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U.S. International Broadcasting: Too Bizarre To Be Explained By Political Science ^[1]

“Public Diplomacy: Ideas for the War of Ideas,” by MIT political scientists Peter Krause and Stephen Van Evera, was published in Middle East Policy, Fall 2009. The authors' ideas follow five themes: U.S. public diplomacy should: 1) emphasize dialogue over one-way monologue; 2) emphasize objective facts over propaganda; 3) convey respect to the audience; 4) the United States should contest the al-Qaeda narrative directly; and 5) new nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that address pernicious ideas around the world could help defeat the al-Qaeda narrative.

This is a thought provoking paper. I was provoked to write some notes about the authors' recommendations regarding U.S. international broadcasting.

Alhurra was launched in 2004 with the goal of providing pro-American coverage of U.S. and Middle East news to Arab publics. Surveys show that Alhurra attracts only a tiny audience and has very little credibility in the Arab world. An April/May 2009 University of Maryland/Zogby poll found that Alhurra was picked by a vanishingly small 0.5 percent of Arab respondents as their favorite TV news source.

The question in the University of Maryland/Zogby International 2009 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey is: “When you watch international news, which of the following network's news broadcasts do you watch most often?”

Only in countries with exceptionally poor media environments, e.g. Burma and Zimbabwe, is an international broadcaster the “favorite” news source. In most countries, international broadcasting is used by a fraction of the population, and as a supplement to domestic broadcasting.

Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are, effectively, domestic broadcasters in the Arab “nation.” It's not realistic to expect foreign broadcast broadcasters to overtake the two pan-Arab news stations in popularity. They should, however, be viewed by a respectable percentage of the audience, especially among elites. And Alhurra should compete well with the other foreign stations, especially BBC Arabic, but also the Arabic programming of France 24, EuroNews, Deutsche

Welle, Russia Today, China's CCTV, and Iran's Al Alam.

By these criteria, the latest round of surveys commissioned by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and conducted in seven Arab nations in late 2008/early 2009, show good results for Alhurra. For all major international and pan-Arab stations, the surveys measure yesterday, past-week, past-month, and past-year viewing or listening. In Jordan, Alhurra has a past-week audience of 23%. This is far lower than Al Jazeera's 92% and Al Arabiya's 78%. But 23% is a large audience for international broadcasting. Furthermore, Alhurra is (for now) ahead of the new BBC Arabic TV (at 12%) and well ahead of the other Arabic television services from non-Arab nations. *

Unfortunately for Alhurra and Radio Sawa, the results of these surveys have not been issued by the BBG. For the time being, journal papers by scholars such as Krause and Van Evera and news reports such as a recent ProPublica story must refer to the UMD/Zogby results.

Radio Sawa, launched in 2002, attracts a larger audience than Alhurra but also has little impact. Its programming consists largely of music with a little news mixed in. The news content is too limited to affect opinion on policy issues.

When it launched Radio Sawa, the George W. Bush administration unwisely chose to cancel the VOA's Arabic-language service, replacing it with Radio Sawa. This bizarre decision created a large hole in U.S. media efforts. The VOA Arabic service served a valuable purpose by reaching a modest but important audience — government, business, academic and media elites — with important hard news. That audience has been lost.

In the Arab nations, as in much of the rest of the world, audiences for broadcast news have migrated from radio to television. Alhurra provides newscasts for elites and others interested in the news.

Many who still listen to radio do so to hear music. Radio Sawa was designed to follow that audience. Small elite audiences have their uses, but large audiences consisting of people from all strata are even more desirable. In the Jordan survey mentioned above, Radio Sawa has a past-week audience of 21%, well ahead of BBC Arabic radio and French-owned Radio Monte Carlo-Middle East, with 9% each. *

The Radio Sawa newscasts and features, multiplied by all the people who listen to them, multiplied again by all the times they are heard over the years, result in the neutralization of a great deal of misinformation and disinformation from less salubrious sources.

Bizarre? Well, yes, in the sense that U.S. international broadcasting now has double-digit

audiences in, of all places, the Arab world, and larger than, of all stations, BBC World Service.

Recent U.S. public-diplomacy media efforts have favored monologue over give-and-take discussion. On Alhurra, recorded broadcasts have predominated over talk shows and call-in programs, and Radio Sawa has no political talk shows. All evidence indicates that this is the wrong approach. Monologue format is less effective than dialogue.

Ken Burns' "The Civil War" was recorded. Should PBS have broadcast, instead, a program in which viewers call in with their opinions about the Civil War? Most of the best television is recorded for a good reason.

Audience participation can be a useful component of much radio and television programming. There is probably a place for talk shows on both Radio Sawa and Alhurra. But as for moving these stations to full-time talk formats, be careful what you wish for. The content is not always compelling. Call-in shows on television can spend much time with the presenter staring blankly into the screen while a caller provides his/her life history before, maybe, getting around to a question. Furthermore, calls from the region will consist of many, many virulently anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli comments. This might be an accurate depiction of Middle Eastern public opinion. But after several hours of this, what's the point?

