

Mass Media

By Dante Chinni

The channel offers more in-depth coverage of the Middle East than most Americans usually see

SAY this about the people who run Al Jazeera: They are nothing if not persistent.

Two weeks ago, the network best known in the United States for airing video messages from Osama bin Laden launched an English-language news channel — known as Al Jazeera International (AJI) — despite the fact that not a single US cable company or major satellite provider had agreed to carry it.

Al Jazeera bypassed the cable companies to stream on the Internet. If you have a high-speed connection and \$6 a month to spare, you can tune in on your computer. The move is seen as a stopgap until AJI can find a home somewhere on US television.

Not surprising, given its pedigree, the new channel has already proved controversial. Critics argue that allowing Al Jazeera

Five hours with Al

International to air on American television would be essentially giving a megaphone to those who spout anti-American propaganda. Supporters of letting the network air argue that seeing the way the Arab world views the US might broaden minds here.

But the “should we or shouldn’t we look at Al Jazeera International” debate is going on in virtual darkness. Few Americans have actually seen AJI. But I have. During its first weekend on the air, I closely monitored five hours of coverage — mostly newscasts — to get a sense of what it was airing and to get some sense of its tone.

In both style and substance, it has a British feel. Indeed, if you briefly clicked by Al Jazeera International on television, you might mistake it for the BBC, from its understated, clean graphics to the on-camera personnel speaking with English accents. It also has the BBC’s more-global view of the news, stretching far afield for stories. In its first weekend, for instance, the channel trumpeted the fact that its reporters got into Burma (Myanmar), a country that foreign

reporters are rarely allowed to enter.

But AJI is no BBC clone. This is an Arab voice — self-consciously so. It also loudly markets itself as independent.

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Anchors at times introduce stories by talking about the channel’s “fearless journalism” — a network slogan. In a story the channel did about its own launch, for instance, it happily pointed out that everyone criticises Al Jazeera. The piece included clips of Saddam Hussein-era Iraqi officials saying Al Jazeera

Jazeera in English

is spreading US propaganda, juxtaposed against soon-to-be-former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld calling the channel "irresponsible".

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Most of all, the news agenda is focused on the Middle East. Consider a rundown of the lead block of stories that appeared on the channel's Sunday evening broadcast that opening weekend.

The lead story focused on Syria getting involved in Iraq in part to prevent the war-

torn country's dissolution. There was a report on Iraq that included footage of the "Islamic Army in Iraq" going through drills and graduating a group of new soldiers. That was followed by a story about the Israeli army bombing targets on Gaza and people who voluntarily went to serve as human shields of a supposed target. There was a piece on how Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was urging followers to protest Lebanon's "illegitimate" government. *New Yorker* reporter Seymour Hersh appeared in a short item saying that the CIA had found no conclusive evidence that Iran has a secret nuclear programme. And, finally, there was a story about President Bush travelling to Asia and "failing" to secure cooperative agreements from China or Russia on how to handle Iran.

That's a heavy dose of Middle Eastern news before the first commercial break. And one that included subtle and not-so-subtle jabs at the US administration.

It is also a different perspective than one would get in the US media. The next day's

New York Times, for example, had a front-page story about Iraq, but its stories about Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza were deep inside the paper. An item about Mr Hersh suggesting that Mr Bush was "ignoring" the CIA was nowhere to be found. The Bush-in-Asia piece was a fairly straightforward account of a presidential travel trip.

A few days later, a Lebanese cabinet minister was assassinated, and Syria renewed diplomatic relations with Iraq. Those stories did not come out of the blue — something that AJI viewers, who had intensive exposure to the broader news context of these regional events, understood.

Among the many issues surrounding AJI that will arise in the days ahead, one seems foremost. Is it a mouthpiece for anti-American propaganda?

That's hard to say after just five hours of viewing. But one thing is clear: The channel seems likely to offer more in-depth coverage of the Middle East than anything else most Americans are going to see. COURTESY THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR