

**THE HEARING OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, HUMAN
RIGHTS AND OVERSIGHT
JUNE 17, 2009**

“TV MARTI: A STATION IN SEARCH OF AN AUDIENCE”

**STATEMENT OF TIM SHAMBLE
PRESIDENT OF AFGE LOCAL 1812**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Tim Shamble. As President of the American Federation of Government Employees, Local 1812, the exclusive representative of the bargaining unit employees at the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, I have been asked to testify about the broadcasting efforts of TV Marti. I would also like to address employee concerns at the OCB as well.

TV Marti Transmission

Since its inception, TV Marti has been under fire from the Cuban government and from critics both inside and outside of Congress. The primary problem with TV Marti has been the difficulty of transmitting a signal into the island. The Cuban government has reportedly successfully jammed the signal since TV Marti first went on the air. Many attempts have been made to defeat the jamming but according to the best research available, all have met with little or no success. As an employee of OCB from 1991 until 1996, I was sometimes required to staff what was known as Central Control. Occasionally we were asked to make copies of recordings of TV Marti that we were told were recorded in Cuba. The recordings would start with the appearance of the TV Logo and then within a few seconds the tape would dissolve into snow. It was apparent that the signal was being jammed. Attempts have been made to defeat the jamming of the signal with the latest experiment being the Aero Marti project in which airplanes are used in an attempt to transmit a television signal into the island primarily around the Havana area. According to a recent GAO report of January 2009 (GAO-09-127) the Aero Marti project has not significantly increased the audience in Cuba. The Aero Marti method of transmission is by far the most costly method of transmitting a television signal into Cuba with a yearly expense of approximately \$5 million.

Audience Measures

Estimates of audience numbers in Cuba should be viewed skeptically. People living under totalitarian regimes would be very reluctant to admit viewing a television station that they know is frowned upon by their government. Research that relies on telephone calls to Cubans in Cuba should not be given a great deal of weight, as the people contacted have no way of verifying who the call is actually coming from and should be expected to be very cautious in how they answer any questions possibly fearing that it is actually the government making the calls. Even though any measure of a Cuban audience should be viewed skeptically, there is little doubt that TV Marti's signal is not reaching a very large audience.

Does Audience Size Matter

In the private sector, audience size is almost all that counts. The larger the audience the more a station can impact the bottom line. Private broadcasters are in the business of making money. The larger the audience the more the broadcaster can charge for commercials and the more money a station can make. Thus broadcasts are aimed at attracting as large an audience as possible and this regularly translates into a product that is aimed at the lowest common denominator. Commercial broadcasters have few restrictions on what they broadcast. Therefore, commercial broadcasters should not be considered as competitors of U.S. government broadcasters. If audience size is the measure of the competition, it is an unfair contest. A show explaining U.S. foreign policy cannot compete with a show such as *Baywatch*.

Government broadcasting is different. There is a mission and the broadcasts must adhere to that mission. In the case of TV Marti, the broadcasts must comply with the VOA Charter which requires that they be a reliable source of news that is accurate, objective, and comprehensive. The broadcasts must represent a wide spectrum of American society and explain the policies of the United States. This is not a formula for a ratings winner. The goal for government broadcasts should be to attract as large an audience as possible while still following the mission of the Agency. The hope is that those interested enough to seek out such programming would have the opportunity to view it and that these individuals, although not great in numbers, are those who can influence events and effect desired change.

So even if the jamming of TV Marti can be overcome and audience research could be done more accurately in Cuba, there should not be an expectation of huge audience numbers. If a greatest number of viewers possible were the goal, we could rely on commercial broadcasters and they would no doubt provide the Cuban population with reality television. The goal, however, of these government broadcasts is to reach as large an audience as possible while providing an explanation of American policies, ideals and unbiased news, programming that a commercial broadcaster is not likely to carry.

Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water

Because TV Marti has not been very successful at defeating the jamming of the Cuban government there are those who would like to close it down entirely. This would be a mistake. We now live in a multimedia environment and radio broadcasts alone are not enough to satisfy an audience, particularly the youth. TV Marti should be thought of as a broadcaster that provides the video component of the OCB. The challenge is in how to deliver that product to the viewer. There are more options now than there were in 1990 when TV Marti began and terrestrial television transmission is not the only one.

Regular terrestrial television transmission was never a very good option for TV Marti. This type of transmission is like FM radio signals. It is line of sight transmission with obstacles between the transmitter and receiver a cause for interruption of the signal. There is a limitation of about 120 miles of effective range. The signal is also easily jammed. The Aerostat blimp and the current Aero Marti methods are variations on this

type of transmission and they have not proven to be that effective. They also cost a great deal.

