

Empirical support for the Al-Jazeera Effect notion: Al-Jazeera's Twitter following

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Abstract

Globalization scholars argue that the launch of Al-Jazeera has promoted a fairer horizontal news flow as a non-Western perspective entered the global public sphere leading to the Al-Jazeera Effect. In contrast, other scholars argue that Al-Jazeera outlets face biases and boycotts due to their Qatari origin, thus casting a shadow over the Al Jazeera Effect argument. This study employs an innovative approach to contribute to this debate by examining Al-Jazeera English (AJE) and AJ+'s Twitter following amongst four epistemic communities: ambassadors, foreign ministries, UN missions and journalists. The analysis found that AJE was consistently amongst the top five most followed new channels on Twitter, obtaining greater popularity than major Western news outlets such as Fox News and Sky News. This lends a unique empirical support for the Al-Jazeera Effect hypothesis. AJ+ was found to be less popular, possibly due to its distinct nature as an online news platform.

Keywords

Al-Jazeera, ambassadors, Qatar, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, cultural imperialism

One of the main debates in international communications studies during the last two decades surrounds the 'Al-Jazeera Effect' argument (Miladi, 2020; Samuel-Azran and Pecht, 2014; Seib, 2008; Zednik, 2002). Scholarship on this issue refers to both the

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Qatari-based networks' perceived effect of democratizing the Middle East (Abdelmoula, 2015) and, from a wider global perspective, to Al-Jazeera's perceived ability to challenge the long-held hegemony of Western news providers such as CNN or BBC News thus flattening international news flow (Palloshi, 2015; Samuel-Azran, 2009; Samuel-Azran, 2017; Seib, 2008; Volkmer, 2003). Our study focuses on the latter argument, examining the extent to which Al-Jazeera is consumed by global news consumers as compared to leading Western-based global news stations. The analysis aims to make a unique and significant contribution to current literature by empirically analyzing which global epistemic communities (Haas, 2007) follow Al-Jazeera regularly as part of their news consumption. Specifically, we focus on four epistemic communities: Ambassadors who use Twitter, Foreign Ministries, the United Nations (UN) in New York and Geneva and journalists from across the world.

The choice to focus on epistemic communities, defined as communities of people who are characterized by high knowledge (Haas, 2007), stems from the fact that these communities usually play a key role in framing events for decision-makers or the public (Ibid.). Thus, analyzing whether these communities follow Al-Jazeera is highly indicative of the Al-Jazeera's global centrality. Specifically, we chose to analyze four epistemic communities: Ambassadors, foreign ministries members, UN missions' members (all fall under the category of diplomatic institutions) and journalists to better understand the role of Al-Jazeera in their media diet. These demographics are required to understand and analyze events from an international perspective as part of their job, and thus, their news repertoires usually comprise of various international sources to gain a supranational perspective of events (Volkmer, 2003). By examining the media diet of these demographics, our study aims to illuminate whether Al-Jazeera's mission statement of providing the Middle-Eastern voice to the chorus of decision-makers that shape global perceptions (Al-Jazeera Media Network, 2021) is taking place on the ground or, alternatively, whether the Al-Jazeera effect argument is a myth.

Importantly, beyond the contribution to the Al-Jazeera Effect argument, the analysis is also relevant to the wider international news debate regarding the extent of the so-called 'contra-flow in global media'. The debate centers on the existence and level of information flows from the 'non-West' to global audience, a flow which counters the traditional hegemony of Western media. While former analyses examine whether Bollywood counters the hegemony of Hollywood within the world of entertainment, and whether telenovelas challenge the hegemony of Western television shows (Thussu, 2018), our analysis will contribute to the specific debate regarding the existence of significant news flow from the non-West to global audience, namely 'contra-flow in global news' (Thussu, 2006).

The question that soon comes to the fore, is how can one measure the 'Al Jazeera Effect'? Although Al-Jazeera itself sometimes releases data about its viewers' demographics via its public relations agencies, there is a lack of independent empirical analyses that examines Al-Jazeera's clout in comparison to the leading Western-based international news stations. We believe that such analysis is at the core of understanding the actuality and validity of the Al-Jazeera Effect argument. Accordingly, the nature of this study is that of an exploratory case study, examining a phenomenon that currently lacks empirical analyses.

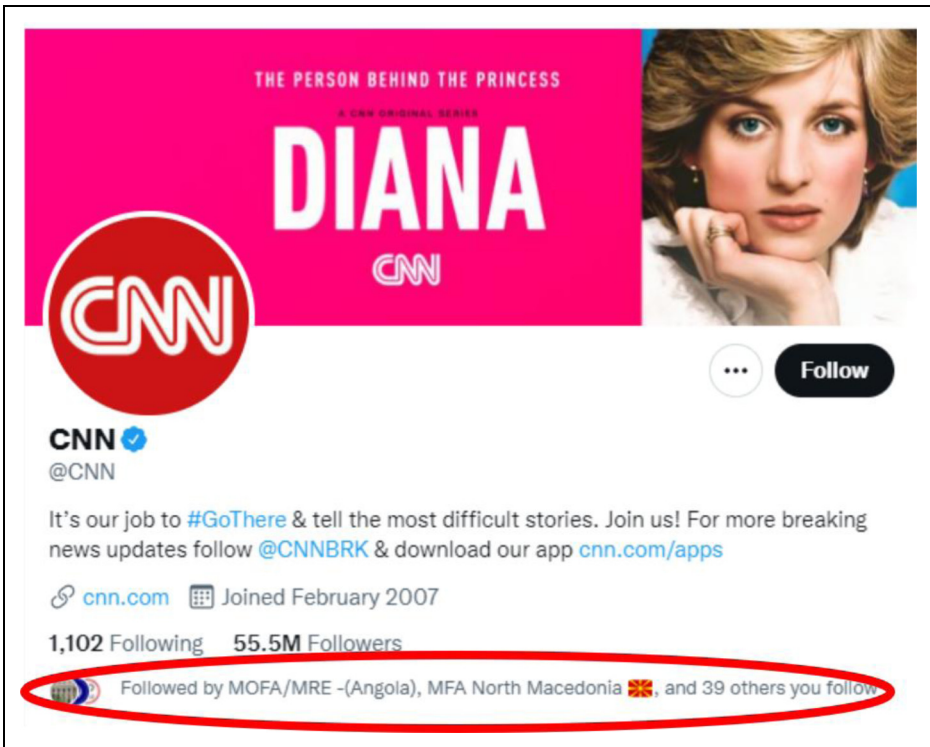


Figure 1. Number of MFA that follow CNN on Twitter.

