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### Mission steadfast

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Introduction

During the past 20 years, Al Jazeera has attracted the attention of many researchers at academic institutions and research centres across the world. This clearly indicates the pioneering role it has played, a role that can rarely be described in just a few words. It was once said that: “Since Al Jazeera was launched, it has become very difficult to lie.”

This book is not an academic study. It encompasses what Al Jazeera’s family has to say about Al Jazeera on its 20th anniversary. A small committee from Al Jazeera’s staff was formed to supervise the making of this book, with Ahmed al-Sheikh as head of the committee, Muneer al-Daymi, Ezzeddine Abdelmoula, Muhammad Sidi Baba and Muhammad Vall as members and Araft Shoukri as member and coordinator of the project. The committee’s main target was to tell the story of Al Jazeera over the past two decades through the words of its own people, those who have witnessed happy and difficult events and reported facts happening on the ground as they were in order to convey the voice of the voiceless to the entire world.

This book does not record the history of Al Jazeera, though some of its articles talk about the establishment of the network. Neither does it list Al Jazeera’s accomplishments and successes, although some of the articles touch upon some of these. This book is a collection of vital humanitarian stories told by those who lived those stories in various parts of the world, exposing what was happening behind the scenes and revealing the feelings they could not convey on screen or through reports and live interviews during news bulletins. These articles are an attempt to express the spirit and mission of Al Jazeera and its bias towards people, regardless of their race, colour or religion.

Two decades have passed and Al Jazeera has maintained the values and principles that have brought it such popularity. It has also constantly met the need for modernisation and complied with the requirements of the modern age, including the adoption of new methods of communication and media tools. They were two decades of originality and renewal.

At the end, we would like to extend our gratitude to all those who participated in the making of this book whether by giving us new ideas or writing its articles. Special thanks go to the book’s Arabic editor Aref Hijjawi, English into Arabic translator Aref Ahmaro, English editor Carla Bower and Arabic into English translator Mays Al-Shobassi. We would also like to thank our Creative Department colleagues who have designed the layout of this book.

The Supervising Committee
Al Jazeera starts a new 20 years

Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani
Chairman of the Board of Al Jazeera Media Network

Twenty years ago, there was a turning point in the history of Arab media that left people and researchers studying and analysing it for a long time. It was the emergence of Al Jazeera; a free, brave and creative voice in a world where people had grown used to official Arab media.

Al Jazeera was born to break the normality of restrictions and fabrication that prevailed at that time. It came to end falseness and reflect reality as it is to its audience.

During those 20 years, Al Jazeera produced what others for long decades could not. It has become a leading name among its competitors. It seeks to present the truth through utmost transparency and strives for excellence and distinction through professionalism and accuracy.

In 20 years, Al Jazeera focused on the entire Arab world, reflected people’s hopes, revealed their pains and expressed their ambitions.

For 20 years, Al Jazeera stood by the side of people all over the world. It defended their right to knowledge and freedom of expression.

For 20 years, Al Jazeera has remained controversial. Some loved it, some criticised it, while others changed their stance towards it overnight. However, Al Jazeera never gave up its commitment to the truth, to transparency and to balance. In the coming 20 years, Al Jazeera will take the same path.
It will continue to seek and present the truth through honest, high quality reporting. It will dig deeper into the current affairs of the Arab world, searching its history and current situation for what is common among its people to reinforce it and what is different to accept and understand it.

During the coming 20 years, we will understand our world better and will become even more prepared to keep up with innovations in form, content and multimedia. Al Jazeera will be the first to use whatever is new in traditional and digital media and will keep up with all kinds of advanced training and technical quality.

The past 20 years were an ever-renewed journey on all levels. And in the coming 20 years, Al Jazeera will always assume leading positions in innovation and creativity. Our mission will always be an authentic one, with solid values and noble goals.
Al Jazeera at 20:
Always Genuine,
Always Pioneering

Mostefa Souag
Acting Director General

This book is a token of love and appreciation for Al Jazeera as it celebrates its 20th birthday. It was written by people whose love for it never wavered, whose lives and careers are inextricably joined to Al Jazeera. Their devotion has been all-consuming: They have spent their lives and energy to serve Al Jazeera, at times more than their children and loved ones.

In return, Al Jazeera has given them loyalty, appreciation, fame and a solid reputation in the world of professional and authentic media, acknowledged by friends and foes alike across the world’s regions, languages and cultures. Joining the ranks of Al Jazeera has become a source of pride, at times coming before affiliations of homeland and family.

Al Jazeera has also raised the ire of those who attempt to compete with it, sometimes devolving into jealousy or outright antagonism, especially among those of unscrupulous journalistic standards, who have dedicated their “weapons of mass distraction” to burying truths in order to serve private interests. It is perhaps this “envy” that has made Al Jazeera a household name. Did not the great poet Abu Tammam once write:

If God wants to spread a hidden virtue
He sends it the tongue of an envious man

The vast number of tongues that have “been sent” to take shots at Al Jazeera
have done nothing but add to its fame, glory and popularity.

When I use the word “envy” I don’t mean the typical linguistic/moral definition of the term. I mean the deep psychosis that is a cocktail of emotions, incentives and hatred that leads some parties to target Al Jazeera, silence it, diminish its remarkably increasing impact and question its professionalism. When the dust settles, we find that these attacks only hurt them, exposing their biases and lack of professionalism, and often revealing their servitude to those who openly oppose free speech and make sure that truths are either buried or distorted.

Talking about Al Jazeera’s success reminds me of a chat with a key foreign official who led his country’s delegation on a visit to the network a couple of years ago. He repeatedly asked about the secret behind Al Jazeera’s success. I told him that his question should be directed to the countless researchers who have studied the Al Jazeera phenomenon, and suggested that he could find hundreds of academic papers on the internet. But he insisted on hearing from me. So I relented, telling him that there were dozens of factors, but I wanted to focus on three: freedom, professionalism and funding. I explained the important role played by these three factors in shaping the popularity of Al Jazeera. The official was not convinced.

“There are many media organisations in Germany, France, Britain and elsewhere who have those three factors,” he said. “But they’re not as successful as Al Jazeera.” I exchanged knowing glances with some of my colleagues in the room. We smiled and said, almost in unison: “Then it must be the blessings of the saint buried under this building.” We always give this answer when we get this question.

“A saint?”

“Yes, he must have been a good man.”

This saint is our team spirit, filled with feelings of loyalty and dedication to Al Jazeera, from the day of its birth until today. You can find that spirit still burning with enthusiasm, you can find it in the faces of the members of our team, in the way they talk, behave, work, and take pride in what they are doing. They are the ones who make up our unprecedented diversity, in race, colour, creed, language and culture (more than 80 nationalities under one roof).

This is the spirit that launched Al Jazeera 20 years ago. On our journey, we’ve gained experience, wisdom and confidence. Now Al Jazeera celebrates its 20th anniversary, reaffirming its commitment to the Code of Ethics it adopted and implements on a daily basis, and its editorial policy based on the highest standards of professional journalism. This commitment has made Al Jazeera a school of journalism, denied only by the blind or “envious”.

As it enters its third decade, Al Jazeera continues as a leading media organisation with its multiple channels broadcasting in different languages, attracting the attention of millions of loyal viewers who trust its credibility and admire its courage and commitment to them, “always with the people”. Al Jazeera also continues to be an ever-innovative organisation that has proved its leading, competitive role in the modern world of “new media” through its various digital platforms. It aims to constantly be a genuine and pioneering player in the mosaic of today’s media, providing the best services for an audience of various ages and backgrounds.

Some of Al Jazeera’s visitors, especially journalists, ask about its competitors, and if Al Jazeera would like to see competitors appear. Without a doubt, honest competition is a good incentive to achieve greater quality and creativity, and it is truly welcome in the Arab world. However, I find myself thinking: “Al Jazeera is a pioneering media organisation, not a competitive one. Others seek to chase it but fail to come close. Every time they think they are getting close, Al Jazeera reaches new heights, and they wind up where they started: chasing but not coming close.”

This is Al Jazeera: Always genuine, always pioneering, always innovative, always in the service of people and a higher calling.

“So for this let the competitors compete.” – Holy Quran (83:26)
On a spring day in late April 2011, our plane landed at Benina airport, near Benghazi in eastern Libya. It wasn’t my first time covering a war, but this time was different.

When we landed, I was received by an armed revolutionary who took a wooden stamp from his pocket and stamped my passport with a large “Welcome to the New Libya” imprint. I knew that stamp would restrict my movements, both inside and outside of the country.

Everything en route to the Tibesti hotel in Benghazi suggested that a violent revolution had reached its peak in the city. Slogans were written on the walls, young men wielded Kalashnikovs and faces were etched with troubled expressions. I spent that night at the hotel reading about Libyan politics, history, economics and society.

I hadn’t realised that I was soon to learn an important lesson about impartiality.

Brega was one of the main battlefields between the revolutionaries and forces loyal to the country’s ruler, Muammar Gaddafi. Parts of it would swing back and forth between the two. Although Gaddafi’s forces had identified some journalists as the enemy and even put bounties on our heads, I couldn’t resist going to the town’s coffee shop.

It was managed by a young Libyan who didn’t speak much but who would stare at those who entered. The journalist in me couldn’t trust anyone and like many residents of
eastern Libya, Fawzi was vigilant around strangers. Ours was a friendship built on caution.

The coffee shop was a microcosm of the war that waged outside: sometimes, it hosted revolutionaries and their talk of freedom and a new Libya; at other times, its tables were filled with government forces. Fawzi was playing the dangerous game of impartiality.

One evening I asked him: “How do you deal with the government forces?”

Calmly, he answered: “Just like I deal with the revolutionaries and with you. For me the only difference is that the government forces like their green tea with almond, while the revolutionaries like theirs without.”

“Why are you being so impartial?” I asked him.

“To stay alive,” he answered. “I have a family and two children.”

Which party do you support - the revolution and change or Gaddafi and his brigades?” I asked him bluntly.

He thought for a moment. “I support the revolutionaries, but I also have a fine relationship with the government forces. I serve tea for everyone and I don’t care about their political ideas or behaviour,” he concluded.

I had a long discussion with Fawzi about impartiality. He believed it wasn’t just a matter of professionalism or good journalism, but a shield that could protect somebody from death. Impartiality meant Fawzi was accepted by everybody. He was nobody’s friend and nobody’s enemy. He served tea for everyone.

One evening, Fawzi shared his knowledge of tea with me, explaining how when it was first introduced to Libya, it was considered ‘shameful’ for Libyans to drink it. Little by little it began to be accepted - initially only being allowed for men. In time, it became a feature of every Libyan household, even making its way into folk songs. Fawzi was even impartial when discussing tea.

He knew about my personal support for the revolution and asked how I could separate that from my professional impartiality while reporting. He called it my “schizophrenia”. How could a journalist report information without expressing their feelings, he wondered.

In May, following days of battles, the revolutionaries declared their final victory and took complete control of Brega. It was a Wednesday. I decided to go to the coffee shop to meet Fawzi. I sat at the same table where I’d sat before. A young boy asked me if I wanted tea.

Noticing my surprise, he told me somewhat indifferently: “Fawzi is not coming. They killed him. The revolutionaries killed him before they withdrew, right in front of the revolutionaries who did not lift a finger to help him. They just let him die.”

I felt obliged to know the truth, and when the opportunity arose, I asked the commander of that battle why the revolutionaries hadn’t done anything to help Fawzi.

“Why would we?” he answered. “We have always suspected his loyalty. If the government forces had not killed him, the revolutionaries would have. Fawzi was a suspicious person. He was impartial.”

As I left Libya, I asked myself why I had survived, despite my impartiality, while he had not, and wondered whose impartiality was more honest – mine or Fawzi’s?
In the winter of 2003, as the then US president George W. Bush was preparing for the US invasion of Iraq, Al Jazeera decided to transfer me from Washington DC, where I had worked as its correspondent, to New York to cover the developments of the Iraqi file inside the United Nations. To accomplish this mission, I was also asked to open a new bureau inside the UN headquarters.

I’ll admit that I felt it was difficult to carry out this double mission. But I also remember that Al Jazeera’s popularity among UN employees, including its then secretary-general, Kofi Annan, helped facilitate it – opening officials’ doors and speeding up the issuance of approval for Al Jazeera’s office there.

Al Jazeera managed to penetrate the various UN units, allowing millions of Arab households to better understand the complicated processes that take place there. I knew that Arabs had long wondered about the structure of this international organisation and its influence upon and role in various international matters, particularly the invasion of Iraq.

During the following two years, Al Jazeera covered many controversial stories out of the UN. Then, suddenly, during one of the UN’s long nights of heated disputes...
over international crises, an unprecedented development took place. One of the UN Secretariat’s officials leaked exclusively to me a report prepared by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, who had been assigned to lead the UN investigation into the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri. The 50-page report was written in difficult legal language that Al Jazeera’s interpreters managed to translate.

The unique nature of the report prompted Al Jazeera to take what seemed at the time to be an unusual decision. As I was being interviewed live by Al Jazeera’s Jamal Rayyan, I heard a colleague in Doha whisper to me through my earphones. “Get ready to read the full report live in a while,” they said. I read it, while the interpreters simultaneously translated it from English into Arabic - for four consecutive hours.

I don’t know how well known Mehlis was among the German public before being asked to investigate the assassination. But I know that when the report was leaked, he became famous across the world, particularly within Arab nations.

As I was reading his report live on screen, I felt that almost every line contained a political bomb. It led to fingers being pointed at prominent Syrian figures, including influential politicians.

Initially, I thought it was peculiar for Al Jazeera to broadcast the full report, especially at a time when most people in the Middle East were asleep. But I later realised that it had caused a significant shift in a region where it was the only network with the courage to go against the grain with four hours of live coverage, starting from 19:00 in New York, the sleepless city.
Where my mind and soul is free

Abdullah Elshamy
Correspondent - Al Jazeera English

It was a Friday evening in 1996, and a technician was testing my family’s new satellite dish at our home in Lagos, Nigeria. I was eight years old, and for the next three hours, I sat in front of the TV screen, watching this channel called Al Jazeera that was being broadcast from somewhere far away, wondering whether I would ever fulfill my dream of being on camera.

In the months and years that followed, I constantly turned to that channel that had first captivated me – to follow breaking news events, watch the news bulletins and consume its programmes.

Then, in 2010, a friend from Al Jazeera Arabic called to offer me a job as a reporter in West Africa. And with that, my childhood aspirations began to be fulfilled. But the extent to which this would change my life and shape my personality had never truly crossed my mind.

That changed in 2013, when I was arrested. The 10 months I spent in prison – which is, perhaps, the burden you behold as a journalist – confirmed that I had made the right choice in joining Al Jazeera.

When I think back on my time in jail now, I see it as a reminder of just what a rewarding job journalism is – full of the hardships that come
with the satisfaction of telling the news in the right way.

But at the beginning of my first night in jail, I was haunted by the thought of spending years in that place. For the first two weeks, I mostly slept and ate nothing. It was only when I learned that my family and my friends at Al Jazeera were keeping my case alive, that my fears began to recede.

Freedom is not a luxury to me; it does not come without a hefty price. I returned often to that thought when, five months after I was first detained, I started my hunger strike.

Jail has changed the way I see and think about the world. Prison is a world of its own; an underground life separated from humanity where you must endure long hours of waiting and doing nothing.

It requires patience to overcome this, which is why I started reading and meeting other inmates – both to break up the time and to turn it into an experience that could be advantageous.

Looking back on it now, I think that time may have done me good, but the difficult memories remain.

Between August 2013 and June 2014, a campaign of support and solidarity that reached hundreds of millions ensured that I and other colleagues detained at the time were released.

Will I always be at Al Jazeera? That’s a question only time will answer. But I will certainly always appreciate what I have learned here, the experiences I have had, the memories I have built and the support I have received.

For me, Al Jazeera is not just a place of work; it’s the place where my mind and soul will always feel their best.

Where my mind and soul is free
Abdullah Elshamy
People in the Arab world, particularly the intellectuals and politicians, have different points of view. But they all agree that the situation in the region is not good and drastic changes and extensive reforms are required. But how and from what point should these changes and reforms start? This they disagree on.

In 1950, an al-Azhar sheikh, Khalid M. Khalid, released his famous book From Here We Start. Another al-Azhar sheikh, Mohammed al-Ghazali, responded with a book entitled From Here We Know. Sheikh Khalid then disagreed with his own opinions and retracted the content of his book. A controversy followed and its consequences grew until it reached court. Until today, the question remains: From where do we start?

We start with words.

God taught Adam, the first man on Earth, words so that he might speak. Man thinks about reforms and projects to implement those reforms, but the real practical starting point for reforms is a truthful word. Words are our means of communicating. Using words, we teach others what we know. And words were Adam’s first weapon in the battle of life. His ammunition was the names of things.

“And He [God] taught Adam the names – all of them.” [Verse 31 from Surat Al Baqara, the Quran]

“Then Adam received from His Lord [some] words…” [Verse 37 from Surat Al Baqara, the Quran]

Using the weapon of words means...
Vision forward looking
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to name things and events and to describe them with qualities in order to distinguish them from each other and to eliminate ambiguity and confusion.

“And He [God] taught Adam the names – all of them. Then He showed them to the angels and said: ‘Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful’. They said: ‘Exalted You are. We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise’. He said: ‘Oh Adam, inform them of their names’. ” [Verses 31-33 from Surat Al Baqara, the Quran]

One reason for corruption is the failure to refer to things by their names. What is worse than that is when these things are referred to by other names, specifically by their opposites. For example, when corruption is called ‘reforms’ and reforms are referred to as ‘strife’, or when oppression is named ‘justice’ and what is false is called ‘right’, or when the oppressor is the leader, the traitor is named ‘loyal’ and the loyal are referred to as ‘criminal’.

