



**THE BLOG** 03/07/2011 12:31 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# Al Jazeera English vs. The Charlie Sheen Channel



By Marty Kaplan

“This is strictly a business decision,” a Comcast source told Rupert Murdoch’s Web site MarketWatch about whether Comcast, the biggest cable operator in the U.S., will offer Al Jazeera English to its 24 million subscribers.

Not a decision about whether Al Jazeera English is anti-American, anti-Israeli, a tool of Al Qaeda, a propagandist for Palestinians. Or none of the above. Nope — it’s strictly dollars and cents.

Comcast has limited bandwidth. With room for only so many new channels, every one of them has to maximize viewership. Al Jazeera English, which is running a “Demand Al Jazeera in the USA” campaign on its Web site, told Comcast that in the first couple of days of Egypt’s uprising, nearly half of their 10 million minutes of live-streamed coverage was being watched in the U.S. But Comcast isn’t yet convinced; they’re worried that the audience for an Al Jazeera English cable channel would just be “news junkies and people who happen to be particularly interested in the Middle East for the moment and will tune out as soon as news out of the region slows down.”

So for Comcast, which just completed its purchase of NBC Universal, it comes down to whether carrying Al Jazeera English is a better business bet than carrying The Vampire Network or Showtime Abs ‘n’ Buns.

The notion that ideology isn’t a factor for an American cable company considering carriage for Al Jazeera: this would have been inconceivable in the wake of September 11th. Just days after that attack, Secretary of State Colin Powell asked the emir of Qatar, whose money launched the station, to rein in its anti-Americanism, and Johns Hopkins professor Fouad Ajami, calling Al Jazeera “incendiary,” “opportunistic” and “shameless,” wrote that it “deliberately fans the flames of Muslim outrage,” and that its “virulent anti-American bias undercuts all of its virtues. It is, in the final analysis, a dangerous force.” Soon Fareed Zakaria was writing that Al Jazeera “fills its airwaves with crude appeals to Arab nationalism, anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and religious fundamentalism.” In his 2004 State of the Union, George W. Bush called Al-Jazeera a source of “hateful propaganda” from the Arab world. If that caused a lot of dissent, I missed it.

Yet this year, when protesters filled Cairo’s Tahrir Square, it was a different story. ABC’s Sam Donaldson said, “Thank you for what you’re doing” to Al Jazeera. A *New York Times* story about the anti-authoritarian

outcry now rocking the Arab world called this “Al Jazeera’s moment.” Last month the network paid for a full page ad in the *Times* citing those quotes, as well as praise for its “great reporting” from MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow, and *The Nation*’s judgment that Al Jazeera carried the “most comprehensive coverage of any network in any language hands down.” And just last week, speaking at a TED conference in Long Beach, Al Jazeera’s director-general, Wadah Kanfar, was enthusiastically applauded by some 1500 Americans for his network’s role in overthrowing corrupt Arab regimes.

But the most striking turnabout, also last week, had to be Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. She told its members that — in contrast to the “million commercials and... arguments between talking heads and the kind of stuff that we do on our news which... is not particularly informative to us, let alone foreigners” — Al Jazeera is “real news around the clock.”

It’s this apparent new journalistic legitimacy, born of its coverage of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and across the Arab world, that has made it possible for Comcast to weigh the pros and cons of adding Al Jazeera English to the lineup without politics putting a thumb on the scale.

Not that that legitimacy isn’t being disputed. In response to Sam Donaldson’s thank you, Fox talking head Bill O’Reilly called him a “pinhead” and called Al Jazeera “anti-American” and “anti-Semitic.” O’Reilly’s guest Monica Crowley agreed, saying that “the far left in this country is essentially anti-American” and that its agenda “dovetails... with the kind of reporting that we see come out of Al Jazeera.” Betraying not a hint of how hilariously his words indicted himself and his network, O’Reilly exploded, screaming at his other guest, Alan Colmes, that Al Jazeera’s sin was its one-sidedness: “I’m getting a little mad at you. Grasp this! There is no counter on it! You got it? There’s no counter on it!”

The last time I looked, Comcast hadn’t signed up for the far left’s anti-American agenda. (No doubt Glenn Beck will soon set me straight on that.) If Comcast is treating Al Jazeera English as just another content supplier, an alternative to The Charlie Sheen Channel, it’s a safe bet that a lot of Americans find Al Jazeera’s motto — “Every Angle. Every Side.” — at least as plausible as Fox’s “Fair and Balanced.” Rupert Murdoch is sometimes held to be much less of a righty than you might suppose from what airs on Fox News; it’s said that his true ideology is profit. Comcast may be similarly motivated.

Is that dangerous? Has Al Jazeera snookered America into thinking that, as Hillary Clinton put it, it’s “real news”? Here’s one thing that’s indisputable: It’s Arab news. With the turbulence sweeping the region, with the wrenching American entanglement with the Islamic world, the least we can do is to find out what that world looks like to its inhabitants. I don’t expect Al Jazeera to be any more evenhanded about Israel or anything else than I expect Fox News to be impartial about Obama. And though I’m as dumbfounded by the ardor of Rush’s dittoheads and Fox’s fans as I am by the passion of creationists and climate change deniers — granted, there’s some overlap there — I’m pretty sure that the best remedy to speech I don’t like is more speech.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.*