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Put the News Here, and the Propaganda There [1]

The complementary roles of U.S. international broadcasting and U.S. public diplomacy

American journalists, writers, scholars, decision makers, and other experts tend to be confused about the relationship between international broadcasting and public diplomacy. For example, in article about President Bush's nomination of Karen Hughes to be under secretary of state for public diplomacy, Fred Kaplan wrote:

> In the Soviet Union of the 1950s and '60s, there was Pravda on the one hand, Voice of America on the other. The former dished out the dreary boilerplate of the ruling Communist Party. The latter offered exciting rhythms from the forbidden outside world.... Today, an official American image, even a well-crafted one, would have to compete with a vast array of newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts and, most crucially, satellite TV networks -- some state-sponsored, some independentthat have a much better idea of what appeals to their viewers than we do. (Slate, March 15, 2005.)

This is an uncommonly astute observation about international broadcasting, but it has little to do with Karen Hughes. True, Ms. Hughes attends meetings of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, sitting on behalf of the Secretary of State, who is an ex officio member of the Board. But the real authority is in the eight appointed members of the Board, a bipartisan panel whose members serve fixed and staggered terms. The State Department representatives can voice concerns, but I assume and hope -- though don't know, as Board meetings are rarely open -- that the Board members do not take these as directives.

International Broadcasting versus Public Diplomacy

The BBG itself has offered different explanations about .the relationship between international broadcasting and public diplomacy. Its 2002 annual report begins with a statement that its chairman Kenneth Tomlinson made at a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in which he places public diplomacy and international broadcasting in "two different spheres":

> We need to understand the importance of maintaining the strength of public diplomacy and the traditions of international broadcasting. I am convinced that we will not be successful in our overall mission of delivering our message to the world if we fail to grasp that these are two different spheres and that they operate according to two different sets of rules.
>
> It is very important that government spokesmen take America?s message to the

> world -- passionately and relentlessly. We should not be ashamed of public advocacy on behalf of freedom and democracy and the United States of America.
>
> International broadcasting on the other hand is called upon to reflect the highest standards of independent journalism as the best means of convincing international audiences that truth is on the side of democratic values.

But the statement concluded by describing international broadcasting as one of the "arms of public diplomacy":

> These arms of public diplomacy should be parallel pursuits because the effectiveness of either is adversely affected when one attempts to impose its approach on the other.

And the 2003 BBG annual report has international broadcasting in the "realm" of public diplomacy:

> "*Within the public diplomacy realm*, the BBG performed its journalistic mission on behalf of the American taxpayers." (Italics added.)

Even the Voice of America described itself as subordinate to public diplomacy, in its March 14 news report about the Hughes nomination.

> Ms. Hughes will undertake a broad review and restructuring of U.S. public diplomacy, which includes cultural outreach, educational exchanges, information programs and international broadcasting, including Voice of America.

For her part, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice does acknowledge the separation of the State Department and BBG. At her Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing on January 18, she responded to a question about public diplomacy and international broadcasting by Virginia Senator George Allen. She placed international broadcasting "as a part of a broad public diplomacy effort." But she added:

> Radio Free Europe and Voice of America and Radio Mart are about telling the truth, not about propagandizing. We have to make certain that people who otherwise don't have access to the truth receive it.... there is perhaps nothing more important in this war of ideas than getting out the truth. And so I look forward to working with the Broadcasting Board of Governors, respecting the line that is there, that has been observed between the State Department and the Board.

But in an interview with the Washington Post, reported on March 25, 2005, Secretary Rice added, perhaps significantly, the words "unified" and "coherent" to her vision of U.S. international broadcasting.

> The way that we were most effective with Radio Free Europe and Voice of America was it was a reliable source of the truth in places where the truth was

> suppressed. And so obviously we'd like our message to be positively received. But you have to be able to communicate a message, and it has to be a unified message and a coherent message....

Some of the recent commentaries about the Hughes nomination are more explicit in their desire to see less of a line between U.S. international broadcasting and public diplomacy. In a Heritage Foundation commentary on March 15, 2005, Stephen Johnson and Helle Dale wrote:

> The BBG is supposed to broadcast balanced news and cultural programs through the Voice of America network and surrogate outlets such as Radio Free Asia. Since the Reagan Administration, these entities have gone on to operate in separate universes... Establish a public diplomacy coordinator position at the National Security Council to put other agencies with missions like information warfare, media development, and foreign broadcasting in sync.

They were perhaps inspired by a recommendation in the widely cited report of Ambassador Edward Djerejian's Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World:

> Broadcasting represents nearly half the spending on public diplomacy, and it must be part of the public diplomacy process, not marching to its own drummer with its own goals and strategy, sources of funding, and board. Congress needs to reexamine the legislation that created the BBG to ensure that broadcast operations support the strategic mission of U.S. public diplomacy. The BBG should also safeguard the professional integrity of the effort, but all broadcasting must fit into the overall public diplomacy strategy of the United States. It is critical, however, that news and opinion programs be accepted as credible and reliable. The truth is our ally.

