

Al-Jazeera: A broadcaster creating ripples in a stagnant pool



200309281

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Abstract

Al-Jazeera is unique in the Arab world. In an environment of state-controlled or stale media, this Arab-language news channel sees itself as a source of fresh water in a parched region bereft of freedom of expression. It broadcasts controversial subjects and, in doing so, has attracted an audience of 35 million households – and plenty of criticism. Most notable controversies have been the airing of tapes of Osama bin Laden, and the broadcasting of images of captured Coalition soldiers and bloodied corpses during the Iraq war. Before those events, Al-Jazeera had criticised Arab heads of state, blatantly ignoring the Arab States Broadcasting Union's code of honour. Some companies have avoided the channel because advertising in the Middle East is based on political, not commercial, interests. Yet along the way, Al-Jazeera has put Qatar, a tiny Gulf nation of perhaps 600,000 people, on the world map. Based on the last-known interviews before the station went on a war footing, this paper looks at why and how Al-Jazeera does what it does. Among the things covered are how the station defines freedom of expression through its own eyes, the role that the station and its employees believe they are serving in the marketplace, and why they do what they do. The paper also considers the station's role in the war in Iraq in March and April of 2003.

Introduction

“Al-Jazeera is a drop of fresh water that was dropped into a pool of stale water that stood still for decades,” says Jihad Ali Ballout, who is responsible for media relations at the channel. “Al-Jazeera has created ripples that refreshed the water. The more the water moves the fresher it gets, until such a time that we have really fresh water for the audience to take from.” (Ballout, 2003)

Quinn, Al-Jazeera creating ripples, *AJR* 25(1), pp. 53-69

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In the Arab world of state-controlled and stale media, Al-Jazeera has indeed caused ripples. The staff of the satellite-delivered television channel regard those ripples as creating a "revolution" in the Arab world. Ballout, in particular, views Al-Jazeera as a major force in developing freedom of expression and liberalising the marketplace of ideas in the Arab world. Travelling this pathway has not been easy because laws and custom sometimes have made covering stories difficult. A raft of privacy laws, plus custom and respect for authority, make covering certain subjects either uncomfortable or off limits. Timeliness is sometimes a problem as well. Mohammed Jasim Al-Ali, the channel's director-general, has noted that a host of agreements between Arab television stations has obliged them not to broadcast any report before transmission by official news agencies. Practically speaking, this has meant waiting several hours before broadcasting a report.

"Arab information mentality must change and develop, and not remain as it was many years ago," Al-Ali said (Al-Farah, 2003). Al-Ali and his staff want Arab audiences to return to trusting the Arab media, especially the news. "You should bring them the truth, not false information, or they won't watch. We treat them as an intelligent audience, rather than the conventional idea that they'll take whatever you give them." (Al-Ali quoted in Schleifer, 2000) Al-Ali has said the broadcaster was a demonstration of faith in the message of freedom. "When the channel became operational, everyone wanted to silence this free voice," he told *Al-Dustur*, Jordan's leading establishment daily (Al-Farah, 2003). The Middle East media have a reputation for being censored and controlled. "All media business in the Middle East is controlled by the government. The leaders of Qatar wanted to change that; they wanted to have a satellite channel with the aim of no longer hiding any information," Al-Ali said (Schleifer, 2000).

Al-Jazeera has not hidden anything, becoming an equal opportunity offender while irritating almost every government in the region and many outside the Gulf. At one time or another, governments from Algeria to Yemen have lodged complaints against the station. Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya have all recalled their ambassadors from Doha in protest at Al-Jazeera coverage, reinstating them once their point was made. Dr Faisal Al-Qassem, who presents the high-rated but controversial *The Opposite Direction*, said Egyptian police once dragged his brother – a pop star – out of his home in his pyjamas and bundled him on a plane to Jordan as a warning to the presenter. "In Algiers," Qassem said, "they cut off the electricity supply so that people could not watch the program because we were talking about the military generals and how they are wasting the money of Algerians." (quoted in Whitaker, 2003, p. 1) Egypt's state-owned media ran a campaign against Al-Jazeera's programs, describing the station as a "sinister salad of sex, religion and politics" topped with "sensationalist seasoning". Yasir Arafat was reportedly incensed by Al-Jazeera's frequent interviews with the Hamas spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. The network upset Palestinian authorities with a preview of a March 2001 docu-

mentary that explored the role of Palestinian guerillas in the 1975-90 civil war in Lebanon. Jordan temporarily closed Al-Jazeera's bureau in the capital, Amman, after a guest on a debate program criticised the government.

