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New Technologies and International Broadcasting: Reflections on Adaptations and Transformations

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Abstract

International broadcasters, like all media institutions, adjust to reflect the existence of new distribution technologies. Technological change is part of a new media landscape that has rendered older definitions and contexts of international broadcasting insufficient. The pace and extent of adjustment differs among the players. Adaptations range from the superficial to the highly integrative and, on the other hand, from the merely adaptive to the pervasively transformative. Can one compare, among institutions, how this process takes place and what factors influence the patterns of accommodation? Theories of organizational structure shed light on which factors lead international broadcasters to which path. This article considers U.S. international broadcasting as a model to tease out some of these factors, among them organizational complexity, political influence, and control and contradictions embedded in institutional purpose. In this scenario, technological adaptation can mask a critical need to address institutional transformation.

Keywords

public diplomacy, international broadcasting, discourse analysis, Radio Free Europe, BBC World Service, Internet, new technologies

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

New Technologies and International Broadcasting: Reflections on Adaptations and Transformations

By Monroe E. Price, Susan Haas and Drew Margolin

Abstract: International broadcasters, like all media institutions, adjust to reflect the existence of new distribution technologies. Technological change is part of a new media landscape that has rendered older definitions and contexts of international broadcasting insufficient. The pace and extent of adjustment differs among the players. Adaptations range from the superficial to the highly integrative; and, on the other hand, from the merely adaptive to the pervasively transformative. Can one compare, among institutions, how this process takes place and what factors influence the patterns of accommodation? Theories of organizational structure shed light on which factors lead international broadcasters to which path. This essay considers U.S. international broadcasting as a model to tease out some of these factors, among them organizational complexity, political influence and control and contradictions embedded in institutional purpose. In this scenario, technological adaptation can mask a critical need to address institutional transformation.

Introduction

In the complex, contested and competitive setting of international broadcasting and public diplomacy, one question frequently reappears: what role should new

technologies play as established players adjust to a new environment. All media—commercial, public service, user-generated, communications for development—are rethinking structure and purposes because dramatic changes in delivery systems have become part of the strategic picture. The invocation of “new technologies” is an obvious and appealing call to modernize, to come to grips with necessities and opportunities. And it occurs at a time when there is a more intense effort to reach for “hearts and minds” and to influence public attitudes around the world.

In this essay, we wish to turn the question of technology somewhat and to discuss what might be called the “organizational environs” in which technological choices are made and the implications of these choices for participation in a global market for loyalties. It is an exploration, as it were, about the idiosyncratic context of international broadcasting organizations coping with norms of adaptation. There’s a reason for this slight shift from the principal issues. Processes of change are ongoing. A snapshot of what various international broadcasters are doing would be helpful, but in this cauldron of change, it is more important to think about how decisions are made, and by whom, rather than which decision, adopting which technology, occurs. Changes are so substantial that, as we briefly indicate, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate clearly the category of “international broadcaster” and the purposes assigned to its denizens. Also, we, like others, succumb to the tyranny of the category, asking how these particular players should or do use new technologies when their masters (the states, the legislatures, the rulers) might decide that new technologies generate such a different competitive playing field, that a wholly different kind of team is necessary to enter into the competition.

There are two additional caveats. First, it is standard to say that an essay concerning international broadcasters is not about the message of public diplomacy or the actual foreign policies that are being pursued. This disclaimer is most applicable for those international broadcasters who see their task as more purely the promulgation of news and related programming than the furtherance of a particular policy. Yet, as we shall see, the question of mission is important to the question of technological choice. A second caveat is more poignant. There should always be a realization that the pursuit of modernization and adaptation can become, itself, a form of escapism. Technology-ardor

can be a siren song. In some settings, the overwhelming possibility of technology can become a justification for torpor. The adoption of new technologies can be a cover for continued misconception of major problems, an occasion for weak, ineffective, perhaps counterproductive experimentation. As international broadcasters, like all media institutions, adjust to reflect the existence of new distribution technologies, the process of shifting can underscore and amplify the discrepancies in existing management styles and organization. Some understanding of these discrepancies, how this process of adaptation and transformation takes place in various settings is useful to examine. Rather than ask what each international broadcaster has done to absorb and take on technological challenges, the essay thus asks a more institutional question: what is there about the organization, management structure, and geopolitical context of each entity that leads to one pattern of technological adjustment or another?

For this reason it is more informative to look at what structural impediments there are to adventitious change among international broadcasters than to look at the specific changes themselves. International broadcasters work, traditionally, with a huge array of audiences, in extraordinary environments, some of which are far from the modern. More important for this essay, international broadcasters have widely different modes and apparatuses of decision-making than those of their commercial counterparts. The result of different organizational forms may be different patterns of adjustment of goals to new technologies.

While this essay is about international broadcasting and technology generally, it has a subfocus on the U.S. case and, in particular, the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Partly this is because there is disquiet that the U.S. players in this field are underperforming, that for some complex of reasons it is difficult to define a proper set of messages or it is difficult to disseminate them. But it is partly practical. It is somewhat easier for us to discuss what might be called the “organizational environs” in which international broadcasters make technological choices in the United States. Ours is an experiment in exploration, as it were, of how to formulate questions about technology adaptations in the idiosyncratic context of international broadcasting organizations and the norms against which those adaptations might be viewed.

The importance of and complexity of the international broadcasting task does not change the fact that international broadcasters are organizations and, as such, are subject to the same tendencies and logics that both sustain and inhibit other similar institutions. For these broadcasters, as for all media institutions, the adoption of new technologies can mask deficiencies in existing management styles and organization, as well as in a clear definition of purpose. At the same time, ineffective use of new technologies, or inappropriate decisions on which technologies to use, can underscore a notion of flailing and ineptitude rather than confidence and mastery.

