

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

Lugar Report Brings Some Honesty to Evaluation of U.S. International Broadcasting ^[1]

Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN), the ranking Republican member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations has done something remarkable: issued an honest appraisal of America's public diplomacy broadcasting. That the report has found U.S. efforts flawed is no surprise, but the willingness of Senator Lugar to publicly state this is welcome relief after so many government efforts to paint a ridiculously optimistic picture of U.S. public diplomacy achievements.

For the report, titled "U.S. International Broadcasting – Is Anybody Listening? – Keeping the U.S. Connected," Senator Lugar asked the committee's Senior Professional Staff Member Paul Foldi to look principally at the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, the Middle East Broadcasting Network, and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. Even in the Internet era, radio and television broadcasts still reach huge audiences, and any country that ignores this does so at its peril.

The BBG has not been fully staffed since 2004 or had a chair since 2008. Meanwhile countries such as China and Russia are pouring money into international broadcasting ventures as they try to win friends, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and other places where access to natural resources and political alliances are essential elements in building global influence. The Lugar report urges the United States to catch up.

The first step in doing so is to end reliance on Cold War operating models and recognize the explosion of diversity in international broadcasting. Al Hurra, the U.S. government's Arabic-language television news channel, was created as if there were audiences eager to hear from America because they had no reliable home-grown news sources. That, however, is no longer true. With Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and many other broadcast news providers in the Middle East, people there no longer need to rely on outsiders' views of the region's events. Although hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on Al Hurra, it does not have a significant audience and needs to be torn down and rebuilt.

The Lugar report also shines light on China's restrictive news environment. While strictly limiting the number of outside correspondents allowed into the country, China is investing the equivalent of US\$6 billion in upgrading its broadcasting outreach capacity. China has even purchased a radio station in Galveston, Texas to deliver its brand of information. The station might not have many listeners, but it is evidence of China's assertive efforts to send its message to a global audience.

Some encouraging news comes from the Voice of America's Persian News Network, which is

encouraging “citizen journalism” among its Iranian constituency. Members of the audience can upload videos from their mobile phones directly to VOA. This recognition of the capabilities of new technologies is unfortunately rare in U.S. broadcasting ventures. More needs to be done to recognize that audience members are no longer passive recipients of news, but rather want to be involved in a dialogue in which they provide as well as receive information. That kind of partnership is a critical element of modern public diplomacy.

Senator Lugar promises that he will address various aspects of public diplomacy. His doing so might push the State Department and White House toward making public diplomacy a more integral part of U.S. foreign policy. That would be quite an accomplishment.
