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Public Diplomacy and the Ratings Game ^[1]

"The success of any moral enterprise does not depend upon numbers," said American social reformer William Lloyd Garrison some 150 years ago. But times have changed.

Ratings matter whether in the medium of television, the internet, or radio. The Nielsen company does website ratings just as they do for television programs. In the digital age numbers count, and in the field of international broadcasting, this has been true from the earliest days of shortwave broadcasting. As Radio Netherlands icon Jonathan Marks once observed, countries began international radio services "to tell the world what a great place their country was, providing you were only visiting on a tourist visa." Public diplomacy only works when people are listening, so audience size has become all important.

Many believe that is why the emir of the tiny Gulf state of Qatar originally started his television satellite channel, al-Jazeera. Qatar's terrain is mainly flat with barren deserts and it is slightly smaller than the state of Connecticut. Nevertheless, al-Jazeera, with its estimated 40 million Middle East viewers, has allowed a country of 863,051 people to speak at the same or greater decibel level as its giant neighbor, Saudi Arabia.

On the radio side, the U.S. government's Arabic-language Radio Sawa is shaking up the Middle East radio market with its large numbers of listeners. It says Nielsen numbers show the pop music and news radio channel has a weekly audience of 20.8 million listeners in the Middle East. Radio Monte Carlo, an Arabic-language service owned by Radio France International, has not fared as well; its audience has fallen in the past ten years from 15 million to 10.5 million listeners. This prompted the president of RMC, Antoine Schwarz, to say at a news conference that his service "has aged a bit in its programs," and needs revamping to counter competition from new television and radio channels.

Even the U.S. Congress is concerned about the numbers. The U.S. government funds Radio Sawa and TV Alhurra, the latter of which faces stiff competition from indigenous and local Arabic channels such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, in addition to more than 200 additional satellite channels that are available to those with a growing number of satellite dishes. Alhurra's image as a go-to channel for news in the Middle East is weakened when top officials such as America's Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes provide exclusive interviews to rivals without granting at least equal access for America's own channel, which is doing its best to remain competitive. Despite such obstacles, Alhurra's weekly viewership is trending upward, and Radio Sawa is gaining favor of U.S. ambassadors in the area, with its mixture of music and news and ability to attract large numbers of young people, a coveted segment of the audience by most broadcasters, including those involved in government public diplomacy.

And yet there are some that still fit Garrison's model and pay attention to the moral enterprise over the numbers. National Public Radio, a popular, non-profit, largely privately-supported network headquartered in America. NPR doesn't care about numbers, and no one bugs the

radio service about them, in part because the quality of the service is so high.

Kevin Klose, the president of NPR, said that it costs little to distribute already produced programs to a wider audience abroad, and it costs its network member stations nothing, through NPR Worldwide. "It's better to get the programs out there, than not to," he said. "We have a huge amount of Internet traffic as well. Up to 25 percent of hits on the website come from abroad. If there's a signal up there of any sort, someone is listening because it's a global community." Once NPR puts a product on the air, people flock to it, without them having to do audience polling to find out how to increase their audience.

Ratings matter, but when quality comes first, the numbers will follow.