But how does one maintain a newsroom that is objective, balanced, and reliable, and capable of earning the credibility that is key to success in international broadcasting, if the content is "unified," "coherent," "in sync," and "supports the strategic mission of public diplomacy"? If U.S. international broadcasting is coordinated," the audience, even illiterate nomads in the most isolated corner of the world, will spot its agenda within half a week. They have heard it all on their shortwave radios and will not be taken in by the strategizing of Washington decision makers and think tank fellows.

The Djerejian Commission was not satisfied that U.S. international broadcasting merely keeps foreign audiences well informed with the news. The broadcasts must make people's attitudes more favorable to the United States. They must "move the needle."

> The view of the Advisory Group is that [Radio] Sawa needs a clearer objective than building a large audience. To earn continued financial support, it must show, through continuous research, that it can change attitudes of Arab listeners toward the United States, that is, "move the needle" toward what the State Department, in its mission statement on public diplomacy and public affairs, calls "influence," which comprises "understanding," "constructive disagreement," and "active support."

Confusion about whether the Voice of America is broadcasting news, or a news-like product with a particular spin, is exacerbated by some recent news coverage about VOA. The New York Times, no less, in its March 13, 2005 story about the U.S. government distribution of videos to news organizations, included this passage:

> The 1948 Smith-Mundt Act ... allows Voice of America to broadcast *pro-government* news to foreign audiences, but not at home. (Italics added.)

The VOA Charter requirement that its reporting be "accurate, objective, and comprehensive" would not allow its news to be pro-, or anti-, anything. Indeed, a few days later, the Times published a letter of clarification from VOA spokesman Joe OConnell.

But since the Times story, the "pro-government" label has spread. On March 19, 2005, the Miami Herald used it in an editorial about the government videos that was printed in other papers via the Knight-Ridder news service.

> The Voice of America is prohibited by law from broadcasting pro-government news to American audiences, out of concern that citizens shouldn't pay to aim propaganda at themselves.

With these mixed signals about what VOA and U.S. international broadcasting should do, it is not surprising that notions of propaganda persist. The Washington Post reported that Representative Jose Serrano said of Alhurra during an Appropriation Committee hearing in April 2004, "Do not tell us it's not propaganda, because if it's not propaganda, then I think... we will have to look at what it is we are doing."

The Communication Process of International Broadcasting

Many American journalists and decision makers seem to think of international broadcasting in terms of the radio propaganda pioneered by Germany and Italy in the 1930s, and continued by Radio Moscow from the 1950s. To them, the concept is send message (A), to audience (B) -- with the assumption that the audience is huddled around their radios to hear message A -- to bring about outcome (C), e.g. a more favorable attitude towards the United States, rejection of terrorism, etc.

But the German, Italian, and Soviet international radio efforts were not successful. This is because the actual process of international broadcasting is more complex than that described in the previous paragraph. It starts not with what message a national government wants to

send, but with what content the audience wants to hear. Audience (A) desires certain content (B) that is lacking from their domestic media (C), and so they seek it from foreign broadcasting outlets (D), with a preference towards the broadcaster that provides the best content, with the clearest signal, through the optimum mix of media, with the most convenient schedule.

But what about (E) -- the all-important impact, or effect, of these international broadcasts? Why would the United States government want to fund an international broadcasting effort if it has no control over its content?

1) Because people will listen. The international broadcasting audience makes the effort to tune in to get news that is more reliable than the news they get from their state controlled domestic media.

2) Well informed audiences are bolstered against the misinformation, disinformation, and intentional omissions of media controlled by dictators, terrorists, and other international miscreants. The audience is now equipped to form their own opinion about current affairs.

3) The VOA Charter states, "The long-range interests of the United States are served by communicating directly with the peoples of the world by radio." In VOA's first broadcast on February 24, 1942, announcer William Harlan Hale said, "The news may be good. The news may be bad. We shall tell you the truth." If the policies of the United States are wise and virtuous, then through reporting about U.S. policies and actions and about the policies and actions of its adversaries, the good and the bad, we can reasonably expect that in the long range well-informed audiences will tend to agree with U.S. policies.

4) Even if the United States government decides to pursue policies that are not popular elsewhere in the world, uses of propagandistic techniques would only exacerbate the unpopularity of those policies and of the United States itself. The best the United States can do is to describe those policies as objectively as possible, and to report on the debate on these policies. If the audience does not agree, at least they will have a better understanding why the administration has adopted these policies. And they will know that the United States has a pluralistic system in which policy-making remains under constant debate, including by people whose views may not be far from their own.

5) The audience will witness democracy in action, with all the inherent disorder therein. They may want some of that disorder in their own countries.

6) Even if the audience does not come to agree with American policies, the fact that the United States provides an honest and objective news service speaks well for the United States.

