

Radio Nederland Wereldroep - www.wereldroep.nl

Features: Media: Articles

Al Hurra's moment of truth

Opinion by Kim Andrew Elliott, 9 June 2004

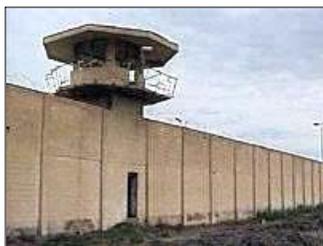
Al Hurra, the controversial new US government funded Arabic language television channel, may be the best means for the United States to ensure that Arab audiences are accurately informed about its policies and operations in the Middle East. Television is the most popular medium for news in the Middle East, and Al Hurra reaches the entire region via satellite.



Al Hurra will succeed only if it establishes its credibility during this critical early phase of its existence. Because people tune to foreign news broadcasts in large numbers only in countries where the domestic media are government controlled, credibility is the essential ingredient of successful international broadcasting.

Promising start

Al Hurra's live coverage of the first Senate and House hearings about the mistreatment of Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison was a promising beginning. As the US-based Arabic-language TV channel, Al Hurra can be the most comprehensive source coverage of the hearings, inquiries, conferences, and proceedings that will be convened to investigate and discuss the subject. This content bring credence to Al Hurra's reports of other aspects of the Iraq war, including the positive work being done by US military and civilian personnel, and of progress against terrorists and extremists.



Al Hurra's credibility was not helped is its recent "exclusive" footage of torture in Iraqi prisons when Saddam Hussein was still in power. Because the images could be construed as an attempt to deflect attention from Abu Ghraib, detractors can now more conveniently dismiss Al Hurra as a US propaganda instrument. As important as the information is, Al Hurra would have helped itself by letting Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, or even the History Channel get the scoop on this video, *then* jumping on the story.

Promotion of US policies is the work of agencies such as the White House's Office of Global Communication, the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs, or public affairs sections of the Defense Department. I hope that executives of

US international broadcasting resist any attempts to "coordinate" Al Hurra's coverage with these offices, or to hold back its coverage of developments that the administration might want to be downplayed.

Two distinct functions

The US Broadcasting Board of Governors has stressed the need to separate the functions of public diplomacy, which employs the techniques of advocacy and persuasion, and international broadcasting, which is basically in the news business. The nine members of the bipartisan Board must now take especially seriously their most important role, as junkyard dogs against attempts to curtail or steer the reportage of Al Hurra and the other elements of US international broadcasting.

Al Hurra's coverage will not cause the Arab people to forgive the United States for what happened at Abu Ghraib. It is unlikely the station will bring general Arab support for US policy in the Middle East. It will, however, show how a democracy responds to official misdeeds. Viewers will see how US justice deals with the abuse of prisoners, even foreign enemy prisoners. They will also witness how all of this is reported by independent journalists.

Arab viewers might imagine similar scenarios of government, opposition, and journalism in their own countries. Those thoughts could find their way into Arab public opinion. That would be Al Hurra's significant achievement.

Kim Andrew Elliott is an audience research analyst in the US International Broadcasting Bureau. Views expressed are his own.

© Radio Nederland Wereldroep, all rights reserved



www2.rnw.nl/rnw/en/features/media/features/us040609.html