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## **The War on Ideas: Alhurra and US International Broadcasting Law in the ‘War on Terror’**

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### **Abstract**

Numerous non-Arab states employ international broadcasting agencies to impact the Arab media mix. This article examines the recent American intervention into the Arab public sphere – via its satellite television network, Alhurra (‘the free one’) – and the inherent norms promoted by these efforts. The regulations guiding the American government’s international broadcasting efforts establish certain standards and guidelines that can explain why Alhurra’s credibility suffers and audience remains scant – it is more accountable to domestic political actors than it is to the audiences it is trying to reach. The structure of political oversight established by American international broadcasting law resembles the top-down authoritarian model of media governance common to many Arab regimes. This suggests that reconstructing Alhurra as an independent network able to push ideational envelopes and facilitate cross-national exchange without the burden of its current imperative, selling deeply unpopular American policies, should be considered.

### **Background**

When the United States government launched the ‘war on terror’ following the attacks of 11 September 2001, it understood the campaign would entail more than military operations, namely, winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of the Arab world (Khalaf, 2004). The premise was that propaganda by anti-American leaders and groups, and cultural misunderstanding, fuelled a hateful ignorance of the United States. The government launched a wide-ranging program of activities, publications and media primarily through the State Department, but also through the Department of Defense to some degree, and other federal agencies such as US Agency for International Development (USAID). Congress, America’s representative, legislative branch of government, also played a role in shaping American communications abroad. This article focuses on one program overseen by the federal agency that manages US international broadcasting, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) (‘Foreign affairs...’, 1998).

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In mid-February 2004 the BBG launched Alhurra, an Arabic-language news and entertainment television channel.<sup>1</sup> It was founded to counter what officials considered anti-US bias in Arabic-language media (Rutenberg, 2003). By reporting openly on American society and government, and human rights and freedom issues in the Arab world, the network explicitly aimed to provide objective and critical news in the promotion of democracy. As BBG officials clarified in a statement to Congress, Alhurra was to offer something provocative and new:

Alhurra's branding, town hall meeting formats, interactive programming, and open-forum debates are designed to help viewers open their eyes and minds, provide new perspectives, show them the world outside of the Middle East, and encourage them to think for themselves. ('Broadcasting Board of Governors', 2005, 102)

The logic behind the broadcasting component of the 'war on terror' was that telling America's story to the Arab world would elicit greater empathy and give American foreign policy a more hospitable political terrain. This assumed that Arab public opinion was driven by a perceptual imbalance, one that could be corrected through American-produced strategic communications, public relations and international broadcasting.

### **Alhurra's Mission Debated: Independent News or Propaganda?**

When Alhurra began airing, it was touted by its proponents as an independent news station that would win credibility by challenging orthodoxies, including US policies, and those of its Arab allies. This was posed as a model for democratic media in the American tradition (Shelby, 2004) – although publicly funded European international broadcasters are also noted for their editorial independence.<sup>2</sup> Alhurra would function so freely of government oversight, it would give 'U.S. officials heartburn', according to one of the network's founders (Guider, 2004, 4). The governmental agency that oversees it, the BBG, disavowed editorial control over Alhurra in its public pronouncements. The BBG's role as a 'firewall' against external pressure would 'protect the professional independence and integrity of the broadcasters', to promote 'accurate, balanced and comprehensive news' (Alhurra's website, 2007). The first news director, Mouafac Harb, stressed the importance of Alhurra's credibility ('US government launches...' 2003), which implied distance from US policy imperatives, meaning governmental management. However, the structure of governance in US international broadcasting did not enable the types of editorial independence enjoyed by some of Alhurra's European equivalents.

The view that Alhurra should be independent was not shared by those who held determinant authority over this question. Legislators argued that Alhurra should not function as an independent broadcaster, but as an outright propaganda outlet. Congressman José E. Serrano said at a hearing in April 2004: ‘Do not tell us it’s not propaganda, because if it’s not propaganda, then I think ... we will have to look at what it is we are doing’ (McCarthy, 2004). Several other lawmakers expressed similar views. Certainly, the notion of winning Arab hearts and minds and telling America’s story did not imply objectivity. Rugh (2005) claims that Alhurra is trapped in an ‘existential dilemma’. Alhurra cannot air views too critical of its own government, yet it must provide free discussion if it seeks an audience share against existing news networks (Rugh, 2005, 86). This is a result, he charges, of its lack of autonomy.

The idea of Alhurra being an independent news station proved to have limited tenability. First, under Harb’s leadership, Alhurra’s staff were overly conscious about operating within American, official political discourse and foreign policy, even at the cost of responsible journalism (Interview, 2007). Media scholar, Marc Lynch (2007), ascribed this to ‘the Harb model’, which doomed Alhurra to ‘irrelevance in the Arab world’ because of a narrow focus on pleasing political actors in Washington.

