

# AMERICA CALLING: A 21ST-CENTURY MODEL

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THE BBG SHOULD MOVE TO CONSOLIDATE U.S. GOVERNMENT-FUNDED INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING INTO ONE MULTIMEDIA ORGANIZATION.

BY KIM ANDREW ELLIOTT

Until about the 1990s, U.S. government-funded international broadcasting — which I will refer to as USIB in this article — was a relatively simple matter. The Voice of America and Radio Free Europe transmitted into a country, usually on shortwave, the best way to broadcast over long distances at that time. The target country's moribund, government-monopoly broadcasting system provided a biased or otherwise deficient news service, giving audiences the incentive to tune to foreign stations.

In communist and developing countries, there was a demand for news that was more comprehensive and reliable than that available from state-controlled domestic media. The United States found it advantageous to cater to that demand, as accurate news provided the antidote to communist and other anti-American propaganda.

Now USIB faces a much more complex media envi-

ronment. Satellite television and the Internet have largely displaced shortwave as the preferred means to send information across national boundaries. Domestic broadcasting in target countries has improved, at least technologically, with several choices of television and FM stations, and growing Internet availability. Emerging international broadcasters such as Al-Jazeera, in Arabic and in English, add to the competition.

USIB is still in the business of providing news to counter misinformation and disinformation from dictators, terrorists and other international miscreants. Ideally, the private sector would provide this service, both to avoid any perceptions that government funding affects its credibility and to save taxpayers money. Indeed, there is private, advertiser-funded U.S. international broadcasting in English (CNN International), Spanish (CNN en Español), and a few other languages.

On the other hand, in most languages where there is a need for reliable news from an external source (e.g., Bangla, Burmese, Hausa), international broadcasting has little commercial potential. The U.S. government must step in to provide the funding.

## The BBG Faces Challenges

The Broadcasting Board of Governors, a bipartisan agency that has existed since 1995, acts as a “firewall” be-

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*Kim Andrew Elliott, an audience research analyst for the United States International Broadcasting Bureau, has taught communications at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He reports on international broadcasting at [www.kimandrewelliott.com](http://www.kimandrewelliott.com). The views expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of the International Broadcasting Bureau or the U.S. government.*

tween the U.S. government and international broadcasting entities it funds: the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Alhurra, Radio Sawa, and Radio and TV Martí. It performs that function mainly by selecting the directors and presidents of these entities, but also provides general supervision, such as proposing the addition or elimination of language services, and adjusting the investment in various media technologies.

Confirmed by the Senate in early July, seven months after being nominated by President Barack Obama, the board's eight new members join Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton — the designated ex officio ninth member of the board — to bring the BBG up to its full complement for the first time since December 2004. (A list of current BBG members and their biographies is available at [www.bbg.gov/about](http://www.bbg.gov/about).)

As the board grapples with a host of challenges, it will find the BBC a useful benchmark. USIB is not exactly in competition with the BBC, because both provide news to countries where reliable news is not available domestically. The international services of the BBC do, however, provide a point of comparison in terms of audience size and budget.

In March 2010, BBC Global News claimed a record weekly audience of 241 million. To compare this meaningfully with USIB's performance, first we must subtract the 61 million people who tune into BBC World News, an English-language global news channel, and the international facing [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com) Web site. These are commercial operations that aspire to be self-funding, and USIB is not allowed to engage in commercial international broadcasting. (CNN International is the U.S. competitor to BBC World News. These two, along with Al-Jazeera English, form the "big three" of global English news channels.)

We can also subtract the BBC World Service audience of six million in the United States, which will never be a target country for USIB. This leaves the BBC World Service, the U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office-funded radio station broadcasting in 32 languages, plus television in Arabic and Persian, with a weekly audience of 174 million.

The global audience of USIB, 171 million listeners

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weekly, is about the same as that of BBC World Service. However, USIB achieves that audience on a budget of \$727 million, while the BBC World Service attracts the slightly larger audience with a budget of just \$420 million.

A common explanation for this discrepancy is that the World Service derives resources from its domestic parent, the BBC. In fact, the BBC is subject to a fair trading regime that does not allow for any cross-subsidy between its various funding streams. The World Service must therefore purchase or barter services and content it gets from the domestic BBC, so that the U.K. television license fee is not used to subsidize an international service.

#### **U.S. Broadcaster vs. U.S. Broadcaster**

The much more likely reason the BBC World Service achieves a larger audience for the money it spends is that it is a single organization, while U.S. international broadcasting is the collection of entities mentioned above. Of the 60 language services of USIB, 22 of the languages are transmitted by more than one station.

