushed many in the news media toward a de facto adoption of the Huntington [clash of civilizations] theory”: despite the criticism, the theory’s simplicity and appeal allowed it to be widely used by Western mainstream media to explain events in a world that could no longer be presented in bipolar terms as during the cold war period.<sup>10</sup> However, although such a framework may help to structure complex issues in a simplified form, it all too easily fails to illuminate underlying dynamics of conflicts that are crucial for their understanding as news events. One part of the problem may be the decreasing ability or willingness of news networks to provide in depth and ‘on the ground’ coverage of international events<sup>11</sup>, be it for financial constraints or consumer preferences. On a more profound level, however, the epistemological underpinnings of news coverage need to be examined in order to understand the ways in which the world is being presented by news media and thus perceived by news consumers.

### ***Dominant discourse and the representation of the ‘other’***

The work of Michel Foucault on discourse has established a landmark in the study of language and knowledge and their implications for the way we see, understand and construct the world around ourselves. Discourse, Foucault believes, can not only create the social reality by shaping our perceptions and organising our behaviour toward each other, but also generates knowledge and ‘truth’ by structuring language so as to set the boundaries for what is accepted as valid and ‘true’ knowledge and what is not.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Foucault sees knowledge and power as being intertwined and mutually reinforcing since the creation of

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<sup>10</sup> Seib, "News Media and the 'Clash of Civilizations'," 76.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

“more extensive and finer-grained knowledge enables a more continuous and pervasive control of what people do, which in turn offers further possibilities for more intrusive inquiry and disclosure”.<sup>13</sup> This dynamic relationship between power and knowledge, being reflected in discourse, offers the possibility to analyze news coverage - creating knowledge - in the context of global power dynamics.

Crucially, Foucault considers cultures to be constructed out of various, competing discourses. Although he clarifies that “there is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it”, he sees certain discourses dominating in a society at a given point in time and shaping its social and political institutions, while other discourses are engaged in a power struggle to compete with or challenge the dominant ones.<sup>14</sup>

In the context of global news media, it follows that mainstream networks, due to their outreach and authority to inform about world events, produce dominating discourses that present certain truth claims as valid knowledge, whereas alternative networks produce competing discourses that present a different ‘truth’ in an attempt to challenge the socially accepted knowledge at the time. While acknowledging that various discourses exist at any point in time, for the sake of simplicity it will be assumed that mainstream news media presents a *dominant discourse* which alternative networks aim to challenge by producing a *counter-discourse*. The former consists of those discourses that reproduce existing power dynamics and the respective ‘knowledge’, whereas the latter entails any type of news discourse that strives to challenge such dynamics of power and knowledge.

While Foucault himself was preoccupied with the history of knowledge in human sciences such as psychiatry and medicine, his framework of discourse has also been applied to the context of postcolonial theory to describe the relationship between colonizers and colonized - between the West and the ‘other’. One of the forerunners of these theorists was

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Rouse, "Power/Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 96.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 101.

Edward Said in his 1979 work *Orientalism*.<sup>15</sup> Said argues that throughout colonial history, Western scholarship and literature have systematically described the Orient, in particular the Muslim world, as a uniform whole standing in every aspect in opposition to the West, thereby serving to legitimize a Western style of structuring and having authority over it. In one of his later works, Said extended his framework to include media into the realm of his analysis, reminding us that we live in a “second hand world” in which our image of the ‘other’ is largely shaped by the media through a process of received interpretation from policy-makers, experts and journalists.<sup>16</sup> Hence, if one is to accept Said’s framework, ‘orientalism’ - whether practiced in scholarship, literature, or news media - can be understood as positioning certain truth claims about the world as part of a *dominant discourse*, which indirectly reinforces existing power dynamics between the West and the non-West.

Admittedly, Said faced considerable criticism for allegedly exaggerating the role of ‘orientalist’ discourse in explaining colonial and neo-colonial domination, for discrediting any outside observer of the Orient as being incapable of escaping the orientalist logic, and for not being able to provide a viable contemporary alternative.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, his framework has greatly contributed to the debate on postcolonial discourse and on how the West sees the rest of the world, making it a fruitful starting point for the study of global news networks.

It therefore needs to be examined how the Foucauldian notion of discourse finds application in the way events are being covered by global news networks and how the discourse in news coverage constructs the social world. If Foucault’s framework holds true in this context, one should expect the discourse of global news networks not only to make truth statements about the world but also to *construct* the truth and to solely allow statements if

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<sup>15</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> ———, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 46.

<sup>17</sup> See for example: Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007).

they are ‘within the true’.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, one is to assume power dynamics to be reinforced through the prevailing news discourse.

Particularly in the news coverage of ‘terrorism’ and the so called ‘war on terror’, critical scholars have found certain dynamics of power and knowledge at work. For example, Thussu argues that “media manipulates truth about terrorism”, criticizing Israel’s usual description of military operations as “proportionate” and in “self-defence” whereas its opponents’ actions are rejected outright as “terrorism” conducted by “fundamentalists”.<sup>19</sup> Although not explicitly referring to Foucault’s framework, he considers the narrative of mainstream media on ‘terrorism’ as uncritically reflecting the truth claims of the powerful, leaving no room for alternative views on what is *truth*. Similarly, Abrahamian claims that American mainstream quality media has uncritically applied the clash of civilizations framework for explaining 9/11 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, which fails to explain the underlying dynamics of the conflict and legitimizes military interventionism and other security measures as necessary means to fight terrorism.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Said also finds that ‘orientalists’ tend to explain contemporary politics in terms of religious and ethnic rather than socio-economic descriptions<sup>21</sup>. This tendency appears to lie at the heart of the problem detected by Thussu and Abrahamian. On the one hand, media are said to rely on simplistic explanatory frameworks that are ‘within the true’ of the dominant discourse - for example hatred based on religious traditions (“Muslim rage”<sup>22</sup>) - and to neglect alternative explanations such as immediate political and socio-economic conditions. On the other hand, this type of discourse contributes to strengthening the position of the powerful by legitimizing oppressive policies for security reasons.

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, 224.

<sup>19</sup> Thussu, "How Media Manipulates Truth About Terrorism."

<sup>20</sup> Abrahamian, "The Us Media, Huntington and September 11."

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 305.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," (1990),  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/90sep/rage.htm>.

A crucial question is therefore whether it is possible to challenge the dynamics of power and knowledge reproduced in the dominating discourses. Considering the clash of civilizations paradigm as part of the socially accepted ‘truth’, the availability of competing discourses relying on alternative explanatory frameworks, thus different ‘truths’, needs to be analyzed. In the following section, it will be discussed to what extent the framework of global news media can provide for such counter-discourses.

### ***Counter-discourse and contra-flow in news media***

The term *counter-discourse* is applicable to any type of discourse that symbolically or effectively resists the dynamics of knowledge and power enshrined in the dominating discourse. It needs to be understood in the context of Gramsci’s concept of ‘cultural hegemony’, which describes a power relation in which the ruling class successfully promotes its own interest as the interest of all. Anyone who is outside the hegemonic power structure, labelled ‘subaltern’ by Gramsci, is consequently “dominated by consent” through subtle means such as inclusive power over the economy, education systems, or the media.<sup>23</sup> More than merely presenting a different perspective than the mainstream, counter-discourse is seen as contesting the hegemonic discourse, thus aiming to challenge existing power dynamics.

In the field of global news media, the question of counter-discourse has only relatively recently gained prominence in academic debate through works such as Daya Kishan Thussu’s *Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow*.<sup>24</sup> While the global media environment, including news media, has traditionally been dominated to a great extent by Western companies, agencies and networks, there appears to be an increasing trend of internationalization at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In entertainment, movies from India

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<sup>23</sup> Antonio Gramsci, “The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916 - 1935,” in David Foragcs (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Daya Kishan Thussu, "Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow," in *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

(“Bollywood”) or soap operas from Brazil (“telenovela”) have attained global fame, and in the news sector a number of satellite TV news channels have recently emerged in a bid to provide global “contra-flow”, including the Iranian *PressTV*, *Russia Today*, the Chinese *CCTV-9*, Venezuela’s *Telesur*, and Qatar-based *Al Jazeera*. Yet, although each one of them claims to provide a distinct perspective from that presented by the dominating Anglo-Saxon networks such as CNN and BBC<sup>25</sup>, it needs to be investigated to what extent these networks exist within the framework of *counter-discourse*.

In 2005, Philip Seib argued that Western news media can be considered “hegemonic no more”, as the international media landscape had become more diverse, a development that he greatly attributed to the success of *Al Jazeera*.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the diversity of international satellite news channels, it appeared, made it possible for ‘subaltern’ views to be mainstreamed as an alternative to the dominant discourse of Western global news networks. However, it remains unclear to what extent such news channels from the non-Western world are actually able to challenge the dominating discourse. Do these networks indeed present a subaltern perspective on news that is not part of the hegemonic discourse? If so, do they really have the capacity to change the actual monopoly on truth held by the dominant discourse?

El-Nawawy and Powers argue that news “viewers worldwide turn to particular broadcasters to affirm rather than to inform their opinions, meaning that global news media [whether from the West or not] are likely to reinforce existing attitudes and stereotypes of cultural ‘others’”.<sup>27</sup> This observation appears to suggest that even though non-Western news media may provide alternative views on events, they fail to actually abandon the dominant discursive framework that has established stereotypical and ‘orientalist’ thinking as the

<sup>25</sup> CNN International and BBC World control with over 100 million (CNNI) and 78million (BBCW) by far the largest share in the global market of satellite TV news channels (Source: James Painter, 2008, p.11).

<sup>26</sup> Philip Seib, "Hegemonic No More: Western Media, the Rise of Al-Jazeera, and the Influence of Diverse Voices," *International Studies Review* 7 (2005).

<sup>27</sup> Mohammed and Powers El-Nawawy, Shawn, "Al-Jazeera English and Global News Networks: Clash of Civilizations or Cross-Cultural Dialogue?," *Media, War & Conflict* 2, no. 3 (2009): 263.

discursive truth. In other words, the 'subaltern' appears to be unable to challenge the dominating discourse as it applies the same modes of structuring reality as the latter.

Similarly, Thussu expresses doubt that the increase of "contra-flows" in global media actually has the potential to have a significant impact on the hegemony of American media in global culture. He detects a continuation of Western hegemony in global media flows in spite of emerging contra-flows, because of the 'localization' of media content, in which Western media products are adapted for local markets across the world without giving up Western ownership and control.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of 'journalism of information', which presents facts that favor certain categories of information and events over others, has taken root as the accepted and almost unchallenged style of news reporting worldwide.<sup>29</sup> Thus, any attempt to provide counter-discourse in global news media appears to be doomed to be part of the dominant discourse.

