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Al Jazeera's *The Stream*.
Digital and Diasporic Geographies beyond the West

Abstract: A few months after the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian revolts, the satellite news channel Al Jazeera English, broadcasting from the Middle-Eastern region for an international public, launched 'The Stream', presented as "A television show based on a social media community". By integrating the social media into the news production process, The Stream is expected, according to its authors, to transfer the geographic and cultural variety of the internet into a television format. This paper aims to explore how a transnational media like Al Jazeera English uses the convergence between television and social networks to 'give voice' to the changing relations of power and cultural influence between the West and the Rest, particularly through the category of the 'diaspora'. By analyzing some episodes of the program, this paper will look at how in The Stram this term, loaded with historic and cultural meaning in migration studies and media- and postcolonial theory, becomes part of the everyday language of a multi-media community. The article analyzes how the term 'diaspora' is used and transformed within The Stream media environment: as a field for 'social change'; as an element contributing to discussion, democracy, modernization; as a key aspect to elaborate the cultural complexity of contemporary societies.

Keywords: *social media, television, convergence culture, diaspora, middle east, digital media*

> I don't think of myself as an Indian writer anymore because, really,
> I don't live there. In a way, that experience of belonging to the diaspora
> is more interesting than trying to pretend that I am what I'm not.
> (Salman Rushdie, *Conversations with Salman*)

1. Introduction

In May 2011 the satellite news channel Al Jazeera English (AJE) launched 'The Stream': a television show created from a blend of different media formats characterising AJE's coverage of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions a few months earlier. In this programme, the television 'flow' is absorbed into the 'stream' of social media, while at the same time incorporating in the TV format some user-generated contents published on the social media platforms, to shed light on underrepresented topics.[1] This article focuses on some of the elements characterising 'The Stream', and particularly on how it selects and represents a category of guests who are represented as 'the diaspora'.

The intertwining between satellite news and social media is one of the latest evolutions in the rich media environment of the Middle-Eastern and North-African (MENA) region. For AJE, the so-called 'convergence' of different media

[1] I refer to the concept of 'flow' as originally defined by Raymond Williams, *Television* (London: Collins, 1974).

tools and cultures soon became a new variation of its founding narrative of 'giving voice' to a collective subject mostly identified as 'the people', identified as the protagonist in the story told by the channel's coverage of the events of 2011 (such as the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt).[2]

In contrast to Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA), the audience of AJE has never been united by geographic proximity, nor by linguistic commonality. While a part of AJA's audience can be categorised as 'diasporic', corresponding to the first and second generations of Arab immigrants in the West, AJE speaks directly to the second and third generations, as well as to a wider international public. Also in The Stream, the channel aims to give voice to this broad, heterogeneous and sometimes undefined community of viewers, through the mediation of social networks.

In a context where electronic media can offer *resources* and *disciplines* for the construction of new identities and imagined worlds, as already found by Arjun Appadurai almost twenty years ago, it is specifically the interaction among different media tools and local situations that leads to new potential *technoscapes*.[3] In the case of The Stream, the cultural and political landscape of contemporary diasporas is constructed and presented through a multimedia environment, combining social media practices with the codes of satellite television. By drawing on theoretical perspectives derived from the fields of media and diaspora studies, this article tries to describe how these groups are portrayed in an unconventional television show, aired by the first news channel broadcasting in English from the Middle East, and representing on the television screens a multimedia modernity exceeding the West.[4]

The main aim of The Stream, as declared by its creators, is to give value to the geographic and cultural position of its contributors. The problem of the Net as a selective space, in terms of ethnicity and nationality has been raised by many authors since its beginnings and it is still relevant today: despite the number of Internet users in Asia currently being double the number in Europe and more than three times those in North America, the main digital hubs and crossroads remain firmly based in the United States and Europe.[5] In this sense, the way in which AJE combines the use of social media with its satellite broadcasting is presented as a way of modifying consolidated patterns in the configuration of what, following Dodge and Kitchin, we might call a 'cyber-geography.'

Yet, despite the efforts of the channel to select guests and topics from the most remote areas of the world, the social media involved in this operation are not politically or geographically 'neutral'. Against the idea of the Net as an open and de-materialised 'no-topia', the need to reconsider the intersections between the physical and the digital space has been reinforced by the use of smart-phone applications, constantly signalling the position of their users, and by the quasi-monopolies established by a few California-based social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google.[6]

Based on these technological and cultural premises, the selection of the participants of the show and the construction of the 'diaspora' category reflects

[2] "Voice to the voiceless" was one of the first slogans used to promote the channel. The mediated construction of "the people" as the main subject of the revolutions has been investigated by Henri Onodera, in "Raise Your Head High, You're an Egyptian!", *Sociologica*, 3 (2011).

[3] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3, 34.

[4] David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 173-203.

[5] Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, *Atlas of the Cyberspace* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 2001). For recent statistics see http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm, January 2013. For the distribution of the main digital hubs see *chrisharrison.net,* http://www.chrisharrison.net/index.php/Visualizations/InternetMap, September 2012.

