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Beware of the dog

Radio Sawa: Should it play the hits, or move the needle?

Analysis by Kim Andrew Elliott, 28 October 2004

As you may have recently read in the [Media Network Weblog](#), Radio Sawa, the US Arabic-language international radio service featuring contemporary music and personalities is lambasted in a draft report of the US State Department's Inspector General (IG). The report was leaked to the [Washington Post](#).



I haven't seen the draft. But from my reading of the Post's account, the IG report contains some strange notions about international broadcasting. Here are a few, as quoted from the Post article:

1. "*Radio Sawa* has been so preoccupied with building an audience that it has failed to adequately measure whether it is influencing minds."

The IG, along with many other "experts" and decision makers in Washington, seem to think that international broadcasting involves a mechanistic, Pavlovian, stimulus-response process. After 27 years in audience research, I understand that people listen to international broadcasts to get news that is more credible than the news they get from their domestic media. Over years - really decades - these listeners are well enough informed to resist misinformation and disinformation from dictators and terrorists. They are equipped to make up their own minds about current events. Such a process is subtle and long-term. It can't be measured by "moving the needle," as some in Washington now like to say.

Media professionals v bureaucrats

As for being "preoccupied with building an audience": yes, absolutely. Successful media professional are preoccupied with building an audience. They stand in contrast to media bureaucrats, who are in the business of sending out a certain sanctioned message (and who are wont to tell listeners: if you don't like it, well, you know where the tuning knob is.)



The Radio Sawa concept is not entirely daft. It follows the example of stations like Radio Luxembourg and Africa Number One. Instead of reaching small, elite audiences with wall-to-wall news and information, it reaches large, mass audiences with a large proportion of entertainment and brief newscasts. A short well-produced newscast to a large number of people can have as much, maybe more, impact in the target country than an hour-long current affairs magazine to a much smaller group of listeners.

2. "*There appears to be a reluctance among officials to use (Radio Sawa) as a tool for public diplomacy.*"

Over the years, Radio Moscow was very much used as tool of Soviet "public diplomacy." On the other hand, BBC World Service has taken pains to remain separate from British public diplomacy. (The British Foreign Office, which funds World Service, has a say in what languages it broadcasts, but not over its content.) Radio Moscow had more funding, more languages, more transmitters, more hours, more kiloWatts than BBC World Service, but World Service had at least ten times more listeners than the Soviet international broadcaster. Which model should US international broadcasting follow?

3. "*Radio Sawa* has been reluctant to conduct post-broadcast analyses to determine whether US interests were advanced in its programming."

Can't you just picture Arab youth gathering round the radio to hear the next broadcast advancing US interests? Can't you see their needles being moved?

The real challenges

It will be interesting to see if the IG report deals with the real challenges to Radio Sawa's success. There are two big ones:

The first is its FM penetration. Radio Sawa has 24-hour FM outlets in nine of the 22 Arab League countries. This is a remarkable achievement and has helped the station build a weekly of audience of nine percent throughout the Arab world. But these nine countries represent only 23 percent of the Arab population. Elites might be willing to listen to international radio via shortwave, distant medium wave, or internet audio streams. But for Radio Sawa to reach more listeners, it will need FM transmitters in the other Arab nations. Key countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Libya and Saudi Arabia do not seem inclined to allow Radio Sawa FM outlets on their soil.

The second is that domestic broadcasters in the Arab countries, upon witnessing the success of the Radio Sawa format mixing Arab and Western pop music, can replicate it and add local content, such as weather and traffic. Radio Fann in Jordan and Nile FM in Egypt are two examples of the new wave of FM contemporary music stations in the Middle East. These may give Radio Sawa some stiff competition.

TV is the medium of choice

In any case, radio will not carry the "freight" of providing news and current affairs to the Arab world. Television is now the medium of choice. Here, the US funded Al Hurra must establish itself as an independent news organization and not a purveyor of the US foreign policy agenda (See Al Hurra's Moment of Truth, 9 June 2004"). If the goal is to provide alternatives to the dominant Arab news channels Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, this might be accomplished at no cost to US taxpayers by the planned BBC Arabic channel or the contemplated CNN Arabic channel.

This would leave Radio Sawa to do what radio does best: music, personality, interviews. It could add half-hour news programs at key morning and evening hours, and these might be VOA branded. But Radio Sawa's most important accomplishment would be to convey goodwill from the United States to the Arab countries. It can best do this not by portraying itself as a domestic Arab station, but as an American radio station that speaks Arabic.



Radio Sawa might even add a few announcers who speak Arabic with an American accent.



Vested interests

Radio Sawa is under the scrutiny of the State Department's Inspector General because the US Broadcasting Board of Governors is too small an agency to have its own IG office. And, so, this draft report is from an office of the State Department, which very much has an agenda in the Middle East. It is evaluating US international broadcasting, which can succeed only if it is perceived as not having an agenda. US international broadcasting would be better off submitting to the inspector general of another agency, e.g. the Department of Transportation, that does not have a dog in the foreign policy fight.

Kim Andrew Elliott is an audience research analyst in the US International Broadcasting Bureau. As always, views expressed are his own. He can be reached at ibcast@mail2kim.com.

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