Nevertheless, the struggle of competing discourses in global news media, exemplified in the recent emergence of various non-Western international news channels, must be accepted as a reality. Although their potential to actually challenge existing power dynamics remains disputed, non-Western news networks do have the theoretical possibility to do so by providing alternative discourses. AJE arguably is in the best position to fulfil this task, being the first viable and well-funded non-Western channel that provides news from a 'Southern perspective'.<sup>30</sup> The next section will therefore illuminate AJE's role in the environment of global news networks in more detail to better assess the network's potential to provide a *counter-discourse*.

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<sup>28</sup> Thussu, "Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow," 28.

<sup>29</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett, "'Global' News Agencies," in *The Globalization of News*, ed. Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Terhi Rantanen (London: Sage, 1998), 20-22.

<sup>30</sup> James Painter, "Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur," (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2008), 6.

## Al Jazeera English: the ‘voice of the South’?

During the relatively few years of its existence, Al Jazeera has been subject to considerable attention and controversy. The increasing popularity of Al Jazeera in the Arab world and beyond<sup>31</sup>, which was greatly facilitated by the launch of the English language program, has turned the channel for many governments both into a threat as well as a welcome tool of public diplomacy. Being Al Qaeda’s favored news outlet and having covered the US-led invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq with a special focus on the civilian population with intensive reporting on the ground beyond that provided by the regular embedded journalists, Al Jazeera has repeatedly faced accusations of having an anti-American bias or even sparking hatred against the West.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, it was also praised as a force toward democratic change in the Middle East as the first independent news outlet in the region.<sup>33</sup> While both of these claims are debatable, Al Jazeera can be said to provide a somewhat distinct perspective from Western news networks on events in the Middle East.

Projecting this perspective in a wider context, Al Jazeera English aims to challenge the worldwide news coverage of established networks, an ambitious mission that is laid out in the channel’s corporate profile:

The channel gives voice to untold stories, promotes debate, and challenges established perceptions..., bridging cultures and providing a unique grassroots perspective from underreported regions around the world.<sup>34</sup>

AJE’s former managing director Nigel Parsons stated the channel’s mandate to report news ‘back to the West’ and cover world events by looking at ‘the other side of the story’.<sup>35</sup> Although this agenda certainly is a distinguishing feature, the mere geographical reversal of news flows and a different focus do not necessarily translate into the challenge of mainstream

<sup>31</sup> In 2007, Al Jazeera (both Arabic and English) reached over 100 million households and had a weekly audience of over 40 million in the Arabic and an estimated one million the English program, the latter figure likely to have considerably increased more recently (Source: J. Painter, 2008, p.11)

<sup>32</sup> See for example: Adel Darwish, "Bin Laden's Tv Choice," (2001): <http://www.mideastnews.com/Jazeera.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Sakr, "Challenger of Lackey? The Politics of News on Al-Jazeera," 116.

<sup>34</sup> AL Jazeera English, "Corporate Profile."

<sup>35</sup> Sakr, "Challenger of Lackey? The Politics of News on Al-Jazeera," 117.



networks. To come truly into its own, contra-flow in global news must be counter-hegemonic, rejecting practices that uncritically reflect and reinforce existing power dynamics.<sup>36</sup>

In order to assess its potential for providing a *counter-discourse*, the content of AJE's news coverage needs to be scrutinized. Does AJE really operate outside the power dynamics of the dominant discourse? Does AJE's news reporting really leave the clash of civilizations paradigm behind? And, what type of discourse does the network's news reporting employ in its coverage of the global South? This chapter will attempt to provide answers to these questions by analyzing both its distinctive features and the similarities with mainstream news networks.

### ***Distinct style, distinct perspective***

AJE was launched with the explicit goal of competing with the dominant anglophone global news networks such as BBC or CNN by providing an alternative perspective on world events.<sup>37</sup> Part of this alternative perspective is AJE's self-proclaimed aim to be the voice of the 'South', which the channel's deputy manager for news and programming Helal describes as symbolizing the voiceless and underrepresented in general, disregarding geographical location.<sup>38</sup> Most importantly, this goal is to be implemented by reporting more on issues or on parts of the world that tend to be neglected by mainstream media, and in particular by covering the developing world in an original way.<sup>39</sup> The fact that Al Jazeera was funded by the Emir of Qatar and also maintains its headquarters in the Emirate contributes, at least symbolically, to the distinctiveness of the channel.

One aspect of its distinctiveness is the diversity of the channel's staff. In order to create authenticity and to avoid news reporting by outsiders, who might be likely to fall into

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Miles, "Al Jazeera," 23.

<sup>38</sup> El-Nawawy, "Al-Jazeera English and Global News Networks: Clash of Civilizations or Cross-Cultural Dialogue?," 269.

<sup>39</sup> Painter, "Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur," 18.

the trap of 'orientalist' logic, AJE employs as many local reporters as possible in their various overseas bureaux and on the ground. AJE also reversed the recent trend of closing down overseas offices for financial reasons. Quite to the contrary, AJE has been expanding its network of reporters around the world, particularly in developing countries where other news channels and agencies are scarcely represented.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, AJE refrains from airing 'infotainment'<sup>41</sup> stories and it has been credited for reporting news with somewhat more depth.<sup>42</sup>

Another distinct feature of AJE compared to Western news networks is certainly the focus on the developing world, which is revealed by just a brief glimpse on the network's website: the front page usually features news stories of events occurring in the Middle East, Asia, Africa or Latin America, while news in the West are only covered on the side unless they are of particular international importance. Indeed, empirical studies on the news coverage of AJE, BBC World and CNN International have found that AJE broadcasts considerably more news on events in developing countries, including those that are largely neglected by mainstream media, than its Western counterparts.<sup>43</sup>

More than this quantitative emphasis on the developing world, AJE also claims to present a qualitatively distinct picture of the world. In its reporting on conflicts, AJE's philosophy of looking at 'the other opinion' has been translated into focusing particularly on the human side of news events. As Waddah Khanfar, Al Jazeera's director general, explained:

[AJE's] philosophy of reporting is a human sentiment paradigm rather than the power center. We shift away from the power. Actually, our relationship with power is always to question power, rather than to give power more domains to control.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Tine Ustad Figenschou, "A Voice for the Voiceless? A Quantitative Content Analysis of Al-Jazeera English's Flagship News," *Global Media and Communication* 6, no. 1 (2010): 96.

<sup>41</sup> 'Infotainment' refers to the commonplace practice in modern media to merge news stories with entertainment, for example when broadcasting 'news' stories about celebrity weddings. See Daya Kishan Thussu, *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment* (Los Angeles, London: Sage, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Painter, "Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur," 72.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid; Figenschou, "A Voice for the Voiceless? A Quantitative Content Analysis of Al-Jazeera English's Flagship News."

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in El-Nawawy, "Al-Jazeera English and Global News Networks: Clash of Civilizations or Cross-Cultural Dialogue?," 272.

Khanfar appears to hint at the power dynamics involved in the construction of reality by news media, which shapes the way we see and understand the world. He lays out AJE's distinctiveness as representing the voiceless and addressing news from a counter-hegemonic perspective, indirectly accusing other networks of focusing too much on the powerful and neglecting the human side of news events.

Particularly in the coverage of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of the recent Iraq war, Al Jazeera has devoted much time and effort to presenting the effects on the civilian population, which is presumably why the channel has often been perceived as having a pro-Arab bias and misrepresenting the US and Israel. As Josh Rushing, one of AJE's correspondents put it: "Al-Jazeera provides a different perspective to CNN but an equally valid one. CNN films the launch of the missile. Al-Jazeera films what happens when it lands".<sup>45</sup> However, Al Jazeera is also credited for presenting the Israeli view to an Arab public, which is in line with the channel's policy to cover news events from different perspectives. All in all, Al Jazeera is committed to profess 'tolerance for difference' by conducting in-depth reporting and presenting issues from different vantage points.<sup>46</sup>

Another point of controversy has been Al Jazeera's willingness if not insistence to discuss controversial topics and addressing taboos. Although the channel has tamed down its tone over time and the English program is arguably more careful regarding the use of emotive language than the Arabic version, the network maintains a policy of publishing any material it considers newsworthy - including images of dead bodies, video messages by Al Qaeda, or critical voices of any sort. This editorial policy can be seen as an attempt to go beyond the mainstream discourse presented by other news networks and has unsurprisingly led to polarized opinions on the channel, which in many ways is a thorn in the flesh of both Western and Arab governments. However, whether AJE offers more than a different style of reporting needs to be investigated in more detail.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Painter, "Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur," 17.

<sup>46</sup> Zayani, *The Culture of Al Jazeera: Inside and Arab Media Giant*, 60.

Analyzing Al Jazeera's news coverage in comparison to that of Western networks, it is possible to identify some qualitative differences. Overall, Al Jazeera is more responsive to popular aspirations in the Arab world by putting Palestinian voices more into public language and avoiding terms or evaluative comments that delegitimize acts of resistance.<sup>47</sup> As Barkho pointed out in his in-depth discourse analyses of Al Jazeera's Middle East reporting, Al Jazeera uses more neutral terms to describe militant groups both in the Arabic and the English program. The Palestinian ' Hamas' for example is usually described by Western networks as a "Palestinian Islamic Fundamentalist, militant, radical or terrorist organisation", while Al Jazeera Arabic solely calls it an "Islamic Resistance Movement"<sup>48</sup> and AJE refers to the group's members as "fighters" or "armed civilians" rather than "terrorists" or "militants".<sup>49</sup> In addition, AJE uses more active language and more quotations when describing events with implications for the civilian population to create an impression of immediacy and personalization. This linguistic choice can be considered part of Al Jazeera's distinct way. It aims both to address the feelings of its Arab viewership and to spur the interest of people outside the Arab world.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, Barkho discerns that BBC and, to a larger extent, CNN in their use of background information tend to give evaluative comments that legitimized Israeli actions as rational and defensive while rejecting those of the Palestinians as irrational and aggressive. By recontextualizing the conflict and applying linguistic means that describe Palestinian actions as negative, BBC and CNN are indirectly taking sides in the conflict despite professing to practice impartial and balanced journalism. AJE, on the other hand, strives to avoid this type of hegemonic discourse that uncritically equates anti-Western groupings with

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<sup>47</sup> Leon Barkho, "The Arabic Aljazeera Vs Britains's BBC and America's CNN: Who Does Journalism Right?," *American Communication Journal* 8, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.: 5.

<sup>49</sup> Barkho, "Unpacking the Discursive and Social Links in BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera's Middle East Reporting," 22.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.: 23.

terrorism or extremism. Yet, Barkho shows that AJE applies similar linguistic patterns when describing and representing the Israelis, albeit to a lesser degree.

