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United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors
Office of Inspector General

Report of Inspection

The International Broadcasting Bureau's Office of Performance Review

Report Number ISP-IB-06-37, May 2006

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KEY JUDGMENTS

- The International Broadcasting Bureau's (IBB) Office of Performance Review provides quality control by evaluating programs, and recommending improvements in the programming of the Voice of America's (VOA) broadcast services, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting's (OCB) Radio and TV Marti, and in IBB support to those broadcasts.
- The performance rating scores that the Office of Performance Review assigns have minimal effect on strategic decisions the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) reaches through its annual Language Service Reviews and budget priorities.
- Performance rating scores also have minimal effect on IBB senior management in its strategic planning and decision-making, and serve primarily as a quality control process. Problem-solving discussions and action items that result from the program reviews of broadcast services more effectively improve broadcast services' program quality.
- The Office of Performance Review should provide to IBB's senior management a quarterly prioritized list of its most important outstanding recommendations to underscore the necessity for their implementation.
- IBB should prioritize significant remaining action items and provide the information to BBG for consideration during Language Service Reviews.
- The director is seeking to increase the office's capability to evaluate television broadcasting and other media in support of BBG's transformation into a multi-media broadcast service.
- The Office of Performance Review analysts' use of complete English-language back-translations or of contracted language-qualified co-reviewers would more fully address all quality criteria for evaluating radio broadcasts.

The inspection took place in Washington, DC, between January 19 and March 10, 2006. Thomas R. Carmichael (team leader), Andrea M. Leopold (deputy team leader), Martha Goode, and Tim C. Fitzgerald conducted the inspection.

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CONTEXT

BBG is an independent federal agency responsible for all U.S. government and U.S. government-funded, non-military, international broadcasting. BBG oversees the federal broadcast entities VOA and OCB, and manages its grantees: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), which is comprised of Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV. The International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB) of BBG provides day-to-day broadcast transmission support services for all the broadcasters.

IBB manages VOA and OCB's Radio and TV Marti and the IBB support offices, including the Office of Engineering and Technical Services, the Office of Management, and the Office of Program Support. The program support unit includes the offices of Marketing and Program Placement, Public Affairs, and Performance Review. The Office of Performance Review provides quality control through annual reviews of VOA's 44 language services and OCB's Radio and TV Marti. In addition, the Office of Performance Review conducts spot checks of certain broadcasts in response to inquiries from BBG and IBB.

BBG has been assessing broadcast quality for decades and has methodologies and organizational structures for that purpose. Prior to the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 and the formation of IBB in 1994, there was an Office of Program Review in VOA. In 1994, the Office of Program Review was established under IBB. In 2002, the Offices of Program Review and Research were combined in a new Office of Performance Review to link performance evaluation with research. The IBB research director directs market research for VOA and OCB, and oversees research projects for, or in cooperation with, the grantee broadcast organizations. The grantees are responsible for directing their own program evaluations and research.

Since the end of the Cold War and with the proliferation of technology and broadcast systems worldwide, BBG has been broadcasting to listeners and viewers in a more complex, competitive environment. New formats and distribution channels are necessary to target and capture audiences that now have more media choices.

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Marrying the Mission to the Market, BBG's Strategic Plan for 2002-2007, provides a common strategy for the broadcasting entities. Congress has charged BBG with determining, at the highest strategic level, which language services and broadcast entities it will support. Legislatively-mandated¹ annual Language Service Reviews assist BBG in reviewing, evaluating, and determining, in consultation with the Secretary of State, which language services should be added, enhanced, or deleted.

Within that strategic framework, the Office of Performance Review's goal at its implementation level is to ensure that OCB's and VOA's language services' broadcasts maintain and improve overall performance quality and, wherever it's appropriate, carry out a market-based broadcasting strategy. Accordingly, it reviews each language service annually. Overall performance is statistically measured through a scoring process that includes data from external language-qualified regular listeners or viewers, and from internal Performance Review analysts. Performance review scores using this data are calculated and then included in one-page summaries of each language service in BBG's annual Language Service Review briefing book. The summaries include a chart with about 19 variables. The score from the performance review is one of these variables. The performance review scores are also included in a different format in reports to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), including BBG's Performance and Accountability Report.