Defining International Broadcasting

We have already suggested one of the implications of new technologies: namely to challenge the category of international broadcasting. Thus, to set the organizational parameters in which the technology-adaptation choices are made, it will first be helpful to explore some definitions for international broadcasters, and to clarify what organizations we are talking about in this essay. International broadcasting has been the elegant term for a complex combination of state-sponsored news, information and entertainment directed at a population outside the sponsoring state's boundaries. It has largely meant the use of electronic media by one society to shape the opinion of the people and leaders of another. It involves what was once with pride called propaganda (Martin, 1958). This function is situated within a somewhat wider rubric now known as public diplomacy.¹

Although they are often overlooked, definitional characteristics are central to the question of technological change. Communication technologies and geopolitics blur distinctions once standard in international broadcasting: target audiences or populations are no longer corralled in contiguous territories or within state boundaries, yet organizations still carry the prior imprint. Relevant organizations and their program content are not neatly categorized according to their relationships to national media systems and audiences. Newer satellite services are often linked to government or regional policy or funding but are not "state-sponsored" in a direct structural or governance sense. Al Jazeera is not, strictly speaking, an instrument of international

broadcasting (its relationship to Qatar does not fit the textbook definition of broadcaster to government), but global practitioners of the craft recognize it as a keen competitor (Ajami, 2001). Although there are those who argue that CNN is an instrument of U.S. hegemony (either consciously or unconsciously), it is relatively far from being an international broadcaster in the precise meaning of the term (in terms of relationship to government, number of languages of broadcast, composition of the target audience).

The very words “international broadcaster” embrace historic origins in a world where power was negotiated among neatly bounded states and “broadcasting” was conceived as messages constructed for delivery to mass audiences via radio, mostly shortwave. The increased availability of new ways of reaching audiences—Internet websites, satellite-to-home, audiocassettes, videotapes, blogs, podcasts—along with the increasingly mobile nature of media reception and use, make it clear that it is no longer sufficient to cabin the subject by distinct format or technologies of distribution. There is the challenge of reaching audiences no longer theoretically or materially conceived of as “mass” or passive or susceptible to message by one-way injection. There is the problem of establishing credibility in conversation with population groups distributed in diasporic networks across the globe. Most important for international broadcasters is the rise of non-governmental groups that rival states in the wielding of discursive or symbolic power via media and which deploy media locally and transnationally in pursuit of political goals. In terms of the global media industry, all media organizations from Doordarshan (the Indian national broadcaster) to the BBC, Al Manar, Al Jazeera and CNN are in some measure missionaries of ideological and cultural hegemony. These developments have rendered the term “international broadcaster” within the standard definitions insufficiently descriptive.

And in a more vicious world, as the Cold War’s geopolitically distinct fields of contestation fade in favor of the porous borders and group networks of a newly conceptualized “Long War on Terror,” other defining features of international broadcasting blur as well. A line has traditionally been drawn between “international broadcasters” who were transparently such and who upheld a tradition of standing for objectivity and impartiality, and those engaged in persuasion through articulation of the position of the government. Another distinction has existed between conventional

international broadcasters and so-called “clandestine” or “black” radios, instruments of information transfer secretly sponsored by governments, intelligence agencies or state-linked political movements. In the United States, international broadcasting is complicated by a further division. Historically, it has been linked to the Department of State, not the Department of Defense, but at times of strain that distinction, important for internal and external credibility, has been crossed. Distinctions exist also between services conceived as “surrogates,” such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA) and its siblings, whereby language broadcast services produce news and other programs designed to show what free and independent media would be like in specific target societies, and a broadcast network that is more general, such as the Voice of America (VOA), designed to carry news of the world along with a portrayal of the United States. In fact, those distinctions have been reduced since 1999 when both families of broadcasters were brought under the auspices of the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

Even a small degree of confusion in the definition of international broadcasting or in its purposes is one element that has a substantial impact on the broadcaster’s strategic decisions, including those concerning technology. The entity’s vision—for example, whether it sees itself as an objective news and information service, or whether it fashions a persuasive tilt by intent—will affect the strategy of reaching particular elites or other targeted population groups. In turn, this strategy will have an impact on the technological choices that are made. How one thinks about the particular role of the international broadcaster, how sponsoring governments (and other competitors) reach out to complex audiences, how governments in the receiving societies interact with the broadcasters, the nature of the competitive fray and the role of technologies in each of these: all these matters are up for debate. Engagement with new technologies is partly a consequence of response to these definitional challenges.

There is a related point: let us assume that the Internet and access to the Internet, though often skewed and digitally fatally divided, alter for many millions the way they receive news and information. Even given the moderate blur in identifying what constitutes an international broadcaster, it is fair to ask how each of them seeks to cope with these new circumstances, which entity has established a beachhead in the

competition to get the most “hits” or be the most read of various news sites. One could look at a standard effort to measure this kind of impact (say through Alexa.com) and reach conclusions about France 24, BBC World Service and the Voice of America. But for the strategist in a government, that question may be a slightly different, and more radical one: given the array of new entrants (the unaffiliated bloggers, the attractive aggregators, the streaming and shifting of video, are the international broadcasters sufficiently adaptable, or are there other mechanisms more likely to make the best use of any particular technology to reach public objectives (assuming they can be sufficiently defined)? It may be that the picture of the universe we now have: with a soft equilibrium among competing news providers will become replicated with minor rankings of the major players. The comparative effectiveness of various players, commercial or quasi-commercial news entities, will change, somewhat, but it will be roughly the same players who count. But it may be that in the competition for news site prominence, or other modes of influential entry, very different strategies must be employed and not all of the existing cast of international broadcasters can effectively enter the competition. Perhaps there is something more like a winner-take-all outcome, and the issue is whether, in that context, other strategies, other ways of thinking about technologies, organization and mission, are important.

Defining New Technologies

Because of our emphasis on the institutional aspect—the context in which strategies are made—we tend to be catholic about the definition of “new technologies.” The task of international broadcasters (at least their stated task) is to reach target audiences effectively. As a result, they have historically been innovative in exploring new devices, to improvise, to use technology to overcome obstacles of distance, topography, and, primarily, barriers imposed because of the resistance of governments in the target areas. Technologies are “new,” in this sense, if a changing strategy facilitates expansion or reach and influence. This definition incorporates, of course, the use of the Internet and the development of online sites as a kind of poster boy of new technologies. But this definition also would incorporate thinking through the reinvigoration of older

modes—such as short-wave radio—in circumstances where other modes make effective delivery of information possible. In that sense, institutional barriers to bringing new technologies to bear depend, to some extent, on the technologies themselves, so we must also clarify what we mean by “new technologies.”

