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## **Air of Truth**

**By KIM ANDREW ELLIOTT**

Arlington, Va.

WHEN the Voice of America radio service first went on the air in February 1942, it promised German listeners: “The news may be good. The news may be bad. We shall tell you the truth.” Because Voice of America transmitted accurate news even when things were going badly for the Allies, the audience believed its reporting when the tide of the war turned. Telling the truth built credibility, the most vital commodity of international broadcasting.

But in our current war, the Arabic-language television channel financed by our government, Al Hurra, faces Congressional criticism because of its reporting of the news. Over the past year, the station has broadcast a speech by the leader of Hezbollah, excerpts of a speech by a Hamas leader and coverage of a conference in Tehran denying the Holocaust.

Al Hurra is reviewing the newsworthiness of these stories. Whatever the outcome of this investigation, it should not lead to a change in America’s basic approach to international broadcasting, as some members of Congress have proposed.

At a recent subcommittee hearing about Al Hurra, Representative Mike Pence, Republican of Indiana, said: “I believe in a free and independent press. This is, however, a diplomatic mission of the United States of America. And are we communicating in a very practical way to employees down the line that this is not a ‘we report, you decide’ television station?”

The president of Al Hurra’s parent corporation, Brian Coniff, suggested a willingness to move in the direction advocated by Mr. Pence. “We need to find as many venues within the organization as possible that this isn’t just straight journalism, but it’s journalism with a mission,” Mr. Coniff said.

I have worked in international broadcasting audience research during the past 30 years. Surveys and focus groups tell me that people tune to foreign broadcasts for information that is more reliable than what they get from their state-controlled domestic news media. They want “just straight journalism.” They will sense if their news has “mission” mixed into it.

A station transmitting full-time advocacy of American policies would not attract many listeners or viewers. They’ll tune elsewhere, probably to the BBC, whose Arabic-language television channel starts later this year. If Congress wants to do propaganda, the government should purchase advertisements in newspapers and on television stations in the target country.

Ideally, America’s international broadcasting would be conducted by the private sector. This would help

provide stations with the independence required to maintain credibility, and there would be no expense to the taxpayer. In reality, there are few prospects for commercially self-sustaining international broadcasting in Arabic, and almost none in Central Asian languages like Dari, Pashto, Persian or Urdu.

So the government must pay for the stations, while at the same time giving them the independence necessary to provide a credible news product. Audiences may disagree with American policies and actions, but they will be appreciative that the United States is providing an accurate, balanced news service. Propaganda to sell unpopular policies might give the audience another reason to dislike the United States.

Comprehensive news is a demonstration of democracy in action. It provides the independent journalism that is necessary for a democracy to function. It will cover the debate between the government and the opposition. And audiences will hear about politicians — American politicians — whose views are closer to their own.

Even if audiences are not compelled to agree with American policies in the present crisis, at least good will and credibility will have accumulated. Those could be useful in the next crisis.

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