

Kim's comments on the Lugar report.

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Paul Foldi and his colleagues on (fellow Hoosier) Senator Richard Lugar's staff have prepared the report "[U.S. International Broadcasting -- Is Anybody Listening? -- Keeping the U.S. Connected.](#)" This is an uncommonly thorough and thoughtful report about the challenges to U.S. international broadcasting.

There were three especially good things in the report...

1) It calls for the much-delayed confirmation of the eight new members of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, held up by some of Senator Lugar's fellow Republicans, especially Senator Tom Coburn. "The Board has not had a formal Chairman since June 2008 when the incumbent left to become the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy for the remainder of the Bush Administration. The Obama Administration did not formally submit candidates for a new Board until November 2009, but [Senate] action on them is still pending as this report was going to print. This is especially unfortunate because the changing circumstances that have confronted the BBG since the current Board members were emplaced in 2002, both technical and geopolitical in nature, require immediate attention; attention the current Board is understandably reluctant to address given the nominations waiting in the wings."

2) The report defends the need for balance in the reporting of US international broadcasting. "[I]n order for the BBG to be credible to its audience and draw in not just those who already agree with U.S. policy, its networks must be permitted to present both sides of an argument." This is in contrast to Senator Coburn, who has said: "The U.S. taxpayers should not subsidize content presenting a balance between the truth and the regime's malicious propaganda. U.S. broadcasts should be the balance to the propaganda being broadcast by the regime and others."

3) The report acknowledges, though briefly, the 800-pound gorilla of US international broadcasting, which is the amount of duplication between entities: "VOA is intended to provide its listeners with news and information about the United States, the world and the particular region to which it is broadcasting. The surrogates are intended to focus their reporting on the news from inside the countries they are broadcasting to. In reality, each does a little of both to the point that some are questioning whether one or the other is necessary."

Now to the specific recommendations in the report...

- The Broadcasting Board of Governors sets the policies and provides necessary oversight of U.S. broadcasting operations. The average vacancy rate for a seat on the Board is more than 470 days (one seat has been vacant for more than four years). The Senate needs to confirm the current slate of nominees for the Broadcasting Board of Governors to provide needed leadership and guidance. Going forward, Presidents should move with dispatch to fill vacancies and should prioritize nominees with substantial international broadcasting experience. In the medium term, Congress must decide whether it is time to consider another management structure if Board staffing difficulties persist.

"Staffing difficulties" persist at present because of members of the Senate stalling confirmation of the new BBG members. If Senator Tom Coburn still thinks BBG is "the most worthless organization in the federal government," he can continue his hold on the BBG nominations until the concept of the Board itself is destroyed.

In international broadcasting, credibility is the most important commodity. That is why people seek news from abroad. Credibility requires independence. In the Western democracies, public broadcasting entities funded by license fees or by government grants maintain their independence by being governed by a bi- or multi-partisan board with fixed and staggered terms. There is no other way. Return to politically-appointed management of US international broadcasting will change the tone of US international broadcasting, which will be detected by the audience, which will tune elsewhere.

- Alhurra – the U.S. 24-hour Arabic television news channel – is expensive, and with the exception of Iraq, little watched elsewhere in this vital region. Alhurra's budget of some \$90 million surpasses the combined budgets of Radio Free Asia (\$37 million), Radio/TV Marti (\$30 million) and VOA's Persian News Network Television (\$17 million). Given the crowded media environment of the Middle East, either greater resources must be devoted to marketing and promotion or additional programming changes must be enacted in pursuit of increasing the channel's market share. Should these efforts fail to improve the overall viewership levels, policy makers will have to decide if continuing Alhurra's operations is worth the costs.

This assessment undervalues Alhurra's reach in Arab countries. I have written before that Alhurra can't be expected to match the audience size of Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya, but it should try to gain a respectable fraction of those stations' viewers. Very much needed now is audience data showing how Alhurra is faring versus the other Arabic-language channels from non-Arab nations: BBC Arabic, France 24, DW-TV, Russia Today, EuroNews, CCTV, Al Alam, etc.

