

Testimony of Matthew Armstrong
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Before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging
Threats and Capabilities
October 22, 2015

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to speak to the unique role the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and United States international media play in advancing our national interests.

I am pleased to join today's panel alongside my colleagues from the Department of Defense (DoD). It is appropriate, and important, that we remain vigilant to the ways in which information and ideas impact our national security. Every day, around the world, we face adversaries and challengers whose primary weapon is not kinetic, but the expert deployment, and at times active suppression, of information.

In today's increasingly interconnected world, responding to the global explosion of information must be a key focus of U.S. foreign policy. Each day, the voices and messages of our friends and foes alike travel and impact beyond familiar political borders with the press of a "share" button. Communities and conversations in the digital space are created without limit to a specific geographical area. As technology continues to develop, cross-border communications and dissemination of information will only increase.

While the information revolution offers the world a plethora of opportunity, particularly those who have lacked a voice either locally and on the global stage, it also provides challenges. In just the past five years, we have seen vivid examples where both state and non-state actors have effectively used information to challenge the United States, our values of democracy and freedom, and the very existence of objective truth.

From Crimea, to Syria, Northern Nigeria, and Southeast Asia, propaganda and censorship have resurged in our increasingly networked world to foment hate and confusion, monitor and suppress dissent, activate acts of terror and roll-back hard-won freedoms. Actors from ISIL to Russia to China are using information not just to "win the news cycle," but to shape the very choices of statecraft.

U.S. foreign policy cannot be effective if we do not appreciate how information shapes the actions of policymakers, institutions, and everyday citizens on the

street. The simple truth is that today's media has the power to reach through the screen to activate audiences to action – or to suppress them. Failing to recognize this fact limits the effectiveness of our foreign policy.

U.S. international media advances U.S. national interests by engaging audiences that are critical to advancing democratic values through open and free exchanges of information.

The BBG oversees all nonmilitary international media supported by the U.S. government, including the Voice of America (VOA), the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), and BBG-funded grantees Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc. (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA) and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, Inc. (MBN). We inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.

Throughout U.S. international media's long history, the tools and goals have been consistent: delivering consistently accurate, reliable and credible reporting that opens minds and stimulates debate in closed societies and those where free media are not yet fully established – especially where local media fails to inform and empower its citizens.

The mission of the Broadcasting Board of Governors is unique. We are a 24/7 global media organization, built for a global mission. BBG radio, television, Internet, and mobile programs reach more than 215 million people each week, in sixty-one languages.

As a journalism organization, our mission is to empower people with both the truth and the context of local, regional, and global affairs, as well as through news from the United States. Our journalists don't just present the news, they unpack the news to provide their audiences with a greater understanding of their world and what is happening. Great journalism – the stories that stick with an audience – shows, often indirectly and subtly, how democracies should work. Great journalism helps audiences understand how democratic accountability, rule of law (not rule by law), human rights, and human security should work, and the differences between the vision of democratic ideals and the reality, so that audiences understand the contrast.

The unique difference of the BBG is not only that we do the news in sixty-one different languages, but also that we prioritize our content to impact our strategic audiences. Many of our reporters are not only from our target markets, but they

also maintain extensive networks in them and speak as locals. They don't parachute in. We know the audiences, what they need to know, and how the story is best told. This is what makes the BBG networks, including VOA, unique. We are called upon, as enshrined in our founding legislation, to operate in markets until "private information dissemination is found to be adequate." Virtually by definition, we target markets that are hard to reach and, at best, under served by accessible reliable independent media. There is no other agency or corporation like us – that puts the audience first, and that actively builds true, independent media markets, in order to one day not be needed. We use future redundancy as a primary measure of success.

President Obama said in his recent speech at the U.N. General Assembly: "The strength of nations depends on the success of their people – their knowledge, their innovation, their imagination, their creativity, their drive, their opportunity – and that, in turn, depends upon individual rights and good governance and personal security."

