CONTROVERSY ON THE AIRWAVES: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY, PORTRAYING AMERICA, AND PUBLIC OUTREACH THROUGH THE VOICE OF AMERICA UZBEK SERVICE

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Introduction

In the United States, government-sponsored broadcast services such as Voice of America (VOA) directed to foreign audiences have been intermittently controversial, with opposing sides in the decades-long debate divided between conservative and liberal political forces. Con-

The authors' views do not represent the official viewpoint of the Voice of America.

servatives generally hold that the U.S. should promote democracy globally and use what they consider benign propaganda techniques, including international broadcasts of news and information that is truthful, entertaining, and supportive American popular culture. Critics of VOA and other taxpayer-funded broadcasters argue that a country with a strong democratic tradition does not need to rely on "propaganda" to extend its influence. They assert that such broadcasts selectively focus on authoritarian governments that are deemed unfriendly to the U.S. or of significant strategic or economic value to U.S. interests. They also accurately note that such broadcasting is rarely directed at nations with authoritarian or dictatorial governments that cooperate with the U.S. and have military alliances or close economic ties with the U.S. In addition, liberals express concern that such broadcasts might subvert popular reform and nationalist movements that conflict with U.S. economic, strategic, or diplomatic objectives.

One such example is Radio Marti, a U.S. government-funded entity that broadcasts news and entertainment to Cuba and is promoted as a means to encourage democratization, with the less clearly stated purpose of bringing down the government of Fidel and Raul Castro. Like VOA and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Marti is a child of the Cold War and Western anticommunism. Launched in 1983 during the Reagan administration and first on the air on 20 May, 1985, it now offers 24-hour-a-day radio short-wave and medium-wave programming. In 1990, television broadcasts to Cuba began through TV Marti.

Debate continues about the effectiveness of such broadcasts. As with Radio Free Europe during the Cold War, it is difficult to measure a station's actual audience through typical listener surveys, although efforts are made to do so. Thus, the true number of listeners and their demographics, let alone the depth and extent of their influence on audience attitudes, are speculative.

There has been little academic research published about U.S. government-sponsored broadcasters.[1] Among those studies, many focused on activities during the Cold War in furtherance of democratic movements and as a counterweight to Soviet propaganda broadcasts, not on the post-Cold War period.

Thus this article reviews the history and programming of another broadcasting child of the Cold War, VOA and its Uzbek Service. It uses Uzbekistan as a case study of how one Western international broadcaster counters one authoritarian regime's pervasive system of media controls. That history in the context of VOA's contemporary operations provides insights regarding conflicting characterizations of the broadcaster as a largely beneficial and benevolent arm of U.S. public diplomacy or a sophisticated, subtle agent of U.S. propaganda and geopolitical aspirations.

The article looks at the establishment and current status of VOA broadcasting to Uzbekistan, which has been an on-and-off ally of the U.S. "war against terrorism" in the Middle East and to a lesser extent in Central Asia. Uzbekistan presents an interesting and important case study of a country that had been integrated into the Soviet empire for seven decades. Its relevance to Western nations lies in valuable geopolitical, economic, and perhaps neocolonial opportunities that were created when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, temporarily leaving a vacuum to be filled by other ex-

[1] See, for example: U. Bah, "Daniel Lerner, Cold War Propaganda and U.S. Development Communication Research: An Historical Critique," *Journal of Third World Studies*, No. 25 (1), 2008, pp. 183-198; A. Iskandar, "Speaking to the Enemy: U.S. Government Public Diplomacy and Discourses of Cultural Hybridity," Paper presented to the International Communication Association, 2008; L. Camaj, "The New World Order and 'the Voices': International Radio Broadcasters after the Cold War," Paper presented to the International Association for Media and Communication Research, 2008; C.D. Hill, "Voices of Hope: The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty," *Hoover Digest*, No. 4, 2001; N. Imamova, "International Broadcasting to Central Asia: The Voice of Reason or Opposition?" *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, No. 3 (2), 2006, pp. 43-47; S.J. Ungar, "Pitch Imperfect: The Trouble at the Voice of America," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 84 (7), 2005, pp. 7-13; S.J. Parry-Giles, "Rhetorical Experimentation and the Cold War, 1947-1953: The Development of an Internationalist Approach to Propaganda," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, No. 80, 1994, pp. 448-467.

pansionist and opportunity-seeking nations. These external economic and political forces had to contend with the near-dictatorial government of newly independent Uzbekistan under President Islam Karimov, who was the pre-independence and post-independence head of government. Karimov's interests and those of the U.S. and its European allies were generally in harmony through the 1990s and the first years of this century. The most recent Bush Administration courted Uzbekistan after the 11 September, 2001 attacks on the International Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the subsequent invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and British-organized coalition. Karimov supported U.S. military facilities in Uzbekistan until they were removed in 2005.

As the regime's human rights abuses and disregard for democratic reforms and extreme forms of authoritarian control continually embarrassed the U.S., it became in the U.S.'s best interests to advocate for reforms—but only cautiously and diplomatically, lest Karimov retaliate by evicting U.S. troops, allying Uzbekistan more closely with Russia, or impeding U.S. economic activities. The reasons why the U.S. chose not to actively support Karimov's ouster and refrained from endorsing his mostly underground opposition include Uzbekistan's general stability and willingness to control insurgencies and internal Islamic fundamentalist movements. The U.S. considered that critical to contain such insurgencies and movements to the south of Uzbekistan in neighboring Afghanistan and in Iraq. Uzbekistan's vast wealth of mineral, natural gas, and other resources provided another reason to avoid antagonizing and alienating the regime.

In that context the article examines the role of the VOA Uzbek Service. It reviews the history of the press in Uzbekistan during and after the Soviet era, the history of VOA and its Uzbek-language programming, and some of the U.S. political and policy considerations that affect the Service. It concludes with a discussion of the Service's future and the unresolved question of whether its broadcasts constitute propaganda, public diplomacy or some blend of both labels.

