



Al-Hurra 2008: A year of Broadcasting Dangerously

Throughout 2008, US-funded Al-Hurra’s broadcast credibility and professionalism were frequently questioned, generating lively debates and reports on its programming, opinions, influence and future. The US government however defended Al-Hurra’s viability and countered critics assailing its programming and *raison d’etre*.

George Washington University professor Mark Lynch asked on his blog *Abu Advaark* in July, “Is the real problem conceptual or implementation and management? ... What should Al-Hurra be, a pseudo-independent news outlet or a mouthpiece for US foreign policy?” (See also PR.IV.14: *Al-Hurra: Sense and Credibility*.) The question remains unanswered to many in the field of public diplomacy.

“Al-Hurra seeks to provide quality, professional journalism with American standards,” asserted Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and former *Broadcasting Board of Governors* (BBG) Chairman James Glassman in July. Yet, a study commissioned by Al-Hurra and led by researchers at the University of Southern California that was released late in the year, concluded that America’s Arabic-language broadcasts in the Middle East fail to meet basic journalistic standards and are seen by few, according to *Pro-Publica* (See also PR.IV.26: “*Privatization*” of US Broadcasting vs. Accountability)

According to the study, Al-Hurra lacked appropriate balance and sourcing, “relied on unsubstantiated information, excessively editorialized” and failed to present opposing views in a majority of its news stories. Moreover, it has not distinguished itself and “has also failed to develop the distinctive style, format and breadth of coverage that might attract a substantial audience.”

Although Al-Hurra now reaches 28 million people throughout Iraq, the Middle East and Europe, Nancy Snow argued on *The Huffington Post*, “Al-Hurra has never produced a large audience share and has not built up a credible broadcast profile in the target publics of the Middle East.”

Al-Hurra is seen as less in-depth than its major competitor, Qatar-based Al-Jazeera. In June, *ProPublica* contributor and former US ambassador to Yemen William Rugh claimed that Al-Jazeera covered Arab government issues and the United States in comprehensive ways unmatched by Al-Hurra. (See also PR.IV.14)

Craig Whitlock for the *Washington Post* reported in June that content seemed inappropriate and boring to Arab journalists and viewers, who criticized the airing of fluff programming rather than major news and the rarity of unique, investigative pieces.

Joaquin F. Blaya, governor at the BBG, argued in the *Washington Post* in July, “The vast majority finds its news and information to be reliable.” According to Blaya, attacks against Al-Hurra failed to recognize the success of the broadcast and reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of US international

broadcasting, which aims to enhance understanding of local events and of American society and policies. (See also PR.IV.15: *Al-Hurra, Alive and Kicking*)

Daniel Nassif, news director of Al-Hurra, in an interview with *Middle East Quarterly* replied to a question on Al-Hurra’s ambitions in the short, medium, and long-term, “To make Al-Hurra one of the top networks in the Middle East.” However, as the recently released USC Annenberg Report demonstrates, Al-Hurra, according to *Blogger News Network’s* ‘The Federalist’, “has never been able to seize the moment and change the paradigm of anti-US public opinion in the Arab and Muslim world.”

Indeed, The Federalist contends that lacking balanced editorial counterpoints, and with ineffective journalistic control, Al-Hurra “symbolizes a daily taunt in the face of the Arab public.”

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The article concludes by recommending that Al-Hurra be shut down, replaced by a re-established Voice of America (VOA) Arabic radio and internet service. The Federalist's sharp critique of US broadcasting efforts also strikes a chord with Kim Andrew Elliott on his *blog*. Elliott points out, "The market for international broadcasting does not seek propaganda. Instead, they tune in for the reliable, credible news that is the antidote to propaganda."

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Kim Andrew Elliott, blogger.

