



Highlights of [GAO-07-904](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

U.S. strategic communication efforts are supported by media and audience research efforts conducted by the State Department (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), Department of Defense (DOD), and Open Source Center (OSC). GAO examined (1) how research is used to support U.S. strategic communication objectives; and (2) how agencies identify end-user needs, assess end-user satisfaction, and share available research. GAO examined program documents and met with key officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that (1) the Secretary of State formally adopt a research-focused, “campaign-style” approach to thematic communications; (2) State, BBG, DOD, and OSC systematically assess user needs and satisfaction; (3) the Secretary of State, in conjunction with other members of the Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy Policy Coordinating Committee, establish protocols for sharing audience research information as well as create a research staff forum and clearinghouse of U.S. government-sponsored research; and (4) the Secretary of Defense ensure that planned steps to improve the coordination of media monitoring activities are implemented. Agencies agreed with these recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-904.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford, (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Actions Needed to Improve Strategic Use and Coordination of Research

What GAO Found

Agencies rely on an array of media monitoring products to support daily communication activities. DOD and USAID use program-specific research to design, implement, and evaluate the impact of thematic communication efforts created to influence the attitudes and behaviors of target audiences. In contrast, we found that State has generally not adopted a research-focused approach to implement its thematic communication efforts. For example, in a recent major thematic communication effort, 18 posts participating in an ongoing pilot initiative developed country-level communication plans focusing on the broad theme of countering extremism. Although broad attitudinal polling is available to inform these efforts, these plans were not supported by the types of program-specific research inherent in the “campaign-style” approach utilized by both DOD and USAID, which stipulates that communication efforts should follow a logical and predictable series of steps. The pilot country plans GAO reviewed did not include program-specific research such as attitudinal polling of specific target groups, focus group data on which messages would most resonate with target audiences, or detailed media environment analyses that could provide the basis for developing in-depth information dissemination strategies. State commitment to the development of a defined approach to thematic communications, centered on program-specific research, has been absent. However, there is evidence to suggest that State’s approach is changing. A June 2007 interagency communication strategy developed under the guidance of State’s Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs describes a communication process model similar to the campaign-style approach, with the major exception that it does not describe how and to what extent research should be used to support each step in the communication process.

U.S. government agencies conducting research on foreign audiences currently do not have systematic processes in place to assess end-user needs or satisfaction pertaining to research products, or to coordinate or share research. In the absence of systematic processes to understand the needs or level of satisfaction of policymakers, managers, and program staff, agencies generally rely on ad hoc feedback mechanisms, such as conversations with individual users and irregular e-mail submissions. Agencies utilize certain mechanisms to coordinate and share research information, for example, the Open Source Center aggregates media monitoring data from more than 30 organizations on its Web site. However, efforts to coordinate and share audience research data are hampered by the lack of interagency protocols for sharing information, a dedicated forum to periodically bring key research staff together to discuss common concerns across all topics of interest, and a clearinghouse for collected research. DOD is currently reviewing the organization and effectiveness of its media monitoring efforts and agency officials indicated that an improved approach to both internal and external coordination will be developed once a department-wide inventory of media monitoring activities is completed.