

HOME

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY BLOG

INSIDE NEWSROOM

NEWSROOM

EVENTS

CENTER PROJECTS

WIKI

LIBRARY

FOR STUDENTS

ABOUT THE CENTER

SEARCH

SEND TO FRIENDS

[Main Page](#) | [Month Archive](#) | [Email Updates](#) | [RSS Feed](#) | [Print Version](#)**THE CHANGING VOICE OF AMERICA**

OCT 27, 2006 - 11:19AM PDT

Posted by [Alvin Snyder](#)[All posts by this author](#)

Events moved rapidly this week at Voice of America. VOA director David Jackson decided to give his managers a heads up, shocking them with the news that he was planning to move on soon. That's exactly what happened. Within days the entire VOA staff saw the announcement that Jackson was indeed leaving. The supervisory [Broadcasting Board of Governors](#) accepted Jackson's resignation and approved a successor, who would arrive on the job a couple of days after that.

The BBG acted faster and more efficiently than it had in years.

[David Jackson](#), previously a 23-year career senior journalist with Time magazine, ran VOA for the past four years.

He made progress but was not a happy camper. Said an authoritative source preferring not to be named: "It's clear that this has not been a lot of fun for David. Things are not done the way they used to be at the old VOA, with a director and an assistant who used to run everything. The board (Broadcasting Board of Governors) has authority over everything. Over the years the relationship with David got chilly."

The broadcasting board was put in charge when the U.S. Information Agency was dismantled during the 1990s. It had been created in 1953 by [President Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), who felt many in Europe were too young to realize how much the U.S. helped to re-build and re-vitalize the continent following its devastation in World War II. Through President Eisenhower's vision of "people to people" communication, the USIA [accomplished its mission](#) and went forward to do its part in helping to win the Cold War with the Soviet ["evil empire."](#)

But now there is a part-time private-sector Broadcasting Board of Governors overseeing America's non-military broadcasts abroad. Worldcasting was told that the board was peeved with VOA Director David Jackson for not disclosing in advance that he intended to fire (or re-assign, in government) a veteran VOA news editor. Jackson reportedly wanted to keep this under wraps, fearing a leak to the press if he let the board in on it.

Sources also told Worldcasting that Jackson was a "hands-on" news manager bent on editing and re-writing copy himself before being broadcast on VOA, or put up on the VOA Web site. He often wanted to be certain that the U.S. position on a given story was elaborated where pertinent, and a VOA staffer said on background that this often frustrated VOA writers and editors.

Conversely, Jackson is said to have felt that working under the "reinvented" American government broadcast organization following the USIA's dissolution, was stifling. But Jackson and the board put up with one another for four years, with the board eventually winning out.

When I was director of the now-defunct US Information Agency's TV and Film Service, life was a lot simpler. I reported to the director of the USIA, Charles Z. Wick, and he reported to his long-time friend, President Ronald Reagan. That was it. And we set up the world's first interactive TV system all over the place abroad. But now with the nine member BBG, things are done by committee, divided evenly between democrats and republicans, the ninth member being the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, Karen Hughes. Most members of the board work outside Washington, DC, where they come once a month

- [Blogroll & Newsfeeds](#)
- [Public Diplomacy Blog](#)
- [PD Newswire](#)
- [John Brown's PD Review](#)
- [Special Reports](#)
- [Press and Publications](#)
- [RSS Feeds](#)
- [PD Blog Archive](#)

Read Posts By:**All Contributors**

[Elsadig Abdalla](#)
[Simon Anholt](#)
[Reza Aslan](#)
[Benjamin Barber](#)
[Robert Berger](#)
[John H. Brown](#)
[John Seely Brown](#)
[Daryl Copeland](#)
[Geoffrey Cowan](#)
[Nicholas Cull](#)
[Lanie Denslow](#)
[Kim Andrew Elliott](#)
[Richard Farson](#)
[Philip Fiske](#)
[Joshua Fouts](#)
[Geoff Freeman](#)
[Mohammad Ganjidoost](#)
[Eytan Gilboa](#)
[Ahmed El Gody](#)
[Anthony Gooch](#)
[Bruce Gregory](#)
[M. Ashraf Haidari](#)
[Peter Ham](#)
[Craig Hayden](#)
[John Hemery](#)
[Peter Herford](#)
[Patrick James](#)
[Wang Jian](#)
[John Robert Kelley](#)
[Nomfanelo Kota](#)
[Joshua Kurlantzick](#)
[Xiguang Li](#)
[Marc Lynch](#)
[Jade Miller](#)
[Joseph Nye, Jr.](#)
[Lawrence Pintak](#)
[Evan Potter](#)
[Adam Clayton Powell III](#)
[Shawn Powers](#)
[Jill Schuker](#)
[Nancy Snow](#)
[Alvin Snyder](#)
[Philip M. Taylor](#)
[Hans Peter van der Woude](#)
[Ernest J. Wilson III](#)
[Peter Winter](#)

for their BBG meeting. The board chairman, however, does not have another job, and lives nearby, and comes to the office almost daily.

