
Al-Jazeera is perhaps one of the most investigated TV channels in the world. With a large number of newspapers articles, academic journals, full-length books, and also one long documentary film (Control Room, directed by Jehane Noujaim) that have all tried to shed light on this controversial channel, it may appear that there is little left to write about it. Miles’ book succeeds, however, in providing a fresh and insightful outlook on the Qatari channel, mainly through the author’s methodological choices and narrative style.

Miles’ interest in the subject of the book stems from both professional and personal reasons. Actually, the Arab world has long had an appeal for Miles. Born in Saudi Arabia to a diplomat father, he went to school in Libya, worked “as an au pair with a family in Cairo” (Miles, p. 4), and studied Arabic in Yemen and at Oxford. His interest in Al-Jazeera specifically started when he was working for the British Sky News channel as a freelance journalist to monitor Arab news channels’ coverage of the war against Iraq in 2003. Miles recognized that there was “a wealth of opinion and second-hand information” on the channel, but that first-hand information and “accurate facts issued by the organization itself” were scarce. In that sense, while Miles’ endeavour falls within the field of investigative journalism, his book goes beyond that. It fuses several genres together, namely journalistic investigation, ethnographic research, and historiographic study.

The book is divided into eleven chapters in addition to the introduction. The introduction as well as the two first chapters try to shed light on the cultural and political setting of the country that hosts the channel and the various factors that led to the establishment and rise of Al-Jazeera as a leading news channel in the region. Chapters 3 to 9 discuss the way Al-Jazeera operates and reports news and how it covered some of the main events that marked the beginning of the twenty-first century. Chapter 10 tries to capture ethnographically how Arab people receive Al-Jazeera and the effect of the latter on the advance of democracy in the Middle East. Finally, the last chapter discusses the future of the channel, mainly the projected launch of its English-speaking sister channel. It is clear that Miles moves from the general to the more specific, demonstrating that “the inside story” of one channel should be situated within a clear historical context. Indeed, for him, the story of Al-Jazeera becomes also the story of all the historical conjunctures within which this channel is operating: the diverse cultural, social, political, and economic factors that help explain how and why Al-Jazeera has become so popular and yet so controversial.

Miles points out a number of questions that form the core of his investigation. They concern mainly the circumstances and parties behind the establishment of the channel, how it was financed, and the presumed relationship between the channel and Osama Bin Laden and the resistance in Iraq. In addition, Miles attempts to investigate whether the channel heralds a new democratic era in the history of the Middle East, in particular, and the Arab world, in general, and how it is received by Arab people in the Arab world and diaspora. These questions are not exhaustive, since they may serve only to raise other sets of related questions. Thus, instead of answering directly the question of the claimed connection between Al-Jazeera and Bin Laden or the Iraqi resistance, Miles investigates the question of whether Al-Jazeera is biased in its coverage of the war against terrorism and against Iraq and whether a political agenda guides its editorial line.

Miles, in fact, allocates considerable space in the book to this last question. Having examined a span of time from the establishment of the channel in 1996 till the aftermaths of
the war against Iraq in 2003, Miles argues that the very fact different and opposing parties have leveled criticism at the channel testifies to Al-Jazeera’s respect of balance and professionalism, rather than to the opposite. He quotes a large number of contradictory opinions that all accuse Al-Jazeera of being biased against one party or another. One of Al-Jazeera’s staff summarizes this situation for Miles, when he states that the channel was accused of being “anti-Israeli by Israelis, Islamist by seculars and Arab nationalists, Arab nationalist by Israelis, Americans and Islamists, funded by the CIA, funded by bin Laden and funded by Saddam Hussein” (p. 56). Miles abstains in most cases from giving his opinion, letting the reader wonder at the absurdity of the accusations directed at the channel.

Miles’ travels around the world to investigate how the channel is received by Arabs revealed the same diversity of opinions. He points out that the channel’s popularity among Arabs throughout the world is only equaled by the controversy it causes. Miles remains sceptical, though, about the potential role of the channel in contributing to democratic changes in the region. He concludes that “to believe that satellite television is automatically going to make Arab societies democratic is to presume that the current state of affairs in the Arab World results from an information deficiency, which is not true” (p. 327). However, he asserts that Al-Jazeera has at least contributed to one clear positive development: it prompted Arab rulers, in an attempt to lure audiences away from it, to establish news channels that try to imitate Al-Jazeera in style and content, thus leading to greater media liberalization in the region.

Thus, Miles succeeds in answering convincingly most of the questions he raises in his book. He substantiates his argument with a wide range of evidence, such as textual analysis of news items, historical facts, and statistics and data drawn from diverse sources, in addition to interviews conducted with a large number of people, including Al-Jazeera’s staff, Western politicians, and common people. His powerful argument and the range of data he provides will certainly contribute decisively to refuting some of the harshest and most common accusations directed against the news channel, namely, that it supports terrorism or that its editorial line is directed by an anti-Western political agenda.

