

The Debate Over Al Jazeera, English in Burlington, VT.

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ABSTRACT: Al Jazeera English struggles to gain wide TV distribution in the United States. This paper is a case study of one of the few communities it is available. The story of its carriage and the debate over it says something about the network's chances in the United States, as well as American receptivity to the channel. Reviewing the local debate in Burlington, VT over AJE by the local public, city-funded telecom company illustrates the discourses of support and opposition to the global news channel in the United States. The arguments reflect cosmopolitan and nativist outlooks towards AJE as a global news channel. Ultimately, local supporters of AJE who mobilized to speak out for it in townhall meetings and local media won the day and the channel stayed available in Burlington. The unique political economy of Burlington Telecom as well as the political orientation and history of Burlington make it difficult to generalize this case of AJE distribution elsewhere in the United States.

KEYWORDS: Al Jazeera English; journalism; news; globalization; Burlington, VT.

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Al Jazeera English entered a competitive global news field in late 2006 by claiming to cover stories in regions underrepresented by the most visible international news outlets and agencies. It did not position itself as an Arab network merely broadcasting in English, though it announces it is the “world's first English language news channel to have its headquarters in the Middle East.” It claims a “global” identity, which means representing regions underreported by the western media giants CNN and the BBC. The network operates nearly seventy bureaus around the world; most of them are in developing nations. Its international staff of more than one thousand represents more than fifty national backgrounds. It seeks to compete by growing its news-gathering reach. This is in stark contrast with patterns in western news media, according to Tony Burman, AJE’s former Managing Director:

The mainstream American networks have cut their bureaus to the bone.... 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 outnumbered them all..... That’s where, in the absence of alternatives, Al Jazeera English can fill a vacuum, simply because we’re going in the opposite direction (Campbell, 2010).

A global audience may be emerging, as well. AJE reaches upwards of 220 million households in more than one hundred countries.

Scholarship concerning AJE has considered the extent to which AJE could subdue “the ongoing discourse of ‘clash of civilizations’ in favor of a new discourse of ‘dialogue between civilizations’” (Khamis, 2007: 49). In a sense, AJE can reconcile the cultural chasm separating “civilizations.” El-Nawawy and Powers found that AJE can serve as a conciliatory media source by moderating viewers’ attitudes towards other cultures (2008; 2010). This could be also be understood as AJE possessing counter-hegemonic potential. Formulated as a “counter-hegemonic” alternative to what is described as the dominant news outlets, AJE may be able to break the western hold on mediated narrative power (Al-Najjar, 2009: 2; Gardner, 2009: 19)

even if its formatting and style resembles other western media (Boyd-Barrett and Xie, 2008: 214). Others argue it, along with the Arabic news service, are “alternative,” but are not counter-hegemonic because of how they are received and treated by mainstream media in the West (Tal-Azran, 2010). While Al Jazeera may be “alternative” for viewers in the West, as a total global brand, the network is mainstream (Iskandar 2005). Questions of alterity in transnational media aside, AJE’s efficacy as a cultural bridge or counter-hegemonic news outlet depends on audience receptivity and access in the global North, especially in the United States.

While AJE gained wide carriage in the United Kingdom and is growing quickly in Canada, it is yet to gain wide carriage in the United States cable television and broadcasting markets. The United States is an important English language TV market. As the world’s strongest and most globalized military and cultural power, it is one of the places where conciliatory international media is needed most, where the hardest test of counter-hegemonic media potential lies.

Significant obstacles stand in the way of market penetration in the United States. Al Jazeera was thoroughly painted as a terrorist-affiliated network by the Bush administration (Miles, 2005; DiMaggio, 2008: 241; Marash, 2007: 47). This led some to speculate that US carriers likely refuse AJE “out of fear of alienating themselves from advertisers and angering the Bush administration and other American political leaders.” (Dimaggio 2008: 246). Even in the absence of the heavy criticism of Al Jazeera by American policymakers and opinion leaders, the majority of Americans do not demonstrate an interest in global news (Khamis, 2007: 48). When it comes to news, main carriers see the market as already saturated, and they call into question the value of adding yet another network to the mix. The political pressures likely interact with the political economy of TV distribution and consumer preferences in the United States. As a

private sector-led industry operating in a de-regulated environment, there is little transparency or clarity as to the causes of AJE's absence. This, along with the inherent difficulties in studying any type of exclusion or absence, suggests more fruitful research opportunities reside in the areas of exception – where AJE has gained carriage within the United States. Studying a place where AJE was made available after a public debate on the subject reveals some of the underlying issues.

