

Nov 04, 2016 by [Adam Clayton Powell, III](#)

U.S. International Broadcasting Reaching Record Audience, Assessing Impact Questioned ^[1]

WASHINGTON --- Voice of America and other American international broadcasters now reach 187 million people every week, an increase of 22 million from 2010 and an all-time record number of listeners and viewers, according to data released yesterday. That increase was a complete surprise, according to Bruce Sherman, Director of the Office of Strategic Planning and Performance Measurement of the United States Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG).

Just last month, BBG released a new Strategic Plan that had as its “performance goal,” an increase of 50 million people in worldwide audience by 2016. Now, just a few weeks after announcing that goal, BBG is already almost half-way there. Sherman said they did not have access to the 2011 audience data when the goal was set.

Sherman also came under repeated questions at a forum today in Washington about the impact of BBG broadcasts, and one question asked repeatedly was whether the BBG’s metrics on impact - “moving the needle” - go beyond total numbers of listeners and viewers.

“Impact cannot be reduced to audience,” Sherman replied, “but you cannot have impact without audience.” He added that you need to look at specific audiences – not just traditional elites, but young people and women.

“The biggest success on the planet” is how Sherman described U.S. broadcasting in Afghanistan, where 2011 data show three-quarters of the entire country watches or listens to American broadcasts. Additionally, 400,000 Afghans subscribe to BBG text messaging services.

Beyond audience growth, another goal of the Strategic Plan is for VOA and other U.S. broadcasters to embrace user content and use material created by listeners and viewers. The “value added” by U.S. international broadcasting, according to Sherman, would be checking and verifying the accuracy of material submitted by the audience.

One questioner at today’s forum, held by the Public Diplomacy Council, said he could not find the phrase “public diplomacy” anywhere in the Strategic Plan. Sherman acknowledged that was correct, and he said that was for a reason: Objective journalists by and large, he said, don’t subscribe to the idea that they are changing people’s attitudes.

“Attitudinal and behavioral change” is the hope, but not a direct goal, explained Sherman. “We don’t do the advocacy piece. Good things will come from good journalism.”

If public diplomacy cannot be found in the new plan, BBG Chairman Walter Isaacson, in his remarks when the Strategic Plan was released

, placed international broadcasting at the center of national security.

"Our media outlets – Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa, Radio Free Asia, and Radio and TV Marti – are vital, cost-effective national security asset," said Isaacson, "whose impact is felt by some 166 million people weekly across the globe where critical U.S. interests are at stake."