This deception was the first crime committed against Adam.

“Then Satan whispered to him; he said: ‘Oh Adam, shall I direct you to the tree of eternity and a possession that never ends?’” [Verse 120 from Surat Taha, the Quran]

The truth was; that tree was not the tree of eternity or everlasting possession. Satan was deceiving Adam. Adam believed this deception and forgot that among the names God taught him was something called ‘lying’ and ‘deceiving’.

From here we should start; by naming things by their original names and describing them by their real qualities. We need a free word. And only then could we recognise what is right and what is wrong.

And then came Al Jazeera

Twenty years ago, a strange media organisation was established. Why strange? Because it possessed two things we had never before witnessed in Arab media – professional quality and a wide range of freedom.

We were used to official Arab TV channels mastering low quality and fabricated news. Al Jazeera came as a revolution against all of this.

The Arab world and Arab viewers were surprised by the arrival of a channel from the Gulf that enjoyed freedom and courage. It broke the prohibition rules and exposed the taboos. Its motto, in word and deed, was The Opinion and the Other Opinion.

Through Al Jazeera, Arab viewers and intellectuals started to listen to the various points of view direct from the people who hold them.

Despite this, there are still some who will find a reason to oppose Al Jazeera. To them, I say: If you work hard to do something and you succeed, you get double credit, and if you miss, you still get some credit. Little incidents or small mistakes do not spoil a huge amount of good work.

Al Jazeera: Quality and courage
Ahmad Al-Raysouni
I can’t believe 20 years have passed since I joined our Al Jazeera. I was a middle-aged man when Al Jazeera was born. From the very beginning, it shook the Arab world, giving it freedom, awareness and a sense of pride. Only those who understood what Arabism meant knew what Al Jazeera was doing. It was born in an era of darkness, but it enlightened the minds of those who had for ages been constrained by oppression; it strengthened the terrified hearts and weak wills of Arabs who had been beaten by long years of silence.

I’ve aged as I’ve watched Al Jazeera growing up. And here we are today, 20 years on, recalling those past decades and looking forward to future ones. Those first journalists were so enthusiastic about this new project, though they had no guarantees it would turn into the great success its organisers promised.

There were many beautiful memories and great achievements. The world welcomed the channel and wondered at how a flame could emerge from the darkness, at how a voice could rise from the depths of oppression to break an enforced silence. It was beautiful then and its continued determination makes it even more beautiful now. Twenty
years on, I am still excited to be a part of it and still eagerly anticipate its future. The past 20 years have been full of accumulated experiences, and it is time to build many more.

There are many unanswered questions we must seek to address. Why has the Arab nation failed in war, in peace, in development and in devolution of power? Why was the idea of Arab unity erased and replaced by the different identities of multiple countries? What eliminated the idea of an Arab national identity that would unify all Arabs under one umbrella? Why have Arabs absorbed the complex ideology of sectarianism and why is each ethnicity selfishly seeking its own interests, ripping apart our common welfare? Why have our ‘neighbours’, who intruded into our world 70 years ago, managed to break us apart after we had been united, historically and geographically, for thousands of years? Why have we weakly surrendered to others though we have a vast homeland enriched with a great history of struggle?

It is time to pause and answer those questions. It is time to let our cameras go deep inside the heart of the Arab world, to disclose what is common among Arabs, to put it under the spotlight and to let people think about it.

Arabs have so much in common and so few differences. But politics and wars have led us away from our mutual interests. It is time for us to heal the wounds that intruders into our homeland are trying hard to keep bleeding. It is time to truly get inspired by our great history. It is time to look for what makes us forgive each other without becoming weak, what makes us stronger without becoming extreme, and what brings us together in unity and away from radicalism.

As we pause for a while, I remember the spirit we had at the beginning; the spirit that drove us each day to reach the highest levels in the media world. It is time to reinforce this spirit so that we might maintain our leading position. It is time for us to master the media profession as one based on rules and regulations, which Arab media have so far failed to comply with. This

honourable profession is capable of breaking oppressive restrictions in order to convey a message to its audience.

It is time to address all people, especially the young; to present to them, through our social media platforms, information that boosts their will to make informed decisions when required. In an era of mobile phones and social media platforms, quality remains our sole way to excel – through the accuracy of our information and the excellence of our pictures, audio, language and ideas.

It is so sad to witness the bloodshed taking place in many parts of the Arab world. Al Jazeera has managed to direct attention to this and it must continue to do so. We must demand unity as our inevitable destiny and regain our united identity.

That is my wish for you, our beloved Al Jazeera.
One day, I’ll go back to Sanaa

Ahmed Al-Shalafi
Yemeni Affairs Editor - Al Jazeera Arabic

Satisfaction is a priceless feeling. I’ve always been satisfied with my work at Al Jazeera, whether during the first 10 years, when I worked as a field correspondent in Yemen, or the last two, which I’ve spent at its headquarters in Doha. I was even satisfied with Al Jazeera before I joined it, when I was just a viewer. I used to spend long hours watching and learning from Al Jazeera. I saw in it a new world of media freedom.

I belong to a generation that has learned a lot from Al Jazeera. I was almost 20 years old when it was launched in 1996. I used to watch the BBC when I was young because it was my father’s favourite channel. But, Al Jazeera gave the Arab world a different example of a TV news channel.

It challenged restrictions and taboos, and opened a door for viewers to see a different world. This one channel led to a drastic change. After long years of silence and oppression, people in the Arab world learned how to speak, to protest and to demand freedom. And then, the Arab Spring, the dream of our generation, was born. It is a dream that Al Jazeera helped to come true; a turning point that I believe will one day lead to our democratic salvation despite the atrocious scale of the price paid.

Yemen may represent a different image of the Arab Spring to those seen elsewhere, but Sanaa’s Taghyir [Change] Square was very much a part of this dream. Every time I feel fed up with this world, I yearn to go back to that square which has become a symbol of Yemenis’ dreams to rid their country of its bad inheritance.

In 2011, Yemenis expressed their eagerness to obtain their right to
Vision forward looking
Mission steadfast

peace, justice and freedom. Al Jazeera was there. We reported the developments from Sanaa, Bayda, Taiz, Aden, al-Hudaydah, Amran, Marib and other parts of the country.

Al Jazeera’s voice was the strongest and the most truthful, and that is why people wanted to listen to it. We, the journalists working in the revolutionary squares, were the people most capable of describing the scenes we encountered. Some of the protests were peaceful; others were forced to become violent.

The Yemeni revolution was different. It started with a call for the fall of President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s government, but ended up 10 months later with an initiative that forced him to step down.

I recall other experiences from my time as a journalist. In 2005, Yemeni security services tapped my mobile phone and widely leaked one of my personal phone calls with my wife in Sanaa. Then came threats and arrests before 2011. In 2010, our team barely survived an attack in Dhale when a group of extremists opened fire and threw stones at us.

Former Yemeni President Saleh used to only watch Al Jazeera. He knew how much it influenced people. Every time he faced difficulties in the country, he used to hold Al Jazeera accountable.

He and others put a lot of pressure on Al Jazeera’s team in Yemen, trying to force us to change our approach. But we never gave up.

I haven’t stopped thinking about my homeland since I left it in April 2014, after the Houthis had approached the capital Sanaa. I decided to flee an inevitable danger. The situation there exploded a few months later.

Journalists pay the highest price in such circumstances. As always, Al Jazeera remains in the field despite all the challenges and difficulties it encounters. It is still in Yemen today.

As for me, I am in the Doha newsroom, working among colleagues of various nationalities. But still, I yearn to return to the field … and to Sanaa.

One day, I’ll go back to Sanaa
Ahmed Al-Shalafi
The Arab Spring and the Spring of Documentary Films

Ahmed Mahfouz
Managing Director - Al Jazeera Documentary

I remember very well how I felt when the ousted Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled his country. I couldn’t believe it. Could Arabs really do this, I wondered. Since when had Arab leaders responded to the will of the people? I felt happy and hopeful. But I was also worried: would this be just a passing moment or could it become a turning point?

The answer didn’t take long to arrive. And it came from Egypt on January 25, 2011.

As the revolution began in Egypt, I immediately wondered how we could document such a historic event. I contacted a number of the Al Jazeera Documentary Channel’s producers in Egypt and asked them to keep their cameras ready. Tunisia’s revolution may not have been properly documented, but I wanted to be sure that the events unfolding in Egypt would be.

On January 25, our producers managed to film the main protests in Cairo, Alexandria and Suez – as well as the government’s violent reaction to them.

On January 27, I again called our producers and stressed the importance of filming as events escalated amid calls for a ‘Day of Rage’. By the end of the day, communication with Egypt had been cut off. I knew something big was coming.
I spent January 28, watching the news and hoping that our producers had been in Cairo’s Tahrir Square to film the sit-in that was being staged there. On January 29, I was relieved to hear from a few that they had.

Over 18 days, our producers, using 18 cameras, had managed to document every stage of the revolution from each of the revolutionary centres.

When Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, stepped down, our challenge became working out what to do with such a huge amount of material and how best to use it to present such a historic moment.

I asked our producers to submit proposals for possible documentary films based on the material they had. We received dozens of similar suggestions. The event had been one of the most significant in modern Arab history and these producers had been at the heart of it.

I asked them to take a different approach to that adopted in the news coverage; to see the story through the eyes of a documenter, rather than a news reporter; to look for the main characters in this revolution; to search for the spirit of the sit-in, for the human and cultural dimensions of the revolution.

The results were excellent documentary films such as Manufacturing the Truth, Tahrir Diaries and Suez: Cradle of Revolt.

At the Al Jazeera Documentary Film Festival in April 2011, I proposed a series of documentary films with the theme of ‘diaries of the revolution’ and suggested that they be co-productions between the Al Jazeera Documentary Channel and other production companies. Together, we’d co-produce 20 documentary films for the 20 days of the revolution. It was the first such co-production project in the Arab world and, through it, we became the only organisation to visually and comprehensively document this historic event. For the first time in history, we managed to visually record our history in an in-depth form.
I came to Al Jazeera from an important position in an important corporation, Qatar Gas, where I had worked for 12 years. I was on track to become a project director, so when I decided to join Al Jazeera instead, it was against my father’s recommendations. He believed the energy sector was more stable and secure.

But I was excited about Al Jazeera’s newly created project division, where I would be able to establish the policies, procedures and culture of executing the transformative projects the company was planning.

Of course, Al Jazeera was a well-known global brand — although I hadn’t fully appreciated just how well known.

I remember being on the Paris underground one day when a man from North Africa grew curious about my origins. When I told him I was from Qatar, he immediately mentioned Al Jazeera. He wasn’t a fan. But whether they like it or not, people around the world know it.

Those in attendance came from all over the world, but whenever I introduced myself to somebody new, they were familiar with Al Jazeera.

During my graduate studies at HEC Paris, we had to move from one table to another in order to meet as many fellow participants as possible.

Al Jazeera holds fast to its professional code, giving careful consideration to the words and terminology it adopts rather than just
following the jargon used by others.
But, of course, what truly makes it stand out
among other international news channels is
the fact that so many of the biggest stories
in the world are taking place right here in
the Middle East: wars and conflicts in Syria,
Iraq, Libya and Yemen, among other places.
Where other media organisations must rely
on limited sources, Al Jazeera has a large
number of correspondents at the centre
of these stories. As a result it can dive into
the very heart of them, analysing events in
greater depth.

Al Jazeera’s coverage and analysis is vital to
accurately presenting news from the Middle
East to the rest of the world.

Here, I will quote Hillary Clinton’s testimony
before the US Congress: “You’ve got a
global – a set of global networks – that
Al Jazeera has been the leader in, that
are literally changing people’s minds and
attitudes. Viewership of Al Jazeera is going
up in the United States because it’s real
news. You may not agree with it, but you
feel like you’re getting real news around the
clock …=”
Breaking the siege... and a news bulletin

Ayache Derradjii
Bureau Chief - Paris

Every journalist who works at Al Jazeera thinks of him or herself as a diver coming out of water with a pearl in their hand, just as the animated word “Al Jazeera” emerges from the water in the graphic title sequence that announces the beginning of every news bulletin on the Al Jazeera Arabic channel. Pearls are hunted in the depths of the seas, and Al Jazeera has presented a new form of news coverage – different to the shallow news Arabs had gotten used to – that tells people that a news story must come from the depths of events.

On a summer day in 2008, I boarded a ship heading towards Gaza. It was an unprecedented initiative. The Israeli authorities had seized control of those regional waters and this was the first attempt to break the Israeli siege of the Gaza Strip. For a long time, the organisers had worked hard in Athens and Cyprus to prepare for the journey. They ended up not with ships or yachts, but with two simple wooden boats – and 40 activists aboard them.

I was a journalist on a mission to cover a news story, but in every hour of that trip, I learned a new lesson about humanity. I may have felt seasick, but the determination to reach our destination was stronger than my seasickness.

My satellite phone was my only means of communicating with Al Jazeera, and Al Jazeera was the only way in which the world
could follow the progress of the two boats. But the telecommunications network was not as good then as it is now and I had to constantly check the phone’s batteries.

The two boats sailed close to each other. The other one carried skilled fishermen and, every now and again, we could smell their grilled fish. But we were satisfied with our canned food, vegetables and bread.

There were two things we watched carefully: our route to Gaza and the Israeli warships we expected to intercept us at any time. But, despite their repeated threats, they didn’t. Perhaps the Israelis thought we wouldn’t succeed.

But after two days of continuous sailing, except for a few stops to check or fix the engines, we could make out roofs in the distance. The Gaza Strip was in sight. We suddenly forgot our seasickness and headaches. Exhausted activists began to smile and then to laugh. When one activist produced a celebratory bottle of champagne from his bag, ready for arrival, others pointed out that drinking champagne may not be the most appropriate way to celebrate breaking the siege of Gaza. He threw the bottle in the sea and celebrations continued, with activists embracing one another as though they had already arrived.

That final part of our journey seemed to pass so slowly. There it was – Gaza, right in front of us. And the people of Gaza were ready to welcome us. Young men swam towards us. Fishermen sailed their simple boats closer to ours. They could not believe that the two boats they had heard about on the news had actually managed to reach them. Neither could we.

We had reached our destination and Gaza had embraced us.

I will never forget one specific scene: as we arrived, a 60-year-old Spanish activist scooped up some Gazan sand, put it in her mouth and swallowed it. And then she cried – like a child reunited with her lost mother.

Every television channel had been given the chance to send a reporter on one of the boats. But it was Al-Jazeera that had believed in it and been there for that historic moment.

One of the funniest things I remember about that trip was that Gaza’s port did not have an official entry and departure stamp for passengers – it had never received any before – so one was made just for this special occasion. Our passports were stamped on our departure day. And thus, our passports became historic as well. ‘Gaza port – entry/Gaza port – departure’, it said. I still occasionally open my old passport to the last page to take a look at it. That stamp seems like a pearl caught from the depths of the sea.
A colleague once decided to cut a live broadcast of a significant event because a news bulletin had to be aired at its scheduled time. That was when the idea of Al Jazeera Mubasher was born.

One of the main challenges in any newsroom is to balance the needs of different viewers: the viewer who wants to follow one event live and the viewer who wants to watch a news bulletin that summarises the developments in multiple stories.

Motivated by the need to find a solution to this challenge, we decided to launch an independent channel that would focus solely on live events, liberated from the restrictions of a regular programming schedule.

As with any new idea, the process of implementation was not always easy. Still, with team work and administrative support, we were able to overcome the obstacles we encountered and, in April 2005, Al Jazeera Mubasher was launched.

In July 2006, war erupted in Lebanon. Viewers were eager not only to watch what was going on but to talk about it. So, during the first days of the war, Al Jazeera Mubasher launched the Mubasher With programme, allowing viewers to call in and share their opinions. That first episode lasted for seven hours, and the phones continued ringing even after it had finished. Even in these pre-social media days, it was clear that people didn’t want simply to ‘receive’ information but to engage.
with it, to interact with one another and to have a platform that would allow freedom of expression.

This reinforced the idea that live interaction was as important as live broadcast.

Al Jazeera Mubasher soon launched its SMS service, becoming the first Arab TV channel to do so. This gave viewers the chance to share their opinions without having to wait for a scheduled programme or spend long hours on the phone.

The service had its supporters and its opponents, but the continuous increase in the number of participants confirmed a willingness within the Arab world to express opinions live at a time when social media platforms were just starting to emerge but were not yet widely used.

In mid-2010, the channel decided to add a strap to the side of the screen that would show viewers’ Facebook and Twitter comments. It was a novel concept at the time and its launch coincided with the success of the Tunisian revolution. Our new social media window offered Facebook and Twitter users the chance to deliver their messages on a TV screen. Some reacted with amazement, unable to believe that their views were being shared on Al Jazeera.

The Egyptian revolution soon followed the Tunisian one. A few days after it started, Al Jazeera Mubasher positioned its camera inside Tahrir Square. For 18 consecutive days, the channel broadcast live footage, allowing our viewers to watch the revolution as it unfolded and to comment on it. The protesters set up giant screens in the square from which they aired Al Jazeera Mubasher. When the Egyptian regime was overthrown, the protesters held a giant banner on which they had written, in the font used by the channel: “Al Jazeera Mubasher - Breaking News: The People Overthrew the Regime.” The day after the revolution succeeded, Al Jazeera decided to launch Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr (Egypt).

