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Tsahi Hayat Tal Samuel-Azran Yair Galily

Article information:

To cite this document:

Tsahi Hayat Tal Samuel-Azran Yair Galily , (2016), "Al-Jazeera Sport's US Twitter followers: sport-politics nexus?", Online Information Review, Vol. 40 Iss 6 pp. 785 - 797

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/OIR-01-2016-0033>

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Al-Jazeera Sport's US Twitter followers: sport-politics nexus?

Sport-politics
nexus

Tsahi Hayat

School of Communication, IDC Herzliya, Herzliya, Israel, and

Tal Samuel-Azran and Yair Galily

IDC Herzliya, Herzliya, Israel

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Received 31 January 2016

Revised 11 May 2016

Accepted 13 May 2016

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to analyses of the sport-politics nexus by identifying whether the demographics of Twitter followers of Al-Jazeera Sport in the USA (rebranded in 2014 as beIN USA) can be associated with a specific political orientation.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on selective exposure theory, which posits that people follow news sources that reinforce their existing views, the authors identify the news outlets followed by beIN Twitter followers. To put the findings in perspective, the authors compared the results to the news outlets followed by the Twitter followers of Al-Jazeera America, Al-Jazeera's second US outlet. Next, to understand the nature of the beIN and Al-Jazeera America communities, the authors used social network analysis to analyze the distribution of retweets within these communities.

Findings – The analysis shows that whereas Al-Jazeera America Twitter followers follow significantly more liberal than conservative news outlets, beIN's followers were not identified with a specific political orientation. Analysis of beIN's followers' retweets shows a greater degree of connectivity among beIN's followers than among the followers of Al-Jazeera America, indicating a more connected social network.

Research limitations/implications – Findings indicate that beIN's Twitter following is characterized by more diverse and more strongly connected audience than Al-Jazeera America on Twitter, highlighting sports as a non-politicized realm on Twitter.

Practical implications – For practitioners, the study illustrates that controversial non-western media networks such as Al-Jazeera can gain access to diverse populations in the West by operating in the sport realm rather than the news realm.

Originality/value – This study offers a pioneering indication of the extent of a sport-ethnocentrism nexus on Twitter.

Keywords Sport, Ethnocentrism, Politics, Al-Jazeera America, beIN

Paper type Research paper

The link between sport and politics, and specifically, whether sport represents an extension of political and ethnic conflict or serves as a bridge between people of different ethnicities and backgrounds who share their love of sport, remains an open question. Samuel Huntington (2004), father of the clash of civilizations theory (1993), argued that his grim premonition that intercultural relations will be inundated with ethnic conflict is strengthened in the sport context when considering, for example, that Hispanics living in the USA usually support the Latin American teams who play against the US soccer team. In contrast, others studies found that international sport competitions sometimes do serve as a bridge between people from conflicting ethnic backgrounds. A notable case in point is a study that found that during the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, the Turkish minority living in Germany overcame differences and wholeheartedly united to support the German team, while German soccer fans refrained from making what had become at the time routine expressions of hatred toward minorities (Kersting, 2007).



Online Information Review

Vol. 40 No. 6, 2016

pp. 785-797

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited

1468-4527

DOI 10.1108/OIR-01-2016-0033

The first two authors contributed equally to the paper.

To contribute to current analyses of the sport-ethnocentrism nexus, this study examines whether the Twitter following of beIN USA, formerly Al-Jazeera Sport (AJS), indicates ethnocentrism and resistance to the Qatari-sponsored sport station or whether this outlet manages to attract fans from different backgrounds who share a love of sport, thus serving as an apolitical platform. This study was inspired by previous studies that identified that conservatives persistently avoid Al-Jazeera's ventures in the USA due to ethnic bias (Samuel-Azran, 2006, 2010; Youmans and Brown, 2011). Accordingly, the study's main aim is to determine whether the US audience of beIN USA, a Qatari-sponsored sport network, also represents a narrow political segment. Importantly, AJS was launched on Twitter on July 2012 and therefore, although it was rebranded as beIN in 2014 as part of organizational efforts to unite all Al-Jazeera's sport channels under a single name (Al-Arabiya, 2013), many of its followers still identify the channel as Al-Jazeera Sport.

