

U.S. Radio Broadcasting in Iraq and Afghanistan: A Grand Soliloquy?

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In response to the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the U.S. government expanded its radio broadcasting operations in the Middle East, with the goal of informing foreign audiences about the United States and thereby improving relations between the regions. This goal was deemed particularly important in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the U.S. military was soon engaged in separate wars. In war zones, radio broadcasting is a particularly important tool of public diplomacy, as infrastructure problems and safety concerns limit other methods, such as professional exchanges and cultural exhibits. However, radio broadcasting is, by its nature, almost exclusively unidirectional. Over the past decade, U.S. radio broadcasts have flooded listeners in Afghanistan and Iraq with information about the United States. However, the unidirectional nature of U.S. radio broadcasting limits its effectiveness as a public diplomacy tool.

Public Diplomacy: Constructing American Reality Abroad

In 1963, Duke Ellington's orchestra played for an enthusiastic crowd of Americans and Iraqis at an ambassadorial residence in Baghdad. The sold-out performance was the first on a Middle East tour, which the U.S. State Department organized as a public diplomacy initiative. While the musicians were well received throughout the Middle East, they expressed disappointment with the composition of the crowds. "[T]he musicians protested that they were playing only for elites already familiar with jazz when they had expected to play for 'the people,'" leading their State Department escort to conclude that their frustration arose from a misunderstanding of the word "people."¹ To the musicians, "the people" meant members of the lower class, whom they believed were more likely to respond to and appreciate jazz music. To the State Department, "the people" meant those who were best positioned to help the

¹ Penny M. Von Eschen, "Enduring Public Diplomacy," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 342.

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U.S. government achieve foreign policy objectives in the Middle East.² Questions surrounding the perceived legitimacy of public diplomacy recipients, and how best to engage them, continue to influence communication between the United States and the Middle East.

The above conflict reflects an underlying assumption of the U.S. government, namely that the legitimacy of foreign audiences is directly related to their perceived ability to promote U.S. foreign policy goals. These foreign audiences are frequently treated as objects to receive messages, rather than independent actors. As Von Eschen notes, many public diplomacy efforts have been directed at audiences “whom policy makers and purveyors of U.S. propaganda rarely imagined as legitimate political agents, but more often as people who might be duped by the Soviet Union, or later terrorists, if the United States didn’t get to them first and more effectively.”³ This attitude is characteristic of U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East, which has historically been unidirectional. Contemporary broadcasting continues to emphasize message delivery *from* the United States *to* the target audience, as opposed to collaborative message construction. U.S. radio broadcasts in Iraq and Afghanistan during the last decade are no different. This method of communication reflects U.S. assumptions about Middle Eastern culture and U.S.-Middle East power dynamics. Contrary to their intentions, U.S. broadcasters have proven less persuasive than locally based competitors that involve Middle Eastern citizens in the construction of narratives.

“Public diplomacy” has many definitions, but this paper uses the term to refer to coordinated efforts by the government of one country to communicate with the public of another. Public diplomacy is an essential strategy for increasing a nation’s soft power, which Joseph Nye famously described as “getting others to want the outcomes that you want.”⁴

Although many scholars argue that soft power is most effective when it involves collaborative action and knowledge-building,⁵ many of the traditional tools of soft power – for example, propaganda and information campaigns, radio and television broadcasting, cultural exhibits, language lessons and cultural centers – involve the distribution of a government-approved message to a foreign audience. This is particularly evident in U.S. international

² While some definitions of “the Middle East” exclude Afghanistan, for the purposes of this paper we will use the term inclusively.

³ Von Eschen 2005, 336.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5.

⁵ See, for example, Amelia Arsenault, “Public Diplomacy 2.0,” in *Toward a New Public Diplomacy*, ed. Philip Seib (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); James K. Glassman, “Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century,” remarks before the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, 30 June 2008; Colleen Graffy, “The Rise of Public Diplomacy 2.0,” *The Journal of International Security Relations* 17 (2009); and Marc Lynch, “America and the Arab Media Environment,” in *Engaging the Arab & Islamic Worlds through Public Diplomacy*, ed. William A. Rugh (Washington, DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2004): 90–108.

broadcasting, which generally follows a cybernetic model of communication in which the United States is the sender and foreign audiences are the receivers.

The strategy underlying U.S. broadcasting campaigns is grounded in the belief that anti-American sentiment arises when “others” do not adequately understand the United States. Anti-American sentiment is thus viewed as a failure of public diplomacy to persuade others, a belief occasionally expressed by U.S. leaders, as in President George W. Bush’s comment that “‘there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about that people would hate us’ or [S]ecretary of [S]tate-designate Condoleezza Rice’s later promise . . . ‘to do much more to confront hateful propaganda, dispel dangerous myths, and get out the truth.’”⁶ These statements highlight two assumptions: first, that anti-Americanism arises from ignorance or an imperfect understanding of the true nature of American culture, and second, that such a thing as “the true nature of American culture” exists.

Certainly complete ignorance of the positive aspects of American culture could contribute to negative attitudes, although, as Todorov cautions, to understand a culture and to sympathize with it are two different things.⁷ As Berger and Luckmann demonstrate, the second assumption is even less defensible because reality is a social construct that is informed by cultural influences. There are many ways to understand the history, culture, and politics of the United States, and “men in the street take quite different ‘realities’ for granted as between one society and another.”⁸ That is, there is not one, objective reality, but many ways of understanding reality, each shaped by symbolic social actions, institutions, and language.⁹ Once established, institutions and attitudes tend to persist, but it is possible for people to migrate from one position to another, and therefore to change their understanding of reality.