Accepting the inter-subjective nature of discourse, this type of ‘media bias’ comes as no surprise since even balanced statements can be understood and interpreted in favor of one or the other side by social implications of what is accepted as valid knowledge. Indeed, it has been pointed out that all news networks tend to tilt somewhat toward their audience by framing facts in a way that is socially accepted among the target audience, stressing certain facts while omitting others.<sup>51</sup> In this context, El-Nawawy and Iskandar use the term “contextual objectivity” to describe the need to provide news in an impartial way while nevertheless being sensitive to local sensibilities.<sup>52</sup>

Consequently, AJE’s choice of language differs both from its Arabic mother channel and from Western mainstream media. AJE avoids the use of emotional words and metaphors such as “martyr” or historically contextual language to refer to Muslim cultural sites or important figures, which is commonplace in the Arabic program.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, AJE distances itself from the language of most Western networks by refraining from the unqualified use of terms like ‘terrorism’ or ‘fundamentalism’. Mostafa Souag, director of the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, explains this policy by pointing to the channel’s historical and geographical background: “Al Jazeera feels it is rooted in the soil of the Middle East and it respects the collective conscience in the Middle East culture”; on the other hand, the channel recognizes that it has to approach AJE’s international audience differently than the Arab

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<sup>51</sup> Miles, "Al Jazeera," 22, El-Nawawy, "Al-Jazeera English and Global News Networks: Clash of Civilizations or Cross-Cultural Dialogue?," 268.

<sup>52</sup> Mohammed and Iskandar El-Nawawy, Adel, *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network That Is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism* (Boulder: Westview, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Al Jazeera Arabic usually describes cities like Mecca or al-Qudus (Jerusalem) as ‘holy’ whenever they are mentioned or follows the phrase ‘peace be upon him’ after every reference of Prophet Mohammed. See: Barkho, "The Arabic Aljazeera Vs Britains's BBC and America's CNN: Who Does Journalism Right?," 7.

one.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it appears that AJE is trying to strike a balance between providing a distinct perspective from the West while not exclusively presenting an Arab view either.

Lastly, it is important to elaborate on El-Nawawy's and Powers' finding that "the longer viewers have been watching AJE, the less dogmatic they are in their thinking and thus more open to considering alternative and clashing opinions".<sup>55</sup> Although news media traditionally reinforce existing attitudes rather than change them, their survey in Malaysia, Indonesia, Qatar, Kuwait, the UK and the US revealed that AJE viewers became over time more open toward considering alternative understandings of the world. In particular, they found out that, contrasting with the type of 'war journalism'<sup>56</sup> practiced by most mainstream news media, AJE was perceived to play a conciliatory role in today's conflict-driven environment. In this context, they developed a typology of a "conciliatory medium", which is manifested most importantly in the 'mediatized recognition' of underrepresented groups, the provision of multiple viewpoints on controversial issues, the avoidance of victimizing ("martyr") or demonizing ("terrorist") terms, and the provision of background and contextualizing information that looks at solving rather than escalating conflicts.<sup>57</sup>

While El-Nawawy and Powers were careful not to provide evidence of a causal relationship between watching AJE and its viewers' opinion on particular issues, these findings suggest that AJE may contribute to a media environment that leaves the clash of civilizations paradigm as explanatory framework for conflicts behind. Nevertheless, AJE also exhibits similarities with mainstream news media as elaborated below.

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in ———, "Unpacking the Discursive and Social Links in BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera's Middle East Reporting," 23.

<sup>55</sup> El-Nawawy, "Al-Jazeera English and Global News Networks: Clash of Civilizations or Cross-Cultural Dialogue?," 264.

<sup>56</sup> Modern mass media has often been criticized for providing escalation-oriented rather than conciliation-oriented conflict coverage, thus "war journalism", in order to attract viewers and explain complex situations in a simplified form. See W. Kempf, "Conflict Coverage and Conflict Escalation," in *Journalism and the New World Order: Studying War and the Media*, ed. W. Kempf and H. Luostarinen (Goteborg: Nordicom, 2002).

<sup>57</sup> Mohammed and Powers El-Nawawy, Shawn, "Al-Jazeera English: A Conciliatory Medium in a Conflict-Driven Environment?," *Global Media and Communication* 6, no. 1 (2010): 70.

## ***Western style, Western perspective***

While AJE and many of its supporters champion the channel for its distinctiveness, it also reveals many features of Western news networks such as BBC and CNN that it wants to set itself apart from. While claiming to have a distinctly Southern perspective, the network is not giving up claims of impartiality, balance and journalistic professionalism that are similar to best practices of Western networks.<sup>58</sup> Although the adoption of professional standards, especially standards based on ethical values, are certainly a welcome development, it needs to be questioned whether such practices do not undermine AJE's integrity as an alternative news network that aims to *counter* the prevailing news flows and discourses.

Another controversial issue is AJE's distinctly 'local perspective'. While AJE emphasizes its policy of hiring local correspondents and prides itself of having an ethnically highly diverse staff, the channel does have many Western employees, particularly in senior positions. Four of the five current lead executives at AJE are Westerners (including the current managing director Tony Burman) and only one of them has an Arab background (deputy managing director Ibrahim Helal, who joined AJE from the BBC World Service Trust).<sup>59</sup> Admittedly, the channel does appear to recruit more local reporters to report on their home region than BBC or CNN. Yet, outside the channel's motherland of the Middle East, where indeed most of AJE's reporters are from the region, the network also flies significant numbers of correspondents around the world to report on the ground, which falls somewhat short of fulfilling the objective of providing a local perspective on global news events.<sup>60</sup> It is also worth noting that Al Jazeera Arabic initially recruited a large number of Western-trained journalists from the failed BBC Arabic Television experiment<sup>61</sup>, a practice that AJE seems to have followed.

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<sup>58</sup> Painter, "Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur," 71.

<sup>59</sup> Al Jazeera English, "About Us," <http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2007/12/200861501043226986.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Painter, "Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur," 22.

<sup>61</sup> BBC Arabic Television was withdrawn from the market shortly after its launch in 1994 due to problems with the Saudi royal family, which had funded the station.

In a content analysis of AJE's, BBC's and CNN's news programs, James Painter found out that while AJE does have more of a focus on the developing world and broadcasts more voices from the South than its Western counterparts, the majority of voices aired are nevertheless those of the establishment rather than of marginalized and underrepresented groups. AJE devotes considerably more time to reporting on developing countries and, possibly due to better access, allows more voices of the voiceless, particularly those of the Palestinians, to be heard. On the other hand, he argues that AJE does not necessarily present fewer voices of politicians or experts and that the way stories on the developing world are presented rarely differs greatly from the coverage of its Western counterparts. Interestingly, he finds that "at times, AJE does follow a remarkably similar news agenda to BBCW[orld]..., covering the same stories from 'under-reported parts of the world', and indeed, providing a similar treatment of those stories."<sup>62</sup>

In a similar project, Figenschou analyzed the content of AJE's flagship news more in detail, particularly investigating the extent to which AJE presents a 'contra-flow' in news coverage beyond directionality of news flows. While she also sees a quantitative focus on the developing world and she praises the channel's strategy to air 'the opinion and the other opinion', she is more critical of AJE's self-proclaimed status as the 'voice of the voiceless': "if the channel has a 'grassroots perspective', this has been voiced by independent elite sources and Al-Jazeera correspondents rather than by ordinary citizens on the ground."<sup>63</sup> Moreover, she detects that AJE, similar to mainstream news networks, focuses on political crises and conflict when reporting on the global South in contrast to legal affairs and the economy when covering the North. Acknowledging that such coverage may reflect the realities on the ground, she nevertheless points out that AJE appears to maintain the

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<sup>62</sup> Painter, "Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur," 41.

<sup>63</sup> Figenschou, "A Voice for the Voiceless? A Quantitative Content Analysis of Al-Jazeera English's Flagship News," 101.



mainstream news practices it aims to challenge rather than providing a fundamentally different picture of news events.

In other instances it has been argued, that AJE is *perceived* rather than intended to be counter-hegemonic. Sakr points out that in addition to the common view of Al Jazeera 'challenging the West', there are voices that accuse the channel to actually reinforce US views in the Arab world by preserving corrupt regimes and using media liberalization as a deception. She concludes that while Al Jazeera's original Arabic program may have threatened hegemonic interests, the channel went through a process of neutralization and exclusion, rendering it nowadays rather a mainstream network with an image problem.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, Iskandar claims that "Al Jazeera has started as an alternative medium and effectively mainstreamed many previously subaltern narratives".<sup>65</sup> Yet, whether due to political pressures or as a commercially-driven move to attract wider audiences, the network has considerably tamed down its language over time. Particularly with the launch of the English language program, the network had to be more careful not to alienate its viewers by presenting too extreme views. A qualitative study on the image of Islam presented in the news programs of AJE, BBC, and CNN also found that the three channels treated the religion only marginally different. While AJE covered events from Muslim countries more extensively than its competitors and allowed more Muslims to comment, it failed to present more background information that could enhance interreligious understanding.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, it seems that AJE falls somewhat short of its objective to cover news from a different angle, particularly taking into account its claim to be the voice of the South and the voiceless. Most of the literature suggests that AJE does indeed differ from Western news networks in terms of: (a) ownership and location (Qatar); (b) focus (on the developing world);

<sup>64</sup> Sakr, "Challenger of Lackey? The Politics of News on Al-Jazeera," 129.

<sup>65</sup> Adel Iskandar, "Is Al Jazeera Alternative? Mainstreaming Alterity and Assimilating Discourses of Dissent," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Iskandar.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Schenk, *Das Islambild Im Internationalen Fernsehen: Ein Vergleich Der Nachrichtensender Al Jazeera English, BBC World und CNN International* (Berlin: Frank und Timme, 2009).

(c) reporting style (addressing ‘taboos’, avoiding ‘infotainment’, and focusing on human stories, in particular with regards to Palestinians). Yet, it is unclear whether AJE actually provides a qualitatively different narrative of events in the global South, considering (a) the adoption of Western professional standards; (b) the reliance on Western management staff and reporters; (c) the use of voices from the Southern establishment rather than from the ‘real’ voiceless.

As Iskandar argues, Al Jazeera appears to be trying to strike a balance between mainstream and subaltern messages by accommodating Western best practices and alternative perspectives in the style of reporting:

While acknowledging its humble and ambitious origins; it is no longer suitable to discuss Al Jazeera, a global news behemoth, as an “alternative” news medium, both discursively and structurally. Despite the station’s expansive reach and growing operations in multiple sectors, the station must continue to balance and manufacture the brand image of a fledgling alternative counter-hegemonic medium coupled with a global source of “reliable” news.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, it remains unclear whether AJE’s aspiration to challenge existing power dynamics through the provision of alternative discourses, particularly regarding the news coverage of conflicts, is being fulfilled. The following case study on AJE’s and the BBC’s coverage of sectarian violence in Nigeria aims to illuminate this issue by means of a critical discourse analysis.