- The Chinese Government has issued only 2 work visas for Voice of America Beijing-based correspondents since 2009 and, for over a year, has blocked VOA from opening a bureau in Shanghai. By contrast, China's state-run media organization - Xinhua News - has some 75 correspondents based in the United States. Since 2007, the U.S. government has issued some 2,900 press visas to Chinese journalists and media personnel. Journalists in Russia are routinely abducted, tortured and murdered with virtual impunity.

Reciprocity agreements might be a way to improve access to journalists and broadcasts in countries such as China and Russia. Such agreements, however, might be construed as limiting US press freedom, even if overseas press is involved. I would have sympathies both sides of such an argument, so may the lawyers for each side give it their best shot.

- The number of Russian radio stations carrying Radio Free Europe's Russian service broadcasting has declined precipitously from over 30 stations in 2001 to currently 5; VOA's dropped from 85 in 2003 to just 1 by 2009 as the Russian government successfully silenced most BBG broadcasts by simply refusing to renew Russian radio station licenses unless US programming was dropped. The State Department should raise

this issue at the highest levels in its meetings and should monitor closely rising attempts to block BBG Internet sites.

Reciprocity again, like the old Cold War agreement to sell so many copies of *Amerika* magazine in the USSR, in exchange for the same number of (mostly unsold) *Soviet Life* in the United States. If BBG websites are blocked in Russia, this would leave only shortwave and satellite, neither especially popular in Russia, as a way to get USIB news into Russia. Russia is one of several difficult challenges for USIB.

- In Asia, according to the human rights NGO Freedom House, the six countries served by Radio Free Asia are experiencing steadily dwindling levels of press freedom, with none currently ranked higher than 132 out of 195 countries. RFA, set up in 1994 with the hope that the post-Cold War tide of democracy and liberalization would soon sweep Asia, was authorized only on a temporary basis. Congress should permanently authorize Radio Free Asia to recognize the unfortunate reality of press freedom in Asia, and put RFA on a legislative par with Radio Free Europe, Cuba Broadcasting, and Middle East Broadcasting.

East Asia is one of the most difficult areas to get news out of, and to transmit news back into. This requires all of the resources that US international broadcasting can muster. Unfortunately, the resources of USIB for Asia are divided between Radio Free Asia and the Voice of America, which overlap and compete in eight of the same languages. Permanent authority for Radio Free Asia would perpetuate this unsatisfactory situation, which forces USIB to be more expensive and less effective than it should be. I'm not saying that RFA should go away so that VOA employees can enjoy better job security. I am saying there should be a merger of all the entities.

- "The BBG's Arabic-language Radio Sawa has an hourly format of 45 minutes of music with 15 minutes of news. As a result, Sawa was deemed heretical by many 'news-only' advocates in the BBG when it appeared in 2002, yet Sawa quickly became popular with the 'under 30' youth-bulge deemed critical in that region, virtually none of whom had listened to VOA's Arabic radio programming. Over time though, as its format has been copied by local stations, Sawa's listenership has declined by 25%. Greater funding for marketing or a change in formats may be needed."

It is a tribute to the designers of the Radio Sawa format that it has held its own against local music radio stations in the Arab World. Through focus groups and other research, Radio Sawa should hang onto its success as long as possible. Eventually, it may have to explore co-productions with domestic broadcasters in Arab nations. A news format for radio might not worth the investment, because the news audience in that part of the world has moved to television, and is increasingly moving to the internet.

- While Radio Free Asia is tasked with reaching a population of over 1 billion people, its marketing budget for fiscal year 2009 was less than \$2,000. The Middle East Broadcasting Network, which oversees Al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa, has seen its marketing budget fluctuate wildly from a few thousand dollars in 2005 and 2006 to \$100,000 in 2007, back to \$5,000 in 2008 to over \$1 million in 2009. Such

inconsistencies wreak havoc with any long-term attempts to capture market share and must be addressed.

Keep in mind that there are not many opportunities to do marketing in the RFA target countries. Marketing is more feasible in Alhurra target countries. Because the coverage area and potential audiences for USIB are so vast, marketing may be an unfathomable task. Because success in international broadcasting increasingly is dependent on getting content onto radio and television stations that are already successful in the target country, USIB marketing is, and probably should remain, focused on the managements of these stations.

