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

Report of Inspection

Review of Voice of America's Deewa Radio Journalistic Controls

Report Number ISP-IB-09-67, July 2009

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PURPOSE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE INSPECTION

This inspection was conducted in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspections, as issued by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, and the Inspector's Handbook, as issued by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the U.S. Department of State (Department) and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG).

PURPOSE

The Office of Inspections provides the Secretary of State, the Chairman of the BBG, and Congress with systematic and independent evaluations of the operations of the Department and the BBG. Inspections cover three broad areas, consistent with Section 209 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980:

- **Policy Implementation:** whether policy goals and objectives are being effectively achieved; whether U.S. interests are being accurately and effectively represented; and whether all elements of an office or mission are being adequately coordinated.
- **Resource Management:** whether resources are being used and managed with maximum efficiency, effectiveness, and economy and whether financial transactions and accounts are properly conducted, maintained, and reported.
- **Management Controls:** whether the administration of activities and operations meets the requirements of applicable laws and regulations; whether internal management controls have been instituted to ensure quality of performance and reduce the likelihood of mismanagement; whether instances of fraud, waste, or abuse exist; and whether adequate steps for detection, correction, and prevention have been taken.

METHODOLOGY

In conducting this inspection, the inspectors: reviewed pertinent records; as appropriate, circulated, reviewed, and compiled the results of survey instruments; conducted on-site interviews; and reviewed the substance of the report and its findings and recommendations with offices, individuals, organizations, and activities affected by this review.

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PREFACE

This report was prepared by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) pursuant to the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, and Section 209 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, as amended. It is one of a series of audit, inspection, investigative, and special reports prepared by OIG periodically as part of its responsibility to promote effective management, accountability and positive change in the Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

This report is the result of an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the office, post, or function under review. It is based on interviews with employees and officials of relevant agencies and institutions, direct observation, and a review of applicable documents.

The recommendations therein have been developed on the basis of the best knowledge available to the OIG and, as appropriate, have been discussed in draft with those responsible for implementation. It is my hope that these recommendations will result in more effective, efficient, and/or economical operations.

I express my appreciation to all of those who contributed to the preparation of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. W. Geisel".

Harold W. Geisel
Acting Inspector General

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KEY JUDGMENTS

BBG created Deewa Radio at Voice of America (VOA) in 2006. Its target audience is the Pashtun population on the Pakistan side of that country's troubled border region with Afghanistan. Deewa Radio provides the United States with a vital communications link to a region of major significance to U.S. foreign policy and national security.

An effective system of review is in place in Deewa Radio and the South Asia division of VOA to ensure that the broadcasted material meets VOA standards for accuracy and balance.

If Deewa Radio continues to grow, VOA will have to take into account its staff size and training requirements to maintain continued effectiveness and quality.

The review took place in Washington, DC, between May 28 and June 8, 2009. Mark Jacobs and Martha K. Goode conducted the review. The OIG team obtained information from BBG, VOA, and the Department through interviews and document reviews.

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BACKGROUND

BBG launched Deewa Radio at VOA in October 2006. Its target audience is the approximately 30 million Pashtuns living on the Pakistani side of the troubled border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Pashto language spoken in Afghanistan is different from that in Pakistan. VOA's Pashto service is directed to greater Afghanistan, while Deewa Radio is directed primarily to the Pakistan/Afghanistan border region and broadcasts in the Pashto dialect spoken there.

Deewa Radio is transmitted by short-wave signal. It is also available on the Internet (<http://www.voanews.com/deewa/>). In addition, three BBG-operated FM stations in Afghanistan near the Pakistan border carry the signal around the clock. At the time of the review, no medium-wave (AM) signal was available, but an AM transmitter was being readied in Afghanistan whose signal was expected to extend significantly into the targeted region inside Pakistan. The transmitters are located in Afghanistan rather than in Pakistan because the Pakistan Media Law is very restrictive in this matter.

Deewa Radio began by broadcasting 6 hours daily, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Eastern Time, in alternating hour-long blocks of news and current events shows as well as call-in shows. The news and current events shows start with a 10-minute news bulletin. The call-in shows start with a 5-minute news bulletin. During the course of the review, Deewa Radio added an additional 3 hours of material in the same format timed for broadcast during morning hours in the border region.

In 2009, allegations surfaced in the media that members of the Taliban in Pakistan had exploited Deewa Radio for propagandistic purposes. These allegations were that Deewa Radio quoted Taliban leaders and their spokesmen excessively; provided a platform for disinformation regarding Taliban military movements; and broadcast a threat by a Taliban leader to attack the White House.