Just as an example, one could look at the technological changes affecting international broadcasting in the 1990s. In part, this was characterized by a shift from reliance on traditional shortwave and mediumwave transmissions: an increasing number of individuals in target societies were turning to TV, the Internet and national and local FMs carrying relays of the international broadcasts tolerable to the host country. International broadcasters, like their domestic counterparts, have had to learn new skills and new modes of attracting attention (Olechowska & Howard, 1999, p.214-257). The end of the Cold War made novel arrangements appealing and the capacity to gain carriage on local FM stations became evident. In 1999, the then-chairman of the IBB’s Board of Governors, Marc Nathanson, captured the mood emerging in that decade: “The technology of short-wave is outmoded. We need to get into modern technology. Congress needs to fund it as we go to satellites, the Internet, and FM broadcasting.” (Hopkins, 1999) This is now the conventional wisdom.

Television, not, by far, a new technology in the commercial sector, has become a more coveted mechanism for delivering international broadcasting than it was in the past. Yet international broadcasting remains substantially a radio service, and its approach to the visual is as if it were new. First CNN’s entry in the 1990s, but more significantly Al Jazeera’s success, has shaken all assumptions about the ways to compete and stunned international broadcasters into considering wholly new approaches. The United States turned to a variety of video-related efforts, most recently Al Hurra; the BBC did likewise and, as well, invested in an Arabic television channel; France introduced a joint public-private news network, France 24. Satellite radio has promise, but to date it predominantly means distribution of a signal by satellite to a terrestrial rebroadcaster. A great deal of planning and experimentation—along the lines of many plans to bring satellite-based or mobile-based radio to Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean—must be undertaken before more traditional means can be scuttled or supplanted for regularly and effectively distributing programs.

New technologies, particularly the Internet, but with a retroactive implication for all efforts, have radical implications for the style of delivery, not only its physical mode. With cable and satellite has come the fierce engine of multi-channel competition and the rise of niche audiences. With the Internet and broadband has come the culture of interaction and user-originated content. “New technologies” mean far more than reaching more people, reaching faster, penetrating through greater barriers. It means, or generally compels a meaning, of altered modes of thinking through the relationship between the content provider (even that term can become quaint and outdated) and the audience. In this way, new technologies beget a new media environment.

The New Media Environment

The power of new technologies has many institutions stirring, whether it is as a result of the rise of blogging, the international rise of interconnected segments of civil society or the various color revolutions of the past decade. International broadcasters are participants in a larger community of media institutions that have a history of preoccupation with technological threats to their stability in the near distance (whether it is television against radio, cable versus broadcasting or satellite against cable). All this generates fear: fear that something unknown, uncontrollable and hugely consequential is taking place, and that the broadcaster is not a part of it. This fear helps drive, for some, the search for new technologies. Commercial entities rise or fall depending, in part, on how they play the game of adjusting to new technologies. Failing at choosing the right technologies can mean falling out of touch with one’s audience, becoming distant from one’s market.

The fierce debate over what technologies to deploy, how much to invest and how to utilize the new mechanisms is a universal one. Like every major commercial and public service media enterprise, international broadcasters know they must adjust or they will wither. The institutional environment for change at commercial organizations is different from that of international broadcasters in terms of pressures, culture of management, and pace of and incentives for change. The international broadcasters and

related entities are both more protected and more vulnerable: They are comforted by political or governmental protection (or subject to its whims), but, as a result, may lack the context and discipline to organize for necessary, large-scale change.

A perception of fear, and the related crisis in management, is illustrated in a February 2006 speech by then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (Council on Foreign Relations, 2006). “Our federal government,” he said, “is really only beginning to adapt our operations to the 21st century. For the most part, the U.S. government still functions as a five and dime store in an eBay world.” Rumsfeld was not differentiating between public diplomacy (in the broad sense) and international broadcasting, nor among the various players. He was enveloping. For Rumsfeld, the “war on terror” or the conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere had become “the first war in history—unconventional and irregular as it may be—in an era of e-mails, blogs, cell phones, Blackberrys, Instant Messaging, digital cameras, a global Internet with no inhibitions, talk radio, 24-hour news broadcasts, satellite television.” What concerned him was that “Our enemies have skillfully adapted to fighting wars in today’s media age, but for the most part we, our country, our government, has not adapted.” To make this an issue of merely using new technologies would be too simple. According to Rumsfeld, the “violent extremists” have proven to be highly successful at manipulating the opinion elites of the world. “They plan and design their headline-grabbing attacks using every means of communication to intimidate and break the collective will of free people. They know that communications transcend borders and that a single news story handled skillfully can be as damaging to our cause and helpful to theirs as any other method of military attack. And they’re doing it. They’re able to act quickly. They have relatively few people. They have modest resources compared to the vast and expensive bureaucracies of Western governments.” Mere adaptation of new technologies, according to this perspective, is not sufficient. Instead, “we ought to ask ourself the question: What should a U.S. Information Agency or a Radio Free Europe for the 21st century look like?... These are tough questions and it’s tough to find the answers for them and to do it right so that we can tell our hard-working folks what to do to meet these challenges.”

Rumsfeld's speech is important, for this essay, not because of the speaker, not because it was frank, but because it implicated current management policies in the failure of key institutions to "adapt to a new media age." Rumsfeld underscored that technology might have a place in an overall radical rethinking of the institutions involved, but asserted the institutional weaknesses that brought about the failure. He was identifying a general malaise.² This was a rather radical perspective on the gulf between need and achievement. Its intensity and sweeping quality may not be relevant everywhere. But it raises important questions about information asymmetry, means of delivery, responsiveness and organization. It raises questions about the need for institutions to alter, adapt and transform in a new competitive environment.