In the post-Cold War period, RFE/RL added Albanian, South Slavic (Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian), Arabic, Persian, Dari and Pashto, duplicating pre-existing VOA services in those languages. In January, implementing an earmark requested by Senator Sam Brownback, R-Kan., in the Fiscal Year 2010 budget, RFE/RL launched Radio Mashaal, broadcasting in Pashto in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. Since 2006, VOA had been doing the same with its Deewa Radio.

Radio Free Asia, created in 1996, transmits in Cantonese, Burmese, Khmer, Korean, Lao, Mandarin, Tibetan and Vietnamese — all languages that were already broadcast by VOA. Thus, in one of the most difficult regions to get news out of, and to get content back into, two U.S. stations compete for vital and scarce resources. For the most part, at least, they do not broadcast in the same language at the same time.

The Radio Free stations have expanded based on a theory that dismisses VOA as limited to the advocacy of U.S. policies, descriptions of life in the United States and English-language lessons. The "surrogate" stations, on the other hand, provide the news about the target country that would be available if the media in those coun-

tries were free. If this premise were true, the audience would have to tune to two stations to get a complete news service. This would be an unacceptable inconvenience to impose upon any audience, especially in an increasingly competitive global media environment.

In fact, the premise is not true. VOA has always put much effort into reporting about its target countries. It must do so to attract an audience. Most audiences for international broadcasting, while also interested in world news, are mainly looking for news about their own countries. As a result, there is considerable duplication in the news coverage of VOA and the surrogate stations.

Within the present structure of U.S. international broadcasting, there is also duplication in management and administrative structures. Moreover, resources for international broadcasting, scarce at the best of times, are split. These include talent, transmitters, transmitting sites and news leads. Even the audience is becoming scarcer due to fragmentation among many new media and information sources.

In many parts of the world, even in many developing countries, television is, or is becoming, more popular than radio. USIB must increase its presence in television, but this will be expensive. With two U.S. stations broadcasting to many target countries, it will be twice as expensive.

The Broadcasting Board of Governors should move to consolidate USIB into one multimedia organization. The new entity can adjust the mix of news (target country, world, U.S.) and media (shortwave, Internet, mobile, satellite) to suit each target country at any time during the country's political development. This will save money, contributing to deficit reduction, while actually improving competitiveness. A merger would also free up funds for television and for promotion, two necessary but expensive components of international broadcasting in the 21st century.

### **Competitive Credibility**

Most people do not seek news from foreign sources unless their domestic media are government-controlled or otherwise deficient. Credibility is therefore the most important commodity of international broadcasting. The

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BBC World Service appears to have a small but persistent lead in this area, which may be another factor underlying the BBC's audience-for-money advantage.

One frequent illustration of this problem is the fact that the elements of U.S. international broadcasting are often described in the

press as "government-funded" (or worse). The BBC World Service, even though it is funded by the British Foreign Office, is rarely described that way.

In the May 9 issue of *Die Welt*, Dr. Wahied Wahdat-Hagh cited a study by Iran's parliament (the Majlis): "(O)ne gleans that BBC Persian is thought to be more dangerous than the VOA. The reason is that the BBC has a more gentle approach and gives the impression of being more objective. Rather than trying to promote a single position, the BBC does so indirectly by using analysis to make certain points."

It takes decades to build a journalistic reputation, and the decades have been kinder to the BBC than to USIB. The BBC World Service has been part of another broadcasting organization, the BBC domestic service, which has always guarded its independence. VOA spent most of its existence as part of the U.S. Information Agency, a public diplomacy agency officially representing and advocating U.S. policies. USIA directors (or, sometimes, presidents) appointed VOA directors who ran the gamut from dedicated journalists to policy flacks. This pendulum took its toll on VOA.

RFE/RL, for its part, spent much of the 1950s as a hard-hitting anti-communist broadcaster, covertly funded by the Central Intelligence Agency until 1978. After controversy surrounding its role in the 1956 Hungarian uprising, RFE/RL began to settle down to its present news mission. Radio Free Asia was compelled by Congress to imitate RFE/RL's name (it initially wanted to call itself the Asia Pacific Network). Because of this name, rather than its content, RFA was not allowed to use relay facilities, including vital medium-wave transmitters, in the Philippines and Thailand.

