

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Al Jazeera: ‘Defending Freedom’ or Promoting Itself? ^[1]

Al Jazeera held its “2nd Aljazeera Forum” Jan. 31 through Feb. 2 in its headquarter city of Doha, Qatar. The conference was titled “Defending Freedom, Defining Responsibility,” but its goal seemed to be to trash U.S. media and celebrate everything Al Jazeera.

Part of the agenda of this year’s conclave was apparently to promote the oft-delayed launch of Al Jazeera International’s (AJI) new English-language service, now pushed back to May, and to quash stories that the new channel is distancing itself from the home Arabic channel.

Prior to the meeting, AJI had stated specifically in its press information that it would have editorial autonomy, but, seemingly in an act of self-promotion, both AJI and Al Jazeera Arabic officials were “singing a different tune,” Professor Marc Lynch wrote in his blog from the conference. “[They] talked at great length about how much editorial coordination there has been, how much the two stations will draw on each other.” Lynch, a Williams College professor and author of *Voices of the New Arab Public*, appeared on panels at the conference, after an “obligatory tour of Al Jazeera’s headquarters.”

The panels were on neutral topics such as professional ethics, blogging, and journalism in the 21st century, but they were all moderated by someone with a vested interest in Al Jazeera’s image: either a network representative, news presenter or news manager, and Lynch was instructed on what to discuss.

In his blog, *Abu Aardvark*, Lynch talks about directions he received before appearing on one panel. “My instructions were to talk about how AJI (Al Jazeera International) would be received in the American market,” Lynch said. “Basically, I said it would have the best shot of succeeding if it embraced its Al Jazeera identity rather than running away from it.”


Julia Day of *The Guardian* covered a panel in the forum and produced an article entitled “US media at ‘all-time low’”. Panelists Amy Goodman, the executive producer and host of “Democracy Now!”, Christopher Dickey, *Newsweek*’s Paris bureau chief, and Faisal al-Kasim, host of Al Jazeera’s “The Opposite Direction,” blasted American media for its coverage on the war in Iraq.

“Even Arabs who live in the West are giving up watching Western networks and tuning to Arabic networks instead,” al-Kasim said.

Blogger Ethan Zuckerman, a research fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School, and Lawrence Pintak, director of the Adham Center for Electronic Journalism and a former CBS correspondent, put the blame on both American and Arabic media. Pintak warned against glossing over problems in Arab media.

“I am concerned that someone from the US or Europe who doesn't know the Arabic world will

think that all is goodness and light when we know that is not the case,” said Pintak, whose new book is called *Reflections in a Bloodshot Lens: America, Islam, and the War of Ideas*.

Ayman al-Zawahri’s video tape that debuted on Al Jazeera last month in response to the U.S. military’s attempt on his life in a bombing raid was never discussed on a forum panel. The tape was aired and distributed by the network in record time. Prior to this, a terrorism expert told ABC news correspondent Brian Ross that terrorist tapes from a remote hideaway location are usually “delivered by a courier network that can involve as many as 25 people and can take eight to twelve weeks to reach its destination” . Al Jazeera has refused to say how it acquired and broadcast the tape in just over one week.

And then there is the professional quality of the tape itself. It appears to those familiar with television production techniques to have been taped with professional high-quality camera equipment in a studio setting, and not in a remote cave. There was a key light which lighting directors use to highlight the “form, dimension, and surface detail of subject matter,” that dramatically modeled shadows on al-Zawahri’s face, in close up against a black background, to heighten the impact of his remarks.

This would have made an interesting panel discussion at the Doha conference, but it would not have advanced Al Jazeera’s PR agenda.
