

MEDIA

The Most Hated Name in News

Can Al Jazeera English cure what ails North American journalism?

BY DEBORAH CAMPBELL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RYAN CARTER

THERE ARE THREE FORCES shaping the world, an Arab reporter I met in the Gaza Strip once told me: money, women, and journalism.

On the first and third counts, he might have been thinking of Qatar, where I pass by luxury shopping malls, glittering real estate developments, and, in a spirit of reasonableness, traffic signs that advise caution when driving the wrong way down one-way streets. Over the past decade, this tiny desert emirate of a million and a half people—a bump on the rib cage of Saudi Arabia, directly across the Persian Gulf from Iran—has asserted itself on the world stage in large measure by pouring money into, of all things, journalism. Since 1996, it has been funding Al Jazeera (Arabic for “the island”), the network that revolutionized the Arab media and is poised to do the same for the English-speaking world.

Passing through the security gate, where a Yemeni guard gives my documents the once-over, I enter the air-conditioned headquarters of Al Jazeera English, the international news channel the network launched in November of 2006. Inside the sweeping high-tech production facility, cameras roll as a young Australian anchor opens a segment on the South African elections, then passes the baton to his co-anchors at the channel’s three other broadcast centres, in Washington, London, and Kuala Lumpur.

The managing director of this ambitious operation is on the second floor, above the fray. Tony Burman, the former news

chief of CBC Television, has the sort of face that can appear to be scowling when in fact he is deep in thought. Most of the time, what he is thinking about is news—like today’s story by AJE’s Beijing correspondent Melissa Chan, who managed to gain entry to one of China’s secret “black jails,” where the government imprisons citizens who challenge its authority. It’s a classic AJE story: a local reporter familiar with the language and culture investigates a place where few foreign correspondents venture to any depth, focusing on the plight of ordinary people and putting the story into context for a global audience. This kind of intrepid field reporting is how Burman made his mark as a producer for Canada’s public broadcaster in the ’80s and early ’90s, when he covered conflict in South America, civil war in Sudan, Mandela’s release from prison in South Africa, and the famine in Ethiopia. His crew famously broke that last story for North American viewers, in the process discovering three-year-old Birhan Woldu, who became the face of international relief efforts like Live Aid.

From his spacious corner office, Burman keeps an eye on four television screens: Al Jazeera Arabic, Al Jazeera English, and AJE’s two main competitors in the global news game, BBC World and CNN International (neither of which is broadly available in North America). Fumbling with the remote, he misfires, landing on what might be considered his arch-nemesis. “I come all the way to Qatar to watch Fox?” he says, bemused.

By the time Burman resigned from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 2007 after thirty-five years, eight of



ABOVE The newsroom at Al Jazeera English.

them as editor-in-chief, he’d had enough of an upper management he thought was turning CBC into a “B-minus version of Global,” the network owned by ailing media giant Canwest. He had become, he says, “less and less happy” with CBC’s Americanized direction (though not nearly as unhappy as he might have been had he stayed for the savage staff and budget cuts of late). “It was really time to leave.” Yet neither he nor anyone else could have predicted that a year later he would decamp halfway across the world to take on the greatest challenge of his career, lured by a fascinating—and unlikely—development in international journalism.

In less than three years, Al Jazeera English has emerged as the dominant channel covering the developing world. As the first worldwide news station to be based in the “global South,” it has an audacious mandate: to reverse the information flow that has traditionally moved from the wealthy countries of the North to the poorer countries south of the equator, and to be the “voice of the voiceless,” delivering in-depth journalism from under-reported regions around the world. With more than seventy bureaus run by staff drawn from some fifty nations, a typical news day for AJE might include reports on a nomadic camel-herding tribe whose members are key rebel leaders in Darfur, a lawsuit against Chiquita (formerly the United Fruit Company) for financing paramilitary death squads in Colombia, the effects of the global financial crisis on Pakistani carpet weavers, and the recent massive spike in arms sales to the United Arab Emirates. AJE currently broadcasts to 150 million

households in more than 100 countries—with the exception, until now, of North America.

That’s where Burman comes in. A bred-in-the-bone journalist who started out in the late ’60s reporting for the *Montreal Star*, where his father was a news editor, he has a lifelong passion for foreign correspondence. Hired by CBC as a radio and TV producer in the early ’70s, he took a year off to freelance in South America before rejoining the network, where he eventually served as its European bureau chief, then moved into management. As head of television news, he was the kind of leader journalists were grateful to have on their side.