Sentiment to give VOA more autonomy than it enjoyed under USIA culminated in the International Broadcasting Act of 1994. This legislation created the bipartisan Broadcasting Board of Governors, which names the presidents and directors of VOA, RFE/RL, RFA and

Radio/TV Martí, among many other functions. The Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 eliminated the last administrative ties between USIA and VOA by eliminating USIA and folding its public diplomacy functions into the State Department. The BBG was now a separate agency.

Vestiges of political influence over USIB remain. The International Broadcasting Act of 1994 places the BBG above the International Broadcasting Bureau. The IBB, in turn, is above its components: VOA and Radio/TV Martí. The appointment process, however, stipulates two instances of leapfrogging: the president (with Senate consent) appoints the IBB director, and the BBG appoints the VOA director. The IBB director can keep sufficiently busy with the IBB's engineering and administrative tasks — or, more problematically, this presidentially appointed official might intercede in content matters at VOA.

VOA itself is still a government agency, rather than a corporation like RFE/RL and RFA. One consequence of this is that, in July, VOA and IBB employees were informed that they should not use agency computers to “download, browse or e-mail” any of the documents about Afghanistan and Pakistan recently made available by WikiLeaks, because they contained classified materials. VOA reporters covering this story worked around the directive by accessing the documents at home. Other international broadcasters covered the story from their newsrooms.

VOA is still required to broadcast daily editorials “reflecting the views of the United States government.” In contrast, the BBC is not allowed to broadcast editorials.

### **The Importance of Maintaining Balance**

Some members of Congress and think-tanks want to abolish the Broadcasting Board of Governors and replace it with a “strategic communication” body to coordinate the output of State, Defense and USIB. News that is “coordinated” is not really news, however. The audiences for international broadcasting, seeking the antidote for the type of news they get domestically, would almost immediately recognize coordinated news for what it is, and tune out.

Other members of Congress scoff at the notion of bal-

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ance in USIB news coverage. They believe that USIB should itself be the balance, providing a pro-U.S., anti-terrorist counterpart to the anti-U.S., pro-terrorist media of adversarial regimes.

Modern international broadcasting operates on the assumption that audiences deserve all of the

news, including reporting that reflects negatively on the governments of the target countries — which is usually omitted by the domestic media of those countries. For that negative news to be believed, the international broadcaster should also report the good (while avoiding the syrupy phraseology the target-country media would use) and neutral news about the audience's own nation. Reporting good, neutral and bad news about the United States and the rest of the world would further bolster its credibility, smoothing out the content so that the U.S. broadcaster is not perceived as the bad-news-about-the-target-country station. But the present structure of USIB does not, at least in theory, allow for such a full-service broadcasting effort.

In June, Senator Richard Lugar, R-Ind., and his staff issued a detailed paper about USIB, “Is Anybody Listening?” Unlike some of his colleagues, Sen. Lugar acknowledges the need for balance: “[I]n order for the BBG to be credible to its audience and draw in not just those who already agree with U.S. policy, its networks must be permitted to present both sides of an argument.”

The Lugar paper also addresses the difficulties due to delays in presidential nominations and Senate confirmations, in keeping BBG membership up to its full complement: “In the medium term, Congress must decide whether it is time to consider another management structure if board staffing difficulties persist.” That sentence has chilling implications.

International broadcasting succeeds largely because of its credibility — which is not possible without independence. And independence is not possible without some sort of bipartisan or nonpartisan board to separate the government from the news function. This is how the highly regarded public broadcasting corporations in most Western democracies maintain their autonomy.

### **Alternatives to the BBG**

There may be other structures that would not require

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constant presidential and Senate attention. For example, the United States could franchise the international broadcasting effort for a fixed term, say five to 10 years, to a consortium of the major U.S. broadcast news organizations: ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX News and CNN. Each of these companies would appoint an executive to a five-person board, which would, in turn, appoint the chief executive officer of the consolidated international broadcasting corporation and approve the CEO's senior management selections. This self-regenerating board would also approve major decisions, such as adjustments in the use of media technologies. If the administration or Congress has objections or questions about the content of USIB, they would come to the board rather than directly to the USIB entity.

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Conservatives may complain that four of the five companies in this consortium are liberal, while liberals may oppose including FOX at all. For better or worse, these five companies represent American domestic commercial broadcast news. It is reasonable for this group, collectively, to provide general supervision to USIB.

For their part, the broadcast news companies may cringe at the thought of cooperating with the government. But their concerns should be assuaged by the fact that during the term of the contract, there will be no kibitzing by the government. It will also be an opportunity for them to give back to the country in which they have prospered.

