

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Superpowers of the Arabic Broadcasting Marketplace ^[1]

The world is divided among three superpowers: the United States, the United Kingdom, and al-Jazeera.

The world of Arabic satellite channels, that is.

Each of the three has claimed its section of this world, defining it in a tidy little package called a business model. The models created by the U.K. and al-Jazeera have filled, or plan to fill, specific voids in the marketplace. The third superpower has its business model too, but the void it attempts to fill is more vague than the others, and thus its goals have been more difficult to attain.

The British Broadcasting Corporation is the most recent entry into this exclusive power-player world with its newly announced Arabic TV channel. Its goal is to bring the news of the wider world, not just the Arab and Muslim world, to the Middle East.

The BBC's Arabic TV Service is expected to debut in 2007. It will offer "trusted and accurate news with an international agenda," says the BBC's World Service Director Nigel Chapman. "Our research suggests there is strong demand for an Arabic Television service from the BBC in the Middle East."

To help pay for its new enterprise, The BBC will close 10 radio language services, mainly in Europe, and receive total public funding from the British Parliament.

Because the BBC's service will be only 12 hours a day at first, it will not reach full strength for several more years, but its mission is clear from the outset. "Our service is not about reflecting the Arab world to itself, it's about reflecting international news to the Arab world," explains Chapman. "That's one of the things that will make us distinctive in the market place because our competitors don't have access to the BBC's resources."

He is referring primarily to al-Jazeera, which is the satellite news channel of choice throughout most of the Arab Middle East. Al-Jazeera's clear objective from the beginning was to be the regional television news provider; to beam its news channel from the Middle East to the Middle East. The channel, from the tiny Gulf state of Qatar, was out to show a thing or two to bigger neighbors like Saudi Arabia. It has more than achieved its marketing goals. Ever sharply focused, al-Jazeera now has a new carefully crafted mission to expand its brand to the United States.

Although al-Jazeera's new English-language channel is targeting America, the world's richest commercial market, it also seeks a global English-speaking audience: "educated affluent viewers; including key decision makers who recognize the importance of an international


news agenda.”

Enter the United States, with its struggling government-funded Middle East broadcast network. Even though the BBC snubs Alhurra by not mentioning it among the BBC’s competition, I list the U.S. as a power player in Arabic TV because of Alhurra’s potential.

The purpose of the U.S. network is “to promote and sustain freedom and democracy by broadcasting accurate and objective news and information about the United States and the world...the mission of all U.S. international broadcasting,” according to Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, who heads the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the group responsible for all U.S. non-military broadcasting.

This has been the mission of U.S. international broadcasting for more than a half-century, since the U.S. Information Agency was formed after World War II. But today’s critics believe that this overarching idea needs another paragraph or two to specifically address how U.S. government television public diplomacy plans to fill the void in today’s ever-changing marketplace.

Worldcasting has learned that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee believes it’s time for an oversight hearing on Alhurra and Radio Sawa, which they have not done for more than a year. It wants to have the “debate” over U.S. government’s Middle East broadcasting, one some of its members think should have happened before the broadcast stations were funded, and the committee was given a “hard sell.”

This is no reflection upon the dedicated men and women who practice public diplomacy, as one earlier critique of modern U.S. diplomacy noted . Rather, it said, “the system” is at fault.

A debate in Congress that attempts to tweak that system and create a specific business plan with milestones to reach desired objectives will likely be productive. It will help to move U.S. Arabic broadcasting to the head of the class, where it belongs.