Second, an actual controversy about Alhurra’s coverage illustrated the lack of independence. The network found itself at the center of a minor scandal occurring under the leadership of incoming news director, long-time CNN Middle East-based producer, Larry Register. At issue were Alhurra’s December 2006 airing of a speech by Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah – his first after the summer war with Israel – and a news package about the Iranian government’s Holocaust revisionism conference. The scandal began after a pundit’s series of op-eds in the *Wall Street Journal* lambasted the station for giving declared enemies of the US airtime (Mowbray, 2007a; 2007b; 2007c). Congress, which controls the BBG’s funding, convened hearings on this coverage. At a Congressional subcommittee hearing, Congressman Mike Pence, said: ‘I believe in a free and independent press. This is, however, a diplomatic mission of the United States of America ... this is not a “we report, you decide” television station.’ (Elliott, 2007, 19). Gary Ackerman, another member of Congress, demonstrated how domestic politics can act directly on international broadcasting through its control of the purse strings:

I am sure many members agree with me that if this is the new direction of Alhurra, it is the wrong direction, and the American taxpayers certainly should not be made to pay for it if it continues. (‘Public diplomacy...’, 2007)

Register resigned when Congress denied the station funding to expand its news division following this episode. The idea that Alhurra could be an independent

news station could not withstand the politicization of its content. The actual non-independence demonstrated by this can be located in the regulatory structure of US international broadcasting.

### **The Legal and Regulatory Basis for Alhurra's Lack of Autonomy**

The foundational law in this analysis, the 1994 International Broadcasting Act, set the broad guidelines for the Broadcasting Board of Governors and its media outlets. The Act was modified in 2004 (United States International Broadcasting Act 2004), and codified in United States Code (22 USC Chapter 71). It frames international broadcasting as promoting freedoms grounded in international law:

The right of freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom 'to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers,' [is] in accordance with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Sec. 302(1))

American international broadcasting law furthers the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, which strengthens both 'international peace' and 'the interests of the United States' (Sec. 302(2)). These basic goals foreshadow seemingly contradictory standards in the Act's specifications, especially those tying broadcasting content to both journalistic objectivity *and* foreign policy goals. The provisions outlining the structure of authority concretize political control, giving governmental institutions and officials a high degree of oversight and monitorial power. Later laws conditioned funding streams on guarantees that broadcasting content meet prohibitions against supporting terrorism. Congress also directed the BBG to make more of its content available to the domestic public. Overall, this legal structure explains Alhurra's lack of autonomy from US domestic politics and foreign policy machinery.

Political control over US international broadcasting is statutorily effectuated in the following ways.

(1) *Contradictory standards and principles.* Sections 303 and 306 of the Act lay out the role of foreign policy as the guiding principle. International broadcasting is treated as an 'essential instrument' of US foreign policy (Sec. 321(4)). As a public diplomacy endeavor, the *raison d'être* of international broadcasting is to forward 'broad foreign policy objectives' (Sec. 303(a)(1)) yet the Act also calls for 'the highest professional standards of broadcast journalism' (Sec. 303(a)(5)). The BBG is to produce 'news which is consistently reliable and authoritative, accurate, objective, and comprehensive' (Sec. 303 (b)(1)). The Act is not explicit about when the principles clash – for instance, in reporting events in ways that undermine those policy objectives. One example is the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Alhurra ultimately relied largely on pro-US government spokespeople (Rugh, 2005, 86),

though some considered its overall coverage ‘extensive’ (Sharp, 2005, 4). The BBG’s answer to this basic tension is to assert, as it did before Congress, that these two functions are complementary by defining ‘the public diplomacy mission and victory in the war of ideas ... as bringing necessary information and objective coverage of world events to people who would otherwise have no access to it’ (‘Broadcasting Board of Governors ...’, 2005, 87). Though a textual reading of the law suggests the primacy of foreign policy objectives, there is ambiguity when it comes to actual news decisions. This leaves controversies and disputes, such as those arising from Alhurra’s December 2006 Hezbollah and Iran conference coverage, for political institutions to resolve.

The countervailing nature of these standards can be seen in public declarations by Alhurra’s management, such as the third station director’s comment that: ‘We are not there to spread propaganda for the United States. We are here to tell the Arab world what Washington is thinking’ (Pechter, 2008). The network’s practice of carrying President George Bush’s speeches live, even when other networks in the region do not, may be telling the Arab world what Washington is thinking, but it is widely seen as propaganda.

Another aspect of this Act cuts against the principle that foreign policy objectives should determine editorial content. The Act stipulates the BBG must design broadcasting efforts so as to ‘effectively reach a significant audience’ (Sec. 303 (a)(7)). What if an audience is entirely uninterested in positive treatment of American foreign policy? It also calls for sufficient audience measurement devices so as to achieve this.

These legal ambiguities are partially to blame for the vagueness of Alhurra’s mission; the lack of a clear mission was an issue staff members voiced concerns about (Interview, 2008). They also manifested in confused institutional planning directives, such as the BBG’s 2002–2007 strategic planning document, ‘Marrying the mission to the market’. The list of paradoxical objectives make it read more like a ‘political document, not one to be parsed exactly as a guide to action. But the “strategic goals” are an index to the conflicting pressures that make it difficult to draw priorities’ (Price et al., 2008, 163). By including inconsistent principles, the door is opened for the political whims of the legislature, the institution closest to US political discourses and special interests, to shape international communications with foreign publics.

