

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Restoring Vision to U.S. International Broadcasting ^[1]

Worldcasting noted last week the need for that "vision" thing to be injected into America's international broadcasts. It should be the first order of business for those who oversee America's non-military TV and radio programs abroad. Instead, the attention these days is diverted to intramural turf battles that accomplish little to advance U.S. efforts to communicate with international publics.

Of course, one's vision could become dated. Aristotle's vision of a perfect city in ancient Greece was one where only men were in charge. But he also believed that leadership requires anticipation, and that notion still holds up.

So let's give the benefit of the doubt to those whose vision in the 1990s was to eliminate the grandly effective U.S. Information Agency, and to spread its entrails around Washington, D.C. to include the State Department, from which U.S. public diplomacy had been removed decades earlier because it was not working there. And the big bang also created the Broadcasting Board of Governors, an untested concept still trying to find its legs in its charge to keep an eye on America's International Broadcasts. The BBG was also set up as a private corporation to funnel funds from Congress to America's broadcasters, thus acting as a "firewall" to shield the broadcast services from government influence.

But not unheard of in Washington is the power grab, and that seems to be what's happening at the BBG, where vision-setting is not on the agenda.

As Worldcasting earlier reported, the BBG is now selecting the Voice of America's director, normally a president's choice, and did so a couple of weeks ago. Now we learn that the BBG advertised for a new Baghdad bureau chief without first consulting the VOA's newsroom head, when it apparently felt the newsroom was not acting fast enough to fill the slot.


Add the squeal from the Foreign Service union and others about the selection of a political appointee to head the State Department's Rapid Response news center in Europe, to counter enemy disinformation on the war in Iraq. And the State Department's Arabic talking head, Alberto Fernandez, used the "A" and "S" words ("arrogant" and "stupid") while referring to US dealings in Iraq, which got press coverage in the U.S. and abroad. His comments were made on Al Jazeera, rather than on America's own station, Alhurra, which would have gained credibility and buzz through the appearance, and perhaps additional audience, had he said the same thing.

So what we have here is standard work-a-day Washington, where it's easy to take your eye off the ball. "When politics absorbs the livelong day, I like to think about the star Canopus, so far, so far away," said poet Bert Leston Taylor, which aptly describes the approach to getting

today's U.S. public diplomacy up and running again.

Now of course that's a sweeping statement, but let's look at evidence.

The State Department's "Little Lies" task force to track enemy disinformation by its very nature is reactive, not proactive, which underscores the problem that U.S. public diplomacy is not out leading the debate, but is rather playing catch-up and reacting to the enemy. The U.S. should be working the enemy into a reactive frenzy, and not sitting back where it gets itself lathered up.

Well meaning public diplomacy task forces have offered advice on how to fix problems, such as training more Arabic speakers how to counter enemy disinformation , and the need to expand contact with local opinion leaders. Then there are almost daily articles about Karen Hughes, the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, who critics say can do absolutely nothing right, but a forward looking vision is often not placed on the table by detractors.

Broadcasting is, after all, a creative pursuit, with content that can generate enthusiasm and build an audience. But formats that have signature and lasting impact are not often created by committee. Don Hewitt at CBS News had the vision of something he thought could be called "60 Minutes," and Ted Turner created a CNN when cable programs were not generating much revenue, and CNN was thought to have a risky business plan, but Roger Ailes later had a vision to one-up CNN.

Maybe someone with vision will come along to jump-start America's PD. It won't happen with eyes wandering toward the star Canopus.
