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CONTROL ROOM

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Jehane Noujaim provides an eye-opening look at Al Jazeera, the independent news network that is the most popular source of information in the Arab world. Demonized by the Bush administration and banned by some Islamic nations, Al Jazeera is faithfully watched by 40 million people. As the U.S. and Al Jazeera media coverage of the war is compared, the filmmakers suggest that Truth is gathered, presented, and ultimately created by those who deliver it.

UNITED STATES/EGYPT • 2004 • 84 mins • Color • In English and Arabic with English subtitles

Whose truth in Iraq? Arab network profiled in superb documentary

JONATHAN CURIEL

The White House continues to accuse Al-Jazeera of bias, poor reporting and other journalistic sins. Four days ago, Condoleezza Rice said the Arab news network skews its coverage in "purely inaccurate" ways. In fact, Washington's hatred of Al-Jazeera is influencing foreign policy. Qatar, the Persian Gulf country where Al-Jazeera is based, was reportedly blacklisted from this week's Group of Eight economic summit because it's not doing enough to rein in the broadcaster.

Against this backdrop, "Control Room" offers a view of Al-Jazeera that's shocking: The network isn't staffed by people who want to firebomb the United States, and it's not run by journalists who are staging gruesome scenes of wartime. Instead, what goes on at Al-Jazeera is what goes on in every American newsroom: Editors and reporters debate what stories to cover, what people to interview, how to get the news first.

"Control Room" was filmed during the run-up and the start of the Iraq war. In one telling scene, Samir Khader, a senior producer with Al-Jazeera, explains why the network aired images of Iraqi civilians (including children) who were apparently killed by errant U.S. bombs. "We want to show," Khader says, "that any war has a human cost."

That "human cost" is what U.S. officials insist is "propaganda." Khader's comments are juxtaposed with those of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who says at a news conference, "We know that Al-Jazeera has a pattern of playing propaganda over and over and over again. . . . We're dealing with people who are perfectly willing to lie to the world to attempt to further their case."

Rumsfeld's comments are, to say the least, "ironic," given the Bush administration's pattern of questionable statements about Iraq. Still, "Control Room" isn't a screed against the White House but a tale with two vantage points: Al-Jazeera's and the one from Central Command, the U.S. military headquarters in Qatar where American and Arab reporters worked side by side and where spokesmen from the Army and Marines tried to spin the war in favor of Washington. Director Jehane Noujaim finds an atmosphere there that veers from offensive to touching.

Offensive: The U.S. network correspondent who sees (via TV at Central Command) Iraqis looting Baghdad buildings, and describes it as "hilarious. . . . It's almost like 'The Price Is Right.'" Touching: Lt. Josh Rushing, a Central Command press officer, who shares a laugh with an Arab journalist, then says, "I've met so many great Arabs since I've been here."

Last week, after hearing that some Marines had complained about Rushing's closeness to Arab journalists, the Pentagon ordered him not to speak about "Control Room," according to the online magazine Salon, which reported that Rushing plans to leave the Marines over the censorship.

A battle is still being waged over information about Iraq, which is why "Control Room" is so timely. Without being didactic, the documentary raises important issues about bias and objectivity. Is it really fair for Americans to tell Arab journalists that they should show more "positive" news from



Baghdad when those journalists (and their viewers) relate so strongly to Arabs being maimed by U.S. weapons? Is it really fair to say that, during the height of the war, all U.S. journalists were willingly hoodwinked by Washington's spin on the war?

In "Control Room," CNN correspondent Tom Minitier, who covered the fighting in Vietnam 30 years ago, complains about the way the U.S. military tries to "manage" the news from Qatar. "They tried it in the first Gulf War -- this time it was supposed to be different," he tells Noujaim.

"Control Room" will be a cinematic Rorschach test for its audiences. Some people will spot what they perceive as Noujaim's own biases in making this film. They'll say her movie shows Bush, Rumsfeld, Vincent Brooks (the Army brigadier general who gave the daily briefings at Central Command) and other higher-ups in an unflattering light. They'll say she gives Al-Jazeera's staff members too much time to question the war, as when Khader (who is from Iraq) suggests that the cheering crowds who first greeted U.S. troops in Baghdad were non-Iraqis who were flown in by the American military. Others, however, will rightfully say Noujaim has done yeoman's work by humanizing the people behind the Arab world's most popular news channel and showing that they wrestle with their jobs and their lives. Khader, for example, says he would love to move to the United States, where he'd even consider working for Fox News. (Khader's sense of humor is one of the many surprising things about "Control Room.")

What can't be argued: "Control Room" is one of this year's most significant films. Like "The Fog of War," which won an Oscar in February, "Control Room" should appeal to a broad audience that wants to go beyond the rhetoric of war and understand how "facts" can really be a mirage of our own choosing.

CONTROL ROOM

Documentary. Directed by Jehane Noujaim. (84 minutes. Not rated. In English and Arabic, with English subtitles.

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