(2) *Political control.* When then-Senator Joseph Biden sponsored the legislation to establish the BBG, he intended it to ‘assure the integrity of the journalists in the organization’ (Kaufman, 2002). Still, the Act provides for political oversight *through* the BBG in two ways. First, foreign policy objectives emanate from the offices of the Secretary of State and the head of the State Department’s public diplomacy

organ, the United States Information Agency. This section instructs them to 'provide information and guidance on foreign policy issues to the Board' (Sec. 306). This happens in practice. As representatives of the BBG submitted to a Congressional hearing, they actually receive 'guidance from the State Department regarding the foreign policy objectives of the U.S.' ('Broadcasting Board of Governors ...', 2005, 100).

Second, the BBG itself is comprised of nine members of both major political parties, all of whom are political appointees, thus reflecting the inclinations of the administration. With the Senate's 'advice and consent', the President appoints up to eight members to the bi-partisan board (Sec. 304 (b)(1)(A)). The final member is the Secretary of State (or someone she appoints) *ex officio*. However, it should be noted that the Act does provide that the eight come from 'the fields of mass communications, print, broadcast media, or foreign affairs' (Sec. 304 (d)). This can result in interesting conflicts, sometimes pitting the BBG against members of Congress. However, the law structures authority in such a way that the BBG has no ultimate recourse against Congressional decisions.

(3) *Funding conditions*. Within this Act, funding was based on fulfillment of the explicated duties. Congress is the sole arbiter of whether the BBG is operating satisfactorily and whether its budget requests are approved. Congress ultimately decides whether foreign policy objectives are prioritized over the goal of building an audience or upholding journalistic standards. Congressional budgetary power over international broadcasting efforts is to be expected, but in practice, it represents the fundamental political leverage over international broadcasting. Like most bureaucratic actors, the BBG's goal is to annually secure funding from Congress and maximize its budget. This gives Congress its political sway over international broadcasting content.

More recent legislation, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2007, made funding for Alhurra contingent on certification by the State Department (which is America's foreign ministry) that it complies with Anti-Terrorism law. Before appropriating funding, Congress requires from the State Department verification that 'Alhurra does not advocate on behalf of any organization that the Secretary knows, or has reason to believe, engages in terrorist activities' (Consolidated Appropriations Act 2008). By enacting an explicit red-line on broadcasting content and sourcing, Congress made explicit constraints on Alhurra's reportage.

(4) *Transparency provisions*. Subsequent legislation furthered the ability of outside groups to monitor Alhurra by promoting 'transparency', or the American public's access to Alhurra's broadcast content. During the controversy over Alhurra's broadcasting decisions, critics called for greater access to its broadcasting content in order to monitor the network. In 2007, the US House of Representatives

inserted language in appropriations legislation calling for more domestic ‘transparency’, including web-streaming video, online archiving and translated transcripts (‘State, foreign operations ...’, 2007). Until pressure from Congress, Alhurra’s website offered little video and no transcripts (Lynch, 2007). According to Lynch (2007), the lack of transparency has been used by Alhurra’s management to protect its reputation in Washington; he argued, however, that it could allow the network to protect itself against domestic critics who misrepresent the network by publicizing isolated examples of coverage at odds with American foreign policy interests. While transparency in government is associated with better governance, in a politically charged context of American official communications to the Arab world, it runs the risk of enhancing domestic politicization of its content and thus self-censorship.

Interestingly, the BBG and Alhurra can rely on other legal artifacts – laws that are still on the books – to limit American public access to their coverage. The key statute giving shape to American international broadcasting overseas, the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, prohibited the ‘domestic dissemination’ of government-sponsored news intended for foreign audiences (Palmer and Carter, 2006). It is still invoked as a prohibition against Alhurra broadcasting domestically (Pechter, 2008). This restriction has proven to be more difficult to enforce with increased technological access, and is considered by many to be at odds with the same international rights to send and receive information codified in the international broadcasting laws. The transparency issue is a mixed one. It is further complicated by the BBG’s contention that lifting the domestic dissemination prohibition would help them inform the American public of their international broadcasting efforts. Further, some maintain that ‘instantaneous global communications make it impossible for the U.S. government to segregate information intended for domestic and foreign audiences; the Smith-Mundt Act must be amended accordingly’ (Public Diplomacy Council, 2008). Overall, suppressing the network’s autonomy puts it in the unenviable position of having to please both domestic political constituencies and the target audience (Price et al., 2008, 167). A former Alhurra producer called this ‘mission impossible’ (Interview, 2007).

### **An Authoritarian Model?**

According to official American discourse, the Broadcasting Board of Governors was proposed as a ‘buffer’ or ‘firewall’ between political agencies and Alhurra (Price et al., 2008, 166). BBG members have sought some autonomy. They maintained that an advocacy agenda would be perceived by the target audience as propaganda (‘Broadcasting Board of Governors ...’, 2005, 105). This did not prevent Congress from using its budgetary power to direct Alhurra and discipline it for coverage incongruent with American policy. With political dependence built into the foundational statute, Alhurra could never venture far from American

political discourse. The law's effects, therefore, tell a different story, one of political stricture, ideological monitoring and other principles at odds with the promotion of democracy.

