

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The Great Alhurra Debate ^[1]

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee conceded that its recent call for a debate on Alhurra's effectiveness should have happened before America's Arabic television channel went on the air. But the oversight committee is too late. The dispute rages daily in Washington and the Middle East, and battle lines have been drawn on two major issues.

One is who is watching Alhurra, and the other is what they see there.

Audience ratings are important because the message means nothing if no one is there to receive it, as noted by Norman Pattiz, who founded Alhurra and Radio Sawa, the United States government-owned Arabic radio station.

How many people are watching the channel might seem like a point everyone could agree on, but there are no neutral zones in the great Alhurra debate. The numbers released by the station paint a much more optimistic picture of its viewership than do those calculated by outside sources.

Recently, Worldcasting cited that Alhurra had a 14 percent viewership in Iraq, according to one independent survey. However, a survey released by the network showed 44 percent viewership in the country. Both surveys had about the same number of respondents in their samples for national representation of actual viewing, both did face-to-face interviews throughout Iraq, which is considered more reliable than telephone polling. Each defended to Worldcasting its sample model - the locations of respondents within Iraq - as the most representative of the entire country.

Why the differing results? The survey showing 44 percent recorded the percentage of the adult population in the Iraq sample that said they viewed Alhurra in the *past week*, while the lower figure, 14 percent, represented viewers who watched the channel *the day before*. Previous day numbers are "the currency of the market, most of the agencies, media and advertisers are relying on such data," according to a spokesperson for IPSOS-STAT, a leading independent marketing company in the Middle East. I also know from my personal experience at CBS in New York, that the overnight ratings delivered to my desk first thing each morning were grabbed before coffee.

A representative from the U.S. government's International Broadcasting Bureau spoke to Worldcasting and granted that "weekly audiences are normally greater than daily audiences for all channels, since more people watch any given channel at least once over the course of a week than watch on any given day." The spokesperson defended the network's research by saying that "Weekly viewing and/or listening is the standard audience measure used for all" - the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and others - and that it is also the standard measure by other international broadcasters including "the BBC, Radio France International, Deutsche Welle, Radio Canada...We use the weekly measure to maintain

consistency...”

And this has yet to get to the heart of the controversy. According to one critic, Alhurra is known as “Al Jazeera lite in the Middle East.” Salameh Nematt, Washington Bureau Chief of the international Arab daily Al-Hayat and the Lebanon-based Arab satellite television channel LBC claimed that Arab audiences are disappointed that Alhurra does not have a harder edge in its reporting, “to expose torture and massacres” that are taking place in repressive Arab countries, and “rulers in the Gulf who pocket one-third of the country’s income.”

Nematt said that “Middle East viewers were hoping that Alhurra would do the kind of reporting about repressive governments as the U.S. had done with Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America Arabic service,” the latter of which was replaced by the music and news channel, Radio Sawa.

Deirdre Kline, communications director of the U.S. government’s Middle East Broadcasting Networks, countered by citing a list of 17 reports on issues carried regularly on Alhurra’s news broadcasts. Those include several stories from Saudi Arabia on such topics as human rights violations and the problem of domestic violence, plus the Kifaya movement’s demonstrations in Cairo before the general elections, and anti-war demonstrations in Washington, DC, and London.

Alhurra gets its lightweight reputation in part because it “outsources” Middle East coverage, said Nematt, who was fired as an Alhurra talk show participant after he criticized the station’s management. He said it uses reporters from its mammoth contractor, Associated Press Television News (ATPN), instead of having its own full-time, staffed news bureaus in the region, as Al Jazeera does. APTN touts on its website that “We are now the primary source of foreign news and technical support for the growing number of satellite stations in the Middle East as well as Alhurra...” Farmed out reporting might work for now, but the new BBC Arabic channel launches in 2007; the British broadcaster said it “will draw upon the BBC’s unmatched newsgathering resources,” which have the potential to dwarf Alhurra’s efforts to compete.

This sentiment was echoed at a November congressional hearing of a subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee. Chairman Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) criticized Alhurra for not having bureaus in locations such as Jordan, where network reporters arrived late to cover the hotel bombing in Amman. The congressman nevertheless gave “high marks” to station representatives for their forthcoming testimony.

Nematt leveled more serious charges when he questioned the ethics of Alhurra’s relationships with Middle Eastern countries that permit Radio Sawa to transmit programs from their territories on their radio frequencies. “Radio Sawa had to be on good terms with those countries, especially the security sections, to get the deals, and now Alhurra must try to please those countries as well, not to take the hard line and upset Radio Sawa’s transmitter agreements,” said Nematt. Radio Sawa lists 24 FM and AM radio stations that carry the channel throughout the Middle East.

Deirdre Kline retorted, “The allegation that Alhurra shows favoritism to any country is unequivocally false. Alhurra’s mission, by law, is to broadcast accurate and objective news and information without bias or favoritism. Alhurra frequently broadcasts news reports, talk shows, magazine programs and town hall meetings on issues such as human rights, the

rights of women, freedom and democracy.”

A debate on Alhurra and Radio Sawa might happen on the Hill some day, but the shouting match has already begun.

Archived Comments

marie on January 13, 2006 @ 8:55 pm:

END OF A VERY UGLY CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF VOA

Pattiz Resigns From BBG

The Wall Street Journal reports that Westwood One founder Norm Pattiz, who launched the US government's Arabic-language media outlets, Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television, has resigned from the governing board that funds and oversees the projects.

A Clinton appointee, Pattiz had served on the Broadcasting Board of Governors since 2000.

In his resignation letter to President Bush, Pattiz said the two ventures are now "reaching mass audiences previously unheard of for US international broadcasting in that region of the world."

Pattiz said that he wants to devote his time to other ventures and that his decision to quit the BBG had "nothing to do with politics."
