


Nov 04, 2016 by [Shawn Powers](#)

The Future of U.S. International Broadcasting: Light at the End of the Tunnel? ^[1]

On June 9, 2010, [Senator Richard Lugar's \(R-IN\) office](#), under the leadership and guidance of Senior Professional Staff member Paul Foldi, released a report prepared for the U.S. Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations on the future of U.S. International Broadcasting. The report, titled, "[U.S. International Broadcasting--Is Anybody Listening--Keeping the U.S Connected](#) , " is by far the most comprehensive, up-to-date and clear writing on the state and future of American international broadcasting. In a field where so much emphasis is placed on the execution day to day tasks, such as finding ways to overcome our radio, television and internet broadcasts from being jammed by the Iranian government, and avoiding potential political controversies, such as finding the appropriate balance between viewpoints in coverage of the Middle East, Lugar's report is an important effort to take a precise tally of the current realities, blemishes and all, of a prominent pillar of America's public diplomacy efforts abroad.

From a quick account of opinion in Washington, D.C., it was clear that the report solicited buy in and consulted almost every possible relevant source of expertise on the topic. At times, the report makes the case for the Alhurra-Iraq broadcast channel even better than the [Broadcasting Board of Governors \(BBG\)](#), the group responsible for overseeing and managing U.S. International Broadcasting, publicly has. For example, while some, [myself included](#), have argued that Alhurra Iraq has failed to account for its inability to generate sufficient trust among its Iraqi viewers, Lugar's report includes data from a previously unreleased survey conducted by [Intermedia](#) in February 2010 explaining that Iraqis across the board don't trust the news media by much larger margins than anywhere else in the region. Yet, while the report solicited a broad amount of information from the BBG and its research and archives, it is also at times critical of the BBG's structure and management and [Alhurra](#) in particular, citing [work by Shibley Telhami](#) calling into question the popularity of the broadcaster in the Middle East, a long and [ongoing exposé](#) conducted by ProPublica outlining the ongoing management difficulties surrounding Alhurra's operations, and a [study](#) commissioned by the BBG and conducted by USC's Center on Public Diplomacy outlining a multi-methodological and systematic critique of the Alhurra's journalistic quality.

A basic but critical contribution coming from Lugar's report is its aggregation of difficult to research and easily discern information, such as the exact budgets allocated for *all* American broadcasting efforts in Iran, China, and elsewhere, how much of the budgets are broken down between the different responsibilities of each of the broadcasters, as well as how the budget for international broadcasting compares to the overall resources dedicated to public diplomacy by the American government. It is these basic building blocks of information that are actually very helpful, and often overlooked, in pursuing productive, grounded, rational and deliberative

conversations about the future of American public diplomacy programs.

The report is level-headed on questions of new communications technologies and platforms, an area of growing controversy (for example, see Evgeny Morozov on the risks of over-reliance on new technologies). On the one hand, the report points to the expanding role for new media platforms in promoting U.S. International Broadcasting journalistic features, laying out the comparative uses of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube among American and popular foreign international broadcasters. Yet, on the other hand, the report also notes the importance of maintaining and perhaps even expanding the technological capacity for radio dissemination in places throughout Asia and Africa where Shortwave radio continues to be heavily relied upon, in autocratic countries, where jamming of satellite and Internet dissemination continues to prove effective, and during crisis and humanitarian situations such as that witnessed earlier this year in Haiti.

Importantly, and unlike so much that is written on the topic, Lugar's report is forward looking. Again, pointing to one of the BBG's biggest successes, Radio Sawa, a radio channel that has attracted significant listenership through its use of popular Arab and Western music to draw in Middle Eastern youth, Lugar's report points to declining audiences, arguing that while Sawa's style--mixing popular music with smaller doses of political news--was innovative at the time, it has failed to continue to adapt as regional radio stations have caught up and improved on the format. In the midst of the current revolution in digital communications technologies, innovation among traditional broadcasters is critical to maintain audience interest and engagement, and Lugar's report points to an important area where second-level innovation is needed, and quickly.

One of the report's recommendations is especially worth noting here, though I would recommend anyone interested in international broadcasting download the treatise in its entirety. The report quite bluntly spotlights a reality that is increasingly noted in academic and popular scholarship on broadcasting, but still unresolved in government circles: that the Smith-Mundt Act, a piece of legislation enacted in 1948 limiting the dissemination of materials generated by U.S. International Broadcasters domestically, is outdated, unenforceable and counter-productive. Pointing to the huge growth in presence and accessibility of foreign news media, both public and private, inside the U.S., Lugar's report states clearly: "It is time to recognize the anachronistic nature of the legislation in light of new technologies and how it hamstringing our own government while foreign governments and broadcasters have no similar impediments," calling on Congress to "revisit the Smith-Mundt legislation." Hear, hear, Senator Lugar.

Lugar's report will serve as a critical text for the future of U.S. International Broadcasting, and the timing could not be any better. Walter Isaacson, current President and CEO of the Aspen Institute and former Chairman and CEO of CNN and the Managing Editor of TIME, was nominated to be the Chairman of the BBG in November 2009 and is reported to be thinking outside the box when it comes to the future of American broadcasting. In 2007, Isaacson wrote about the need for dramatic overhaul to create "an organization for public diplomacy in the digital age. This is a field in which America, with its values and media savvy, should be triumphing, but instead it is failing astonishingly. The outmoded structures of the Broadcast Board of Governors, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and the like -- built for an analog broadcast era -- should be swept away for a coherent agency empowered to create an honest and open information strategy built for the age of blogs, social networks, digital streaming and satellite." Well, Mr. Isaacson, there is no better place to start thinking through the details of such a broad and important shift in structure and organization than with this detailed report on

the state and future of U.S. International Broadcasting.
