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# Understanding the Mission of U.S. International Broadcasting



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**McCormick Tribune Conference Series**

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# **Understanding the Mission of U.S International Broadcasting**

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Understanding the Mission of U.S. International Broadcasting

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## Foreword

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**D**uring the Cold War, international broadcasting was an important strategic tool of U.S. foreign policy. In fact, it was instrumental in communicating the strengths of the West while simultaneously weakening the Communist states from within. The key to this success was our understanding of two distinct aspects of our communications policy: public diplomacy—telling the world our story; and surrogate broadcasting—giving other countries the opportunity to openly discuss themselves.

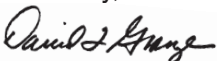
Our current attempts at international broadcasting have blurred this important distinction. With no distinct mission, our international broadcasting has become nothing more than another player in the arena of commercial broadcasting. If we are to overcome our current adversaries, we must reestablish the link between our foreign policy and strategic communications objectives. We must utilize new technologies to compete effectively in the current global communications environment.

This April, the McCormick Tribune Foundation teamed with the Hudson Institute to host a conference, “What is the Future of United States International Broadcasting?” The goal of this conference was to examine the current condition of U.S. international broadcasting and recommend policies for moving forward.

We would like to personally thank the Hudson Institute for partnering with us in the development and execution of this conference. With their help we were able to involve many influential participants that have first hand-knowledge on this topic. Participants included former senior policy makers with experience in public diplomacy and strategic communications, former directors and senior executives of international broadcasting stations, and leading specialists in public diplomacy.

The McCormick Tribune Conference Series is meant to bring together diverse groups of individuals to discuss current and crucial issues affecting our communities and nation. Conferences are intended to have a meaningful impact on public policy and academic investigation. Through our recommendations in the enclosed report, which addresses the future of international broadcasting and its positive role on improving U.S. foreign policy, the Foundation’s hope is to advance the ideals of a free, democratic society.

Sincerely,



Brig. Gen. David L. Grange, USA (Ret.)

CEO and President of the McCormick Tribune Foundation

## Introduction

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America's international broadcasting is in disarray. In the last decade or so, these powerful instruments—the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), Radio Marti (RM), and the recently created Middle East Broadcast Network (MEBN) Radio Sawa (RS) and Al Hurra TV (ALHTV)—have today been reorganized and reinvented as something unrecognizable from the successful broadcasting experience of the Cold War. Important lessons of that time, which took 50 years to accumulate and refine, have been forgotten or purposefully discarded. The once distinct missions of individual broadcast stations have become blurred, and the potent complementarities among them that characterized U.S. international broadcasting (USIB) for nearly five decades have been lost. Today, several of these historic stations all do approximately the same things, a narrow definition of “public diplomacy.” “No national strategy connects their efforts to larger strategic purposes, while the politicized oversight board that governs them, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), a self-described “collective CEO,” lacks authority and stature. Once the centerpiece in America's arsenal for fighting the war of ideas through their trenchant and focused programming, American international broadcasting in recent years has lurched in the direction of becoming just another competitor in the crowded field of commercial broadcasters purveying a menu of entertainment, popular culture and news. As one seasoned observer noted recently, “[t]he war of ideas has been demoted to the battle of the bands.”<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, a number of current security landscapes (e.g., Iran, the Middle East, Russia, South Asia, North Korea) have become resonant sounding boards for traditional broadcast strategies that feature a carefully orchestrated mix of information about America, its values and policies, on one hand, and full-service substitute local or “surrogate” broadcasting designed to draw critical elites and decision makers into debates on the directions of their societies and the future. New technologies—the Internet, podcasting, text messaging, and breakthroughs in traditional radio and television broadcast technologies—suggest new strategies for making this cooperation more potent and successful.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert R. Reilly, “Winning the War of Ideas,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Summer 2007, p. 37.

# Chapter 1: Understanding the Missions

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U.S. funded civilian international broadcasting (USIB) can be a major “soft power” weapon in the war of ideas. Yet USIB has lost the conceptual and organizational coherence that it maintained throughout the Cold War. It is today all too often discussed as a tactical instrument with little attention to the strategic goals it should serve. Means are confused with ends. The contemporary media-rich environment in the Arab and Muslim worlds, Russia, Asia and elsewhere will affect the approach of but not the potential for USIB to offer audiences objective information and ideas, absent from state-controlled and radical media, that can advance the cause of freedom in the world. If we are to do this effectively as a country, we must, in the words of one conference participant, “know your enemy, know your audience, know yourself and don’t confuse the three....”

From its beginnings, USIB has had two key missions.<sup>2</sup> These were located in different institutions so as to minimize contradictions that might arise, strengthen each mission’s essential focus without distraction, and relate in different ways to the foreign policy making priorities and processes of the U.S. government.

The Voice of America concentrated, in the words of the VOA Charter, on “balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions and presenting the policies of the United States clearly and effectively and ... responsible discussions and opinion on these policies.”<sup>3</sup> This was intended as classical public diplomacy, with the emphasis on the United States—that is on “us.”

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), on the other hand, were, in the words of former RFE/RL President James Buckley, “surrogates for the responsible, uncensored radios that the Communist regimes denied their people,” focused on local news, history, culture, religion, and literature banned from local media. They became a megaphone for internal advocates of freedom. Surrogate broadcasting, as this kind of broadcasting was called, was about “them,” the audience, and not about “us,” the United States. Moreover, these stations were important not simply for the information they brought to their audience but for the data and information they collected in the course of their broadcast duties. In this sense, these

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<sup>2</sup> Former Director of Radio Free Europe A. Ross Johnson discusses the history of U.S. international broadcasting, with special emphasis on why different missions were originally devised and how these distinctions worked in practice, in a paper prepared for the conference, “Cold War International Broadcasting: What Worked and Why.”

<sup>3</sup> The VOA Charter is available at <http://www.voanews.com/english/about/VOACharter.cfm>.