The Bush administration attempted to change attitudes about the United States in the Middle East by both eradicating enemies and spreading pro-American information throughout the region. In this context, public diplomacy operates as a tool for reconstructing the reality of foreign populations whose attitudes and opinions conflict with those of the U.S. government. This is, of course, an overly simplistic view that accounts for only one goal of public diplomacy – informing and influencing foreign publics – and should not be considered a complete and exclusive assessment of public

⁶ Liam Kennedy and Scott Lucas, “Enduring Freedom: Public Diplomacy and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 321.

⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 185.

⁸ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 2.

⁹ The reality described in this paper is equally subject to such influences, as the ideas and opinions of the writers have been shaped within a cultural context.

diplomacy's utility. Within this context, however, it is clear that the cybernetic model of U.S. public diplomacy communication persists, as the U.S. continues to generate and distribute messages throughout the Middle East.

The effectiveness of this tactic, however, is questionable. Nearly a decade after the 2001 terrorist attacks, anti-American sentiment in the Middle East is still strong, as demonstrated by polls conducted by Gallup, Zogby International, the U.S. State Department, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Pew Center, and others.¹⁰ The Bush administration's strategy was to win respect in the Middle East by demonstrating strength and disseminating information about U.S. values and culture, but this strategy was based in part on incorrect assumptions about the Arab world, including the notion that the best way to impress Arabs is to dominate them, that the power of authoritarian states in the region negates the influence of public opinion, and that anti-Americanism arises from misunderstanding U.S. policies.¹¹ These assumptions are based on beliefs about fundamental differences between U.S. and Arab culture.

Many cross-cultural theorists and practitioners have relied on frameworks that emphasize cultural differences to inform their assumptions about other cultures. As Hall notes, "it is not possible to adequately describe a culture solely from the inside or from the outside without reference to the other."¹² But doing so reveals as much about the attitudes of the observer as it does about the culture being observed. In the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. public diplomacy has revealed a greater desire to be heard than to listen, to be understood than to understand.

Power Dynamics and the "Other"

The U.S. government spends hundreds of millions of dollars on international broadcasting operations every year.¹³ Two decades ago, U.S. broadcasters like Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) were praised for their role in contributing to the end of the Cold War, but recent studies have questioned the effectiveness of contemporary broadcasting efforts.¹⁴ Analysis of the context and content of U.S. broadcasting suggests that current radio broadcasting efforts may be failing to increase U.S. soft power in Afghanistan and Iraq for several reasons, including public suspicion of government-news, limited scope, and perceptions of indifference to public opinion.

¹⁰ Peter G. Peterson, "Public Diplomacy and the War on Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 5 (2002): 75.

¹¹ Marc Lynch, "Taking Arabs Seriously," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 5 (2003): 82.

¹² Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), 222.

¹³ "FY 2011 Budget Request," Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2010, 16.

¹⁴ Peterson 2002, 75.

One reason may be that people throughout the Arab world are often wary of government-sponsored news. For decades, Arab media served as a mouthpiece for the government and were viewed with skepticism by the public. During the 1990s, the Arab media environment underwent significant changes, resulting in a more critical media environment, particularly in the medium of television. Al Jazeera and its imitators invited opposition leaders and intellectuals to analyze and debate official positions, creating a space for Arab people to frame issues and shape the public sphere. As Lynch notes, "Whereas the broadcasting of the 1950s had been in the service of powerful states, the new media (both television and press) have self-consciously portrayed themselves as a mouthpiece for an Arab public deeply frustrated with all Arab regimes and beholden to none of them."¹⁵ This media revolution created an environment in which the public had greater agency in the framing and interpretation of news. The United States entered this environment in the post-9/11 world with broadcasts that more closely resembled the unreliable state media programs of the mid-twentieth century than their more popular, populist counterparts.

The credibility of traditional "push-down" communication of U.S. public policy can also be undermined by limited scope and the implication that it devalues the opinions of others.¹⁶ While the U.S. government spends billions of dollars on public diplomacy outreach every year, only \$5 million supports foreign public-opinion polling.¹⁷ Yet, understanding the attitudes of others is an essential aspect of successful public diplomacy. As Nye notes, "When we measure power in terms of the changed behavior of others, we have first to know their preferences. . . . Power always depends on the context in which the relationship exists."¹⁸ But comparatively low funding for foreign polls suggests that the U.S. government has more interest in Middle Eastern publics as information recipients than as generators. This attitude, Lynch argues, is reflected in U.S. public diplomacy efforts:

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has distinguished between "strategic" and "communicative" action, with the first designed to manipulate others so as to further one's own self-interest and the second designed to search for truth. . . . All too often, U.S. public-diplomacy efforts have fallen crudely into the strategic category and missed their mark for that very reason. Information has gone in one direction; the target's views and thoughts have been of interest only insofar as they could be molded.¹⁹

¹⁵ Lynch 2003, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82, 76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ Nye 2004, 2.

¹⁹ Lynch 2003, 90.

