Book review: Al-Jazeera

Hugh Miles
Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World
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We interpreters are news junkies who want to know what is going on in the world; I'm no exception yet often find myself disappointed by our parochial and celebrity-obsessed media.

So I took notice when not long after the attack on the twin towers in the autumn of 2001 the Guardian published a long article with the title "Who needs CNN?" about the new Arab language channel Al-Jazeera. Soon afterwards we began to hear the adjective "controversial" applied to Al Jazeera, as in "the controversial broadcaster..." This was a subtle way of casting doubt on the channel's intentions and legitimacy, a mealy-mouthed hostility it has not entirely shaken off.

This well researched book tells the Al-Jazeera story with great fluency. Hugh Miles is an Arabic speaker with broad knowledge of the Middle East and he plots the early history of Al-Jazeera as it carved a unique position in the region as a network listened to and trusted by millions.

The Al-Jazeera television channel grew from the failure of a joint Saudi/BBC project to launch an Arabic television service that was to be available in all Arab countries, which left a team of trained journalists looking for work. The new channel soon acquired a reputation for honest reporting but also has its detractors. Some in the West saw it a mouthpiece for Palestinian or Al-Qaeda propaganda, whilst its critics in the Middle East accused it of being in cahoots with the Americans and Israelis. It has never had a very happy relationship with Saudi Arabia.

The channel appears at pains to offer its audience real news and current affairs rather than the bland output of most national channels available in the region. It set out to cover all shades of opinion and was the first Arabic channel to talk to Israelis and to feature popular no-holds-barred phone-ins and chat shows. The irony of Al-Jazeera offering a high quality product at a time when the media in the West is becoming obsessed with political process (not issues) and celebrity is not lost on the author.

Clearly Al-Jazeera's presence in Afghanistan and Iraq meant it was at times the sole provider of footage and reports from these conflict zones. This provoked the suspicion of Western governments at a time when western television channels were all making news-sharing deals to get access to Al-Jazeera's reports. Indeed Al-Jazeera's coverage of Iraq and the conflict there has been in stark contrast to the American press's mute response - in Miles' telling phrase in America "watchdog journalism was asleep in its kennel".
The irony in any discussion about Al-Jazeera is that Western politicians have spoken eloquently of the need for democracy in the Middle East, but have tended to attack Al-Jazeera because it has - democratically - broadcast stuff they'd prefer people not to see. The fact that democracy needs a free press has at times been conveniently forgotten, or curiously applied only to the West. Because Al-Jazeera talked to various groups in the Middle East (including Al Qaeda) they were considered terrorists themselves; clearly Al-Jazeera is the outlet of choice for many groups because it speaks the language and knows the culture; it enjoys home advantage.

Al-Jazeera has now launched an English-language channel available through subscription and on some cable services. It will be interesting to see how quickly it acquires faithful viewers.

Recommended citation format: