

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Al Jazeera's Days Are Numbered—and in Arabic Numerals ^[1]

Washington, DC -- OK, if The New York Times says so, it must be true, right?

Two days after I wrote in [this column](#) that days may be numbered for Al Jazeera and U.S. public diplomacy stands to win a big one by default because of commercial marketplace competition, a page one story in today's New York Times [reports](#) that the TV channel's owner is shopping around for a buyer.

To tell the truth, this is not a new story, because Al Jazeera's management considered bailing out three years ago. But let's look past this for the time being, because of today's news peg.

You might describe this as an Election Day Sale -- only fitting following today's heavy turnout in the Iraqi election.

So may mark the decline of Al Jazeera, the Mouse that Roared at the United States, not from tiny, fictional Grand Fenwick of the classic Peter Sellers' movie, but from tiny, real life Qatar, one of the smallest states in the world, teenier than Connecticut.

Al Jazeera has garnered more press than any of the 700 (yes, seven hundred) satellite television channels that can be seen in the Middle East, for anyone wealthy enough to own three satellite dishes, far too many satellite TV channels vying for a small number of advertisers. But Al-Jazeera craved attention foremost, and it got it, and now the handwriting is on the wall.

Here's my take on the history of Al Jazeera. Ten years ago, there was a bloodless palace coup in Qatar, and a year later, in 1996, the former Emir's son, who deposed his father, funded a start-up TV satellite channel to show that he can attract as much attention as the royal family next door in Saudi Arabia. Al Jazeera lost money for five years and was preparing a public stock offering to keep it going, when the U.S. invades Afghanistan, and the only TV news crews there on the spot are from Al Jazeera. It sells its war coverage to frantic TV newsrooms around the world and does some serious PR. Al Jazeera becomes the distributor of Bin Laden and beheading videos. But Al Jazeera still loses money - lots of it.

It was of all people the U.S. State Department that lent credibility to Al Jazeera by promoting exclusive interviews on the channel with Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and other U.S. government luminaries. But Al Jazeera continues to run in the red.

Below the radar, beneath the media hype, market forces in Afghanistan and Iraq were stirring, while arguments raged in U.S. government agencies and hearings were held on Capitol Hill to explore how to reorganize U.S. public diplomacy to make it effective.

But by then, public diplomacy had grown into four-humped camel, since the U.S. Information

Agency was abolished after the Cold War. As reported here on Friday, more than a score of local TV stations have been licensed to operate in Iraq. And in Afghanistan, the radio dial is beginning to load up like a top 10 market in the U.S.

The smart money these days is on the new non-profit foundations, such as the Foundation for International Understanding, led by David Abshire, that will help to sustain new and existing broadcast facilities abroad with relevant high-quality content while nurturing local filmmakers and television producers. It is the kind of soft power that resonates more effectively than any other, from people, not governments.

About once a week I take my own unscientific survey by doing Google name searches, to see who's getting buzz in the WorldCasting war of ideas.

Last week Al Jazeera registered 761,000 hits on Google.

But guess what? The Voice of America, chastised and downsized because it is considered by some in Washington to be a relic of the Cold War, registered 19,000,000 hits on Google, almost 25 times as many as Al Jazeera.

That's nothing: just wait until the local television and radio stations take hold.

Anybody want to buy a satellite TV channel?