To examine whether beIN Twitter followers are characterized by a specific political orientation, we examined the news outlets followed by beIN USA's Twitter followers. This method was selected as the best approach to identify beIN's followers political orientation in view of various studies and theories, most notably selective exposure theory (Hart *et al.*, 2009; Jonas *et al.*, 2001) and hostile media effect theory (Vallone *et al.*, 1985), which contend that the majority of media consumers follow news sources that reinforce their existing views and avoid sources that contradict their views. Based on the above, we assume that the news sources beIN followers choose to follow are indicative of their political orientations.

To put the findings in perspective, we compared the news following trends of beIN's Twitter followers with those of the followers of Al-Jazeera America, another English-language Qatari outlet in the USA. The goal of the comparison is to understand whether beIN's following patterns in the USA resemble those of Al-Jazeera's English news outlets, which former studies have identified as outright rejection by conservatives (Samuel-Azran, 2010) and racially biased individuals (Youmans and Brown, 2011). Next, to better understand the follower patterns of the two Qatari-sponsored outlets, we examined how many beIN followers also follow Al-Jazeera America on Twitter. Finally, to better understand the connectivity and spread of information among the Twitter followers of beIN vs Al-Jazeera America's Twitter followers, we examined the network comprising retweets of tweets originating from beIN and Al-Jazeera America.

This study offers a pioneering indication of the extent of a sport-ethnocentrism nexus on Twitter via an analysis of the Twitter following patterns of beIN USA, one of the major non-western news outlets operating in the global arena. From this perspective, the analysis will illuminate whether non-Western sport outlets encounter ethnic and racial biases among western audiences or do they, instead, unite fans from all sides of the political spectrum around a common interest – sport.

Sport following: ethnocentric or truly global?

The notion that sport following depends mostly on fan ethnicity is supported by several accounts. Valeriano (2014) and Huntington (2004) describe the tendency of the Latin immigrants living in the USA to support their respective national soccer teams, including when these teams play against the USA; Huntington (2004) argues that Latino immigrants to the USA rallying behind their homeland flags indicates that international sport events actually aggravate international divisions by triggering immigrants' feelings toward their birthplace. Similarly, Porat (2010) notes that the soccer teams of

Barcelona and Glasgow are perceived as political symbols of the oppressed Catalonian minority in Spain and the Catholic minority in Scotland, respectively, and fans consider these teams as weapons against their perceived aggressors.

Other studies show that sport events may exacerbate international conflicts. The World Cup soccer games in particular provides a good setting to examine the common ground vs tensions and mediations question, as two teams, sometimes from countries in conflict, compete in these games against each other. The majority of studies portray the World Cup as a ground of ethnic and international tension. Thus, when the teams of England and Germany had a match during the 1999 European Soccer Championship semifinals, Vincent *et al.* (2010) found that both the English and the German media framed this match using political and historical terminology, and described the match as a continuation of England's and Germany's "match" during Second World War. In a similar manner, in the 1998 FIFA World Cup game between the national teams of USA and Iran, US media and audiences paid more attention to the political implications of the match-up than to the game itself (Delgado, 2003). Additional evidence comes from a highly publicized global survey conducted by YouGov before the 2014 World Cup games on people's favorite teams (Aisch *et al.*, 2014), which strengthened the notion regarding the impact of international tensions on attitudes toward national teams. For example, in Argentina, the most hated team was England (possibly on grounds of the Falkland War), whereas in England the most hated teams were Russia, whose relations with the UK on grounds of the March 2014 annexation of Crimea were tense during this period, and Germany.

In contrast to these grim observations, Kersting (2007) optimistically claims that during sport events of high magnitude, sport-related values such as a *croqs d'esprit*, tolerance, multiculturalism, and social solidarity eclipse ethnic and national tensions. According to Kersting, during sport events, Germans and minorities set their controversies aside and unite to support the German national team. Similarly, Bandyopadhyay (2008) asserts that cricket games between India and Pakistan – where fans leave tensions aside and share their love of the game – raise hopes of conflict resolution among the people of these rival countries.

Another interesting optimistic study was conducted in Israel, where a research conducted in 2003 among 448 Arabic interviewees between the ages of 18 and 50 indicated that approximately 66 percent of all Arabic men in Israel were followers of one of the Jewish-Israeli teams league football teams in the Israeli league. The researcher concluded that soccer provided a unique opportunity for Arab residents of Israel to form a non-threatening identification with Jewish and Israeli symbols (Sorek, 2003).