The regulatory regime dictating Alhurra's news production is strikingly similar in some important ways to the model of authoritarianism some media critics have used to describe Arab media systems. Rugh argued that in an authoritarian system, the media 'support and advance the policies of the government' (2004, 23). While Alhurra maintains it does not advocate specific policies, it is governed in such a way that it is effectively an ideational instrument of the state, and is scrutinized by legislators who demand that it promote policy objectives. The government, in this model, 'controls the media either directly or indirectly through licensing, legal action, or perhaps financial means' (Ibid., 23). In the case of Alhurra, all three are employed and apparent in the guiding laws. The 2007 Act requiring State Department certification was 'legal action'. The other two mechanisms are inherent to government broadcasting. For Rugh, the substantive outcome includes top-down communication flows by which the government directs information to the people. Readers, he writes, are neglected and the mechanisms for feedback are scant or highly controlled (Ibid., 2004, 24). Alhurra's lack of call-in shows, a staple of Arab news media, is an example of this. Authoritarianism tends to enforce negative, meaning restrictive, limits on coverage (by contrast, the totalitarian model holds media as outlets of pure propaganda). Government interventions are not necessarily frequent since its expectations can be implicit or internalized easily. Authoritarian governments allow space for some non-guided 'discussion of society and the machinery of government', but do not permit questioning directly those in power (Ibid., 2004, 23). The forms and extent of criticism are demarcated and media's goals mirror the regime's. Alhurra's preclusion from giving live airtime to certain voices and its mission to tell America's story in the region certainly resembles this feature of the authoritarian model. However, there are important limits to applying the authoritarian model. Alhurra does cover some critical voices, including anti-US protests in Iraq (Wise, 2005). Also, authoritarian regimes are much more likely to use arbitrary punitive measures and media control devices that do not appear in American governance of Alhurra.

Such state-media relations are not inevitable, even in state-run broadcasting aimed at foreign populations. There exist different models of governmental control over international broadcasters. The classic distinction, for instance, is between the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation models. The former is 'institutionalized as a government agency', while the latter is 'an autonomous public corporation' – amounting to differential levels of 'autonomy limited by and within the overlapping societal subsystems of media and politics' (Zollner, 2006, 170). The instrumental difference lies in how funds are distributed, whether they



are contingent on political processes or merely administered independently of them.

An authoritarian structure prevents Alhurra from competing in an increasingly crowded field either as in terms of credibility or as audience-seeker. Instead, it serves as a conduit for official discourse. Without changes to the legal schemes mandating government control, and allowing domestic political interest groups to set the broadcast agenda, Alhurra will not be able to project credibility and compete for audience share. As a provider of government-subsidized information, it is unlikely to contribute constructively to debate within the Arab public sphere. Such subsidized information is not part of a news-gathering process that is accountable to an audience. It will be widely presumed to be non-reflexive and monologic in nature. Some of Alhurra's officials publicly disregard competing for audience through a dialogic posture – one that accounts for audience preferences – as partaking in a 'popularity contest' (Pechter, 2008).

The monologic nature of American international broadcasting lies in the requirement that it advance American foreign policy – a topic that Arab audiences would generally prefer scrutinized and discussed critically. Public opinion surveys in the Arab world find that American foreign policy is the source of negativity towards the United States. A 2006 poll showed that only *11 percent* of Arabs said their 'attitudes toward the US are based more on US values' whereas *70 percent* said their attitudes were due to 'US policy in the Middle East' (Telhami and Zogby, 2007, 30). In the same poll, re-conducted in 2008, the percentage opposing American policies was higher, 80 percent (Telhami and Zogby, 2008, 71). That United States international broadcasting law obligates Alhurra to promote the issues that prime the target public's disdain also prevents it from reacting to audience preferences and giving voice to its audience.

In this sense, a state–media regime, an American one (international broadcasting law), is inhibiting the exchange of ideas in the Arab world. It is not functioning as a model of free, open press. If it plays any role as a norm entrepreneur (Finnemore and Skkink, 1998) among Arab states – by spreading beliefs about the proper roles of institutions – it only bolsters traditional modes of state-run media, bound by top-down ideological controls, self-censorship and disconnection from the audience. A norm is 'a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity' (Ibid., 891). American policymakers should be concerned with the normative implications of the perception of Alhurra since it reflects the government's agenda. The Arab states will be less concerned, and probably even satisfied, with Alhurra's credibility gap. This reaffirms the American commitment to promoting national interests at the expense of the high-minded ideals often used to criticize Arab governments as undemocratic, media-suppressing, human rights-violating regimes. This is not to argue that Alhurra's presence will

necessarily directly silence critical voices, but it will likely fail to challenge the powers that limit dissent. If there is any impact on Arab governance, it will parallel the pattern of American foreign policy overall, suspended reform and an extension of support for autocratic allies (Cook, 2005, 91). As a result, Alhurra's content, like American foreign policy, offers little promise for Arab publics. Salameh Nematt, the Washington bureau chief of *Al Hayat*, noted: '[i]f it is the policy of the United States government not "to rock the boat," then we should not blame Alhurra for being so bland, and so useless' ('Summary', 2006, 5). This is a far cry from the transformative effects envisaged by those espousing the idea of Alhurra as an independent news network.