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<sup>67</sup> Iskandar, "Is Al Jazeera Alternative? Mainstreaming Alterity and Assimilating Discourses of Dissent."

## **Case study: news coverage of sectarian violence in Nigeria**

This case study critically analyzes the online news coverage of Al Jazeera English and BBC World on incidents of sectarian violence that occurred in Nigeria between July 2009 and April 2010. In this regard, three major events took place during the given time period:

1. During the days following 26 July 2009, when members of the Muslim sect Boko Haram attacked a police station in northern Nigeria after the arrest of some of their members, hundreds of people were killed in fighting between police forces and sect members across several Northern Nigerian states; a number of Boko Haram members, including their leader Muhammad Yusuf, were killed while in police custody in what were later revealed to be extra-judicial killings.
2. On 17 January 2010, allegedly religiously motivated violence between Muslims and Christians erupted in the central Nigerian city of Jos, which lasted until the military intervened days later, leaving several hundred people, most of them Muslims, dead.
3. On 7 March 2010, another outbreak of violence occurred that was believed to be a reprisal for the January events, claiming another several hundred lives of predominantly Christian villagers near the city of Jos.

After outlining the relevance of the case, a brief history of the conflict, and the methodology for the empirical study, the discourse of the two networks' online news coverage will be analyzed in detail.

### ***Relevance of the case***

The case of sectarian violence in Nigeria is particularly well suited to study AJE's potential to challenge the discourse of mainstream news networks for a number of scholarship-, media-, and conflict-related reasons. There exist quite a number of scholarly studies on AJE's

coverage of the Middle East and, more recently, AJE's general news output as well as its perception among viewers have been investigated both quantitatively and qualitatively. However, as the scholarly focus has been on events in the Middle East in the context of the 'war on terror' and the Israel/Palestine conflict, no study has yet examined the network's coverage of Africa in detail.

Upon its launch in late 2006, AJE had stated the explicit goal of putting an unprecedented focus on Africa through a strong presence and a high level of expertise, which would distinguish the network from its competitors. Criticizing the widespread neglect and "reactive" coverage of the continent by other news networks, Andrew Simmons, AJE's Africa bureau chief, announced a "proactive" news agenda that would "concentrate on the people of Africa, not necessarily the political initiatives of those in power".<sup>68</sup> In particular, AJE aired a lengthy report on news media coverage of sectarian violence in Nigeria in its TV program 'Listening Post', criticizing mainstream news media, including the BBC and CNN, for failing to cover underlying causes of violence beyond cultural and religious stereotypes adequately.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, it needs to be examined whether AJE manages to transform these goals into practice by looking at the human side of news events and especially by uncovering root causes of conflicts rather than relying on simplified and stereotypical explanatory frameworks.

According to Huntington's clash of civilizations framework, Nigeria is divided along a civilizational fault line between the Muslim North ('Islamic civilization') and the predominantly Christian South, which he declares part of an abstract 'African civilization'.<sup>70</sup> Having established that mainstream news networks have been repeatedly criticized for reporting on the global South in stereotypical ways, particularly when it comes to the Islamic

<sup>68</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Press Release: Africa Line-Up," (19 September 2006),

<http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus/2006/11/200852518541361384.html>.

<sup>69</sup> ———, "Listening Post: Nigeria Violence," (27 March, 2010),

<http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/listeningpost/2010/03/2010326133057466229.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 27.

world, it is worthwhile investigating to what extent this critique holds true in the case of this ‘intercivilizational’ conflict in Nigeria.

To this end, AJE needs to be examined with regard to its ability to leave this framework of clashing civilizations behind and to cover the conflict in a less stereotypical way by providing more profound background information beyond religious preconceptions. Given the research gap on AJE’s Africa coverage, the network’s emphasis on providing a new perspective on the African continent and the existence of an ‘intercivilizational’ conflict that includes Islam but remains outside the typical dichotomy of the ‘West versus the non-West’, this case study provides an ideal opportunity to analyze AJE’s potential to challenge the dominant discourse of global news networks. In particular, it is worthwhile investigating whether AJE’s role as a ‘conciliatory medium’, for which El-Nawawy and Powers claim to have found evidence through surveys among AJE’s audiences, can be confirmed by means of a critical media analysis.

Lastly, the choice of the BBC to represent the dominant discourse of global news networks may be in need of explanation. The critique of mainstream news networks to readily apply Huntington’s framework for explaining conflicts and to represent cultural ‘others’ in stereotypical ways has been primarily directed at American news media.<sup>71</sup> The BBC, on the other hand, has been described as exhibiting a ‘liberal bias’ and promoting ‘multiculturalism’ or even ‘anti-Americanism’<sup>72</sup>, which might prevent it from being the ideal representation of a dominant Western discourse in global news media. Yet, comparative studies have revealed that BBC on many issues provides a similar discourse to that of CNN and applies the same cultural stereotypes, albeit to a lesser extent.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the BBC is based in London,

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<sup>71</sup> Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Abrahamian, "The Us Media, Huntington and September 11."

<sup>72</sup> See for example: The Daily Mail, "We Are Biased, Admits the Star of BBC News," (21 October, 2006), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-411846/We-biased-admit-stars-BBC-News.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Barkho, "Unpacking the Discursive and Social Links in BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera's Middle East Reporting." El-Nawawy, "Al-Jazeera English and Global News Networks: Clash of Civilizations or Cross-Cultural Dialogue?."

funded by British taxpayers and staffed mostly by Westerners. Most importantly in AJE's self-perception, the BBC is considered part of the mainstream discourse from which the network intends to separate itself. Therefore, the BBC serves as a suitable representation of global mainstream news media that can be juxtaposed to AJE for the purpose of this study.

### ***History of sectarian violence in Nigeria***

In early 2010, a wave of violence erupted in and around the city of Jos in central Nigeria. Clashes between Muslims and Christians in January 2010 had left hundreds of people - the majority of them Muslims - dead and thousands displaced. The immediate reason for the unrest could not be clearly identified: different eyewitnesses stated that a football match, a dispute over the rebuilding of homes destroyed in earlier clashes in 2008, and the spread of text messages with hateful content sparked the conflict.<sup>74</sup> It is important, however, to see the violence in the wider context of a religiously divided nation with tremendous economic, political and social problems. Similarly, the subsequent 'massacres' in March, which claimed hundreds of more lives - most of them Christians this time - must not only be understood as retaliation for previous killings, but as just the latest episode of a civil struggle with economic, political and social undercurrents.

Nigeria's population is roughly divided in half in terms of religious affiliation.<sup>75</sup> The majority of Nigerian Muslims lives in the Northern states and the country's Christians predominantly populate the South and Southeast. While the vast majority of Nigerians live together in harmony, the country has been plagued by inter- and intra-religious tensions since its independence in 1960. Rivalries for political power and state resources between the

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<sup>74</sup> BBC News: <http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/8465108.stm>;  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/8482666.stm>

<sup>75</sup> While other sources state even a smaller difference, according to the CIA factbook, 50% of the population is Muslim, 40% are Christian, and 10% follow other beliefs: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>

(Muslim) North and the (Christian) South persist until now - as manifested, for example, in the unwritten agreement of switching the presidency between a Northerner and a Southerner every term - and are considered to be a leading cause of the civil war between 1967 and 1970. Although many commentators have refused to see the civil war over “Biafra” as a religious one, Udoidem argues that it at least also had a religious dimension: Christians from the oil-rich Niger delta attempted to secede not only to keep oil revenues in the region but also out of fear of Muslim expansionism by the military central government, which was dominated by Northerners.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, a recurrent theme in post-Independence Nigeria has been the threat of increasing radicalization. In December 1980, the Northern city of Kano experienced a series of extremely bloody and destructive riots unprecedented in such scale in Nigeria’s young history. The unrest was sparked by a religious group lead by so-called “Maitatsine”, who preached what he saw as ‘pure’ Islam and opposed all forms of modernization including the use of television, radios, bicycles or the reading of any book other than the Koran. As the Kano State government failed to fulfil the promises of modernizing the economy, the Maitatsine movement attracted the oppressed groups of society who felt disillusioned with both the social and the religious systems. When the group learned that it was targeted by the government, Maitatsine launched an attack on everyone they considered to be ‘infidels’ (including Muslims and Christians) killing thousands of people in a matter of days. In spite of the crisis’ intra-religious character, many Christians saw the government’s handling of it as too soft and feared a further Islamization of society.<sup>77</sup> In this respect, also the role of Sharia law in Nigeria’s judicial system has been a hotly disputed issue ever since independence and since 1999 Sharia has been introduced in twelve of the Northern states.

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<sup>76</sup> Sylvanus Udoidem, "Religion in the Political Life of Nigeria: A Survey of Religious-Related Crises in Nigeria since Independence," in *New Strategies for Curbing Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Nigeria*, ed. F.U. Okafor (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1997), 159.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 164-66.

Udoidem points out that the Sharia dispute has been first and foremost a political issue - using religion as a foil to gain political advantage.<sup>78</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, the spread of Pentecostalism, which Udoidem describes as a form of Christian fundamentalism that includes a militant attitude toward modernism and ‘non-believers’,<sup>79</sup> has also provoked a further increase of tension between the two religious groups which has repeatedly led to violent clashes between them over the past decades.

Similar to the Maitatsine movement, the Muslim sect Boko Haram (meaning “Western education is prohibited” in the local Hausa dialect), which was engaged in major fighting with police forces in July 2009 in several northern Nigerian states, should be understood as a social force that profited from widespread poverty and the absence of effective and accountable government. Moreover, the most recent clashes around the central Nigerian city of Jos, which is not only situated on the religious fault line of the country but also surrounded by the most fertile lands of Nigeria, have more than only a religious dimension: the Muslim Hausa people feel marginalized and disadvantaged in terms of access to land and resources; conversely, members of the local Christian ethnicities feel threatened by a perceived loss of political power and resources. Hence, while religious identity serves as an easy mobilizer for the recurrent violence, the root causes of the conflict are likely to be found in an increasing competition for resources, widespread corruption, and in political rivalries using the violence to spark unrest or consolidate power.<sup>80</sup>

## **Methodology**

As argued in Chapter one based on Foucault, there are always different discourses at work constructing the social reality, providing different perspectives on the world, and struggling to

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>80</sup> Ukoha Ukiwo, "Politics, Ethno-Religious Conflicts and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 1 (2003).



be accepted as valid truth. Drawing largely on the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed by Fairclough<sup>81</sup> and van Dijk<sup>82</sup>, this case study will investigate the discourses of AJE and the BBC in view of the discursive creation of reality. By relying on Gramsci's notion of hegemony, CDA examines the political implications of discursive practices and analyzes the power relations between different subjects of discourse. In this case, the approach translates into investigating the contextualization of the conflict as well as the various relationships between victims and perpetrators of the violence, state and non-state actors, media, 'experts', and the audience. Ultimately, it is aimed to discern to what extent AJE's news discourse challenges the power dynamics typically implied in the news discourse of mainstream networks and thereby distinguishes itself from the BBC.