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, chairman of the board of Al-Jazeera, recalls that when Al-Jazeera covered events in Iraq, it was accused of being a channel financed by Iraq or Saddam Hussein.

... When we reported on the Israeli elections and when we ran interviews with Ehud Barak and Shimon Peres, Al-Jazeera was immediately accused of being financed by the Mossad [Israel's secret police]. ... When we reported on events or issues within the United States from our office in Washington we were accused of being financed by the CIA. (quoted in Transcript of interview with Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al-Thani, 2001)

According to the channel, some Arab viewers have even accused it of promoting US propaganda when it puts American officials or statements on air. Al-Jazeera broadcasts all White House, Pentagon and State Department press briefings from Washington (Campagna, 2001).

Broadcasts of videotapes featuring Osama bin Laden have generated the most fame and notoriety for the channel. Al-Jazeera's long 1998 interview with bin Laden, which it re-broadcast with English subtitles not long after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, brought the channel praise and condemnation in almost equal measure. In an editorial on October 14, 2001, the *New York Daily News* described Al-Jazeera as "one of the most potent weapons in the Islamic Axis arsenal". The newspaper then opined, almost hysterically: "It is an Arab propaganda outfit controlled by the medieval government of Qatar that masquerades as a real media company. For years, it has inflamed the Arab world against the United States and its allies." The newspaper concluded that dealing with the station was "a job for the military". "Shutting it down should be an immediate priority because, left alone, it has the power to poison the air more efficiently and lethally than anthrax ever could." (Al-Jazeera unmasked: An Arab propaganda machine in the guise of real journalism, 2001)

During a meeting in Muscat, the Omani capital, in October 2002, the ministers of information in all six Gulf Co-operation Council states recommended that Al-Jazeera be banned in their countries because the station's news and programs "offend the whole Gulf region" (Staff reporter, 2002, p. 1). The United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman subsequently decided to allow the channel to stay. Saudi Arabia forbids Al-Jazeera staff from entering its territory, and in 2003 extended the ban to special events such as the hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Al-Ali was philosophical about these bans, suggesting that satellite technology allowed them a virtual form of entry. He said:

True, we do not exist in Bahrain, but we do cover events there. The same can also be said about Kuwait and other places, regardless of whether we have a presence there or not. We have been covering events without any problem. No one can say that they can boycott Al-Jazeera, because that is very difficult. (Al-Farah, 2003)

Others inside the station agreed with this assessment. Ballout said the coverage of events

ran against the grain of several Arab states to say the least, and the reverberations of which we can still feel, with the refusal to let us work in several states. We only have two bureaus, one in the UAE and one in Oman. While Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain have a problem with the way we do our business. So yes, it has caused us some problems, but it goes with the territory. I think if everyone was happy with us we won't be doing our job.

Since 2001, various Western government leaders have visited Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, to ask him to restrain the station. The US embassy in Qatar filed a formal diplomatic complaint with local authorities regarding Al-Jazeera's coverage. Bush administration officials made it clear that they were upset by what they viewed as Al-Jazeera's "unbalanced and anti-American" coverage. And in the aftermath of September 11, many Washington officials refused to appear on the channel despite numerous requests from Al-Jazeera's Washington bureau (Sullivan, 2000).

But Al-Jazeera has its defenders too. Organisations like the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Journalists sans Frontieres have lodged complaints about the aggressive statements coming out of the United States. "Arab government attempts to influence Al-Jazeera have garnered widespread attention over the years. We are disheartened to see US officials adopting similar tactics," said CPJ executive director Ann Cooper (quoted in Sullivan, 2000). Former CNN correspondent Peter Arnett rhetorically asked: "What about the US right-wing press that's been [bashing] Arabs? Do they rein them in? Do they rein in Fox TV? Are we going to order our own media to rein in its coverage? It's getting out of hand."

