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# Al Anstey looks to rewrite Al Jazeera America headlines

Shannon Bond in New York

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New cable chief tries to put out ‘burning fires’ while boosting TV and online audiences



Shortly after Al Anstey arrived in New York in May to take the helm of Al Jazeera America, he held a series of marathon meetings with the US cable news channel’s editorial staff to answer a question: “What is Al Jazeera America?”

The result was a list of tenets describing the channel’s “editorial DNA”. It included exhortations to “hold power to account” and uphold balance and integrity. “We are pro-nothing and anti-nothing.”

But employees had their own more prosaic questions. “What came up repeatedly was, ‘You’re putting the cart before the horse’,” says one staffer. “You first have to figure out how to put on television with workflows and a system that makes sense. There are so many structural flaws in the organisation that it does not matter what the vision is.”

The exercise was a deliberate first step by the 49-year-old Mr Anstey to stabilise an organisation that has come nearly undone in its two years of existence.

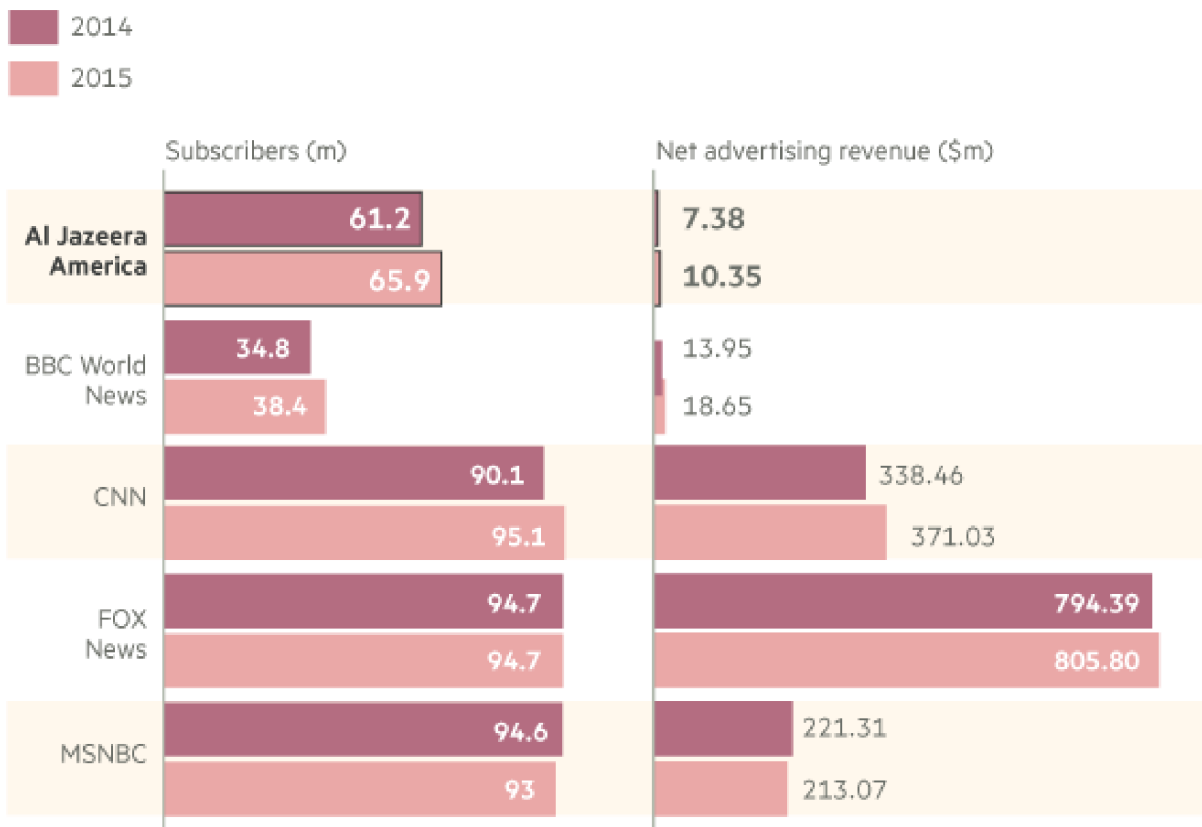
“People perhaps thought there’d be rapid change within the first few weeks. And that would have been wrong,” he tells the Financial Times in his first interview since taking over. “You’ve got to be inclusive and you’ve got to build a strategy . . . It’s going to take time. We’re beginning to see some of the changes.”