7) Personality and entertainment programs transmit goodwill and convey the humanness of the American people.

All told, the process is long term and subtle and probably cannot be measured by any convenient "needle."

The Complementary Role of Public Diplomacy

While international broadcasting exists as an independent entity, there is, as a separate and parallel effort, public diplomacy. Every country has a right to engage in public diplomacy, and the United States has a special need to.

Public diplomacy would continue to use its usual methods, including the exchanges of writers, artists, and experts.

Web sites are increasingly being used for public diplomacy and are ideal for this purpose. Journalists, government officials, researchers, interested individuals use the websites to get a country's policy statements, transcripts of speeches, contact information, etc.

The U.S. website for this purpose has the rather ungainly URL of http://usinfo.state.gov. It is now available in seven languages. This number of languages should expand. Instead of U.S. international broadcasting competing with itself in 22 languages (VOA versus Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Russian, Ukrainian, Albanian, etc. and VOA versus Radio Free Asia in Mandarin, Burmese, Tibetan, etc), it would be better and certainly more efficient for international broadcasting and public diplomacy to complement each other in at least those 22 languages.

And to make this complementation work, and to maintain credibility all around, the content of the public diplomacy website and other public diplomacy products should not be disguised as news. Users should know that they can go to the U.S. international broadcasting website for an independent journalistic treatment of U.S. affairs, and to the public diplomacy website for official views presented by representatives of the U.S. government.

As a general rule, public diplomacy cannot on its own attract a mass audience because its output does not cater to any popular demand for information or entertainment. To reach large numbers of people, public diplomacy will have to find ways to attach itself to successful media outlets in the target countries. This is increasingly important as domestic media in the target countries improve.

One way to do this is to line up interviews with foreign television stations - including the controversial Al Jazeera -- and other media with large audiences. As an unnamed U.S. official told the London Telegraph (reported March 25), "What would have a real impact is a cast of American diplomats who were capable of putting their case over on Middle Eastern news and talk shows."

Another method is to purchase advertisements on media in the target countries. The use of television advertisements by former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers to inform audiences about the life of Muslims in the United States probably served no useful purpose. But she was on the right track by using ads to tap into large audiences already gathered by these domestic media, rather than try to reinvent the wheel with external U.S. radio or television services built from scratch. These advertisements, if straightforward, economical, plainly identified, and employed only when needed, can help correct the record if U.S. policies and actions are not accurately reported by media in the target country.

Whatever the target country, public diplomacy has a perpetual role, whereas international broadcasting has a finite shelf life. When the domestic media of the country become sufficiently free and diverse, or at least entertaining, people will no longer tune to foreign radio

and television channels. Eventually, the domestic radio and television stations will not use programs and reports from foreign broadcasters, preferring to do the reporting on their own. When this point is reached, international broadcasting no longer has significant potential in the target country. However, even in countries with rich and diverse domestic media, journalists must turn to the public diplomacy operation of the transmitting country to obtain policy statements, press releases, and to arrange interviews and media events.

The British Model: Spend Less, Get More

Since September 2001, the multitude of commentaries that have called for improvements, expansions and, above all, budget increases for U.S. public international broadcasting have ignored the elephant in the living room: From the Cold war years through to the present, BBC World Service has had the largest audience, most impact, and greatest prestige of any international broadcaster, even though Britain spends less money on international broadcasting.

I discussed this fifteen years ago in "Too Many Voices of America," Foreign Policy, Winter 1989/90. One of the reasons is that, in Britain, there is less confusion about the distinct roles of international broadcasting and public diplomacy. Members of Parliament by and large understand the need for the independence of BBC World Service. World Service officials bristle when their station is categorized as public diplomacy. They point out that their role is to provide news, and providing that "speaks well for Britain."

John Tusa, managing director of BBC World from 1986 to 1992, articulated this stance in his book Conversations With the World (1990):

> Short-wave broadcasting is, in essence, anarchic -- it leaps boundaries, defies regulations, scatters forbidden thoughts, and challenges otherwise unchallengeable authorities. It is essentially humanistic, allowing the individual to make his or her own decisions about their view of the world; it opens minds; defies collective regimentation and, out of the darkling confusion of the ether, offers a dialogue of ideas between broadcaster and listener. (pp. 12-13)

So, while many international radio stations have transmitted propaganda, successful international broadcasting provides an antidote to propaganda.

Success in the international communications efforts of the United States requires that international broadcasting and public diplomacy should be conducted by separate agencies, from separate buildings, located, ideally, in separate cities.

Improving U.S. international communications to meet the challenges of the twenty first century requires thinking outside of the proverbial box. Specifically, the thinking should move into two boxes, one box for international broadcasting, another box for public diplomacy, with sufficient distance between the two.

Dr. Kim Andrew Elliott is an audience research analyst in the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau. Views expressed are his own. Kim?s personal website is www.kimandrewelliott.com.