

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

Public Diplomacy's Quiet Face Lift ^[1]

What's hot in public diplomacy?
Answer: C-SPAN, but of course.

What's not?
Answer: Everything else.

An exaggeration, perhaps, but there's no denying that the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN), which provides gavel-to-gavel coverage of Congress, press briefings, newsmaker speeches, public policy discussions, and much more, is mentioned more than anything else nowadays by those recognized as in the know who are trying to help "fix" America's lagging public diplomacy effort in the Middle East.

This week, Mark Helmke, Senior Professional Staff Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said at a Heritage Foundation meeting on public diplomacy that "The first mission of promoting and explaining American foreign policy is what the VOA (Voice of America) has long been about. This the VOA should continue. And it should expand its work to involve Congress by serving, in part, as an international C-SPAN." Earlier, two Op-Eds from the Council on Foreign Relations, suggested that C-SPAN programming would show Arab TV audiences how the U.S. system of government works, to help foster democratic change in the Arab world.

Writing in the New York Times, Council fellow Stephen Cook said the U.S. government's Arabic-language TV channel, Alhurra, ought to become "a kind of C-SPAN for the Arab world (that) would go a long way toward promoting democratic principles in the Middle East." LINK

And in last week's Washington Post, the co-chairs of a task force organized by the same Council on Foreign Relations -- former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Vin Weber, former Republican representative from Minnesota -- suggested in their Op-Ed that Alhurra "should include C-SPAN-style coverage of legislative hearings and political rallies in the United States and other democratic countries. Arabs should be exposed to the spectacle of free political systems in action, including the questioning of senior leaders by public representatives and the press."

Norman Pattiz, the driving force behind Alhurra, says his satellite channel is already carrying such programs. One example he cites is the Senate Armed Forces Committee hearing on prison abuse at the Abu Ghraib facility, at which Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld testified, transmitted by Alhurra throughout the Middle East. The channel also carried extensive coverage of Presidential elections in the U.S., Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Interestingly, some of the most comprehensive coverage in the Middle East about the American system of government is offered by the much-maligned Arabic satellite channels, such as al-Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and Abu Dhabi TV channels, according to the Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal (TBS)

During the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, for example, Arabic channels offered "a plethora of talk shows, documentaries, call-in programs, special reports, and live coverage of the entire elections process, starting with the Democratic primaries and continuing all the way through the conventions, debates, and the all-night marathon of Election Day itself."

According to TBS's Usama Najeeb and Lindsay Wise, who spent months analyzing the Arabic channels' coverage, "...some episodes focused on America's image of Muslims, whether religion is a major factor affecting the way Americans vote, the Patriot Act, fears about fraud connected with the use of new computerized balloting machines, the consequences for the region in the case of a Bush or a Kerry victory, and Bush's talent for keeping his message simple and direct, thereby inspiring trust in some voters while alienating others."

Former Pentagon official Richard Perle, once a vehement al-Jazeera critic, now says the satellite channel has helped to further the cause of democracy in the Middle East through its coverage of free elections in Iraq and Afghanistan. [LINK](#)

By any comparison, the early effort by Charlotte Beers to "brand" America to Arabs and Muslims abroad was a flop.

The former top New York advertising executive had ambitious plans to "brand" America when she became Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy soon after 9/11. She told Congress that she would "tap into new channels of communication" to portray America and its values "more accurately through television and the Internet" to Arab-Muslims abroad. [LINK](#)

She published [booklets](#) and a youth-oriented Arabic/English-language magazine called "[Hi](#)" which is still in print.

She also produced TV and radio paid spots on a "shared values" theme, depicting contented Muslim-Americans at work and at play, but TV outlets in most Arab countries refused to air them. [LINK](#)

But it is America's free media that have stepped up to the task. TV reporters at local stations throughout America, many hundreds of them, report from the Main Streets of America 24/7. They have become the new team of international broadcasters.

