

Mission impossible

Is government broadcasting irrelevant?

WHAT US GOVERNMENT AGENCY WAS RECENTLY LABELED “DYSFUNCTIONAL” BY the State Department’s Inspector General, and year after year is rated in employee surveys as the worst—or near worst—place to work in government? If you guessed the Broadcasting Board of Governors (bbg), which oversees the Voice of America (voa), Radio Marti, Radio Free Europe, and the rest of the federal government’s media outlets, you are correct. In 2009, *Washington Post* columnist Joe Davidson wrote that the bbg has come to mean “bottom of the barrel in government.”

The core problem afflicting the bbg and its various entities is institutional schizophrenia. It is simultaneously a news organization trying to be a government agency, and a government agency trying to be a news outlet. Since 1942, the US government has been broadcasting—and now texting, tweeting, and Facebooking—to the world, voa was the first, and remains the best known of the government broadcasters. In voa’s first broadcast (in German), the announcer said, “The news may be good or bad. We shall tell you the truth.”

voa’s journalists have had a clear mandate under the charter, signed into law by President Gerald Ford in 1976, to present unbiased news to the world, especially to countries denied uncensored news. But the charter also says voa will “present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies.” The schizophrenia, then, was built into the equation from the start.

Today, though, the problem of conflicting missions is exacerbated by the fact that the Board of Governors—and in particular the voa, where I worked as a correspondent and news analyst for 27 years—has become mired in bloated bureaucracy, duplication of effort, internecine warfare between broadcast entities, and subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) efforts to politicize the news. The workforce is demoralized, and the credibility of the news has been undercut. It raises the question of whether, given that people around the world now have unprecedented access to news and information, we still need the voa and its sister outlets to attempt this awkward dance between journalism and public diplomacy.

POLICYMAKERS HAVE LONG VIEWED US INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING AS PART of the public-diplomacy effort. The use Center on Public Diplomacy’s website notes that the term was coined to get away from the pejorative word “propaganda.” The center says that “in the past few decades, public diplomacy has been widely seen as the transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences

overseas for the purpose of *promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals* [italics added].”

In other words, “public diplomacy” is simply public affairs—that is, spin, propaganda, messaging, whatever you wish to call it—re-labeled and repackaged for foreign consumption. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said as much before departing from the Obama cabinet. “We have abdicated the broadcasting arena,” she said at a congressional hearing. “[W]e have private stations, CNN, Fox, nbc, all of that. They’re out there, they convey information. But we’re not doing what we did during the Cold War. Our Broadcasting Board of Governors is practically defunct in terms of its capacity to be able to tell a message around the world.”

voa has often been called a propaganda agency, but it’s not. It has fulfilled its public-diplomacy role by broadcasting editorials, which are labeled as official government viewpoints. In this way, the separation between news and propaganda is maintained, at least in theory. voa correspondents travel on normal passports (although non-journalist employees use “official” or “diplomatic” ones) and get journalist visas to travel to countries with visa requirements. However, when voa/bbg executives and administrators travel overseas, they use official or diplomatic passports and get logistic and other assistance from the local US embassy. It’s no wonder that governments are confused about the role of American international broadcasting.

voa earned credibility around the world on the basis of its honest journalism, even when its stories conflicted with US policy. “Some might argue that as a government-funded network, the voa should always be expected to portray US policies as righteous and successful,” wrote former voa Director Sanford Ungar in *Foreign Affairs* in 2005. “But experience demonstrates that the voa is most appreciated and effective when it functions as a model US-style news organization that presents a balanced view of domestic and international events, setting an example for how independent journalism can strengthen democracy.”

voa was part of the US Information

Agency (usia), which was an arm of the State Department. But voa, in particular its Central News Division, which provides content to 45 language services, has fought to protect the agency's journalistic independence in the face of attempts by government officials to influence news coverage. I once had a deputy chief of mission in Pakistan threaten to have me thrown out of the country if I went into then-communist Afghanistan without embassy permission. In his *Foreign Affairs* article, Ungar cited instances of attempts by one of his predecessors, David Jackson, to skew news coverage to be favorable to the Bush administration, especially during the Iraq War. (In a rebuttal, Jackson—now executive editor of *The Washington Times*—denied Ungar's assertions, saying his piece was “filled with errors and unsupported accusations.”)