In our analysis, we compared Al-Jazeera's Twitter followers (i.e., Ambassadors, Foreign Ministries, UN missions and journalists) with those of established Western-based international news networks, including CNN, BBC World News, Reuters, Bloomberg, AFP, Fox News, Sky News, Deutsche Welle and EuroNews, as well as Russia Today and the Sputnik news service (see Figure 1). The analysis focused on the Twitter following of Al-Jazeera's English outlets, Al-Jazeera English (AJE) and AJ+ (Al-Jazeera's online news channel available through a website, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) amongst the four epistemic communities. The study focused on English accounts since English is widely considered as the contemporary lingua Franca.

In line with of all of the above, and the nature of the study as an exploratory case study with little background studies to base our hypotheses on, our research questions are:

RQ1: Does AJE Twitter following amongst ambassadors, foreign ministries, UN missions and journalists support the Al-Jazeera Effect hypothesis?

RQ2: Does AJ+ Twitter following amongst ambassadors, foreign ministries, UN missions and journalists support the Al-Jazeera Effect hypothesis?

International news flows: From ‘Western imperialism’ to the ‘Al-Jazeera Effect’

Since the late 1960’s, the international communication discourse focused on the so-called unilateral media flow from ‘the West’ to the ‘non-West’ through the theories of ‘cultural imperialism’ (Schiller, 1969) and ‘media imperialism’ (Boyd-Barrett, 1977). According to Boyd-Barrett (1977), Western and most notably US-based trans-national channels export so much content to the non-West that they affect the production of local media organizations in non-Western countries and also dictate their local news agenda. The pessimistic cultural/media imperialism notion was challenged in the 1980s with the birth of CNN. CNN’s global broadcasting of the 1990s humanitarian interventions in Africa and Eastern Europe as well as the coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, led to the CNN Effect notion, arguing that international news channels have the ability to promote a transnational perspective of global events to a ‘global audience’ (Gilboa, 2005). Scholars operating within this prism (such as Held et al., 1999) saw that CNN, along with the BBC World Service, EuroNews, Star News and Sky News led to a new form of framing of global events beyond the nationalistic viewpoint, thus contributing to a newly formed ‘global consciousness’ with a supranational perspective (e.g., Volkmer, 2003).

However, critics note that the aforementioned international stations originate in, and operate from Western countries. Thus, scholars have asserted that the emergent global news realm is merely a reincarnation of a Western and US dominated media imperialism (Boyd-Barrett and Mirrlees, 2019; Sparks 2007; Thussu, 2000). These scholars assert that Western-based global news stations create new ways for the West to legitimize and force its values and perspective on a global scale and shape the hearts and minds of viewers worldwide (Thussu, 2018).

This line of argument was challenged with the advent of the Al-Jazeera network. The Al-Jazeera news network was born in 1996 with the sponsorship of the Qatari Emir, and soon became a regional household name thanks to the networks’ bold criticism of Arab leaders (Samuel-Azran and Hayat, 2020). In the wake of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq following the 9/11 attacks, Al-Jazeera grew from a regional to a global household name thanks to exclusive access of Al-Jazeera Arabic channel to battle zones. Notably, Al-Jazeera’s images and logo frequently appeared on Western news stations. Indeed, in a 2003 survey conducted by a leading branding agency Al-Jazeera was selected as the fifth most influential brand in the world (The Guardian, 2005). In scholarly terms, AJ’s launch was described as an attempt to provide a counter-hegemonic contra-flow (Samuel-Azran, 2009; Thussu, 2016), a voice from the periphery that will counter the traditional one-way flow of information from Western-based international news networks (Thussu, 2018; Wojcieszak, 2007). The possible effect of contributing towards a more horizontal global news flow and a genuine and inclusive global public sphere (Volkmer, 2003) was termed the ‘Al-Jazeera Effect’ (Seib, 2008; Zingarelli, 2010), a controversial argument that we review next in more detail.

The Al-Jazeera Effect

The Al-Jazeera Effect hypothesis centers on the emergence of a non-Western perspective at the heart of the global news ecology; a perspective that reduces the hegemony of

Western voices, limits Western ability to dictate the global news agenda and contributes to a new and more genuine cross-cultural news exchange (Samuel-Azran, 2010; Seib, 2008; Volkmer, 2003). Volkmer (2003) argued that at times, Al-Jazeera's presence on the ground and the wide distribution of its images across various channels worldwide, forced Western news stations, and particularly US stations, to include perspectives from the Middle East in their reports. Similar arguments were made by Jaspersen and El-Kikhia (2003), suggesting that Al-Jazeera introduced a new global perspective which included the Arab framing of events on international and national news channels during the war in Afghanistan, a perspective which was not evident in former conflicts. The Al-Jazeera Effect and its possible positive consequences on viewers' psyche were corroborated in a study which analyzed AJE's viewership (El-Nawawy and Powers, 2010). The study found that the more viewers watched the AJE channel, the less dogmatic they became as they started thinking about global events from an inclusive, transnational perspective.

However, the Al-Jazeera Effect was criticized by some as being inflated. For example, Azran's (2004) analysis of the representation and re-presentation of Al-Jazeera's images on US news channels found that editors persistently manipulated Al-Jazeera's images to fit the US national agenda. He notes that during the war in Afghanistan, American networks constantly self-censored images of wounded Afghani children and only showed images of the rubble after the fact, thus minimizing a potential debate about atrocities committed by the US army. In a similar manner, Youmans' (2017) book describes in detail how the US administration as well as civil organizations across a decade and a half persistently thwarted Al-Jazeera's attempts to become a global household name.

In any case, Al-Jazeera's ambition to become a global brand motivated it to launch an English outlet in 2003, the Al-Jazeera English news website, with the aim of reaching international audiences in a non-mediated way. The Al-Jazeera English website provided international audiences with direct access to news regarding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as raising issues from the developing world and introducing a non-Western perspective (Azran, 2006; Figenschou, 2010). Next, in November 2006, the Al-Jazeera Media Network launched an English television news channel – Al-Jazeera English – with a reported billion-dollar investment (Rushing, 2007). The channel recruited leading reporters and opened bureaus worldwide to compete with the main Western news channels. Al-Jazeera's ambition to become a global household name with a strong presence in the US progressed in 2013, as Al Jazeera launched a sister channel for Al Jazeera English named Al-Jazeera America, focusing on stories from the United States. The last major expansion took place in 2014 as the Al-Jazeera network expanded its online presence with Al Jazeera +, an online news and current events channel. The channels' stories are available on its website, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, with the aim of reaching younger and wider audiences than television services. AJ+ sometimes features stories from AJE but normally presents shorter segments that better fit social media platforms.

