

Alternative TV: The war through Arab eyes

by [Gregg Reynolds](#) in the [April 19, 2003](#) issue

If good reporting can be judged by the enemies it makes, then al-Jazeera must be doing something right. The Arabic-language TV channel provoked rebukes from the U.S. government and military officials in the early days of “The War on Iraq” (al-Jazeera’s phrase) when it rebroadcast Iraqi footage of dead and captive U.S. soldiers. Shortly afterwards the New York Stock Exchange and the NASDAQ expelled al-Jazeera reporters from their trading floors.

On April 2, Iraq expelled one of al-Jazeera’s Baghdad correspondents and barred another from working, apparently because they had sought interviews without government permission. The network responded by suspending operations in Iraq. “They cannot dictate to us who can and who cannot work,” said editor-in-chief Ibrahim Helal.

Aficionados of the “clash of civilizations” school should hesitate before branding Osama bin Laden’s favorite TV station as a mere mouthpiece for the axis of evil. The Qatar-based network has a distinguished history of ruffling feathers within as well as outside the Arab world. Arab opinion leaders of every stripe have castigated the station at various times, and on more than one occasion Arab governments have demanded that Qatari authorities rein in the station.

To his credit, the Sandhurst-educated Emir of Qatar, who has underwritten the station’s expenses for most of its life, has steadfastly refused to interfere with editorial decisions.

Established in 1996 from the remnants of a failed venture between the BBC and Saudi Arabia, al-Jazeera burst on the Arab scene like a super-nova. Its productions were polished and visually sophisticated; its staff was composed of experienced professionals, many of them veterans of the BBC, all of them native speakers of Arabic; its programming was completely unfettered by the state-controlled censorship that had long dominated Arab media. And it was free to anyone with a satellite dish.

It is difficult to overstate the station’s impact. Prior to al-Jazeera, state control of media made for dreadful TV: uninformative, boring and unrelated to the issues of the day.

Serious, open debate occurred in private, rarely in organs of mass communication. Al-Jazeera broke all the taboos, exposing the hypocrisy and vapidness of official news reporting and airing the concerns and opinions of Arab populations in a way that had previously been unimaginable. The call-in sections of its wildly popular talk and debate shows provided ordinary citizens for the first time with the chance to express opinions in a public forum. The shows often took on the character of a transnational therapy session.

The immediate and widespread popularity of its programming has revolutionized mass communications in the Arab world to the point that competing services are now beginning to emerge, with similar editorial freedom. That’s why the *New York Times* editorialized against the expulsion of the network from Wall Street, arguing that al-Jazeera “deserves all the help it can get.”

Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the war in Iraq has been extensive. Because it still has relatively little advertising, reporters often get more time than they would on American commercial TV—five, six or even seven minutes is not unusual. Its entire schedule is now devoted to war coverage. It has employed reporters on the ground in most of Iraq’s major cities. News anchors usually follow up live reports with a series of questions in a lively,

conversational style, much like the one used by American media. The network interviews a wide range of experts from various fields and countries, including the U.S. Like American media, al-Jazeera has a stable of retired military men (from Arab militaries) to provide analysis.

Al-Jazeera reporters were approved for embedding with coalition forces, but since Kuwaiti and Saudi authorities refused them visas, it is not clear whether they made it to their assigned places. In any case, the kind of video-phone reporting from coalition military units so conspicuous in American reporting has been largely absent on al-Jazeera. Much of the live reporting in the first days of the war was from Iraqi cities. Reporters discussed the effects of the bombing campaign and interviewed residents.

Press conferences and speeches by major political and military figures in the U.S. and the United Kingdom receive extensive coverage, usually with simultaneous translation. American and British figures are frequently interviewed, and other world leaders also receive substantial attention. Al-Jazeera has full-time correspondents covering the Pentagon and the White House and others are based in New York and other major cities, along with many throughout the Arab world.

A striking contrast to American media is al-Jazeera's coverage of the Iraqi government. It tends to cover official Iraqi sources in much the same way U.S. media cover official American or British sources. During the first week of the war, al-Jazeera rebroadcast Iraqi TV coverage of Saddam Hussein's speeches and videos. It treated Iraqi government press conferences with the same degree of respect accorded to press conferences at coalition headquarters in Doha or at the Pentagon.

Another difference between al-Jazeera's coverage and American coverage is the amount of time and energy devoted to responses to the war in countries not directly involved in the conflict. Al-Jazeera allocates substantial time to reports on local reactions, such as the large demonstrations that occurred in Arab capitals in the first days of the war.

Antiwar protests in other parts of the world also received substantial coverage. Al-Jazeera aired interviews with antiwar figures and events that received little or no coverage in American media. By the same token, pro-war voices, such as those stressing the liberation of Iraqi, received little attention in the early days of the war.

Al-Jazeera is famously unafraid to broadcast grisly images, a reputation it earned with its footage of the Israel-Palestine conflict. It has broadcast a number of disturbing images from the Iraq war, including the images of dead American soldiers, for which it has been castigated in the U.S. Curiously, it has not shown much footage of Iraqi military casualties. It is hard to tell if this is a result of editorial decisions or if the network simply doesn't have the footage. Al-Jazeera broadcasts are also largely devoid of the sentimentality that frequently afflicts American media—no pieces about the soldier pining for the wife and new baby he left at home.

American critics of al-Jazeera complain of its biased reporting. Biased it is, much like every media organization. It seems safe to say that the Arab world by and large opposes the war and remains deeply suspicious of American motives and plans. Al-Jazeera's reporting reflects this. It is unapologetic in its Arab point of view. This approach will often offend American sensibilities

For example, al-Jazeera reporters speak of "American-British invaders," not "coalition forces." Considerable air time is devoted to covering civilian suffering. Some expert commentators are openly opposed to the war and hostile to the U.S., although perhaps no more so than some of the more fervent antiwar figures in the U.S. Reporters are always professional, but are often clearly disdainful of official American statements and enthusiastic about Iraqi successes.

An honest bias does not necessarily entail unfair or inaccurate reporting. Indeed, in the first few days of the war al-Jazeera proved to be a more reliable source of information than American sources regarding the battles in southern Iraq.

Al-Jazeera recently launched an English-language version of its Web page (though it was shut down by hackers), and is reportedly planning an English-language broadcasting service. Americans will soon be able to judge al-Jazeera for themselves.