Yet, *ProPublica* noted in July that many were concerned that Al-Hurra undermined US efforts and goals in the region, and the conflict between US interests and journalism pervaded. Larry Register, a former CNN executive who asserted that the US government supported free speech as long as it was in line with US policy, reported *CBS News*. (See also PR.IV.14)

Controversial broadcasts such as a live speech by Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, a Holocaust deniers' conference in Iran and a program, which featured a wanted Iraqi MP drew extensive government criticism and threats for cuts in funding because they provided a platform to terrorists and

views contrary to the US position. (See also PR.IV.14 and PR.IV.15)

Late in the year, the BBG launched a campaign to defend its efforts. *Free Media Online* (FMO) asserted that "innovations" to combat censorship and promote democracy have instead been responsible for the steepest decline in the positive indicators of US image abroad in recent history. (See also PR.IV.26)

Ted Lipien, former VOA acting associate director recommended in *Free Media Online* the abolishment or redesign of Al-Hurra under the Obama administration. Al-Hurra's Arabic broadcast has received nearly \$500 million from US taxpayers.

Bloggers News Network concluded that separating BBG-generated "propaganda" from the advice of "independent experts with no link to the political appointees, consultants, and contractors who have exposed US public diplomacy to international ridicule" is necessary.

The fiscal and editorial "fiasco" of Al-Hurra has severely damaged America's reputation abroad thereby undermining the primary purpose of its creation, FMO added.

For its part, Al-Hurra's year-end acquisitions reflect a continuation of most current programming strategies. According to *C21 Media*, purchases include the extreme weather series *Epic Conditions*, interstitials series such as *travel Postcards* and hour-long documentaries *Inside Indonesia: Struggle for the Soul of Islam* and *Thomas L Friedman Reporting: The Other Side of Outsourcing*.

Whether this indicates a deepening focus on investigative reporting and a response to Al-Hurra's critics remains to be seen.

Hard Times on Soft Power

In June-July 2008 (PR_IV.14: *The Crisis*

of US Public Diplomacy) recently sworn in Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, James Glassman, in the *Wall Street Journal*, described the newly defined 'war of ideas' as "an early renaissance... we have the opportunity to leave a robust legacy for the next administration."

On his *Mountain Runner* blog, Matt Armstrong responded favorably to Glassman's assertions, considering the approach "more like the aggressive information activities of the early Cold War than the passive beauty contest of the last couple of decades." In the *Nevada Appeal*, Guy Farmer concluded that Glassman's first public announcements were "a promising mission statement."

Yet by the end of July 2008, opposition to Glassman's 'war of ideas' was reported in PR_IV.16. Emphasizing America's Middle East policies, particularly though concerning a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, George Hismeh for *Gulf News* explained that Glassman was "unable to, or unwilling to acknowledge a connection with these misconceived policies and the low American standing, or more accurately, the unpopularity of the Bush administration."

Rami Khouri, writing in *Arab Media Watch*, supported Hismeh's thesis. Khouri argued Glassman's approach to addressing the sense of injustice felt by many in the Arab-Islamic world, "leaves irresolvable the fact that American policies are so pro-Israeli and pro-Arab autocrats in the Middle East these policies are core drivers of Arab radicalism and terrorism."

Importantly, Glassman's new 'war of ideas' also focused on the harnessing of new technology in innovative, appealing ways, as mentioned in August's PR_IV.18: *Managing the Battle of the Hearts and Minds*. On *Mountain Runner*, Armstrong quotes Glassman as advocating the maximal use of "the tools of ideological engagement, words, deeds, and images, to create an environment hostile to violent extremism."

Armstrong, though, remained skeptical, contending that Glassman's vision was limited in terms of vision and efficiency, and ignored the potential of open-source counter-propaganda. In this regard, *USA Today's* Jim Michaels uses a SITE Institute report to question whether US public diplomacy could hope to emulate the "wide [online] distribution" that terrorists had gained for their attacks.

Attempts to utilize new technologies, specifically social networking sites, as public diplomacy techniques have also met with some cynicism. Steve Clemons for *The Washington Note*, introduced in December the State Department's new Co.Nx web-based exchange tool, adding to DoS' Facebook page.

