

Nov 04, 2016 by [Kim Andrew Elliott](#)

Fine Tuning Broadcast Public Diplomacy ^[1]

I am happy to see that [Alvin Snyder](#) is contributing again to the CPD Blog. I have always learned from his experience and have found his views to be interesting and provocative. His [return commentary](#), about a revival of Worldnet, accordingly provoked me to add some thoughts about the possibilities for a public diplomacy television service.

When it was created in 1985, Worldnet billed itself as the “first global satellite television network.” Despite its head start, Worldnet was soon eclipsed by CNN International and BBC World, which were much more successful in getting access to cable systems around the world.

I think Worldnet’s problem was that it tried to be both a news service and a public diplomacy vehicle. The audience has always been much more interested in the news: real news, credible news, especially news accompanied by video from the scene of the news. Such video is useful to audiences even if they don’t understand English.

There would be nothing wrong with a 24-hour channel devoted to public diplomacy, consisting of the advocacy and official representation of U.S. policies abroad. It must, however, not attempt to disguise its content as news. If it does, it might be confused for Voice of America or other U.S. international broadcasting services that actually do news. Also, audiences would soon enough discern that the “news” is not really news. This could make them even more annoyed with the United States than they already are.

The public diplomacy channel could contain speeches by future-President Obama, the secretary of state, and other U.S. officials, along with press conferences and occasional persuasive productions like the old “Let Poland Be Poland.” The video stream could be accompanied by audio tracks in multiple languages, similar to EuroNews.

The popularity (at least at the outset) of Barack Obama notwithstanding, this fare won’t usually attract large audiences, and thus won’t be carried by many cable systems or direct-to-home satellite bouquets. Fortunately, a lack of cable outlets is not as much of a problem as it used to be. These days, many people who want to see official U.S. policy on video can use the internet to do so. And instead of filling a channel 24 hours with public diplomacy content, which might be a stretch, the content could more conveniently be available on demand through a website.

Indeed, something like this is already available. There is a [video section](#) at the public diplomacy website [America.gov](#). It could usefully be expanded, offering more content in more languages.

As for Worldnet’s “interactive TV capacity,” that also still exists through the [American Embassy TV Network](#), “the Department of State’s global television network and a direct U.S. television resource for international broadcasters.” Al Snyder’s source says that State

Department's television dialogues have "lost their traction" since the days of Worldnet and the U.S. Information Agency. If that is the case, regaining the traction does not necessarily require a new, or revived, bureaucracy. It would be gentler on the taxpayers to do a better job by doing a better job.

Al concludes: "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."

"Complement" is good: U.S. international broadcasting and U.S. public diplomacy are separate, indeed adversarial, activities. Public diplomats are involved in (in the best sense of the term) spin. The journalists in U.S. international broadcasting have the very different job of unspinning the spin of government spokespersons. This is why international broadcasting and public diplomacy must be conducted by separate agencies, in separate buildings. Such a configuration was the point of the International Broadcasting Act of 1994.

One interesting way in which the two activities complement is that international broadcasting has a finite life span, whereas public diplomacy is useful forever. VOA and RFE/RL have, for example, dropped their Polish, Czech, and Hungarian services. People in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary can now get competent news about their own countries, and about the world, from their own media. On the other hand, journalists, researchers, government officials, and other interested persons in those countries will always need official statements of U.S. policy, and they would appreciate access to that information in their own languages. The best "broadcast public diplomacy" is interviews of U.S. officials and spokespersons on television channels popular in the target countries.

As for Al's "smart integration of all broadcast endeavors," I'm not sure what that means. I've advocated the consolidation of U.S. international broadcasting since "Too Many Voice of America," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1989/90. But if "all international broadcasting endeavors" means that the advocacy function of public diplomacy media is to be combined into a single agency with the news function of international broadcasting, the latter will not have the independence necessary to achieve the credibility that is required to attract an audience.

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