The leading Arab-Israeli team, Bnei Saknin, has however since achieved success, and most Arab-Israelis are now "gunning behind their own team," in a shift that underscores the relevance of ethnic background and sport fandom in Israeli football. On the Jewish-Israeli side, one of the leading teams, Beitar Jerusalem, which is identified publicly with the right-wing party Likud, is renowned for its racist chants and refusal to accept Muslim players. Nonetheless, several studies (e.g. Shor and Yonay, 2011) indicate that Israeli football still includes enclaves of Arabs and Jews who put their love for football above their ethnic and religious identities.

About beIN

AJS was established in November 2003 as part of the expansion of the Al-Jazeera network into new fields beyond the news. In its early years, AJS's main competitor was the Saudi network Arab Radio and Television (ART), until AJS purchased the six ART sports channels and all sports rights held by ART for approximately US\$1 billion on

November 24, 2009. As a result, AJS became the largest sports network in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). AJS's main and almost sole competitor remains Abu-Dhabi Media, whose main assets were exclusive rights to the English Premier League and the German Bundesliga, until 2013, when AJS defeated Abu-Dhabi Media in the competition over English Premier League rights, paying around US\$300 million for the rights for three years, as well as the right to broadcast the German league matches, stripping Abu-Dhabi Media of its main assets. These new rights positioned AJS as an unbelievably strong monopoly in sports broadcasting rights in the MENA region, with exclusive rights to the French, Italian, English, Russian, German, and Spanish soccer leagues. AJS also has exclusive broadcasting rights to FIFA World Cup, UEFA European and World Championships, AFC Asian Cup, Africa Cup of Nations, and Copa America, among others.

In light of its immense success in the MENA region, AJS decided to expand to the West. Currently, it operates channels in France, Canada, Spain, and Australia and it launched two channels in the USA (in English and Spanish) in August 2012. Concurrently with its launch in the USA, Al-Jazeera also launched its Twitter account and started tweeting as AJS. A year and a half later, in early 2014, the Al-Jazeera Media network rebranded its sport channel as beIN in order to unite all its sport channels worldwide under a single brand name, and thus became known as Al-Jazeera beIN USA. All AJS titles, including its Twitter account name were replaced with the beIN brand name. In the USA and Canada, beIN Sports holds the rights to broadcast the world's major soccer leagues, including the Italian, French, and Spanish soccer leagues, the South American World Cup Qualifier, the English Football League Championship matches, and materials from Barca TV (Qatar, Al-Jazeera's sponsors, the Barcelona soccer team sponsors via Qatar Foundation). As of February 2015, the beIN channel is received by 16,945,000 households (14.6 percent of all households that own a television) in the USA (Seidman, 2015). In parallel to the television broadcasts, beIN maintains a very active Twitter account and its operators have tweeted over 41,000 tweets and acquired over 180,000 followers since July 2012.

Biases against Al-Jazeera ventures in the USA

The present study was inspired by studies that found that Al-Jazeera's ventures in the USA are a target of ethnic and racial bias. The first manifestations of such bias were evident in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, when the Al-Jazeera brand name reached western homes due to its exclusive access to the battle zones in Afghanistan and Iraq. Al-Jazeera's exclusive images and reports were imported by leading western stations, triggering objections that the practice imposed a non-western perspective of the hostilities on western stations (Jasperson and El-Kikhia, 2002, 2003; Volkmer, 2002). However, a comprehensive study that tracked the resonance of Al-Jazeera Arabic news items in the US media strongly contradicted this notion and found that Al-Jazeera Arabic's materials were actually persistently manipulated by US stations to fit within the western perspective (Azran, 2004; Galily *et al.*, 2016; Samuel-Azran *et al.*, 2016). Online, Al-Jazeera's materials were re-presented primarily on liberal platforms and were rejected by conservative platforms (Samuel-Azran, 2006).

To prevent biased mediation of its news materials, Qatar launched a 24/7 English television channel named Al-Jazeera English on November 15, 2006, aiming to broadcast directly to western audiences. However, its attempts to gain distribution in the USA were blocked by Republican bodies that were able to successfully block its distribution on American cable and satellite providers. Specifically, Accuracy in

Media, a conservative media watchdog founded in 1969 that systematically criticizes “leftist propaganda” in the media, ran a campaign that urged Americans to take action against Al-Jazeera English by writing, calling, or e-mailing their Senators and House representatives, which intimidated major US cable and satellite carriers from carrying Al-Jazeera English. Only two small cable carriers – Burlington TV (BT) in Vermont and Buckeye in Toledo, Ohio – agreed to broadcast AJE at its launch in November 2006, and even they faced intimidations by conservative groups (Youmans, 2011).

