

The Broadcasting Board of Governors is an independent federal agency supervising all US government-funded non-military international broadcasting whose mission is:

To promote freedom and democracy and to enhance understanding through multimedia communication of accurate, objective and balanced news, information and other programming about America and the world to audiences overseas.

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BGG HIGHLIGHTS

Strategic Goals, Challenges, and Accomplishments Around the BGG

January 2009

Note: This monthly newsletter highlights selected Implementation Strategies of the BGG Strategic Plan, new programming and transmission initiatives, market trends, successes, best practices and other items of interest in fulfilling our mission.



The inaugural parade as photographed by VOA English reporter Erin Brummett, who was with journalists at the front of the motorcade.

Implementation Strategies at Work

Engage the World in Conversation About America

Worldwide Audiences Tune in to BGG Broadcasters' Inauguration Coverage

BGG broadcasters brought President Obama's inauguration to the world with live coverage and special programs from throughout Washington and the U.S.

VOA, RFA, Alhurra, Radio Sawa and Radio and TV Marti all covered portions of the inauguration with live simultaneous translations.

VOA provided coverage to dozens of partners and affiliates worldwide, including live reports to nine national TV stations in Indonesia and Pakistan's state radio and television. VOA programming included a 4.5 hour special report in Persian including live coverage and continuous interactive coverage on Afghan radio.

Multimedia reporting played a key role in BGG broadcasters' coverage. RFE/RL posted an online [video feature](#) of participants' reactions to the inauguration. VOA Russian became one of YouTube's most-watched Russian sites that day thanks to its video blogs (vlogs).

For more information, see the [BGG](#) and [VOA](#) press releases on inauguration coverage.



VOA inauguration coverage airs on Indonesia's ANTV.

Build on BGG Reach and Impact Within the Muslim World

Alhurra TV Reports Live From the Hajj

For the first time since its inception, Alhurra Television was given permission from the Saudi government to report live from the Hajj, a sacred journey for Muslims around the world. Alhurra carried live reports from Mount Ararat and Mina, examined the history of the Hajj and conducted interviews with participants.

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Briefs

Threats to Journalists

- RFE/RL web editor Ermek Boltay was attacked outside his home in Kazakhstan in the fourth attack on an RFE/RL correspondent in Central Asia this year. Boltay's most recent reporting was focused on social unrest in Almaty, Kazakhstan.
- Osman Hallyev, a Turkmen correspondent for RFE/RL, has been under virtual house arrest since early January. Another RFE/RL Turkmen correspondent, Dovletmurat Yazguliev, was interrogated in late December and was told his family would suffer if he continued working for RFE/RL. These incidents follow a crackdown before December's parliamentary elections, when RFE/RL correspondents were placed under increased surveillance and had their mobile phones blocked.
- Five journalists and anti-corruption campaigners, including VOA correspondent Marc Ona, were detained in Gabon in late December for possessing a document critical of the president. Ona was released on bail, but still faces charges.

Transmission Updates

Alhurra has been establishing dedicated fiber lines from key cities in the Middle East, in order to import news packages from the region without the cost of renting satellite time. MBN currently has dedicated lines to Baghdad, Dubai and Jerusalem and testing of a line to Beirut is underway.

VOA Tells Post-Poppy Story to Afghans

VOA Afghan aired an original TV series about life in Badakhshan Province that included stories on how the province is faring following the cessation of poppy cultivation. The series also featured a women-run nursery business and a USAID program that provides food for families who send their girls to school.

Help Audiences in Authoritarian Countries Understand the Principles and Practices of Democratic, Free and Just Societies

RFA Calls Attention to Chinese Media Activists

In December, RFA reported the story of China's crackdown on media workers who signed "Charter 08" calling for expanded human rights. Callers to RFA programs indicated they were learning about Charter 08 and the detention of its architect only from international media.



Correspondent Majda Halabi reports on the Gaza conflict for Alhurra TV.

