

2007: A Fateful Year for America's Voices?

As the fifth year of the U.S. occupation of Iraq approaches, there is a stunning gap in Middle East media in that country and the region as a whole. Amidst appalling casualties of Iraqis and Americans in the land between the rivers, you can **scarcely** hear the official Voice of America on the airwaves in the Arab world. Or if you should happen to stumble on a VOA program, it is to only a few scattered shortwave frequencies in English, or perhaps Kurdish, a very few hours a day.

In the words of a customs official on the Syrian-Jordanian border to a VOA reporter passing through early last year: "Where are you? I used to listen every evening to the VOA Arabic service." Instead, the border guard went on, he now hears Radio Sawa from the United States, with its predominant mix of Arab and American pop music and much less news or analysis than five years ago when VOA Arabic used to broadcast a full-service day-to-day account of events in the world, his country and the United States.

Beginning in March of 2002, at the height of the Palestinian intifada and Israeli scorched earth reprisals against cities and towns in the West Bank, Radio Sawa replaced the VOA Arabic Service. This was at the insistence of a powerful former U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors member Norman J. Pattiz, who sought to bring a

commercial flavor and youth-oriented programming to U.S. international broadcasting in this strategically critical area of the globe. Broadcast mogul Pattiz, the dominant figure in the oversight Board of VOA and other U.S.-funded overseas civilian networks, insisted that Radio Sawa provide in its early weeks a program that was 90 percent pop music to a news-hungry region.

The Broadcasting Board of Governors, known in Washington as the BBG, has since moved ahead to invest more than \$200 million in a newly established federally-funded private corporation known as the Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN). That media conglomerate today encompasses Sawa, initially launched inside VOA, as well as Alhurra television. Both are on the air 24/7 in Arabic and together claim a weekly audience of around 35 million according to a January 23 2006 press release of the Middle East Broadcast Network.

But the fundamental question remains: who is listening? Mass youth audiences are indeed impressive. But take a closer look. Are the movers and shakers—the government and media leaders and opposition figures in the Arab world—tuning in, and if they are, what do they hear? Astonishingly, no impartial body during the past five years has undertaken a serious investigation of the content of either Radio Sawa or Alhurra TV. A panel contracted by the State Department Inspector General in 2004 said plainly: “America can do better.” That panel’s critique was shelved and never made public.

2007: A Year of Change for U.S. International Broadcasting?

2007 may well be the year for a comprehensive reappraisal of U. S. international broadcasting. There are striking changes in the leadership of the Board and the individual U.S. overseas networks and these have gathered momentum since Pattiz resigned early last year.

There are several reasons the new Democratic 110th Congress, the Bush administration, or both need to take a hard, new look at the American networks without delay. The first reason is that this is a period of change at the very top of the BBG. On January 9, Board chairman Kenneth Y. Tomlinson wrote a letter to President Bush offering to step aside when his successor is named—this, after a year of turmoil in the BBG and a State Department inspector general’s report claiming that Tomlinson had run horse race breeding and racing operations from his office and placed a personal friend on the Board’s payroll under questionable circumstances. Tomlinson said in his letter to the president that those who opposed his re-nomination “cite charges against me that simply do not stand up to scrutiny.” His departure was expected to clear the way for the appointment of a new chairman and possibly re-nomination or replacement of as many as five other members of the bipartisan board.

Secondly, the three-year terms of those five other presidentially appointed BBG incumbents have all expired. The 1994 act creating the Board provides that they may

serve until replaced. That, says Republican senior Senate Foreign Relations Committee aide Mark Helmke, “has become a political recipe for failure.” To begin re-shaping the Board, the White House recently submitted the name of one of its Democratic Party members, Jeffrey Hirschberg, for appointment to a second three-year term, and President Bush’s 2004 campaign advertising guru and Republican Mark McKinnon to his first term on the BBG. (President Bush, as of this writing, has yet to name a chairman to succeed Tomlinson.)

Thirdly, during the past 18 months, the top executives of four of the five U.S. overseas networks under the Board’s aegis also have retired or been replaced. Danforth Austin has succeeded David Jackson as director of VOA. Libby Liu has taken the helm at Radio Free Asia following the retirement of its founding president, Richard Richter. The Board has just named Jeffrey Gedmin of the Aspen Institute in Berlin to succeed Tom Dine, the president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) from 1997 to 2005. Brian Conniff heads a new management team at the Middle East Broadcasting Network (Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV) and has named CNN professional Larry Register as head of news at Alhurra to succeed Mouafac Harb. Only at Radio-TV Marti has there been a director for more than two years, Pedro Roig.

