

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Hearing on the Broadcasting Board of Governors
"Broadcasting Board of Governors: An Agency 'Defunct'"
June 26, 2013
Testimony by D. Jeffrey Hirschberg**

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Jeff Hirschberg, and I had the pleasure of serving on the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) for eight and a half years, from 2002 to 2010. It was an honor to help advance the interests of an organization of committed and courageous journalists who share a deep and abiding sense of mission.

The title of this hearing, "Broadcasting Board of Governors: An Agency 'Defunct,'" conveys a fundamental misunderstanding. There is nothing defunct about the BBG. Its work is more relevant than ever, and its broadcasting services are performing better than ever.

The five BBG organizations – Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Middle East Broadcasting Networks (Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television), and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (Radio and Television Marti) – now operate in 61 languages in more than 100 countries on every conceivable media platform. Their broadcast signals, from shortwave to satellite, are the best in the agency's history. So are the results: BBG audiences are at record levels – now more than 200 million weekly.

This is hardly the sign of a "defunct", or moribund, enterprise.

Yet I recognize there is a perception of the BBG as being dysfunctional, if not defunct. A core problem is that only four of the nine seats on the board are currently filled. This means there's no quorum to make decisions on critical issues. As things stand, the BBG won't be able to submit its budget request to OMB in September. The Senate needs to confirm the three BBG nominees named by President Obama to serve on the board.

I urge the committee not to conflate the performance of the BBG broadcasting services with difficulties experienced by the BBG's governing board, or to use the circumstance of such problems to mount a too aggressive overhaul of our international broadcasting services.

We can debate the merits of a structure in which a part-time board manages the affairs of a complex government agency. Personally, I believe there isn't much wrong with the BBG that a first-rate BBG chairman and full complement of board members, committed to working together, could not solve. That said, the BBG strategic plan calls for creating a CEO position; the President's FY14 budget request includes this provision. I can support this, provided the CEO operates behind a firm editorial firewall protected by the board. The proposed legislation does that. I note,

however, that this will add still another layer of management and create possible additional conflict within the agency.

Safeguarding BBG editorial content from outside political pressure is the board's first duty, as credibility is the BBG's greatest asset.

There is greater value, however, in the concept of a BBG board than defending the firewall. Private citizens from various walks of life, including media, foreign affairs, and government inject fresh ideas, practical experience, and enthusiasm. I witnessed firsthand during my tenure how the board helped to energize the bureaucracy and motivate needed change, and was the driving force behind the creation of Alhurra television. Indeed, I would argue that the BBG board represents the type of beneficial public-private partnership public diplomacy studies over the last decade have frequently recommended.

While the world is awash in media, people still do not have free access to news and information. Despite the information revolution – the Internet, mobile phones, Facebook, Twitter, etc. – only just over one tenth of the world lives in a country with a free press, the lowest level in more than a decade, according to Freedom House, on whose board I serve.

In the Middle East, there are hundreds of satellite television channels, and yet the region ranks last in the world in press freedom in the 2013 Reporters Without Borders survey. In China, there are 600 million people online, but the government systematically censors their access to news and monitors their activity. In Russia, almost everyone has a TV and watches it, but all the major channels are controlled by the Kremlin.

It is no coincidence that in the areas where extremists are most active – the Middle East, South Asia, and increasingly in the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa – strong, indigenous, independent media are largely absent.

Fostering free, open, democratic societies is critical to U.S. strategic interests. BBG nurtures such societies, and thus plays its part in our country's security.

But just as the BBG targets those countries that most need support for a free press, many of those same countries are mounting deliberate, well-financed, and increasingly sophisticated campaigns to drive information flows and influence global public opinion. This includes China and Russia, in particular, but also Qatar with its expansion of Al Jazeera in English, as well as Iran and Venezuela.

Because we in the U.S. endorse free flows of information, and there is a First Amendment to our Constitution, we support the right of any state or company to publish or broadcast just about whenever and wherever it likes, including on our domestic airwaves. Yet we have to face what we're up against, and we have to make a commitment as a nation, with adequate levels of focus and funding for our own

international broadcasting services, to compete effectively.

