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Let us first put things in perspective. We are talking about a region which has for a long time lacked a tradition of freedom, whether freedom of speech, association or the press.

The winds of change have been blowing for a while. The world is changing, but the Arab world is changing at a much slower pace.

The early '90s witnessed the birth of Arab Satellite Channels, spearheaded by MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Corporation.) When Al Jazeera came on the scene in November 1996, it pioneered independent 24-hour news coverage across the Arab world that was globally competitive in its professionalism.

Al Jazeera had a huge impact on the region generally and on the media specifically, comparable in many ways to that of CNN a decade earlier when they broadcast 24-hour breaking and developing news, across the globe.

Al Jazeera transmitted into the homes of Arab viewers according to a new ethos and approach. Firstly, it dedicated itself exclusively to professional and independent news coverage. There were virtually no red lines in terms of the freedom offered to its journalists, with regard to freedom of subjects to report or angles to explore. Al Jazeera had no veto on any world view that existed in the Arab world. Israeli and pro-Israeli views were aired, Arabs of different political affiliations had the chance to express the entire spectrum of their views. For the first time, opposition groups were given equal air time on an Arab TV station, regardless of the nature of the relationship between their country and the host country, in this case Qatar.

Due to its strong impact, especially with regard to Al Jazeera's critical approach to Arab politics, it paved the way for serious attempts at competition, which can only be a good thing for viewers and the cause of freedom in the Arab world.

Now we have some news only channels with a good degree of freedom, though not necessarily matching that of Al Jazeera: channels like ANN, Alarabiyya, Al Hayat-LBC as well as improved news coverage on general coverage channels such as MBC, Abu Dhabi and LBC.

During the last war, Arab Media saw a chance to be different and to make a difference. Abu Dhabi, Al-Arabiyya and Al Jazeera did a brilliant job conveying a different view of facts and events on the ground, despite the fact that the funding states were officially on the side of the Allies.

In our case, and to be as comprehensive and neutral as possible, we had four different teams covering the war. We had independent teams in Basra, Mosul and Baghdad, we had a team at Cent Com in Assiliya in Qatar, we also had a journalist embedded with the British forces in Basra - as well as a team covering the Kurdish areas in the north. Each team was subject to the rules set by the governing authority.

The Americans offered us four embedded slots. Ironically, we couldn't get visas for our journalists to enter two of the Arab countries, Kuwait and Bahrain, to take up those embedded slots.

It is also a myth that our coverage was pro-Saddam or pro-Iraqi regime. We had an equal balance of pro-American or pro-Coalition coverage, in terms of our information sources originating in 100% US or Coalition-force perspectives, to the same or greater degree than pro-Iraqi sources.

Iraqi officials branded us pro-American, or more pro-American than they liked. They tried to deport two of our correspondents. The Iraqi Information Minister threatened to hang two of our journalists. Our embedded journalist in Basra was considered a US agent by the Iraqis and I was branded a Kurdish agent, covering

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developments in the north. The Kurds did not consider my own coverage pro-Kurdish enough and I was roughed up. Some of our reporters were suspended from working in Baghdad.

Our cultural perspective is different than that of the West. We see things from a different world view, because we are Arabs and Muslims – not the BBC in London or CNN in Atlanta.

Of course, we have made mistakes, since we are a human enterprise and therefore not perfect. But all in all, we are very satisfied with the overall result of our coverage. Some of the things we reported, which were seen at the time as biased or 'pro-Saddam' have been proven correct and factual. The standing of some members of the Ruling Council, for example, that an Iraqi Resistance existed and was growing.

Some of the criticism directed against us by Western politicians is similar to what we are already used to from Arab politicians – in that it is politically driven and motivated. We believed that we were simply aiming for the kind of freedom of expression and speech, based on evidence and facts that is a pre-requisite for advanced democracies. Which is, after all, what the US and Europe are trying to bring to the Arab world.

But when the going got tough, we found the outcry and rapprochements of these same enlightened democracies to be louder and harsher than that of our Arab world dictatorships. And that is an irony with which we have had to deal and work.