

Nov 04, 2016 by [Lawrence Pintak](#)

Al-Jazeera English: Beginning to Find an Identity ^[1]

(Cairo) -- Bad news is often good news for journalists. Last week's assassination of Lebanese opposition leader Pierre Gemayel may have been exactly that for al-Jazeera English, the Westernized cousin of the channel the Bush administration loves to hate.

It isn't so much that AJE has triumphed in its coverage of the latest Lebanese crisis -- far from it -- but it has shown signs of finding its footing after an uncertain first week. Since AJE went live Nov. 15, it has looked more like Bob Geldorf TV than a channel dedicated to "fearless journalism" that is "setting the news agenda," as promised in the self-congratulatory promos.

While it has been refreshing to see reports from places like Darfur, Myanmar and Zimbabwe, the channel was crammed with so many obscure features from forgotten corners of the world that it was beginning to resemble a UN video service. News flash: There's a reason some of these stories are "ignored" by other channels.

In an interview in early November ("Al-Jazeera's Chief: 'We Are Not Politically-Correct'"), Wadah Khanfar, director general of the al-Jazeera Channels, told me that the new English service would have a "global" rather than "Arab" perspective, with an emphasis on the "global South." That was evident in Week One, as staffers pursued a self-conscious -- sometimes excruciating -- emphasis on being the Un-CNN. If Geldorf had used the proceeds from Live Aid to start a TV channel, it seemed, this would be it.

Launch day was particularly disappointing ("Al-Jazeera English: Day One Report Card"). The weakness was not in bias, as critics warned in advance, but in the breadth and depth of news coverage. Soft news -- if you could even use the term for a series of timeless features -- ruled the day. With all the delays, the channel had plenty of "exclusive" (but largely news-less) interviews and evergreens in the can and it seemed determined to use them, come Hell or high water (literally, since that day's Japanese tsunami was largely ignored). Pieces on an obscure tribe in Brazil and Chinese kids who drive fast were endlessly looped. There were almost hourly live shots from Darfur (because they were there) and the same spot on gas shortages in Zimbabwe ran over and over.

The magazine-style topical shows that occupy the second half of each hour showed great potential to add context and perspective to global developments, digging into important stories largely ignored in the West, but the breaking coverage itself was lacking. Things improved as the week went on, but the channel remained heavy on compassion and light on news.

Then came the Gemayel assassination. Its boss may claim AJE doesn't present an "Arab" perspective, but the Qatar-based channel damn well should be outperforming Western rivals on its own turf. The first hours after the assassination showed little evidence of that.

In fact, AJE -- which North American audiences can see only on the Web -- seemed to be repeating the mistakes of both Western and Arab broadcasters. Two-thirds of the channel's presenters are Brits and it was Sky News veteran David Foster, rather than an Arab, who was sent in to anchor coverage from Beirut. Such "parachute journalism" is a key criticism of Western reporting from the Arab world. Foster promptly mispronounced the names of Beirut's two largest newspapers.

Beirut correspondent Rula Amin, a Palestinian who previously served as CNN's roving Middle East correspondent, then briefly strayed into journalistically-dangerous territory when she described Pierre Gemayel as a "martyr" and somewhat fawningly kept referring to the slain Christian politician with the honorific "sheikh." Conservative bloggers in the U.S. have been sharpening their knives for AJE, which a [columnist on Accuracy in Media's](#) site called "enemy media, plain and simple" out to "infiltrate our country." Adjectives like "martyr" -- no matter the context -- will only feed the frenzy.

During live coverage of last Thursday's dramatic mass funeral-cum-political rally, which drew hundreds of thousands to Beirut's city center, Al-Jazeera English and its competitors -- BBC World and CNN International -- appeared virtually identical, relying on the same pool feed as the Arabic channels. But it was in the analysis and depth of coverage that AJE finally began to distinguished itself.

While Western channels focused largely on the obvious confrontation between the anti-Syrian faction that Gemayel represented and the Shi'ite party Hizbullah, AJE's other Beirut correspondent, Zeina Khodr, provided valuable insight into the way in which the assassination had exacerbated divisions within the Christian community as well.

But the biggest difference between AJE and its competitors came as the funeral ended. It was here that Jazeera's home court advantage came into play.

Both BBC World and CNN International (a completely separate channel from the CNN domestic U.S. service) quickly switched away to other programming, CNN-I's anchors looking a little uncomfortable with a segue from Lebanon and the latest carnage in Iraq right into a fluff piece about the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, without even a commercial to buffer the jarring contrast.

AJE stayed with Lebanon, interviewing a Hezbollah spokesman, a perspective not heard on the other channels, one in a comprehensive series of interviews with the key players in the drama not seen elsewhere. AJE's Lebanon specialist Omar al-Jassawi dug deeper into the impact on the country and region as a whole, while Middle East analyst Lamis Andoni noted that although Syria is widely presumed responsible for Gemayel's death, plenty of other players in the region had reason to see him dead.

She also picked up on some historic references in the speech of Phalangist leader Samir Geagea, architect of the 1982 Sabra and Chatilla massacre of Palestinians and Shi'ites, that have important implications for the future but were largely overlooked on the other channels (Andoni, it should be noted, has been al-Jazeera Arabic's lobbyist with the Americans and Spanish over the cases of al-Jazeera staffers currently imprisoned on terrorism charges by authorities in those countries). The discussions were facilitated by intelligent and knowledgeable prompting by Sami Zeidan, an Egyptian anchor most recently with CNBC Arabia.

The Gemayel assassination was not the first hard news reported by AJE. Since launch day, its correspondents in Gaza and Israel have been doing yeoman's work, as are those covering the ever-increasing chaos in Iraq. But there was little in AJE's reports to differentiate them from those of the competition. In Lebanon, the channel finally began to separate itself from the pack. The recent Israel-Palestine ceasefire, extensive live coverage of the Pope's controversial visit to Turkey, new unrest in Chad and the Ecuador elections, and Friday's pro-Hezbollah rally in Beirut were more signs AJE may be finding its real identity.

The Beirut crisis was by no means as important to AJE as the first Gulf war was for CNN or 9/11 was for the al-Jazeera Arabic mothership; the opportunity for such a defining moment was squandered because endless delays meant AJE was not on the air for last summer's Lebanon war. But the latest Beirut crisis has provided a glimpse of AJE's potential and, hopefully, shaken the channel's editors out of their early fixation on the soft and the obscure; reminding them that even if others are covering a breaking story, they can still contribute an important new perspective to a global news narrative no longer controlled by the Western media ("America's Media Bubble").

That's critical, because let's face it, AJE is able to report from places like Darfur, Myanmar and Zimbabwe, largely off-limits to its Western competitors, because of the al-Jazeera name. If the channel does provide the kind of "fearless journalism" promised, it won't be long before AJE's reporters find themselves outside looking in like everyone else. That's when the real test will come.

In the meantime, as Beirut demonstrated, being different does not mean the arriving at every story by dugout canoe.

Lawrence Pintak is director of the Adham Center for Electronic Journalism at The American University in Cairo and author of Reflections in a Bloodshot Lens: America, Islam & the War of Ideas. Email lpintak-AT-aucegypt.edu. Full disclosure: Pintak contributed a commentary to this week's edition of the AJE media criticism show Listening Post.