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stations were fully local in concept, despite actually broadcasting from thousands of miles away. That distinction between the public diplomacy mission and the surrogate broadcasting mission dates back to National Security Council directives of the late 1940s, which distinguished between foreign information programs covering America and foreign information programs promoting political change abroad. It is also the distinction that contributed importantly to victory in the Cold War.

The origins of this distinction can be traced to the thinking of USIB's early architects and founders, especially George Kennan, Frank Wisner and Edward Barrett. They envisioned that promoting American interests, culture, values and policies through broadcasting was extremely valuable, but it was not the same thing as stimulating debate within target countries on matters germane mostly to their populations and mostly divorced from life in America, with the intent of shaping the policies and activities in those environments in ways that favored America's political and security interests. Thus, two distinct missions emerged. The first—promoting America and “telling its story”—fell naturally to the Voice of America. Surrogate broadcasting that served “local” broadcast stations in the target regions was handed to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty—eventually Radio Marti and Radio Free Asia were added to surrogate capabilities. Indeed, they were created explicitly for this purpose. These were never seen as competing missions; rather, they were intended to be, and in fact became, broadly complementary, and the arrangement worked exceedingly well. According to VOA Director Henry Loomis, “the two stations were like the blades of a scissors, each working together to produce an effective cutting edge.” At various points and times, the missions overlapped. But the distinction was never lost.

Both broadcasting initiatives were part of the international information programs of the United States. Were both of these elements “public diplomacy?” If one accepts a narrow definition of public diplomacy that emphasizes its commitment to promote America as an ideal and, especially in today's environment, defend it against malicious claims made by America's adversaries, the answer is no. The Radio Frees were neither tasked in this way, nor did their charters contain language remotely akin to that in the VOA charter about promoting America. Indeed, most veterans of surrogate broadcasting during the Cold War note that keeping the Radio Frees distant from the

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American experience made them stronger broadcast stations because it allowed listeners to embrace them as their own local stations, e.g., as a Voice of Poland rather than a Voice of America. Post-Cold War testimonies from many critical elites of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (e.g., Walesa, Havel, Yeltsin, Sakharov, Sharansky) underlined their attachment to these broadcasters as “our” stations. If one accepts a wider definition of public diplomacy, that it is an effort to reach people in other countries outside of the traditional means of diplomacy, the Radio Frees fit better, but not perfectly. Participants noted repeatedly that trying to employ the Radio Frees as public diplomacy instruments raises difficult issues about mission, strategy and management that are not receiving adequate attention today. To the contrary, to the extent that they are run as conventional public diplomacy instruments, their surrogate mission is significantly degraded.

Indeed, the distinction between the fundamentally different missions of America’s international broadcasters has been lost in key segments of USIB today. Perhaps the clearest example is broadcasting to Iran. VOA Persian radio and television and the Broadcasting Board of Governors’ (BBG) Radio Farda project, operated jointly by VOA and RFE/RL, both attempt to offer Americana and local coverage, with the consequence that both are hybrid stations with uncertain missions and blurred focus. The RFE/RL Persian Service (Azadi), a Radio Free Iran with a clear surrogate focus begun in 1998 at Congressional behest, was terminated by the BBG in 2002 just as it was achieving success. The same confusion about mission holds for broadcasting to the Arab world. The BBG-initiated Al Hurra Arab-language satellite television combines both public diplomacy and surrogate elements, as does the limited non-music content of the BBG-initiated Radio Sawa. The VOA Arab Service, focused on Arab elites, has been terminated, while RFE/RL’s surrogate-focused Radio Free Iraq continues on a BBG-imposed shoestring budget.

This pattern of hybridizing the Middle Eastern language services in both the VOA and the Radio Frees has meant that both original missions—and their strategic complementarities—are compromised and weakened. The move toward hybridization results in part from BBG decisions to adopt American commercial broadcast formats for USIB assets and to attempt to maximize audience sizes by substituting music and entertainment drawing heavily on American culture for the local programming traditionally carried by the Radio Frees. VOA’s programming has been similarly affected. (See

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the chapter on Audiences.) Budget cuts in the 1990s contributed to the “dumbing-down” of broadcast content. For example, full-fledged Radio Free Iran and Radio Free Iraq were proposed, but only partially funded, so important content for their broadcasts was never developed.

Blurring the distinctions between our broadcasters cannot be justified in the context of tight resources for USIB. If America is going to have multiple international broadcasters, then there must be a clear rationale for each of them. Right now, that rationale is vague at best.

USIB’s mission is further clouded by what increasingly appears to be a confusion of purpose. Those responsible for articulating a solid mission seem unable to bridge the divide between two visions of how America connects to the world through its broadcasting. The first vision is that we broadcast as a normative activity, for example to showcase ourselves, increase our credibility and support the free flow of information. The second vision is that we are enlisting our persuasive arts, talents and powers in the cause of a great struggle, which is not normative but is full of passion and emotion. During the Cold War, these two visions largely converged; everyone connected to USIB understood that America broadcasted for a purpose, that while our broadcasts were balanced and met high standards of journalism they were never neutral. Since the late 1990s, however, these two visions began to diverge significantly, with substitution of “news products,” perceived to be value-free, for focused programming on politics, economics, history and culture — that is, on environment shaping programming. Today, these distinct visions and separate paradigms have not been reconciled nor have efforts been taken to promote re-convergence. A number of participants underlined the danger of such conceptual wandering. USIB, they argued, is a national security tool and will receive sustained support only on that basis.

