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Al Jazeera has reversed the flow of world news

AL JAZEERA ENGLISH, sister channel to the Arabic news network, began broadcasting to the Western world on Wednesday. But the station was a household name long before that. It was thrust into the spotlight after September 11 by delivering some of the most controversial scoops in TV history, including messages from Osama bin Laden, and was accused by the Bush administration of being “al-Qaeda’s mouthpiece”.

Yet, despite its growing status, relatively little is known about the station. Saudi-born Hugh Miles (29) (right), a journalist and consultant for Middle East Consultants International, is set to release his debut book *Al Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged The World*. He spent two years investigating the station and told Euan Duguid *The Honest Truth* about it.

WHAT INSPIRED you to write about Al Jazeera?

I was working for Sky News during the war in Iraq in March 2003. Because I speak Arabic I was told to watch the Arab news channels. Al Jazeera had correspondents in areas where there were no western agencies and I became intrigued.

The channel is exactly 10 years old this month.

It’s based in Qatar and the name means “The Peninsula”, referring to the greater Arabian peninsula which comprises of countries including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait. But there’s a hidden meaning.

The Qataris were taking a swipe at old enemies the Saudis, who consider themselves the most important country in the peninsula. By naming it after the whole region the Qataris wanted to remind the Saudis that wasn’t the case.

WHO FOUNDED it?

It was established to challenge Saudi Arabia by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Emir of Qatar, an autocratic ruler who trained and studied at Sandhurst. Saudi has a historically volatile relationship with Qatar and the Emir knew he had to protect himself from invasion, particularly with the unrest in the region.

He couldn’t do this militarily, because Qatar is so small. But, realising public opinion was a strong shield, he invested \$150 million to set up Al Jazeera.

HOW WAS it received?

When the Emir came to power in a coup in 1995 he brought progressive ideas. Most of Al

Jazeera's original staff were BBC-trained, recruited immediately after the botched BBC Arabic service, backed by Saudi Arabia, fell apart in 1994. BBC Arabic lasted less than a year following editorial disagreements between the Saudis and the BBC.

Al Jazeera took on a slick, "westernised" style.

In the Arab nations the government or leaders controlled news, using it as propaganda. Usually the lead item would focus on what the president or sheikh had done that morning. It sounds very basic, but Al Jazeera did something different by leading with the most newsworthy items.

HOW DID the new station fare?

It demolished the competition, perhaps due to stirring controversy, and immediately upset its neighbours by featuring guests who made claims of Saudi Arabian human rights violations, never openly discussed before. Saudi accused it of "serving up poison".

They ran a controversial show called The Opposite Direction featuring guests with different points of view. On one edition they had a religious cleric debating with an intellectual who denied the existence of God, which was obviously explosive.

WERE THERE teething problems?

Initially Al Jazeera had limited impact because it was carried on a weak satellite signal that could only be received by a metre-wide dish.

It was a gaffe by a French station that fuelled its growth. In 1997, Canal Plus had been broadcasting a children's education programme when there was a technical mix-up in Paris. They inadvertently sent out adult film material. That was greeted with outrage, particularly in Saudi Arabia, and Canal Plus was kicked off the main Arab satellite.

Al Jazeera moved into the vacant spot, hugely increasing its audience. It now has 50 million viewers worldwide.

HOW DID it obtain the post-9/11 tapes of bin Laden?

They were handed in to the bureau in Kabul. On another occasion some arrived in the mail. There were also faxes, from Tajikistan, signed by bin Laden. The correspondence has never been traceable.

Generally, tapes from terrorists pose a massive headache for Al Jazeera. They might be sent a video with an accompanying demand to "show or the hostage is killed". That puts enormous pressure on the editorial team. They don't want to see the hostage killed, but they also don't want to be seen as a mouthpiece for terrorists.

WHAT OTHER scoops has it broadcast?

The biggest was the interview with bin Laden in November 2001, by Taysir Alluni. He's now under house arrest in Spain for allegedly carrying money for al-Qaeda. Many human rights groups say he didn't get a fair trial.

The irony is that Al Jazeera decided not to broadcast the interview, for their own professional reasons. Somebody — we don't know who — gave a copy to CNN, who quickly broadcast it. Some say it was the American government, looking for a September 11 "confession".

Al Jazeera investigative correspondent Yosri Fouda, on the first anniversary of 9/11, went to Pakistan under cover and lived for several days with two of the atrocity's planners. It was extremely courageous reporting.

WHAT ABOUT the missile attack on Al Jazeera's Kabul bureau?

The Pentagon has suggested Al Jazeera is funded from suspicious sources and it's even been

speculated it's financed by bin Laden. I believe Bush targetted the Kabul bureau because Al Jazeera was showing civilian casualties after the coalition bombing, which directly contradicted the Pentagon line.

There were no casualties in the Kabul bombing but a correspondent was killed in Baghdad when Al Jazeera's HQ was hit during the invasion of Iraq. They've also had two journalists confined in Abu Ghraib and there's a cameraman held at Guantanamo Bay, who hasn't been charged. The staff are very proud of what they do and many previously worked for Arab state news channels with constraints. They are obsessive about freedom and it'd take a lot to put them off their jobs.

This is in spite of huge threats. In every Arab country there are governments who will lock up, torture and even kill journalists. An Al Jazeera journalist is in jail in Tunisia right now.

IS IT a "mouthpiece for al-Qaeda"?

Al Jazeera has very good contacts and relationships with Arabs, even marginalised groups. It gets scoops for the same reason The Washington Post gets scoops. People trust it and call up when they have a story.

Although Al Jazeera features guests who often say inflammatory things, there is no suggestion that Al Jazeera's journalists are ideologically predisposed to al-Qaeda or bin Laden any more than BBC journalists who interviewed IRA killers supported the IRA.

The Israelis often say Al Jazeera is spying for the Palestinians. Hamas says Al Jazeera is spying for Fatah and vice versa. I think this is because it has many different voices saying many different things, which makes people opposed to these views very suspicious.

WHAT'S THE future for Al Jazeera?

It's still financially backed by the Emir of Qatar and is very much dependent on him. If something was to happen to him or his legacy, that could jeopardise Al Jazeera.

It has reversed the passage of world information for the first time. News has traditionally gone from West to East. Now you have Westerners looking to the East for information.