Al Jazeera English in the United States

Despite its growth and global appeal, AJE struggled to reach television sets in the United States. AJE has not been picked up widely on cable or by digital broadcasters, the two most common TV delivery systems in the country. It is on just a few cable providers, including Buckeye Cable in Toledo, Ohio and Burlington Telecom in Burlington, Vermont. AJE gained a large indirect foothold in Washington, DC through a carriage agreement with the MHz network, a non-commercial, educational broadcaster based in Virginia. The MHz network airs AJE full-time through one of its pre-existing channels and can be seen through satellite, digital over-the-air broadcasting and through the area's major cable companies, including Comcast, Cox and RCN. MHz's Worldview channel airs AJE's news, along with that of other international broadcasters, in several other cities, such as Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia and around 30 more local markets. Some of AJE programs and news bulletins appear regularly on several other channels, such as LinkTV, which is on the DISH Network and on cable in San Francisco, New York and other cities. A handful of local public broadcasters, college TV networks and cable access channels also air programs occasionally. It is also available via some free-to-air satellite systems, such as WorldTV. The major cable operators have not been interested in carrying AJE. Negotiations started with some, such as Time-Warner and Comcast, relatively early on, but they

did not produce a deal. Overall, the presence of AJE on American television is sparse. The Al Jazeera network has apparently adapted an incrementalist strategy to US market entry. It appears to be aiming for local footholds, from which to expand its presence. It sought a carriage deal with Pacifica radio network, a listener-supported community radio network known for its generally progressive orientation. If it goes through, radio listeners in major TV markets like New York, Houston and Los Angeles will be able to listen to AJE's news. Another element of its strategy is to use new media to build an American audience, thereby circumventing traditional distribution channels. Nearly half of views of its prolific Youtube page and website come from American online users (Marash, 2007: 46-7). By reaching a "selective exposure" audience of limited size, online distribution is not yet a substitute for cable TV carriage. It is hoped the online audience comes to represent public demand for AJE on cable TV.

This paper examines the particular case of AJE in Burlington, Vermont – one of the few places in the United States AJE is available. There, cable carriage of AJE was subject to an especially intense, public debate. Unlike Buckeye Cable or Link TV, Burlington Telecom (BT) is a quasi-public entity and therefore has a different practice of accountability to its customers. The issue of offering AJE actually produced public mobilizations, which required articulable public justifications for or against the network's availability on TV sets in the community. AJE was subject to a public discussion that took place in public meetings, local media, and finally before city council and public committees. Whereas Buckeye Cable made the decision to carry, and received angry letters and phone calls, the political contest over AJE in Burlington yielded a fruitful public deliberation. This generated rich, textual documentation of the underlying issues and discourses that were in play over AJE's market entry in one American city. Although Burlington, VT is renowned for its leftist political disposition and the political economy of

Burlington Telecom is unique, the public justifications unearthed in the exchanges over AJE illustrate the underlying principles at stake, the hopes and anxieties the idea of its local transmission evokes.

This, it should be noted, is a preliminary paper, and is part of a larger study on AJE's entry the US cable market. In terms of this paper's research method, the Burlington audience debate is largely reconstructed through press reports, city documents, letters to the editor and videos from public meetings. This is a discourse analysis that aims to capture public articulations of those who mobilized on this issue, and is therefore not a reception study *per se*, nor is it a gauge of general public opinion.

Background: Burlington, Vermont and Burlington Telecom

Larkin (2003) called to examine the "social context" of global media flows – which help explain why certain "media travel." Using such a decentered media approach, as Larkin writes, it is necessary to discuss the particularities of the time and place of the BT debates. Vermont is a small state in the old colonial New England region of the American northeast. Burlington, its capital of roughly 40,000 people, has been the main city economically, culturally and politically since the early 1800s. The state prides itself for being politically independent, progressive and having a long-tradition of public deliberation through town hall meetings – a form of small-scale "real democracy" (Bryan 2004). In few places do citizens enjoy such a strong, direct role in local policy decision-making. Although the state is often characterized as an exemplar of liberal New England republicanism, it has a more recent tradition of left-wing, working class politics, especially in Burlington (Clavel 1986, 164). Political radicalism grew in the 1970s as activists and counter-cultural communes migrated there. With the University of Vermont and other educational institutions in or near Burlington, the city was both a state capital and college town,

making it a local socio-political hub.

The move to the left was a transformation. The state had been largely conservative until the 1950s when many of its industrial bases, including textile mills, began to collapse. Centrist Democrats took political control of the state and initiated public-private enterprises to shift and modernize the economy. The development plans were met by opposition, however. During its industrial era, worker unrest and organizing were fairly common. This was something of a Vermont tradition, according to Clavel. He cites the influence of French Canadian immigrants as one source of strong union movements. Changes in the economy prompted further activism and agitation in this tradition. In response to an unequal developmentalism that gave preference to commercial growth over affordable housing, Burlington narrowly elected a Socialist candidate for mayor in the early 1980s. Bernie Sanders was part of the movement of political activists in the 1970s. He originally went to Vermont to work as a low income housing advocate, and took part in anti-war activism. By tapping into both the recent activist migrants and the traditional currents of workers' rights sentiments, he was able to defeat the Democratic incumbent. As mayor, he expanded public regulation of private enterprise, often making public interest a condition of business, but by also establishing more public-private partnerships. After serving as mayor for nearly a decade, he ran successfully for the U.S. Congress in 1991. In 2005, he began campaigning for the Senate and was elected by a wide margin. He is currently the only openly socialist Senator in American history. Burlington's current mayor Bob Kiss is a member of the Vermont Progressive party. The party backed the Green Party candidate Ralph Nader's presidential bid in 2000. As testament to Vermont's left political tendencies, the Vermont State Senate passed a resolution calling on Congress to undertake impeachment hearings against President Bush and his vice president (Rao, 2007).

