

# WebMemo



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## Time to Rethink the Broadcasting Board of Governors

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Recent strategic decisions by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) on Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts to China suggest that the time has come for Congress to take a serious look at the way the U.S. government manages its international broadcasting services. Even Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in her testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on March 1, expressed strong concern over the state of U.S. international broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Clinton herself has a seat (usually deputized to Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale) on the BBG, so she has the opportunity and responsibility to act on her concerns.

The fact is that, as currently constituted, the mostly unpaid, part-time BBG, which meets once a month and has no real CEO, is no way to run a complex media organization with over \$750 million worth of broadcasting entities paid for by U.S. taxpayers. This is no reflection on the board members (four Democrats and four Republicans, in addition to the Secretary of State) who volunteer their time, work hard to serve their country, and do so for idealistic reasons. Yet, with other responsibilities and day jobs, board members are not able to devote the time or resources to U.S. international broadcasting that it deserves. Congress should look at changing this situation.

**BBG Shrinking While Needs Are Growing.** Congress established the BBG in the mid-1990s to isolate broadcasting from political interference. At the time, broadcasting continued to have a connec-

tion to U.S. public diplomacy through the United States Information Agency, but when the agency was closed down in 1999, the BBG became a free-standing government agency. Yet it has been troubled from the start. Members are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate, and “it has become clear that the BBG, rather than functioning as a political ‘firewall,’ has become a political ‘football,’” noted a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report in June 2010.<sup>2</sup>

For six years the board was not fully staffed, and for two years it had no chairman. The confirmation of the current board was held up for months while frustrated Senators demanded greater accountability by the broadcasting services. Now the board has signed off on a budget that has tremendous strategic implications for the future of U.S. public diplomacy in Asia.

Members of Congress should be concerned that while the Chinese government is investing billions in public diplomacy efforts and broadcasting, the BBG has presented a budget that would cut 45 positions at the VOA China branch, reduce the overall broadcasting in Mandarin, and eliminate the Cantonese service as early as October 2011. It should be noted that the BBG’s proposed 2012 budget is

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a 2.5 percent increase over current funding. These changes reflect a cost-shifting rather than a cost savings and are a distinct re-prioritization of services not necessarily born out of frugality.

**The BBG's Internet Gambling.** The cuts in the Chinese service are part of an overall BBG strategy focused strongly on building Internet capacity at the expense particularly of radio. (Other VOA shortwave services that were cut in January are Vietnamese, Indonesian, and French to Africa, following numerous other cuts in recent years.) Speaking about the impact of the social media in the Middle East uprisings and of the thrust of the BBG's Web-based products, BBG chairman Walter Isaacson recently stated, "This is an exact template of what I think the future of international broadcasting will be like. It's crowd-sourcing, mixed with great journalism, mixed with social networking so that people are empowered by accurate information."<sup>3</sup>

This strategy is problematic for several reasons. While social media and cell phones are highly effective at connecting individuals and fostering citizen journalism, traditional mass media—in this case broadcast—is often still the most effective means by which to disseminate news and information to certain areas of the developing world. In the case of BBG outreach to China, while the developed coastal areas might indeed be best served through the Internet and cell phones, rural areas (where the majority of the population lives) is often reachable mainly by shortwave radio.

In fact, even the Chinese government, which is buying up shortwave frequencies en masse, uses them in part to communicate with its own hinterlands. And while the Internet and cell phones are

vulnerable to government interference—especially in China, where the entirety of the telecommunications infrastructure is government-owned—radio, particularly shortwave, is difficult to block if enough is invested in signal strength and bandwidth.

Even if only 0.04 percent of people in China are using shortwave, as has been stated by the BBG, in a country of 1.34 billion people, that amounts to a very significant amount of the population that may no longer be influenced by U.S. international broadcasting.<sup>4</sup>

And of what does get through on the Internet, will that content remain unchanged? Chinese filtering of the Internet is well known, with keywords deemed to be a threat to the Chinese Communist Party regularly blocked in an obvious fashion. But what will keep hackers or the state from more subtly redrafting information and affecting the ultimate presentation of VOA news that the end user receives?

The fact is that the BBG is throwing all of VOA-China's chips into one Internet/new media basket in a gamble that it will be able to overcome not only hackers from inside "the great firewall" but certainly also those from without.

Just a week after the 2012 BBG budget was made public on February 21, VOA's own Web sites in the U.S. were knocked offline and users sent to extremist propaganda, causing another blow to confidence that the BBG's Internet-dominated approach would result in the successful fulfillment of its mission in China (or elsewhere, for that matter). And if the gamble fails, will VOA-China be able to shift back again to reincorporate broadcasting?

1. Hearing, *Assessing U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities and Needs Amidst Economic Challenges*, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 112th Cong., 1st Sess., March 1, 2011, at [http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing\\_notice.asp?id=1219](http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing_notice.asp?id=1219) (March 16, 2011).
2. Hearing, *U.S. International Broadcasting: Is Anybody Listening? Keeping the U.S. Connected*, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 111th Cong., 2nd Sess., June 9, 2010, at <http://ugar.senate.gov/issues/foreign/diplomacy/report.pdf> (March 16, 2011).
3. Press release, "Staying Ahead of the Digital Curve: U.S. Global Engagement in the New Media Era," Broadcasting Board of Governors, February 15, 2011, at [http://www.bbg.gov/pressroom/press-releases/Staying\\_Ahead\\_of\\_the\\_Digital\\_Curve.html](http://www.bbg.gov/pressroom/press-releases/Staying_Ahead_of_the_Digital_Curve.html) (March 16, 2011).
4. Matthew Shaffer, "Rohrabacher's Radio Rage," *The Corner*, February 18, 2011, at <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/260160/rohrabacher-s-radio-rage-matthew-shaffer> (March 16, 2011).

**Who Is in Charge Here?** At this time, Congress should seriously consider replacing the board with a more professional broadcasting management structure or potentially giving it advisory (as opposed to managerial) responsibility. A \$750 million corporation in the private sector could ill-afford the absence of fully engaged and accountable leadership. The five international broadcasters that the BBG oversees represent a staff of nearly 4,000 personnel and need a non-partisan, paid, full-time president and CEO with the resources and time to engage in long-term planning and implementation strategies for U.S. international broadcasting.

In addition, Congress itself should also take a far more active role in oversight of this important tool of U.S. foreign policy. Paying attention only when things go wrong is not enough.

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