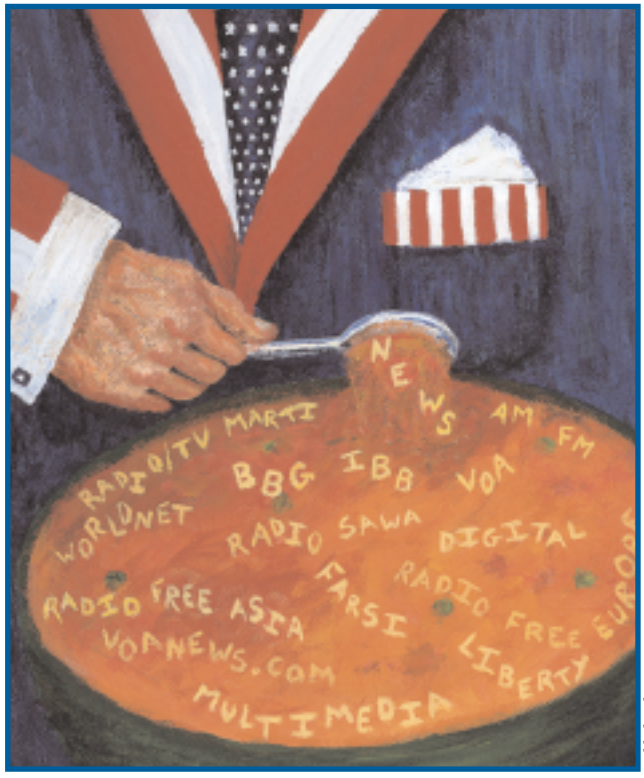
THE ABCs OF U.S. OVERSEAS BROADCASTING



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THE BBG AND THE BBC ARE DIFFERENT ANIMALS, BUT FACE MUCH THE SAME CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

BY STEVEN ALAN HONLEY

Over the past 16 months, the *Foreign Service Journal* has periodically spotlighted each of the foreign affairs agencies (besides State) with Foreign Service contingents: the U.S. Agency for International Development (September 2002), the U.S. & Foreign Commercial Service (January 2003), and the Foreign Agricultural Service (May 2003). This month, we wrap up the series by focusing on the smallest (and newest — just a decade old) of the bunch, the International Broadcasting Bureau.

Now, a quick show of hands: how many of you knew there was another foreign affairs agency with Foreign Service posi-

tions — much less what the IBB does, or how it relates to the rest of the acronym-laden alphabet soup of international broadcasting? I thought so.

Well, here's the story.

America was the last major power to enter the world of international broadcasting, setting up the Voice of America in 1942 — well after Radio Moscow, the official service of the Soviet Union (1929), Vatican Radio (1931), the British Broadcasting Corporation (1932), and Nazi Germany's Rundfunk Ausland (1933). Yet despite that relatively late start, today VOA broadcasts around the world (except for Western Europe and the United States) in 55 languages to an estimated audience of 91 million people each week. Its programming travels via short-wave and medium-wave radio, on television via satellite (14 hours a week), and on the Internet.

Now we jump ahead half a century to the International Broadcasting Act of 1994. That legislation brought VOA and all the other radio, television and Internet resources of U.S. nonmilitary international broadcasting under the aegis of the nine-member Broadcasting Board of Governors. It also established the International Broadcasting Bureau as the administrative arm of the BBG (not to be confused with the BBC!). The IBB not only manages the day-to-day operations of the three governmental broadcasters (the Voice of America, Radio Marti and TV Marti), but also provides technical support to all the other official U.S. broadcasting entities the BBG manages: Radio Sawa, Radio Farda, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and WORLDNET Television (which is now being folded into VOA).

We hope our coverage will provide a solid framework for understanding the bureaucratic structure of U.S. international broadcasting, some of the issues it faces, and how most of its components operate. But that is a far cry from being able to assess its effectiveness. Are the fruits of America's governmental broadcasting effort worth the approximately half-billion dollars the BBG spends annually?

How Effective Is the Effort?