Aside from the press freedom implications, CPJ Middle East coordinator Joel Campagna noted, US calls for Qatar to censor Al-Jazeera may have backfired by generating criticism from the Arab world at a time when the United States needed the support of people in the region. "I think this elevates Al-Jazeera into an even more powerful organisation than it is," agreed Arnett. "Simply, it's a news source that's threatening the US. They don't have any guns. They haven't been traced to bin Laden." (quoted in Campagna, 2001)

Some critics of Al-Jazeera have maintained that the station is willing to criticize Arab governments in the region, but will not challenge Qatar's rulers. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman argues that Al-Jazeera sometimes "goes easy" on the Doha government. "To be sure, Al-Jazeera goes easier on Qatar than it does on Saudi Arabia, but it has actually aired charges of torture in Qatar." (Friedman, 2001) The CPJ argues that the station has generally been well regarded for its editorial independence, despite being funded by the emir of Qatar until November 2001. "Nevertheless, it has been taken to task for usually avoiding tough scrutiny of Qatari affairs and any strong criticism of the ruling Al-Thani family." (Campagna, 2001) Local Qatari families sometimes wonder the same thing (Interview with author (anonymity requested), 2002).

More seasoned thinkers believe that muzzling Al-Jazeera would be a case of shooting the messenger. Yosri Fouda, head of Al-Jazeera's London bureau, asked rhetorically: "If bin Laden is going to send a tape, who will he send it to? To CNN, who he probably considers a representative of 'the enemy'? No. To an Arab government channel? No, because there's just as much animosity there." Al-Jazeera was relaying valuable information that the West did not have, Fouda said, and it would continue doing so "for as long as everything is verified and as long as time and space are given for different viewpoints" (Sullivan, 2001). Journalists in the Arab world also see United States policy as hypocritical for pressuring Al-Jazeera to modify its coverage, given the American view of itself as a symbol of freedom and democracy. Daoud Kuttab, director of the Institute of Modern Media at Al-Quds University on the West Bank and an observer of Arab regional media, believes Al-Jazeera's work has been professional and balanced. "As to the Americans, they are completely wrong and apply a double standard. I can see why they are angry but it is not because Al-Jazeera is not fair. On the contrary, I think they wish for Al-Jazeera to be biased to the US." (quoted in Campagna, 2001).

Al-Jazeera's creators appreciated early on the power of media technologies, particularly satellites and more recently the Internet, to enter Arabian homes and tell compelling stories. "You could once control the information before there was Internet, before there was satellite," noted Al-Ali. "People got much of their information from government sources. ... When satellite channels started, it was no longer possible to hide the sources of information from the viewing audience. This is the atmosphere in which Al-Jazeera started." (quoted in Schleifer, 2000) Many countries have managed to block the BBC terrestrial services, but they cannot block satellite channels or the Internet, Al-Ali said. "If something is on a Western channel, it has a limited effect. But Al-Jazeera affects a much larger audience, because it's in Arabic." (quoted in Schleifer, 2000)

The barriers that prevented dissemination of information to Arab citizens have been torn down because of developments in information technology and telecommunications worldwide, Al-Ali said. "The Arab information ministries

can no longer control information. No one can control information." In the 21st century, the news business had changed but the news mentality in many Arab states had not. "And, if there has been a change, it is very modest and has not caught up with the rapid change in the technology and information sectors worldwide." (quoted in Al-Farah, 2003)

Others who work at the station agree with this assessment. Ballout says:

Al-Jazeera has managed to push a crack in the dogma of media in the Arab world. I think we have the lead and people now are following. Al-Jazeera has blasted the censors. The rest are stepping, a step at a time, towards perhaps how media should be practiced professionally, with lesser ... censorship, lesser control, lesser influence of whatever powers that be.

For his part, Ballout is happy to see that Arab media have moved towards the type of service that the Arab public deserves. "For decades," he said, "the Arab public has been treated by the media as simply a pot where news is chosen, disinfected, doctored and thrown in." And the public had to accept it. The difference today is that the public can now see news "as raw, as it is". Ballout says:

We are proud to say that this is what Al-Jazeera has started. Someone has said that Al-Jazeera has started a revolution in media, and I think this statement is borne out because so many media are ... trying to base their ethos along the lines that Al-Jazeera has come out openly with.