At the heart of the Al Jazeera Mubasher story is the concept of freedom of expression on TV and the belief that to be able to exchange ideas is essential to the evolution and development of our nations.
We like to disagree at Al Jazeera - over email, face-to-face, at editorial meetings, in the cafeteria, at gatherings outside work. There is always a colleague who thinks your perspective is wrong. All newsrooms debate stories. But there aren’t many newsrooms with more than 50 passports. The Al Jazeera English online team has that advantage, and we cherish that statistic. Whatever you think you know about the world, you probably don’t. When we plan out our coverage, there is rarely black and white. Instead, there are as many shades - more - than the nationalities and life experiences of those you’re working with on any particular day.

Sometimes, of course, conventional wisdom reported by other big media organisations finds its way into our building - and into our heads. But it is usually quickly overturned. Is it our place to call that group extreme? Why is the conflict in Somalia being reported only through the prism of the impact it could have on the West? Don’t we care more about what it means for Somalis? Why should a train crash in New York lead “international” news sites but a similar incident in India be ignored? Everyone is talking about Malala, but what about Nabila Rehman in Yemen?

It was a thought like those above - a journalistic gnawing - that led us to decide that we would no longer headline one of the biggest stories of this young century: “Mediterranean migrant crisis.”

Rather than a quick debate, this was more of a murmuring. Days - perhaps weeks - went by and as more and more people were thrown into the sea from upturned boats, as more and more bodies washed up, and as it
became clear that most of them were fleeing war, the media persisted in deeming them migrant. Not people. Not man, not woman, not child, not baby. Not even refugee. Migrant.

This didn’t feel right to us. But in journalism, while an emotional response is important, we also need evidence. Above all, we need accuracy. So we looked at the facts. According to the United Nations, the overwhelming majority of the people arriving on Europe’s shores in rickety boats were fleeing war. The largest number among them were fleeing Syria, a country in which an estimated 400,000 people have been killed in one of the most vicious, annihilative and complex conflicts of our times.

Many others came from Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Eritrea and Somalia – all places from which people are commonly, or should be commonly, given asylum. These people were refugees.

We publicly announced through a blog on Al Jazeera English that we would call them that, sparking a debate that would draw in both other news organisations and aid agencies.

Syrians visit our websites and watch us. Syrians are Al Jazeera journalists. We have large audiences in the African countries from which so-called “economic migrants” depart. Also Afghans, Iraqis, Eritreans, Somalis. These are not people we just report on. They are our audience. And they work here.

Journalism is not perfect. Sometimes it does harm. Sometimes it is self-important, sometimes it is slow to criticise itself and sometimes it is slow to debate what impact its framing of a story has.

But that’s not good enough. There were clear political reasons why some governments said “migrant” and not “refugee”. And journalism at its best must challenge those reasons.

Substituting refugee for migrant was a step that sparked a debate. The most appropriate word, though, for those risking everything in the Mediterranean is more prosaic: people. At Al Jazeera, we never forget they are that.

“Why Al Jazeera will not say ‘Mediterranean migrants’” and “Malala and Nabila: worlds apart” are available to read on aljazeera.com.
Tears of despair

Chris Gunness
Chief Spokesperson for UNRWA

Since its launch, Al Jazeera has blazed a trail in being editorially open to multiple narratives and alternative viewpoints, particularly those of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities on our planet. From the perspective of a multinational organisation like the United Nations, this openness allowed the voices of the oppressed and disadvantaged to be heard as never before. Suddenly there was a broadcaster prepared to shine a light into some of our world’s most conspicuous editorial black holes.

This is particularly true of the five million Palestinian refugees UNRWA serves. They are truly the dispossessed of the earth; people whose voices have been all but extinguished in the mainstream media and whose stories have been obliterated by politics and history, obscured by the passing fads and fashions that bewitch news editors, particularly in “the West”.

What was groundbreaking when Al Jazeera first set up shop - the concept of news centres that were revolving hubs going on air as day dawned and off air as night fell - was felt editorially. It effectively broke down the notion of news as seen from a certain capital, which characterised so many international broadcasters then and still does, even today in our media landscape of placeless bloggers. Back then, it allowed Al Jazeera to break free of traditional editorial silos.
Perhaps the most high profile example of this was the work we did around that iconic image of Yarmouk, the Palestinian refugee camp on the southern outskirts of Damascus. It all began on March 31, 2014, when an UNRWA worker – who was by no means a professional photographer - casually took a photograph that captured a massive river of nameless faces waiting for UNRWA food aid. Their narrative had languished in obscurity until then. Al Jazeera was among those leading the way to tell the story behind the image. It eventually went viral. Yarmouk had touched the imagination of a generation and become the icon of one of the most pitiless conflicts of our age.

Palestinians living under blockade in Gaza or amid Israeli occupation in the West Bank are other telling examples of stories that Al Jazeera will tell where other media outlets seem reluctant. Many journalists ask: “What’s new today after 10 years of blockade and 50 years of occupation?”

The Al Jazeera answer is not to shrug and abandon the story, but to dig further, to find fresh insights and reveal new aspects of the humanity that lies at the heart of these highly newsworthy injustices.

Allow me to end with a personal observation. It was Al Jazeera Arabic that captured one of the most unbearably painful and embarrassingly public moments of my life, when during the 2014 Gaza War, after an interview had ended and I thought the camera was off, I broke down and sobbed disconsolately.

To this day, I can hardly bear to view it. But in retrospect I have Al Jazeera to thank for going with that private moment of grief as the story that summarised that tragic day. If my tears served to focus international attention on the tears of helplessness and despair being shed by hundreds of thousands of people in Gaza and if global audiences for once focused on the plight of five million exiled and dispossessed people, then I don’t have one scintilla of regret; and I have Al Jazeera to thank.

Tears of despair
Chris Gunness
The countdown

Edin Krehić
Senior Editor - Al Jazeera Balkans

10, 9, 8...

The stopwatch was running ahead of the launch of Al Jazeera Balkans. It was 11/11/2011. “When you watch Al Jazeera and read it on the web, there is one thing you will never do,” Goran Milić, the news and programme director of Al Jazeera Balkans told a few of us.

What would that be?

“You will never laugh!”

Not even that is funny.

Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Jazeera English news bulletins were being broadcast live on the TV screens hanging on the walls of our newsroom in Sarajevo. Footage our colleagues had shot in the field played out: bomb explosions, blood-filled streets... Next to them, one large wall display was waiting to go live. Al Jazeera Balkans was about to start broadcasting.

The countdown continued: 7, 6... In those few seconds, a kaleidoscope of images from two decades before rolled in my head, of a time when I had, by chance, become a war reporter in my home city.

Usually, reporters dream of taking a helmet and kevlar vest emblazoned with the word PRESS and reporting from a warzone. In the Balkans, we didn’t have to go anywhere in the early 1990s. The war had come to our front door. I worked at Oslobođenje...
then, the oldest daily newspaper in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where I was the deputy editor-in-chief and newsdesk chief before coming to Al Jazeera. I witnessed massacres, when grenades fell in streets filled with people; or in the queue for water; I wrote about children murdered and wounded by snipers while going to class in basements; circled the rare stalls with food that had been smuggled into the city, priced similarly to blood diamonds. Life was the cheapest, just as it is now, across the world.

My wife often says that I remember too much, which is why I am able to write books. I know that.

I recall the smallest details: From the sentence “Good night Dubrovnik, good night Dubrovnik folk, good night all my dreams…”, which I had published as a 17-year-old student in the youth newspaper Sigma, in a story dedicated to the most beautiful Croatian city on the Adriatic coast, besieged in 1991; to every street I walked and every person I talked to on the outskirts of Sarajevo, where they lived next to trenches on the frontline. I remember the time I was sentenced to a year in jail because I wrote about the smuggling of Kurds through Bosnia and Herzegovina and later being acquitted by the Supreme Court. I remember each detail from our Srebrenica 360 and Sarajevo Under Siege specials, which the web department of Al Jazeera Balkans created in Bosnian, English, Arabic and Turkish and which was published prominently across the network.

I also remember how dejected I felt when a foreign TV station would refuse to show footage from war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the explanation that it was too bloody and that it would disturb viewers in some peaceful country, where young people were deciding what to wear for a night out...

We are now thinking about clothes, while somewhere else, people are dying and starving. I know that it will always be so. Someone will always be thinking of fashion while others cry over the dead.

All we can do is fairly report on it. Whenever we publish disturbing footage, which is usually marked with the disclaimer – DISTURBING, I recall George Orwell’s (1903 – 1950) words: “Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed: everything else is public relations.”

The countdown was nearing the end: 5, 4, 3…

The countdown was ending: 2, 1…

Did our colleagues elsewhere in the network sigh with relief like this when they launched?

I managed to think of the words of Italian writer and editor Ugo Ojetti (1871-1946): “A journalist is the only writer who, when reaching for the pen, does not hope for immortality.”

I managed, too, to think of people who would be the main actors in our stories, who have no hope of immortality either.

The countdown has finished…

The news has started…
It was a typical sunny day in Doha. The receptionist at the DG’s office greeted me as he did every day: with a big smile. Everything seemed normal, except for the large number of missed calls displayed on the screen of my office phone.

I quickly discovered that this wasn’t any ordinary day. We had lost contact with our team covering the revolution in Libya. We didn’t know where they were or who had captured them. Their families were calling our offices, desperately seeking news.

I was tasked with contacting the spouses of those who were missing. It was one of the most difficult missions I’d been assigned in the two years since I’d joined the organisation, because Al Jazeera’s relationship with its employees is not merely about work. Everybody here belongs to one family, and the difficulties we encounter only bring us closer together.

I felt that same sense of belonging to an Al Jazeera family when we welcomed our returning colleagues who had been captured by Israeli forces aboard the Mavi Marmara vessel, which had broken the siege of the Gaza Strip. I saw it when I looked into the eyes of the son of Ali Hassan al-Jaber, an Al Jazeera cameraman killed in Libya. And I heard it in the words of the wife of Al Jazeera correspondent Lutfi al- Masoudi, who had been captured in Libya, when I called her to let her know he was doing well. Crying, she...
said: “I don’t know what happened to my husband. But I’m sure Al Jazeera will never forget its staff and will do its best to bring them back home safe.”

Al Jazeera not only reports the news, it also seeks to raise awareness among an Arab audience, equipping young Arabs to cope with the rapid progress under way in their region.

“Al Jazeera’s Ambassadors” was an initiative designed for this purpose by Al Jazeera’s training centre. Through it, we organised workshops in many Arab countries, where Al Jazeera staff shared their skills and experiences with those in attendance. Young Gazans were trained to document Israel’s repeated violations and to report on the suffering of those around them. Syrian refugees in the camps along the border with Turkey were shown how to use their cameras to record acts of oppression committed against them.

From Jerusalem to Nouakchott and Khartoum, we have strived to offer young Arabs free professional training courses to help them be the future of the media in their countries and to reflect what is truly going on in the region.

I remember how at the end of one of the Al Jazeera Ambassadors courses, tears rolled down the face of a participant as he received his certificate. In that moment I became even more certain that Al Jazeera is not only the channel of ‘The Opinion and the Other Opinion’; it is also a family and an unprecedented project in the sharing of knowledge.
I’ve been a part of the Al Jazeera family for 18 years. Together, we have witnessed wars and occupations, assassinations and explosions, tragedies and victories.

Al Jazeera was born into a dark decade in the history of the Arab world at a time when Arab media was a mere tool – the voice of threats and the conveyor of fabricated news – rather than a platform to raise awareness and promote freedom.

Al Jazeera has been targeted since it launched simply because it is different; because it shattered the stereotype of Arab media.

In 1996, two years after its launch, it became known internationally as the only TV channel airing footage of US missile strikes on Baghdad during Operation Desert Fox. It wasn’t only viewers who turned to us, but international news channels such as CNN.

As it faced opposition on the one hand, Al Jazeera’s popularity grew on the other. Arab viewers had longed for a platform that expressed their disappointments, heard their voices and conveyed their ambitions for freedom.

Al Jazeera chose to raise awareness after decades during which awareness had been suppressed by other Arab media organisations. That awareness was at the core of its
Vision forward looking
Mission steadfast

‘journalism for humanity’.

This is the story of Al Jazeera and, through it, my own. I have lived its stories and conveyed its values.

Today, as Al Jazeera grows older, I look back on the past 20 years and recall events that changed the world and stories that changed me. Two particular visits to refugee camps stay in my mind.

To meet those whose stories I reported in news bulletins every day, whose plight I would question representatives of international organisations and politicians about was powerful. But I wasn’t prepared for the scope of the misery I was going to witness in the refugee camps.

It was a cold winter’s day when we travelled in UN vehicles towards Al Baqa’a refugee camp in Jordan. The aim of our visit was to check on the situation of Syrian and non-Syrian refugees who had fled their war-torn homelands.

I saw a 13-year-old boy standing in a very small shop. He looked at us. I approached and asked him about his story. Ibrahim was from the Syrian city of Daraa and had been working at the shop since he’d fled with his parents and eight siblings. The school at the refugee camp didn’t have a place for him. I tried to record an interview with him, but he refused. I asked him about his working hours and daily wage and what he would like to be in the future. His answer was immediate. “A teacher,” he said.

Ibrahim didn’t realise that going to school was the only way to achieve his dream. Or maybe he did, but he just didn’t want to let go of his dream.

On another day, we went to Al Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan. The names of its streets attracted my attention. There was Freedom Street, Victory Street, Democracy Street, Jasmine Street, Zaitoun Street – names intended to express the dreams of a displaced people. Eighty-thousand people live in this camp, our guide told us. Young men, women and children were in the streets, trying to sell as many of their possessions as they could.

Others drew colourful graffiti on the walls of their temporary homes, trying to inject a sense of joy and perhaps to add some colour to their lives. We eventually reached the refugee camp hospital as it was celebrating the birth of its 5,001 baby.

Al Jazeera shared all of those experiences with those refugees.

This is Al Jazeera. It embraces people. Since it launched, it has been biased towards humanity, and it always will be.
“Al Jazeera has successfully managed to introduce China to Arab viewers in one week, while Arab-speaking Chinese media has failed to do so for 50 years,” said the then Chinese foreign minister, Li Zhaoxing, while meeting with the then Director General of Al Jazeera, Waddah Khanfar, in 2006 at the official Guest Palace in the Chinese capital, Beijing.

The minister wasn’t just being polite. His comment was based on fact and reports received by China’s embassies in Arab capitals.

The minister continued: “Arabs have a proverb that says: ‘Pursue education even if in China’. I tell Chinese media organisations: ‘Learn from Al Jazeera even if it is in Qatar’.”

The Chinese minister was referring to Al Jazeera’s week-long Eye on China show; the first in a series that would also go on to cover Sudan, Turkey, Russia and Iran.

In the first episode, Al Jazeera’s anchor Jamal Rayyan started the show from the Great Wall of China, announcing: “This wall was built by the ancient Chinese to prevent invaders’ attacks. Al Jazeera has now turned this wall into a cultural bridge between two civilisations.”

In June 2002, Al Jazeera opened its bureau in Beijing, becoming the first and only Arabic-speaking news channel broadcasting from the country. It chose its bureau staff carefully: selecting people who were fluent in the language and understood the Chinese culture.
It marked a turning point in how the Chinese authorities dealt with foreign media organisations. Chinese officials agreed to be interviewed live on Al Jazeera’s shows; something that was unprecedented on foreign and even local media channels.

But journalism is a very difficult profession in China, and that is amplified when you work for a channel whose logo is “The Opinion… and the Other Opinion”. It is that sentiment that explains our exclusive coverage from Tibet shortly after the so-called “revolution of the monks” in 2008 and of the unrest in the Muslim Uighur-majority Xinjiang province, where the authorities had imposed a complete information and media blackout. Enraged by our coverage, the Chinese foreign ministry summoned Al Jazeera’s correspondent on several occasions.

Al Jazeera’s influence in China expanded even more following its coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 60th anniversary of the creation of the People’s Republic of China, and the SARS and H1N1 outbreaks.

Covering such a geographically vast country with such rich cultural heritage is not easy. But Al Jazeera managed to cross the Great Wall of China and uncover new regions for our viewers: becoming the first Arab media organisation to go inside North Korea, presenting a view of that country that went beyond nuclear reactors and missiles, and entering Myanmar when so few others did.

However, Al Jazeera’s coverage of the earthquake that struck China’s Sichuan province in 2008, killing more than 80,000 people, restored the good relationship between the channel and the Chinese authorities. In a speech delivered before Arab ambassadors during their visit to the afflicted province, a Chinese official explained that Al Jazeera’s coverage had helped to raise awareness of the scale of the disaster, resulting in a flow of humanitarian aid from Arab countries.

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I will never forget the South Korean translator who greeted us at the airport with such childish joy, declaring: “I couldn’t sleep all night. I called all my friends to tell them I would escort Al Jazeera’s team.” When I jokingly replied: “Then come and work with us at Al Jazeera” I hadn’t anticipated her answer. “Really? I’d walk all the way to Doha if I was given that opportunity,” she said.

When Al Jazeera’s Beijing bureau began its operations, it had just three employees. We now have 20. We report China’s news to an Arab audience and developments in the Arab world to the Chinese via Al Jazeera’s Chinese-language social media pages. We will soon launch our Chinese-language website.

Twenty years after its establishment, Al Jazeera is recognised all over the world, and we, at the Beijing bureau, are proud to be a part of this success.
Mahmoud stood to my right, Abdul Baset to my left and Fatima sat on my lap as her grandmother told stories of war and displacement, holding back her tears as she shared tales of their suffering.

Other children joined us - Sadan, Amina, Louay, Mohammed and Ahmed; the circle growing bigger and bigger still.