In addition to the scores, the Office of Performance Review's principal function regarding quality control of programming is to direct the formulation of an action plan with suggestions and recommendations for improvement for the language service and IBB's support elements. These recommendations are not binding, but because they have been arrived at by consensus of the parties involved, they are usually complied with when possible within the tasked elements' budget and strategic plans. There is a three-month follow-up period following the review, during which the Office of Performance Review monitors compliance with the recommendations contained in the action plan.

The Office of Performance review's 16-person staff includes the IBB Research Director and three research analysts, who direct audience research carried out for use in the Office of Performance Review's evaluations. This research is necessary to develop and carry out a market-based broadcast strategy. The Office's FY 2006 budget includes \$1.872 million for salaries and benefits and \$1.923 million for general operating expenses; about \$1.8 million in the operating budget is for target

¹ U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994, as amended by the Foreign Affairs Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998.

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area research. The Office of Performance Review relies heavily on BBG's International Audience Research Projects contract for annual broadcast service research projects, such as determining audience size and characteristics, and listener reaction and preferences in a particular target area. That five-year contract has varied between \$3 million and \$5 million annually.

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTION

The Office of Performance Review's director is a Senior Executive Service officer who has 30 years of broadcast management experience. He has held his current position since 2002 and is credited with developing broadcast performance standards and new criteria for evaluating television programs.

The director has excellent relationships throughout BBG. The director's staff and peers said his collegial manner and depth of experience have made performance reviews less contentious and more collegial and productive. His staff said he is open and fair and clearly supports Equal Employment Opportunity and civil rights objectives. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) saw the need for more dialogue between the two parts of the Office of Performance Review (i.e., the performance review staff and the research staff). Expanded communication will ensure analysts in both disciplines will take greater advantage of one another's expertise. OIG informally recommended that the director conduct staff meetings more regularly to ensure good communication.

The director balances a heavy workload that includes time-consuming administrative responsibilities that could be handled by an administrative staff. In the five and a half years that he has been in his position, there have been several changes in administrative staffing, including the recent detail of two personnel from other offices. The director outlined for OIG his plans for distributing administrative work effectively after the departure of these detailed employees. OIG counseled him to proceed with his plans. He is also assigned other work on external initiatives. Despite this workload, he has extended the performance review process to the Office of Policy.

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PERFORMANCE REVIEW

IBB's 1999 Manual of Administration and Operations defines the responsibilities of the Office of Performance Review. The manual states that the office is to conduct annual reviews and periodic spot checks of VOA and OCB broadcasts by: 1) evaluating programs for conformity with the VOA Charter, the VOA Programming Handbook, accepted journalistic standards, and other relevant guidelines; 2) evaluating program content, presentation, and delivery; 3) hosting formal program review discussions based on staff analyses and independent research that relevant IBB elements attend; 4) developing recommendations to improve programs; and 5) monitoring compliance with recommendations. In November 2000, BBG agreed that IBB management should be accountable for implementing the action plans that derive from the annual reviews.

RESEARCH

About three months before a performance review is scheduled, the Research Director and his staff develop a research plan for a research contractor regarding the particular language service. The research follows industry standard methodologies for broadcast analysis. A week before the program review, the research analyst and the research contractor meet with the representatives of the language service to discuss research findings.

The research, in the country under study, includes quantitative, qualitative, and evaluative results. The 50-page quantitative opinion survey is provided to a population sample of a size appropriate to the country or region, ranging from 1,500 to more than 4,000 persons. The qualitative portion captures a seven-person focus group's reactions. Focus group members listen to and/or view programs and discuss them. The focus groups do not represent majority opinions; however, they provide insight into listeners' and viewers' impressions and may suggest new quantitative questions for future survey questionnaires.

