

Memo: July 21, 2016

To: Amanda Bennett, Voice of America director

From: Joyce Dehli, Tom Detzel, Marcy McGinnis

Re: Voice of America, Consultants' Review

Introduction

Voice of America has many talented journalists and offers vital news and other programming to a huge global audience. It has the potential to be one of the world's greatest news organizations, but it is late to the digital age, hindered by archaic habits and bereft of some skills and resources needed to achieve excellence. Bureaucratic obstacles are not the biggest problem; VOA needs a radical change in thinking, spirit and organization. Tradition has carved the agency into fiefdoms that impede communication, collaboration and creativity. We suggest significant reorganization in the News Center to enhance responsiveness, encourage enterprise and deepen cooperation with language services. This restructuring should be designed by a task force or teams drawn from editors, producers and reporters who will be affected and who are best positioned to know the problems and find solutions. Their charter should be bold: What VOA needs is a dramatic break from outdated structures and routines – a revolutionary plan of action, designed from within, to propel the organization into the future.

Assessment

Ultimately, one can judge Voice of America's success or failure by its content. Does the quality meet professional standards? Is it relevant to VOA's diverse audiences? Is it distinctive? Does it connect with audiences in the most apt formats, from digital news and social media to podcasts, radio and TV? Finally, does it serve VOA's mission to tell America's story abroad and to cover global regions and peoples not otherwise served by uncensored news organizations? Too often the answer to these questions is no.

VOA content varies widely in quality and relevance but is often routine, mediocre and late. It frequently lacks the context, sourcing, sophistication and production values today's audiences demand. Investigative stories, data journalism, long-form narrative and in-depth video storytelling are largely absent. There are many talented and passionately committed VOA journalists who aspire to do high-level work; in some cases, they are following through. But overall, leaders throughout VOA must raise ambition levels, communicate better and work harder to inspire quality and creativity.

Most importantly, VOA leaders must do much more to recognize, nurture and promote the rich trove of expertise and enthusiasm within its language services. Some of VOA's most powerful

and meaningful work comes from the services, yet it can be obscured or underdeveloped by historic prejudices and ineffective communication. Recently this has begun to change, but for VOA to achieve its full potential, journalists in the News Center and services should be working arm-in-arm as a matter of routine.

Recommendations

1 – Hold managers accountable for producing “value-added” content: journalism that is lively, topic-driven, people-centered, enterprising and distinctive. Draft an action plan to increase accountability, rewarding good performance and penalizing poor performance consistent with VOA’s charter and mission. Set and communicate clear performance expectations.

2 – Create true news beats for enterprise reporters, and give them more freedom to pursue their ideas. Create topic teams of reporters from the News Center and services who cover the same subjects: education, technology, corruption, women's issues, health, science, etc. Reporters and editors on the teams would meet regularly to share ideas and plan projects.

3 – Put a strong leader in charge of training. Develop a comprehensive, long-term training strategy covering writing, storytelling, standards, mobile and other digital news creation, TV production, social media, beat management and other needs. Use expert staff for informal buddy-training initiatives. Share best practices from the language services that have been more aggressive and successful in multimedia training.

4 – Continue efforts to ensure VOA is getting the data needed to assess its audience goals. Do not hesitate to drop bad content, redundant content and content with little audience. Share traffic and audience data with all reporters and editors and find ways to reward growth.

5 – Make investigative and accountability reporting a VOA priority. Get reporters with investigative skills and ambitions working on project-based teams. Create a virtual team of investigative reporters and editors from different divisions to consult, contribute and be a sounding board for investigative projects across VOA. Create a data team to deliver news apps, feed reporting projects and teach data skills across the VOA divisions.

6 – Encourage reporters to design and lead all-comers sessions – editors included – that solicit, discuss and propose story and project ideas. Celebrate creative work and hold workshops or brown bag lunches with VOA and outside journalists to share skills and best practices.

7 – Create teams to redesign the News Center and strengthen collaboration with the language services. These teams or task forces should have a diverse mix of stakeholders: editors, reporters, producers and others who will be directly affected. The teams should:

- ❑ Conduct a thorough review of the authorities and operations of the six News Center desks to eliminate duplication and enhance communication and quality. Consider consolidating the Multimedia and Feature desks under Real Time News, and whether there is duplication or overlap with the English language service. Consider creating a Planning Desk to map out longer-term enterprise and prepare for special coverage.
- ❑ Identify ways to strengthen collaboration and sharing with the News Center. Assign more News Center reporters to work directly with reporters and editors in the language services, following successful liaison arrangements in East Asia-Pacific, Eurasia and some other divisions. Make sharing and cross-division collaboration a top VOA priority.
- ❑ Consider creating a true assignment desk, staffed 24/7 by people who have good news judgment, are proficient in logistics and have the authority to act quickly. The desk would be a clearinghouse for information on all assignments and stories across VOA.
- ❑ Consider creating a TV unit with the most skilled broadcast journalists, camera people and editors. Have this unit produce compelling, relevant and creative stories primarily about America. The unit should take advantage of the broadcast-skilled personnel in New York, perhaps based there with overall management under one person. The unit (with its N.Y., D.C. and bureau staffs) would work in close collaboration with the language services to generate deadline-driven assignments and content. Consider creating more broadcast "go teams" (reporter, producer, camera) based around the U.S.
- ❑ Hire more associate producers and create a booking desk. Reporters and producers should not have to book guests. Associate producers could be the start of a larger research team to assist the News Center and language services.
- ❑ Evaluate whether VOA's foreign and domestic bureaus are properly located and serving audience needs. Should VOA have more domestic bureaus located in proximity to important diaspora communities? Are the foreign bureaus serving the needs of the language services? Could a different configuration better tell America's story?

Bias in News

The perception of biased coverage is real among multiple VOA reporters and editors. Biased coverage threatens the credibility of the overwhelming majority of VOA journalists who strive for fairness, balance and accuracy. It's vital that VOA leadership take visible steps to communicate that bias is unacceptable and that the integrity of VOA reporting is sacrosanct.

Recommendations

- ❑ Create a safe avenue for staffers to report bias concerns without fear of reprisal. Regularly remind staffers about the responsibility to report perceived bias. Put division directors on notice that that they will be held accountable for bias in their services.
- ❑ Consider more frequent content audits to determine if bias is evident.
- ❑ In communications about bias, clarify the difference between bias and aggressive accountability reporting. Tough, authoritatively sourced coverage that calls out abuses of power is not biased.