

question that Turner and this reviewer would agree is vital to the effective functioning of democracy, needs to be set within the emerging context of the digital future. When there are myriads of channels to choose from, when linear television has given way to video on demand, and when the younger generation of digital natives are trawling the internet or relying on comedy or satirical shows for their knowledge of the world, how can the journalistic mission continue to be fulfilled? There are no easy answers to this question, but Turner's book provides an exceptionally useful analysis to fuel the debate, a debate that must be had, with as wide a range of participants as possible.

It would seem appropriate that the final word on this topic be given to one of the true giants of current affairs reporting, Ed Murrow, as celebrated in the recent film *Good Night, Good Luck*. His reflection on television in 1958 remains utterly apposite today:

The instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes and it can even inspire, but it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.

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## Not the perfect solution, but at least some hope

*Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*, by Hugh Miles. London: Abacus, 2005, 438pp. ISBN 0349118078

*The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, by Mohamed Zayani (ed). London: Pluto Press, 2005, 222pp. ISBN 0745323332.

AT THE beginning of this century, the Israeli author David Grossman wrote:

In the impossible relationships that exist in the Middle East each competing ideology has for years appeared to suffer from almost complete blindness to reality's complexity. Each is certain that the other is not telling the truth (Grossman, 2001).

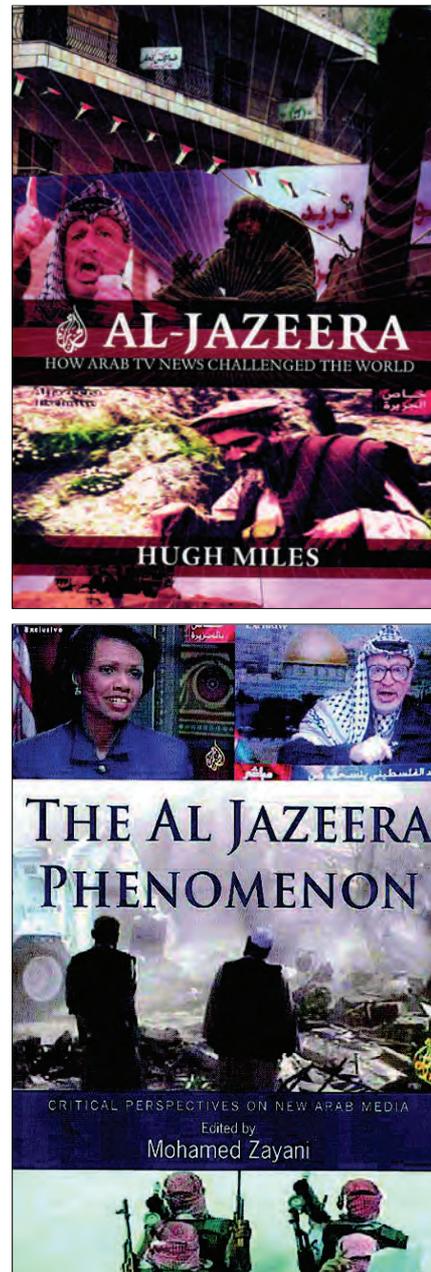
One of the hopes attached to Al Jazeera is that it will introduce a level of objective, rational debate to Mid-

dle East politics and help the different sides see more clearly what needs to be done.

Unfortunately, as Hugh Miles discovered, this aim has not been entirely achieved. Interviewing a Jordanian family near the end of his detailed account of the rise of the Qatar-based channel, he soon discovered that just below the surface lie all sorts of fantastic assumptions about how the world works.

Many of these are familiar enough to those of us living in this part of the world: That Al Jazeera is a plot by the Zionists, that it is funded by the CIA or M16. These are harmless enough delusions; they pale beside the fervent conviction of many that Princess Diana was assassinated because she was carrying Dodi Al Fayed's son who might one day sit on the throne as a Muslim king of Britain, or that Mossad ordered 5000 Jews not to go to work in the Twin Towers on September 11; or even, as one bright-eyed taxi driver told me recently, that the CIA tells Saudi Arabia to pay Osama bin Laden to kill Shi'ites in Iraq.