Uzbekistan's Media in the Soviet Era

Given that a major Uzbek Service mission is to supply news and information to a country with no system of independent mass media, it is important to briefly discuss the press in Uzbekistan before independence in 1991.

With the Russian Revolution came an overhaul of the existing czarist-era press system in what would become the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. For the next seven decades, writers and journalists working for state agencies and media were fully integrated into the Soviet system, serving as advocates and guides for socialist experiments and as supporters of centralized economic plans. Hopkins cites a common reference list of values and virtues that were guidelines for the press throughout the U.S.S.R.:

(1) Party orientation (*partiinost*);

(2) high level of ideology (*vysokaia ideinost*);

(3) truthfulness (*pravdivost*), the requirement to provide information truthfully;

(4) popular orientation (*narodnost*);

(5) mass character (*massovost*); and

(6) criticism and self-criticism *(kritika* and *samokritika*).[2]

[2] See: M.W. Hopkins, *Mass Media in the Soviet Union*, Pegasus, New York, 1970, p. 34.

Although Uzbekistan was far from Moscow, its journalists contributed to the legitimization of continued Russian/Soviet domination of Central Asia and of the country's Cold War policies of militarization and confrontation with the West. Uzbekistani journalists were active in, or at least complicit with, Russian occupation of Eastern and Central Europe. They propagandized for communist-imperialist expansion in the developing world, culminating in the invasion and failed occupation of Afghanistan. In fairness to this somewhat-critical overview of a monolithic Soviet press system and the complicity of its journalists, the mass media also encouraged journalistic professionalism and competency and facilitated unification of disparate cultures and ethnic groups. It also propagandized to reduce religious strife.[3]

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Uzbekistan launched its difficult nation-building process, including integration of culturally and linguistically diverse minority populations. One challenge was to modify or dismantle Soviet structures, among them state-controlled media informed by Marxist-Leninist theory and Communist party policies. Reducing the effects of these institutions would prove complex, in part because many journalists trained before the early 1990s were reluctant to abandon the benefits of state employment and the perks of elite-status intellectual workers.

The Post-Independence Press

The contemporary Uzbek press remains highly constrained. Although forms of censorship and guiding ideology have changed, the Karimov regime has not deviated far from Soviet policies of near-total control of the press. For example, the Uzbekistan News Agency cooperates closely with Karimov's staff to prepare and disseminate officially sanctioned news and information, while the government's press and information agency monitors and controls all media, according to a U.S. State Department human rights report.[4] The Cabinet of Ministers owns and oversees three of the most influential national daily newspapers, *Pravda Vostoka* (Russian language), *Halq So'zi* (Uzbek language), and *Narodnoe Slovo* (Russian language). The national government, government-controlled political parties, the municipal government in the capital city of Tashkent, and regional administrations own or control several other daily and weekly publications.

Additional constraints include banning newspapers that do not meet the law's standards for a "mass media agency," including appointing a board of directors acceptable to the government. The regime allows the operation of a few limited-circulation, privately owned newspapers containing advertising, feature stories, and horoscopes, with little or no substantive news or editorial content. Russian-language papers *Novosti Uzbekistana*, *Noviy Vek*, and *Biznes Vestnik Vostoka* are permitted; their predominant content is news and editorials favorable to the government. Also allowed are two Uzbek-language newspapers, *Hurriyat*, owned by the Journalists' Association, and *Mohiyat*, owned by Turkiston Press, a nongovernmental information agency loyal to the state.

Government-run channels dominate television broadcasting. VOA, RFE/RL, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) do not have permission to broadcast from inside Uzbekistan, and the government refuses to accredit foreign journalists and local correspondents for those and other Western media, such as Reuters and the Associated Press. As for the Internet, the government runs

[3] See: E. Freedman, R. Shafer, G. Rice, "Training Central Asian Journalists: Soviet Legacies Meet Lessons from U.S. Media History," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (41), 2006, p. 156-168.

[4] See: "2009 Human Rights Reports: Uzbekistan," U.S. Department of State, 11 March, 2010.

official sites such as the National News Agency's UzA.uz and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Jahonnews.uz. Reporting by purportedly independent Web sites such as Press-uz.info, Gorizont.uz, and Region.uz reflected the government's viewpoint.[5] In another potent obstacle to press freedom, "[t]he criminal and administrative codes impose significant fines for libel and defamation. The government used charges of libel, slander, and defamation to punish journalists, human rights activists, and others who criticized the president or the government."[6]

Origins of the VOA

VOA is the largest U.S. government-sponsored international multilingual multimedia broadcaster and is administered by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), whose members are appointed by the U.S. president. BBG also manages Radio Marti; Arabic-language Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa; Radio Farda and the Persian News Network broadcasting to Iran; Radio Free Asia; and RFE/RL. Its International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB) handles engineering, administrative, and oversight functions, as well as marketing and program placement for these stations.[7]

The fundamental assumption for each of these stations is that people in societies isolated from independent news outlets want to know what is happening inside and beyond their borders, and thus they turn to international broadcasters to fill that informational gap.[8] Although BBG stations clearly serve the interests of the U.S. government, VOA claims a high degree of objectivity and presents its content as a service to the underserved in less-free nations.

While each broadcast entity has a unique mission, the central goal of all U.S. international broadcasters is to provide underserved populations with balanced news coverage in areas where a free and open press does not exist or has not been firmly established. The open exchange of information and ideas, in turn, is designed to serve the interests of the United States by promoting international peace and stability.[9]

The VOA Charter of 1976 and its 1995 Journalistic Code set programming standards designed to reinforce credibility and, in the case of the code, to require accurate and objective reporting. The Code states that reporters and broadcasters: "…must strive for accuracy and objectivity in all their work. They do not speak for the U.S. government… VOA professionals strive for excellence and avoid imbalance or bias in their broadcasts. VOA is alert to, and rejects, efforts by special interest groups, foreign or domestic, to use its broadcasts as a platform for their own views."[10]

After World War II, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) loaned Archibald Roosevelt Jr., a grandson of former President Theodore Roosevelt, to VOA as director of the Middle East, which administratively included Central Asia. In that role, Roosevelt planned Uzbek, Caucasus (Azeri, Armenian, Georgian), and short-lived Tatar programming. He believed in VOA's power to reach the small republics of the Soviet Union. As a professional intelligence agent, he had good knowledge of the

[5] See: "2009 Human Rights Reports: Uzbekistan," U.S. Department of State, 11 March, 2010.