Al-Jazeera received much criticism during the Iraq war in March-April 2003 because it broadcast footage of the dead and bloodied bodies of Coalition soldiers. It also showed images of maimed and dead civilians, especially children. Much of this footage was gory and bloody. The channel responded to this criticism by saying it had a duty to show the world casualties on all sides in the Iraq war. "War has victims from both sides," said Al-Jazeera's editor in chief, Ibrahim Hilal. "If you don't show both sides, you are not covering the war." (El Deeb, 2003) A former BBC Middle East correspondent and an expert on the region's media, Tim Llewelyn, said Al-Jazeera was doing what the BBC had taught it to do. It was providing coverage of the war from another perspective. Many Al-Jazeera journalists were "products of the BBC" because they had worked for the corporation's Arabic service before joining the channel, Llewelyn said. "The Arab media is used to it [criticism from the West] and they talk about double standards. What they are doing is showing the war from a different perspective while we show it from a British perspective." (Deans, 2003) Nicola Baldwin, a freelance journalist working for the Middle Eastern Broadcasting Corporation in Dubai, said there was also a cultural element to the debate. Middle East television had much less of a taboo about showing close-ups of dead bodies. "TV stations in the Middle East have always shown

pictures of [dead] bodies. They don't have the same restrictions – it's normal for them. They will show pictures of dead Palestinians and Israelis, for instance.” (Baldwin, 2003). It should be noted that Al-Jazeera removed images of bloodied Coalition soldiers until the soldiers' families had been notified, after the Pentagon asked it to do so (*New York Times*, 2003). Television stations in numerous other countries continued to show them.

Al-Jazeera has made television news topical in the Arab world, through a combination of professionalism and controversy. Before Al-Jazeera went on the air in November 1996, Arab stations ignored news, concentrating on entertainment. That has changed. And more changes are afoot. Viewers were turned off because the media gave the official side, whereas Al-Jazeera was different because it stuck to “the viewers' side, which is the most important” (Al-Farah, 2003). Al-Jazeera gives more than the official view, deliberately offering opinions from different viewpoints. This policy is reflected in the station's motto, emblazoned in Arabic on its publicity brochure: “al-ra'i ... wal ra'i al-akhr”. In English it means “opinion ... and the other opinion”. This is reflected in the titles of its talk programs – *The Opposite Direction*, *More Than One Opinion* and *No Frontiers* – which screen about 9.30 most evenings. Its news programs offer breadth and depth of content, with bulletins at the top of the hour plus a full hour at dawn, early morning, midday and late evening. The channel boasts two flagship investigative programs that screen after the evening talk shows about 10pm. All station timings are based on Saudi Arabian time, which is three hours ahead of GMT.

From Ballout's perspective, the origins of this varied programming are simple. “To gel all this together, to come up with a good product,” he said, “you need a constant measure of freedom, for your journalists to express themselves through. And here we have the acid test.”

Al-Jazeera ... has taken the element of freedom and transparency to extremes – perhaps, some people say.... We believe we can still go further than that. It's just a matter of if the others can create for themselves a playing field the boundaries of which are wide enough for them to express themselves satisfactorily, to be happy with themselves in the first place as journalists and then to satisfy the audience that [we] have spoiled for all intents and purposes by getting them used to news that has been unedited, uncensored and to a very considerable extent balanced.

He said that if that news was imperfect, that “is just because of the way people are”.

A journalist is a human being at the end of the day. He's got his loves, his likes, his hates. So perhaps it is very difficult for a journalist, like any other person, to be fair, because fairness is a matter of the heart and the spirit. I would not claim that any of my colleagues have attained a spiritual clarity.

What should happen, he thinks, is that a journalist should create a level playing field by being balanced. "If a journalist can manage to do that ... he would be going a long way towards doing his job," said Ballout. This search for balance is the way in which Al-Jazeera sees itself as revolutionary.

Some commentators think the station may have gone too far, complaining that it deliberately courts controversy. Some believe that the "raw, as it is" method of presenting leads to the "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality prevalent in local news in the United States. Others believe that Al-Jazeera's choice of content reflects the Arab perspective on world events, telling the truth through Arabic eyes. That means the war in Iraq is being presented through the eyes of average Iraqis, not through the eyes of Coalition soldiers. This is very much a different perspective. Dr Lena Jayyusi, a Palestinian media commentator, applauds Al-Jazeera's news for its depth, breadth and analysis.