While the U.S. government would likely define its actions in terms of national security,²⁰ they have often been perceived in the Middle East as extensions of U.S. imperialism and a quest for global hegemony.²¹

These power dynamics are hardly new to U.S. involvement in the Middle East. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that two aspects of the U.S. cultural narrative surfaced during the first Gulf War: "one was the great power's right to safeguard its distant interests even to the point of military invasion; the second was that lesser powers were also lesser peoples, with lesser rights, morals [and] claims."²² Such an attitude is typical of a view that conceives the "other" as inferior at an axiological level.²³

There are significant differences between the two cultures, and these differences influence how people within those cultures view the world; but conflicting realities are not inevitable. Weisinger and Salipante discuss an alternative framework for responding to cultural differences in a paper on international joint ventures for which they observed three groups of collaborative workers. One group that included both Japanese and U.S. workers avoided culture clashes by creating a unique space in which neither culture dominated. This collaboration provided a "third space" where the participants could create a new culture based on common goals.²⁴ A similar strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan could establish a more dialectical model of communication in which U.S. and Middle Eastern representatives work together to shape the narrative of U.S. military engagement. Zaharna notes that "public diplomacy, like communication, is enriched by multiple perspectives."²⁵ To successfully address communication problems and "advance political objectives," public diplomacy must focus on both message content and distribution as well as relationship building.²⁶ Current U.S. broadcasting, with its non-collaborative focus, reflects broad and imperfect assumptions about Middle Eastern culture and perpetuates perceived power imbalances in the region. The failure to adopt a more inclusive, collaborative system of message construction is one factor contributing to the low effectiveness of public diplomacy outreach in Iraq and Afghanistan.

²⁰ Kennedy and Lucas 2005, 316.

²¹ Lynch 2003, 81.

²² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 36.

²³ Todorov 1982, 185.

²⁴ Judith Y. Weisinger and Paul F. Salipante, "Cultural Knowing as Practicing: Extending Our Conceptions of Culture," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (2000): 382.

²⁵ R. S. Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 138.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Afghan Culture

Traditional communication and modern mass media live side by side in Afghanistan. Until the civil war in the 1990s, a segment of the population, particularly those people living in remote areas of the country, maintained communication through a traditional method consisting of small groups within a specific territory holding meetings in their tribe or village to decide the needs of the community.²⁷ At the same time, people in Kabul and other urban areas had access to more advanced technological sources. Afghanistan's first weekly newspaper was established at the end of the nineteenth century.²⁸ The nation's first radio broadcasts followed four decades later, while television did not become readily available until the 1970s.²⁹ The development of newspaper and radio stations was strongly influenced by colonialism and decolonization in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century.³⁰ Although Afghanistan had ever-increasing access to modern broadcasting technology throughout the twentieth century, it remained a country in which interpersonal communication and locally generated knowledge were influential.

While newspapers were available in Afghanistan, it was radio that became the most reliable and sometimes the only source of mass media for a great portion of the community – considering that a large percentage of the population was illiterate and that the radio programs were free.³¹ By 1990, Radio Afghanistan, the only state-owned radio station, had 50 programming hours across the country and abroad. Rawan notes that “[a]ccording to some estimates, in 1990 there were about 5 million listeners across the country and a total listening audience of 10 to 12 million.”³² However, the fact that Radio Afghanistan belonged to the government caused some skepticism regarding the accuracy of the information. As a result, the Afghan community accessed alternative radio stations with greater frequency. These stations, including BBC, VOA, and Deutsche Welle, as well as Pakistani and Iranian stations, offered programs in Dari, the first language of 75 percent of the local population, and Pashto, whose speakers are often bilingual.³³ The efforts to reach out to a multilingual listenership demonstrated that these stations had a broad and diverse understanding of what constituted a legitimate audience.

Basic public services, such as transportation, telephone service, and postal deliveries suffered under the totalitarian regime of the Taliban, and

²⁷ Shir Mohammad Rawan, “Modern Mass and Traditional Communication in Afghanistan,” *Political Communication* 19, no. 2 (2002): 155.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

³¹ Bruce Girard and Jo Van der Spek, “The Potential for Community Radio in Afghanistan.” Available from <http://comunica.org/afghanistan>. October 2002 (accessed 8 April 2010), 1.

³² Rawan 2002, 161.

³³ Girard and Van der Spek 2002, 14.

media broadcasting was no exception. Extreme censorship was policy, and the majority of mass communication disappeared. The Taliban destroyed radio facilities, and banned music and the Internet. Television programming fell under the control of armed factions. There was no place for independent media on Afghan soil until the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.³⁴

Radio Free Afghanistan (also referred to as RFA or Radio Azadi) had been on air since 1985 as an American response to the Soviet influence in the region.³⁵ The station dissolved in 1993, but reactivated after the Taliban were forced to leave the government in 2001. From 1985 to 1993, RFA was a pro-American, anti-Soviet soft power tool used to promote American values and culture to counteract communist propaganda in the region. In 2001, RFA was reinstated using the same model with a different focus: to promote American values and offset Taliban ideals and influence in Afghanistan.³⁶ The unidirectional model of communication reflects the non-collaborative focus and the power dynamics that have characterized the relationship between the United States and Afghanistan. This relationship embodies Von Eschen's description of the United States exporting information to listeners viewed as passive recipients.

RFA and VOA Afghanistan

Radio is still the main source of information for the Afghan community, and since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the United States has increased its efforts to provide radio broadcasts throughout Afghanistan. The two branches of U.S. radio broadcasting in Afghanistan are RFA and VOA Afghanistan. RFA and the two Afghan branches of VOA are ranked among the top three international broadcasters in Afghanistan.³⁷ Together, they provide 24 hours of programming daily. VOA's Afghan branches feature "call-in shows and in-country reporting."³⁸ The call-in shows from VOA's Radio Deewa generally receive about 300 calls per day.³⁹ Radio Azadi offers programming with wide appeal for a diverse audience.⁴⁰ RFA's daily programming consists of 12 hours of shows, with three and a half minutes of live news at the top of the hour and three call-in shows per week. According to the United States Department of State and the BBG, 60 percent of the broadcast material is prepared in Afghanistan and 40 percent originates in Prague, with guests participating from

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁵ "RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan. History." Available from <http://www.rferl.org/info/Afghanistan/181.html> (accessed 10 April 2010).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ "BBG Budget Request 2009." Available from http://media.voanews.com/documents/bbg_fy09_budget_request.pdf (accessed 10 April 2010), 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰ "RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan. History (2010).