Satellite TV is a better option. For starters it is less expensive. There are limitations in that the cost of satellite dishes for the user may be prohibitive especially in poorer countries such as Cuba, and the fact that satellite dishes are highly visible and can be made illegal in repressive regimes. The choices are many as there are normally hundreds of channels to choose from. However, it is hard to arrest everyone with a satellite dish and a small audience can be expected to be reached through satellite TV.

Video products can also be delivered via the Internet. This option has its drawbacks as has been demonstrated inside China and more recently in Iran. The gatekeeper can effectively block access to websites and in totalitarian regimes the gatekeeper is more often than not the government. But some have found ways to get around the gatekeepers and the Internet is an option that should be used.

Other alternatives include reaching viewers via cell phones and other hand held devices such as iPods. Surveys have shown that today's youth are more inclined to get their news and information through these new delivery methods as opposed to television broadcasts. The bottom line is that TV Marti does not have to broadcast via regular terrestrial television methods to be effective.

Another option to consider is a single 24/7 TV broadcast product for satellite distribution in conjunction with the Voice of America LatAm Division. The employees of TV Marti are not only knowledgeable about Cuba but of Latin American affairs as well. The BBG has largely ignored the importance of broadcasting to Central and South America. A combined effort could combat the current influence Cuba has over Latin American affairs. A portion of the broadcast cycle could be devoted to Cuba and perhaps Venezuela, a country that has been rapidly following the path of Cuban politics and repression. Other Latin American issues could be addressed during other hours of broadcast. TV Marti would then have the opportunity of reaching Cuban citizens outside of Cuba. It would also help strengthen U.S. broadcasts to a region of the world, such as Venezuela.

Changing the Video Product

A proposal has been made in the FY 2010 budget process to eliminate the long form news and information product of TV Marti and produce only five minute news briefs with a very limited staff. This format violates the Congressional mandate for "accurate, objective, and comprehensive news." The explanation for this proposal by the current OCB administration is to help increase audience size. This is disingenuous at best. A change in programming will not impact audience size because it does not address the main problem. The major obstacle to increasing TV Marti's audience is not the programming, but the transmission. The Cuban audience deserves more than five minutes of news headlines, which is an ineffective method of providing comprehensive information using U.S. taxpayers' dollars; especially at a time when the Cuban

government has expanded their newscasts to three per day at the same hours TV Marti currently broadcasts its newscasts.

A better option would be to keep the long form news and information programming, eliminate terrestrial television broadcasting and use the savings to invest in newer technologies to deliver the video produced. The employees of TV Marti are dedicated and highly skilled federal workers with many combined years of broadcasting experience and who come to the Agency with a sense of mission. There is still a need to meet that mission. In the future there may come a time when regular television transmissions into the island may be a viable option. It would be better to have these employees available and in place than to try to suddenly ramp up a broadcast team.

Problems with Employee Morale

Finally, I would like to say a few words about employee morale at OCB. The morale problem has been characterized more than once as a problem of “communication”. It is a much deeper problem than that. For years AFGE Local 1812 has received complaints of unqualified individuals being hired either as contractors or into the federal service. Reports of cronyism and nepotism have been frequent. Although some of these accusations have been reported through proper channels there is a real fear of retaliation in OCB and throughout the BBG itself so employees are reluctant to do anything more than report the charges. In the last three OPM Human Capital Resources surveys the BBG has been at or near the bottom of all government agencies who took part. The latest survey showed the BBG at the very bottom. For questions such as “I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule or regulation without fear of reprisal” employees of the BBG answered in the negative almost twice as often as the government wide average. Therefore it is not surprising that in the GAO report of January 2009 some of the allegations were investigated but little solid evidence was uncovered. One of the main problems is the overuse of contractors. Often, contractors have been given reporting assignments while fully capable federal employees have sat idly by because supervisors have refused to assign them the work. This is an example of government waste. Significant cost savings could be realized by a thinning of the ranks of contractors at the OCB.

AFGE Local 1812 has reported what we believe are violations of the contracting regulations in the BBG’s use of contractors. We believe that the BBG is in many cases treating contractors as federal employees. We filed a petition to the FLRA who ruled against the Union’s claim without holding a hearing and without speaking with any of the contractors. We believe that a serious look at the use of contractors within the OCB and the BBG will reveal violations of contracting rules and regulations.

That completes my statement and I will be happy to answer any questions you or any of the Subcommittee members may have.