

TV Marti: An Idea Whose Time Has Come – and Gone

Statement of Philip Peters
Vice President, Lexington Institute

Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations,
Human Rights and Oversight

Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives

June 17, 2009

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to join you today to discuss TV Marti in the context of U.S. policy toward Cuba.

I support public diplomacy in the large sense of that term, encompassing information and ideas that our government directs to foreign publics; scholarship and visitor programs that give foreign nationals chances to live, study, and work in America; and policies that allow free, unregulated contact between Americans and people overseas. Vigorous public diplomacy is an expression of American confidence, and it's an underrated, cost-effective foreign policy tool that boosts our influence around the world.

TV Marti is a classic instrument of public diplomacy, an attempt to go beyond the radio signals of the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and Radio Marti, and to bring television programming to our neighbors in Cuba.

Last March 27, TV Marti marked 19 years on the air. It also marked 19 years without a discernible audience in Cuba.

TV Marti has been broadcast from balloons floating in the air over Florida, from satellites in outer space, and now from an airplane that flies figure eights in U.S. airspace south of the Florida Keys.

Nineteen years of effort have not overcome Cuba's jamming. I don't think it's possible to find a broadcast engineer who will explain how a television signal that originates more than 50 miles from its audience, can ever overcome jammers that are located amid the target audience. We cannot repeal the laws of physics.

Among all the difficult decisions this Committee makes in its jurisdiction, I would think this would be the easiest: to pull the plug on TV Marti. Lots of good intentions and hard work cannot overcome the fact that this project is, and has long been, an affront to the American taxpayer.

Some might argue that ending TV Marti would be a concession to the Cuban government, a sign of retreat. By the same token, one could argue that a pitcher who can't locate his curve ball is backing down by switching to sliders and change-ups. Both arguments are absurd – TV Marti is a tactic, not an end in itself, and it is certainly not a test of anyone's fortitude with regard to communism in Cuba.

If anything, TV Marti itself manifests weakness – it's a communication program that communicates with no one, and it wastes \$10 million per year that could be used in other ways actually to communicate with Cubans. Only in government could such a program prosper for 19 years, into its fourth Administration and its eleventh Congress.

“No se ve”

How do we know that TV Marti has no discernible audience?

There is evidence, but I urge you to start with your intuition.

First, have you ever heard of a TV station that has been on the air for 19 years, and where there is an active debate after 19 years as to whether its signal reaches the audience? Every day people debate the quality of TV stations, or their audience size, but we never debate whether a station actually appears on your TV if you tune in. The United States government has created the first TV station in history to achieve that distinction.

Second, has anyone ever heard an anecdote from Cuba about TV Marti programming? I have heard none in 19 years, and have seen evidence of none. That's not so in the case of Radio Marti. If one asks in Cuba, one does find Cubans who have heard Radio Marti and have an opinion of it. Or we recall that in 2002, for better or worse, Radio Marti broadcasts were said to have provoked a famous incident at Mexico's embassy in Havana. There is no similar story about TV Marti, and that should tell us something.

Now for evidence.

I cannot recall how many times I have asked Cubans in Cuba, all across Cuba, about TV Marti and have received the same answer: *“No se ve”* (“It's not seen”). For years, I have asked diplomats and clergy and journalists who travel regularly around the island, and get the same answer. I recall a conversation that a member of this Committee and I had with a dissident in Cuba in 2004, where he asked about TV Marti and she called it “virtual TV Marti.” Other travelers to Cuba report the same results.

A report last March by the BBC's correspondent in Havana was typical: "I don't know anyone in Cuba who has seen TV Marti," he wrote.

In August 2007, Cubanet reported on comments by a group of dissidents in a videoconference; the report said they were in "consensus" that "work should be done so that the [TV Marti] signal may fulfill its purpose." To me, that's a slightly cryptic way of saying that the signal isn't seen.

Then last April, there was a more direct statement in a letter that the dissident groups Todos Unidos, Unidad Liberal de la República de Cuba, and Agenda para la Transición sent to President Obama. Those groups include virtually all the dissidents with whom we are familiar. Their letter said TV Marti's signal "simply does not reach Cuban homes."

In December 2003, the Broadcasting Board of Governors reported that its surveys showed that TV Marti had a 0.3 percent audience share.

