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Al Jazeera Goes South ^[1]

Let's say Al Jazeera goes south, then what?

The Arabic-language satellite channel from Qatar has changed the way people receive information, especially in the Middle East, and it has changed the way information is fashioned and perceived. So if Al-Jazeera goes on the block and new owners take over, which now appears likely, or if it simply goes dark, which is unlikely but one never knows, things will never be the same. Like him or not, the Emir of Qatar, who came up with the idea, has Chutzpah. Okay, let's call it that vision thing.

In the years since World War Two, visionary communicators have brought us significant innovations too numerous to mention, of greater or lesser value to mankind. What they all had in common were simply defined objectives right for their time - and that would make a difference.

Here are but a few that come to mind.

In the early 1950s, General David Sarnoff ran the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and NBC, and he wanted to sell color TV sets. But there were no color TV shows to watch back then, in the early 1950s. CBS actually presented the first color TV show, starring Arthur Godfrey, but CBS management became convinced color TV was a bum idea. After all, there were all those black and white television sets already in people's homes. Sarnoff thought otherwise, had his RCA color system adopted as the U.S. standard, and ordered his NBC network to broadcast in color when most people still could only see programs on their black and white TV sets. Some people thought Sarnoff was crazy, but others went out and bought color TVs - most of them back then made by RCA.

Around the same time, President Eisenhower showed vision in public diplomacy. He believed the U.S. wasn't getting due credit for rebuilding war-devastated Europe, especially among younger people there who didn't realize what the Marshall Plan had accomplished. The very year he took office, Eisenhower decided to pursue President Truman's "Campaign of Truth," to help promote America's story abroad. His chosen instrument was the U.S. Information Agency, established in 1953, that helped correct what were perceived as distortions of U.S. policies by America's enemies. Abbott Washburn, an Eisenhower principal assistant, once told me that his boss's vision was to set up a people-to-people agency -- which is just what the USIA became.

Another visionary communicator, Ronald Reagan, while he was skimming low in the presidential helicopter over lush green suburbs of America's heartland, turned to press aide Larry Speakes and said, "Look down there. That's America. Every house has a car, every house has a swimming pool. If we could just get the Russian people to see this type of thing."

So President's good friend, USIA Director Charles Z. Wick, turned that idea into an interactive

satellite TV network called Worldnet, of which I was privileged to serve for eight years as Director under Wick. Through WorldNet, news reporters in countries all over the world, friend and foe, even in Communist countries, could gain access to U.S. policy makers, live, to air things out. It got great media play abroad and saw the Berlin wall topple.

The vision of the Emir of Qatar was to put his tiny Arabian state on the map, so to speak, through all the attention it would likely attract to itself via an "independent" Arabic-language TV satellite channel that would cover the entire Middle East. Al Jazeera has accomplished this so effectively, as even its detractors will admit, that it has set the pace and direction of the U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East.

Now, with Al-Jazeera's tab costing Qatar some \$100 million dollars per year, or about a billion dollars since its inception, the channel could soon be turned over to a committee of Arab state investors, including Saudi Arabia, bringing yet another point of view.

Although the editorial approach of Al-Jazeera and Al-Hurra, the U.S. government funded satellite channel, are arguably different, there is at least one similarity. Because Arabic-language broadcast-related experts are in such demand, it is not uncommon for freelancers to work interchangeably between the two competing channels, often in the same day. So there are no secrets.

It's too early to tell what Al-Jazeera's plight may mean to Al Hurra, whose effectiveness continues to be reviewed by the Government Accountability Office, which has suggested audience impact research in addition to measuring audience size. With Al Jazeera facing an almost certain makeover, Al Hurra, with an annual budget about the same as Al-Jazeera's, could come under increased scrutiny.

Not only has U.S. public diplomacy been driven by the competition: it has also fallen victim to technology. Several years ago, those in charge of U.S. public diplomacy -- both political parties had their say on this -- decided to communicate directly to people abroad through home satellite dishes. Worldnet, a secondary delivery source designed to work with credible representatives of TV stations and newspapers abroad, was transferred to the State Department, which largely abandoned the original model. The satellite dish audience is hugely competitive, with resulting low audiences for most channels, and the final results for the increasing number of government-funded networks are not at all conclusive.

Meanwhile, in Europe, where the U.S. has lacked vital support for its Iraq policy, audiences could have been better informed through a Worldnet-type effort.

It's certainly not too late to resurrect that vision thing, to see how Worldnet could work in the 21st century international media environment, as a complement to Al Hurra's highly-polished professional channels.

Maybe the Emir of Qatar would go for the idea.