The evaluative portion of the research uses a seven- or eight-person panel that listens to programs for a week and scores them daily. In addition, there are usually control listeners outside of the target country, who also listen to and score the

programs. The control panels understand the subject country's language and culture, the role of international broadcasting in the target country, and BBG's mission.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW PROCESS

The Office of Performance Review's analysts review several weeks of programs, analyzing program logs for balance, timeliness, diversity, and compliance with the VOA Charter. They also listen to the language services' broadcast productions and interview service broadcasters to understand problems and additional support needs. Before the performance review meeting, the office compiles and distributes research, and content and production reports. The Office of Performance Review's analysts also meet with VOA and OCB senior program management to set the meeting agenda.

Performance Review Meeting

The review meeting is a round-table session that lasts about three hours. It begins with the Office of Performance Review director's remarks and language service directors' comments. Next, in a sequence appropriate to the service and its target audience, the researchers present their findings and suggest implications; then each support entity discusses its area of responsibility, including program placement, marketing strategies and requirements, signal transmission, and Internet activity.

The content analysis portion of the review discusses news handling, target area coverage, feature material, music and entertainment programming, original television or simulcast program content, and policy presentation and discussion. The production analysis of the review addresses voices, pace and style, music, visual quality, and other broadcast requirements. Throughout the meeting, attendees propose action items for the language services and support elements.

Within 10 days of the review meeting VOA's director or alternate and the language service division directors, service chiefs, and performance review staff attend a meeting that defines an action plan, based on financially and technically feasible items. Three months later, there is a follow-up meeting to determine the outcomes. Finally, the performance review staff sends an action item report to VOA, IBB, and BBG.

The action items resulting from the performance review may be directed to VOA, OCB, IBB's support elements, or BBG. Items vary greatly and cover a wide scope of activity. Action items may be specific; for instance, an item may direct a language service to monitor broadcast volume or adjust program formats to fit affiliates' needs. Action items could target strategic goals and request policy-related direction from BBG. An action item for the Office of Marketing and Program Placement may suggest training for broadcasters from affiliates, and an action item for the Office of Engineering might ask engineers to help a service solve technical issues, cooperate with a service to monitor broadcast quality, or solve information technology problems. An action item could also ask VOA's News Division to produce more material for a location.

Most of the VOA language service chiefs and the OCB director told OIG that performance review, or quality assessment, is necessary. They appreciated the opportunity to hear objective views, particularly when there is little time for planning during the busy pace of day-to-day broadcasting. They also said performance review meetings provide an opportunity for language services and support elements to address issues directly with each other. OIG observed that the collegial atmosphere fosters a willingness to resolve problems on the spot.

COMPLIANCE CONCERNS

According to the Office of Performance Review, ensuring compliance with all of its action items is a challenge. The 2004 compliance report indicates an 81 percent compliance rate, including recommendations directed to language services and the other support elements. OIG generally considers 81 percent a good rate; however, these action items evolve from consensus among the involved elements, and OIG therefore expects a higher compliance rate. Even the Performance Review analysts believe the compliance rate casts doubt on the reviews' effectiveness. Most support elements and the language services do implement action plan items, but only if they involve little or no cost, as many action items do. OIG could find no relationship between action items and budget decisions. The need for an element's compliance with an action item (recommendation) did not necessarily translate into changes in its budget or resource planning. Even within existing budget constraints, however, prioritizing action items that have not been addressed or completed and continuing to monitor compliance after the three-month limit would help ensure IBB management is kept informed and maintains its attention on

the most important recommendations. In turn, if IBB provided BBG with information about significant outstanding action items, BBG would be aware of recommendations with budget implications that may have been carried over and warrant BBG budget attention.