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Kabul.⁴¹ RFA reaches approximately 8 million people weekly (or 45.3 percent of the market share), and is broadcast in those remote places where the population does not have direct contact with the government. The BBG's Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Request suggests that "more than 30% of adults listen to or watch VOA Afghan programs in Dari and Pashto at least once a week."⁴² RFA has gained trust and credibility within the Afghan community. However, "[n]ot all Afghans know that Radio Azadi is U.S. funded, and the radio station does not advertise its funding sources."⁴³

Afghanistan Radio Broadcasting Analysis

After decades of war and oppression, Afghanistan still lacks both reliable infrastructure and a unifying national narrative. The current government, in partnership with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations, and the United States, has supported the development of nationwide media broadcasting, especially radio broadcasting. Since 2001, current Afghan president Hamid Karzai has authorized the creation of independent radio stations for both commercial and community radio broadcasting licenses.⁴⁴ In fact, Karzai "not only gave his full support to the establishment of independent media, but also his commitment to the diversification of media outlets, including the development of community radio."⁴⁵ However, most of the financial resources for these projects have come from coalition forces, with special attention from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Some of these efforts have included the professionalization of radio station activities by providing training for journalists through educational programs.

For the United States, radio broadcasting in Afghanistan has been an invaluable tool in its practice of public diplomacy. But the partnership between the two countries is still hampered by differences in "traditional, economic, ideological, and communicative structures,"⁴⁶ as well as questions regarding the legitimacy of each nation's political intentions. Ongoing U.S. involvement in major political decisions within the country demonstrates that the United States questions the complete legitimacy of the Afghan government.⁴⁷ The U.S. government describes such actions in terms of national security, but others within the region have described it as imperialism.⁴⁸ This critical disconnect is

⁴¹ OIG Rpt. No. ISP-IB-10-48, Broadcasting Board of Governors Operations in Afghanistan, 5.

⁴² *Broadcasting Board of Governors, Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Request*. Available from http://media.voanews.com/documents/bbg_fy10_budget_request.pdf (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁴³ OIG Rpt. No. ISP-IB-10-48 2010, 5.

⁴⁴ Girard and Van der Spek 2002, 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Rawan 2002, 167.

⁴⁷ Lynch 2003, 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

also evident in the way the United States and Afghanistan interpret the word “democracy.” As John Hughes notes,

If democracy is to flourish in the Islamic world, it may not be “democracy” as Westerners know it. Perhaps “freedom” is the better word to describe what we hope for. Freedom may come in different forms in different countries. Though the culture may dictate different approaches, there are some basics: freedom of the press, free elections, an independent judiciary, and the emancipation and empowerment of women.⁴⁹

The United States has shown its commitment to the theme of freedom. However, “we have lacked an ability to listen to other visions of freedom. We have been unwilling to . . . ask ourselves what freedom means to the people whom we are trying to influence.”⁵⁰ For its public diplomacy to be truly effective, the United States must be willing to receive messages as well as transmit them, and it must focus on dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect between different cultures.

Ever-increasing communication efforts in the world have been one of the diplomatic “soft power” tools in the fight against terrorism, but this communication has largely moved in one direction – from the United States to the world. Debate continues regarding whether these efforts are actually effective, or if they are viewed as mere propaganda by their intended targets. Hughes argues that “our public diplomacy is unlikely to be effective unless we understand better the mindset and culture of the audiences we are trying to reach. . . . We must listen to the views of those we seek to engage in dialogue.”⁵¹

Although most Afghan radio broadcasts supported by the United States are unidirectional, there are some exceptions. In 2001 RFA was reinstated by the United States and has since become extremely popular.⁵² The radio station receives “hundreds of letters and calls each month from across Afghanistan and neighbor countries.”⁵³ In one instance, the station facilitated the “reunion of a father and his daughter after a separation of 10 years. The Afghan woman sent a message in search of him via Radio Azadi. Within a few

⁴⁹ John Hughes, “Many Voices: Is Anyone Listening?” in *America’s Dialogue with the World*, ed. William P. Kiehl (Washington, DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2006), 17.

⁵⁰ Anthony C. E. Quainton, “Refocusing America’s Message?” in *America’s Dialogue with the World*, ed. William P. Kiehl (Washington, DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2006), 28.

⁵¹ Hughes 2006, 18.

