Comcast should add Al-Jazeera English

Marwan M. Kraidy
is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication

News outlets rise to prominence during times of war and upheaval. The Arab uprisings are Al-Jazeera English's time to shine.

The news organization is lobbying for a channel on Comcast, and it should get one. It's time for Americans to take Al-Jazeera English, established by the Qatar government, as a serious source of news.

Unlike its Arabic-language sister, Al-Jazeera English played no favorites between the protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, which Al-Jazeera Arabic supported, and their brethren in Bahrain, which the channel did not. Its coverage of protests elsewhere, as the movement metastasizes into the Arab world, should be no less balanced. When Al-Jazeera English was launched in 2006, I appeared on several talk shows to explain the background and consequences of having a new global English-language news outlet moored in the Middle East. I should not have been surprised by the hostile e-mails I received afterward.

The Al-Jazeera brand in the United States is toxic, evoking irrational fear and a desire to suppress contrary voices. In the land of the First Amendment, few seem willing to stand up for Al-Jazeera's right to speak, even less a chance to be heard.

Cable companies said market factors pushed them to not carry Al-Jazeera English. They argued that there was no demand in the United States for what some uninformed pundits call "Bin Laden TV." As a result, only viewers in Washington, Burlington, Vt., and Toledo, Ohio, can watch Al-Jazeera English on cable, though it is widely available through the Internet and YouTube.

This is unfortunate. Americans are missing out on sophisticated and consistent coverage of parts of the world that CNN and BBC remember only during crises, and then only for the duration of the news cycle. Al-Jazeera English's coverage of Africa, for example, is unparalleled in frequency, breadth, and depth. The channel's coverage of the recent Arab uprisings provided unprecedented local access for a global news organization.

The uprisings have cemented Al-Jazeera's status as a threat to autocratic regimes. On Libyan state television, Moammar Gadhafi and his proxies continue to spin tales of four co-conspirators targeting Libya: two minor players, Israel and the United States, and two major actors, al-Qaeda and ... Al-Jazeera. Clearly Al-Jazeera is on the right side of history.

Surveys continue to show that Americans are not very informed about global affairs. This is a liability in our politically and economically interconnected world, in which limiting our sources of information can harm America's competitive edge.

We should expand the range of our news sources, and U.S. cable providers should add Al-Jazeera English to their lineup. We would not be doing anything remarkable.

Viewers in most parts of the world have the option of watching Al-Jazeera English alongside BBC, CNN, and Sky News. We would simply be joining the rest of the world, to the benefit of America's education, interests, and national security.