

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Growing Pains At The 'New Alhurra' ^[1]

The "New Alhurra" is on a fast track. In just over half a year, two of its embattled top leaders either slipped off the track or were pushed.

Larry Register is the latest news chief to exit the American government's Arabic satellite channel. The embattled former CNN newsman came in to lead Alhurra only last November.

Such a revolving door is business-as-usual in the highly-charged profession of broadcast news in America, and Alhurra is no exception. (Although in Arabic, Alhurra broadcasts from a Washington, D.C. suburb, so the American revolving door rule applies here, we maintain).

Statistics compiled by the Radio and Television News Directors Association show that American broadcast news chiefs spend much of their career hopping from one job to another. There are exceptions, of course, but according to the RTNDA, "the median is just two years" on the job for a U.S. broadcast news executive. That's because it takes about that long for the individual to make his or her mark, or not, and to move on perhaps to something bigger and better, or not. The golden ring, of course, goes to those who get the highest viewer ratings.

Alhurra's first news chief, Mouafac Harb, held the job 3 years, and his successor, Larry Register, lasted only 6 months, so the median stay for an Alhurra news chief is less than average so far, but still in the ballpark.

What precipitates frequent broadcast news shifts is quite common throughout the industry and holds true for Alhurra as well:

Audience ratings are weak, a replacement news chief comes on board, shakes things up, makes some dreadful decisions as news coverage is hyped in a frenzy to attract viewers (and to get Congress off its back, in this case), the operation gets bad press resulting from leaks from disgruntled employees, and news chiefs often bungle their own press relations, peering out from their bunkers instead of fessing up to achieve closure, and get back to business.

For the past 6-months he has been on the job, Mr. Register would seem to have brought about a new Alhurra, on paper at least, to make his mark in an effort to boost ratings. This includes his expansion of news programming air time on the channel, according to statistics supplied by the channel to Worldcasting.

"In June 2006, Alhurra had 3 live hour-long newscasts everyday," we are informed. "Today, Alhurra has 4 live hour-long newscasts each day... and in April of this year we will add an additional hour of live newscasts creating an average of 6.5 hours of live news each day.... The percentage of live or breaking news coverage of the U.S. or U.S. policy rose 178 percent. The percentage of live coverage and reports in newscasts combined rose 80 percent," says Communications Director Deirdre Kline.

But a series of articles in the Wall Street Journal by Joel Mowbray proved to be Register's

undoing. Among other things, Alhurra provided live coverage of rantings by Islamic terrorist leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, and the channel covered the Iranian-government's Holocaust denial conference. The articles continued but Register never spoke up.

Only a few hours before Register's letter of resignation was made public, a government official suggested to me that this could be in the offing, despite the official expression of "surprise" that Register was still hanging around, while being pummeled. Sure enough, in his letter of resignation not long after Register referred to Mowbray's "attacks" as "unwarranted, unfair and based on falsehoods... placing Alhurra and its editorial independence in jeopardy."

Now, let's for the moment suggest that even in the rush to attract viewers in the Middle East by providing coverage that might resonate with audiences, Register was still wrong by providing airtime to terrorists and Holocaust deniers. That said, most broadcasters still follow the dictates of a now defunct regulation that "required" U.S. broadcasters "to present controversial issues of public importance in an honest, equal and balanced manner" over time.

Register's bosses at the Broadcasting Board of Governors said as much by stating that the channel should be "judged on its entire body of work." But the BBG didn't provide Register the time to achieve this balance, and Register did not speak up in his own defense, or perhaps he wanted to but was told not to.

When interviewing new candidates for Register's job, the BBG should make it clear that while its firewall protects Alhurra's independence from government pressure, the BBG will still decide when that firewall of independence can be breached.