In 1994, Congress reorganized the government's international broadcasting function by creating the Broadcasting Board of Governors within usia to oversee all broadcast entities. The usia as a whole was abolished five years later, with all non-broadcasting functions (embassy public affairs, libraries, etc.) transferred to State Department control, but the bbg was kept as a separate organization. The board was to act as a “firewall” against political or bureaucratic influence over the integrity of the news. But instead of being a solution, the bbg became the problem. The part-time, nine-member, politically appointed board—half Democrats, half Republicans, with the secretary of state as an ex-officio member—started micromanaging operations through the creation of an administrative bureaucracy, dubbed the International Broadcasting Bureau. The bureau runs the day-to-day business of the broadcasters, but over time has expanded into peripheral projects like audience research and strategic planning—in essence whatever the Board of Governors wants it to do. Senator Richard Lugar wrote in a 2010 piece in the *Foreign Service Journal* that “after 15 years... it has become clear that, rather than serving as a political ‘firewall,’ the bbg has often become a political ‘football’ as board nominations have become enmeshed in partisan politics.”

One result of this micromanaging is that a commercial mode has taken root at Voice of America, where the equivalent of chasing ratings has become paramount and the news has been trivialized in much the same way it has at networks and stations across the country. As a 2007 report by McCormick-Tribune Foundation put it, “Once the centerpiece in America's arsenal for fighting the war of ideas through their trenchant and focused programming, American international broadcasting in recent years has lurched in the direction of becoming just another competitor in the crowded field of commercial broadcasters purveying a menu of entertainment, popular culture and news.”

The bbg brought in outside people, many of them former cnn managers, to sharpen this commercial-style focus. Hard news, the meat and potatoes of voa since its inception, has been greatly de-emphasized. Pressure has increased for softer stories, usually of two minutes or less, which are then translated for use by the language services. (There is virtually no English-language television, and English-language radio programming has been drastically cut back, even though it's the strongest medium to reach remote audiences that lack computers or TVs.)

The voa's journalistic standards have suffered in this push into a more commercial-TV mode. For instance, there was always a strict two-source rule: The essential elements of all stories had to be verified by two sources (typically two wire services) before a story would be issued. The exception was if a voa correspondent witnessed an event. But some language services complained that they were not getting stories from Central News fast enough. voa Director David Ensor, and a subsequent internal review of the news operation, recommended doing away with that requirement and allowing stories to be pinned on one attributed source, usually a wire service.

The Central News Division has resisted efforts to dumb down the news operation, and that has led to clashes with upper management, voa management has tried to break up the division, which is staffed by professional

journalists, and scatter its members to the language services. Traditionally, most of the news broadcast by the voa has been produced by the journalists in Central News and sent to the various language services, where it is translated for their respective audiences. For some time now, the language services have been eager to broaden their mandate, and the agency's leadership has come to believe that much of the work done by Central News can be done by language services. “We have to struggle every day just to cover the important news now,” said one voa senior news editor, who asked not to be identified.

The politically incorrect secret at voa is the wildly inconsistent journalistic acumen of the language services. Some possess a wealth of journalistic expertise; others are woefully bereft. The disparity is explained by the simple fact that it is difficult to find people who are fluent in a given language, and also have experience in the kind of rigorous journalism voa has traditionally required. Many are academics, here or in their country of origin, but have no journalistic background. The services often turn to émigré communities for recruitment, and a lot of the staffers come from countries where news organizations are expected to be politically partisan or pro-government. Some language services—in particular the Farsi-language service broadcasting to Iran—have been criticized on Capitol Hill and elsewhere for alleged bias in their broadcasts, arising in large part from deep partisan divides over developments or movements in the countries to which they broadcast.

But voa officials continue to deny there is any disparity in journalistic expertise. At a recent program review of the Central News Division, one of the reviewing officers said: “There are still two classes of reporters in this place, the English-language reporters and then everybody else who is a reporter or stringer. And some of those reporters and stringers in the field, in vernacular language, are as good or better than the English-language people, and we think Central News cheats itself by not allowing, not taking advantage, frankly, of all of the voa news sources that are covering stories.”