The connection of USIB to broader U.S. foreign policy goals currently appears tenuous at best. No overarching set of principles guides the choice of who we broadcast to and who is left out. The BBG, an eight-member, presidential-appointed panel, plus the Secretary of State—always represented by an undersecretary—make these critical decisions; the source of their political guidance, if any, is unclear. Where does the BBG get its judgment to cancel VOA English or VOA Russian broadcasting, examples of two recent occurrences? Some broadcast services are eliminated entirely, while some countries enjoy two broadcast services from different broadcast

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stations. Strategic guidance appears to be governed by a kind of budgetary serendipity; funding is taken from one operation and given to another without regard to long-term interests or strategy. At the most elemental level, this part of USIB's mission needs to be clarified.

The complementary but distinct missions of VOA and surrogate broadcasters should be restated, and the hybrid and entertainment-focused stations recast. Most of USIB should be organized on a country and not regional basis; one exception is VOA English. Provided the separate missions of the two kinds of broadcasters are clear and respected, no apology should be offered for a certain percentage of similar material on the air for high-priority countries. Such "overlap," the pejorative description of the budget-cutters, should be seen not as negative but as a positive, raising the standards of programming through competition and maximizing reach among significant audiences who listen to/view different media for different purposes.

Resources, however abundant, will always be limited, and multiple broadcasters will not be needed for all countries. One VOA English language service should continue. For other important but not top-priority countries (e.g., Armenia), one U.S. broadcaster may suffice.

## Chapter 2: Understanding the Audiences

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Successful Cold War broadcasting was based on extensive analytic research on conditions within the target countries and on extensive audience research—in that era, among travelers—on listener media habits and attitudes and reactions to specific broadcasts. This audience research allowed basic segmentation of the audience and shaping of programming for the various segments. U.S. international broadcasting (USIB) today lacks any counterpart to the Cold War analytic research operations of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and although significantly more funding is available for USIB, it primarily focuses on audience research, focusing on overall audience reach and behavior and program quality control. Attitudinal research has been downplayed and separate research on elites has been abandoned. Without analytic research focused on developments within broadcast countries and comprehensive attitudinal as well as quantitative audience research, USIB is in danger of shooting in the dark. With the broadcast environment increasing in complexity each day, this kind of research is critically necessary.<sup>4</sup>

In 2002, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) initiated an entirely new concept to USIB Middle Eastern broadcasting that stressed the importance of attracting younger audiences through the use of music and other popular culture devices with the aim of maximizing listenership. This convention, borrowed from U.S. commercial broadcasting, was justified on the grounds that youth attracted to music and other popular fare would be enticed to stay tuned to news broadcasts and other substantive programming.

The dimensions and dynamics of this change had a dramatic impact on USIB, but it is mostly negative. The consensus at the conference, where participants discussed implications and consequences of the change extensively, was that this constitutes a significant step backward from fighting the war of ideas intelligently. It was noted that substantive programming on politics, culture, economics, society, religion, literature and the arts, human rights, labor and other important topics was neglected in favor of music, mostly of the American popular genre. Music had filled expanded

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<sup>4</sup> Former Director of Radio Liberty S. Enders Wimbush explores probable and imaginable changes in the future broadcasting environment in “International Broadcasting’s Emerging Landscape,” a paper prepared for the conference.

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airtime that could have been put to better use. Although overall audiences to USIB among younger people increased, they were largely among entertainment-seekers.

This focus on mass youth audiences—in contrast to established practices during the Cold War of targeting critical elites and the populations that support them—was particularly criticized. The new broadcasting formula seems to suggest that youth culture is something *sui generis*, that it stands apart from family culture and the culture of older people. Yet this is not the case in most countries; young people do not live in separate compartments from their parents and older people. Few conform to the American youth stereotype, where every kid has his own room, a TV, a computer and an iPod.

Targeting mass youth audiences with popular music and other entertainment reflects a fundamental change in the basic assumptions that have long been the bedrock of effective American international broadcasting. The successful Cold War formula, which seems to have been jettisoned by the BBG in part because it was associated with the Cold War, called for emphasizing programming that has the power to affect decision makers and opinion formers, individuals and groups that will be essential to the course of political and social change. Within this stratum, USIB generated a megaphone effect, as ideas and information were passed eagerly among them. As one participant noted, “You target people who think. They will lead those who do not think.”

In a broadcast universe of limited resources, it was noted, USIB can't be all things to all people; we have to make choices about which audiences we seek to reach. During the post-Cold War period, research on audiences in the former USSR and Eastern Europe for RFE/RL identified nine particular segments around which the broadcast strategy was built. Three groups were considered most important. The prime target—“movers and shakers”—made up roughly 20 percent of the population, mostly between the ages of 25–45, who tended to be more educated than the average. They were interested in politics and they were mostly pro- or proto-democratic in their leanings. A second older group—“older influentials”—was the legacy audience. Broadcasters did not work to build audiences specifically in this stratum, but they did not wish to lose them, either. Highest rates of listening were among this group. “Engaged youth” comprised another important target, but these were not young people targeted indiscriminately with pop music or entertainment. They were under 25, interested in media, in following the news, and in politics. This was a very special youth target.

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Across all RFE/RL services in recent years, weekly listening averaged about 10 percent. Among “movers and shakers,” the prime target, it was about 20 percent, while among “older influentials” the listening rate was about 25 percent. RFE/RL has considered this strategy to be highly successful, as these two groups constituted most of the societies’ critical elites, including those who ran the countries receiving the broadcasts. “Engaged youth” accounted for approximately 12 percent of the aggregate audience.

It was emphasized repeatedly that when USIB was able to understand its audience and target segments scientifically, it maximized its impact. For American commercial broadcasters—the model introduced to USIB in 2002—a high-impact service is anything exceeding five percent weekly listening rates; it’s the numbers that count. But as the Cold War broadcasting experience demonstrated, for USIB it matters greatly where the five percent comes from. If it comes from segments that are of low priority, for example from disinterested youth, the numbers are rather meaningless.

Audience segmentation of this kind is currently conducted for RFE/RL. All broadcast services, it was strongly recommended, should segment their audiences and decide which segments are in fact the key targets for them, and adjust their programming accordingly.

