

Testimony of Michael Abramowitz, Director, Voice of America  
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability  
Management Successes and Failures: Assessing the U.S. Agency for Global Media  
Tuesday, July 9, 2:00 p.m.

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow and members of the Subcommittee,  
Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability on my role and responsibilities as the Director of Voice of America (VOA).

I was sworn in three weeks ago as the new VOA director. When I have been asked why I wanted to lead VOA, the answer is simple: I love the mission. It is a true privilege to take on this role during an age when propaganda is spreading globally and fact-based journalism is under dire threat around the world. VOA is a critical bulwark against the accelerating efforts of authoritarian regimes to spread lies and disinformation. It is a vital source of trusted news and information in large parts of the world without access to reliable and independent news. It is a fierce defender of a free press and the safety of journalists, who increasingly practice their craft amidst a dizzying array of physical threats. I could not be more proud to be leading VOA with a long and storied history of countering lies with truthful and factual journalism.

I want to take a minute to express my appreciation to VOA's outstanding journalists and staff who perform their critical work in often dangerous and trying circumstances. Thank you for putting your trust in me, and I look forward to working with you in fulfilling our important mission.

I also look forward to working closely with this Committee and Congress. I believe strongly that the nature of VOA's work and its importance to U.S. national security should inspire support across the political aisle. Voice of America is probably the most cost-effective foreign policy tool the U.S. possesses. VOA is a highly efficient antidote to the disinformation and propaganda spread by our adversaries. As the new VOA director, I promise to protect taxpayer dollars and use funds effectively to advance our vital mission. I will expect VOA staff and journalists to adhere to highest journalistic and professional standards.

I am eager to sit down with this Committee and other members of Congress to get your best ideas for how we can strengthen VOA in its ability to carry out its vital mission. I look forward to working closely with the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM) and our fellow networks, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, to find ways to better collaborate and coordinate our efforts. With China and Russia doubling down on information warfare, it is essential that VOA and the other networks work closely together to create synergies and avoid duplication.

While it is too early in my tenure to provide definitive plans, my aspirations for VOA are straightforward. I want to ensure that the agency continues to be the leading international broadcaster providing factual and impartial news and information to international audiences, especially those living under tyranny. VOA will rebut misinformation and disinformation,

whatever the source. In addition, we will tell America's story to the world. In doing all this, we will counter malicious narratives spread by state-sponsored media, extremist groups and other actors.

We will also present our content in a way that is relevant to the diverse audiences we serve around the world. VOA, like many other news providers, faces an urgent challenge of building audiences in places where young people have turned away from traditional news sources. We need to win them over with stories that are interesting and meet them where they are—on their cell phones and social media feeds.

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Over the past 15 years, first at the Holocaust Museum and then at Freedom House, I gained a firsthand appreciation of the crucial role that propaganda and disinformation play in undermining the national security of the U.S. and other democracies. As Freedom House reported in 2022, China in particular is rapidly expanding its global media footprint: “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its proxies are using more sophisticated and coercive tactics to shape media narratives and suppress critical reporting.” Though exact figures are not available, China's annual investment in “external propaganda” has been estimated at \$10 billion<sup>1</sup>.

According to a 2023 report from the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), Beijing seeks to maximize the reach of biased or false pro-PRC content and has acquired stakes in foreign media. The report also cites Beijing's information control tactics, with a particular focus on Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In these critical regions, the PRC is building media partnerships (more than 1,700 according to the GEC report), sponsoring online influencers, and laying the groundwork to ensure that its messaging is heard. Beijing's views don't go unchallenged because VOA has a strong presence and brand recognition in these regions and an even larger affiliate network (more than 3,500). VOA's continued dominance is not assured, as the PRC outspends the U.S. USAGM's enacted budget for FY 2024 was just \$867 million, of which VOA was \$260 million.

Despite resource imbalances, VOA's journalists counter the PRC's disinformation campaigns by broadcasting accurate, trusted, and reliable news and information, just as they have for more than 80 years. While the threat actors have changed over the years, VOA's mission, and its foundational journalistic charter, are as relevant as ever to U.S. national security.

Consistent with the American values of free speech and free expression, VOA advances U.S. national interests by providing audiences in closed societies, or where free media is not yet fully established, with consistently accurate reporting and other content that opens minds and stimulates debate. Even as repressive actors around the world work to keep information from their citizens and propagate false realities through disinformation, VOA will provide facts and information. Professional journalism has enduring value in helping to foster free, open, democratic societies which support a shared appreciation of truth and of the foundational norms of the international system.

Voice of America plays several specific roles related to national security:

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<sup>1</sup> Shambaugh, David. “China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect” *Foreign Affairs*. July-August 2015.