By unleashing the power of professional journalism, we open up new markets for independent media and, in doing so, challenge the governments, institutions, and non-state actors who would manipulate facts to limit choice or infringe the rights of their people. Accurate news not only informs the public, it allows individuals to aspire to freedom by offering them a platform from which to make decisions based on what is verifiably true – rather than on what their governments may tell them. In short, by exporting the power of a free press we fuel and sustain the exchange of ideas and the struggle for individual thought and freedom – the very building blocks of democratic freedom.

The VOA Charter, which is enshrined in our enabling legislation, mandates that our programs "present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and...also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies." In this way we are a part of broader U.S. public diplomacy, a means by which the U.S. Government can articulate and explain its policies and actions, and through which Congress and other constituencies can present alternate views.

Our journalism exposes corruption and abuse, and empowers our audience to root it out. When we cover the success of free and open elections, as we have recently in Nigeria, we educate audiences on how opposition parties can seek power peacefully through the ballot. When we help repressed voices talk about their future, as we do in Iran, we show how communities can solve problems on their own.

And when we train the lens on our own challenges, for example by covering the protests surrounding Ferguson, Missouri and the subsequent national debate on racial equality, the Detroit bankruptcy, or differing views on key foreign policy initiatives, such as the recent negotiations with Iran, we allow the world to see democracy not as an abstraction, but as a constantly evolving work in progress. This reporting shows the strength of our democracy – the identification of problems, the ability to air our differences in peaceful, respectful ways in line with the rule of law – and gives the opportunity to dive into often unfamiliar concepts to our audiences, such as accountability of civil authorities, what a grand jury is, and how a legal system can work. Even talking about how – and why – Americans go about paying parking tickets can open the eyes of our audiences.

Journalism is a powerful force for change. By acting as the “foreign domestic media” we play a critical role in the lives of audiences, as a news source that provides them with information, in their local language and relevant to their daily lives, that helps them make critical decisions. Decisions on their tolerance for local corruption. Decisions on whether to believe disinformation or form an opinion on fact-based information. Decisions on whether to be connected to the world or remain isolated from it.

U.S. International Media and U.S. Foreign Policy

Today, with so much of the world awash in information, the BBG’s role is changing. As our adversaries have embraced the opportunities to engage and influence audiences using new tools and techniques, the BBG has made changes as well.

Our success no longer depends on our unique global reach, but also on the intensity of the BBG’s relationships with its audiences, the extent to which they share and comment on our news and information and, ultimately, how they influence local knowledge and thought.

The impact of U.S. international media for the next decade is based on our ability to be an influential news and information source in this dynamic 21st century information environment. Under the leadership of our new CEO, the BBG is aggressively moving along five core themes to be the 21st century media organization the tax payers – and the Government – demands.

First, the BBG is accelerating our shift toward engaging audiences on digital platforms, especially utilizing the power of video, mobile, and social networks. We must be on the platform, in the format, and providing the content the audience needs – be it radio, television, or mobile tools and social media. To be clear, this is not just one-way dissemination, but also the empowering and encouraging of their participation in the conversations.

Second, we are rapidly expanding coordination and content-sharing across the BBG’s five interdependent networks in order to cover and report on the stories that matter to audiences and markets that increasingly transcend political borders and languages. For instance, this will allow us to more effectively share our coverage of the Middle East with interested audiences in Indonesia and Russia, or issues surrounding Chinese investment in Africa with audiences across Latin America.

Third, the BBG is concentrating its efforts in five key issue areas where we can be most effective in support of our mission. These five areas are Russia; covering violent extremism; the widening regional influence of Iran; China, not only in the South China Sea region, but also in Africa and Latin America; and, the continuing struggle for democratic rights in Cuba.

Fourth, we are evolving to an organization actively engaged in curating, commissioning, and acquiring content. This is about more than just internal capacity. There are new generations of compelling storytellers, such as the youth in many of our markets, documentarians and journalists that engage their peers every day on digital platforms.