[6] Ibidem.

[7] See: "About the BBG: An Organization of U.S. International Broadcasters," Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2008, available at [http://www.bbg.gov/bbg_aboutus.cfm].

[8] See: L.L. Zhang, "Are They Still Listening? Reconceptualizing the Chinese Audience of the Voice of America in the Cyber Era," *Journal of Radio Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2002, pp. 317-337.

[9] See: "U.S. International Broadcasting: Strategic Planning and Performance Management System Could be Improved," U.S. General Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-00-222, 2000, p. 3.

[10] See: "Journalistic Code," *Voice of America*, 2005, available at [http://www.voanews.com/english/About/JournalisticCode.cfm].

region and Turkic languages, which he had learned while mastering Turkish and studying Central Asian history. In his memoir, he wrote that childhood exposure to British writer Rudyard Kipling made him aware of the aggressive Russian advance eastward through Turkistan, the region that encompasses Uzbekistan and other parts of formerly Soviet Central Asia. The region had been under Russian influence or rule in czarist times and was incorporated into the U.S.S.R. after the Bolshevik Revolution. In later travels to Iran, Roosevelt sympathized with the struggle of the Turkic peoples, whose place in history and the modern world he sought to showcase at VOA.[11]

Soon after launching programs to the Middle East, VOA officials discussed whether to add broadcasts to non-Slavic peoples of the Soviet Union. "A few unusual visitors began trickling into my office, immigrants from Russia's Asian borders…," Roosevelt recalled. "I was also visited by a Turkistani who arranged to have sent to me regularly an émigré publication, 'Turkistan,' published in Munich." That publication was printed in the Latin alphabet; with his knowledge of Turkish, he could read it with less difficulty, but ended up speaking with the Uzbek visitor in Russian. According to Roosevelt, Central Asian representatives heavily lobbied for programming in their native languages but opposed having them controlled by the VOA Russian Service director, a Soviet defector, whom they considered a "Russian chauvinist."[12]

VOA leaders and other government officials disagreed about the strategic wisdom of broadcasting into the U.S.S.R., with opponents arguing that U.S. propaganda would antagonize the Soviet public. Roosevelt prevented a Russian from directing Turkic-language programming for VOA, but the State Department issued a directive that program content should not offend Soviet—meaning Russian—nationalism.

Roosevelt chose Uzbek as the only indigenous language for broadcasts to Central Asia. One reason was that BBG's Radio Liberty already broadcast in Kazakh, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen. In addition, VOA had limited resources, and Uzbekistan was the region's most populous Soviet republic.[13] The first Uzbek-language broadcasts aired in February 1956.[14] By that time, however, Roosevelt had returned to the CIA. There were subsequent interruptions in Uzbek broadcasting for staff and fiscal reasons.

As the Cold War wound down and new independent states emerged in the region, important organizational changes took place at VOA. Between 1993 and 1997, the Central Asia Division encompassed Uzbek, Persian, Turkish, Dari, Pashto, and Azeri services. In a later realignment of language divisions, the Uzbek Service came under the Near East and Central Asia Division.[15]

The Voice of America in Uzbekistan

VOA has an explicit mission of serving audiences that otherwise lack reliable news and information due to their own governments' media controls and censorship. Thus in Uzbekistan, it proffers to provide viewers and listeners with an alternative to domestic broadcasts that are heavily censored or self-censored and controlled by the government and its ruling party and allies. Primarily because of

[11] See: A. Roosevelt, *For Lust of Knowing: Memoirs of an Intelligence Officer*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1988.
[12] See: Ibid., p. 235.
[13] See: A.L. Heil Jr., Telephone interview with lead author, June 2005.
[14] See: R. Nasar, Telephone interview with lead author, 17 July, 2005.
[15] See: A.L. Heil Jr., op. cit.

its proven value during the Cold War, VOA has largely avoided the kind of political criticism in the U.S. that is directed at Radio Marti.[16]

Of the five authoritarian former Soviet republics in Central Asia, VOA broadcasts only to Uzbekistan in its national language. One reason is Uzbekistan's strategic location in relation to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and, to a lesser extent, Iraq.

Regular VOA Uzbek Service radio broadcasts started in 1973 and were discontinued for short periods in the summers of 2001 and 2004. Since the mid-1980s, VOA Uzbek's daily broadcasts have gradually declined from two hours to the present thirty-minute show. It has supplied TV programming to regional affiliates since 2003. The Service competes for audiences with two other principal Western, Uzbek-language international broadcasters, RFE/RL and the BBC.[17]

Uzbekistan maintains heavy-handed controls over the mass media to ensure minimal deviation from government-produced news and information within the country, where only the most compliant journalism practices are tolerated. Thus the domestic press generally fails to effectively or freely cover internal conditions, events, and controversies. It is also unable to act as a watchdog on government in other ways, such as analyzing and reporting on the complex international diplomatic and international trade relationships the government is pursuing. Examining the country's human rights record for 2009, the State Department reports: "The government continued to commit serious abuses and authorities restricted political and civil liberties… Human rights activists and journalists who criticized the government were subject to physical attack, harassment, arbitrary arrest, politically motivated prosecutions, and forced psychiatric treatment."[18]

Policies of tight media control, unofficial censorship, and self-censorship deny citizens the benefits of a dynamic and independent press system that can advance meaningful participatory voices, transparency, and the information needed to construct and sustain functioning civil society. Two decades after independence, lingering Soviet press practices still dull content and support disinformation. In addition, the domestic press cannot generate sufficient advertising to become self-supporting because it cannot disseminate news that may attract mass audiences and advertisers.