Understanding how different socio-cultural-political groups within a broadcast area choose broadcast media—psychographic analysis—was also studied carefully during the late Cold War years. We had a good idea where liberals, moderates, conservatives and hardliners turned for their information. For example, nearly half of Radio Liberty’s audience was composed of “liberals,” who comprised about 12 percent of the Soviet population. VOA and British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) attracted only 20 percent of their audiences from this group. In short, we learned from this analysis that different stations were actually attracting different kinds of people, and we were able to tailor programming to accommodate audience preferences. Psychographic analysis continued in a more sophisticated way in the post-Cold War period but was largely abandoned after 1995 with the consolidation of USIB under the BBG in favor of hard numbers. Attitudinal and elite research, pioneered at RFE/RL, was discontinued as the BBG allocated the needed resources elsewhere. This kind of research could and should be restored.

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In addition to customizing audience targets, a considerable challenge for USIB will be to match broadcast platforms and technologies to specific target audiences. Critical elites, women, young people or other social groups, it was noted, tend to prefer to receive information on specific kinds of media, for example on radio, TV or the Internet. Making these determinations—i.e., medium or media platform reaches particular audiences most effectively—should be an integral part of a revamped broadcasting master plan, based on solid research.

Moving away from the current one-size-fits-all audience formula in favor of “customizing” broadcasts for particular audiences will require a different national security philosophy of what USIB is intended to achieve and additional ways of measuring the results to better judge impact. The preoccupation with audience size over audience quality is driven in no small part by Congress’ conviction that numbers equal success. A key recommendation of the conference is that Congress be urged to “get away from the big numbers,” to abandon audience size as the key metric for determining where USIB has succeeded and where it has not. Numbers alone tell us too little about the nature of international broadcasting intended to articulate American policies effectively and convey news and information in ways that shape political landscapes to our advantage. Indeed, large numbers of the wrong audiences might indicate that we have not succeeded and that we have wasted resources.



## Chapter 3: Choosing the Right Messages

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United States international broadcasts should seek to influence audiences by informing them; there is no contradiction between these terms. Nor is there any contradiction between the goal of promoting freedom and the practice of high-quality journalism. On one hand, journalism, practiced effectively, is a good set of tools for purveying information objectively. On the other hand, Western journalism embodies a number of organic values such as the people’s right to know and the responsibility of citizens to scrutinize and criticize their governments and leaders. These are powerful messages in and of themselves.

That said, the global journalism environment has changed dramatically in the last decade or so, which will affect the way USIB needs to refine and recalibrate its journalistic filters. American journalism is identified in most of the world with CNN and Fox these days—not with the Edward R. Murrow tradition—and perceptions of it are not particularly positive, far from the ideal. This contrasts dramatically with the Cold War years when American journalism and USIB were compared favorably to the heavy-handed propaganda of the Soviet regime and its Eastern European offshoots. Participants noted that our current competitors are likely to be other U.S. entities, controlled broadcasting in certain countries, or commercialized infotainment, which is the source of information for a growing number of people. It is not enough simply to hold up some ideal of journalism against somebody else’s mishandling or propagandistic use of journalism when our own version is seen as less than ideal. We need to understand that USIB journalists are operating in a changed context. Pressures to “dumb-down” USIB to address lower-end competition will be intense, but they should be resisted.

Objective newscasts, in the tradition of Voice of American (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) newscasts during the Cold War, will remain a staple of the USIB and are essential to building and maintaining the credibility of the broadcast operations that are a prerequisite to their effectiveness. Objective newscasts will be produced by experienced journalists imbued with democratic values, without interference from broadcast management or U.S. government officials. These will not only convey information accurately but “bear witness” to these values. They are fact-based, accurate, and cover the bad news as well as the good news—but they cannot be value-neutral. The coverage of surrogate broadcaster and public diplomacy broadcaster newscasts will differ, but not their high standards of journalism.

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Newscasts and news analysis are only one component of robust programming, a necessary but not sufficient condition of successful international broadcasting. As one participant observed, “Newscasts are just the beginning of good programming, not the desired end-state, which seems to be where we are today.” Given the plethora of international entertainment media, music and entertainment should have a limited role in USIB broadcasting. Moderated music programs such as those effective during the Cold War may still have a place. But rather than positing that entertainment will lead the audience to newscasts, programming should aim for newscasts to lead the audience to discussion and commentary aimed not just to inform but to encourage critical thinking. Lamented one participant: “In the old days of Voice of America, the news was a hook to get people to listen to the rest of it. Now in the mistaken way in which things have gone currently, they play music as the hook to get people to listen to five minutes of news, and so the entire mission is lost.”

Substantive programming beyond newscasts must be credible, but it must also be relevant to the audience, and to be relevant it must have a purpose. Current USIB audience research indicates that listeners/viewers give Western broadcasters high marks for objectivity but low marks for relevance. VOA, and Al Hurra if defined as an instrument of public diplomacy, should offer features that attempt to counter misconceptions about the United States. National Public Radio (NPR) can also play a role. It was noted that NPR’s recent entry into the Berlin broadcasting market was criticized in Washington for being “too liberal for Berlin.” In fact, NPR Berlin is proving to be extremely popular because of its in-depth coverage of and commentary on American issues. It is having a positive effect on attitudes there toward the United States.

USIB should not be thought of as a tactical instrument for combating anti-Americanism. Throughout the world, people are drawn to what is going on in America, even when they espouse anti-American views that rise from specific American policies or activities. We should not lose sight of the fact that America remains a preferred destination for many of our listeners, so the tone of our broadcasts about America should seek to be positive, not reactive or defensive. Recent efforts in other parts of America’s public diplomacy universe that attempt to confront and correct malicious propaganda about America by telling “the real truth” should be avoided in U.S. international

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broadcasting. Gaining credibility is a long-term venture that will not be advanced by becoming involved in “he said/she said” squabbles over who knows America best; indeed, this kind of defensive reaction is likely only to deepen anti-Americanism. In particular, our broadcasts should highlight Americans’ ability to self-criticize and self-correct.