[6] Fivos Papadimitriou, "A Geography of Notopia", *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 10.3 (2006); David Morley, *Home Territories,* 173-203; Geert Lovink, "A World beyond Facebook", in Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch, eds., *UnLike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013).

some of the contradictions characterising the channel. The aspiration towards cosmopolitanism collides with nationalist constraints; the advocacy of political and cultural minorities often coexists with the promotion of the host nation's interests; the promotion of a 'counter-hegemonic flow' relies on the dominant position of the main corporate media companies.[7] Still, what emerges, at least in the limited sample of episodes analysed, is an attempt to re-position the diaspora members within the television landscape, by portraying them as fully recognised social actors in a complex modernity, and by displaying their diasporic condition not only in its collective, communal dimension but also in a more individual, 'existential' mode. In this sense, the resulting 'diaspora' on the screen is made of a combination of commonality and singularity; of general, recurring patterns and varieties of conditions depending on geography, politics, history and personal life experiences.

By introducing the language and functionalities of social media online communities into the televisual medium, The Stream tries to constitute a space which is intrinsically 'diasporic', as a mediated common ground for different, specific diasporas. Three main components, namely the online community following the show, diaspora as a 'common condition' of displacement and the specificity of several diasporic communities, are combined in The Stream episodes, with variable outcomes. It is this displaced, transnational or postnational dimension displayed in The Stream that seems to constitute the core of channel's audience, incorporated into the EuroAmerican modernity, and yet at the same time belonging to parallel realities. The geographical space covered by The Stream episodes is defined by not being Western, by being eccentric with relation to dominant centres of media power; still, the new US hegemony in the field of communication, reinforced by means of social media, seems to be taken for granted. This said, without the geographic mobility and the widespread reach of the corporate social media, it would not be possible to include into a television show a variety of individual and collective voices, such as those of the diasporic communities, in the way it is done in The Stream.

2. The Stream: "a social media community with its own daily TV show"[8]

One of the most evident features of The Stream is its drive to mobilize a sense of community, solicited by a continuous dialogue between the presenters and the social media users taking part in these mediated discussions. The first presenter of The Stream, the 'Afropolitan' musician Derek Ashong, used to conclude every episode of the show by saying "thank you for staying with us ... we'll see you online",[9] underlining in this way the central role of the online community in the television show. Although other men and women of different origins succeeded Ashong as presenters, the core concept of the show hasn't changed. As declared by the authors of The Stream, its main objective is to construct a social media

[7] Daya K.Thussu, ed., *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contraflow* (Routledge: London, 2007).

[8] Http://stream.aljazeera.com/about, accessed March 2014.

[9] 'Afropolitan' was a definition found on *Derrickashong.com*, http://derrickashong.com/about-me/, accessed January 2014.

'community' which could directly contribute to the television programme, by broadening the cultural and, most importantly, the geographical variety of the topics covered.

> The site compiles information from around the globe by working with our audience and then the television show is the place where we talk about those stories ... we want to invite and engage people who already have a nuanced understanding of their particular corner of the world (or community) and allow them to drive the narrative.[10]

[10] Robert Hernandez, "In 'The Stream' with Al Jazeera English's social media news show", *The Online Journalism Review,* 3 May 2011, http://www.ojr.org/in-the-stream-with-al-jazeera-englishs-social-media-news-show/.

All the episodes analysed were divided into two parts: the first 20-25 minutes broadcast on television, followed by a 'post-show' of 10-15 minutes that was only visible online. The topics discussed include both stories spread through social media, as well as stories centred on social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Reddit, Linkedin, Pinterest and Storify. The show is aired from Monday to Thursday at 19:30 GMT, in full British prime time, while it is early afternoon in the Washington studio where it is recorded.[11] This choice seems to target primarily a European public, even though there are also three daily replicas, more friendly to other time-zones (14:30, 04:30, 08:30 GMT).

[11] After the opening of Al Jazeera America, in 2013, another parallel version of The Stream has been appositely designed for the US public. Here we will consider only the first, 'international' version of the show.

This article considers twenty episodes of the show, selected from 2011 to 2014. Ten of them cover a wide range of topics, and were selected randomly; the other ten were chosen because of their relation with guests and issues related to 'the diaspora'. First, a few aspects that all of the episodes have in common are considered; a focus on the episodes centred around 'the diaspora' will follow.

2.1 *The 'stream' of social media into the television 'flow'*

In The Stream, some members of the 'online community' appear in a television show, though comments, posts and short video slots, as the specific convergence between the televisual flow and the social media stream is at the core of the programme contents and aesthetics. Most of the visual strategies of the show, in fact, seem to be based on the attempt to select and transform some of the online exchanges into television language. At the same time, as to emphasise a modernization of the classical TV experience, the television show reproduces some of the aspects determining the perceptive and cognitive experience of 'being online'. As one of the producers explains:

> what makes this show different is that it feels like the experience of being on the Web. There is no giant touch-wall, we don't have crazy animations. We are individuals who use the Web like anyone else and the show is a reflection of that experience. It's more true-to-life, I think that's something that has been lacking in television news treatments of social media.[12]

[12] Hernandez, "In The Stream".