Structural Forces

This brings us to the main question of the essay: how to think about the institutional context in which these technology-related questions are determined. In *Good to Great*, James Collins (2001) and his team compare 11 pairs of companies, each from the same industry or market, over a period of 20 years or so. At the start of the study period, each company was a mediocre performer; by the end, one company in each pair had become a top performer while the other was still middle of the pack at best. Collins' detailed qualitative research concluded there were several key factors to these successful transformations. A key determinant for us is that without a redefinition of organizational purposes (and those of its constituent parts) as well as an examination of existing strengths and weaknesses, exploitations of new technologies will be less than optimal. "When used right, technology becomes an accelerator of momentum, not a creator of it. The good-to-great companies never began their transitions with pioneering technology, for the simple reason that you cannot make good use of technology until you know which technologies are relevant." (Collins, 2001, pp.152-153) Another way to put the question is to ask about competing modes of introducing new technologies for what Barley (1986) calls the "structuring of organizational worlds."

To understand the problem, one can describe two types of behavior as institutions approach new technologies: adaptations and transformations. Adaptations can be bifurcated. In “integrative adaptation,” technology does not radically alter the function of the entity, but is used to perform the traditional tasks in a more complete and efficient manner. Other adaptations are more superficial and serve primarily a legitimizing function, allowing an institution to present a modern face to external entities. Institutional theory predicts that adaptations of this sort—merely updating and adapting in the normative and acceptable way—yield shortcomings, mask weakness and postpone inevitable, more organizationally transcendent, change.

The alternative to adaptation, in the organizational literature, is “transformation.” Whereas adaptations are primarily surface-level reorganizations that may actually be harmful to an institution’s survival by postponing confrontation with foundational issues, transformations may be defined as reorganizations that actually come to grips with such fundamental changes (Freeman & Hannan, 1989). Transformations can be convulsive, involving reductions in staff or substantial modifications in the bureaucracy (though layoffs are not a guarantee that a transformation has taken place).³ Some international broadcasting entities, like many organizations, have a model of operation that enables them to function with apparent effectiveness even when they are on the verge of failure. There is an external shell of adequacy of performance. These organizations are most likely to undertake superficial adaptations.⁴

Theories of organizational structure thus provide guidance as to underlying forces that might help us understand the actions of U.S. international broadcasters as they seek to absorb new technologies. “Ecological theorists” argue that most organizations come into being to match the environment in which they are launched; when the environment changes, they decline and are replaced by others, a “life cycle” of corporate life (Adizes, 1988). There are fortunate exceptions, including those organizations that are large enough to buy or acquire the potential challengers and incorporate them into their structure, as well as jettison old divisions. However, ecologists doubt the capacity of organizations to transform.

Organizational theory also outlines the tendency for bureaucracies to lionize their own norms and adapt themselves into homogeneity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio

& Powell, 1983). Institutions survive and persist, theorists claim, because they adapt by embedding themselves within structures that have apparent legitimacy, rather than welcome redefinition in new circumstances. In terms of technology adoption, this means that international broadcasting entities engage in technology adoption partly to perform better, but partly because of a set of expectations. Patterns of adaptation (for example, the development of a website or the introduction of web-casting) reflect the expectations of the entity's overseers—in the United States, the BBG and Congress—with the result being dominance of political or short-term criteria, and criteria that do not reflect wholly the needs of the receiving or the imparting society.

Looking at international broadcasters, we take a more moderate but related position, that their structures will inhibit transformation unless a strengthened and clarified mission is conceived. This is consistent with our view that, in general, structural problems limit organizations to modest adaptations, and, further, that no managerial crisis has sufficiently encouraged international broadcasters to veer substantially from existing patterns, though, of course, patterns vary. Much more would need to be known in the way of comparing structures of governance of international broadcasters to make a convincing case concerning this argument. Only with such greater familiarity would one know when technological improvements are merely symptom-masking drugs that divert policy attention from the need for transformation or impede transformative impulses.

Adaptations and Transformations

Every international broadcaster presents its own case of adaptation and transformation. Each has its own structure, its own history, its own relationship to political masters. As a result, from an institutional standpoint, there are great differences in terms of the mode by which each international broadcaster can take on the task of assessing technological possibilities and seizing those that will render it more capable of achieving strategic objectives. We would label as a “dysfunction” structural impediments that restrict clear focusing on the relationship between technology and objective. The capacity to have strong executive leadership with relatively clear goals, about which there is a sufficient consensus, is part of a stable framework, including the environment in

which the international broadcaster functions. The BBC World Service has had, for example, the immense benefit of synergies with the BBC itself and the capacity to use the extraordinarily successful bbc.co.uk news portal. It is not only new technologies themselves, but additional opportunities for cross-promotion and branding that have provided the World Service with new strategies.

A second rather obvious point about the environment for change complicates the issue. Adjustments within international broadcasters are certainly the function of technological possibilities, internal budget priorities and geopolitical change. But technological change brings with it transformed modes of thinking about the medium. The current round of new technologies, especially the Internet, has caused a shift in the relationship between the viewer or listener and the producer. As we have already suggested, “interactivity” or audience participation and even more effective control becomes a new touchstone of programming approach. Given the strong tradition of hierarchy in international broadcasting, in which control over message could be said to be a key aspect of the approach to provide information to needy listeners, the cultural change is great. Different international broadcasters may, using the adjustment to new technologies as a lever, have differing abilities to adjust here as well. The World Service, for example, seems to have multiplied its interactive practices and more solidly and consistently brought listeners into the process of contributing content—bringing old technologies into a new media environment. Developing from the experience of the BBC itself, the BBC World Service inaugurated its “Have Your Say” program and website, connecting audiences across the globe on major issues, provoking debate with an apparent immediacy. One of its editors claimed that “Our programme belongs to our audience. They set the agenda, either through comments posted on our blog, or their blogs, through texts, emails and calls. There’s an important underlying principle here. Our belief is that people don’t want to interact with a corporation, they want to interact with each other, and World Have Your Say provides the daily forum for them to be able to do that” (BBC World Service.com n.d.).

