Viewing guide for *Control Room*

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Control Room – Pre -viewing Guide

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1. Overview

Released in 2004, *Control Room* is a film which documents the news station Al Jazeera as it covers the US-led war in Iraq. It has been garnering critical praise since its debut at the Sundance Film Festival. The movie lets audiences in on a fascinating glimpse at the war through the perspective of the first free and independent news organization in the Arab world. American-Egyptian filmmaker Jehane Noujaim follows the lives of Al Jazeera producers and reporters as they cover the war and interact with representatives of US Central Command. What follows is an ardent, often-times surprising look one of the world's most controversial news organizations.

Al Jazeera is a news station which has been roundly criticized by the Bush Administration and Arab governments alike. It has been accused of being a tool for both terrorism and western imperialism. And, as *Control Room* explains, it has become the most popular news station in the Arab world. This makes Al Jazeera a very important entity, and one we would do well to pay more attention to. *Control Room* is an excellent step in this direction. The film seems tailor made for a western viewer who perhaps has only heard of Al Jazeera from Donald Rumsfield's denunciations of the station. Noujaim allows the people of Al Jazeera to tell the story of their organization themselves. These characters include senior producer Samir Khader, and journalists Deema Khatib and Hassan Ibrahim.

Another key interviewee in the film is Lieutenant Josh Rushing, a press officer for the US Central Command. Readers might remember the hubbub surrounding Rushing's participation in the film. Apparently he participated against the wishes of the American Armed Forces. Luckily he did, for without Rushing the film would be missing a key element. Rushing's segments document his interactions with the Al Jazeera staff over the course of the war, and how this affects him.

One of the recurring themes in the film is that of bias verses objectivity. Characters wrangle with this concept constantly, and one is left with the feeling that personal bias in news reporting is bad but unavoidable. One accusation leveled against Al Jazeera is that it is a perpetrator of "death porn," relentless news coverage of civilian casualties for the purpose of inciting hatred. In *Control Room*, members of Al Jazeera are given time to explain their programming decisions for themselves, and question the objectivity of other, "opposing" news organizations. At one point an Al Jazeera producer dismisses the very idea of objectivity as a "mirage." If nothing else, *Control Room* illustrates that both war and news are things it is impossible to keep your heart out of.

a) Questions to keep in mind before viewing

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- In what contexts have you heard Al Jazeera mentioned before? Was the representation positive or negative? What was the source of this information, and what might their agenda be?

- Take a second to create in your mind an image of a person of Arab heritage. Do you think the image is feed by any stereotypes? Can you identify the sources for this image? Some possibilities might include film and television, news reports, and people you know personally.

- How often do you think about the war in Iraq? How many times a day do you hear it mentioned in conversation or in the news? In your opinion, is this too much, too little, or just enough discussion about the war?

- How much do you know about what's going on over in Iraq?

b) **Where to get copies of the film**

- The OCLC World Library Catalogue lets you search the catalogues of libraries all over the world.

- Amazon.com and Ebay offer new and used copies for sale.

- Netflicks and Blockbuster offer copies to rent.

Control Room – Post -viewing Guide

Daphne Karpel, December 2006
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1. Overview

The following discussions and resources are intended to help audiences explore *Control Room* further at a critical level. It is targeted at students, teachers, and anyone else looking to gain additional understanding from the film. I have put together a plethora of related resources that I hope will be helpful in learning more about *Control Room* and Al Jazeera, and thereby getting more out of the movie.

There are many ways in which this guide can be used. First, I recommend at least skimming over the websites related to documentaries and film, in order to gain a further understanding of the documentary genre and its role in representing truth in the world. Also, a basic understanding of film and editing terms will be useful for analyzing the *Control Room* at a technical level. Though it may seem a bit intimidating to the unfamiliar, this is actually a very effective way to tease out more about what the filmmaker is trying to achieve.

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Do take some time to read a few of the critical reviews of the film. Even though you have (hopefully) already seen it, it will give you some useful ideas about what other people are thinking about in relation to *Control Room*. Reviews are also a great way to see different interpretations of the movie, especially if the reviewer managed to reach a radically different conclusion from your own.

