

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The Week That Was in International Broadcasting ^[1]

This was a week when some international broadcasters came of age while others began to show theirs. Winners began to emerge, meaning someone had to lose. Some broadcasters stepped out of the shadows to participate in the big dance. And new startups set out to take on the world's most familiar satellite news channels.

At the BBC, news editors and writers decided to cast away their policy stylebook to do it their own way on the morning of the London bombings and use the word "terrorism" to describe what had happened. But 12 hours later they backed off.

The BBC newsroom official stylebook states its opposition to the use of the word terrorism. "Our credibility is severely undermined," it says, "if international audiences detect a bias for or against any of those involved. Neutral language is key: even the word 'terrorist' can appear judgmental in parts of the world where there is no clear consensus about the legitimacy of militant political groups."

It took the BBC just 12 hours to come to its senses and end its irreverent depiction of the London bombings as a "terrorist" act, reverting instead to the use of such words as "bombers," "insurgents," and "perpetrators" in its coverage. As Diane Sawyer of ABC News once said on the passing of Yasser Arafat, "There may not be any other man in history who embodies the saying that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

Al-Jazeera, in its coverage of the London "explosions," couldn't help blaming it on the Jews, or at least linking them in some fictitious way with the story. It cited anonymous sources as revealing that the Israeli Embassy in London "received a pre-attack warning." As a result, claimed the story, Israel's Finance Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, canceled his planned trip to London. The Associated Press also picked up and ran the story, basing it on unnamed British government officials.


And on a personal note, last May when I was researching my column about two French journalists who had been kidnapped in Iraq and subsequently released unharmed, one of the journalists who was released suggested that the word terrorists not be used in reporting his story, so as not to endanger the lives of others still being held hostage. The concern was that because the kidnappers did not consider themselves terrorists, they would be inflamed by that designation.

On the day following the London bombings, the BBC seized the moment to announce that it was more urgent than ever to challenge the feisty Arabic channel Al-Jazeera with a BBC Arabic language TV satellite news service of its own.

On the same day, the French expanded on its plans to start a global French-language

channel that many believe is aimed at countering American world influence. Like the BBC, it also has a target. It's not al-Jazeera, but CNN International -- a so-called "CNN a la Francaise," as the BBC's media analyst, Peter Feuilherade, calls it.

In my winners and losers of the week category, France Internationale, a loser, gets the bump from the winner, a U.S. upstart. The long-standing popularity of the French government's Radio Monte Carlo is being seriously challenged in its Arabic-language service by the American government's Radio Sawa. The Managing Director of Radio France Internationale, Antoine Schwartz, says that Radio Sawa has "absolutely...changed the lay of the land. It's a success, we have to admit that."

In an interview  with the European Broadcasting Union's Morand Fachot, Schwartz said: "Two things have changed the Arabic broadcasting environment. First of all, the proliferation of [pan-Arabic] television channels, especially news channels that are stiff competition for radio, represent even greater competition in that they often get the information before radio stations. That's a fact and not only in the Arabic world."

Schwartz continued: "Secondly, the Americans have carried out an in-depth analysis of the market. They have defined a product that was apparently fairly well adapted to the market, albeit not perhaps well adapted to the wishes of the American government, but that's another issue. However, the results are there: they have taken listeners from other broadcasters, and from us in particular. So, obviously, we need to define our goals in relation to this too."

So hooray for Radio Sawa, which must demonstrate that its programs are having an impact on America's policy objectives in the Middle East, in addition to attracting a large number of young listeners. Perhaps Congressional oversight committees can articulate exactly what it expects of Radio Sawa now that it has its competition running scared. But Sawa deserves some time to catch its breath for now.

Its companion on the TV side, Alhurra, was not being pursued this week by any of its competitors -- like CNN and Radio Sawa, who were being stalked by the French, or al-Jazeera, hotly pursued by the BBC. Alhurra is the nice guy of Middle East broadcasting, and if it wants to be something more, to attract the attention it deserves, it needs to produce hard-hitting, controversial documentaries, and feature charismatic reporters and talk show personalities to stand out among the rest.

Finally this week, emerging from the shadows perhaps ready for the big dance, one can look toward the coast of Borneo, at the tiny Islamic sultanate, Brunei, which celebrated its 30th year of international broadcasting. Its programs are carried 10 hours a day to Japan, India, China and Australia, and perhaps someday to America.

Satellites level the playing field for everyone, where brains count more than size.
