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### Voices of America

#### Public diplomacy is not the magic bullet

**Since the 9-11 terrorist attacks, a multitude of commissions, advisory panels, working groups, foundations, and institutes have advocated more US public diplomacy. This, they say, would reverse the anti-American sentiment in the Middle East and elsewhere.**

One think tank paper called for broadcasts of "pro-American programming." The writer must have had visions of a family in an oppressed country huddled next to the shortwave: "Olga, come quickly! Is tonight's Pro-American Broadcast on the wireless!"

Social scientists call such a notion the bullet theory of communication. Send a certain message and the audience will eventually come to agree with that message. The theory was discarded decades ago. The media audience is not so Pavlovian.

#### Increased spending

To improve US public diplomacy, pundits advocate another favourite Washington magic bullet: increased spending. While taxpayers pry the senior fellows' fingers off their wallets, they should consider that Britain spends less (\$407 million per year) on international broadcasting than the United States (\$503 million), but its BBC World Service has more listeners (150 million weekly) than the US-funded Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia combined.



One reason for this is that Britain's international broadcasting is concentrated in one formidable entity: BBC World Service, broadcasting in 43 languages. The United States divides scarce resources, e.g. frequencies, overseas transmitter sites, and foreign-language talent, among VOA, RFE/RL, RFA, and a growing number of specialty services, such as Radio Sawa (Arabic), Al-Hurra (Arabic), Aap Ki Dunyaa (Urdu), Radio Farda (Persian). In some cases, the US international broadcasting entities have overlapping missions and compete among themselves for the same audiences.

The other reason is that BBC World Service, which does news and some entertainment, has been kept separate from Britain's public diplomacy. Britain and British policy are promoted through the British Council, British Information Services and the website i-uk.com.

#### Achieving credibility

In the United States, policymakers and experts have not decided if international broadcasting should be in the news business or the propaganda business, or a bit of both. The VOA Charter, part of federal law, requires its news to be "accurate, objective, and comprehensive." But the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 requires VOA to broadcast editorials, exercises in traditional radio persuasion that advocate US policies. (BBC is prohibited from broadcasting editorials.)

The audience for international broadcasting has certainly decided what it wants: news that is more reliable than what they get from the state controlled media in their own countries. Credibility is therefore the be-all and end-all of successful international broadcasting.

#### A proposed solution

The US government's international communication activities are divided where they should be combined, and combined where they should be divided. The several broadcasting elements should be combined into a single multimedia operation with the resources required to compete in the modern global market. It should have the autonomy necessary to achieve credibility.

Editorials and other advocacy functions should be transferred to a US public diplomacy agency. The State Department's Office of International Information Programs already exists for this purpose. International broadcasting and public diplomacy should be conducted by separate agencies, from separate buildings, if possible from opposite coasts. Each activity is important and can be successful if one does not step on the toes of the other.



Listeners around the world would soon figure out where to go to get the news, and where to go to get official US policy statements.

Will this new rationalized structure make people around the world embrace unpopular US policies? No. But they will be accurately informed about those policies. They will see how the United States debates and derives those policies. And they might appreciate that we provide this information in a straightforward manner.

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