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Al-Jazeera's challenge

By IKE SEAMANS

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Can 50 million fans be wrong?

Last summer at a television convention in Monte Carlo, I met Mostefa Souga, London bureau chief for al-Jazeera, the Arab satellite news channel with a worldwide audience of more than 50 million viewers. The maverick network routinely scoops American competitors, then sells them video for \$20,000 per minute. Critics charge it is prejudiced. "We aren't biased, we're neutral," Souga told me. "Our motto is 'the opinion and the other opinion.'"

However, as Hugh Miles convincingly establishes in this exhaustively researched inside account, broadcasting unedited diverse convictions along with inflammatory viewpoints can propagate hate. "Many of the voices heard on al-Jazeera are deeply illiberal and often express strong anti-Western or anti-Semitic sentiment," he writes. "The slogan 'Islam is the solution' is frequently heard."

The network is constantly immersed in boiling oil because it doesn't hesitate to dig up dirt on dictatorial Arab states as well. It has unearthed countless scandals perpetrated by tinhorn potentates who angrily censure the station as sycophantic, treacherous, corrupt, anti-Islamic and pro-Zionist. Ironically, Israel derides it as anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian while many Palestinians believe just the opposite. The Bush administration denounces al-Jazeera as a "platform for terror," hardly surprising since the network ridicules the American "so-called war on terror," provides fawning coverage of Osama bin Laden and had a cozy relationship with Saddam Hussein and Afghanistan's Taliban.

In retaliation, employees in many foreign bureaus are beaten, jailed and expelled, accused of spying for everyone from the Mossad (Israel's CIA) to Saddam to Osama, sometimes simultaneously. Al-Jazeera's correspondent in Spain faces charges of being an al-Qaida operative. These tumultuous uproars are wildly popular with news-starved average Arabs. "When an impoverished desert Bedouin gets married," Miles observes, "he no longer is given jewelry, but a satdish instead" to watch al-Jazeera.

In 1996, the Emir of Qatar founded the network that now has offices everywhere, including Washington. He felt Islam would be best served by an independent, Western-style news organization instead of being rigidly controlled. Most of the staff has been trained in British and American newsrooms. "Trying to make them follow the party line," the author asserts, "would be like trying to herd cats."

Miles spends an inordinate amount of time examining al-Jazeera's coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and U.S. involvement because in the Middle East, everything is seen through this distorted prism. During the second intifada, which began four years ago, the network became a household name in the Arab world by ignoring its self-proclaimed image of being fair and balanced. It featured 24/7 "blood drenched" anti-Israel stories that provoked unparalleled disdain against the Jewish state. Conversely, it also uncovered massive corruption in the Palestinian Authority.

During the current Iraq war, Miles, who is a big fan of al-Jazeera, contends its impartiality surfaced again even though he confuses the issue. Initially arguing it was even-handed, he abruptly reverses field. "Al-Jazeera rejected the legitimacy of the invasion; its tone was notably sympathetic to Iraqis and hostile towards Americans," he writes. "This wasn't about liberation; this was colonial conflict." Such flip-flopping highlights the book's soft spot: poor editing, which results in incessant rambling and an annoying tendency to regurgitate the same information and conclusions chapter after chapter.

Nevertheless, Miles, born and raised in the Middle East, the son of a British diplomat, has produced a worthwhile volume that expertly analyzes how in less than a decade, an obscure satellite news channel broadcasting in Arabic (an English version is in the works) has, arguably, become the most important in the world by beating Western counterparts at their own game.