Uzbekistan officially abolished censorship in May 2002; in actuality, media constraints diminished little, and local journalists still feel compelled to avoid covering government-sensitive issues.[19] Journalists find it difficult, and even dangerous, to advocate for looser press controls and economic reforms that might stimulate effective independent and potentially socially responsible mass media outlets.

Human rights organizations consistently rank the country among the world's worst in press rights. For example, Freedom House classifies its press system as "not free," and the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters sans Frontieres, and other press rights defender groups frequently criticize the regime.[20]

Foreign governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international media advocacy organizations have unsuccessfully tried to further press freedom and editorial independence, but such efforts are inherently suspect due to the regime's concerns about the imposition of new forms of Western-based colonialism and hegemony. As an American government-sponsored agency broadcast-

[16] For example, the head of the International Telecommunications Union's Radio Communications Office has criticized Radio Marti and TV Marti transmissions as illegal. In addition, the Government Accountability Office (GAO, formerly General Accounting Office) has alleged that the station propagandizes through editorializing, incendiary language, unverified reporting, and unprofessionalism; management disputes such assertions.

[17] See: N. Imamova, op. cit., pp. 43-47.

[18] See: "2009 Human Rights Reports: Uzbekistan."

[19] See: R. Shafer, E. Freedman, "Obstacles to the Professionalization of Mass Media in Post-Soviet Central Asia: A Case Study of Uzbekistan," *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003, pp. 91-103.

[20] See: "Freedom of the Press 2008," Freedom House, 2009, available at [http://www.freedomhouse.org].

ing alternative news and information, VOA is routinely accused of complicity in furthering American ambitions for colonialism and hegemony, although it fervently denies such charges.

Programming for Multiple Media

The Uzbek Service maintains reporters in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and Khujand, Tajikistan. Until October 2007, VOA heavily relied on its reporter in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, independent journalist Alisher Saipov; he had founded an Uzbek-language newspaper, ran a media group, and was well-known for his articles critical of the region's governments. Unidentified assassins shot Saipov in front of his office, provoking a sharp response from press rights advocates.[21] Due to such attacks and frequent harassment of journalists in this area, VOA has been unable to recruit another reporter in Osh.

VOA's daily radio shows air mainly on shortwave (SW) and medium wave (MW) in Uzbekistan and on 103 FM in Osh, a southern province of Kyrgyzstan—home to almost 120,000 ethnic Uzbeks.[22] Radio broadcasts present hard news from around the world. The Service carries interviews with U.S. officials and lawmakers, analysts, insights from the region, and stories contextualizing the lives of Uzbek immigrants in the U.S. Radio broadcasts focus on regional developments in Central Asia and local issues in Uzbekistan. Coverage includes controversial issues such as corruption and human rights violations. The program also invites experts to comment on issues, as it did on 23 August, 2008, when environmentalists and researchers discussed Uzbekistan's water crisis and the concerns of citizens whose voices were brought to the air through people-on-the-street interviews. The same month, the Service reported on child labor in the cotton industry by interviewing local farmers and officials and European and American business and advocacy groups. Another program in the same period featured an interview with Ahmed Rashid, whose book, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation-Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, questioned Bush administration policies in the region.

A weekly educational series answers questions from Uzbek youth interested in studying or working in the U.S. The Service invites students, professors, and NGO and government representatives to talk about opportunities, conditions, and exchange programs. VOA Uzbek also airs special segments where immigrants from Central Asia share their stories. For example, the 13 June, 2009, show featured Uzbeks talking about the joys and pains of making a new life in the U.S. The 28 July, 2008 edition of "Exploring America" featured an Uzbek model in the fashion industry; the 4 August, 2008, show presented the story of an immigrant family in Philadelphia. Weekend radio forums tackle critical issues, such as unemployment, human trafficking, and religious extremism. One of the most-discussed topics has been the situation of an estimated five million Uzbekistani migrant workers in Russia and Kazakhstan.

In advance of the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, VOA Uzbek devoted considerable time to the coverage of the primaries and presidential candidates, as well as explaining how the country was preparing to elect a new leader. Its 18 August show included an analysis of race and politics, asking Americans whether they were ready to elect a Black president. Another show provided background on Democrats and Republicans and how the parties shape domestic and foreign policy.

[21] See: "Kyrgyzstan: Ensure Justice for Murdered Journalist," Statement, Human Rights Watch, 25 October, 2007, available at [http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/10/25/kyrgyz17171.htm].

[22] See: Media Association of Ferghana Valley, 2005, available at [http://eng.fergana.org/about/region].

Obstacles within Uzbekistan

"Exploring America" is the first and, so far, only television programming in Uzbek and now airs weekly for a half-hour of news and features.

The television project began in December 2003 when four local stations agreed to air its daily and weekly programs. VOA provided them with satellite dishes and other equipment for downloading the broadcast feed. By early 2004, the number of affiliates in Uzbekistan grew to fifteen, including Samarkand TV in Samarkand; Aloqa TV in Gulistan; Bakhtiyor TV in Jizzakh; Koinot TV in Bukhara; Margilan TV in Margilan; Turtkul TV in Karakalpakstan; and Channel 30 in Tashkent. Then-Director David Jackson said that the TV feeds and radio broadcasts would carry democratic values to the region and "will reach a broader audience than any other means available to the U.S. government."[23]

Expanded public access to television raised the question of how to market it to the region. In its first year of working with the local TV stations, VOA Uzbek greatly benefited from cooperation with the country office of Internews Network, a U.S.-based NGO supporting local media development. That arrangement provided a networking opportunity for VOA and regional broadcasters airing VOA feeds. But by the end of 2004, the political environment was bleak for independent media. Internews was losing its battle with the Uzbek government over trumped-up charges that it violated laws governing NGOs, and the future looked ominous for other Western-funded, democracy-oriented NGOs.

