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Brian Mackey: Al Jazeera offers on-the-ground perspective

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Recent events have cast a spotlight on a television channel most of us can't see.

The revolution that's roiled Egypt and may be sweeping across the Middle East has vaulted Al Jazeera English to worldwide prominence. But in the United States, odds are you can't see it on your TV.

It's been repeated so much it's almost become a cliché, but Al Jazeera English's in-depth, on-the-ground coverage of the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt is being called a "CNN moment" for the network. It's a reference to the way the American cable news network rose to prominence on the strength of its coverage during the Gulf War in the early 1990s.

To find out what we might be missing, I called Kristi Barnwell, who teaches modern Middle East history at the University of Illinois Springfield. She's been following the events in Egypt on both American cable news channels and Al Jazeera English's Internet stream.

"Especially in the first week and a half of the revolution, American TV was really American-focused — what is this impact going to have on the United States? — and wasn't paying as much attention to what was going on on the ground," Barnwell said.

"For example, American news sources were focused on the Muslim Brotherhood, and if you listened to the news (in America) for the first week, you'd think that was a serious threat," she said. "If you were listening to Al Jazeera, it was much more de-centered and focused on what was going on in Egypt."

Asked about Al Jazeera's bad reputation — that it's anti-American and not objective — Barnwell said she teaches her students there's no such thing as objectivity.

"(Al Jazeera) offered more perspectives, and perspectives that Americans were not necessarily used to hearing," she said. "Certainly there are negative perspectives about American foreign policy, where people were critical of it, but the main thing is that the coverage coming out of there tends to focus on what impact it has on the ground in whatever area they're covering, whether it be Iraq or Palestine and so on."

Of course, a lot of Americans would probably rather not learn the nitty-gritty ways in which our policies play out on the ground.

"That gap in knowledge makes it seem like Al Jazeera can be anti-American," Barnwell said, adding that the network also brings on American and British officials who have perspectives that are in line with Western foreign policies.

But, if most Americans don't get to see it, what does it matter?

Al Jazeera English hasn't been totally unavailable in the U.S. — it streams live on the Web, and there are a few independent cable providers that carry the network (apparently you can watch it on your TV in Toledo, Ohio, which has a large Muslim population; and Burlington, Vt., which has a large liberal population).

When the channel was launched about five years ago, many Americans assumed it would offer anti-American coverage. No major cable or satellite TV companies agreed to carry the channel, though most cited not the controversial coverage but the "overly fragmented 400-channel TV universe," as Businessweek put it at the time.

Things have not changed. I asked Comcast spokeswoman Angelyne Amores why her company does not carry the channel.

"We do not have a carriage agreement with Al Jazeera English on our service," Amores said. Asked if there was any chance of it being added in the future, she said, "We can't speculate; however, we regularly examine our channel lineups."

I hope so. Late last year, Comcast finalized a program to convert a significant chunk of its programming from analog to digital, ostensibly to free bandwidth for more channels and faster Internet connections.

So now we have a glorious bounty of sports programming (ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNU, ESPNNews and ESPN Classic; networks for the NBA, NHL, MLB and NFL; the Outdoor, Sportsman, Tennis, Soccer, Golf and Horse Racing channels; plus CBS, Fox, Comcast, Versus and Big Ten channels). And at any given moment, there are enough movies available On Demand to keep any one person occupied for an eternity.

Is it too much to ask to get a uniquely foreign, on-the-ground perspective on the news?

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