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Next November, if all goes as planned, Al-Jazeera, the Arabic-language satellite news channel, will begin broadcasting an English-language version of its programmes. It plans to win millions of new viewers to add to the 50m who already tune in across the Arab world. From a standing start in 1996, the channel has metamorphosed from a tiny service staffed mainly by former employees of the BBC's Arabic service into a world player with bureaux in dozens of countries.

Nobody could have expected that a small television channel backed by the wealthy Emir of Qatar and broadcast from a country with only 80,000 citizens could in such a short time have conquered the competitive world of television; Saudi Arabia tried for years to promote an Arabic-language satellite channel, but retired hurt. But there was something about Al-Jazeera that made it work, despite the well-known censorship in the Middle East and the even more pronounced problem of megalomaniac proprietors.

Part of the reason for its success stems from its genesis in a joint venture between the BBC and Orbit, a Saudi-owned satellite station run from Rome. Orbit carried the BBC's Arabic News Service and its viewers quickly grew to like the no-nonsense, accurate reports which made their own highly controlled national television reports appear stale and sycophantic. It could have been the beginning of a highly successful venture had not politics intruded once again.

The journalists working for the BBC began to realise that Saudi Arabia was intervening more and more in the daily running of the service. A turning point came in early 1996 when the Saudi dissident Professor Mohammed al-Masri was blanked out halfway through a broadcast, leading to a huge row, both between the BBC and the Saudis and between the BBC and its own journalists. In April 1996 the BBC Arabic Service was switched off by Orbit, to be replaced soon after by the Disney Channel. Suddenly, 250 Arabic journalists and support staff were without jobs. Al-Jazeera had just been formed and quickly took on 120 of them, many of whom have subsequently become leading figures in the organisation.

Now, for the first time, there was an Arabic service, free to viewers, based in an Arab country and managed by Arabs. Even so, at the beginning it was very basic, broadcasting only six hours a day with an extremely weak signal. And that could have been the end of things, but for one of the most remarkable blunders in television history.

Al-Jazeera desperately needed to upgrade its signal, but all the slots were taken. Then the main leaseholders, Canal France International, instead of showing an educational programme for children, accidentally put out a 30-minute hardcore porn flick called Club Privé au Portugal. Up to 30m people, many of them children, saw the programme and the response was immediate. CFI lost its lease, which was awarded to Al-Jazeera.

Since then, Al-Jazeera has doggedly stuck to its mission of providing accurate information, combined with a healthy diet of debate. In sharp contrast to most television in the Middle East, it has hosted all shades of political and religious opinion, even allowing Jewish Zionists onto its airwaves. It is hard to overestimate the impact this had on the conservative and inward-looking

regimes in the region. By the end of the 1990s, Al-Jazeera was the leading broadcaster in the Middle East, loathed by many regimes, but loved by its viewers.

It was the Al-Qaeda 9/11 attacks on America that elevated the channel to the world stage. For straightforward cultural reasons, the Al-Qaeda leadership chose to circulate its statements through Al-Jazeera. In the aftermath of 9/11, as the world tried to grasp what had happened, everyone with an interest was forced to recognise Al-Jazeera's pre-eminence on the subject. Indeed, for many, it was nothing more than the mouthpiece for Osama bin Laden.

Official American antipathy towards the channel is well-known and was highlighted when the channel's office in the Afghan capital Kabul was deliberately bombed in November 2001 as the Taliban regime was collapsing. It was, according to Rear Admiral Craig Quigley, the US assistant defense secretary for public affairs, "at the time a facility used by al-Qaeda". In April 2003, as American forces entered Baghdad, an American A-10 "tankbuster" fired two missiles at the channel's office, killing reporter Tareq Ayyoub, a rising star in the organisation whose death was widely mourned. As in Kabul, the American authorities had been explicitly told the location of the bureau. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Al-Jazeera has been banned from Iraq by the interim government, but nothing has diminished the Arab world's appetite for its highly professional service and unbeatable diet of timely, well-informed news programmes.

And, despite the setbacks, the scoops keep coming, none bigger than Yosri Fouda's exclusive interviews with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshibh, the two main organisers of the 9/11 attacks. Fouda, says author Hugh Miles, "has almost single-handedly pioneered the Arab tradition of investigative journalism".

Miles, a former Times young journalist of the year who was born in Saudi Arabia, travelled extensively to research the book and provides, for example, a fascinating chapter on the way the channel is perceived by America's substantial Arabic-speaking community. He also offers conclusive arguments to show that, far from being a friend to the terrorists, Al-Jazeera has done more than any single institution to promote democracy in the Middle East.