

Broadcasting truth needed in time of war

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Houston Chronicle op-ed

October 7, 2001

When the Voice of America, the U.S. government international radio station, first broadcast on Feb. 24, 1942, the announcer said, "Daily at this time, we shall speak to you about America and the war. The news may be good or bad. We shall tell you the truth."

Over the years, the Voice of America has built its good reputation and 91 million listeners because of its news service. In the new war against terrorism, some government officials and commentators have been trying to define a new mission for VOA, consisting of one-sided news and propaganda.

On Sept. 21, the State Department compelled VOA management not to broadcast a report including an exclusive interview with the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Omar. Bolstered by support from VOA journalists who did not want VOA's independence to be compromised, that report was broadcast on Sept. 25, with some updated information.

On Sept. 20, New York Times columnist William Safire chided VOA for broadcasting a report containing an interview with Yasir al Serrri, a leader of Egypt's Islamic group Gama'a Islamiyya. Safire wrote, "Even in peacetime, news credibility does not flow from splitting a moral difference between good and evil. In the climate of today's undeclared war, private media in democracies are free to take either or neither side, but U.S. taxpayer-supported broadcasting is supposed to be on our side."

On Oct. 1, a New York Post editorial had this message for VOA: "Hello? Voice of America? Didn't anyone tell you? There's a war on. You're supposed to be delivering propaganda!"

Safire and The New York Post seem to think that VOA's output should be crafted from some central bureaucratic plan. But over the years, we have learned that, especially in the media business, market-based decision-making leads to success. The market for VOA is people who live in countries where news from state-controlled domestic media is one sided and propagandistic. These listeners seek the objective, comprehensive and timely news that provides the antidote to what they receive domestically. Credibility is therefore the be-all and end-all of successful international broadcasting.

People in these media-controlled countries are selective about what foreign stations they listen to. From the 1950s through the 1980s, Radio Moscow was the granddaddy of international broadcasters, transmitting more hours per week, in more languages, through more transmitters, with more kilowatts, than any other station. But its audience never amounted to more than 10 percent of that attracted by the British Broadcasting Corp. or our VOA. Beijing's China Radio International has grown to be one the formidable voices of this decade, but its audience numbers are as dismal as Radio Moscow's.

Since World War II, the BBC has been the most successful international broadcaster because it is perceived as the most independent and objective source of news. VOA occupies a respectable second place, because over the years it has adhered more to the news model than to the propaganda model.

The VOA Charter, a U.S. law signed by President Ford in 1976, says in part: "The long-range interests of the United States are served by communicating directly with the peoples of the world by radio. ... VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive."

The wording "long range" is significant. VOA's content may include details and viewpoints at odds with U.S. policies. But by broadcasting such a balanced and complete news service, VOA in the long term builds credibility and wins an audience. And if U.S. policies are wise and virtuous, we can safely bet that

this accumulated audience will in the long term tend to see things the way the United States sees things. This is the communication process of effective international broadcasting.

Should VOA broadcast only the U.S. government's side of the news because it is U.S. government funded? Actually, VOA is government funded because there is no commercial potential for international broadcasting in languages such as Dari and Pashto. People in Afghanistan want to be informed, and it is in the interest of the United States that they be very well informed about their own country, about U.S. policies and about events in the rest of the world. It would also be effective to provide them with the music and friendly announcers forbidden on their domestic media.

VOA is under the supervision of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, a nine-member, bipartisan body of prominent citizens, nominated by the president and approved by the Senate. The board is supposed to provide a "firewall" between the U.S. government and VOA. Somehow, that firewall did not work on Sept. 21. The board must ensure that VOA's ability to report the news is protected in the future.

A VOA with one-sided news and a greater emphasis on propaganda would not be an authentic voice of America. A VOA that is a product of press freedom and sound principles of journalism is a truer voice of America. And such a VOA will continue to attract an audience and have an impact in the world.

Elliott produces a weekly Voice of America program about media and was VOA's audience research officer from 1985 to 1995.