However, Ilan Berman at the *American Foreign Policy Council* believes "something appears to have been lost in translation." Berman uses the Twitter page of Colleen Graffy, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Diplomacy, to claim "public diplomacy and strategic communication are not about total transparency." In response, Graffy argues that tools such as Twitter put a "human face on a message that otherwise might not get through."

Thus, what is the state of US public diplomacy today? Rob Asghar of the *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* describes the Iraqi shoe-throwing incident as that "of a grown child's sudden eruption up at a nauseatingly tense Thanksgiving family meal," brought about by misconceived notions of hard and soft power.

On the *History News Network*, John Brown criticizes Glassman's 'war of ideas' for simplifying the "complexity and changeability" of the United States and being "simply dumb," and dismisses it as a "crude propaganda campaign thinly disguised."

The Federalist goes further than Brown, accusing Glassman of following a "business as usual" approach to Al-Hurra that avoided the known criticisms of the channel's management and programming. The incoming Obama administration,

according to the Federalist, should seek a replacement for Glassman, and "sort through the debris of US public diplomacy...to determine what is salvageable."

"[Under Secretary Glassman is] unable to, or unwilling to acknowledge a connection with these misconceived policies and the low American standing, or more accurately, the unpopularity of the Bush administration."

George Hismeh, Gulf News journalist.

Finally, President-elect Obama is receiving positive reviews for his handling of US public diplomacy thus far. First, Matt Armstrong on *Mountain Runner* has praised reports of a greater role for the State Department in the shaping of US diplomacy. Armstrong notes "a very promising beginning to what appears will be active leadership at the State Department."

Obama's decision to visit a Muslim capital during the first 100 days of his administration is also lauded by Saad Eddin Ibrahim in the *Washington Post* in December. Seen as an "excellent idea," Ibrahim believes that an Obama visit has

the potential to heal the deep grievances abundant in the Muslim World.

Public Diplomacy 2.0

Toward the end of 2008, the US Department of State drew attention to a variety of online initiatives aimed at curbing extremism and promoting engagement with foreign publics in the 'War of Ideas' (PR.IV_23: *E-Diplomacy in the Digital Age.*)

Speaking about the role of social networking sites such as Facebook, Under Secretary Glassman stressed during a Briefing on US Public Diplomacy and the War of Ideas in November that the State Department was "acting as a facilitator to speed the use of the same techniques again employed by foreign citizens, not governments to build movements against violence."

In addition to discussing the power of social networking sites, the State Department briefing touched on the progress of the digital outreach team, a select group of "people who go onto the Internet, into chat rooms, onto popular websites, onto blogs in some cases, and talk about American policy, correct mistakes that are being made, and refer people back to factual documents."

In another attempt at web-based diplomacy, the State Department launched in October an initiative entitled "Briefing 2.0" in which Department spokesman Sean McCormack will take questions from the general population as a way to help Americans understand the importance of foreign affairs.

"The world of Public Diplomacy is changing and ever adapting to the digital age, enhancing communication outside of the traditional channels of convention," notes Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Colleen Graffy for the *Washington Post* this month.

Remarking that the "proliferation of democracies and the emergence of the

round-the-clock media environment have brought an end” to the days when diplomats dealt with diplomats and decisions were taken behind closed doors, today “governments must communicate not only with their people but also with foreign audiences, including through public diplomacy.”

Graffy asserts that public diplomacy is the art of communicating a country’s policies, values, and culture, and notes that diplomats today engage, connect, and listen to people before communicating. This also explains the introduction of the State Department’s “Public Diplomacy 2.0,” social networking side for State alumni, enhanced Web sites, blogs, and Facebook pages for embassies.

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Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Colleen Graffy.

One clear lesson that emerged from the Cold War was that winning hearts and minds required communicating in a way that “connected” with people on their terms, whether through film or jazz or jeans. Graffy concludes, “To keep our

public diplomacy relevant today, we have to reach out and connect with people on their terms, whether we use blogs or texts.”

Shoe Politics

Shoe-throwing journalist Muntather Zaidi told his family he would never apologize to President Bush for hurling his shoes at him, reports the *LA Times*. Praised by religious leaders and others across the Arab world (PR.IV_26: *The Shoe, The President and Iraq*), Muntather’s brother Uday challenged the government’s assertions that the offender asked for forgiveness.