In the first episodes, the experience of 'being on the Web' was mainly recreated

through a studio designed as a domestic space, with a mix of dark and warm colours, the use of natural light, and an informal distribution of the guests. After one year of broadcasting, the studio's style was overturn, giving room to light and cold colours, to one big table around which the host, the producer and the guest(s) are sitting, and to a big screen showing the online contributions. The 'being on the Web' effect from that point on has been based on a non-domestic, nakedly-digital setting, where an empty space is dominated by the megapixels on the wall.

Apart from one or two guests in the studio, the participants are usually connected via Skype and Google+, while the other contributions are selected live from Twitter and Facebook by the 'digital producer'. The tone of the conversation is generally relaxed, linguistically controlled and politically correct; far from the informality of most American talk shows but still accessible to a large public. As another producer argues, "...the show has the space to be serious. We're covering important topics and taking the time to air them out".[13] A fair amount of time is indeed dedicated to discussing topics not immediately appealing to an international public, such as the destiny of the Tamil minority in Sri-Lanka, the Oromos in Ethiopia or freedom of speech in Vietnam. These discussions often seem to be even longer, compared to the average of those on television talk shows, if we consider that most of them are mediated by Skype or Google+, with low-fi, amateur aesthetics[14] paradoxically contributing to reinforce the authenticity of the testimonies from 'the community'. This definition, as it is used by the programme's presenters, corresponds to a temporary combination of users of different social media platforms, overlapping around topics of discussion which are eventually generating some written and visual outputs contributing to the television show.

In sense The Stream can be seen as a television show going "beyond the setting of traditional broadcasting", incorporating other media languages as well as other modes of interaction.[15] This new configuration is not too far from what Felix Guattari envisioned in the 1990s as a 'post-media' assemblage: "The digitisation of the television image will soon reach the point where the television screen is at the same time that of the computer and the telematic receiver. Practices that are separated today will find their articulation".[16] More generally, to borrow the terms of Sreberny and Mohammadi, the combination of satellite-TV and social media formalised by The Stream sees the interplay of 'small' versus 'big' media, or, in the words of Lazzarato, the 'centrifugal', pluralistic force of the Net and the 'centripetal', normalising effect of the mass-media, coming together in a digital 'convergence culture'.[17] In this strategic partnership, if the Internet is considered to be the place for the expression of (political and cultural) difference, satellite TV can select, amplify and deliver some of these contents to a much larger audience, by adding the authoritative, established framework characterising 'the old media'.

According to the programme's creators, in The Stream social media enable a series of functions rather than providing a form: "Al Jazeera's New Media team has always been looking for ways in which to use technology and social media to

[13] Hernandez, "In The Stream".

[14] Robrecht Vanderbeeken, "Web Video and the Screen as Mediator and Generator of Reality", in Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers Miles, eds., *Video Vortex Reader II* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2010).

[15] William Boddy, "'Is It TV Yet?' The Dislocated Screens of Television in a Mobile Digital Culture", in James Bennett and Niki Strange, eds., *Television as Digital Culture* (Durham: Duke U. P., 2011).

[16] Félix Guattari, "Towards a Post-Media Era", in Clemens Apprich et al., eds., *Provocative Alloys: A Post-Media Anthology* (Lüneburg, PML Books, 2013), 27.

[17] Annabelle Sreberny and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Maurizio Lazzarato, *La politica dell'evento* (Cosenza: Rubbettino, 2004); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York U. P., 2006).

achieve a function rather than a form. It isn't about the polish but about the product and why you are using this medium and what the real power of these tools are with regards to producing, sharing, or highlighting important information, quickly".[18]

[18] Hernandez, "In The Stream".

Among the different strategies used to give significance to this temporary aggregate of users defined by the presenters as the 'online community', there is that of making its members visible through short videos inserted in some of the episodes. In these brief presentations, the contributors say their name, their job and location, and end with the same sign-off: "... and I am in The Stream". Such presentations appeared in seven out of twenty episodes, and among them there was a documentary film-maker based in India; a blogger from Yemen; a human rights activist from Bahrain; a society administrator from the US; a university professor from the US; a journalist from Nigeria; a Chinese researcher based in the US. While previous data showed that most of the website's users are from North America and Europe,[19] these 'voices' (four men, three women) seem to confirm a wide geographical variety characterising the programme's 'online community'.

[19] Al Jazeera Press Office 2009.