Complicating the Service's venture into television was a new association of local broadcasters, engineered by a former member of the Presidential Press Office and media owner who had launched Samarkand TV in the mid-1990s and Poytaxt-Inform Radio in Tashkent in the early 2000s. The National Association of Electronic Mass Media of Uzbekistan (NAEMMU), a self-described professional union, was formed in 2004 to create a "civilized market for electronic media that provides equal conditions for all broadcasters and their active participation in building civil society."[24] Within a year, thirteen stations became members, most of them former Internews partners that had benefited from the NGO's capacity-building activities.

But independent-minded local broadcasters and the international community regarded NAEMMU and its TV network—which sought to control the source of programming for all member stations—as a serious threat to independent television. According to Internews, NAEMMU's true purpose was to influence broadcasters without overt government control. A special NAEMMU committee determined which programs would be broadcast based on conformity with national and cultural ideologies. In late 2004 and early 2005, four regional TV stations, most of them VOA affiliates, found their licenses suspended because, as their owners claimed, they refused to join NAEMMU from fear of losing credibility with their audiences. Many channels dropped "Exploring America" under pressure from the government, whose relationship with Washington had soured amid U.S. criticism of human rights abuses in Uzbekistan.

U.S. Politics, VOA, and the Uzbek Service

During the 1950s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower regarded VOA, RFE/RL, and their Central Asia services as mutually reinforcing. VOA was to be a source of accurate, balanced news about America

[23] See: "VOA Debuts Uzbek-Language Television Reports," Press Release, *Voice of America*, 12 December, 2003.

[24] See: National Association of Electronic Mass Media of Uzbekistan, 2005, available at [http://www.naesmi.uz/russian/about].

and the world. Meanwhile, RFE/RL was a privately incorporated, CIA-administered and government-funded network intended as an alternative or surrogate broadcaster in countries lacking democracy and freedom of the press and free expression. From 1953, when VOA became part of the new U.S. Information Agency, until the early 1960s, there were periodic radio councils in which leaders of VOA and RFE/RL met and coordinated activities. Alan L. Heil, Jr., former deputy director and author of *Voice of America: A History*, says that despite Eisenhower's intent, during the tumultuous 1960s co-operation was not close and the networks viewed each other as rivals: "The VOA professional staff regarded the Munich [where Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were then headquartered] radios as propagandists, likely to twist the news to destabilize governments of the countries to which they broadcast. RFE and RL professionals, on the other hand, felt that VOA was amateurish and basically an official U.S. government gazette unfamiliar with the cultures and languages of the region to which both beamed broadcasts."[25]

VOA has come under periodic scrutiny and political criticism. For example in 1965, Director Henry Loomis resigned when the Lyndon Johnson administration pressured the agency over its coverage of the expanding war in Southeast Asia. Loomis' farewell speech said: "The Voice of America is not the voice of the administration."[26] More recently, on the operational side, the Government Accountability Office, the nonpartisan investigatory arm of the U.S. Congress, has reported critically about BBG's management, planning, and effectiveness in the context of overall U.S. international broadcasting activities. A major theme of GAO criticism has been lack of research into audience needs and satisfaction and lack of reliable measures of effectiveness.

In January 2000, BBG finished a comprehensive language service review intended to help strategically reallocate $4.5 million "from emerging democracies in Central and Eastern Europe to several African countries and selected countries in other regions and planned annual reviews to analyze broadcast priorities and funding."[27] Directly relevant to the Uzbek Service was the board's intent to use its 2001 review to examine "program duplication" between VOA and surrogate language services, such as broadcasts to countries of the former Soviet Union, and to determine on a country-by-country basis whether overlap effectively served U.S. interests. At the time of the report, overlap existed between VOA and RFE/RL broadcasts in Uzbek, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Russian, and Ukrainian.

In early 2001, BBG closed VOA Uzbek radio. Worldwide producer-presenter Kim Andrew Elliott questioned the rationale for that decision because Uzbekistan was among the countries with the least amount of press freedom. A 1998 audience survey had showed RFE/RL and BBC with a 3 percent weekly audience, while VOA had only 1.8 percent. But VOA numbers look better when considering that VOA transmitted only one half-hour per day in Uzbek, compared to four hours per day for Radio Liberty. Audiences for all the stations are higher among listeners with college educations.[28]

By the summer of 2001, VOA Uzbek television broadcasts had been cut from one hour to a half-hour and then to only 15 minutes daily. Most contractors were laid off and only civil servants stayed to run the show. Just a few weeks later, the events of 11 September 2001 changed the situation. In the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, most laid-off staffers were recalled. By early 2002, the Service was enlarged with new recruits and air time increased to one hour daily.

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[25] See: A.L. Heil Jr., op. cit.

[26] See: W. Grimes, "Henry Loomis, Who Led Voice of America, Is Dead at 89," *New York Times*, 14 November, 2008, A27.

[27] See: U.S. International Broadcasting: Strategic Planning and Performance Management System Could be Improved, p. 5.

[28] See: K.A. Elliot, "Communications World," *Voice of America*, 2001, available at [http://www.kimandrewelliott.com/Cw/cw_20010127.html].

William Royce, then-advisor to the South and Central Asia Division, explained the BBG's rationale: "We want the Uzbek people to receive reliable, accurate news and information on events in the world and in neighboring Afghanistan, along with clear statements of U.S. government policies and actions in the war against terrorism."[29] Although listenership numbers remained discouragingly low, the Service tried to diversify content, which mostly centered on human rights and political opposition-type stories. More call-in shows and discussions of the political scene in Uzbekistan were aired, and stringer coverage of government corruption and internal affairs was added to the programming mix.

Meanwhile, renewed attention focused on BBG's services as tools to build a positive world image of America's in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks and the invasion of Afghanistan. That is when the government expanded public diplomacy initiatives to predominantly Muslim countries. That expansion included establishment of Radio Sawa in the Middle East, Radio Farda in Iran, and the Afghanistan Radio Network to attract larger audiences.