Canada’s international broadcaster’s dramatic reduction in service and repurposing has been an example of considering the influence of new technologies in a new media environment. There, the consequence was a substantial downsizing and

repurposing of Radio Canada International. Since 2006, in a radical revision of function using new technology, Radio Canada International has been operating RCI Viva, on the Internet, as an information service for recent immigrants to Canada. In the late 1990s, CBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, had already discontinued its funding of RCI; a first transformation was to shift the service to serve and promote Canada's economic interests around the world. The interaction of market-altered technological frameworks and sources of funding have led to the current mix of functions for Germany's Deutsche Welle. In late 1994, Deutsche Welle became an innovator among public broadcasters in Germany in terms of a World Wide Web presence evolving into the current site that offers daily exclusive coverage in core languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese [for Brazil], Farsi and Russian) as well as a mixture of news and information in 23 other languages corresponding to Deutsche Welle's radio programs.⁵

America's Al Hurra was established to attract audiences through formats using new technologies, but it has mirrored traditional approaches in terms of content. Radio Sawa, on the other hand, took a traditional technology, radio, and transformed content. In our vocabulary, Al Hurra is adaptive and Radio Sawa is potentially transformative. This is not a reflection of the merits of either effort, but rather a comment on the nature of the institutional step by the international broadcaster involved. Not surprisingly, Radio Sawa has been subject to more criticism from within the international broadcasting establishment than Al Hurra. Al Hurra is criticized as a faltering effort that has the trappings of innovation, though statistically valid studies of impact have yet to be completed. Professor William Rugh is not atypical in noting that that

a common Arab reaction that I have heard is disappointment that Al Hurra is not effective as a newsgathering agency in the Middle East. ... Arab viewers assumed that since the United States is the occupying power in Iraq, and Al Hurra is the American government's television channel, Al Hurra should be in the best position of any broadcaster to have the best and quickest access to news events in Iraq, but it does not. Al Hurra's

potential advantage in this competitive market has been lost. (U.S. Senate Committee, 2004)

Al Hurra has been criticized almost from every vantage point and a frequent conclusion, perhaps premature, has been that it has not gained traction with viewers.⁶ Radio Sawa, on the other hand, has reported surprisingly large audience share in many of its markets (though these figures have been disputed on methodological grounds). Sawa radically altered the usual international broadcasting feed, focusing on popular music for most of the format, with a relatively small amount of news. It seemed to gain audience in the demographic it most sought, but was said by many not to impart, sufficiently, the message that U.S. broadcasting is charged with transmitting. It was a major threat to the historic modes used by U.S. international broadcasters: popular music aimed at young audiences had been featured among language service programs in the past to great success, but news had been paramount. Sawa's all-music, every hour format (with interspersed news) appeared almost heretical given the mission's previous interpretation in terms of information delivery. The outcome of all of this is not yet known.

A Case Study: the BBG and the Voice of America

We have asserted that each traditional international broadcaster—and the broader class of entities that compete for audiences—presents its own institutional environment for making decisions concerning the uses of new technologies or the readaptation of old ones. While it is not possible, in this essay, to describe elements of institutional context in enough international broadcasters to have a convincing set of comparisons, we can try to demonstrate how to think about this question with a specific example. We focus on one example of a context for change, namely the US Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and its flagship, the Voice of America. We do so because of proximity of material and because the case illustrates important lessons in the relationship between structure—the institutional composition of international broadcasting in the United States relates closely to its special structure and definition by Congress, the Broadcasting Board of Governors and other agencies—and capacity to change.

We look at mission statements and reviews as an important window into the process of institutional adjustment to new technologies and examine certain of the documents produced between 2002 and 2007 by the BBG, the General Accounting Office (GAO), the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), Congress and others, including critics, as indicators of how the BBG, and particularly the Voice of America, deal with issues of adaptation and transformation. These documents are part of a non-choreographed paper discourse on the future of international broadcasting and its relationship to new technologies. Most official discourse of this kind is coded and not sufficiently explicit, and this set of exchanges is little different. But running through these documents is some notion of unresolved conflicts of direction and planning; there is an expressed dissatisfaction, either because of a perceived departure from an earlier ideal or because of a sense of inadequacy of current performance—or both. We are interested in how the contradictions revealed by this analysis might inhibit useful organizational transformations as they relate to deployment of new technologies.

A starting point is one of the inventions of the BBG, its 2002 – 2007 strategic planning document, called “Marrying the Mission to the Market.” (Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2002). Among the stated strategic goals and objectives were:

Goal I – Design a Broadcasting Architecture for the 21st Century.

- Create the Worldwide U.S. International Broadcasting System
- Realign the BBG Organizational Structure

Goal III -- Employ Modern Communication Techniques and Technologies

- Accelerate Multi-media Development, Infusing More TV and Internet into the Mix
- Adopt the Principles and Practices of Modern Radio “Formatics”
- Control the Distribution Channels that Audiences Use
- Drive Innovation and Performance with Research

Goal V – Revitalize “Telling America’s Story” to the World

- Be a Model of a Free Press and Democracy in Action

- Concentrate on Those Aspects of America that Research Tells Us Interest Individual Audiences
- Present Targeted Editorials that are Relevant to Local and Regional Concerns
- Use Formats, Presentation Techniques, and On-air Presence that Will Appeal to Audiences
- Maximize Interactive Use of the Internet as a Ready Reference Source for Presidential Speeches and Other Vital Documents

The problem—portrayed, but not clarified in these goals—is what constitutes “the mission,” what constitutes “the market,” and how “marrying” the mission to the market will be accomplished. This is in some ways a political document, not one to be parsed exactly as a guide to action. But the “strategic goals” are an index to the conflicting pressures that make it difficult to draw priorities. Is the “mission” to “provide accurate and objective news” or, in the BBG’s support of U.S. foreign policy, “tell America’s story to the world,” or, in a third iteration, shape a strategy that supports public diplomacy efforts to shift attitudes and opinions about the United States? What happens when the compatibility or incompatibility of these goals is called into question and international broadcasters face demands that are in conflict with one another? The BBG acknowledged that “The challenge facing the Broadcasting Board of Governors is to discern how to reach large audiences in complex, competitive media environments worldwide with straight news as well as perspectives on American culture and information on official U.S. government positions and policies.” (Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2002, p.34) Without a consensus of sorts on these questions, the issue of how to use technologies becomes muffled and imprecise.