Azerbaijan Removes VOA and RFE/RL From Domestic Frequencies

On December 30, Azerbaijan's National Television and Radio Council voted to ban foreign broadcasters from domestic frequencies, a decision that took VOA and RFE/RL's Azeri language broadcasts off FM radio and VOA off terrestrial television effective January 1.

The decision also affects BBC and Europa Plus broadcasts.

RFE/RL and VOA had been broadcasting on a shared 24-hour FM stream in Baku since 2007 when their local affiliate station was shut down. VOA was also airing television programs on Azeri TeleVision.

Both are still available via shortwave, satellite and online; however, terrestrial television and FM radio are by far the most popular media in Azerbaijan. RFE/RL

Facilitate Citizen Discourse

MBN Covers Gaza Conflict

When the conflict in Gaza erupted in December, both Alhurra and Radio Sawa shifted resources and preempted programming to provide extensive coverage. Alhurra provides frequent updates from reporters in Gaza, Israel, the West Bank and neighboring countries. Radiosawa.com is posting original articles, audio and video clips.

Develop and Motivate the Workforce to Meet the Changing Conditions of U.S. International Broadcasting

VOA Burmese Trains Reporters at Bird Flu Seminar

In December, VOA Burmese service chief Than Lwin Htun ran a five-day health reporting workshop on Avian Flu. Held in Thailand and sponsored by USAID, the training prepared Burmese reporters to supply health-related reports and features to VOA. The Burmese service plans to broadcast a weekly feature produced by this reporting team.

Preserve Credibility and Ensure Overall Programming Excellence

RFE/RL Armenian Gains Popularity

RFE/RL's Armenian Service broadcast year-end interviews with Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian and Speaker of the Parliament Hovik Abramian that were widely discussed in other media outlets in Armenia. That the prime minister and the speaker of the parliament were willing to come to RFE/RL's Yerevan studio for interviews reflects the credibility and rising popularity of the programs.

President Jeff Gedmin estimates that the ban will cause RFE/RL to lose 90% of its audience.

According to a VOA editorial, Charles Rice with the International Center for Journalists said that without the FM broadcasts of Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the BBC, Azerbaijanis will have almost no access to uncensored media.

The Council's decision has been criticized by many organizations including the State Department, the EU and the OSCE.

There has been a grassroots backlash as well. The Trend News Agency reported that several members of Azerbaijan's opposition Musavat party were detained on January 9 and again on the 21st while protesting against the closure of foreign radio stations.

A video posted to YouTube depicts a group of Azeri youth celebrating the New Year with the RFE/RL staff minutes before the decision went into effect. According to Global

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[Voices](#), one individual in the video comments that “they can close Azadliq, but Liberty will surely come to this country.”

There is also a [Facebook group](#) of over 750 members entitled *Support Radio Liberty, VOA and BBC in Azerbaijan!!!* and an [online petition](#) objecting to the suspension of RFE/RL, VOA and BBC broadcasts that reads, “Do not constrain our Liberty!!!”

The IBB continues to work with RFE/RL and VOA to re-establish the broadcasts, develop alternative transmission methods and inform the Azerbaijani audience where to find the ongoing broadcasts. ■

2008: Year in Review

In 2008, BGG broadcasters continued diversifying and expanding their media presence on FM, television and Internet, while preserving shortwave and AM radio where effective, in order to reach audiences on their preferred media.

BGG broadcasters preserved their brand as an authoritative voice in closed societies and during crisis situations, and cemented their status as a window to American society by providing comprehensive U.S. election coverage. They also continued reaching out to key strategic audiences, particularly throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds, with new programs and new transmission methods.

The result has been a sizable increase in the BGG’s audience. In 2008, over 175 million people tuned in to BGG broadcasts each week. Yet our broadcasters continue to face significant challenges in reaching their audiences, as much of the world remains hostile to the institution of a free press.

