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Report to the Chairman, Legislation and
National Security Subcommittee,
Committee on Government Operations,
House of Representatives

September 1994

RADIO MARTI

Program Review Processes Need Strengthening





United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

National Security and
International Affairs Division

B-248284

September 23, 1994

The Honorable John Conyers, Jr.
Chairman, Legislation and National
Security Subcommittee
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In response to your request, we reviewed the implementation of the U.S. Information Agency's (USIA) plan for enhancing the overall review process for Radio Marti by (1) moving a program review unit from the Office of Voice of America (VOA) Programs to the Office of the Associate Director, Bureau of Broadcasting, and making the unit responsible for overseeing the review process at Radio Marti and (2) creating an external review panel to evaluate the broadcast practices at Radio Marti.

Results in Brief

Although oversight responsibility was transferred more than a year ago to the Bureau of Broadcasting, because of staffing problems the Bureau's Office of Program Review only recently began overseeing Radio Marti's programming. Although this Office was intended to be a primary tool for ensuring that Radio Marti's broadcasts meet VOA standards, the Office has not yet initiated any study to determine whether the station is meeting VOA standards.

According to officials from the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), the external review panel has provided useful comments and suggestions on Radio Marti's broadcasting practices. However, during its first year of operation, weaknesses in procedures governing the development and use of the panel's views have limited the panel's effectiveness and credibility as a review mechanism. For example, the Bureau of Broadcasting has no mechanism to ensure that OCB addresses the review panel's suggestions. It is unclear whether the panel's suggestions were appropriately considered, and OCB provided no feedback on what actions, if any, it intended to take on the panel's suggestions. The Acting Associate Director, Bureau of Broadcasting, told us that actions have been taken to address some of these problems.

Background

Radio Marti, a U.S.-funded radio station, was established in 1983 to fill a void in news and information the Cuban government created through censorship. The station is located in OCB within USIA's Bureau of Broadcasting. (App. I provides a partial organizational chart that shows the various USIA offices connected with Radio Marti.)

According to the authorizing legislation,¹ Radio Marti broadcasts shall be in accordance "with all Voice of America standards to ensure the broadcast of programs which are objective, accurate, balanced, and which present a variety of views." The Director of OCB and the Director of Radio Marti have direct responsibility for ensuring that broadcasts meet these standards. For several years, there have been allegations that political bias has undermined the accuracy and objectivity of Radio Marti's news and information broadcasts.

In December 1992, the Director, USIA, tasked the Office of Program Review to ensure that Radio Marti's broadcasts were complying with VOA's standards. Then, in January 1993, the Bureau and OCB established an external review panel to evaluate the content and presentation of Radio Marti's programs that provide news and information. We reported on USIA's plans to enhance the overall Radio Marti review process in February 1993.²

Bureau of Broadcasting's Oversight of Radio Marti Has Been Delayed

USIA moved its program review unit from the Office of VOA Programs, which did not oversee Radio Marti, to the Bureau's Office of Program Review in December 1992. The purpose of the move was to give the unit oversight responsibility for the program review process throughout the Bureau, including Radio Marti. This Office is seen as the primary oversight mechanism outside of OCB for ensuring that Radio Marti's broadcasts meet VOA standards. However, a program review analyst was not hired until June 1994 and as a result the Office has just begun to evaluate Radio Marti's broadcasts.

The Office of Program Review has been tasked to analyze and evaluate VOA and Radio Marti broadcasts to ensure that they conform to the standards and principles outlined in the VOA charter,³ which requires broadcasting activities to include news that is consistently reliable and authoritative,

¹P.L. 98-111, sec. 3(b), 22 U.S.C. 1465a.

²Radio Marti (GAO/NSIAD-93-126R, Feb. 17, 1993).

³P.L. 94-350, 22 U.S.C. 1463.

accurate, objective, and comprehensive. The unit is also tasked to evaluate programs using Radio Marti's editorial guidelines⁴ to ensure that broadcasters, editors, writers, and producers consistently remain unbiased and do not censor information.

