

Nov 04, 2016 by [Adam Clayton Powell, III](#)

UN Lebanon report prompts wall-to-wall live coverage on Al Jazeera ^[1]

WASHINGTON -- Oct. 22

Thursday night was a big night for Al Jazeera, the Arabic-language television news channel in the Middle East.

The preemptive lead story was the release of the UN report on the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon.

For most news organizations, it was a story worth at best three or four news reports. At Al Jazeera, editors decided this was the only story of the night.

When the report was released, Al Jazeera's UN correspondent went to a small studio and read the report. On camera. All 54 pages of it. It took four hours.

Any TV news producer with an ounce of sense knows that one man on camera reading for four hours is the most boring television in the world.

Any TV news producer with an ounce of sense was wrong.

Viewers across the Middle East were captivated, according to Al Jazeera news editors, who said other networks later copied their coverage.

Those four hours of reading the report was followed by yet more hours of live reaction, from the region and across the world.

By Saturday, the New York Times also took note of the interest in the region.

"A young Syrian businesswoman, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the situation, stayed up all night Thursday with her family watching Al Jazeera's coverage of the Mehlis report," according to the Times. "Everyone who loves Syria, who loves this country, was up watching," she said. "The report is a turning point in our lives."

By Friday morning, Al Jazeera's Washington bureau had the lead, producing reaction from the U.S.

A visit there Friday revealed a news organization on high alert. Morning newspapers lay discarded on tables and desks throughout the second-floor news center, while editors and producers were working reaction stories, live, to keep the story going. On small desk monitors and from a large video wall, the Arab-language network's live coverage served as a watchful

eye over the journalists working the story.

Syria's ambassador to the U.S. was being booked for an extended afternoon interview. Another producer was trying, in vain he said later, to persuade the U.S. State Department to send a spokesman to discuss the report. Even an English speaker would suffice: simultaneous translators were standing by.

But was the coverage fair?

To someone with limited Arabic language skills, the principal criterion was the video, and that was at best only partially informative - except when Al Jazeera cut away to live shots of hurricane coverage from Mexico.

But one indicator was on the Al Jazeera Web site, where the link between the assassination and the Syrian government was reported in detail. It's not the Arabic-language Al Jazeera site, but it is an indicator.

This all misses the larger picture: Al Jazeera as we know it is all part of the network's expansion into a multi-channel global television empire, just like News Corp. or Viacom. Already available on Dish TV in the US, Al Jazeera now claims to be one of the five most influential global brands, joining Apple and Starbucks. Now the network wants to expand, with a new C-Span-style channel that provides live video from Parliaments all over the world, a new Al Jazeera children's channel, a sports channel and of course the new Al Jazeera International channel, the Al Jazeera news channel for cell phones and an English-language all-news channel scheduled to launch next year.

By this time next year, viewers around the world - including the US - will be able to see live reports from the more than thirty Al Jazeera news bureaus around the world, including Mexico City, Caracas and Rio de Janeiro in this hemisphere - and seven bureaus across Africa, more than any other television news organization.

While US networks are butting back international coverage, petrodollars are funding Al Jazeera's expansion. And there will be no coverage of missing teenagers in Aruba.

Upstairs on the fourth floor, where the new English-language channel is taking shape, if you look out of the windows from the Al Jazeera Washington bureau, across K Street you can see the headquarters of the Radio Television News Directors Association, which represents broadcast and cable journalists across the U.S.

A year from now, if Al Jazeera continues on its present course, it will be members of RTNDA looking across K Street - and at their television monitors - looking at Al Jazeera.

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