

Nov 04, 2016 by [Adam Clayton Powell, III](#)

US government broadcasting in Iraq: One Hit, One Miss ^[1]

Radio Sawa popular, but 'no one is watching' Alhurra TV Part of broad failure of U.S. to reach out to Arab media

Washington, Dec. 9 -- The new U.S. government broadcasters in the Middle East have a mixed record: Radio Sawa is a hit, but Alhurra television is a failure.

That was the assessment today by Rajiv Chandrasekaran, who recently returned to Washington after serving for 18 months as Baghdad bureau chief of the Washington Post. Before reporting from Iraq, he was based in Cairo for the Post.

"Radio Sawa is actually popular," he said. "It was more popular before the war when it was one of the few stations you could get with news on the ... medium wave dial as opposed to short-wave."

Chandrasekaran said the news is presented every fifteen minutes, and it reminded him of Washington, D.C., all-news radio station WTOP, a "light and snappy" style that appeals to younger listeners. And almost unique on the Baghdad dial, he said Sawa's news was delivered "without the anti-American slant" favored by most other broadcasters in the region.

But it is the music, not the news, that attracts listeners to Sawa, and that is by design. Popular songs in Arabic alternate with popular music in English.

"It was a brilliant idea," said Chandrasekaran. "People love it. For some reason local broadcasters hadn't hit on the formula."

But on television, he said the U.S. had had several failures, notably Alhurra, in some ways the video partner of Radio Sawa.

"The truth is that no one is watching it," said Chandrasekaran, despite Alhurra's claims (see press release) of a significant audience. He also pointed to some reports, including one by his newspaper, that the channel's programming may be improving.

But he said Alhurra was just one of the mistakes the U.S. is making in Arab television. Perhaps an even bigger mistake was the failure last year to return Iraq's national television broadcaster to the prominent role - and audience - that it once had.

"A key mistake that was made is reopening Iraq's state-run television station," he explained. The Pentagon invited bids, and the contract eventually was awarded to SAIC, a San Diego-based government contractor.

"As Iraqi employees tell it," said Chandrasekaran, "the SAIC folks brought no television

equipment with them.” Instead they tried to scrounge pieces of equipment that survived the U.S. bombing and then the looting by Iraqis.

SAIC’s contract was terminated, he said, and a new contract was awarded by the Pentagon, this time to the Harris Corporation, a Florida-based manufacturer of television transmitters and other electronic equipment.

But Harris had “no experience” running Arab television, the company subcontracted the operation of Iraq’s national broadcaster to a Lebanese television company.

“The result is that Iraqi TV shows ‘Sesame Street’ in Arabic and Lebanese cooking shows,” said Chandrasekaran. When violence breaks out, he explained, Iraqis no longer turn to the national Iraqi broadcaster “because they’re running muppets. Instead, they turn to Al Jazeera and Al Aribiya,” the region’s dominant Pan Arab satellite channels.

He described the ineptitude at Iraq’s national TV channel as “staggering to me,” wasting the enormous good will that Iraqis showed in the spring of 2003.

“Why the U.S. government didn’t find a more competent partner to rebuild the media,” he said was a central issue, “so the [new] Iraqi government could at least have a channel where newscasters didn’t refer to insurgents as freedom fighters.”

But the U.S. government’s failure in Arab television didn’t stop there, according to Chandrasekaran: The U.S. “failed to find a way to reach out to Arabic media,” he said, adding Al Jazeera and other Arab television networks are “frozen out,” so the U.S. view is rarely represented in the most popular news broadcasts.

For a start, he urged the U.S. military to invite Al Jazeera on tours of reconstruction around Iraq, to get pro-U.S. stories and pictures on Arab television. Chandrasekaran said the Arab TV networks are like journalists everywhere: offer them a junket and “they’d take it - and air it.”

Chandrasekaran concluded by saying America’s media missteps in Iraq are part of a wider pattern of failure.

“We had a narrow window of opportunity in my view, four to six months,” he said.

Arriving in Baghdad the day after Saddam Hussein’s government fell, he found “the U.S. was viewed as the country that liberated Iraq. I remember being hugged, being invited into peoples’ houses for tea. People were happy the dictator was gone, people were eager to get on with their lives and run their country.”

But now all of that is what might have been.

Both Sawa and Alhurra are funded by the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors and broadcast to the Middle East from Springfield, Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C.

The person behind both Sawa and Alhurra is Norman J. Pattiz, BBG board member and founder of Westwood One, which he describes as “America’s largest radio network organization.”

Pattiz has described in detail the research behind Sawa and Alhurra, including in

appearances at the USC Annenberg School (watch the [video here](#)).

Chandrasekaran arrived in Baghdad on April 10, 2003 and said he “probably spent more days on the ground than any other journalist.” He said he plans to return to Iraq next month to cover the election.

He has also reported from Iraq for the PBS News Hour (see, [this for example](#)) and for [National Public Radio](#).

Chandrasekaran’s work in Baghdad has been highly praised, including in the new issue of the [American Journalism Review](#).

He made his remarks at a forum today at the [International Reporting Project of Johns Hopkins University](#), where Chandrasekaran will become the [Journalist in Residence](#), taking a leave next year from the Washington Post to write a book about Iraq.