Subsequent GAO congressional testimony criticized the absence of an interagency strategy for communication efforts by BBG, the State Department, and other federal agencies. GAO reported that the State Department and BBG had not comprehensively and systematically measured progress toward their goals of improved public understanding of the U.S. and reaching broader audiences in priority markets.[30] That critique of BBG's lack of measurable program objectives to evaluate broadcast services mirrored GAO observations a year earlier; its prior report advocated such metrics of effectiveness as audience awareness, broadcaster credibility, and audience size in designated markets. It said BBG had not determined the appropriate level of overlap and duplication between VOA and other BBG services or the number of language services it can effectively carry.[31] Iskandar reached similar conclusions in his study of Arabic-language Radio Sawa, finding "no cohesive and strategically attainable objective to the public diplomacy ventures illustrated by Radio Sawa."[32]

Budget and staff cuts, coupled with political interference, sparked additional criticism. Former Director Sanford J. Ungar complained that VOA programming in critical languages such as Arabic was "being replaced with commercial-style shows featuring pop music and brief news bulletins," while political intervention was evident as congressionally required editorials "now blend into or trump objective news reports." He asserted that "other broadcasters and bloggers, many of them overtly hostile to the United States," were filling the void.[33] As for the reality of congressional intervention, the GAO pointed to a provision in the 1999 amendment to the International Broadcasting Act of 1994 expressing a sense of Congress statement "that RFE/RL should continue to broadcast to the peoples of Central Europe, Eurasia, and the Persian Gulf until such time as a particular nation has

(1) clearly demonstrated the successful establishment and consolidation of democratic rule and

(2) "firmly established a widely accessible domestic media that provides accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information to the national audience."[34]

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[29] See: "Voice of America Goes Quiet in Uzbekistan," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia*, Issue 307, 13 August, 2004.

[30] See: J.T. Ford, "U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department and Broadcasting Board of Governors Expand Post-9/11 Efforts but Challenges Remain," Testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, House Committee on Government Reform, GAO-04-1061T, 2004.

[31] See: "U.S. International Broadcasting: New Strategic Approach Focuses on Reaching Large Audiences but Lacks Measurable Program Objectives," U.S. General Accounting Office, GAO-03-772, 2003.

[32] See: A. Iskandar, op. cit.

[33] See: S.J. Ungar, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

[34] See: "U.S. International Broadcasting: Enhanced Measure of Local Media Conditions Would Facilitate Decisions to Terminate Language Services," U.S. General Accountings Office, GAO-04-374, 2004, p. 6.

Continuing Challenges

BBG's 2004 budget request to Congress proposed eliminating seventeen Central and Eastern European language services — ten VOA and seven RFE/RL — affecting Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Rumania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, but not Uzbekistan. However, a GAO analysis of that proposal reported "unstable media environments" remained in four of those countries and recommended that the board enhance its assessment of local media conditions to improve its language service review process. The budget proposal triggered a statement of congressional opinion that the Rumanian and Croatian services continue.[35]

With VOA Uzbek reaching its audience on radio and TV, and with growing interest in online content, the Service's future seemed assured until late spring 2004, when BBG considered canceling its radio programming but strengthening its TV broadcasting. Brian Mabry, a senior IBB advisor, said access to commercial outlets had clear benefits because Uzbekistan's tightly-controlled media meant U.S. broadcasters relied mostly on shortwave for radio. "While VOA has moved to broadcasting in Uzbek on television," Mabry said, "its sister broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty continues to reach Uzbekistan, broadcasting by shortwave and medium wave radio, with RFE/RL broadcasts seven hours of Uzbek-language radio daily."[36] At the time, VOA Uzbek had fewer weekly listeners than RFE/RL's 2.4 percent or BBC's 2.3 percent of the audience, according to InterMedia.

When VOA Uzbek radio programming stopped again in July 2004, longtime listeners complained of losing an important source of news— a rare commodity in a country dominated by state-controlled media. Human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and other NGOs, criticized the closure. The last radio broadcast aired 31 July, 2004 — the day after suicide bombers in Tashkent attacked the U.S. and Israeli embassies and a prosecutor's office. Many complained that the new TV programming would not adequately substitute for lost radio shows since TV did not cover events inside the country or problems confronting people there. VOA's TV affiliates lacked the credibility with the audience that its radio programs had. Some analysts in Washington, such as Martha Brill Olcott of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, expressed regret. "Access to AM or FM airwaves in a competitive commercial market is difficult. But bad reception is better than no reception, which will now be the case in Uzbekistan."[37]

Soon after the May 2005 uprising in the eastern Uzbekistan city of Andijan that led to the massacre of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people, Ismail Dahiyat, the division chief, sent a memo telling management that VOA should review its options on how to better reach Uzbekistan. Dahiyat explained the outcome of two dramatic developments in the country. First was the creation of the "quasi-governmental" entity NAEMMU as an umbrella for all private or "independent" stations.[38] As a result, he said, affiliates gradually but methodically dropped VOA programs. By late May, only a couple of stations still carried its feeds. Negotiations with the association were too slow to reach agreement, and judging from experience in dealing with the government, prospects did not seem reassuring, even if a deal were struck. The second cause for worry was the escalating crackdown on international media. With domestic media totally subservient to the regime and the situation in Uzbekistan volatile, U.S.-based groups, including the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, advocated for more broadcasting to the country and for reinstatement of radio broadcasts.

[35] Ibidem.
[36] See: "Voice of America Goes Quiet in Uzbekistan."
[37] Ibidem.
[38] See: I. Dahiyat, Telephone interview with lead author, July 2005.

