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# A Constructive Look at Al-Hurra and its Critics [1]

I have to admit I did not expect to be writing what could be deemed a defense of Al-Hurra -- the U.S.-sponsored Arabic language television station beamed across the Arab world. Al-Hurra (which means "the free one" in Arabic) has come under scrutiny over the past few years for its potential impact on U.S. public diplomacy objectives. Yet the recent story by CBS News on the failings of Al-Hurra and coverage by *The Washington Post*, necessitates a critical response. The following blog entry provides two critiques -- first of the oddly framed arguments in CBS's coverage of Al-Hurra, and second of the government's rejoinder. Basically, while the CBS report brings up important organizational and strategic deficiencies surrounding Al-Hurra and its 'mission' -- its criticism only highlights the fact that Al-Hurra has been conferred conflicting (and perhaps contradictory) objectives and lacks a political constituency in the government. The U.S. government's response amounts to claims that Al-Hurra's numbers are improving and that the government is essentially "doing something" to promote its perspective in the competitive Arab media market. This controversy reveals the enduring problems of contemporary U.S. international broadcasting -- its weakness in the face of domestic political opposition, haphazard implementation of conflicting foreign policy imperatives, and perhaps a strategic misrecognition of the real communication landscape. In the wake of these observations, I suggest that a revitalized Al-Hurra would resolve its mandate issues, and embrace the relevance of participatory media in its target market.

**CBS criticizes Al-Hurra**

What is frustrating about the CBS piece (produced in conjunction with the non-profit investigative news organization ProPublica) is that it down-plays serious critiques of how the station is managed (including what gets covered and how stories make it to broadcast) and its viability in the crowded Arab media market, in favor of an oblique argument insinuating that Al-Hurra is an outlet for terrorism. By citing disparate incidents taken out of context, the report suggests that Al-Hurra has become an outlet for terrorists, because it broadcast a speech by Hassan Nasrallah (the leader of Hezbollah), and offered poor coverage of the Iranian conference on the Holocaust (coverage which seemed to be uncritical of the absurd suggestions of Holocaust deniers).

CBS recounts a history of controversy surrounding Al-Hurra in interviews of Al-Hurra personnel. CBS rightly interviews Larry Register, who had been hired to bring some credibility to the station -- only to be let go as the channel became increasingly politicized (as Marc Lynch has previously noted). Register tells the CBS interviewer Scott Pelley that "credibility" means:

> "Not just picking and choosing what you might want to cover because it's favorable for your side versus their side. Cover all of it. Tell the whole story. Part of the idea

is Al- Hurra is the free one. The name is 'The Free One.'"

And yet, the CBS story continues to focus on how the few instances of coverage unsupportive of U.S. and Israeli positions constitute a failure to the American taxpayer and to the objectives of public diplomacy. Even Brian Conniff, the station's top executive, tries to explain that these instances were not representative of the station's programming content, and should not be used to judge its effectiveness.

If we interpret the story as I believe it was intended to be framed, Al-Hurra is a station beset with managerial problems, which have resulted in it becoming a mouthpiece for terrorist interests. These implications are severe, and echo similar arguments made in 2001 in the U.S. Congress about how VOA Afghanistan was a mouthpiece for terror by allowing the Taliban to share air-time with other voices on U.S. programming.

I am still curious about this kind of argument -- especially when the principles of journalistic freedom (a cornerstone of American democratic governance), invoked to justify spending on these programs, are obviated by editorializing content that doesn't align with the U.S. government's positions. Which perspective should govern how the U.S. designs and implements its international broadcasting strategy? And, does airing an alternative perspective (even if it is morally onerous or contrary to the U.S.'s own declared values) constitute advocacy? Seriously -- should I as a teacher be censored if I show Leni Reifenstahl's "Triumph of the Will" to my students to illustrate the terrifying potential of propaganda -- because I've given voice to fascists? Perhaps airing the voices of those opposed to the U.S. alongside the arguments made by Americans could highlight the strengths of American discourse, and show the shallow, instrumental nature of some of the anti-American diatribe circulating in Arab media. Arguing to censor the anti-American rants suggests that they are too powerful and too strong a message to consider competing with, even if it entails sacrificing American journalistic values.