⁵² Lauren Knapp and Mike Fritz, “On Radio Free Afghanistan, Time for Letters,” PBS News Hour. March 2010. Available from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/blog/2010/03/on-radio-free-afghanistan-time-for-letters.html> (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁵³ RFE/RL’s Radio Free Afghanistan, History. Available from <http://www.rferl.org/info/Afghanistan/181.html> (accessed 10 April 2010).

months, the father contacted the radio station, and they were soon reconnected.”⁵⁴

In recognition of this phenomenon, the Library of Congress in partnership with the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., has organized a multimedia exhibition called “Voices from Afghanistan.” The letters were selected from over 15,000 sent by “ordinary listeners for whom radio is often the only window on the larger world. They are filled with requests: for songs by beloved artists, for assistance with local problems, and sometimes, they are filled simply with gratitude and enthusiasm for Radio Azadi.”⁵⁵ The letters are extraordinarily elaborate – with photos, hand paintings, drawings, and allusions to Afghan poets. They are true works of art, and to Radio Free press officer Ari Goldberg, these letters show “a side of Afghanistan we don’t always get to see.”⁵⁶ They reinforce the importance of radio in Afghans’ daily lives, and show that Afghans live like everyone else in the world. Goldberg emphasizes that in Afghanistan, “[p]eople live in remote places, the government is clearly not formed in such a way that people can get instant feedback from their representatives . . . so this radio station is really one of the few avenues to have their voices heard.”⁵⁷

“Voices from Afghanistan” demonstrates the positive impact of U.S. broadcasting initiatives in Afghanistan. The letters indicate that Radio Azadi is on the right path to achieving its mission “to bring listeners accurate and fair news and to promote discussion for citizens unaccustomed to a free press.”⁵⁸ The openness of the letters demonstrates increasing trust in the U.S.-sponsored radio program, and the potential for further collaboration between the station and the community. However, the fact that Radio Azadi is not universally recognized as a U.S.-sponsored station casts doubt on its effectiveness as a public diplomacy tool.

Radio Azadi is a moderately successful example of cross-cultural communication, but it is only a small piece of U.S. diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan. Amr and Singer argue that in general, U.S. “efforts have relied on informational programming that has lacked priority or been misdirected, lacked nuance in dealing with diverse and sensitive issues, and not reached out to the key ‘swing’ audiences necessary to marginalize and root out violent extremists.”⁵⁹ “Voices from Afghanistan” demonstrates the power U.S. radio broadcasts can have when they welcome input from their audience and allow

⁵⁴ Knapp and Fritz 2010.

⁵⁵ Philip Kennicott, “Library of Congress: ‘Voices from Afghanistan’; Folger: ‘Extending the Book,’” *The Washington Post*, 3 March 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/10/AR2010031003768.html> (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁵⁶ Knapp and Fritz 2010.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Hady Amr and P. W. Singer, “To Win the ‘War on Terror’, We Must First Win the ‘War of Ideas’: Here’s How,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 618 (2008): 213.

listeners to help shape the narrative of their country. However, such efforts are the exception, not the rule. The majority of U.S. radio broadcasts employ a unidirectional format, emphasize the power disparity between the countries, and deny listeners the opportunity to contribute to knowledge formation via the broadcasting process. While Radio Azadi enables more listener contributions, it does so in a way that promotes only one goal of U.S. public diplomacy – disseminating messages. One of the key features that distinguish international broadcasting from propaganda is that in broadcasting, “the information source or sponsoring nation is often readily identifiable.”⁶⁰ Ultimately, the ambiguity surrounding Radio Azadi’s sponsorship undermines its effectiveness as a public diplomacy tool because it impedes any attempts to openly build meaningful relationships and improve mutual understanding between representatives of the United States and Afghanistan.

Iraq Culture

The contentious history between the United States and Iraq is not uncharted territory in the field of international relations, and neither is the field of radio broadcasting. States have transmitted messages through radio to Iraq for years, and the success of these efforts is frequently debated among public diplomacy scholars. A brief history of international broadcasting attempts towards the Middle East must be analyzed to provide a solid foundation from which to start discussing the current endeavors to reach out to the Iraqi population through radio broadcasting. First, however, an overview of Iraq’s culture is necessary to understand the perceived success or failure of international broadcasting efforts to impact the country.

Congressional Quarterly’s *The Middle East* explains that “more than two decades of dictatorship, war, and sanctions have taken a heavy toll on Iraqi society.”⁶¹ This destruction has wrought havoc on basic Iraqi infrastructure, including the country’s health and sanitation systems as well as oil facilities. Further, Iraq has been shaped by frequent invasions throughout its long history:

[N]o invader ever succeeded in completely conquering the region, however, and as each empire fell it left a cultural residue that survived succeeding invasions. The area’s religious, communal, ethnic, and linguistic groupings have historically had a tendency to identify with their own parochial communities rather than with the central governing authority.⁶²

⁶⁰ Zaharna 2010, 143.

⁶¹ *The Middle East* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2007), 264.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 263.

Thus, any attempt to influence the culture or understand the effect of public diplomacy on Iraq must be analyzed through its historical and cultural framework. As a nation whose collective identity remains a patchwork of identities largely formed by small communities with resistance to the homogenizing influence of dominant foreign powers, this framework is still being formed.

According to Linzer, "U.S. radio broadcasts to the Middle East formally began in 1950 when the Voice of America . . . beamed its radio programs in Arabic. They were aimed at countries the United States feared would fall under Soviet influence."⁶³ Since then, the U.S. government has made multiple efforts to reach the population of Iraq through radio broadcasting. These include VOA Arabic, Radio Free Iraq, and Radio Sawa, which are all considered part of the BBG. The BBG became an independent federal government agency in October 1999. Its mission statement details the way it views its role: "Our mission is to enhance understanding of the United States, our institutions, beliefs, values, and policies, and of world, local and regional events. We do this by broadcasting accurate, objective, balanced news and information about the United States and the world."⁶⁴ According to BBG testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy, and Global Women's Issues, the challenges in launching media broadcasts to Iraq have been plentiful: "At the start of the conflict in Iraq, we had no established broadcasting platform in the country – no local facilities, no in-country transmission, no significant national audience . . . at the same time, Iraqi and foreign media outlets proliferated, intensifying competition."⁶⁵ Now, U.S. radio and television broadcasts to Iraq reach 73 percent of Iraqi adults.⁶⁶ Radio Free Iraq, established during the Clinton administration, is said to connect with 10 percent of Iraq's radio listening audience – while Radio Sawa, created during the Bush administration, meets 23 percent of the market.⁶⁷ For international broadcasting to succeed, Lynch believes that "the media component of an effective public diplomacy in the region would emphasize private, free media with open and wide ranging political coverage – and should demonstrate by example the American commitment to political

