

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4401 | MAY 5, 2015

U.S. International Broadcasting Still Needs Reform

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Congressional efforts to reform and reorganize U.S. international broadcasting (USIB) stalled last year. The U.S. International Communications Reform Act of 2014 (H.R. 4490)¹ was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in the House but was never introduced in the Senate. The USIB is still much in need of reform and facing greater challenges than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

Audiences within reach of Russia's growing media empire are increasingly subjected to manipulation and rampant anti-Americanism. This trend has intensified since the Russian annexation of Crimea and its invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Free Western media has no comparable presence in Russia.² In the Middle East, a new version of Islamist fundamentalist fanaticism has developed advanced communications strategies focused on social media to recruit and radicalize foreigners. USIB needs to be effective to counter falsehoods and deception with truthful reporting.³

Politicization and Poor Governance

A major obstacle is the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) itself, which oversees most major civilian assets of USIB. 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, the positions are supposed to go to four Democrats and four Republicans 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. In some cases, 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.

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.⁴

Even though it oversees multiple organizations and activities with a budget of close to \$750 million, the BBG operates on a part-time basis; members have other jobs⁵ and meet once a month or 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."⁶

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4401>

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In an attempt to address this issue, the BBG instituted a position of Chief Executive Officer for International Broadcasting in 2014. This position answers only to the Board. The first CEO, Andrew Lack, left in April after only six weeks. Also in April, the director of Voice of America (VOA), David Ensor, announced his resignation. Their departures leave an unfortunate leadership gap at a time when strategic demands are high. But more fundamentally, the administrative decision to create a CEO position lacks the permanence and resulting authority that would arise from legislated reform.

Unclear Mission and Inadequate Leadership

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.⁷ This was particularly true under the presidency of George W. Bush.

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.

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, at the time of the Russian intervention in Ukraine and Crimea in 2014, VOA had almost no presence left in Russia or Ukraine, sending the signal that the United States was not engaged. The BBG has had to reverse course and ramp up programming to counter the onslaught of Russian propaganda in its neighboring countries.

Budget constraints and the drive toward new expensive technologies have also led the BBG to narrow the number of languages that USIB uses. Mandarin and Cantonese have been slated for elimination. Time and again, Congress has had to step in to prevent crippling cuts in services. In the case of Ukraine,⁸ Congress stepped in to pass legislation to restore funding to boost service to Ukraine. In addition, USIB has been increasingly focused on Internet and television at the expense of radio. While radio may sound quaint, it remains the primary medium of mass communication in the world.

What to Do

What is needed is strong leadership, 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:

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1. United States International Communications Reform Act of 2014, H.R. 4490, 113th Cong., 2nd Sess., <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-113hr4490ih/pdf/BILLS-113hr4490ih.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2015).
 2. Helle C. Dale, "Russia's Weaponization of Information," testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, April 15, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/04/russias-weaponization-of-information>.
 3. "ISIS' Influence in Social Media," event held at The Heritage Foundation, February 4, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/events/2015/02/isis-and-social-media>.
 4. U.S. Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Office of the Inspector General, "Inspection of the Broadcasting Board of Governors," January 2013, p. 1, <https://oig.state.gov/system/files/203193.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2014).
 5. Helle C. Dale and Brett D. Schaefer, "Time to Reform U.S. International Broadcasting," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4206, April 24, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/04/time-to-reform-us-international-broadcasting>.
 6. Ibid.
 7. 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>.
 8. Ukraine Support Act, H.R. 4278, 113th Cong., 2nd Sess., <http://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20140324/BILLS-113hr4278v2-SUS.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2015).
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- **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 management 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 and policy and political discussion. They could benefit from an affiliation with the National Endowment for Democracy, whose mission they share.
- **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 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.

Still Needed

Instability, conflict, and political and religious repression in many areas of the world mean that the need is acute for America to promote its policies and provide objective news and clear calls for freedom, representative governance, and tolerance. 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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