Similar to the alleged bias against Al-Jazeera Arabic's reports, studies have found that Al-Jazeera English outlets also faced fierce resistance from various bodies, trying to thwart the networks' attempts to gain global credibility (Samuel-Azran, 2016; Youmans, 2017). Studies have documented how satellite and cable providers refused to carry the Al-Jazeera

English channel due to its perceived political and religious impartiality (Youmans, 2017). Studies also found that US and Canadian satellite and cable news providers persistently blocked Al-Jazeera English due to pressure from Republican viewers (Samuel-Azran, 2017). Accordingly, in its first few years of operation, AJE was unable to secure a major North American host platform and was entangled in struggles against various conservative organizations that called to ban the channel. Indeed, the opposition to the Al-Jazeera English outlet is best exemplified in the closure of Al-Jazeera America, Al Jazeera's US-oriented channel. The channel was shuttered in 2016, three years after its launch, following conservative groups' campaigns which sought to delegitimize the channel, and apathy from the US audiences with only 32,000 viewers on average during primetime (Samuel-Azran and Hayat, 2017). Naturally, these actions cast a long shadow over the whole Al-Jazeera Effect argument and global audiences' willingness to welcome a non-Western, specifically Arab, news channel as a credible international news source. Furthermore, like other Al-Jazeera platforms, AJ+ also came under criticism as late as September 2020 when the Trump administration accused it of being an arm of the Qatari government and threatened sanctions against the channel. The next section examines the validity of these arguments.

Al-Jazeera: A voice for the voiceless or a voice for Qatar?

Since Al-Jazeera's 1996 launch, various voices blamed the channel for serving as a vehicle to promote Qatar's interests under the guise of a legitimate news network (El-Ibiary, 2011). The channel was indeed born thanks to a loan by the Qatari Emir with a declared aim to move from a public-sponsored channel, inspired by the BBC, to a private channel inspired by the CNN model. However, this transformation never took place and the Qatari government still invests billions of dollars in the annual operation of the Al-Jazeera channels. Thus, one of the main persistent criticisms against Al-Jazeera is that it criticizes every issue, and every country worldwide, with the exception of Qatar (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2008).

One of the more revealing studies linking Al-Jazeera with Qatari interests examined the interplay between Qatar and Saudi Arabia's relationship over the course of 8 turbulent years with respect to Al-Jazeera's reportage (Samuel-Azran, 2013). The analysis found that Al-Jazeera's criticism of Saudi Arabia rose three-fold during the years of tension between the two countries, but decreased to virtually no criticism when the countries resolved their conflict. This finding strongly established a link between Al-Jazeera's output and the interests of its Qatari sponsor. The study highlighted that the nexus was much stronger for Al-Jazeera Arabic, arguing that the reason could be that Qatar plays a 'double game' where it operates Al-Jazeera Arabic in a partisan manner to maximize its interests in the Arab world, while operating AJE within Western journalistic norms to gain credibility among English-speaking audiences. This strategy supposedly allows Qatar to maximize its political gains and global clout which make its enormous investments in Al-Jazeera worthwhile.

By contrast, Fahmy and Al-Emad's (2011) analysis of Al-Jazeera Arabic versus AJE's coverage found that the two outlets systematically provide a similar framing of political

events and that both outlets provide a comprehensive picture of events. Furthermore, Johnson and Fahmy (2008) found that AJE's audiences believe that the network provides a highly credible coverage of political events in comparison to other channels.

Two questions now come to the fore. First, has Al Jazeera been able to contest the dominance of Western news channels such as CNN or BBC? Second, and even more importantly, how can one measure Al Jazeera's success in contesting the dominance of Western news channels? In this study, we propose a novel answer to these questions. We assert that the Al Jazeera Effect may be approximated by measuring Al Jazeera's ability to attract epistemic followers, or followers that are heavy consumers of news and the rely on the news to obtain professional goals. Haas (2007) defines epistemic communities as those with a high degree of knowledge. Such knowledge can be generated, among other, by accessing the news. To measure the Al Jazeera Effect, we sampled four epistemic communities that are characterized by high degrees of knowledge and that rely on the news to obtain professional goals. These include: journalists, Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs), UN missions and Ambassadors. As scholars have noted, information is the currency of diplomacy and diplomats rely on accurate and timely information to obtain their goals be it in managing bilateral ties between states, obtaining concessions during multilateral negotiations or managing their state's image and reputation (Hocking and Melissen, 2015).

Notably, we do not assert that all of the above are part of the same epistemic community but we do contend that all are reliant on the news. For instance, a journalist covering the Arab world would likely use Twitter to map the issues dominating news coverage in that region. To this end, a journalist may follow the Twitter profiles of leaders in the Middle East, high ranking policy makers, activists and regional news channels such as Al Jazeera. This is especially true of journalists and newspapers that offer their audiences a global perspective on world affairs.

Our decision to focus on diplomats and diplomatic institutions stemmed from recent studies which suggest that diplomats are heavy consumers of news on social media. First, studies have found that diplomats have migrated en masse to social media platforms. Presently, it is estimated that 90% of UN member states have established some form of social media presence (Bjola, 2017). Second, studies have found that diplomats first migrated to social media in order to narrate national policies and comment on world events as they unfold (Hallams, 2010; Xiguang and Jing, 2010). This was important as individuals across the world turned to social media to learn about the world around them (Bjola and Holmes, 2015; Collins et al., 2019; Manor, 2019; Seib 2012; Seib, 2016). Commenting on world events as they unfold demanded that diplomats follow news channels so as to gather relevant information on global events and then formulate a response to these events. However, diplomats soon learned that social media constitutes competitive framing arenas in which multiple actors vie over the attention of online publics including established news channels, independent news agencies, citizen journalists and diplomatic institutions (Causey and Howard, 2013; Hayden, 2012; Haynal, 2011; Pamment 2014).

Moreover, studies indicate that while diplomats use Facebook to communicate with average social media users, they employ Twitter to communicate with elites including

journalists and opinion makers (Bjola, 2017; Bjola and Pamment, 2019; Manor and Bjola, 2021). In some cases, MFAs migrated to Twitter with the expressed goal of interacting with journalists and shaping media coverage of events (Manor, 2016; Manor and Crilley, 2018; Mazumdar, 2021).