Finally, the related resources about *Control Room* and Al Jazeera may give you more to think about, having already seen the film. For example, did you know that Josh Rushing only gave one, 40 minute interview, even though in the documentary it seems like we are seeing him change over time? The various interviews with the director also shed interesting light on the film, especially when Noujaim discusses why she made *Control Room*.

If you are teaching a class or leading a discussion about *Control Room*, the discussion questions may be appropriate. They can be supplemented with some of the useful information provided in the links below. For instance, after viewing the movie, you may want to show the interview with Jehane Noujaim. Or, you may want to hand out a brief list of film terms, in order to lead a discussion on the technical aspects of the film and how these relate to the larger themes. For a sample analysis, check out the discussion of the video clip. This may give you some ideas about what themes are present in the film and how to discuss them.

Remember, a documentary is a representation, not a replication of truth. It would be very interesting to analyze not just the film itself, but the filmmaker's agenda with the film. As the characters in Control Room admit, there is no such thing as total objectivity. Where does the filmmaker's own bias come out? What are the implications for the film as a whole?

2. **Useful Resources**
   a) **Related resources about Al Jazeera and independent news in the Arab world.**

   Official Al Jazeera Website (http://english.aljazeera.net)

   This is the English-language version of the official website of the Al Jazeera news organization. The site provides international news coverage with a focus on events in and important to the Middle East. I also includes contact information for the organization, as well as streaming media of their television news station.

   Al Jazeera File on Allied Media Corp. (http://www.allied-media.com/aljazeera/)

   Allied Media Corp. is a company which offers targeted marketing services through various media, including radio, television, and newspaper. Although their dossier on Al Jazeera is aimed at potential clients, it is still a useful tool with which to understand the station. The site includes a history of Al Jazeera, a breakdown of viewer demographics, an explanation of the station's most popular

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programs, and a summary of the praise and criticism the station has received since its inception.

Wikipedia Entry for Al Jazeera (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Jazeera)

Wikipedia offers a comprehensive overview of the station, including an interesting discussion about the origins of its name. The entry also contains an overview of the station's staff, documentation of criticism from various national governments, and a special section on Al Jazeera's coverage of the Iraq war. Information about the documentary *Control Room* is included. Note: Wikipedia is an open-source encyclopedia and is therefore sometimes inaccurate.

b) **Related resources About *Control Room***

Official Movie Site (http://www.noujaimfilms.com/controlroom/site/01.html)

This is the official homepage for *Control Room*. The site includes a trailer as well as a synopsis of plot and characters. There is also information about the filmmakers, including an interview with director Jehane Noujaim. The Press Room section lists and links to media coverage of the film.

Control Room on IMDb (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0391024/)

IMDb's page on *Control Room* includes an in-depth summary of the film, a cast and crew list, and a collection of quotes from the movie. Be sure to check out the message board, which provides a glimpse of different perspectives of the film.

Control Room on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Control_Room)
Wikipedia's *Control Room* page includes a look at Al Jazeera's role in Arab society. It also provides some interesting analysis of the themes of bias and objectivity in the film. Note: Wikipedia is an open-source encyclopedia and is therefore sometimes inaccurate.

Charlie Rose Interview
(http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6677638017680306458&q=%22control+room%22+%22al+jazeera%22)

GoogleVideo hosts this episode of Charlie Rose online, which includes a segment about Al Jazeera. There are interesting interviews with the filmmaker herself, as well as with one of the journalist who stars in the film. Look for the second segment into the episode.

The website of Josh Rushing (http://www.joshrushing.com/)

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Definitely take a moment to poke around here. After *Control Room* came out, Rushing left the marines and ended up working for none other than Al Jazeera. This is his story.

c) Related Sources About Documentary Film

Teacher's Guide to Documentary Film Production (http://www.onf.ca/enclasse/doclens/php/htmlversion.php?language=e&section=btc)

This page is part of the National Film Board of Canada's website. It's geared toward those interested in teaching and learning about creating documentaries. It includes a history of documentary film-making, guides for pre-production, production, and post-production, and advice on how to distribute films and reach your audience.