Burlington's political history has involved strong public participation and a willingness to control and challenge private enterprise. This carried over into telecommunications. In the early 1980s, many city residents opposed Adelphia's cable monopoly and high costs (Rao, 2007). Sanders, then-Mayor, proposed a municipal-run fiber-optics network through the city. The Burlington government eventually followed up and proposed a plan to modernize its communications infrastructure in the 1990s. It worked towards building the system through public-private partnering and mixed financing. In 1996, Burlington voters approved Burlington Electric Department's proposal to examine the provision of cable television, fiber optic cable, Internet and other telecommunications services through the planned network. The city was also looking for an alternative to private cable companies, which were seen as costly and unaccountable gatekeepers on content. Three years later, city officials announced a \$15 million project to build the fiber-optic cable network in the city. Burlington voters passed measures, including a bond of \$6.1 million, to allow for the network's creation. In 2005, the city applied to the state Public Service Board for a "certificate of public good," which authorized, conditionally, a city-owned and operated cable, Internet and phone service. This came to be called Burlington Telecom (BT). The following year, 2006, it began offering Internet, phone and TV service at low rates. BT was pitched as a long-term money-saver. After being built-out and repaying its debts in the future, it was estimated to eventually provide 20% of city's general fund requirements (Mitchell, 2010). However, after the economic downturn, BT has fallen deeper into debt and required loans from the city, a violation of its Certificate of Public Good. Although its future is uncertain presently, 4,800 of the city's 20,000 homes and businesses were subscribed to at least one of BT's services.

AJE in Burlington

As public initiative, BT provided the technology to vastly improve telecom services to the city and offer an alternative to the monopoly of the city's private sector cable company, which was acquired by Comcast, the nation's largest cable operator. With fiber optic service, BT's digital cable could provide virtually limitless channels. BT's initial channel marketing strategy was to offer the same channels as competitors, as well as any channel that provided free content since it had far more slots than did other cable companies. Each extra channel not carried by the other cable company was considered a competitive advantage. BT decided to include AJE in its TV offerings. Carrying AJE did not violate the terms of its Cable TV Channel Carriage Policy. The three underlying objectives mandated by the policy were (a) providing a diverse array of channels to maximize feasible consumer choice, (b) staying economically viable as a system operator, and (c) responding to the needs of the community it serves. This enabled AJE to get its first carriage arrangement. According to Richard Donnelly, BT's sales and marketing director, it was firstly "a simple competitive decision. When we heard that Comcast and Al Jazeera's talks had failed, we decided to look into getting the channel" (Rao, 2007). Before beginning to carry AJE in December, 2006, the staff at BT previewed it for three weeks.

Donnelly commented that the network impressed them:

I was just stunned at the quality of the coverage... It was fantastic. There were some amazing, eye-opening news stories about world affairs, women's issues and stories about what we call the 'Third World.' (Rao, 2007)

They also felt carrying the network was congruent with the overall spirit of BT to provide access to views and news that provide an alternative to the mainstream. A non-binding, non-contractual agreement was reached and the network was featured in BT's premium cable channel lineup.

Soon after, however, public pressure began to mount against AJE's availability on BT.

The Debate Over AJE

Despite the care BT took in screening the network and applying company policy in its

decision to carry, AJE's presence in the premium package lineup was politicized by individuals and groups. Complaints about carrying AJE emerged as outside organizations, including the national media watchdog Accuracy in Media, saw Burlington as did AJE itself, as a foothold in the coveted U.S. cable market. A small, local opposition coalesced and actively pushed BT to drop the station. One of the leading forces was a newly formed citizen group, the Defender's Council of Vermont, which aimed to warn the public about the threat of radical Muslims and generate support for American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2008, BT moved to drop the station. Its General Manager Chris Burns noted they received "dozens" of complaints. Burns later offered a different reason: an annual review of BT's carriage contracts showed there was not one with Al Jazeera, prompting concerns about legal liability (Picard, 2008b).