⁶³ Dafna Linzer, "Lost in Translation: Alhurra – America's Troubled Effort to Win Middle East Hearts and Minds," *ProPublica* (2008).

⁶⁴ "Broadcasting Board of Governors – Frequently Asked Questions," <http://www.bbg.gov/about/faq.html> (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁶⁵ "Testimony of the Broadcasting Board of Governors," in *Senate Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy, and Global Women's Issues*, United States Congress (Washington, DC: 2009).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

freedom.”⁶⁸ If this is the ultimate goal, how do Radio Free Iraq and Radio Sawa fare in achieving it?

Radio Free Iraq and Radio Sawa

Radio Free Iraq and Radio Sawa are the two U.S. radio-broadcasting stations in Iraq. Radio Free Iraq, housed under RFE/RL, began broadcasting on October 30, 1998. According to its website, RFE/RL’s mission is

to promote democratic values and institutions by reporting the news in countries where a free press is banned by the government or not fully established . . . RFE/RL strengthens civil societies by projecting democratic values [and] fosters closer ties between the countries of the region and the world’s established democracies.⁶⁹

Radio Free Iraq (RFI) is broadcast in Arabic from the RFE headquarters in Prague. It also has staff in Baghdad contributing to the dissemination of information. RFI focuses 17 hours of daily programming on distributing relevant news regarding the current Iraqi situation. What little entertainment programming the station has is limited to classical Iraqi music.⁷⁰ Under the Bush administration, the BBG decided to replace VOA Arabic with Radio Sawa in 2002. According to the BBG, “Radio Sawa provides its audience with reliable and objective up-to-date news, interesting information and an upbeat blend of mainstream Western and Arabic popular music.”⁷¹ The station broadcasts 24 hours a day in Arabic from studios in Washington, D.C. and the United Arab Emirates. Unlike RFI, Radio Sawa’s target population is Iraq’s younger generation; therefore, it focuses on entertainment rather than providing information.⁷² Norman Pattiz, then chairman of the BBG and responsible for creating Radio Sawa, explains,

In the Middle East, the elite versus mass audience discussion becomes almost moot, as 60–70 percent of the population is under age 30. . . . They enjoy few opportunities for social mobility and progress. They are ripe for exploitation by radical

⁶⁸ Marc Lynch, “America and the Arab Media Environment,” in *Engaging the Arab & Islamic Worlds through Public Diplomacy*, ed. William A. Rugh (Washington, DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2004), 90–108.

⁶⁹ “Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Mission Statement.” Available from <http://www.rferl.org/info/mission/169.html> (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁷⁰ “Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Iraq,” <http://www.rferl.org/info/Iraq/187.html> (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁷¹ “Broadcasting Board of Governors, About,” <http://www.bbg.gov/about/index.html> (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁷² “Radio Sawa, About Us,” <http://www.radiosawa.com/english.aspx> (accessed 10 April 2010).

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Islamic fundamentalist ideology and elements of Arab media that seek to incite them. Reaching them is key.⁷³

Iraq Radio Broadcasting Analysis

Kim Andrew Elliott, a research analyst at the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau, states, “international broadcasting and public diplomacy should, and for the most part already do, coexist in similar fashion.”⁷⁴ Despite the claim that RFI and Radio Sawa are successful in their attempts to reach the Iraqi population, this is often called into question – often due to the decision to replace VOA Arabic with Radio Sawa.

The decision to replace VOA Arabic with Radio Sawa is controversial. The decision to create Radio Sawa was based on BBG Chairman Pattiz’s belief that the key to reaching Iraqi youth was to play musical hits from the West.⁷⁵ Radio Sawa’s broadcasts consist of a myriad of Western pop songs, short news reports, and – rarely – Arabic music. The BBG hoped this model would bridge the cultural divide between Iraq and the United States, and would encourage Iraqis to embrace Western popular culture. If Radio Sawa could generate an Iraqi audience receptive to Western pop music, then perhaps they would also be receptive to foreign news reports. Pattiz designed Radio Sawa “to be a forward-looking, optimistic, empowering radio station, an example of the American spirit of openness to new ideas and cultural diversity.”⁷⁶ While this may have been Radio Sawa’s original goal, some argue that it is just another form of cultural imperialism – exporting Western culture to a less developed country whose own cultural narrative is seen as irrelevant by the West. This form of cultural imperialism is described by modernization theory.

Thussu describes modernization theory as the idea that “international mass communication could be used to spread the message of modernity and transfer the economic and political models of the West.”⁷⁷ Under the modernization paradigm, the United States could use media technology to encourage Iraq to adopt more “modern,” that is, Western, political attitudes. In this theory, mass media are seen to be a neutral force that informs and enlightens the uneducated population; however, this framework failed to take

⁷³ Norman Pattiz, “Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV: Opening Channels of Mass Communication in the Middle East,” in *Engaging the Arab and Islamic Worlds through Public Diplomacy*, ed. William A. Rugh (Washington, DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2004), 69–90.