The program review analyst conducted the first review of Radio Marti in July 1994; the report was issued in August 1994. The analyst used the review to acquaint the Office of Program Review with Radio Marti's programming, since the Office had no previous experience with the station. In the review, the analyst compared the news presented on Radio Marti with VOA's Spanish language newscasts to illustrate their similarities and differences. The review did not address whether the broadcasts met VOA standards, even though the Office is tasked with this function. According to the Office Director, once a formalized process has been established to obtain programming from Radio Marti, the Office will develop a schedule for reviewing the station's programs with that function in mind. The Director expects that the first such review will be undertaken sometime after the current Cuban refugee crisis abates.

Weaknesses Lessen Effectiveness and Credibility of External Review Panel

The external review panel was established in January 1993 and was to convene quarterly to provide comments and suggestions to OCB on Radio Marti programming. OCB views the panel as one of several mechanisms, including focus groups and an editorial board that monitor and evaluate Radio Marti programming. OCB believes the panel provides informed, independent, professional opinions of the strengths and weaknesses in Radio Marti's programming, and makes helpful comments and suggestions. (See app. II for examples of the panel's comments and suggestions.) The panel held its first meeting in July 1993 and has conducted four reviews since that time.

OCB decides whether to act on the panel's suggestions, without higher level monitoring. Some panel members questioned whether the Office was interested in their views, since they had received little feedback from OCB regarding their suggestions. Furthermore, in May 1994, USIA's Inspector General criticized the method for selecting programming for review by the panel because it did not ensure independence. In our opinion, these weaknesses lessen the effectiveness and credibility of the panel as a review mechanism.

⁴The guidelines were established in December 1985 and updated in February 1994.

OCB Decides Whether and How to Respond to Panel's Suggestions

When the panel was established, USIA stated that the panel's reports and recommendations would be submitted to the Agency, the Bureau of Broadcasting, and OCB. The Bureau's Director of the Office of Program Review participates in the panel's meetings, but has no authority to ensure that OCB adequately considers or responds to the panel's suggestions. Furthermore, if OCB agrees to act on a suggestion, there is no oversight process to monitor actions taken. In contrast, for VOA programs, the Bureau's Office of Program Review has a system for identifying deficiencies, recommending changes, and reviewing programs to ensure that corrective actions were implemented.

Panel Desires More Communication

Former panelists stated that the lack of communication between OCB and the panelists, other than to inform them it was time to undertake another review, signified that the panel's work was not valued. OCB helped create this perception by failing to communicate with the panel regarding implementation of the panel's suggestions. A high-level Radio Marti official agreed that there had been little communication between OCB and the panel. At its August 1994 meeting, the panel raised the communication issue again. OCB's Director of Program Evaluation acknowledged the panel's desire for increased communication and noted that OCB had recently revised its administrative procedures to specify, among other things, that the Programming Committee's responses to the panel's suggestions and its recommendations to OCB management will be shared with the panel.

Program Selection Process Altered

In May 1994, USIA's Office of the Inspector General reported that OCB, not the panel, was selecting programs for review.⁶ The Inspector General's report expressed concern that the independence of the program selection process was diminished and thus recommended that the external review panel decide what programs to review. OCB officials believe that these observations were not accurate. However, the Acting Associate Director, Bureau of Broadcasting, agreed to change the selection process and issued new procedures in June 1994. Under the procedures, the panelists will select programs for review, review the same materials, submit their written comments to the Office of Program Evaluation, and meet with OCB's Director of Program Evaluation to discuss their observations and suggestions.

⁶Review of Allegations Concerning Radio Marti Employees, USIA Office of the Inspector General (Audit Report 93-A-62, May 19, 1994).

Recommendations

Because of the controversial nature of Radio Marti, allegations of improper broadcasts, and concerns that broadcasts meet VOA standards, it is important that quality control procedures be effective and credible. Therefore, we recommend that the Director, USIA, require the Associate Director, Bureau of Broadcasting, to examine the external review panel's past comments and suggestions and determine whether OCB adequately considered them and took the appropriate actions. On past and future suggestions, we recommend that the Associate Director ensure that OCB follows through with actions it agrees to take and that its reasons for not acting on suggestions are valid. In addition, we recommend that OCB routinely provide the panel with formal responses that summarize actions taken or planned or reasons why no action is planned.

