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VOICE OF AMERICA

The Troubling Journey to Professional Journalism

Chetra Chap

Born out of the intention to tell America's stories to the world, Voice of America (VOA) was established and funded by the United States (US) as an international broadcasting channel in 1942 with a first broadcasted announcement, "This is a voice speaking from America ... the news may be good or bad; we shall tell you the truth." (US General Accounting Office, 1992, p.8). Under the budget of around \$206.2 million (fiscal year 2012), VOA is one of the five major civilian US international broadcasters under the supervision of Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) whose board consists of the secretary of state and eight governors appointed by the President to pursue the mission of informing, engaging and connecting people around the world in support of freedom and democracy. It started by providing radio-based, reliable news to the population living in closed and war-torn societies, and since then has grown into a multimedia broadcast agency that has a total of 1151 employees working to produce a wide range of contents – at least 1,800 hours of radio and television programming – for an estimated 134 million audiences outside the US on radio, television, mobile and the internet in 43 languages every week (Fast facts, 2013).

During the interview with National Public Radio (NPR), the director of VOA, David Ensor, explains that numerous changes and challenges are happening to alter the existence and operation of VOA owing to the growing advancement of communication technology. While on a budget constraint due to government's cutbacks in response to economic downturn, VOA has to "do more on less". He indicates that VOA has no longer exclusively relied on radio shortwave as it used to do to reach audiences globally. Only a small portion of the world geography – which covers countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, Burma and North Korea – sees radio shortwave remains popular, and important. Therefore, there must be a quick move of resources into new media (such as social media), mobile-ready internet sites, and satellite television broadcasts (Simo, 2011). In a recent keynote address to a Public Diplomacy Council forum at the State Department's Marshall Center in Washington, Ensor (2013a) reports that despite budget and technical difficulties, the future roadmap still presents obstacles for VOA although efforts to seek resolutions are incredibly and constantly accelerated.

One of the major problems, Ensor utters, lies on the power-exercising practice of tyrannical administrations that always try to figure out ways to cut off the free flow of information in the media even though there is a gigantic explosion of new digital technologies – social media, mobile application, satellite television and the internet. In Pakistan, a local VOA reporter, Mukarram Khan Aatif, was shot in the head at a mosque by a gunman whose associate, a local Taliban commander, said, "All reporters of Voice of America are our targets and should resign, otherwise we will kill them." A similar case happened in Northern Mali, where an armed gang from the *Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa* broke into VOA office in the city of Gao, and beat a local on-air host to death with their rifles.

Tied to the shrinking budget issue and like other Western broadcasters, VOA encounters another tough situation granted that there is a rapid increase of radio and television broadcasts from countries like China, Russia and Iran. While trying to tightly restrict or jam VOA signals, some of these countries spend billions of dollars to expend their media capabilities and seek access to audiences in America and around the world.

In a nutshell, Ensor suggests that VOA is struggling to fight against challenges in many fronts. Regardless of the threats from repressive regimes to its pursuit to report balanced and unbiased news – and while the voices of extremism and autocratic states are proliferating – VOA will need to keep on doing what it has always done. The point is the enemies must not dominate the global conversation. People around the world cannot afford to only hear the voice from al-Qaida affiliates in Africa, Pakistan and elsewhere. Clearly, he stresses, VOA is one of the most cost effective ways to fight these issues since its stories broadcasted reach hundreds of millions a week, at a budget less than the cost of a single US fighter jet.

According to Ensor, with the new face of media technologies and platforms, VOA has also adopted an all-digital strategy, where radio and television programs are directly distributed on the web and has used social media for communicating with audiences for real-time feedbacks. A lot of changes have been in place to accommodate the presence of this new broadcasting scenario. For instance, radio has been instead called “audio” since it is available on so many platforms, and television is just known as “video” now.

It is worth noticing that VOA has always been the primary actor in disseminating the international communication of American policies, culture, institutions and thoughts. It is not surprising that its existence and broadcasting operations cause rise to numerous challenges of all kinds. These challenges, nevertheless, have not stopped VOA from continuing to carry out

its missions, yet instead they have forced this institution to flexibly undergo significant changes in programming methods and identities since its inception. In many ways, it is not an exaggeration to say that VOA will always remain motivated to undertake all kinds of measures against difficulties and threats to its existence and values.

However, in order to increase its relevancy and credibility as an international media outlet, VOA must be innovative and willing to make significant reforms on certain critical matters. Although VOA has taken prompt measures to deal with most of the problems and challenges above, there is a critical issue that VOA needs to focus on so as to strengthen itself: propaganda controversy. Regarding the issue of propaganda, Heil (2003) indicates that VOA has always been suffering from a “split personality” which forces it to be at the intersection of “journalism and diplomacy.” In its charter, VOA is required to possess both journalistic values and responsibility to protect and promote the public diplomacy of the United States of America (p. 4). Unfortunately, serving American diplomacy is seen as propaganda on other nation states.