Other studies have found that diplomats and their institutions are heavy consumers of online news given that diplomats must remain abreast of global affairs to practice diplomacy. This is true of Ambassadors, who must comment on events happening in a certain country, as well as MFAs and UN missions who have a global remit and who deal with a host of issues ranging from climate change and nuclear proliferation to combating pandemics and negotiating trade agreements (Duncombe, 2017; Manor and Pamment, 2019). Even more fundamentally, diplomats use social media in order to comment on or negate news stories, while also recommending trusted news sources to their own followers (Manor, 2019). For instance, the Russian Embassy to the UK routinely criticizes British newspapers for misrepresenting Russia's policies (Manor 2021); the Polish MFA berates journalists and newspapers that associate Poland with Nazi atrocities (Manor, 2019) while Israeli diplomats demand corrections of news stories that use terms such as 'Palestinian assailants' as opposed to 'Palestinian terrorists' (Manor and Bjola, 2021).

There is truth to the argument that following a news source on social media is not the equivalent of consuming news. In other words, the fact that an Ambassador follows CNN and Al Jazeera on Twitter does not mean that he consumes news from both sources, or that both sources shape the Ambassadors' worldviews and opinions. Having said that, diplomats can now follow diverse social media accounts be they managed by citizen journalists, independent news agencies, bloggers, social media influencers or established news sources. Faced with this paradox of plenty, diplomats and their institutions make choices regarding who to follow on social media, and who *not* to follow. We maintain that diplomats' choices matter and that they may offer insight into which news channels are deemed as worthy or important enough to follow.

The motivation to follow a news source may vary between diplomats and diplomatic institutions, based on their location and remit. For instance, an Ambassador to the US may follow Fox News not because he values its coverage of world events but because his/her work demands that they identify the issues and opinions expressed on Fox News thereby gaining insight into an important demographic. Similarly, a British Ambassador to Israel may follow Al Jazeera in order to gauge the opinion of the Arab World. Yet given that in a global age, events impact many nations, Ambassadors are also likely to follow global news channels that offer information on events that have global ramifications. This is also true of the UN missions and MFAs who by nature have a global remit. Here again choice becomes important. Do Ambassadors and MFAs tend to learn about world events from BBC and CNN or from Al Jazeera? If diplomatic institutions now follow Al Jazeera this might attest to Al Jazeera's ability to be 'heard' around the world and influence global news flows.

Finally, it is important to note that diplomats are not immune to the effects of priming and framing. Diplomats may ascribe importance to those issues and events that dominate Al Jazeera's Twitter profile. Moreover, diplomats may come to assume that the opinions expressed by Al Jazeera represent those of the Arab World. This, in turn, could shape the

conduct of Ambassadors and their worldviews. To summarize, we decided to measure Al Jazeera's ability to contest the dominance of Western news channels by focusing on the social media activities of epistemic communities that are heavy consumer of news and that rely on the news to obtain professional goals- diplomats and journalists.

Methods

The decision to use Twitter followers as an indication of the Al-Jazeera Effect stems from Twitter's centrality as a social network that serves as a news hub, as well as the ability to gather relevant data on Twitter followers. Notably, we do not contend that 'following' a news source on Twitter is the same as consuming content from that news source. We acknowledge that factors such as the Twitter algorithm might interfere in the process by recommending articles and issues based on paid promotions amongst other subjective elements. We also acknowledge that following a news source on Twitter, and viewing its tweets, requires less commitment and attention than actively searching for information online. Instead, we contend that the data provided by a large-scale analysis of Al-Jazeera's following amongst the epistemic communities, and comparing this Twitter following with that of leading Western news stations (as well as other leading international news networks), does provide a relevant measure of Al-Jazeera's centrality as a global news source. Moreover, such an analysis offers a new dimension to the analysis of Al-Jazeera's centrality.

On Twitter, users can create dedicated lists. For instance, a user may create a list titled 'Football players'. They would then add to this list the accounts of various football players that are active on Twitter. Then, whenever the user logs onto Twitter, they may access the list and see all the latest tweets by the Football players they have chosen to follow. Notably, these lists are accessible to other users. Over the past several years the Twiplomacy research group has created dozens of lists pertaining to diplomats and diplomatic institutions. For instance, one list includes all the Twitter accounts operated by Albanian diplomats. Another list includes Twitter accounts managed by EU diplomats. A further list includes all the accounts of MFAs that are active on Twitter, be in the British Foreign Office or the Lithuanian foreign ministry. In this study, we relied on Twiplomacy's lists in order to generate four samples: A sample of MFAs that are active on Twitter; a sample of UN missions in New York (NY) and Geneva that are active on Twitter and a sample of Ambassadors that are active on Twitter.

By 'created' a sample we mean that we created a dedicated Twitter account and then followed certain institutions or individuals. For instance, in order to create a sample of MFAs that are active on Twitter we first created a new, dedicated account. Next, we visited the Twiplomacy account and accessed its list of MFAs that are active on Twitter. Finally, we began to follow those MFAs listed by Twiplomacy. We thus ended up with an 'MFA Twitter account' that included 94 MFAs that are active on Twitter. Finally, we used this dedicated MFA account to visit the Twitter profiles of various media institutions. This enabled us to immediately count the number of MFAs that follow each media institution, as Twitter lists this information. For instance, as the image below demonstrates, the CNN Twitter profile is followed by 41 of 94 MFAs in our sample.

In this study, we chose to analyze four epistemic communities: Ambassadors, foreign ministries members, UN missions' members (all fall under the category of diplomatic institutions) and journalists to better understand the role of Al-Jazeera in their media diet. These communities are required to understand and analyze events from an international perspective as part of their job, and thus, their news repertoires are usually comprised of various international sources to gain a supranational perspective of events (Volkmer, 2003). By examining the media diet of these communities, our study aims to examine whether Al-Jazeera obtains its stated mission of providing a Middle-Eastern perspective to decision-makers that shape global perceptions (Al-Jazeera Media Network, 2021) or whether the Al-Jazeera Effect is more myth than fact.

