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Is There an Audience for Public Diplomacy?

By KIM ANDREW ELLIOTT

ARLINGTON, Va. — Public diplomacy — the current and gentler term for international propaganda — has lately been the subject of task force reports and articles in Foreign Policy and Foreign Affairs, and both houses of Congress will be considering relevant legislation early in their next session. One of the first applications of the new thinking on public diplomacy is State Department mini-documentaries about the lives of Muslim Americans, currently broadcast as commercials on Indonesian television. The State Department is trying to emphasize American values and their wide applicability, as well as the accomplishments of Americans.

I have been doing international broadcasting audience research for 25 years, and I am not aware of any persons huddled by their radios to hear about the achievements and values of the United States or any other country.

People do listen to foreign broadcasts if they are in countries where information is controlled by the government. They listen to the stations that best provide a credible substitute for the news they are not getting from their domestic media.

During most of the postwar years, Radio Moscow was the behemoth of international radio. Yet its audience was normally a small fraction of that of the major Western stations. This is because Radio Moscow transmitted propaganda.

Britain spent much less than the Soviet Union on international broadcasting and still spends less than the United States. But its BBC World Service has the largest audience and most prestige of any international radio station. This is largely because the BBC World Service has with rare exceptions remained independent of British government control.

The American radio stations — Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia — have generally adhered to their news missions and have earned good reputations among their audiences. There is, nonetheless, a persistent ambiguity to American international broadcasting. The BBC is prohibited from broadcasting editorials; V.O.A., by contrast, is officially required to broadcast United States government editorials.

Almost all of the recent reports, articles, bills and speeches about public diplomacy put international broadcasting in the same basket as public diplomacy. Public diplomacy, however, manages information to put the United States and its policies in the best light. In my experience, this is exactly the type of pro-government reporting that audiences seek to escape by tuning to foreign broadcasts.

American decision-makers may wonder why on earth they should provide money to a radio or television station that merely tells the truth. For the answer, let us consider the Arab target audience. Arabs are largely opposed to American policies toward Israel and Palestine and to any possible American invasion of Iraq. No amount of spin will make a dent in the public opinion of the Arab world.

However, Arabs will listen to a radio station or watch a television channel that provides news that is more comprehensive and reliable than what they get from their domestic media. Well informed, they can make up their own minds about current events. They will be grateful to the United States for providing such a service.

The independent journalism of such an American station would be an example of how democracy works. Arab audiences will hear debate in Congress, among pundits and in assembly halls. Sometimes it will be raucous, but that's part of its attraction. They may wish for such open differences of opinion in their own countries.

Sooner or later they will hear a viewpoint, perhaps from a member of Congress, perhaps from an American newspaper editorial, that is not so far from their own. They will understand that such an opinion may not be the Bush administration's foreign policy, but it is American, and something that will help them relate to America. Then audiences in the Arab world and elsewhere may understand America a bit more and dislike it a bit less. All told, it might be enough to make a difference.

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