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## 'Quality of news on Arab TV better than Western networks'

Senior writer John R. Bradley in Cairo talks to Hugh Miles, author of *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World* (Abacus, 2005) about his views on how the Arabic-language media is covering the war in Lebanon

How does coverage of the Lebanon-Israel flare-up by major Arabic-language satellite news stations differ from that of major Western-based, English-language stations?

The quantity and quality of news on the pan-Arab networks far exceeds that on the Western networks.

The latter have made some concessions to give more airtime, but Arab networks have gone much further, suspending programming and in some cases even dropping advertising.

The level of commentary, whether from journalists or network guests, is more sophisticated. Of course, Arab networks are addressing Arab viewers, who naturally have a deep interest in the Middle East.

What specific differences are there between Arab and Western networks?

Many more interviews have been carried live, translated and at length on Arab stations than on Western networks, whether with UN officials, Arab ambassadors, Israeli military spokesmen or ordinary citizens.

Al-Jazeera even scooped an extended interview with Hizbollah leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, in his hideout. This was syndicated widely across many other channels, Western and Arab.

It was rumoured that Al-Jazeera also interviewed the Israeli soldiers captured by Hizbollah, although if this is true the interview has not yet been broadcast.

Why such different coverage?

Arab satellite news networks typically have a much more sophisticated understanding of the historical and cultural conditions underpinning crises in the Middle East. Journalists, studio guests and even phone-in callers have a better grasp of the facts.

For example, an Arab audience does not need to be routinely reminded of the difference between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, or told that Hizbollah played a key role in forcing the

Israelis to withdraw from southern Lebanon in 2000. This is common knowledge in the Arab world.

What this means is that Arab networks can quickly progress beyond the basics to more sophisticated analysis, and guests can express more nuanced opinions.

On Arab TV, this is not a war about recapturing a handful of Israeli prisoners, but rather a complicated regional conflict with roots in Palestine that touches on countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, as well as on Lebanon, Israel, Hizbollah and its backers.

Arab networks have been asking questions from day one that Western networks are now only arriving at, like 'What does Israel really want?' and 'Why does it have to punish the whole Lebanese population?'

Gaza meanwhile seems to have become the forgotten war on Western news stations.

Al-Jazeera is often accused by Western critics of pandering to a pan-Arab agenda. Is this an accurate description?

Pan-Arabism is a political movement in the Middle East that holds that all Arab countries should unify and it has often been suggested that this is Al-Jazeera's real agenda.

The network's journalists come from all over the world and to Arabs this often makes them seem suspicious.

Certainly by regional standards, they are a threateningly independent bunch. Many of them are exiles, which is not in itself surprising - the Arab world is full of exiles - but many Arabs feel instinctively that no journalist can ever be trusted to fully surrender his national allegiance.

But nothing on Al-Jazeera recently has suggested the station is trying to propagate a particular message, least of all a pan-Arab one.

In fact, rather than spread pan-Arabism, Al-Jazeera has addressed many of the cracks that have appeared in the Arab world in the wake of the conflict, as Arab governments have struggled in vain to come up with a unified response.

Al-Jazeera covered the bickering at the Arab League summit soon after the war started, when Arab leaders squabbled over whether Hizbollah was to blame.

Al-Jazeera has also been quick to show the growing schism between Arab governments and their people.

While pro-Western regimes like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait and Egypt were quick to censure Hizbollah for its part in provoking the attack, there is no doubt that the people of these countries stand firmly behind the militant group.

Many educated Arabs I talk to say they cannot watch CNN or BBC World for more than a few minutes without feeling so outraged at their 'pro-Israel bias' that they have to turn back to Al-Jazeera. Do those stations actually seem pro-Israel in comparison to the Arabic-language stations?

There is no doubt the American media is deeply pro-Israeli. Even the Israeli media features many more voices critical of Israel than those you find in America.

Virtually the only kind of criticism of Israel found in the US media is to wonder whether the war is progressing in a way that is good or bad for Israeli interests in the long-term. Why the war started is blamed on the Hizbollah raid, which is usually presented as quite unprovoked. Any connection between the raid and Israel's occupation of Palestine is avoided.

There has been next to no criticism of the hugely disproportionate Israeli military response, despite the fact many times more Lebanese have been killed or wounded than Israelis, and over half a million civilians have been displaced.

American networks do not make it clear that the entire Lebanese population has been punished, rather than simply Hizbollah.

How does the American media frame events in Lebanon differently from the Arab media? In my opinion, the US media has settled on a misleading narrative of events leading up to the start of the war.

It presents the Israeli attack as a legitimate response to the abduction of Israeli soldiers without providing more historical context or mentioning that more than 9,000 Arab political prisoners - including women and children under the age of fourteen - are currently held in Israeli jails.

Although Hizbollah undoubtedly has ideological and material connections to Iran and Syria, American journalists and their guests frequently assert that Hizbollah is acting on the instigation of Teheran or Damascus, when in fact for many years Sheikh Nasrallah has taken orders from no one but himself.

The American media also often omits to mention when Arab children are killed, but makes a special point to identify dead Israeli children.

American news about Gaza often fails to mention words like 'occupied', 'occupation' or any other variant of the word.

Instead the West Bank and Gaza are described as 'contested' or 'disputed' or often simply as 'Israel'.

The American media describes Israeli assassinations of political activists as 'targeted killings'; the Israeli military becomes the 'security forces'; and Israeli settlements, all illegal under international law, become innocuous-sounding 'neighbourhoods'.

In your book you are also very critical of the way the Arab point of view is presented in the American media. Have you modified your opinions at all?

In Gaza, since the Israeli unilateral withdrawal, the American media often seems surprised that the Palestinians are continuing to fight at all. There is scant mention of the fact that Israel still controls Palestinian airspace and beaches - effectively turning Gaza into a giant prison camp.

Arab motives are left unexplained; they are consistently presented as the aggressors, hateful without reason, without explanation as to what their grievances are.

In Lebanon, the war is presented as one where evil battles good, not as a highly nuanced

conflict where lives are of equal value on either side.

But isn't Al-Jazeera itself anti-Israel?

Al-Jazeera is not anti-Israeli although the network's critics in America like to claim otherwise. In recent weeks the network has given extensive coverage to the Israeli perspective on Lebanon. Israeli spokesmen have been interviewed at length. There have been regular clips of Israeli officials within news bulletins.

In Haifa and elsewhere in northern Israel, Israeli citizens have been interviewed about life under the Hizbollah bombardment.

It is important to remember that Al-Jazeera was the first Arab news network to allow Israelis to appear at all.

Before 1996, when Al-Jazeera began broadcasting, Israelis were forbidden from appearing on any Arab network and most Arabs had never actually heard one speak before.

Now thanks to Al-Jazeera, Arabs have seen interviews with such senior figures as the Israeli Chief of Staff, the Prime Minister's Strategic Councillor, Defence Minister and even the President.

Al-Jazeera gives more airtime to Israeli issues than any other channel outside Israel itself.  
jbradley@sph.com.sg