The epistemic communities selected for the study require a more detailed explanation. The choice of diplomatic institutions, namely Ambassadors, foreign ministries and UN missions' is based on three arguments. First, that diplomats and their institutions are avid consumers of news on Twitter as they must access relevant information on events shaping the world (Bjola and Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2016; Manor, 2019; Pamment, 2014). Information was, and still is the 'currency' of diplomacy during peacetime and during times of crisis (Gilboa, 2005). Specifically, MFAs use Twitter to a) comment on world events as they unfold (Kampf et al., 2015) b) communicate with foreign policy makers, opinion makers and the diplomatic community (Bjola, 2017; Cassidy and Manor, 2016; Manor, 2016; Manor and Pamment, 2019) and c) respond to events in a manner consistent with their nation's image.

Second, we chose to analyze diplomats' news following because this demographic often turns to social media sites, and Twitter in particular, to interact with journalists, manage relationships with journalists and impact journalists' coverage of foreign affairs in real-time with the hope of shaping digital publics' understanding of world events (Hocking and Melissen, 2015; Seib, 2016). Diplomats view social media such as Twitter or Facebook as 'competitive framing arenas' in which multiple actors, including traditional media, new media, citizen journalists and even NGOs, compete over the attention of digital publics (Hayden, 2012). Thirdly, we postulate that, like any social media user, diplomats are faced with a 'paradox of plenty' on Twitter. Diplomats wishing to monitor news stories and developments from across the world have numerous sources that they can turn to ranging from wire services such as AFP, to global networks such as CNN to state-owned networks such as DW or Russia Today. Thus, we contend that if diplomats choose to follow Al-Jazeera this might attest to the Qatari network's ability to become central to global flows of information.

In addition, we examined journalists' news following on Twitter. We believe that this epistemic community is important as recent studies showed that journalists increasingly turn to social media to form an opinion about news event (Barnoy and Reich, 2021; Zhang and Li, 2020). Journalists prefer to learn about events from traditional elite sources so as to avoid 'fake news' (Ibid.). Thus, understanding Al-Jazeera's ability to attract journalists on Twitter is central to evaluating its effect on the global news agenda.

For each sample, we repeated a similar procedure by creating a dedicated Twitter account, using a Twiplomacy list to follow certain diplomatic institutions and then visiting the profiles of different media institutions. In this way we could identify which media

institutions attract the highest number of MFAs, UN missions and Ambassadors. Notably, our study follows in the footprints of Manor and Pamment's 2019 analysis of digital prestige. The authors used a similar method of creating samples of Twitter accounts that are managed by diplomat and diplomatic institutions. In most MFAs, Twitter accounts are managed either by a dedicated digital diplomacy unit or a unit charged with public diplomacy (Manor, 2016). At the level of UN missions, accounts are usually managed by diplomats who have received some training in the use of social media platforms (Manor and Pamment, 2019). In addition, we created a sample that included the Twitter accounts of journalists, foreign policy editors and newspapers from across the world. This sample was used to evaluate whether AJ attracts its peers on Twitter. Below we elaborate on each sample. Crucially, our methodology was inspired by Manor and Pamment's 2019 analysis, which evaluated the relative importance and centrality of diplomatic institutions by analyzing their ability to attract epistemic communities on Twitter including news outlets, multilateral institutions and MFAs. In this article we adopt a similar approach to measuring the AI; Jazeera's ability to contest the dominance of Western news channels.

News organizations sample

The sample of 529 news outlets was originally compiled by Manor and Pamment in 2015 in an article measuring the relative importance of MFAs. However, the sample was reduced from Manor and Pamment's 540 twitter news accounts to 529 as some journalists or editors no longer tweeted in 2021. The final sample included the Twitter accounts of global news outlets (e.g., CNN, Reuters), newspapers throughout the world (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Jordan Times*, *Kenya's Daily Nation*), diplomatic correspondents, editors-in-chief and radio and television stations. The sample was compiled using three different open-source databases listing the most influential news suppliers in the world.

MFA sample

The original sample included 105 MFAs whose Twitter accounts were listed on the Twiplomacy Twitter list. Of these, 11 were omitted as they were dormant accounts that had not been used for some time. In other words, these were accounts that had not tweeted any new information in some months. The final sample included 94 MFAs (See Appendix 1). Notably, there was a high level of variance in MFAs' social media activity with some ministries publishing dozens of tweets per day and others publishing few tweets per week. As a guiding principle, the sample was deliberately diverse with regard to geographical location (e.g., Africa, Europe, and Latin America), culture and language (e.g., English, Spanish), levels of economic prosperity (i.e., GDP per capita), and diffusion of ICTs.

UN in New York (NY) sample

The NY sample included 145 Twitter accounts. Of these 125 were States' missions (see Appendix 2) while the rest included organizations such as the EU. Several nations were represented more than once in the sample as they operated more than one Twitter account.

This sample was compiled from a list on the Twiplomacy Twitter channel. As was the case with the MFA sample, the NY sample was also diverse in terms of geographic location (i.e., the Middle East, South-East Asia, Africa, and the Baltic States), culture and language (e.g., English, Spanish, Arabic, Korean), levels of economic prosperity (e.g., Latvia, Belarus, China, US) and diffusions of ICTs.

UN missions in Geneva sample

The Geneva sample of 127 Twitter accounts was smaller than that of NY (see Appendix 3). The sample included missions to the UN as well as Ambassadors as some nations only manage an Ambassadorial account. In these instances, Ambassadors tweet as opposed to UN missions. Certain countries were represented more than once as they have a dedicated Twitter account to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and a dedicated account for the Human Rights Council. In total, the sample included diplomats and diplomatic institutions from 79 countries. The fact that the Geneva sample was smaller than the NY sample is not surprising as several studies have shown that Twitter is more prevalent in NY as opposed to Geneva (Manor, 2019; Manor and Pamment, 2019). The sample consisted of missions that were listed on the Twiplomacy Twitter list Missions were diverse in terms of geographic location (e.g., Scandinavia, South America, and South-Asia), culture and language (e.g., English, Arabic, and Portuguese) as well as levels of economic prosperity (e.g., Togo, Lithuania, Norway, US) and diffusions of ICTs.

Ambassadors sample

The sample of 945 Ambassadors was compiled using a list on the Twiplomacy Twitter channel. Markedly, the sample included bi-lateral Ambassadors (e.g., Mexico's Ambassador to Lebanon and Norway's Ambassador to Botswana), Ambassadors to multilateral forums (e.g., the UN, World Trade Organization and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), Ambassadors to the EU and Ambassadors to multilateral capitals (e.g., Vienna, Rome). It should be noted that the sample included at least one Ambassador from 128 countries (see Appendix 4).

