

## **Al-Jazeera in Burlington**

**John Stuart**

When Al-Jazeera tried to launch a spin-off version, Al-Jazeera International, in the U.S., they ran into opposition in the form of Accuracy in Media (AIM). AIM produced a DVD, entitled "[Terror Television: The Rise of Al-Jazeera and the Hate America Media](http://www.stopaljazeera.org/terror_television_trailer.html)" [http://www.stopaljazeera.org/terror\\_television\\_trailer.html](http://www.stopaljazeera.org/terror_television_trailer.html), which exposed Al-Jazeera's anti- American biases and support for terrorism.

In September of 2006, AIM commissioned a poll to gauge Americans' view of having Al-Jazeera air in the U.S. The poll results showed that by a margin of 2-1, Americans think the U.S. government should oppose giving the new channel access to the U.S. media market.

The AIM Press Release of September 13, 2006, points out that:

"Al-Jazeera International, an English-language sister network to the Arabic Al-Jazeera, has been desperately seeking carriage on U.S. cable and satellite systems. It has hired well-known media figures such as David Frost, Dave Marash and Riz Khan, and its expensive new television studios are under construction on K Street N.W. in Washington, D.C.

"But the new AIM poll finds that the channel's launch is opposed by more than one-half (53 percent) of the American people, a figure which dwarfs the number of those (29 percent) supporting it. What's more, 38 percent of the American people were adamantly against the channel."

In a FOX News televised debate with the then top U.S. journalist at Al-Jazeera English, Dave Marash, AIM's Cliff Kincaid reported on documented evidence that captured terrorists in Iraq had testified that they were motivated to go to Iraq to kill U.S. soldiers by the images they saw on Al-Jazeera's Arabic stations. In addition, he pointed to documentation of close connections between Al-Jazeera and the former regime of Saddam Hussein.

Kincaid also points out that Retired Army Intelligence officer and columnist Ralph Peters, who is nothing if he is not blunt, called their correspondents "Killers with Cameras." He has written that "Al-Jazeera is so consumed by hatred of America and the West that the network would rather see Iraq collapse into a bloodbath than permit the emergence of a democracy sponsored by Washington." Rather than deny these allegations, Marash simply insisted that Al-Jazeera English would be free from influence of the parent company and not have the same biases.

Well, as they say, “That was then, this is now”. Recently, Marash has stepped down from the station, citing a "reflexive adversarial editorial stance" against Americans at Al-Jazeera English.

Americans are not the only ones with a beef against Al-Jazeera. In a February 2007 blog, AIM reported that the Iraqi government issued the following statement: “The Al-Jazeera channel continues in its overtly hostile attitude towards the Iraqi people and continues to contribute to the spread of death and destruction by adopting a line that is frankly hostile to the Iraqi people and government. We condemn this attitude and call on parliament to take a firm position on this channel and resort to all legal means to prevent it continuing its hostile policy.”

The result of AIM’s heroic efforts was that no major cable station in America was willing to carry Al-Jazeera English. In spite of all the nation wide opposition to carrying Al-Jazeera English, Burlington Telecom, a local municipally owned station, decided to carry it.

The move to bring Al-Jazeera to Burlington met with some immediate local opposition. According to a local Burlington resident who is now spearheading the opposition, “The prior general manager of BT (Burlington Telecom) brought Al Jazeera online unilaterally, without formal approval from the Mayor or City Council. Apparently he did brief the council, but told them Al Jazeera is just like the BBC and CNN.” Subscriptions have been floundering. There are 15,000 potential customers and only 2,300 have subscribed thus far.