Mohammed held out his hand. I tried to decline the biscuit he offered, made with love by his mother to pack into his school lunchbox, but he insisted that I take it. Other little hands followed, offering their biscuits too.

Fatima disappeared and then returned with some peanuts and a piece of paper on which she had written a message. Mahmoud brought a skipping rope and asked if I’d play with him. We jumped and laughed from the depths of our hearts.

When it was time to say goodbye, Mahmoud asked me: “Will you be back?”

“In the evening, I will be on that hill outside the camp, but it will be late. You’d be sleeping as it is a school night,” I replied.

“I’ll wait!” he said.

That night, as I was reporting live from the hill, I looked at my watch and saw that it was 11pm. The refugee camp was a light in the distance. I imagined Mahmoud standing there looking at the hill and the lights of the cameras. I heard some voices. I heard his voice calling me. I didn’t know if it was real or if I was just imagining it.
Go to sleep my little baby… Tomorow is a better day…
Go to sleep my little baby… Syria will be back as it was once…
Go to sleep my little baby… You are the future and you are hope…

Doha - October 17, 2015

That was the message I wrote after returning from reporting on the Syria-Turkey border. It conveyed some of the feelings I couldn't express on screen, which was already overloaded with tragic tales of war and displacement.

Every time I come back from field coverage, I ask myself the same question: “Have I covered all that is happening?” The answer is always the same: “What screen, what coverage and what report could cover all of what is happening?” How can I report what happened with Um Mutaaz before and after our live broadcast, even though it is as important, maybe even more so, than what has been covered on screen.

Here is the full story:

Before going on air, we would sit on the pavement in front of a camp where hundreds of refugees fleeing the war in Syria had settled. Um Mutaaz told us: “Yes, I’ll talk about how difficult it is to go inside and outside this camp. I’ll talk about the shortage of basic needs – we don’t have bread, milk, flour and many other things.”

I wanted to tell her: “But we need to focus on…” but that phrase seemed so inappropriate considering the tragedy she was living. “How am I supposed to tell her what is more worthy of being spoken about?” I wondered. “Aren’t we here to be with Um Mutaaz? Isn’t one of our mottos ‘To be with people?’”

So I hushed the voices inside me and decided to listen to whatever Um Mutaaz wanted to tell the world.

One… two… three… We are live.

Without any introduction, Um Mutaaz began to share her story, explaining how she had fled war and death and her yearning to return to her home and neighbourhood. In perfectly articulate sentences, she conveyed so much, without even mentioning the bread and milk.

Then, when the camera’s light went off, she said: “Our homeland is more important [than bread and milk] … Syria is more important. Let the whole world listen to the suffering of the Syrians. Isn’t Al Jazeera the best platform for our voices?”

We left the refugee camp and continued our journey. With each new day, came a new story.

On another day, we were heading towards the Jarabulus border crossing, which had been seized by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). We wanted to get as close to Jarabulus as we could so our team went ahead to choose the best spot.

“I am a cemetery?” I asked my colleague as we arrived.

“Don’t be afraid, Harm comes from the metres from where we stood, they told us.

We decided to go live regardless, and what was supposed to be a 10-minute live broadcast ended up lasting for half an hour.
The Stream, creating ripples since 2011
Femi Oke
Senior Presenter - The Stream / Al Jazeera english

It’s May 2011, and I’m in Brooklyn, New York watching something extraordinary on my laptop.

It’s hard to tell where my computer ends and the show begins. People appear on screen, lined up in little boxes, and they’re chatting to each other from around the world, connected to a studio in Washington, DC via a beta version of a Google Hangout. There’s a guest in the studio sitting on a magnificent, retina-destroying orange sofa. Perched next to him is digital producer Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, balancing a laptop on his knee, monitoring live tweets and Facebook comments from viewers. And trying to hold the whole thing together while surfing on his own computer, the host Derek Ashong.

This is raw, addictive, sensory-overload viewing, and for me and so many followers of @AJStream around the world, it is love at first sight.

The concept was simple - create a space for netizens to discuss important news, current affairs and cultural issues on Al Jazeera TV and online. At a time when traditional media journalists were agonising over the ethics of broadcasting a single tweet, giving the social-media community access to an international news network was revolutionary.

In the early years of The Stream, I’d often hear it described as “that show where they read out tweets”. It wasn’t a compliment. Critics were annoyed that the new technology being experimented with didn’t always work. My co-host Malika Bilal vividly remembers a time the show decided to try some open source technology and experiment with an alternative to Skype. It failed spectacularly on live...
TV. Sometimes Skype connections were so bad that guests looked like they were being beamed up to the Star Trek Enterprise. Even I, ardent Stream fan-girl, would roll my eyes every time somebody started to speak but you couldn’t hear them because they had forgotten to unmute themselves. This was pretty much every show.

Frankly, there were executives at our Doha headquarters who were not impressed with what they were seeing. The Stream was creating live, unpredictable television and online stories that looked like nothing else on the network, and they didn’t know what to make of it.

By 2013, when I joined the show, it had a solid fan base. I don’t think we would have thrived if the audience hadn’t embraced The Stream so passionately. We asked for stories, they shared them, and we told them. Before the Occupy Wall Street movement became a global phenomenon, the first protesters came to the show with their grievances. Months before the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was international news, viewers told The Stream about the deaths of friends and family. We dedicated an entire show to their questions and followed up with two more episodes on Ebola. Every single show from day one was made because of, or with, our global audience.

The original team created a digital doorway for the millions of people who admire Al Jazeera and invited them to be part of the network, too. For me, a tweet, a Facebook question or an Instagram picture represents a breaking down of the elite hierarchy that often determines how and what news is delivered. We’re used to journalists telling us what’s going on in the world. The Stream community flips the script and makes Al Jazeera’s coverage stronger because of it.

We haven’t stopped experimenting either, and if you follow us online you’ll be in a prime spot to watch the team try out new technology. Watch for links labeled “test” - then brace yourself. The Stream has been creating ripples since 2011, and we’re not about to stop now.
In early 2009, Al Jazeera sent me to the besieged Gaza Strip. Israel’s war on the territory had just ended and I was among the first to be allowed to enter. As soon as I passed the Rafah crossing, I immediately understood what people meant when they referred to it as “a big prison”.

As an Arab journalist, I was familiar with the Palestinian cause. But it was only then that I realised the full horrors of an occupier’s war on civilians. It was only then that I understood how strong Palestinians – from the very youngest to the very oldest – are.

How can a journalist cover the developments that take place in occupied Palestine and apply the rules of balance and the “The Opinion and the other Opinion”? At first, I thought it would be difficult.

But Al Jazeera has encouraged me to go where few others dare – to the people. And the truth doesn’t contradict impartiality.

A single story is to be told here – a piece of land, one of the most densely populated in the world, has been targeted by weapons that do not distinguish between civilians and military personnel. It is a region besieged and destroyed; where Palestinians cannot even catch the fish in their sea and where even olive trees have been targeted.

A different approach must be adopted to tell this story – ‘just report
In the summer of 2014, Israel launched a new war against Gaza, preceded by a military campaign in the occupied West Bank. What Al Jazeera’s cameras managed to capture during that conflict was even more brutal than what had been inflicted upon the Strip in 2009.

How, I wondered, could the world stand by, watching those crimes being committed against civilians?

I knew then that I needed to interview Israeli officials live on Al Jazeera. My interview with the Israeli government spokesperson Ofir Gendelman inspired an article in the Israeli newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth. It was seen as an unprecedented blow against Israeli propaganda.

Only then, did I realise the true power of the media – to expose an unbalanced war and its impact on an occupied people.
After years of reporting and filmmaking in the Middle East, mainly for the British media, I joined Al Jazeera Arabic in 2004 with fresh hope. Al Jazeera promised something different: a chance to report on events and people in the Middle East from a different - and more complete - perspective.

I have now been with the Al Jazeera family for 12 of its 20 years - moving across to Al Jazeera English when it launched in 2006. It has been a wonderful journey.

And as I look to the road ahead, two great challenges loom large: One is hugely worrying, and the other is hugely exciting. Both are potentially threatening, in different ways, if they are not addressed.

Yet, I see that each of these challenges allows us to reaffirm our core principles, stand up for what we believe in and meet the future.

One of the challenges is what appears to be an increasing number of assaults on media freedom - whether intimidating, attacking, kidnapping, imprisoning or killing journalists.

Of course, journalists have often been targeted in the past, but there seems to be a growing propensity for governments and
protagonists around the world to deliberately put journalists in their crosshairs. Being a journalist who is dedicated to telling the truth - factually, accurately and impartially - seems to be an ever more perilous career path.

Perhaps the world is more dangerous, or perhaps journalism has lost its sheen of independence in the eyes of some. Whatever the reason, any assault on media freedom is an assault on freedom of expression.

Over the years, Al Jazeera has had bitter experiences in this regard – having seen some of its journalists killed, and others arrested, sentenced and imprisoned without charge.

And I feel proud that Al Jazeera is at the leading edge of seeking ways to defend media freedom, most recently through its publication of the International Declaration on the Protection of Journalists in collaboration with the International Press Institute.

The other challenge is very different. It relates to the digital revolution sweeping the news industry and creating what has been dubbed ‘innovative disruption’, whereby the media landscape is being shaken up by new technologies, new platforms, new players and new trends that are all challenging - even threatening - established market leaders.

Some consider the scale of disruption facing the TV news industry as comparable to what printed newspapers experienced over the last decade or to the challenge faced by the music industry when the online sharing of audio files took off. I believe it’s a challenge that is nothing short of existential.

Al Jazeera has proven that it can beat the best, winning international awards for outstanding digital content and technological innovation. But the market never rests and just as quickly as change occurs, so more change is expected to come. It’s fast, exciting and requires news media organisations to be agile, adaptive and to work diligently to get and stay up to speed with the changing times.

Although many talk of technological advancements, I believe it is creativity that will be critical. Creativity, more than technology, will be the differentiating factor in the market.

And in this respect, Al Jazeera has a strong advantage in the quality of our content and the talent of our teams. These are our core products. These are our core strengths, which can help us navigate the flux and fluidity of the media landscape.

Despite the dangers and the disruption, it is these that will help ensure Al Jazeera stays ahead of the game and will be around to celebrate for many more decades to come.
A group of masked armed men stopped our car, pointed their weapons at us and said: “Get out of the car, now.”

“What do you want?” I asked. “You must be mistaken. I’m Al Jazeera’s correspondent Hamdi al-Bakari.”

They answered with their guns pointed at our heads: “Shut up and don’t say a word.”

They blindfolded us, led us to their car and took off. I was with two independent contractors who were working with Al Jazeera – cameraman Abdul Aziz al-Sabri and driver Munir Sadeq. It was January 18, 2015, and we were in the Yemeni city of Taiz.

They took our mobile phones and violently searched us. They told me to hand over an electronic chip they said could locate the targets and locations of air strikes. Of course, I had no such thing.

An hour later, they took me alone to a remote room away from the house where they had kept us. The room was so small it could barely accommodate one person. “If you make any move, we will blow up the room,” they told me.

They came back later, took me to a house and chained my feet. I stayed looked up in that room for 11 days. I later learned that my two colleagues had been held in other rooms in the house.
Those were difficult times, during which I believed I was going to die at any moment. The hardest part to endure was the mock executions they conducted.

I can’t think of a worse situation than being kidnapped. It affects not only you, but your family, friends and colleagues.

As I awaited death, I remembered key moments in my professional journey with Al Jazeera. I stored them in my mind, believing I would never get a chance to write them down. But, here I am, putting those memories in writing.

I joined Al Jazeera in late 2006 as a news and interview producer in Yemen. I became a correspondent in 2010. I covered the daily news of the revolution in Taiz in 2011. In 2013, I covered the activities of the Southern Movement, or the al-Hirak al-Janoubi, in Aden, the government war on al-Qaeda in Abyan and Shabwa provinces, along with other security and political activities in the country.

In 2014, we covered the developments of the national dialogue in Sanaa and examined the atmosphere among Yemenis as they hoped for an end to the crisis. But war soon erupted in Dammaj in Saada province and other neighbouring districts. I went to cover the war in west Saada, near the borders with Saudi Arabia, then in Amran, until the Houthis reached Sanaa.

In the beginning of 2015, I moved to Maareb and then covered the war in Aden. I returned to Taiz as the war escalated and started to take on regional and international dimensions.

It was a difficult journalistic experience during which I - and our brave cameramen Mujib Sweileh, Samir al-Nimri, Amin Rushdi, Khaled Rajeh and other independent contractors - came close to death several times.

But this time it was different. I had been kidnapped and was being psychologically tortured. I believed I was going to die soon.

Let it be, I thought, I have no regrets. During my 10 years with Al Jazeera, I had been completely satisfied with my work, knowing that I had always been committed to the ethics of this profession.

To me, Al Jazeera is not only a media organisation that makes you a professional journalist, but a school where you learn the values of courage and sacrifice in order to report the truth to the people. I was satisfied with the professional duties I had so far carried out.

Our kidnappers released us on January 28, 2015. I was surprised by the scale of local, Arab and international solidarity and the role played by Al Jazeera’s administration and staff to save us. It made me feel proud to be a part of such an organisation.

Today, as I write this article in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Al Jazeera, I would like to express my solidarity with every imprisoned journalist. I would also like to take my hat off to all our colleagues who are bravely covering the news in conflict zones. Courage, challenging our fears and focusing on humanitarian cases are the core values of journalists who serve people and help them gain their right to a decent life.
Since its launch, Al Jazeera has played a leading role in Arab and international media, raising awareness and enhancing people’s understanding of their rights and freedoms.

It also played a significant role in the Arab Spring, reflecting the reality of the revolutions in Arab nations. Al Jazeera’s reporters and cameramen have made sacrifices to achieve this mission. Some have been killed while carrying out their journalistic duties. They didn’t carry weapons, but cameras and microphones. Still, they were killed by despotic regimes that had also killed their own people.

One of those ‘martyrs’ was Ali Hassan Al Jaber, a cameraman who had covered the war in Afghanistan and been in Iraq and Kuwait during the Gulf War in 1990. He joined Al Jazeera’s team covering the revolution in Libya, using his camera to convey the truth of what was unfolding there. The last pictures he took were of the tomb of Libya’s national hero, Omar al-Mokhtar.

I didn’t know Al Jaber personally, but I was deeply affected by his death. He represents a perfect example of the sacrifices Al Jazeera has made since its launch in 1996.

Several of its employees have sacrificed their lives for the sake of reporting the truth. Al Jaber was not the first. Tareq Ayoub was killed in a 2003 US air strike targeting Al Jazeera’s Baghdad bureau.

During the Arab Spring, others were killed in revolutionary squares as they...
tried to report on the attempts to gain freedom and justice taking place there.

We cannot forget the Syrian media activist Mohammad al-Masalma. He revolted against the Syrian regime, medically assisted the injured and reported, as Al Jazeera’s correspondent, on the Syrian revolution and the suffering of the Syrian people.

The moment of al-Masalma’s death was captured on camera. None of those who saw that video will forget it. He held his microphone in his hand and tried to cross the street but was shot dead by a sniper. It was an indescribable and unforgettable scene.

Also in Syria, media activist Mohammad al-Qasem escorted the Free Syrian Army and provided humanitarian relief to displaced Syrians until he, too, was shot dead while covering the events in that country.

Syrian journalist Mahran al-Deeri had worked for the Syrian official news agency, SANA, until he decided to stop reporting the government’s false news. He believed in a free media and started working as a correspondent for Al Jazeera’s Arabic website. He was killed while covering the battles between the Syrian government and armed opposition in the city of al-Sheikh Maskin in Deraa.

We also remember Al Jazeera’s cameraman Mohammad al-Asfar, who was killed by a Syrian government sniper, and Zakaria Ibrahim, who had filed several field reports focusing on the situation of besieged and displaced Syrians.

We often watch scenes of conflict on Al Jazeera, both at home and at work. We are affected by the things we see but often forget that those responsible for letting us see them are journalists and cameramen who endure great hardships to bring us the truth, sometimes being detained and physically and psychologically abused in the process. That is why we must promote and support legislation to protect them and push governments around the world to respect the freedom of the media so that journalists might report the truth without fear of being targeted.

May the souls of all our ‘martyrs’ rest in peace.

Journalism’s ‘martyrs’
Hanan Ali Al Thani
It is difficult to sum up 19 years of my life and work at Al Jazeera in just a few lines. As the head of the promos department, I have traveled to different Arab countries in order to shoot promos in the field. I remember going to Egypt in 2006, on Al Jazeera’s 10th anniversary. It was my first time there, and the only thing I had in common with many of those I met was Al Jazeera: everybody wanted to discuss it with me, whether to praise or criticize. I would find myself surrounded by people who wanted to discuss their own, often desperate, plight. “Are you Al Jazeera?” they would ask wherever I went. People trusted us and they wanted to talk. An intellectual wanted to debate, an inventor wanted to show us his invention and the documents he had proving that it was his but which he’d never been able to file to the responsible authorities, and a researcher wanted to ask why the results of his studies had been ignored. There were so many stories and so many dreams. Those dreamers believed that Al Jazeera could open doors for them. It might have honesty, integrity and determination, but it doesn’t have the keys. I remember one old woman most...
clearly. We were filming an interview, when I felt a hesitant tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw her, smiling broadly, with a couple of fresh, hot loaves of bread in her hands.

“Yes, can I help you?” I asked.

“Are you Al Jazeera?” she responded.

“Yes, how can we help?”

“I want to speak on Al Jazeera.”

I smiled and asked: “What do you want to say?”

