

Al-Jazeera's AJ+ eyes young viewers on 'social stream'

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The Al Jazeera logo seen at their television broadcast studio in New York, August 16, 2013

Al-Jazeera launches its AJ+ online video service Monday, aiming to connect with young people who want to keep up with news without watching television or reading newspapers.

The new service, separate from Al-Jazeera America and the rest of the

[news](#) organization, is directed at the hard-to-reach audience which eschews traditional media.

The target audience is "people who don't have a TV and whose news consumption starts with mobile and ends with mobile," says Yaser Bishr, executive director of strategy and development at Al Jazeera Media Network.

AJ+, which has a 60-person global staff and is based in San Francisco, began with a "soft launch" earlier this year. Monday it rolled out its app for Apple iOS devices, aiming to generate broader interest and sharing of its news videos.

The goal is to deliver news videos in an on-demand format like Netflix, and allow viewers to share via a variety of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

On the social stream

"We exist on the social stream," Bishr told AFP in a phone interview. "This is for people who have a different news consumption cycle."

This means there is no news "anchor" who presents the news, and users can select what they want to view and when to view it.

But the service will leverage the rest of the Al-Jazeera network by using the dozens of Al-Jazeera bureaus around the world, and some of the raw video footage from the network.

With the launch of the service to a global audience in English, AJ+ is essentially trying to create a new category for news consumption centered around the elusive 18- to 34-year-old consumer.

Bishr said he sees little overlap with Al-Jazeera's US cable channel, which launched last year, noting that the average cable TV news viewer is around 45 years old.

"This is a different audience," he said.

He said AJ+ has had more than seven million views over the past weeks without any marketing "and that indicates there is audience out there that is looking for this kind of content."

The new service puts an emphasis on "socially shareable content that will highlight human struggles and achievements while also providing context and relevant background on the world's biggest stories," according to a statement from the media group.

A broader footprint

AJ+ seeks to broaden the footprint for Al-Jazeera in the United States after its US cable channel launched in 2013 gained little traction, said Adel Iskandar, professor of communication at Simon Fraser University who follows Al-Jazeera and co-authored a 2002 book on the group.

"They chose to go with cable, which probably cost them around \$1 billion, only to realize the majority of their young audience, which had followed their YouTube channel and Al-Jazeera online, no longer had access," Iskandar said.

He said AJ+ will compete against services such as Vice Media and Huffington Post's HuffPost Live, but will have a stronger international flavor and "slightly more politicized position," with a focus on issues such as human rights and social justice.

The new effort "could be a smart way to go about rebranding without

using what is negative about the Al-Jazeera brand," Iskandar said, noting that some Americans are still wary of the group's Middle East roots and ties.

A new category

Some analysts say there is potential for a digital video news product, if it is well executed.

Ken Doctor, analyst with the media research firm Outsell, said he sees a market for smartphone users "who want to plug into headphones and watch on the subway."

The Millennial generation, Doctor notes, is especially coveted by media and advertisers because it is bigger than the baby-boom generation and people's habits are not yet entrenched.

"You want people as they are becoming adults. Their buying behavior is still in formation," he said.

AJ+, however, will start off with no advertising, Bishr said.

"We are looking at ways to generate revenue," he explained. "But we are not going to sacrifice the viewing experience" by inserting ads in news videos.

For now, Bishr said, the priority for AJ+ will be "getting into the mainstream" by building a viewer base.

According to Doctor, AJ+ may face hurdles in building an audience because of the roots of Al-Jazeera, which is backed by Qatar's royal family.

"There are only a minority of people who want to stay on top of the news," he said. "And those people are more likely to understand Al-Jazeera's funding and roots."

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