One of the functionalities adopted from social media is the use of quantities such as numbers of likes, shares, and tweets. These numbers shown on every episode's web page provide a measure of the success of the single topics discussed and an indication of how important its online community is to The Stream.[20] One could expect for instance that episodes related to the politics and society of Arabic countries had more success than others, given the success of the network in 2011 as a 'bridge channel' between the MENA region and an international Anglophone public.[21] While this is the case for the episode on the protests in Bahrain (617 likes on Facebook, 405 tweets on Twitter), the same cannot be said for similar subjects, such as the future of post-Gaddafi Libya (376 likes, 72 tweets) or freedom of speech in Saudi Arabia (210 likes, 264 tweets).[22] Among the episodes considered, the most successful online was the one on land neo-colonialism in Africa (1000 likes, 594 tweets), confirming the rooting of the channel in the sub-Saharan region; but the same success is not shared by the story of the legal battle of the Ogoni people in Nigeria against Shell (92 *likes*, 212 *tweets*), despite it fitting ideally into The Stream narrative – 'giving voice' through the social media to the battle of a 'subaltern' community against a powerful Western corporation.[23]

[20] Since the beginnings of 2014, with the new website layout, these numbers are unfortunately not visible anymore.

[21] Viola Sarnelli, "Tunisia, Egypt and the Voices of the Revolution in Al Jazeera English", *Journal of Arab&Muslim Media Research*, 6.2-3 (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013).

[22] "Bahrain: The social media battle continues", accessed 11 August 2011. http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201108112054-0012881, accessed January 2014; "Libya's uncertaintime future", accessed 23 August 2011; http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/libyas-uncertain-future, accessed 22 February 2012; "Saudi journalist faces trial over tweets", http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/saudi-journalist-faces-trial-over-tweets-0022055, accessed March 2013.

[23] "Are foreign investors colonising Africa?" (25 October 2011), http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/are-foreign-investors-colonising-africa-0021551, accessed February 2012; "The Ogoni vs oil giant Shell", 8 March 2012, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/ogoni-vs-oil-giant-shell-0022089, accessed February 2013.

[24] In January 2014, searching for the term "diaspora" in the official web page of The Stream, yielded 19 episodes related to the term. Among them, I selected 8 in which the "diaspora" assumed a central role in the debate, and to these I added another two episodes not resulting from this search but still thematically connected with it.

3. The 'Diaspora' in the Media Stream of Al Jazeera English

In the study I carried out on The Stream, ten out of twenty episodes were selected because of their connection with the 'diaspora'.[24] This choice was motivated by noticing how this category was presented as one of the keywords capable of mobilising a large part of the 'community' of viewers the channels is addressing, both online and through the satellite feed. This community is 'imagined' as in the classical definition of Benedict Anderson; but contrarily to his definition does not

share the belonging to the same national dimension.[25] While the bonds connecting the viewers of a channel like Al Jazeera English are generally quite loose and unstable, compared to the ones uniting the audiences of national channels, the 'diasporic' category allows the television show to capitalise on a wide trans-national network of already well-established cultural, political and historical bonds. These 'diasporic networks', capable of supporting and redirecting flows of people, money, information from each of the motherlands to the new places of residence, are mobilised across the episodes through the use of the social media platforms. In this way, 'diasporic communities' become a part of the discussions promoted by The Stream, and a substantial component of the 'online community' following and fuelling the show. In fact, in the episodes selected, a familiar, informal use of the term 'diaspora' can be noticed, raising the question of how it is used to indicate or represent a particularly meaningful category for its audience. One result seems to be the normalisation of a traditionally 'problematic' category (questioning the unity of the host country, of the motherland, of the national public), now legitimised by its mediated appearance and interaction with other social actors.

As Rogers Brubaker argued, the term 'diaspora' in recent years experienced a dispersion of meanings and uses, not only in academic writing.[26] What is included, then, in the contemporary meaning of the 'diaspora', as it appears in the media and in many collective self-representations?[27] Some emigrant groups, defined by Benedict Anderson as 'long-distance nationalists', have been presented as diasporas because of their involvement in homeland politics; in other cases, the term also includes labour migrants maintaining emotional and social ties with their homeland.[28] Even linguistic or religious communities have been conceptualised as 'diaspora', as Tölölyan noticed long ago.[29] The risk, according to Brubaker, would be that "If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so".[30] Still, this lack of specificity of the term, or better its 'dispersion', also allowed for its use as a key category to conceptualise our 'postnational world', as Appadurai wrote, in which "diaspora is the order of things and settled ways of life are increasingly hard to find".[31]

In order to discriminate in this large semantic field, Brubaker suggests three core elements as constitutive of the diaspora. The first is dispersion in space; the second, orientation to a 'homeland'; and the third, 'boundary-maintenance', "involving the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society".[32] This last definition, however, depends on how identity itself is intended: as determined by cultural traditions, or as an unpredictable, on-going process. In the second case, following the well-known formulation by Stuart Hall, "The diaspora experience ... is defined, not by essence or purity...; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.[33] This powerful vision of the diasporic subject, combined with a poststructuralist and postcolonial perspective, as Syrine Hout argued, "complicate

[25] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983).

[26] Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora", *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 28.1 (January 2005), 1.

[27] Ibid., 4.

[28] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, South-East Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998); Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[29] Khachig Tölölyan, "The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface", *Diaspora* , 1.1 (Spring 1991), 4.

[30] Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora", 3.

[31] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 171-172.

[32] Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora", 5-6.

[33] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 235.

[34] Syrine Hout, "The Last Migration", in Layla Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 147.