This paper argues that in order to end the criticism concerning propaganda, VOA needs to establish itself as an independent journalistic organization that does not serve American public diplomacy, and hence alter the provisions in its Charter that specifically present the intention to stimulate US interests.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Sanford Ungar (2001), president of Goucher College and a former VOA director from 1999 to 2001, says that VOA has evolved to be a highly capable and credible actor in the international flow of information. Its correspondents are among the fiercest and most courageous frontline soldiers risking their life to report truthful stories from dangerous spots

around the world. As it has an important role, VOA must be able to “interview anyone anywhere at anytime, without fear of rebuke or reprisal,” so that an honest and full coverage of remarkable events is brought to the public. “The State Department should keep its hands – and editing pencils – off the news.”

This statement of Sanford Ungar was made long after the end of cold war and right before the 9/11 attack. The criticism, nevertheless, claims that VOA may be seen as exercising aspects of professional journalism during peacetime, but its nature is always a tool for advocating US foreign policy objectives at times of war. During the Vietnam War under the Reagan administration, VOA was heavily denounced as an arm of US State Department for jeopardizing its journalistic integrity by broadcasting misleading and biased report (Weaver, 1998, p. 36). With the Cold War, the accusation came in full force as there was a propaganda war going on between the West and the Soviet bloc. Kondracke (1990) commented, “If ever there was an American foreign policy success story [in the Cold War], it’s in international broadcasting” (p. 10). Nelson (1997) argues, in his book *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War*, that it was neither diplomacy, nor global economy that won the Cold War for the West. It was radio. A little more than a decade later, another major kind of war emerged after the 9/11 attack. The war against global terrorism succeeded the cold war, and once again stirred up pressures from the US government on VOA to censor its reporting (Heil, 2003, p. 410).

Despite what the critics are saying, VOA has been putting enormous effort into embodying in the itself the principle of telling the truth and sustaining free flow of reliable information. Probably, the best evidence showing the credibility of VOA is its passing of the first most significant test on the issue of Mullah Omar, spiritual leader of the Taliban. On September 21 – right after the 9/11 attack – VOA wanted to broadcast its interview with

Mullah Omar although it had no intention in allowing Mullah to use VOA freely at his will to spread his radical views. The editorial decision was to put together President Bush's address to a joint meeting of congress and excerpts from Mullah's response in a balanced manner. At that time, tremendous pressures to kill Mullah's interview from US State Department was laid upon the VOA acting director, Myrna Whitworth, and sadly, some members of VOA supervising board, BBG, took side with the State Department (Heil, 2003, p. 411). The reasoning behind that banning was that "a taxpayer-supported network should not become a platform for broadcasting terrorist views back to Afghanistan" (Nakashima, 2001). Three days later, Andre DeNesnera, VOA News director, sent an email to his staffs saying, "the State Department's decision is a totally unacceptable assault on our editorial independence, a frontal attack on our credibility." On September 25, the acting director Whitworth decided to broadcast the interview, and DeNesnera concluded, "We've done it. Article One of the Charter remains intact. At least for today." (as cited in Heil, 2003, p. 414-415).

The New York Times praised VOA for its courageous act and published an editorial, describing, "Since the end of the cold war, the Voice of America's radio programs have metamorphosed from government echo into real journalism" (Censorship, 2001). Recently, VOA's director, David Ensor, was interviewed about diplomacy and the role of VOA. While the interviewer, Nicholas Krlev, painted VOA as a "strange beast" for being a government-funded journalistic organization, Ensor rebutted, "The Voice of America is not a propaganda organization and is not a mouthpiece of the White House or anybody else" (as cited in VOA Is 'Not, 2013). Ensor (2013b) claimed that VOA has been a proud journalistic institution for more than 70 years, and to provide the world with fair and balanced information, but what VOA clearly needs to do better is to explain its mission to the public.

The declaration that VOA have been of proud journalism since its birth sounds rather loaded, especially when there have been obvious circumstances that the US government used VOA to intensify its influences on the international stage. Recent incredible achievements might prove VOA's credibility and its strong commitment for journalistic ethics, but the identity crisis will continue to haunt VOA, like it or not. For instance, the interviewer, Nicholas Kralev, opened up the interview with Ensor with a doubt about VOA's nature – a proclaimed independent news outlet that is funded by the government and established, based on its charter, to favor American foreign policies. Ironically, while Ensor admitted VOA's failure in interpreting its mission, the failure, in fact, lies on that established mission – spelled out in VOA charter and other laws – itself.