Views of USIA Officials

As requested, we did not obtain written agency comments. However, we discussed our findings and recommendations with senior USIA officials, including the Acting Associate Director, Bureau of Broadcasting; the Bureau's Director of Program Review; and the Directors of OCB, Radio Marti, and its Office of Program Evaluation. We have incorporated their comments where appropriate.

The Acting Associate Director agreed that actions should be taken to improve the effectiveness and credibility of the panel. He said he plans to charge the Office of Program Review with monitoring OCB's responses to the panel's comments and suggestions. In addition, he said he would task OCB with providing a formal response to the external review panel on what it plans to do on each of the panel's suggestions.

Scope and Methodology

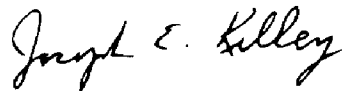
We obtained information and interviewed officials from USIA's Bureau of Broadcasting, OCB, past and current members of the external review panel, the Advisory Board on Cuba Broadcasting, and the U.S. Board on Public Diplomacy. We observed the panel's meeting in August 1994. We did not attempt to determine whether program review processes were adequate to ensure that broadcasts meet VOA standards.

We conducted our review from June to August 1994 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days after its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to appropriate congressional committees; the Director of USIA; the Bureau of Broadcasting; the Directors of OCB and Radio Marti; and other interested parties.

Please contact me on (202) 512-4128 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Major contributors to this report were John Brummet, Assistant Director, and Julie Hirshen, Evaluator-in-Charge.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joseph E. Kelley".

