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## AFPC Event: Digital Dictators: Media, Authoritarianism, and America's New Challenge

BBG CEO and Director John F. Lansing

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**John F. Lansing,**  
BBG CEO & Director

*Following an introduction  
by Ilan Berman, Senior VP  
of the American Foreign  
Policy Council*

Thank you, Ilan. It is a special honor for me to join this conference of the American Foreign Policy Council.

Around the world today we are seeing an alarming increase in illegitimate and authoritarian regimes expanding their choke hold on press freedom and basic human rights.

Citizens in countries from Russia to China to Iran to North Korea have been victimized for decades.

Now we are seeing authoritarian regimes expanding the repression in places like Cambodia, Turkey, and Venezuela...to name a few.

Add to that, the growth of non-state actors like ISIS in the Middle East, and Boko Haram in sub-Saharan Africa.

In fact, Freedom House reports that only 13% of the world's population live in societies where the press is fully free.

And now, with the advent of social media platforms, we are seeing the campaigns of disinformation, lies, and fake news pushed beyond the boundaries of authoritarian regimes to attack western democracies—including American citizens directly.

This is a brazen example of what can only be termed information warfare.

We are beginning to fully understand attempts by the Kremlin to disrupt and manipulate the 2016 presidential election in the United States.



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And their sophisticated and far-reaching effort to essentially weaponize social media platforms through the use of robots and human trolls.

This is unquestionably intended to:

- weaken the American ideal as a beacon of freedom to the world;
- divide us among ourselves through a distortion of the truth; and
- ultimately, undercut the very existence of any VERIFIABLE, EMPIRICAL TRUTH.

That is the aim, in my view, of authoritarian disinformation campaigns of today: to destroy the very idea of an objective,–agreed upon set of facts.

Think about it from the Kremlin’s perspective, for example...

In a world where nothing is empirically truthful – any lie will do...and if everything is a lie, the biggest liar wins.

In their world, the death of facts is the first step toward creating the post-truth alternative reality that helps them gain and keep authority with no accountability.

That is what we are up against. And it is certainly not just the Kremlin.

In Cambodia, the Hun Sen regime is assaulting and jailing journalists for the crime of reporting the truth.

In China, citizens of the Uyghur region are being rounded-up and placed in “re-education camps”–targeting the families of journalists outside of China reporting truthfully about the Chinese government’s actions there.

In Syria, the Assad regime explains away the murder of innocent women and children from a chemical weapons attack with a barrage of lies under the blanket excuse of “fighting terrorists.”



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And in Iran, the recent protests in late December led to the regime blocking the encrypted messaging app - Telegram.

I'm sure the recent political events in Iran are on the minds of most of you in this room. It's certainly on our minds.

I'd like to show an example of our coverage from the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty during the wave of the protests that rippled through in Iran in late December.

*[Play Iran protests video.]*

Of our top priority markets around the world, none has more of our attention right now than Iran.

Given the dynamic situation, it's more important than ever that Iranians get

- the facts about U.S. positions on key issues;
- Responsible, informed analysis of those issues;
- and truthful dialogue about what's happening inside Iran and from the United States.

Our media outlets in Iran—VOA and RFE/RL—are committed to bringing unbiased, accurate, and comprehensive news and information to the Persian-speakers in Iran.

And the BBG is actively looking for ways to sharpen the impact of VOA Persian and RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

Last year, I commissioned an independent study to take a fresh look at our Persian broadcasting across all radio, television and digital platforms in Iran.

I'd like to especially thank the AFPC and Ilan Berman's leadership on the study.

We are taking the recommendations seriously and we are acting on them.



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In terms of our impact in Iran, our most recent research in the country indicates that the VOA and RFE/RL combined reaches 23 percent of Iranian adults in the country—nearly 14 million people—on a weekly basis across digital, mobile, TV, and radio platforms.

Our skyrocketing audience in Iran is aided by the BBG's internet freedom tools which allow citizens there to circumvent Iranian government censorship.

At the height of the protests, BBG-sponsored circumvention technology averaged 800,000 users per day and ranked in the top three downloads among all apps.

Earlier this month, when President Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran deal, VOA reached Persian-speakers in Iran and around the globe with a live special report on satellite TV channels simulcast on four digital platforms.

On social media, the videos of the President's remarks were viewed more than two million times.

This included simultaneous translation in Persian of the announcement and live reactions from diaspora representatives in Los Angeles and Paris.

Audiences around the globe could also tune in to VOA's new show *Unplugged with Greta van Susteren* to see her interview with National Security Advisor John Bolton.

Our reach and impact in Iran show that Persian-speakers place a premium on U.S. international media content.

They see it as a key source of objective news during moments of uncertainty as well as in their everyday lives.

Carrying that success forward, we're very excited about a new project in the pipeline: a 24/7 Persian-language global network—a cooperative effort of VOA and RFE/RL.

We plan to launch the new global network in the first quarter of 2019.



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The 24/7 network will build on the BBG's existing, strong Persian-language brands. And our goal is to reach Persian-speakers in Iran and around the world.

The network will be distributed in Iran and wherever large Persian diaspora audiences can be found from Paris to Dubai and beyond.

## **Why the BBG is Critical**

Now looking beyond Iran, the five networks of the BBG—VOA, RFE/RL, Radio and TV Marti to Cuba, Radio Free Asia, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks—continue to expose corruption through investigative reporting, share life-saving health knowledge, and provide information needed for vibrant civic engagement.

Their reporting spotlights problems that, in turn, trigger corrective action by governments.