“When Tony left, people thought, ‘There goes the last great journalist in management,’” says Beth Haddon, an old friend and colleague of Burman’s who is an adjunct professor at the journalism school of the University of British Columbia. They met when both were senior news producers at CBC in the ’80s. “Tony really stood for something,” she says. “For quality journalism—that’s old-fashioned, of course—of fairness, balance, verification, public discourse.”

Burman had a reputation for defending his journalists when their reporting raised hackles. (His physical presence can be intimidating: “Give Tony a cigar,” one young Al Jazeera staffer told me, “and you could roll the cameras on a Mafia film.”) And he didn’t mind taking controversial positions if the facts backed them up. Such qualities stand him in good



ABOVE Tony Burman in his office in Doha.

stead running not only AJE's global news coverage, but also its campaign to break into Canada and the US, where cable and satellite carriers have been loath to associate themselves with a network that much of North America still considers Terror TV. The task of demolishing the misconceptions attached to the Al Jazeera brand is daunting. As Haddon warned Burman when he first floated the idea of leaving Toronto for Doha, the job sounded good, "but you'll never have lunch in this town again." Yet his move could hardly have been better timed, coming at a moment when the Western media are in a state of unparalleled crisis, undergoing the first seismic challenge to their dominance since the advent of television.

After years of sacrificing qualified reporting staff to the bottom line, and substituting public relations (press releases barely rewritten, press conferences reported verbatim) for costly investigative journalism, the media corporations that, starting in the '90s, convinced regulators that consolidation was essential to their survival have found themselves with little immunity against the financial crisis. Faced with the simultaneous defection of their ad revenue and audiences to the Internet, even towering news titans such as the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* are struggling, while others are perishing outright.

Foreign bureaus have been among the hardest hit by cost-cutting measures in print and television media alike. According to the Pew Research Center's annual *State of the News Media* report, coverage of international events by American

media fell by about 40 percent in 2008. Thus has a bizarre situation arisen: at the most interconnected time in history, accurate and comprehensive news of the outside world is disappearing—and with it an informed public.

"The mainstream American networks have cut their bureaus to the bone," says Burman. "They're basically only in London now. Even CNN has pulled back. I remember in the '80s when I covered these events, there would be a truckload of American journalists and crews and editors, and now Al Jazeera outnumbers them all." The channel plans to open ten new bureaus in the coming year, including one in Canada. "At the risk of sounding incredibly self-serving," Burman says, "that's where, in the absence of alternatives, Al Jazeera English can fill a vacuum, simply because we're going in the opposite direction."

Today Burman is marking a victory: Al Jazeera English has finally broken into the United States. A non-profit educational broadcaster has agreed to carry it in Washington and twenty other American cities. The breakthrough is a watershed after years of confinement for AJE to two small areas in the US (besides the State Department and the Pentagon), and—in stealth manoeuvres that have essentially commandeered new technology to circumvent the blockade—on YouTube, or streaming for free online through Livestation.com. Burman's main thrust, however, has been Canada, which he considers a critical

beachhead. If AJE can get permission to broadcast here, he expects to have a far easier time with the commercial American cable carriers that have thus far shied away.

"My hope is that once people see that the sun still shines, kids still go to school, people still laugh at good jokes, and the republic holds," he says, "they will give it a shot."

Al Jazeera built its name on opposing the status quo. The first twenty-four-hour news channel in the Arab world, it was launched by the Emir of Qatar in 1996, a year after he overthrew his father while the old man was holidaying in Switzerland. The coup, which ushered in an era of liberalization in the emirate, was nothing compared with the revolution the channel would create—one arguably as significant for the Arab world as Martin Luther's legendary nailing of his dissident theses to a church door was for Europe. (That old-school press conference, which ignited the Protestant Reformation, took off thanks to a new technology: the printing press. For the Arab world, that technology is the satellite dish.)

The birth of Al Jazeera marked the first time in modern history that a plurality of viewpoints was included in the Arab public discourse—and there was something to outrage just about everyone. With a mandate to broadcast "the opinion and the other opinion" through a mix of news and audience-participation talk shows, the channel gave Israeli and American commentators a voice, along with religious skeptics, Islamic fundamentalists, women's advocates, and political dissidents. The result was accusations from all quarters—that it was an instrument of the Mossad, the CIA, or, of course, al Qaeda. As American political science professor Marc Lynch, author of *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, has said, the channel provided "a relentless criticism of the status quo, of political repression, of economic stagnation." It pried the stranglehold on information from the hands of state leaders, and allowed formerly heretical views to enter the living rooms and coffee shops of the Arab public, forcing their politicians to, as Lynch puts it, "at least think about what will play well on Al Jazeera."