I was in Paris when the war against Iraq started. I had access to CNN and BBC there around the clock. But, despite the pleas and warnings of friends and relatives about flying back to the Gulf, and questions about whether I was worried or fearful about doing so whilst the war was taking place, I could not wait to get back, just so I could follow the war through the coverage of Al-Jazeera. Literally. I knew I would not get one-sided propaganda on this issue, and I would get to see really what was going on at ground zero. This has indeed been the case, at a time when networks like the BBC and CNN sanitise the images and reports they air. This reaction is pretty well general in the Arab world. (Jayyusi 2003)

Dr Badran Badran, another Palestinian media commentator who is an avid Al-Jazeera viewer, believes the station leads in the area of freedom of expression. "Arabs appreciate a station that covers all major events very well and is not afraid to tell the truth," he said. "I appreciate the station's coverage of inter- and intra-Arab issues in a transparent and open manner. I also admire the station's echoing of Arab voices against what they perceive to be an ineffective and dysfunctional Arab body politic." Dr Badran said he appreciated Al-Jazeera's commitment to be balanced and objective. "[But] I do not appreciate the lack of intellectualism in some of its talk shows which smell of political agitation without a real agenda." (Badran, 2003)

Ballout counters that this lack of an agenda has its own value:

I think that our *raison d'être* is the ... other opinion. ... I believe without freedom of expression, a human being is missing. Without a human being being able to express himself, in a responsible way, without being told "this is a taboo, don't touch" – in other words you are telling him not to think. Ultimately people will become stale. If they can't express, why

should they think. Or they would think and bottle it up until such a day that they would explode. It's not only that we believe in freedom of expression, we practice it.

Beyond attracting an audience, Ballout believes that freedom of expression ultimately will profoundly impact the entire Arab world. He said:

I was discussing the issue of freedom of expression and democracy with a senior colleague the other day. My colleague said that Al-Jazeera will have another role, and that's leading with freedom of expression towards democratising the community and Arab society. This idea made sense to me. I have reached the stage where I have started thinking [that] freedom of expression and democracy are one and the same, and there is hardly any difference. Because to be able to practice democracy you have to have freedom of expression, and to have freedom of expression you have to have democracy. So perhaps there is a fine line that separates freedom of expression and democracy. So in essence, for you Americans, we are practising democracy in Qatar.

This wasn't always the case in Qatar. In 1995, Sheik Hamad, then crown prince of Qatar, overthrew his father – on holiday in Europe – in a bloodless coup. Analysts say the crown prince was impatient with his father's reluctance to release funds for investment. The new emir and his foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani, promptly announced a new order and set out to challenge Saudi primacy in the Gulf region. They hoped Al-Jazeera would demonstrate the country's independence and give the small kingdom a voice in the world (Curtiss, 1998). Sheik Hamad founded Al-Jazeera by decree in February 1996 and it started broadcasting on November 1 of that year. Initial funding of somewhere between \$137 and \$140 million was provided on the understanding that the station would be self-sustaining within five years of debut. The station operated for six hours a day initially, quickly moved to 12, and on January 1, 1999, it started broadcasting around the clock (Zednik, 2002).

The emir, Sheik Hamad, abolished the position of minister of information in 1998, a radical move given that every Arab nation has a ministry of information or culture whose role is to control and regulate the media. Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al-Thani is chairman of the board of Al-Jazeera and a member of the Qatari royal family. He noted that the ministry of information in Arab countries is designed to control the news media. "We looked to the Western world which has very advanced media, and found that there are no ministries of information. We don't see that a ministry of information has any positive role to play in future media projects." (quoted in Transcript of interview with Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al-Thani, 2001)

Audience data are not easily available in the Arab world, but the generally agreed figure is that about 20 million households watch Al-Jazeera regularly – a huge audience, given the large number of people in extended Middle East households. Most households receive it via satellite. Dishes are almost ubiquitous in the Arab world – tens of millions of Arab families own them – and cost less than \$100. “They are as common in Cairo slums as they are in Dubai mansions. Al-Jazeera beams its signal free of charge to most countries.” Outside the Arab world, in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, Al-Jazeera is usually offered as part of a subscription package (Ajami, 2001).

Managing director Al-Ali attributes the station’s success to three factors.

