

**The Scotsman****BY GAVIN ESLER | JANUARY 8, 2005****Al-Jazeera - How Arab TV News Challenged the World  
by HUGH MILES**

THERE'S A REVEALING MOMENT IN George Bernard Shaw's play about Ireland, John Bull's Other Island, when the rather pompous English central figure says that Irish freedom is, of course, a good idea - but under English supervision. You get the same sense about a free press in the Arab world. All very fine, Arab governments, the Americans, Tony Blair's administration all seem to suggest - as long as this free Arab press doesn't criticise us too much. How else can you sum up the extraordinary suspicion about the Arab satellite channel al-Jazeera? In just a few short years the journalists working for the station have managed to antagonise almost every government in the Middle East and win the enduring suspicion of Downing Street and the White House. At the same time they've earned the trust of ordinary Arabs. Do you think there might be a connection? Hugh Miles seems to think so. His book is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the Arab world now - and what it might become.

For Arab people who complain about what they see as the Orwellian nonsense that forms the basis of most state TV in the region, the processed pro-government drivel of the Ministries of Information which abound in the Arab world, al-Jazeera is a breath of freedom. Arab people openly debate controversial issues. They have rows on screen. They insult one another. They discuss the repression of Islamic militants - and Islamic militant terror. To understand how breathtaking this is, you have to understand what Arab people were used to. You can sum it up in one word: lies. In the various wars against Israel, state-controlled Arab media fed their people the self-deluding nonsense that the Arabs were winning - until the humiliating truth of successive losses emerged. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, state-controlled TV in Saudi Arabia kept it secret. Al-Jazeera, for all its faults, simply tries to get the news as quickly as possible to as many people as possible and then debate all sides of the political issues.

Miles puts the hatred of the station this way: "As al-Jazeera passed its sixth birthday, there were distinctly mixed views about who was thought to be 'behind' it. It was popularly held in the Arab world that al-Jazeera was a pawn of the CIA, the American press regularly decried the station as a mouthpiece for terror, the Israelis complained about its alleged pro-Palestinian bias, while the Kuwaitis had shut al-Jazeera's bureau for supporting Saddam." If you can tell a man by the company he keeps, then perhaps you can tell a journalistic organisation by its enemies. Al-Jazeera's are as impressive as any in the world. But so are its friends.

Miles also details how ordinary Palestinians during the intifada call al-Jazeera journalists with tips, how al-Jazeera reporters in Britain are congratulated for their editorial stance by British people who don't understand Arabic but nevertheless like the idea of the station, and how wily leaders, from Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden, have come to recognise that al-Jazeera is trusted in the Arab world - and therefore a useful tool.

The most interesting question underpinning Miles's account in the book is one of - literally - biblical clarity: "And Ye Shall Know the Truth, and the Truth Shall Set Ye Free." Miles is asking whether Arab people can use the new freedom of information, the prospect of a free press, to liberate their nations from what Arabs themselves complain are the often useless governments

that have abounded in the Middle East for decades. Can free debate help the modernising currents in the Islamic world over those who would freeze Arabs in the Middle Ages? Miles is sceptical. "To believe that satellite television is automatically going to make Arab societies democratic," he writes, "is to presume that the current state of affairs in the Arab world results from an information deficiency, which is not true ... Many Arabs I met told me that the explosion of new media in the Middle East is tranquillising them."

Miles also argues that the family and clan systems in some Arab countries mean that western ideas of democracy may not fit the Arab world very well. If you are from a big strong clan which votes as a bloc, then you will win elections, whatever arguments are ranged against you. Still, there are worse things than flawed satellite TV and flawed attempts at democracy. The Arab world for too long has been torn by those fundamentalists who preach that the only truth is in religion, and those Arab nationalists, such as Saddam Hussein, who put up chumps such as the Iraqi information minister Comical Ali to lie to his people and the world. Now, Miles suggests, there is a third force: courageous Arab journalists. If you want to understand the Arab world at a time of profound, exciting and sometimes dangerous change, this book is a good place to start.

\* Gavin Esler is a presenter on BBC2's Newsnight.