



What Trump Needs To Know To Reform US Broadcasting

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The announcement last week by Rep. Ed Royce (R-Calif.), the powerful chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, that he plans to resign at the end of his current term in office will unquestionably have enormous ramifications for the shape of U.S. foreign policy toward Syria, Ukraine, North Korea and Iran, as well as a host of other topics on which the congressman has distinguished himself during his eleven terms in office. But Royce's impending retirement will be felt in another area as well: that of U.S. public diplomacy.

Currently, U.S. outreach to the world is spearheaded by the Voice of America and its sister media networks. Collectively known as U.S. International Media (USIM), their broadcasts reach over 270 million audience members worldwide every month. Their operations, in turn, are overseen by an independent federal agency known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, or BBG.

Royce has long been a champion of the effort to fundamentally alter this structure. Royce and other congressional reformers feel that, among other deficiencies, the BBG does not promote U.S. values aggressively enough, is overly complacent in its 1980s era broadcasting look and feel, is late to the digital media game, and does not appeal to younger generations of viewers/listeners. The answer, as they see it, is to change the BBG, and by extension the tools that the U.S. uses to speak to the world.

To that end, beginning in 2015, Royce and his Democratic counterpart, Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), began to promote H.R. 2323, or the *United States International Communications Reform Act*, which embodied such an overhaul. The following year, President Obama signed the larger defense authorization act of which H.R. 2323 had become a part, thereby codifying the process into law.

But so far, nothing of the sort has happened. The advent of the Trump administration brought with it conversations about further change to the structure of U.S. media, and the need for a revitalized role for the United States in the "war of ideas" against radical Islam. But, as a practical matter, the process of BBG reform has sputtered to a stop.

Now, with Royce's impending departure, the future of this effort is even more uncertain. Yet the need to optimize America's tools of strategic influence is more urgent than ever before.

For much of the 20th century, the mission of U.S. international broadcasting was clear enough. The Voice of America was founded on the belief that a free and independent press was a powerful tool in defeating Nazism and subsequently Communism. Edward R. Murrow, then the Director of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), laid out the fundamental mission of the channels when he testified to Congress in 1963 that "American traditions and American ethics require us to be truthful, but the most important reason is that truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst."

"To be persuasive, we must be believable," Murrow went on. "To be believable, we must be credible. To be credible, we must be truthful. It is as simple as that."

Today, however, that simply isn't enough. Increasingly, new modes of media, as well as hostile media actors and the growing weaponization of information, have challenged America's ability to effectively communicate and persuade. The BBG must be reformed into an agile, digital-first platform that can effectively communicate in this environment, while nurturing and supporting democratic principles. And all of that must be done in a wise framework of journalistic values, such as the one advocated by Edward R. Murrow, but updated for our times.

This requires the Trump administration to focus on two priorities. First, the focus of the BBG must be shifted to better communicate values that speak to the unique role of the U.S. in the 21st century. Second, the White House must clarify and solidify where USIM fits in the administration's larger approach to foreign policy and national security.

Today, President Trump has the opportunity to reshape the BBG into a smarter, focused media platform. A positive reform program would not attempt to damage the BBG's independence, but focus instead on enhancing the agency's investments in digitally-capable journalism, modern facilities, staff that are forward deployed in or near key strategic audiences, and strong social/mobile distribution channels. By doing so, the Trump administration will enable the BBG and its constituent organs to once again communicate effectively to the world that the U.S. remains its best hope for stability and prosperity.

If that happens, it would be the most enduring legacy of Congressman Royce's distinguished career.

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