

**PURGE WITHOUT PURPOSE**

It's Not Broke! And You're Not Fixing It!

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A former President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and a longtime observer of America's public diplomacy weigh in on Michael Pack's "Wednesday night massacre."

There's a lot of blood on the floor in Washington these days, so the reader may not be focused on the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). But it's worth a look, because what is happening to this system could have dire consequences for America's already battered reputation in the world.

USAGM (formerly known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, or BBG), has never been easy to manage. It contains five different networks—Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), the Middle Eastern Broadcasting Networks (MBN), and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB)—each with its own distinctive history and culture.

The system as a whole has always been run as a loose confederation of rivals, each headed by a president with robust decision-making authority. Today all that has changed, because owing to a reform put in place three years ago but not acted on until now, the confederation has turned into a dictatorship.

The new dictator is Michael Pack, a mild-mannered filmmaker who never struck

us as a hatchet man. But here's what he has done in his first week as the CEO of USAGM:

- He has fired four network presidents. The head of VOA, Amanda Bennett, was an Obama appointee who understandably resigned on June 15. But two others, Jamie Fly of RFE/RL and Alberto Fernandez of MBN, are loyal Republicans who have been widely praised by conservatives for having raised morale at their respective networks while also preserving the editorial independence that distinguishes USAGM from the well-financed propaganda and disinformation outlets of America's authoritarian adversaries.
- He has dissolved the boards of the three networks—RFE/RL, RFA, and MBN—that operate as grantees of the federal government, a move that some believe may provoke legal action.
- He has begun to install individuals in these now vacant positions whose only qualification seems to be either a commitment not to leave the S.S. Trump even though it appears to be sinking, or a personal tie to Steve Bannon, an individual who would rather sink America than see a Democratic president elected.

As we write, the hatchet is still swinging, and it is impossible to know how much blood will be spilled. But at some point, the mess will have to be cleaned up. And then it might be useful to have a short guide to the actual workings of this \$628 million organization that provides news and information in 61 languages to 100 countries around the world. As long-time observers and participants of USAGM, we hereby offer help in the form of three “lessons learned.”

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

Two USAGM 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, USAGM 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: The system works because of its amazing employees.

The hardest and grittiest work in USAGM 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 are native to the languages, cultures, histories, and politics of the audiences they serve. They also know the dangers facing their profession around the world today, and they wear their courage lightly.

Further, the vast majority of these men and women admire and exemplify the American tradition of press freedom. But they don't get a lot of recognition in Washington. This is because the political debate over how to push back against hostile propaganda from China, Russia, Iran, and violent jihadist groups is dominated by ill-informed clichés.

As noted above, one such cliché is that USAGM uses outmoded, “horse-and-buggy” technology to communicate in a fast-paced, digital world. Related to this 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?*”

This cliché is quickly dispelled in conversation with USAGM journalists. In Abuja a few years ago, one of us interviewed a group of reporters doing surrogate news for the VOA Hausa service. Some of these reporters were risking their lives to expose the ravages of Boko Haram, the radical jihadist group that was killing more innocent civilians than ISIS. These journalists were not trying to reach the English-speaking clientele of the Transcorp Hilton Abuja. They were trying to reach fellow Hausa speakers in northeast Nigeria, northern Cameroon, Niger, and Chad—places not served by CNN, which last we checked, doesn’t broadcast in Hausa.

In Kyiv not long ago, 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 some of these extraordinary individuals, it would go a long way toward refreshing the debate.

Lesson Three: The first mission is news, not propaganda.

USAGM has always prided itself on reporting local, regional, and global news in a manner that upholds the norms of professional journalism: truthfulness, accuracy, thoroughness, and fairness. But it has two other missions, as well. The second is to convey “a full and fair picture of American life” as a counter to the distorted images propagated both by the nation’s enemies and by the cruder aspects of its own exported media. The third is to provide a forum for the articulation and responsible discussion of U.S. foreign policy.

This third mission 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 USAGM 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.

In the current debate over how to push back against the “war of information” being waged against America by the authoritarian rulers of China, Russia, and Iran, among others, 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 principles 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 USAGM system has, with some lapses, taken the latter route. It has 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. 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 USAGM system to build up the trust and credibility it now enjoys. It would take only days to tear it down.

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