She took a bite of the fresh bread in her hand and said: “Al Jazeera is fresh … just like this hot bread.”

And there it was: a perfect promo. In just a few simple words, she had conveyed what hours of brainstorming couldn’t.

She didn’t ask for help. She didn’t want to complain about anything. She just wanted to talk about Al Jazeera.

I thought it would be a golden chance to shoot an interview with her, but our cameraman was busy filming with somebody else. I asked her to wait until we were finished with that interview so that we could speak with her and offered her a chair on which to sit while waiting.

I rushed the other interview so that I could speak to her. But when I turned around, I found her seat empty. Then I spotted her at the end of the road, holding a young man’s hand and getting onto a bus. She was still smiling.

I lost some great promo material, but I won a memory that would stay with me forever.

“Are you Al Jazeera?”

Hasan Zidane
Vision forward looking
Mission steadfast

Refusing to be silenced

Ibrahim Nassar
Manager of Teleport
Technology & Network Operations Division

On a daily basis, I am reminded of the woes of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip – of their hardships and the challenges of living within the confines of an illegally blockaded tiny strip of land.

The war on Gaza was a humanitarian crisis of huge proportions. There was a shortage of food, water and medical supplies, but there was never a shortage of hope.

Al Jazeera always strives to be the voice of the voiceless, and during the war on Gaza it was no different. But while we were reporting on every detail of that war, we learned that Al Jazeera’s signals were being blocked, using jamming technologies, so that those inside the Gaza Strip could not see their own stories being told on Al Jazeera. This jamming technology, called geo-blocking, effectively stopped the Gaza Strip from being able to receive Al Jazeera signals. Without being able to watch our reports on their plight, the people of Gaza felt alone and as though the world was oblivious to the crime that was being committed against them.

Of course, Al Jazeera has encountered attempts at censorship before, whether politically or commercially driven. But it is something Al Jazeera cannot accept.
In line with the values of Al Jazeera, and unshaken by the efforts to block our journalism, I, in coordination with the Al Jazeera Technology Team, launched an initiative to allow the people of Gaza to access Al Jazeera. The result was the Al Jazeera FM Radio project.

By utilising FM radio, the people of Gaza were once again be able to hear the news – and to know that they are not alone, that their stories are being told.

The launch of the Al Jazeera FM Radio project was born out of our conviction that everyone has the right to receive unbiased news and to hear both sides of the story, as well as our determination to stand firm when confronted by those who wish to silence us.
It was my father, a man with strong principles of social justice, who first introduced me to the old African proverb: “Until lions have their story-tellers, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter.” Fast forward three decades or so and I am working for Witness, Al Jazeera English’s flagship documentary strand, and I’m talking to a filmmaker about his rough cut. It’s a documentary about an impressive Kenyan botanist and his discovery of a grass seed that could potentially hold the secret to food security in Kenya - but the first edit of the film is a disappointment. We work through the film and I point out how the filmmaker has, unintentionally, undermined the authority of his main character. He’s done this by constantly talking about him, instead of letting the Kenyan tell his own story, and the dominant commentary track locates the power of the story with the narrator rather than the main character.

We discuss how to redress this and move on to the visual messaging of the piece. Again unintentionally, the filmmaker has reduced the main character’s visual centrality and authority in the story through some thoughtless editing, framing and shot selection. All of these issues are relatively easy to repair by interrogating each scene, asking: Whose story is this? Where is the power-base of the story? Who owns this scene? Is the character a victim or an agent in their own story? Who is visually dominant? Is the character objectified or empowered through the imagery? What is the overall messaging of the piece?

In the end, the re-edited film does justice to the Kenyan protagonist and brings an engaging story of innovation and expertise.
from the global south to our audiences. But it reminds me of that old idiom from my youth. And it reminds me still, every day, of my responsibility at Al Jazeera: To position authoritative, empowered and active story-tellers, from communities which are usually excluded from the media, centrally within their own stories.

When Al Jazeera says it gives ‘voice to the voiceless’ and presents ‘the human story’, it speaks to a long-held passion of mine. I am delighted to have these kinds of conversations with hundreds of filmmakers, to steer our documentaries away from the old-fashioned ‘us and them’ style that dominates in many other media organisations.

While we seek a range of perspectives and presenters, I am drawn to story-telling that challenges dominant narratives, that elevates disempowered voices and that eschews the prevailing, often Western, perspectives. It fills me with pride to be part of a global media network that actively encourages this, questioning assumptions and leading the way in looking at the world differently. For us at Al Jazeera, it’s not enough to think about what stories to cover: we also question how they are told. I’ve worked for some 28 years in international television and nowhere else has this been such a central part of the general discourse around output. This is what I love most about working at Al Jazeera and to my mind this is what puts Al Jazeera way ahead of its competitors.

Whether it’s Kenyan botanists, Syrian refugees, Chinese villagers or Cuban comedians, when these people have real ownership of the global airwaves to tell us their stories in their own words, they challenge the very way we understand the world. I believe that, despite the actions of politicians and warlords around the globe, it is the stories we tell that ultimately shift perceptions and that allow other versions of the world to be imagined and even achieved.

I am very proud to have played a small part in Al Jazeera’s history of bringing new stories and story-tellers to our screens, giving the ‘lions’ of the world some of the glory for a change.
Every time someone talks about Al Jazeera’s 20th anniversary, I get confused – it feels more like 120 years. For the network’s pioneers, it is hard to believe that so much history has been made in just 20 years.

There has been one exclusive news story after another; employees killed, arrested and harassed; bureaus targeted and shelled; talks between the former US president, George W. Bush, and the former British prime minister, Tony Blair, about bombing Al Jazeera’s Doha headquarters in order to silence it, even if just for a few days, during the US invasion of Iraq. Then there is that logo – now recognised all over the world.

I remember how, before launch, I would run back and forth every day, sometimes several times a day, between Al Jazeera’s administrative and HR building and its main headquarters. We would work 12 hours a day. It wasn’t compulsory; we willingly worked such long hours in order to build this significant media symbol in the heart of the Qatari capital, Doha.

As our launch date approached, journalists began to arrive and piloting sessions commenced. We were all well aware of the huge responsibility that fell on our shoulders and of the need to produce our very best. I still recall Al Jazeera’s Chairman of the Board working hard every day with his key...
advisers, ensuring that any administrative and financial support that might be needed was available, at any time, to solve any problem.

That launch team was professionally and socially integrated. On any day, they might prepare pilot news bulletins, produce documentary films and create talk shows, suggesting topics, discussion points and interviewees. Then, in the evening, they might all gather at a colleague’s home or head together towards Doha’s seaside Qalaa coffee shop.

Everyone agreed on one basic idea: the channel would be a platform for “The Opinion … and the Other Opinion”.

The logo was initially suggested by the anchor Jamil Azar, while news anchor Jamal Rayyan announced the birth of the channel, reading its very first live news bulletin.

The channel presented balanced news bulletins and interviewed controversial figures who had been “politically blacklisted” in various countries.

A number of Arab states accused Al Jazeera of collaborating with Mossad, British intelligence or the CIA. Those who were irritated or enraged by Al Jazeera sought to produce their own ‘antidote’, launching competing satellite channels.

One of my best memories is of how Al Jazeera itself turned into a news story as Western channels reported on what they called the ‘Al Jazeera phenomenon’. CNN even embedded a journalist within our newsroom.

Soon, a visit to Al Jazeera’s Doha headquarters featured on the agenda of almost every high-profile foreign official visiting the state – not because it was official protocol, but out of personal interest. One of the most memorable was that by then Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, who declared: “This matchbox! All this noise is coming out of this matchbox?”

His words were an affirmation of exactly what it was that made Al Jazeera great – not its offices or studios, but its determination to shine a light on the world.
When Al Jazeera’s general manager asked me to come up with a motto for the new channel, I consulted members of the board and then wrote three suggestions down on a small piece of paper. I still have it today. It reads: Uncensored, The Opinion and the Other Opinion and Professionalism, Objectivity and Pioneering.

Two days later, I decided to submit only the second option. It seemed to perfectly sum up what this new channel aspired to be – a challenge to media controlled by ruling regimes and an articulation of courage and impartiality.

Through this motto, Al Jazeera has managed to enforce a culture of dialogue and freedom of expression. It has become the channel of ‘The Opinion and the Other Opinion’.

And its influence on Arab public opinion has even been observed by non-Arabic international media organisations. In its April 26, 2004 edition, Time magazine listed Al Jazeera as one of the world’s 100 most influential people.

Al Jazeera has proven itself to be committed to the motto we chose all those years ago. It strives for the truth and delivers it to its viewers, it reports the news objectively and it focuses on people. In so doing, it has gained the confidence of its audience and become a number one choice for those looking for truthful information about developments in
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Arab countries and, indeed, the rest of the world.

As we celebrate Al Jazeera’s anniversary, we must remember that this is not simply a tradition as it might be for many other international organisations. The emergence of Al Jazeera was not just the beginning of an organisation; it was the start of a phenomenon, the likes of which will probably never again happen in the world of Arab, or even international, media. Al Jazeera had a direct and active role in changing the media landscape.

Why has Al Jazeera been distinguished from other media channels since it was established? Why does it preoccupy decision makers in Arab countries and the rest of the world? It isn’t by chance. The very idea to establish Al Jazeera came from an analysis of the poor state of existing media in the Arab world and a far-sighted vision to change it. But translating this idea into a tangible reality could not be achieved through improvisation. Extensive consultations led to the creation of editorial guidelines that demanded the channel be ruled by the standards of free journalism.

Still, in every step we take, we face challenges. But for millions of people, Al Jazeera is the means through which they can express their ambitions in a world that is constantly changing, sometimes threatening their very survival. It is a big mission and the goal is noble. But we have shown that achieving it is possible.

Living up to its motto

Jamil Azar

TIME Magazine - Special edition
26 of April 2004. P.62
It was summer 2005 when a friend told me that Al Jazeera was launching a new English channel and asked if I'd be willing to work for it. It's a controversial network, he warned me with a smile.

What he didn't know was that I'd already spent time with Al Jazeera Arabic journalists.

During the winter of 2001, I was covering the bombardment of Kandahar, Afghanistan for CNN and Al Jazeera was in the same compound. So I knew what it was that made Al Jazeera controversial: Its bold, unadulterated search for the truth. It went directly to the victims to tell their story, showing the world the agony of ordinary people paying the ultimate price of war.

Would I be willing to be part of such a network? My answer was an overwhelming yes.

My journey from Afghanistan to Al Jazeera had been long. As the bombardment of Kandahar intensified, the Taliban decided to leave. Early one evening, Mullah Omar's special assistant, Tayyab Agha, came to our compound to tell me it would be prudent for my team and me to do the same.

I gathered the essentials I'd need for the journey, leaving behind...
everything else I had collected over the six years I’d spent in the country. I knew the journey back to Pakistan would be perilous, and that I would never see some of my friends again.

I told myself that if I made it back safely, I would take a break from journalism to grow olives and oranges on my farm. I would try to forget the things I had seen – the rows of children lined up ready for burial, victims of bombs dropped by fighter jets.

After a couple of years on the farm, tucked away in the Himalayan foothills, it was time to go back into the field. A massive earthquake had struck northern Pakistan and Kashmir, killing tens of thousands of people.

The following year, I flew to Doha to meet the team that was setting up Al Jazeera English. In this talented group of people, there were no biases; national borders and religious differences meant nothing here.

After months of training, we finally went on air on November 15, 2006. With just a two-man team – myself and Saleem Shahzad – in Pakistan, we knew we had our work cut out for us.

Pakistan was feeling the blowback of the Afghan war with suicide bombings and attacks on hotels, mosques and even funerals. The country’s tribal areas were being struck by US drones and other aircraft, as many places became no-go zones where ordinary people seldom ventured.

Al Jazeera was gaining respect for its balanced reporting. It wasn’t viewed as another foreign channel with a narrow agenda, but as one willing to look at every angle of the story.

The stories we reported on were often our own. As a conflict brewed in the Swat Valley, the military ordered civilians to leave the area. An exodus of almost 2.5 million people ensued. Many members of Al Jazeera’s team in Islamabad, including our producer Hameedullah Khan, came from Swat. His family was lucky to have escaped unharmed, but the family home was demolished by the retreating Pakistani Taliban.

Of course, as others fled, we looked for ways to get in. When we entered Swat, we found the valley deserted. The streets were empty; the orchards were full of fruit, but there was nobody left to pluck it.

Al Jazeera was the only channel inside. The world relied on us for a view of what had taken place there. In 2010, just a year after people returned to Swat, heavy rains turned the rivers of the Hindu Kush mountains into raging torrents. Buildings were washed away and people displaced. Almost 20 million were affected.

Recognising the scale of the catastrophe, Al Jazeera sent reporters to locations across the country. For the past 10 years, Pakistan has been in the eye of the storm. And the years ahead are likely to be just as critical.

Ten years may seem a long time for an individual, but for this network, it is just the beginning.
The art of knowing a little about a lot

Kelly Jarrett
Executive Producer of News
Output Department / Al Jazeera English

The day begins with coffee, a green smoothie and the headlines; international leaders attend crisis meetings, a natural disaster, an important election, a space discovery. On the journey into work, I think of ways we could tell those stories and ways other networks might tell them. How can we best help our audience understand and engage with the news of the day?

At the office, I walk straight into a heated debate about a story we should cover - two impassioned people switching between English, Arabic, French and occasionally Spanish to make their points. I intervene, and we settle on a guest segment.

It’s almost the top of the hour, so attention turns to the screen. It’s time to rally a weary overnight team to persevere through their last bulletin.

It’s going to be a long day.

A conversation with the news editor about how to plan for an opposition protest despite a government crackdown is cut short by an explosion. The breaking news ticker is activated, local channels are downlinked and a correspondent is called to go live. We’re the first to break the story.

Then, just as heart rates in the newsroom begin to normalise, one of the agencies cuts to a live news conference by a military leader.
“Does anyone speak the general’s language?” I ask. An archivist and a media manager reply. One is whisked away to a sound booth to begin simultaneous interpretation.

The general announces a coup.

More coffee arrives, which means it’s time for our morning editorial meeting: two breaking news stories, international leaders at a crisis meeting, the aftermath of a natural disaster, important elections inspiring a generation, a new discovery in space, opposition protests despite a government crackdown, a high court ruling in a controversial case and an important football game.

The art of knowing a little about a lot
Kelly Jarrett
I remember …

Khalid Albaih
Sudanese Cartoonist

It is November 1996, and I am full of teenage fury. My father has seized the remote control for the only television in our home in Doha, Qatar, and is searching for the new satellite channel that has started airing from the same city. He is excited because many of his journalist friends who were facing persecution in Sudan have joined forces with others from across the Arab world to bring this new channel into being. I’m angry because it has ruined my chances of ever watching Seinfeld in peace again.

I remember my father being thrilled at the idea of an all-news, Arab-made channel. For my father, it offered a glimmer of optimism; a reminder of the dreams of pan-Arabism on which he, like so many others across the region, had been raised. He had grown up listening to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Voice of the Arabs (Sawat al-Arab) radio service. It was the first radio channel to broadcast across the Arab world, speaking out against imperialism and in defence of Palestine. In 1954, it had declared: "The Voice of the Arabs speaks for the Arabs, struggles for them and expresses their unity."

I remember how, before Al Jazeera, my father rarely watched the 9 o’clock news, and when he did, it was mostly for the comedy value. He’d laugh at the poor quality of the propaganda; the stories about a “great leader’s” achievements here or there, whether opening a water tanker or delivering a rousing speech...
to “the party’s” followers (looking back, I suspect that those times spent watching alongside him provided the initial inspiration for my career as a cartoonist). In fact, my father rarely watched any Arab television channels, unless there was an Adel Imam movie on.

I remember in 1997, my whole family travelled to Sudan for a summer vacation. One of the first things I noticed was how everyone – in barbershops, restaurants, social clubs and private homes – was watching Al Jazeera. They knew each of the presenters by name and the airing times of each of the shows. It showed them the shared struggles of those living in the region and gave a voice to the possibility for change. My father and, I believe, many others in the Arab world, had suddenly stopped laughing at the news.

I remember being in the common room of my university dorm in the UAE on September 11, 2001, as the second plane crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York.

“Jeeb Al Jazeera [switch to Al Jazeera],” people were shouting.

I think, from that moment on, Al Jazeera became the most watched news outlet in the region. We had a voice: a voice that asked questions and started debates, a voice that had for so long been silent.

Al Jazeera is a part of my life, as it has been a part of every Arab’s life for the past 20 years – whether you agree or disagree with it, which is, after all, the whole point.

I remember the Bin Laden tapes. I remember the footage of Baghdad being bombed at night. I remember Sami al-Hajj, Tayseer Aloni, Tareq Ayyoub. I remember ….

I remember …
I have visited Baghdad six times; twice as a student and four times as a presenter for Al Jazeera.

During my first two visits, towards the end of the 1970s, Iraq was a glorious country experiencing prosperity and power. But in each of my professional visits, I found a country that had deteriorated since I’d seen it last. The first of those four visits was during the late 1990s, as Iraq suffered under an international embargo; the second came the day before the 2003 US invasion; the third lasted for two months; and the fourth was to mark the first anniversary of the invasion, which also coincided with the so-called war on Fallujah.

At the end of each visit, I left Iraq with more mental images than could ever have been conveyed on a TV screen, which is, after all, unable to capture the feelings of a presenter.