DocumentaryFilms.net (http://www.documentaryfilms.net/)

This interesting site offers a group blog by and about documentary filmmakers and their work. It also includes a forum, a festival directory, a list of film reviews, and section in which documentary film-makers can submit press releases for their work.

Insight News TV (http://www.insightnewstv.com/)

Insight News offers a plethora of free, online versions of many professional documentaries. Most documentaries available seem to be of the exposing-the-suffering-of-_____ variety, so it can get rather depressing after a while. Altogether, it's an interesting, educational site that illustrates the forms' use in getting the word out.

d) Glossaries of Useful Film Terms

IMDb's Film Term Glossary (http://imdb.com/Glossary/)

As the web's go-to source for information about film, IMDb provides an extensive film term glossary. Its one weakness is perhaps being a bit too thorough for the purpose of understanding this film. However, one can hope to find nearly any concept or film term explained here.

The New School's Film Term Glossary (http://homepage.newschool.edu/~schlemoj/film_courses/glossary_of_film_terms/glossary.html)

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This collection was complied as a study guide for film production students at The New School university in Greenwich Village. It is therefore geared toward looking at film through a production perspective, with more of an emphasis on techniques and film equipment. The emphasis on editing terms makes it useful for understanding *Control Room*.

Durham University's Glossary of Film Terms (http://www.dur.ac.uk/m.p.thompson/filmterms.htm)

This film term glossary is offered, surprisingly, through Durham University's School of Modern Languages and Cultures. I like it because it provides a short and succinct overview of basic film and editing terms. This guide should be very useful to someone without a lot of experience analyzing film.

e) **Film Reviews of *Control Room***

Control Room on Rotten Tomatoes (http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/control_room/)

The definitive site for film reviews, Rotten Tomatoes' *Control Room* page features reviews from 104 different critics which can be sorted by critic, ranking, source and date. It also includes trailers, credits, and information about the DVD.

Control Room on Metacritic (http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/controlroom/)

Metacritic offers basics information about the film, as well as an extensive list of reviews from major critics and publications. Be sure to check out the "What Our User's Said" section for some lively and opinionated takes on the film.

Control Room on Salon (http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/feature/2004/05/27/beyond/index.html)

Salon.com offers a review of the documentary which is part traditional review and part explication on the effect of the film so far. Andrew O'Hehir looks at both the movie's commercial success, and its implications for the social and political ramifications of the war and American-Arab relations.

f) **Scholarly Treatments of *Control Room***

- My paper on *Control Room* (http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/l.glomb.loose.change.pdf)

This paper was written for the same class that this viewing guide was created for. The assignment was to analyze one of the films we watched which pertained to the Iraq War, September 11th, or religious fundamentalism. My analysis focuses on persuasion

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and editing techniques in *Control Room*. The link also leads to a fellow classmate's paper on the same film.

- Al-Arian, A. (2005, Jan-March). Control Room/Al Jazeera: Voice of Arabia. *Political Communication, 22*, 133-136. Retrieved October 15, 2006 from Academic Search   Premier (http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=6&hid=16&sid=68f303cf-   ec48-400b-985c-5f7cdf5bc073%40sessionmgr8)

Abdullah Al-Arian reviews both *Control Room* and another documentary about Al Jazeera called *Al Jazeera: Voice of America*. He analyses the portrayal of Al Jazeera as the voice of free media in the Arab world.

- El-Nawawy, M. (2002, March). Al-Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East. *Political Science Quarterly, 118*, 288. Retrieved October 15, 2006 from Academic Search Premier

El-Nawawy, a journalism professor with experience practicing journalism in the Middle East, and Iskander, a professor of Communication, analyze the history of Al Jazeera and the influence it has had in the Middle East since its inception.