Many countries jam, block, censor or prohibit BGG broadcasts and websites; like Russia, which has continued cracking down on BGG affiliates in the past year, or Kyrgyzstan, which removed RFE/RL from its airwaves in October. In China, advanced web censorship technology filters or blocks completely VOA and RFA sites.



VOA Albanian’s Service Chief, Arben Xhixho reports from Kosovo. VOA was the first network to air the news that the U.S. recognized Kosovo’s independence.



Presidential candidate Ron Paul speaks with Deewa Radio reporter Ifthikar Hussein.

The BGG will continue looking for ways to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and reach of U.S. international broadcasts to fulfill our mission of promoting freedom and democracy and enhancing understanding of the U.S. and the world.

Social Media

Two buzzwords of 2008 were new media and social media, and BGG broadcasters now offer their content via these innovative technologies and web services.

Streaming and on-demand video and audio is now a feature of most BGG websites. In 2008, Alhurra added exclusive web content and streaming audio and video for its Arabic-speaking audiences.

BGG broadcasters now integrate blogs and interactive features on their websites. VOA Russian’s blogging community is growing and VOA Urdu’s online U.S. election quiz averaged one hit per minute in the final days before the vote. RFA hosts six blogs, including one in Tibetan written by a broadcaster during the meetings in Dharamsala on Tibet’s future.

RFE/RL’s websites also invite citizen participation. The Persian-language Radio Farda site features blogs and online forums. During and after the Georgia-Russia War in August, two Georgian Service correspondents in the besieged towns of Gori and Poti set up blogs on the that provided first-hand accounts of the events.

VOA’s [USAVotes2008.com](#) election site encouraged users to join an online VOA community, where they shared photos, asked questions and provided comments.

To take advantage of the rapidly growing popularity of YouTube, [VOA](#), [RFA](#) and [Alhurra](#) have established their own channels with the service. TV Ashna, VOA’s Dari and Pashto broadcast service, posted its [documentary](#)

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Briefs

New Programming

- Elshinta TV, the new TV arm of Indonesia’s number one radio station, now airs a six-minute VOA Indonesian feature called *VOA Spotlight* five times every day. The premiere offered pieces on American films and a report on an Indonesian music group touring the United States.

- VOA Khmer’s website now features an audio version of *History of Democratic Kampuchea*, the first independent Khmer-language history of the Khmer Rouge permitted inside Cambodian classrooms and a photo slideshow of the Preah Vihear temple, including images of the military standoff there between Cambodia and Thailand.

- On January 9, VOA launched a radio show to provide Zimbabweans a forum to discuss the political, economic and social challenges facing the nation. *Live Talk*, a 30-minute weekly call-in radio show, incorporates callers who speak English, Shona and Ndebele.

Press Clips

- “In Tehran, families gathered to hear Obama’s speech, translated into Persian on the Voice of America,” according to a [Boston Globe](#) article on January 21 that quoted a young viewer’s positive opinion of President Obama.

- The New York Times and [International Herald Tribune](#) on January 6 called RFE/RL “an important source of news in many of the countries of the former Soviet Union,” and [Eurasianet](#) reported that “loyal listeners are going digital to keep up with the US-financed broadcaster’s Internet and satellite-distributed programs” in Azerbaijan.

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Briefs

- Al Snyder called Alhurra a “go-to” news channel in Iraq” and said, “Alhurra can now lay claim to its legitimate connection with the mythical ‘Arab Street’” in a piece for USC’s [Center on Public Diplomacy](#).
- “I am fully aware about the life, culture and politics of the United States,” said an Iraqi refugee now living in Maryland to the [Baltimore Sun](#). According to the report, Faisal assimilated quickly to life in America because he grew up listening to VOA.
- Blogs from the [Wall Street Journal](#) and [Time](#) magazine ran portions of an essay by Chinese activist Bao Tong, broadcast on RFA’s Mandarin Service and translated to English by RFA staff, in which Bao criticizes Deng Xiaoping on the anniversary of his reforms.
- International broadcasting magazine [The Channel](#) discussed the importance of VOA and RFA multimedia broadcasting to information-deprived citizens during and after the cyclone in Burma and the earthquake in Sichuan Province, China.
- The [Combined Federal Campaign](#) (CFC), an annual fundraising drive conducted by federal employees, highlighted the BBG’s CFC booster function, focused on the personal stories of beneficiaries.

