


Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

Reinventing Broadcast Public Diplomacy ^[1]

It's unfortunate that President Ronald Reagan's global interactive TV Network, Worldnet, no longer exists as it did two decades ago when he stood at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and dared Soviet leader Gorbachev to "tear down this wall".

Our former Worldnet TV service at the U.S. Information Agency would have been a perfect fit for President Obama, who plans to speak to Muslim audiences in the first 100 days  of his administration from a venue somewhere in the Middle East.

With Worldnet's former global, regional, and local reach abroad, including its interactive TV locations at many U.S. cultural centers linked to Washington, Mr. Obama's vision for state-of-the-art language training programs could have been put into play quickly. These proposed programs also include "speakers of local languages (to) ensure our voice is heard on the ground", as outlined in Mr. Obama's Counterterrorism Fact Sheet issued during the presidential campaign.

At the former U.S. Information Agency in the 1980s, we developed, and eventually extended, Worldnet's interactive TV capacity to more than 300 U.S. embassies, missions, and cultural centers worldwide. Invited audiences, including media, could interact with and quiz administration officials and others on a host of topics -- from hunger relief in Africa to the latest advances in heart surgery; and from the placement of "defensive" U.S. missiles in Europe targeted at the Soviet Union, to movie directing tips from Hollywood experts.

Worldnet functioned best *bottom up* -- when experienced U.S. Foreign Service public affairs experts abroad, in touch with issues in their areas, suggested topics for maximum impact to us in Washington. In time, our programming was going full tilt in multiple languages with simultaneous translations, and Washington could not always keep up with the load of interactive program requests from our officers abroad. *The Washington Post* called Worldnet "the jewel in the crown" of Mr. Reagan's public diplomacy efforts abroad.

Sadly, when the U.S. Information Agency was disbanded in the late 1990s, international TV dialogues brought over to the State Department "lost their traction", a Department official lamented to me. "Except for posts in Africa and some in South Asia and Latin America, satellite TV conversations from the Worldnet system collapsed at U.S. embassies," he said. "Compared to the promises of the Internet, television was no longer viewed as the tool of choice for programming to large audiences. But we should have grown television as we grew the web."

Today's Worldnet, if reconstituted and enhanced with a strong Internet component, would complement, and not compete with, the stalwarts - the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, and other USG broadcast entities with varying missions. To the contrary, the smart integration of all broadcast endeavors would help build the critical mass of U.S. public diplomacy that has been missing for too long. This can be achieved without breaching the so-

called "firewalls" that protect the integrity and charters of U.S. government broadcasts. It would be a fitting accomplishment for the new transition team on broadcast public diplomacy to get the broadcasters themselves to act as a team. It could help America "tear down this wall" that separates it from much of the Arab world.

Alvin Snyder served as the director of the U.S. Information Agency's Television and Film Service throughout the Reagan administration, and is the author of *Warriors of Disinformation*, Arcade Publishing, New York, 1995
