

**Time Out****January 26, 2005**

Zionist mouthpiece, the media wing of Al-Qaeda, a CIA front, dangerous secularists, apologists for terror: in Al-Jazeera's short life, the Qatar-based news network has been castigated by so many powerful enemies from the Gulf to the Pentagon, you can't help thinking it must be doing something right.

The station caught Hugh Miles' attention early in the Iraq war as he slogged through 12-hour night shifts at Sky News monitoring unedited footage from Arabic channels. The son of a Middle East-based diplomat and a graduate in Arabic, Miles realised that in Al-Jazeera he was watching a revolution in how the Arab world spoke to itself and to the globe.

He suggests a shift of historic significance, as television news breaks free of state influence to report impartially and reflect the opinions of ordinary Arabs in societies where illiteracy is common a development as potentially seismic as the growth of printing in early modern Europe.

Miles' achievement is to set the rapid ascent of Al-Jazeera with its 50 million viewers worldwide in the context of Middle Eastern news and its history of state-fuelled propaganda and nationalist wish-fulfilment fantasies. We see how media in the Arab world became irredeemably tainted by state control while a web of regional rivalries created a market for Al-Jazeera's Western style. With exceptional access to station personnel, Miles details the successes and trials of the station, most fascinatingly its frequent run-ins with the US government, and manages to slip in a smart and entertaining dissection of the American media's less-than-probing coverage of the Iraq war. Much more than the sum of its parts, this is vital stuff. Paul Fairclough