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SIX LESSONS

Protecting America's Voice Abroad

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A memo to the new CEO of U.S. international media.

Memo: March 2, 2017

To: The new CEO of U.S. international media (USIM)

From: Martha Bayles and Jeffrey Gedmin

Re: Lessons learned about U.S. international media

In December 2016, President Obama signed into law a big change in the structure of U.S. international media (USIM). Since 1994, America's system of government-funded international media has been overseen by the nine-member Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). Now, thanks to Section 1288 of the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, the BBG board is slated to be abolished, and direct operational control of the entire system is slated to go to a full-time CEO appointed by the President, confirmed by the Senate, and answerable to the White House.

You are that CEO. You stand at the head of a \$778 million media organization that, working through five different networks, provides news and information in 61 languages to one hundred countries around the world.¹ As long-time observers and participants, we know how daunting and bewildering this system can be. So we wish you luck. We also offer help, in the form of six "lessons learned."

Lesson One: Don't be fooled by the word "radio."

Two USIM networks have "radio" in their names, and all five use radio wherever it attracts a significant audience—not just in rural areas but also in big cities where people sit in traffic much of the day. But these networks are also

extremely sophisticated at using every existing media platform, from radio to TV to digital to mobile, to reach audiences in some of the most remote and restricted places on earth. Indeed, USIM networks are more sophisticated in this respect than their commercial counterparts, which do not even try to reach such places, because the people who live in them are too poor and powerless to interest advertisers

Lesson Two: Get to know your amazing employees.

The hardest and grittiest work in the USIM system is “surrogate” news, defined as fine-grained investigative reporting of local and regional events in countries where the media are censored or otherwise compromised. This work is rarely done by Americans. Instead, it is done by Russians, Bosnians, Moldovans, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Afghans, Pakistanis, Iranians, Iraqis, Yemenis, Syrians, Nigerians, Somalis, Indonesians, Tibetans, Uighurs, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Cubans, Venezuelans, and many others—smart, savvy men and women who know the languages, cultures, histories, and politics of the audiences they serve. They also know the dangers facing journalists around the world today, and they wear their courage lightly.

These people admire, and often exemplify, the American tradition of press freedom. But they don’t get a lot of recognition in Washington. This is because the Washington debate over how to push back against hostile propaganda from Russia, ISIS, China, and other adversaries is dominated by ill-informed clichés. As noted above, one such cliché is that USIM uses outmoded, “horse-and-buggy” technology to communicate in a fast-paced, digital world. Another is the view from the luxury hotel: “*I was in Abuja and they had wireless and CNN International. So why are we spending taxpayer dollars on VOA?*”

These clichés are quickly dispelled in conversation with USIM journalists. In Abuja, one of us interviewed a group of reporters doing surrogate news for the VOA Hausa service. Among these were young men, and a few women, risking their lives to report on the ravages of Boko Haram, the violent jihadist group that has killed more innocent people than ISIS. Some of these journalists’ reports have been [translated into English](#). But VOA’s main audience is not the English-speaking clientele of the Transcorp Hilton Abuja. It is the Hausa-speaking population of northeast Nigeria, northern Cameroon, Niger, and Chad—places not served by CNN and with few other sources of accurate and reliable local news.

In Kiev last year, one of us met with both the Ukrainian and Russian language services of RFE, and got a vivid, ground-level account of how their journalists were struggling to provide fair and balanced coverage of *both* the corruption in western Ukraine *and* the war in eastern Ukraine—while at the same time staying out of harm’s way. Similarly, when one of us visited Kabul a few years ago, the local RFE/RL channel, known locally as Azadi, had reporters in every one of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, working in both Dari and Pashtu. Threats from the Taliban were a daily occurrence.

If decision-makers in Washington could just meet and talk with some of these extraordinary individuals, it would go a long way toward refreshing and refocusing the debate.

Lesson Three: Remember the three missions.

Surrogate news is the oldest and most respected mission of USIM—even though, as we’ve seen, the commercial media have no interest in providing it. But that raises a question: In the 21st century, does the U.S. government have any interest in providing it?

We believe it does, for two reasons. First is the dire situation of press freedom around the world. According to the latest report from Freedom House, the portion of the world’s people living in countries where the press is free is now 13 percent, with another 41 percent living in countries where the press is “partly free,” and 46 percent living in countries where it is “not free.” These numbers reflect a decline that has been going on for more than a decade. The second reason is that surrogate news is only one part of a larger strategy that

has stood the test of time and is still relevant today. That strategy involves not one but three missions

Mission #1: To report the news—local, regional, and global. The USIM system has always prided itself on doing this in a manner that upholds the norms of professional journalism: truthfulness, accuracy, thoroughness, and fairness. But there is ongoing confusion about how, and whether, the five different networks are mandated to pursue this mission.

There is no question that the three congressionally funded nonprofits were created to provide surrogate news. The same is true of OCB, the federal agency created in the 1980s to penetrate the closed media environment of Cuba. But because of an ambiguity in the VOA Charter, it is unclear whether VOA should be doing surrogate news (as it presently does in Nigeria and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa). Any meaningful reform of the system will have to sort out this confusion.

Mission #2: To convey a “full and fair picture of American life.” The phrase is Harry Truman’s, part of a speech justifying the continuation of public diplomacy after World War II. Expressing the hope that “private organizations and individuals in such fields as news, motion pictures and communications will, as in the past, be the primary means of informing foreign peoples about this country,” Truman suggested that the government’s role was to make sure the picture received by “other peoples” was “full and fair.”