The challenge can be seen in the GAO’s evaluation of the BBG’s strategy:

“Marrying the Mission to the Market,” ... emphasizes the need to reach large audiences by applying modern broadcast techniques and strategically allocating resources to focus on high-priority broadcast markets, such as the Middle East. However, ... this plan lacked a long-term strategic goal or related program objective to gauge the Board’s

success in increasing audience size. Further, there were no measurable program objectives to support the plan's strategic goals or to provide a basis for assessing the Board's performance with regard to changing audience views toward the United States. (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004, p. 3)

The list of challenges facing the BBG included: "outmoded programs and poor signal quality; the disparate structure of the agency, which consists of seven separate broadcast entities and a mix of federal and grantee organizations collectively managed by a part-time Board; and the resource-intensive job of broadcasting 97 language services to more than 125 broadcast markets worldwide. (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004, p. 4)

In terms of Goal I, creating a "worldwide U.S. international broadcasting system" sounds like an important opening for thinking through the use of technologies, but little in that document came to grips with how such an aggregate of entities would become a system or the role of technology in this process. There is a reference to the overlapping, parallel and potential conflicts in certain markets of the Voice of America and RFE/RL, but a promise to make them a single stream does not overcome the intense political realities that underlie their separation. Nor is there an indication of how "realigning" the BBG would negotiate or mitigate old political and constituency barriers. Understanding the constraints, the document states that "Any adjustments will build on current practice, so the degree of change will be moderate." This rhetorical position keeps the peace internally—among broadcasters operating under the historic VOA model and the grantee surrogate domestic broadcasters in the tradition of RFE/RL, concerned about radical change, such as suggestions of mergers or elimination of one model or the other. It fends off Congressional funders fearful of radical change. But such rhetoric also operates materially within the organization to sanction superficial adaptation rather than rewarding impulses toward transformation.

Goal III speaks directly to new technology but provides no real guidance on how new techniques should be integrated and balanced with the old, an omission that is particularly significant in light of increasing budget pressures and changing strategic

priorities. The BBG asserted that “radio will remain the backbone of our communications,” though it recognized that “for some broadcast languages, TV and the Internet have strong roles to play as well.” The finding became partial justification for reducing English-language radio services on the basis that new technologies will be more effective.

When it comes to websites, the BBG has stated that “We have seen spotty progress towards the goal of having all language services create high quality news-oriented websites. Some are outstanding. The content of others is thin in content and visually uninteresting. Bottom line: We will ensure that all the entities have world-class Internet presences” (Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2002, p. 37). But is “bottom line” more than a slogan? A world-class Internet presence has been achieved by both public and private broadcasters: BBC.com and CNN.com. In the case of the United States, separate branding strategies for international broadcasters remain an inconvenient barrier to global success.

Although Goal III defines audience research as “the life’s blood of broadcasting,” the BBG’s performance indicators promote disguising technological adaptations as well. Though the BBG makes countless pronouncements about strategic vision, until recently the BBG focused heavily on a single measure of performance—cost per unduplicated weekly audience reach. Weekly audience reach is a standard brought forward over time from the radio industry. The BBG utilizes this metric as a longer-term measure, setting performance targets for annual reductions in the cost per unduplicated weekly audience member; costs were slated to decline by pennies per year through 2009.

The primacy afforded this “lowest unit cost” mentality grounds strategy and operations in an outdated industrial management model: the production of flows of information and programming channeled via discrete broadcast technologies intended for individual audience members who interact with products in only one way. In other words, audience size is conceived in terms of technology of reception—radio, TV and Internet, for example—that does not acknowledge a dynamic media environment in which consumers interact with information via multiple media: a radio listener who relays to television or to the Internet for a live story, links to and forwards information to

others online or by cell phone, and engages in commentary is equated with a radio-only audience member. The generation of heightened engagement is not accounted for in evaluating the effectiveness (as audience reach) of radio or TV as impetus for Internet site use. In other words, because most Internet users of VOA gain access to the system first via radio or TV, for example, they are not “unduplicated” and therefore their audience status as Internet users, at least in some modes of reckoning, was muted, if counted at all. This encouraged BBG broadcasters to employ new technology in a rudimentary but highly visible way, where each distribution technology (radio, TV, Internet) must be matched solely to a distinctly identifiable audience.⁷

Underlying these issues, and influencing the BBG’s difficulty in defining a mission and engaging in transformation, are questions of structure. Ironically, the elements that were designed to strengthen international broadcasting in the United States have weakened its capacity to act strategically. The Broadcasting Board of Governors was designed, in its own words, “to protect the professional independence and integrity of the BBG broadcasters”—to maintain the traditional journalistic firewall between news production and external interference. Because of the nature of the appointment process, however, the “buffer” itself has channeled political intervention.

Questions about the firewall are related to the underlying purpose of the various segments of the BBG. The interest and zeal of Congress in seeing its own definition of objectives and methods of achieving those objectives have not abated, with intervention going beyond the strategic. Soon after 9/11, it became tolerated and almost acceptable for individual members of Congress to suggest limits as to which voices and sources could be heard in VOA newscasts (Taliban spokespersons, for example); the mood of Washington led to further self-examination and self-censorship when editors determined what might approach an ideal of objectivity in the news.⁸ And in 2002, during a time marked by increased fissures in the firewall, the President appointed as chairman of the board of the BBG Kenneth Tomlinson, who was generally expected to be a reliable hand in ensuring that segments of the enterprise interpreted “accurate and objective” in a manner favorable to the Administration. The State Department and Defense Department have played a role both directly and through the Board, rendering more complex the process of achieving strategic objectives.

The organizational pattern has also weakened the power of broadcaster (as opposed to Board) management. The Broadcasting Board of Governors provides a complex and difficult model for governance. Because Board membership is usually evenly divided between the two major political parties (with an extra ex-officio seat reserved for the Secretary of State giving one more seat to the party in power), it is difficult for the board to agree on a strategic vision, despite its pronouncements. This structural complexity means that the BBG can gain consensus only over very limited points. This serves the tenets of institutional theory, which would suggest that the few accepted practices, such as measuring accountability by cost per unduplicated user, take on too much sway.