The United States should reformat its media to offer more objective news, with fewer polemics or one-sided arguments. For example, British public-diplomacy broadcasting has long emphasized objective news, as heard on the BBC. In contrast, U.S. public diplomacy has emphasized advocacy. This is a mistake for two reasons. First, successful persuasion requires a credible messenger, and credibility is best earned by offering accurate, objective information.

It is not that UK public diplomacy is objective. It is, instead, that BBC World Service is separate from UK public diplomacy. Yes, World Service is funded by the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office under a budget category called "public diplomacy," and there is consultation between BBC and the FCO about the languages in which World Service will transmit. But the UK government does not have a say in the content of BBC World Service. In this statement on December 15, 2005, BBC carefully spelled out how its role is distinct from that of UK public diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Britain has other instrumentalities that do conduct public diplomacy, and they absolutely do engage in advocacy. See the "newsroom" section of the FCO website. See the FCO blogs. See British Satellite News, whose videos (in English and Arabic) look like news, but upon closer examination, they are (to paraphrase Douglas Adams) almost, but not quite, entirely unlike news. The topics are selected for their friendliness. The writing is not hard-hitting. There is nothing wrong with BSN. It's public diplomacy in practice.

The upshot is that, in the UK, international broadcasting and public diplomacy exist as complementary forms of international communication. The BBC caters to the global demand for news that is more comprehensive and reliable than the news from state controlled domestic media. Providing such a news service helps overcome the misinformation and disinformation on which dictators, terrorists, and other international miscreants thrive. UK public diplomacy makes the case for British foreign policy.

In the United States, international broadcasting and public diplomacy should, and for the most part already do, coexist in similar fashion. The "sole superpower" has the right and the obvious need to advocate on its own behalf. That is the job of U.S. public diplomacy.

A television or radio channel devoted to U.S. public diplomacy would not have much of an audience. Effective methods of public diplomacy would, instead, include: 1) interviews with U.S. officials on popular media the target countries; 2) issue advertising in the target country to set the record straight, when necessary; 3) a website in as many languages as possible explaining and arguing for U.S. foreign policies.

U.S. broadcasting also needs better management. Recent U.S. broadcasting has failed partly because the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is poorly run. Appointments to the eight-member board that runs it have often been awarded as perks to political friends of those making appointments. As a result, the BBG has become a headless horseman, independent of outside control but poorly managed from within. In recent years, influential board member Norman Pattiz was allowed wide latitude to make poor decisions without debate or accountability for results. High-quality professionals with experience in public diplomacy should be appointed to all BBG board posts, and the BBG should be held to high standards of performance.


It is an unavoidable reality of Washington that memberships on federal commissions and boards will generally be political in nature. But, in the BBG, the political connections have usually been accompanied by media experience. The ideal BBG member would be a grizzled journalist with overseas experience, especially in a place where he/she has witnessed the role of international broadcasting in information-deprived nations. For reasons cited above, experience in public diplomacy would be less helpful.

The BBG member should also not aspire to other government positions, because he/she will have to: 1) stand up to officials who wish to meddle in the news process, and 2) make decisions that will be unpopular with the administration and with Congress. That's the point of an "independent" board.

Norm Pattiz, founder of Westwood Radio, was a BBG member who served as the provisional CEO of U.S. international broadcasting initiatives for the Arab world. In 2001, I was in the audience at the VOA Auditorium and, like most of my colleagues, appalled when he announced that VOA Arabic would be eliminated, to be replaced by a station that broadcasts mostly pop music.

Within a few months, however, Pattiz did what VOA needed to do for decades to jumpstart its Arabic Service. He established a medium wave relay in Cyprus and FM rebroadcasting outlets in several Arab nations. Later, he established Alhurra in similarly short order. As reported by ProPublica and many other sources, both stations have experienced a plethora of management and personnel issues. But, as discussed above, both stations have succeeded in attracting audiences.

Furthermore, Pattiz's creation of Radio Sawa and Alhurra lit a fire under VOA. With unaccustomed speed, VOA upgraded its own services in Persian, Dari, Pashto, and Urdu, thus heading off any schemes to offload them to an "excepted" corporation like Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), Inc (parent entity of Alhurra and Sawa).

In 2005, when it was an open question whether Pattiz would be renewed for a second term on the BBG, I wrote the essay "[Pattiz Should Stay](#) ,

" for Radio Netherlands Media Network. Apparently, President George W. Bush did not read my commentary. And, so, Pattiz went, but U.S. international broadcasting still reaps the benefits of his "poor decisions."

*Unpublished data used with the permission of the BBG.

Dr. Kim Andrew Elliott is an audience research analyst at the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau. Views expressed are his own. His personal website, reporting on international broadcasting, is <http://www.kimandrewelliott.com>.
