

Americans should be able to watch Al-Jazeera English TV

By B. Kumaravadivelu

My students at San Jose State often hear me say with irritating persistence that most of them have an appallingly low level of general knowledge about world events that affect all of us. I try to impress upon them that they are long on opinions and short on facts mainly because they remain uninformed. If this is true of university students, it may be true of the general public as well.

We all know that an enlightened citizenry is essential for any democracy to thrive. It is, therefore, regrettable that the American public has been denied an excellent learning opportunity to get better informed about a civilization with which it is supposed to clash. They have been denied access to Al-Jazeera English TV, which is considered to be the voice of the Islamic world.

Since its inception a decade ago, the Qatar based Al-Jazeera's Arabic network has created a niche for itself. In the process, it has invited the wrath of Western as well as Islamic governments. The Bush administration tried, without success, to persuade the Qatari government to rein in Al-Jazeera. Then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called it "vicious, inaccurate and inexcusable." Some governments, which are not very fond of press freedom, have from time to time prohibited its correspondents from operating within their countries. It is still banned in Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Biased or not, Al-Jazeera has definitely made a dent in the American dominance of global information dissemination, at least in certain parts of the world. Now, with its new English language network, it has the potential to be a bridge between Western and Middle Eastern world views. Bowing to this reality, countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Italy and even Israel have made the channel available for their citizens.

Sadly, the United States is one of the few democracies in the world where Al-Jazeera will not be seen. None of the major cable TV providers, such as Comcast, Time Warner and Cablevision, will carry the network. Nor will the two major satellite TV providers: Dish Network and DirecTV. The providers say it is "a business decision." It is, however, naive to believe the decision was motivated entirely by business considerations, given the severe criticism directed against the network by high-level officials of the Bush administration.

Although the Islamic network has been criticized for being pro-Islam and not pro-American, our government has been spending millions of taxpayer dollars to establish, from time to time, a number of specialized radio and TV stations to broadcast pro-American views. We know the success of Voice of America. We know how influential

the Spanish language Radio Martí has been in educating the people of Cuba. More recently, we established Radio Sawa to broadcast in Arabic, and Radio Farda to broadcast in Farsi. In fact, in 2004, as soon as the security conditions in Iraq permitted, we rushed to launch an Arabic-language TV station called Al-Hurra just to make sure that the newly liberated Iraqis have the right kind of information.

After Sept. 11, our government even created the job of undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs in the State Department, with the purpose of promoting cross-cultural understanding and burnishing the American image, which has been under severe stress in the wake of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Most of its effort is directed toward the people of the Islamic world so that they are knowledgeable about American values and visions, and do not fall an easy prey to cultural and religious stereotypes about the American people.

A crucial question that seems to have escaped us is: How do we ensure that we also make an effort to develop a genuine understanding of the people of other countries, cultures and religions? How do we ensure that we do not become prisoners of the frozen and false image that we carry in our head about others? The corporate decision about Al-Jazeera English, and the lack of public response to that decision, may betray a deep-rooted feeling that only others should know about us; we do not have to know about them. Perhaps we think that knowledge, like a river, flows only in one direction.

Interestingly, the rest of the world has taken kindly to CNN and even Fox News. There are government officials and people in other countries who think that these American networks are, well, pro-American, and yet they do watch them. Why do we hesitate to let alien voices and images appear on our TV screen? What are we afraid of?

Knowledge is not a scary thing, is it?

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