

# WebMemo



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## Don't Silence Voice of America

*Helle C. Dale*

With the proliferation and fragmentation of traditional news sources, what do most people identify as the medium they trust most for information? According to a new poll by Ofcom, the independent regulating authority of the British communications industries, the answer is radio. Of the poll's 1,824 respondents, 66 percent said they found radio the most reliable medium. Second was online news Web sites with 58 percent, which for the first time inched out television with 54 percent. Only 34 percent trusted newspapers the most, confirming their status as a dying breed.

These findings are of particular relevance for U.S. lawmakers, who need to take a hard look at the way U.S. international broadcasting is structured. While the budgets for this important component of U.S. public diplomacy have steadily increased in recent years, radio is being deemphasized—despite being the most effective and the most economical method of mass communication in many parts of the world. Particularly where television is concerned, global competition is so fierce that a massive investment would be needed to have a real impact in many markets around the world, especially in the media-saturated market of the Middle East.

**Trusted and Versatile.** Not only does radio remain the medium most people trust, but in some parts of the world, it is the only medium that can evade the control of the state. Both television stations and the Internet are far more vulnerable to censorship and government interference in a way that shortwave radio—due to the laws of physics, which allow transmitters to be stationed as far away as the other side of the earth—is not. Medium-wave

radio can be effective if transmitted from across borders, as in the case of the array of U.S. transmitters located in Kuwait but directed at Iran.

Furthermore, other countries are seeing the value of shortwave radio. For example, in China's new media and public diplomacy strategy, shortwave radio is prominently featured. Thus, according to the World Radio and Television Handbook (2000 and 2009 editions), while in 2000 the United States had some 260 shortwave frequencies and China 150, today that relationship is reversed, with China having some 280 and the U.S. just over 200. (See Chart 1.)

Over the past decade, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), whose nine members are appointed by the President and which oversees U.S. international broadcasting, has made the decision to close down nine transmitter sites around the world, leaving just 13 active. In previous decades another 14 sites were closed down, including in 1997 the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty site in Gloria, Portugal, the largest shortwave transmitting facility in the West.

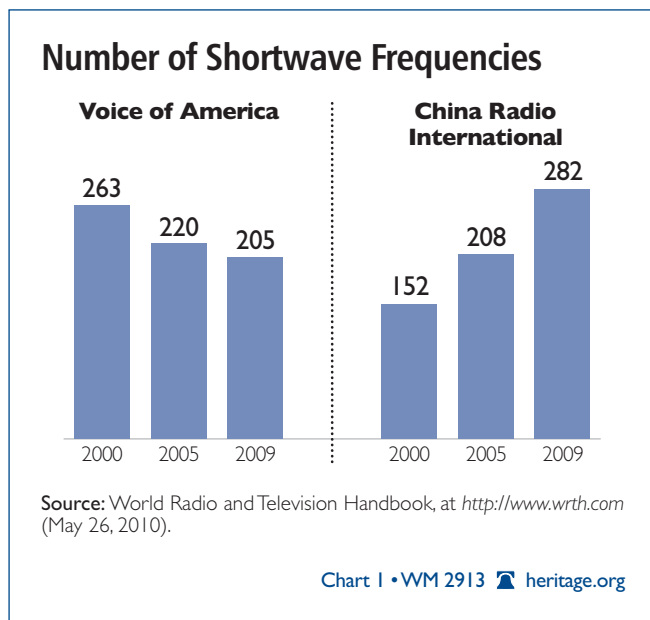
**Oversight Needed.** Oversight of critically important broadcasting assets is wanting, possibly because of the institutional leadership vacuum at

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the BBG. According to a report by the State Department's inspector general, a powerful radio transmitter aimed at the Iranian audience was scheduled to go on the air in May 2008, yet it remains unfinished. Construction of the \$5.2 million, 600,000-watt, medium-wave transmitter intended to reach a high-priority audience in Iran is far behind schedule.

As a result of this delay, the powerful transmitter was not available in the chaos that followed the June 2009 disputed Iranian elections, which were precisely the type of event for which this transmitter was designed. Consequently, America's ability to broadcast into Iran was severely curtailed; existing medium-wave assets at the Kuwait transmitting station can reach only a narrow band of the western portion of Iran. According to the BBG, the transmitter is now scheduled to go on the air this fall.

In order to make full and appropriate use of the considerable investment made by the U.S. over the years to build up its international broadcasting capability, Congress should:

- Move with deliberate speed to seat the new BBG if and when Members of the Senate have satisfied themselves of the nominees' qualifications and dedication to democracy, freedom of expression, and the free flow of information; and
- Hold hearings on the appropriate role of radio in U.S. international broadcasting strategy, considering the possibility of recalibrating the relative weight given to television and radio.

The Obama Administration should:

- Revisit its major public diplomacy strategy documents, promulgated this spring by the National Security Council and the State Department, neither of which has assigned a major role to U.S. international broadcasting. America has important, but not unlimited, assets whose potential should be maximized.

Although diplomats and pundits have crowned Web 2.0 as the new communications king, radio remains the globe's most trusted source for information. Consequently, America should ensure its public diplomacy strategy continues to commit resources, as well as congressional oversight, to developing its radio capabilities.

—*Helle C. Dale is Senior Fellow for Public Diplomacy in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*