Dahiyat suggested relaunching Uzbek radio programming on shortwave and medium wave, possibly from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both home to tens of thousands of Uzbek speakers.[39] In recent years, VOA found partners in Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan and has tried to maintain their cooperation by providing technical assistance. Dahiyat sounded confident that current Service staff were ready, noting that it had three dynamic, highly qualified broadcasters and a contract employee who could mount a daily 30-minute radio show, with minimal additional cost for outside contractors. However, reestablishing broadcasts would carry costs, and it would be difficult for existing personnel to produce both a half-hour daily radio program and maintain a TV schedule. As a compromise, the Service dropped its 10-minute daily TV feeds but kept its 30-minute weekly TV news magazine.

VOA resumed radio broadcasts to Uzbekistan on 12 June, 2005, within a month after the Andijan uprising. Management explained: "We believe very strongly in the right of people to have access to news and information that affects their lives. We have been providing that service to you on television for nearly a year, but because of the recent events in Uzbekistan and the Uzbek government's tightening of controls on foreign television broadcasts, we have decided to resume our radio broadcasts."[40] However, interruptions in programming have impaired VOA's reputation in Uzbekistan as a timely, dependable, and accessible source of information.

Although the Internet penetration rate in Uzbekistan is only 8.9 percent, VOA regards that medium as an effective way to attract younger audiences; the agency says Uzbek and other Turkic-language speakers on all continents read, listen to, and view its online content.[41] Its Web sites, www.voanews.com/uzbek, www.amerikaovozi.com, and www.amerikaovozi.org had 260,533 regular visitors in 2007, mostly from Central Asia, Russia, Turkey, Europe, and the U.S.[42]

The Service now uses social media to reach younger Uzbeks inside and outside the country. It has a You Tube channel and maintains Facebook and Twitter pages. Both TV and radio broadcasts are also available on podcasts and iTunes. Since Uzbekistan blocks VOA's main Web site, audiences can access content through these increasingly popular networks.

Former director Ungar blames the virtual lack of a constituency inside the U.S. for VOA's political problems at home.[43] Few lawmakers know much about VOA, and he says "of the various ironies besetting U.S. foreign policy at the moment, one is both particularly acute and little recognized: even as the realization grows that the international image of the United States is in steep decline, the country's best instrument of public diplomacy, the Voice of America, is being systematically diminished."[44] Although critics assert that a government-funded network should always portray American policies as righteous and successful, he claims that — in the right hands — such propaganda or public diplomacy could defuse anti-Americanism. Experience demonstrates that VOA is most appreciated and effective when functioning as a model U.S.-style news organization, according to Ungar: "By presenting a balanced view of domestic and international events, it exemplifies how independent journalism can strengthen democracy."[45]

In 2007, audience research by InterMedia showed VOA to be the leading international broadcaster in Uzbekistan.[46] Thus BBG's proposal to eliminate it in 2008 shocked the Service and its advocates. BBG provided little explanation beyond noting that its budget was tight, requiring the sacrifice

[39] See: I. Dahiyat, Telephone interview with lead author, July 2005.
[40] See: "VOA to Resume Radio Broadcasts to Uzbekistan," Press Release, *Voice of America*, 10 June, 2005.
[41] See: Internet World Stats, 2009, available at [http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/uz.htm].
[42] See: M. Messenger, "VOA Uzbek Program Review," Washington, June 2008.
[43] See: S.J. Ungar, op. cit.
[44] Ibidem.
[45] Ibidem.
[46] See: Intermedia, Research Findings, November 2007.

of a few services that were struggling to increase audiences and that faced complex challenges to penetrate targeted regions.

The board's $668.2 million budget request called for a 3.8 percent increase from the anticipated fiscal 2007 level to expand programming to North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and to boost funding of the Arab-language satellite network Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa.

Uzbek Service supporters argued that its elimination would impede the war on terrorism and efforts to instill democratic principles throughout Central Asia. A *Washington Post* editorial called the plan an attempt to silence America in a turbulent neighborhood heavily influenced by Russia. "Uzbekistan's brutal dictatorship is of the sort that incubates religious fundamentalism and anti-Americanism," the editorial said, adding that programming in Uzbek provides "about the only direct contact Uzbeks have with the U.S. and the only unvarnished news in the region. Meanwhile, the highly controlled Russian media beam their often misleading programming in with ease."[47] The newspaper also published an article about the proposed cuts. It included interviews with VOA broadcasters, analysts, and BBG officials in which advocates contended that the board had opted to bulldoze the Service rather than explore alternatives, including asking for higher appropriations to cover the cost of the doomed services, including Uzbek.[48]

In defense of its plan, BBG cited independent surveys showing a yearly decline in shortwave listeners and said satellite TV, FM radio, and the Internet are the wave of the future. Research showed that VOA's Uzbek audience declined due to lack of publicity, marketing, and jamming. "The reception is poor," respondents complained.[49] Without broadcasting partners inside a media-hostile country, the board determined to drop the Service but perhaps increase funding for RFE/RL Uzbek, which delivered four hours of original radio programming on medium and short wave, the same ways VOA reached its audience.

VOA Uzbek supporters countered that the Service already was delivering TV programs via satellite, airing radio shows through an FM affiliate, and focusing heavily on Internet coverage. VOA also stressed that it was a crucial source of trustworthy news and information for decision-makers and influential figures worldwide, a demographic that is difficult to quantify.[50] InterMedia findings showed VOA still led by 4 percent over RFE/RL and the BBC, mainly because of TV programming accessed via satellite (ASIASAT and TURKSAT) and through Kyrgyz stations. Throughout 2007, "Exploring America" was also available on Ayna TV in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, home to an Uzbek-speaking population in the north of the country.

As a petition drive to save VOA Uzbek and other "endangered" services kicked off, Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid warned that the proposed cuts would reinforce the dictatorship in Uzbekistan, saying: "Ironically, just as the Bush administration is proposing a cutback in Uzbek-language broadcasting, both the European Parliament and the OSCE are urging greater media projection into Uzbekistan and training for Uzbek journalists in exile."[51] Rashid emphasized that broadcasts also reached ethnic Uzbeks in the other four Central Asian republics, the Uzbek diaspora in Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, and the powerful Uzbek warlord in Afghanistan, General Rashid Dostum.