Zaidi was allegedly tortured in jail. Uday said his brother had lost a tooth and his nose had required stitches because of the beatings he had suffered while in custody. “A judge investigating the case told the Associated Press on Friday that Muntather showed signs of having been beaten in custody,” comments the *LA Times*. Meeting with Iraqi reporters on Saturday, Maliki criticized Muntather for giving the world a “bad image” of Iraq and harming the reputation of its journalists.

Above all, the shoe incident exposes the West’s failure to understand the Arab world, claims columnist Ray Hanania for *Arabisto*. According to Hanania, the case of the shoe-throwing Iraqi cameraman highlights the disconnect between what Americans do and do not know about the Arab world.

Hanania explains that although the Arab world has been at the core of US policies since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, America knows barely anything about the Arab world. He adds there is not “one major Arab American columnist who writes on a regular basis for a major mainstream American newspaper who is allowed to explain Arab culture and Arab thinking and Arab politics.”

Further, Hanania argues that Arab

Americans are excluded from most debates in the US and “the coverage of the Arab American community is often restricted to controversy, violence and terrorism.” He goes on to add that until Americans understand the Arab mind and fight against stereotypes and prejudices, little else but failure should be expected.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also commented that US popularity is currently “not great” in the Arab world, reports *Agence France Presse*. “Perhaps it is not popular in the Middle East to say that it is time for the people of the Middle East to live in freedom, not in tyranny,” Rice said in an interview with AFP.

“Do you really think in 10 years anybody will remember this incident? What matters is the US liberated the people of Iraq from Saddam Hussein.”

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

American popularity has seen considerable decline in the wake of the US-led war on terror, and the recent event with Muntather was another characteristic of the state of US-Arab relations. The chief US diplomat was surprised when AFP, like other media outlets, continued to ask her about the wave of popular Arab support for the Iraqi journalist who threw his shoes at President Bush during his recent unannounced visit to Baghdad.

“Do you really think in 10 years anybody will remember this incident?,” Rice asked

before adding, “What matters is the US liberated the people of Iraq from Saddam Hussein.”

PRStar remarks however, “Sadly, the incident is also a sign of the diminished global stature of the American presidency.” Many Iraqis and others in the Muslim world condemned the attack in no uncertain terms, for it was a deep cultural faux pas implying that the president is as low as the dirt underneath the shoe and an affront to the hospitality one is expected to show a guest. The incident demonstrates the necessity of rebuilding America’s reputation in the Middle East in the next few years.

Arabs Debate on Hamas’ Responsibility While the IDF Goes on YouTube

The Israeli airstrikes against Hamas targets in Gaza, which have killed more than 300 Palestinians, have created an uproar across the Arab world with some comparing the attacks to a genocide, according to *Kuwait Times*. National Assembly Speaker Jassem Mohammad Al-Kharafi said in a statement to KUNA, “This aggression represents a genocide against unarmed and besieged people... especially as the attacks came during religious occasions of both Muslims and Christians.”

Leaders of the Assembly believe that Israel is singlehandedly responsible for the breakdown and failure of peace negotiations, and consequently should be coerced into taking responsibility for its actions, while others contend that military intervention may be necessary. The Arab League singled out Israel for blame, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference accused it of a “war crime” for not protecting the lives of civilians. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said in a statement that “Egypt

condemns the Israeli military aggression on the Gaza Strip and blames Israel, as an occupying force, for the victims and the wounded”

Muslim nations angrily condemned Israel over air attacks on the Gaza Strip while UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon deplored the violence. Rallies and protests took place all over the Arab world too.

“The Hamas movement has thwarted all attempts to achieve Palestinian national unity and has not accepted repeated Egyptian advice on the importance of maintaining the truce (with Israel).”

Statement by National Democratic Party (NDP), Egypt.

