



# SPEAKING OUT

## *Time to Speak Up for the Voice of America*

BY MYRNA WHITWORTH

“Remember you represent the American people and its free press.” With these words, VOA Newsroom Chief Bernard Kamenske bade farewell to his staff in the fall of 1981. Bernie lived and breathed the First Amendment, and believed passionately that VOA had an obligation to its international audience to provide balanced journalism. A self-professed Jeffersonian, he also knew the American experience was worthy of sharing with the rest of the world.

Bernie, my friend and mentor, passed away in September, but he leaves behind a lasting legacy best exemplified in the document he helped to become law — the VOA Charter. The Charter, drafted in 1960 and signed into law in 1976, is both the foundation of VOA’s credibility and a statement of its public diplomacy role. “VOA will serve the long-range interests of the United States,” the document states, “by communicating directly with the people of the world.” It requires VOA to provide accurate, objective and comprehensive news; a broad and balanced picture of American institutions, thought and values; and a thorough explanation of U.S. policies on a broad range of issues. It provides a road map for U.S. international broadcasting that is as relevant in today’s war on terrorism as it was in the Cold War.

However, at the very time that it should be at its strongest, America’s Voice is being silenced in some parts of the world and marginalized in others. One might expect pressure from out-

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side to politicize VOA content. To be sure there has been some of that; notably, for instance, the State Department’s disagreement with VOA management in the emotionally charged days following 9/11 over the airing of a report based on an interview with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. But equally troubling, if not more so, is the tilt toward commercialization of publicly funded international broadcasting.

### **The Commercial Impulse: Radio Sawa**

Following restructuring in the 1990s, a nine-member, bipartisan Broadcasting Board of Governors oversees VOA and its sister grantee broadcasters. (The Secretary of State serves as an ex-officio member.) This part-time group of private citizens, most of whom are active in the media business, has broad authority over a multimedia, international broadcast operation that cost the American taxpayer some \$540 million in 2003. The

BBG sets priorities, determines languages, allocates resources and commissions program content. Under the current structure, the directors of VOA and the grantee entities do not make policy or programming decisions; instead they are expected to implement the wishes of the board.

Drawing upon their domestic commercial experience, board members seek to oversee with a corporate, micro-managerial style. Unfortunately, there is no one among them who advocates for the Voice of America. In fact, frustrated by what they see as a cumbersome federal bureaucracy, board members have chosen to break away their pet projects from the Voice of America, thus bypassing the mandate of the VOA Charter. (Of all the entities that the BBG supervises, VOA is the only one that has a legal mandate, based on Public Law 94-350, to uphold the provisions of the VOA Charter.)

A case in point is the much-touted Radio Sawa that replaced VOA’s Arabic Service in March 2002 with a 24-hour Western/Arabic music network. Gone were the VOA brand, the VOA central news product, and the comprehensive reporting and analysis that had been the hallmark of VOA Arabic programming for 55 years. In their place were Britney Spears, Amer Diab, Justin Timberlake and Nawal Zoghby. VOA Arabic Service employees were required to compete for positions in the new Radio Sawa. In fact, the majority of the Sawa staff is not from VOA. They were hired under a relatively new personnel provision called



the Personal Services Contract.

Radio Sawa is the creation of BBC Governor Norman Pattiz, founder and chairman of Westwood One, the nation's largest radio syndicator. Using the business acumen and salesmanship that turned a small business into a multimillion-dollar media empire, Pattiz led a campaign on Capitol Hill and in the corridors of the State Department to sell his vision of a network designed to attract Arab youth with music and then inform them about the United States with short news, interviews and opinion pieces.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Pattiz found a receptive audience willing to appropriate \$35 million to put Sawa on the air. And more funding is promised for an around-the-clock Arabic-language TV service, the Middle East Television Network, to compete with the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera and the 44 other Arabic-language satellite channels that blanket the Middle East.

### **A New Model of Success?**

In its literature and public statements, the BBG regards Radio Sawa as an unqualified success, pointing to the results of an ACNielsen survey that showed it is the leading international broadcaster in five Middle Eastern countries, with a 31-percent listenership. But what is the audience hearing? It is true that at the height of the Iraq War, Sawa's four streams increased news coverage, but it continued to air at least 14 hours of Arabic and Western pop music as U.S. bombs fell on Iraq. Radio Sawa now offers at least one 30-minute news program on its Iraqi stream. However, the bulk of news is delivered in hourly five-minute and 90-second increments. This is hardly sufficient for comprehensive news coverage or for in-depth discussion that will foster greater understanding of the United States. The board says it will continue to layer more substance onto Radio Sawa, but

in Jordan, where Sawa's easily replicated format is already receiving competition from a local military station, news programming is being reduced not increased.

