

Al Jazeera, but not for the wrong reasons

The Cranky Professor

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We in Canada should be able to watch Al Jazeera, a news network based in Qatar, on our televisions in our living rooms, or says Joan Baxter (“Why Can’t Canadians Watch Al Jazeera,” *Chronicle Herald*, 14 January 2009; <http://thechronicleherald.ca/Columnists/1100628.html>).

Baxter is right—of course we should be able to watch Al Jazeera. But the reasons why are nothing like those Baxter gives. Our quarrel should not be with any decision that the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission has made. It should, rather, be with the power the CRTC has to make such decisions.

We cannot watch Al Jazeera on our televisions because the CRTC requires companies that would distribute it to monitor it for abusive content and to delete anything that crosses one or another line. Understandably, no distribution company will devote to this task the resources required, especially not when, despite its good-faith efforts, the company might still receive a complaint and, thereby, incur the wrath of the CRTC. Thus, the CRTC in effect prohibits companies from offering Al Jazeera to their subscribers.

Baxter has three arguments why the CRTC should lighten up. The first is that Al Jazeera doesn’t broadcast abusive content and, therefore, doesn’t need to be monitored. It’s a fine news network, Baxter tells us: it employs former CBC people, it attempts to appease no one, it covers stories other networks don’t, and it gets its facts right. Larry Haiven, a professor at Saint Mary’s and a member of Independent Jewish Voices (Canada), agrees. Baxter quotes Haiven saying that Al Jazeera “offers an extremely moderate view.”

Baxter’s second argument is that Al Jazeera is no worse when it comes to abusive content than Fox News, which Canadian companies can distribute without monitoring. Baxter asks, Why the double standard?

Baxter’s third argument is that Al Jazeera provides a perspective on events the other networks don’t, a needed perspective. Here she’s joined by Mohamed Boudjenane, of the Canadian Arab Federation. According to Boudjenane, it’s in the interests of certain lobbyists that Canadians be denied Al Jazeera’s perspective.

Significantly, not one of Baxter’s reasons is a reason against the CRTC’s having the powers it does to control Canadian airwaves. In fact, each reason assumes that it’s a fine thing for the CRTC to be able to keep Al Jazeera out of our living rooms. Baxter merely challenges the CRTC’s rationale for choosing to exercise its power in this case.

Indeed, Baxter might well be happy to have the gates closed on what she would judge to be abusive content. She just disagrees that the content of Al Jazeera is abusive, or abusive enough, or abusive in a bad way.

What's truly outrageous in the case, though, is that a government agency can make judgements regarding what we Canadians can and cannot watch. What's outrageous is that the CRTC has the power to regulate our viewing options. Even if Al Jazeera is everything despicable its critics say it is, still our distribution companies should be able to offer it to their subscribers.

We have in the case of the CRTC and Al Jazeera another instance of the state regulating expressive behaviour though that behaviour puts no one directly at risk of harm. Like many of our human rights commissions, the CRTC attempts to impose on Canadians, through legally binding decisions, an orthodoxy of belief and feeling. That's what concerns all of us who care about freedom of expression. And that's really what should concern Jane Baxter, Larry Haiven, and Mohamed Boudjenane as well.