During the first visit, during the late 1990s, as Iraq endured an international embargo, I was accompanied by Iraqi director Imad Bahjat and Yemeni cameraman Mansour al-Ibi. We were there to record episodes of Al Jazeera’s A Guest and a Cause programme and interviewed prominent Iraqis, including physician and artist Alaa Bashir, poet and playwright Yousef al-Sayegh, and Moayyad Ne’ma, a great cartoonist who passed away at an early age.

I still remember the suffering of the Iraqi people at that time and the fact that, despite their hardships, their pride and generosity remained.

Qatari director Farid al-Jabiri and Moroccan producer Abdul Salam Abu
Malek joined me on my second visit in 2003. We were there to present a special episode of Today’s Cause, observing the atmosphere in Iraq as it anticipated what seemed to be an inevitable military strike. When we arrived in Baghdad, we found a city in a state of deep sadness. At the airport, we ran into the well-known British journalist Robert Fisk, who joked that only journalists head towards those places from which others are fleeing. Little did he know that I wasn’t one of those journalists. I was only there to present a programme.

When Al Jazeera’s then director-general, Muhammed Jassim al-Ali, asked me to stay in Baghdad to cover the imminent war, I told him I was “too much of a coward” to do so. He tried to persuade me. “All the ‘guys’ are with you. Maher Abdullah, Majed Abdul Hadi, Mohammed al-Abdullah and all of the Baghdad bureau staff.” But he couldn’t convince me and neither could my colleagues Farid and Abdul Salam. They were both hoping that after work, we could go to a riverside restaurant to eat the famous Iraqi fish dish Masqouf. I was just hoping to get straight into a car heading towards Syria and then take my flight back to Doha. “To hell with this Masqouf dish if it is going to cost us our lives,” I told them. “How can we stay in Baghdad when even the diplomats and UN inspectors have left?”

We returned to Doha. One day later, the US war on Iraq began.

The third visit was the longest and the most effective. For two months, we aired a daily political programme, the first of its kind in the history of Al Jazeera, entitled Iraq: After the War. Every day, we would tackle a different aspect of life under occupation. Every day, I would meet with Abdul Salam Abu Malek, Farid al-Jabiri and our amazing Iraqi colleague, Tareq al-Yaqoubi, who worked as our interview producer even though he is, in fact, a highly talented picture editor. We would select our topic and then start filming while simultaneously looking for guests.

We were lucky to have an amazing Iraqi driver who knew every corner of Baghdad. Thafer would find the houses of our suggested guests and then drive them to the studio and back again – all before the start of the curfew. He would then return to the studio to drive us to the residence of our friend Hamad al-Khalifa, the head of the official Qatari delegation to Baghdad who had kindly let us stay at his deserted house. Eventually, that house turned into our studio.

The fourth and last visit was in April 2004. A team, led by Samir Khader and including presenters Ahmed Mansour and Abdul Qader Ayyad, headed to Iraq to cover the first anniversary of the fall of Baghdad.

During that visit, I cemented my reputation for cowardice, refusing to leave the building for the 24 days of our stay. “Do you think you will be safe by staying inside and not going out onto the street?” one of my colleagues asked me. I knew very well that I wasn’t safe, even inside, but I just couldn’t bring myself to step out.
Inspiration is undeniably the greatest force that can transform our lives. It opens the doors of freedom, innovation and creativity. It is the nucleus of change and positive thinking.

Throughout history, few entities have managed to inspire masses of people in the same manner as Al Jazeera. Many outside of it have written about its inspirational force and a large number of studies and papers have discussed its success and influence.

I have considered myself a part of Al Jazeera since its inception on November 1, 1996, although I have only officially been working within it since mid-2013. Since its launch, Al Jazeera’s message, style, courage and coverage has intrigued and captivated.

For a youngster growing up in the Middle East, TV stations were part of how the government controlled its citizens. They offered only one point of view and covered every movement of their country’s ruler and his crew. Nowhere were any voices of opposition allowed, let alone appreciated. If silence is safe, the governments of the region practiced the ultimate in safety.

I witnessed, as did millions of others, the transformative influence of Al Jazeera on almost every element of society. Its energy touched the upper echelons of power and inspired the oppressed to ask the
questions that had long been taboo.

The gravitational force of such energy is almost irresistible and in my case absolutely desirable. But I remained an outside member of the team until fate brought me through Al Jazeera’s doors in mid-2013.

Shortly after becoming a part of the network, I started to realise that the secret behind the massive success of Al Jazeera is simply its people. The team is inspired by the mission of the organisation. Working under tight deadlines, in tough conditions and making personal sacrifices are part of daily business operations. Every member of the team realises that their role is critical to the success of the network’s mission.

Personally, I felt that my biggest challenge was to belong to a group of such driven and mission oriented people. The questions in my mind were not about my abilities in a professional sense, but in a human one. Would I be able to feel the same sense of mission? Display the same courage? Step up to make the sacrifices when needed?

As I worked with the team to commence the digital transformation of the network, I challenged my team to think even more outside the box when it comes to providing the best technical and operational solutions to ensure not only the success of Al Jazeera’s mission but the ability to grow the mission into new and uncharted territories. I challenged my team to accept greater responsibilities and invest more time and effort in improving the technological and operational landscape within the network. I further challenged them to step outside their comfort zones, to question the industry status quo and to challenge the industry to deliver at the level of Al Jazeera’s expectations.

Driven by a sense of mission, the team rallied behind the digital transformation initiatives, rose to the challenges and realised that they needed to transform themselves first in order to successfully transform the workplace and, ultimately, the mission of Al Jazeera.

As we complete our first 20 years, we look forward to leading the media industry and continuing to inspire people over the next 20. We have already started working with other technology giants to jointly plan and develop technologies and solutions for the next wave of digital media transformation. If you thought the last 20 years were impressive, what is to come will wow you.

Compared to 20 years ago, Al Jazeera is big. Compared to 20 years from now, we’re still a baby.

A matter of inspiration
Mohamed Abuagla

Comparison to 20 years ago, Al Jazeera is big. Compared to 20 years from now, we’re still a baby.
Africa’s ‘own Al Jazeera’ - at last

Mohammed Adow
Senior Correspondent - Al Jazeera English

“Africa needs its own Al Jazeera.”

I’ve heard this said many times, but it’s more than a mere phrase. It’s a statement that carries great meaning for the people of the continent; people who are tired of seeing their nations portrayed as impoverished, corrupt and helpless by Western media.

The world, many Africans believe, comes to report on Africa with the story already written. The frame is the same; only the names and dates change. The plot lines are cast in stone: tribal enmities, horrific bloodletting, egregious corruption, comical ruling dynasties.

For them, in short, Africa is a continent of unending horrors.

It is a narrative abhorred by Africans, who have called incessantly for more positive stories, such as how quickly the continent has embraced technology and connectivity, to be told.

But such pleas had fallen on deaf ears, convincing many that the African story would continue to be distorted until the continent developed its own media resources – ones strong enough to be heard above the clamour of the international media.

“Africa’s own Al Jazeera,” they called it.
Proponents argued that the continent not only needed an outlet that told real African stories, but one that would eventually become a catalyst for political and economic change.

What they wanted was what Al Jazeera Arabic had done for the people of the Middle East when, in the late 1990s, it became a voice for those who had never heard of a free media and who lived, like so many Africans, under governments unaccustomed to scrutiny. With its courageous Arab journalists, it had inspired a new sense of pride among the Arab public.

But huge obstacles stood in the way of the establishment of a pan-African broadcaster. For one, there would be no shortage of governments willing to harass such a network to its demise. And if it were to be truly continent-wide, it would have to navigate a number of complex issues, such as language, distribution, funding and regulation.

It never came to pass, but in November 2006, Al Jazeera launched its English language channel.

Anyone watching its inaugural hour would have immediately understood that this channel was going to lean heavily towards Africa. There was a reporter live in the Darfur region of Sudan, covering a conflict that was being largely ignored by others. There was a dispatch from Zimbabwe, which had hitherto been closed to journalists. Then there was Mogadishu, Somalia’s lawless capital, as it came under the control of the Islamic Courts Union.

With bureaus in Nairobi, Johannesburg, Abuja and Abidjan, the network eschewed the ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ parachute journalism of other outlets.

For the past 10 years, its teams of dedicated African journalists have told the African story. And the love with which the channel has been received by the people of Africa, who form its largest audience, says it all – Al Jazeera may not be exclusively theirs, but Africans do, at long last, have “their own Al Jazeera”.

Africa’s ‘own Al Jazeera’ - at last

Mohammed Adow
It was May 2000 and I was about to embark on a new challenge as one of those chosen by Al Jazeera’s management to establish its Arabic website. The mission was clear: to maintain the spirit of Al Jazeera’s journalism on a different platform. It was a challenge we embraced with a mixture of enthusiasm and fear.

We worked day and night to ensure that the site launched on time at the beginning of the new year and that it was worthy of the reputation and popularity the channel had already gained. But you cannot plan for the news, and when our website was just nine months old, the events of September 11, 2001 took place. Al Jazeera became the most searched word on the internet. It was a challenge we had to rise to – covering the news with dedication and professionalism at a time when so many eyes were turned to us.

We had started our work with so much enthusiasm, believing that it would one day turn into a daily routine as sometimes happens with things that at some point seem challenging but soon become mundane. We were wrong. As time passed, we realised that this job is an ongoing challenge. It is one that requires us to constantly keep up with
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technological progress. In 2003, we published a story about how new mobile phones would be manufactured with built-in cameras. We had no idea then that these phones would one day become people’s first choice when filming footage, taking stills or surfing the internet.

When social media platforms emerged, we encountered yet another challenge: to commit to the core values of our profession in such an open and unstable space. Have we succeeded? I believe we have, where many others have failed.

And then the Arab revolutions erupted. As events unfolded in different places almost simultaneously, we had to keep on top of them all. We did so. And when the counter-revolutions sought to prevent people from using newer tools, we were able to benefit from our past experiences to revive older tools, such as online blogs.

At a time when the amount of traffic on news websites has been expected to decline in line with the rise in social media, Al Jazeera.Net has shown that electronic journalism has not turned into some kind of traditional media tool that is fighting to stay alive, but has instead opened new channels. Last year, the number of clicks on the website’s main page increased by 20 percent.

This represents a victory not only for the Al Jazeera Network, but for Arab media as a whole.

We can look back with pride at what we have achieved and know with certainty that the challenges continue.
In the early 1990s, I was the head of the Tunisian Human Rights League. At that time, the League’s battle with the government of then President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali over human rights violations, specifically torture, reached its peak. The government had imposed media restrictions on our league: local press was not allowed to publish our statements and our forums were only permitted to take place under extreme levels of surveillance. I had to use pay phones to call the international press and Amnesty International in order to report on suspected cases of torture and death.

But all of this changed overnight, when Al Jazeera was established in 1996. We human rights activists were suddenly able to convey our messages and talk openly about the violations taking place in Tunisia. It was a strong blow to the dictatorship-controlled local media.

The government responded by trying to control the distribution of satellite dishes in an attempt to prevent the Tunisian people from having access to Al Jazeera. But Tunisians went ahead and installed them on the roofs of their buildings regardless. Those satellite dishes were like the first signs of civil resistance and revolution.

Al Jazeera would play a key role in my own life and the history of democracy and human rights in Tunisia. My first interview on the channel was with Ahmed Kamel in the late 1990s. It became my first public attack on the Tunisian government. Similar acts of condemnation followed during the
eight times I was invited to appear on “The Opposite Direction” programme, which had opened Arab minds to the real meaning of dialogue, albeit an often heated one. In the summer of 2000, while speaking on Al Jazeera, I called on the “dictator” to respect the constitution and not run in the 2002 election. I was immediately sacked from the Medical University of Sousse.

In October 2006, I called on the Tunisian people to prepare for civil resistance and to use modern technology to peacefully oust the tyrant.

Four years later, what I had called for happened.

Al Jazeera was, and still is, a reflection of the reality that other Arab channels try to conceal. The violence we currently witness, whether in heated arguments on the screen or in the developments taking place in Aleppo, Tazaz and Ramadi, is the reality of the Arab world that Al Jazeera openly presents to us.

Al Jazeera is not only the reflection of our emotions and feelings. It is also a space for Arabs to think strategically about the main issues facing us. It is true that television programmes cannot always provide an in-depth insight into our causes, but this is where Al Jazeera’s website steps in. I have had the honour of writing and also of reading the views of key Arab intellectuals on it.

Another of Al Jazeera’s achievements has been the promotion of the Arabic language, and consequently the reinforcement of Arab unity. The presence of presenters from various Arab countries on Al Jazeera’s screen has increased Arab pride in a channel they view as a space for political and cultural integration.

Al Jazeera’s coverage of Arab revolutions has played a major role in their outbreak across the Arab world. But no one can deny the challenges Al Jazeera currently faces as “counter-revolts” take place by those who oppose the uprising of oppressed people and fear that other revolutions could take place.

Al Jazeera has had to pay an expensive price for its successive achievements; a price paid in the freedom and lives of a number of its reporters, to whom we owe gratitude for their sacrifices. I would like to express my personal appreciation to all of Al Jazeera’s staff for the role they have played.

Since I currently don’t assume a political position, and although I’ve never been known for praising rulers, today I would like to acknowledge the great man who stands behind this all and without whom Arab history might have looked very different: Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani.

I, and many Arabs, owe this man and all of Al Jazeera’s staff one phrase: Thank you!
At around noon on February 11, 2011, I was deeply depressed. I felt as though we were trapped in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and that the revolution had reached a deadlock.

But, by evening, everything had changed.

On the morning of January 25, a friend made a bet with me. Something significant was going to happen in Egypt, they said. By midday, I started to receive messages from friends about massive protests in Tahrir Square. As the police surrounded them, they angrily questioned why Al Jazeera was not reporting on the events underway there. When Al Jazeera’s 23:00 news bulletin began, the Egyptian protests were not among its headlines. But half an hour later, the channel realised that something significant was happening in Cairo.

My friend called me to say: “I win the bet. The revolution has started.”

Egyptians were called upon to stage massive protests on the coming Friday, January 28, in what was labeled “A Day of Rage”. Al Jazeera aired special coverage of the protests in Tahrir Square. The main actor in its coverage was the citizen journalist. Al Jazeera provided an online platform on which videos and pictures from Egypt could be uploaded. Despite the authorities’ attempts to paralyse telecommunications and internet services, activists managed to send their contributions to Al Jazeera.

My task in the newsroom was to collect all the video clips sent from the protest squares. I felt helpless being so far from Tahrir. It wasn’t just the feeling...
of a journalist hoping to be a witness, but of a young Arab who had never voted in free elections. I was eager to go.

On the evening of January 30, I arrived at Cairo’s airport, carrying just a small suitcase so that I wouldn’t attract attention. A state of instability prevailed at the airport. I got my passport stamped and left in a hurry. Some activists were waiting for me outside. We got in a small car and took off, using back alleys to avoid army checkpoints. Tahrir Square was the ‘safe zone’ for journalists. I spent my first night in a safe place that nobody knew about.

On the morning of February 2, supporters of the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, were mobilised. Everything seemed normal until they arrived at Tahrir Square and started to throw stones at those gathered there. I was in direct contact with Doha, reporting the news of the clashes. Then suddenly, thugs riding horses and camels entered the square and began to attack people. All night long, I reported on the number of casualties.

But we didn’t realise the full scope of what had happened until the next morning. The field hospital that had been hastily set up in the yard of one of the buildings in Tahrir Square was packed with the injured. Those killed had been transferred to hospitals.

The tragedies I witnessed on that day reduced me to tears. The endurance of the revolutionaries and the setting up of sand barricades at the entrances to the square had prevented a massacre from taking place. It had also foiled an attempt to end the revolution.

In the evening, we heard news of another possible attack on the square. We had to spend the night at the field hospital, lying among the injured and, most probably, the dead. One man screamed all night long. He’d had an epileptic seizure but nobody could get his medication because the square was besieged. A state of fear had descended upon it.

Every day, the number of protesters increased, while bad news arrived from outside the square: the government was determined to stay and the army’s stance towards the revolution was unclear.

On February 10, the protesters heard that Mubarak was going to deliver a televised speech to announce that he was stepping down. But the opposite happened. He refused to go. The protesters were enraged and disappointed. I was worried and depressed. I wondered how much longer the protesters would stay in the square.

February 11 looked like it was going to be anything but the day the revolution finally succeeded. But Mubarak’s speech had seemingly led to the opposite of what he had planned. By the evening, the protesters were still chanting: “The people want the fall of the regime.” And fall it did.

My birthday is a few days after February 11, but I felt as though I was reborn on that day.
It was October 2001, on the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan. I was with fighters from the Northern Alliance - remnants of the mujahedeen who had worn down the Soviet military during the 1980s and were now fighting the Taliban. They controlled just a slither of the country, but the West was using them as a proxy ground force to topple the Taliban government, which had refused to hand over Osama bin Laden.

A month earlier, US President George W. Bush had declared his “war on terror”, with his epoch defining phrase: “You’re either with us, or against us.” As a journalist reporting on the war for the BBC, I was neither. After two decades in the corporation, I had been inculcated to balance any issue or conflict with views from both sides. I had followed its style guide, only using the word “terrorist” when it was in the mouths of others.

I watched as American warplanes dropped bombs on Taliban positions near the Shomali Plain, which was once full of almond and cherry orchards but was now lifeless. And as I listened to news reports on Western outlets, I grew increasingly concerned about how the future “war on terror” would be framed.
It was at that time that a US missile struck Al Jazeera’s offices in Kabul.

The shock of an apparently deliberate attack on fellow journalists was accompanied by another realisation: while Western journalism had always been criticised for its occidental perspective, it was now overtly taking sides.