It is noteworthy that Miles’ argument seems to be underpinned by a clear ethical perspective that tries not only to analyze how news channels operate, but to prescribe how they should do it, as well. Thus, Miles contends that while it is possible to be balanced and neutral, no news channel can be objective. So like any other commercial channel, Al-Jazeera is “pitching itself at its viewership” (p. 359). That is, it is more inclined to report within the ethos boundaries of the audiences it is targeting. El-Nawawy and Iskandar confirm this view in their book on Al-Jazeera when they state that “[t]he issue is not who is delivering the message or when the message is being delivered; the issue is whether the message can connect with Arab viewers and whether they identify with its content” (2002, p. 190). El-Nawawy & Iskandar further advance the concept of “contextual objectivity” (p. 54) to argue that all news channels are objective insomuch as they try to work within the context of the cultural constraints in which they operate.

Unlike El-Nawawy & Iskandar, however, Miles believes that the concept of “contextual objectivity” has a limit. For him, there is a dividing line between abiding by a cultural perspective to convey news, on the one hand, and the respect of veracity, balance, and neutrality, on the other. This is a line which, he argues, Al-Jazeera did not trespass in its reporting of the war against Iraq, at a time when the major American news channels traded balance and critical journalism for the sake of patriotism. He points out, for example, that in the build-up to the war, “[w]hile Al-Jazeera, like many international networks, was deeply skeptical of the White House’s case for war, American networks wolfed it down uncritically” (Miles, p. 235). Moreover, unlike the sanitized reporting of war that some Western media practised, Al-
Jazeera wanted to report on the war but also on the “terrible humanitarian costs of it” (p. 169).

In that sense, Miles seems to support a type of journalism that Bell qualifies as one “that cares as well as knows” (1998, p. 16). Miles is right in insisting on linking any analysis of news media performance, especially when dealing with foreign news, to media ethics. Without an ethical commitment on the part of the media to remain balanced and critical, their work can easily become cheap propaganda.

On the other hand, though Miles tries to remain neutral throughout the book, his personal sympathy for Al-Jazeera sometimes affects the solidity of his argument. One example is when he points out that politically, Al-Jazeera “made Arab leaders more accountable for the way they behave” (Miles, p. 335). To support his argument, he refers to the example of a former Lebanese political leader, Elie Hobeika, who had to appear on television to clear himself of an accusation made against him on one of Al-Jazeera’s shows. Miles’ example is certainly a very weak one. First, Hobeika in that case acted simply as a former political leader of a Lebanese faction who has been long discredited for his alleged role in the Sabra and Shatilla massacres. Second, Al-Jazeera still does not dare to investigate issues directly involving senior Arab officials, let alone ministers or head of states.

Moreover, Miles seems to exaggerate in his unqualified claims that Al-Jazeera has particular effects either on political events or on its audiences. Miles argues, for instance, that Al-Jazeera’s “powerful visual messages [on the Intifada] politicized young Saudis and prompted them to interrogate their government about its relationship with America” (p. 91). Miles fails to explain how he came to that conclusion. The fact that Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Intifada coincided with some forms of political reaction from Saudi youth does not necessarily prove there is a causal relationship between the two. McQuail asserts, in this regard, that however pervasive they may be, “the mass media do not monopolize the flow of information we receive, nor do they intervene in all our wider social relations” (2000, p. 65). Mass media are only one factor that contributes to the construction of people’s political opinions and consciousness; other factors, such as personal experience, economic and social status, and cultural background, may play a more crucial role in that respect.

In general, while the subject of the book is very polemical and complex, Miles succeeds in conveying a very readable, coherent, and balanced perspective on it. He exploits his talent as a reporter and journalist to write in an affable and attractive style without falling into the trap of oversimplification. If the book tells the story of Al-Jazeera, Miles exploited the most salient techniques of storytelling, namely, narration and dialogue. Indeed, throughout the book, the author maintains a narrative tone even when he discusses abstract concepts in the fields of journalism, politics, or culture. The narration sometimes even veers into a dramatic suspense, such as when he describes the way Al-Jazeera’s journalist Yosri Fouda managed to interview Al-Qaeda’s Ramsi bin al-Shaibah in the latter’s hideout in Pakistan.

Moreover, Miles’ heavy use of quotes from interviews he conducted achieves two goals. It brings a dialogical element into the text that reflects the polemical nature of the issues discussed, and it makes the text more vivid, immediate, and attractive to the reader. The latter elements reflect the features of TV documentaries more than written texts. What helps achieve this effect is the book edition and layout. The book contains no footnotes or reference indexes. In fact, Miles either makes contextual references or does not make any references at all, assuming that some facts are well known or that statements attributed to well-known personalities can be easily verified. This shows that the book is intended not for a specialized readership only, but for a general one as well—especially in the West—of readers who might be curious about the channel that is often accused of having a link with terrorism.

But the real success of Miles’ work is that it tries to depict the development of communi-
cation politics and culture in Arab countries and the Middle East. Indeed, within Miles’ story of Al-Jazeera are interwoven many other stories of political decisions, successes, and limitations of the media industry in the region, the interaction and clash between the communication politics of different countries, and the communication of politics seeking to win media wars and the hearts and minds of people.

Miles’ book is certainly a qualitative contribution to media studies, and its originality lies in the fact that it sheds light on the conjunction between diverse fields such as political communication and media ethics. But Miles’ book is an excellent contribution to historiographic media research as well. Miles stresses that Al-Jazeera has made history because “it has reversed the flow of information so that now, for the first time in hundreds of years, it passes from East to West” (p. 426). His book, in fact, is an attempt to get a close picture of that historical process and to explain how it is taking place.

References

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