A number of tools can be applied in the field of CDA. Firstly, the *representation* of the world needs be investigated. As the "construction of news is most of all a reconstruction of available discourses"<sup>83</sup> (from news agencies, government sources, eye witnesses, 'experts' etc.), it is of paramount importance to look at how any news event is contextualized and explained. Here, the analysis focuses on such issues as who is given voice, who is the agent of certain action or how the news event is 'framed'. Moreover, the *identities* and *relations* of discursive objects must be scrutinized: relevant questions are in which way are certain groups or people labelled, in which relationship do they stand to each other, or in what type of language events are circumscribed. Lastly, it is crucial not only to look at what is most visible in the discourse but also on what is excluded or backgrounded.

As a guiding framework of analysis, an adapted version of van Dijk's conventional superstructure of news discourse will be applied, which looks at news discourse in the typical structure of an inverted pyramid, first presenting the facts believed to be most important and

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<sup>81</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Arnold, 1995).

<sup>82</sup> Teun van Dijk, "Discourse Analysis: Its Development and Application to the Structure of News," *Journal of Communication* 33, no. 2 (1983).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*: 28.

then moving on to less important ones.<sup>84</sup> The headline and teaser, which usually paraphrase the news event but at times also include reactions or comments, carry most condensed and relevant information for the audience. The main body, moreover, can be divided into four layers of discourse: (1) paraphrasing, (2) background, (3) reactions, and (4) comment. Although the latter is usually avoided in news articles in order to maintain journalistic independence and balance, it needs to be investigated in how far a commenting function is integrated in the other layers. Expecting that both AJE and BBC observe journalistic standards of impartiality, special emphasis will be put on analyzing whether AJE's differs from the BBC in terms of framing, the source of reactions and analysis, and the type of background information given.

A total of 20 online news articles - ten by AJE and the BBC each - will be subject of a CDA. For each of the three major events of violence during the period of investigation, three articles will be analyzed in detail: the first one, the last one and the longest one which is expected to include extensive news analysis and background as well.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, each of the news networks published one background article on the Muslim sect Boko Haram, which will be examined as well. In addition to this linguistically oriented discourse analysis, some means of traditional content analysis that examine the whole output of the two networks' online news coverage relevant for the case study will be applied. This allows not only to find evidence for certain discursive practices across the whole news output without an in depth analysis of each article, but also to quantify certain parameters such as the use of certain terms (for example "Islamist").

In practice, it will be investigated whether Al Jazeera interprets the occurrences in Nigeria differently than BBC and thereby constructs a different reality. If AJE does indeed present a challenge to the mainstream discourse of global news networks, one is to expect the following indicators in the news articles of AJE (and the opposite in those of the BBC):

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.: 37.

<sup>85</sup> See Appendix A for the choice of articles and Appendix B for bibliographical information.

1. AJE takes a *Southern perspective* on the conflict, hence relying more on non-Western voices and local/regional implications of the conflict
2. AJE focuses more on the *human side* of conflict, hence taking a critical stance toward any type of state power and particularly looking at events from a civilian perspective
3. AJE, having its roots in the Arab world, focuses more on the *Muslim perspective* in the clashes
4. AJE takes a *conciliatory approach* to news reporting, thus leaving the clash of civilizations paradigm behind and providing background information beyond cultural stereotypes in order to put the conflict into a wider context

The following section will investigate to what extent these features can be discerned in the actual online news output of the two networks.

### ***Media Analysis of AJE's and the BBC's online news coverage***

During the whole period of investigation, AJE published a total of 48 items and the BBC 86 items on their websites that were related to sectarian violence in Nigeria. Out of the 48 items on AJE online, there were 37 actual news articles, 21 videos (including four longer background pieces that were broadcasted at length on the TV channel), and two background articles. Out of the 86 items on the BBC's website, there were 60 actual news articles, seven personal accounts of eye witnesses, four background articles, 26 videos, five audio publications and two photo reports.<sup>86</sup> For reasons of technical constraints, however, only textual output is examined, leaving all audio and visual material outside the scope of this analysis.

Before advancing to the in-depth discourse analysis of the selected articles, a number of first observations are useful to guide the subsequent analysis. Firstly, BBC strikes out for

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<sup>86</sup> See Appendix A for a complete list of news items.

providing almost twice as much reporting on the issue than AJE, and it appears to present more background analysis and considerably more personal accounts from affected civilians in the region than AJE. While this emphasis may simply stem from BBC's more far-reaching infrastructure and nothing is yet said about the qualitative difference, it is noteworthy that AJE has no single story solely looking at the human side of the conflict. On the other hand, AJE published a video on 10 February 2010 that revealed the extra-judicial killing of Boko Haram leader Muhammad Yusuf by police forces, which was widely reported on by other media including the BBC and lead to subsequent political debate and judicial investigation. Although this scoop might simply be a coincidence, it might also indicate AJE's particular role as a watchdog of state power and human rights abuses.

Lastly, a content analysis of all articles reveals that AJE is much less inclined to use emotionally charged terms when describing members of violent groups. While BBC employed the terms "militant" (67 times), "Islamist" (26), "radical" (18), or "Taliban"<sup>87</sup> (15) extensively when describing members of Boko Haram or other civilians involved in the fightings, AJE used the same terms only on rare occasions - "militant" only twice when quoting other sources, "Islamist" eleven times, "radical" once, and "Taliban" three times. In order to investigate whether this is a difference in style only or whether a more profound pattern of counter-discourse can be discerned, the next two sections will now examine ten news articles of BBC and AJE each in detail.

## **Critical Discourse Analysis of BBC World**

In its reporting on the fighting between Boko Haram members and police forces, the BBC appears to have a clear focus on the state perspective, which is indicated in the choice of most

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<sup>87</sup> Members of Boko Haram are locally also called 'Taliban' due to their alleged similarity in ideology. Both BBC and AJE used the term only in quotation marks or when paraphrasing the group as 'locally also known by the name of Taliban'.

relevant facts. Two of the three analyzed articles directly adopted the government's stance in the headline (headlines in bold):

**BBC(1)<sup>88</sup> Fear and tension after Nigeria attack**

Dozens of people have been killed in gun battles between police and Islamist insurgents in the Nigerian city of Maiduguri.

**BBC(2) Islamist death 'good for Nigeria'**

A Nigerian government minister has expressed relief at the death of an Islamic sect leader, Mohammed Yusuf.

**BBC(3) Nigeria to probe Islamist attacks**

Nigeria's President Umaru Yar'Adua has ordered an investigation into last week's Islamist uprising, which left hundreds dead.

The headlines of BBC(2) and BBC(3) present the reactions of Nigerian officials as news event in itself. Although the remark in BBC(2) is identifiable as a quote, this naturalization of a comment into a news headline suggests its implicit adoption into BBC's editorial opinion. The teaser of BBC(1) paraphrases only the event without presenting any reaction, yet the use of the term "Islamist insurgents" - though arguably being an appropriate description - implies not only who is to blame for the violence but also recontextualizes the group, which is likely to spark connotations of anti-Western terrorism among the audience.

While elements of paraphrasing, background and reaction are all included in the three articles, the layer of comment is largely absent yet is indirectly incorporated through strategic placement of reactions such as the title of BBC(2). Most of the paraphrasing describes how sect members had attacked the police and how security forces responded and attempted to restore order, which may be accurate but may also be a means of obscuring the agency of state-sanctioned violence by using passive sentences and legitimizing it as a responsive action.<sup>89</sup>

BBC(2) Crowds of militants tried to storm government buildings and the city's police headquarters, but dozens of them were shot dead by security forces.

<sup>88</sup> All articles are categorized in chronological order as BBC/AJE(1),(2),(3)... except for BBC/AJE(10), which were published earlier but were numbered (10) because they will appear last in the analysis. See Appendix B for full bibliographical information.

<sup>89</sup> See Roger Fowler quoted in van Dijk, "Discourse Analysis: Its Development and Application to the Structure of News," 31.

The articles all provide some background information on Boko Haram's ideology:

BBC(3) The sect said it was fighting against Western education and believed Nigeria's government was being corrupted by Western ideas and wanted to see Islamic law imposed across the country.

But the immediate cause of unrest attack is addressed only indirectly (BBC(1): there had been "rumours" of an attack after Boko Haram members had been apprehended by police) and no further-reaching background information on social, ethnic and religious tensions is given. Moreover, the BBC appears to suggest that the violence is somehow linked to global Islamic terrorism:

BBC(2) Sharia law is in place across northern Nigeria, but there is no history of al-Qaeda-linked violence.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that no civilian is given direct voice. Although considerable space is devoted to present human rights concerns (extra-judicial killings of alleged Boko Haram members, including their leader Yusuf) through two experts from Human Rights Watch pressing the government toward investigating the killings, the state position is given the last word, which defended the killings and welcomed the sect leader's demise as "positive" for Nigeria:

BBC(2) [Information Minister] Akunyili praised the security forces, saying they had managed to stop the violence spreading even further and that normality was returning to the region.

In conclusion, these articles suggest that the BBC somewhat tends to present the state's perspective rather than that of civilians and recontextualizes the violence in connection with global Islamic terrorism, indicating some characteristics of a dominant discourse that Western news media have been criticized for.

The coverage of the January fightings in Jos also puts emphasis on the state perspective, suggesting that the state has brought the conflict under control, which was sparked by violent youths:

**BBC(5) Nigeria riot city under control, says army chief**

BBC(4) Troops and riot police are patrolling the Nigerian city of Jos, after fighting between gangs of Muslim and Christian youths in the central city.

Relatively little space is used for paraphrasing the violence, merely describing the incident as “fighting between gangs of Muslim and Christian youths” (BBC(4)), focusing more on the consequences of the clashes and avoiding direct accusations of which party had started the violence. First, it is described how security forces restored order, then the situation of the civilian population is addressed having Red Cross officials and a local rights group explain the needs and concerns of the people on the ground. Yet, the reported reactions to the violence are rather critical of the state’s actions, quoting a rights group that “no-one had been prosecuted for participating in previous religious and ethnic clashes” (BBC(5)).

Interestingly, the number of deaths is always first stated in the neutral term “people” - thus leaving religious identity aside -, but in two out of three articles followed by a description of how many Muslims and Christians lost their lives respectively:

BBC(5) Religious officials said at least 265 people had died since Sunday. Among the dead are said to be 65 Christians and 200 Muslims.

Moreover, considerable space is devoted to giving background information, including different sources providing potential motivations for the clashes and referencing previous outbursts of ethnic and religious violence:

BBC(4) there were reports...that it may have started after a football match.