The benefit of the consortium would extend beyond its role as a firewall. Its members would provide con-

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tent, mainly U.S. coverage, to USIB, which, in turn, would provide international coverage and regional expertise to the consortium companies. This would not be government funding of private U.S. news, but a fair trade. Under this scenario, U.S. broadcasters would enjoy the synergy now available to the BBC World Service and BBC domestic as they exchange coverage and resources.

### **International Broadcasting vs. Public Diplomacy**

USIB often is considered part of U.S. public diplomacy. To succeed, however, the two must be separate, generally complementary but occasionally adversarial, endeavors. A reporter for a U.S. government station, knowing what his/her audience is thinking, will occasionally have to ask a U.S. government spokesperson pointed questions and follow up. The spokesperson must, for his/her part, stay on message.

These complementary roles were explained in the preface to the 2002 BBG annual report:

“It is very important that government spokesmen take America’s message to the world — passionately and relentlessly. We should not be ashamed of public advocacy on behalf of freedom and democracy and the United States of America. ... International broadcasting, on the other hand, is called upon to reflect the highest standards of independent journalism as the best means of convincing international audiences that truth is on the side of democratic values.”

Similarly, the writer P.J. O’Rourke, after a recent visit to RFE/RL in Prague, wrote in the *World Affairs* blog: “[The term] ‘promotes democracy’ makes democracy sound like a commodity, a product, a brand of snack food that RFE/RL is supposed to be selling. And the State Department, the president and Congress can measure how much of this product has been sold. ... In fact, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s real mission is neither frighteningly complicated nor terribly simple. RFE/RL delivers information. Information is the essence of what might be called the ‘Attitude of Liberty’ — the feeling of being free. People must, of course, feel free of physical and economic oppression. But first they

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must feel free of ignorance. ... Information is the source of citizenship. Without information no one can even attempt to build a civil society.”

Another difference between international broadcasting and public diplomacy is that the former has a finite shelf life. Some target countries have achieved press freedom and media diversity to the point that

few people in these countries seek news from foreign sources. This is why VOA and RFE have eliminated their broadcasts in Polish and Czech, among other languages. On the other hand, foreign journalists, researchers, government officials and other interested persons will always have a need for official statements of U.S. policy — i.e., the output of U.S. public diplomacy. An already established outlet for such content is the State Department’s public diplomacy Web site, [www.America.gov](http://www.America.gov).

For reasons discussed above, VOA and the Radio Free stations currently compete in 22 languages. It would make more sense for USIB to consolidate those operations to create a more complete news service, with [www.America.gov](http://www.America.gov) (now available in seven languages) complementing USIB’s offerings in as many languages as possible.

### **The Communication Process of International Broadcasting**

The concept of an international broadcasting service funded by the United States government, over which the government has no direct control, is difficult for some to accept. Nevertheless, maintaining and enhancing the present autonomy of USIB is essential for the following reasons:

- It will bring a larger audience, because it is a market-based approach, providing the type of news listeners are seeking.
- Well-informed audiences can resist the misinformation and disinformation of dictators, terrorists and other international miscreants, and make up their own minds on current affairs.
- In the long term, the United States can expect that well-informed audiences, even if they don’t come to agree with our policies, will at least understand why they

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were implemented.

- The audience observes independent journalism, a necessary ingredient in any democracy, in action.
- Providing this service to the world speaks well of the United States.

The consolidation of U.S. international broadcasting would be an opportunity for a rebranding exercise to signal unambiguously that the new entity is an independent and reliable provider of news. The organization should be a government-funded corporation rather than a government agency.

### Telling the Truth

With technologies changing quickly and new players coming on the scene, we are at a critical juncture in the world media environment. A winnowing process is deciding which broadcasting organizations will be competitive, and which will merely be bureaucracies. If the new mem-

bers of the Broadcasting Board of Governors can convince the administration and Congress that changes must take place, USIB can compete with the improving domestic and regional services throughout the world, even among a greater choice of media technologies.

The site of the VOA Bethany shortwave transmitting station near Cincinnati is an artifact of an older, simpler time in U.S. international broadcasting. The space is now home to the popular Voice of America county park, the Voice of America Learning Center of Miami University, and the shops and restaurants of the Voice of America Center. The art deco building that housed the shortwave transmitters is being developed into the National Voice of America Museum of Broadcasting.

A T-shirt sold to raise funds for the museum depicts the building with VOA's slogan under it: "Tell the truth, and let the world decide." That, succinctly, describes how successful international broadcasting works. ■

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