Recommendation 1: The International Broadcasting Bureau should request that the Office of Performance Review provide it with a quarterly list of the most significant outstanding action items. (Action: IBB)

Recommendation 2: The International Broadcasting Bureau should prioritize the significant outstanding action items and provide the information to the Broadcasting Board of Governors for consideration during the annual Language Service Review. (Action: IBB)

PERFORMANCE REVIEW SCORING

Performance scores are derived from research information and from established, uniform criteria that measure effectiveness and quality. IBB analysts and external listeners (participants in research surveys and other private reviewers) measure broadcast content and production values for their scores. Total scores are weighted to assign greater value to broadcast content and external evaluations than to broadcast production and IBB analysis. (See Table 1.) Concerns have been raised regarding the performance review analysts' lack of familiarity with the language of the broadcast service under review.

Table 1: Program Content Compared to Program Production Values

Content (percent)		Production (percent)	
External control listener	10	External control listener	10
Listener panel	25	Listener panel	10
Internal analysts	30	Internal analysts	15

Listener panels and control listeners evaluate performance in a narrative format and quantitatively. The panels also assign scores for their impression of journalistic quality, content, and presentation. Performance review analysts use the same 1-to-4 rating scale (see key) and, like listener panels, assign a score, based on content

and production criteria. These scores are combined by BBG staff and included in the language service review and OMB's Program Assessment Rating Tool.

The Office of Performance Review has posted written procedures on IBB's Intranet outlining its step-by-step analysis process. Nevertheless, representatives of BBG's language services said they are concerned about the subjective nature of

<i>Poor</i>	0- 1.3
<i>Poor to Fair</i>	1.4 - 1.6
<i>Fair</i>	1.7 - 2.3
<i>Fair to Good</i>	2.4 - 2.6
<i>Good</i>	2.7 - 3.3
<i>Good to Excellent</i>	3.4 - 3.6
<i>Excellent</i>	3.7 - 4.0

the scores. Although analysts follow a process, they must ultimately assign a quantitative score through qualitative analysis. As Table 2 indicates, the difference between a 2.6 and a 2.7 score is very important to the rating of a service ("Fair to Good" versus "Good"), but represents a nearly intangible difference in a subjective decision. In a few cases, language service officials mistakenly believe the 2.6 score has caused reduction or

elimination of a service. The Office of Performance Review has said that its scores play no part in those decisions. OIG believes that the scores are less important than the reviewed entity's efforts to implement action items and suggestions.

Multimedia Capability

BBG is moving from broadcasting primarily via short-wave radio to using FM broadcasting, television, the Internet, and other new technologies. The Office of Performance Review is attempting to improve its capability to review television and has been developing standards for evaluating television programming. Presently, the performance reviews do not reflect all of the language services' activities and innovations regarding news distribution, including the use of computer-based technologies and book distributions. BBG must provide up-to-date standards regarding the use of new media and disseminate the standards to broadcasters and evaluators. Therefore, the outdated 1991 VOA Programming Handbook should be rewritten.

Recommendation 3: The International Broadcasting Bureau should rewrite its 1991 Voice of America Programming Handbook to address standards for television and other news media and place the handbook on the Broadcasting Board of Governors' Intranet site. (Action: IBB)

Spot Checks

The Office of Performance Review occasionally conducts spot checks of language service broadcasts in response to senior management requests. These requests are generated by complaints from listeners, foreign governments, or IBB entities. The requestor may ask for analysis of impartiality or journalistic quality, raise management issues, or request a translation for a separate review. The Office of Performance Review frequently contracts outside language-qualified reviewers and translators for these assessments, which may dispute the assessments offered by the office in an earlier annual review. For example, a foreign government recently complained about biased reporting to a U.S. embassy. When the Department's concerns caused BBG to request a spot check, the Office of Performance Review brought in three locally hired, language-qualified reviewers who listened to nearly 30 hours of broadcast tapes from the time-frame specified in the complaint.