This goal has long been associated with VOA. But it is not absent from the work of the other networks. And it remains critically important today—not because the world is deprived of information about America, as was frequently the case during the Cold War, but because so many people judge American life and institutions based on the distorted images conveyed both by its enemies and by the cruder aspects of its exported popular culture.

Mission #3: To provide a forum for the articulation and responsible discussion of U.S. foreign policy. This goal is often called public diplomacy, but that is a misnomer, because historically, the term “public diplomacy” encompasses a wide array of activities, including programs of educational and cultural exchange. A better term is “policy advocacy,” defined as efforts by U.S. officials and diplomats to explain and defend U.S. interests, intentions, and ideals to overseas audiences.

Some critics within the USIM system argue for eliminating policy advocacy, calling it inimical to the norms of professional journalism. But this is unrealistic. Policy advocacy is an inescapable part of any government’s communication with the world. The challenge is to keep policy advocacy separate from news reporting—and to do it in ways that are truthful, not propagandistic.

Lesson Four: Don’t do propaganda.

In recent years Vladimir Putin’s Russia has been waging a slick, aggressive “war of information” against America and the West.² ISIS and other violent jihadist groups have been flooding social media with a toxic brew of bloodlust, utopianism, and promises of instant salvation.³ And Xi Jinping’s China has been spending billions on subtle and not-so-subtle efforts to manipulate foreign opinion and blunt criticism by Chinese nationals living overseas.⁴

How should America push back? In the current debate over this question, some of the loudest voices are calling for the U.S. government to bombard the world with pro-Western “messages” and “counter-narratives.” But significantly, when asked about the actual content of these messages, these voices tend to fall silent. This is because there is simply no viable alternative to doing what comes naturally to a free society: gathering the facts, articulating the values at stake, and disseminating both as forcefully as possible, even if some aspects of the story do not reflect well on the United States.

Throughout its 75-year history, the USIM system has, with some lapses, reported truthfully about global, regional, and local events, while at the same

time offering a mostly truthful account of America's interests, intentions, and ideals. Another ill-informed cliché is that 21st-century transformations in global politics and technology have made truth obsolete. Truth telling is a hard principle for any government to follow, because all governments lie to some extent. But—this is important—*they don't all lie to the same extent*. Authoritarian regimes and criminal gangs do everything they can to crush the distinction between objective truth and official fiction. The U.S. government should do everything it can to uphold it.

This means playing the long game. It has taken decades for the USIM system to build up the trust and credibility it now enjoys. It would take only days to tear it down.

Lesson Five: Put your job into perspective.

As defined by Section 1288 of the 2017 NDAA, your job as CEO of the USIM system gives you an unprecedented degree of power. Some observers are not worried about this, because the system is still required, under the language of the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994, to maintain “the highest professional standards of broadcast journalism.” But others, including the authors of this memo, are worried. Here's why.

In the past, no single individual has had the power to: 1) hire and fire the presidents, CFOs, and other officers of *both* the federal agencies *and* the congressionally funded nonprofits; 2) “determine the membership” of the nonprofits' oversight boards; 3) “direct” and become “substantially involved in” the nonprofits' activities; 4) “redirect or reprogram funds” throughout the system (subject to only 15 days' notice to Congress); and 4) add new language services and delete others at will.

The bipartisan, nine-member BBG board was not perfect. For much of its history, it was dominated by political appointees who, despite their other accomplishments, lacked the experience necessary to oversee and manage such a large and complex system. But by the same token, the BBG board presented an obstacle—a firewall, if you will—to any political actor, from the President on down, who wanted to dictate content in any part of the system. This is not to suggest that the system's content has always been impeccable. Mistakes have been made, and some networks and language services have always been weaker than others. But overall, the system has worked according to the time-honored American principle of checks and balances. This principle is now gone, replaced by a virtual dictatorship.

In other words, your job gives you the power to, say, replace the current president of RFE/RL with an attention-seeking blogger who cares nothing for the editorial independence of the company's 26 language services. We hope you won't.

Lesson Six: Stick with the basics.

The more familiar you become with the USIM system, the less you will want to dismiss it as a relic of the Cold War. But there are some things that are just as true now as they were then. First, Americans need to find some common ground among ourselves when communicating with the rest of humanity. This cannot wait until we resolve our cultural and political differences, because those differences will never be resolved. But this is precisely the point. America's most important message, to ourselves as well as others, is that it is possible to build institutions that, by recognizing the inevitability of disagreements, make it possible for people to live together in spite of them.

Second, Americans must reckon honestly with USIM's essential function, which is to further the nation's agenda as forcefully as possible without engaging in propaganda. This is nothing to apologize for. The USIM system emerged from a unique tradition of truth-based persuasion, rooted in constitutionally protected freedoms of speech, press, and debate. When this tradition is upheld, it highlights the difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes. When it is neglected, the difference becomes blurred. And that is a very great danger.

¹The five networks include established federal agencies: the Voice of America (VOA) and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB); and three congressionally funded nonprofits: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and the Middle Eastern Broadcasting Networks (MBN).

²See, for example, Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "[The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood'](#)," RAND report PE-198-OSD (2016).

³See, for example, Alberto M. Fernandez, "[Here to stay and growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks](#)," Brookings Institution (2015).

⁴See, for example, Anne-Marie Brady, "[China's Foreign Propaganda Machine](#)," *Journal of Democracy* (2015).

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