This is a core tenet for us—honest and truthful journalism acts as a catalyst for positive change. And it represents our best weapon on the information battlefield.

The BBG continues to provide accurate and compelling journalism that reflects the values of our society: freedom, democracy, and hope.

As the BBG's CEO and Director, I am passionate and committed to ensuring that the global work we do delivers on our mission for the U.S. government and the American people.

One of the ways we do that is our market-driven shift to digital and social media distribution.

Digital is the fastest growing element of the BBG's global audience—survey research measures our current digital audience at 45 million people.

Since 2015, that number has grown more than 40%.

We are making these shifts because we operate in a constantly evolving media space.



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The global spread of information has changed profoundly since the BBG's creation.

Global communities are awash in information, and not all of it is truthful.

Groups and governments use modern tools not to "win the news cycle," but to shape the very choices of information available to citizens.

And modern authoritarianism is adept in disguising their tools of repression.

I believe the best response to all this is rather basic—objective, fact-based reporting that arms citizens with the truth.

And that's what our networks do best.

Our core role is to support free, open, and democratic societies.

These societies are important to us because they:

- enjoy greater stability and prosperity;
- live in peace with neighbors;
- reject terrorism and extremism; and
- make better political allies and trade partners for the U.S.

## **State of International Media**

Yet, governments around the world are increasingly cracking down on the free flow of information, silencing dialogue and dissent, and distorting reality.

State-sponsored broadcasters, whether CCTV or Russia Today (RT), are expanding their global operations, opening new bureaus, and developing programming that in ways subtle and not-so-subtle distort the truth, or completely fabricate facts to disrupt and manipulate vulnerable societies.

Of the ten worst offenders—which include Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria—all are covered by one or more of the BBG networks.



To address all of these challenges, the BBG is:

- Becoming more agile in program delivery—following our audiences where they most likely will consume media;
- Identifying key audiences targets such as young, future leaders;
- Holding ourselves accountable for how we impact audiences after we reach them; and
- Targeting strategic partnerships on innovation and new generation media platforms;
- Combining the strengths of our networks – strategic cooperating to create new products and building a for multiplier.

The most recent example of strategic cooperation is last year’s launch of Current Time (roughly translated as “The Real Story”).

It’s a 24/7 Russian-language worldwide TV and digital network.

It is widely available across Central Asia, the Balkans, the Baltics and across the Russian Federation via satellite.

It is also available in large capital cities with significant Russian diaspora such as Jerusalem and Madrid.

*[Here is a short video clip in English that explains the network]*

Despite near-total exclusion from Russia’s cable market, Current Time is doing incredibly well and continues to expand its coverage by satellite in Russia.

Over the last year, Current Time had more than 400 million online views – half of them from Russian federation.

Its audience on VKontakte—the most popular social network among mainstream Russians—has quadrupled in size.

Another weapon of our high-impact, strategic approach to pushing back against Russian disinformation is **Polygraph.info**.



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Polygraph.info is an English-language fact-checking website which serves as a resource for verifying the increasing volume of Russian lies and disinformation being distributed and shared globally.

Polygraph's Russian-language sister project is called "Faktograf," also designed for fact-checking, but again in Russian.

Faktograf compares statements by politicians or officials with real facts, providing clarity and a sense of how Russia's experience matches up with the rest of the world.

Both are joint VOA and RFE/RL efforts to highlight Kremlin-backed disinformation and provide factual alternatives for Russian-speakers and others.

In the Middle East, our pan Arab network Alhurra is rapidly expanding its news programming by adding an additional six hours of live daily news, and opening up a 24/7 news bureau in Dubai.

Under the new leadership of Amb. Alberto Fernandez, leading voices in the Middle East are now being heard as they debate the daily fluctuations of policy; and the credibility of Alhurra is on the rise as it moves people, modernizes equipment, and creates an energetic pulse to the front lines of the information wars in the region.

It is confronting ISIS directly with special documentary programming like "Exiting ISIS" which profiles disillusioned former ISIS fighters who have defected from the terrorist camps.

From the ravages of Syria to the former Soviet sphere—the Korean Peninsula and the rapidly expanding influence of Chinese media, the export of U.S. journalism and the values of free media and free speech speaks to the world at this critical juncture.

Independent journalism brings clear, unfiltered news to the people who need it.

We want people to make informed decisions.





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And we believe that when given the chance, this method definitely plays a major role in demystifying Russian, Chinese, or ISIS narratives.

Like defense, development, and diplomacy, U.S. international media—accurate, balanced and true—is an essential part of our standing on the world stage.

We know that positioning our global media networks to be an impactful tool of U.S. foreign policy on the dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century information battlefield isn't just a good media strategy.

It's also fundamental to achieving our mission of informing, engaging, and connecting people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.

## **Closing**

Despite our efforts, media repression will continue to be a daunting task for us all.

At the end of the day, however, we're confronting information warfare and authoritarian media toe-to-toe with fact-based, truthful, professional journalism.

Some—even here in Congress—argue that America should fight fire with fire and develop our own propaganda machine.

I would argue that anything that takes us away from truthful, accountable, and honest reporting about America and about the world we cover would only play right into the hands of those who want to destroy the very idea of truth.

I'll close with a quote from Edward R. Murrow, who served as director of the U.S. Information Agency—predecessor to the BBG—from 1961 to 1964. He testified before Congress in 1963 and said:

“To be persuasive we must be believable; To be believable we must be credible; To be credible we must be truthful.”

His words are as resoundingly true today as they ever were.

Thank you, and I'm happy to take a few questions.