In accordance with the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994,¹ Section 304 (a) (3) (B), OIG is prohibited from evaluating the content of BBG broadcasting entities. The section, titled "Respect for Journalistic Integrity of Broadcasters," states

¹Pub. L. No. 103-236

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that “The Inspector General shall respect the journalistic integrity of the broadcasters covered by this title and may not evaluate the philosophical or political perspectives reflected in the content of broadcasts.” For this reason, the OIG team evaluated only the processes and procedures in place at Deewa Radio and VOA that are used to ensure the accuracy and balance of Deewa Radio’s broadcasts.

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND LISTENERSHIP

The border region that Deewa Radio targets is a hostile media environment. It is underserved by traditional media because of its geographical isolation and Pashto dialect; in other parts of the country Urdu and English are commonly spoken. Unlike the rest of Pakistan, where television predominates as the source of news and information, radio is the most important medium in the border region.

The Taliban operate a large number of unlicensed FM transmitters throughout the region. While they have limited range, these “rogue” stations regularly broadcast propaganda, including frequent claims for terrorist actions carried out by the Taliban.

In that challenging environment, Deewa Radio’s goal is to provide accurate and balanced news and information in the Pashto dialect spoken by its listeners.

Conducting research in what is essentially a war zone presents a major challenge, and relatively little has been done since Deewa Radio’s inception in 2006. In 2008, BBG commissioned a research study which suggested that Deewa Radio is developing a significant listenership.² Research sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development and by the Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research buttressed that perception.³ At the time of the review, BBG was finalizing plans to commission additional research.

²InterMedia, VOA Pashto to Pakistan: Listener Feedback on VOA’s Deewa Pashto Service.

³U.S. Agency for International Development, Media Perceptions in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Office of Transition Initiatives.

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CREDIBILITY

BBG and VOA interlocutors at every level expressed the conviction that to be effective, Deewa Radio must earn and sustain credibility with its intended audience. In their view, credibility comes from strict adherence to VOA's reporting standards as spelled out in the VOA charter, established in Public Law 94-350. A copy of the charter appears in Appendix A. Its standards are further spelled out in VOA's journalistic code (Appendix B). Those standards stress accuracy and balance. In the view of BBG and VOA personnel, the role of Deewa Radio is to provide Pakistan's Pashto speakers with reliable news and information in the VOA tradition; its role is not to provide a propaganda counterweight to Taliban efforts.

VOA and BBG interlocutors emphasized a second factor critical to the success of Deewa Radio. In addition to being credible, Deewa Radio must also be locally relevant. While this is generally true around the world, it is of particular importance in a region whose population is suffering the multiple stresses that the Pashtuns have been experiencing. War, social upheaval, and economic uncertainty are the daily facts of life in the region. To gain an audience, Deewa Radio must cover those issues straightforwardly and consistently. Pashtuns must believe that, by tuning in VOA, they will receive reliable and objective news and information about the region.

For both these reasons—credibility and relevance—VOA personnel at every level expressed the belief that Deewa Radio must report on the Taliban, including the Taliban's sometimes outrageous and offensive claims. As events dictate, they must selectively interview Taliban leaders and spokesmen. Ignoring them would be like The Washington Post's failing to report on a natural disaster in downtown Washington, D.C. The issue, in the view of VOA personnel, is not whether to cover the Taliban but how to do so. In that regard, the question of journalistic controls is paramount.

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JOURNALISTIC CONTROLS

The OIG team conducted interviews and reviewed the policies, procedures, and safeguards in place to ensure Deewa Radio's compliance with VOA standards of journalism, particularly its mandate to provide balanced and accurate reporting. The OIG team found an effective system of checks and balances in operation. The process by which material is vetted begins with a review by stringer coordinators based in the provinces of Pakistan. Following that initial review, material passes through a stringer coordinator based in Washington, a Deewa Radio news editor, and the Deewa Radio service chief. Additional review is available as needed from the director of the South Asia division, the associate director of VOA language programming, the VOA executive editor, and the VOA Director. The criteria employed throughout the review process are VOA's standards as articulated in the charter and the journalistic code.

In addition to this system of daily review, Deewa Radio, the International Broadcasting Bureau and external experts conduct an annual review of each of VOA's language services, including Deewa Radio. As a result of this process, VOA develops an action plan for improvement with defined responsibilities and milestones. A Deewa Radio program review was conducted in September, 2008; the next is scheduled for the fall of 2009.

Interviewees at all levels noted that, in addition to the review processes described above, Deewa Radio follows VOA practice by providing significant explanatory context and perspective when citing or quoting news sources.

The BBG and VOA staff who were interviewed provided a description of the reactions of some Deewa Radio listeners to Taliban interviews. Although audience research is difficult to conduct in the Pakistani provinces at issue, informal feedback mechanisms such as e-mails and telephone calls sometimes provide anecdotal evidence of the station's impact. In some instances listeners ridiculed the Taliban for making outrageous claims. In other instances, Taliban spokesmen made the group look bad to Deewa Radio listeners by claiming credit for terrorist actions in which Pakistani civilians died.

