

'It provides the one window through which we can breathe'

Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif explains why the al-Jazeera TV station is so important to Arabs

The Guardian, October 9, 2001

The first time I happened on al-Jazeera was in a hotel room in Cairo. I was channel-hopping at two in the morning and suddenly there was a channel, speaking in Arabic, but in a way I had only ever heard people speak in private - away from the censorship and the various state security services that dominate our public discourse.

This particular debate was between two Algerians: one a dissident (and exiled) journalist, the other a representative of the government. It was ferocious. They were naming names, citing incidents, quoting figures. It was live - and alive. Then, wonder upon wonder, there was a phone-in. People called from all over the world to ask questions, express views. I wondered if what I was watching was a play, or a hoax; the theatre is allowed a little more leeway than reportage. I phoned my mother, my brother: "That's al-Jazeera," they said. "Isn't it amazing?"

Back in London, I had a dish installed and I was in touch. When the current Palestinian intifada broke out a year ago, I became hooked. In a way, even though the images we saw on al-Jazeera were far worse than the ones presented on British television, it was a relief to see them straight and hear the interviews from the ground rather than getting reports from the point of view of British TV.

Al-Jazeera interviewed Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah (of Hizbollah) and Ehud Barak (then prime minister of Israel), Sheikh Ahmad Yaseen (spiritual leader of Hamas) and Itzhak Rabin (now Israeli foreign minister). It was the first time any of these people had been interviewed on Arab TV. Nasrallah and Yaseen have never, to my knowledge, been interviewed on western TV.

In the current crisis, al-Jazeera's reporting has been straight and sober; a

welcome relief from the flag-waving and rhetoric, for example, of CNN . Sunday night, when the US and Britain started bombing Afghanistan, the gale that was blowing over London blew away my satellite reception. I was so bereft I found myself gazing at the black screen, trying to stare through it to what al-Jazeera might be transmitting.

Within the Arab world, this channel has made censorship of news and opinion pointless. For us outside, it provides the one window through which we can breathe. It also provides reassurance against the negative or partial image of ourselves constantly beamed at us every day from the media of whatever country we happen to find ourselves in. It's not that we want to hear our own opinions; rather that we want to hear a variety of opinions of which ours is one. The titles of some of their most popular programmes speak for themselves: Against the Current, The Opposite Direction, One Opinion and Another, and so on.

Perhaps the most poignant example of the unique work undertaken by al-Jazeera is a two-part documentary on Egyptian prisoners of war killed by the Israeli Army in 1967. An Israeli journalist and an Israeli academic presented their research. Egyptians and Israelis bore witness to what had happened. No government is interested.

I have often found myself while watching al-Jazeera, translating the interviews into English in my head, wishing I could transmit them. Now at least the non-Arab world has had a taste of what it's missing.