By 2001, Al Jazeera had gained a reputation for widening the parameters of debate in the Arab world. At the same time, a contrary phenomenon was taking place within the Western media: a tendency to embrace the language and sentiments of the ‘war on terror’. Journalists adopted the logic of the former mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani: “Those who practice terrorism lose any right to have their cause understood. We’re right. They’re wrong.”

As the September 11 attacks changed the landscape of global journalism, Al Jazeera found a role on the world stage.

I’d always believed that the best journalism provided a platform for two warring sides to establish a vicarious dialogue. Denying a group a voice in political debate often forced it underground and towards greater violence.

For half a century, the region’s people had been denied a voice as authoritarian rulers, often backed by the West, prevented them from shaping their destiny.

After the Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi was overthrown in June 2013, I had lunch with a former BBC editor. He told me that he disapproved of the coup by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, but then remarked that the Egyptian people were trapped “between a rock and a hard place”.

“The Muslim Brotherhood,” he asserted, “was just as bad as the Egyptian military.”

To equate a military dictator with a democratically-elected president is an example of the false equivalence that satisfies the balance principle in much Western journalism.

As the Arab world remains in the shadow of authoritarian rule, Al Jazeera stands alone in placing the fulcrum of balance in the true centre of political debate.
“You are a journalist ... Please ask them for a painkiller.”

The young man’s plea was sincere. He didn’t see the hopelessness in my face.

I bent down in front of him, my camera in my hand. For the first time, it felt heavy.

We were at the entrance of Omar bin Abdul al-Aziz hospital in the Maadi neighbourhood of Aleppo, Syria. Its top floors had been damaged in the shelling.

"You are a journalist .... Please ask them for a painkiller," he repeated, over and over again.

Then he disappeared into the dust. But I could still make out the words of those carrying him: “We must transfer him to another hospital. His foot must be amputated.”

At first, I stood motionless. Then I started touching my own limbs. Time seemed to stop in that moment and a piece of me disappeared with him. In my country, a man’s body is doomed to have more than one grave, I thought.

It was more than two years ago but that scene plays out in my head now every time I feel any kind of pain.

When I was asked to write this article, I suddenly felt illiterate. Writing is how I earn my living, but five days passed and I couldn’t muster a single word.
Eventually, I decided that I wouldn’t do it.

Then I remembered that young man. After that day at the hospital, I found out his name. I learned that he had gone to Turkey for surgery and been given an artificial limb. Then he’d returned to Syria and taken up arms against the government.

At Al Jazeera, we tell the stories of the oppressed, abandoned and ignored. Human beings come first – this is the principle that guides us. Our reporting has sometimes managed to change the lives of those whose stories we’ve told. For our team in Syria, it offers a form of ethical compensation: the sense of relief we feel when we see the stories of Syrians on Al Jazeera’s screens.

I do not know what became of that young man after he returned to Syria. In many ways, I don’t want to because I do not want his story to end. Some stories must continue in order for their characters to become ‘imperishable souls’.
Al Jazeera has always been a pioneer. Twenty years ago, it was pioneering in the way it brought news to an audience in the Arab world hungry for real-time - and real - information about what was going on around them. The fledgling network was, in a very real sense, providing a voice to the voiceless: a phrase which - two decades on, and in a very different world - has become something of a motto for the network as a whole.

I joined Al Jazeera English as part of the launch team in 2006 because it was promising to do something different. In a media landscape dominated by talking heads, opinion and speculation, it was daring to buck the trend by trying a new approach to global newsgathering. The idea was simple, and - one decade on - has survived intact as the bedrock of our channel, indeed the entire network. It can be summed up in three words: putting people first.

From day one at Al Jazeera English, and for a decade before that at Al Jazeera Arabic, the editorial message has been clear and unambiguous: People need to be central to our storytelling, no matter where they are in the world and no matter that nobody else is covering their stories.

We wanted to create a news revolution, spin the world on its axis, and report from south to north. We sought to shun the corridors of power in favour of those who live far from the seats of government, but whose quality of life depends on decisions taken by the politicians who are supposed to serve them.
We developed a new genre of storytelling that has now become an industry standard: the ‘First Person’, told through the eyes and words of one individual. It is not a replacement for powerful, correspondent-led reporting, but allowing people to take control of their own stories is part of our DNA.

We looked at under-reported parts of the world - including Latin America, South Asia and Africa - and invested heavily in them, opening bureaus in, and shining a light on, places neglected by others.

What is our mission as a network for the next decade?

We need to stay true to our editorial roots, and to our unique storytelling heritage. But we also have to adapt to the digital age, embracing and exploring new technologies. We can no longer expect anyone to seek us out. We have to hunt down our audience and engage with them, wherever and whenever they want to interact with our content.

But as the news and information industry transforms, our mission - putting people first - remains the same as it was when Al Jazeera was founded in 1996.

One of the first stories we put to air when Al Jazeera English was launched in 2006 was about a day in the life of an ambulance driver in Gaza. The piece, told through the eyes and words of the driver as he went about his dangerous work saving lives, was everything it should have been - and everything our stories should always be: compelling, eye-opening, thought-provoking and challenging.

Our own challenge, as we move beyond the first 20 years, is to remain a constant source of information and inspiration, even as the next decade is likely to be as transformative, disruptive and unexpected as the last.
Palestine in Sarajevo’s heart

Rawan J Damen
Senior Producer - Programmes / Al Jazeera Arabic

Wednesday, October 8, 2014 - I remember the day very well. I received an email from two colleagues at our sister channel, Al Jazeera Balkans. The subject line read ‘Palestina U Fokusu’ – Bosnian for ‘Palestine Under Focus’.

Since 2008, I have been the supervising producer of Al Jazeera Arabic’s Focus and Palestine Under Focus series. The email was to announce that the latter’s episodes would be translated into Bosnian, reversioned and broadcast from Sarajevo.

For me, it was a confirmation that Palestine will never be erased from the world map and a validation of all the work that our network and many independent filmmakers and producers all over the world have done to tell the Palestinian story.

Palestine Under Focus is the only weekly documentary programme on any international channel to focus solely on Palestine. And its reach has grown as Al Jazeera English and then Al Jazeera Balkans began to translate and reversion its episodes so that they might be more easily comprehended by an international audience. Our films have been seen around the world.

When I contacted my colleagues at Al Jazeera Balkans to thank them for their initiative, I was delighted to discover that it had been the audience that had requested a programme that focused entirely on Palestine. Finding similarities between their recent history and events in Palestine many decades before, Bosnians sought out...
I realised then the significance of Al Jazeera Arabic’s English, Balkan and Turkish sister channels. Without them, we would never have been able to reach such a broad audience, sharing authentic Palestinian narratives with those who otherwise might not have had access to them.

So it was that Europeans who longed to know more about Palestinians were able to see documentaries about a fisherman targeted by Israeli navy ships, a student unable to reach school because of the Israeli forces, a church in Nazareth set ablaze by Jewish extremists and hundreds of other films that illuminate life in Palestine.

That email inspired me to revive our work on a project that would bring all of the Palestine Under Focus films – more than 120 hours of documentaries – together on a comprehensive interactive website that let users explore the story of Palestine.

The result was the award-winning Palestine Remix. But that’s another story ….
Once upon a time before Guantanamo

Sami Elhaj
Manager of Public Liberties And Human Rights Centre

One of the main things that encouraged me to join Al Jazeera was the atmosphere it provided for its staff, allowing them the professional freedom to carry out their journalism without restrictions, and its focus on humanitarian perspectives.

My work with the channel took me to cities, villages and deserts around the world, until I found myself in a dark cell in one of the world’s most brutal prisons: Guantanamo.

Despite the long years I spent there, I have never had any regrets. I have been able to convey the message I’ve always believed in, shining a spotlight on the plight of oppressed people.

Of course, I became a humanitarian case myself – and one that Al Jazeera was relentless in defending. While I was in Guantanamo, my name appeared daily on its screens and the channel ran a campaign that drew the attention of international human rights organisations to my situation and ultimately led to my release.

But my story seems far less tragic when compared to those I witnessed in Afghanistan before I was detained. I remember one story in particular. My team and I were in Quetta, Pakistan, when we learned that Tayyab Agha, the secretary to the Taliban’s Mullah Omar, was going to speak at a press conference in Afghanistan’s Buldak region. I went with others to cover the conference. We decided to report on the plight of Bedouin Afghan IDPs. At an IDP camp in Buldak, one particular scene caught my attention. A young woman was washing clothes in turbid water, without soap. She used
one hand to wash and the other to hold and breastfeed her baby. A boy aged around three or four was next to her crying.

The scene seemed to convey so much about the Afghan tragedy. I wanted to photograph it so that the world might see who really bears the consequences of war, of attacks carried out by the US, as it claimed to promote peace, democracy and human rights.

I started to take photographs of the young woman. Beside her, I saw burned, blackened bags that looked as though they had been in a fire. As I started to take pictures of her belongings, I noticed a copy of the Quran, which had also been burned in places. On top of it was a red pouch. I tried to push it aside so that I might take a clearer picture, but the woman grew enraged. She started to shout at me; words I could not understand.

Shocked, I asked the translator to explain. Her mother came running. She pushed me and started to shout. The translator explained that she was saying I should not have touched the pouch. “This red pouch contains some of the body parts of this young lady’s husband, father, brothers and sisters-in-law,” he told me.

We later learned that US air strikes had targeted their village, killing her family. Only this young woman, her two children and her mother survived. All of their belongings were burned in the attack, and she carried the pouch wherever she went.

The scene affected me a great deal. That young woman, her babies and elderly mother didn’t even know that Kabul was the capital of Afghanistan or that the US had launched a war against them, claiming to be fighting terrorism. For me, that is the real tragedy – losing everything for unexplained reasons.

This is an excerpt from Sami al-Haj’s upcoming book, My Story in Guantanamo.
In 1999, the former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak visited Qatar. Upon his arrival at the airport, an Al Jazeera correspondent asked him about Egyptian-Qatari relations. “They are very good as long as you [Al Jazeera] stay away from it,” he replied.

During Mubarak’s stay in Doha, the emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, escorted him on a visit to Al Jazeera’s headquarters. Mubarak seemed surprised at just how “small” the offices of this “annoying” channel were relative to its influence in the Arab world. “All of this fuss is coming out of this little box,” he exclaimed.

When he made that comment, he perhaps had in mind the huge Maspero building; the Egyptian Radio and Television headquarters that host thousands of employees and dozens of TV channels and radio stations. Mubarak couldn’t imagine that this new channel had become so popular and influential where huge media organisations had failed. But these channels had failed to influence people simply because they had failed to represent them.

I was one of the Egyptian journalists who had come from Cairo to cover Mubarak’s visit to the Gulf. But a few months later, I joined the “little box”.

It was the beginning of an enriching experience, professionally and personally.

Al Jazeera has presented a new form of news coverage. It has created and adopted a media agenda that transparently conveys information in a way Arab viewers – previously used to...
official media organisations that praised rulers while neglecting audiences - were unfamiliar with.

But was this Al Jazeera’s only secret?

As I went inside that small newsroom, I found the answer to my question: the most professional media personnel in the Arab world, who enthusiastically believe in the values of freedom and the viewer’s right to know.

Behind them stands a wise administration with the courage to bear the consequences of the channel’s achievements and the possible resulting crises between the country where the channel is based and its regional and international counterparts.

All of these qualities were the characteristics of the then new leadership of the State of Qatar.

Standing by the side of the people, focusing on their ambitions for freedom and a decent life, being where the real stories were taking place via a network of professional and experienced reporters and presenting the news on time were the components of the magic recipe for Al Jazeera’s continued success. A commitment to authenticity and professionalism and a firm belief in its media mission took Al Jazeera from being a mere media project to becoming an enlightening one.

Many years passed, and the “little box” grew into a big network. Many new challenges came along.

Then came the Arab Spring, which erupted in a number of countries starting from late 2010. It was a time when Al Jazeera started to reap what it had sown. It became known as the channel of the revolutions, the one that reflected the dreams of the people.

But as well as providing an opportunity for Al Jazeera to reinforce its presence, the Arab Spring also imposed new challenges. The conflict between the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces resulted in the targeting of Al Jazeera. Revolutions in some Arab countries coincided with parallel revolutions in the Arab media, reflected in the emergence of a huge number of local TV channels considered competitors to Al Jazeera in relation to their influence upon their audience.

Twenty years later, Al Jazeera is still the leading Arab news media platform, despite the challenges, conflicts and changes. It is a great achievement that we take pride in. But the challenges are increasing.

The 20th anniversary of the establishment of Al Jazeera Media Network is the perfect opportunity for Al Jazeera, its management and its staff, to reflect deeply upon the fast-developing technological revolution in the current media space.
Covering an Israeli incursion into the West Bank

Shireen Abu Akleh
Correspondent in Palestine - Al Jazeera Arabic

I had a strange feeling as I stepped out of the Palestinian presidential headquarters in the West Bank. It was March 28, 2002 – a spring day, although the weather was stormy. I didn’t know it then, but in the early hours of the following morning, Israeli tanks would be preparing to roll into Ramallah. Israel would call it Operation Defensive Shield.

On April 2, Israeli forces surrounded the headquarters of the Preventive Security Force in Beitunia. About 280 employees and a number of Hamas prisoners, who had been transferred there before the invasion, were inside. All night long, Israeli planes and tanks shelled the compound. Israel then announced that it had detained the security staff and their prisoners. A curfew was imposed, so we were forced to sleep at the office. When it was eventually lifted for three hours, we returned home to grab some clean clothes and enough food to last us for a few days. We tried to film and photograph the destruction we witnessed along the way.

Then my colleague, Muhammad al-Turaii, suggested that we head towards the Preventive Security headquarters. I knew he wasn’t only thinking as a cameraman seeking exclusive footage: his brother had worked there and he was worried about him. We went there with another colleague, cameraman Majeed al-Safadi.
We travelled in a simple Jeep, taking an unpaved route because the main road was closed. We knew it was risky. On the way, we ran into a CNN team travelling in an armoured vehicle. It was reassuring to know we weren’t alone.

When we arrived at the damaged compound, it was still on fire. Israeli tanks had surrounded the headquarters but there were no soldiers positioned inside. No one approached us, so we started filming. Stunned that nobody had stopped us, we crossed the outer yard and entered the main building, which for years had seemed like a fortress. Now it was empty and silent, except for the sound of the wind that blew through the holes in the walls and the broken windows.

We knew we were racing against time to film the destroyed building.

We noticed that Muhammad was no longer with us. Growing worried about his prolonged absence, we decided to leave. But just as we did, he returned, holding a photograph that he’d found on the floor. It was a picture of his two nephews, the sons of his brother. Majeed pointed his camera at Muhammad, capturing the image of the two children in his hand. For years, it would appear on Al Jazeera’s screens.

On our way out, we were shocked to discover machine guns pointing at us. We raised our hands. We’d been right there in front of the soldiers all this time, so why did it seem like they had only just noticed us? They approached and asked the CNN team to leave. Then a soldier pushed Muhammad up against a wall and began interrogating him, asking: “What were you doing? And what is that in your hand?”

After they’d made some calls, we were eventually allowed to leave and ordered never to return. But the question I asked myself then, has remained with me ever since: where does that fine line between protecting ourselves from danger and pursuing our responsibilities as a journalist lie? Of course, we care about our own safety, but still, something always seems to push us to cross that line.
Myanmar has long been an elusive country for reporters. Ruled by a military junta for decades, embroiled in a series of long-running conflicts between the army and armed ethnic groups and with pervasive discrimination against its Muslim and Christian minorities, the country has had plenty to report on. But it hasn’t been easy to gain access.

The story of Myanmar’s Muslim minority is, perhaps, the most tragic in east Asia.

Al Jazeera started shedding light on the plight of the Muslim Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand 10 years ago. Our teams reached Myanmar’s western state of Arakan, officially known as Rakhine State, shortly after violence erupted there in 2012. We returned to cover the November 2015 and March 2016 elections and to report on the situation of Muslims, which was expected to improve as the country underwent a democratic transformation. But what we found was shocking.

Most of Myanmar’s states have Muslim residents. They live in remote northern and southern villages that the rest of the world’s Muslims have never heard of. They are descendants of Muslims from India and China and come from various minorities such as the Rohingya, Bamar and Kamein. Hundreds of villages from Myanmar’s north to its south are inhabited by hundreds of thousands of Muslims.
who are not officially recognised as part of the country’s population.

Myanmar’s Muslims suffer from discrimination. Their access to official documents, education and job opportunities is restricted. They cannot move around freely. But those with the worst plight are the Rohingya, the oldest and largest minority despite the fact that two million of them now live in exile.

Like foreigners, Myanmar’s Muslims need official permits to enter Arakan state. If obtained, they are allowed into specific regions for just a few days or sometimes hours. About 140,000 Rohingya refugees, whose houses have been burned down, live in dozens of refugee camps in central Arakan. More than one and a half million live in northern Arakan. They are not allowed to leave or work outside their towns. They are banned from fishing beyond a certain point. Theirs is essentially life inside a large prison.

By witnessing the situation in their refugee camps and surrounding villages, one realises that a prison can simply be a tent, a wooden shack or a small piece of land hosting thousands of huts where people live without food, healthcare, education, jobs or hope. Years pass and new generations of children are born into the same existence.

The scene that most affected me was of a four-year-old boy sat in front of his shack holding his baby sister. They remained alone like that all day long because their parents needed to search for fish on the shores near the refugee camp. Everyone was busy looking for food for their children. It was easy to understand why the Rohingya describe themselves as “Southeast Asia’s Palestinians”.