Consider the following statistic, cited on the BBG's home page (www.bbg.gov) and quoted in several of the articles on the following pages: "Every week, more than 100 million listeners, viewers and Internet users around the world turn on, tune in and log on to U.S. international broadcasting programs."

That's a nice, round figure. But like most statistics, it raises as many questions as it answers. First of all, given that a large portion of our "target audience" resides in countries where tuning in to U.S. broadcasters can be dangerous, it is impossible to know for sure how accurate that estimate is. But assuming that many more people would listen if their governments did not jam our signals — for instance, Fidel Castro's regime does such an effective job of jamming Radio and TV Marti that as few as 1-2 percent of Cubans can receive those broadcasts — let's triple the figure to 300 million worldwide "customers" per week.

Impressive as that hypothetical number is, it represents barely 5 percent of the six billion or so people in the world. On the other hand, if they are "opinion leaders" (in Foreign Service parlance) who disproportionately influence their compatriots to understand and (ideally) appreciate America and Americans, then that would be a real success story — particularly if they are located in volatile regions such as the Middle East that are difficult to reach otherwise.

Complicating the issue further, one must also bear in mind the increasingly stiff competition VOA and its sister services face on the international airwaves from dozens of other governmental broadcasters, such as the BBC World Service, Radio France International, China Radio International, and the Voice of Russia (Radio Moscow's successor). Even more formidable is the challenge from the commercial media that have mushroomed around the world in the past decade or so — from the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya and Qatar-based Al-Jazeera satellite TV channels to the private FM stations in Africa.

Suddenly, Everything Changed …

During the four decades of the Cold War, the scope and mission of international broadcasting was simple and straightforward. The Soviet bloc and the Free World battled to sway each other's domestic populations and the populations of developing countries, and nobody much questioned the budgetary outlays involved. Getting an audience was not very complicated either: there weren't many broadcasts to be picked up on the shortwave dial, so just putting a strong signal out there meant you'd be likely to get listeners. Jamming, of course, was a problem, but

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with sufficient funding it could be worked around.

The fall of communism and the end of the Cold War transformed the world's political geometry. Many international broadcasters cut back on their hours and foreign languages, and were generally forced to scramble for government funding. The Voice of Russia, for instance, discontinued six languages and laid off 30 percent of its staff in 1995. In the U.S., foreign policy premises and goals were thrown into turmoil, and many questioned the continued need for public diplomacy of any sort. Suddenly, international broadcasting was fighting for its life, at the mercy of lawmakers for whom budget restraint had become an overriding preoccupation.

Perhaps more significant, this crisis coincided with an explosion of communications technology that fueled a commercial media boom around the world and fierce competition for audiences everywhere. Satellite technology, in particular, gave broadcasting a global reach. The growth of the Internet and developments in digital technologies linking television and computers point to the continuing nature of this revolution. Few governmental broadcasters have the budgets to proceed with all of the program delivery options simultaneously, so choices have to be made and priorities set.

And, because listeners worldwide now have more choice in private and governmental media offerings to tune into than ever before, programming content has become a critical issue. How do you win and hold a growing audience share, and at the same time get a particular editorial message across?

Content In Contention

Two of the BBG's new market-based projects — Radio Sawa, aimed at Arab listeners, and Radio Farda, aimed at Iranians — exemplify a trend toward downplaying news and information in favor of popular music and other "softer" programming. Early indications are that this approach is successfully inducing younger listeners to tune in. A late-November survey conducted by D3 Systems Inc., of Vienna, Va., in Baghdad, Mosul and Basra, Iraq's three largest cities, found that Radio Sawa's average listenership was 48.9 percent of the population, compared to 39.2 percent for Radio Monte Carlo and 30.4 percent for the BBC. But is Britney Spears truly the best cultural diplomat we have in our arsenal? And it may not take long for local commercial media to copy the format, leaving out the "content" altogether, as former VOA Assistant Director Myrna Whitworth notes in her Speaking Out column (p. 13).