Thus, the journalistic coherence that Central News brings to voa has been rendered impotent. In effect, voa now has 45 different news operations, each with the potential to put a different spin on the same story. If there is a clash on the India-Pakistan border, let's say, the Pakistani-oriented Urdu Service may issue a very different view of events than the Hindi-language service aimed at India.

The Board of Governors is trying to sell the Obama administration and Congress on a scheme to merge all the broadcast entities into something called the Global News Network, under the authority of an international broadcasting czar. The bbg's Strategic Plan outlines a grandiose vision to "become the world's leading international news agency by 2016." There are indications this plan may be shelved for now, or ramped down, because of the fragile budgetary climate. The FY 2013 budget for bbg is \$756 million—chump change in the governmental scheme of things—and the kind of effort envisioned by the bbg would require huge increases if it is to be done right. The proposed 2014 budget asks for \$732 million. Without significantly more money, something Congress would likely be leery of approving, the Global News Network cannot hope to compete with other news entities.

And there is the unresolved question of whether what would emerge under consolidation would really be a news organization. The board and voa management say the voa charter is still valid, but a new mission statement in the strategic plan says the goal is "to inform, engage, and connect people around the world *in support of freedom and democracy* [italics added]."

That last phrase is advocacy, not journalism. Regimes around the world—especially hostile ones like Iran—will read that and see voa as a regime-change instrument of the US government. This formulation not only undercuts voa's journalistic credibility, it puts voa correspondents at even greater risk than necessary. I made several trips to Iran to cover events, including the 2005 presidential election. Iranian officials told me they gave visas to voa Central News correspondents, but not to the

It's time to fix US broadcasting, or forget it.

Farsi-language service, now called the Persian Service, because the language service is perceived as partisan.

voa was offered an opportunity to comment on the issues raised in this article, and questions were submitted to the agency for response. It declined to answer any of the questions. The voa Public Affairs Office's response was: "Frankly speaking, the questions submitted by Mr. Thomas, a former voa employee, contain multiple errors and suggest a bias that concerns us greatly. We invite those who want to evaluate the quality of voa journalism to look at our websites or our programs that reach over 135 million people each week in 45 separate languages."

US INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING is at a crossroads. If it is to be a truly dynamic, respected news organization in the 21st-century media market, then several steps must be taken:

- Get rid of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. It has been a disastrous experiment. A January 2013 report by the State Department's Office of Inspector General concluded that, since its inception, the board "has been fully staffed for only seven of its 17 years of existence, and current governors are serving under expired terms." Members have as a rule lacked journalistic credentials, coming from corporate media executive jobs or diplomatic posts. On May 11, President Obama nominated Ryan Crocker to the board, a diplomat who over a 37-year career has served as ambassador to Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon, and, most recently, Afghanistan. A distinguished record, certainly, but one lacking any journalistic background.

- If a "broadcasting czar" is to oversee the proposed combined operation, then he or she should be someone with an unimpeachable journalistic reputation, not someone who goes through

the revolving door between government spokesman and working journalist. The appointee should be named by the president and subject to Senate confirmation (as voa directors were before the creation of the bbg), and be appointed for a fixed term (like the fbi director) as additional safeguards against politicization of the news.

- Re-establish the Central News Division as the operational hub of voa (and, if there is consolidation, of the combined operation) to ensure journalistic cohesion, continuity, and credibility. Having what amounts to dozens of separate news shops competing with one another for resources, stories, and interviews breeds duplication and uncertainty.

- Don't dumb down the news. Without a complete fiscal change of heart in Congress, international broadcasting will never have the money and staff to compete with commercial outlets. So stop focusing undue effort on lightweight fluff that is eroding credibility, and encourage and support intelligent and thoughtful journalism that is unfettered by bureaucracy and politics.

- Stop dismissing radio as a dead medium. Radio remains a highly effective way to reach the many people in remote areas who don't have Internet or TV, and television broadcasting, such as to Iran, is much more easily jammed than radio. The proposed 2014 budget would gut Urdu and Afghan radio services that broadcast to Pakistan and Afghanistan and shut down all Farsi-language radio to Iran.

However, if the mission of US broadcasting is to be "messaging" and policy advocacy, then stop hiding behind the label of journalism. Call it what it is—public diplomacy—and put it under the State Department. Anything less is a disservice to voa listeners and to the profession of journalism, and an insult to the men and women who strive to uphold the journalistic integrity of Voice of America,

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