

Testimony of John Lansing
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Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today regarding the future of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and United States international media. I am pleased to join BBG Chairman Jeff Shell and BBG Governor Ken Weinstein today.

I currently serve as the Chief Executive Officer and Director of the BBG, where I oversee all operational aspects of U.S. international media and provide day-to-day management of BBG networks on behalf of the Board.

In my testimony today I want to present my initial reactions to the BBG mission, detail our effectiveness, and outline some of the steps I am taking to position the BBG to be both a leader in the international media space and a uniquely powerful tool in the U.S. foreign policy toolbox.

Prior to my current role as BBG CEO, I served for nine years as President of Scripps Networks, where I helped the company become a leading developer of unique content across various media platforms including television, digital, mobile and publishing.

More important, I am a journalist at heart. I started out as a photojournalist in the field, with a camera on my shoulder, and from there I was hooked. I worked my way up to serve as a field producer, assignment manager, managing editor, and news director at television stations in Detroit, Michigan and Cleveland, Ohio.

It is through my professional experience as a journalist that I gained deep respect for the vital role that impartial, fact-based reporting plays in our society. By holding people, institutions, and governments accountable to the truth – and by arming citizens with undeniable facts – journalists show, often indirectly and subtly, how democracies should work. Great journalism presents not only the news, but also the context of that news to provide audiences with a greater understanding of their world and to empower them to take action.

As President Obama said in his speech at the 2015 U.N. General Assembly: “The strength of nations depends on the success of their people – their knowledge, their innovation, their imagination, their creativity, their drive, their opportunity – and

that, in turn, depends upon individual rights and good governance and personal security.”

The Broadcasting Board of Governors is fundamentally engaged in the business of fact-based journalism. We are not a propaganda outfit. Rather, we advance U.S. national interests by engaging audiences that are critical to furthering democratic values through open and free exchanges of information.

Throughout U.S. international media’s long history, the tools and goals have been unwavering: to deliver consistently accurate, reliable and credible reporting that opens minds and stimulates debate in closed societies and those where free media are not yet fully established – especially where local media fails to inform and empower its citizens.

In short, we inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy. This mission is critically important because, more than ever before, information matters.

In today’s increasingly interconnected world, responding to the global explosion of information must no longer be considered as a “value added” function in support of broader strategic ends, but rather a key focus of U.S. foreign policy in its own right. Today’s media has the power to reach through the screen to activate audiences to action – or to suppress them. Failing to recognize this fact limits the effectiveness of our foreign policy.

Our global agenda will not be effective if we fail to appreciate how the flow of information shapes the actions of policymakers, institutions, and everyday citizens on the street, and capitalize on these trends.

Equally important, we must constantly evaluate how audiences’ media consumption preferences change – and we must change with them – if we are to be successful. Any media executive worth his or her salt understands that as markets and audiences evolve, so too must your organization if it is to remain competitive and impactful.

As CEO of the BBG, I recognize that we must change as well. Chairman Shell outlined a few solutions that we believe the Congress can provide that would allow the BBG to succeed in the 21st Century. First and foremost, we need legislation to enshrine a Chief Executive Officer position at the BBG who is empowered to

manage all BBG operations and functions, including the ability to shift resources as needed and appoint senior officials.

But, regardless of these legislative fixes, my team and I have taken action internally to move the BBG into a more modern, impactful stance. As our adversaries have embraced the opportunities to engage and influence audiences using new tools and techniques, so too must the BBG team.

The key driver of all of our internal reforms is *impact*. Our success no longer depends on our unique global reach, but also on the intensity of the BBG's relationships with its audiences, the extent to which they share and comment on our news and information and, ultimately, how they influence local knowledge and thought.

The impact of U.S. international media for the next decade will be based on our ability to be an influential news and information source in this dynamic 21st century information environment. We cannot afford to lose our status as a global, influential news service. BBG's programming must exist on the platforms our audiences prefer and use. It must include content that moves and engages them. It must include a focus on regions of the world that need us the most –closed or closing societies. It must use modern tools to embrace younger demographics and engage them as future influencers.

In order to accomplish these imperatives, I, with the unanimous support of the Board, am aggressively prioritizing five core themes to ensure the BBG is the 21st century media organization that the tax payers demand. I will briefly outline these themes here, but I am happy to answer any questions, and brief you in greater detail on any of these points, as needed.