To understand US audiences’ attitudes toward the Al-Jazeera English brand, Youmans and Brown (2011) studied the reception of Al-Jazeera in American society during Al-Jazeera English’s “greatest moment” in the USA, when the coverage of the Arab Spring brought praise to the station for its bold, professional reporting, and increased its US viewership exponentially. In their experimental study, participants were randomly divided into one of three groups those who viewed either an AJE clip or a CNN International (CNNI) clip, and a control group. As part of the study, all identifying AJE markings were removed and replaced with CNNI branding and vice versa for CNNI materials. Participants rated the bias or reliability of each clip, and reported their intention to watch AJE and CNN. The findings of the study clearly showed the persistence of substantial prejudice against AJE among the US public, as the average respondent gave more credit to CNNI for an AJE-produced news clip edited to look like a CNNI item, but no similar credit was given to AJE when the CNNI-produced clip carried AJE’s logo. The study concluded that bias against Al-Jazeera in the USA is rooted in religious and cultural differences.

To overcome these challenges and biases, the Al-Jazeera Media network launched Al-Jazeera America on August 20, 2013. To gain access to US cable and satellite providers, Al-Jazeera purchased Al Gore’s Current TV for US\$500 million in early 2013, only to immediately shut it down and utilize its distribution to over 50 million viewers in the USA. However, although Al-Jazeera America employs a team of close to 800 journalists and staff in the hope of challenging the major US news networks such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, its primetime viewership average is still less than 5 percent of CNN’s viewership (CNN has 600,000 viewers in comparison to AJAM’s 25,000), which indicates that it has a small niche market, most likely Muslims and liberals who wish to consume and/or complement their news from a network that originates in another culture. Less than three years later, Al-Jazeera America was forced to downsize its staff and in January 2016 it announced that the entire Al-Jazeera America operation would close in April 2016.

Research Questions

- RQ1.* Which news sources do beIN’s and Al-Jazeera America Twitter followers follow?
RQ2. What is the distribution of retweets by followers of beIN and Al-Jazeera America?

Method

To best address these research questions, we used the social network analysis (SNA) method. To examine *RQ1*, we relied on Groseclose and Milyo’s (2005) classic division of the political tendencies of the main 20 US news outlets when selecting the news outlets to follow and identifying their political orientation. We used the 19 out of the 20 outlets proposed, eliminating the *The Early Show*, which is no longer running. Groseclose and Milyo (2005) computed an ideology score for these 20 media outlets by

counting the times that a particular media outlet cites various think tanks and policy groups, and then comparing this number with the times that members of Congress cite the same groups. Their ideology score ranges from 0 (conservative orientation) to 1 (liberal orientation).

We also added Al-Jazeera America to the list of our news sources in our analysis, which was not mentioned in Groseclose and Milyo (2005), in order to specifically examine the overlap in beIN USA and Al-Jazeera America followers. The use of SNA in online media consumption research can become a valuable method for understanding the diversity of media sources individuals turn to. We find SNA to be particularly useful in analyzing Al-Jazeera America's and beIN USA's following as it can shed light on the interconnections within these outlets' audiences.

Understanding the premises behind SNA is particularly important in approaching RQ2. SNA focusses on the structure of relationships among units, whether individuals, groups, or organizations, and on the way these relationships affect processes in a network (Hayat and Lyons, 2010, Hayat and Mo, 2015; Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988). The links in social networks represent various types of relationships such as collaboration, kinship, shared ideologies, economic exchange, and communication. The basic premises underlying SNA are: nodes and their actions are interdependent on their relational structure, and nodes are not viewed as independent autonomous units; links between nodes are channels for transfer or flow of (material or non-material) resources; the network structure is an environment that provides incentives, opportunities, or constraints on individual action; and network models conceptualize structure as a lasting pattern of links between individual nodes (Wasserman and Faust, 1994).

In this study, we use a network approach to describe social networks that represent followers' retweeting ties on Twitter using the following scheme: individuals are represented as nodes in the network; nodes are connected to one another by an edge if a retweeting relationship between them exists.