[35] Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy, "Thinking Experiences: Transnational Media and Migrant's Minds", in James Curran and David Morley, eds., *Media and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 86-87.

[36] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

[37] Robins and Aksoy, "Thinking Experiences", 87-89.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

notions of nation, location, and identity in an age of globalization".[34]

Also in the field of communication, from the 1990s onwards, the category of 'diasporic media' has been used to indicate how new media technologies help to transcend the distances separating diasporic communities from their 'communities of origin'.[35] In their study on Turkish immigrants in London, Kevin Robins and Aku Aksoy argued for the need to go beyond concerns over 'bonding' and 'belonging', considering individuals more than their 'imagined communities'.[36] By focusing on "how they think, rather than how they belong", they criticise the idea of the 'diasporic community' itself and the media consumption related to this collective, elusive subject.[37] In their study, transposing the television 'use and gratification' theories from a national to a transnational context, a disconnection emerges between the personal and social dimension of TV viewing. If, as they wrote, "Television makes a difference because it is in its nature – in the nature of television as a medium – to bring things closer to its viewers", for the transnational audience this closeness is frustrated by the impossibility to interact with the world on the screen, creating a double displacement, from the homeland and from the place of residence.[38]

Seen in this light, a channel like AJE goes beyond the idea of 'diasporic media' because of its hybrid, multicultural identity, not connected to any specific community of viewers. For channels like AJE and similar others, created to address an international public united only by the knowledge of a 'lingua franca', in a perpetual 'hetero-lingual address', the displacement is a starting point, and the challenge is instead to promote new cross-category bonds.[39] Among the variety of online and offline communities constituting the channel's audience (with contrasting education and economic level in different areas of the world), the 'diasporic communities' seem to hold a key position, because they reflect some of the main features of the channel: interculturalism, hybridity, transnationalism. Far from the material conditions related to the diasporic movements in the past and in the present, that of The Stream's participants appears more as part of a post-diasporic scenario, where diasporas and migrations are treated as a given fact, as a part of our modernity. More than connecting 'diasporas' and 'homelands', The Stream promotes exchanges between individuals that are part of different, overlapping communities (online, geographic, ethnic, religious, etc.). In this sense, to borrow Robins and Aksoy's expression, the 'thinking' of the public – as a temporary aggregate of individuals, and more specifically of social media users – has already been integrated in the structure of The Stream.

4. The 'diaspora' episodes and voices

In the episodes considered, participants identified as belonging to a variety of 'diasporas' mainly took part in three different ways: to denounce and criticise the policies of the homeland; to contribute to discussions related to the homeland,

along with other local and international observers; or to promote 'social change' and better living conditions in the homeland, and to develop a more transcultural society.

As television guests, the 'diaspora members' are usually defined by the collective dimension of the ('imagined' or concrete) communities they belong to. As such, they take part in the formation of alternative 'diasporic public spheres' and they are invited to perform their role as a 'counterpublic', often within the framework of the host-country political discourse, as in the case of The Stream.[40] At the same time, in the show an emphasis is also placed on the individual dimension of the 'diaspora' guests, and to their personal contribution. As Myria Georgiou and Roger Silverstone suggested, "Diasporic identities are not others to the mainstream. They are not *contra*. These identities are essentially plural".[41] As such, their belonging to one community is non-exclusive, as it is their potential participation in multiple public spheres in their daily lives, speaking for the 'community' but also for themselves. What follows is a short account of the role played in The Stream by multiple diaspora communities, corresponding to multiple homelands, given the transnational reach of AJE. This richness of cultural and geographical variety is often emphasised by the channel as one of its trademark, exhibited as a significant difference with other established English news channels, which are culturally and geographically centred in the West.

4.1 *Diaspora as a counter-voice against the 'homeland' policies*

An essential role is played by 'the diaspora' within The Stream's 'community' when discussing critical issues related to the homeland, e.g. the lack of civil or political rights for a minority or the whole population. The discussion usually takes place between someone still living in the country (typically a state with an authoritarian government) and some part of its 'diaspora', mostly political refugees living in the West, denouncing these abuses in front of an international audience.

Such condemnations can also point to violence committed long ago that is still affecting the present. In "Sochi's indigenous on the sideline", the episode is centred on the 'NoSochi2014' campaign, launched to raise awareness about the mass killing and expulsion of the Circassians by Russian forces in the Nineteenth century, on the same land that in February 2014 hosted the Winter Olympics.[42] To debate the question "Should history be revisited or is it time to move on?", four guests are invited: the co-founder of the campaign; a Circassian journalist of Voice of America; an American professor of Russian Studies; the director of the Russian Institute for Democracy and Cooperation. In a heated debate where 'Circassian' and Russian perspectives are opposing each other, it is particularly the young and attractive American-Circassian Tamara Barsik, the co-founder of 'NoSochi2014', who is vocal in claiming justice for her people:

[40]Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, cit. in Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88.4 (November 2002).

[41] Myria Georgiou and Roger Silverstone, "Diasporas and Contra-flows beyond Nation-centrism", in Daya K Thussu, ed., *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow* (London: Routledge, 2007), 44.

