

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

Worldcasting: U.S. Fails to Fight Russian Government Censorship of VOA/Radio Liberty News Broadcast ^[1]

To be or not to be -- A 'Re-Jiggered' U.S. Information Agency

That is the question, or one of them anyway, as to how America's public diplomacy efforts may be ratcheted back up to speed.

My recent "F" grade to those who pine for a reassembled USIA is challenged by former Director [Bruce S. Gelb](#), who headed the U.S. Information Agency from 1989-91. He contends that:

... [A]ll the "transformational" BS and the re-jiggering of the half-man half-beast organization that purports to be the 21st century upgrade of the once effective USIA just doesn't work and cannot work period.

But a highly respected former USIA Foreign Service officer who wished to remain anonymous does not believe the Agency's rebirth will come any time soon. "As for recreating USIA, I am not aware of anyone seriously considering the matter. Much talk, but little real action."

Others say our PD grades are too generous. A former employee of the American government's Alhurra TV, Magdi Khalil, disagrees with the "B" grade awarded to his former channel and Radio Sawa. "Alhurra is not as much American as it is Arab -- with the typical flaws and mediocrity of an Arab news media," he offers.

John Ferguson, president [American Voices](#), takes issue with my too-early-to-tell "C" grade for the State Department's diverse public diplomacy efforts. He gives it an "F." "Outreach through mass media is good, but we need much more exchange, cultural and speaker programs to be truly effective," he writes.

As for remaining mid-year grades, I first pose a question to you public diplomacy handicappers out there:

Can you name an American international broadcasting service that was the prototype for today's [Fox News Channel](#)?

Here are some hints:

The vintage broadcast service displayed an "attitude," or an "edge," if you prefer, for many years before there was a [Fox News Channel](#), and touted itself as "[fair and balanced](#)" in its domestic and international reporting. Its news coverage ventured where no local or regional media had gone before, which resonated with many in the audience, but detractors sullied the

news service as biased.

Ah, you've got it! The answer is Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and, of course, Voice of America.

So what's the point? The Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty still have that edge to which audiences in Russia are attracted.

Why else would dozens of Russian radio stations have partnered with those American-funded stations to carry their news broadcasts? It is because audiences in Russia still like to hear what they have to say. And it is why Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, as *Worldcasting* reported last August, has effectively blocked news reports from RFE/RL and Voice of America by threatening to revoke the broadcast licenses of partner Russian affiliate stations that carry those broadcasts. Dozens of stations in Russia have now dropped the broadcasts because President Putin does not like their news reports about Russia's domestic problems.

This would seem to be the Perfect Storm for Washington, especially for those who manage the purse strings for the U.S. government's non-military international broadcasts -- the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Why not increase funding for the stations that are on a roll, make the case to Congress, go to the UN, pursue other affiliate stations in Russia who want to build their audiences? Instead, the BBG capitulates to Mr. Putin by proposing to Congress to end VOA's Russian language broadcasts, as well as reduce English language programs.

While *Worldcasting* understands the pressure to shore up programming to the Middle East to combat terrorism, we feel Congress ought to ask the BBG to get back to basics and find the money elsewhere to keep the core enterprises of VOA and RFE/RL in tact. There ought to be a sign hung on the core businesses of America's international broadcast treasures -- Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: "Do Not Touch."

A decade ago it seemed to some a good idea to re-jigger the U.S. Information Agency but it turned out not to be such a great idea after all. Just ask Bruce Gelb.

And so the BBG gets an "F," but it can turn that around next semester by hitting the history books. As for VOA and RFE/RL, they remain at the head of the class.
