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Mubarak's Fall Prompts Double Takes by Anchors

By **ALESSANDRA STANLEY**

It took 18 days to shake the world, but this time the revolution was shown live. People around the globe watched Egyptians rise up in an unarmed insurrection. They looked on, gobsmacked, as the Mubarak dictatorship crumbled on camera. Even the fall of the [Berlin Wall](#) in 1989 didn't quite have the same hypnotic pull and roller-coaster suspense — this was a long vigil that carried a constant threat of mass violence in high definition.

And when the end came on Friday, it was peaceful and so abrupt that American television put on its own kind of five-second delay. All the cable news channels were focused on Cairo from early morning; broadcast networks interrupted their regular programming to go live to Cairo when the news hit. But it wasn't until the crowds on the streets of the city went berserk that viewers could be sure that they had heard right. CNN's instantaneous translator was so stunned as he took in Vice President [Omar Suleiman](#)'s words that he faltered and repeated President Hosni Mubarak's name three times.

Some anchors seemed uncertain about what had just happened. A puzzled Richard Lui of MSNBC turned to the correspondent Richard Engel in Cairo and asked him what he could "glean" from Mr. Suleiman's brief statement. Mr. Engel paused and grinned as a wave of joy rose up from Tahrir Square below him.

There was no hesitation on the English-language service of [Al Jazeera](#), which covered the uprising 24 hours a day and provided an up-close, almost personal experience of populist revolt. At times, the coverage looked less like a front-row seat to history than a video game — World of Warcraft: Anti-Mubarak Edition.

Calling Mr. Suleiman's statement "short but sweet," the anchor Adrian Finighan said simply, "[Hosni Mubarak](#) is gone." Reporters and anchors on other news programs rushed in over the commotion to describe the scene and begin speculating on what would happen next. Mr. Finighan stopped talking and let the outpouring of car horns, flags and tears tell

the story.

It was Al Jazeera's victory as well, of course, and that struggle was also fought live on television over the last 18 days, though more subliminally. The Mubarak government, which repeatedly tried to block the Arabic-language channel, treated Al Jazeera as an enemy that incited the protesters.

Al Jazeera English seemed intent on using the upheaval in [Egypt](#) to assume the kind of authoritative role that CNN had during the 1991 Persian Gulf war. The network fought back — with impassive resistance. Throughout the crisis, its correspondents covering the protests tried to hold themselves to a strict neutrality that even CNN reporters didn't feign.

Most viewers in the United States can't watch Al Jazeera English on television — though [Link TV](#) recently began simulcasting live programming for 12 hours a day. But lots of people are frustrated with the short attention span and distractions of American news programs. (On Thursday, when Mr. Mubarak was supposed to resign and didn't, cable news programs were underscored with crawls about [Kelsey Grammer's](#) divorce and Jennifer Hudson's weight.)

As they did at the height of the Iraq war, many Americans chose to watch foreign newscasts, in particular streams of [BBC World News](#) and Al Jazeera English.

Sometimes, it paid off. On Thursday, when the world expected Mr. Mubarak to step down, MSNBC was so convinced of it that it kept the words "Egyptian President to Step Down" on the screen several minutes into Mr. Mubarak's speech announcing he wasn't leaving.

Hours earlier, Al Jazeera's correspondent in Cairo, Ayman Mohyeldin, was asked whether he thought Mr. Mubarak would indeed depart. The correspondent said he thought it was unlikely that the Egyptian dictator would relinquish power so easily. And when he turned out to be right, Mr. Mohyeldin remained poker-faced and soft-spoken as he covered the protesters' enraged reaction.

He was far less indignant than [Anderson Cooper](#) of CNN, who told Wolf Blitzer: "This is a slap in the face. This is stepping on the grave, on the blood of Egyptian people that has been spilled for more than two weeks in that square we're looking at, Wolf."

On Friday, Mr. Finighan asked Mr. Mohyeldin, who is Egyptian-born but educated in the United States, to "stop being impartial for a moment" and share his personal feelings about the turn of events. (Mr. Mohyeldin was one of the reporters for Al Jazeera who were

detained by the security forces during the protests.)

He didn't allow himself to express joy. Instead he noted that all Egyptians couldn't help but feel some pride in what had taken place on the streets of Cairo. The closest he got to a personal expression of feeling was this: "I never thought that I would actually live to see a day like this."

It was the understatement of the day, and it said a lot.