- The government of Iran continues to attempt to jam both VOA's Persian News Network TV (which uses multiple satellite systems to prevent a total shutdown) and Radio Free Europe's Persian-language "Radio Farda." In February 2010, the Iranian government arrested seven journalists who had merely held job interviews with Farda. Efforts to ensure that our programming gets through should remain a high priority."

Not just in Iran, but also China, Cuba, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Vietnam, Burma, and other countries that jam, block, and confiscate to keep out US international broadcasts. Getting information through to countries whose governments try to keep that information out is the number one challenge for US international broadcasting. Remedies must be assessed objectively, by people who do not have commercial or bureaucratic ties to any one anti-censorship technology.

- Critics note that some BBG entities have allowed individuals opposed to U.S. policy to air their views without any rebuttal or balanced context. While allowing such vitriol to go uncontested is clearly poor journalism, such occurrences have been the rare exception, not the norm. Nonetheless, in order for the BBG to be credible to its audience and draw in not just those who already agree with U.S. policy, its networks must be permitted to present both sides of an argument.

Discussed above. It is gratifying to see this defense of credibility from Congress.

- Congress should revisit the Smith-Mundt legislation, which was passed originally in 1948 and later amended, which bans U.S. government broadcasting within the U.S. for fear the government would unduly influence its own citizens. Today, however, Russia and China and other entities currently broadcast in English in the United States. Additionally, recent Arabic-speaking immigrants to the United States are able to watch Al Jazeera but prevented by Smith-Mundt from viewing Al Hurra. These realities, coupled with the rise of the Internet, which enables computer users in the U.S. to receive video and audio streams of BBG broadcasts and readily access BBG websites, demonstrate that aspects of the legislation are both anachronistic and potentially harmful.

The existence of Russian and Chinese broadcasts in the United States is not a reason to allow US government broadcasts in the United States. There are better reasons to eliminate the domestic dissemination prohibition on US international broadcasting: 1) Americans have a right to know what their government is transmitting to the rest of the world. 2) USIB can provide a public service to immigrant communities, at no additional cost to the taxpayers, by providing news

about their home countries in their native languages. 3) The domestic dissemination prohibition is difficult to enforce, as any American can visit the websites of the USIB entities. (It could be enforced if the decision is made to block those sites to persons with US IP addresses). 4) Without the domestic dissemination ban, USIB could barter its international coverage for the domestic coverage of US news entities. 5) The domestic dissemination prohibition is based on the incorrect premise that US international broadcasts are propaganda.

Congress occasionally allows exceptions to the domestic dissemination ban. One of the most recent allowed the VOA Afghan Service documentary "A Fateful Harvest," about the opium drug trade in Afghanistan, to be distributed within the United States. To serve US immigrant communities, perhaps Congress should make a similar exemption for all USIB content that is not in English. Ethnic radio stations would then have no qualms about providing VOA content to their local listeners.

If the domestic dissemination ban is dropped, there should be legislative language ensuring that funds allocated to international broadcasting are not used for domestic distribution, with a few small exceptions, such as to facilitate the barter deals mentioned above.

- As part of its FY2011 budget submission, the BBG has proposed closing its last U.S.-based short wave broadcasting facility, located in Greenville, North Carolina. The Board estimates a \$3.2 million dollar savings as a result of this closure. While there is no question that audience for short-wave is decreasing in some countries, policy makers need to decide if shuttering the only remaining SW facility on American soil makes strategic sense. Additionally, while the U.S. has been jettisoning its shortwave frequencies, cutting some 60 in the last 10, China has been doing the exact opposite, almost doubling its number to 284 in the same period.

If China is investing unwisely in shortwave, the United States should not feel compelled to match that unwise investment. There should be a conference, perhaps in North Carolina, about the future of shortwave broadcasting, including the future of the Greenville facility. There are interesting arguments on both sides. Shortwave may no longer be popular, but it is useful in emergencies. And there will be emergencies.

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