The idea of removing the network was not received well, however, and some Burlington residents counter-mobilized. Local peace and justice organizations and viewers complained about Burns' decision. BT revealed that by May 15, 2008 it received 116 messages in support of carrying AJE; by contrast, 87 were for its removal. This caused the city council and Burlington's mayor to move for a delay in the decision in order to allow for public comment. The response was a rigorous public debate marked by public meetings, letters, local print and broadcast media attention, and events. An oversight committee for Burlington Telecom and another public committee heard public speakers at their routine meetings. After the debate carried on for several weeks, the committees jointly recommended leaving the channel in its cable offerings. BT. The mayor accepted the resolution. Through this debate, the primary issues emerged, painting a picture of how a deliberative approach to AJE produced public justifications that illustrate some of the underlying issues of AJE in the United States.

Before reviewing the key arguments, a more detailed description of the debate's timeline

is needed. After the Mayor and city council called for public input, interested individuals attended the two advisory committee meetings on May 27. Attracting nearly 75 people, the two citizen committees that monitor BT's management, the Citizens Advisory Committee and the Burlington Telecommunications Advisory Committee, provided a chance to gauge public sentiments on the matter. The first committee was established by the Vermont Public Service Board, the state regulator that issued BT's Certificate of Public Good. The second committee was set up by the city council. Of the 28 area residents who spoke on the matter, roughly three-fourths supported keeping the channel on the air. The mayor called for further deliberation claiming that a "broader discussion" was necessary before they could reach a decision. Greg Epler-Wood, who chaired both committees and was appointed by the City Council, invited written comments from the public and announced a second meeting was to occur on June 11. That meeting, which took place at a local college, included AJE representatives, then-Managing Director, Tony Burman, and the network's leading American-based correspondent, Josh Rushing. They took questions and appeared on local television talk shows. AJE also covered the meeting and produced a twelve-minute report on the evolving debate.

After airing out the public differences, these advisory groups reached a consensus. On June 24th, the committees re-convened and issued a joint resolution (APPENDIX A) calling to keep AJE on BT's channel list. The resolution acknowledged arguments on both sides and adjudicated between them. They concluded that arguments that the station's "content is objectionable in that it supports terrorism, anti-Semitism and promotes the destruction of the State of Israel" were weak since they were "based on secondary sources." The Committees cited the dearth of "consistent or widespread agreement or evidence from respected sources" as a reason for rejecting these claims. The resolution recommended continued carriage while

admitting some of AJE's faults. AJE, the resolution suggests, is a media organ financed by the Emir of Qatar, which the resolution says is an ally of the U.S., but is "a constitutional monarchy that applies Islamic law and is perceived by many as being restrictive of human rights." The councils stated they cannot determine whether these particular characteristics of Qatar have any bearing on the content of AJE. The resolution was not based on a calculation of the consequences for BT's revenues since advocates from both sides of the debate threatened to drop their BT subscriptions. The net effect was therefore impossible to predict. On balance, the councils heard more from those wanting to keep AJE on BT. The resolution references a "compelling preponderance" of support for keeping AJE and reinforces the principle of freedom of expression.

The content of the debate is worth exploring. This review of public justifications gives shape to the divergent articulations of a locale seeking to set agreed-upon standards about the presence of a global, Arab-sponsored media outlet on their televisions. Though defining and characterizing AJE and its potential effects are central to this debate, both sides are often imprecise about what AJE actually reports; they both often treated it as the English equivalent of the Arabic service. Starting with justifications for retaining AJE, below is a review of the main points made during the public debate.

Arguments for Carriage

A central democratic value in the United States is the conception of the marketplace of ideas. Many of the arguments furthered this sort of reasoning. This idea is deeply entrenched in the United States Supreme Court's first amendment constitutional jurisprudence (Hopkins 1996, 40). It is believed to have emerged from the American justice Oliver Wendell Holmes' argument in the dissenting opinion in *Abrams v. United States* (1919): with the "free trade in ideas... the

best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.” Although the term is debated, especially to the extent it has come to be interpreted as supporting economic privatization and de-regulation of media ownership, it is a widely held belief that the exchange of different opinions, facts, and perspectives strengthens the health of a polity. There is also a general understanding that in considering issues fairly, one should get all sides of the story and it is through considering them that learning and understanding is best accomplished.

Intercultural Understanding

This notion that different views should be free to circulate with and against each other among the public has several corollary arguments. One is that communication between the Arab world and the United States could improve intercultural relations. In one letter to the editor, a resident claimed that a source of poor relations between the United States and the Arab region was that “citizens don’t know enough about each other” (Baker, 2008). Rep. Bill Aswad, a Burlington Democrat in the state legislature, said AJE provided the opportunity for Americans to learn about Muslims and Islam (Guma, 2008). The advisory committees furthered this logic in the joint resolution, declaring that AJE “provides a point of view not found in the coverage of national and international news of other channels.” A resident, Richard Weed, said at the June 11, 2008 forum that the country needed to address its “ignorance of the Arabic world” (Zind, 2008). Interestingly, this also assumed that AJE was a mere extension of Al Jazeera, Arabic, rather than an editorially independent “global south” news channel. AJE itself claims to act as a bridge between cultures, though it never specifies the particular cultures.

