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Al-Jazeera in English

Feb 7, 2003



Brief Analysis

Planning to target the English-speaking market for the first time in its history, the popular twenty-four-hour Arabic television news network al-Jazeera is working to launch a new English-language website sometime this spring. Upon its launch, the site will reach a new and diverse audience beyond the borders of the Arabic-speaking world. The Christian Science Monitor has even reported that this might be a first step toward the creation of an English-language television channel designed to broadcast controversial news programming in the United States "by satellite and cable."

Background

Since its inception in 1996, al-Jazeera (Arabic for "the peninsula") has wielded considerable influence among millions of Arab viewers worldwide. Headquartered in Qatar, the network was formed after the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Arabic Service network dissolved in 1996 following a disagreement between the Saudi-owned company Orbit and the BBC World Service. Although al-Jazeera solicits advertisers, the emir of Qatar, Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifeh al-Thani, has provided most of the network's funding, donating approximately \$150 million between 1996 and 2001. Al-Jazeera is staffed by 500 personnel in Doha (many of whom are former BBC Arabic journalists, technicians, and managers) and has an additional twenty-seven offices worldwide. According to its marketing coordinator, the network currently draws 35 million daily viewers in the Arab world and nearly 15 million viewers outside the Arab world.

Al-Jazeera has a distinctive approach to news coverage in a region where the majority of the people are generally unsatisfied with their media outlets. Many in the Arab street see the network as a liberal and credible source of news relative to the heavily censored Arab government television stations. Talk shows such as *The Opposite Direction*, *More Than One View*, and *Open Dialogue* pointedly discuss and analyze sensitive topics, often criticizing the United States, Israel, and various Arab governments. Consequently, al-Jazeera has clashed with Arab regimes that are not accustomed to rebuke, including those of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. Tellingly, however, little of the network's programming touches on Qatari topics, indicating some degree of censorship. This has led many viewers and analysts to question both the Qatari government's role in promoting certain messages through al-Jazeera and the real extent of the network's ability to report unbiased news.

'CNN Mideast' or Terror TV?

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, al-Jazeera provided many al-Qaeda operatives with a platform to air their views. Accordingly, many in Washington have accused the network of being al-Qaeda's personal media outlet, with U.S. officials such as Secretary of State Colin Powell deploring the station for broadcasts of Osama bin Laden's "vitriolic [and] irresponsible" statements after September 11. Moreover, the network's extensive coverage of the Palestinian intifada is often regarded as unbalanced incitement that foments anti-Western sentiment in the region.

Nevertheless, some in Washington have praised al-Jazeera. For example, according to the Christian Science

Monitor, Kenton Keith, former U.S. ambassador to Qatar, said that the network has "revolutionized media in the Middle East." He added, "You have to be a supporter of al-Jazeera, even if you have to hold your nose sometimes."

Al-Jazeera's New Venture

Joanne Tucker, managing editor of al-Jazeera's forthcoming English-language website, stated in a National Public Radio interview that much of the funding for the project will come from advertising, in addition to a certain amount from Qatari government subsidies. The site will emphasize "certain unique products," such as exclusive interviews with well-known personas.

Moreover, according to the Guardian (London), the network will create a "full English-language" television station if the website succeeds. As part of its proposed expansion plan, al-Jazeera has already signed a "news-gathering deal" with the BBC. According to the Daily Telegraph (London), "the two stations will share facilities on the ground, such as al-Jazeera's satellite link in Kabul. In return, the BBC will offer training for the new website's staff."

For the time being, however, establishing a new television channel seems far too ambitious. Al-Jazeera has already begun to experiment with providing English subtitles to some of its rebroadcast programming. In addition, according to Hafiz al-Mirazi, the network's Washington bureau chief, potential future plans include "English programming that might be broadcast only to North America at first." Nevertheless, he added, such plans "will take at least a year or more before they materialize."

Initial Response


Without so much as a URL, the proposed English-language website has already garnered some attention in the United States. According to Immad Mousa, producer at al-Jazeera's Washington bureau, hundreds of people have expressed interest in working for the new site even though no job vacancies have been posted. If successful, the site will likely attract an interesting mix of visitors, including policymakers, academics, pundits, and ordinary citizens. According to Mousa, it will also target Muslim and non-Muslim visitors in Asia and Europe and the Indian subcontinent.

Although some in the United States view this new venture as a propagandistic plan to change people's minds regarding U.S. policies in the Arab world, al-Jazeera officials disagree. Tucker, for one, argues that the website will serve as a means of bridging "the gaps in cultural, social and political information" between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds.

The Real Thing?

The proposed English-language website will not be an exact replica of its Arabic counterpart. Indeed, al-Jazeera maintains that the English site will move beyond simply translating the Arabic site's news stories, instead aspiring to feature original reports of its own. Moreover, according to Mousa, the English site might be equipped with features not currently available on the Arabic site in order to attract more visitors. Al-Jazeera claims the online chats with hosts and guests from al-Jazeera's televised talk shows will be paramount to the site's success because such shows are the network's "claim to fame." The new site may also feature translations of some of these shows, as there is already high demand for English transcripts of such broadcasts.

In any case, if al-Jazeera wishes to be taken seriously in the United States, whether by internet or television, it will need to learn how to appeal to American audiences: namely, through politically neutral language and an unbiased approach to news that is unafraid to tackle any issue. Whether the new English website will succeed in following the network's motto of presenting "The Opinion and the Other Opinion" in a responsible fashion remains to be seen.

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