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Oversight Hearing - United States Assistance to Promote Freedom and Democracy in Countries with Repressive Environments House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs

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Chairwoman Granger, Ranking Member Lowey, members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here on behalf of the Broadcasting Board of Governors to address our agency's work via broadcasting and the Internet to promote freedom and democracy in some of the most closed societies on the planet.

BBG programs reach more than 206 million people per week in 61 languages. We present reliable news and information for people in places where unbiased and up-to-the-minute reports on current events are a rare commodity, whether due to autocratic regimes, conflict or natural disaster. Our journalists adhere to the most rigorous standards of professional independence and objectivity, providing people who live in places without free media a much-needed window on the world, as well as news from their own countries and regions.

This includes large audiences in countries that are strategically critical for U.S. foreign policy. The 206 million weekly audience figure reflects the combined TV, radio, Internet, and mobile audiences of five networks: Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio and TV Martí, Radio Free Asia and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (comprised of Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa). And this audience reach is a net increase of nearly 31 million from last year's total. For the first time, our TV audiences have surpassed radio, with the TV audience measuring 110 million and radio reaching 109 million people per week. The Internet audience has grown substantially from last year, with 22 million reached online. The BBG's largest audiences are in Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico, and Iran.

With respect to promoting Internet freedom, the BBG has a robust program, with a current budget of \$25.5 million per year due to an increased mandate in the Fiscal Year 2014 omnibus appropriations bill. Consistent with this requirement, the BBG will continue to expand its complementary and collaborative approach among all the BBG networks in order to leverage their Internet freedom work.

The BBG's IAC Division, which is an office within the federal agency, and RFA's Open Technology Fund provide a variety of tools to improve access to the Internet for citizens of countries whose governments censor the Web, and they help educate these audiences about how to navigate the Internet safely.

Addressing government-imposed censorship of news and information on the Web requires a high level of agility. In the past three years, given additional support first from the State Department and then directly from Congress, our Internet freedom program has undergone a major period of growth to focus as well on mobile and satellite platforms. We have also expanded research and development, analysis, and the creation and implementation of tools that address audience needs for access, security and anonymity. The BBG collaborates with other Internet freedom projects to achieve these aims.

With its newly-expanded Internet freedom funding in the Fiscal Year 2014 budget, the BBG expects to continue research on such topics as how interference in modern Internet data networks occurs; development of technologies to promote Internet freedom and increase communication safety; and the implementation of tools and education programs. It is also expected that the BBG will continue to improve and deploy tools to establish Virtual Private Networks, protect information about URLs visited on mobile devices, and optimize traffic routing through peer-to-peer networks.

The subcommittee has asked the BBG to address how we reach people via broadcasting and our Internet freedom programs in seven countries in particular. I will begin closest to home, with Cuba.

Cuba

Our Office of Cuba Broadcasting is the home of Radio and TV Martí and the website martinoticias.com – collectively, they are known as the Martí's. The Martí's are a multimedia hub of news, information and analysis that provide the people of Cuba with interactive programs seven days a week through satellite television, shortwave and AM radio, as well as through flash drives, email, DVDs, and SMS text. This is a one-of-a-kind service that provides unbiased, objective information.

The Martí's face distribution challenges in Cuba. The Cuban government attempts with some success to jam our broadcast signals, and it places prohibitions on satellite dish ownership. It monitors use of the Internet and restricts bandwidth.

There is a well-established market for DVDs and flash drives with material from outside the island; we have testimony and photos from activists in Cuba demonstrating that programs produced by the Martí's are watched on these media. OCB has also set up an SMS-based social media network called Piramideo that users in Cuba access by cell phone. It allows users to connect via text messaging within the island. And the BBG uses an anti-censorship tool to provide web proxies for access to the Internet, along with a suite of software apps that counter the censors' filters.

OCB works with dissidents in Cuba, the blogging community, and civil activists to improve access to the Internet and information in Cuba, which is considered one of the least connected countries in the Western hemisphere.

Connectivity to the Internet is a new frontier in the Martí's' work. It will dramatically increase the free flow of information on the island. The goal is for citizen journalism to trump the governments' efforts to censor information.

North Korea

The BBG has enhanced broadcasts to North Korea by focusing on improved programming, increased original broadcast hours, and multiple avenues of signal transmission. The current 10-hours-per-day coordinated stream of VOA and RFA programming to North Korea uses BBG programming and transmission resources in the best strategic manner. The services broadcast on medium wave and shortwave frequencies and maintain Korean-language websites.

