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"Pattiz should stay"

Why the White House should keep Norm Pattiz on the Broadcasting Board of Governors

Commentary by Kim Andrew Elliott, 23 June 2005

United States international broadcasting (Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Alhurra, Radio Sawa, etc.) is presently embroiled in several controversies. One is about Norm Pattiz, member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which supervises US international broadcasting. The White House has not renewed his membership on the Board. Because of this, Joseph Biden, ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has delayed the confirmation of Dina Powell to be deputy under secretary of state for public diplomacy.



Mr Pattiz, founder of the commercial radio network Westwood One, was the prime mover in the creation of the Arabic-language Radio Sawa and Alhurra television. I remember the town meeting in which he introduced his Radio Sawa concept. VOA employees were appalled: the VOA Arabic Service was going to be replaced by a service that (gasp!) broadcasts mostly pop music?

Reaching larger audiences

I was among the appalled. But, as a shortwave listener, the concept reminded me of such stations as Radio Luxembourg, Radio Monte Carlo, Radio Ceylon, and Africa Number One. Instead of broadcasting large amounts of news, current affairs, and analysis to small audiences, these music and personality stations transmit short newscasts to large audiences. Their impact could be as great or greater than the traditional international stations. Radio Sawa, I thought, might work.



And Radio Sawa has worked. Its weekly audiences are as high as 63% in the Moroccan cities where it is available on FM. That competes well with domestic broadcasting, let alone with other foreign stations. And BBC Monitoring just reported that the audience for Radio Sawa in Egypt, which the station reaches via mediumwave, is now up to 11 percent weekly. That's nearly the audience size of Egypt's own Voice of the Arabs.

Why the numbers are good

These numbers are good because Mr Pattiz did what successive VOA managements never did: he saw to it that the all-important mediumwave relay in Cyprus was constructed, established, and that FM outlets were established in several Arab cities.

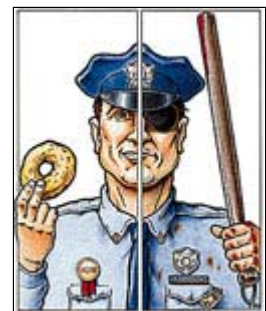
The Alhurra numbers are also good. Alhurra is not displacing Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiya, but it does have, for example, weekly audiences of 33% of satellite households in Kuwait. That's enough to carve a niche in the Arab television market.

Radio Sawa and Alhurra complement each other well. Radio Sawa has the music and personality that works on radio. Alhurra, on television, gets a smaller but more elite and older audience with full-length news programmes, documentaries, and set-piece entertainment programmes.

"Good cops, bad cops"

The White House has not confirmed that it intends not to renew Mr Pattiz's term on the BBG, so it has not provided any reason why it would not keep him on the Board. News articles have pointed out that Mr Pattiz is a major financial contributor to Democratic political candidates. The BBG is a bipartisan panel consisting of four Republicans, four Democrats, and the secretary of state as an ex officio member. In fact, the BBG members are not just Republicans and Democrats, they are *prominent* Republicans and Democrats. And one popular way to become a prominent member of one's party is by donating sacks full of money to the candidate of one's party. So donations can't be a reason not to renew Mr Pattiz's governorship.

Another possible reason floated by Democrats is that the White House is "uneasy about an active Democrat running such a delicate area" as international broadcasting to the Arab and Muslim worlds. President Bush and his advisors have done what they think they must do, and have said what mean to say, concerning Iraq, the war on terror, and the Middle East. Regardless of what we think of these actions and words, they are generally not held in high regard among Middle East publics. President Bush and the Republicans might be considered "bad cops." The Democrats are, to varying degrees, less identified with the foreign policy of the Bush Administration. As such, they might be construed as the "good cops." For this reason, the White House might do well to employ a Democrat to reach out to the Arab and Muslim worlds through international broadcasting.



Consumption is voluntary

Criticism of Mr Pattiz's initiatives comes from former diplomat Edward Djerejian, who was chairman of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy to the Arab and Muslim World. He told the Wall Street Journal: "We commend Radio Sawa for capturing such an audience, but what are they doing with it? How are they moving the needle and changing people's minds?"

Ambassador Djerejian's view is typical of that of many distinguished fellows of Washington's prestigious think tanks. To them, the process of international broadcasting is to send Message A to Audience B to achieve Effects C. Repeat as necessary. These experts seem to think that the content of international broadcasting is what you say after you've grabbed the listener by the scruff of the neck and pinned him against the wall.

We consumers of international broadcasting know that listening to, or watching, a foreign broadcast is rather more voluntary than that. We can, and do, tune elsewhere if the programming does not interest us.

Traditional formats are boring

The Wall Street Journal writes that Mr Pattiz's "main philosophy is that audience size equals success." I would, more or less, go along with that philosophy. If you have an audience, then:

- 1) You know they are well informed, or at least informed the way you want them to be informed.
- 2) They are now more immune to misinformation or disinformation from other stations.
- 3) If radio is done right, with personality and intimacy, it will develop a relationship with the listener. This can, over time, foster goodwill between the United States and the audience. These outcomes are subtle and long-term, and difficult, if not impossible, to measure.



As I have thought about the Radio Sawa and Alhurra phenomena, it dawned on me that these stations are affirmations of the hypotheses I laid out in my ancient doctoral dissertation, *An Alternative Programming Strategy for International Radio Broadcasting* (University of Minnesota, 1979). I argued that the traditional format of international radio programming - news, followed by commentary, analysis, and background reports, then business programme on Mondays, science programme on Tuesdays, women's programme on Wednesdays, youth programme on Thursdays, programme for stamp collectors on Friday, and so on - is boring. I proposed alternative programming approaches, including something much like Radio Sawa.


Still work to be done

Norm Pattiz's term on the Broadcasting Board of Governors should be renewed. US international broadcasting to the Arab World is not yet an unqualified success:

- 1) Radio Sawa's FM penetration has plateaued at nine of the 22 Arab League countries.
- 2) Alhurra will soon face competition from the revived BBC Arabic television channel.
- 3) Both Radio Sawa and Alhurra must demonstrate that they are transmitting real news and not what the Bush Administration, or any future administration, thinks ought to be the news.

Furthermore, Mr Pattiz and his colleagues on the BBG should declare a moratorium on creating new broadcasting entities and shift their formidable energies to protecting the independence of Radio Sawa, Alhurra, the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia. This is necessary to build credibility, without which there can be no lasting success in international broadcasting.

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