Data

Our study uses data from Twitter, an internet platform through which users connect and communicate with each other. We describe below the data, we collected through the Twitter API. To examine the political preferences of beIN's and Al-Jazeera America's Twitter followers and their ties, we constructed a network of Al-Jazeera America and beIN USA followers. To identify the other news sources to which these followers are exposed, we tracked all the news outlets they follow on Twitter. We used the classification system proposed by Chu *et al.* (2010) in order to screen for automated bots (i.e. a program used to produce automated tweets on). On January 24, 2016, the day our data were collected and downloaded, there were 181,749 Twitter users who followed beIN USA, and 321,176 Twitter users who followed Al-Jazeera America. These users comprise our sample of Twitter users.

Results

The analysis below describes the media outlets the users in our sample follow. Figure 1 illustrates how many people follow at least one other media outlet in addition to beIN and Al-Jazeera America: 117,511 (65 percent) of beIN USA followers follow at least one additional news outlet from our list. As depicted in Figure 2, 186,282 (58 percent) of Al-Jazeera America followers follow at least one additional news outlet from our list.

Table I presents the outlets in ascending ideology score order. Due the variation in the number of followers for each outlets (see column 2), we used an SPSS-measured

z-score to normalize the number of beIN USA users who also follow each outlet (see column 3), and the number of users Al-Jazeera America followers who also follow each outlet (see column 4). This normalized scores range from -3 to 3 .

To further explore the differences between beIN and Al-Jazeera America followers, we plotted the overlap between Al-Jazeera America and beIN USA followers' following patterns (see Table I and Figure 2). The x -axis presents the media outlets in ascending ideological order, according to Groseclose and Milyo's (2005) ideological score.

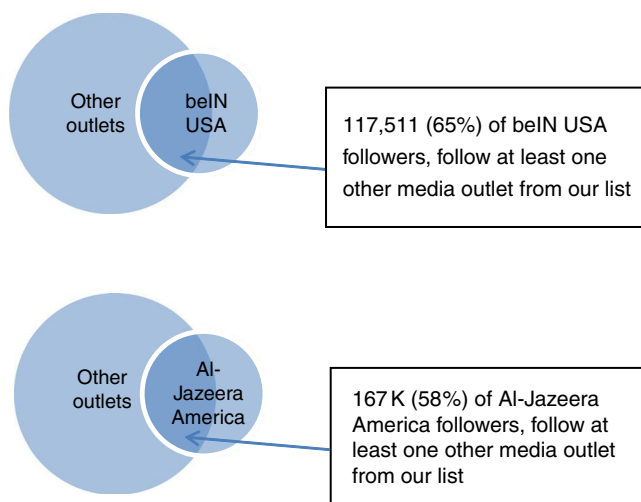


Figure 1.
Overlap of users who follow beIN USA and at least one other media outlet

Figure 2.
Overlap of users who follow Al-Jazeera America and at least one other media outlet

News outlet	Number of followers (rounded)	Percentage of beIN USA followers who also follow this outlet (normalized)	Percentage of AJAM followers who also follow this outlet (normalized)
Fox News	7,730,000	-0.815	-1.700
The Drudge Report	882,000	-0.199	-1.117
Washington Times	256,000	1.4	-1.151
Wall Street Journal	9,350,000	-0.699	-1.134
US News & World Report	111,000	1.90	-1.077
The LA Times	1,750,000	0.17	-0.769
USA Today	2,000,000	-0.033	-0.691
Good Morning America	2,910,000	-0.904	-0.445
The News Hour	756,000	0.702	-0.100
CBS News	4,190,000	-0.557	0.247
Newsweek	2,710,000	-0.402	0.445
Washington Post	5,710,000	-0.310	0.677
The Today Show	3,290,000	-0.858	1.151
Time Magazine TIME	9,410,000	-0.734	0.776
ABC World News	250,000	0.215	1.128
CNN Breaking News	33,700,000	-0.991	1.134
NBC Nightly News	511,000	0.688	1.117
The New York Times	25,500,000	-0.895	1.077
Morning Edition (NPR)	155,000	2.376	0.901

Table I.
Breakdown of news outlet followers beIN USA and Al-Jazeera America followers who follow at least one other media outlet

As we can see in Figure 2, while Al-Jazeera America followers show a clear preference for following other more liberal media outlets, no similar preference is evident among beIN USA followers. We then moved to test the statistical significance of these differences. Given the non-normal distribution of our data, we used Mann-Whitney test for between-group comparisons. The analysis revealed that the number of liberal media outlets followed by AJAM followers is statistically significantly higher than the number of liberal media outlets followed by beIN followers ($U = 170, p < 0.01$).