By the summer of 2007, the message from congressional appropriations and foreign relations committees and from individual lawmakers was that VOA Uzbek and other threatened services would survive another budget cycle. However, BBG still identified Iran and other parts of the Middle East as

[47] See: "Silence of America; Cutting the VOA's Presence in Mr. Putin's Neighborhood," *The Washington Post*, 16 February, 2007, A22.

[48] See: D. Schrank, "VOA Says Goodbye to Uzbek, Other Tongues," *The Washington Post*, 23 February, 2007, A13.

[49] See: Intermedia, Research Findings, November 2007.

[50] See: D. Schrank, op. cit.

[51] See: A. Rashid, "Planned VOA Cuts Would Reinforce Dictatorship in Uzbekistan," *Eurasianet*, 22 February, 2007.

priorities and sent another proposal to Congress in early 2008 to shut down the Service. In July 2008, however, management informed the Service that programming would continue as Congress had designated.

Conclusions and Implications

From a research perspective, this case study highlights the need for further research into BBG-sponsored international broadcast services, both individually and collectively. Such studies could include quantitative content analyses of program content, survey research of listeners and viewers, interview-based research with present and former BBG journalists and managers; and documentary studies into the history and politics of the services. In addition, there is a need for more comparative examination of Western international broadcasters, such as BBC, Deutsche Welle, VOA, and RFE/RL. Yet another area ripe for examination is the role of Russian international broadcasts into Central Asia and other parts of the former Soviet Union and their role as instruments of Russia's foreign policy, public diplomacy, and propaganda.

The battle for survival of the Uzbek Service continues, despite the fact that evaluations by VOA's Office of Research for three successive years praised the quality of its radio and television shows. While the Service has been promised that it will survive, it faces crucial questions: How can excellent programs be most effectively delivered? How can VOA boost its presence and expand outreach and penetration? What options exist for better marketing and promotion? Should it mainly rely on the Internet or concentrate on improving reception through shortwave radio? Does its limited TV programming, available only on satellite and stations in neighboring countries, have a future? Technological changes beyond VOA's control will also play a role in determining the Service's future as the Internet becomes more accessible. In China, for example, the audience for VOA and other Western shortwave broadcasts has shrunk as the Internet's role as a primary source of external information has grown, despite the Chinese government's ability to block some foreign Web sites.[52] Meanwhile, Uzbekistanis lag far behind the Chinese in access to the Web.

Supporters say additional funding and resources would open doors. Some call for more political attention—perhaps engagement with President Karimov's regime—and pragmatic compromise at a time of Russian expansionism and concerns about Islamic radicalism in Central Asia. Critics counter that the era of U.S.-funded international broadcasting as an avenue of public diplomacy is over; instead, they argue, domestic media in target countries need professional and financial support to enable them to fill the news and information gap.

"'Propaganda' is a controversial term" and "retains conspiratorial and anti-democratic connotations" in the American political context.[53] Communist party leadership recognized Soviet-era journalists as critical agents of the social and economic changes essential to central planning. As a Soviet republic before 1991, Uzbekistan was directly part of that central planning process, with a press system virtually inseparable from the larger Soviet media apparatus.[54] Thus Uzbekistanis consumed Uzbek mass media during Soviet times and were serviced by a highly controlled press system after independence. Except during a brief period of eased constraints in the early 1990s, they have largely been denied alternative news and information outlets that may encourage and sustain a democratic society.

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[52] See: L.L. Zhang, op. cit.

[53] See: M.J. Socolow, "'News is a Weapon': Domestic Radio Propaganda and Broadcast Journalism in America, 1939-1944," *American Journalism*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2007, p. 109.

[54] See: E. Freedman, R. Shafer, G. Rice, op. cit.

There no longer exists what Camaj describes as the "bipolar world that existed until the beginning of the 1990s," in which international radio broadcasters—from the U.S. and Western Europe, on the one hand, to the Soviet Union, on the other—competed as propaganda organs spreading rival ideologies.[55] Today's different fundamental public policy and ideological questions raise the issue of whether publicly labeling VOA broadcasts as "propaganda" resurrects the specter of the Soviet enemy in a post-Soviet era. Further, what are the political implications of doing so at home and abroad? Today we tend to regard the label "propaganda" primarily in the context of the rivalry between communist nations and the West. Yet it does not have that limitation in the historical context of VOA, as reflected by its intensified Arabic-language radio broadcasting to the Middle East in the 1950s, which was unambiguously propagandistic.[56]

Yet another question is how Congress and the White House will determine future U.S. priority targets for internal broadcasting under the BBG umbrella. The addition of Arabic- and Farsi-language stations since 2001, for example, reflects the continuing fluidity of priorities, just as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War changed priorities in the 1990s.

Whether characterized as public diplomacy or propaganda, it is clear now, as it was from VOA's birth, that the broadcaster's principal purpose is to influence world opinion in favor of fundamental American values, principles, governance, and culture. Certainly such goals are far more subtle and less ambitious than the Russians had been as imperialists and colonialists in Uzbekistan since the 1860s. Nevertheless, VOA might be viewed as a manifestation of U.S. efforts to replace the Russians in controlling the hearts and minds of the people. At the same time, policymakers must balance political realities of an increasingly globalized world, of extra-governmental threats, of new information dissemination technologies, and of conflicting traditions, faiths, and aspirations. It remains to be seen whether VOA's Uzbek Service will still be an important alternative source of reliable news and information for Uzbekistanis—or if a modernized, independent, and socially responsible domestic mass media system will emerge to make VOA's American-generated Uzbek broadcasts both obsolete and unnecessary.

[55] See: L. Camaj, op. cit.

[56] See: J. Vaughan, "Propaganda by Proxy? Britain, American, and Arab Radio Broadcasting, 1953-1957," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2002, pp. 157-172.