A Matter of Freedom

Many Burlington residents suggested that merely having the choice to watch the network

was important. They framed it in terms of freedom and argued that the advocates of removal sought to deny that freedom. One resident, James Leas, directly countered the argument that “somehow our freedom is going to be jeopardized if we are permitted the choice to tune in to Al Jazeera.” He contended at the June 11, 2008 public forum that the opposite is true, that restricting public choice is tantamount to stripping away freedom (Zind, 2008). The advisory committees acknowledged this argument, claiming that people have a right to watch what they want in their home.

Another stream of this argumentation responded to claims that carrying the network was undermining “the troops” since Al Jazeera incites violence against them. An Army veteran spoke in defense of carriage saying that soldiers “fight for our freedoms” including “the right to have different opinions” (Gram, 2008). Another implicit freedom involved *not watching* – a freedom those wanting AJE advised the opposition to exercise. In what became one of the rallying cries of AJE’s defenders, he told the opposition that “your remote control will allow you not to watch Al-Jazeera.” In other words, the freedom of choice means one can just as easily go to a different channel. Rep. Aswad said those who were unhappy with AJE “can switch to a different channel” (Guma, 2008). There is also technology for blocking particular channels through BT’s services. The joint resolution mentioned that BT subscribers can actually block channels they do not want viewed on their television sets.

Similarly, some felt the spirit of the constitution was at play. There was some question as to whether BT as a public agency would be violating any constitutional rights by removing the channel. Local attorney and activist Sandy Baird, cited a 2006 U.S. District Court case against the Miami-Dade School Board for removing a library book. He argued that as a publicly owned city utility, “it is not a privately held company that can decide for itself what is shown” (Picard,

2008b). Baird and others characterized the possible removal as “government censorship.” The *Burlington Free Press* echoed this in a June 29, 2008 editorial (“Broader view helps in understanding world”). Several statements from public officials expressed hesitance at the city government deciding what news networks the public could not access. Some observed the ironic parallel between government censorship being proposed in Burlington and actual government control of the media in the Arab countries. One Arab-American resident, Mousa Ishaq, said after the May, 2008 advisory committees meeting that advocates of removal would be in agreement with many Arab leaders: “Al-Jazeera has been kicked out of every single Arab country... Arab governments do not like Al-Jazeera” (Gram, 2008).

No Worse than Fox News

Why would carrying a biased network matter if some of the news channels are already openly biased, some asked. Several speakers at the public meetings compared AJE with Fox News. Some suggested they were similar, while others argued Fox was a greater “threat to liberty.” Others merely mentioned the news network in terms of the freedom to not watch that all BT subscribers should have. The Army veteran quoted above said, “Personally I don’t really like Fox News, so I don't watch that” (Gram, 2008). His insinuation was that AJE can be similarly neglected. This argument rejects the claim that AJE is somehow beyond the pale of acceptable bias in the context of American politics.

Other Arguments

There were a few other arguments worth mentioning. One suggested that AJE programs would still get picked up in Burlington, specifically, by RETN, the local educational channel. It was carrying broadcasts already. Thus it seemed strange that opposition making BT carriage an issue when its programs could be seen in Burlington through other venues. Separately, others

noted that the opposition to AJE had weak evidence or seemed to be acting out of ideology as opposed to credible data about AJE's coverage. At least one commenter felt the argument that AJE would change how viewers think "belittles" their intelligence. In a letter, one resident rejected the assumption that "those who watch it will have their opinions forcibly transformed in some 'anti-American' manner (Baker, 2008).

Arguments Against Carriage

Those calling for AJE's removal tended to advance a logic presumed on a 'war on terror' that fell along roughly civilizational lines, a furtherance of the type of worldview inherent to Huntington's thesis (1996) about the fault lines of conflict that shape the world. Rather than undercutting democracy, they held that democratic principles were under attack by radical extremists and authoritarian regimes willing to use violence and propaganda. Al Jazeera, they argued, was the media face of this assault and that this justifies denying the network a presence on BT's lineup.

AJE is Foreign Propaganda

Complaints focused on AJE as a foreign, government-subsidized network. They opposed this in principle, but also often had very particular critiques of Qatar, where AJE is headquartered and funded from. Some pointed out it is a "hereditary monarchy" that enforces oppressive religious law. Zeppernick wrote that it was "a dictatorship posing as a monarchy" (2008). One resident, Kay Trudell warned that just because they have the right to broadcast, they should not be invited. She warned that their propaganda would not be overt, but rather a "soft, subtle cultural jihad" (Zind, 2008). The overall effects of this propaganda would be deleterious for the health of American democracy. Paul Laffal and Jeffrey Kaufman, local residents and members of the Israel Center of Vermont, suggested that Al Jazeera's "hate speech insidiously

presented as news serves only to undermine the basic tenets of democracy” (Picard, 2008).