1. **Information Dissemination:** VOA broadcasts news, informational, and cultural programs to audiences outside the U.S. This helps in countering misinformation and propaganda spread by hostile nations or extremist groups. By providing accurate, balanced and reliable news, VOA contributes to global stability and promotes democratic values. This approach contrasts sharply with Chinese, Iranian and Russian propaganda, which often includes misinformation and distorted facts. By offering trustworthy reporting, VOA aims to counter misinformation spread by state-sponsored media from China (e.g., CGTN), Iran (e.g. IRIB), and Russia (e.g., RT).
2. **Speaking regional languages:** VOA operates in 48 languages, including Mandarin, Farsi and Russian, reaching audiences directly, offering an alternative to state-controlled media channels. Crucially, we also speak languages like Vietnamese, Kurdish and Bambara to reach populations in Vietnam, the Middle East, and Mali where domestic challenges to liberty are compounded by the influence of malign foreign media.
3. **Countering Disinformation and Propaganda:** In regions where disinformation campaigns are prevalent, VOA provides an alternative factual narrative. This counters propaganda efforts aimed at undermining U.S. interests or destabilizing regions crucial to our national security. For example, Polygraph.info, VOA's fact-checking website, serves as a resource to verify the increasing volume of disinformation and misinformation being distributed and shared globally. It is here where reporters separate fact from fiction, add context, and debunk lies. As part of our regular reporting, VOA has fact-checking and verification processes to ensure the accuracy and balance of our journalism. This contrasts with the often misleading or false narratives propagated by Chinese, Iranian and Russian media outlets.
4. **Presentation of U.S. Policies and Values:** VOA communicates U.S. policies, positions, and values to international audiences helping to shape global perceptions about the U.S. and its interests. VOA also provides cultural and educational programs that promote understanding and goodwill between the U.S. and other nations. This can contribute to long-term stability and security by fostering positive international relations.
5. **Supporting Strategic Objectives:** VOA's programming often aligns with U.S. strategic objectives in various regions, such as promoting democracy, human rights, and free media. By modelling and supporting these objectives, VOA contributes to creating environments that are less susceptible to extremism and conflict, enhancing national security. For example, VOA extensively covers protests, dissent, and human rights issues within Iran. By highlighting these issues, VOA challenges authoritarian governments' narratives of stability and popular support.
6. **Highlighting Diverse Perspectives:** VOA provides a platform for diverse viewpoints, including those critical of government. This allows audiences to hear perspectives that are often censored or marginalized within China, Iran and Russia. VOA also ensures that women are featured prominently in on-air roles and in interviews – a rarity in countries like Afghanistan.
7. **Engaging with Chinese, Iranian and Russian Diasporas and Civil Society:** VOA engages with the diasporas and civil society organizations to amplify their voices and perspectives. This engagement helps to counteract propaganda from these governments aimed at diaspora communities.

As Edward R. Murrow, the renowned journalist and former head of the U.S. Information Agency (USAGM's predecessor agency) once said, "To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful."

Consistent with the VOA Charter, this means reporting *all* of America's story, even if it does not always portray the U.S. in the best light. This may be a difficult pill for some to swallow; after all, what proud American would want to spotlight something other than our best face to the world – especially when they as a taxpayer are footing the bill? However, audiences in VOA's markets are familiar with self-congratulatory coverage like what is often churned out by domestic media in their home countries, or by the spin on Russia Today or Chinese state television.

They turn to VOA to escape just that. They understand and respect that a warts-and-all approach is preferable to a highlight reel. This is why VOA won praise for its coverage of the Watergate Scandal and why we reported honestly on the fall of Afghanistan even as our own personnel struggled to flee the country. This is why we report with crucial nuance on Presidential impeachments and the Hunter Biden conviction. This is why VOA continues to honor the promise made by William Harlan Hale in 1942 during our first-ever broadcast: "The news may be good for us. The news may be bad. But we shall tell you the truth."

Hale's promise came over the radio, but VOA has evolved and modernized into a full-fledged multimedia news provider. Continued modernization is essential for VOA to compete with the increasingly successful efforts of adversarial governments and violent extremists. Through a combination of digital analytics and population-based research, we know that there are still markets where broadcast media are dominant, but our audiences on digital platforms are large and ever growing. To that end, VOA offers a full suite of products, including websites, mobile apps, and a strong presence on most major social media platforms. Our analytics operation tracks every single one of these platforms on a daily basis, creating constant feedback for our journalists that helps them decide what to cover. We would be happy to share more information about specific markets upon request.

For more than a decade, Congress has funded technologies at USAGM that help users in information-denied markets jump over firewalls and access a free and open internet while also exposing those users to the reporting of our five networks. That program, historically run under the Office of Internet Freedom at USAGM and now managed under OTF, funds two companies in particular that are invaluable to VOA. Those companies --Psiphon and ACI/nthLink-- deliver enormous, measurable audiences in the critical markets like Russia, Iran and China.