Given the history of American foreign policy in the region, and the posturing accompanying the launching of the 'war on terror', Alhurra faced skepticism from a wide variety of perspectives since before it launched. It did not help when, instead of diffusing impressions that it would be a propaganda outlet, its first major guest was President George W. Bush (Shelby, 2004). For some Arab viewers, this resembled Arab state-run television's penchant for ceremonial leadership ('A new voice', 2004). There is an interpretive gulf between Arab audiences and Congress concerning President Bush's visibility. It manifested during one hearing. A BBG board member mentioned that Alhurra carries Bush's speeches, to which a sarcastic Rep. Ackerman responded, 'You carry President Bush live? Hopefully we find this helpful to the mission' (Cooper, 2007). This exchange captured an inherent problem with government-managed media: broadcasting shaped by American domestic political institutions is presumed to be in the service of the state. This is qualitatively analogous to media run, regulated or funded by the Arab states. Even though Alhurra's coverage of the 2005 Egyptian elections (Interview, 2007), Egyptian torture allegations (Lynch, 2007) and a few run-ins with Syrian censorship enforcers (Ibid.), were examples of critical coverage, Alhurra has not managed to overcome this widely held impression. President Bush unintentionally encouraged this perception by ending an interview about the Abu Ghraib scandal by telling then-director Mouafac Harb 'good job' (Bush, 2004).

### **An Uphill Struggle**

Alhurra has been unable to develop a sizable audience, the first step in American international broadcasting's aim to gain influence or 'mov[e] the needle' of public opinion. One of Alhurra's architects pointed out: 'It doesn't matter what you're saying if no one's listening' (King, 2005). Without the viewership, there has been little observable impact in Arab public opinion, which has turned even more oppositional since American public diplomacy initiatives began, according to public opinion polls (Telhami and Zogby, 2008). The network's poor performance is an outgrowth of the authoritarian nature of its structure. It fails to engage the

Arab public sphere as it actually exists, on equitable and reciprocal terms. Instead, it acted as an outgrowth of myopic, American discourse, confined to the contours of American, rather than a truly international, politics. This is a function of the laws governing American international broadcasting. The political controls that manifest out of the prevailing legal scheme relegate Alhurra to serving an outmoded role, that of a government outlet – a direct contravention of the democratic ideals of open debate, free press and pluralism. The repercussions included a crucial deficit in the most valuable media asset, credibility (Seib, 2007, 13).

Contradictory viewer figures and methodological weaknesses call into question Alhurra's claims about its audience share. Early ACNielsen and Ipsos-Stat surveys commissioned by the BBG reported a sizable viewership and high perceived credibility (King, 2005; Pechter, 2008). The United States Government Accountability Office (USGAO) questioned the validity of the figures on the basis of its use of nonprobability sampling, and improper documentation, uncertainty estimates and data verification processes (USGAO, 2006, 38–43). It expressly could not confirm BBG's claims about its performance. Though it acknowledged the difficulties of audience research, it outlined steps the researchers could have utilized to enhance the study's level of confidence.

Independent polls reported findings that contradicted the BBG's estimates. A Zogby poll showed that roughly 1 percent of those surveyed reported watching Alhurra's news broadcasts (Telhami and Zogby, 2007, 102). Two percent of Telhami and Zogby's 2008 survey respondents named Alhurra as a frequent source of international news reporting (2008, 108). The change between the two studies, of 1 percent, was smaller than the second poll's margin of error of 1.6 percent – meaning it was possible there was no change. These audience estimates quantified one former senior producer's sense of their audience:

We never ever believed any of the numbers that the BBG ... were sending our way. 'Congratulations, the latest poll showed that the size of audience of Alhurra is expanding.' Deep skepticism. Always met by deep skepticism among – I'm not just saying myself – everyone ... We felt we were broadcasting in a void. (Interview, 2007)

Though limited as a measure, Alhurra's website has not become a major destination for Arab internet users, as Table 1 indicates. As of May, 2008, it ranked most strongly in Yemen, where it was the 3,130th most visited website. Such figures are of little use since the website offered so little content until recently; it was deemed 'rather abysmal' by one Arab blogger (Fandy, 2007, 108).

Table 1: Alhurra's position among websites most visited Arab internet users

<b>Country</b>	<b>May 2008</b>
Yemen	3,130th
Sudan	7,390th
Saudi Arabia	11,956th
Qatar	13,875th
Egypt	17,310th
UAE	19,391st
Morocco	19,696th
Algeria	23,199th
Kuwait	23,888th
Iran	64,387th

*According to www.alexa.com, accessed 19 May 2008 and 8 January 2009*

One of the only media effects studies questioned the station's ability to achieve its fundamental purpose. A nonrepresentative survey of 394 Arab college students in five Arab countries indicated that Alhurra was not achieving its goals. It found that Alhurra had effects opposite to those intended – it actually inspired less favorable views towards the United States; however, this finding was statistically insignificant, meaning the effect was comparable to zero (el-Nawawy, 2006, 196). The BBG disputed the study's over-reliance on students and Palestinians (Kaplan, 2006).

Influential commentators in Arab media reached similar conclusions. Rami Khouri, the editor of the Lebanese newspaper, *The Daily Star*, speculated that the network will 'exacerbate the gap between Americans and Arabs, rather than close it'. He called the station an 'entertaining, expensive, and irrelevant hoax'. In reference to American outreach efforts in the region, he asked 'Why do they keep insulting us like this?' (Nasrawi, 2004).

