

Nov 04, 2016 by [Shawn Powers](#)

Bravo, Burlington: A Small Victory for Al-Jazeera English, A Symbolic Victory for the United States ^[1]

It is about time that the Al-Jazeera Network received some good news from America. Having been accused by the former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld of inciting terrorism and assisting Iraqi insurgents, and then allegedly considered as a potential target of a U.S.-led military strike, Al-Jazeera has not exactly felt welcome here in the United States since the beginning of the war in Iraq. When Americans hear the words "Al-Jazeera", many immediately associate it with Osama bin Laden, the world's most recognized face of terrorism. It is thus easy to see why Al-Jazeera English has had trouble finding room in the U.S. cable market.

The arguments levied against Al-Jazeera -- most typically "that it is a mouthpiece for terrorists" -- have carried significant weight in discussions in the U.S. A 2006 poll commissioned by Accuracy in Media (AIM) found that 53 percent of Americans were opposed to having the channel available via cable in the U.S., and that 38 percent were "adamantly against the channel." Of course, AIM conducted the poll prior to the broadcaster's launch, and thus none of the respondents had ever actually seen Al-Jazeera English's award winning programming. What the poll does illustrate, however, is that there is a widely held bias against the Al-Jazeera brand, an organization whose image has been thoroughly denigrated in America.

Launched in November 2006, Al-Jazeera English represents the largest rollout of an English-language news broadcaster ever. Some speculate that over \$1 billion was invested in the launch. Al-Jazeera English features four primary broadcasting bureaus in Doha, Kuala Lumpur, London and Washington, D.C., each of which are independently responsible for programming for a designated period of time each day. In addition, the Al-Jazeera Network features over 50 bureaus worldwide, with more "indigenous journalists" than either of its main competitors, the BBC World and CNN International.

Al-Jazeera English stands apart from its Arabic sister, with an entirely different audience and news agenda. Over the past year, its exclusive interviews with the Burmese Junta, on-the-ground coverage of protests in Malaysia and live coverage of the Hamas takeover from inside Gaza, have each been praised for being much more thorough than those of its competitors and for relying on local journalists with deep familiarity with the countries and cultures being covered. So far, its somewhat clichéd mission statement of providing a voice to the voiceless has, to a certain extent, been fulfilled.

Yet, here in the U.S., Al-Jazeera English's voice -- or, more importantly, the voices its broadcasting represents -- have been systematically stifled. Al-Jazeera English is available in the U.S. via four public media systems: Buckeye Cable in Toledo, Ohio; Burlington Telecom in Burlington, Vermont; via the Internet on Youtube and JumpTV; and in the Pentagon. It is,

somewhat ironically, the top choice for news for many active U.S. soldiers.

This May, Burlington Telecom's (BT) General Manager, Chris Burns, decided to drop the channel from the municipally owned telecommunications company in response to what he described as "dozens" of complaints from angry subscribers. Because the broadcaster is publicly owned and financed, Mayor Bob Kiss intervened and called for a broader public discussion regarding the merits of removing Al-Jazeera English from BT. In a hopeful display of democratic deliberation, two separate forums were organized where citizens and advocacy groups could argue their case for or against keeping Al-Jazeera English on the air. On May 27, 2008 around 100 people attended the first meeting. Of the 28 residents that spoke, three-to-one were in favor of keeping the broadcaster on air. At the second forum, which took place on June 11, the Al-Jazeera English Managing Director, Tony Burman, and the leading American-based correspondent, Josh Rushing, joined the discussion to answer the Burlingtonians' questions.

The public discussions resulted in an intelligent give-and-take on the role of news media in informing public opinion. Supporters argued that the channel offers the citizens of Burlington a better opportunity to learn about Muslim society and culture. Others pointed out that the quality of news provided is far superior to that offered on other cable news channels such as MSNBC and Fox News. Yet, the critics were fervent, arguing that carrying the channel was "an insult to any patriotic American," as well as to the local Jewish community. Supporters responded by pointing out that Al-Jazeera English is so popular in Israel that it recently replaced the BBC World and CNN International on the two top Israeli cable systems. While many different perspectives were heard, the vast majority of opinions expressed were in favor of keeping Al-Jazeera English available on Burlington Telecom.

On June 25, BT's two oversight committees voted unanimously to continue to air Al-Jazeera English. The committees found "no consistent or widespread agreement or evidence from respected sources that confirmed that Al-Jazeera English supports terrorism, anti-Semitism and promotes the destruction of the State of Israel."

What the Burlington debates show is that there is hope, and not just for Al-Jazeera English, but for informed discussion about Arab culture and Muslim religion. Stereotypes about Arab culture and Islam are pervasive in the United States. Congress' refusal to allow an Arab company to control American ports is a telling example of just how powerfully and deeply anti-Arab stereotypes are embedded in American culture and political discourse. These stereotypes are, to a certain extent, responsible for much of the American public's fear of Al-Jazeera English. The Burlington debates offer a compelling demonstration of how unwarranted stereotypes can be scrutinized, one by one, with informed, intelligent and public argument. While this may be a small victory for Al-Jazeera English, it is a much larger symbolic victory for American civic discourse. One can only hope that similar conversations -- both about Al-Jazeera English, as well as about Arab culture and Muslim faith -- continue here in the U.S., and produce similarly productive dialogue. Bravo, Burlington.

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