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The Future of America's Global Voice: The Debate Surrounding the New VOA Budget
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On February 6, 2006, a Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) press release made clear that the proposed 2007 budget will result in dramatic changes at the Voice of America (VOA). In particular, the budget will mean the elimination of VOA's main English transmission, VOA News Now Radio while retaining funding for VOA English to Africa, Special English, and VOA's English website. Other language broadcasts set for elimination include: all VOA television and radio broadcasts in Croatian, Turkish, Thai, Greek and Georgian; and VOA radio broadcasts in Albanian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Serbian, Russian and Hindi. These changes, particularly the demise of VOA English, have instigated a flurry of speculation about the direction of American international broadcasting and the future of all VOA programming.

Domestically the affair has widened the already considerable gap between those who feel that America should revive and expand the VOA broadcasts and believe that a news and information driven international broadcasting service model will best serve US public diplomacy goals, and those who see the VOA model as increasingly anachronistic in the face of rapid changes in communication technologies and the increasingly global presence of private news organizations such as CNN and Fox News. The latter believe that a more commercially oriented model of international broadcasting as represented by the recently launched FM station Radio Sawa and the television station AlHurra, represent the best way forward. Climbing audience shares and credibility ratings as documented by an unreleased 2004 AC Nielsen survey of the Middle East are offered as key support of the Sawa/AlHurra formula. According to the survey 21.5 million people in the Middle East now regularly tune into AlHurra and find the station credible or somewhat credible. However, others question the implications of Nielsen results particularly in light of a 2005 poll conducted by Zogby International and public opinion scholar, Shibley Telhami, which found that only 1% of Middle Easterners surveyed cited AlHurra as their first choice for credible international news.

VOA supporters cite VOA's long-standing credibility throughout the Middle East and around the world, and caution that just because audiences may be tuning in to Radio Sawa and AlHurra they may not necessarily be buying the message. They also caution that while the Internet provides a critical medium to engage foreign audiences, much of the world remains reliant on radio as its main source of news and information, and thus truncating VOA broadcasts is premature. Many pundits not clearly affiliated with either side of the debate have greeted the closure of VOA English with ambivalence, questioning whether it is prudent to cut English broadcasting services at the same time that China Radio Broadcasting and Al-Jazeera are launching their own English stations. Internationally, however, there has been very little discussion about the closure of VOA English, rather coverage has tended to focus on the BBG decision to cut other VOA specialized language services such as the Russian and Thai broadcasts and the strategic implications of the decision to expand farsi VOA programming in Iran. While the blogosphere was slow to address the changes to VOA, an increasing number of sites are beginning to address the issue. A new anonymous blog, Save VOA English provides ongoing coverage and commentary about the closure.

The following is an aggregation of key recent articles and commentary about the VOA. The articles are divided into two sections: (1) mainstream articles and editorials and (2) a sampling of the discussion going on about VOA in the blogosphere. If you would like to post your reactions and ideas about the changes to VOA, you can add your comments at the bottom of this page.

Articles, Editorials, and Letters to the Editor

OpEd: The World Needs VOA English

(Amb. Richard Carlon, *The Hill*, March 8, 2006)

“The administration wants to kill the English broadcasts that are listened to and depended on by millions of foreign listeners, particularly educated elites, the people who make or influence policy decisions. In foreign countries where English is not the predominant language it is often spoken and understood by the leadership and intellectuals... The amount of money saved by these pending changes in the dropping of VOA worldwide English broadcasting is piddling, nothing compared to the weekly, no the daily, waste in the federal budget. It would be good someday to look back on the intelligent strengthening of the Voice of America at a time when it was badly needed.”

Opinion: The Thought-Provoking Media Strength

(Guoqing Zhang, *China People's Daily*, March 3, 2006)

A Research Fellow at the Institute of American Studies, Zhang sees the changes in VOA programming as evidence of a shift in US foreign policy focus: “to popularize the argument that Iran is becoming the US biggest strategic threat in the Middle East, VOA announced to increase its Persian language program from one hour to four hours. It will close Russian, Albanian, Bosnian, Serbian, Macedonian and Indian language broadcasting starting from 2007 and strengthen its work in Arab and non-Arab Muslim regions. It's not exaggerating to say that VOA's program is a "barometer" of the US foreign strategy.”

Letter to the Editor: An Indian Defense of VOA

(Vijay Kranti, *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2006)

"I wonder if the U.S. policy-makers ever knew that the total population of shortwave radio listeners in India alone is more than total number of U.S. voters on any given day. Unlike me, most of these listeners live in areas where they have just "zero" or not enough access to TV, FM or Internet. Shortwave radio has, for decades, been their main source of information. And it is going to stay with them till the day technology offers them a low-cost battery-operated direct to home TV."

Muffling the Voice of America

(John J. Schulz, *Boston Globe*, February 24, 2006)

Dean of the College of Communication at Boston University and former VOA news executive, John Schulz warns that, "while abandoning VOA as a "relic of the Cold War" and ignoring nearly 50 years of reputation and good standing among Middle Eastern audiences (some of whom get VOA on local AM or FM relay broadcasts, as well as shortwave), the White House is casting about for ways to connect with Islamic audiences globally when the answer is just 10 blocks away at the VOA headquarters." Broadcasting Board of Governors, Kenneth Tomlinson quickly responded to Schulz's editorial in a letter to the editor entitled, *Voice of America in the 21st Century*. In his response, Tomlinson defended the VOA cuts and the expansion of new broadcasting initiatives, citing the fact that "the Middle East, Radio Sawa and Alhurra reach an audience of more than 35 million, compared with 1.6 million for the pre-9/11 service Schulz describes. Far from just a "teen pop" station, Radio Sawa is widely acknowledged as one of the most reliable sources of news in the Middle East."

War in the Information Age

(Donald Rumsfeld, *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2006)

While Rumsfeld does not directly address changes to VOA he offers his support for embracing new formulas of international broadcasting: "Improving our efforts will likely mean embracing new institutions to engage people around the world. During the Cold War, institutions such as the U.S. Information Agency and Radio Free Europe proved to be valuable instruments for the United States. We need to consider the possibility of new organizations and programs that can serve a similarly valuable role in the war on terror."

Commentary: Radio programs Articulate US values to the Global Community

(John Hughes, *Christian Science Monitor*, February 22, 2006)

According to former VOA Director Hughes, while the Middle East remains a critical region for American public diplomacy and Arabic-language broadcasts are critical, the US should not ignore the rest of the world. Particularly as Chinese Radio International and Al-Jazeera begin English broadcasting services, he believes that it is a mistake to close VOA English. According to Hughes, "the ideal would be an [international broadcasting] budget that could encompass the needs for broadcasting to Islamic lands but still maintain English programs for lower priority but nonetheless important regions."

Letter to the Editor: Save America's Voice

(Semyon Reznik, *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2006)

"I work for the VOA Russian service, so let me say a few words about it, but I speak only for myself -- not for the agency. Our influence in Russia has diminished in the last decade, mostly due to the shrinkage of our presence on the air (from 18 hours a day in the 1970s and 1980s to three hours now); however, we still have about 3 million listeners daily. Last Friday, I hosted our talk show and was overwhelmed with calls from listeners who were shocked with the news that the VOA Russian radio would disappear after 60 years in existence. They could not comprehend that the enlargement of the Iranian service requires such a sacrifice."

Commentary: VOA is DOA in Budget

(Martin Schramm, *Washington Times*, February 19, 2006)

"It is correct: Shortwave broadcasting is old-tech (yet still widely used, especially in rural impoverished areas). And the Internet is not just the medium of the future, in many places that future is now. Moreover, there is also a medium of the future within the Internet -- streaming audio and video. Millions will soon listen to or view programs not just on home computers or laptops, but on their cell phones -- which are becoming the communications instrument of choice in poor countries. So, if millions of English-speaking people in Muslim countries and other places in the emerging world are watching the Internet, what English-language programming will there be for them to watch? Precious little -- if it is all being scrapped in a shortsighted (see also: short-listened) effort to save a few bucks (\$9 million) in the interim."

Voice Lessons

(*Wall Street Journal*, February 17, 2006)

This article addresses the debate surrounding the proposed closure of VOA English service. It asks the question why "at a time when other countries and even al-Jazeera are boosting their international broadcasts in the world's most influential language, America itself is backing off?" English service supporters such as former VOA directors Sanford Ungar, Edward Pell, and Geoffrey Cowan outline why VOA English remains a decisive national strategic asset. While, Broadcasting Board of Governors Chairman, Kenneth Tomlinson compares those who would like to preserve the short-wave international broadcasting model to "the people who wanted to preserve ...horse-drawn buggies." (Subscription required)

Op-Ed: Spreading the Word

(Helle Dale, *Washington Times*, February 16, 2006)

"So, what is it the Chinese and al Jazeera know that we seem to have forgotten? It could be that of all the world's languages, English has the widest reach. More than one-third of the world's population speaks English today, and that number is projected to be more than half in 2050. English is overwhelmingly the language of international commerce and of the Internet -- making it a phenomenally cost-effective medium. Furthermore, while the Broadcasting Board of Governors justifies its cuts by saying that short-wave is the way of the past, and the Internet and television are the way of the future, but most of the world we are trying to reach does actually live in the past. There is nothing wrong with Internet and television, but wide swaths of rural populations

throughout the world have no access to the Internet or even television. Yet, they, too, benefit from learning English by listening to VOA."

