



Al Jazeera, in English

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Tune in around 4 o'clock Eastern and the news is feeding from the London anchor desk. The ticker is crawling: DR Congo Loser to Challenge Results . . . Netherlands Moves to Ban Burqa. Co-anchors Nick Clarke and Barbara Serra, in an urbane British accent that osmoses credibility, lead into the hour's top story: Darfur. Break for commercials. Then back, with a plume of soaring, faintly New Age music that's as clean, familiar, and forgettable as a Marriott lobby. The only thing unfamiliar is the logo in the corner: a glowing golden bulb of flowery Arabic script. Welcome to Al Jazeera English.

If you're in the United States, you can only watch Al Jazeera English on a computer monitor. Cable and satellite providers have been hesitant to carry the channel, so for now

it streams from the Internet. Depending on your connection speed, the video may sporadically freeze or pixilate. And then there is the cognitive dissonance.

Planned for years by its Arabic-language parent as a direct competitor to the likes of CNN International, Al Jazeera English went live on November 15, and, depending on who you ask, either started bringing fresh perspectives to a public fed on developed country-centric news or uncapped a fire hydrant of jihadist propaganda.

The new network's Washington anchor, former *Nightline* correspondent Dave Marash, urges critics to tune in and judge for themselves. But watching only confuses the matter further.

There's a distinctive new-network smell to Al Jazeera English. In the run-up to launch, network executives lined up big, polished journalism names such as Sir David Frost and Riz Khan. Four anchor desks across the globe--in Washington, London, Doha, and Kuala Lumpur--rotate throughout the broadcast day, each giving their respective regional stories top billing. The plurality of on-air personalities appear to be British.

Advertisers haven't moved in en masse. Most of the break space is filled with house promo spots, where confident voiceovers promise "direct and fearless journalism" and "every angle, every side" of the story, and that "now with Al Jazeera, ordinary people have a voice."

Aside from a fuzzily Third World orientation, there's nothing contentious about the vast majority of the programming. Live, looping coverage starts with the same top stories playing on most other news nets. Below the top line are stories that AJE's competitors probably wouldn't mention (i.e. election results from Mauritania).

The interview shows do not feature Keffiyehed Islamic scholars calling for a thousand more bin Ladens: The line-up of guests on Riz Khan's *One on One*, for instance, includes Nobel-winning economists and Bollywood stars. The net effect is less than revolutionary.

If not as joltingly distinct as promised, this is still the face of Al Jazeera that its defenders like to de-

fend. Their line is that the network's Arabic-language parent is a world class press that breaks taboos and represents views of the Arab street; AJE translates those, and other perspectives from the "global south" into the world's lingua franca. The implicit suggestion is that everyone is better off for it.

On one of the days i was watching, the London desk had breaking news from Gaza. A hundred-plus Hamas gunmen had formed a human shield around their leader's house to ward off an Israeli air strike. This began a string of short reports on recent events in the Strip: The U.N. Assembly had voted overwhelmingly to condemn Israel; accompanying footage showed Palestinian bodies. The next item was Israel's bombing of a building that housed (AJE authoritatively asserted) a charity. The broadcast made no mention either of what the Israelis believed the building contained or why the Israelis were attacking in Gaza in the first place.

One of AJE's promos boasts that its only concern is airing what's newsworthy, be it a Bush press conference or a bin Laden video. It was odd then that the Gaza report closed with Hamas Prime Minister Haniyeh ("his government isolated by the Americans") meeting with the former mayor of Santa Cruz, California (pop. 54,593), who incidentally--the cameras got a clear sound bite to go out on--fully supports the Palestinian cause.

The next day, AJE aired a short segment on the Islamic Army of

Iraq. The publicity video showed disciplined rows of masked men drilling: bursting out from the cover of tall reeds and scanning the horizon with their AK-47s. An off-camera voice described how they fight all foreigners. Their tactics of kidnapping and releasing "grisly videos" were noted as "effective intimidation technique[s]." A group spokesman, his face obscured, gave a boasting quote but doesn't field any questions.

If this isn't propaganda for America's enemies, that's only because the definition of propaganda in today's constantly shifting media environment isn't perfectly clear. What is uniquely disturbing about AJE is the delivery: Right after the weather and sports scores, they give reports depicting Hamas gunmen as victims and the Islamic Army of Iraq as Arab minutemen. And as the channel cuts back to ideologically hohum stories on Ben Affleck's latest project, it's easy to see how unconsciously this all might be digested.

Of course, even this is different from the original flavor of Al Jazeera, whose broadcasts incite violence against Americans, whose panel show guests suggest that the Nobel Prize is a Zionist plot, and whose reporters are doing time in Spanish jail, convicted of aiding al Qaeda.

AJE supporters try to claim that the new network is independent from the original Al Jazeera. But as Cliff Kincaid, of *Accuracy in Media*, notes, both Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English are funded directly by the emir of Qatar, and three of the four

top managers at the English-language channel come from the Arabic one.

Taking a hands-off approach to Al Jazeera English is, Kincaid continues, akin to giving Tokyo Rose an anchor's seat on NBC radio during World War II. This is not an uncommon reference for the network's critics and it sounds vaguely right. Only Tokyo Rose probably never had U.S. Navy spokesmen on her show to discuss Guadalcanal. Al Jazeera English, on its *Inside Iraq* program, does.

Eventually, the questions that proliferate after an hour of watching AJE can't be contained: What's an enemy's perspective and what's enemy propaganda? How do you classify an outlet that airs deceptive and terrorist-promoting segments, but only for about five minutes of every hour? What if some of its reports have a pro-Western tilt? Does a balance of biases constitute journalistic integrity?

If it isn't like having Tokyo Rose on NBC, then perhaps watching AJE is like viewing East German TV news during the Cold War. (It's fun to imagine a channel between *NBC Nightly News* and the *CBS Evening News* where a bald, colorless man in a 20-year-old suit delivers the day's top story: Central Committee chairman visits Tractor Factory 225.) Anything like East German TV would instantly discredit itself. But Al Jazeera English isn't really in this ballpark. Partially it's because of the money and the polish. Partially--this is a big caveat for propaganda--it's

because AJE does report actual news.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Al Jazeera English is beyond historical comparison. After all, the war on Islamist terrorists is also, as Americans have been oft reminded, a new kind of conflict. One that requires us to, simultaneously, hunt down and kill terrorists, aid earthquake victims in Pakistan, prevent nuclear proliferation, liberalize world trade, promote women's rights, suppress the Afghan opium trade, imprison terrorists, conserve oil, and win hearts and minds, just to name a few imperatives.

The problem isn't that Americans don't understand the various imperatives of this new conflict; or that hawks think the war is A while doves think it's B. It's that most every reasonable person believes that it is A, B, C, D, and E at the same time, with the order of importance chang-

ing from day to day depending largely on the news.

Without a unified, coherent understanding of what the war on Islamist terror is and isn't, what counts as propaganda in the war--and what's just a free press--will be blurry.

Consider the example of a recent Saturday on AJE: Jane Dutton delivered the news from Doha, where the first reports were that female candidates for Bahrain's parliament were doing surprisingly well in the first race they have been allowed to run in.

Fifteen minutes later, a news magazine called *Listening Post* came on. It contained a segment pondering whether reporters in the Palestinian territories were right to embellish and dramatize images of local suffering, or whether Israeli atrocities are so egregious as to need no embellishment.