If anything, the editorial policies of Al-Hurra present a glaring contrast between declaring ambitions of journalistic freedom and actually demonstrating democratic pluralism. Put another way, Al-Hurra seems to conflate what public diplomacy scholar Nicholas Cull has identified as two 'traditions' of U.S. public diplomacy -- advocacy and international broadcasting. Implemented as policy, these two traditions yield different expectations and likely, different standards of measurement for effectiveness. As Marc Lynch observed, if the political pressure on Al-Hurra continues to its logical conclusion, we'll likely end up with another TV Marti -- a waste of taxpayers' money in international broadcasting with limited reach and impact. It is one thing to provide a media platform for the U.S. perspective; it is another to offer what aims to be a reliable international news service.

Of course, is it the obligation of Al-Hurra to provide differing perspectives (even from its enemies)? Surely, Arab audiences can get a heavy dose of news framing considered contrary to American policy objectives if they tuned into other channels. Yet, Al-Hurra was initially conceived as a "news" outlet, as much a corrective to the message provided by Al-Jazeera as it was a model for reliable, objective journalism in the Western tradition. Continuing to balance this declared mission with that of providing a positive view of American policies seems increasingly difficult, if not contradictory. One mission is journalism, the other is public relations. Honestly embracing one of these perspectives might do the channel some good -- especially since many Arab audiences are well acquainted with the historically partisan role of

Arab journalism. Perhaps the credibility of the U.S. could be helped along by openly acknowledging what the rest of the Arab world already knows -- instead of trying to assert a moral authority and an editorial "firewall" with its claims of objectivity. Public relations (let alone advocacy) is also an American tradition -- why hide from it? Alternatively (and perhaps more constructively) the U.S. might learn something about the democratic reasons why stations like Al-Jazeera are so successful in the first place.

**Responding to CBS**

The Broadcast Board of Governors issued a statement on June 22 defending Al-Hurra. The defense was, in many respects, a decent response to the "pattern" of evidence offered by CBS. Yet, it was also indicative of the station's problems. First, it offered different polling numbers to show that it did have a growing audience in the Arab world, with increasing levels of "credibility". It then, rightly, pointed out that the CBS investigation took evidence out of context to reach its conclusions about what gets broadcast on Al-Hurra.

Yet, the response leaves some lingering questions. Do the numbers mean anything? And what really constitutes success for a news station "competing" for viewers and already saddled with questionable credibility? Al-Hurra is not the BBC (nor, for that matter, is it the VOA). So what should its mission be? When you factor in the increasingly diverse Arab satellite and regional media sphere that Al-Hurra must compete within, a fresh look at Al-Hurra seems urgent. Specifically -- what should the U.S. expect from Al-Hurra? Should it attempt to be popular like Al-Jazeera? Should it try to embody and model Western style journalism as a foundational aspect of democratic culture? Should it be a democratic (read: participatory) forum for advocating and debating the controversial aspects of U.S. policies, values, and intentions?

*The Washington Post* coverage of Al-Hurra offers some instructive observations about the challenges facing Al-Hurra in its "target" market -- and they have little to do with its level of anti-American content. The article's interviews with Arab viewers reflect the changing culture of media access in the region. The crowded media market, in particular, puts distinct pressure on Al-Hurra to provide compelling content. These are developments important for any television producer to recognize, let alone an international broadcaster. As the Post article indicates, Al-Hurra is not just American; it's potentially irrelevant and boring.

**What can we learn from Al-Jazeera?**

As *The Washington Post* article suggests, if Al-Hurra is to be considered a compelling news channel in the region, it must provide interesting, distinctive content that is relevant to its audience:

> "Salameh Nematt, a Jordanian journalist based in Washington, said that Al-Hurra, like many of its competitors, has ignored controversial issues such as financial corruption involving Arab leaders and the use of torture by security forces… Al-Hurra would have been the number one station in the Arab world had they done one-quarter of what they should have covered."

But to follow this path suggests an emphasis on news over the imperatives of providing a

distinctly U.S. message. Nematt's comment highlights the role that news outlets play for audiences facing real information needs. Al-Jazeera, for example, offers some helpful lessons about the relationship of audiences to news media. While the U.S. continues to argue for spreading democracy in the region, evangelizing universal values to the benighted -- those who had suffered so long without a voice -- it seems to overlook the value of performing democratic principles. What do I mean by this, and how might this be linked to the incredible popularity of Al-Jazeera?