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, the average news outlet evaluated in this study (i.e., Reuters, BBC World, CNN) attracted 93 news organizations, newspapers and journalists, out of a possible 529. For instance, 240 newspapers, news organizations and journalists followed Reuter's Twitter account; 211 followed BBC World while 2014 followed CNN on Twitter. The top five news outlets that attracted the most news organizations and journalists on Twitter were Reuters (240), BBC World (211), CNN (204) AJ (130) and Bloomberg (113) out of a possible 529. Notably, the top five news outlets include state-owned outlets (BBC, AJ), privately held outlets (CNN, Bloomberg) and independent news agencies (Reuters). It is worth noting that AJ substantially out-performed other

Table 1. Sample of 529 new organizations and journalists that are active on Twitter.

News Outlet	Number of Followers
Reuters	240
BBC World	211
CNN	204
Al Jazeera English	130
Bloomberg	113
Sky News	90
FOX	89
France 24	59
AFP	57
Russia Today	55
CNBC	50
Sputnik	30
AJ+	26
EuroNews	23
DW News	22
AVG	93

state-owned news outlets such as Russia Today or Sputnik. AJ also outperformed privately held news outlets including Bloomberg, Fox, Sky News and CNBC.

Table 2 lists the number of MFAs that follow each news channel. As illustrated, BBC World is followed by 43 MFAs out of a possible 94. CNN is followed on Twitter by 41 MFAs while Bloomberg attracts 18 MFAs on Twitter. Table 2 demonstrates that news organizations are more eager followers of news outlets when compared to MFAs. Indeed, the average news outlet evaluated in this study (i.e., BBC, DW) attracted 18 MFAs as opposed to 93 news organizations. That said, the top five news outlets did attract a considerable number of MFAs. These were BBC World (43 MFAs out of a possible 94), CNN and Reuters (41), Bloomberg (18) and Russia Today (17). AJ did not rank among the top five news outlets in this list as it attracted 16 MFAs. The analysis of the MFA and news organizations are similar in that BBC World, CNN, Reuters and Bloomberg attract the most followers. However, Russia Today ranked in the top five news outlets among MFAs while among news organizations it ranked 9th. It should be noted that AJ+ ranked last among MFAs and third to last among news organizations.

A closer analysis revealed that Al Jazeera attracts the MFAs of major world powers (e.g., the UK). Moreover, Al Jazeera attracted MFAs from different world regions including foreign ministries from Latin America (e.g., Chile, Costa Rica), Europe (e.g., Austria, Denmark, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden) Africa (e.g., Uganda) and Asia (e.g., India, the Philippines).

The results of Table 3 suggest that UN missions more eagerly follow news outlets than MFAs, with the average news outlet attracting 21 NY missions, as opposed to 18 MFAs. This difference is in line with previous studies which suggest that Twitter use varies across diplomatic venues (Manor and Pamment, 2019). For instance, NY missions

Table 2. Sample of 94 MFAs that are active on Twitter.

News Outlet	Number of Followers
BBC World	43
CNN	41
Reuters	41
Bloomberg	18
Russia Today	17
Al Jazeera English	16
AFP	16
France 24	15
EuroNews	15
FOX	14
Sky News	14
CNBC	10
Sputnik	8
DW News	8
AJ+	1
Average	18

Table 3. Sample of 145 UN in NY missions that are active on Twitter.

News Outlet	Number of Followers
BBC World	62
Reuters	56
CNN	55
AFP	31
Al Jazeera English	26
Bloomberg	21
FOX	18
Russia Today	13
France 24	10
CNBC	8
DW News	6
EuroNews	6
Sky News	5
Sputnik	2
AJ+	2
Average	21

must be kept abreast of developments all over the world given the diversity of issues addressed in NY ranging from the Syrian Civil War to Global Development Goals and tensions along the Crimean border. Moreover, unlike MFAs, UN missions do not receive daily briefings from Embassies stationed abroad and may thus be more reliant on news outlets for gathering pertinent information.

The NY sample differed from the MFA sample in three ways. First, Bloomberg which ranked in the top five news outlets among MFAs, ranked 6th among NY missions. Second, AFP ranked in the top five among NY missions while it ranked 7th among MFAs. Once again, this difference may be explained by the global remit of UN missions. Finally, unlike the MFA sample, AJ ranked in the top five among NY missions, coming ahead of other state-owned media (Sputnik, Russia Today) as well as privately owned outlets (Bloomberg, CNBC). However, AJ + still ranks last among NY missions.

An analysis revealed that Al Jazeera attracts the UN Missions of major world powers (e.g., China, EU, France, Germany, Russia). Al Jazeera also attracted a diverse group of NY missions including missions from Latin America (e.g., Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico), Europe (e.g., Cyprus, Denmark Italy, Sweden) Africa (e.g., Rwanda, Uganda), North America (e.g., Canada) and Oceania (e.g., New Zealand).

The Geneva missions' sample in Table 4 mirrors the NY sample as the top five new outlets include Reuters (46 missions out of a possible 127), BBC World (44), CNN (31) and AJ (16). The only difference between the two UN venues is that Bloomberg outperforms AFP among Geneva missions. Bloomberg may attract Geneva missions as Geneva is home to several financial organizations including the World Trade Organization, the World Labor Organization and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Thus, in this diplomatic venue, financial stories may be more relevant than the global perspective offered by AFP. Additionally, the remit of Geneva missions is more focused than that of NY missions as Geneva diplomats deal mainly with trade, human rights and intellectual property. While AJ ranked 4th among Geneva missions, AJ + failed to attract followers and ranked second to last.

Among the Geneva missions to follow Al Jazeera one finds both world powers (e.g., the UK, the US) as well as missions from around the world including Pakistan, Spain, Haiti, Denmark, Norway, Uganda and Israel. Notably, Al Jazeera attracted a more diverse following among NY missions than in Geneva yet this may be attributed to the fact that NY missions are more avid users of Twitter than Geneva based missions (Manor and Pamment, 2019).

Table 5 demonstrates that Ambassadors do in-fact follow news outlets on Twitter with the average outlet attracting 120 Ambassadors. As was the case with all previous samples, the top three news outlets among Ambassadors were BBC World (375), Reuters (334) and CNN (263). AJ ranked 4th with 149 Ambassadors followed by AFP with 120.

