

Al Jazeera English election coverage: Another missed opportunity

By Lawrence Pintak

There was something almost forlorn in U.S. election coverage on Al Jazeera English Tuesday night/Wednesday morning. It was a bit like watching a local college TV station attempt to compete with the big boys. No matter how hard they try, it's just not the real thing.

Another missed opportunity for the two-year old channel that has yet to live up to its potential to produce true borderless journalism.

Make no mistake: AJE is not supposed to be CNN. Its self-imposed mission is very different from that of the other English-language global news channels: To report events through the prism of the developing world. By that measure, it failed. And what it did produce just wasn't very good.

Where CNN was – quite literally – beaming holographs of their correspondents onto a set worthy of the bridge on the Starship Enterprise, AJE anchors Ghida Fakhry and David Foster sat huddled in their coats on a rooftop overlooking the White House, looking like they wished someone would bring them a hot chocolate.

More importantly, there was a strange lack of heft to the AJE election team. Correspondent Rob Reynolds, a U.S. network veteran who has done an excellent job covering Obama, continued to produce yeoman's work from Chicago. But where was everyone else? It was like the A-team had the day off. Random people would occasionally pop up – Josh Rushing made a cameo appearance from Texas, we briefly saw Mike Hanna – but there was no continuity; no sense of a whole. No sign that AJE was taking this seriously. Or that coverage had been planned with any vision.

CNN benefited from what it endlessly told us is “the best political team on television,” and the BBC tapped experts such as ABC News *Nightline* host Ted Koppel and former U.S. ambassador to the UN John Bolton. AJE, meanwhile, depended for analysis almost solely on former CNN White House correspondent Charles Bierbauer – brought back from obscurity in academia – and, a bit bizarrely, had U.S. political blogger John Nichols on the cavernous and seemingly abandoned set in Doha (yes, *Doha*, as in Qatar, 8,000 miles from the story), where Kamahl Santamaria was struggling with the slow and – in contrast to CNN and the BBC – dated-looking electoral map on the video wall (that they were not in the U.S. was never overtly acknowledged during my channel surfing).

Bierbauer, the dean of journalism at the University of South Carolina, and Nichols, a contributing editor at *The Nation*, both know their stuff. But – during my lengthy viewing of the channel – the audience never had any way to know that. No on-screen ID, no verbal intro, *nada*. I had to Google Nichols to figure out who he was.

Meanwhile, in news lingo, AJE just didn't advance the story. Where the other channels looked forward in their coverage, AJE seemed stuck in a time-warp. While other channels were making projections, the lower third on the AJE screen told us "Economy top concern for voters." No kidding.

On CNN, correspondents around the country interviewed top campaign officials; big name political operatives like democratic consultant James Carville, looking for all the world like an alien on that Starship Enterprise set, parsed voter patterns in obscure corners of Ohio for their significance. The BBC roundtable explained developments in language the global audience could absorb. Meanwhile, AJE's field reporters focused on yesterday's news, endlessly asking McCain and Obama supporters why they voted for their candidate. Or the channel ran pre-cooked features on things like blacks struggling to get by. Been there, done that, guys, let's move on.

CNN's coverage might have seemed frenetic at times, but there was no time to get bored. The BBC's coverage may have unfolded at a more sedate pace under the avuncular Jonathan Dimbleby, but it included a relative plethora of voices compared with AJE. This is TV; keep it interesting.

Barnaby Phillips, one of AJE's star correspondents, must have felt like screaming that at the exec producer – if there was one. Across the broadcast spectrum, the historic night pulsed with excitement. Other correspondents were shouting to make themselves heard over the roar of the crowd while poor Phillips stood all evening in front of some sort of government building in Columbus, Ohio, with nary a human being in sight. Boorrring. Actual exchange at 8:20 am EST: "What's happening Barnaby?" "Not much..."

At times, it all had the feel of a Jerry Lewis Telethon. The low point came when Foster urged viewers to email their friends in the U.S. to tell them to watch online. Memo to staff: Don't beg.

With the exception of the anchor Fakhry and Latin America correspondent Lucia Newman in Miami, who we saw in a few two-ways, the U.S. team was largely white, male, and British or American. A woman reporter with Goldilocks hair and an Eastern European accent, who I can only guess must have been an intern to whom they tossed a mike, did make a brief appearance from Chicago early in the evening, but she then disappeared. Another woman with an indeterminate accent and breathless "gee whiz, I'm covering the election" delivery popped in occasionally from Phoenix (who *are* these people?). But they were bit players in an Anglo dominated cast.

