

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Op-Ed: Al-Jazeera Finally Coming to Town, But Hurdles Remain ^[1]

In what can only be described as anti-climactic, Al Jazeera International is starting its English channel broadcasts to North America November 15 with a whimper, rather than the desired flourish. After failing to meet several self-appointed inaugural air dates over the past year, the controversial Arabic TV channel kicked off its service to the U.S. via bottom-tier, off-the-beaten-track delivery services on which Al Jazeera International's audience in America will be miniscule to start.

The satellite service Globecast, owned by France Telecom, has added Al Jazeera English to its menu of some 150 overseas channels on its program menu, watched mainly by ex-patriots living in the U.S. who want to view programs from their native lands. For those not already subscribing to Globecast who wish to watch Al Jazeera English and other channels, the one-time cost for the program package is about \$200., plus the cost of the receiver dish and installation, about an additional \$200-\$300. Other carriers also offering their own Al Jazeera English packages include relatively unknown and smaller program providers such as Fision, the on-line service Jump TV, and VDC, a Houston, Texas company.

In what can only be described as anti-climactic, Al Jazeera International announced it will begin its broadcasts to North America November 15. After failing to meet several self-appointed inaugural air dates over the past year, the controversial Arabic TV channel is scheduled to kick off its service by showcasing an exclusive interview with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Sir David Frost's new breakfast show.

Major carriers like a Cox Cable, or a satellite-delivered DirecTV, did not wish to deliver Al Jazeera International into America's TV households. But when or if the channel is given the opportunity to reach and touch Americans in their living rooms, can Al Jazeera eventually make a go of it in the world's most competitive commercial marketplace?

One likely scenario is that Al Jazeera will start out to show prospective U.S. carriers, which obviously have been reluctant to do business with the network, that it has a different face for North America than it does for the Middle East, and does not intend to damage any provider's integrity. It would not, for example, be the go-to channel for the terrorist video pronouncements and news releases which helped the parent Arabic regional channel gain considerable notoriety.

Executives at Al Jazeera's home base in the Persian Gulf country of Qatar contend that the network's hard-earned brand will be maintained for its English off-spring. But those in front-line management positions for the international channel -- top-heavy with British and American electronic journalists -- envision an Al Jazeera that offers something closer to a BBC, but certainly not an "Al Jazeera light," as some critics have suggested it is likely to

become.

Nonetheless, broadcast journalists, both domestic and international, these days do find themselves compromising what they report to gain the maximum number of viewers.

In the highly competitive U.S. marketplace, for example, there is more emphasis than ever on showcasing an anchor with star power and charisma, and arguably less emphasis on field reportage. Might the model of the new Al Jazeera emerge likewise, with the old Middle East brand taking a back seat to an attractive, glib anchor, who shows up well in focus groups?

Will TV viewers in America really want to follow the news as broadcast from the other side of the world, as the Al Jazeera International business plan would have it, from its home-based newsroom in Doha, Qatar in the Persian Gulf, to one of the four anchor locations in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia and to London and across the pond to Washington and beyond? Or would viewers rather hear about the latest on the U.S. congressman who carried his tutorial of male interns to the extreme, or gauge for themselves whether Michael J. Fox over-acted on the issue of stem cell research, or get the latest about the "M" word (macaca) that emerged in the Virginia senatorial race?

Competition for audience share will most likely alter the heady pre-conceived visions in Al Jazeera International's business plan, resulting in a new service that won't resemble either Al Jazeera's flagship or the BBC.

The make-or-break imperative in Al Jazeera International's vision is to make a profit through the sale of commercials. Therefore it will need to focus on the kind of news coverage mentioned above, leaving the sun to streak alone across the globe from Kuala Lumpur to Washington.