The Ambassadors' sample mirrors that of the NY sample with one exception – AJ ranks 4th among Ambassadors and 5th among NY missions. We assert that these two samples are similar as like NY missions, Ambassadors must gather a wide breadth of information and must stay abreast of developing stories throughout the world, including the Arab World, a consistent source of global tensions and instability. This is especially true of our sample of Ambassadors that included bi-lateral Ambassadors and multilateral Ambassadors. As was the case among all samples, AJ + ranked extremely low, attracting 13 Ambassadors out of a possible 945.

Table 4. Sample of 127 UNGeneva missions that are active on Twitter.

News Outlet	Number of Followers
Reuters	46
BBC World	44
CNN	31
Al Jazeera English	16
Bloomberg	14
Russia Today	7
AFP	7
EuroNews	6
FOX	5
Sky News	5
France 24	3
Sputnik	3
CNBC	1
AJ+	1
DW News	1
Average	12

Table 5. Sample of 945 ambassadors that are active on Twitter.

News Outlet	Number of Followers
BBC World	375
Reuters	334
CNN	263
Al Jazeera English	149
AFP	120
Bloomberg	111
FOX	89
Sky News	75
Russia Today	65
France 24	56
EuroNews	50
CNBC	46
DW News	30
Sputnik	26
AJ+	13
Average	120

Notably, among Ambassadors, AJ outperforms state owned media outlets (Russia Today, Sputnik) as well as privately held media (Bloomberg, Fox, CNBC). AJ also outperforms independent news agencies such as AFP.

Among the Ambassadors that follow Al Jazeera one finds Ambassadors of major world powers (e.g., the EU, France, Germany, the UK), European nations (Finland, Ireland, Norway, Poland, The Netherlands, Sweden) as well as nations from North America (e.g., Canada) Latin America (e.g., Brazil, Mexico) Africa (e.g., Angola, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia) Asia (e.g., Azerbaijan, Afghanistan) and Oceania (e.g., Australia).

In summary, three news outlets attracted the most followers in all our samples – Reuters, BBC World and CNN. These news outlets might thus be considered as especially influential among diplomats and may have the ability to shape the agenda of the international diplomatic community. Yet the same is also true of AJ that ranked in the top five among four samples – news organizations, NY missions, Geneva missions and Ambassadors. Even more importantly, Al Jazeera attracted diplomats from major world powers as well as a diverse group of diplomatic institutions from numerous world regions. Like CNN and BBC World, Al Jazeera too can thus boast that it has a global following among diplomats and their institutions. These results lend some credence to the assumption that AJ has successfully positioned itself as an important source of news and that it too *may* be able to shape the diplomatic agenda as diplomats are not immune to the impact of priming and framing. Those diplomats that follow Al Jazeera may, over time, ascribe importance to issues covered by Al Jazeera.

Markedly, this study did not directly measure the influence that Al Jazeera has on diplomats' worldviews and beliefs. Nor did it directly measure whether news stories that are trending on Al Jazeera come to shape the agenda of diplomats. Yet that was not the goal of this study. Ours was a more modest goal as is customary in an exploratory study. We sought to offer a new method of measuring the Al Jazeera Effect. We maintained that Al Jazeera's ability to attract social media users who are heavy consumers of news, and that rely on the news to obtain professional goals, may be indicative of Al Jazeera's ability to contest the dominance of Western news channels. To do so, we compared the number of diplomats and journalists that follow Al Jazeera, and that follow Western news channels. This analysis reveals that Al Jazeera is followed by a substantial number of journalists and diplomats, and that it rivals established Western channels such as BBC World and CNN. This is but a stepping stone towards a more comprehensive analysis that may identify which diplomatic actors each channel attracts and use statistical analysis to measure the relative importance of each news channel to diplomats and journalists. This method is not entirely new. Indeed, traditional media channels are often ascribed importance based on their audience size and the quality of that audience. The *New Republic* enjoys a level of prestige as it known as the 'in-flight magazine of Air Force 1' meaning that it reaches important policy makers in the White House. We have applied this logic to the digital realm using global policy makers, or diplomats.

It should be noted that AJ outperformed another state-owned media outlet analyzed in this study – Russia Today (RT). Among news outlets AJ ranked 4th while RT ranked 10th. Among NY missions, AJ ranked 5th while RT ranked 8th. Similarly, in Geneva AJ ranked

4th while RT ranked 6th and among Ambassadors AJ ranked 4th while RT ranked 9th. This suggests that AJ is able to promote its narratives and perspective among the international diplomatic community.

Discussion and conclusions

The paper examines the following of the Al-Jazeera English Twitter channel and AJ+ amongst four epistemic communities: ambassadors, MFAs, UN missions and journalists, while comparing it with following of other leading international news sources. The analysis reveals that AJE was regularly one of the top five most followed news sources amongst these epistemic communities. Interestingly, the analysis identified that amongst the evaluated epistemic communities, Al-Jazeera English is actually more popular than some of the most known Western news sources, including the Fox News Channel and Sky News. One possible explanation could be that the examined communities have more liberal tendencies and view these channels, which are identified with conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch, as less newsworthy than Al-Jazeera English.

The findings of our first research question supports the Al Jazeera Effect hypothesis. Our analysis demonstrates that Al-Jazeera English contributes to the emergence of a fairer horizontal global news flow and brings a non-Western perspective to international audiences. Whereas the Al-Jazeera Effect argument was made numerous times, few studies actually examined the audiences AJE attracts, beyond Al-Jazeera's own reports. Thus, this study provides a unique empirical contribution that supports the Al-Jazeera Effect hypothesis.

From a wider scholarly perspective, the analysis of AJE also supports the counter-hegemonic contra-flow paradigm which argues that with the emergence of international non-Western stations, the information flow is not unidirectional but there is an exchange of information and subsequently consumption of news from a non-Western perspective. In this regard, our analysis also demonstrates that global news channels attract diverse demographics and that a micro-state like Qatar can succeed in operating a news channel in the same caliber of leading countries such as the US and UK.

The analysis of our second research question identified that in contrast to AJE, AJ+ 's following is substantially smaller than the other international news channels. This could be because it is a much smaller and newer operation and that it differs from other news sources as it is an online news platform rather than a news station. In addition, the AJ+ target audience is mostly younger social media users as opposed to the wider appeal of AJE. Thus, the analysis also draws the boundaries of Al-Jazeera's clout.

