

## Parameters

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Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel that Is Challenging the West Seib, Philip 1 October 2005  
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Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel that Is Challenging the West. By Hugh Miles. New York: Grove Press, 2005. 438 pages. \$24.

The persistent, jabbing journalism of Al-Jazeera has made the Qatar-based news channel a significant factor in Middle East policymaking. Although Al-Jazeera's objectivity deserves challenge (as is the case with many news organizations), its credibility in the Arab world is what really matters.

British journalist Hugh Miles presents a wide-ranging-if at times overly admiring-examination of the technique and impact of this journalistic phenomenon. In a region where almost all television news had been state-controlled and dull, Al-Jazeera has at the very least enlivened politics and journalism since it began broadcasting in 1996. It is news for Arabs, provided by Arabs, and broadcast from an Arab country, which means a lot to an audience that has grown increasingly suspicious of Western-based newscasts from the likes of CNN and the BBC.

Nevertheless, Al-Jazeera's product has been strongly influenced by American television. Al-Jazeera shows such as "The Opposite Direction" feature the same silly bombast as can be found on "Crossfire" and other intellectual food-fights, and the newscasts are slick and fast-paced. Al-Jazeera, writes Miles, also embraces the kind of freedom that US news media enjoy, and the station's reporting often irritates government officials. Miles notes that Al-Jazeera extensively covered the bickering among Arabs that occurred before the Iraq war, while most channels in the region played it down. Its coverage of the second intifada in 2000 stirred public sentiment in ways that angered Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, who was resisting pressure to intervene on behalf of the Palestinians.

That coverage of the intifada was similar in some respects to US reporting during the Vietnam War. "On both occasions," writes Miles, "the audience acquired a strong sense of immediacy to the events through the medium of television. Both conflicts changed the way future wars would be covered." Al-Jazeera's graphic images of civilian casualties during the intifada and in the Iraq war have not only spurred much debate about appropriate content of coverage, but also have affected the political dynamics of the region, creating a more volatile environment in which American diplomatic and military personnel, among others, must operate.

Al-Jazeera is a magnet for criticism from diverse sources. It is periodically assailed by other Arab news organizations for "normalizing" relations with Israel by airing interviews with Israelis, and Miles found viewers who said that because the station was not consistent enough in its support of Palestinians it must be "a Zionist-American trick." On the other hand, the loudest critics of Al-Jazeera include US government officials who condemn the station for inciting anti-Americanism in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world. To its credit, Al-Jazeera has broadcast these blasts from former Secretary of State Colin Powell and others, and viewers can decide whether it is unseemly for the American government, which might be expected to champion press freedom around the world, to attack one of the most independent Arab news organizations.

Part of America's nascent public diplomacy strategy in the Arab world is to compete with Al-Jazeera, using tools such as Al-Hurra, the Arabic television channel bankrolled by the US government. Survey research indicates that few people watch Al-Hurra and even fewer trust its news reporting. Miles calls it "just another illconceived Washington media stunt, leading nowhere." Public diplomacy planners might consider whether American interests could be better served by cooperating with Al-Jazeera instead of trying to hijack its audience.

The long-term impact of Al-Jazeera is difficult to predict. Miles cites the idea of an "Islamic glasnost" based on the liberalizing effects of information, but he adds that "to believe that satellite television is automatically going to make Arab societies democratic is to presume that the current state of affairs in the Arab world results from information deficiency, which is not true." Given the complexities of Arab politics and culture, an influx of news could have profound or negligible effect, depending on the circumstances of the moment.

With plans to provide English-language programming on the air as well as on the Internet, Al-Jazeera could have even greater impact beyond the Arab world, particularly among members of the ummah, the global Islamic community, more of whom speak English than Arabic. If its broadcasts become more accessible, Al-Jazeera could also help reduce Western ignorance about the Arab world.

Many members of the American defense community must work in an environment affected by Al-Jazeera and so should develop a sophisticated understanding of the station's journalistic practices and its influence on its audience. In this volume, Hugh Miles presents the most comprehensive and up-to-date appraisal of the station. Although his work has some minor errors and would benefit from endnotes and a bibliography, it is a valuable guide to the new media world in which Al-Jazeera is indisputably a major player.

Reviewed by Philip Seib, author of *Beyond the Front Lines: How the News Media Cover a World Shaped by War* and the Lucius W. Nieman Professor of Journalism, Marquette University.