As FM markets continue to open in the Arab world, we can expect more stations to copy the successful Sawa model but jettison the American news content. There is precedent for this. Backed by a million-dollar research study, VOA Europe was launched in 1985 in an effort to attract a new generation unaware of the U.S. role in reconstructing the new Europe. Its "music and more" format had some success, especially as media markets began to open in Central Europe after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. But it didn't take long for young, would-be media moguls in Europe to pick up on the format and, given the easy availability of CDs on the commercial market, to replace VOA Europe with their own brand.

The quality of Sawa's transmission also has something to do with its listening rate. Despite repeated appeals from VOA managers for improved transmission facilities, VOA's Arabic Service — Radio Sawa's predecessor — was relegated to barely audible short-wave and medium-wave signals to the target area. In the days of the Cold War and in the budget-tight 1990s that followed, no money was ever appropriated for better radio coverage to the Middle East.

Yet with a one-time capital expense of \$16 million, the BBG built and improved AM transmissions, established FM transmitters in nine Arabic-speaking countries, including four in Iraq, and leased audio channels on popular regional satellites. We will never know what kind of audience VOA Arabic would have garnered during the Iraq War if it had had similar transmissions at its disposal.

Instead, audiences seeking substantive VOA information had only one source — an eight-minute newscast on

the VOA Arabic Web site that drew not from Sawa news output, but from double-sourced and carefully edited VOA central news material.

And the producers had much to choose from. The VOA newsroom output during the 22 days from March 19 through April 9, 2003, comprised a total of 1,563 news items and 847 reports and backgrounders; about two-thirds of the output reflected U.S. policies and statements. Understaffed and underfunded, the VOA newsroom rose to the occasion in the finest Bernie Kamenske tradition. The overall content of this material was judged "accurate, objective and comprehensive" by an inside review panel and by four outside experts.

### **A Public Diplomacy Mandate**

In recent months, a series of reports have been released documenting the failure of American public diplomacy since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. To name a few, they include reports from the Council on Foreign Relations, the Heritage Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trust, and the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World. All have concluded that anti-Americanism is widespread, particularly in the Muslim world.

While each takes a different approach to addressing the problem, none has given adequate recognition to what a properly funded, staffed and supported Voice of America could contribute to improving international understanding of the United States, its values, its institutions and its policies. VOA tells the American story within a regional and cultural context and in the 50-plus languages its audiences speak. The BBC World Service is not going to tell that story.

No other entity under the purview of the Broadcasting Board of Governors has the well-defined public diplomacy mandate that is

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outlined in the VOA Charter. Radio and Television Marti have no such mission, nor do Radio Free Asia and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. These are surrogate broadcasters, created to promote democracy through the broadcast of accurate local and regional news and information. Their mission statements do not call for an explanation of American values or policies. On the contrary, the "Radios" take pride in the fact that they are not required to carry U.S. policy statements.

If Radio Sawa is any example, the BBG strategy of trying to increase audience and market share by "marrying the mission to the market" will bring on line more tax-supported, easily replicated, commercial-style music stations with a minimum of information or American identification.

### Cost Efficiencies

The American taxpayer spent about \$150 million dollars in 2003 for the Voice of America to deliver credible, truthful information about the United States and the world to an estimated global audience of 100 million people. That's less than the cost of an F/A-22 jet fighter. As a public diplomacy tool, VOA is cheap.

To put it in even clearer focus, VOA's Kirundi/Kinyarwanda Service broadcasts a daily program of news coupled with conflict resolution, democracy-building, humanitarian and youth reporting to the strategically important Great Lakes region of Central Africa. The cost of the program, which reaches an estimated 50 percent of the population, is about the same as one State Department FSO with a family posted to an overseas mission.

The globally recognized VOA brand is worth protecting and preserving. Strengthen it; improve it; streamline its personnel and administrative procedures. But don't dismember, marginalize or commercialize it. For over 60 years, the Voice of America has, in Bernie Kamenske's words, "represented the American people and its free press" to the world. This venerable institution remains the best and most cost-effective vehicle for projecting American values and policies to tens of millions of people around the globe. And hopefully, once knowing us better, they will distrust us less. ■

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