Perhaps it was this opposition, coupled with the bleak financial future that now confronts BT, which led to a decision by the current general manager simply to drop Al-Jazeera. This was a move that should not have been much of a surprise since they had no contract to begin with. When the local “Peace and Justice” groups got wind of this, they started to scream about violations of free speech. This resulted in a publicly-televised event set up to explore the question as to why Al Jazeera was being dropped. Of course, no such public inquiries have been made as to why it was picked up in the first place. At this event, members of the newly formed [Defenders Council of Vermont](#) challenged the notion that the right to free speech included the right to taxpayer-subsidized airing of one’s speech. It was suggested that the free speech issue was a Red Herring argument that could lead to an end of the real debate on whether BT’s listeners are well served by carrying Al-Jazeera.

Then on Tuesday, May 27, a public meeting was held by BT’s advisory groups in order to determine what their recommendation to the telecommunications company should be. The following was reported to me by a member of the Defenders Council of Vermont who was able to attend.

Of approximately 100 of the public, 25 elected to speak to the issue in front of a committee consisting of about 12 board members. Of those 25 people, more than two thirds spoke in favor of airing Al Jazeera. Each was given the space of one minute in

which to air his/her views. Some complained that those who objected to airing Al Jazeera were simply discriminating against a badly maligned people. Others echoed that sentiment, speaking of a “disturbing sense of fear and hatred of Islam” they had noted in Burlington. Another pointed out that, after all, Al Jazeera was some of the favorite programming in Israel. Free speech and censorship issues were a constant refrain.

On the other hand, others who wished to see Al Jazeera stopped, spoke of the lives lost on the battlefields in the Middle East and the documented evidence that some of them were enticed to become suicide bombers while listening to Al Jazeera. Another reminded us of the contradiction inherent in the idea of being *tolerant* of those who only know intolerance. Still another mentioned that the very idea of such programming was an insult to patriotic Americans, Burlington’s Jewish population, and soldiers, either on active duty or veterans of the present conflict in Iraq. Since Burlington Telecom is a public utility, and one that is presently losing money, someone observed that it was important that the people running it be allowed to make a business decision that was untainted with politics.

A speaker near the end of the public session identified the heart of the matter. He reminded us that we were at war, that the freedoms enshrined by the founding fathers were not intended to be limitless, nor were they intended, when written in our constitution, for any by our own people.

Within the next three weeks, there will be another public meeting. However, it may only allow a two minute expression of opinion.

Meanwhile, it is far fetched to think this battle will be won and *certainly not* easily won. Those who expressed embarrassment about living in one of only two cities in the entire United States to air Al Jazeera were told that they were in the minority. One should, instead, be proud. And indeed, Burlington Vermont is a very good, and strategic place to establish roots if you have a long-term plan.

Education is the key. And it is not just education about radical Islam. It is education about the freedoms we take for granted, (and about which it seems we really know very little), and which radical Islam is using against us....whether it is freedom of speech or freedom of religion, or the right to a fair trial in our courts.

Freedom of speech, as conceived by the founders, is a negative freedom, as are all the others. We, in America, enjoy freedom from interference by the government in our expression of speech. If it were a *positive* freedom, that would mean that we as individuals were *entitled* to that free speech. In other words, someone...most likely the government.... would have to provide us with the way to get that speech out there. As originally written, the freedom to say what you want does not mean you will be given the podium as well. It does not mean you will be given a radio or TV station on which to express your views. You may speak but people are not thereby forced to *listen, or to subsidize your speech*, as would be the case with a government supported media outlet like BT.

How very important it becomes, in fighting against an implacable enemy, to know *why* it is important that we win. Only when we know what we would lose and what we fight *for* do we have a chance of being victorious.

The question still stands before us: do the citizens of Burlington want publicly to support a station with ties to a media outlet which has been instrumental in encouraging terrorists to come to Iraq and engage in battle with the men and women of OUR armed forces?

Is that how we support the troops?

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*John Stuart is the president of Defenders Council of Vermont. Their mission is to build Vermonters' understanding of America's heritage, support our Armed Services and educate Vermont's citizens about the nature, reality, and threat of radical Islam  
If you are a reporter or producer who is interested in receiving more information about this writer or this article, please email your request to [info@defenderscouncilvt.com](mailto:info@defenderscouncilvt.com)*