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*CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY*

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**Time to Rethink the Broadcasting  
Board of Governors: Strategic  
Mistakes and Mangement Priorities**

**Testimony before the  
Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign  
Operations, and Related Programs  
United States House of Representatives**

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon. My name is Helle Dale. I am a Senior Fellow at The Heritage Foundation.

The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation or any other organization I am associated with.

It is a pleasure to appear before you today to discuss the U.S. International Broadcasting as a foreign affairs specialist and observer of U.S. foreign policy and communications strategy for some 15 years now.

Recent strategic decisions by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) on Voice of America broadcasts to China suggest that the time has come for Congress to take a serious look at the way the U.S. government manages its international broadcasting services.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in her testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, March 1<sup>st</sup> expressed strong concern over the state of U.S. international broadcasting.

“Frankly, I wish we were doing a better job in our broadcasting efforts. I have met with Walter Isaacson, who is the new chair of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. “Al Jazeera” is a 24/7 entity. The Chinese have started an English language television network. The Russians have started an English television network. We should be by far the most effective in communicating. So, yes social media is very important but still most people in the world get their news and their images from television and radio. So, we can’t forget the old media

while we try to break new grounds in new media.”<sup>1</sup> Of course Mrs. Clinton herself has a seat on the BBG, usually deputized to Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale, so she has the opportunity and responsibility to act on her concerns.

The fact is that as currently constituted, the mostly unpaid, part-time Broadcasting Board of Governors, who meets once a month and has no real CEO, is no way of running a complex media organization with over \$750 million worth of broadcasting entities paid for by U.S. tax payers. This is no reflection on the board members (four Democrats and four Republicans, in addition to the secretary of state) who volunteer their time, work hard to serve their country and do so for idealistic reasons. Yet, with other responsibilities and day jobs, board members have to rely on decisions of permanent staff, and many of those decisions were made in the BBG’s strategic five year plan, covering 2008-2013, years before the current board took their seats in July, 2010.

Congress itself established the BBG in the mid-1990s to isolate broadcasting from political interference. At the time, broadcasting continued to have a connection to U.S. public diplomacy through the United States Information Agency, but when USIA was closed down in 1999, the BBG became a free-standing government agency. Yet, it has been troubled from the start. Members are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, and “it has become clear that the BBG, rather than functioning as a political ‘firewall,’ has become a political ‘football,’” noted a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report in June 2010. For six years the board was not fully staffed and for two years it had no chairman.<sup>2</sup> The confirmation

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing\\_notice.asp?id=1219](http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing_notice.asp?id=1219)

<sup>2</sup> Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate: “U.S. International Broadcasting: -- Is Anyone Listening? – Keeping the U.S. Connected. “ June 9, 2010. <http://www.cfr.org/information-and-communication/senate-committee-foreign-relations-report-us-international-broadcasting-anybody-listening-keeping-us-connected/p22423>.

of the current board was held up for months while frustrated senators demanded greater accountability by the broadcasting services. Now the board has signed off on a budget that has tremendous strategic implications for the future of US public diplomacy in Asia.

Members of Congress should be concerned that while the Chinese government is investing billions in public diplomacy efforts and broadcasting, the BBG has presented a budget that would cut 45 positions at the Voice of America China branch, reduce the overall broadcasting in Mandarin in a consolidation under Radio Free Asia and eliminating the Cantonese service as early as October 2011.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the BBG's proposed 2012 budget is a 2.5% increase over current funding. These changes reflect a cost shifting rather than a cost savings and are a distinct re-prioritization of services not necessarily born out of frugality.

The cuts in the Chinese service are part of an overall BBG strategy focused strongly on building Internet capacity at the expense particularly of radio. (Other VOA short-wave services that were cut in January are Vietnamese, Indonesian, and French to Africa, following numerous other cuts in recent years.) Talking about the impact of the social media in the Middle East uprisings and of the thrust of the BBG's web-based products, BBG Chairman Walter Isaacson recently stated, "This is an exact template of what I think the future of international broadcasting will be like. It's crowd-sourcing, mixed with great journalism, mixed with social networking so that people are empowered by accurate information."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Washington Times: "VOA radio broadcasts to China signing off, while Beijing boosts propaganda" <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/feb/15/obama-admin-to-cancel-voice-of-america-china-broad/?page=1>

<sup>4</sup> Broadcasting Board of Governors, Press Releases: "Staying Ahead of the Digital Curve: U.S. Global Engagement in the New Media Era." [http://www.bbg.gov/pressroom/press-releases/Staying\\_Ahead\\_of\\_the\\_Digital\\_Curve.html](http://www.bbg.gov/pressroom/press-releases/Staying_Ahead_of_the_Digital_Curve.html)

This strategy is problematic for several reasons. While social websites and cell phones are highly effective at connecting individuals and fostering citizen journalism, traditional mass media, in this case broadcast, often is still the most effective means by which to disseminate news and information to areas of the developing world, depending upon the particular area's circumstances.. In the case of BBG outreach to China, while the developed coastal areas might indeed be best served through the internet and cell phones, because of the technology gap, rural areas where the majority of the population live is often reachable mainly by short-wave radio. In fact, even the Chinese government, which is buying up short-wave frequencies en mass, uses them in part to communicate with its own hinterlands. [do we need a source?] And while the internet and cell phones are vulnerable to government interference, especially in China where the entirety of the telecommunications infrastructure is government owned, radio, particularly short-wave, is difficult to block if enough is invested in signal strength and band-width.

Even if only .04% of people in China are using shortwave, as has been stated by the BBG, in a country of 1.34 billion people, that amounts to a very significant number of the population that may no longer be influenced by US international broadcasting.<sup>5</sup>

And of what does get through on the internet, will that content remain unchanged? Chinese filtering of the internet is well known, with keywords deemed to be a threat to the Chinese Communist Party regularly blocked in an obvious fashion. But what will keep hackers or the

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<sup>5</sup> National Review, "The Corner," February 18, 2011 6:22 P.M.  
<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/260160/rohrbacher-s-radio-rage-matthew-shaffer>

state from more subtly redrafting information and affecting the ultimate presentation of VOA news that the end user receives?

The fact is that the BBG is throwing all of VOA-China's chips into one internet-new media basket in a gamble that it will be able to overcome not only hackers from inside "the great firewall" but certainly also those from without.

Just a week after the 2012 BBG budget was made public, on 21 February, VOA's own websites in the US were knocked offline and users sent instead to extremist propaganda, causing another blow to confidence that an internet-dominated approach would result in the successful fulfillment of its mission in China, or elsewhere for that matter.<sup>6</sup> And if the gamble doesn't succeed, will VOA-China be able to shift back again to reincorporate broadcasting?

At this time, Congress should seriously consider drafting legislation to replace the board with a more professional broadcasting management structure. A \$750 million corporation in the private sector could ill-afford the absence of fully engaged and accountable leadership. The five international broadcasters that the BBG oversees represent a staff of nearly 4,000 personnel and need a non-partisan, paid, full-time president and CEO, who should have the resources and time to engage in long-term planning and implementation strategies for U.S. international broadcasting. In addition, Congress itself should also take a far more active role

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<sup>6</sup> International Business Times, "Voice of America news site knocked off by Iranian Cyber Army" <http://uk.ibtimes.com/articles/115194/20110223/voice-of-america-iran-cyber-army-government-hacking-islamic-iranian-revolutionary-guard-corps.htm>

in oversight of this important tool of U.S. foreign policy. Paying attention when things go wrong, is not enough. If members of the Committee have any further questions on the subject of my testimony, I will be pleased to answer them.

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