Officially, citizens of the DPRK are permitted only to tune to official stations, and radios are locked to those frequencies. Against these enormous risks, though, independent research indicates that North Koreans are listening to BBG-supported broadcasts on black market radios. Although the BBG is not able to survey audiences inside the DPRK, interviews of North Korean defectors allow us to make certain assumptions about listening habits. Recent refugee surveys reveal that 18.4 percent of those surveyed listen to BBG programming on a weekly basis.

Based on audience research on North Korean listener habits, the BBG has developed a broadcast schedule during the hours which provide for the greatest potential audience reach.

The BBG carefully monitors these broadcast transmissions on a daily basis for signal quality and indications of jamming, and we adjust technical parameters as resources permit to achieve the best possible quality. VOA and RFA Korean transmissions have been jammed in the past – but only sporadically and not very effectively. To combat shortwave jamming and to provide reliable reception over a target area, the BBG uses multiple simultaneous shortwave transmissions on different frequencies from different locations. To improve medium wave signals, the BBG looks for available time on medium wave transmitters close to the DPRK.

In addition, the growing number of mobile phone users in North Korea offers the BBG new opportunities to use mobile technology as a future alternative, effective means to reach the North Korean audience. An RFA iPhone app that plays RFA Korean's most current programming has been available since 2011, and VOA's Korean Service launched a new mobile site in April 2013.

Iran

The BBG has developed multiple avenues to reach the Iranian people because for a number of years, Iran jammed satellite transponders, which the BBG joined other broadcasters in protesting. Television, social media and mobile phones appear to be the most effective means for program delivery to Iran.

Satellite television dominates the Iranian media market. According to surveys that we have done with Gallup, almost all Iranians (98.2%) report watching TV in the past week. VOA Persian targets the 26.4% of the Iranian population who say they have a satellite dish at home, along with the 32.7% who say they had watched satellite television in the past week. Forty-four percent of VOA's viewers are in the prime 15-34 year old demographic.

RFE/RL's Radio Farda is a 24/7 Farsi-language news station broadcasting independent and unbiased information to Iran on multiple shortwave frequencies and one cross-border AM station, making it available virtually at all times.

U.S. international media reach more Iranians on a weekly basis through television, radio and the Internet than does the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, although the audiences are different.

Iranian authorities continue to aggressively block our broadcasts via localized jamming of satellite TV, shortwave, and medium wave radio signals within Iran.

Additionally, Facebook is a popular platform within Iran as well as among the diaspora population. There are 960,000 fans on the main Radio Farda Facebook page, operated by RFE/RL. This Facebook presence is hugely important for distributing content and interacting with audiences. When the United States returned an ancient artifact to Iran last year during President Rouhani's visit to the United Nations, 205,000 Iranians read the news on Radio Farda's Facebook page. A report about the former Shah of Iran 35 years after his downfall was read by more than 350,000 people and shared more than 20,000 times. VOA received more than 1,000 comments sent on Facebook during a half-hour interactive TV program last November on news about the Iran Joint Plan of Action Agreement hammered out in Geneva.

We also provide satellite transmissions with related on-screen text and audio services for both VOA and Radio Farda, which has proven an effective means since satellite dish ownership, while illegal in Iran, is widespread.

Similar to the Martí's service to Cuba, the BBG currently uses desktop tools to promote access to communication services to Iran. Every month, users from Iran log on to Radio Farda's page via these tools more than 11 million times.

Russia

The BBG, like all international broadcasters, has faced a special challenge in Russia due to a law that went into effect in late 2012 restricting the ability of Russian broadcasters to carry programming from abroad. Both VOA and RFE/RL continue to produce audio and video programs that can be aired on affiliate stations, but are mostly seen and heard on the Web. VOA's Russian Service produces a 30-minute weekday audio podcast that is available online and broadcast on Moscow's 810 AM frequency via a contract with Voice of Russia, and it offers popular video products including daily reports from the New York Stock Exchange at the opening and closing bell. RFE/RL's Radio Svoboda produces an hour-long program aired on satellite and cable channel Top Secret on weekdays, as well as maintaining a partnership on content exchange with the remaining independent media such as radio station *Ekho Moskvy* and the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*.

In spite of the Russian government's efforts to restrict the delivery means for Radio Svoboda, it is seen by the human rights and NGO communities in Russia as a source of support and one of the few media that promote the coverage of civil

society and human rights activity in the country. Last year, the service launched a joint Internet page with the leading human rights group "Memorial."

Last month, the BBG and Gallup released study results on media consumption habits in Russia and the rapid growth of Internet use. The data from the survey show that there is dissatisfaction among Russians with the limited news and opinion offerings of major Russian media. Thirty percent of adults said that Russian media do not offer enough variety in perspectives on current events and issues. A 2013 Gallup World Poll survey of Russia found that only 48% of respondents felt that media in Russia was free, and Freedom House ranked Russia 176 out of 196 countries for press freedom in 2013.

