

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Al Jazeera's Global Branding Comes Up Short in America ^[1]

It may be too soon to tell, but it appears that Al Jazeera's plans to go public may have suffered a severe setback when its long awaited English channel failed to achieve major distribution into American homes following its November 15 debut.

Al Jazeera International has come up short thus far in its biggest effort yet to transform its maverick Middle East brand into an attractive worldwide public business investment.

Two years ago it was reported by the Reuters news agency and a German newspaper that directors of the controversial Middle East channel planned to offer public shares for sale on the Doha, Qatar stock exchange when Al Jazeera was able to expand from a regional to an international service. Since then Al Jazeera has put its building blocks in place through the start up of one new channel after another to bolster its anchor 24-hour Arabic service, with the introduction of its children's channel, two Al Jazeera sports channels, and a planned CSPAN-type channel. An international English news channel was planned as a globally-accessible centerpiece, to be commercially-supported in America to help move Al Jazeera into the public marketplace.

For well over a year before its launch last week, the English channel tried to distance itself from the reputation of Al Jazeera's parent Arabic channel, which some viewed as biased against the West and as a mouthpiece for terrorists. In 2005 Al Jazeera International hired the British public relations firm of Brown Lloyd James for image building. The PR firm targeted ads in broadcast trade journals and the mainstream media to build the channel's base with potential advertisers, cable and satellite distributors, and viewers. BLJ had previously handled the successful image-building campaign in Washington, DC for Dr. Ayad Allawi, who became Iraq's interim prime minister. AJI also hired the Middle East marketing company TBWA \ RAAD for additional ad campaigns.

Al Jazeera International's staff had felt confident that the new English service would provide a much needed perspective about the Middle East that was not carried by Western media, such as CNN. In an AJI press release provided to Worldcasting last year, program host Faisal al-Kasim was quoted as saying, "Even Arabs who live in the West are giving up watching Western networks and tuning to Arab networks instead." In another press release, AJI said it would "attract well-educated, affluent viewers, including decision-makers who recognize the importance of an international news agenda."

Al Jazeera officials felt confident that the channel would attract large numbers of American viewers. A 2005 press release claimed that "the highest number of hits and most frequent visitors to the English language Al Jazeera Web site come from North America." But major US carries, such as Comcast, Cox Cable, and DirecTV, have opted not to transmit the new English news service, perhaps adopting a wait-and-see position on the controversial channel,

and its reputation, real or imagined. To date, the channel is transmitted in America by only a few Internet providers which offer the channel's live streaming video for a subscription fee, and by a French-owned satellite service which transmits in-language programs from stations abroad for expatriate subscribers living in America.

Why haven't major American cable and satellite channels signed on to distribute Al Jazeera English?

Dr. Arie W. Kruglanski, Distinguished Psychology Professor at the University of Maryland, references studies showing that "people expose themselves to information that they feel they could agree with. The kind of anti-Americanism that the Mid-Easterners may find appealing, glorification of terrorist acts, etc. for which Al Jazeera has earned its reputation is very likely to turn off scores of American viewers, hence is unlikely to be taken on by networks and media outfits whose commercial objective is to attract maximal numbers of viewers."

In only a few days on the air, Al Jazeera International has appeared to shift its coverage to "under-reported" areas of the world that may or may not be of interest to potential American subscribers, who may be more interested in domestic issues with a new Congress, and before long an upcoming U.S. presidential campaign. Meantime, some who are monitoring AJI's daily feed note that the channel is "trying to find its identity," and another noted there is "little corporate advertising. Among the few sponsors was Sony, which advertised a new camera. The ad featured an Arab-looking man taking pictures of a small boy chasing fireflies."

Al Jazeera's board of directors in the Middle East are no doubt monitoring the new channel and taking lots of notes.