Next, we examined how many beIN followers also follow Al-Jazeera America and found that only 2,777 users followed both Al-Jazeera America and BeIN USA. This figure is dramatically lower than the number of beIN followers who also follow most of the US media outlets examined, indicating little overlap. As discussed above, while AJAM is mainly a news outlet, BeIN is a sports media outlet. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that only 2,777 of the followers of BeIN also follow AJAM. Previous studies have identified similar patterns when studying the Twitter accounts of other news organizations. For instance, Bastos *et al.* (2012) identified low overlap between the Twitter accounts followed by users who are interested in sports as compared to those followed by users who are interested in politics. Bastos and Zago (2013) further identified differences in tweeting and re-tweeting behavior of Twitter users interested in politics when compared to those interested in sports.

To address *RQ2* and study the network of beIN USA and Al-Jazeera America followers, and the extent of connectivity among them, we used data on links within our sample of Twitter users (see Figure 3). We downloaded the list of retweets (of tweets originally tweeted by beIN USA) and mapped the retweeters. Using these links, we reconstructed networks of beIN USA's and Al-Jazeera America's engaged followers. When examining these two networks we looked at their density (the proportion of pairs of nodes that are connected of all pairs of nodes; Coleman, 1988). The normalized graph density of Al-Jazeera America is 0.00164 while the normalized graph density of beIN is 0.0037. A network of more densely connected users indicates more extensive communication among users, and thus increased circulation of information. Our findings indicate that beIN followers comprise a network that communicates and shares information more intensely among themselves, as compared to the Al-Jazeera America follower network (Figure 4).

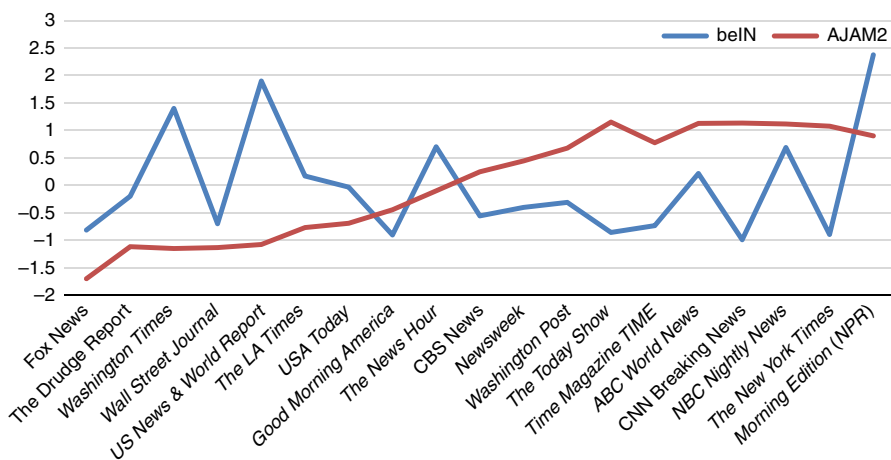
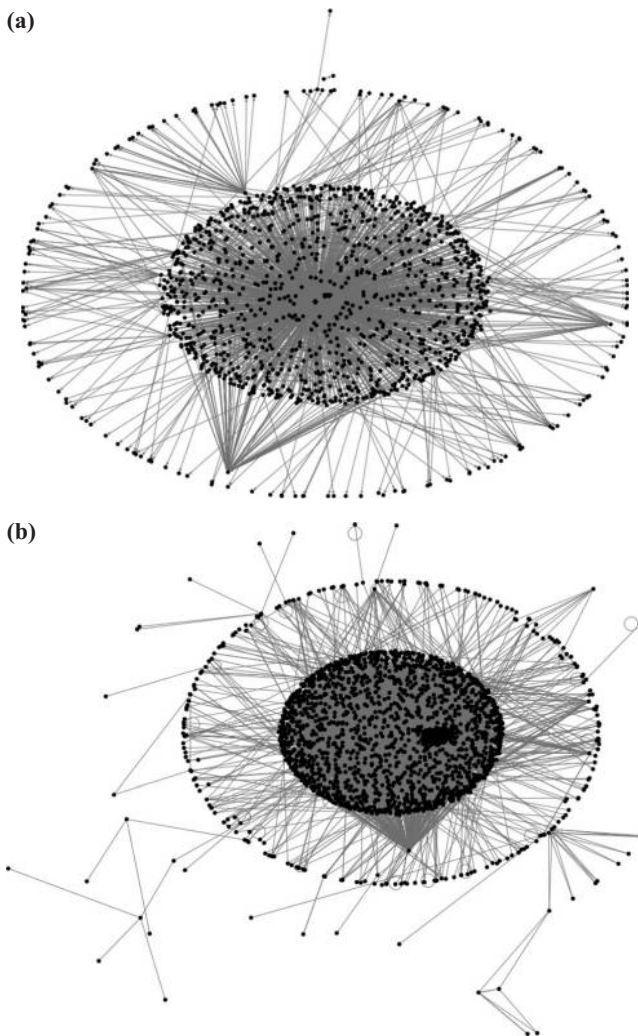


