

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

It's Anniversary Month for Al Jazeera English, Which Yearns to be Appreciated in America ^[1]

The 6-month anniversary for Al Jazeera's English satellite TV channel comes up mid-month, and the many challenges that beset the organization appear to have bubbled to the surface in the months since the channel debuted November 16.

The big hurdle, of course, is to be seen by the multitudes of available TV viewers in America. This has not happened to date. Major American satellite and cable providers have not risked putting AJE on their systems because of its parent Arabic channel's controversial depiction of terrorists.

AJE's invisible American channel has reportedly frustrated AJE players across the board who had been led to believe early on that getting AJE on the air in America would be a slam dunk. This includes the channel's marquee on-air presenters in Washington and London, the capable, veteran news executive staff, and the government of Qatar, which pays the bills.

The TV profession is rife with egos. For many broadcast stars it's not just the money that counts. It's the rush of being on top and staying out front just to be seen and appreciated, and more is better.

Sir David Frost is one example. The British icon celebrity interviewer and now AJE star of the weekly interview show "Frost Over The World," doesn't do his present stint just for the money, although he reportedly has a multi-million dollar contract with AJE.

Frost became a household name in Britain and across the pond in America decades ago through his popular TV interview programs. But on AJE his audience in America is nil, a patchwork of subscription Internet streams and some regional satellite-cable hookups.

In his 1970 book, "The Americans," Frost said he was enjoying his "voyage of discovery through America more than anything I can recall," He expressed affection for everything in America from New York cabbies, to being able to get a free pack of matches with a pack of cigarettes.

Frost had been publicized as AJE's marquee Western on-air personality, with the channel banking that with his credibility and public adulation in America, he would help get the channel carried into millions of American homes by U.S. distributors.

In his book Frost also likened his interviews with interesting people as part of show business's "Craftsy Arts," where he can get a crowd around on television and just tell a story to entertain and inform them. He gets energized through the public's response to his broadcasts.

I recall my dinner years ago with Frost and his producer, Peter Baker, at Sardi's in New York's Times Square, when I was on the White House press office staff and coordinated the placement of government officials on his show and others. Frost had his own table positioned inside the entrance of Sardi's so that patrons had to walk by his table to get to theirs. He would complain all the while that he couldn't find time to eat because he was so busy signing autographs, even on napkins, but he loved it, or else he wouldn't have had his regular table so strategically positioned.

I suspect he would be a much happier camper if his "Frost Over The World" included America, and he might want to hang around AJE a bit longer.

Another familiar face to American TV news viewers is former ABC News "Nightline" correspondent David Marash, now a major AJE news anchor. Marash told a New York Sun reporter Josh Gerstein that he was unhappy about the lack of major exposure to U.S. TV audiences. "It's disappointing, Of course, you want to play to your home crowd if you can," he said.

Frost and Marash, as known quantities in America, were to have provided much needed credibility to AJE to get it into American homes. If they are unhappy about not being carried big time in the US, so too may be the emir of Qatar, who pays their salaries and all the others. But beyond that, the emir would seem to desire adulation and attention just like TV stars.

The emir literally put Qatar on the map by establishing in 1996 what would become the landmark Al Jazeera Arabic channel, "to attract as much attention as the royal family next door in Saudi Arabia," as we once wrote. It worked, and then some. But now Qatar is boxed out of America with its new AJE franchise. The powers that be in Qatar appears to be looking at the bottom line of their AJE expenditures, and what they are receiving as a return on investment.

The London Guardian's James Robinson notes that "staff at AJE claim there has been a financial clampdown," from Doha headquarters. "Apart from some highly paid presenters, many staff members are on salaries below industry norms," writes Robinson.

Those in Qatar, London, and Washington would be a lot happier than they are now if Americans might someday be permitted to show their appreciation for what the AJE folks are doing, and a lot more media attention would be just fine as well.

The day will have to come before too long.