Last January, GAO reported that "the best available audience research," indicates that "Radio and TV Martí's audience size is small, with less than 2 percent of respondents to telephone surveys since 2003 reporting that they had tuned in to Radio or TV Martí during the past week." By contrast, GAO reported, "over 90 percent of telephone survey respondents said they watched Cuba's national television broadcasts during the past week," and 60 to 70 percent report that they listen to three Cuban radio stations. Also: "OCB [Office of Cuba Broadcasting] officials said that the quality of Cuban television programming has recently improved and includes popular U.S. programming (such as *The Sopranos* and *Grey's Anatomy*)."

And finally, I'll note that a 2007 report from the State Department Inspector General disclosed that the U.S. Interests Section in Havana has enlisted people at 15 sites throughout Cuba to monitor Radio and TV Marti. These monitors' reports, the State Department says, provide a "bleak" assessment of TV Marti – it "can rarely if ever be received."

What to do?

This reporting – from independent observers, from dissidents, from our own government – leads to a clear conclusion that Congress stop funding a program that has proven utterly ineffective for 19 years.

At that point, there are several options for the money you would save.

First would be to simply stop spending the money and to make a miniscule contribution to attacking our national debt, which everyone's children and grandchildren would appreciate.

Another option is to use the money to improve Radio Marti. That is a worthy goal, but before spending the money there, I would urge skepticism on your part. Radio Marti is

changing to an all-news format, which may make its operation less expensive. And it is not clear that improvements that Radio Marti might need, such as newsroom management that is relentlessly committed to balance and objectivity, require money to implement.

What I would urge is a fresh look by Congress and the Administration at our public diplomacy goals with respect to Cuba, and at all the tools available to achieve them.

I would urge you to begin that re-examination by recognizing that public diplomacy is not a government monopoly. While our government has many good public diplomacy programs, private Americans and American civil society are also sources of American influence.

There is no more effective way to increase communication with the Cuban people than to approve Chairman Delahunt's legislation to end all restrictions on American travel to Cuba. This concept was at the heart of the West's successful approach to the Soviet bloc when we supported the free movement of people in the Helsinki accords; it was at the heart of President Reagan's promotion of unrestricted exchanges with the Soviet Union. In the first months after enactment, the flow of information and ideas on the part of individual travelers and our nation's vibrant civil society – universities, professional associations, humanitarian and religious groups, cultural and sports organizations – would far outweigh the impact of two decades of funds spent on TV Marti.

If TV Marti funds were to be redirected to programs related to Cuba, I would urge you to look at the classic public diplomacy programs in the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. These are tested programs with track records, and they have operated in many kinds of political environments. They include a wide variety of exchange and visitor programs in all fields, including programs that send American students and academics abroad, and that bring foreign students here. If you estimate the total expenditure on TV Marti at \$10 million per year for 19 years, that \$190 million could have brought 7,600 Cuban students to America for one-year study programs costing \$25,000 apiece.

I would also urge you to look at the private sector. One example is the One Laptop Per Child program, an educational program developed at MIT by Professor Nicholas Negroponte. The program was driven by American ingenuity and a desire to use the power of computing and network communication to improve education around the world. The program developed its own laptop, the XO, which costs about \$200 and allows users to communicate with each other through a wireless mesh network, so that all users in a local area are interconnected. TV Marti's 19-year budget would have paid for 950,000 XO laptops for Cuban children.

Those are three suggestions for increasing contact and communication with the Cuban people. There are many more, and that is the goal that should be kept in mind – the point of TV Marti, after all, was not to create a television station – it was to increase communication with the Cuban people.

Other means of communication can easily succeed where TV Marti has failed. Some may involve government spending, but at a time when communications are increasingly being driven by citizens, not government or media institutions – witness the wave of communication coming from audio, video, and text via cell phones in the streets of Tehran in recent days – it is more likely that the Congress can do far more to increase communication with Cuba by taking away restrictions on American liberties than by taking our tax dollars to spend on government programs.

“Civilized people everywhere have a stake in keeping contacts, communication, and creativity as broad, deep, and free as possible,” President Reagan said in 1984 at a conference promoting exchanges with the Soviet Union. He had no illusions about the Soviet government: “The Soviet insistence on sealing their people off and on filtering and controlling contacts and the flow of information remains the central problem.” But his prescription was clear, and we would do well to follow it today with regard to Cuba: “The way governments can best promote contacts among people is by not standing in the way.”