Finally, in the past, the BBG was asked to maximize our potential reach, as befitting a broadcasting organization with a broadcasting mentality. We “paid back” the American people whenever we powered up a new transmitter or launched a new program over satellite. Today, we are focusing on impact over reach; specifically by putting the audience first in how we collect, create and distribute news and information.

Now, let me touch upon three key challenges that may be of interest to the Committee.

Responding to Russia

The Kremlin has demonstrated the use of propaganda and disinformation as a tool of foreign policy, as well as maintaining support at home. By doing so, the

Kremlin has built a house of cards that is susceptible to the truth and transparency. We see the constant statements and laws to shut down the freedom of speech and the freedom to listen in Russia. We see the same in the Kremlin's second greatest export – propaganda and obfuscation – that encourages audiences to “Question More” - to the point of not trusting anyone or thinking independently.

Countering Russian propaganda is not a proactive strategy; it is a reactionary posture predisposed to responding to the Kremlin's initiative. It allows the Kremlin the space to be proactive in disseminating disinformation to distract and obfuscate reality to manufacture blame and mask their own activities.

The BBG engages key audiences in Russia, the Russian periphery, and globally to provide them with the realities about Russian, and US activities, and, importantly, their context. Like elsewhere, we want our audiences to be empowered by facts and to think, to see the ‘say-do’ gaps of their leaders, which we have found over the decades to be a successful strategy for countering propaganda. For instance, RFE/RL continues to ramp up DIGIM, its new social-media driven digital reporting and engagement service, which includes the “Footage vs. Footage” feature, a daily video product that compares and contrasts how Russian media and global media report on the same events, providing the facts of a case and pointing out inconsistencies in Russian reporting.

We engage the audience's – often silently held – interests and concerns. The fundamental question that Former Soviet Union (FSU) citizens are considering is “Are we headed in the right direction?” They are weighing whether Putin's political and social reality is where they want to raise their children, start or grow a business, get an education; these are pocketbook and core questions that speak to hopes and dreams. In other words, the future media environment is not just about countering Kremlin propaganda, but a campaign for the future of the region.

Covering Violent Extremism

Extremist narratives too often go unaddressed within local media environments and digital echo chambers. These narratives are often tied to extremists' alleged religious virtue and organizational invincibility, with a toxic additive of anti-American conspiracy theories.

Our journalism exposes the gap between rhetoric and reality – ideologically and organizationally – of extremist groups. We do this through objective reporting that

adheres to the highest standards of professional journalism. By covering violent extremism, we expose it for what it is.

Extremist groups have excelled at re-centering the news cycle on their violence. The BBG offers audiences more than coverage of violence through programming on positive alternative visions for the world to build support for more stable local and regional communities.

While other parts of the government directly support civil society, the BBG is uniquely positioned to elevate moderate voices – from the street to the elites. To cover local issues of concern, and provide constructive outlets for communities to discuss the issues that matter to them. For example, MBN’s 30-minute, weekly documentary series “Delusional Paradise” presents firsthand accounts, obtained through original interviews, of families and communities that have suffered at the hands of ISIL. The program includes compelling accounts of families, in their own words, who have lost loved ones both due to ISIL recruitment and attacks, including the first interview with the Jordanian pilot’s family.

Internet Freedom

A third prominent challenge for us is the fundamental importance of information freedom.

This is an enduring and central role for the BBG. Almost 75 years ago, President Roosevelt gave his ‘Four Freedoms’ speech that symbolized America's war aims and gave hope to a war-wearied people because they knew they were fighting for freedom. His first freedom was of speech and expression everywhere in the world.

Today information freedom means the freedom for people around the world to be informed, to engage and connect with one another and ultimately use that information to change their lives and the lives of their community for the better.

