

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Al-Jazeera International Hires Ad Agency to Promote its English-Language Channel ^[1]

Al-Jazeera is ramping up to test Fox News and CNN on their home turf. The Qatar-based Arabic news channel, scheduled to launch its English-language service in the U.S. and Canada early next year, has retained the public relations firm Brown Lloyd James (BLJ) to help build its base in the world's most lucrative and challenging commercial marketplace.

According to PR Week we can expect to see a big advertising campaign for al-Jazeera America in the coming months. BLJ plans to target TV news viewers and broadcast trade publications in order to build al-Jazeera's base with advertisers and potential viewers. BLJ's diverse list of clients has included Disney, the BBC, the Ford Foundation, and Dr. Ayad Allawi, who became Iraq's interim prime minister following an image-building campaign for him in Washington managed by the firm.

Al-Jazeera's Arabic channel has been carried in the U.S. and Canada since 1999 via EchoStar's Dishnet TV. Elsewhere, it is beamed to Australia and Asia by WorldMedia International, to the U.K on Sky Digital, and to Latin America by Multipole International.

The U.S. government's Arabic-language TV news channel, Alhurra, is available throughout the Middle East, and its service is slated to be extended to Europe. By law it cannot be distributed in the U.S.

Special attention will be paid to the developing world by al-Jazeera International's English-language service, according to the BBC's Peter Feuiherade. Home base will be in Doha, Qatar, with news bureaus in London, Washington, DC, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Nigel Parsons, managing director of the new service, says it will have "unique access" to contacts in the Middle East and the developing world. But he admits that the U.S. is the most difficult market for the channel to penetrate.

In the U.S., with its large number of immigrants from all over the world, the subscription base for Muslim TV programming has increased markedly on direct broadcast satellites in recent years. A variety of non-news programs have been distributed by the Arabic Radio and Television service to the U.S. market since 1996 on the EchoStar direct broadcast satellite. Al-Jazeera's 24/7 news channel was added three years later. Arabic programs include entertainment, sports, movies and news.

A growing number of Arab coffee shops in America have installed satellite dishes where al-Jazeera news programs are in demand. Many customers who own their own home satellite dishes seem to prefer watching al-Jazeera's news with others, so they can discuss its news coverage. Parsons says, for instance, that al-Jazeera provided its Middle East viewers an alternative view of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He suggests that Western journalists who were "embedded" with American and coalition troops were perceived by Middle East audiences as

providing “one-sided” coverage. So al-Jazeera's news provided another side.

Al-Jazeera has advantaged access to news in some, but not all, of the region. While al-Jazeera's news correspondents are permitted free reign to report from Israel, its correspondents have been banned in six Arab countries, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Tunisia. Sudan has jailed an al-Jazeera reporter. Several Arab states claimed the channel's coverage of Palestinian uprisings in Israel caused demonstrations throughout the Middle East, threatening the stability of monarchies there.

Al-Jazeera often makes news itself in addition to reporting it. It has ready access to video pronouncements by Al Qaeda leaders in hiding, such as the most recent by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy, who threatened more terrorist bombings in Britain. Al-Jazeera manages to obtain those videos, airs them first, then sells them to other media outlets. Al-Jazeera has also turned kidnappings into TV mini-series running several months in some cases, by acting as media broker between kidnappers and government officials or others from a victim's homeland.

How al-Jazeera will fare in the U.S. may depend in part on such incidents as the preposterous al-Jazeera news story following the London terrorist bombings, in which an anonymous source was quoted as saying that the Israeli embassy in London was tipped off in advance of the bombings. While piquing the interest of audiences in the Middle East, such a fable would not elicit credulousness nor curry favor in the Blue States of the Northeast U.S.

But al-Jazeera is a wily competitor, and it could find a niche in the U.S. 24/7 news market. A few years ago CNN seemed invulnerable to competition, but in 2002 it was surpassed by Fox News as the top-rated cable news channel. And, according to Journalism.Org's report on "The State of the News Media 2005," audience ratings of the nightly network news broadcasts continue to wane.

“The (TV) networks face the classic dilemma of a legacy industry,” says Journalism.org. “They have enormous fixed costs, declining revenues, and nimble new competition, all of which suggests a gloomy future. At the same time, they have an invaluable brand, a reputation for quality and a huge customer base” to help them transition into new businesses.

No one knows for sure how many Muslims there are in the U.S., but some estimates put the figure as high as 7 million. Many will be able to watch al-Jazeera's American news service in English, almost certain to come soon to a coffee house near you.