Budget Proposal Cuts English-Language Broadcasts

(David Folkenflick, *All Things Considered*, February 13, 2006)

This radio program includes a number of interviews with key participants in the debate. According to Tomlinson, "It is simply a matter of priorities. If you have to choose between broadcasting in English to Iran or Persian to Iran, you go Persian. You go with the native language." While Dan Robinson, the VOA Congressional Correspondent, feels that "this [English] is the language of the world. For VOA to do away with that, for the board to make a decision like that is just unthinkable." And former VOA Director, Sandy Unger feels that "It is as if to say that we, as a country and as a political culture, prefer that people around the world not get their news from the United States in English. We prefer they get it from Al-Jazeera, China, Russia, France, Australia, all sorts of people who are broadcasting in English."

Voice of America Expected to Stop Russian Broadcasting

(Anne Arutunyan, *The Moscow News*, February 10, 2006)

"Voice of America was initiated in German in 1942 as a counterweight to Nazi propaganda. Then on Feb. 17, 1947, when relations with Stalin's Soviet Union had cooled, the service began broadcasting in Russian. The news was met with dismay by some of Russia's most prominent rights activists, like Valeria Novodvorskaya. 'We did not need to be educated,' the *Novyie Izvestia* daily quoted her as saying. 'But Russia as a whole needs to be educated. And that process is far from over. That is why I believe the U.S. decision was hasty.' The *km.ru* website was more tongue-in-cheek about the cutback. 'Whether we like it or not, 'the enemy's voice' was for many years part of the U.S.S.R.'s national culture,' an article dedicated to the news read. 'Someone used it to sound informed in the kitchen, others just wanted to taste something of the forbidden fruit. But on the whole... there weren't too many people that totally trusted American radio propaganda.'

(Full text available on Lexis Nexis. Subscription required.)

USA: Voice of America budget shifts focus, axes rolling news

(Nigel Taggart, *BBC Media Monitoring Service*, February 8, 2006)

"The main casualties of these budgetary changes include reductions in English language programming, particularly the rolling news service "News Now" which will cease to broadcast, but will continue as a text-only service via the web. VOA English to Africa and Special English remain unaffected and should serve to underline the BBG's ongoing commitment to English language programming, as well as the ever-growing popularity of the Internet."

(Full text available on Lexis Nexis. Subscription required.)

Bush Boosts Middle East Broadcast Funding

(John Eggerton, *Broadcast and Cable*, February 6, 2006)

"Maybe former CPB Board Chairman Ken Tomlinson made the right move in exiting the noncom to devote full time to his other job as Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of

Governors. . .The administration is trying to cut budgets across the board, but by contrast to CPB, BBG's Middle East Broadcasting service and Voice of America are considered weapons in the war on terrorism. In fact, while non terror-related language services under BBG will get the knife, or even the outright axe, the Middle East services are getting a 13% increase and VOA a 5.3% increase, which more than offsets the cuts elsewhere."

The Blogosphere

Save VOA

(The Arabist, February 28, 2006)

"I remember growing up in Morocco we would listen to Radio Montecarlo, which was especially good as reporting on the Lebanese civil war. Often these foreign stations are the only means for people to get reliable information, and they build up their reputation over time. The BBC and VOA did so — whereas Al Hurra has probably already lost its own reputation."

US Government Broadcast budget builds war chest to fight terror armed with new technology

(Digital Broadcasters Vendor News, February 11, 2006)

Based in Hong Kong, blogger Gerald Brown comments that, "It constantly amazes me that while using radio and TV is one of the least expensive means to promote national objectives around the world, politicians in the west continue to argue over broadcast budgets. Why compromises have to be made with legislators who are too short sighted to understand the role of the government media in international relations is beyond my reasoning. In this context, the loss of VOA New Radio Now is totally incomprehensible. The programming does more than any other on VOA Radio to show what real America is all about, in English the second most widely spoken language on earth. There is a strong mantra in programming management: "If it works,don't mess with it". Doesn't VOA reach 120 million listeners a week? So why mess with it?"

America Muted

(RedState, February 9, 2006)

This "Republican community blog" features a lively debate about the future of VOA. The post that prompted the discussion asserts that, "The President should have told his bean-counters at OMB. His 2007 budget contains a proposal that would mute the Voice of America's global service, and surrender the airwaves to our enemies. Most people in the U.S. don't know VOA still exists, but the rest of the world sure does. Tens of millions, from Vietnam to Pakistan to Nigeria and everywhere in between get their news from VOA. And for many of those millions, the VOA speaks America's voice: English."