BBC(4) Reuters news agency quotes residents as saying the violence started after an argument over the rebuilding of homes destroyed in the 2008 clashes.

The last article only covers the background of the clash, reporting on a religious leader who stated that text messages, which had been circulating among both Muslims and Christians, have fuelled the unrest:

BBC(6) Rev Joseph Hayab said hundreds of texts circulated around the city of Jos - some urging Christians not to buy food from Muslims “because it was poisoned”

Although the article mentions that “religious leaders have urged people to ignore the messages”, the notion of inevitably clashing religions appears hard to resist. Only in the very

last sentence does the author state that the root cause is likely to be found elsewhere, a comment that is made more clearly in the previous article:

BBC(6) Jos [...] lies between Nigeria's mainly Muslim north and predominantly Christian south and has seen sectarian riots in the recent past. But analysts say the real cause of the violence is a struggle for political superiority in the city.

BBC(5) Correspondents say such clashes in Nigeria are often blamed on sectarianism. However, poverty and access to resources such as land often lie at the root of the violence.

Ultimately, it seems that the BBC provides a narrative of these events that is particularly concerned with the human situation. Although the articles try to dispel the notion of clashing civilizations by stating underlying socio-economic reasons for the conflict and avoiding active descriptions of the fighting, the reporting along lines of religious identity and of religious hate messages also have an opposite effect, which will have to be juxtaposed with AJE's reporting for a more meaningful analysis.

The set of articles on the most recent events in March 2010 appears to have the strongest focus on the human situation, and much effort is put into explaining the underlying causes of violence by keeping the paraphrasing of events short and reporting at length on background and reactions. Most importantly, the government's failure to protect the population is criticized by various sources, including the governor of the affected state, the US, different human rights organisations, two Nigerian Christian associations and civilians:

**BBC(8) Nigerian army 'ignored warning of massacres' in Jos**

BBC(8) [Saidu Dogo from Nigeria's Christian Association:] "For quite some time we have alerted the government to training grounds [...] where people are being trained to cause problems in the country... Nobody did anything about it"

BBC(9) "We are undefended," one elderly man cried to us. "They can return any time." We set up our TV cameras and radio equipment, reporting the lack of military presence. Within an hour, more than 100 soldiers arrived, swarming the streets.

It is also noteworthy that religious identity of both perpetrators and victims is less stressed. It is merely noted that the killings are "suspected religious clashes" and "seem to be reprisals" for earlier clashes (BBC(7)). Although it is stated that villages "largely inhabited by



Christian members of the Berom community” were attacked by “members of the mainly Muslim Fulani community (BBC(9)), the use of active agency accusing Muslims of aggression and victimizing Christians is avoided. Reports on mercenaries recruited from neighboring countries also contribute illuminating socio-economic and political dimension to the conflict in addition to the religious one.

Particularly the last article, which is entirely meant to provide background information, attempts to reveal the human side in the conflict, looking at the victims on the one hand but also analyzing what may have motivated those involved in the killings from both a personal and a wider social perspective:

BBC(9) “I killed three people”, admits one youth in the local Hausa language. He looks almost childlike [...] “In the first crisis, they killed most of my brothers.”  
But another protests: “I never went there for killing anybody, only to carry my cows.” [...] It is impossible to know whether they have been put under pressure to admit taking part in the killings.

Moreover, the article explains the socio-economic and political dynamics among different population groups in the affected area beyond religious identities:

BBC(9) People here are either classified as indigenes [who are mostly Berom Christians] or settlers [mostly Hausa Muslims]. [...] Many Christians believe Hausa Muslim settlers seek to seize political control and impose Sharia law. [...] Many Muslims believe the Plateau State government wishes to drive them out of certain areas.

Hence, the analysis of these three articles indicates that the BBC is careful not to present the clashes as the actions of irrational religious fanatics. It rather searches for the underlying causes of conflict that include political struggles, socio-economic disparities, bad governance and poverty, indicating that the BBC assumes a conciliatory approach rather than relying on cultural stereotypes in its reporting.

Finally, a background article on Boko Haram, which was published shortly after the sect’s uprising in July 2009, investigated the group’s alleged ties to international Islamist terror organisations:

**BBC(10) Is al-Qaeda working in Nigeria?**

Mohammed Yusuf, leader of the Islamic sect whose members staged attacks across north Nigeria leaving 700 people dead last week, was facing charges that he had received money from an al-Qaeda linked organisation, defence analysts have revealed.

The article comments that the country “may seem to be the ideal breeding ground for anti-Western radicals”, but states that “so far there has been no evidence” of al-Qaeda operating in Nigeria and that “analysts remain sceptical about any link between Nigerian radical Muslims and global jihadists”. Two experts are mentioned who doubt that Boko Haram is linked to organisations engaged in international terrorism:

(BBC10) Nigerian Islamic sects are relatively parochial and inward-looking, concentrating on fighting the Nigerian government rather than a worldwide jihad, [Adam Higazi from Oxford University] says.

The last section of the article even provides some historical context, exploring Nigeria’s “long history of Islamic uprisings against ‘corrupt’ rulers”, as part of an argument that radical Islam in Nigeria needs to be seen in a domestic context rather than a global one. Yet, the suggestive headline that brings in al-Qaeda may nevertheless spark a different impression among less attentive readers.

As the discourse analysis of these articles has revealed, the BBC has a somewhat mixed record regarding the four indicators stated in the methodology section. While exposing a tendency towards the state perspective and some cultural stereotypes in some articles - particularly those on Boko Haram -, others reflect a more balanced and human-centered approach of a conciliatory medium which contradicts what the dominant news discourse has been criticized for. In order to properly put the BBC’s news discourse into context and to assess to what extent AJE departs from it, ten AJE articles on the same events will now be examined.

## **Critical Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera English**

On first sight, AJE’s coverage on the July 2009 unrest appears to have some similar features to the BBC’s reporting. The articles begin by paraphrasing the event, then providing

background information and reactions from state officials, civilians and independent sources, avoiding direct comments. Like the BBC, AJE refers to Nigeria's official reaction to the uprising in two of the three analyzed articles:

**AJE(2) Nigeria hunts Islamist fighters**

**AJE(3) Nigeria to hold inquiry into unrest**

Although there is indeed considerable space used to describe the state's position, however, AJE also allows a civilian and, crucially, a member of Boko Haram to present their view:

AJE(1) One of Boko Haram's members, who was wounded during the clashes, was quoted by Reuters news agency that his group wanted to "clean the [Nigerian] system which is polluted by western education and uphold sharia all over the country [...] The police has been arresting our leaders that is why we decided to retaliate".

While atrocities conducted by Boko Haram are clearly pointed out, AJE also describes and subsequently scrutinizes human rights violations conducted by government forces:

AJE(2) An AFP correspondent reported witnessing soldiers shooting three young men dead at point blank range close to the city's police headquarters. The men, who had just been arrested, were seen kneeling and pleading for their lives before being shot.

Moreover, AJE mostly avoids using emotional terms like "radical" or "militant" to describe Boko Haram. While it is mentioned that Boko Haram is "sometimes referred to as the Nigerian Taliban" (AJE(1)) and also the label "Islamist" is used on occasions, AJE mostly describes Boko Haram in more neutral terms as a "Muslim group" or simply "group", referring to the attackers as "fighters" rather than "militants".

On the other hand, AJE's further narrative uses several emotionally loaded terms, describing Boko Haram's action as a "killing spree":

AJE(2) Residents said fighters armed with machetes, knives, bows and arrows, and home-made explosives, attacked police buildings and anyone resembling a police officer or government official in the city.

One expert from the African Democracy and Conflict Research Institute is quoted extensively arguing that the outbreak of violence is a matter of religious extremism unrelated to poverty or other social issues:

AJE(2) “Previously when you had religion rear its head into [Nigerian] politics you had a clash between Christians mainly in the south and Muslims in the north, [...] but the most recent [incident], frankly, it seems to me is nothing but religious extremism and violence”.

Oddly, this article provides no further analysis regarding underlying dynamics and causes of the conflict, hence failing to go beyond the framework of clashing religious identities that AJE has claimed to reject on other occasions. It seems therefore that while AJE departs somewhat from a state-centric discourse by taking different perspectives into account, it falls short of providing a more profound analysis of underlying conflict causes beyond religious extremism.

The set of articles on the January 2010 events put more emphasis on the human situation in the clashes, paraphrasing the events in a neutral but explicit way:

AJE(4) The violence broke out on Sunday morning between rival Christian and Muslim gangs, setting fire to mosques, churches and other buildings.

While the state’s actions, reactions as well as criticism on it are mentioned only toward the end of the articles, the human suffering of the people in the region is addressed quite extensively, mostly reported in an indirect voice:

AJE(5) Locals in Kuru Jantar [...] [said] that a massacre had taken place in the village [...] Up to 18,000 people in the area are thought to have been left homeless by the clashes in Nigeria’s Plateau State.

Although both Muslim and Christian civilians are given voice to express their views on the outbreak of violence, it is noteworthy that the Muslim view receives more attention in three sub-paragraphs including a direct quotation, whereas the Christians’ perspective is only presented in one sub-paragraph through indirect speech. Yet, AJE seems more careful than the BBC with stressing religious identity when referring to the number of deaths, departing from the neutral term “people” only once in the three articles when stating that while Muslim leaders said “at least 364 people have been killed [...] the Christian death toll was still being compiled”.

Moreover, it is striking that the whole last article on the issue, while presenting different views on the immediate reasons of violence, provides no background on root causes of the conflict. On the contrary it reports the clash largely in terms of religious binaries:

**AJE(6) Nigerians trade blame over violence**

Christians and Muslims in central Nigeria are accusing each other of starting the recent clashes in which hundreds of people were killed in and around the city of Jos.

However, another article (AJE(5)) provides an in-depth analysis of the conflict citing both Christian and Muslim religious leaders as well as a researcher that the “violence is more than simply a religious dispute”:

AJE(5) Christian and Muslim leaders in Plateau State said that previous bouts of unrest owed more to the failure of political leaders to address ethnic differences than to inter-faith rivalries.

AJE(5) “It’s more to do with political and economic rivalries [...] discriminatory policies of local and state governments, [...] corruption that has continued to impoverish Nigeria” [said Eric Guttschuss from Human Rights Watch.]

In conclusion, the violence was covered by AJE mostly from a human perspective, but while providing substantive background information and avoiding stereotypical binaries at some points, it failed to do so at others.

In the clashes of March 2010, AJE covers the human suffering in great detail. But it is noteworthy that while only one resident is given voice to paraphrase the event, the government perspective is much more focused on when it comes to the reactions. Although the government is also criticized for the failure to prevent another outbreak of violence, the state’s position is granted much space to explain its position and actions, which is apparent in the following openers:

**AJE(8) Arrest made over Nigeria attacks**

**AJE(9) Nigeria vows to tackle violence**

Nigeria’s police chief has said that police officials in Nigeria’s central Plateau state will be held responsible for future violent acts.