The impressive obstacles to effective American international broadcasting in the Arab world caused some to propose alternative approaches. Some public diplomacy experts argued that with such a saturated Arab media market, the government's efforts would be more effective if they targeted pre-existing media channels (Rugh, 2005, 87), or if Alhurra featured coverage of American politics exclusively, possibly with C-SPAN-style, unedited coverage of proceedings (; Albright and Weber, 2005; Cook, 2004). Alhurra's backers argue that more time is needed. The former head of public diplomacy at the State Department, Karen Hughes, contended that this is a long-term project, of inter-generational proportions (McMahon, 2007).

Regardless of the projected time frame or specific approach, the changing nature of international communications requires international broadcasters be credible, trustworthy, cue-givers (Nye, 2008, 99). The emergence of a new information age defined by an exponential proliferation of information sources and media made the classic simplex flow/propaganda model obsolete. International broadcasters must compete in new media environments. The wide proliferation of media, including improving indigenous media, gave way to new informational menus at the public's disposal. This multitude of sources engenders 'the paradox of plenty', in which 'attention rather than information becomes the scarce resource' (Nye, 2004, 89). This is a stark contrast from the Cold War era of international broadcasting, the assumptions of which American international broadcasting still maintains. During that time, foreign government media were the only alternatives for citizens of authoritarian regimes. With the market for information growing heavier on the supply side, the 'cheapening of information transmission has opened the field' (Keohane and Nye, 1998, 83). In all but a few of the most isolated media markets, foreign broadcasters need the audience more than the audience needs them. There is little dispute that, within saturated informational fields, credibility is central. Communications research shows that the perceived credibility of sources is an instrumental component of audience receptivity. This is congruent with soft power theory's assertion that 'credibility is the crucial resource' (Keohane and Nye, 1998, 89).

Media faced with credibility deficits can proceed in several directions, from foundational restructuring to changes in programming, language and appearance. The more autonomous the media entity, the more ability it has to adapt to target markets. Media subject to authoritarian-like governance structures have few options for maximizing credibility. One option is to persist and hope that familiarity leads to greater acceptance. 'Sleeper effect' research shows that, over time – through repeated interactions – audiences may overlook a source's low reputation and poor credibility. There is an important exception: when 'the communicator and his stand [on issues] are so intimately associated that one spontaneously recalls the source when he thinks about the issue' (Hovland and Weiss, 1951, 649). This would still require a level of disassociation from the sponsoring state implausible for Alhurra given the requirements laid out in American international broadcasting statute.

Another tactic for establishing credibility is already used by international broadcasters: strategically presenting news and views that reflect poorly on the international broadcaster's sponsoring government. It was often done strategically during American Cold War broadcasting, and was termed 'letting out a long vine'. It refers to reporting favorably on adversaries and unfavorably on the sending country during times of peace, when it mattered less, or in regards to inconsequential matters ('International Broadcasting', 1999). This was a

disingenuous approach since the broadcasters continued their basic agenda-setting exercises, and framed strategically according to policy priorities. With today's more sophisticated viewers, it is unlikely that this would be able to surmount the presupposition that 'media that's governmental will be seen as propaganda', as *Al-Hayat* journalist, Raghida Dergham predicted ('US government launches...', 2003). One viewer in Yemen called Alhurra 'one more state-run news agency' and lamented, 'we already have plenty of official news' (Johnsen, 2004). Arab viewers are savvy and sense the bias of the coverage they are getting, probably limiting the 'letting out the long vine' approach of the Cold War broadcasts. Arab audiences, according to Marc Lynch, balance it out by rapidly switching different news stations to concoct a media mix suitably devoid of single-party bias:

Arabs watching news in cafes generally surf the satellite television offerings, comparing al-Jazeera to CNN, or al-Arabiya to Egyptian state television. Well-versed in the arts of deciphering political codes in the authoritarian media, these audiences now excel in comparing coverage and analysis and triangulating. (Lynch, 2006, 46)

The level of saturation in the Arab media market makes it one of the most competitive news markets in the world (Battah, 2007). Programming, thus, 'tends to reflect consumer preferences' (Fandy, 2005). One way for an international broadcaster to generate credibility is by looking at trends within the Arab public sphere and mass media market, namely the growing propensity for dialogue and interaction, an indication of a popular desire for a voice and critical exchange. The high demand for dialogic media could offer one possible way to confront the credibility gap.

A new Arab media realm, spawned by satellite, cellular and computer technology, has emerged. Al-Jazeera, a defining force in this transition, challenged discursive boundaries. Acting as a quasi-public sphere itself, it has been described as 'a thorn in the side of many regimes' (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003, 142). Its path to prominence came about 'by giving voice to public opinion rather than directly attempting to mobilize or lead it' (Lynch, 2006, 37). Al-Jazeera's call-in shows are wildly popular (Ibid., 2006, 103). Yet Alhurra has none (Interview, 2007). American international broadcasting would gain from emulating the dialogic formats of other networks. Allowing callers to speak their minds – regardless of their views – would go a long way towards convincing them of the station's neutrality. Of course, such a move within the current regulatory practice bears the risk of violating the laws governing the station if, for example, representatives of groups considered terrorist by the American government call in.

