

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Reinventing America Abroad, Getting off the Government Dime ^[1]

It's time to reinvent U.S. government international broadcasting - again. But this time, let's get it right and privatize this operation.

The campaign to sell America abroad in a coordinated fashion began in 1953, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). He was particularly dismayed that so many Europeans were too young to realize how much the Marshall Plan had done to rebuild the war-devastated continent. "Western Europe," said Eisenhower, "was rapidly being re-built, modernized industrially, and restored to prosperity, but European governments did little to inform their own people about the steps we were taking to help them."

Through its wide range of overseas information programs, the independent foreign affairs agency did a spectacular job of promoting American interests abroad for many decades. Then, in 1994, bureaucratic "reinvention" intervened and the International Broadcasting Act established a Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) to oversee the USIA's Voice of America (VOA), Radio and TV Martí, and Worldnet television, as well as two surrogate international broadcast services -- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia.

The State Department in 1998 subsumed the rest of the former USIA, which was sent packing in a deal between the White House and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Chairman, Senator Jesse Helms (R., North Carolina). Chairman Helms was bent on eliminating what he considered to be wasteful duplication among U.S. foreign affairs agencies, and unless the White House played ball, he would continue to block a vote on the Clinton-endorsed Chemical Weapons Convention.

While the reinvention of the U.S. government's international broadcasting operations may have looked sound to those who worked up the plan in the 1990s, it has not passed the test of time. Today's Senate Foreign Relations Committee now admits that what may have looked okay on paper in the 1990s turned out post 9/11 to be a bum idea.

So says Mark Helmke, Senior Professional Staff Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "The fault lies with us," he says, referring to the creation of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. He calls the BBG "a confusing federal agency of multiple public and quasi-private entities run by political appointees of both parties... It's not working."

I'll second that, based on personal experience.

In the 1980s, a full decade prior to government "reinvention" of U.S. public diplomacy, the USIA had established a worldwide satellite TV channel that provided a full schedule of news, interactive interviews, sports, information and music programming in multiple languages,

including Arabic. The program service was carried throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Australia, and New Zealand, and to some 300 U.S. non-military facilities abroad, including U.S. embassies, missions, and library/cultural centers worldwide. I was the director of that international channel, called Worldnet, which the Washington Post in a page one article called the "Jewel in the Crown" of President Reagan's international public diplomacy effort.

Worldnet fell into a black hole somewhere between the BBG and the State Department during the reinvention process of the 1990s, and it no longer exists. Following 9/11, there was a lag of several years before the BBG's Arabic-language satellite TV channel, Alhurra would begin broadcasting to the Middle East. It is still not available in Europe and elsewhere. Worldnet, had it not disappeared, could have provided this timely link worldwide.

Worldnet also had the potential to become a financially independent operation.

In the mid-1980s, at the zenith of Worldnet's Cold War broadcasts, BBC executives keen on starting their own international commercial TV channel visited us several times in Washington, DC, to observe our operation. I also was invited to consult at BBC headquarters in London, and did so.

Today, the commercially-supported BBC Worldwide has flourished, announcing just last week record sales of \$261 million, a 50% increase over last year.
<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117924401?cs=1&s=h&p=0>

The BBC's World Service Television, a satellite-delivered international commercial operation, launched in 1991, costs the British taxpayer nothing. Similar privatized systems are also flourishing by being attentive to commercial marketplace forces and shaking loose from their own government bureaucracies. Through a holding company, the French government owns popular and profitable commercial broadcast properties, including TV and Radio Monte Carlo, which promote French interests.

The time has come for U.S. international broadcasting to enter the commercial marketplace, where others like it have made their own way.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Mark Helmke says that the U.S. government's Middle East broadcasting entities, TV Alhurra and Radio Sawa, should "eventually get off the government dime." This is a sound idea.

Norman Pattiz, who spearheaded Sawa and Alhurra, said in a Wall Street Journal article this week that the services are extremely popular in the Middle East. He cites A.C. Nielsen audience surveys that have Alhurra watched at least once a week by 12% of viewers in Egypt and 24% in Saudi Arabia, two of the largest commercial markets in the Middle East. Mr. Pattiz says that tens of millions of viewers are reached daily in 22 countries by Alhurra and Sawa combined.

What this suggests to me is that these broadcast services are commercially viable, and can go it alone, without government financial support, amounting to some \$150 million per year. They would also enjoy more credibility with audiences abroad if the umbilical cord to government is cut. A business plan containing an exit strategy from government financing should be a top priority.

Let the marketplace prevail in the next reinvention of U.S. public diplomacy. It's the American

way.
