

THERE IS A HUNGER

When, after a 35-year career at Canadian public broadcaster CBC, **Tony Burman** took the helm at news network **Al Jazeera English** in 2008, one of his priorities was to extend Al Jazeera's vast audience reach, most notably in North America. As AJE is launching throughout the Washington, DC area on MHz Networks, he is planning the next breakthroughs in India and Australia



AJE's core business is to bring to an international audience a global perspective on international stories. We are focused very much on covering stories in countries that are totally ignored by other media, and providing a southern perspective on international issues.

This world has become incredibly complicated, frightening to a lot of people. With an audience reach now of more than 140m households in over 100 countries, we are learning that there is a hunger worldwide for a much more comprehensive perspective on global events. With our Arabic colleagues we have 69 news bureaux - more than the BBC or CNN - and next year AJE hopes to add 10 more. The end result of that is a breadth and diversity of news coverage that is quite unique.

How much of a competitive edge does that give you?

At the Al Jazeera conference several months ago there was a study which tracked news coverage on the BBC, CNN and AJE over a period of three months. What it revealed was that on AJE, more

than 80% were stories and issues from the developing world. In comparison, both BBC and CNN provided roughly 40% of their news items from the South thus focusing very much on Western Europe and the US.

Our mission as an international news channel is to be strong and popular in Asia, Africa, Latin America, obviously throughout the Middle East as well, and the expectation of our audience is that we provide something that is far more comprehensive than simply a kind of American or British take on the news. I think also there is a real appetite to get a clear sense of what is going on in the developing world that has a direct impact on people's daily lives. People come to a channel like AJE so that they can better understand what is going on in Iran, in Iraq, in Pakistan, Afghanistan or in parts of Africa.

The Middle East and the BRIC countries are significant in terms of news stories - do the US networks cover that?

In the US the sad reality is the commercial broadcasters basically turn the lights off when it comes to covering the world, and that is even happening in Canada. And in this part of the 21st century where there

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are so many genuine profound issues in play that's a dangerous state of being for democracies, because the lack of information leads to faulty thinking and mistaken policy decisions.

I think that there is a practicality that's slipping into a lot of people's minds, including here in America, that it is really in their own interest to be far better informed about what's happening globally. In that sense I think AJE is perfectly positioned to help fill the vacuum.

Who do you think is watching and who would you like to watch AJE?

A frustration that all international news channels have, because their audiences are so spread globally and fragmented, is that it's really hard to get the kind of hard data that those of us who have worked on domestic channels are used to. So right now a lot of what we believe comes from audience responses through our live streaming, through the internet.

A primary target for us would be the young viewer - from 18 to 40. They are less loyal to the so-called established brands like CNN, BBC; they are far more sceptical of conventional mainstream media. In areas of the world where English is not the first language this young



block of potential viewers is far more likely to understand English than perhaps their parents did, and find AJE's perspective on international affairs appealing.

The whole new media, the internet, getting our journalism distributed on a multitude of different and new platforms is a priority for us, and that is clearly the way to reach this younger audience. Over time we also want to attract as many of the established viewers of our competitors as we can.

How has AJE coped with events in Gaza and Iran?

With great enthusiasm and aggressiveness. In Gaza we were the only international English-language news channel that was able to cover both sides of the conflict, and I think a lot of people were on to us because of that. We are very creative as an organisation in ensuring that we get our journalism on Gaza in a multitude of ways.

The response was quite striking, particularly from North America and the US. I think our coverage of Iran has built on that. There has been a real difficulty on the part of everybody to find out what's going on so we too have been reliant on material that's come into us. What we discovered was that, given a

choice between interacting with one organisation over the other, people are drawn to the Al Jazeera brand. I think that we are seen worldwide by a lot of people, including young people, as a far more balanced international channel than perhaps some of our competitors are.

What's the difference in the way that AJE treats stories from Al Jazeera Arabic?

We serve different audiences. We are incredibly proud of our coverage of the Middle East but we are not a channel that is obsessed with Middle Eastern issues because our audience is everywhere and we have to be strong in our coverage of other parts of the world. The audience for Al Jazeera Arabic is Arabic speaking, largely centred in one part of the world.

I think we work together well when we need to work together but the two channels operate largely independent of each other.

What developments are in the pipeline?

I think expanded distribution is a headline for us, not only in North America, Canada and the US. We are really hopeful to make important breakthroughs in India and Australia.

▲ from left: The Al Jazeera English newsroom in Doha; Tony Burman

The fact that by the early part of 2010 we'll be adding 10 more news bureaux is a significant development at a time when every other news organisation is cutting back. We take coverage of the world very seriously and the only way that we feel we can provide coverage of the world is to have journalists in parts of the world where others are not present.

Your outlook for the TV news broadcasting industry?

Clearly convergence, integration, the whole idea that we have to serve our audiences wherever they are in whatever form or platform they choose is the way to go. In that sense, the organisations that are able to restructure themselves to deliver on that promise will be the ones that will survive and thrive. There will come a time very shortly when people will not think of AJE as a TV channel.

We are very hopeful, very enthusiastic about our cross-media, multi-platform strategy and it's perfectly consistent with our desire to capture the young audience. A year from now, things will be very bright.

Tony Burman, thank you. ■
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