USIB must also find a way to deal with the uncomfortable reality that America’s de facto ambassador around the world is American popular culture. It has penetrated the global marketplace widely and is engaging the attention of young people, especially, in most countries. Americans seem to be of several minds about its import and impact. On one hand, there is a sense that American culture is subversive—an attitude that is derived, perhaps, from the Cold War, when projecting American popular culture was seen to undermine rigid Communist orthodoxy. This view today, transposed onto the current political landscape, sees American culture as something capable of subverting Islamist culture, although there appears to be very little evidence to back up this claim. On the other hand, some see American popular culture as liberating; as a culture that teaches freedom.

The strong consensus among participants was that American popular culture badly misrepresents America and Americans. One participant recalled a recent conversation with a famous Turkish film director about a violently anti-American film that had gained great popularity in Turkey. “It’s the most anti-American film ever made outside the United States,” he said, meaning that most anti-American films were those “made in America.” He added that foreigners are fed a steady diet of Hollywood films, rap music, and anti-social “art” that convey to them the persistent message that Americans are “irreligious, overweight, materialistic, sex-obsessed and lost in malls.” Participants recalled conversations with foreign visitors to the United States whose litany often goes: “I didn’t know that Americans didn’t run around shooting each other all the time. I didn’t know that Americans don’t take drugs all the time. I didn’t know that Americans weren’t wildly promiscuous all the time. I didn’t know that Americans actually had mothers and fathers and children and lived in families. I didn’t know that they went to church. I didn’t know that they were religious.” Participants expressed incredulity that USIB actually might officially reinforce the misrepresentation of ourselves abroad by enlisting American popular culture in its broadcasts as an incentive to attract listeners.

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Instead, our broadcasts should underscore that even Americans can think critically about the excesses of their popular culture. If we want to encourage critical thinking among young people, it was suggested, the place for USIB to start is to encourage critical thinking about our own popular culture—that is, about the things listeners are actually consuming and the ways they are actually viewing America and Americans. Smart young people in our target audience are keenly interested in the lives of their counterparts in the West and the United States. It is not a frivolous concern, nor easily dealt with, but rather a complicated set of issues having to do with social morality, public morality and the ability of people to sustain family life against individualism and consumerism. The United States is full of smart people who can carry on such a conversation, but they seldom are invited to USIB studios. With their help, our broadcasters could submit American popular culture to a rigorous interrogation through wide-ranging conversations that direct attention toward distorted or misleading caricatures of America. Such conversations could be made even more appealing by making them interactive with the audience. This kind of “youth programming” would attract a very ardent and interested audience of younger people who think critically. This would be an audience worth having.

Greater interactivity in programming is consonant with delivering messages of this kind and, participants believed, with many others in the emerging global media marketplace. The rise of peer-to-peer technology makes greater interactivity possible, so that our broadcasts are not simply designed to have listeners present themselves to us but individual people getting to know each other through meeting in cyberspace and creating something together. It was noted that today it is possible for people in China and people in the United States to make music together, exchange stories and interact on all kinds of things beyond entertainment. It was recommended that USIB facilitate the diffusion of peer-to-peer technology and enable access to it. Sophisticated, real-time translation software that would make direct communication between audiences in different parts of the world with people in the United States possible in new ways, is now available.

Broadcasting to the Islamic world today poses a host of difficult problems that are not easy to overcome. Several surveys show overwhelming majorities of Muslims believe that the United States seeks to weaken and divide the Islamic world, if not to destroy Islam, then to wound it. American policies and actions have managed to convince many Muslims that we are trying to

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crush their identity. In the Muslim world, the war of identities has led to the crystallization of Muslim identity around the vision of a great struggle, in many ways legitimizing the message of radical Islamists who many moderate Muslims loathe. America appears, to many Muslims, to have undercut the things it says it believes in, causing it to lose its moral authority. Speaking to Muslims from the United States via broadcasts is thus fraught with special challenges.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and surrogate broadcasters for Iran and key Arab countries (e.g., Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, along with Iraq) should offer features and reasoned commentary, drawing on many voices and sources, showing respect for the audiences and devoted to the present, past and future of those countries, with coverage of politics, economics, culture, history, religion, minorities, women's rights and human rights. Audiences will look for views of contemporaries abroad, not just experts, on such issues. Such programming will seek to counter radical Islamism, and other repressive ideologies, often within a context of Islam and with little or no reference to the United States. They will apply the lesson of successful Cold War broadcasting of affirming American-held values but not promoting United States policies, of publicizing moderates while not polemicizing with and thus legitimizing, the radicals. It is essential to display empathy and respect for the audience. Stations with the surrogate mission should aim for the audience perception articulated by one listener about Radio Free Iraq; "You don't sound like an American radio at all; you sound like an Iraqi radio." In this respect, the two new media from the Middle East Broadcast Network—Radio Sawa and Al Hurra TV—should be relieved from the burden of trying to be both public diplomacy stations like the VOA and surrogate broadcasters. In the context of today's Islamic world, trying to straddle both missions is a likely formula for failure.