In the case of the BBG, the structural impediments to technological transformation are illustrated by its difficulties responding to criticisms in a 2004 report by Ernst & Young. In response to Ernst & Young's suggestions, the BBG consolidated its technology functions in one entity, the International Broadcasting Bureau's Office of Engineering and Technical Services. Problems, however, remained. An October 2006 Office of the Inspector General report (Broadcasting Board of Governors OIG, 2006) stated that the consolidation effort, while accomplished at a surface or operational level, "did not go far enough in strengthening BBG's technology focus" (Broadcasting Board of Governors OIG, 2006, p.12); the BBG was found to continue to lag in "Internet technologies and television." (Broadcasting Board of Governors OIG, 2006, p.6) The OIG found that the Office of Engineering and Technology Services, like other BBG entities, was resource-poor:

That lack of resources demonstrates the subordinate nature of the Internet as a news medium within BBG. Coupled with the philosophical impasse between VOA and Internet Services [of the IBB's Office of Engineering and Technology Services], the lack of emphasis on the Internet creates a challenge for BBG to remain competitive with other major news outlets for audience share. ... The board of directors and senior managers must regard IT as the BBG's foundation and come to see the Internet as a core

means of accomplishing the BBG's mission. (Broadcasting Board of Governors OIG, 2006, p.32)

Again, there have been surface modifications as a result of this ongoing conversation among internal and external entities evaluating organizational performance and strategy. However, the overall structural issues—rooted in unresolved conflicts of mission—remain unaddressed (Hope & Hope, 1997).

The complex BBG architecture is a response to political realities at the time of the abolition of the United States Information Agency, in 1999, but as an ensemble, and as related to present-day needs, the structure might be an obstacle to a coherent technology strategy, not an aid to fulfillment. This is hardly a paper on management techniques. But there is overwhelming indication of dysfunction in the existing structures of U.S. international broadcasting. Congress creates the BBG as a means to maintain a firewall, but also generates fire; from the Executive Branch there is the rhetoric of objectivity alongside the fact of political interference. There are multiple broadcast entities whose governance is dictated not by current functional needs but by historic circumstances. Projects designed to have external and international effects are governed by individuals who seem answerable less to the urgencies of those goals than to the demands of domestic constituencies.

Booz Allen Hamilton, in its consultant report to the BBG, has summarized the situation in this manner:

The current IBB/VOA structure is stovepiped by function; closely-related functions have separate reporting lines in practice. Managers often make operational decisions without adequate understanding of the upstream and downstream impact and cost. The number of official management layers slows decisions and has generated a practice of side-stepping formal reporting chains in order to get things done in a more timely way. The combination of unclear management roles/authorities and operating processes that are not standardized causes extra effort, negotiation, and friction at the front-line level. We concluded that the current

organizational structure is unnecessarily complex and hinders the effectiveness of the enterprise.... VOA lacks the ability to operationalize its decisions, as key elements in its resources and delivery processes are effectively in a separate chain of management. (Booz Allen Hamilton, 2006)

There is a kind of tragedy to this analysis. In the best of worlds, organizations have life cycles: periods of productivity and periods of decline. As an “ecological” perception of these entities would have it, resisting the momentum of an ongoing cycle is extremely difficult. The process of resistance and rejuvenation requires a much clearer vision and a much clearer sense of organization and management than appears to be the case at some elements of the BBG.

What do we learn from this case study and what more should we try to know and understand? We see that the “organizational environs” for each international broadcaster is fairly specific to its national context. The specific concatenation at the BBG, a result of the demise of the United States Information Service, the rhythm of neglect and then intense interest in the function of international broadcasting, the hyper-pressure of the post-September 11 world, the specific role of Congress, the State Department and the Department of Defense—these may have counterparts elsewhere but are not duplicated. And we believe that only by understanding such a context can choices about technology adaptation be understood. But we can also see that looking only through the BBG lens is insufficient. If we are asking how the BBG responds, our approach is on track. If, however, the issue is how the government adapts to new technology, we might have to look at a far broader array of actions. The BBG, functioning as a system administrator, might and does use technology choices to alter the balance among members of the family, and to change dramatically the way a particular entity operates. At a level removed from that—Congress or the White House—the decision could be made that new technologies call for investments in entities outside the BBG group, say in increasing media assistance to “free” the Internet or subsidize private entrants into the field of satellite-delivered news and politics.

Technologies, International Broadcasters and the Market for Loyalties

International broadcasting, at its core, is about the behavior of states in various markets for loyalties; that expands to include entities other than states. Knowledge influences action, and key international players have various concerns as to what those around the world “need to know” with the goal of affecting short-term or long-term behavior. Great powers—those who try to shape the allegiances of large masses, domestically and internationally, use law, technology, force, and subsidy to maintain the strength of particular perspectives, often ones that buttress or weaken political systems. And they use the power of information. Why governments intervene to alter information in target societies is not centrally the subject of this essay. But international broadcasting can be seen as a set of external efforts, largely, but not exclusively, by governments, to break through cartels that control the flow of words and ideas within markets. Why outside entities seek to alter such cartels and provide information assembled from culturally, politically distinct and alternative points of view has its altruistic and its national interest aspects and sometimes, but not always, the two are conjoined. Technology is important because it provides devices or techniques for surmounting barriers to entry. How effectively international broadcasters and their competition adjust or adopt to new technological possibilities, how well they use existing ones, how flexible they are—all this will determine how well they cope with the situation presented to them by specific constraints on the flow of information in a target or receiving state. In that sense, technologies (technologies of freedom in de Sola Pool’s phrase) are modes of privileging the reception rights of individuals against the efforts of the target state at shaping and delimiting the scope, character and content of information available.

We have indicated how the existence of political barriers create pressures for innovation. And the pressure for innovation can be for old or recycled technologies as well as for the latest fashion. Audiocassettes were the subversive technology to defeat state restrictions in pre-revolutionary Iran. Shortwave has had its role and may have a similar role again with the revival of repressive regimes. Or, to take a different example, Al Jazeera becomes more productive and inventive than others in its use of video

streaming and Internet websites because of impediments imposed formally or informally on diffusion of its product. The plethora of satellites and the lowering of cost and technical barriers to entry in the direct satellite-to-home or satellite-to-cable market helped create an environment that encouraged the establishment of state-sponsored signals designed to persuade and to reach diasporas abroad. Supply of opportunities has fostered a demand already kindled by shifts in the geopolitical context. Now the Internet—home for insurrectionist, guerrilla, civil society and state sponsored sites, further indicates the relationship of access opportunities to demand.