Interestingly, AJE does not seem to obscure the religious component of the conflict. While providing the context that the attack appeared to be a reprisal for previous clashes, AJE is

much more explicit than the BBC in mentioning the religious identity of perpetrators and victims:

AJE(8) Our correspondent quoted police as saying that the attackers were Muslim Hausa-Fulani herders while the victims were mainly Christians from the Borom Community.

On the other hand, AJE does not fail to illuminate more profound dynamics and causes of the clashes when it comes to providing background information. A London-based African affairs analyst is quoted as explaining that political leaders “manipulate fears of religious and ethnic differences” (AJE(7)), another Nigeria expert from the South African Centre for Security Studies comments:

AJE(9) “There are deep divisions in Nigerian society and some people within communities still feel excluded from access to power, resources and if you look specifically at Jos, what is happening is a clash between those who feel they are settlers and those who are nomads who feel cut off from their land”

Hence, in its coverage of background AJE appears to aim for a balance between religious and socio-economic dimensions of the conflict as well as between Northern and Southern perspectives. In spite of the focus on the human situation, however, the state’s reactions to the conflict maintain prominence over the human perspective in most parts of the articles.

The background piece on Boko Haram frames the sect somewhat differently than the article by the BBC. Most importantly, no connection is drawn to global Islamist terrorism except once when it is revealed that the group’s base is dubbed ‘Afghanistan’ by locals. Rather, the sect is analyzed in a regional context, describing its history and local presence:

AJE(10) The group behind the latest violence in northern Nigeria is known by several different names, including al-Sunnah wal Jamma, or “followers of Muhammad’s teachings” in Arabic, or Boko Haram, which means “Western education is forbidden” in the local Hausa dialect. The group was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, allegedly by Mohammed Yusuf, a religious teacher.

Moreover, the sect’s members are given opportunity to directly express their perspective:

AJE(10) Adulmuni Ibrahim Mohammed, a senior member of the group arrested on Monday, told the Reuters news agency that “we do not believe in Western education. It corrupts our ideas and beliefs. That is why we are standing up to defend our religion”.

Moreover, the article examines underlying socio-economic and political problems that may have contributed to the sect's formation in the region. Salisu Mohammed, a "conflict management specialist" is quoted as criticizing the government for not having prevented the proliferation of Boko Haram much sooner:

AJE(10) "Many people have known of the existence of this group, silently and within the community, especially in the last year" [...] "They are taking advantage of a broken-down structural condition in Nigeria that people can take the law into their hands without getting reprimanded."

Subsequently, the article mentions other experts and indirectly transforms their analysis into a commenting function on the conflict's emergence:

AJE(10) Analysts also said that at the heart of this week's violence is dire poverty and political manoeuvring - not religion. They believe attacks were committed mainly by frustrated, unemployed youths and orchestrated by religious leaders and politicians who manipulate them to retain power.

Thus, while the BBC is examining Boko Haram in view of its potential to threaten Western interests, AJE is more concerned with the conflict's social background and implications for the region.

All in all, also AJE's news reporting needs to be looked at in a differentiated way. While the human situation is covered quite extensively and analyzed by particularly African experts, most space is devoted to paraphrasing, and sometimes also scrutinizing, the state's perspective. Whereas some profound analysis of the complex conflict background beyond cultural stereotypes is provided, other articles offer no other explanation than religious extremism as the cause of conflict. Lastly, although AJE is at times more considerate in its use of emotional and stereotypical terms - indicating a conciliatory approach -, at other times it is more explicit in its linguistic choices when paraphrasing violence in an active and partly shockingly blunt way. As AJE seems to exhibit both characteristics of a dominant and a potential counter-discourse, the findings on both networks' news coverage will now be synthesized in order to draw a more conclusive comparison.

## Synthesis: competing or complementing discourses?

The discourse analysis made clear that both AJE and the BBC follow similar journalistic standards including balance, impartiality and structure (inverted pyramid). Moreover, both networks apply certain features of a conciliatory and human-centered approach indicating signs of a counter-discourse; however, both the news coverage of AJE and the BBC also tend to apply some discursive practices assumed to be part of the dominant discourse. A more qualified analysis along the lines of the four indicators of counter-discourse will be able to shed light on the specific differences in discourse:

1. In contrast to the BBC, AJE tends to assume more of a *Southern perspective* on the events. Particularly the clashes involving Boko Haram were framed in the context of a potential terrorist threat to the West by the BBC (BBC(10)), whereas AJE focused more on regional implications of the conflict (AJE(10)). Furthermore, AJE relied more on African (three quotations) rather than Western (two) ‘experts’ or research institutes than the BBC (no African and three Western sources), albeit this does not necessarily translate into a more differentiated or insightful perspective.
2. Regarding the *human perspective*, AJE does not seem to fully come up to its stated aim when compared to the BBC. While AJE gave voice to four civilians in the sample articles, the BBC cited six - moreover, during the whole time period covered, the BBC published a total of seven articles solely giving personal accounts of the events as opposed to none by AJE. Besides, the state perspective was more pronounced by AJE (nine quotations) than by the BBC (eight). In particular, while both networks scrutinized the extra-judicial killings of Boko Haram members and the alleged failure of the government to better protect civilians, AJE appeared to be less critical and more accommodating of the government’s view than the BBC, which matches ill with the goal of countering the discourse of the powerful.



3. Only minor differences can be detected in view of reporting with an implicit religious identity. While AJE may tilt slightly toward a *Muslim perspective* by explaining the Muslim view on the conflict in somewhat more detail than the Christian view, the BBC directly quoted three Christian organisations as opposed to no Muslim one. Yet, all fatalities were first labelled as dead “people” by both networks, which was only sometimes further qualified by breaking the numbers up along lines of religious identity. Hence, for the most part, both networks retain a balanced and neutral reporting style, framing the sectarian violence in a wider than solely religious context.
4. The existence of a *conciliatory approach* to the conflict, which seems to be the most interesting indicator, can be discerned in the reporting of both AJE and the BBC. Both networks searched for underlying dynamics of the conflict beyond religion and on several occasions commented that socio-economic and political struggles - rather than religion - are likely to be the root cause. Similarly, religious identities were for the most part ‘backgrounded’ to avoid the impression of religious fanaticism being the sole trigger of violence. Interestingly, the BBC indicated a conciliatory approach by putting least emphasis on the religious dimension when reporting on the last major instance of violence when mostly Christian villagers were killed by Muslims, possibly to dispel connotations of militant Islamic fundamentalism among its Western audience. Conversely, AJE was at times less inclined to use stereotypical and emotionally charged labels, but on other occasions presented the clashes in binary terms (AJE(6)) and failed to provide a more profound analysis beyond religious extremism (AJE(2)). Hence, although both networks exhibit signs of a conciliatory approach, AJE overall appears slightly less inclined to depart from the much criticized clash of civilizations framework.

Therefore, it is not possible to categorize AJE clearly as providing a counter-discourse to mainstream news networks such as the BBC. Although AJE assumes a slightly more Southern perspective, it appears to focus less on the human situation than the BBC. Most importantly, the conciliatory approach, though certainly present in AJE's coverage, seems somewhat more discernable in BBC's news reporting. Two conclusions are possible to draw from these findings: either, AJE has been absorbed by the dominant discourse as its news reporting varies only minimally from the BBC; or both AJE and the BBC depart from the dominant discourse by providing substantive analysis and background information beyond religious stereotypes. The concluding section will attempt to evaluate which of these statements seems more appropriate.

## Conclusion

The case study has revealed that AJE's news coverage of sectarian violence appears not to present a clear counter-discourse to the mainstream news discourse exemplified by the BBC. While AJE may cover news from a slightly more Southern perspective, the BBC in fact puts more emphasis on the human perspective and seems somewhat more inclined to present news events with a conciliatory approach. It is important to note, however, that both networks present news to a large degree in a way that departs from the discursive practices that mainstream news discourse has been criticized for. In particular, the clash of civilizations paradigm as an explanatory framework for this conflict was to a great extent rejected, since both networks emphasized that the religious dimension of the conflict is likely to be only the cover for further-reaching social, economic and political struggles. In this sense, neither AJE nor the BBC appear to be part of the dominant discourse and a comparative study between AJE and CNN, for example, may have led to more oppositional results.

The detected similarities between AJE's and the BBC's news coverage do not entirely come as surprise: firstly, many of AJE's staff had been trained or previously employed by the BBC; more importantly, in a bid to fulfil quality criteria and to compete with the leading global news networks, AJE has adopted journalistic practices that are largely considered to be universal but to a great extent drawn from Western standards. Nevertheless, AJE's discourse should not be equated hastily with that of the BBC. Both the TV channel and the website of AJE offer considerable amounts of background reports, news analyses, features and comments that are likely to be more explicit in assuming a distinct perspective, as indicated by the program 'Listening Post' on violence in Nigeria mentioned earlier, which revealed AJE's distinct approach to covering conflicts. Further research that analyzes AJE's output beyond hard news is therefore necessary to qualify the findings of this case study.

Moreover, the role of news media constructing reality and thereby shaping global power dynamics through discourse must be assessed. Clearly, it is impossible to detect a causal relationship between news discourse and power structures, but as the works of Said suggest power relations may be reinforced by their representation in media. While the case study revealed that AJE does not present a clear counter-discourse - thus a different 'truth' in Foucauldian terms - that entirely resists the global power structure, there are a number of signs that the network remains somewhat outside the dominant discourse including the departure from simplifying explanatory frameworks, the avoidance of stereotypical labels, and not least the overall emphasis on the developing world and its underrepresented groups.

Hence, AJE seems to be engaged in a balancing act between providing a distinct perspective on news events in the South and at the same time fulfilling professional standards adopted from Western media. Ultimately, it will be the news consumer judging the viability of this approach. Considering the few years of its existence, however, AJE has been a tremendous success in terms of providing high quality news on and from the developing world.