AJE as Anti-American

One of the predominant themes of the protests against AJE is that the entire Al Jazeera brand is hostile to the United States. Advocates for removal claimed Al Jazeera called for the killing of Americans. Zeppernick wrote that the Arab service’s content directly motivated people to kill American soldiers; he referred to anecdotes of suicide bombers moved by what they saw on the network¹. He considered that even if “one American troop is killed by someone who was enticed by what they watched on Al-Jazeera, then that is one too many” (2008). This line of reasoning suggests that supporting American troops necessitates opposing the channel’s inclusion on BT’s lineup. This struck a deep chord with several, including City Councilor Paul Decelles, who lost a friend in Iraq. He said he was “insulted and disgusted” and would refuse to subscribe to “as long as Al-Jazeera is there” (Gram, 2008).

AJE as anti-Israel

The Israel Center of Vermont urged its supporters to write letters of support to BT when it was considering ending AJE’s presence on the system. A local rabbi wrote on his temple’s website that the network was “nothing more than a political and religious voice piece of radical Moslems” (Picard, 2008b). He opposed silencing opinions, he wrote, but the cable system should not allow channels that “incite civil unrest or religious prejudice.” Incitement, it should be noted, is one of the well-known exceptions to first amendment free speech protections. The tenor of public comments is captured in letters to the advisory oversight committees. The advisory committees mentioned in the joint resolution that they received the message that AJE promotes anti-Semitism and the destruction of the State of Israel.

Against BT’s Interests

¹ I have not been able to verify this, but will try.

Some argued that carrying AJE goes against BT's interests and is bad for the company's business interests – calling into mind a more economically-minded reading of the free marketplace of ideas. Steve Flemer, a resident, articulated this most forcefully in a letter published on the Burlington Free Press blog (2008). He wrote that a “fledgling city-owned outfit” that struggles with low customer subscriptions should “provide a varied cable menu without having to feel like they needed to make potentially self-harming political statements.” He feels this endangers the entire enterprise, suggesting they would be better off avoiding controversy. He questions whether “our priority [is] to make a political statement which is deemed offensive by a large swath of the city's potential cable subscribers or do we want to shepherd Burlington Telecom into a successful example of a locally-controlled cable provider?” He ends the letter by claiming that as much as he would like to support BT, he will not subscribe because does not wish to support the political act of carrying AJE.

Carrying AJE is Not a Matter of Free Speech

Critics of BT's provision of AJE argued against the idea that free speech was at issue. Zeppernick wrote in an oped that there is a difference between “free speech” and the right to a “podium provided or paid for by others” (2008). In other words, if BT dropped AJE, it would not infringe on some free speech right that AJE possessed since this is not a total ban. It could, for instance, still be seen online using BT's fiber optic cables. Some felt that AJE was exploiting American freedom to destroy it. Marc Abrahams, a local resident, said referring to AJE's sponsors, “They laugh at us, knowing that our blind, sheepish bleatings about ‘freedom’ will ‘freedom’ us right into totalitarianism” (Gram 2008). On the issue of freedom, others took a different argumentative approach. One speaker at the May 27 meeting said that as a country at war, freedoms could be limited and that, after all, they were originally intended for Americans.

Procedural

Though a less direct form of opposition, many pinpointed the process as the issue. Some did so as points of order while others sought it as a basis for nullifying the carriage agreement. City Council member Andy Montroll acknowledged that the public is in favor of disallowing BT's removal of the network, but argued there needs to be better controls in place – perhaps a group of unelected people or outside groups to determine the channel offerings. From a different purely oppositional position, Zeppernick, of the Defenders Council of Vermont, protested that “we haven't been able to find a very detailed and proper framework – and how these decisions are made, who makes them [in] what types of time frames” (Potter, 2008).

The Outcome

In the end, BT and Mayor Kiss decided to maintain the network, and BT signed a contract to carry in July, 2008. Naturally, AJE welcomed the decision. Washington Bureau Chief Will Stebbins said, “We're overjoyed” and compared it to the movie ‘Inherit the Wind,’ but “with Clarence Darrow winning this time” (Briggs, 2008). The advocates for removing AJE were disappointed. However, they also seemed to implicitly acknowledge that after viewing the network, AJE was different than they had initially characterized it as. Nevertheless, they warned it could be a facade. Jamie Zeppernick, executive director of the Defenders Council of Vermont, said in response to the public presentation of the network during the debates:

Given the historical track record of Al-Jazeera's unsavory past, the burden of proof falls not on those who oppose it, but on the network itself and the managers of Burlington Telecom to ensure that the discrepancy between the incendiary images and messages that it has aired and the new dressed-up version that is currently being promoted does not resurface on our publicly owned communication outlet (Briggs, 2008).