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The OIG team believes that the system in place in Deewa Radio is effective, as is the supervision of Deewa Radio broadcast material and personnel.

Among those interviewed at the working level, the OIG team found that they understood VOA's mission and the importance of producing material that meets VOA quality standards. Interviewees articulated their understanding of those standards with specific reference to the subject matter on which they report.

FUTURE GROWTH

Like other services that have developed quickly, Deewa Radio will face a number of challenges if it continues to grow. At the time of the review, the Washington-based staff included three full-time employees and approximately twelve persons working on a contract or purchase-order basis under the supervision of a VOA language service chief and division director. (Twenty stringers provided material from Pakistan.) The full-time employees were engaged in a broad range of activities ranging from translation of VOA central news desk stories to hosting on-air programs. Whether they can sustain the intense pace and volume of work over a long period of time appeared to be an open question. Staff burn-out could present a problem for VOA. It could, over time, affect Deewa Radio's ability to sustain high-quality programming.

TRAINING

The OIG team's interviews suggested a high degree of commitment to VOA standards but an uneven pattern of training. Staff backgrounds in journalism varied, as did the kinds of training people had received since joining VOA. The situation was further complicated by strictures on the training of contract personnel and purchase order vendors. There was no existing blanket exemption to the prohibition on training individuals in those categories, although there are guidelines governing the training of contractors and obtaining approval for such training as appropriate, e.g., orientation training. The service chief attempted to compensate for these shortcomings by offering on-the-job orientation and training. The OIG team believes that a more systematic approach to training and development would contribute to ensuring that Deewa Radio continued to meet VOA standards.

The OIG team interviews confirmed an understanding of VOA's principles and standards. Deewa Radio remains a new service, its corporate identity still in the process of development. The OIG team believes that VOA can speed and solidify that process by providing a session or a workshop or some other mechanism focused on the service's mission. The purpose of such an exercise would be a kind of team building anchoring the work of Deewa Radio in the VOA tradition.

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Recommendation 1: Voice of America should develop and implement a comprehensive training plan for Deewa Radio that requires consistent journalistic orientation for people who are not full-time employees. (Action: VOA)

In comments to a discussion draft of this report, VOA reported that it is developing a 3-hour class on understanding and applying the VOA charter and journalistic code to daily assignments. The objectives of this class include the opportunity to discuss various journalistic principles including: sourcing, accuracy and balance, fairness, independence, context, and comprehensiveness. According to VOA, students will be urged to participate in group discussions about news coverage, steps for accurately reporting stories, and guidelines to guarantee balance. The course will be taught by experienced VOA journalists, and will be made available to the entire Deewa Radio staff, both employees and contractors.

The OIG team determined that Deewa Radio is adhering to VOA's broadcasting standards. The OIG team believes that the system in place to ensure the balance and accuracy of Deewa Radio's reporting is effective.

RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation 1: Voice of America should develop and implement a comprehensive training plan for Deewa Radio that requires consistent journalistic orientation for people who are not full-time employees. (Action: VOA)

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PRINCIPAL OFFICIALS

	Name	Arrival Date
BBG Executive Director	Jeffrey Trimble	04/08
VOA Director	Danforth Austin	10/06

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBG	Broadcasting Board of Governors
Department	Department of State
OIG	Office of Inspector General
VOA	Voice of America

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APPENDIX A - VOA CHARTER (PUBLIC LAW 94-350)

The long-range interests of the United States are served by communicating directly with the peoples of the world by radio. To be effective, the Voice of America must win the attention and respect of listeners. These principles will therefore govern Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts.

1. VOA will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive.
2. VOA will represent America, not any single segment of American society, and will therefore present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions.
3. VOA will present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies.

(Public Law 94-350)

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APPENDIX B – VOA JOURNALISTIC CODE

Preamble

Since 1942, the Voice of America has built a global reputation as a consistently reliable source of news and information. Accuracy, balance, comprehensiveness, and objectivity are attributes audiences around the world have come to expect of VOA broadcasters and their product. These standards are legally mandated in the VOA Charter (Public Laws 94-350 and 103-415). Because of them, VOA has become an inspiration and information lifeline to nations and peoples around the world.

Summary

Adhering to the principles outlined in the Charter, VOA reporters and broadcasters must strive for accuracy and objectivity in all their work. They do not speak for the U.S. Government. They accept no treatment or assistance from U.S. Government officials or agencies that is more favorable or less favorable than that granted to staff of private-sector news agencies. Furthermore, VOA professionals, careful to preserve the integrity of their organization, strive for excellence and avoid imbalance or bias in their broadcasts.