Launched in 2013 after the \$500m purchase of Al Gore’s Current TV, Al Jazeera America embarked on an ambitious mission to bring smart international reporting to a US audience. The channel made flashy hires supported by hefty investment from its owner, the Qatari government. But it has struggled to build a significant audience or generate advertising revenue.

Following months of job cuts and staff agitation, AJA nearly imploded earlier this year when it was hit with a \$15m discrimination lawsuit, lost three female executives and removed the unpopular Ehab Al Shihabi, its founding chief executive.

Mr Anstey walked into a newsroom reeling from what half a dozen current and former staffers described as Mr Al Shihabi’s dysfunctional management style. One former executive spoke of “a culture of fear”.

## How AJA measures up



Source: SNL Kagan

FT

“The teams here lived through some very rocky times. It was an aggressive timeline to launch,” says Mr Anstey. “There was quite a fast pace, I think, set by my predecessor, and that created certain challenges and certain disquiets which did resonate before my arrival.”

Mr Anstey, the former managing director of the Al Jazeera English global news service, acknowledges that he must extinguish “burning fires”, including two lawsuits from former employees alleging sexism and bias.

He must also confront widespread concerns over the channel’s ability to survive amid reports that Al Jazeera Media Network, its parent group, is preparing to cut as many as 1,000 jobs. Those reductions are expected to spare Al Jazeera America, according to people familiar with the matter. But with falling oil and gas prices, some staff question Qatar’s willingness to maintain Al Jazeera’s funding. AJMN declined to comment.

Mr Anstey’s early moves have focused on reassuring the newsroom. An employee manual now details “internal best practices”, including anti-discrimination policies, and his editorial brainstorming sessions were meant to demonstrate transparency and “inclusivity”. Mr Anstey says he plans to bolster its staff, which is currently about 500.

But Mr Anstey faces further hurdles as he tries to



Al Anstey, chief executive of Al Jazeera America

expand the network's audience.

"Al is a charming guy and he's brought a level of stability and professionalism that was sorely missed," says one employee. "He's saying all the right things but the thing that's missing is any sense of action."

The network faces fierce competition, both on television, where its viewership is near the bottom of

the cable networks rated by Nielsen, and online, where it is up against new media groups including Vice Media and BuzzFeed.

"People are savvy and discriminating and they have lots of choices, whether they're on TV or online," said Andrew Heyward, a former CBS News president.

AJA recently settled a \$75m lawsuit with DirecTV to keep its channel on the satellite service. But it is still fighting to win over many Americans who are suspicious of the Al Jazeera name.

"The reputation is low," Mr Anstey says, in contrast to Mr Al Shihabi who dismissed suggestions that the brand had a poor reputation in the US.

Instead, he casts the network's limitations as an opportunity. "The best way of dispelling misconceptions about what Jazeera stands for is to get the content to [viewers]. And the digital opportunity is such a ready way of doing so," he says.

Mr Anstey points to a recent profile of the first mixed-race winner of the Miss Japan pageant, which has been viewed more than 4m times on AJA's Facebook page. Website traffic over the past six months is up 8 per cent from a year ago, but averages little more than 2m monthly US visitors, according to ComScore.

The newsroom "would like to see something more energetic", says a long-time employee. "There's still some cathartic need for people to see, 'Did you fix these problems or are you just the new guy?'"

Mr Anstey argues that the network is in the uniquely privileged position of having time to build a sizeable loyal audience interested in global news. "There's no set target that it has to be profitable by X date," he says.

But he must still convince employees that his deliberative approach will produce results.

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