First is the financial means, which, if available, would ensure the technical resources, which are equally important. Second is the existence of a specialised, good working team, which is under constant training. Third and most important is the availability of a margin of freedom. (Al-Farah, 2003)

Al-Jazeera has earned a reputation that inspires love and hate in almost equal measures (Whitaker, 2003, p. 1). Until Al-Jazeera arrived, Arab viewers rarely recognised newscasters, though the people who introduced variety programs were well known. Al-Ali noted that in the past few years, presenters and newscasters have become famous – “like film stars” – because of their exposure on the channel.

For a station with such a large reach and loud voice, Al-Jazeera is located in a small building with a tiny newsroom and – by Western standards – a minuscule staff. The palm trees, satellite dishes and transmission masts outside dwarf the headquarters building in Qatar’s capital, Doha. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, touring the building in 2000, is said to have exclaimed: “This matchbox. All this noise is coming out of this matchbox.” (quoted in Friedman, 2001; Zednik, 2002) The main newsroom, with about 70 workstations, measures 40m in each direction. Al-Jazeera has 755 employees worldwide, compared with CNN’s 4000. Only 75 journalists work in the Doha newsroom, said Ballout, who is one of three people authorised to give media interviews (Ballout, 2003). The others are managing director Al-Ali and chairman Sheik Hamad. Reporter Rick Zednik, who spent 12 days in Qatar in late 2001, described the journalists in the newsroom as a loose, sociable bunch, representing almost all 22 members of the Arab League. “Moroccan producers, Syrian talk show hosts, Iraqi translators, Algerian fixers, Sudanese librarians, Palestinian secretaries, and Qatari executives all speak together in Arabic.” (Zednik, 2002) No one nationality dominates, though almost all are Muslims. The newsroom is a secular place, but a tiny mosque sits behind the main building. Journalists are united through their language and religion, though not necessarily their politics. Al-Ali believes this gives his station an edge over rivals in the region. “In Iraq we know the language,” Al-Ali has said. “We know the mentality. It’s very easy for

us to find out things and move around there.” (quoted in Whitaker, 2003, p. 1) The journalists come from many different backgrounds, Al-Ali said. “There are communists, secularists and Islamists. But they produce professional work in the end.” (Al-Farah, 2003)

Dima Khatib has worked as a reporter and producer for Al-Jazeera since 1997. A Syrian, she initially worked for Swiss Radio International in Bern. On the evening we interviewed her, it was her day off and she had already spent seven hours at the station, and was about to return to translate Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar’s broadcast from the Azores. Khatib speaks seven languages fluently and loves working at the channel. When she started it “felt like home” because it gave her a chance to “put all her experiences together” in an Arab context. “There is no typical day in my life, actually. This would be the hardest question for me to answer.” Working for Al-Jazeera gave her huge opportunities for travel, and to show the world that many of their perceptions of Arab women were stereotypes (Khatib, 2003).

Al-Ali maintains that his journalists’ style is more similar to the BBC than CNN: “We are closer to the ideas and the rhythm of the reports of the BBC.” Chief editor Ibrahim Helal said Al-Jazeera was set up about the same time that the Orbit-funded BBC Arabic TV service was closed down. Al-Jazeera brought 17 former BBC staff to Doha to help build the channel. “We built Al-Jazeera up on the Western experience we had,” said Helal, who moved from London to Qatar.

From day one most of our editorial staff were from this BBC environment – assignment editors, interview producers, news-gathering editors, even picture editors. ... even after five years if we’re in doubt in a certain situation, we convene and ask ourselves, if we were in London now what would we do? (Sullivan, 2001)

Al-Jazeera’s staff are Arabs but most have had experience working with Western media – “they’re ex-BBC, ex-US media – but all are Arabs”.

Reporters gained professional experience from the BBC, but their background as Arabs meant they adapted this experience to the Arab world. “We know the mentality of the Arabs – but we also want the expatriate Arab audience, who are used to Western media.” Al-Jazeera had worked hard to create a “culture of television journalism” in the newsroom, Helal said (quoted in Schleifer, 2000). In an interview with *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, Al-Ali pointed out that chairman Sheikh Hamad had worked as a journalist for 14 years and “thinks like a journalist” – implying he appreciated freedom of expression. “He’s got good experience in the media. He’s a graduate in communications from Qatar University; he’s got 14 years of experience in the field. He thinks as a journalist, and that helps us a lot. He knows what we want exactly.” (Schleifer, 2000). *Asia Times* magazine, based in Hong Kong, said Qatari

officials likened their relationship with the channel to that which the British Broadcasting Corporation enjoyed with the British Government, but added a codicil: "It is a well-known fact that Qatari foreign minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani owns 35 per cent of the channel and is a cousin of the Qatari emir." (Janardhan, 2002)

