

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Al-Jazeera-America is Coming to Town ^[1]

Al-Jazeera-America is coming to town, heading straight for your living room.

Its executives, from their headquarters in the tiny Middle East gulf state of Qatar, have held preliminary talks in the U.S. with cable operators about carrying the channel's new English-language service, expected to debut early next year.

So you can expect to see for yourself, in English, the infamous Arabic satellite news channel, via your cable system or small dish antenna. It will compete for your attention against CNN, the Fox News Channel, MSNBC and all the rest, and can be expected to give them a run for their money, commercial sponsorship money, that is.

Once again, al-Jazeera is setting the pace with its TV news channel, while the U.S. government's international broadcasting effort is in the position of playing catch-up with its wily competitor.

It will be interesting to see al-Jazeera and Alhurra, America's Arabic TV channel, in head-to-head competition, don't you think?

No, that won't happen. America can explain itself to audiences abroad, but Congress won't let those of us at home see for ourselves what Alhurra is doing, or not doing, in the war of ideas. That's been the law since the end of World War II.

Okay, so I'll ask: Why not change the law? The world's a different place now, with the Internet and all.

Al-Jazeera, of course, is the purveyor-of-record for Bin Laden videos from his hideouts. And it's the channel-of-choice for kidnappers and worse who monitor it closely after they make a hit to see how their story is being played, then send ransom messages on the channel.

Al-Jazeera could well become America's Most Wanted, just like the TV show, because it deals in a subject that American viewers like to watch: crime news. An example: the media monitoring web site News Hounds, which proclaims, "We watch Fox News so you don't have to," reports that the recent crime story from Aruba about the tragic disappearance of the vacationing teenage girl from Alabama interrupted regular cable news coverage over the Fourth of July weekend more frequently than any other news item on Fox and competing channels.

Popular Internet sites in the U.S. and abroad provide clues to solve mysteries. And our kids are being educated about crime news. At Tennessee State University, citing interest in mystery, crime and terror, and after her previously successful summer course "Serial Killers," Dr. Leonore Simon this summer is scheduled to teach a class, "Crimes of the Century."

A former public defender, Dr. Simon cites criminal cases "that people remember, the ones that

get media publicity. They are all really fascinating." What she considers really fascinating subjects are Charles Manson, O.J. Simpson, and the recent trial of Scott Peterson, which she said stood out because of "frenzied media publicity."

Juries are even demanding more evidence from prosecutors, after watching such popular crime shows on TV as CSI, Law and Order, and Court TV's Forensic Files, according to surveys.

If al-Jazeera gets good ratings from its English language news channel in America with all its crime and mayhem, sponsors are sure to follow. Although the channel has been bleeding red ink consistently since it was founded in 1996, one reason is that it has been unable to get big bucks from the richest commercial market in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia. The royal family there has threatened to expel from the country companies that have their commercials run on al-Jazeera.

But the outlook is more promising for al-Jazeera in America. The cable channel's English-language Internet site already has a large U.S. following. Americans reportedly make up more than 40 percent of its readers. In second place is Europe, and third place, the Arab countries.

So I take it that al-Jazeera isn't good for America?

Good. Schmud. The Voice of America isn't concerned. It doubts that Al-Jazeera-America can make money.

But I can't help recalling that when the Fox Network first started up with only a few hours of programming once a week, it was derided as the "Coat Hanger Network" by the head of NBC. And you know the rest.

And I remember when a dinky little cable company was spun off by CBS. It was called Viacom, and it wound up owning CBS.

And one must mention the original ABC Monday Night Football team of commentators who almost laughed themselves out of the broadcast booth as they carried on about an upstart called ESPN, from Bristol, CT, that was going to challenge them. Today ESPN has inherited ABC's Monday Night Football mantle.

So don't hang your coat on al-Jazeera-America just yet.