The Internet, by contrast, is one of the more promising avenues for news and information in Russia. The survey results show that as more Russians get Internet access – seven in 10 have access at home in 2013 – more of them are getting their news online. A majority of Russians (56.4%) said they receive their news from the Internet at least once a week. The Internet outdistances traditional media such as newspapers and magazines (49.8%) and radio (43.8%) as a source for weekly news. With this increasingly Internet-savvy audience that expects on-demand, personalized news, a robust Internet strategy is key to engaging younger, digital audiences and expanding reach in Russia.

China

Our networks have been on the forefront of reporting on breaking news and exclusive stories from inside China. Their coverage includes topics that are restricted in the Chinese press, such as unrest in Tibet, human trafficking, government corruption, tensions in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and crackdowns on house churches. This coverage provides audiences with an honest look at some of the most politically sensitive and heavily censored issues in China.

Due to severe restrictions on international broadcasting in China and intensive jamming of radio transmissions -- preventing our broadcasts from being heard and, in some cases, substituting them with Chinese state-run radio programs -- the BBG attempts to reach audiences simultaneously through diverse methods ranging from traditional shortwave broadcasts to more modern Internet proxy services that reach tech-savvy, urban news-seekers on the mainland. Since China has a very robust Internet censorship program as well as popular national social networks that are carefully monitored by the authorities, our Internet freedom program in China

includes the use of newsletters that are sent via e-mail using proprietary software that helps them reach their audience in the face of censorship efforts.

Satellite television presents a promising area for growth for the BBG in China. Dishes as small as 10 inches in diameter are popular in many parts of the country due to their reliability and capabilities.

In terms of total broadcast hours to China, the BBG has ample offerings: VOA's Mandarin service produces 63 hours of radio per week, and 14 hours of TV. The Cantonese service produces two hours of news radio programming, as well as a weekly TV feature on American life. Both the Mandarin and Cantonese services operate websites with popular programs, as well as social media sites with unique content that is not available on-air. VOA Tibetan reaches its target audience on television, radio and the internet with uncensored news that is unavailable to Tibetans through state-controlled Chinese media. RFA Mandarin broadcasts 43 hours of radio each week and eight webcasts. RFA's Tibetan service has broken new ground repeatedly in covering the stories of unrest in that region and is the first to report on many of the self-immolations among Tibetans protesting Beijing's rule. RFA's Uyghur service has been closely covering the tightening of restrictions and targeting of China's mostly Muslim Uyghurs, as well as the ethnic violence that is pervasive in western China. RFA's multi-media website delivers daily news through proxies and other counter-censorship tools and through republication by a broad network of in-country celebrity bloggers. RFA maintains an active social media presence on Twitter, Weibo, Youku, YouTube and blogs.

VOA's daily programming includes international, China, and U.S. news; features on topics such as legal issues, media on China, human rights, and U.S.-China relations; talk shows featuring debates and call-ins; and English teaching. RFA's programming includes newscasts, call-in programs, news features, cultural programming, and talk shows. RFA also plays a vital role in building Chinese civil society by modeling free press and by bringing to light the work of indigenous civil society groups. RFA promotes freedom and democratic values through its coverage for China's underserved communities – including migrant workers, those in remote areas, and those with no access to the Web – along with land grabs, the rule of law, and the millions suffering under religious repression.

Burma

VOA and RFA have two different yet complementary roles to play in a country where democratic reforms are still fragile and are threatened by increasing

religious, racial and ethnic tensions that domestic media have difficulty covering. RFA's goal is to provide surrogate indigenous free press until robust and sustainable indigenous free press exists in Burma. Once this goal is achieved, RFA will withdraw from Burma. VOA fosters the growth of indigenous free press, as well, but it serves to accurately represent American policies and views. Established in 1943, VOA Burmese has broadcast consistently since 1951 presenting U.S. regional and political interests. As long as there is a gap in knowledge about the United States and its values, or broadcasting in Burma that misrepresents America, there will be a need for VOA in that country.

Audience research indicates that the vast majority of VOA's audience listens to RFA and vice versa. Given the large number of dual listeners, we infer that the respective products of VOA and RFA are not duplicative, but rather both valuable in the lives of the listeners.

VOA and RFA programs together create for the BBG the most popular international broadcasting service in the country with a weekly audience share of 28.4 percent, or approximately 15.33 million adults. Media consumption has been largely via radio (61% report listening to radio; 58% use radio for news) – and predominantly on the shortwave band, but FM listenership is growing.