THE OLD LAW IN THE NEW WORLD

Moscow's party chief, Yuri A. Prokofiev, mentions that the former Soviet statesman, Mikhail Gorbachev, always believes in the necessity to control state-run broadcasters, and he also points to VOA as a model of government control, saying, “the US-government broadcaster [VOA] is subject to censorship and cannot take stands critical of the US government” (as cited in Shane, 1991). With this comment, Director of VOA's Office of External Affairs, Joseph D. O'Connell Jr. (1991), responds back, affirming, “VOA is not subject to censorship.” Its congressionally mandated Charter, by law, obliges broadcasts to be “accurate, objective and comprehensive.” The staffs always have taken these words seriously at VOA, and millions of people outside the US have taken the Voice of America seriously as well.

For the record, this debate is very common. By looking at the response from VOA, the argument seems to be valid although the big picture has yet to reveal. VOA Charter is not that simple, having only these few words. There are other provisions inside the Charter that

primarily caused the identity crisis from which VOA has been suffering. As illustrated by Heil (2003), the Charter pronounces that VOA must be an accurate, objective and comprehensive source of world and US news, or it will not be able to stand a chance with the world audiences. At the same time, the Charter also demands that VOA reflect American thought and opinion, and present US policies as well as debate about those policies. These contradicting provisions eventually give rise to uncertainty about VOA's credibility as a broadcasting institution (p. 4).

Some may not see the charter as a problem that provokes a sense of propaganda for VOA. Heil (2003) in his own right tends to see that American policies can be reported within Western journalistic norms (p. 4). Generally, this perspective merits on the ground that America is the symbol of freedom and democracy. Yet, using such a one-sided view to rebut the criticism of the Charter can be somewhat irrelevant and implausible.

It is worth noticing that the VOA Charter was written in 1960 and signed into law in 1976 – the period during intense ideological struggles of the Cold War. The creation of this Charter was mainly intended to respond to the criticism concerning how VOA was politically utilized to promote pro-America views (Buhayar, 2007). This context, therefore, makes it possible to explore the reasons behind the two contradicting provisions in the charter. As with the principle to be accurate, objective and comprehensive, the Charter was distinctly directed to the criticism. Having said that, the remaining provisions – that appoint VOA as a body to reflect and protect US policies – were arguably the result of the Cold War ideology. Since the world went into a clear-cut separation between the America-oriented West and the Communist Soviet, there was a necessity, if not a must, for VOA to establish its stand, and the Charter, consequently, needed to also define that stand.

After the Cold War ended, political division in the world became inapplicable, and so does the stand VOA is holding. The world has no longer consisted of two separated competing groups, where either of which VOA needs to represent. The primary role of VOA since that day has boiled down to just being a proud journalistic outlet that provides truthful and reliable news to the people around the world – including the Americans. On this note, it is critically important for VOA to propose an amendment to its respectful Charter. The Charter shall not entail the responsibility of VOA to reflect and protect American policies, yet institute only the code of conduct that paves the path for VOA to become an independent, credible and reliable media institution with significant journalistic integrity.

CONCLUSION

In regard to legal reform, the US congress has just made an amendment to another broadcasting law – the US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, or simply the Smith-Mundt Act – that also contributed to VOA’s identity crisis. According to this law, VOA is state-run broadcaster, so its contents are banned from distribution in the United States. This law is intended to “prevent the government from turning its propaganda machine on its own citizens” (Landler, 2011). However, it is not to say propaganda issue is the main reason of this amendment.

Walter Isaacson, a onetime head of CNN and now a chairman of the BBG, was one of those willing to rewrite that law. He said that the internet era has made this law out of date and to deal with relentless competitions such as China, Russia, Iran, and also Egypt – players that have been increasingly funding their broadcasting sectors – VOA should turn itself into a “state-owned CNN: create a state-of-the-art global newsroom that would gather all the programming generated by the five networks and send it out via television, the Web, social-media services, mobile phones — even shortwave, where it still makes sense.” After all, the

need for America to get its message to an “often hostile world” is greater than ever (as cited in Landler, 2011). Beside, VOA has been called “the largest [US] broadcaster that few Americans know about” (Metzgar, 2013). Congressman Eliot Engel, the senior Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and an influential voice for democracy in the Balkans, mentions that the money spent by American people on VOA has allowed to America to show its goodwill, good faith and what it really stands for – freedom and democracy. It is time for VOA to do more to make Americans know “how tremendous the soft power impact of their taxpayer dollars in reaching the world through radio, TV, internet, mobile and social media.” (Ensor, 2013c).

Like many other media outlets, VOA faces challenges in the new digital age. However, unlike many of them, VOA always have this propaganda controversy weighing on its shoulder no matter how hard it tries to prove the journalistic integrity and how much positive impacts it has on millions of lives. With the Charter refined, this giant media outlet will stand a chance to pursue what its former director, Dan Austin, once said, “We believe that the interests of this country [US] are served by having people around the world understand us. We're not asking people to like us. Those are policy issues. And we don't do policy at Voice of America” (as cited in Brown, 2007). America needs VOA more than ever to exemplify its good faith, and goodwill in providing free flow of truthful information that is vitally essential for peace and development in the world.

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