We don't have to look far to observe our global competitors in operation. We see their publicity inserts are in our newspapers, their channels on our cable TV networks, and their neon signs in Times Square.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was right when she said a couple of years ago that there was an "information war" under way. It is my belief that we will lose that information war unless the U.S. is committed to resourcing our broadcast entities sufficiently to meet the challenge.

Two weeks ago, Vladimir Putin celebrated the work of Russia's global TV network, Russia Today, with this remark: "When we were devising the concept (Russia Today) in 2005, we wanted to see one more player on the global information scene which would not only objectively talk about events in our country, Russia, but would also try - I want to emphasize this - try to break the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon media on global information flows. And I think we have succeeded." What viewers of Russia Today notice, both in the U.S. and overseas, is routine anti-American content, albeit well produced.

China is investing billions in its long-term global information effort. In places such as sub-Saharan Africa, where its programs have yet to enjoy a mass audience, China takes the tack of buying media properties and funding media infrastructure to ensure it has a permanent place in the media landscape. Its investments in information are in sync with its investments in trade and commerce. For China, the two go hand in hand: information is an integrated component of national power projection.

Al Jazeera outspends the BBG by at least three to one in the Middle East. In the U.S. alone, it has committed \$750 million, equivalent to the BBG's entire budget, to buy the Current TV network and build out its U.S. news operation. It remains to be seen how Al Jazeera's news coverage in America in English compares in style and tone to its news coverage in the Middle East in Arabic, which since the Arab Spring has closely tracked Qatar's foreign policy, including support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Unlike the United States, none of these countries - Russia, China, Qatar - believes in press freedom as a matter of principle or fundamental right. If they did, they would respect press freedom at home, and none does. Instead of truly seeking to expand information choice, as BBG does, our competitors' international media efforts are ultimately designed to advance their policy agendas.

The United States would be myopic not to see the current reality and possible future consequence of rapidly shifting global information flows. Our government should not, in my view, cede any territory on the information battlefield.

When increasingly people in the world lack access to credible, accurate news and information and when state-sponsored media of competitor nations that do not embrace our values are increasingly active, now is the time to strengthen, not weaken, the BBG.

As this committee meets to consider the future of U.S. international broadcasting, there are proposals to break up the BBG. Some believe the work of the Voice of America and the other broadcasters is so different they cannot successfully coexist within the same organization.

I reject this view and believe it further reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what the BBG is about.

None of the BBG broadcasters is engaged in public relations work or propaganda. They're journalistic organizations. VOA and MBN expressly cover the United States. They do so to open a window on the American democratic experience. The aim is not to make people like us; it's to let them see democracy in action. Doing so directly supports the mission of fostering free, open, democratic societies.

Coverage of this country that shows how democracy works complements coverage of societies that are struggling to establish or consolidate democracy. U.S. and local news coverage are thus inherently compatible. They can and do co-exist naturally within one integrated BBG organization.

At the same time, none of the BBG broadcasters advocates regime change or other efforts to produce certain desired effects. Such an approach is not consistent with objective journalism.

The only way for U.S. government-funded broadcasters to have success is to retain credibility with audiences. And the only way to ensure credibility is to play the news straight up – to report the facts as they are, and let audiences make up their own minds about what the facts mean.

Audiences are smart. They know spin when they see it. They'll reject impostors.

VOA, RFE/RL, RFA, MBN, and OCB are all news organizations. They practice objective journalism. They don't do advocacy (beyond the VOA editorials, which are clearly labeled as such) or act to bias coverage towards pre-set desired outcomes. Either of these activities would jeopardize their credibility with audiences and nullify any long-term benefit they can have.

As news organizations, BBG broadcasters must be seen as independent actors. Congress wisely incorporated VOA and the other broadcasters into the independent BBG in 1998 with passage of the Foreign Affairs reform and Restructuring Act, the same legislation eliminated the U.S. Information Agency.

I urge the Committee to harness the best of our broadcast entities and address the other half of the equation, which is the fact that the BBG and its broadcast entities is substantially under-resourced.