I have followed, worked on, and blogged about public diplomacy and strategic communication issues for more than a decade. And I’ve been privileged enough to combine these experiences in my work on the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

I recall the rush when early bloggers in formerly closed societies pushed the envelope, and blogged about things their governments would rather see kept quiet.

At the time, there were those who called blogs “the samizdat of the 21st century” – a reference to the underground newsletters self-published by Soviet dissidents during the Cold War. And, for a time, bloggers and independent journalists did do some astounding work in places like Russia, China, Iran, Cuba, Egypt and Azerbaijan.

The BBG created the Internet Anti-Censorship (or “IAC” program) to accomplish two simple goals. The first is to support journalists, bloggers, civil society actors and activists to use the Internet safely and without fear of interference. The second is empower world citizens to have access to modern communication channels that are free of restrictions, and allow them to communicate without fear of repressive censorship or surveillance.

Using funds provided by Congress for internet freedom programs, our International Broadcasting Bureau funds large scale proxy servers and other means to defeat censorship, such as proxy servers like Psiphon. Through the BBG’s investment and supports of multiple circumvention technologies, we have been able to create a new generation of mobile apps that directly challenge and overcome the firewall of Iran and Great Firewall of China. Our web proxy servers allow literally over a billion sessions a day of Internet users from the Middle East, North Africa, Eurasia and East Asia to access news and information outside of their tightly controlled information markets.

Through our Open Technology Fund, we underwrite apps and programs for computers and mobile devices that help to encrypt communications and evade censorship. OTF’s approach to identify and support next-generation internet freedom technologies has led to the development of first-of-its kind tools which support encryption of text messages and mobile phone calls, detection of mobile phone censorship and intrusion efforts, and technologies which allow transfer of data without use of the internet or mobile networks. Such efforts allow users facing changing methods of curtailing free expression online to continue to communicate safely.

The success of our Internet Freedom work is at the core of our role as journalists and reflects our unique capabilities within the U.S. government. In the digital era, the freedom to speak and the freedom to listen remain essential. And you can count on the BBG expanding our efforts in this area into the future.

Cooperation between BBG and Department of Defense

Finally, I would like to turn towards our engagement with other U.S. government colleagues. The BBG has a unique set of capabilities that were enabled by a range of authorities and requirements that first established and then grew U.S. international media. While we do work closely with other parts of government to accomplish our own mission, the Board of Governors and staff at the BBG remain committed to, and strong guardians of, the Agency's statutory journalistic firewall, which ensures the independence and journalistic integrity of our broadcasts and other content.

Having said this, the BBG does cooperate effectively with other U.S. government agencies, including colleagues at the Department of Defense, Department of State, USAID, and the Centers for Disease Control. We have a number of projects already underway with each agency, and are exploring others where appropriate.

The BBG has worked closely with various different DoD commands to accomplish mutual goals. In an agreement with Africa Command, the Voice of America produced a youth program to understand the impacts of violent extremism among Somalia youth. The radio programming was supplemented by SMS messaging, Town Hall meetings and journalism training for young people.

In Southeast Asia we have executed an agreement with Pacific Command that enabled the BBG to launch a new journalism effort focused on extremism in that region, including Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Malaysia.

And Voice of America continues to train broadcast technicians and photographers within the combatant commands in the technical aspects of journalism. We are already laying plans to host and train more technical operations staff during the FY 2016 fiscal year.

Conclusion

To close, the fundamental purpose and intent of the BBG is to empower our audiences to own their future. We enable this goal by providing fact-based alternatives to the propaganda they suffer, giving them access to truth, and demonstrating the building blocks of democratic society – accountability, rule of law (versus rule by law), human security issues, and more.

Voice of America's first broadcast stated: "The news may be good or bad; we will tell you the truth." At BBG, we continue to operate with that in mind, because truth builds trust and credibility, and delivering credible news is the most effective

means to ensure impact and provide the audience with information that will affect their daily lives and use in their own decision-making.

And with that, I am happy to take questions. Thank you for your time and attention.