

21 February 2009

NATIONAL POST

Al Jazeera struggles to change channels; Image Problem; English version boasts of balance, eyes Canadian TV

Craig Offman

"My war hero is Ayman Mohyeldin, the young correspondent for Al Jazeera English," wrote a Middle Eastern viewer during the Gaza conflict. "Al Jazeera English is not what you might think. It offers balanced, professional reporting from correspondents both in Sderot and Gaza."

This elegy did not come from the Facebook wall of an enchanted Egyptian. It was published in Ha'aretz, a prestigious daily in Israel.

Such mainstream acceptance is manna for the channel's managing director Tony Burman, who was quoting the praise to a crowd at the University of Toronto last week.

Hired nine months ago to smooth over internal strife, balance and polish the channel's content, and bring it to North America, the former CBC news honcho was back in his hometown to tackle what is perhaps his biggest obstacle: the murky image of its sibling channel, Al Jazeera Arabic.

On this side of the world, most people associate the Qatar-based broadcaster with the airing of al-Qaeda figures and hate-spewing sheikhs.

Yet Mr. Burman's two-year-old channel features a high-end presentation and a sense of balance -- a leftish world view that, if approved for broadcast in Canada, may actually be a greater threat to CBC Newsworld than to Canadian civil rights.

Indeed, by the fall, Mr. Burman hopes that his channel will appear on screens across Canada.

He says he has already lined up a major cable carrier, but ultimately the decision rests with the CRTC, which five years ago permitted the Arab-language channel to air. Heeding complaints about incitement, however, it created strict provisions for cable providers such as round-the-clock translators that ultimately chased them away.

This time, however, Mr. Burman could prevail in Canada. The CRTC will examine whether or not Al Jazeera English presents a threat to existing Canadian pay and specialty channels and any sign of incitement. Ownership is not a factor, unless there is a significant outcry. "They'll only evaluate the content," said someone intimate with the process.

So far though, its lack of exposure here inevitably leads to brand confusion. Most people are likely to imagine it as an elaborate translation service. When the moderator of Tuesday's event, CBC reporter Susan Ormiston, asked Mr. Burman how he felt when Barack Obama snubbed Al Jazeera for a tiny rival from Dubai, Mr. Burman awkwardly explained that Al Jazeera is not just one channel.

"I was competitively more irritated that the White House went to Al Arabiya and not my colleagues at Al Jazeera Arabic."

While depicted as a form of terror TV, an unfettered soapbox for sociopaths, the channel is by far the most viewed channel in the Middle East. It is celebrated as a blunt cudgel of truth, airing the immediate emotions of the day across dozens of countries -- including Israel, where leading politicians make regular appearances on its airwaves.

Sponsored by the Emir of Qatar, who by some estimations has injected as much as \$1-billion into the more recent, English-language endeavour. The oil-rich leader is a U. S. ally but has suspended his country's low-level ties with Israel to protest the Gaza offensive and supports the Hamas leadership there -- all of which might help explain the Obama snub.

So can its content. While Al Jazeera Arabic can also be a gadfly bumping against the windows of Middle Eastern dictators, it has been a continuing source of concern, especially among conservatives and Jewish groups.

Late last year, for example, its staffers threw a welcome party for a terrorist who had been released from an Israeli prison after murdering a defenceless family, resulting in a temporary press ban from the Israeli government. Reprimands were handed out, but no one was fired.

When asked in a subsequent interview if controversies such as these affect his brand, Mr. Burman stressed that the two channels should be viewed on their own merits.

"It's inaccurate and somewhat lazy for journalists not to make distinctions," he said. "The example I sometime use is that if you look at Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, and evaluate the Times of London, you don't say well, the Times of London may be fine, but Sky News or the Sun newspaper aren't. They're different titles and operate within the same company. If anyone would lift their eyes above their desk, they'd see that Al Jazeera English has a separate staff and mandate."

Watching the channel on the streaming video Web site, www.livestation.com/aje

[<http://www.livestation.com/aje>], one can immediately see production values dripping with the Emir's munificence. There are almost no ads, except for Qatar Airlines, also a crown corporation of sorts. Aimed at a younger, more international demographic than Al Jazeera Arabic, it claims to reach 130 million households in more than 100 countries. It presents fresh-faced far-flung reporters with English accents of varying poshness -- including that of Canada's Avi Lewis. There is also a grad-schoolish, leftist perspective that comes out in documentaries that suggest, for example, the evils of American multinationals. In essence,

the channel is the Arabic world's response to Fox News -- without any brash interruptions from the anchors.

Like competitors CNN International or the BBC, Al Jazeera English offers weather, sports updates, musical specials, or a pointed interview with Iranian presidential candidate Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in which the veteran politician is asked if his country is storing nuclear arms and if he would ever use them against Israel. There was even a pre-emptive report about President Obama visiting Ottawa, with Maclean's columnist Paul Wells offering his thoughts from the Rideau Canal.

During this week's controversy over the denial of a visa to Israeli tennis player Shahar Peer, whom the Dubai authorities in effect banned from playing in women's tennis event, the channel ran interviews with various Israeli leaders and a mealy-mouthed official for the tournament. Advantage: Israel.

In the six-odd hours of watching Al Jazeera English, this viewer might have squirmed or rolled his eyes several times but did not see anything that verged on incitement.

That assessment is shared by Steven Stalinsky, executive director of the Middle East Media Research Institute in Washington, D. C. "There is no incendiary material that we could find," he said.