Analysis

Al Jazeera, English gained carriage on Burlington Telecom and survived efforts to remove it as the result of several factors. Burlington's political culture offers one explanation. The city's political orientation to the left, pride in political independence, and tradition of local deliberation and participation made the decision to carry more likely. After being challenged by some, public debate through local committees allowed for resolution. This was also a function of the BT's nature as a public enterprise, a long-term project aimed at development free from the control of the orthodox cable industry. As a taxpayer-supported entity, its programming decisions, unlike those of private sector telecommunication companies, could be subject to public citizen scrutiny. Viewers could mobilize as citizens to make demands on a shared institution rather than need to attempt to organize consumer pressures in the case of a private company. The public nature of BT's political economy is therefore a partial explanation, and likely a prominent one given that Comcast, a competitor, has not made AJE available in Burlington. Still, carrying AJE was made possible by the technological affordances of digital cable – a surplus of free channels to fill meant that BT was initially open to carrying any free channels. This was also a function of AJE's political economy. The network's funding from Qatar's emir means it was able to seek carriage without seeking fees. Also, attributes and strategies of the station itself played a role in the outcome. Overall, these factors gave way to a productive tension between AJE's supporters and the opposition, generating a public stream of ideas, perceptions and interactions that shape AJE's distributional-ideational map – the discourses that run in support or against AJE's market entry.

The debate about AJE reflects larger “war on terror” concerns. Within the limits of Burlington, even given its leftist leanings, one can see an ideological divide between those who take the United States to be a nation under threat from foreign enemies versus those who see it as

a country that should engage with the world on dialogic terms. The supporters of AJE felt it offered a chance for dialogue and mutual learning. The opposing advocates of removal saw it as a threatening propaganda mouthpiece that incites hatred of the United States and Israel. One side saw the ability to watch AJE as a freedom of choice that furthers a healthy marketplace of ideas, while the others suggested that a foreign media outlet has no right to carriage even in an ostensibly libertine media system and that AJE's carriage would be a victory for those aiming to harm the country. Supporters of AJE argued it was no worse than other biased news sources and that people were wise enough not to be brainwashed. Opponents charged the network with being beyond the pale, and felt that citizens should have more control over channel decisions so that they could keep out hostile content from the collective channel lineup.

This story of AJE in the United States illuminates the division between the nativistic, nationalism of wartime America and the embedded internationalism of media globalization. The stated positions in the public debate seem congruent with the distinction between nativism and cosmopolitanism in reactions to globalization. Nativism may be inherent to the anti-globalization views that asserted the need to preserve a sort of inherent and monolithic cultural purity that is threatened by foreign cultural invasion. Nativists argued that foreign media interventions harmed the receiving nation's polity and cultural institutions. However, cultural imperialism was a term used by underdeveloped nations to describe the influx of powerful western, corporate media and cultural products promoted by the political and economic power of western, industrialized states. Perhaps instead, cultural jihad, as it was termed above by an opponent of AJE's carriage on BT, is more appropriate to describe the perceived threat they mobilized against. Cosmopolitanism, as demonstrated by the winning party in this debate, seeks to get beyond the fear of infiltration and conflict along essentialized cultural and political

differences. They embraced AJE as a globalized media product that could be useful as an educational tool and help bring together peoples who know little about each other. AJE is quite aware of these tensions, and is trying to position itself as a cosmopolitan network, one that shares “the voices of the voiceless” and bridges cultures.

If the public justifications that emerged in Burlington are indicative a potential discursive divide around AJE nationally, we can get a better sense of the ideational obstacles to AJE’s market entry. Many of these concerns are pre-reception and based on several unquestioned assumptions. However, without a political economy that invites public deliberation over carriage, these discourses around AJE are mostly latent, and will not be adjudicated in public forums. Institutional gatekeepers, such as cable companies, will make the decision. Without public mobilizations around the issue of carriage, the *status quo* of non-carriage will remain. Cable companies will safely act out of risk aversion – avoiding controversy – and let presumptions about audience tastes determine carriage decisions (not just whether to carry or not but how, for example within the basic, premium or “ethnic” channel bundles). AJE’s potential for counter-hegemonic effects or intercultural bridge-building is limited by the challenges of widespread distribution in the United States. However, this debate in AJE shows that latent discourses can be activated to demand AJE, portending the possibility of future distribution.

Postscript

Al Jazeera English’s reputation and image in the United States underwent a transformation in early 2011 during the Arab uprisings, which began in Tunisia, then spread to Egypt and other countries. AJE became an important news source for coverage of the revolts, Egypt’s in particular. Its coverage was widely seen as superior to that of American news outlets. AJE won accolades from political elite, media figures, pundits and others who are attentive to

international affairs. Many, including government officials, began to argue that AJE should be more widely available, and news reports indicated that President Barack Obama himself watched AJE. A “Demand Al Jazeera” campaign initiated by AJE generated 80,000 letters of support to cable companies. This sea-change in AJE’s image did not immediately translate into vastly greater TV distribution, however. It is too soon to determine whether changing discourses around AJE, and growing demand, will impact AJE’s availability on TV nationally. Given the political economy of the industry as a private sector, and the still controversial nature of the Al Jazeera brand among members of the public (Youmans and Brown, 2011), it seems likely that Burlington continues to be one of the outliers where Americans can view AJE on their television through cable.

