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A Market-Based Strategy of International Broadcasting ^[1]

International broadcasting (now sometimes called “international media” to accommodate its increasing use of the Internet) is often subject to strategic plans. This is probably because international broadcasting is usually funded by national governments and is considered part of a country’s international relations.

Some of these strategic plans can be quite detailed, filling many pages. They specify which policies will be communicated, through which media, to what type of audience, with what desired effects. They can be rather Shannon-and-Weaver-like (or even Pavlovian, if the desired effect is perhaps to make audiences abroad salivate). Such strategies are centrally planned rather than market-based.

A market-based international broadcasting strategy, informed by a uses-and-gratifications perspective, centered on the audience’s own strategy of seeking information from abroad, does not require so many pages of detail. It can be sketched out on the back of an envelope: 1) Find out what audiences are seeking information from foreign sources, because of government control or other deficiencies of their domestic journalism. 2) Determine which media both the audience and broadcaster have access to, keeping in mind that, in many countries, the most popular media are not available to foreign entities. 3) Give the audience the content they want.

In 40 years of international broadcasting audience research, the principal takeaway for me is that audiences for international broadcasting are seeking news that is more comprehensive, timely, reliable, and, above all, *credible* than the news they get from their state-controlled domestic media. The audience is interested mainly in news about their own country, but not to the exclusion of news about the rest of the world. Strategic international broadcasting would therefore provide a complete news service, and do so without government interference.

The tricky part is explaining to legislators and other government officials why they should provide funds for a news service but not have control over its content. Members of Parliament in the U.K. generally understand the concept, perhaps because of the BBC's tradition of journalistic independence dating back to the 1920s. It's a more difficult sell to American decision makers, scholars, and fellows. Here are some talking points...

1. People in many countries need the news that they are not getting from their domestic media. Because there is little commercial potential for international broadcasting in languages such as Burmese and Hausa, governments must fund most international multilingual news services.
2. A comprehensive news service counters the misinformation and disinformation of dictators, terrorists, and other global miscreants. It is necessary for the development and nurturing of democracies. Such a news service provides people with the information they need to form their own opinions about current events.
3. It speaks well for the broadcasting country that it is providing a valuable public service in the form of an independent news operation. Propaganda, on the other hand, would provide yet another reason to dislike the broadcasting country. Propaganda in the form of ersatz news would *really* insult audiences, for the brief time that they tune in.
4. A news service that is not independent would not be credible, and therefore it would not have much of an audience. And, accordingly, it would be a waste of the taxpayers' money.

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Strategic international broadcasting would position itself as separate from public diplomacy. Public diplomacy, in the grander strategy, *complements* international broadcasting. The former advocates and is tied to policy. The latter reports and must be independent of policy. Each endeavor should be conducted by separate entities, in separate buildings, ideally in separate cities.

It may seem odd that I am advocating a non-public-diplomacy approach to international broadcasting in the blog of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy. There is, unfortunately, no USC Center on International Broadcasting.