Another challenge for Alhurra is that the ideological guidelines constrain the station from reporting in ways that resonate with Arab public opinion. On the one hand, the American government's hesitance to embrace Islamist opposition

movements, despite their leading roles as legitimate, indigenous reform movements in the Arab world, translates into a discursive barrier between Alhurra and its audience. Alhurra's coverage of political repression by the Egyptian government, therefore, focused more on the opposition figure Ayman Nour, than it did on the Muslim Brotherhood, according to one former Alhurra producer (Interview, 2008). Despite its status as an American media outlet, Alhurra was still subject to authoritarian media regulations by some Arab states. One Egyptian analyst claims that since Alhurra's launch, the state's security services exercised 'covert control' through its close relations with management. She asserts they impact Alhurra's coverage directly; they 'handpick many correspondents [and] even have final say over which guests appear on programs' (Mustafa, 2005).

One way to achieve the degree of reflexivity needed to gain credibility is to actively gauge and adapt to audience tastes, which is decreed by the 1994 International Broadcasting Act. Alhurra did not conduct audience market research to explore their target's preferences early in its development (Sefsaf, 2004). Internal US government reports took aim at the lack of effective measures for gauging audience demand, as well as the impact of American international broadcasting and public opinion about the perceived credibility of these efforts (USGAO, 2006, 12). Alhurra, however, has weak incentives to adapt to audience preferences. The governing structure requires it to promulgate American foreign policy objectives; the high degree of political control discourages it from risking offending predominant strains within American political discourse. Without independence, it lacks the adaptability needed to compete in the rapidly developing information age (Fandy, 2007, 115). Although Alhurra exploits modern satellite technologies, its content is a throwback to the state-run broadcasting era of staid ideological uniformity (Price et al., 2008, 161). Its formats fail to make optimal use of available technology for unscripted dialogue.

So long as Alhurra is not free to act within the Arab media market, credibility will remain elusive for the network. BBG members recognized that the political backlash against Alhurra for airing the Nasrallah speech would further damage Alhurra's reputation abroad. Joaquin Blaya, who would become chairman of the BBG, said after one hearing that the network's credibility depends on giving airtime to those who oppose the United States. He noted it was ironic that a network established to promote democracy was being censored. He said this was the difference between 'free media and propaganda' (Cooper, 2007).

### **Towards an Ethical US Engagement with Arab Audiences**

The government's broadcasting to the Arab public sphere projects certain norms about state-media relations and the value of dialogue. As an actor subjected to an authoritarian-like media regime, its ability to contribute constructively to the Arab

public sphere is limited. Its incongruence with both increasingly dialogic formats in Arab media and the epistemic realities of most people living in the region, 'seemed designed to marginalize and weaken the Arab public sphere as an effective political voice' (Lynch, 2006, 250). The design, however, was not necessarily endogenous to Alhurra. It grew from the governing international broadcasting laws that give room to domestic actors to politicize and ideologically scrutinize content. The laws de-professionalize its journalism by establishing its dependence on political institutions.

An ideal-type for international broadcasting in the information age is what Habermas (1985; 1987) called 'communicative action'. The use of language in communication as opposed to instrumental action, he argues, intrinsically entails mutual understanding. Instrumental action involves an ends-defined notion of success. As a vision of ethical communication, Habermas' theory of communicative action can be extended to official broadcasting interventions into foreign public spheres. It is not clear how an instrumental imposition is beneficial to the receiving publics, despite Alhurra's mission to help the audience 'make informed decisions' (Pechter, 2008). A stance of mutuality, based on an engagement with the audience, rather than the propagation of state-owned truths is more likely to attract and impact an audience that has plenty of alternatives. Thus, this normative vision is practical as well. If American policymakers intend to promote democracy, this would be the appropriate paradigm of interaction. It would mean acknowledging that the 'marketplace of ideas' reasoning so valued in American jurisprudence can apply beyond American borders. This concept, the Supreme Court articulated, means that with the uninhibited exchange of ideas, 'the truth will ultimately prevail'.<sup>3</sup> If the American government has truth on its side, a dialogic format would be in its interests. However, a dialogic format would subvert the foreign policy orientation of the 'war on terror' administration. Former Voice of America (VOA) acting director Myrna Whitworth told a public diplomacy conference:

in the early days of the 21st century, we must find ways to develop and sustain a conversation with the people of the world ... if, at the highest levels the Bush administration continues to follow a policy of no diplomatic engagement in some areas of the world, it makes it all the more important that U.S. international broadcasting open and sustain a conversation with the people of the world. ('Summary', 2006, 9)

The obstacles to realization of such a vision are manifold. They lie primarily in the observation that international broadcasting is often a 'reflection of the priorities and internal politics of the sending nation' (Price, 2002, 208). The primary structural component of Alhurra's dependence on domestic politics is found in the legislation that formed the BBG. As a state-backed television network tied to the reigning administration's political agenda, Alhurra embodies the authoritarian



state–media model, just as Arab mass media struggle to break free of it. US international broadcasting law makes dialogue unlikely, but not impossible.