⁷⁴ Kim Andrew Elliott, “U.S. International Broadcasting: Too Bizarre to Be Explained by Political Science,” *USC Center on Public Diplomacy*. Available from http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/newswire/cpdblog_detail/us_international_broadcasting_too_bizarre_to_be_explained_by_political_scie/. 28 September 2009 (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁷⁵ Pattiz 2004, 79.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Daya Thussu, “Approaches to Theorizing International Communication,” in *International Communication: Continuity and Change* (New York; Hodder Arnold, 2000), 43.

into account that this is a top-down, one-way model of communication that often serves only the interest of the elites. Lynch argues that such policies are identical to those that authoritarian Arab governments use to deliver government messages: "this campaign epitomized a monologic conception of public diplomacy, one based in manipulation rather than in engagement."⁷⁸ Laurie Kassman, a former VOA Arabic employee, argues that the true nature of Radio Sawa is to "dumb down" listeners in hopes of imposing U.S. culture on their more traditional, conservative societies.⁷⁹ On the other hand, proponents of Radio Sawa argue that one of its news broadcasts, *Iraq and the World*, analyzes only the news that is important and relevant to Iraqis.

Nevertheless, many VOA former correspondents like Kassman argue that the decision to implement Radio Sawa effectively deprives the United States of a potentially successful public diplomacy tool. Sam Hilmy, one such VOA employee, argues that pop music is a successful enterprise on its own, "but it alone cannot present the picture of America which American public diplomacy is intended to present. . . . [P]op does not attract potential future leaders or opinion makers. It does not build credibility."⁸⁰ Kassman agrees, describing how listeners of VOA Arabic in Iraq were surprised when they could no longer listen to its programs. Radio Sawa was not quickly identified as part of the U.S. international broadcasting efforts, and the perceived lack of credible programming only served to further deprive the U.S. of a successful public diplomacy tool.⁸¹

In canceling its VOA programming, the BBG seemed unconcerned for the already-established relationship between the VOA Arabic staff and its Iraqi audience. Instead, it was more concerned with sending a message to what the BBG determined was a more important audience: the youth. The BBG dismantled VOA Arabic in one quick action, issuing a last-minute note to VOA staff: "Effective this weekend the programming currently being produced for the VOA Arabic Branch will cease and all programming in Arabic will be produced for the Middle East Radio Network (Radio Sawa)."⁸² This demonstrated a complete lack of respect for both the VOA staff and its listeners, who had grown to rely on the broadcasts for credible information. In abandoning this important audience, the BBG determined who was and was not a legitimate audience for their international broadcasting effort.

⁷⁸ Lynch 2004, 100.

⁷⁹ Laurie Kassman, "Voice of America versus Radio Sawa in the Middle East: A Personal Perspective," *The American University in Cairo* 2 (Summer 2007).

⁸⁰ Sam Hilmy, "Radio Sawa: America's New Adventure in Radio Broadcasting," *Arab Media & Society* (2007).

⁸¹ Kassman 2007.

⁸² Alan L. Heil Jr., "A History of VOA Arabic: A Half-Century of Service to the Nation and the Arab World," in *Engaging the Arab & Islamic Worlds through Public Diplomacy*, ed. William A. Rugh (Washington, DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2004), 49-68.

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Radio Free Iraq, while focused on news and not music, did not escape unscathed from criticism. Some critics may view its broadcasts as propaganda, but others believe its programming benefits Iraqis on a daily basis. Originally, Elliott and other VOA officials were against the establishment of RFI because they felt the VOA was capable of meeting the broadcasting needs of Iraq. Yet, the BBG believes that RFI provides news coverage in a nonpartisan manner; therefore, it provides a unique service different from other information outlets available to Iraqis.⁸³ The same Senate Foreign Relations testimony explains that RFI contributes to the BBG goal of “empowering audiences and, in turn, to Iraq’s transition to more free and democratic society.”⁸⁴

An example of how RFI provides necessary services includes outreach to troubled Iraqis. Many Iraqis were being held in prisons in Saudi Arabia without access to any form of legal counsel throughout 2009 and into 2010.⁸⁵ These prisoners smuggled in cell phones and a radio to listen to RFI’s broadcasts, hoping to reach out for help. They succeeded. After they contacted RFI and explained their dire situation, RFI informed Iraq government officials. This provided the officials with the concrete evidence they had been missing in order to free some of the suspected prisoners. While the cases are still ongoing, with the aid of the radio broadcasts, the governments of Saudi Arabia and Iraq have started a negotiation process.⁸⁶ Many claim this is the true purpose of RFI – to give a voice to the previously voiceless citizens, thereby providing an outlet to serve information-deprived societies.⁸⁷ Perhaps this proves why RFI is viewed as a more legitimate media source. It allows Iraqis to speak for themselves.

Regardless of the perceived success in either obtaining prisoner releases or providing reliable news programming from a neutral, nonpartisan source, RFI is still the root of much concern. Although the radio station attempts to separate itself from its noticeable ties to the U.S. government, it is clearly far from independent. Regardless of RFI’s actual intentions, its effectiveness is related to whether the target audience sees it as legitimate. Perhaps due to the distrustful nature of relations between Iraq and the United States with regard to culture, power, and freedom, only 10 percent of the Iraqi population that has access to radio broadcasting follows RFI.⁸⁸ In fact, Lynch believes most U.S. broadcasting attempts have been dismal failures thus far, because “the American approach to the Arab media has been profoundly self-

⁸³ Testimony, 2009.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Ladan Nekoomaram, “Radio Free Iraq Helps Iraqi Prisoners in Saudi Arabia.” Available from http://www.rferl.org/content/off_mic_RFI_helps_saudi_prisoners/1943058.html, 29 January 2010 (accessed 10 April 2010).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, “Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa: Advancing Freedom in the Arab World,” *Arab Media & Society* 2 (Summer 2007).