Figure 3. Normalized value of Al-Jazeera America and beIN USA followers who follow the other media outlet presented in Table I



Notes: (a) Al-Jazeera America ($n=2,693$); (b) beIN USA ($n=2,427$). Each node represents a user, and each link indicates that a tweet was retweeted

Figure 4.
Retweet networks as
of January 24, 2016

Discussion

This study aims to contribute to current analyses by identifying whether the demographics of the Twitter followers of beIN USA, formerly AJS, indicates a political bias. To better understand the political orientation of beIN's followers, we examined the news outlets that beIN's Twitter followers follow on Twitter. To put the analysis in perspective, we compared the results with the following patterns of Al-Jazeera America news follows. The analysis revealed that whereas Al-Jazeera America Twitter followers follow significantly more liberal than conservative news outlets, highlighting conservatives' resistance to Al-Jazeera in the US, beIN's followers were less strongly associated with a specific political

orientation. Further analyses also identified that few beIN USA Twitter followers also follow Al-Jazeera America, further indicating the distance between the followers of these two outlets. Finally, an analysis of beIN's followers' retweets indicates much greater connectivity between beIN's followers in comparison to Al-Jazeera America's followers, pointing to a more tightly connected online community that actively engages in the exchange of sport-related materials.

The study strongly indicates that beIN USA is characterized by wider, more diverse, and more strongly interconnected audience than Al-Jazeera America on Twitter, illustrating beIN's Twitter account as an arena where sports hosts fans from all sides of the political spectrum and serves as a bridge between diverse sport fans rather than extension of political tensions. The study adds to currently limited evidence against a sport-politics nexus (e.g. Huntington, 2004; Porat, 2010), by showing that sport can bridge between people from different backgrounds and that a sport network, even originating in Qatar, can attract diverse population groups in the USA.

For globalization studies, then, the study indicates that whereas the ability of non-western news stations to gain credibility in the West is very limited, the sport realm potentially offers a much better opportunity for online interactions on platforms of a non-Western origin. Thus, the study strengthens the notion that sport provides a more promising platform than news for the concept of contra-flow (Tamir *et al.*, 2015) – the ability of non-western originated media outlets to succeed in the West, countering the traditional dominance of western stations in both the West and the non-West.

Although not the main aim of the study, findings also provide insight on rebranding a product whose brand name in the West is problematic for political grounds. From an advertising studies perspective, the study suggests that rebranding AJS as beIN most likely contributed to the diversity of the station's Twitter followers. Nonetheless, an important limitation of this study is the absence of information on beIN's followers' awareness of the outlet's link to AJS. Future studies should address this question via polls or interviews to better understand the effects of rebranding AJS as beIN on audience decisions to follow beIN on Twitter.

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About the authors

Tsahi Hayat is a Faculty at the Sammy Ofer School of Communication, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel. His research focusses complex socio-technical systems, networks of people, artifacts, data, and ideas. He is particularly interested in how new technologies such as tablets, smartphones, and social media platforms may enable or hinder the transfer of different resources

within social networks. His publications cover topics such as networked work, innovations, social support, and social network theory and methods.

Tal Samuel-Azran (PhD, University of Melbourne, MA, New York University) is the Head of the International Program at the Sammy Ofer School of Communications. His main fields of research are political communication, new media, and media globalization. Tal Samuel-Azran is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: tazran@idc.ac.il

Yair Galily, PhD, is an Applied Sociologist, Mass Media and Management Researcher and Senior Lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Centre, Herzliya. He is the Founder and Head of the Research Unit at the Israeli Football Association and Member of UEFA Club Licensing Committee.

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