Evaluating Foreign Language Broadcasting

Using analysts who do not speak the broadcast language to make assessments and assign scores is a contentious issue. Many representatives of VOA language services said they believe that, if analysts do not understand the broadcast language, they cannot fully evaluate the broadcast. Even lacking language fluency, an experienced analyst can assess a program using radio broadcast production quality criteria, including clarity of audio, use of music, length of individual items, and pace and liveliness, among others. Broadcast program logs can reveal a language service's thematic program balance, the currency of its broadcasts, the amount of local program content it uses, and other factors. Analysts from the Office of Performance Review said that if a question arises requiring word for word understanding, they can request a back translation of the broadcast into English or they can contract with a language-qualified reviewer to address all of the quality criteria for evaluating radio broadcasts. Some representatives of the grantee broadcasters and other experts told OIG that the analysts' review of program logs, area expertise, broadcast experience, and awareness of production values address the great majority, but not all, of the analytical criteria.

In contrast to the Office of Performance Review's system where knowledge by IBB analysts of the language is not required to review a broadcast, RFE/RL uses a panel of three staff members and a contractor with language fluency to conduct reviews, and RFE/RL provides them with English translations of the broadcasts if a panel member does not speak the language. Office of Performance Review

analysts occasionally ask for translations and/or use language experts to assist in evaluating broadcasts.

Most of the other broadcast entities have developed review methodologies similar to those the Office of Performance Review uses. For instance, RFE/RL uses similar procedures but also uses internal analysts, whether or not they are part of the broadcast service, and often translates broadcast material into English. Language service officials believe the differences among the reviewing processes may not afford BBG comparable data. The differences among reviews for all broadcast entities have not been fully addressed, but, since OIG found that performance review scores are not key to the BBG's annual language services review and resulting budget or other decisions, there may be no urgency to standardize performance review methodologies at this time. RFE/RL's use of back-translations and language-qualified co-reviewers warrant consideration in any such review.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW SCORES AND BUDGETING

Performance review scores have a minimal effect on the budget. Strategic national foreign policy priorities drive BBG's budget. In a December 2004 Memorandum Report,² OIG said BBG had made progress in aligning its budget process with strategic planning. One of BBG's goals is to enhance programs and create new ones to broadcast significant information to audiences the United States has identified as necessary to its interests. Given this goal, quality may be less important than reaching that audience.

Performance reviews should be viewed as quality assessments that may show a need for improvements. In announcing its FY 2007 budget, BBG said that proposed language service reductions were "not a reflection of programming quality." For BBG to respond efficiently to the nation's most immediate and vital national security challenges, BBG said it was necessary to make some reductions to support priorities.

Performance review scores for VOA and OCB, however, indicate that their services generally exceed quality goals, allowing budget decisions to be based on strategic priorities and not scores. However, changing priorities determine budget outcomes and language services are often not informed about the criteria for those decisions.

² *Review of the Broadcasting Board of Governors' Progress in Linking its Budget Process and Strategic Planning* (Report Number IBO-A-05-01, dated December 2004)

Language Service Reviews

Each year's budget decision process is informed by BBG's Language Service Reviews. Foreign policy objectives are primary issues for budget decisions for BBG and OMB. OMB's analyst said that performance review scores are a minor factor in making budget decisions and that the primary budget drivers are the results regarding Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 goals, the Performance and Accountability Report's Program Assessment Rating Tool, and, most importantly, strategic national priorities.

The Language Service Reviews are based on research done within the country or region the language service is attempting to reach and other factors that IBB controls. Aside from performance review scores, there are 15-to-20 factors included on the one-page language service review documents. These factors include:

- audience reach,
- signal quality,
- the number of adults listening to and or watching broadcasts at least once each week,
- the percent of the elite or best-educated adults who listen or watch,
- the percent of the population who recognize the station,
- the credibility of the broadcast,
- total budget,
- cost per listener,
- number of hours of on-air broadcasts, and
- number of affiliates.

The documentation also contains a discussion of other evaluation factors, including the country's political stability, the availability of competing broadcasters, the popularity of certain media, and audiences' access to media.

