



US News and World Report

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Culture & Ideas

Everybody's watching, but on different channels

Meanwhile, The Other News . . .

Is the new news good news? Today's technology and logistics have changed the nature of war reporting.

Media War: The shooting that precedes the shooting. (3/4/03)

Al Jazeera, the independent Arabic TV network that aired tapes of Osama bin Laden after 9/11, has America fuming again. The Bush administration has lambasted the network for airing footage of American POWs and dead soldiers. Last week, the New York Stock Exchange and Nasdaq abruptly expelled al Jazeera's reporters from their facilities. And the network's Web site was knocked out for days, allegedly by U.S. hackers.

In many parts of the world, though, Qatar-based al Jazeera is a hit, spawning half a dozen other Arabic networks since going live in 1996 and doubling its European viewership since the Iraq war began. Some Arabic media experts say the channel is misunderstood by Americans because of cultural differences. While rolling tape of dead soldiers struck many Americans as tasteless, they point out that al Jazeera has shown dead and injured Iraqis since the war started and has long aired pictures of dead suicide bombers--sometimes before their families have been notified. "In the Middle East, death and life are put on the same footing," says Jamal Dajani, a producer for Mosaic, a show on U.S.-based WorldLink TV that broadcasts news from Middle Eastern television networks. "There are constant deaths in the Arab-Israeli conflict; it's no longer shocking to see."

Like many foreign critics of U.S. media coverage, Dajani says stateside television coverage of the war is highly sanitized, with little airtime given to the ordeals of Iraqi civilians. "Watching American TV, you get a sense of riding through the desert with the troops, seeing bombs from a distance," says Ali Abunimah, cofounder of electronicIraq.net, which posts reports from Baghdad. "But I saw a report on al Jazeera from the streets of Umm Qasr, and it was absolute chaos."

The overwhelming popularity of satellite TV in the Middle East means that many Arabs see both CNN and al Jazeera. And unlike American news channels, al Jazeera last week carried live speeches from President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair and briefings by the Iraqi government. "Americans and Arabs," says Al Tompkins, who teaches broadcast journalism at the Poynter Institute, "are watching the same war completely differently." -Dan Gilgoff