⁸⁸ Testimony, 2009.

defeating, and it appears to rest on fundamental misunderstandings of the Arab media's nature, content, and public role."⁸⁹ As Johnson argues, "the Iraqis . . . should establish [their] own Radio Free Iraq with no U.S. government ties."⁹⁰

Conclusion

Nearly four decades after Duke Ellington's orchestra played for the Middle East elite, the U.S. government is still following a cybernetic model of communication, targeting select audiences to receive messages constructed by the government. While some aspects of U.S. engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan are collaborative, U.S. radio broadcasts are generally not. Broadcasters like RFA, VOA, RFI, and Radio Sawa target specific audiences for the purpose of improving regional attitudes about the United States. As the almost exclusive generator of messages in this context, the United States reinforces existing power dynamics, treating radio audiences, for the most part, as passive recipients of information and not co-creators.

Although circumstantial differences make it next to impossible to compare the effectiveness of U.S. broadcasts in the two countries, Afghani and Iraqi broadcasts share many characteristics. First, reception of these broadcasts is shaped, in both countries, by existing cultural dynamics. In Afghanistan, where attitudes about the U.S. military are more positive and fewer locally generated broadcasters exist, response to U.S. broadcasts has been considerably warmer. In addition, general ignorance about RFA's connection to the U.S. government has reduced perceptions of U.S. imperialism, but undermined its success as a public diplomacy tool. In Iraq, U.S. government radio broadcasts, like the U.S. invasion, are generally regarded as unilateral enterprises, which has impeded their credibility.

Second, exceptional situations involving cooperation between the broadcasters and their listeners have provided opportunities for collaborative narrative generation in both countries. In Afghanistan, listener mail has provided the community with an opportunity to communicate with the broadcasters and with one another. In Iraq, imprisoned Iraqis have used the radio to alert others to their plight. By opening up opportunities for more collaborative communication, U.S. radio broadcasters provided a necessary service to their listeners and increased their perceived credibility — but such situations are the exception in government-sponsored radio broadcasts, not the rule.

⁸⁹ Lynch 2004, 90.

⁹⁰ Hans Johnson, "A U.S. Government-Run Radio Free Iraq Won't Help Bring Down Saddam Hussein," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (1998).

Despite its limitations, radio broadcasting is an important public diplomacy tool, particularly in countries where other methods of public diplomacy and communication are limited and unreliable. By increasing opportunities for more interactive communication, the United States could improve the effectiveness of its radio broadcasts. This could be accomplished by inviting more feedback from the community, by collaborating with credible local broadcasters and, paradoxically, by including more critical material in its programming.⁹¹ This solution would represent what Lynch describes as “a fundamentally different approach to the United States’ interactions with the region – one that speaks with Arabs rather than at them and tries to engage rather than manipulate.”⁹²

What would a new approach to international broadcasting look like? It might involve small changes, such as increased funding; the establishment of firewalls to prevent government influence of content; and programming that actively demonstrates U.S. commitment to freedom of expression, such as call-in shows, debates, and locally generated news. In addition, it might include greater collaboration with established Arab media broadcasters. At its most extreme, it would entail a complete overhaul of the BBG, granting more independence, resources, and editorial control to the government’s international broadcasting body, and clearly defining a mission founded on promoting the public good. Despite the success of the globally respected BBC, which was founded on similar principles, such drastic change is unlikely, due to the United States’ historic distrust of government-controlled media and its commitment to neoliberal media policy. Whatever steps are taken, the BBG should articulate clear objectives for its programs; emphasize interpersonal relationships, openness, cooperation, multidirectional communication, and humility; and demonstrate a desire to learn as well as inform.

While the United States is deeply invested in the future of Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. leaders’ hopes for these states are not identical to those of Afghani and Iraqi people. Even where goals align, the nations are frequently divided regarding how best to achieve them, making it difficult to work together to reach a solution. As Lynch notes, “successful dialogue requires minimizing power considerations and demonstrating mutual respect.”⁹³ Creating a communication environment to support multi-directional communication flows would be an important step in the right direction. Doing so would demonstrate a desire to create a new space, free from the cultural assumptions and power dynamics that have hindered past attempts at public diplomacy. It would also demonstrate U.S. commitment to public diplomacy processes that not only distribute messages, but establish relationships and

⁹¹ Peterson 2002, 83.

⁹² Lynch 2003, 90.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 91.

foster mutual understanding. According to Zaharna: For U.S. public diplomacy to expand its vision, it needs to view communication as encompassing *both* information and relational perspectives. An even greater level of fluency or mastery would be designing public diplomacy initiatives that integrate the two perspectives. This type of integration of information with relationship-building happens all the time within interpersonal communication between people and is one of the reasons why it is such an effective medium of communication.⁹⁴

Increasing multidirectional communication flows is a complicated process, but one that could have significant benefits for U.S. public diplomacy in Iraq and Afghanistan by strengthening its perceived legitimacy and, consequently, its effectiveness.

⁹⁴ Zaharna 2010, 154.