His group has found plenty of programming on the Arabic channel to criticize, such as an instalment this week, which featured a Kuwaiti professor advocating a biological at-to tack on the White House and sneaking anthrax through Mexico, or the sheikh who late last month told viewers that Adolf Hitler "put Jews in their place" --even though they "exaggerated the issue."

Mr. Stalinsky believes Al Jazeera English is an elaborate Western front operation. "One of the main goals of Qatar is to use English as a PR vehicle for Al Jazeera Arabic, so that the Westerners think that the English channel is not so bad, so the Arabic can't be bad, either." People close to Mr. Burman say that he was hired to ease tensions between the two cultures: the so-called "professionals," or Western-trained journalists, and so-called "ideologues," or employees with a radical agendas.

Both channels saw dramatic exits in the past two years, in which leading correspondents have complained of ideological influence. Last March, the English channel's Washington bureau chief Dave Marash said there was a "reflexive adversarial editorial stance" against the United States, which in part explained why he quit. Six months earlier, his Arabicchannel counterpart, Hafez al Mirazi, also quit, complaining that Mr. Burman's boss, Wadah Kanfar, was hiring hard-line Islamists as his assistants.

A pay disparity also created dissension among the ranks: Al Jazeera Arabic staff was angry that English-speaking staff were better compensated.

Mr. Burman explained that stabilizing operations and building morale is part of his mandate. "The relationship between Al Jazeera English and Al Jazeera Arabic is much closer," he said. "A lot of those early tensions had to do with the fact that a lot of people

didn't know each other."

Any news organization with employees who come from 45 countries will see a lot of "robust discussion," he said, adding that the complaints reflect the biases of the complainer, not the channel. "I don't think there is an agenda or conspiracy. People make their views known, but we have total autonomy."

While these high-minded distinctions might help Mr. Burman's cause in front of the CRTC, they won't have much truck down south, where suspicion of the brand runs high, sales are not likely to be promising, and cable operators cannot hide behind the judgments of a regulator.

Burlington, Vt., is one of the very few areas in the United States where Al Jazeera English can be watched. Though it is famously left-leaning -- it actually operates the cable system there -- it still faces arm-twisting pressure to drop the channel.

To clear up any misapprehensions, Mr. Burman recently introduced a Web site, WantAJE.net, which provides background information and allows people to petition their cable operators to carry the channel.

"He's just bugged," said Hugh Miles, the author of *Al Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*.

"There's no way he can sell this to the Americans. It's just toxic."

WHO'S AFRAID OF AL JAZEERA?

What happens during a randomly picked hour of viewing Al Jazeera English yesterday on the streaming video site www.livestation.com/aje [<http://www.livestation.com/aje>]

2:36 p. m. Sir David Frost. Yes, that one. But the older, Nixon-less Frost sounds very wheezy interviewing *Slumdog Millionaire* star Anil Kapoor. "It's taken off in a major way," the TV legend says about the film. "Like it's been visited by the Holy Spirit."

2:42 Trailer for the seventh part of an HIV/AIDS-related series called *Saving Soweto*.

2:44 Moderates really boring mini-debate between economist Philippe Legrain and European MP Gerard Batten about immigration.

2:57 Stock market update, followed by exchange rates of the Euro, pound and yen.

2:59 Trailer for *Focus on Gaza*. Will Israel be charged with war crimes? Everyone in Gaza featured seems to think there's enough evidence. Oy.

3:00 Ad for a state-owned Qatar oil company QAPCO.

3:00 Live from London reviews what the government of Israel might look like under Benjamin Netanyahu; And, is Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan the next Guantanamo?

3:03 Tzipi Livni, leader of Israel's centrist Kadima party, is interviewed, telling either a scam or AJE reporter about her discomfort in joining a coalition with a rightist regime.

3:04 Former Clinton Middle East envoy Aaron David Miller holds forth on the Israel coalition situation. Rejects anchor's suggestion that the right will be a counterproductive force for peace. "It's usually the doves talking the talk and the hawks walking the walk," he

said.

3:15 U. S. official gives outline of who Bagram detainees are, admitting some prisoners have been apprehended from outside Afghanistan.

3:20 Spot for state-owned Qatar airlines.

3:25 Report on vigilantism, racism and foreigners in Rome. Much of it against Romanians. Romanian Foreign Minister interviewed.

3:27 Weather in North America and elsewhere. "Cuba will have a fine and steady day."

3:28 Focus on Gaza next.

3:30 Special focuses on lives of ordinary Gazans and larger issues. Cites Hamas statistics that 1,300 people died in recent Gaza conflict, 400 of them children. Voiceover talks about how many people who settled in Israel were Holocaust survivors. Country signed the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Articles of Convention alternate with images of violence against civilians. Pulsating, menacing music. Visits people in the area. Boy depicts Israeli soldiers as relaxed, singing. One of them tells him to sing or else he'll kill him. "So I sang," he says.

3:39 No official Israeli comment yet.

National Post

Color Photo: Al Jazeera English / Sir David Frost interviews Slumdog Millionaire star Anil Kapoor. ; Color Photo: Al Jazeera English / Anchors talk about a Netanyahu-led Israel. ; Color Photo: Al Jazeera English / The weather from across the world, including Cuba. ; Color Photo: Al Jazeera English / Al Jazeera's "Focus on Gaza" feature segment. ;

National Post