But it is not enough that there are incentives to innovate. The organizational context for innovation is equally important. Al Jazeera can pioneer and quickly advance because of its organizational structure, security of financial support, lines of authority and clarity of purpose. The BBC World Service has built-in advantages in terms of the historic role and financial base of the BBC itself. Drawing on Pierre de Chardin, Arquilla and Ronfeldt use the concept of the noosphere to portray “an expanding realm where the emphasis is on the ideational and organizational dimensions, without ignoring the technological one.” The noosphere “inclines the analyst and the strategist to think in terms of the roles of ideas, values, and norms, rather than in terms of Internet hosts, Web sites, and baud rates — that is, in terms of structural information rather than in terms of information processing.” (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1999)

The performance of international broadcasting is, undoubtedly, related to complexities of foreign policy and their relationship to the current geopolitical environment. But it is also, as we have tried to show, a function of the structure of international broadcasters as institutions and organizations operating in a withering management ecology. Ultimately, this essay is descriptive of the dilemmas for policymakers and legislators rather than prescriptive of any particular attitude towards international broadcasting and new technologies. We have tried to suggest how institutional challenges that affect most organizations have specific resonance for those that operate within the structures of international broadcasting. We have tried to place the discourse about particular international broadcasters and the larger mission within these institutional constraints particularly as they seek to adapt or transform using new technologies as part of that adaptation or transformation. And we have tried to suggest

why improvements in technology—seemingly so obvious a place to start in evaluating change among international broadcasters—may prove to be not only false indicators of improvement but also the means by which entities continue to be diverted from the transformative self-examination critical to the success of public diplomacy.

This essay began with a question about technologies and ended with questions about missions, strategies and life cycles of organizations. The issues of structure are important because technologies and their uses shift so quickly. Now it is not only cable and satellite that provide new opportunities, and it is not only the questions about the Internet, its uses and restrictions that pose problems for international broadcasters. There are the new worlds of MySpace, Second Life and whatever is next on the idiosyncratic, hyperbolic and unpredictable communications horizon. It is the sheer variety of possibilities that calls for an organizational approach that is flexible and dynamic. As styles change of seeking, constructing, distributing, receiving and interacting with information and of considering what constitutes credibility and integrity, it will be more and more important to have the capacity to shift. Transformation lies more in conceptions of mission and its fulfillment, rather than in the adaptation, superficially, of the benefits of technological advance.

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¹ There's an objection to linking public diplomacy and international broadcasting. "Journalistic purists" among international broadcasters wish to link the venture (or at least some practitioners) to "objective coverage" with as little instrumental purpose and political guidance as possible. This is one of the structural ambiguities that leads to difficulty.

² A talk by Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes, in contrast, contained these low expectation comments at the Council on Foreign Relations in 2006. "Technology," she noted, "is probably one of our biggest challenges and we've got a long way to go. Government does not tend to

be a trend leader; they tend to be a trend lagger. And so we have to be better about technology and we're working to do so and that's one of the things I've charged our Bureau of International Information Programs with looking at ways that we could use things like MP3 players to deliver messages or text messaging or to improve the quality. We've got a couple of new web-based programs that we're trying to become more active and engaged on the Internet." It is unfair to characterize a set of policies on a few comments, but this is an example of grudging adaptation for institutional legitimation of change. Karen Hughes, Comments at Council on Foreign Relations, May 10, 2006. <http://www.state.gov/r/us/66098.htm> (Accessed June 5, 2007).

³ Of course, it would be foolish to contend that radical transformation is always the way forward, and there are cautions. Professor William Rugh, commenting on the introduction of a new international broadcasting satellite service to serve the Middle East, argued, "Something urgently needs to be done to help bridge the great gap between American and Arab perceptions. We are in a serious war of ideas."

[I]t would be more cost-effective to devote the funds used for television broadcasting to other badly needed public diplomacy programs. The most effective public diplomacy for Arab audiences involves dialogue by Americans willing to listen and able to explain the United States and its policies. Instead of trying to manage our own television channel, we should do more to gain access to the existing Arab channels, and we should increase the number of trained professional officers with Arabic language capabilities who can explain America and its policies using Arab media. The 9/11 terrorists used our planes to kill our people. We should be able to use Arab media to inform and educate Arab audiences.

U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism. *Broadcasting Board of Governors: Finding the Right Media for the Message in the Middle East*. 108th Congress, 2d sess., 2004. S. Hrg. 108-607.

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⁴ Other literatures tend to emphasize adaptation via transforming culture and group identities, often using structuration approaches from Giddens. Stephen Barley's (1986) study of the introduction of CT

scanners in different radiology departments is one example of this. In brief, Barley found that based on different initial cultures and structures, the introduction of the scanners had divergent impacts on the interactions between radiologists and technologists. One department became more collegial and cooperative, the other more centralized and hierarchical.

⁵ Deutsche Welle's website: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/0,2142,7882,00.html>

⁶ For a useful analysis of the debate over Al Hurra's content and audience share, see http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/worldcast_detail/051207_the_great_alhurra_debate/

⁷ Evaluative documents can also be read in the spirit of encouraging broader, more meaningful metrics that value research and a means of assuring a more integrated policy concerning technologies.

Unduplicated reach, however, retains value as a set of superficial bar graph ratios that, while stripped of contexts of broadcast population, market and political conditions, can be compared to serve as information for overseers. According to Congressional testimony, an August 2006 Government Accountability Office review of the Middle East Broadcasting Networks found "methodological concerns" in audience survey research used to estimate listening and viewing rates for Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV. U.S. Government Accountability Office. "U.S. Public Diplomacy: Strategic Planning Efforts Have Improved, but Agencies Face Significant Implementation Challenges: Testimony of Jess T. Ford, Director, International Affairs and Trade, to Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, House Committee on Foreign Affairs." GAO-07-795T, April 26, 2007. Available at <http://www.gao.gov/htext/d07795t.html>

⁸ A May 2007 congressional hearing criticized the BBG for allowing, in December 2006, an Al Hurra broadcast of an anti-Israel speech by Hezbollah leader Hannan Nasrallah, In the hearing, Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, D-NY, said, "Why are American taxpayer dollars used to spread the hate, lies and propaganda of these nuts, when our goal was to counter them?"