[42] 'The Stream' 5 February 2014, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201402050032-0023446, accessed February 2014.

> Nine out of ten Circassians live in diaspora today ... In 1864, our life changed forever.... This idea of genocide has never stopped ... because when I get on the phone with my family in Syria and they're telling me about ten Circassian villages being decimated, about two members of my family being killed, I think myself 'seems like the genocide is still happening'. And I'll tell you why: because of Russian policy towards Syria and Russian policy towards our people living in diaspora: we have no rights to return to our nation, especially in times of crisis... Our question to the world is, what's going to happen to the Circassian people...?

In other cases, like in the "Crackdown on Vietnam's voices" episode, the debate specifically investigates the possible role of the Vietnamese diaspora in international disputes over civil rights.[43] The week before this episode, several activists, bloggers and journalists were sentenced to prison in Vietnam for attempted subversion. To debate freedom of speech in Vietnam the former director of the Vietnamese Service at Radio Free Asia, a station founded by the USA, and the chairman of Viet Tan, a US-based Vietnamese political organisation, are invited. However, the main points are actually made in the video-messages from adolescents of Vietnamese origin. One boy brings up a personal topic: his father, an activist and American citizen, is currently detained in Vietnam. "His trial is coming up in one week, and my question is, if he has to receive a very long sentence, for something that is considered a natural right in most countries, how will the international community, and especially the American government react?". Another open question comes from Don and Vivien, Australia: "What can youth outside Vietnam do to support their cause?". This interplay between the inside and the outside of the motherland seems to be one of the key features of the 'diasporic' episodes in The Stream, where the television show offers an artificial common ground mediating between the two levels.

Also in the episode "Oromos seek justice in Ethiopia", Oromian diasporic subjects denounce the political oppression and economic marginalisation of the Oromos in the homeland, in the hope that the Ethiopian government will finally change its policies towards the larger minority in the country.[44] While the main guests are an Oromo rights advocate from Ethiopia, a representative of the Oromo Liberation Front based in the US, and an Oromo journalist based in New York, the definition of the role and mission of the diaspora careful again about using this term in a too generic way comes again from a girl's video: "Living in a country like Australia as a young Oromo I think it's important that we continue to rise awareness about the plight that our people face, I mean we have the opportunity ... to identify as Oromo without being persecuted, and that really challenges an entire system".

Similarly, in the episode "Does Eritrea have a dictator?", the debate is centered on the oppressive government led by Isaias Afewerki. From Asmara, the voice of Rahel Weldehab, from the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, fills the studio.[45] She patiently rejects all the accusations of Mussie Zenai, from the

[43] 'The Stream' 16 January 2013, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201301160009-0022483, accessed January 2014.

[44] 'The Stream' 25 June 2013, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201306250132-0022854, accessed January 2014. These government policies were documented also in a United Nation Report on Ethiopia (2009), http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session6/ET/A_HRC_WG6_6_ETH_3_E.pdf, accessed February 2014.

[45] 'The Stream' 3 August 2011, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201108032051-0011925, accessed January 2014.

association of Eritrean refugees in Indiana, US, about the conditions of the youth in Eritrea – forced into endless military service and unable to find other jobs, resulting in desperate mass migrations through the desert. Although the tone is highly confrontational, the 'diaspora' spokesperson is recognised by a government representative: as Zenai insists in the beginning, "I would like to thank the government regime for being willing, for the first time in history, to talk with the opposition".

4.2 *'Diasporas' members as participants in the debate on the 'homeland'*

In contrast to the cases above, the issues in the following episodes are not new for most of the international audience of the channel, which can thus contribute more actively.[46] These concern unsolved complex political matters, lacking a unique counterpart opposing 'the diaspora': refugees or immigrants discuss with journalists, scholars and residents in other countries about the origin and scale of the problem, its various aspects and possible solutions.

The episode "Turkey confronts Kurdish separatists", comes after a discourse held by Turkish prime minister Erdogan in the home region of the Kurdish minority, urging unity against 'terrorism'.[47] The episode becomes an occasion to discuss the long-denied political rights of the Kurds as well as the Turkish policies towards 'terrorism' in general, particularly confronting Erdogan's attitude in foreign politics. As one of the tweets from the public claims, "Erdogan recognises rights for Palestinians – pity he doesn't respect rights of Kurds in his own country". While the real 'opponent' for the Kurdish diaspora would be the Turkish government, in this case, to represent somehow the Turkish nation, there is a balanced, sensible Turkish intellectual. Thus, the discussion takes the shape of an open debate about the present and past of Kurdish cultural identity in Turkey. As Kani Xulam, from the American Kurdish Information Network, underlines, "we don't want to be Turks, we want to remain Kurds. We need a policy of tolerance… The struggle is to be equal".