A few hours before we left Arakan, we went to perform the Friday noon prayer. Hundreds of people were packed into a small wooden mosque. At the end of the prayer, the imam recited a verse from the Quran: “Oh Lord, get us out of this town whose people are oppressors, and send us a supporter and send us a helper.” It was the first time I’d heard an imam reading this verse as he prayed, but it perfectly described their suffering.
Many years ago, a grizzled veteran reporter from the local television station I was working at in Canada pulled me aside after watching one of my stories. I had just been hired straight out of college and was as green a journalist as could be.

Staring hard at me, he said: “Listen … When you’re covering breaking news, like a building fire, remember, the real story is behind you.”

It took me a while to fully grasp what he meant, and even longer to inject this advice into my reporting, but that lesson has guided me to this day.

Stories are not just about the facts. A fire engulfing a building doesn’t mean much on its own. Stories are about people.

It is the people assembled in the background, outside the burning building, who have been left homeless or lost loved ones, that matter.

Stories are about people.

But in this short-attention-span age of Twitter and click-bait, this intrinsic value of journalism is sometimes pushed aside. Television broadcasts are replete with bulletin-style data on the latest financial crisis or of scientific reports about issues like climate change. It’s cheaper to use satellite imagery or photos captured by citizens to showcase a typhoon
sweeping through the Asia Pacific than to have crews on the ground telling the story of the people living in the storm’s path.

But this is where I believe Al Jazeera stands out.

At a time when news organisations worldwide are retreating from having teams in the field, this upstart station from Qatar has largely upheld the core value of our mission as journalists: to put people first, giving a voice to the voiceless.

The examples are many. Since I joined the network as a correspondent in 2009, our assignment editors have dispatched me to join scientists living on sea ice in the North Pole as they measured the acidity of the oceans to better predict how fast our climate is changing. They have allowed me to venture on horseback into the remote borderlands of Nepal and China to document the lives of Tibetans as they struggle to maintain their identity.

In an age of parachute journalism, where a natural disaster merits coverage of little more than a week, Al Jazeera devoted a year to covering the aftermath of the 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan. It did the same in 2010, after the earthquake in Haiti.

Such commitment has allowed us journalists to immerse ourselves in communities and to better share their personal stories with viewers. This, in turn, lets us more effectively document all that is going right or wrong ... and thereby hold power to account.

In Haiti, we spent time at the refugee camps, where we met Beken, one of the country’s most famous folk singers. His life began on the streets of the capital, Port-Au-Prince. Having lost his home to the quake, he was again left with nothing. After sitting with him for hours, he agreed to pick up his guitar. And in the glow of candlelight, with a crowd gathered around, he sang in poetic prose about the joys and sorrows of life. It was a moment that captured what so many have endured in this impoverished nation.

In some cases, Al Jazeera’s commitment to storytelling through people has helped bring change. Our investigation into the treatment of refugees in Malaysia exposed those within the United Nations who were demanding bribes for refugee cards. It was the stories of the refugees who had been taken advantage of that proved the most compelling - and later convinced the UN High Commission for Refugees to launch an internal investigation and to fire those found guilty.

The very essence of our role as journalists is to document life and to do so in as compelling a manner as possible. Rudyard Kipling wrote: “If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

Journalism may be undergoing massive change, but people must remain at the heart of our stories.

‘The real story is behind you’

Steve Chao
It was a summer’s day in 1998, and, having grown bored with my work in banking and accounting, I’d decided to look for a new job. With copies of my CV and certificates in hand, I began knocking on the doors of different organisations.

That was how I found myself standing in front of a small building, which I would later learn was known as ‘The Villa’, that hosted Al Jazeera’s administrative department. I submitted my documents with little hope or expectation.

Four days later, I received a call inviting me to take a secretarial test. It lasted for two hours and there were many others participating. I was surprised to learn that I was one of only three successful applicants.

The next day, I arrived at the General Manager’s office, where I was to begin work as the assistant to his office manager.

In that small office, where the General Manager and his deputy worked, there was a spirit of dedication that reflected the important role the administrative department played in establishing the foundations of the channel.

The door of the office was always open to everyone and the General Manager would pass by each department every day. He would constantly watch Al Jazeera’s live broadcast and was often...
seen rushing into the newsroom to give instructions. He had a unique ability to watch the screen and listen to his visitors simultaneously.

The General Manager would hold weekly meetings at his office with the heads of other departments. The Chairman of the Board would visit almost daily.

The newsroom was like a beehive during special coverage, such as the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. At such times, a caravan would be hired and placed outside the building so that, during the long hours of work, people could sometimes catch a few moments of rest.

That was the great beginning of Al Jazeera: a time when, I believe, the foundations of a media monument were laid.

Some of my colleagues from that time are still here, working with the same level of dedication. Others have, sadly, passed away, leaving us with fond memories. But all of us have had our lives enriched by our experience here.

Suad Abdullah
Twenty years ago, as the Balkans were just embarking on the path of post-war reconciliation, it was difficult to imagine what the region and its media landscape would look like in 2016. Frankly, even the most optimistic projection for the future looked slightly grim.

In November 1996, when Al Jazeera Satellite Channel was launched, we had just held our historic first general election in Bosnia and the region’s media was brutally divided and just about light years away from Al Jazeera’s motto, The Opinion and The Other Opinion. It was a time when ordinary Bosnians could find joy in small things, like having our national football team play its first-ever friendly match at home (we beat Italy 2:1).

Yet, things did change. Slowly, and mostly against all odds, good things started to bless us. Global leaders began investing in the Balkans, in all economic fields, except one: media. For many of us in the region, Al Jazeera became the dream we hoped would one day become our reality. When Al Jazeera became the first global media player to invest in the Balkans, it was welcomed as a breath of fresh air.
The recognition Al Jazeera Balkans received and the reputation it developed was built on the strength of the entire network, as well as on our efforts to maintain the standards for which Al Jazeera was known.

When I was appointed managing director of Al Jazeera Balkans in 2010, I set a goal for myself and the, at that time tiny, team: to establish Al Jazeera Balkans as a regional media leader.

Ours is a rather difficult post-war society, with deep wounds on all sides. It was and still is imperative that our reporting is based on building bridges between peoples and fostering a spirit of tolerance and reconciliation. Thanks to the support and guidance of the Al Jazeera Media Network, we have been able to push boundaries in the Balkans, establishing new professional and ethical standards.

So far, it has been a challenging but rewarding journey. What seemed to many in the region to be a mission impossible, became the biggest and most important success story in the Balkans media landscape. Today, five years on, as we at Al Jazeera Balkans are preparing to celebrate our fifth anniversary, we are proud and grateful that those years have been built on the foundation of the overall global success of the network.

As the Al Jazeera Media Network develops new platforms and looks to create the future of news coverage, we take pride in keeping up as an equal member of the Al Jazeera family.
Vision forward looking
Mission steadfast
Twenty years
with the people
Thembisa Fakude
Researcher - Al Jazeera Centre for Studies

The description of the Al Jazeera Media Network is best encapsulated in its motto: the voice of the voiceless.

For the past 20 years, it has provided award-winning journalism without fear or favour.

Ever since the brand was established, the name has been associated with bravery, creative journalism and the amplification of the voices of the people of the Global South – living up to the promise of its motto.

When South Sudan seceded from Khartoum, Al Jazeera English was the first international news organisation to maintain a presence in the new capital, Juba. When I was asked about this decision at the time, as the network’s bureau chief of Southern Africa, the answer that immediately came to mind was that we do this because those voices matter.

That has been the driving spirit of Al Jazeera. We pride ourselves in broadcasting the stories of ordinary people and in staying behind to tell them long after other networks have moved on.

Al Jazeera has also made inroads into the field of educational, academic and political research. The creation of subsidiaries, such as the Al Jazeera Center for Studies (AJCS) and the Al Jazeera Center
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for Training and Development (AJCTD), is among the initiatives that continue to position the network above the rest.

The AJCS and AJCTD have been instrumental in the training of journalists and the provision of in-depth research in the Middle East. As such, the network has been giving back to the community and to the journalism fraternity.

When Al Jazeera started in 1996, it was dubbed a “new phenomenon”, becoming the topic of a book, The Al Jazeera Phenomenon by Professor Mohamed Zayani of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service.

The creative and professional manner in which Al Jazeera has carried out its business has undoubtedly changed the culture and understanding of journalism in the region and the world. Several media organisations have subsequently followed suit, embracing similar approaches to journalism.

Providing context is critical to our journalism. Through context we elucidate stories, providing insight into their sociopolitical complexities. We achieve this, in part, by encouraging homegrown journalism.

Al Jazeera prides itself on employing people from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. The composition of our staff helps us understand global demographics and encourages healthy debate. The widely reported debate that took place within Al Jazeera English over the terminology used to describe those undertaking desperate journeys to escape war is a case in point. What started as a discussion between journalists and management in the newsroom concluded in a bold statement: Al Jazeera will use the term refugees, not migrants. It was a move that inspired other media networks and instigated conversations in political, academic and humanitarian circles.

Media institutions are going through difficult times as budgets, advertising revenues and sponsorships dwindle. Despite those challenges, the network’s groundbreaking work continues.

Twenty years with the people
Thembisa Fakude
When I filed my first report for Al Jazeera in 1996, I couldn’t watch it on screen because I didn’t have a satellite dish. Neither could I watch it online, because the internet was barely used to send emails then. But, today, live broadcasting on the web competes with satellite broadcasts.

Where once people gathered together in front of a television at a specific time and in a specific place, many now watch individually, whenever and wherever they choose on small, portable screens.

But each screen still has a role to play and an audience to serve.

Watching a news package on a social media platform may be faster, easier and more convenient than watching it on TV, but some still prefer to consume their news as part of a full bulletin on the big screen.

Al Jazeera appeals to both types of audience – retaining its traditional viewers while attracting new, younger ones too.

In the competition presented by other channels and social media platforms at the height of this digital transformation, Al Jazeera has managed to find a source of profitable partnership. We have taken pride in being pioneering, becoming the world’s first TV news channel to broadcast live on Facebook and Telegram. This has
enabled us to reach a larger audience and to present a richer array of content.

This vast expansion in digital media may have created confusion between the method and the target. But Al Jazeera is the same Al Jazeera; it now simply adopts several methods to achieve the same target.

After all, it is the content created by Al Jazeera that defines its spirit and identity. It is that content that explains why viewers have continued to watch it for two decades – on the screen of their choosing.

And that content has not come without a price – in the blood, lives and freedom of its staff and the bombing, closure and looting of its bureaus.

Digital expansion encourages us to maintain our editorial line and provides us with a huge amount of footage and information. We verify the authenticity of this material and present it to tens of millions of Al Jazeera viewers.

Al Jazeera has always taken pride in its Arab identity, but it is not only an Arabic-speaking channel. It speaks for those who became homeless as a result of a tsunami as much as it does for those who lost their homes to a barrel bomb. It takes the side of the weak, the voiceless, the poor, the prisoners of conscience. But it also tells stories of joy and success. It strives to be the best and the bravest.

Al Jazeera will never be a bloodless screen. It will always show images of the dead and injured. But it will also depict happiness and peace where that is to be found, for it is the variety, richness and honesty of our content that defines us.
Our transformative journey over the past two decades has been rich with vision, passion, spirited competition, determination, and commitment towards our audience. When we launched in 1996, the internet was still on its way to becoming the commodity people know and love today.

Google was nothing more than a concept. Just 10 years ago, smartphones and mobile apps did not exist, Facebook was only known to a minority of early adopters, and social media was still misunderstood and feared by the majority. Only five years ago, social media was not considered a source of news. All this was happening amid a coming of age of a new digitally connected generation.

The wide portfolio of our digital products developed since inception was a result of our constant determination to deliver unmatched high quality journalism to our audience through means that extend the boundaries of an aging TV platform. As we continue to deliver first-class TV news, we are facing an ever-increasing chain of challenges that stands in the way of fully captivating digital consumers.

One clear challenge is the heightened innovation in newsgathering, production, formats and distribution, which is forcing media organisations to adopt cutting-edge technologies or risk becoming obsolete. In other words, while quality original content is key to succeeding on digital platforms it is no longer the only differentiator. Broadcasters need to rethink...
Moving forward, growing in the digital space is taking on a new meaning, one that caters to a new generation with its own habits, expectations, and dynamic intricacy, which is often emerging faster than what the market can offer. The key question becomes: “How can you anticipate your audience needs before the audience and before the competition?” We believe that the answer lies in continuously listening to the pulse of our audience as well as creating a culture of innovation.

The next five years will see dramatic changes in the way people receive and consume content. This will be driven by the rise of chatbots, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), driverless cars, wearable devices, and Virtual Reality (VR).

Amid these innovations, content publishers and distributors increasingly face challenges to stay ahead of the technology evolution curve to better serve and reach their audience.

Our digital strategy is to be omnipresent everywhere on all platforms with an ever innovative portfolio of digital products that inform and educate our growing audience. One good example is AJ+, which was started in 2013 by our innovation team as an experiment in storytelling targeting millennials. Today it has become one of the top digital-native video publishers in the world. The success of AJ+ is a byproduct of building innovation capabilities that rethink market needs, rely on advanced data analytics tools, develop deeper and more intimate relationships with audiences, and prioritise crossing the frontier in all aspects of new products. Digital engagement centricity is one of those aspects that requires continuous improvements to methods of storytelling, creating better social communities, two-way active communication channels, real-time analytics, and pushing the journalistic cycle much further past distribution.

In order to maintain our global leadership and be able to achieve our strategy, we need to develop our competitive edge in four key areas:

• Become a magnet that attracts and retains our most important asset – talented people
• Original and high quality diversified content focused on informing and educating our audience
• Innovation in the way we gather, produce, visualise and distribute content
• Master the art of data science and real-time analytics

In summary, a new digital vision driven by our talented staff who are focused on developing our innovation capabilities, and equipped with significant wealth of knowledge and understanding of journalism, positions us for success. Al Jazeera is not here to follow – we are here to lead.
I have been asked to share a story about the role journalists can play in the lives of those whose stories they tell. I can think of many from the different countries and conflicts – military and political – I have covered over the years.

You see, the media can change people’s lives. It can influence governments. It can bring about change just by being there. And ‘being there’ is what Al Jazeera does best.

At a time when many networks parachute teams in to tell a story, we are there before, during and after a crisis. We don’t just cover a story when it is in the headlines. We make the headlines. And ‘being there’ gives even the most desperate and powerless people hope.

It is the stories of those people that we share with the world – and, sometimes, the world reacts.

In one case, that reaction ‘saved’ a 14-year-old Syrian refugee.

Hanifa’s family had escaped to Lebanon. But once there, they faced a different kind of threat.

“I have no choice, I am doing this for my family, even though it will destroy my life,” she cried when we met her in the border town of Arsal.
Hanifa had agreed to become the second wife of the family’s Lebanese landlord. It was supposed to be a trade-off. Her father was too sick to work, and the family could no longer afford to pay their $250 monthly rent. So the landlord demanded Hanifa in exchange.

This child’s life had been one tragedy after another, but she did smile as she showed us photographs of the 22-year-old cousin she was supposed to marry. He had been killed fighting in Syria.

Apart from sharing her story with the world, there was little else we could do for Hanifa.

But as it reached millions of viewers, messages of solidarity and offers of monetary assistance began to pour in. I couldn’t believe the number of people who’d reached out to us wanting to pay the family’s rent so that Hanifa wouldn’t be forced into the marriage. Some sent me emails; others contacted me via Twitter.

As journalists, we can’t get involved in collecting donations, so we asked those who offered help to contact the UNHCR in Lebanon. We also contacted the organisation’s office in Beirut.

The UN stepped in and found a new shelter for the family, and I responded to all those who had sent me messages to tell them that their concern had – in one way or another – saved Hanifa.
We were getting ready to cover the international music festival in Nouakchott, Mauritania, planning our story on how music was bringing people together and promoting peace.

We were excited – at the prospect of getting to listen to the African, Arab, European and American bands that had gathered and at the opportunity of filing a report that was unlike the mainly political news the channel typically covers.

But as we were setting up our equipment, my phone began to ring. The only words the caller spoke before hanging up were: “Sounds of gunfire in Nouakchott. Sounds of explosions.”

I looked around at my colleagues whose phones were also ringing. We’d all received the same news. But nobody could confirm where the gunfire was coming from or who was responsible for it.

And then a reliable source called to report that clashes were underway in the heart of Nouakchott between security forces and fighters from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The melodies we’d been expecting to listen to had turned into gunfire.

We headed for the neighbourhood where the fighting was taking place, finding ourselves caught in the middle of a gun battle between...
AQIM fighters, who had taken up positions inside a house, and the security forces.

Mauritania had become the leading story on Al Jazeera’s 23:00 news bulletin. Reporting live, I summed up what was happening as the sound of gunfire could be heard in the background.

Once I’d finished, my colleagues in Doha urged me and the team to stay safe – our wellbeing was more important than the story, they said. But we didn’t feel fear. We didn’t have the time to. As a team, we wanted to be up to the challenge and we had all the support we could have needed from our colleagues.

Looking back at it now, I wonder how I could have reported live in such a dangerous situation.

But it didn’t go unnoticed by Mauritanians, who followed our reports closely, overwhelming us with concerns for our safety and praising our commitment to following the story.

For the whole night, we stayed near the scene of the clashes, managing to enter the house from which the AQIM fighters had been shooting and capturing remarkable footage of the weapons and equipment they’d left behind.

Our coverage of that critical moment in the country’s history helped to propel our popularity in Mauritania.

But what about the music festival? Well, we managed to cover that as well.
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