## Chapter 4: Technologies New and Old

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New media technologies have created new media-use habits. Listeners and viewers use different media in different ways. Unlike the Soviet-era audiences predisposed to listen to international broadcasts as the primary source of non-regime information, today the richness of international communications creates a poverty of attention, highlighting the need for audience programming targeted in terms of both content and medium. This is the case even in the most repressive countries. Information is seeping into North Korea from South Korea and China, while in Iran, which jams international broadcasts and blocks “hostile” Web sites, print media and especially the blogosphere retain considerable autonomy. In China, too, the blogosphere escapes much regime control. International broadcasts now serve to supplement local media, which offer considerable information, much of it extremist propaganda but generally of high technical quality. Radical Islamist and other extremist forces make full use of the new technologies. For example, on the Iran clergy’s Web site, Hezbollah’s satellite television channel and the re-emerging Taliban’s radio station, insurgents in Iraq make wide use of the Internet to disseminate “news,” which is re-amplified when picked up by al-Jazeera. “Insurgent media are forming perceptions of the war in Iraq among the best-educated and most influential segment of the Arab population,” reports a new Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) study.<sup>5</sup> As one participant noted, the video camera, not the artillery piece, has become the weapon. Al Qaeda is a creature of the information age. Elites—those that are democratic or proto-democratic as well as those who are presently regime loyalists—will rely increasingly on the Internet for content delivery and must be engaged through that medium.

Responding to this altered media environment, the USIB is in the process of supplementing or replacing Cold War-era radio transmission via short-wave and medium-wave (AM) with television (direct satellite and local placement), local FM radio and podcasting, Internet text audio, video and text messaging (SMS). Currently, of the 140 million estimated audiences for USIB, 69 percent utilize radio, 44 percent utilize television and two percent utilize Internet. Shortwave listeners are a primary source of information in North Korea, China and other parts of Asia and significant numbers in Africa and Iran. A veteran BBC official cautioned against writing off shortwave as

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<sup>5</sup> One of the best reports of how Muslim insurgents use media is by RFE/RL’s Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo, “Iraqi Insurgent Media: The War of Images and Ideas,” June 2007, p. 3, available at <http://realaudio.rferl.org/online/OLPDFfiles/insurgent.pdf>.

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an effective delivery vehicle. Digital short-wave technology, with FM signal quality, has great potential and should be included in future content delivery planning. (Other international broadcasters, including China and the Vatican, are preparing for digital short wave utilizing Digital Radio Mondiale, DRM.) Meanwhile, shortwave frequencies are a gold standard that, once abandoned, may never be reclaimed. USIB is in the process of giving up short-wave frequencies, and that process should be halted immediately and reversed, even if the frequencies are only “mothballed” for now.

Since the end of the Cold War, USIB has taken advantage of existing broadcasting facilities within target areas to place its own programming, which is then broadcast to local audiences. This use of “affiliates” for domestic rebroadcasting generally lowers costs and provides a better signal—often FM—than is usually possible by broadcasting to the target country from outside. For example, RFE/RL has achieved a weekly reach of 50 percent in Kyrgyzstan with local placement. But such arrangements entail costs of another kind. Some governments seek to influence the content of this programming as part of the agreement giving U.S. broadcasters access to their broadcasting facilities. This is “a deal with the devil” that USIB must continue to reject. Once governments find that they cannot influence the broadcasts, they simply direct or pressure local affiliates to end them; witness the recent termination of almost all local USIB placement in Russia. The less open and democratic a country and thus the higher priority for USIB, the less likely it is that local authorities will tolerate local placement. In other words, local placement is usually fundamentally incompatible with true surrogate broadcasting. Congress and other oversight bodies must understand that the less open and democratic a country—the higher the priority for USIB—the less likely it is that local regimes will tolerate uncensored local placement and that avoiding this pitfall can result in smaller audiences. They should also understand that media usage can change dramatically during crises, such as the ouster of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in October 2000. Serbs who relied primarily on local television for information switched in their majority to cross-border international radio for news of what was happening in their own country, including the peaceful “March on Belgrade” that thousands joined as a result of those broadcasts.



## Chapter 5: Generating Sufficient Sustainable Resources

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International broadcasting, properly conceived and conducted, is a strategic instrument in support of U.S. national security and requires appropriate sustained strategic funding. This principle, last taken seriously in the Reagan Administration, should be reaffirmed at the outset of the next Administration<sup>6</sup>. All major corporations devote a specified percentage of their budgets to communications, and the U.S. needs to do the same.

George P. Shultz has outlined the need for broad support for robust --communications to the Muslim world that “can assure the necessary sustainability over many years.”<sup>7</sup> Newton B. Minow has suggested longterm funding for U.S. international broadcasting of an order of magnitude of one percent of the defense budget.<sup>8</sup>

Resources devoted to international communication should be seen as a long-term investment. They cannot be expected to “move the needle” in the short run, and that metric should be abandoned. (Had that measure been applied to Radio Liberty in the 1950s and 1960s, the station would have been closed down before “accrued capital” and changing Soviet conditions made it a powerful force for change in the 1970s and beyond.) Global audience numbers will always be of interest, but they will be less significant than audience reach among key audience segments of opinion makers and agents of change, and individual testimony about impact from those circles. Just as during the Cold War, the measure of success for USIB will not be attitudinal polling data about the United States, but “facts on the ground”—social and political changes within the target countries over time.

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<sup>6</sup> National Security Decision Directive Number 190, “U.S. International Information Policy,” March 6, 1984, declassified December 21, 1991, read in part: “All executive departments with significant activities in the international or national security areas should comprehensively review their participation in and support of U.S. international information activities, with a view both to increasing resources devoted to this area within current allocations and establishing clear requirements for future budgetary submissions.”

<sup>7</sup> George P. Shultz, “Sustaining Our Resolve,” *Policy Review*, August-September, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Newton N. Minow, “The Whisper of America,” Morris I. Leibman Lecture, Loyola University of Chicago, May 19, 2002.