They reflect what's happening in Steubenville, Grand Forks, and West Seneca, and from Midwest City, to North Bend, to Pleasantville (yes, in New Jersey!), plus countless other American cities large and small. In addition to audiences who can see and hear them in their own local coverage areas, their reports about life in America can be accessed just about anywhere else on Earth by a huge and growing Internet audience abroad. [LINK](#)

An estimated 800 million Internet users worldwide comprise the new potential audience. In the Asia Pacific area alone, the number of broadband Internet users, who can easily download moving video from news sites, will expand to an estimated 176 million by the end of the decade, up from its present 61 million. ([LINK](#)) In less than two years, the number of broadband users in China is projected to exceed those in the U.S. According to a Stanford University study cited in [USA Today](#), "Internet usage is growing faster in Iran than anywhere in the Muslim Middle East."

"[Local TV news sites] operate in the same community with the same presence, recognition and credibility that a local newspaper, television or radio does," says the Radio and Television News Directors Association.

"They bring local reputation and credibility; they have a lean and mean culture that responds quickly to breaking news; and they can present news succinctly, in clear language, to the user who often just wants to check what's going on.

"Finally, and perhaps most important...television news (Internet) sites have distinct business advantages. They know their local advertisers." And, of course, that helps pay the bill for the Web operation, which in turn also publicizes the TV station and its news broadcasts.

Although many Internet users prefer newspaper sites to those of television stations, now with more people enjoying broadband access to the Internet, TV stations with timely video and archived stories are gaining in popularity.

Mind you, local news reflects reality, which often is not pretty. But it is nonetheless the story of America, unvarnished, displaying our society at the grassroots level, warts and all. As such, it is the most credible source of news about the U.S. and its people for the rapidly growing Internet audiences abroad. It is, arguably, the finest of American public diplomacy, in the raw.

Many of the 700+ local TV news stations feature sophisticated content on spiffy news web sites, with streaming locally produced news videos. They form the new media links to the American heartland, from where CBS News Correspondent Charles Kuralt would take TV viewers in his popular "On The Road" features.

Visitors from afar peering at the web site of KSL-TV, Salt Lake City, can read about a new cancer institute that offers user-friendly information and Utah's outdoor adventure activities, including hunting and fishing. In addition, the site's education section has interesting features for people everywhere: safety in the playground, after school programs, student entrepreneurs starting their own business, a math fair that gives kids the incentive to succeed, and video links to the station's on-air TV news broadcasts. <http://tv.ksl.com/index.php?nid=21>

From Cincinnati, Ohio, WCPO-TV links to health breakthroughs, with topics that are updated daily, including, when I looked in, stories about better breast cancer treatments, dental health, diabetes treatment, and fertility and pregnancy.

In the Pacific Northwest, KATU, Portland, Oregon has a no-nonsense government Investigative "Watchdog" unit that displays its grit by taking on the perceived excesses of local and state governments. Recent topics include an \$80 million state budget overrun, the question of whether cigarette tax money is being put to good use, what's to be done with the State Hospital, and whether politicians are being influenced by contributions without limitations.

Almost 150 local U.S. TV stations have formed an advertising alliance to attract national sponsors, riding the burgeoning Web ad boom. They intend to challenge the big sites, such as CNN.Com and MSNBC.com, for advertising dollars. Kagan Research says broadcasters are "using their unparalleled local presence to keep revenues growing and values intact." Internet audiences abroad can be individually identified within their respective countries, and their consumer activities can also be measured. <http://www.comscore.com/matrix/gs.asp>

Webcasts, on both TV and radio, are of course available from many other outlets worldwide.

Established broadcasters abroad are taking a long, hard look at stiff competition from the new media. "More and more international broadcasters are moving into web casting," says the European Broadcasting Union's Morand Fachot.

At a recent EBU meeting of international broadcasters the hot topic was how to survive the challenge from what was described as "the new tough media environment where the Internet makes all domestic broadcasters potential international broadcasters," as well as the problems of budget cuts and attracting new audiences.

But back in the cities and small towns of America, far from meeting rooms on Capitol Hill and C-SPAN cameras, a new team of international broadcasters is skillfully telling the story of our country and its people for all the world to see.
