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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: US government wants to air national news broadcasts dubbed in Arabic into Iraq

BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor: This is MARKETPLACE. I'm David Brancaccio. If you want to win hearts and minds, you know who to call. Rather, Jennings, Brokaw, Lehrer and Hume. The US government is paying to beam the keynote newscasts of these gentlemen, translated into Arabic, onto Iraqi television screens. Norm Pattiz, a member of the US Broadcasting Board of Governors, is spearheading a project that he says has a mission of journalism, not propoganda. MARKETPLACE business of media commentator Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, says it'll be interesting to watch the effects of this both in Iraq and in American newsrooms.

MARTIN KAPLAN: You can imagine it going for better and for worse. To some degree, it might enforce a certain amount of sobriety or balance. On the other hand, it might encourage them to second-guess themselves about what a foreign audience might misperceive in a story, where an American audience might understand it quite well.

CNN, interestingly, decided not to join the consortium that's providing this free tape because they feared that it would be somehow compromising journalistic standards; that it's inappropriate for an American news enterprise to lend its content to what is, first and foremost, an arm of the American government's information outreach, its foreign policy. It's, some would say, propoganda.

BRANCACCIO: I wonder what happens if, for instance, CBS runs a piece that is critical of US policy in Iraq, and then its critics say, 'Look what you are showing the Iraqis.'

KAPLAN: Well, I think the upside of that is that the more stuff that's aired that's critical that gets shown in Iraq, the more we're showing them what we think democracy is. What's our long-term objective here? It's to create a democracy in

Iraq. But in order to get there, what you need first is to demonstrate what we mean by democracy, and that's a cacophony of voices.

My sadness about the programming choices is that we're limiting it only to the mainstream US stuff. Wouldn't it be more appropriate for a nation that's not a conqueror, but a liberator, to provide access to the people there of democratic news sources from around the world?

BRANCACCIO: And the chances that the US government is going to pay for the electricity to broadcast the French national newscasts to Iraqis at this juncture?

KAPLAN: Well, exactly, which underlines why it's a tightrope act. It's not just a good deed that we're doing. We have foreign policy objectives. We want them to like us. The possibility, though, is that it will boomerang. The idea of coming in there with a blunderbuss, which consists of the American mainstream media's stuff, translating it and saying, 'Here, enjoy it, this is democracy,' doesn't demonstrate the kind of cultural sensitivity which, at least some people on the ground think, is conducive to helping create a democracy.

BRANCACCIO: Clearly, this, though, a short- or medium-term solution to Iraq's information needs.

KAPLAN: Yes. And in the long run, no doubt, Rupert Murdoch and Sky TV and other purveyors of for-profit content will be delighted to have the people in Iraq be paying for the privilege rather than piping it in for free. In that sense, what they're getting now is a kind of free sample, whetting their appetite for perhaps "Baywatch" and "The Bold and the Beautiful."

BRANCACCIO: Marty, thank you.

KAPLAN: Thank you.

BRANCACCIO: Martin Kaplan is also the director of the Norman Lear Center at USC.