The contradictions within the law – for instance in valuing journalistic objectivity as well as foreign policy – could mean that, short of a new globalized domestic politics in America or a new culture of government broadcasting independence, a significant reformation of American mass-mediated communication with Arab publics is unlikely. Looking at the American propensity for dialogue internally, first, and towards the Arab world, second, its political culture may not be ripe for a dialogue-based public diplomacy. In general, the occurrence of political discussion in the United States is middle-range compared to about half of the rest of the countries in the world. The World Values Survey found that, of 81 countries surveyed, American respondents were in the 60th percentile in frequency of political talk in general (Mutz, 2006, 49). The frequency of cross-cutting political talk is a better indicator of the practice of dialogue. Mutz found that American social relationships are exceptionally defined by interaction with others of the same political orientations (Mutz, 2006, 50–4). The United States was the country with by far the lowest frequency of political discussions between people with varying views. With such a weak practice of internal deliberation, the prospects for globalized, trans-border deliberation are not promising.

The rhetoric of the ‘war on terror’ was as monologic in tenor as US foreign policy is unilateral. When the United States launched public diplomacy measures in the hope of diminishing anti-Americanism, it proclaimed as a goal winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of the Arab world (Bowers, 2004) without the possibility of changing their own hearts or minds. While the ‘war on terror’, including the invasion of Iraq, was depicted as being for the promotion of democracy, the American public grew to prefer national security when the actual difficulties of building democracy became apparent. When the choice is given between promoting high dialogic ideals and preventing Muslim fundamentalists from gaining power, a slim majority of Americans choose the latter. A 2005 survey found that a small majority of Americans, 54 percent, felt that the US should not ‘support a country becoming a democracy if there is a high likelihood the people will elect an Islamic fundamentalist leader’ (‘Americans on promoting democracy’, 2005)

There are dialogic currents within American political culture, to be sure. The legacy of the first amendment freedoms of speech, press and association has been to promote the exchange of ideas. Also, there is a deep-seated, principled opposition to propaganda within the American public (Socolow, 2007, 109). The Bush administration ignited controversies by paying conservative columnist Armstrong Williams to promote its education policies (Toppo, 2005) and by producing friendly news packages for domestic media – practices the USGAO, the investigative arm of Congress, suggested may have violated bans on domestic

propaganda (Barstow and Stein, 2005). There is more tolerance for American propaganda aimed at foreign audiences, apparently, though there is still a cultural discomfort with the label. The term 'public diplomacy' supplanted it in the 1970s because of its 'negative connotations' (Gregory, 2008, 275). Public diplomacy grew to encompass a variation of different communication modes, some of which are more multilateral and reciprocal, such as exchange programs. If there is an American dialogic political culture, it has not manifested in corollary political forms vis-à-vis Arab publics.

Outside of the foundational legal structures, and domestic political culture, is another crucial and interconnected factor – the international communications network. Changes in the global information system have obfuscated monologic international broadcasters such as Alhurra and the state-media structure that produces it. This may eventually force structural changes in American international broadcasting. The hesitance of American officialdom to expose itself to critical views is a diminishing privilege of power. Those with less power have more room to communicate and assemble a global sphere, to assert their 'subjugated knowledges,' (to borrow a term from Foucault, 1994). Keohane and Nye (2001) explored how this translates into a multiplicity of fields of power, from cultural, to informational, to military, with states exhibiting varying levels of aptitudes in different fields. Weaker states manage the interlocking sets of goals by, for example, creating linkages to force side payments, or concessions, from powerful states. Historically, stronger states did not need linkages. They used military dominance to coerce, whereas the new informational global society demands that powers coalesce and communicate. American international broadcasting – and standing in the world – will continue to suffer without an official recognition of the obsolescence of one-way communication in an increasingly interdependent world. Extending the principles of the domestic opposition to blatant propaganda to international broadcasting would be a step in the interdependent direction. Keohane and Nye argue that the realist vision of power, with its narrow focus on military might, is out of tune with the world's growing interdependence (1998, 86). Thus international broadcasting will not be able to function as a unilateral extension of domestic perceptions of the national interest, but will have to take account of the audience if it is to survive.

## **Conclusion**

American governmental communication efforts in the Arab world are not consistent with the stated ideals of American official rhetoric following the declaration of the 'war on terror'. A media outlet aimed at promoting democracy, or building an audience requires independence from governmental control. International broadcasting must take a dialogic posture, in order to approach a receiver public in a spirit of exchange. Instead, American international

broadcasting treats Arab public opinion as a hostile force to combat in a 'war of ideas' or simply manipulate as a tactic towards larger aims (Lynch, 2006, 250). This threatens to have a regressive influence on the norms of state-media relations. If there is an Alhurra effect, it is to bolster the authoritarian media model and politically directed news coverage, ignore dialogic formats that engage the public, and de-legitimize views that run counter to American foreign policy. This flows from the legal structure of authority established in the 1994 Act.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alhurra, Iraq, and Alhurra, Europe, are affiliated networks that relay some of the same programming and also unique content, as well.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Deutsche Welle's editorial autonomy from the German government 'is ensured by an elaborate system of regular parliamentary accords' (Zollner, 2006, 170).

<sup>3</sup> *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC* 395 U.S. 367 (1969).

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