Al-Jazeera is not a member of the Arab States Broadcasting Union. The channel initially applied for membership, but the union rejected it, claiming that Al-Jazeera failed to respect the union's code of honour, which includes not broadcasting material critical of any Arab head of state. Al-Ali admitted the channel had tried to join in the beginning. "We would be an addition to them as much as they could be a support to us. We are not losing anything by not being part, though; there's no advantage for us." (quoted in Schleifer, 2000) By 2003, the channel was seeing its non-membership as a badge of honour, an indication that it was not part of the broadcasting establishment.

Al-Jazeera's chairman, Sheik Hamad, has maintained that the channel is going in the same direction as the state of Qatar. He cited elections for a chamber of commerce, plans for parliamentary elections and municipal elections with women's participation – as candidates and voters – as recent examples of modernisation. Qatar was the first Gulf nation to hold elections for municipal positions:

I think this direction corresponds with the direction of the media, be it Al-Jazeera or lifting censorship on local Qatari newspapers. The two go together in this stage, and I think the direction of Al-Jazeera is a natural one that corresponds with the strategy Qatar is taking. (Transcript of interview with Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al-Thani, 2001)

If imitation is a form of flattery, then Al-Jazeera should be flattered. Several broadcasters are looking at re-creating its formula. Abu Dhabi Television, the flagship of Emirates Media Incorporated, has an extensive news operation that gained much attention from Arab viewers because of its coverage of the intifada violence from September 2001. It set up a bureau in a prime location in central Baghdad several months before the Iraq war started. The station distributed \$16 million worth of backpack video equipment with satellite uplinks to people on the ground in Iraq. Many of these people were not trained as reporters, but they managed to get some impressive footage. These strategic moves enabled the channel to provide superior coverage of the war, especially after Iraq evicted CNN's four journalists within days of the war starting (Personal communication (anonymity requested), 2003).

Late in 2002, the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Centre, with headquarters in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, announced the formation of Al-Arabiya, intended to be a 24-hour news channel. It launched on February 20, 2003, initially broadcasting for 12 hours a day. It sees Al-Jazeera as its main

competition. Salah Negm, head of news at MBC, worked for Al-Jazeera from July 1996 until September 2001. Negm said journalists with TV experience at an international level were rare in the Arab world. "The industry is not yet mature and the training in most of the mass communication schools is not up to the required standards," he said. The \$300 million investment in Al-Arabiya is said to come from private Saudi, Kuwaiti and Lebanese businessmen, but the Saudi Government, through parent company MBC, will be able to exercise influence (Khalaf, 2003). Within weeks of the Iraq war ending, Al-Arabiya was the highest-rating news channel in the Gulf (Baldwin, 2003).

In Beirut, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation and London-based newspaper *Al-Hayat* spent \$24 million a year on a joint venture in which the newspaper's 69 correspondents supply news for LBC International's three half-hour bulletins each day. Jihad Khazen, *Al-Hayat's* founding editor-in-chief, and LBCI's managing editor, Salameh Nemett, said if the venture succeeded another 24-hour news channel could emerge. Saudi money is also behind this partnership (Khalaf, 2003).

For his part, Ballout is not worried. "If imitation is any indication of respect, then Al-Jazeera is doing well," he notes. "This little bit of competition is always healthy." One key issue in the drive for editorial independence will be revenue streams for all stations. Despite the fact that Al-Jazeera has the most popular news and is the second most-watched pan-Arab station, it generated only about \$130 million in advertising revenue in 2002. By contrast, the Lebanese Broadcasting Company – the region's most-watched network – attracted about \$186 million. MBC generated almost \$600 million; and LBCSAT generated about \$132 million (Pan Arab Research Centre, 2003). Most Arab stations earn about 90 per cent of their revenue from advertising. But commercials account for only 40 per cent of Al-Jazeera's revenues. The rest comes from renting equipment, cable subscription fees, and selling programs and videotapes. Three-minute sections of bin Laden footage have reportedly fetched as much as \$500,000 apiece. As of early 2002, the station operated without government subsidies (Zednik, 2002).

