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Nov 04, 2016 by **David S. Jackson**

How to Save the Voice of America ^[1]

Note from the CPB Blog Manager: An expanded version of this blog originally appeared on the Public Diplomacy Council web site.

As an enterprise that includes both journalism and public diplomacy – two disciplines that have been undergoing seismic changes – the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the bipartisan group of presidential appointees who oversee America’s stable of international broadcasters, is facing growing demands that it, too, make some major changes.

The pressure is coming from all directions: from the current and former secretaries of State; from Congress; from the BBG itself; and from a wide range of foreign policy experts, including former diplomats, journalists, and academics.

Last month the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington hosted a lively discussion about a new report  that urged sweeping reforms to fix what it called “ineffectual” broadcasters with “inconsistent” missions, working under “haphazard” oversight. Then last week, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) and Ranking Member Eliot Engel (D-NY) re-introduced bipartisan legislation that would authorize what Royce called

a “complete overhaul” of the BBG, which he described as “an agency adrift.”

The criticism has been bipartisan, with just about everybody (including many of the affected employees) agreeing that some changes are needed. But that’s where the agreement ends. The core dispute now is on the journalistic independence of the broadcasters. And there the discussion has hit a snag. Amid all the proposals for broad structural reform, no one has yet described in any detail how just how they think the broadcasters should work, day-to-day, to be more effective.

So I have some suggestions.

Voice of America (VOA), the government broadcaster responsible for “telling America’s story,” is facing the most drastic changes in its mission if the proposed legislation passes. Yet the debate over its future has polarized into two irreconcilable positions: One would leave VOA completely independent journalistically, with no oversight and virtually no influence by the State Department or any other branch of government; the other would bring VOA under the direct supervision of State or another government policy-oriented institution.

I believe there is a middle path that could satisfy the concerns of both sides.

For example: Say a VOA reporter or an embassy political officer hears of a particularly damaging but false accusation against the U.S. that is spreading, unchallenged, on social media or through foreign media. VOA is alerted, and then quickly puts together a balanced, objective story reporting that the claim is spreading, and includes – ideally by interviewing a government official – the U.S. response to it. The whole package is done professionally in a way that satisfies audience expectations of journalistic content and balance from VOA, but it would also satisfy the U.S. government’s interest in publicly countering damaging propaganda before it spreads further. (It would also increase the chances that the U.S. government’s response would get further attention by being picked up from VOA by other broadcasters, which frequently happens.)

Just because the original tip-off might come from a government official, and include information from that official, doesn’t make it propaganda. That process happens in journalism every day. (Based on my experience, both as a foreign correspondent for *Time* magazine and as the VOA director for more than four years, I often felt that other journalists – even from other countries – had closer relationships with U.S. embassy and other government officials than many VOA journalists did, mainly because of the VOA reporters’ sensitivity over being government employees.)

Overseas, U.S. embassy officers often detect trends or hear of good stories that VOA should cover, yet VOA’s newsroom culture has historically discouraged such fraternizing. That relationship needs to be repaired, both in Washington and abroad.

The example I gave above was hypothetical. Here’s one from personal experience: When I was at VOA, the State Department asked if we would run public service announcements (PSAs) for Rewards for Justice, a program that offered multi-million dollar rewards for information leading to the identification and capture of known 9/11 terrorist suspects.

It was certainly an understandable request. State was already doing everything it could to publicize the program, and we were broadcasting every day to countries where these people might be living. If there was a chance that someone in our audience saw one of the suspects

and was motivated to turn him in, that was clearly in the U.S. national security interest.

But were PSAs – which could be counter-productive if the audience resented the intrusion – the best way to tell them?

I suggested another approach: Why don't we tell them about Rewards for Justice not through PSAs, which they may have seen elsewhere, but in a different way that will make them *want* to pay attention? The U.S. has a long history of offering rewards, or bounties, for criminals, and foreign audiences have always been fascinated with the American West and the gangster days of Al Capone. So let's do a series of short, entertaining pieces where we recount for audiences some of this history, complete with colorful anecdotes and music and soundtracks, and in every piece point out that we're doing it again now with the 9/11 terrorists (and then, of course, provide the email and phone contact information for anyone who has information to pass on).

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Such an approach not only got the State Department's message across in a compelling way, it also upheld the audience's expectation of VOA as a credible source of information and entertaining programming about American culture and values.

Any discussion of what rules government-paid journalists should operate under is complicated and inherently controversial, for both journalists and non-journalists. But it's time to get specific. I want to see VOA survive, and I don't think that's likely in the long run unless VOA makes some major changes, and improvements, in how it conducts its mission.

The choice today is not between VOA being a propaganda mouthpiece for the government, or just another independent news organization. Audiences will pay no attention to the former, and Congress will not pay for the latter. VOA's future depends on it finding a way to maintain its journalistic credibility while also creatively serving the country it represents.