Because a VOA director doesn't report to the BBG anyway, there is need to wait a month for a decision. Under the reorganization plan that did away with the USIA, since the VOA director reports only indirectly to the BBG via the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). Worse, the IBB's director's job hasn't been filled for more than two years. VOA used to supervise some of what the IBB now oversees, such as engineering, marketing, and program placement, and it worked well when VOA did all this with just a director and an assistant. So go figure.

The new VOA director, Danforth W. Austin, comes from the Wall Street Journal, where he held senior editorial positions. In a newly created position, TV producer Russell Hodge was appointed Director of VOA television, under Austin. Another source found the wording of the BBG announcement of all this to be interesting. The BBG chose the new VOA director, not the White House, so that the "firewall" of the BBG, to separate VOA from politics, seems to be working. But how can this be since the board is appointed based on political party affiliation?

When America's foreign broadcast operation was re-configured, although the old one worked just fine, there was too much emphasis on form (organization boxes) and not enough on substance (programs). Jackson was a hands-on program guy, with a heady editorial background, and the two didn't mix well. Aside from their organizational woes, VOA veterans are concerned about whether they will have the funding to keep up with the "Big Boys," the BBC, the French, the Germans, the Chinese, the Russians. It's not just a matter of listening (and now watching) VOA or no one. There's now a lot more competition out there on satellite and the Internet, VOA staffers point out.

Rather than re-establishing a new USIA, which would take at least as long as the decade it took to blow it away, better to appoint a full-time BBG chairman, someone with a vision to take the BBG to places "[where no man has gone before](#)," at least since USIA days. And, of course, the new BBG chairman should know the way.

[Read Comments \(5\)](#) | [Add Your Own](#)

[Email this](#) • [Technorati: 5 links to this item](#) • [Add to del.icio.us](#) • [Subscribe to this feed](#)

Read Comments:

anthony c. collins on October 31, 2006 @ 7:34 pm:

david jackson was the worst director in VOA history -- and I spent 34 years there so I should know. he did not believe in the VOA charter calling for accuracy and objectivity. VOA directors traditionally left the news writing to the news division -- but he insisted on trying to add administration spin to news stories. he tried to stop english language news broadcasting at a time when Al Jazeera is starting english broadcasts. he fired the best news division chief we ever had because that individual insisted on standing up for what was right. the damage Jackson did will never be undone because too many good people have left in disgust. as long as the BBG insists on a VOA director who follows their misguided policies and will not stand up for the VOA Charter and VOA professionals who have given their entire working lives to the organization, the Voice will be a shadow of its former self and millions of listeners around the world will tune in to the BBC instead.

David Hubler on November 2, 2006 @ 8:16 am:

With all due respect to Tony Collins, the all-time worst VOA director was Ken Tomlinson, who ruined morale and careers during his ruthless reign at VOA in the Reagan years. He was responsible for forcing out the best news director, Bernie Kamenske, who had devoted his career to keeping VOA an impartial source of news. I was there, and was among many to experience the wrath of Kennie Caligula, who, alas, still holds sway over VOA. More's the pity!

peter m herford on November 5, 2006 @ 12:46 am:

Subscribe:

Enter your Email

Powered by [FeedBlitz](#)



From a listeners point of view the damage seems to have been long done. I have spent 10 of the last 13 years outside the United States. In that time the letters VOA have never been spoken to me by anyone other than a student. The students don;t listen they have heard the letters VOA and understand that they mean The Voice of America, but because of the name and the now almost universal bad reputation of United States foreign policy, they don't listen. They don't "listen" to anyone else either. The populations Ideal with - the under 35 crowd - when they have access to the Internet that's where they spend the bulk of their time. If they do not have home access to the Internet you will find them at an Internet cafe. Surveys worldwide will back up these anecdotal findings. That leaves the VOA with small corners of the world and a mission drastically changed from its earlier circumstances. I gather from comments and colleagues at VOA that little has changed to focus on the new realities.

Sexton Collins on November 6, 2006 @ 2:58 am:

You've watched too many political commercials, Mr. Herford. Is Africa one of your "small corners of the world"? What about China? I don't know where you spent your time, but my time for most of the last 20 years has been spent in places where news is hard to get, and VOA is seen as a reliable source.

You're right, of course, with respect to the developed world, Latin America, the former East Bloc, and the Middle East. Still, let's start by looking at what VOA does well and where it is successful, and build on it, rather than disdaining it as a anachronism.

Alan Simpson on November 9, 2006 @ 6:11 pm:

The success, or failure of any public diplomacy broadcaster must be judged on the metrics of "How much support has been gained for US policies", "How many US lives has it saved", and "How many US goods or services have been purchased". Just giving the starving masses of remote small corners of Africa and China entertainment and news they don't understand comes well down on the priority list.

Develop effective and truthful metrics, then create effective programs. Regarding the worst manager, you can't manage what you can't measure. Have neutral outside media consultants gather the metrics, not believe the super hyped figures from the field.

And remember global political media is about the future, not the past!

[Add a Comment:](#)

Your Name:

Your Email:

Comment:

Please enter the word you see in the image below:



NOTE: Your comment may not post immediately.

[Back to Top](#)

