

International public broadcasting can come home, but do we need it at all?

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This month, due to a little-known provision of the National Defense Authorization Act, government-funded international media agencies, such as Voice of America, Alhurra, and Radio Free Asia, can broadcast domestically for the first time in 40 years. Some have called it an open invitation for unlimited propagandizing of American citizens. They argue that subjecting Americans to our own international propaganda will fill domestic airwaves with blatantly nationalistic content resembling the state-funded efforts of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

The truth is more nuanced. While we should be concerned with how government funding can sway and distort media, allowing those international media agencies to broadcast domestically is a sensible adjustment to an antiquated law. Rather than focusing on which state-funded media Americans are allowed to view, we should focus on whether we need these media organizations in the first place.

In 1948, the Smith-Mundt Act established U.S. government-produced international broadcasting (USIB) agencies. USIBs support U.S. interests abroad in order to “create a better understanding of our nation with a foreign populace as a whole by providing them access to American culture, history, law, society, art, and music that might not be otherwise available through standard local media outlets.” During the Cold War, U.S.-funded media outlets, such as Radio Free Europe, helped get messages of freedom through the Iron Curtain. Today, the USIB television network Alhurra is broadcast in 22 Arab countries.

Yet until this month, Alhurra could not broadcast domestically. Oddly, Al-Jazeera, which is largely funded by Qatar, broadcasts domestically, as does Russia Today, which is funded by the Russian government.

Americans can watch foreign government-funded media, but we cannot watch our own government-funded media. Except, of course, PBS.

On Voice of America’s website, you can listen to live streams of their broadcasts, as well as peruse the site’s content. Voice of America is not any more — or less — propagandistic than PBS. Yet by banning domestic broadcasts, Congress told the world that VOA and other USIBs are so full of lies that not even the American people are allowed to hear them. This has understandably hurt the reputations of USIBs abroad.

Now that such domestic broadcasts are allowed, Americans can finally hear, watch, and judge for ourselves. Congress has tried to build an artificial barrier around Americans' media sources for too long, and it is a barrier that is becoming increasingly irrelevant as consumers easily consume international content with new technologies. It is time, as one congressional committee put it as far back as 1967, to allow the "public access to what the U.S. government is saying about itself and the rest of the world."

Ironically, having Americans actually watch USIBs may politicize them more than before and turn them into even greater vehicles of propaganda. Public broadcasting has spent decades dangling at the end of a politicized string. Most recently, Juan Williams's termination from NPR for allegedly anti-Muslim comments led to personnel changes and renewed calls by conservatives to either cut public broadcasting's funding or to make it more conservative.

Throughout its existence, public broadcasting has been assaulted from both sides of the aisle, as well as by presidents who hoped to turn it into a vehicle for propaganda. President Nixon constantly tried to pull strings behind the scenes to make public broadcasting more amenable to the "administration's views." During the 1980s, President Reagan used public broadcasting to promote his anti-drug campaigns.

Because of its domestic visibility, public broadcasting has been politicized by the tides of political opinion. Yet USIBs have hitherto been largely invisible to the American public, thus free of that type of pressure. When USIBs begin broadcasting domestically they may face as yet unfelt political pressure to conform to voters' and politicians' whims.

Which is why, ultimately, it is government funding of media agencies, domestically or abroad, that is suspect. Voice of America is a quality product that, like PBS and NPR, can stand on its own. Alhurra's popularity is also growing, with one poll showing that 25 percent of Egyptians tuned into the network during the 2011 riots, compared with only 22 percent for Al-Jazeera. Moreover, private media companies like CNN have long had a substantial international presence. And America has never had a difficult time disseminating our culture. Getting America's message out seems to be the least of our concerns.

But if the government is funding USIBs then there is no reason not to let them broadcast domestically. With domestic public broadcasting, the government already has a substantial foothold in the media market. We should be allowed to see what we're telling other countries.

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