The Voice of America pursues its mission today in a world conflict-ridden and unstable in the post Cold War era. Broadcasting accurate, balanced and complete information to the people of the world, and particularly to those who are denied access to accurate news, serves the national interest and is a powerful source of inspiration and hope for all those who believe in freedom and democracy.

The Code

All staff who report, manage, edit, and prepare programming at VOA in both central and language services therefore subscribe to these principles:

Sourcing

VOA news and programming must be rigorously sourced and verified. VOA normally requires a minimum of two independent (non-VOA) sources before any newswriter, background writer, political affairs writer, correspondent, or stringer may broadcast information as fact in any language.

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The only exceptions to the double-source requirement are facts directly confirmed by a VOA journalist, or significant news drawn from an official announcement of a nation or an organization. In those rare instances when a secondary source offers exclusive significant news (e.g., a verified news agency exclusive interview with a chief of state or prominent newsmaker), this story is attributed to the originating agency by name.

Accuracy and Balance

Accuracy and balance are paramount, and together, they are VOA's highest priority. Accuracy always comes before speed in VOA central service and language programming. VOA has a legal obligation to present a comprehensive description of events, reporting an issue in a reliable and unbiased way. Though funded by the U.S. Government, VOA airs all relevant facts and opinions on important news events and issues. VOA corrects errors or omissions in its own broadcasts at the earliest opportunity.

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. This applies to all programs and program segments, including opinion or press roundups, programs discussing letters, listener comments, or call-in shows. In the case of call-ins, views of a single party must be challenged by the interviewer if alternative opinions are unrepresented. In interviews, points of possible discussion are submitted in advance if requested by an interviewee of stature (e.g., a chief of state). However, VOA journalists always retain the right and responsibility to pursue newsworthy angles, including entirely fresh lines of questioning, during such interviews.

Whenever VOA reports a charge or accusation made by an individual or a group against another, or presents one side of a controversial issue, a response and/or balancing information will be included in the first use of a news item or feature containing that material. If the balancing information cannot be obtained by the program deadline, or the subject of the charge declines to comment, that will be made clear in VOA's account, and the balancing material will be broadcast as soon as it is available.

Fairness

VOA has, in the words of the Founding Fathers, "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." VOA is required to present a full and fair account of events. VOA broadcasters evaluate information solely on its merits, rejecting incitements to violence, sensationalism, personal value judgments, or misleading emphases. Attributions are specific and complete.

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VOA journalists (including correspondents, news and language stringers, political affairs writers, and program hosts) avoid at all times the use of unattributed pejorative terms or labels to describe persons or organizations, except when the individuals and groups use those labels to describe themselves or their activities.

In news, features, and current affairs programming, VOA broadcasters will meticulously avoid fabricating, distorting, or dramatizing an event. If sound at an event illustrates the reporter's account of that event and is edited for time, the remaining sound effect reflects what occurred in an accurate and balanced way. If there is a risk of misleading the audience, no use will be made of sound effects not actually recorded at the event being described.

Context and Comprehensiveness

VOA presents a comprehensive account of America and the world, and puts events in context. That means constant vigilance to reflect America's, and the world's political, geographical, cultural, ethnic, religious, and social diversity. VOA programming represents the broadcast team's best effort to seek out and present a comprehensive account of the event or trend being reported.

VOA broadcasters will avoid using announcing or interviewing techniques that add political coloration or bias to their reportage or current affairs programming. Music will not be used to make editorial statements. VOA journalists and all those preparing news and feature programming avoid any action or statement that might convey the appearance of partisanship.

Procedures

When performing official duties, VOA broadcasters leave their personal political views behind. The accuracy, quality, and credibility of the Voice of America are its most important assets, and they rest on listeners' perception of VOA as an objective source of world, regional, and U.S. news and information. To that end, all VOA journalists will:

1. Always travel on regular, non-diplomatic passports, and rely no more and no less than private-sector correspondents on U.S. missions abroad for support, as set out in the guidelines for VOA correspondents.
2. Assist managers whose duty is to ensure that no VOA employee, contract employee, or stringer works for any other U.S. Government agency, any official media of another state, or any international organization, without specific VOA authorization.

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3. Adhere strictly to copyright laws and agency regulations and always credit the source when quoting, paraphrasing, or excerpting from other broadcasting organizations, books, periodicals or any print media.

In addition to these journalistic standards and principles, VOA employees recognize that their conduct both on and off the job can reflect on the work of the Voice of America community. They adhere to the highest standards of journalistic professionalism and integrity. They work to foster teamwork, goodwill, and civil discourse in the workplace and with their colleagues everywhere in the world, all to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of the Voice of America.

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