

27 June 2008

The Straits Times
The Sunday Times
Recognized achievement and the addition of a further dimension
to the headlines coverage of the Singapore newspaper

Like it or not, Al-Jazeera's the TV station to watch

William Choong, Senior Writer

At a Nato base in Kabul, American soldiers pound on their treadmills every morning, gazing at television screens broadcasting news from Arab news channel Al-Jazeera. When Osama bin Laden makes the news, 'America's finest work beneath the solemn gaze of their most wanted enemy', the New York Times reported.

In the early 1990s, CNN was widely watched by American policymakers as missiles rained down on Baghdad during the first Persian Gulf War. Has Al-Jazeera become the CNN of the noughties?

'We are reaching two million households in Afghanistan. The American military watches us because we give them valuable insight that affects their day jobs. The US military is probably one of our biggest viewers,' Mr Phil Lawrie, Al-Jazeera's head of global distribution, told The Straits Times in a recent interview.

The network has made some headway in Asia in recent years. It has won many accolades. Viewership of Al-Jazeera English, which went on air in late 2006, now stands at 110 million households. And it has ambitious plans for further expansion. In Singapore, Al-Jazeera has been broadcasting on SingTel's mioTV since March.

In the 1990s, the so-called 'CNN effect' - the live coverage of major global events in graphic terms - shaped opinion worldwide. Now, media watchers say a similar 'Al-Jazeera effect' is operating in the Muslim world and beyond.

Al-Jazeera was formed in 1996 with funding from the Emir of Qatar. It recruited journalists from BBC Arabic, which had foundered that year. Its journey since then, however, has been plagued by controversy.

Former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld once called Al-Jazeera's coverage of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq 'inaccurate and inexcusable'.

The most common and widespread allegation is that Al-Jazeera supports terrorism and is 'Al-Qaeda's mouthpiece'. After the US attacked Taleban and Al-Qaeda elements in Afghanistan in 2001, the station aired an exclusive statement from Osama bin Laden.

Critics point to other examples: Tayseer Alouni, Al-Jazeera's Kabul bureau chief, was convicted and sentenced to prison in Spain for being an Al-Qaeda agent; cameraman Sami Al-Hajj spent six years at Guantanamo Bay facility for being an 'enemy combatant'. Mr Lawrie dismisses such allegations as 'misconceptions' and 'urban myths'. He withheld comment on Mr Alouni's case as it was still under appeal, but noted that Mr Al-Hajj was released last month without trial.

Mr Lawrie, a Briton, added that Al-Jazeera's airing of Al-Qaeda footage did not amount to an endorsement. Moreover, Al-Jazeera was the sole foreign news agency remaining in Kabul in 2001.

'An analogy is when the IRA (Irish Republican Army) has a statement to make, say, during the 1980s Troubles. They send a tape to the BBC in Belfast or Londonderry. That doesn't make BBC a propaganda arm of the IRA any more than receiving tapes from Al-Qaeda makes Al-Jazeera the propaganda arm of Al-Qaeda.'

Al-Jazeera has gained some credibility in Asia, where its editorial operations are directed from its Kuala Lumpur offices. Its other broadcast centres are in Doha, London and Washington.

In February, Al-Jazeera's Hamish MacDonald, an Australian, was named Young Journalist of the Year by Britain's Royal Television Society for his coverage of the street protests in Kuala Lumpur last year. Al-Jazeera also won an award at the Monte Carlo Television Festival for its coverage of the Myanmar regime's suppression of pro-democracy protests last year.

Mr Derl McCrudden, the network's Asian bureau chief, said Al-Jazeera's key priorities were to report a story from both sides, and to bring a so-called 'Southern' - that is, developing world - perspective to the news.

'The Western media generally covers Asia through disasters, economic crises or stories with little substance, like technology,' he said. 'Al-Jazeera's remit is to cover stories on the ground, week in and week out. The last time we were in Myanmar was not only during the crackdown (in October last year). We were in Myanmar a week before Cyclone Nargis, and we have been there many times in the interim,' he said. In late 2006, Al-Jazeera scored a scoop by becoming the first foreign television station to film in Myanmar's new capital Naypyidaw and interview its information minister about the country's political situation.

Said Mr McCrudden: 'Our position is not to automatically assume that some government is bad...and then report in a biased way. My job is to report on what's going on and let people make up their own minds.'

While Al-Jazeera has enjoyed some success in Asia, its plans to break into the competitive US market have run into flak. For example, Mr Cliff Kincaid, editor of press watchdog Accuracy in Media, has charged that Al-Jazeera is 'terror television' and anti-American.

Not everyone agrees with him.

'I don't think there was a time when Al-Jazeera possessed the image of terror television,' media scholar Adel Iskander told The Straits Times. 'Few in the Arab region or beyond assumed there was a congruence between the network's philosophy and that of the militant group.'

Al-Jazeera has also received some bouquets. New York Times columnist Roger Cohen has written that Americans need 'to watch Al-Jazeera to understand how the world has changed. Any other course amounts to self-destructive blindness'.

Mr Hugh Miles, a journalist and author of Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story Of The Arab News Channel That Is Challenging The West, notes that the network is also hated by many Arab governments for widening the boundaries of political debate in the region.

'Al-Jazeera is as hated in the palaces of Riyadh as it is in the White House,' he wrote in Foreign Policy.

Doubts about Al-Jazeera are nevertheless persistent. In March, Mr Dave Marash - a big-name journalist from ABC who joined the station in 2006 - quit. He cited, among other things, his discomfort with the station's American coverage. In particular, a documentary about poor Americans was 'execrable', 'stereotypical and shallow', he told the Columbia Journalism Review.

Mr Lawrie has only one message to his viewers: Watch the channel and make up your own mind.

He said: 'Since it was launched in 1996, Al-Jazeera has been accused of being a mouthpiece for everyone from Mossad and the CIA to Al-Qaeda. Luckily for us, our 50 million Arabic viewers are smart enough to see through these lies.'

williamc@sph.com.sg

MIXED RECEPTION

While Al-Jazeera has enjoyed some success in Asia, its plans to break into the competitive US market have run into flak. For example, Mr Cliff Kincaid, the editor of press watchdog Accuracy in Media, has charged that Al-Jazeera is 'terror television' and anti-American.