However, Egypt’s ruling party accused the Islamist Palestinian movement Hamas on Wednesday of adventurism, irresponsibility and ignoring Egyptian advice on Gaza, reports *Reuters*. The National Democratic Party (NDP) declared in a statement, “The Hamas movement has thwarted all attempts to achieve Palestinian national unity and has

not accepted repeated Egyptian advice on the importance of maintaining the truce (with Israel).”

The statement went beyond criticism of Hamas by the government, which has said that it gave repeated warnings before Israel attacked last Saturday and that those who ignore warnings have only themselves to blame for the consequences.

“The Hamas leadership has been dragged behind delusional promises by parties and quarters who have contributed to the Palestinian cause only words and slogans,” it added.

Meanwhile, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has chosen to broadcast the airstrikes and operation on YouTube, reports the *Jerusalem Post*. “The blogosphere and new media are another war zone,” said IDF Foreign Press Branch head Maj. Avital Leibovich, “We have to be relevant there.” The news site comments that the IDF’s media strategy is intended to avoid Israel’s lack of readiness for intense media coverage as happened in 2006 during the Second Lebanon War.

Some of the footage aired on YouTube might be considered disturbing, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, such as one video that depicts men loading rockets onto a pickup truck, to be driven to the border and launched into Israel. Leibovich’s YouTube initiative is another piece of the new media offensive, she explains, “The intelligent audience watching the footage will know that people killed did not have peaceful intentions toward Israel. I don’t believe they’ll be disturbed.”

“The important thing is to get the truth out there,” she added, noting that her office, in addition to curating the YouTube channel, had delivered multiple private briefings to bloggers around the world. Members of the IDF’s various foreign desks intend to use these vlogs to discuss a number of aspects of the conflict, in both English and Arabic, in a personal setting that they hope will

overcome what they perceive as “the stiffness of television news.”

Confusion Between DoS and DoD

In 2008, the role of public diplomacy changed course as the Department of Defense (DoD) progressively encroached over State Department (DoS) territory (PR.IV_22: *Communication in Public Diplomacy*), obtaining more funds for strategic communication campaigns, described Craig Hayden for *Intermap*. He argued, “The US needs to be aware of the media market today and strategic realignment of resources and priorities is vitally important.”

Skeptical about the \$300 million funding to DoD destined for public diplomacy purposes, Hayden warned that greater Pentagon involvement risked US public diplomacy efforts being perceived as a tool of manipulation.

“The US needs to be aware of the media market today and strategic realignment of resources and priorities is vitally important.”

Craig Hayden, Intermap

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, (PR. IV_23: *Hard Talk on Soft Power*), acknowledged that military force alone would not achieve everything set out in US foreign policy objectives, remarking

that soft power “is needed to win the hearts and minds of people abroad.”

According to the *New York Times*, Hillary Clinton, President-elect Barack Obama’s choice for Secretary of State, wants to give a new lift to US diplomacy efforts. Clinton intends to strengthen the State Department’s diplomatic role which has been overshadowed “by [the]Pentagon, the vice president’s office and even the intelligence agencies.”

It is thought Clinton that will also resurrect the role of special envoys for certain countries and regions. Although specific envoys have not been determined yet, this idea will differ from the Bush administration which “made relatively little use of special envoys,” and consequently yielded “meager results.” An official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said “Mrs. Clinton was being supported in her push for more resources by Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates.

Great Strides in Arab Media

The Arab League awarded Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Vice-president and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, the title of the First Patron of the Arab Media, reports *AME Info*. The announcement came at the concluding ceremony of the 4th Forum of Arab Producers held at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo in recognition of the efforts of Sheikh Mohammed in promoting the visual and print media as effective instruments of social development in the Arab world.

According to *Gulf News*, it is the first time that an Arab leader has been awarded this title. The award reflects “The great appreciation the people of the media ...[for the]...support Sheikh Mohammed has extended for media enabling them to play vital roles in social, scientific, cultural, economic and political development in the Arab world.” A source at the Arab League explained

that this award reflects the civilized face of the UAE, “specifically its respect for and commitment to culture, education and art.”

