



U.S. AGENCY FOR
GLOBAL MEDIA

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CONSOLIDATION

WHAT WAS FOUND

Observers of U.S. civilian international broadcasting have long recognized that its management structure is broken. In part, the reason for the dysfunction is historical. The first U.S. civilian international broadcaster, the Voice of America (VOA), was created in 1942 during World War II to combat Nazi propaganda with accurate and unbiased news and information. Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL), targeting Soviet satellite states and the Soviet Union itself, respectively, emerged during the Cold War as “surrogate broadcasters,” providing local news to places without a free media. Thereafter, other broadcasters were created in response to America’s foreign policy needs of the moment, resulting in one more federal entity, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and two more surrogates, Radio Free Asia (RFA) and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN) – five networks in total.

Criticism of U.S. civilian international broadcasting – namely its inability to effectively fulfill its mission and, per its legal mandate, to advance U.S. foreign policy – has greatly intensified, especially over the past decade. For example, in 2012, former Chair of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) James Glassman [averred](#) that the institution was “structurally a mess.” The very next year, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [testified](#) to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Our Broadcasting Board of Governors is practically defunct in terms of its capacity to be able to tell a message around the world.” By 2018, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that a succession of scandals had caused U.S. civilian international broadcasting to become “the news itself.” Also that year, the *Hill* [noted](#) that “[s]ince its inception, the BBG has been plagued by dysfunction and poor management.” Despite attempts at “reforms,” U.S. civilian international broadcasting remains unwieldy, inflexible, and, in turn, ineffective.

WHAT WAS DONE—AND WHY

Our adversaries are ramping up their misinformation and disinformation propaganda campaigns, especially China, but also North Korea, Iran, Russia, and others. America needs an effective way to share America’s story with the world, to shine the light of truth in dark, repressive places, and to promote our principles and values. The present system of U.S. civilian

international broadcasting is not adequate to meet that mandated function in service to U.S. foreign policy.

At CEO Michael Pack's direction, USAGM and other federal entities have started analyzing the prospect of consolidation, which would result in the creation of a single network. The new network would simply be called "Voice of America," since that is the most universally-recognized name among the five. The new VOA would be divided into regions around the world rather than into separate networks. It would continue to use all current brands, for example, RFA for some broadcasting into China. Because the surrogates have been so successful in their target areas, the new entity would be built around them in the parts of the world in which they currently operate. For instance, MBN would become the VOA Middle East Service and RL would become the VOA Russia Service, incorporating VOA Russian. These new regional services would have the mission of both the surrogate and VOA. Since MBN has the same mission of VOA, that merger should not prove difficult. The two missions, surrogate and VOA, have been converging over the years, anyway, particularly with the growth of the internet.

Few Americans are aware that USAGM has five disparate networks with different missions and management structures – a redundant and ungainly system. The new VOA would have regional language services all over the world, but just one English-language newsroom and one consolidated back-office. Most Americans already believe that U.S. civilian international broadcasting is structured this way. This would prove a simple, rational, and effective structure.

The new consolidated VOA would be:

- **More Manageable.** In the current system, each network has its own director, acting independently of the other networks. No other international broadcaster has such a system. With the new VOA, there would be a clear reporting structure, like a traditional broadcaster.
- **More Accountable to Congress.** One group of senior managers would be much easier to hold accountable. There would be no shifting of blame or separate reporting.
- **More Easily Held to High Journalistic Standards.** With only one organization and a clear hierarchy, the leadership would be able to more easily hold senior managers accountable for maintaining high journalistic standards. This would be done not to allow leadership to control editorial direction, but rather to better guarantee the ability to respond to violations of the agency's broadcasting [Standards & Principles](#) and transgressions of the [VOA Charter](#).
- **More Aligned with U.S. Foreign Policy.** The U.S. Department of State, the National Security Council, and other federal entities would still have no control over how journalists report the news, and rightly so. However, the new VOA would be more responsive to changes in U.S. foreign policy. The purpose of U.S. civilian international broadcasting is to disseminate the American experience in service of the national interest. The new VOA would keep that focus.

- **More Efficient.** Many functions would be merged. There would be no need for five human relations departments, five finance departments, five communications offices, multiple Content Management Systems, etc. Currently, duplicative language services, such as VOA Russian and RFE/RL Russian as well as VOA Mandarin and RFA Mandarin, would be merged. The success of Current Time, a 24-hour Russian service, jointly run by VOA and RFE/RL, proves that this model works. There would be enormous cost savings for the American taxpayer, which could be redeployed to journalistic initiatives that advance the agency's strategic mission. USAGM is currently funded to the tune of about \$800 million, annually. The analysis, thus far, finds that consolidation would save the American taxpayer more than \$170 million within just three to five years.
- **More Effective.** The new VOA, one well-managed organization, aligned with U.S. foreign policy, adhering to the highest standards of journalism, would effectively counter our adversaries' propaganda and be a true American voice for freedom and democracy.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE MOVING FORWARD

USAGM is conducting a detailed assessment, including a legal analysis, above all, to gauge the viability of bringing together federal networks and grantees. USAGM is also undertaking budget and logistical analyses. Beyond that, the prospect of consolidation would need to gain support from all of U.S. civilian international broadcasting's stakeholders, including Congress and the White House. USAGM expects that a lively debate about this prospect would ensue. But that debate would prove an essential part of defining the ways in which U.S. civilian international broadcasting would best advance U.S. foreign policy – and America's national interest writ large – in the decades ahead.