The fourth reason why Congress and the Bush administration need to take stock of U.S. international-broadcasting strategy is that the critical position of director of the federal International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB) has been unfilled for more than two years. That post is the highest ranking senior civil service executive in U.S. overseas

broadcasting. The IBB provides engineering and transmission services for all the U.S. overseas networks, most of VOA's administrative and support functions, and some of these for the Miami-based Radio and TV Marti.

BBG Decisions that Need to be Revisited

So in terms of structure and of global programming strategy, there is an opportunity to bring new and soon-to-be recruited managers together to revisit many pressing issues in U.S. international broadcasting. These include several crucial—and questionable—BBG decisions or actions of the past year, all of which raised heated debate amongst delegates at last November's Public Diplomacy Council Forum at George Washington University in Washington D.C.

Perhaps the most contentious decisions that will need to be revisited are the proposed reductions in current strategically vital broadcasts. Just about a year ago, the Board advocated the virtual elimination of VOA's worldwide English service, closure of the Croatian, Georgian, Greek, Thai and Turkish services, and cessation of radio (but not TV) broadcasts in the Russian, Albanian, Serbian, Bosnian, Hindi and Macedonian services. It also advocated reducing Radio Liberty Russian from 24 to 18 hours a day. The cuts, according to the Board's own records, would cost VOA about 15.7 million listeners and TV viewers a week

The outcry stemming from these proposed cuts led the U.S. House of Representatives last summer to call for a reversal of the reductions. The Republican-controlled Senate, however, failed to act. That means that U.S. government agencies all continue to operate at levels set two years ago. Under what is termed “a continuing resolution,” last year’s reductions cannot be implemented until new appropriations are enacted and signed by the President.

The new Democratic Party-controlled Congress is now considering the Bush administration's budget for 2008 that was just unveiled on February 5. Some predicted that it might inflict even more damage on the Voice and other overseas networks, in order to sustain or build up Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa. They were right. The proposed new budget retains most of the reductions proposed a year ago and will expand even further the cuts to VOA English and central news operations. VOA’s 24/7 music service in English will disappear. Eighteen other languages will either be eliminated or scaled back at VOA, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia. The latest draft budget adds VOA’s Uzbek and Cantonese services to the list of those abolished, but spares the Turkish Service. If the budget is passed by Congress, Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa would be increased by more than \$20 million. Together, they would cost more than \$100 million—well more than half the worldwide request this year for VOA of \$178 million.

There is also a need to consider the continued dismantling of the global shortwave relay station distribution that serves both VOA and RFE/RL. One of America’s leading experts on shortwave, George Jacobs, estimates that there are still 300,000,000 shortwave

listeners around the world. BBG chairman Tomlinson has often stated that shortwave is a “medium of the horse and buggy era.” Yet the Board’s own statistics indicate that VOA English on radio reaches in excess of 15 million listeners a week—many of them on shortwave. Shortwave has become more and more important during the past two years in countries outside the Middle East where media are restricted. These include Russia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan where increasingly authoritarian governments have limited or cut off relays of foreign broadcasts on local radio or TV. Yet the Board has shut down or razed VOA and RFE relay stations in Spain, Greece and Germany—silencing the very facilities that used to reach Russia, its increasingly threatened neighboring republics such as Georgia, and other Caucasus hotspots. The Board proposed closure of the VOA Thai Service only a few months before a coup d’etat in that country. Within hours, VOA Thai returned to direct broadcasts on shortwave after a 20-year hiatus.

Furthermore, there is evidence that the board’s structure inhibits the development of a clear strategy for U.S. international broadcasting. In mid-2005, the Board commissioned a comprehensive survey of IBB and VOA management and operations by the respected Booz Allen Hamilton consulting firm. In its initial draft, the Booz Allen Hamilton team noted that “the BBG structure of governance and executive management is unlike that in any other public or private (media) organizations reviewed. There is no central executive manager for U.S. international broadcasting,” the study concluded, “and the Board acts as a ‘collective CEO.’ Instead, members of the Board work directly with individual managers three or four levels down on special initiatives without a clear reporting channel.” Much of this pointed criticism of the Board was deleted in the final

version of the report, issued in July of last year, more than six months after its due date. Nonetheless, the published final report observed: “The complex organizational structure, the tangled lines of management authority, the limits of current performance objectives and metrics, the history of poor communications and the competing internal loyalties make it even more necessary for the Board to chart a clear path forward to all.”

