

Nov 04, 2016 by **Kim Andrew Elliott**

Two international broadcasting consolidation proposals (one eclipsing the other) ^[1]

Every so often, with about the same frequency as a combination hailstorm and solar eclipse, I get an op-ed published. In 2002 and 2007, The New York Times published my pieces about the need for autonomy in U.S. international broadcasting. On July 13, they published me again. The op-ed, "Radio Free of Bureaucracy" is about my other recurring theme: the need for consolidation in U.S. international broadcasting.

I pointed out that the audience for U.S. international broadcasting (Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio and TV Marti, Alhurra, and Radio Sawa), at about 180 million, is about the same as for BBC World Service. (This is after subtracting the BBCWS U.S. audience of 6 million – the United States not being a target country for USIB.) On the other hand, the budget for USIB is about \$757 million, whereas BBCWS attracts the same sized audience for \$420 million per year.

Why the discrepancy? Some think that BBCWS derives all sorts of free services from the parent domestic BBC. BBC, however, tells me it is subject to a fair trading policy, in which World Service pays for or barter anything it receives from the domestic BBC. This is to make sure those who pay the U.K. television license fee are not subsidizing World Service, which is funded by the Foreign Office.

I think the real reason for the discrepancy is in the number of entities, resulting in multiple overheads, lost opportunities for synergy, and much duplication. For the 60 languages of USIB, 22 are transmitted by more than one station. The rationale for that, and the reason I think that rationale is specious, are discussed in the op-ed.

I was expecting some negative reaction to the piece, but what happened instead is that people asked me if I received any negative reaction. The only whiff of discord was from a recently retired VOA broadcaster, who took issue with my calling for a merger of the U.S. international broadcasting entities into a corporation (like RFE/RL) rather than an agency (like VOA). I used the word "corporation" specifically and purposefully.

It seems to me problematic for a U.S. government agency also to be a news organization. And, coincidentally, on July 26, VOA and International Broadcasting Bureau employees were informed that they cannot "download, browse, or e-mail" documents from the recent WikiLeaks dump of documents about Afghanistan and Pakistan. These included documents that were not yet unclassified, and thus cannot be stored on any typical computer in a government agency.

I don't think VOA was planning any major exposé based on those documents, but VOA reporters did need to verify some of the material mentioned by other news organizations. They were able to do so – from their homes.

National Public Radio's Carl Kasell organizes news articles while preparing for one of his last newscasts.

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The day after my op-ed, the Wall Street Journal published “Journalism Needs Government Help,” by Lee. C. Bollinger. Mr. Bollinger argues for government funding for financially beleaguered American journalism, similar to public broadcasting entities in many other democracies. Specifically, he would combine the resources of Voice of America and Radio Free Europe with those of NPR and PBS to create an “American World Service,” modeled, of course, after BBC World Service.

Now that created negative reaction. Why did the Bollinger piece get much more response than my piece? It might be because he is president of Columbia University, no less, whereas I'm a midlevel bureaucratic functionary.

More likely it had to do with hot buttons. My article, in the New York Times, generally described as liberal, could be construed as conservative, at least fiscally. His article, in the Wall Street Journal, whose opinion page is usually described as conservative, was likely construed as liberal.

Some people thought it was straw-man liberal, a ploy by the WSJ to provoke a spirited response. There were more than 400 comments (e.g., “Thank you Joseph Stalin. Yes who needs a free press when we can have a government propaganda [sic] machine.”) as well as letters to the editor and blog posts, almost all negative. The responders envisioned and objected to another government bailout, to government involvement in the media, to anything modeled after the BBC, which they considered hopelessly anti-American. A few mentioned VOA and RFE, almost always referring to them as propaganda outlets.

Because enough members consider NPR and PBS to be left-wing, I don't think Congress would approve a merger of these two organizations with VOA and RFE. On the other hand, an exchange of content between USIB and U.S. private broadcast news organizations might be possible and beneficial. I have written about this in a new paper, if it ever manages to get

published. Anyone know when the moon will next pass before the sun?

Dr. Kim Andrew Elliott reports about international broadcasting at www.kimandrewelliott.com.