## Appendix A

total news output on sectarian violence in Nigeria: July 2009 - April 2010  
(marked articles: part of discourse analysis)

### Al Jazeera English

date	title	paragraphs	video/audio/photo	news/background/ personal	discourse analysis
26.07.2009	Nigeria clashes kill dozens	2		news	AJE(1)
27.07.2009	Deadly Nigeria clashes spread	3		news	
27.07.2009	Video: Clashes erupt in Nigeria	0	video	news	
28.07.2009	Nigeria violence "under control"	4		news	
28.07.2009	Nigeria on high alert after clashes	3		news	
29.07.2009	Video: fighting rages in Nigeria	0	video	news	
29.07.2009	Nigeria hunts Islamist fighters	4	video	news	AJE(2)
29.07.2009	Deadly Nigeria fighting rages	3		news	
30.07.2009	Senior Islamist among Nigeria dead	4		news	
30.07.2009	Nigeria's sectarian crisis	1	video	background	
30.07.2009	thousands flee Nigeria violence	4		news	
31.07.2009	Islamist leader killed in Nigeria	3		news	
31.07.2009	Nigeria's Boko Haram Leader "killed"	3		news	
01.08.2009	Nigerian police "free" hostages	3		news	
01.08.2009	call for probe into Nigeria killings	4		news	
02.08.2009	Nigeria to hold inquiry into unrest	4		news	AJE(3)
03.08.2009	Video: Boko Haram widows in custody	0	video	background	
18.01.2010	deadly clashes rock Nigerian city	1		news	AJE(4)
20.01.2010	Clashes spread in Nigerian city	2		news	
21.01.2010	Clashes near Nigerian city of Jos	3		news	
22.01.2010	Nigerians displaced after clashes	3	video	news	
23.01.2010	Nigerians claim religious massacre	1	video	news	
23.01.2010	horror of Nigeria clashes uncovered	4	video	news	AJE(5)
24.01.2010	probe sought into Nigeria killings	3	video	news	
25.01.2010	hundreds held over Nigeria clashes	2		news	
26.01.2010	Nigerians trade blame over violence	2	video	news	AJE(6)
09.02.2010	Nigeria video shows "executions"	4	video	news	
09.02.2010	Profile: Boko Haram	3		background	AJE(10)
10.02.2010	Nigeria killings caught on video	5	video	news	
10.02.2010	Nigeria forces kill "civilians"	0	video	news	
01.03.2010	Police arrested in Nigeria killing	3		news	
07.03.2010	hundreds killed in Nigeria clashes	3		news	AJE(7)
08.03.2010	central Nigeria on "high alert"	1	video	news	
08.03.2010	Nigeria forces hunt Jos killers	3		news	
08.03.2010	hundreds killed in Nigeria attack	2		news	
08.03.2010	deadly clashes in central Nigeria	1	video	news	
09.03.2010	Nigeria cracks down after attacks	3	video	news	
09.03.2010	Arrests made over Nigeria attacks	4	video	news	AJE(8)
10.03.2010	security concerns in rural Nigeria	1	video	news	
10.03.2010	massacre leaves Nigerians on edge	2	video	news	
10.03.2010	Nigerians bury massacre victims	3	video	news	
11.03.2010	Behind Nigeria's ethnic violence	1	video	background	

15.03.2010	Nigeria vows to tackle violence	2	video	news	AJE(9)
17.03.2010	Timeline: Tensions in Nigeria	1		background	
17.03.2010	death in Nigeria ethnic clashes	2		news	
27.03.2010	Listening Post: Nigeria Violence	1	video	background	
31.03.2010	Nigeria court quiets amputation row	1	video	news	
25.04.2010	Several killed in Nigeria violence	2		news	

## **BBC**

date	title	paragraphs	video/audio/photo	news/background/ personal	discourse analysis
27.07.2009	fear and tension after Nigeria attack	3		news	BBC(1)
27.07.2009	eyewitness: Nigeria attacks	4		personal	
27.07.2009	Nigeria's anti-education preacher	2		background	
27.07.2009	curfew after Nigeria gun battle	2		news	
27.07.2009	dozens killed in Nigeria clashes	2		news	
28.07.2009	security boosted in North Nigeria	2	video	news	
29.07.2009	hostages freed in Nigeria clashes	1	video	news	
29.07.2009	Nigeria army fights Islamist sect	2	video	news	
29.07.2009	Nigeria clashes "under control"	1	video	news	
30.07.2009	Nigeria riot city under control	2		news	
30.07.2009	"crushing blow" for Nigeria sect	1	video	news	
30.07.2009	Nigeria forces storm sect mosque	3	video	news	
31.07.2009	Nigerian officials visit scene of fighting	1	video	news	
31.07.2009	Nigeria row over militant killing	3	video	news	
31.07.2009	Islamist's death "good for Nigeria"	4		news	BBC(2)
31.07.2009	In pictures: Nigeria clashes aftermath	0	photo	news	
31.07.2009	brutal reality of Nigeria killing	4		news	
31.07.2009	Nigeria's Taliban enigma	4		news	
31.07.2009	Nigeria sect head dies in custody	2	video	news	
31.07.2009	detained sect leader dead	1	video	news	
01.08.2009	"normalcy restored" in Nigeria	1	video	news	
01.08.2009	Nigeria seeks last sect members	3	video	news	
01.08.2009	row over Nigerian militant's death		video	news	
02.08.2009	scale of Nigeria unrest emerges	1	video	news	
03.08.2009	Nigeria photo shows leader alive	1	video	news	
04.08.2009	Nigeria to probe Islamist attack	2		news	BBC(3)
04.08.2009	Is al-Qaeda working in Nigeria?	3		background	BBC(10)
16.08.2009	Nigeria police raid Muslim sect	1		news	
25.08.2009	Nigeria state vets Muslim clerics	2		news	
28.08.2009	sect members captured in Nigeria	1		news	
21.12.2009	Nigeria herders and farmers clash in central Nasarawa	1		news	
29.12.2009	Nigerian sect violence victims "mostly children"	2		news	
29.12.2009	Nigeria police in deadly clash with sect in Bauchi	1		news	
18.01.2010	Nigeria troops patrol in Jos after religious clashes	1		news	BBC(4)
19.01.2010	Nigeria imposes 24 hour curfew after clashes	3		news	
19.01.2010	many killed in riots in Nigeria	0	video	news	

20.01.2010	Nigeria religious riots "kill 200" in Jos	2	video	news	
20.01.2010	Nigeria riot city resident describes violence	3		personal	
20.01.2010	Nigeria riot city under control, says army chief	3		news	BBC(5)
21.01.2010	Nigeria curfew relaxed after religious fighting in Jos	2		news	
21.01.2010	Nigeria riot city Jos "under control"	0	video	news	
21.01.2010	In pictures: Nigeria riot aftermath	0		news	
21.01.2010	Nigeria: mass funerals in Jos riots	2		news	
22.01.2010	Nigeria army takes control of riot-hit Jos	2		news	
23.01.2010	Nigeria religious riot bodies found in village wells	2		news	
23.01.2010	safety fears amid Nigerian violence	0	audio	news	
23.01.2010	Nigeria riot bodies found in village wells	0	video	news	
25.01.2010	hundreds arrested after Nigeria clashes	2		news	
26.01.2010	Nigeria riots: "our homes for razed"	3		personal	
27.01.2010	Nigeria text messages "fuelled Jos riots"	2		background	BBC(6)
01.02.2010	ICC "must probe religious violence in Jos"	2		news	
17.02.2010	Nigerian troops end cemetery row	1		news	
01.03.2010	Nigeria police held over Boko Haram sect killing	1		news	
07.03.2010	Central Nigeria attacks lead to "at least 100 deaths"	2		news	BBC(7)
08.03.2010	Nigeria ethnic violence leaves hundres dead	2	video	news	
08.03.2010	Nigeria violence: eyewitness stories	4		personal	
08.03.2010	"hundreds dead" in Nigeria clashes	1	video	news	
08.03.2010	Nigeria violence in Jos: Q&A	3		background	
08.03.2010	"terrible" scenes follow Nigeria clashes	1	video	news	
08.03.2010	"60 dead" in Nigeria unrest	1	audio	news	
08.03.2010	Nigeria president puts forces on alert after Jos deaths	2		news	
09.03.2010	Hilary Clinton seeks trial for Jos massacre	3	video	news	
09.03.2010	In pictures: mourning in Nigeria	0	photo	news	
10.03.2010	Jos in fear of further attacks	1	video	news	
10.03.2010	Nigerian army "ignored warning of massacres" in Jos	3		news	BBC(8)
11.03.2010	Nigerian military denies it ignored Jos massacre warnings	1	video	news	
11.03.2010	Nigeria women protest at Jos killings	2		news	
11.03.2010	Nigerian survivors recall Jos massacre survivors describe violence in Nigerian town of Jos	3	audio	personal	
11.03.2010	massacre must be revenged	1	audio	personal	
11.03.2010	Nigeria charges 49 over Jos killings	4		news	
12.03.2010	Nigerian women demand Jos justice	1	video	news	
12.03.2010	no end to Nigeria cycle of violence	4		background	BBC(9)
17.03.2010	Nigeria village in machete attack	1		news	
13.04.2010	Borno state debates law "to stop Islamic Extremism"	2		news	
14.04.2010	Nigeria police found guilty in sect clash case	2		news	
21.04.2010	Nigeria reprisal killings continue near City of Jos	1		news	
26.04.2010	"Why I burnt my Nigerian friends house down"	5		news	

## Appendix B

The following list provides links to the articles used in the discourse analysis. They were all accessed in April 2010.

AJE(1). Nigeria clashes kill dozens (26.07.2009):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2009/07/2009726131716385625.html>

AJE(2). Nigeria hunts Islamist fighters (29.07.2009):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2009/07/20097294511346828.html>

AJE(3). Nigeria to hold inquiry into unrest (02.08.2009):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2009/08/200981144254630202.html>

AJE(4). Deadly clashes rock Nigerian city (18.01.2010):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2010/01/2010118362386809.html>

AJE(5). Horror of Nigeria clashes uncovered (23.01.2010):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2010/01/201012333947758520.html>

AJE(6). Nigerians trade blame over violence (26.01.2010):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2010/01/201012610250404786.html>

AJE(7). Hundreds killed in Nigeria clashes (07.03.2010):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2010/03/20103713521482760.html>

AJE(8). Arrests made over Nigeria attacks (09.03.2010):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2010/03/20103814174576164.html>

AJE(9). Nigeria vows to tackle violence (15.03.2010):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2010/03/201031493832639496.html>

AJE(10). Profile: Boko Haram (09.02.2010):  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2009/07/200972913529620235.html>

BBC(1). Fear and tension after Nigeria attack (27.07.2009):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8171482.stm>

BBC(2). Islamist`s death "good for Nigeria" (31.07.2009):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8177681.stm>

BBC(3). Nigeria to probe Islamist attack (04.08.2009):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8183898.stm>

BBC(4). Nigeria troops patrol in Jos after religious clashes (18.01.2010):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/8465108.stm>



BBC(5). Nigeria riot city under control, says army chief (20.01.2010):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8469863.stm>

BBC(6). Nigeria text messages "fuelled Jos riots" (27.01.2010):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8482666.stm>

BBC(7). Central Nigeria attacks lead to "at least 100 deaths" (07.03.2010):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8554304.stm>

BBC(8). Nigerian army "ignored warning of massacres" in Jos (10.03.2010):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8558246.stm>

BBC(9). No end to Nigeria cycle of violence (12.03.2010):  
<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8564884.stm>

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<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/8465108.stm>

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<http://news.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/8482666.stm>

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