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VOA is by far the largest USAGM news network. VOA's journalists, broadcast technicians, overseas reporters and support staff deliver accurate, objective, and trusted news and information to an estimated weekly global audience of 354 million people in 48 languages to approximately 100 countries via digital, television, and radio platforms. As VOA Director, I am accountable to each and every one of those 354 million people, as well as the over 1,400 in our workforce.

Voice of America is also accountable to our stakeholders, both on Capitol Hill and on Main Street. One of the ways we demonstrate this is by inviting the general public to our headquarters

for regular public tours. I welcome any of you to visit. During the tour, our guides –many of them journalists hailing from unfree countries– present a map from the non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF) that demonstrates Press Freedom around the world. The tour then pivots to another map—that of VOA’s target markets. The overlap is striking between the countries that RSF designates as lacking a free press and those where VOA is prominent.

Until recently, I served as President of Freedom House, another organization that publishes a similar map that indicates the overall levels of freedom around the world. Here, too, there is an undeniable overlap with VOA’s target markets.

All three maps are in agreement with what you already know: Russia, China and Iran are sorely lacking in the freedoms enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Sadly, they are just the tip of the iceberg: the lack of freedom extends well beyond their borders. Sadder still, Russian, China and Iran are working hard to export their illiberal ideologies to many of the markets that VOA works so hard to illuminate through the best of American media culture. There is a very real battle of ideas and ideals at play around the world that VOA is uniquely suited to contest.

Overall, Voice of America plays a crucial role in promoting press freedom and providing an alternative source of information to audiences affected by Chinese, Iranian and Russian state-controlled media. VOA is steeped in countering authoritarian messaging.

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More than 80 years after our first broadcast to Nazi Germany, the U.S. is no longer in the midst of a World War nor a Cold War. However, the world is not at peace. We are facing a great power competition with authoritarian regimes that seek to twist the truth to their own political and economic ends to the detriment of their citizens and often the people of strategically aligned countries. These people need VOA more than ever. They need to know that they are not alone in the world and that there is hope. They need to know that someone is watching and that someone will speak truth to power.

Congress recognized this when it enacted the VOA charter, which was signed into law by President Gerald Ford in 1976. It provided that “long-range interests of the United States are served by communicating directly with the peoples of the world.”

Today, people all around the world rely on VOA. In my first two weeks, I have started meeting with VOA’s six regional division directors, the dozens of language service chiefs, and the leadership of the VOA News Center to better understand the need for VOA and how we are meeting the challenges we face. I look forward to meeting even more members of the VOA workforce in the coming weeks.

As I meet our workforce, I am heartened and inspired by the many talented journalists in our ranks. After all, I am a longtime journalist, and I believe passionately in the vital role journalists play in telling the truth and holding the powerful to account. We know that China, Iran, and Russia disagree and are working mightily to force their vision of the future around the globe, making it all the more important that VOA continues, if not increases, its work in places where our adversaries proliferate.

It is equally important that VOA provide independent news and information to closed societies where people would otherwise only hear and see what their oppressive governments provide. For example, in places like North Korea, Sudan and South Sudan, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Honduras, and Eritrea –some of the lowest-ranked of the 180 countries measured by Freedom House– it is vital that people hear the truth about the world around them and see the value of democracy and the free exchange of ideas.

I have a few information points related to the specific regions of the world where we operate:

### **Africa**

VOA's Africa Division provides objective information and spaces for constructive dialogue in 17 languages for and between individuals living in across the continent, including many in conflict zones. For example, the "Paths to Peace" series of moderated, town-hall programming has received commendations from former assistant secretaries of state for its focus on peace, reconciliation, democracy, and governance in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

- VOA has a measured weekly audience of 92.7 million in sub-Saharan Africa.
- VOA Africa's audience finds it to be extremely trustworthy, with ratings hovering in the 80<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles.
- VOA Africa has 1515 affiliates.

### **East Asia and Pacific**

The East Asia and Pacific Division's 10 language services are on the forefront of countering disinformation, authoritarianism, and CCP influence in China, the Pacific, and Southeast Asia. The focus on China does not come at the expense of other threats. For example, VOA Korean is frequently cited by South Korean media for its invaluable information about developments on the Korean peninsula, including for its analysis of satellite photography of North Korea.

- VOA has a measured weekly audience of 83.2 million in the East Asia and the Pacific, not including China, where we are unable to accurately measure our audience.
- VOA East Asia and the Pacific has 1254 affiliates, including more than 700 affiliates in Indonesia, the world's fourth most-populous country.