3. Video Clip Analysis

a) Explanation and set – up

The following clip illustrates what is possibly the only good thing to come out of the war as documented by the film so far: the constructive interaction between representatives of the Arab media and the American media and armed forces. Not only does this result in friendly, off-the-job banter, but also a deeper appreciation for the struggles that the other side faces. Since it is primarily about war, *Control Room* can be bitter and sad. However, this clip is very human and humorous and makes for a very nice moment in the movie.

b) Link to Clip

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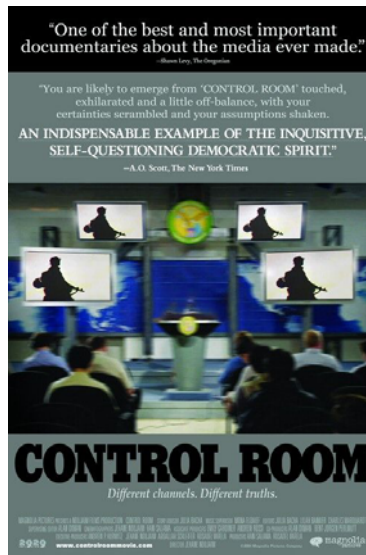
c) Analysis

There are a couple things at work here. One the one hand, there is the engaging banter between the Arab newsman and the American Marine, people who "should" be at odds with each other. The more serious matter seems to be the American reporter's interview, in which he explains what Al Jazeera is doing and the challenges they face as the first independent news organization in their area.

However, taken as a whole, the clip paints a rather optimistic picture of what Arab-American relations could be after all. Even though the two sides seems to be at war with each other, here, at the US Central Command (ironically) seems to be an oasis of friendship between the two worlds. If this were to be taken analogously, the key to peace seems to be mutual understanding. Lieutenant Rushing says, "It's our responsibility to try and reach out and understand their perspective, and I hope they feel the same way, that they need to reach out and understand our perspective, because truly, the two worlds are colliding at a rapid rate." He discusses trying to learn Arabic and getting to know all the Arab reporters personally. Likewise, David Shuster, the NBC reporter, seems to have gained respect for Al Jazeera and their unique situation. The deeper implications of this friendly moment seems that as bad as the Iraqi War is, and as deep as the rift between the Arab and Western worlds seems to run, there is a way out that doesn't entail more violence and bloodshed.

Another interesting aspect of this clip is the music at the beginning. It is a modern, "western" sounding tune. Compare this with the energetic and decidedly Middle Eastern music that started the movie. In fact, Noujaim employs both Western and Middle Eastern music throughout the film. It seems to say that if their music can coexist in the same film, than maybe both societies can in fact live in harmony.

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4. Discussion Questions

- Although the film is a documentary, how are the conventions of narrative film used to tell the story of *Control Room*?

- How do the members of Al Jazeera who we meet in Control Room defy western stereotypes of people in the Arab world? Are there any ways in which they could be described as conforming to stereotype?

- Did this film affect your opinion of Al Jazeera and/or the War in Iraq? If so, how? If not, why not?

- Although it is never disclosed in the film, Josh Rushing only filmed a single, 40 minute interview for *Control Room*. Knowing this, do you feel that use of this interview of this movie was at all deceptive? Do you think this is an ethical violation on the filmmaker's part? What does this mean for your perception of the rest of the movie?

- Who do you think was the target audience for *Control Room*? What led you to this conclusion?

5. Closing Thoughts

Control Room is an excellent example of what a solid, well-made documentary is capable of doing. Certainly it has succeeded in making its audience both feel and think as well as any narrative film could, while shedding light on something about the real world. Rather than simply watch the film, you have chosen to dig deeper and quarry more meaning from it. If you feel that this experience was a good use of your time, please be sure to check out the other viewing guides, which include guidance for navigating such films as *Loose Change* and *Hearts and Minds*.

6. About the author of this guide
a) Bibliography

Daphne Karpel is a junior at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX. She is double majoring in English and Communication. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing, volunteering as a member of the Alpha Phi Omega service organization, and watching television and films.

b) Contact Information

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c) A note to teachers, students, and anyone who uses this material in a group setting

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I hope you have found this viewing guide helpful. Please contact me with any questions or comments you may have.

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