Both RFA and VOA offer original programming on popular and emerging platforms. Together, they provide five and a half hours of original, daily radio content and one hour of original television programming six days a week. RFA and VOA are each building unique social media audiences with breaking news updates on the Internet and mobile devices in anticipation of significant penetration of these media in the country.

RFA is focused on reporting domestic news from the far corners of the country, with offices in Rangoon and Naypitaw, as well as reporters stationed in other states. It reports in seven ethnic languages about what is happening on the ground and how people's lives are being affected by legacy problems and the challenges associated with a transitioning democracy. RFA also reports on the solutions that individuals, the government, the private sector, and NGOs are adopting as the landscape continues to evolve. RFA produces a bi-monthly program with Aung San Suu Kyi, "The Hard Road to Democracy," in which she discusses current democratization efforts and issues.

VOA provides a unique American perspective on events in Burma through coverage of national, regional, U.S., and international news and events. This

includes first-hand reporting on issues such as U.S.-Burmese relations, the U.S. role in Southeast Asia, Burmese relations with China and North Korea, Constitutional Reform, and Buddhist-Muslim communal tensions.

Two significant things occurred in recent months creating new and unique opportunities for VOA Burmese. First, the Burmese government accorded VOA official press accreditation. Second, the 2014 budget proposal includes a \$200,000 investment for VOA Burmese television and digital efforts. VOA will use these opportunities in carrying out its mission, serving as a model of good journalism and providing media training to local Burmese outlets.

Finally, VOA will continue to exploit the strong appetite for English Learning materials. VOA already provides Learning English products for placement on State Radio and Television and Shwe FM.

During the past two years, the BBG has been able to pursue affiliate relationships for the first time in Burma, and has signed both radio and direct-to-home satellite agreements with partners placing programs inside Burma.

Zimbabwe

VOA remains the only Western station broadcasting into Zimbabwe full time in Shona and Ndebele, filling a niche for Zimbabweans seeking news in their own languages that is unfiltered by the state. VOA programs are distributed via shortwave and medium wave frequencies, stereo audio via satellite, the Internet (with downloadable links for all shows), and radio on TV.

The most popular VOA program in Zimbabwe is *Studio 7*, which is in Shona, Ndebele and English. Broadcast each weekday, the 2 1/2-hour program consists of three 30 minute news shows followed by 60 minutes of entertainment. *Live Talk*, an hour-long call-in program introduced in December 2013, consists of three 20-minute shows presented in Shona, English, and Ndebele. It airs on shortwave and medium wave and the livestream is available for viewing online.

According to data collected by Gallup in January, about three fourths of VOA's total weekly audience continues to access the network's programming via its three shortwave frequencies, while 15.3% listen via AM frequencies. However, growing use of satellite television and the Internet in Zimbabwe represent opportunities to expand VOA's reach in the country. Internet use will rise as the population continues to urbanize; in 2013, 46% of city dwellers went online weekly for news.

VOA Zimbabwe's Internet presence includes comprehensive websites in English, Shona and Ndebele, each with streaming audio and a Studio 7 Facebook page.

The prevalence of mobile phones continues to grow rapidly, particularly in rural areas; eight in ten Zimbabweans now have their own phone. As the country's wireless infrastructure expands and the cost of wireless data service and low end Internet-capable phones continues to fall, this will develop as an important distribution channel for VOA and other international media. About one-fifth of the country's mobile phone owners (22%) currently listen to the radio on their phones at least weekly (most likely via the built-in FM receiver) with a substantial proportion of these also able to access the Internet on their phones. As Internet radio becomes more accessible, it will become an increasingly viable alternative to shortwave and a way to reach Zimbabwean radio listeners.

Conclusion

Over the years, the BBG's networks have played a critical role in promoting freedom and democracy by exemplifying free expression by a free press. They are able to report on issues that indigenous media cannot or will not cover, such as official corruption, religious and political persecution, and human rights violations and abuses. In addition, the networks have developed greater global understanding by engaging their audiences on the issues of importance to them, and by providing trusted news and information.

By organizing town hall-style forums with opposition and independent candidates, providing thorough election coverage for countries where democracy is under threat, and letting audiences engage knowledgeable experts on issues such as rule of law, democracy, human rights, and rights under domestic laws, our networks function as open forums and platforms advancing the progress of democracy and civil society.

In a prolonged period of declining press freedom, our journalists have faced numerous threats. In spite of these hazardous conditions, the BBG's networks have met critical strategic challenges with special programming and broadcasts in response to the war in Syria, democratic transitions in Egypt and Iraq, the rise of Islamist fundamentalism in Mali and northern Nigeria, the political opening in Burma, and unrest and protests in Tibet.

We are grateful to Congress for the support and the resources entrusted to us to achieve this critical mission. I look forward to answering your questions.