

AL JAZEERA — THE WORLD THROUGH A NEW LENS

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✘ By Greg Quill, [The Toronto Star](#), 23 May 2010

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In the couple of weeks since its introduction on Canadian cable and satellite rosters, the English-language network of the Qatar-based world news service, Al Jazeera (it means “the peninsula,” as in “Arabian Peninsula”), has had ample time to demonstrate just what makes it different from any other network news North Americans are used to watching, and why it has changed the template, style and methods of what we think of as traditional television news coverage.

The most obvious difference is perspective. Viewers inured to the skewed world view created, out of necessity and with compelling logic, by a business dedicated, long before television, to serving its immediate audience first — local news dominates, followed by regional news, then national news, with overseas news relegated to the outer regions of a faux map — will be stunned, even if they're prepared for the optics shift, by the dramatic effects of seeing events from all over the world unfold through the eyes of observers for whom the traditional template, with its Western biases and emphasis on money markets, celebrity, power and social well-being, means little or nothing at all.

Sure, Al Jazeera reports world financial news, and it has its share of celebrities. But the business news lede is not the relative value of the American dollar or the state of the first-world's economies, and its celebrity interview subjects, conducted by dizzyingly busy news mediator and chat show host Riz Khan, one of Al Jazeera's key operatives, are more along the lines of Indian poet and lyricist Javed Akhtar, veteran Cuban jazz singer Omara Portuondo and, yes, Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, than with the stars of the latest Hollywood blockbusters or American pop music chart toppers.

The world Al Jazeera sees is clearly not the world North Americans see every night on the preferred networks or all day every day on CNN, CBCNN or the CTV News Channel. And maybe the Qatar-based service's focus on stories from that vast and under-reported other world — stories about people and nations the West considers disenfranchised, economically handicapped, politically unstable and downright unfriendly — is the reason it took so long to be picked up by Canada's cable and satellite companies, and why it's still not being offered by U.S. carriers.

It's worth noting that the CRTC cleared the Arab-language network for non-basic, discretionary carriage here some six years ago, but it was ignored by signal carriers, unlike dozens of other high-priced specialty channels targeting non-English-speaking communities across the country. The

English network, whose North American expansion is now in the hands of Al Jazeera's managing director, Canadian Tony Burman, an award-winning CBC news veteran, has been up and running since 2006.

Al Jazeera, with its transparently partisan tilt toward dramatic, often grim coverage of events in the Middle East, and a consistent bias favouring stories about opponents of Israeli and U.S. foreign policy in that region, also reports on the state of nations only scantily represented on most Western news services, BBC World aside.

A random sampling in the past two weeks yielded, as the network's priorities:

- * stories about the looming, now accomplished, Turkey-Brazil-Iran nuclear swap deal;
- * reports on the black-market domination in Haiti of donated survival materials (food, tents, clothing, tarpaulins, water) supposedly distributed free under U.N. directives;
- * vivid reports of nightly news coverage of real-life drug wars in Mexico that have killed off one of that country's most popular cultural staples — reality TV shows about good-hearted, Robin Hood-like drug barons paid for by the cartels' own bosses;
- * accounts of the Thai government's crackdown on the "red-shirt" protesters in Bangkok, days before it was of interest elsewhere;
- * a clearly tongue-in-cheek story about thousands of taxpayer-supported ultra-orthodox Jewish men who are paid not to work, but to study the Torah, and the effects on their welfare of looming government cutbacks;
- * a report from India on the disappearance of a large, centuries-old section of the lower working class — manual clothes washers — attributed to the rising wealth of the middle class and the sudden availability of affordable home appliances;
- * reports on a fire in the Philippines that left 4,000 homeless, and on strikes in Greece and Spain over tax hikes and austerity measures;
- * and stories every hour from the Gulf Coast about the BP oil spill, rendered with healthy skepticism about the U.S. government's and oil company assessments of the severity of the catastrophe.

What's striking is not that you won't necessarily see some of these items on the rosters of North American news programs, but the genuine importance Al Jazeera gives them. If there's an underlying political, moral or ideological bias — and, let's face it, all news operations have those — this new and truly revolutionary network makes little effort to hide them.

That's maybe what makes the loud protests from veteran American TV newsman David Marash — he quit Al Jazeera's English anchor job in 2008 after two years over what he called a lack of objectivity regarding the network's underdeveloped coverage of flaws in the U.S. economic system — seem so hollow now. It's apparent within 30 minutes that Al Jazeera is addressing a largely complacent and spoon-fed English-speaking audience on issues that affect the majority of the world's population.

Mistakes are abundant. Despite attempts to English-up the appearance of the network, with big-set desks in Washington and London – there are also bureaus in Russia, India and Africa — and the presence English speaking reporters in the field all over the world — key home-issue programs such as Inside Iraq, a never-ending screaming match between host Jasim Azawi and his weekly guest panelists over arcane political and ideological issues that are never properly explained, are disorientating, to say the least.

But they do serve to remind us — the too easily comforted, the safe, the well-heeled, the well protected and well educated — that it isn't our world any more, if it ever was.

Al Jazeera has opened a window on another world, maybe the real world. It's something we need, a breath of fresh air.