In the episode on the conditions of Palestinian refugees in Arab states ("Discrimination in the diaspora") the focus is also about the lack of civil rights, suffered by the Palestinians not only in their motherland but also in the supposedly friendly neighbour countries.[48] Although many Arab governments refuse citizenship to the Palestinians living in their countries claiming that this would go against their 'right of return', a tweet from the 'community' states: "I hold Jordanian passport but I am a Palestinian…. I didn't lose identity when I gained passport". To testify to the denial of simple rights like travel documents there is the Palestinian blogger Laila ElHaddad, living in the US. "My husband and I often joke that we have the most difficulties to travel as a family in the Middle East … they see Palestinian refugee, Palestinian documents, and they reject your visa". Another tweet asks: "is it fair to say that the plight of Palestinians in Arab countries is the

[46] According to AJE's official figures, the channel reaches more than 260 million households in more than 130 countries. "Facts and Figures", http://www.aljazeera.com/iwantaje/2010321821108 72987.html, accessed January 2014.

[47] 'The Stream' 19 September 2011, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201109191922-0 016796, accessed January 2014.

[48] 'The Stream' 19 April 2012, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201204191929-0 022181, accessed February 2014.

defining failure of pan-Arabism?".

In "Somalia's global diaspora", the episode is specifically dedicated to determining the political and economic weight of the Somalian diaspora on the homeland.[49] After two decades of civil war, drought and famine, an estimated one million Somalis currently live in Europe, the US and the Middle East and, according to a tweet from the 'community', "diaspora remittances were more effective than aid agencies". To discuss the issue there are two Somali women, Sadia Ali Aden, co-founder of the US-based Adar Foundation, and the journalist Idil Osman from the UK. Apart from the homeland, there are also matters concerning the Somalian diasporic community itself: Osman mentions the widespread identity crisis in the Somali diaspora youth, living between two different worlds, pushed by extremist organisations to choose only 'one side'.

[49] 'The Stream' 24 January 2012, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201201242032-0022000, accessed January 2014.

> This is probably something that the diaspora committee can take an active lead role in, in terms of generating this … awareness among the youth that they can be Muslim, and Somali, and Western at the same time; the fact that they are a new culture, a new generation that is coming up, that has sprung about from … the civil war basically.

4.3 'Diaspora' as a promise of social change

Finally, in some of The Stream episodes, the 'diaspora' members also assumes a central role in discussing new possibilities for 'social change'. As in the discourse of the Somalian journalist, the 'change' mainly concerns the younger diasporic or post-diasporic generations that are expected to reinvent their identities and cultures in new, hybrid, conciliatory ways.[50] If the previous episodes portrayed the 'diasporic guests' in a way closer to what Castells defined as a 'resistance' identity building model, associated to the communal defensive reaction to a condition of minority, in these case is the full realisation of the subject and his/her 'project identity' to be connected to the transformative change potentially affecting the rest of society.[51] This allows not only political issues but also more nuanced questions related to diasporic identity, belonging and culture to be included in the debate.

[50] Mohamed El Nawawy and Shawn Powers, *Mediating Conflict: Al Jazeera English and the Possibility of a Conciliatory Media* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2008).

[51] Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Chirchester: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 7-9.

The historical premise for the episode "Will youth lead the way in Bosnia?"[52] is that twenty years after the Bosnian war, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks in the country are still deeply divided. The participants in the debate are all young representatives of NGOs, three based in Bosnia and one in the U.S.A., trying to answer the key question posed by the host: "Is there a generational difference in how people think about ethnicity?". A video comment from a girl originally from Srebrenica and now resident in the U.S. answers affirmatively: "We must … root out this divisive behaviour from our future generations, so that we can end the perpetual circle of segregation and hatred".

[52] 'The Stream' 3 April 2012, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201204031951-0022151, accessed February 2014.

Many guests also express their faith in technology as a driver of social and economic renovation, as clearly illustrated in "Africa's tech challenge".[53] The

[53] The Stream 8 November 2012, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201211080137-0022392, accessed January 2014.

episode explores the concrete roots of the hype on tech start-ups in Africa, and its relation with real opportunities. As a tweet notices, "Africans have got the innovations and skills but the capacity to sustain world scale tech projects is still lacking". To discuss this concepts the founder of a communication company in Tanzania and a new media strategist from Nairobi are connected via Skype, but the main guest, sitting in the studio, is Teddy TMS Ruge, an expert in new technologies originally from Uganda and now residing in the US and Canada, who in 2011 awarded the title 'White House Champion of Change'.[54] In the episode he appears as the co-founder of "Project Diaspora": "an online platform for mobilising, engaging and motivating members of Africa Diaspora in matters important to the continent's development".[55] Although it went offline shortly after the episode, the project still remains the best example of how, in The Stream narrative, diaspora – as a social, cultural, symbolic category mediated by the channel – is incorporated in the 'social change' passing through technology.