This study has limitations that should be noted. First, the study would have benefited from complementary qualitative methods such as interviews, which would have shed light on the uses and gratifications gained by following AJE on Twitter. Such interviews would have illuminated the extent to which our epistemic communities actually read Tweets from Al-Jazeera. In addition, future studies would benefit from a location-based global network analysis which can better highlight the trends of Al-Jazeera's following in different regions. Finally, future studies should take a more quantitative approach and analyze the 'quality' of one's followers. For instance, it is possible that CNN attracts Ambassadors from major world powers while

AJE attracts Ambassadors from smaller or more peripheral states. This could suggest that CNN is better positioned to impact the diplomatic agenda than AJE.


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Appendix 1: Sample of Miniseries of Foreign Affairs

Afghanistan	Georgia	Paraguay
Albania	Germany	Peru
Angola	Ghana	Philippines
Argentina	Greece	Poland
Armenia	Iceland	Portugal
Austria	India	Qatar
Australia	Indonesia	Republic of Korea
Azerbaijan	Ireland	Romania
Bahrain	Israel	Russia
Belarus	Italy	Rwanda
Belgium	Japan	Saudi Arabia
Belize	Jordan	Serbia
Bolivia	Kazakhstan	Singapore
Brazil	Kenya	Slovakia
Bulgaria	Kosovo	Slovenia
Canada	Kuwait	Somalia
Chile	Latvia	South Africa
Colombia	Lithuania	Spain
Costa Rica	Luxembourg	Sweden
Croatia	Maldives	Switzerland
Cuba	Morocco	Trinidad and Tobago
Cyprus	Mexico	Tunisia
Czech Republic	Moldova	Turkey
Denmark	Monaco	Uganda
Dominican Republic	Mongolia	Ukraine
Ecuador	Montenegro	United Arab Emirates
Egypt	Namibia	United Kingdom
Estonia	Netherlands	United States
Ethiopia	New Zealand	Venezuela
European Union	North Macedonia	Vietnam
Finland	Norway	
France	Pakistan	

Appendix 2: Sample of UN in New York Missions:

Afghanistan	Armenia	Belize
African Union	Australia	Bhutan
Albania	Austria	Brazil
Algeria	Azerbaijan	Bulgaria
Andorra	Belarus	Canada
Argentina	Belgium	Chile

China	Jordan	Portugal
Costa Rica	Kazakhstan	Qatar
Croatia	Kenya	Republic of Korea
Cuba	Kuwait	Romania
Cyprus	Kyrgyz Republic	Russia
Czech Republic	Latvia	Rwanda
Denmark	Lebanon	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Djibouti	Liberia	Saudi Arabia
Dominican Republic	Libya	Sierra Leone
Ecuador	Lichtenstein	Singapore
El Salvador	Lithuania	Slovakia
Eritrea	Luxembourg	Somalia
Estonia	Madagascar	South Africa
Ethiopia	Malaysia	Spain
European Union	Maldives	Sri Lanka
Fiji	Mali	Sweden
Finland	Malta	Switzerland
France	Marshall Islands	Tajikistan
Georgia	Mexico	Tchad
Germany	Monaco	Thailand
Ghana	Mongolia	Trinidad and Tobago
Greece	Morocco	Tunisia
Grenada	Namibia	Turkey
Guatemala	Netherlands	Tuvalu
Holy See	New Zealand	Uganda
Hungary	Niger	Ukraine
Iceland	North Macedonia	United Arab Emirates
India	Oman	United Kingdom
Indonesia	Pakistan	United States
Iran	Palau	Uruguay
Iraq	Palestine	Uzbekistan
Ireland	Panama	Venezuela
Israel	Paraguay	Vietnam
Italy	Peru	Yemen
Ivory Coast	Philippines	Zambia
Japan	Poland	

Appendix 3: Sample of UN in Geneva Samples

Albania	Bahrain	Brazil
Andorra	Belarus	Canada
Argentina	Belgium	Chile
Azerbaijan	Bosnia and Herzegovina	China

Croatia	Italy	Republic of Korea
Cuba	Italy	Russia
Cyprus	Japan	Rwanda
Czech Republic	Kazakhstan	Saudi Arabia
Denmark	Kenya	Seychelles
Dominican Republic	Latvia	Singapore
Ecuador	Lithuania	Singapore
El Salvador	Malawi	Slovenia
Estonia	Malaysia	Spain
Ethiopia	Maldives	Sri Lanka
European Union	Marshall Islands	Sweden
Fiji	Mexico	Switzerland
Finland	Moldova	Syria
France	Mongolia	Togo
Georgia	Morocco	Turkey
Germany	Netherlands	Ukraine
Greece	New Zealand	United Arab Emirates
Haiti	Norway	United Kingdom
Honduras	Oman	United States
Iceland	Pakistan	Uruguay
India	Palestine	Venezuela
Iran	Poland	
Israel	Qatar	

Appendix 4: Sample of Ambassadors

Afghanistan	Bolivia	Djibouti
African Union	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Dominican Republic
Albania	Brazil	Ecuador
Andorra	Brunei	Egypt
Antigua and Barbuda	Bulgaria	El Salvador
Argentina	Burundi	Eritrea
Armenia	Canada	Estonia
Australia	Chile	Ethiopia
Austria	China	European Union
Azerbaijan	Colombia	Fiji
Bahamas	Congo	Finland
Bahrain	Costa Rica	France
Bangladesh	Croatia	Gabon
Barbados	Cuba	Georgia
Belarus	Cyprus	Germany
Belgium	Czech Republic	Ghana
Belize	Denmark	Greece

Grenada	Luxembourg	Serbia
Haiti	Malawi	Seychelles
Hungary	Maldives	Sierra Leone
Iceland	Malta	Singapore
India	Mauritania	Slovakia
Indonesia	Mexico	Slovenia
Iran	Moldova	Solomon Islands
Iraq	Monaco	Somalia
Ireland	Mongolia	Spain
Israel	Montenegro	Sweden
Italy	Morocco	Switzerland
Jamaica	Namibia	Syria
Jordan	Netherlands	Timor-Leste
Kazakhstan	New Zealand	Tunisia
Kenya	Norway	Turkey
Kosovo	Oman	Uganda
Kuwait	Pakistan	Ukraine
Kyrgyzstan	Palau	United Arab Emirates
Laos	Paraguay	United Kingdom
Latvia	Poland	United States of America
Lebanon	Qatar	Uruguay
Lesotho	Romania	Uzbekistan
Liberia	Russia	Venezuela
Libya	Rwanda	Yemen
Liechtenstein	Saudi Arabia	Zimbabwe
Lithuania	Senegal	