

NOT FOLLOWING, LEADING

MD Nigel Parsons led Al Jazeera English out of the starting blocks for a spectacular first 12-month lap. Media response to the new international news channel, he says, has been 'unremittingly positive'



I think if there was one new international channel that was desperately needed it was this one. We are headquartered in the Middle East, the world's news hot spot, and we have the heritage of Al Jazeera Arabic channel whose brand of fearless journalism we want to build on.

We are headquartered in the developing world and looking at reporting from the political south to the political north. Previously news has always gone in the other direction, and so we felt a new perspective was very much overdue.

How do you define your success one year in?

Within weeks of our launch we were already referred to as one of the "Big Three" - we consider that a phenomenal achievement to be put on that pedestal with people who have been in the business a long time. I think we have been very successful in sticking to our mission statement, particularly in terms of being the channel of reference in the English language when it comes to the Middle East,

and being the channel of the developing world and giving, if you like, a voice to the voiceless. In places like Africa we are, anecdotally, already the channel of choice. I had a call the other night from someone who had just been to Afghanistan and he was astonished to see that the only channel anyone is watching there - from American troops to UN people to people in cafes - is Al Jazeera English.

Why haven't your competitors tried to beat you at your own game?

They have in a way but you are what you are. If you are a zebra, you are stuck with the stripes. If you are coming out of a major power it is very difficult not to reflect some of the agenda of that country. Ours is a bit woolly, we are based in the Middle East so we do reflect to the Middle East but we are also a tiny state. Every story we do is a foreign story.

Some people say that coming from the Middle East you might have a bias.

Not true. The latest survey by Arab Media Watch which included all the

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major international channels and all the major Arab channels which focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict found AJE by far the most impartial channel. We are covering the Middle East from the inside out and it is very important that people in other parts of the world understand the perspectives of regions such as this. I think people in Europe far more than elsewhere understand the consequences of what's been committed in places like Iraq in the name of democracy. And if we are guilty of showing the ugly side of war so be it. That's our job.

Some of your fiercest critics are people who haven't seen the channel - how do you correct that view?

The US is quite a difficult market but there's been a sea change there. The media articles that are written about us are all favourable now and they all say "We need to see this channel, we need to understand the world we are living in". I think perceptions are changing in our favour.

What's your key objective when it comes to carriage?

We are in over 100m households



Launched 15 November 2006

Key personnel Nigel Parsons (Managing Director), Ibrahim Helal (Deputy MD, News and Programming), Steve Clark (Director of News and Programmes)

Funded by the State of Qatar; budget not disclosed

Staff 1000 (a little under half are journalists)

Viewers (households) 100 million

Where available see www.aljazeera.net/english for a full list

Mission To be the world's leading international English language news network

▲ **Main Image:** Nigel Parsons in the Al Jazeera English newsroom
Top right: Al Jazeera, Doha

now across the world which is phenomenal within a year of launch. We have our own channel on YouTube which is heavily watched, gets up to 100,000 downloads a day, about half of them from the States. Apart from the small cable deals we have in the States we are available to American customers of GlobeCast – there are almost 2m receivers out there. We are increasingly active in places like Latin America, Asia is an important area for us, in Africa we are still looking to expand, so it's on all fronts all the time, we are strengthening our distribution team quite significantly.

You have had a very active correspondent in Pakistan. Is AJE being watched in the country?

Yes, it is being widely watched. We want to be there as the story develops. I think in Pakistan we have been ahead of the game from day one in terms of the international channels. We have had a few successes like that this year – in Burma/Myanmar

we were the only ones who stayed in reporting after the crackdown. Everyone stayed outside and said they weren't allowed in - well, we weren't allowed in either but we still were there.

How do you see your relationship with the other players?

I admire the professionalism of the established players and would never underestimate them, and our job is to catch them up and overtake them. Others have got a slightly different agenda: they have acknowledged themselves they are there to put the point of view of their country. I think they will struggle for a mass audience because they will struggle to be relevant across borders.

Does Al Jazeera have plans for more languages?

It's an idea that's always on the table but there are no immediate plans to branch out into other languages. We need a

period of consolidation.

Feedback from the audience – how are you measuring that?

There are snap surveys of sample groups on our web site and unsolicited feedback. The media itself has been unremittingly positive.

What about non-traditional platforms – is traditional TV dying?

If it is dying, it is going to be a very long and slow death. I don't put all these different platforms in separate boxes, I think they are all part of the same product. The central product, for the time being anyway, is still TV. In the Middle East only 6% are connected to broadband, so TV has a way to go here, similarly in Africa. It is a huge advantage for us actually that so many of our audience will rely on TV for years to come so we can stand back and watch other broadcasters experiment with all the new toys and new channels, and sooner or later one will emerge dominant and that is the one we will go for.

Nigel Parsons, thank you for talking to The Channel. ■