The 'social change' discourse can also pass through the possibility of using, reclaiming and creatively reinterpreting traditional cultures in the diaspora, as in the episode "When traditions become trends".[56] Here, the discussion starts from the case of the Urban Outfitters brand selling a dress identical to a traditional Ethiopian and Eritrean one, without mentioning its origin. As explained by Lolla Mohammed Nur, the Ethiopian-American girl who started a petition online against the firm, "This dress is something that you wear on significant occasions, it does have a lot of meaning... and so to see it on an Urban Outfitters model, without any culturally appropriate labelling... I just found it to be very disrespectful". A positive example, presented by its founder Mac Bishop, is Nativex.net, where pieces of 'authentic Native American design' are sold, crediting the originators. The point, as the New York based Sikh musician and writer Sonny Singh argues:

> it's not about being cultural nationalistic or something like that.... I am a musician myself, I play music that is a blend of lots of different styles, I'm drawing a lot of music from South Asia but also a lot from other states, but ... when we live in a society that is a capitalist society, where white supremacy pervades all of our institutions and our interactions everyday, sharing becomes a little bit more complicated.

5. Conclusions

This article explored how a transnational media like Al Jazeera English uses the convergence between television and social networks to bring together different geographical areas and topics, particularly through the category of the 'diaspora' guests in a show called The Stream. In the episodes considered, a variety of 'diasporic communities' was represented by several kinds of guests taking part in discussions related to their homelands, either to criticise, contribute along with other voices, or to encourage 'social change' and cultural appropriation.

[54] *Tmsruge.com,* http://tmsruge.com/who-me/, accessed February 2014.

[55] *Tmsruge.com,* http://tmsruge.com/project-diaspora-going-offline/, accessed February 2014.

[56] The Stream 2 April 2013, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201304020053-0022650, accessed January 2014.

In The Stream, as a result of the combination between a television format and some functionalities of the social media, the 'online community', as often referred to by the presenters, converges with the category of the 'diaspora' in creating a space where singular diasporic experiences can be made visible. Trying to counter the hegemony of US and European voices in transnational communications, the show contributes to the creation of a mediated 'diasporic' space – between television and online networks, beyond the space of the nation and the US-Euro dominated world. At the same time, this space also shows its limits and tensions. Looking at these episodes, it can be noticed that almost all the 'diaspora' guests and political refugees appearing in the show are based in the US. This could be partially explained by the fact that the program is recorded in Washington DC, making it easier to have guests living in the US, and that the format of Al Jazeera English favours English speakers. Another reason might be the fact that, despite the geographic variety of the channel's audience, its online following is for a big part located in the US.[57] Still, for a programme emphasising the geographic and cultural variety of topics and 'voices', this homogeneity might be problematic – even more so if we consider that another edition of The Stream aired by Al Jazeera America since 2014 is already totally US-centered. The pervading presence of US foreign policy is openly discussed only on a few occasions, like in the episode on "Parazit – Voice of America or voice of the people?", a programme for the Iranian public written by two Iranian authors, but broadcast and paid for by the US government.[58]

In general, the representation of the 'diaspora' in the show seems to contribute to the normalisation of a supposed 'contra-' category, fully legitimised as one of the multiple social and even political actors taking part in international debate. The price to pay for this role, though, is the pressure deriving from belonging (or opposing) to one nation-state, bringing the debate back into an inter-national framework more than into a cosmopolitan or post-national one. As Georgiou and Silverstone suggested:

> The diasporic condition unravels some of the key characteristics of cosmopolitanism, but it does so from a distinct position which might be *beyond* nation-centrism but not *outside* the national. Diasporas do not exist outside the authority of nation-states. ... The complexity of the diasporic condition is often reflected in communication practices that are diverse, contradictory and unstable.[59]

Which 'diaspora', then, is displayed in The Stream? One made of complex subjectivities resulting from international migrations or temporary re-localisations, following flows of people, goods, cultural models still mainly confronted by Western formats and political frameworks, more than among different extra-Western areas.[60] It could be argued that a channel like AJE operates in what is left by the historical diasporas of the last centuries, and deals with a higher-profile of

[57] Al Jazeera English, "Facts and Figures": "Approximately 50 percent of the Al Jazeera English website traffic comes from the United States and Canada". http://www.aljazeera.com/iwantaje/2010321821108 72987.html, accessed January 2014.

[58] 'The Stream' 17 November 2011, http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201111171940-0 021872, accessed March 2012.

[59] Georgiou and Silverstone, "Diasporas and Contra-flows beyond Nation-centrism", 46.

[60] Herbert Schiller, "Not yet the Post-imperialist Era", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 8 (1991).

diasporic, or rather 'post-diasporic', cosmopolitan individuals. Even though 'mass-diasporas' of migrant workers and political refugees are certainly still part of the present, the members of The Stream's diasporas are mostly NGOs members, activists, journalists, writers and designers, taking seriously the task of "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew".[61] If, as Georgiou and Silverstone wrote, "Diasporas are cosmopolitans of a different kind to the high-flying, jet-setting cosmopolitans in control of global capitalism",[62] it is difficult to state to which one of these two categories The Stream community belongs. Perhaps to a third one, at the crossroads between social media marketing, civil rights activism and cultural complexity: a 'diasporic space' within which different conditions of displacement can be combined, to create short-term, multimedia narratives.

[61] Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", 235.

[62] Myria Georgiou and Roger Silverstone, "Diasporas and Contra-flows beyond Nation-centrism", 45.