

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Is It Time to Permit Americans to Watch U.S. International Broadcasting? ^[1]

In 1948, gasoline was 26 cents a gallon, a new car was \$1,500, and you could drive it to see Bob Hope in the movie "Paleface," or head home to watch Milton Berle cavorting on your small, round, green TV screen.

1948 was also the year that Congress enacted the Smith-Mundt Act that has, for more than half a century, prevented Americans from understanding how a critically important part of the U.S. government carries out its responsibilities: Under that law, domestic distribution of U.S. government media content meant for overseas audiences was forbidden.

That law, still in force, was designed in and for another era, when memories were still fresh of Hitler's propaganda pounded into audiences in Nazi Germany. And American commercial broadcasters, too, were all in favor of the Smith-Mundt Act; the nation's radio stations were concerned about competition from the government-funded Voice of America, so they did not want its signal heard in the U.S.

As a consequence, even informed Americans are kept in the dark about how our tax dollars are used to promote U.S. interests through international broadcasting.

"Bin Laden et al understand the power of media in waging the war, not just the tactical war but the more important war of ideas -- but what is the US doing?" a reader of this column recently asked. "Are they being effective? These are not rhetorical questions -- I really want to know how we're using media, either official channels like VOA or stations set up in Iraq and Afghanistan, quasi-channels like funded third parties, or pure propaganda efforts like leaflet campaigns and other activities... it distresses me that we're not hearing about more activities in this respect."

True, there have been articles, including [here](#) about the rash of movies and TV shows from Hollywood about the military, especially the war in Iraq. But VOA and other U.S.-funded global broadcasting all remain a mystery to those who fund them and might be interested to monitor their progress.

For example, the government's Arabic-language satellite television channel, Alhurra, blankets the Middle East with programs from the U.S., Iraq, Morocco and other Muslim countries, but it cannot be seen by viewers in the U.S. Alhurra is also hoping to extend its existing service into Europe before the end of the year, but it still cannot play in Peoria.

Europe does offer rich potential for audience expansion for Alhurra, so the idea to extend its signal to additional Muslim TV viewers could make a great deal of sense. It could have even been carried to Europe when Alhurra began its service to the Middle East a year ago. There are 1.6 million Muslims in Britain, 1.8 million in Germany, five million in France, and millions

more in other European countries.

Morand Fachot of the European Broadcasting Union in Geneva told me that even in tiny Switzerland the Arab audience is substantial.

"In the summer there is a large influx of visitors from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States," Fachot said. "This is reflected in the large number of Arabic TV channels offered on cable, where penetration is extremely high, about 95 percent."

But just as the U.S. government was late in getting into the Middle East with its satellite TV channel Alhurra, in Europe it will once again be the new kid on the block hoping to attract attention and win respect. Norman Pattiz, the private sector entrepreneur who conceived Alhurra, has wanted to expand U.S.-funded Arabic language television, and he has attracted support in the administration and on Capitol Hill. But he is working within a bureaucracy that works at a much slower pace.

To test the waters for domestic dissemination, Congress could consider a trial run before opening the flood gates. For example, there is a TV program called Mosaic, carried weeknights on DirecTV in the U.S., that broadcasts up-to-the-minute video news segments from Arabic-language channels in the Middle East, translated into English. Middle East channels with the exception of Alhurra, that is. Because of the time difference, with the Middle East several hours ahead of the U.S., viewers in North America watching in the evening can see the following morning's news reports from the Middle East.

Mosaic producer Jamal Dajani told me that he sent a letter to Alhurra when it went on the air last year, seeking permission to carry segments of it on Mosaic, but he has not received an answer.

"We show the diversity of coverage from four or five different perspectives from the various Arabic language TV channels," he said.

But here at home, the more than one million Muslims estimated to live in the U.S. will have to wait until the U.S. government plays catch up and permits the Alhurra to be seen here.

Pattiz said he was unaware of Dajani's letter. But, cautioning that he was speaking as a private citizen and not as a member of the U.S. Board of Governors that oversees Alhurra, he suggested he might support Mosaic's application.

"I would love to see" Alhurra's news coverage shown on such a program, said Pattiz. "I can tell you that the issue of lifting the ban on domestic dissemination has been raised on visits to the Hill" with members of Congress.

But to implement this, Congress must amend or repeal the half-century-old Smith-Mundt Act. Then, after freeing up programs like "Mosaic" to use segments of Alhurra programs for U.S. audiences, we could take the next step: Put Alhurra on a U.S. domestic satellite 24-hours a day, so that everyone in the U.S. -- and in the satellite coverage area in Canada -- can view the channel for themselves, as audiences can in the Middle East and, soon, throughout Europe.

2005 could be the year to bury the Smith-Mundt legislation in a time capsule where it belongs, along with scratchy black-and-white kinescope films of "Amos 'n Andy," the Camel News