Yet this is not the same as paying for itself. Seven years after launching and 16 months after it was cut loose from the emir's financial umbilical cord – and despite a huge audience of about 20 million households – Al-Jazeera was not making money as of early 2003. "We have not yet reached the profit-making phase," said Al-Ali in January 2003. "In fact, we are still trying to break even by covering our expenses from our work as much as possible and by diversifying the sources of income." (Al-Farah, 2003) The sale of footage from the Afghan conflict to other television channels has boosted revenue, as should footage from the Iraq war.

Meanwhile, some major advertisers operate an undeclared boycott, Al-Ali admitted. "Advertising in the Middle East is not based on the commercial, it is based on the political," he said, though he declined to give more details. Others

blame Saudi influence and moves by the Gulf Co-operation Council against the channel (Whitaker, 2003, p. 2). In an interview early in 2000, Al-Ali said the channel needed to change the mentality of the businessman in the region.

Usually when you have a large audience, all the advertising companies come to you. Here, all the advertising businesses are impacted by political considerations; they think about the political side rather than business side. I think this will change, just like the freedom of the press has changed on the editorial side. (quoted in Schleifer, 2000)

Regional and multinational companies tend to avoid ruffling the feathers of host governments, so they also have not bought advertising. Al-Ali admitted that Saudi Arabian companies had tried to influence Al-Jazeera's coverage by cutting advertising budgets for the station or threatening to do so. The tactic had had no effect, he said. "We would lose our credibility with the audience." Pepsico and General Electric cancelled advertising campaigns worth a combined \$6 million in 2001, Al-Ali said (Zednik, 2002). Some marketing people have suggested taking advantage of the Al-Jazeera brand, probably one of the most valuable in the Middle East. A tobacco company wanted to use the channel to sell Al-Jazeera cigarettes, but that idea was dropped. Branded sunglasses might be a safer option, marketing staff suggested (Whitaker, 2003, p. 2).

Al-Jazeera still has big plans, despite cash shortfalls. On March 16, 2003 it announced that an English-language Website would launch that month, two years after launch of *aljazeera.net*. The new site debuted 10 days later, presumably hastened by the need to cover the Iraq war (see <http://english.aljazeera.net>), but hackers brought it down within days. Al-Jazeera also announced it would be broadcasting in English early in 2004. It remains to be seen whether the latter occurs, because other broadcast plans announced years earlier have failed to materialise. Late in 2001, Al-Ali announced plans to launch new Arabic-language networks, including a business news channel in cooperation with CNBC and a documentary channel along the lines of National Geographic or Discovery. The CNBC deal eventually went to a Dubai syndicate (Nair, 2003). In January 2003, Al-Ali repeated the plan to establish an Arabic-language documentary channel by the end of that year, along with opening bureaus in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur (Al-Farah, 2003). The channel has signed an agreement with the BBC to set up a training centre, because Al-Ali appreciates the importance of training. To stay at the top, he said, "we have to keep up with the latest in the technological and technical fields and raise the efficiency of the technicians and employees".

Conclusion

Despite the number of pretenders, Al-Jazeera intends to stay at the top. It

has the advantage of a good reputation among Arab viewers, the benefit of being the first 24-hour news and talk station in the Arab world, and dedicated and well-trained staff. The major issue will be its ability to pay for itself and to keep key people. Despite having a smaller staff budget compared with CNN and BBC World, broadcasting remains an expensive business. Small staff numbers mean that reporters work long hours, and it may prove difficult to retain staff long-term if they are tired, and if richer channels come by with cheque books open.

Regardless of whether reviewers have been negative or positive, it is safe to say Al-Jazeera has attracted great attention, putting tiny Qatar with its population of perhaps 600,000 on the world map. And, while some critics object to the "how" and the "what" that the station puts on air, those who work at Al-Jazeera believe in their mission. "The journalist always makes a difference. From a basic reporter up to the editor in chief, everyone makes a difference. We feel that we are making a difference, especially in view of how the traditional Arab media has been for the past four or five decades," said Ballout. Al-Jazeera and its staff, he believes, are a breath of fresh air. They are happy to be creating ripples in the stagnant pond of Arabic broadcasting.

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