APPENDIX A

Recommendation Resolution re: Al Jazeera English on Burlington Telecom

Adopted by the Burlington Telecommunications Advisory Committee (BTAC)/Burlington Cable Advisory Council (BCAC) at their joint June 24, 2008 meeting

WHEREAS the Telecommunications Advisory Committee (TAC) was created by Burlington City Council, which desired to include a measure of citizen input and oversight into the development and deployment of Burlington Telecom; and,

WHEREAS the Vermont Public Service Board required Burlington Telecom to form the Cable Advisory Council (CAC) to provide it with ongoing public input from Burlington residents of all walks of life on community needs and to serve as a vehicle for two-way communication with Burlington Telecom (BT); and,

WHEREAS the Mayor of the City of Burlington requested that the TAC and CAC make a recommendation of whether or not Al Jazeera English (AJE) should be retained or dropped from the BT cable channel lineup before BT takes any action; and

WHEREAS the Mayor of the City of Burlington requested that the public be heard on the matter of whether or not AJE should be retained or dropped from the BT cable channel lineup before BT takes any action; and,

WHEREAS our Committees have received both written and verbal comments from individuals residing inside and outside of Burlington; and

WHEREAS our Committees are unequivocally opposed to hateful and intolerant speech in whatever form; and

WHEREAS our Committees have heard assertions that AJE's content is objectionable in that it supports terrorism, anti-Semitism and promotes the destruction of the State of Israel; and

WHEREAS the Committees believe that much of the testimony regarding AJE's objectionable content has been based on secondary sources, and that the Committees have seen no consistent or widespread agreement or evidence from respected sources to substantiate the aforementioned assertions; and,

WHEREAS our Committees understand that while AJE is owned and financially supported by the Emir of Qatar, an ally of the United States and a constitutional monarchy that applies Islamic law and is perceived by many as being restrictive of human rights, we cannot draw any conclusions as to whether or to what extent these particular characteristics have impact on the content of AJE or have any relationship to AJE carriage on BT; and,

WHEREAS our Committees have heard that many potential customers of BT will not subscribe to its services while AJE remains in the channel lineup, and, likewise, our Committees have also heard that many current customers of BT will unsubscribe if AJE were to be removed from the channel lineup or will only subscribe if it is offered, and that these conflicting assertions present an uncertain revenue effect upon BT, such uncertainly being underscored by the fact that

requests from our Committees to BT for empirical information to measure revenue impacts in this regard have not been productive; and,

WHEREAS our Committees have heard from a significant number of subscribers and potential subscribers asking that BT expand the number of international news and information channels available on BT; and,

WHEREAS our Committees recognize that individuals have both the capacity and the right to watch what they want in their home; and,

WHEREAS BT subscribers currently have at their disposal technologies capable of blocking objectionable material; and,

WHEREAS our Committees believe that AJE provides a point of view not found in the coverage of national and international news of other channels; and,

WHEREAS our Committees firmly stand on the side of free expression, we have heard arguments supporting the contention that the removal of AJE is a First Amendment issue as well as arguments that it is not a First Amendment issue, nevertheless determining the answer to this question is outside the scope of the expertise of our Committees, particularly since BT is organizationally structured as a department of a municipality; and,

WHEREAS our Committees appreciate the overall tenor and thoughtfulness of those in our community who have chosen to make their voice heard on all sides of this issue; and,

WHEREAS upon consideration of all public testimony, our Committees have witnessed a compelling preponderance of subscribers and potential subscribers requesting that BT not drop AJE; and,

WHEREAS BT has in effect a Cable TV Channel Carriage Policy (the spirit and letter of which was approved by the TAC and CAC) that guides BT to make choices based on three principal objectives of (a) providing a wide variety of channels along with the greatest feasible degree of consumer choice, (b) remaining economically viable as a system operator in a climate of rapidly changing technology and consumer trends, and (c) being responsive to the needs of the communities it serves; and,

WHEREAS BT has not provided our Committee with requested contractual detail pertaining to its carriage of AJE thus preventing our Committees from considering contractual circumstances as part of our recommendation,

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Telecommunications Advisory Committee and Cable Advisory Council in their advisory capacities jointly and unanimously recommend that Burlington Telecom maintain its carriage of Al Jazeera English.

Members voting unanimously for the Resolution:

Michael Burak (TAC/CAC)

Gregory EplerWood, Chair (TAC/CAC)

Jules Fishelman (CAC)

Timothy George (TAC)

David Jenemann (CAC)
Shakuntala Rao (CAC)
Jan Schultz (TAC/CAC)

Members absent:

Linda Deliduka (CAC)
Patrick Griffin (TAC/CAC)
Michael Wood-Lewis (TAC/CAC)

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