International media scholars Shawn Powers and Eytan Gilboa have shown that Al-Jazeera enjoys incredible audience loyalty. They cite research indicating that large segments of Al-Jazeera's audience not only faithfully watch the channel, but believe that it speaks for them. In other words, they identify with the channel, believe in its mission, and thus give it tremendous credibility. This kind of loyalty would be hard to cultivate by any U.S. news channels domestically, let alone in the Middle East.

There are numerous historical reasons why Al-Jazeera became so popular, especially given the history of regional and pan-Arab journalism. But for the moment, let us focus on how the station offers a modicum of democratic participation. I am certainly not the first to note that Al-Jazeera provides a voice to its viewers, especially in its talk-shows. It also provides multiple perspectives on controversial issues (often-times at odds with various regional governments). Though perhaps some of Al-Jazeera's tone has shifted to accommodate the rising popularity of its competitor Al-Arabiya -- Al-Jazeera remains a seemingly independent voice that foregrounds its obligation to its cultivated pan-Arab audience.

But is Al-Jazeera democratic? As Marc Lynch has noted -- perhaps so in the sense that it is pluralistic. But this is a crucial step in the process of building a democratic culture. "Democracy" is performed in steps that foster acceptance of democratic practices, of sharing opinions, and recognizing the legitimacy of other opinions. Marwan Kraidy observed in his study of Arab reality television that the call-in and text-message voting segments of these programs constitute a mediated site of social transformation towards a participatory political culture.

What I am getting at here is that while the U.S. continues to dither over how its broadcast voice in the Middle East may or may not be serving the interests of opposing perspectives (i.e. a monolithic notion of "terrorists"), the robust and dynamic satellite news environment is already forging ahead as a protean space for a changing political culture. When we consider the increasing importance of mobile phone and social networking technology as a tool for political activism in the Arab world -- arguing about Al-Hurra's supposed level of terrorist content seems out of touch.
Consider the following statement in CBS's reporting about Arab perception of Al-Hurra:

> "'The Free One' is seen by most Arabs as the U.S. government station, "The Cheney Channel" as some have called it, and that perception is limiting in a region where people tend to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Leave aside for the moment the essentializing "gift horse in the mouth" comment. If the U.S. is, as former BBG chairman Norman Pattiz claims, in a 'media war' -- then the complex terrain of this war needs to be re-assessed. The instruments of international broadcasting should be

updated to the ways in which audiences are consuming, evaluating, and incorporating media content and media platforms into the everyday communicative process of sense-making. U.S. communications research left behind simplistic notions of news functioning like "magic bullets" decades ago, and we should not expect such dynamics in the Arab media ecology. So what would make Al-Hurra more relevant, or useful, to U.S. objectives?

Kim Andrew Elliott, in my opinion, makes the most succinct summation of the predicament facing Al-Hurra. First, if Al-Hurra aims to be a legitimate international broadcasting entity -- it must provide a considerable amount of 24-7 content. Much of this will involve voices and perspectives that might reflect U.S. interests, but work to establish Al-Hurra's credibility as a legitimate news provider. Yet, even the occasional bits of anti-U.S. opinion make Al-Hurra an easy target for those who would see it as something other than international broadcasting in the traditional sense. Second, it is clear from the current controversy that Al-Hurra is beset by conflicting obligations. If Al-Hurra is expected to "promote a positive image, win over hearts and minds, or influence people over the airwaves", it loses its credibility as an international broadcaster. In its current incarnation, it loses on both fronts.

But, can Al-Hurra be a proving ground for a 'new' kind of international broadcasting -- an amalgam of advocacy and journalistic intent that still retains its credibility? The increasing convergence of media technology, interactivity, and news outlets (something outlets like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya have already embraced) suggest some interesting possibilities.

Regardless, if Al-Hurra is so disregarded in the landscape of Arab news alternatives then it needs a 2.0 reboot where its mission is clear. Once the mission is settled (an upfront arm for providing news from an American perspective, or, perhaps, a platform for demonstrating democratic journalistic values) then the range of American media expertise and technologies can be implemented with more realistic (and perhaps measurable) expectations. And of course, perhaps Al-Hurra can get the kind of managerial oversight and attention that it apparently needs. For now, however, Al-Hurra remains a kind of political target for skeptics of public diplomacy and the capacity of truly democratic media to constructively engage public opinion in any sort of contest of ideas.