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Requiem for a media pioneer

Al Jazeera America advanced human rights through journalism

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by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

Al Jazeera America will shutter its website this week. But in its short tenure, the outlet has left an indelible mark on the American media landscape. Its editors eschewed click-bait, instead speaking truth to power and amplifying the struggles of marginalized people, both at home and abroad. Its broad purview was guided by the principle that distant tragedies are not as [far away as they may seem](#), and that journalism plays a critical role in bridging artificial divides, fostering transnational solidarity and inspiring collective responsibility to confront the structural injustice that underlies much of human suffering.

Human rights discourse has not yet gained much traction in the United States. But AJAM, as the soon-to-be-defunct network is known, provided haunting and visceral details of human rights crises that are on the media radar such as the catastrophe facing Syrian refugees, but also the plight of those in more remote places — from Central African Republic to Burundi and Myanmar to Honduras — framing their stories within the globalized context in which they arise. It also covered crises at home, including the lead-poisoned water crisis in Flint, Michigan, through a human rights lens.

In journalism they say context is king. But contextualizing international stories remains an underappreciated virtue in the mainstream media. Human rights stories in faraway lands or besieged but disempowered local communities don't lend themselves to light reading or generate the volume of web traffic that often drives coverage, nor can they rely on the comfort of shared experiences to foster empathy.

For Americans struggling under the weight of their own immediate needs and sidelined by sociopolitical exclusion, it's hard to stay engaged in issues that don't appear to have direct relevance to their everyday lives. It takes time and patience to sift through the polarized, nativist rhetoric and fear-mongering that saturates mainstream coverage and reinforces the narrow range of media's echo chamber. The lack of context then leads to indifference toward those fleeing violent internecine conflicts or displaced by transnational extractive industries. But as civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. said, "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It is to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Toward that end, AJAM set itself apart by equalizing the traditionally differential access to the media. Opinion pages of the mainstream media tend to feature established columnists, but AJAM was willing to publish people whose narratives are typically only filtered through the platform of prominent writers. Young freelancers and local human rights advocates have moving and remarkable stories to tell, but they often lack experience writing for a global audience and more importantly connection to editors willing to democratize civil discourse.

AJAM editors welcomed and nurtured the voices of people from a diverse geographic, gender, religious and racial range, who helped unpack deeply held but poorly examined convictions, and cultivate empathy and global understanding.

Despite the chasm that appears to separate them, injustices are deeply intertwined, transcend borders and demand a collective response. AJAM presented a transnational and historical perspective that elevated concerns that may appear local but exist within globalization, whose structural underpinnings must be understood before they can be confronted and dismantled.

Human rights discourse in the U.S. tends to evoke the image of authoritarian leaders on distant soils. This is partly attributable to [American exceptionalism](#) — the idea that the U.S., which pushed for universal human rights standards after World War II, is beacon of global leadership, freedom and integrity and thus

exempt from the rigors of self-critique or accountability for the rights principles to which other governments should be held.

But Washington's uncritical self-congratulations don't hold up. For one, its selective condemnation of leaders whose policies conflict with American interests while ignoring the transgressions of those who are more closely aligned only serves to erode Washington's credibility.

AJAM will go silent, but its gutsy work in humanizing journalism will continue to shape the contours of human rights discourse.

Second, the United States' vexing [lack of accountability](#) for human rights violations undermines it even further. Some failures have captured international attention and opprobrium, such as Abu Ghraib, indefinite detention at Guantánamo Bay prison in Cuba, [drone strikes](#), the [lack of transparency](#) and impunity for torture and the [incalculable human cost of the war on terror](#).

At home, mass incarceration, the death penalty, police brutality, the erosion of voting rights, the criminalization of poverty, persistent racism and the lack of equal justice in the courts in both criminal and civil matters dog U.S. legitimacy as a human rights leader.

AJAM has helped highlight the repeated occasions when Washington has exerted its influence across the globe to advance its strategic and economic interests in ways that undermine human dignity abroad. For example, the U.S. war on drugs has motivated the vast carceral state at home that devastates communities and contributes to the mayhem south of the border that has fueled the deluge of desperate refugees, who in turn are often deprived of due process protections required by domestic and international law.

Meanwhile, the money spent militarizing the drug war depletes coffers that could have been used to fix corroded water pipes or failing schools or caring for ailing veterans. Instead, those needs go unmet, often pitting constituencies against

each other to compete for limited resources rather than uniting against policies that enrich already powerful economic interests.

The U.S. exalts civil and political rights, even as it allows them to be subverted, including through the corrosive influence of money that is transforming American democracy into a plutocracy. But it has yet to embrace economic and social rights or understand their indivisibility from their civil and political rights, overlooking the grossly unequal distribution of resources and increasing concentration of wealth within and between nations that causes unspeakable misery. The deprivation of economic and social rights is not a natural and inevitable aspect of the human condition and insufficient resources to fulfill them.

Much continued suffering emanates from policies that uphold the unjust status quo: The [global architecture of economic and political governance](#) that advances the interests of rich countries and perpetuates global poverty. Multilateral economic institutions such as the [World Bank](#) and the International Monetary Fund have started to decry inequality. Yet these organizations owe their allegiance to the governments that set their agendas and provide their funding, and have so far refused to implement policies that fully [protect an expanded notion of rights](#).

Governments have been loath to hold to account transnational corporations that evade responsibility for the human rights ramifications of their work. Trade policies continue to privilege the profits of corporations over the rights of people. All of this is relevant to American workers fighting for a livable wage, affordable health care, decent public schools and a level playing field for their children, irrespective of their race, national origin, class or gender identity.

Yet human rights proponents must undertake their work with the same critical eye directed toward transgressors, to fully interrogate whether the effect of their advocacy reflects the principles they espouse. AJAM has not given them a free pass, pointing out that [human rights organizations](#), the [humanitarian aid](#) industry and even [the U.N. itself](#) have the failings of mission and accountability.

A journalism that promotes human rights reporting is starting to resonate within the U.S. media market. AJAM has advanced that goal — both explicitly and implicitly — through the expansive scope and diverse perspectives of its coverage and by drawing attention to the connection between inequality and injustice at home and abroad. A national conversation to reflect on and uphold the United States' vaunted ideals is increasingly critical and quintessentially patriotic, especially in the current climate of nationalistic demagoguery.

For those of us who have had the great privilege of writing about global injustices that ordinarily fail to capture the imagination of editors, losing this platform leaves a lamentable void. AJAM will go silent, but its gutsy work in humanizing journalism will continue to shape the contours of human rights discourse.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.