Frank Debate at the Public Diplomacy Council Forum

What might that clear path forward consist of? Last November, the Public Diplomacy Council, a private non-partisan group of about 70 scholars, former diplomats, and international broadcasters met at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., to consider the current state and future of U.S. international broadcasting.

The lively three and a half hour debate ranged over many of the issues described in this article. The delegates agreed that broadcasting is essential to America’s public diplomacy effort, and VOA is the gold standard in American overseas broadcasting. It was agreed that integral to VOA’s achievements (and those of other stations such as RFE/RL) in the 65 years since it went on the air during World War II has been a reputation for accuracy, credibility and integrity. The forum concluded that these attributes remain indispensable today. There was also wide acknowledgment that television and the Internet are increasingly important, and that continued additional exploration of and investment in new technologies in these platforms should take place

over the long term—in a strategic rather than a tactical way which RFE/RL Acting President Jeff Trimble called “not a sprint but a marathon.”

There were also issues that divided delegates, sometimes profoundly. All agreed in the importance of research and of identifying audiences, but there was no consensus as to whether U.S. broadcasting should primarily pursue a younger and larger audience (clearly the Board’s preference), or move to a smaller or more influential audience (as critics contend). Some even said that the ideal strategy should incorporate both. There was also disagreement over the challenge of how to juggle the priorities present in an age of digital communications. It became clear that hard choices would have to be made between long established delivery systems and new media technologies, as well as between elite and mass audiences, when U.S. federal budgets are getting tighter and tighter. Differences of opinion also emerged between stakeholders who see broadcasting almost exclusively as a regional instrument directed at the Arab and Muslim countries and those who say reaching critically important listeners, viewers and website readers in the world beyond has been shortchanged in the past five years. However, several delegates agreed to maintaining a balanced approach.

“Tough decisions,” conceded forum summarizer Bob Callahan, a professor at George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs. “Yes, we have to change and adapt. We all recognize that. But to what extent, and where? I think a lot of it ratifies the adage that where you sit determines where you stand on an issue. It’s a

changing environment, and it's something that is endlessly fascinating and still extremely important to our efforts as a government.”

FREEWHEELING DEBATE AT FOGGY BOTTOM

The forum, summarized with a full text at www.publicdiplomacycouncil.org, was unusually heated for a gathering sponsored by an organization consisting largely of diplomats. Some excerpts:

“In terms of English, 25 years ago I didn't go anyplace in the world without a shortwave radio. I'm a shortwave buff and always have been since I was a foreign correspondent in the 70s. For the last 15-20 years, I've never carried a shortwave radio abroad because I can get television in virtually every hotel room where I go... Our mission is to broadcast to information deprived people (especially in the Arab and Muslim countries,) and to do it in a language they understand... if we have to choose between serving that primary goal, providing information to deprived people versus English, I'd go with the information deprived.”

---Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, chairman, U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors

“To say that English is no longer a priority language for the Voice of America is absolutely absurd. If the Russians were to say that Russian was no longer a Priority One language for Radio Russia, they'd be laughed out of the room. For the Chinese to say

that Chinese is no longer a Priority One language for Radio Beijing or other broadcast languages, this would be regarded as absurd. My friend Ken Tomlinson used what he said was a metaphor earlier when he said: ‘There’s nothing like a noose to bring about change’ and I noticed there was no laughter in the room at the time, because a noose has been used at the Voice of America... and this is really a very difficult way to run a news organization.”

---Sanford J. Ungar, former director, VOA

“I think the bottom line for (U.S.) international broadcasting is that it faces major structural, major strategic difficulties. The makeup of the Broadcasting Board of Governors designed by Congress to attempt to ensure that the so-called political firewall remains strong has turned the Board into a den of bickering partisan interests and conflicts... Through a curious provision in the 1994 act creating the Board, members can continue to serve after their terms have expired. This approach has become a political recipe for failure. It proves that this plan to govern U.S. international broadcasting has failed. It’s time to scrap the whole idea of the Board and reorganize.”

---Mark Helmke, senior staff member, U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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