By contrast with AJE's bright new premises, the Arabic channel's headquarters are spare—nothing more than a series of high-end trailers with stained industrial carpeting and the scent of coffee laced with cardamom floating through the hallways. Just inside the front entrance is the original production facility, recognizable from *Control Room*, the 2004 documentary about Al Jazeera filmed during the early days of the Iraq invasion. On this particular afternoon, Wadah Khanfar, the forty-year-old director general of the network (which encompasses the Arabic and English channels, plus a documentary channel, and a handful of subscription-only sports channels—the network's primary money-makers, given an ongoing Arab advertising boycott) has been contending with two new sources of outrage. Today it is Egypt, which is claiming that the "state of Al Jazeera" is plotting to overthrow its government; and Sudan, where an adviser to the president wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes has stated that Al Jazeera is too "stupid" to understand the concept of national interest.

For Khanfar, an imposing figure in a navy blue pinstriped suit and red tie who wields stock phrases like "speaking truth to power" and clearly relishes the role of the muckraker, it's just another ordinary day. Seated in his first-floor office next to the newsroom, where a beautiful woman with blown-out hair and full TV makeup is preparing to anchor a segment, he complains about the authoritarianism of Arab states. "You know what is the national interest for every leader in the Arab world?" he asks. "To protect his seat." He pounds the leather armrest on his chair for effect. "Can you believe that most of them, when they die, their children take over?"

Like in Qatar? "Everywhere. I don't think of Qatar as a haven for freedom and democracy, but it has done this: it allowed Al Jazeera to exist while every other Arab government either closed down bureaus or arrested journalists or put them in jail. And for this the Arab world, I must tell you, is experiencing something different."

Having begun his career as an Africa correspondent, Khanfar went on to report for Al Jazeera from the Kurdish region of Iraq in the lead-up to the US invasion. He presented, he says, the facts: that the Kurds hated Saddam Hussein and wanted him gone. Khanfar's broadcasts so enraged Iraq's then minister of information (not to mention viewers who supported Saddam Hussein) that he marched into Al Jazeera's Baghdad bureau with his Kalashnikov and a security detail and promised that Khanfar would be hanged in the main square in Baghdad. Within days, however, the government had fallen. Khanfar became Al Jazeera's Baghdad bureau chief and in October 2003 was named director general.

If the channel has made enemies among Arab states—it's currently banned in Iraq, Tunisia, and Algeria, and was prohibited in Saudi Arabia until this summer—it has found a weightier opponent in a former friend, the United States. Prior to 9/11, Al Jazeera was greeted by US officials as good news for Arab democracy. All that changed in October 2001, when it aired the first videotaped message from Osama bin Laden after the attacks on New York, and then began reporting on civilian casualties during the American invasion of Afghanistan. That year, the US bombed Al Jazeera's Kabul bureau, an event echoed two years later when it bombed the one in Baghdad, killing a correspondent. On Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, meanwhile, Sami al-Hajj, a rookie cameraman with the station, was captured in what he believes was a case of mistaken identity (another cameraman named Sami had filmed an interview with bin Laden); he spent six years in Guantánamo before being released in 2008. The forty-year-old Sudanese national, who now walks like an old man, told me he was interrogated more than 300 times—almost exclusively about Al Jazeera, on whom he was asked to spy.

America's obsession with Al Jazeera has inadvertently handed the network star power. A week before my arrival, surfer-haired Virgin CEO Richard Branson and Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez both dropped by to visit. Such establishment figures as Tzipi Livni, Shimon Peres, Madeleine Albright, Ban Ki-moon, and General David Petraeus have also made the pilgrimage. Even former British prime minister Tony Blair came by for a private meeting. Blair had report-

edly discussed with George Bush the possibility of bombing the channel's Doha headquarters in the wake of its reports on heavy civilian casualties during the 2004 battle in Fallujah—an issue Khanfar made sure to bring up. (Blair, he says, brushed him off, laughingly suggesting that such matters were in the past and might not have been what they seemed.)

Well before the Bush-Blair discussion, international demand was mounting for an English version of Al Jazeera's contentious brand of reporting. The network's response was to create an entirely new entity, which would share some footage with the Arabic channel yet have a completely separate staff, management, and editorial mandate. "We wanted it to be an authentic English channel that broadcasts from within the mainstream but carries the ideas Al Jazeera has established," Khanfar says. The ideas he's referring to are editorial independence, an emphasis on field reporting, and a diverse staff who reside in the regions they cover, "so they understand and interpret and forecast much better than those who come overnight equipped with intensive reading from Wikipedia."

