

Perspectives

Vol. 11 Issue 2, February 2010

The Ever-Expanding Global Electronic Town Meeting: Challenges ahead for U.S. international broadcasting

by Alan L. Heil, Jr.

Imagine an electronic town meeting of person-to-person communications, writ large. So large, in fact, that it encompasses the entire planet, digitally. Entering this arena is the primary challenge to U.S. publicly-funded civilian overseas networks in a new decade, as 21st century international broadcasting approaches its adolescent years amid unpredictable geopolitical and technological challenges.

Global engagement is the latest term of art in Washington these days. Because of their rapidly expanding digital communications capabilities, U.S.-funded overseas media outlets are poised to play an unprecedented role in amplifying traditional diplomacy by providing accurate, timely, objective and balanced news and ideas to the rapidly expanding blogosphere in an increasingly skeptical and curious world.

President Obama's nomination of an entirely new U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) presents a timely opportunity for a fresh look at this potential. The new bipartisan board consists of specialists in media, philanthropy, and diplomacy, as well as several members with experience on Capitol Hill. The BBG oversees the nation's largest, flagship network to the world, the Voice of America, and four other entities: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, the Middle East Broadcast Networks Inc. (Al-Hurra Television and Radio Sawa in Arabic or MBN), and Radio and TV Marti (Spanish to Cuba).

Last October was the 10th anniversary of the part-time Board as the sole supervisor of these networks. One writer described the BBG's broadcasting entities as "a jerrybuilt structure...a wing here, a porch there, a shaky cupola on top." Such a review is propitious as America seeks a broader engagement with overseas publics in a cost effective way.

Under the Obama administration, all new members of the BBG, under the leadership of the new chairman, Walter Isaacson, president of the Aspen Institute and former CEO of Time Inc. and CNN, are expected to take a fresh look at what has become a complex, multimedia operation that is facing the unprecedented challenges posed by the rapid emergence of new media and social networks around the globe.

As outlined below, agenda items in the new decade could include a review of broadcast priorities, increasing coordination among networks, exploring the use of social media and information sharing, expanding training programs, pursuing a public-private partnership, and

strengthening protections for objective and accurate journalistic standards.

Review worldwide broadcast priorities and allocations of resources.

This might include re-examination of the decision to abolish VOA radio services in Arabic, Russian, Ukrainian and Hindi, and the draconian cuts to VOA English (except in Africa). These cuts have and will result in the virtual silencing of the flagship network in our own language in the Arab world and Israel. Finally, there may also be a reconsideration of the investment to date of nearly two-thirds of a billion dollars in Arabic 24/7 broadcasting (Al-Hurra TV and Radio Sawa) to the same region, and similarly the sustained annual outlays of \$30 million for Radio-TV Marti, as U.S.-Cuba tensions ease.

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Coordinate real-time program planning, newsgathering, information sharing, and distribution systems among the networks.

The broadcast entities may insist on preserving their brand names and newsgathering systems. But might not more coordination and sharing of content among them be the daily norm, rather than the rare exception? All five networks have highly qualified CEOs capable of exchanging content to create a news service unmatched in scope and reach while reducing costs. U.S. international broadcasting already has a weekly audience and viewership exceeding 170 million because of its solid, honest journalistic skills. VOA alone has 125 million listeners and viewers, and linking the news product of all five networks in new media formats is bound to increase market share globally.

Develop new social networks and build the electronic town square, while ensuring that "old media and new media converge to become now media."

Words, sounds and images literally leap from one medium to another, streamed by citizen journalists in the

digital age via portable devices. There are 4.7 billion cell phones worldwide and 350 million online users in China. One-to-one and one-to-many conversations are expanding in a blogosphere that defies imagining. The new BBG will likely review how the various media delivery systems reinforce one another. For example, they will probably examine VOA's presence in radio, TV and on the internet in all strategic languages that serve the national interest.

In Iran, during escalating protests after the disputed election in June 2009, an eyewitness captured a stunning video of the agonizing death of Neda Agha-Solton, a young woman killed in a Tehran plaza by a bystander deployed by the regime. The 40-second video of her blood-soaked final moments was instantaneously forwarded to The Guardian newspaper in Britain, four online recipients in Europe, and VOA's Persian News Network. "Neda was transformed, on the web," said one account, "from a nameless victim into an icon of the Iranian protest movement."

Images of her murder were streamed within seconds across traditional and social media to every corner of the globe. Roger Cohen of the New York Times recently joked: "Two mullahs gaze out on a crowd of protesters in Tehran. The one says: 'Arrest the correspondents.' To which the despondent reply is: 'But they're all correspondents'."

This new phenomenon of "citizen journalism" is now bringing news to international broadcasters that are traditionally prevented by authoritarian governments from covering events within a country. The growing use of cell phones has become pivotal in accessing and exchanging real time information and empowering listeners, viewers and website readers.

To illustrate this point, VOA recently teamed up with local or regional cell phone providers to deliver short message services (SMS) in China, Ghana, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Nigeria and Pakistan. The Voice's Deewa Radio to Pakistan's volatile northern regions bordering Afghanistan reports that many civilians displaced by the fighting there have called into the station with questions or suggestions about needed relief supplies, food, water, shelter, and even cookware. This is the "electronic town meeting" at work, in practical terms.

Radio Free Asia reported on October 1 on the use of a technology in China that is also increasingly popular in Iran. Many 'netizens' in the Peoples' Republic, RFA reported, "are now making use of Bluetooth, an open wireless protocol for exchanging data, to create personal short range networks on their mobile devices to share information." At crowded bus stops and subway stations in China, data can reach people within a range of 50 meters.

VOA's Persian News Network (TV and radio) has the largest audience of any international broadcaster to Iran. It has just introduced a new Web iPhone application to enable users in Iran to get the latest news from PNN, and with a single click, to send links to others via Facebook and Twitter. VOA Director Danforth Austin summed it all up: "In addition to turning on your radio or tuning in VOA on your television," he told listeners, "sign up for VOA's Twitter update and be our Facebook friend. Talk to others with similar interests in the myVOA.com cyber community. Improve your English speaking skills with the new GoEnglish.me program in Mandarin and Persian. As always, let us hear from you at askVOA@voanews.com."

Consider expanding the media training workshops offered by the U.S. international broadcasters as listening vehicles for generating program ideas directly relevant to audiences.

The International Broadcasting Act of 1994, Section 303, defines guiding principles for America's overseas networks. Among them: to "provide training and technical support for independent indigenous media through government agencies or private United States entities." Over the years, VOA's Office of Development and Training has conducted workshops for more than 5,000 foreign journalists in 140 countries.

The State Department and USAID have funded many of the 12 workshops held overseas since 2007. The Voice workshops -- often the occasion for town meetings rebroadcast or broadcast live by VOA language services -- stimulate much wider indigenous local reporting of a variety of health issues, pandemics and the environment. The Voice's Ferdinand Ferella, who was co-leader of a recent Goma workshop in the DRC dealing with reportage of infectious diseases and abuse of women, spoke about what he termed radio trottoir, literally "sidewalk radio," or how overseas broadcasts enrich the local, on-the-ground grapevine. In his view, "the new radio trottoir is the cell phone. We have to be there," he added. "If we are credible with local news, we will be regarded as credible with news of the world and the U.S."

Explore more vigorous consultation and coordination with the commercial broadcasting industry and non-governmental non-profit producers of television and radio programs.

Layalina Productions, America Abroad, and Search for Common Ground are among the producers of a rapidly growing menu of valuable programming on conflict resolution, the environment, community development, and cross-cultural understanding among other issues. U.S. international broadcasters might well gain fresh perspectives through informal contacts with these organizations, and with potential producers such as the Foundation for International Understanding.

Last but not least, ensure the continuing credibility of all U.S. international broadcasts and shield them from influences that might compromise their statutory requirement to be a journalistically sound source of news and information, "accurate, objective and comprehensive."

Professor Nicholas Cull of USC's Annenberg School for Communication long has advocated separation from policy advocacy of the publicly-funded U.S. overseas networks and cultural and educational exchanges programs. This, Cull says, would protect their intellectual integrity, their objectivity, and enhance their ability "to listen as well as tell." In his landmark *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency, 1949-1989*, Cull chronicles the long-range impact of candid international broadcasting and notes that educational exchanges, too, sometimes bear fruit decades later.

VOA, RFE/RL and the BBC reported events honestly over several generations, and this helped bring about the victory of the West in the Cold War. "Our most important job," says the BBG, "is ensuring the credibility of our broadcasts." It "acts as a firewall between BBG journalists and the rest of the United States government, critical to ensuring that BBG journalists and editors can

make the final decisions on what stories to cover, and how they are covered.” International broadcast scholar Kim Andrew Elliott argues that credibility is pivotal in attracting audiences, while countering disinformation spread by dictators, terrorists, and other global miscreants. Furthermore, in Elliott’s view, providing a respected, honest news service bodes well for the United States’s image.

To paraphrase Edward R. Murrow’s timeless prescription, broadcasting “can hold a mirror up to the nation and the world. The mirror must have no curves and be held with a steady hand.”

The bottom line: international broadcasting can set the record straight instantaneously (as in real-time news reporting of events in Iran, China, Burma, Haiti, and terrorism’s deadly toll). But it is also long-range; listening to and reflecting over time countless conversations of “collective groups” about how to improve individuals’ lives in an ever-expanding global electronic town meeting. It can enrich the blogosphere in this lively marketplace of ideas, while empowering publics as never before. May the new leadership of U.S. international broadcasting seize the moment. The 21st century adolescent years of their trade can truly be a time of renewal central to the growing global engagement that America seeks.

- (1) The term “electronic town meeting” was introduced by United States Peace Institute executive vice president Tara Sonenshine at a gathering of public diplomacy specialists at the Hilman Foundation White Oak conference center, Florida, January 31, 2009.
- (2) Mark Hopkins, “Babel of Broadcasts,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1999, page 44.
- (3) See also “Renewing America’s Voices---Ideas for Reform,” Walter Roberts, Barry Zorthian, Alan Heil, Public Diplomacy Council website, September 17, 2009, and “Local Voices/Global Perspectives: Challenges Ahead for U.S. International Media,” Public Diplomacy Council, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., April 2008.
- (4) Email from Matt Armstrong, MountainRunner.com, October 10, 2009.
- (5) Juan Mercado, *Philippines Daily Inquirer*, June 28, 2009.
- (6) Roger Cohen, *New York Times*, September 10, 2009.
- (7) Interviews and emails, VOA South Asia Division Director Spozhmai Maiwandi, and Deewa Radio Chief Nafees Takar and Deewa producer Iftikar Husain, September/October 2009.
- (8) Danforth Austin, statement accompanying the VOA annual calendar for 2010, November 15, 2009.
- (9) Interview with Ferdinand Ferella, November 24, 2009.
- (10) Dr. Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pages 492-493, 498-499.
- (11) U. S. Broadcasting Board of Governors, “The Firewall,” a statement to all U.S. international broadcasting employees, July 24, 2008, page 1.



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