In related news, Al-Sumaria TV, the Iraqi satellite channel, also received a media trophy from the ‘Arab Producers Union’, reports *AME Info*. Chafic Elias Tabet, the CEO of the TV station, expressed his joy at the award, emphasizing that it is an honor for every employee at the station, which was established in September 2004.

“[Al-Sumaria TV’s credibility and objectivity] without looking into religious, political or ethnic affiliations, which gained the respect of all the Iraqis.”

Chafic Elias Tabet, CEO of Al-Sumaria TV.

Tabet added that Al-Sumaria TV is a forum for the Iraqi people, chosen especially for its credibility and objectivity in its news and programs “without looking into religious, political or ethnic affiliations, which gained the respect of all the Iraqis.” The TV station also promotes democracy and freedom within the context of a unified Iraq.

New York Man Guilty of Aiding Hezbollah News Network

Javed Iqbal, a Pakistani-born New York

resident, pled guilty this week to charges of providing satellite television services to a terrorist organization. Iqbal admitted to transmitting Al-Manar, the Lebanon-based Hezbollah news network, to United States customers in exchange for thousands of dollars, reports *Reuters*.

The Foundation for Defense and Democracies (FDD) issued a statement on December 23, 2008 entitled *FDD's Coalition Against Terrorist Media Calls Hezbollah Al-Manar Guilty Plea "Sobering" and "Significant"*. In the statement, the FDD noted the United States designated Al Manar as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity in March 2006. Hezbollah is a Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.

The report also states that many satellite companies such as Asiasat, Eutelsat, and Intelsat have banned Al-Manar from being carried on their satellites.

Iqbal argued that his actions were protected by the First Amendment right to freedom of speech and freedom to broadcast and publish news and information.

However, Richard Berman of the United States District Court disagreed with Iqbal's defense, saying, "I don't think the case is about content," according to the *New York Times* Berman continued, "I don't think it's about protected speech or advocacy. I don't think it's about defendants' right to say what they wish, to write what they wish, to publish what they wish or even to broadcast what they wish."

Rather, he argued, the case was about "whether the defendants ran afoul of legitimate laws designed to help protect against terrorism, for example, by providing aid to terrorist organizations, and that is also a fundamental government concern."

The article also noted that Iqbal was well aware of the relationship between Al-Manar and Hezbollah. He was also aware that Hezbollah is a designated a terrorist

organization in the United States.

Saleh Elahwal, Iqbal's suspected partner in this crime, will face trial in January.

Internet Out...Again, in MENA

Internet service providers scrambled to reroute data detoured due to the severing of several underwater cables last week, reports the *Associated Press*. The incident resulted in widespread internet outages across the Middle East and North Africa.

According to the Egyptian communication ministry, three internet cables were cut off the coast of Sicily, notes the *Associated Press* in another article. Yemen, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates were among the countries reporting widespread outages, continues the news site.

Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* surmised that millions of people across the region lost access to the internet and international phone calls had to be rerouted.

While the cause of the break remains unknown, some seismic activity was reported near Malta before the cut was detected, adds Al-Ahram.

This incident was the second large-scale internet outage in the region this year, states *AP*. Undersea cables were also damaged in January, causing outages across the Middle East. Egypt in particular suffered prolonged outages both in January and last week, notes Akil Bashir, chairman of Telecom Egypt.

While cuts in undersea cables are not rare, two major incidents in one year are certainly cause for concern, adds Bashir. The massive internet outage earlier this year led many in the Middle East and across the blogosphere to ponder conspiracy theories (See PR_IV.4: *Conspiracy Theories Surround MENA Internet Outage*).

For instance, the fact that January's internet blackouts occurred in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Pakistan and India, but not in Israel and Iraq was a source of suspicion. In a similar vein, some bloggers across the MENA suggested at the time that the internet blackout was orchestrated by neo-conservatives bent on controlling terrorist propaganda in Iraq.

Whatever the cause, January's outage and the most recent incident "highlighted the fragility of international communications," argues Al-Ahram.

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