about the Afghan opium trade, “A Fateful Harvest,” on YouTube for international audiences.

VOA and RFA also expanded onto Facebook and Twitter in 2008, reaching out to a tech-savvy demographic.

Redesigns of websites for RFE/RL, Radio and TV Marti, RFA, and some VOA languages in 2008 have laid the groundwork to continue seeking out new audiences and providing more content through new media and social media.

Arab and Muslim World

Throughout 2008, BBG audiences continued to grow in critical regions in the Middle East and Central and South Asia and with priority Arab and Muslim audiences.

The programs of the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV) are broadcast 24 hours a day in Arabic and reach audiences in 22 countries in the Middle East as well as Europe. In Iraq, Alhurra’s audience, with 56% of adults viewing the station weekly, has equaled or surpassed that of Al Jazeera.

VOA’s Persian News Network continues to broadcast into Iran 24 hours a day, up from only eight daily broadcast hours in 2006. RFE/RL’s Radio Farda also broadcasts 24/7 with a mix of music and information programs. Telephone surveys conducted in Iran indicate that the BBG’s Persian language programming reaches more than one in four Iranians on a weekly basis.

Both VOA and RFE/RL provide blanket news and information coverage to Afghanistan in the Dari and Pashto languages. RFE/RL is the most popular radio station for news in Afghanistan and over half of Afghan adults now listen to or watch BBG broadcasts at least once a week.

In Pakistan, new partnerships with state television and radio channels have expanded VOA’s reach in Urdu. From 2007 to 2008, VOA doubled its weekly radio and TV audience in Pakistan. VOA’s Pashto language broadcast to Pakistan’s volatile border region, Deewa Radio, receives two to three hundred telephone calls during its live call-in shows.

All of these broadcasts feature innovative programs such as RFE/RL’s “In Search of the Missing,” which reconnects separated Afghan families or the Persian News Networks “Today’s Woman,” which highlights women’s issues for Iranians, or the unique music and news mix used by Radio Sawa and Radio Farda to attract younger audiences.

Crisis Response

Providing information and an authoritative voice during crises has always been a key aspect of BBG broadcasting. In 2008, BBG broadcasters distinguished themselves during a number of crisis situations.

Both VOA and RFA increased their broadcast hours to Tibet following peaceful protests and the ensuing Chinese crackdown, and an RFA Mandarin stringer used a hidden camera to document Chinese security measures in the Tibetan region of Sichuan province.

A new broadcast stream to Darfur, started in September by the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, is providing a lifeline to those displaced by the ongoing conflict. The program provides news and information about the Darfur Peace Process, the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces, human and women’s rights, U.S. humanitarian relief efforts and the scheduled 2009 elections.

When the Burmese government first



RFA interviews Grace Wang, a Duke student who sparked a nationalist backlash in China when she tried to mediate between Chinese and Tibetan students.

ignored and then underplayed the threat of Cyclone Nargis, RFA and VOA broadcast some of the first warnings of the impending cyclone. The two broadcasters were also on the ground in the storm’s wake, bringing images of the destruction to the world and telling Burmese citizens about the global outpouring of support and aid – which their government was refusing to allow in.

In 2008, surge broadcasting was also used by VOA to respond to crises in Zimbabwe and Kenya, and by VOA and RFE/RL’s Georgian services after the Russian invasion of Georgia in August.. ■