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Time to Reform U.S. International Broadcasting

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Congressional efforts are currently under way to reorganize U.S. international broadcasting (USIB). Although the draft legislation is not publicly available, these are several key issues that any bill should address.

Poor Governance. The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which oversees most major civilian assets of USIB, is dysfunctional and should be reformed or eliminated. Though in charge of multiple organizations and activities with a budget of over \$700 million, the BBG operates on a part-time basis, being composed of individuals with other jobs and meeting only once a month (sometimes less).

The absence of day-to-day leadership has impeded effective governance of the various entities overseen by the BBG. In 2013, a State Department inspector general's report concluded, "The Board's bylaws and self-adopted governance policies are inadequate to govern appropriately the conduct of Board business."¹

A Political Process. The BBG is composed of nine members who are supposed to have expertise in communications, media, or international affairs. The Secretary of State automatically has one seat. Although the remaining eight members are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate, they

are supposed to be allocated so that there are four Democrat members and four Republican members.

This is intended to reflect the nonpartisan mission of the BBG, but the appointment process can be very political. Members are appointed as it suits the political needs and timing of the White House. Sometimes, positions are not filled in a timely manner, leaving USIB subject to partisan bias because of unbalanced representation on the BBG or rudderless due to insufficient representation to establish a quorum.

Internal Politicization. Although the BBG was created by Congress to provide a firewall against political influence on its news broadcasting, its structure and lax observance of bylaws and agreed practices invites internal conflict and the creation of fiefdoms by individual governors. Moreover, as documented by the State Department inspector general, the ability of BBG members to serve simultaneously on the corporate boards of nonprofit-affiliated broadcasters such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) can lead to conflicts of interest.²

News Versus U.S. Perspective. USIB has been accused of content bias or deliberate efforts to downplay its American message, which is exacerbated by the BBG's permanent employees, who often see their mission as functioning as a news outlet rather than as a vehicle for promoting U.S. policy. On a number of occasions, the Persian News Network of Voice of America has been documented to show anti-American bias. This was particularly true under the presidency of George W. Bush.³

This predilection is sometimes abetted by the political process, such as President Obama's proposed deep cuts in the Office of Policy, which writes the editorials on U.S. policy for the broadcasters.⁴

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<http://report.heritage.org/ib4206>

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Opacity. BBG decisions also tend to be marred by a lack of transparency. For instance, seeking to clamp down on leaks in June 2012, the BBG voted in favor of a “Protocol to Prevent Unauthorized Disclosure of Confidential and Pre-Decisional Information” between members and staff or two board members. “Pre-decisional information,” of course, could mean almost anything, which in effect makes all deliberations within the agency confidential.⁵

Competing Resources. The lack of clearly defined missions leads to overlap, duplication, and unnecessary competition for resources, airtime, and responsibilities. VOA, the flagship of USIB, has been experiencing cuts in its services to many countries in favor of more cost-effective surrogate broadcasters, which broadcast domestic news into countries deprived of free media. Thus, VOA has almost no presence left in Russia, Ukraine, or Crimea, sending the signal that the United States is not engaged.

Budget constraints have also led the BBG to narrow the number of languages that USIB uses. In recent years, Mandarin and Cantonese have been slated for elimination. Time and again, Congress has had to step in to prevent crippling cuts in services.⁶ In addition, USIB has been increasingly focused on Internet and television at the expense of radio. While radio may sound quaint, it remains a popular broadcast vehicle in some poorer areas of the globe and is harder to block than more modern technologies.

What to Do. What is needed is a clearer division of roles among U.S. broadcasting assets, sufficient funding to have a prominent U.S. media presence in global hotspots, and an organizational structure that separates VOA from the surrogates while protecting the core functions of each. Equally important will be

regular inspector general reports to ensure controls of broadcast quality. In order to strengthen USIB, Congress should:

- **Eliminate the BBG or downgrade it to an advisory role.** If there is to be a broadcasting board, it should have a strictly advisory role and should be populated by media and public diplomacy professionals.
- **Disaggregate the broadcasting services according to their functions.** VOA should become an explicit arm of U.S. public diplomacy focused on promoting America’s story and U.S. policy. The VOA leadership role performed by the BBG should be replaced with a new powerful CEO, appointed by the President and confirmed by Congress, who is instructed to coordinate with the State Department on U.S. public diplomacy messaging and targeting. Surrogate media such as RFE/RL and Radio Free Asia should more closely coordinate and share resources to increase efficiency and economies of scale and should be overseen by a governance body separate from VOA to avoid the conflicts of interest present in the current structure. The surrogates should focus on bolstering America’s democracy promotion efforts by providing unbiased news coverage, policy and political discussion, and, where governments constrain political speech, alternative outlets for political dissidents and minority parties. They could benefit from an affiliation with the National Endowment for Democracy, whose mission they share.

1. U.S. Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Office of Inspector General, “Inspection of the Broadcasting Board of Governors,” January 2013, p. 1, <http://oig.state.gov/documents/organization/203193.pdf> (accessed April 22, 2014).

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

3. See Helle C. Dale, “Why America Has Trouble Reaching Iran: VOA’s Persian News Network in Dire Need of Reform,” *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 2659, March 5, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/03/why-america-has-trouble-reaching-iran-voas-persian-news-network-in-dire-need-of-reform>.

4. Press release, “International Broadcasting Bureau Ignores Congressional Request to Save Critical Office,” Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), September 20, 2013, <http://rohrabacher.house.gov/press-release/rep-rohrabacher-international-broadcasting-bureau-ignores-congressional-request-save> (accessed April 22, 2014).

5. Free Media Online, “Rep. Rohrabacher—BBG Strikes Blows Against Government Transparency and Congressional Oversight,” June 27, 2012, <http://freemedialine.org/freemedialineblog/2012/06/27/rep-rohrabacher-bbg-strikes-blows-against-government-transparency-and-congressional-oversight/> (accessed April 22, 2014).

6. William Lowther, “US to Cut VOA Broadcasts in Chinese,” *Taipei Times*, February 16, 2011, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2011/02/16/2003495998> (accessed April 22, 2014).

- **Provide adequate funding.** To be effective, USIB must be capable of answering global ideological threats through a multimedia approach at VOA and at the surrogates, including radio, satellite television, and the Internet.
- **Regularly review and target USIB to maximize its impact.** USIB should not replicate the efforts of pre-existing free and independent media. USIB should focus on countries where representative government and/or a free and independent media are absent or inadequate, where there is conflict and political instability, or where U.S. interests justify a robust public diplomacy presence.
- **Substantiate decisions about language services.** Short-sighted decisions have currently left the United States short of assets to counter the new Russian revanchism as well as the aggressive Chinese global media advances and the ideological threats from militant Islam, to name a

few of the critical challenges currently faced by this country.

Still Needed. Instability, conflict, and political repression in disparate areas of the world underscore the need for America to promote its policies and provide objective news and clear calls for freedom, representative governance, and tolerance. Sadly, America's vehicles for communication are muffled by poor management and unclear missions and objectives. Congress should take steps to improve the focus, effectiveness, and responsiveness of U.S. international broadcasting to evolving situations and crises.

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