## Chapter 6: Reorganizing Governance

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U.S. international broadcasting (USIB) as it emerged from the 1990s with reduced post-Cold War budgets, “consolidation” under the International Broadcasting Act of 1994, and abolishment of the United States Information Agency in 1999 is an illogical patchwork, an archipelago of broadcasting organizations lacking clear individual missions and lacking a normal separation between management and oversight. The organizational chart of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) reveals the dimensions of this dysfunction.<sup>9</sup>

As prescribed by the International Broadcasting Act, the BBG is a part-time body whose members are appointed by the President, with four members from each of the major political parties and the Secretary of State as the ninth member. The BBG has described itself as “a collective CEO,” and each of the members is assigned responsibility overseeing broadcasting operations to particular parts of the globe. Between monthly meetings, it is not uncommon for individual members of the BBG to intervene in the internal management of the broadcasting components for which they are responsible, often setting policy and priorities according to their own inclinations and frequently over the objections of senior management of the individual broadcasting stations. Noted one participant with direct experience: “You can’t have eight CEOs running an institution. It’s dysfunctional, it hasn’t worked, and it’s been terribly destructive.” Other participants who had worked in various capacities to create the structure with the BBG at its pinnacle lamented that, despite best intentions, the International Broadcasting Act was flawed and the arrangement had never worked.

Reporting to the BBG as federal grantees, private non-profit corporations are Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and the Middle East Broadcast Network (Radio Sawa and Al Hurra TV). Also reporting to the BBG is the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB), which is not a grantee but a federal department, in fact a remnant of USIA. The director of the IBB oversees most of the technical functions for all USIB and all of the personnel support functions for the civil service components. Most incongruently, IBB also formally oversees the Voice of America and Radio/TV Marti. In practice, therefore, as several participants observed, this amounts to the Voice of America in effect reporting to its support services. (In fact, the position of Director IBB has been vacant for more than two years, allowing the BBG to reach directly into VOA operations.) The composite picture is of the BBG having jurisdiction over three grantees, all of which are supposed to be

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<sup>9</sup> See current organization of USIB, p. 28.

## Reorganizing Governance

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surrogate broadcasters, and three federal agencies—two of which report to the third. To heighten the confusion, Radio/TV Marti, a federal agency, is a classic surrogate station, while the Middle East Broadcast Network is a kind of hybrid organization, far from surrogate broadcasting, and yet it was established as a grantee.

According to those who helped create this arrangement, it was envisioned that the IBB director would serve as a coordinator of the senior executives of all the broadcast components. Reporting to the board, but not micromanaged by it, together they would plan strategy, search for opportunities to share resources, and collectively identify challenges and opportunities that might be best addressed through consultation and/or collective action. They would manage the broadcast organizations. But this never happened. In consequence, the BBG moved into a role normally reserved for management, much to the annoyance of those managers and drawing the criticism of at least one outside study—by management consultant Booz Allen Hamilton—for micromanaging operations at the expense of providing broad strategic direction to USIB.

The overwhelming consensus at the conference was that USIB must be reorganized if it is to become an effective instrument of American soft power in the long-term competition with Islamic radicalism and other national security challenges. While conference participants did not attempt to outline details of such needed reorganization, they did suggest some underlying principles. First, there was strong consensus that oversight must be separated from management, that broadcasting organizations should be re-empowered to run their own operations without BBG interference. Second, none of the broadcast components, including VOA, should be subordinated directly to the State Department. Third, improved technical support, information and research services should be shared within the USIB universe. Fourth, oversight bodies, however organized, should be composed of foreign policy and media professionals focused on overall broadcast strategy and fiscal responsibility.

One model discussed would provide for a single board, perhaps constituted as a commission, to oversee all of USIB, with an executive director responsible for coordinating the work of CEOs from the individual broadcasters. While this model might seem to most efficiently oversee total USIB resources, it was viewed by many as flawed by the need to oversee the quite distinct missions and operations of the public diplomacy and surrogate broadcasting organizations.

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A second model, supported by more conference participants, would return to the Cold War arrangement of providing separate governance of the Voice of America, on the one hand—perhaps under the jurisdiction of a new USIB-like Cabinet-level institution divorced from State Department control—and of the surrogate Radio Free broadcasters with their distinct missions, on the other hand. In this model, the surrogate broadcasters would be governed by their own board without ties to the State Department or other agencies of government. It was suggested that oversight would best be exercised by a mixed public-private board like that of the National Endowment for Democracy or the National Endowment for the Arts.

A hypothetical third model—a single corporation for international broadcasting—lacked appeal. That model would end the essential distinctions between VOA and surrogate broadcasting and beg the question of why the United States should duplicate the international news and information service the BBC so ably provides the world as a part of alliance burden-sharing.

Specific proposals for revamped governance could draw on a rich history of legislative initiatives, including the International Broadcasting Foundation initially proposed to oversee VOA in 1946; the 1971 Administration bill that would have established an American Council for Private International Communications, Inc., to oversee Congressionally funded surrogate broadcasting grantees; and the 2002 bill passed by the House, but not the Senate, that would have established an International Broadcasting Agency with its own head of agency and Board of Governors, replacing the BBG and the International Broadcasting Bureau.

It was stressed at the conference that, in any model, determination of broadcast countries and broadcast languages is a long-term national security policy issue. As such, it exceeds the purview of any broadcasting oversight board. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, not the BBC's oversight body, the BBC Trust, makes this determination for the BBC World Service. Prior to the 1990s, an inter-agency process centered in the National Security Council made these decisions for USIB, and that is the logical venue for these strategic determinations. And as such, they do not lend themselves to yearly review; a tri-annual review on the BBC model would make sense. These stipulations of the International Broadcasting Act should also be revised.

# Chapter 7:

## Recommendations

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The conference discussions summarized above contained a number of recommendations for strengthening United States international broadcasting so that it can function as an effective national security instrument in the coming decades.

These recommendations are repeated here in outline form. They do not necessarily reflect the views of all conference participants.

### 1. Mission

- Reimpose and strengthen the conceptual and operational distinctions between the Voice of America, whose broadcasts should emphasize American life, values and policies, along with world news, and the “surrogate” broadcast stations (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and Radio Marti), whose primary function is to stimulate debate within the target area by serving as “local” broadcasters.
- End the “hybridization” of those broadcast units trying to combine public diplomacy and surrogate functions.
- Most immediately dispel the confusion over the proper mission—public diplomacy or surrogate—of the new broadcast units Radio Farda, Radio Sawa and Al Hurra TV. Farda should become a true surrogate broadcaster to Iran.