He continues: "We are at the centre of a lot of troubles—Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Palestine, Sudan—a curse for

us as individuals but a blessing for us as journalists. The developing world is generating a huge number of stories, and a TV station headquartered in one of the most complicated and news-producing regions is a great opportunity for audiences all over the world to see a different angle." AJE is already the most watched international channel in sub-Saharan Africa, and Khanfar argues that the wealthy countries of the North, too, will benefit from an inside view of such developing-world issues as terrorism, immigration, oil, and energy: "If they are not explored properly from within the South, the North is going to suffer as well."

AJE has poured resources into Africa, Asia, and Latin America, building on the Arabic channel's access in the Middle East. This at a time when other networks, driven by commercial agendas, are scaling back, which Khanfar considers a "disaster" for the profession. "I mean, a journalist who used to go for a month to do something investigative will find it shortened to a few days, if it's commissioned at all." Given that his network is funded by the emir of the richest nation in the Middle East and is therefore free from commercial pressures, he knows he has an advantage in steering AJE through the current financial crisis. "We would like to appear, later on, as *the* player when it comes to English news internationally."

In the lobby of the Four Seasons Doha, where I am waiting for Tony Burman, a young Qatari woman in a rhinestone-encrusted black abaya and head scarf checks her text messages, then floats across the marble floor clutching her Louis Vuitton bag. It's a far different setting from the rundown auditorium at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver where I first met Burman earlier this year. There, he was launching a Canadian speaking tour, a kind of pre-emptive strike to address concerns about AJE as it applied for a broadcast licence from the

Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission. In 2004, the Arabic channel had been granted a CRTC licence that was essentially useless, freighted with the onerous condition that its content be monitored continuously. This time would have to be different, and so on a cold Tuesday evening in February several hundred people turned out to see a panel discussion on the future of international news—the first of many appearances at which Burman would deliver his message. Though there were other luminaries on the panel, which was moderated by Global national news anchor Kevin Newman, it was clearly Burman they had come to see.

Burman readily acknowledges, as we sit at the Four Seasons patio bar with the waters of the Persian Gulf lapping up beside us, that his stature in Canadian media is part of the reason he was tapped for the managing directorship at AJE. "I think, to speak as dispassionately as I can about my-

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self, that it's better it be a North American," he says, pausing to order a gin and tonic, "because like any Canadian I feel I'm a Ph.D. student on the US. And obviously the Canadian system I know."

When Burman left CBC, he initially planned to go small—to take on manageable creative projects as a consultant, which is what he initially did for AJE. Pressed to take on an expanded version of his job at CBC, he was resistant. He would have to leave Toronto just as he was finally becoming reacquainted with his two adult children, and planning his marriage this past summer to Jane Ferguson, an Ontario Superior Court judge. Yet as someone who had devoted his life to understanding the wider world, he couldn't pass up the chance to oversee one of the most ambitious ventures in global news. His timing has been fortuitous, not only because competition in international newsgathering has withered, but because of the channel's biggest scoop to date.

The Gaza war of 2008–09 was to Al Jazeera English what the first Gulf War was to a little-known satellite network called CNN. As the only international broadcaster based inside Gaza during the three-week Israeli onslaught, in which some 1,300 Palestinians and thirteen Israelis were killed, AJE had the story everyone wanted but couldn't get, since Israel had banned journalists from entering the war zone. AJE, unlike other international news agencies, had a permanent presence on both sides (Jerusalem is its largest foreign bureau), which meant it was already on the ground when the war started. Then it made the prescient, groundbreaking decision to give away its content to other networks for free, under the most lenient of Creative Commons licences.

The station's coverage swept the globe, garnering accolades from international media, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Le Monde*, and even Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper, in whose pages

columnist Gideon Levy called the channel's twenty-nine-year-old Gaza correspondent, Ayman Mohyeldin, "my hero of the Gaza War." An American born to Palestinian and Egyptian parents, Mohyeldin had worked as a producer for CNN in Iraq before being headhunted by AJE. "There was plenty of opportunity for journalists to go into Gaza almost a week before the war," he told me. "But they decided it wasn't sexy enough or picture-rich or gripping."

"Al Jazeera," investigative journalist Seymour Hersh said at the Arab Media Forum in Dubai in May, "has broken the West's monopoly on how the world views conflicts in the Middle East and beyond. Its coverage of Gaza was nothing short of remarkable. While most American people are still denied the right to view Al Jazeera, many networks were forced to carry its reports and images simply because they were so insightful. Gaza also proved, if needed, the objectivity and professionalism of Al Jazeera."

Gaza also provided an argument for AJE's campaign to enter North America, the last significant holdout in the English-speaking world. Views of video reports on the English website—launched in 2003, the same year it was hacked, in one of the largest-ever denial-of-service attacks, after posting photographs of dead US soldiers and Iraqi civilians—jumped 600 percent, with 60 percent of those coming from the United States. Monthly visits to the site, meanwhile, rose to 22 million. That's proof, Burman says, of the appetite for the channel's reportage.

AJE's coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict may have put it on the map, but that same reporting is the chief source of opposition to the channel. "The introduction of an English-language Al Jazeera into Canadian homes can only provide yet another outlet for vicious anti-Israel propaganda," Frank Dimant, executive vice-president of B'nai Brith Canada, told the *Jewish Tribune* after Burman spoke at a Canadian Journalism Foundation event in February. "Al Jazeera may masquerade as an unbiased, neutral media outlet, but it is fooling nobody."

"The argument that Al Jazeera English should not be allowed in North America because it's, quote, anti-Semitic, is bogus," Burman says as our waiter brings another round. "I think they



realize they have nothing on Al Jazeera English, so if they want to keep it out the only way to do it is through guilt by association." Rather than letting matters lie, Burman met with Canadian Jewish leaders earlier this year in what Bernie Farber, CEO of the Canadian Jewish Congress, characterized as a frank exchange, and agreed to open a direct channel for them to communicate any concerns. The strategy worked. In the end, the CJC, which had lobbied vigorously against licensing Al Jazeera Arabic, chose not to oppose the English channel's application to broadcast in Canada because, says Farber, his organization's job is to reflect the community's mainstream, and "we have people who feel both ways." (B'nai Brith told the CRTC that in a "spirit of co-operation," it had also decided not to challenge AJE's entry into Canada, but added that it would remain vigilant.)

Having watched AJE during his travels in Europe and on the Internet, Farber found the channel no more alarming than the BBC ("which I have concerns about because of its depiction of Middle East issues"), and in fact welcomes Al Jazeera English's coverage of under-reported places like South America and Sudan. "The largest of the albatrosses hanging around their neck," he says, "is their name."

Burman's first year on the job has been a scramble to revive morale, which had stagnated under his predecessor, a former BBC executive who was part of a management team that staff privately dubbed the British Boys Network. A high-profile American hire, former ABC correspondent David Marash, had quit after being removed as the channel's Washington anchor, and publicly criticized its British executives for relying on lazy anti-American stereotypes when covering issues like poverty in the United States. "Al Jazeera English is an absolutely first-rate news channel, and if you're interested in the world south of the equator it is absolutely dominant," Marash told me. "What's so heartbreaking to me is that the United States would be its weakest link."

Marash's analysis "has merit," admits Burman. Better coverage of the United States from a "helicopter view" is a priority as the channel begins airing there—a prelude to what he believes is a turning point in the channel's relations with the West. The limited entry of AJE into the US, and the station's likely approval in Canada—which Canadians overwhelmingly supported with thousands of comments to the CRTC this spring—coincide with a cultural shift symbolized by Barack Obama's decision to give his first presidential interview to the Arab network Al Arabiya in January, followed by his speech to the Muslim world in Cairo this June. Since then, attitudes in Washington have changed so dramatically that officials who used to regard being asked to appear on Al Jazeera English like an invitation to an al Qaeda training seminar are suddenly courting the network.

This shift, combined with the fact that Western media have essentially abandoned foreign correspondence, leaves AJE well situated to assume the sort of dominance it has already achieved in other parts of the world. And it may be—with a planned Canadian bureau and expanded coverage of the United States, including a new US-focused current affairs show hosted by Avi Lewis—that North Americans under-

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served even by domestic journalism will start looking to Qatar not only for news of the outside world, but to understand what is happening at home.

It's World Press Freedom Day, an annual event organized by the UN's Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and held this year in Doha. In the crowded hallway outside the Intercontinental Hotel conference room, a hundred or so journalists and media freedom types mill about, exchanging business cards and revelling in one of the last places on earth where they are free to smoke indoors.