### **Eurasia**

VOA's Eurasia Division provides news and information in eight languages. Across Eurasia, where Russian propaganda and disinformation hold sway, VOA language services continue their decades-long status as trusted sources of reliable information. Remarkably high trust scores and broad audience reach underscore their effectiveness. For instance:

- VOA has a measured weekly audience of 8.4 million in Eurasia.
- VOA enjoys a 99% trust score among Albanians and 94% among Kosovars.
- VOA Serbian is trusted by 83% in Montenegro and 67% in Serbia.
- VOA Ukrainian enjoys a 95% trust score among Ukrainians.
- VOA Eurasia has 981 affiliates.

## **Latin America**

VOA's Spanish service provides news and information to audiences throughout Latin America on TV, radio, internet, and social media. The service's "U.S. Bureau strategy" focuses on delivering U.S. news and information to affiliates in the region, including leading media organizations in the Americas. Latin American media markets are diverse. VOA Creole provides news and information about Haiti, the Haitian diaspora, the U.S. and the world by collaborating with local affiliate stations who cannot afford to acquire such programming on their own. Due to Haiti's proximity and the United States' longstanding role in the country, audiences have an appetite for information about the U.S., its people, policies and the U.S.-based Haitian diaspora. Without VOA, this appetite would go unfulfilled. The service brings credibility and objectivity to coverage of local events that is not present in a very politicized Haitian media market.

- VOA Latin America has a measured weekly audience of 101 million.
- VOA Guatemala enjoys a 96% trust score in Guatemala.
- VOA Mexico enjoys a 77% trust score in Mexico.
- VOA Creole enjoys a 85% trust score in Haiti.
- VOA Latin America Division has 744 affiliates.

## **Persian**

VOA Persian's innovative and daring reporting counters the Iranian regime's domestic censorship and repression. VOA Persian became the first international Persian-language broadcaster to defy the Iranian government's ban on televised women's sports by airing the Iranian women's volleyball and handball teams' matches in international tournaments.

During the first 120 days of unprecedented, nationwide women-led anti-government protests that rocked Iran from September 2022 into January 2023, VOA Persian refocused the entire prime-time programming blocks to the coverage of protests, added special morning and after-hours live newscasts and analytical shows with a total of 336 broadcast hours dedicated to the reporting on protests inside Iran and on the worldwide campaign of solidarity with the Iranian protesters. VOA Persian's original reporting on the protests was greatly enhanced by the use of citizen journalism and other forms of user generated content (UGC) from inside Iran. During the protests, VOA Persian distributed 1,500 eyewitness UGC videos, including 350 videos sent by citizen journalists and witnesses exclusively to VOA. Amid the protests, all 5 VOA Persian's social media platforms registered a major spike in users' interest to VOA news reporting and the combined audience reach of the platforms has increased from 7.2 million to 8.1 million by adding 892,000 new followers, a 12.3% gain in just under 4 months. During the same period, VOA Persian's website traffic increased by 42.9% with website article views increasing by 101.2% and website video views increasing 148%.

During the Israel-Hamas war, VOA Persian interviewed Iranian citizens in Iran, discovering and broadcasting that a significant number of Iranians reject the official government narrative of the war and do not believe their government's portrayal of the United States as Iran's enemy in this conflict.

- VOA Persian's audience has a measured weekly audience of 10 million.
- VOA Persian is trusted by 50% of its weekly audience.

## **South and Central Asia**

VOA's SCA division broadcasts in nine languages. When important news breaks in the region, audiences flock to the South and Central Asia Division. For example, when former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was arrested, VOA Urdu's Facebook engagement jumped by more than 2000%. When Hamas terrorists attacked Israel, in one week, from October 7-15, 2023, the Urdu service garnered 50 million video views and more than two million interactions on social media.

- VOA has a measured weekly audience of 66.5 million in South and Central Asia.
- Despite the obstacles of Taliban rule, VOA is the most-trusted brand for news in Afghanistan.
- VOA Ashna (VOA's Afghan Service) is trusted by 94% of Afghan adults.
- 60% of all mobile devices in Afghanistan access VOA content weekly.
- VOA South and Central Asia has 99 affiliates.

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For more than 80 years, VOA has delivered trusted news and information to the world, especially for those living in closed societies who have no other access to the truth. To continue this work is an awesome responsibility, and I am committed to working with you and to maintaining and growing an agency of integrity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I reiterate my invitation to each and every Member and to congressional staff to walk down the Hill to visit us at VOA on Independence Avenue for a look behind the scenes at our 48 newsrooms and for the opportunity meet some of our incredible journalists. I am still getting to know them, but their stories are amazing. And they represent America, writ large. It is my honor to share their voices with you and with our audiences around the world who need them more than ever.

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