

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3080  
December 13, 2010

## U.S. International Broadcasting: The Need for a New Strategic Plan

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One of the mysteries surrounding U.S. international broadcasting is why more money spent each year is buying less and less airtime. Even as the budget for such operations continues to grow, U.S. broadcasting services are being cut back—and, no less, in parts of the world that are of immense strategic value to the U.S.

The new Congress should ask questions about the long-term strategic goals of U.S. international broadcasting and how best to meet those objectives while adapting to a changing environment.

**The Importance of Shortwave.** At Voice of America (VOA), one radio language service after another has been closed down, and in October four major languages narrowly escaped getting the hook. These were not piddling obscure languages with a few hundred listeners but world languages: Spanish, French (to Africa), Mandarin, and Indonesian.

According to figures by Intermedia—the company that conducts audience research for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG)—in Ethiopia, 69 percent of listeners state that they listen weekly to shortwave. In Zimbabwe, the number is 84 percent, and in Burma it is 91 percent. In Afghanistan, almost 40 percent say they listen to the Dari broadcasts of VOA or Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty.

In other words, while the global audience for shortwave has indeed dropped steeply in the last 20 years, the countries where it dominates are important for U.S. foreign policy and hard to reach by other means. In other key areas—e.g., Central Asia,

the Caucasus, China, North Korea—shortwave radio is the only medium available at this time as the government jams or controls other media. Radio Free Asia, which broadcasts into China (much to the irritation of the Chinese government), functions entirely in shortwave.

The reason given by the broadcasting management for cutbacks in radio: a funding shortfall in the 2011 budget. Yet the fact is that the budget for U.S. international broadcasting has grown by more than \$100 million over the past five years.

So what's the deal? It is entirely understandable that Members of Congress, when apprised of the imminent closure of these languages, started voicing their strong concerns to the U.S. government's International Broadcasting Bureau. Similar concern has been raised over plans to shut down the only remaining shortwave transmission station owned by the U.S. government in the continental United States in Greenville, North Carolina.

**The Need for a Strategic Review.** Thankfully, both plans have been put on hold by the new BBG under the chairmanship of Walter Isaacson. Taking office in July, the new board has initiated a long-overdue strategic review. This is critically needed to

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3080>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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prevent important U.S. assets from arbitrary and short-term decisions made under the previous management to cover shortfalls and in support of a bias in favor of television and Internet vis-à-vis radio.

The BBG's current strategic document is a five-year plan that dates from 2008.<sup>1</sup> It is heavily focused on the Internet, social media, new technologies, and satellite television distribution. The investment in the high-end technology is a major reason for the continuous cuts in radio. Yet as the WikiLeaks scandal demonstrates, the Internet remains extremely vulnerable to interference not only by foreign governments like that of China or Iran but also by "information anarchists" like Julian Assange with agendas hostile to the United States.

Another reason for cutbacks in radio is an unconscionable amount of duplication within the broadcasting systems. For instance, not until recently did any sharing of journalistic and technical assets take place between VOA's Latin America Service and Radio and Television Marti broadcasting into Cuba. Even today, the U.S. broadcasting entities directed at the Middle East—Al-Hurra television and the Persian News Networks of VOA, among others—function entirely independent of each other. Despite being given high priority in the BBG's current strategic plan, the U.S. Middle Eastern broadcasting services often come under intense criticism for quality, content, and bias, and they cry out for a thorough review.

**Recommendations.** Congress should:

- Support the strategic review of the BBG. As the Senate has been dragging its feet on oversight, it will fall to the House to take an active interest in international broadcasting through the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the House Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy Caucus.
- Halt any further erosion of the BBG's radio transmissions and capabilities, even as other media and venues are explored. The technological disparities between different parts of the global audience demand a mixture of media, including medium and shortwave radio alongside television and the Internet.
- Demand that the National Security Council fulfill the congressionally mandated requirement for analysis of the need for an intergovernmental public diplomacy and strategic communications agency or center.<sup>2</sup>

**Reassessing Strategy.** The new Congress should support this strategic review when it takes office in January. Oversight hearings have been awaited in the Senate on U.S. international broadcasting since this summer. But at least in the House, the leadership of the Foreign Affairs Committee come January will have the power to support a thorough strategic review and an ensuing comprehensive broadcasting strategy for the 21st century.

This ought to include a realignment of assets and, ideally, a new and more effective governing structure. Ultimately, this work should be coordinated with an agency or center for strategic communication within the U.S. government that can clearly define the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and national security goals and its international broadcasting strategy.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Broadcasting Board of Governors, "2008–2013 Strategic Plan," at [http://media.voanews.com/documents/bbg\\_strategic\\_plan\\_2008-2013.pdf](http://media.voanews.com/documents/bbg_strategic_plan_2008-2013.pdf) (December 10, 2010).
2. Helle C. Dale, "Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications Review: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2840, March 22, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/03/Public-Diplomacy-and-Strategic-Communications-Review-Key-Issues-for-Congressional-Oversight>.
3. See Tony Blankley, Helle C. Dale, and Oliver Horn, "Reforming U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2211, November 20, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2008/11/Executive-Summary-Reforming-US-Public-Diplomacy-for-the-21st-Century>.