### 2. Audience

- Target critical elites, agents of change, people who think, influencers, “movers and shakers” and the populations that support them.
- Reverse the current emphasis on attracting undifferentiated youth audiences.
- End efforts to maximize the size of the listening audience regardless of the quality of the audience.
- Focus audience measurement on targeted audiences, not global numbers.

### 3. Message

- Readjust the current focus of surrogate broadcasters on topical information to strengthen thematic programming on politics, economics, culture, art, religion, human rights, women’s issues, history and other issues.
- Feature programming with critical views of American popular culture.

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- Promote greater interactivity with listening audiences in broadcasts.
- Rely principally on “surrogate” stations for broadcasting to the Islamic world and into areas of high anti-Americanism.

### 4. Research

- Expand segmented audience research to all of USIB so that all broadcasters can identify core audiences and target them precisely with appropriate programming delivered by appropriate media.
- Reinstate elite audience research and attitudinal and psychographic research.
- Develop a substantial analytical research capability on developments within key target countries, a prerequisite for fully effective “surrogate” broadcasting.

### 5. Technology

- Target segmented audiences with the media most likely to appeal to them—radio, television, Internet, podcasting and mobile Internet.
- Retain short-wave capabilities that currently reach major audiences, “mothball” shortwave frequencies not currently needed and explore digital shortwave transmission (e.g., DRM).
- Understand the limitations of local placement of programs, which will generally be prohibited in countries where USIB is most needed.

### 6. Resources

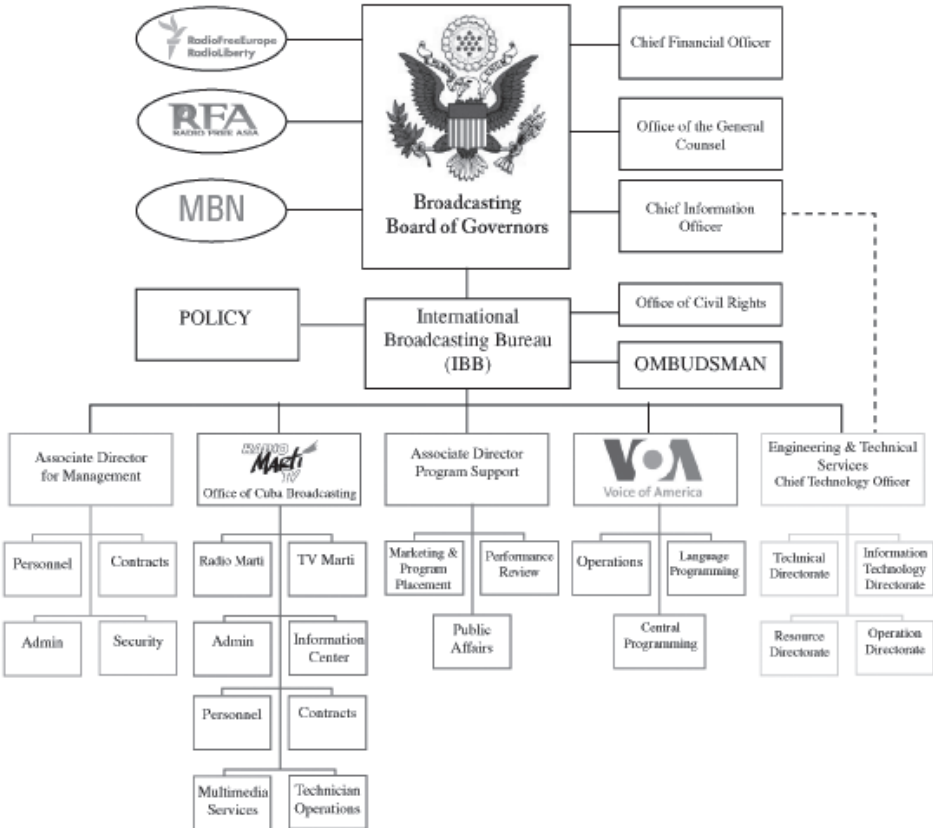
- Make the case for sufficient sustainable resources for USIB as a key instrument in a long-term competition of ideas.
- Understand that USIB is a strategic instrument with long-term impact and abandon short-term effectiveness metrics.

### 7. Organization

- Revamp governance of USIB, separate oversight from management and re-empower broadcast organizations.
- Consider separation of oversight of public diplomacy broadcasters from oversight of surrogate broadcasters, the latter exercised by a public-private board.
- Reassign determination of broadcast countries and languages on a multi-year basis to the NSC.

# Current Organization of USIB

*The Board staff performs several key functions*



### ***Roles and Responsibilities***

#### **Board:**

- Supervises and oversees all non-military U.S. international broadcasting including the IBB, VOA, OCB, RFE/RL, RFA and MBN

#### **Executive Director and Board Staff:**

- Principal liaison between the Board of Governors and external/internal entities; coordinates Board activities
- Integrates strategic planning, language service review, audience research and program review
- Coordinates BBG's congressional activities and programs

#### **Office of the General Counsel:**

- Provides legal advice to the Agency
- Represents the BBG on all legal matters
- Assures compliance with all pertinent laws and regulations

#### **Office of the Chief Financial Officer:**

- Responsible for the overall management of the BBG's budget, financial operations and strategic management

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## Understanding the Mission of U.S. International Broadcasting

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## **Additional Readings**

For additional readings on U.S. international broadcasting, please visit <http://cffss.hudson.org>.

1. "Cold War International Broadcasting: What Worked and Why"

By: A. Ross Johnson, research fellow at the Hoover Institute

2. "International Broadcasting's Emerging Landscape"

By: S. Enders Wimbush, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute