

NEW DIRECTIONS IN U.S. INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING

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THE BROADCASTING BOARD OF GOVERNORS IS BUILDING ON THE PROUD LEGACY OF U.S. INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING, NOT RESTING ON ITS LAURELS.

By BRIAN CONNIFF

he world is in the midst of a communications revolution, with new technologies and delivery systems constantly changing the way people receive facts and information. Yet billions of people continue to be denied access to basic, accurate news about their countries and the world.

To fill that gap, the Broadcasting Board of Governors supervises a diverse array of U.S. government-funded, non-military international broadcasters. These include the Voice of America; Radio/TV Marti; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; and Radio Free Asia.

An independent federal agency since Oct. 1, 1999, the BBG has about 3,200 employees; its budget was \$544 million in FY 2003. (See table on p. 24 for a detailed breakdown.)

Previously, the BBG was part of the U.S. Information Agency, which was abolished when the State Department assumed public diplomacy functions in 1999. The BBG is headed by a nine-member Board of Governors, eight of whom are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. The Secretary of State is the ninth member, serving ex-officio; Sec. Powell has designated his under secretary for public diplomacy as his representative on the board.

By law, no more than four of the appointed governors

may belong to the same political party, a limitation intended to reinforce the firewall that insulates broadcasters from political pressures. The Senate confirms a chairman, appointed by the president; Kenneth Tomlinson currently holds that position. All eight governors, many of whom have extensive private-sector media experience, serve three-year terms, on a part-time basis, including regular monthly meetings.

VOA, based in Washington, D.C., with bureaus around the world, is the largest and oldest of these broadcasters. Founded in 1942, it is charged with presenting news about the world and the United States, and representing all segments of American society in its reports to the rest of the world. (Under the 1948 Smith-Mundt Law,

VOA is prohibited from broadcasting to the United States.)

Radio Marti and TV Marti, now based in Miami, have been broadcasting Spanish-language programming to Cuba since the mid-1980s. Like VOA, they are under the aegis of the BBG.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia are known as "surrogate" services, focusing on providing news to countries where the free flow of information is blocked and residents have little or no access to uncensored news. RFE/RL, headquartered in Prague, Czech



Republic with an office in Washington, was founded in 1950 as a Cold War tool to defeat communism. The Washington-based RFA was started in 1996. Both services are private, nonprofit corporations, wholly funded by Congress, but they are also supervised by the BBG.

In addition, the BBG oversees the International Broadcasting Bureau, which manages the day-to-day operations of VOA and the Marti services — a function previously performed by the now-defunct U.S. Information Agency before its consolidation with the State Department. The IBB handles transmission, marketing and program placement for all broadcasting services, including RFE/RL and RFA.

The IBB's global transmission network includes shortwave stations in Botswana; Delano, Calif.; Germany; Greece; Greenville, N.C.; Kuwait; Morocco; Philippines; Sao Tome and Principe; Sri Lanka; Thailand; and the Northern Mariana Islands. High-powered AM transmitters, with a long reach, are used to reach places the BBG can't penetrate with FM signals, such as Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia. (IBB has over 1,400 FM affiliates around the world.) IBB's engineers also distribute radio and TV programs via satellite.

Reporting the News

The BBG's mission is deceptively simple: "promote and sustain democracy by broadcasting accurate and objective news and information about the United States and the world to audiences overseas." And that commitment has remained constant through more than 60 years of international broadcasting

BBG's broadcasters are journalists first. Every day, they reaffirm William Harlan Hale's maiden VOA broadcast on Feb. 25, 1942. "The news may be good for us. The news may be bad. But we shall tell you the truth," Hale said.

As Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, the BBG's current chairman and a former editor-in-chief of *Reader's Digest*, points out, U.S. international broadcasting is part of the public diplomacy apparatus, but operates according to a separate set of rules.

"International broadcasting ... is called upon to reflect the highest standards of independent journalism as the best means of convincing international audiences that trust is on the side of democratic values," he told the Senate

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Foreign Relations Committee in early 2003.

Yet when overseas listeners, particularly in the Middle East, are already skeptical or cynical about U.S. policies, it can be a daunting challenge to build an audience. Fortunately, the BBG has identified several tools with which to address this problem.

Research is a building block in creating a flexible, multi-media broadcasting service that reaches the target audience. Each year, BBG hires an independent research firm to conduct research on the effectiveness of broadcasting in all languages as part of a program review process. In addition, the BBG itself annually reviews all language services to determine priority audiences, in accordance with U.S. foreign policy objectives. The process, conducted in consultation with State Department officials, helps the BBG allocate its resources more efficiently. In some cases, language services have been consolidated — RFE/RL's Persian service was combined with parts of VOA to create Radio Farda for Iran. In other cases, the language services complement each other as in Afghanistan.

Keeping up with **technological advances** is also crucial. Shortwave radio was once the only way to listen to U.S. international broadcasting. Today, more than 100 million listeners can receive news, information and entertainment by shortwave, FM, medium-wave, television, Internet and digital audio satellite in English and 64 other languages.

The BBG is also moving to accelerate multimedia development, adopt updated techniques, control distribution and develop multiple products for key areas.

Finally, the BBG is moving to **tailor content to the audience**.

"The one-size-fits-all approach no longer works as a model for U.S. international broadcasting," says Governor Norman J. Pattiz, a radio pioneer who is also chairman of Westwood One, America's largest radio network. "We have to use modern communications techniques to target our audiences."

Adds Tomlinson: "We need to keep in mind that no media market is monolithic. We have to make choices about which parts of the market we most want to reach."

For example, Congress has recognized "the particular importance of broadcasting in countries and regions undergoing democratic transition." So the BBG's five-year strategic plan, 2002-2007, spells out the following priority areas as the Middle East; Central, South and West Asia; China and the Far East; Southeast Asia and the Pacific

area; Eurasia, particularly Russia, Ukraine and Belarus; the Caucasus; the Balkans; Sub-Saharan Africa; Cuba; and the Andean region.

In many of the priority areas, the BBG continues to face challenges in reaching audiences because governments jam, block and censor broadcasts and the Internet. China is a major offender, jamming VOA and RFA broadcasts in Mandarin and Tibetan as well as RFA broadcasts in Cantonese and Uygur. BBG files monthly complaints with the International Telecommunications Union over the jamming — and spends millions transmitting on extra frequencies to get through.

China also blocks the Internet sites of RFA and VOA, requiring both services to experiment with proxy servers and mirror sites. But BBG Governor Edward Kaufman, a former chief of staff to Sen. Joseph Biden, D-Del., believes the Chinese are pursuing a losing strategy in censoring international broadcasting. “While pursuing more interaction in the global marketplace, the Chinese government is trying harder than ever to isolate its people, cut off the free flow of information and deny them access to accurate and credible news.”

Other countries that routinely jam and/or block U.S. broadcasts include Cuba, Iran, Vietnam and North Korea.

Recent and Upcoming Initiatives

The BBG’s recent and upcoming initiatives include: a soon-to-be launched, Arabic-language Middle East Television Network; the popular Arabic-language Radio Sawa and Persian-language Radio Farda; new television programs for Iran and Indonesia; a country-wide, 24/7 radio network for Afghanistan; special e-mail packages for China, and new delivery options for Cuba, designed to elude jamming. The BBG recently announced a test to put TV and Radio Marti on Hispasat’s satellite, allowing Cubans and others with a dish and digital receiver to view the programs.

One of the BBG’s most ambitious projects has been Radio Sawa, a 24/7 Arabic-language station that is broadcast throughout the Middle East on a combination of AM, FM, shortwave, Internet and digital audio satellite. Sawa, aimed at listeners under 28 who comprise about 60 percent of the Middle East’s population, primarily broadcasts Arabic and Western popular music, but also mixes in news and current information.

Not surprisingly, it took less than a year for Radio Sawa to become the leading international broadcaster in the

region, according to an ACNielsen study. Nielsen’s research, conducted in July and August 2003, showed that Radio Sawa has an average listenership of 31.6 percent among the general population 15 years and older in five Middle Eastern countries. Listener rates were: Egypt 10.6 percent; Jordan, 30.4 percent; Kuwait, 39.5 percent; Qatar, 40.8 percent and UAE, 36.6 percent. (Typically, international broadcasters get between 4-5 percent listening rates.)

Because the BBG manages Sawa’s transmission, including FM and AM stations, the U.S. government is able to deliver crucial information at key times. During the Iraq War, Sawa broadcast as much as five hours of news a day. And when U.S. forces bombed Baghdad in April 2003, residents heard live coverage from Sawa’s correspondents on the ground.

Joining Sawa in the near future will be the Middle East Television Network — an Arabic-language, full-service network that will compete with Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabyia and other direct-to-home satellite channels in the region. This product will be the first Arabic-language Western network in the Middle East, a region where 90 percent of the people own television sets, and satellite viewing is growing rapidly.

“Impressions of the U.S. in the region come from government-controlled stations,” says Pattiz, chairman of the BBG’s Middle East Committee. “We’re changing that with Radio Sawa — now we want to do the same with METN.” He adds that the United States needs to get involved in the “media war,” where “the weapons include disinformation, incitement to violence, hate radio, government censorship and journalistic self-censorship.”

Based outside Washington in suburban Virginia, with bureaus across the Middle East, the new network will feature news, information and public affairs programs, along with family and children’s entertainment. More than 100 Arabic-speaking broadcasters will comprise the core staff. Startup is expected in early 2004.

In December 2002, VOA and RFE/RL launched Radio Farda — a 24/7 program stream targeting young Iranians with popular Persian and Western music, as well as news and special features. With studios in Prague and Washington, this program offers a fresh alternative to listeners in Iran, a country where 70 percent of the population is under 30 years. Farda is available on AM, shortwave, Internet and digital audio satellite.

Listeners’ response to Farda has been strongly positive, judging from e-mail traffic, Internet use and reports from inside Iran. “You cannot imagine what a big impact you

F O C U S

had during recent events with your timely news,” an Iranian e-mailed the station during the pro-democracy protests in the summer of 2003.

In addition to Farda, the VOA radio network continues to offer objective news and information through its AM, Internet and shortwave broadcasts, which Iranians have enjoyed for over 30 years. Radio Farda and VOA's Persian-language Web sites attract nearly a million visitors every month.

Television is popular in Iran — 90 percent of Iranians say they get their news that way — so VOA has developed a range of TV products beamed to Iran by satellite.

“News and Views,” a daily 30-minute show, offers comprehensive news and expert commentary about events inside and outside Iran. “Roundtable with You” is a weekly 90-minute, call-in program that allows viewers and listeners to speak directly with prominent figures regarding politics, social issues, and entertainment. And “Next Chapter” provides the younger Iranian generation a weekly sample of fresh cultural fare — including the latest in sports, technology, fashion, Hollywood films, and car

reviews. It also profiles the daily lives of young Iranian-Americans.

Afghanistan is another important broadcasting area. VOA had strong listenership for its Dari- and Pashto-language broadcasts during the Taliban era, when as many as 80 percent of the country's men tuned in. (Women were not permitted to own radios.) So in January 2002, just a few months after the Taliban fell, RFE/RL launched Radio Free Afghanistan. Together, the services form a single, 24/7 stream of news and information.

Shortwave was the only medium in the past, but the BBG has installed high-powered, 400-kilowatt AM transmitters in Kabul to give the programs nationwide reach. The BBG also gave an AM transmitter to the Afghan government. Meantime, engineers are installing FM transmitters in cities around the country.

Training is a key component of the Afghan initiative. With money from the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, BBG has trained more than two dozen journalists, coaching them on how to cover events involving politics, health and education in a

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FY 2003 Budget and Staffing for U.S. International Broadcasting

IBB (*Engineering and technical services, management, direction, program support*)

Budget: \$219.583 million
Positions: 1,048 (including FSNs)

Voice of America

Budget: \$155.643 million
Positions: 1,364
Bureaus: 22 (5 domestic and 17 international)

RFE/RL

Budget: \$78.486 million
Positions: 602

RFA

Budget: \$27.084 million
Positions: 262

Radio/TV Marti

Budget: \$25.362 million
Positions: 163

fair, balanced and unbiased fashion. This is helping build a cadre of independent journalists with the skills needed to impart information to their fellow citizens.

Cuba, where Fidel Castro stifles dissent and imprisons independent journalists, remains a priority for the BBG. As engineers try new radio frequencies to overcome jam-

ming, Radio Marti has redesigned its programs to attract listeners. At TV Marti, broadcasters have added new programs, and, as part of a transmission test, shows are being put on a popular, high-powered regional satellite.

Other potential initiatives are in the works — increasing Urdu broadcasting to Pakistan with a lively, upbeat, youth-oriented service designed to run 24/7; refocusing on Africa, which holds about 40 percent of VOA's audience; and ensuring comprehensive coverage of countries in Central Asia.

Nearly 40 years ago, John Chancellor, the respected broadcaster and onetime VOA director, wrote in the *Foreign Service Journal* that there was a “spirit ... that exists inside the Voice. ... They understand that microseconds after they speak, what they say is communicating to people in bedrooms, living rooms, tents, cars, caravans as they enter the world of the listeners.”

Chancellor's description of the “magic of the Voice” persists. But it has grown — and the same magic now pervades the expanding, vitally important world of international broadcasting. ■

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