According to BBG, because U.S. international broadcasting uses different approaches for different markets, it is difficult to make country-to-country or broadcast-to-broadcast comparisons. For example, some countries forbid news broadcasts, and others forbid programs explaining U.S. policy or coverage of local news. In some countries, research is also forbidden, tightly restricted by government policies, or impeded by war or hostile conditions. Consequently, no single measure guides the resulting budget decisions.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The Office of Performance Review staff includes the director, a research director, nine performance review analysts, three research analysts, and two support staff, including one on temporary detail. The office's 2006 budget includes \$1.872 million for salaries and benefits and \$1.923 million for general operating expenses including \$25,000 for travel, \$11,000 for talent, \$7,000 for office materials and services, and \$1.880 million for research, including travel, contracting, and special research outside of BBG's central research contract.

The Performance Review staff is generally satisfied with the IBB Office of Administration's support but is unhappy with its temporary relocation to the basement, although that move is temporary. Some analysts believe more clerical support is needed, but the director prefers to maintain the current staffing. At the time of this inspection, one administrative staff member was working on temporary detail in another office. Two administrative employees, currently on detail to the Office of Performance Review, will leave the office when their details are completed.

Office of Performance Review analysts have diverse educational backgrounds and differing area and broadcasting experience. They are serious and enthusiastic about their work, and their morale is good. Each of the analysts has worked in U.S. government broadcasting.

The review analysts are primarily strong in radio broadcast review; however, the director has identified the need to build more expertise in television review because of BBG's increasing emphasis on television broadcasting. He is considering hiring a senior television producer to address this need; however, there is no funding for this position, and such action will only be possible when existing staff depart or retire.

OIG found most position descriptions are out of date; one is dated 1990 and others are dated in the late 1990's. For sound human capital development, the office should ensure its position descriptions reflect its current staff capabilities and help it meet projected needs in television and other media. The director should update position descriptions to reflect actual staff duties, which may indicate some

personnel have developed television and Internet evaluation skills. The office in addition should take advantage of attrition to update position descriptions for use in hiring candidates who can provide greater television and Internet evaluation skills.

Recommendation 4: The International Broadcasting Bureau should require the Office of Performance Review to review and rewrite all position descriptions to reflect current duties and have them reviewed for reclassification.
(Action: IBB)

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

The Office of Engineering and Technology, Computing Services Division, provides timely and effective information technology support. These services include systems development and maintenance, network infrastructure and desktop support, web site development, application and systems training and assistance, and technology and information management security.

The Office of Performance Review uses its Intranet web site to coordinate, communicate, and disseminate research reports, program analyses, and review notes including action plans. The action plan section of the web site collects information about the 44 language service programs that are in preparation for review. Although the support is timely and responsive, it is performed in an *ad hoc* manner. Future enhancements and the need for additional services may require a more formal process.

FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The International Broadcasting Bureau should request that the Office of Performance Review provide it with a quarterly list of the most significant outstanding action items. (Action: IBB)

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Recommendation 3: The International Broadcasting Bureau should rewrite its 1991 Voice of America Programming Handbook to address standards for television and other new media and place the handbook on the Broadcasting Board of Governors' Intranet site. (Action: IBB)

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INFORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Informal recommendations cover matters not requiring action by organizations outside of the inspected unit and/or the parent regional bureau and are not subject to the OIG compliance process. However, any subsequent OIG inspection or onsite compliance review will assess the mission's progress in implementing the informal recommendations.

There is inadequate communications among the Office of Performance Review and the Office of Research analysts. Greater communication among them would strengthen cooperation and take advantage of their combined strengths.

Informal Recommendation 1: The Office of Performance Review should conduct regularly scheduled officewide staff meetings.

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PRINCIPAL OFFICIAL

	Name	Arrival Date
Director, Office of Performance Review	John E. Lennon	04/2000

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBG	Broadcasting Board of Governors
IBB	International Broadcasting Bureau
OCB	Office of Cuba Broadcasting
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
VOA	Voice of America