If Al Jazeera has not entirely laid to rest the more lunatic theories that bubble up around the *sheesha* bowl, it has at least introduced a much needed corrective to the hagiographic mush that fills the local news in many



Middle Eastern countries. It broadcasts criticism, discussion, divided opinion, news and viewpoints that have never been seen before. It has also caused outrage by inviting Israeli spokesmen to appear on screen. Many Arabs have been angered by what they see as a deliberate attempt to sow dissent within the *ummah*, the pan-Islamic community, by openly criticising incompetent or corrupt practices.

Certainly, any number of Middle Eastern governments hate Al Jazeera. It has had its offices closed and staff restricted in a number of countries, including, as Miles points out, newly 'liberated' Iraq and most recently in Iran (All activities, 2005).

Miles does well in describing the early days of Al Jazeera. The channel was born after the BBC naively agreed to provide an Arabic television channel for the Saudi-owned Orbit satellite network. It is astonishing that the BBC could have been so foolish as to think it would be allowed to maintain its own standards of integrity and fairness by the Saudis. Inevitably, the Saudis pulled the plug and many highly skilled, BBC-trained, journalists lost their jobs.

At this point the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, entered the fray and invited many of the former BBC staffers to join a new

venture he was setting up called Al Jazeera. The channel struggled along in its early days, but gradually expanded its broadcasting hours. However, it was hampered by being transmitted on an obscure wavelength on the Saudi-owned Orbit platform and might have stayed there until a pornographic film accidentally appeared on Canal France Internationale's Middle East service. Incensed, the Saudis threw the French off the air and allocated their much stronger signal to Al Jazeera.

However, if Al Jazeera survived its infancy, it has continued to struggle financially. Miles blames the Saudis for much of Al Jazeera's troubles with advertising, suggesting that advertisers have been pressured to drop the channel in order to keep doing business with Riyadh.

The two main thrusts of the book are Al Jazeera's effect on the satellite news industry and its relationship with the American administration. While its model is the BBC World Service, Al Jazeera's impact in the Arab world has been more akin to that of CNN. It has spawned a number of imitators, most notably the Dubai-based (and Saudi-backed) Al Arabiya. Abu Dhabi television now competes in the same market and during the invasion of Iraq in 2002 many of the pictures seen on Western television

screens came from its crews.

Even the American administration has been forced to react to the growth of Arabic news channels by launching its own satellite channel, Al Hurra. The channel is promoted as being dedicated to American standards of journalism to an audience that largely seems to regard it as a tool of US imperialism (Arabic channel, 2004).

Al Jazeera's relationship with the American administration has not been easy. While some Arab viewers see Al Jazeera as a tool of the Israelis and Americans, the Bush administration has vilified the station as a mouthpiece for Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorists. Al Jazeera offices in Kabul and Baghdad were destroyed by US forces and one of its journalists killed. Its website, [www.aljazeera.net](http://www.aljazeera.net), was shut down by hackers and it has faced tremendous problems finding office space in America. Al Jazeera has, it seems, reached that fabled point where it knows its journalism is objective because people on both sides hate it.

And yet there is a note of caution here: Despite all the praise given to Al Jazeera for allowing open discussion, allowing a range of views to be heard and airing previously unheard of criticism of Arab regimes, might it be that after a while people will be-

come so used to this new freedom that they will be happy to just talk and vent their anger on air and not actually do anything about their situation? A question must arise as to whether channels like Al Jazeera are tolerated because, like the Hundred Flowers Campaign or the Democracy Wall Movement in China, they can act as a state-sanctioned safety valve for a disgruntled populace.

Recently, Al Jazeera announced that its long awaited English language channel will be on air some time next year. If this actually happens, it will be an extremely important development. It will make the channel more accessible to non-Arabic speakers and create a potentially huge new audience outside the Middle East. It will also create a new market within the Middle East, where the official English language news services are as uninformative as their Arabic counterparts and much rarer.

Miles' book is not the first book on Al Jazeera; indeed Amazon lists at least half a dozen volumes on the topic. Miles' work is aimed at a wide, general audience and is likely to be more easily available than most. It bears all the hallmarks of somebody who knows the Middle East intimately, speaks Arabic and who is prepared to travel widely and talk with as many people as possible to form

an overall picture of the topic.

Having said that, his book has its faults. It has occasional longeurs, which a more conscientious editor would have removed. More seriously, although bearing a 2005 publication date, it fails to mention the death of Yasser Arafat or the capture of Saddam Hussein. More annoyingly, there are no footnotes and no bibliography, which makes it difficult to evaluate his sources. It is to be hoped that these serious problems will be rectified in the next edition.