Tolerance is the theme of this year's event — aptly illustrated by the bikini-clad women at the pool next to others in head scarves and full bodysuits. Even the surprise appearance of Flemming Rose, the editor who published the controversial Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, yields only mild indignation. And while conference organizers have a great deal to say about the “information explosion,” the rise of new media, and the need for everyone to just get along, the drastic decline in the amount of actual journalism being done is barely addressed.

It's a subject of some obsession for one of the participants, Andrew Stroehlein, communications director of the International Crisis Group, a global non-profit that advises governments and intergovernmental agencies such as the UN, the European Union, and the World Bank on the prevention and resolution of deadly conflict. An Anglo-American journalist in a natty suit, and a two-thumbed demon on his BlackBerry, Stroehlein churns out op-eds from his office in Brussels in an attempt to draw attention to forgotten wars. He worries that the plummeting budgets for foreign coverage mean more and more conflicts will fall into that category.

“People think there's an information explosion,” he tells me while the rest of the participants feast on pastries during a break, “but what's not being replaced is newsgathering by professionals.” And what of the assumption that everyone with access to the Internet or a camera phone will fill the gap? “Citizen journalism,” he says, “is like citizen dentistry.” Without trained journalists expending the time and resources to find out what is going on, the risk in places such as the United States — where the news can seem like an endless lunatic carnival in which the outside world doesn't exist — is not only of becoming cut off from reality and developing skewed perceptions. (“That,” he says, “has already happened.”) The greater concern is what such an information vacuum permits. “You get away with things like Iraq because people don't know what's going on. That's why these things happen.”

In an op-ed titled “Welcome to a World without Foreign Correspondents,” Stroehlein lamented the dearth of coverage of Somalia and Sri Lanka, adding, “Too bad Al Jazeera English is not available on most living-room screens in the US, and people there have to choke down the endless rotting fish heads of celebrity news, or the same tiresome group of ignoramus shouting at each other in a studio — both the cheap forms of filling air time after a test card.”

He calls himself a “major fan” of AJE, which is widely watched in Europe. “I think Al Jazeera English is the best

international television news in the world, with the caveat that BBC World News is probably equally good. We as an organization take it very seriously. We're trying to get political decisions made to stop conflict, so we're fairly elite-media driven, and people in foreign policy circles watch it because it's so intelligently done.”

At a time when the media have come to be regarded as actors in international conflicts rather than impartial observers — embedded coverage of the Iraq war being a case in point — a Knight Foundation-funded study of Al Jazeera English, conducted by the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School, found that the channel functions as a form of “conciliatory media.” In other words, it works as a “clash of civilizations” in reverse, facilitating cross-cultural reconciliation rather than pitting us versus them. The longer viewers had been watching AJE, the study concluded, the less dogmatic was their thinking.

Comparing it with the American networks “is like comparing *The Economist* to *Newsweek*,” Philip Seib, author of *The Al Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics*, told me in Dubai. “It's so much more sophisticated and broad in terms of coverage.” A professor at USC Annenberg who studies the links between media, war, and terrorism, Seib says AJE has “expanded the realm of discourse” and could be invaluable in breaking down American insularity. “I think you'll find those who criticize it have never seen it,” he says.

Stroehlein, meanwhile, thinks AJE has caused its only real competitor, BBC World, to up its game. “One reason I'm desperate to see Al Jazeera English enter the American news market is that it's going to challenge the other news providers,” he says. Or maybe it won't. Solid international reporting is important, but it's hardly profitable; and serious reporting, Stroehlein acknowledges, is all about the dateline. That means foreign bureaus based in the countries they cover. It means long-term commitments to a region. In other words, it means something commercial broadcasters aren't willing to provide: money.

Journalism has a responsibility to society, Stroehlein says, arguing that news reporting is not just another business: “How many businesses are there where if someone screws up just a little bit, you have mass violence?”

The same potential exists when no one is there to bear witness at all — potential not only for mass violence but for corruption, nepotism, and an uninformed public incapable of holding anyone to account. Which is why the current crisis in journalism is so dire, and why any and all efforts to reverse that trend should be welcomed, even if they come from the most hated name in news.

For Tony Burman — who can, it turns out, still have lunch in Toronto, despite occasional ribbing about “shilling for al Qaeda” (he likes to say he's only met Osama bin Laden a dozen times), and who expects you'll be watching Al Jazeera English somewhere around the same time you read this — controversy is the price of admission for hard-hitting journalism. Al Jazeera, he believes, “will be controversial every day it exists. That's not only the nature of the organization; that's almost the *purpose* of the organization: to keep stirring the pot so that change happens.”