

Nov 04, 2016 by [Monroe E. Price](#)

Changing International Broadcasting in the Obama Era? ^[1]

Can two late thinkers, a French philosopher and British media scholar, point the way to a new American public diplomacy— or at least an American international broadcasting strategy— for the Obama era?

Let's start with two unarguable points. The very election of Barack Obama shifts the world of public diplomacy and automatically alters the dynamic of U.S. messaging abroad. As Timothy Garton Ash put it in the *Guardian*, "Obama is himself a weapon of mass attraction."

Second, as commission after commission and report after report found this decade, without addressing underlying foreign policy initiatives, attention to the form and technique of the message was a somewhat losing operation. Now, policies and public diplomacy goals may be brought into greater harmony.

A new international broadcasting strategy should be sufficiently ambitious to take into account sea changes in the media and cultural environment. What are dimensions of a rethinking? In the mid 1990s, Jacques Derrida delivered a series of lectures later compiled into a short book called *Of Hospitality*. Derrida didn't specifically address international broadcasting (far from it), but the discussion can be adapted to reconsider the art form. International broadcasting could move from primarily a means of projecting perceptions of the U.S. and reflecting (even if indirectly) U.S. policies to one which would be a platform for cooperation, mediation, and reception— a mode of being informed as well as informing.

The focus— as I am wildly rereading Derrida— would be on creating an international broadcasting environment built on receiving and hearing as well as sending. It would be a platform that would demonstrate more pervasively the idea of recognizing messages from all sides. Public diplomacy and international broadcasting might be constructed on principles of deeper reciprocity as well as rearticulated targeting. There could be even more collaboration among international broadcasters to achieve this goal.

I want to make clear that this refiguring would go far beyond the recent preoccupation with "listening," as outlined in many public diplomacy proclamations, or the frequent efforts at increasing interactivity such as in "[My BBC](#)". This refiguring would affect not only the international broadcaster— increasing its sensitivity to the views of its international audience— but affecting the American audience as well.

Actually, Roger Silverstone, the chair of [Media@LSE](#) came very close to this connection in his last book, *Media and Morality*. He described, longingly, a Mediapolis that would serve as a site in which "communication is multiple and multiply inflected... open to the circulation of images and narratives." For Silverstone, unless the media (in some form) did the work of bringing home a wide variety of opinions, virtually unedited and unfiltered (especially those of

the “other”), then the society would not be well informed. The opportunity of the media to make its rich contribution to its own society would be lost.

What, actually, would a different international broadcasting and public diplomacy be like? One point would be to rethink what would become the mainstays of U.S. international broadcasting; country or region-specific services (i.e. Radio Farda in Iran, Radio Free Asia, or Radio Sawa in the Middle East) designed, as Ambassador Edward Djerejian put it in a noted report, “to move the needle” in target societies. These services, while having their uses, are the most inconsistent with the ideas of “hospitality,” of listening and receiving as a hallmark of a moral mediasphere. They perform important functions. Yet, unadjusted, they may be increasingly out of tune with Obama-like directions in international affairs..

Reciprocity would involve taking steps to advance popular domestic American understanding of international events as well as penetrating consciousness in regions such as the Middle East or the Caucasus. It would mean a possible repeal of the Smith-Mundt Act, which bars transmission of U.S. financed international broadcasting within the United States, a somewhat pointless prohibition in the Internet era. Reciprocity would, of course, broaden cultural exchange, including expanding cultural exchanges, but it would have consequences for the broadcasting sphere as well. Undoubtedly there will be nostalgic discussions of restoration of the USIA.

In the Silverstone-Derrida model, the very process of filtering could be said to interfere with the basic goals and objectives of hospitality. For me a wholesale evisceration of editing is a step too far. Unconditionality of receipt may involve its own betrayal of morality. Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights and its Article 19 equivalent recognizes limitations on the right to receive and impart. International broadcasting should be sensitive to certain high-level norms that are properly enacted and consistent with constitutional standards.

There’s another point: for Derrida and Silverstone, the Mediapolis of unbounded hospitality should be achieved for moral grounds; such a platform is the marker of a society that has the capacity for just citizenship. But I think there is another basis for such a refashioned approach to international broadcasting, one that would more clearly resonate with present needs. The national security and well-being of the United States is weakened if its populace has too limited knowledge and understanding of global events.

One final point: another citizen related challenge related to the future of international broadcasting is the dramatically changed political economy of U.S. news organizations and the continued decline of foreign coverage. Knowledge of the world is a public good. If the market cannot provide it in a way that is essential for citizenship, then other means to finance it must be found. International broadcasting (originating from other states and American as well) already emerges as a partial filling of that gap. The Voice of America and RFE/RL have had that role internationally for decades. The BBC World Service has begun to play that role impressively within the United States.

It is daunting, indeed frightening, to think of a U.S. government entity performing such a role within the United States. Cooperation with and among international broadcasters as well as basic adjustments that assure greater independence from government might dampen, though not eliminate the need for, these fears.

The point— whether to consider the implications at home or on the streets of the Middle East and elsewhere— is to reconceptualize international broadcasting for a new time, a time in

which the problems facing the world shift and the administration at home shifts its foreign policy strategy as well.