My viewing companions, media professionals all, and I frequently found ourselves cringing in sympathetic embarrassment. At 7:05 Eastern time, AJE rolled out a "Breaking News" graphic and we waited on the edge of our seats for a major

development, only to be told by anchor Foster that it was “too early to call” Virginia. That’s breaking news? Moments later, they cut to Doha, where Santamaria parroted the catchphrase “the world is watching” as he stood in front of the video wall projecting a variety of generic “international” scenes. Unfortunately, several of those monitors contained nothing but color bars.

Technology aside, the most disappointing aspect of the coverage was that AJE did not play to its strengths. For the most part, we didn’t *see* “the world watching.” Where were those much-vaunted “global voices?” Where was that multinational corps of correspondents around the world? Having live correspondent whip-arounds may be a contrived device, but it does make good TV – and would have emphasized AJE’s supposed global perspective.

Why no roundtable of foreign ambassadors or international editors providing analysis from Washington? What about a panel of former foreign ministers? Why no live shots from election-viewing parties in Harare and Katmandu or a few presidential palaces? No matter how knowledgeable, four or five individuals cannot carry so many hours on end of coverage largely on their own backs. It’s unfair to them and to us.

At very least, why weren’t the overseas broadcast centers leveraged? London and Malaysia were AWOL. Instead of live interviews with global newsmakers, we got three quick canned sound-bites – “World Leaders Comment” – from former (not even current) Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, former (not even current) UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, and some guy from the “Re-Liberating Front” of Somalia (when was Somalia liberated in the first place?). They were recycled several times and looked like a product of the promo department. Ditto some very weak/unintelligible videocam comments from ordinary folk that seemed more a pro forma ‘because we are expected to do it’ gesture than a real effort to infuse the coverage with a global worldview.

The BBC even cut away to Obama’s ancestral village in Kenya long before AJE did so. The Beeb also beat AJE in the diner. An Al Jazeera reporter set up shop in a diner in tiny Phoebus, Va. Just up the road in Culpepper, Va., the BBC did exactly the same thing. The difference was that where AJE’s diner felt like it was closed, the BBC’s was full of energy – and people – and the reporter didn’t just talk to the same two couples all night.

Back in Washington, when the show periodically shifted from the roof to the studio (presumably to give the anchors time to thaw out), things did not improve much. Avi Lewis may host a mildly interesting – though arguably mono-chromatic – AJE show looking at the dark side of America, but that doesn’t make him a particularly strong moderator. Add in the cramped DC studio and the fairly light-weight credentials of most of his guests, and the whole thing had the feel of a local access cable show. Atmospheric aside, the one segment that was worth watching was when Lewis interviewed three young Americans about what an Obama presidency will mean for their generation. This is a dimension the other channels largely ignored and a core AJE demographic that should have been leveraged.

There *were* a couple of efforts that worked: A rooftop interview with experts in Beijing was effective; so too was a conversation with Afghan political figures in Kabul after the Obama victory was confirmed, even if the Kabul segment looked like it was coming from a carpet shop (a conversation with the same group earlier in the evening was mired in internal Afghan politics and way off the mark). A high point was a two-way with Bob Fisk, the Beirut-based correspondent for *The Independent*, who gave a no-BS assessment of what an Obama victory meant for the Middle East. Where was that same analysis from New Delhi, Jakarta, Moscow and Buenos Aires?

Meanwhile, why weren't the channel's marquee names, like Riz Khan and David Frost, integrated into the special? Instead of recycling a four-day-old edition of *Listening Post* in the half hour before the polls started closing [full disclosure: I am an occasional contributor to the show], why wasn't Richard Gizbert on set doing real-time analysis of how other media around the world were covering the election? Why wasn't a host of *Street Food* watching events from the Seattle fish market? Etc., etc., etc. A little imagination would have gone a long way.

Instead, as one of our Arab students said after watching the election on both Al Jazeera Arabic, which carried its own extensive coverage, and Al Jazeera English: That wasn't Al Jazeera. That was embarrassing.

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