Joseph E. Kelley
Director-in-Charge
International Affairs Issues

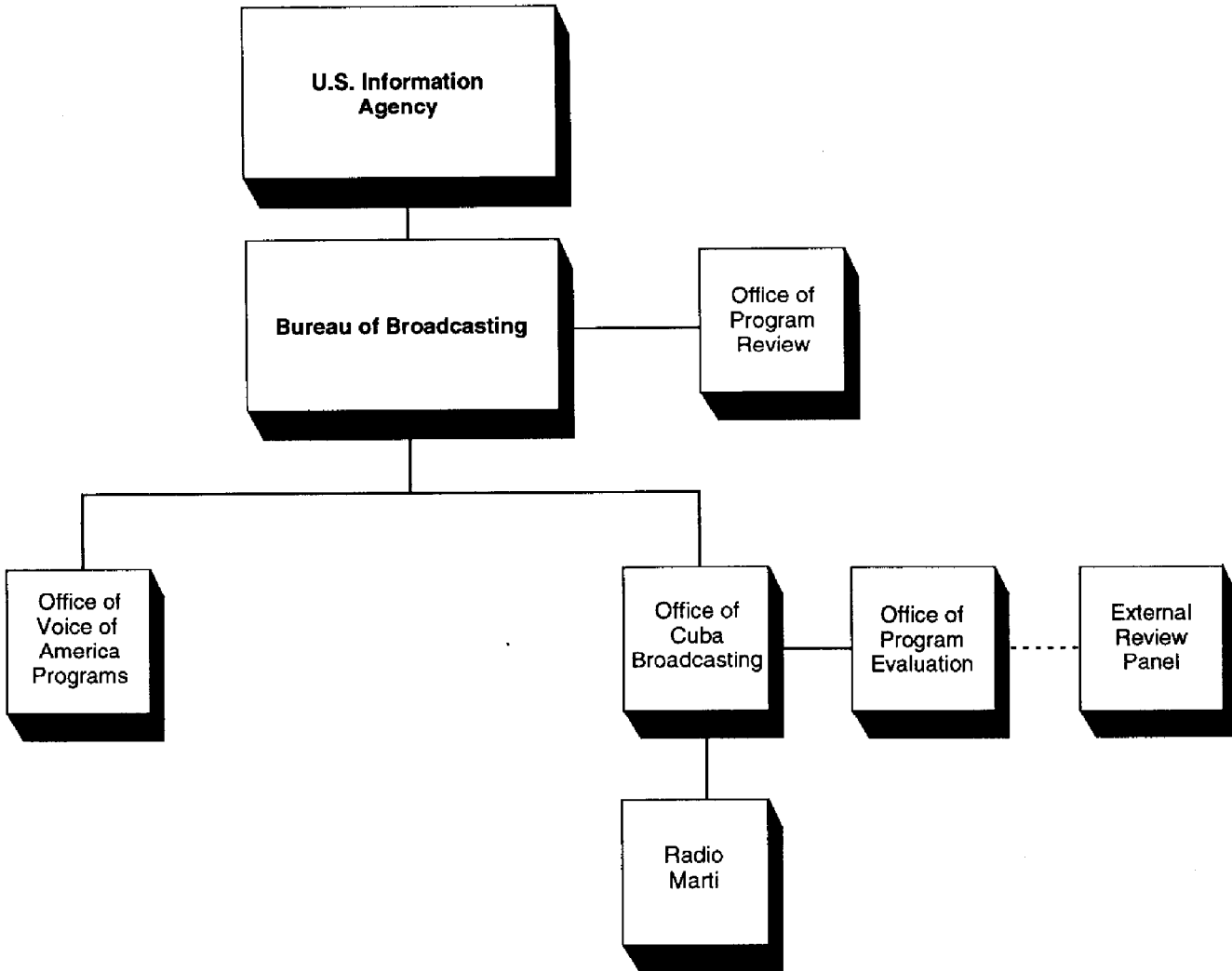
Contents

Letter	1
Appendix I Partial U.S. Information Agency Organizational Chart	10
Appendix II External Review Panel's Comments and Suggestions and OCB's Response	11

Abbreviations

OCB	Office of Cuba Broadcasting
USIA	U.S. Information Agency
VOA	Voice of America

Partial U.S. Information Agency Organizational Chart



External Review Panel's Comments and Suggestions and OCB's Response

After the external review panel meets, Radio Marti's Programming Committee¹ reviews a summary of the meeting prepared by OCB's staff and a verbatim account of the panel's evaluations. The Committee discusses the panel's views and decides whether recommendations for programming changes should be made to OCB management. The following are examples of the panel's comments and suggestions discussed at the Programming Committee's June 1994 meeting, and what actions—if any—were taken in response.

Generally, panel members had favorable views on non-news programming. The panel, however, made some negative comments about the use of rhetorical speech in short features and the lack of detail in other programs. One panel member questioned the use of dramatization in a program to inform Cubans about human rights issues. The Committee decided that the medium of dramatization was well accepted in Cuba and that the technique should be retained because the program reaches a less-educated audience than other human rights programs.

Regarding news programs, the panel commented that more international news should be broadcast during long newscasts. Regarding broadcasts on human rights, the panel suggested (1) more diverse sources for reports of human rights violations in Cuba, (2) more confirmation of violations from internationally recognized sources (such as Amnesty International or the Organization of American States) before airing denunciations, (3) an explanation of how and why the denunciations were reported in the broadcast, and (4) less emphasis on human rights denunciations in newscasts. The Committee agreed that all bulletins and newscasts should have some international news and made a recommendation to that effect. The Director of Radio Marti discussed the matter with the News Bureau and instructed the Bureau to address this issue. During its August 1994 meeting, the panel noted that the balance of news in broadcasts had improved. However, panel members again suggested that international news have more coverage.

The Committee also agreed that (1) all bulletins and newscasts should have some international news, unless Cuba stories clearly took special precedence and (2) the format for including international news should remain flexible to allow for day-to-day changes in news priorities. However, the Committee disagreed on the number of human rights denunciations, stating that denunciations are a station priority and that

¹The Programming Committee has representatives from the Office of Cuba Broadcasting's (OCB) program, news, technical, research, and evaluation offices.

**Appendix II
External Review Panel's Comments and
Suggestions and OCB's Response**

tone, rather than quantity, should be monitored. The Committee reached no resolution regarding adding diverse sources of denunciations and made no recommendation on this matter to OCB management.

Regarding technical programming aspects, the panel suggested adding (1) male-female teams in newscasts, (2) music and dynamism in the noon newscast, (3) diversity in commentators, and (4) a disclaimer at the end of commentaries that the views expressed do not necessarily represent the U.S. government or Radio Marti. The Committee agreed, and OCB management is now considering using male-female teams and having diverse commentators.

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