Mohamed Zayani's collection of essays on the origins and significance of Al Jazeera complements Miles' book by adding a range of views by mostly Arab, but also French and American academics.

The question of the channel's significance is at the heart of Zayani's collection, with some writers arguing that it signals a major change in the Arabic media and others saying that too much should not be expected of it. Zayani himself argues in the introduction that we should be sceptical of claims that the new channel and its imitators will cause a major transformation.

Real change cannot be expected solely or mainly from the media...Democracy cannot emanate just from the media; the political systems and institutions themselves have

to change, evolve and adapt. Short of that, our faith in the new Arab media is misplaced (Zayani, 2005, p. 35).

Not all his writers agree with him. Faisal Al Kasim, host of the station's most controversial programme, *Al Ittijah Al Muaakis (The Opposite Direction)* argues that at the very least it has helped construct a new public sphere, claiming that

satellite talk shows have brought the Arab masses together and given them a pan-Arab identity...one might argue that popular talk shows on Al Jazeera have succeeded where Gamal Abdel Naser failed (Zayani, p. 103).

Whether the changes emanating from Al Jazeera are on a macro or micro level will not be clear for some years and will be endlessly debated in the meantime. However, it is probably true to say that the station has already created a public sphere quite different from the one at which most government-controlled stations are aimed.

Al Kasim's programme is the subject of another chapter by Muhammad Ayish from the University of Sharjah. Ayish is critical of the programme, describing it as an arena in which Al Kasim provokes his guests into fighting, rather than debating and carefully creating and

maintaining tension to sustain an atmosphere of hostility.

Naomi Sakr, of Westminster University, examines Al Jazeera's women's programmes in a thoughtful chapter that draws parallels with broader issues of gender equality and development in the developing world. Using the concept of the counterpublic, she argues that Al Jazeera's female viewers are afforded an alternative space on television by programmes such as *Lil Nissa Faqat (For Women Only)* precisely because they provide a forum for discussion where women can feel they are being addressed on their own terms.

How this view will sit with those who argue that the place of women can be advanced only when they are treated equally with (or as if they were equal with) men, is open to question. It has echoes of the Western feminist/separatist movement of the 1970s, but also, of course, of the whole question of the separation of women into their own public and private/public sphere in many Arab countries.

Olivier Da Lage and Mohammaed El Oifi provide closely argued accounts of Al Jazeera's role in the political sphere. They look at its role in relation to Qatar's foreign policy in the Gulf, especially in regards to Saudi Arabia and the wider implications of Qatar's relationship

with the United States.

R.S. Zarhana's examination of Al Jazeera's relationship with the US administration in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks is invaluable for anybody wanting to understand the misunderstandings surrounding the channel and its vilification by many quarters in the west. Zarhana uses Condon and Yousef's analogy of a dance between two partners from different cultures who distrust each other because of a total failure to understand body language or cultural reference points.

While Zarhana refers to specific interviews to bolster her argument, she indicates that a wider analogy exists. If her chapter is a classic analysis of inter-cultural communication gone wrong, then it is also symptomatic of a wider malaise; of good intentions undermined by too much certainty that one side will easily understand the other. On a broader scale, the failure of many Western governments to understand the parallel, but sometimes conflicting demands of the *ummah* (pan-Islamic nation) and the individual Arab nation-state, is probably the biggest tragedy of the dance between Al Jazeera, the Arabic world and the West.

In a way, this echoes Grossman's comments. Despite the best intentions, there is still misunderstanding

and often wilful blindness. Al Jazeera is not the perfect solution, but at least it offers the hope that it will keep people talking to each other. In the current situation, that may be all we can ask for.

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## Hong Kong still a sanctuary for dissident media ideas and sparks

*The Chinese Journalist: Mediating information in the world's most populous country*, by Hugo de Burgh. London and New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2003, 248pp, ISBN 0 415 30573 x

CHINA IS a fertile place for journalists' stories. We frequently read that China has changed and is continuing to do so for the better. But the magnitude and nature of changes in China may be hard to comprehend for journalists who observe them from the relatively stable freedoms of Western democracies.

One might consider the impact of political change on the single life of a 20th century Chinese intellectual. A friend of mine's Chinese grandmother decided to see out her days in Hong Kong. The old lady had been