First, we are accelerating our shift toward engaging audiences on digital platforms, especially utilizing the power of video, mobile, and social networks. If we are to be a credible information source we must be on the platforms used by our audiences – be it radio and television, or mobile tools and social media. These platforms not only reach new audiences, but represent a shift from one-way dissemination, to more empowering and engaging audience participation.

A great example of this ethos is the Middle East Broadcasting Networks' (MBN) "Raise Your Voice" campaign, which encourages citizens across the Middle East to speak out and be a part of the discussion about the fight against violent extremism. Over just the past four months more than 590,000 votes have been cast

on daily “Raise Your Voice” polls and MBN now has 12.3 million followers on Facebook.

Second, we are rapidly expanding coordination and content-sharing across the BBG’s five interdependent networks in order to cover and report on the stories that matter to audiences and markets that increasingly transcend political borders and languages. For instance, this will allow us to more effectively share our unique coverage of the Middle East with interested audiences in Indonesia and Russia, or issues surrounding Chinese investment in Africa with audiences across Latin America.

BBG has taken several notable steps in this regard already. One of my first steps as CEO was to convene the U.S. International Media Coordinating Council (ICC), comprised of the heads of each of our five networks.

The BBG’s five networks – Voice of America, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks – operate independently and effectively. But, in many instances, they may have overlapping stakes on key stories – for example, violent extremism or Russian military action in Syria.

In order to better coordinate our reporting, and make use of scarce resources, the ICC now meets monthly to discuss ongoing reporting, share information, and join forces where possible on hard-hitting reporting.

Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) are already making powerful strides on this front. The two networks worked together to create *Current Time*, a popular daily 30-minute Russian-language television news program that is now available in nine European countries of the former Soviet Union via 25 media outlets, and worldwide via digital platforms. In Russia, where placement on domestic stations is not possible, *Current Time* is available on NewsTube.ru, Russia’s largest news site. Our new research shows that nearly two million people in Russia are watching *Current Time* weekly online and that the program is most popular among 15-24 year olds.

Third, the BBG is concentrating its efforts in five key issue areas where we can be most effective in support of our mission. While our reach is global, the BBG cannot cover all events with equal intensity; we need to focus our efforts.

To do so, we are focusing our reporting on the key spheres of importance that matter most to U.S. foreign policy, U.S. global interests, and the U.S. taxpayer:

- Reporting on Russia;
- Covering violent extremism;
- The widening regional influence of Iran;
- China, not only in the South China Sea region, but also in Africa and Latin America;
- Promoting universal rights and fundamental freedoms in Cuba.

Fourth, we are evolving to an organization actively engaged in curating, commissioning, and acquiring content. For broader impact, we need to focus BBG original reporting to not just rehash the daily news, but to provide depth and perspective on events for more meaning and impact. To do so, we will complement our deeper original reporting through the added curation of external content.

Curating external content will not only free up BBG resources for more impactful, in-depth reporting, it will also potentially support the new generations of compelling storytellers, such as the youth in many of our markets, documentarians and journalists that engage their peers every day on digital platforms.

Finally, we are emphasizing impact over sheer reach. In the past, the BBG was asked to focus primarily on maximizing the number of people our programs potentially reached. This number-centric strategy was befitting a broadcasting organization with a broadcasting mentality. But in today's digital and engaged media environment, we must focus on more than just reach. By putting the audience first in how we collect, create and distribute news and information, we take a more modern approach to informing, engaging and connecting with our audiences.

These five priorities provide an initial framework for how the BBG will position itself as an influential media source on the global stage, and as a more functional tool in the USG strategic toolkit. I look forward to working with this Committee, and the rest of the Congress, to implement these strategies fully.

To close, the fundamental purpose and intent of the BBG is to empower our audiences to own their future. We do this by providing fact-based alternatives to the propaganda, offering them access to truth, and demonstrating the building

blocks of democratic society – accountability, rule of law (versus rule by law), human security, and more.

Voice of America’s first broadcast stated: “The news may be good or bad; we will tell you the truth.” At BBG, we continue to operate with that mindset, because truth builds trust and credibility, and delivering credible news is the most effective means to ensure impact and provide the audience with information that will affect their daily lives and empower their own decision-making.

And with that, I am happy to take questions. Thank you for your time and attention.