Further, the introduction of a commercial approach has given a new twist to the old tension between the public broadcaster's role as an instrument of U.S. policy and as an exemplar of free and independent journalism. This fundamental tension is still alive and well. Al Kamen's column ("In the Loop") in the Nov. 19 *Washington Post* reprints an internal VOA e-mail, for instance, expressing high-level displeasure with a report on President Bush's visit to England that focused on the millions being spent for security during the trip, the numbers of police to be deployed and protest activities, rather than the substance of the visit. Here are the final two paragraphs from that missive:

"Do you think the listener in North Korea or India or Nigeria understands or cares that $9 million will be spent on security, or that 5,000 police will be deployed?

"If you were the Khmer or Dari or Swahili language service chief, would you even bother translating these stories? I know that slightly more substantive stories about the visit were sent out yesterday, but that was yesterday. The users of today's stories have been given no clue why this visit is occurring or what these national leaders are planning to talk about. Did the White House not have a pre-trip briefing on the trip? Where is that information?"

Such complaints are not new. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors put intense pressure on VOA not to air a news report that included excerpts from an interview with Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar. Nonetheless, News Director Andre de Nesnera authorized the release of the report as one part of VOA's overall coverage. For his courageous efforts to defend VOA's charter and preserve the integrity of its news broadcasts, AFSA honored de Nesnera in June 2002 with the Tex Harris Award for constructive dissent by a Foreign Service specialist.

The Challenge of Public Broadcasting

The BBG's five-year strategic plan issued in December 2002 attempts to address the new challenges. The plan, "Marrying the Mission to the Market," was prompted by declining audience share in key markets such as Russia, and historically static performance in critical strategic regions such as the Middle East. In the early 1990s, for instance, the BBG had a 21-percent market share in Russia; in recent years that has declined to about 4 percent of the adult audience. For decades, the VOA's Arabic ser-

vice listenership in the Middle East has been static at less than 2 percent of potential listeners. Hence the desire to prioritize the use of limited resources to reach larger audiences in key markets in support of U.S. national interests. Support for the war on terrorism is one of the BBG's principal missions.

According to a U.S. General Accounting Office report issued in July 2003 for the House Committee on International Relations, the BBG has done a commendable job of advancing solutions to the challenges of technological innovation and better coordination of its seven separate broadcast entities. But the board needs to set measurable objectives, and has yet to address the problem of overlapping language services, the GAO report notes pointedly ("U.S. International Broadcasting: New Strategic Approach Focuses on Reaching Large Audiences but Lacks Measurable Program Objectives," GAO-03-772).

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As of April 2003, the GAO states, the BBG had a 55-percent overlap between VOA and the surrogates broadcasting in the same language: 23 of RFE/RL's 31 language services overlapped with VOA's language services, as did eight of RFA's nine services and Radio/TV Marti's Spanish services. Though the BBG refuses officially to accept the premise that there are "duplicate" services, it is currently conducting an in-depth assessment of the utility and practicality of integrating current overlap language services. The findings will be reported as part of its Fiscal Year 2005 budget submission.

"Overlap" is only one aspect of the skirmishing over the language services. The BBG conducts an annual review intended to address the need to delete or add language coverage to streamline operations. More than $9 million has been reallocated through the elimination or reduction of language services since the first review in 2000: VOA Portuguese to Brazil was eliminated, and VOA Arabic and RFE/RL's Persian service were eliminated (replaced by Radio Sawa and Radio Farda respectively), and the scope of operations of another 25 services has been reduced so far.

But Congress has begun to challenge the efficiency moves. The BBG's 2004 budget request, reduced at OMB's direction by $8.8 million to reflect the proposed elimination of nine language services assessed as low priority/low impact in the BBG's 2001/2002 language service review, ran into roadblocks when senators objected to ending service in some countries where a free and fair press is not yet assured. As the GAO report notes, the total number of language services has actually increased, from 91 to 97, between the BBG's 2000 review and today.

Despite the many difficulties, as the BBG's "Vision 2010" strategic plan asserts — and several recent commissions deploring the state of public diplomacy have noted — the need for U.S. international broadcasting has never been greater. The challenge for the Foreign Service personnel and other professionals working at the IBB, VOA and regionally directed services will be to organize and direct the official broadcasting behemoth to accomplish this mission, despite circumscribed budgets, increased competition from other governmental and commercial broadcasters, and omnipresent political sensitivities about program content. ■