



Delivered date: May 7, 2019

## Media for Democracy Forum

Remarks by USAGM CEO & Director John F. Lansing

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**John F. Lansing,** Hello and thank you to everyone for being here today.  
USAGM CEO &  
Director

It's an honor to join you for this conference.

I've seen such a diversity of professional backgrounds and perspectives represented already today—from journalism, government, civil society, academia, and technology.

And there's still more to come.

We appreciate you spending the day with us to discuss a topic that interests everyone here: the intersection of media and democracy.

### **Overview**

Over the past three and half years, I've had the honor and privilege to serve at the helm of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM).

We are the U.S. government's civilian-operated, globally-focused media enterprise, broadcasting in 60 languages to more than 100 countries around the world.

Our hundreds of journalists pursue fact-based, cutting-edge stories that serve as surrogate media where local press isn't entirely free or independent.



Put simply, there isn't another organization in the world that operates on the scale of USAGM.

Conceptually, our mission is simple: USAGM journalists and storytellers inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.

But fulfilling this mission has never been more challenging, nor has it ever been more urgent.

I'd like to take a few minutes to discuss three concerning trends that highlight the importance of publicly-funded, innovative journalism:

1. The weaponization of information by a number of sophisticated adversaries;
2. The continued and marked decline in freedom of the press; and
3. The rapid escalation in violence against journalists.

Combined, these trends aren't just concerning – they present a clear threat to global stability.

Combating these trends is crucial to the national security of the United States.

### **Information Warfare**

As we have already heard this morning, governments around the world are:

- Increasingly cracking down on the free flow of information;
- Silencing dialogue and dissent; and



- Distorting reality.

The result is what I believe a war on truth.

This war is being fought on many battlefields, especially the digital information battlefield.

This is where information is weaponized and unsuspecting citizens here, and around the world, are being manipulated.

It is an information war often conducted in shadowy corners of social media by foreign and domestic posers, twitter trolls, and even robots.

They poison truthful narratives that would otherwise help the consumer sort through issues.

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

But now, we are seeing authoritarian regimes expanding media repression in places like Turkey and Venezuela.

In Burundi, the government shut down Voice of America broadcasts while also forbidding any journalist – Burundian or foreign – inside Burundi to provide information to VOA.



In China, citizens of the Uyghur region are being rounded-up and placed in “re-education camps.”

And the families of our journalists from Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur Service, who report truthfully about the Chinese government’s actions, have become a target.

And in Iran, recent protests on the part of ordinary citizens have led the regime to block connectivity and communication.

But our Persian-language global network, VOA 365, is getting to people within Iran and the Iranian diaspora worldwide.

At the same time, state-sponsored broadcasters, whether China’s Global Television Network (CGTN) or Russia Today (RT), are expanding their global operations.

And they are developing programming that in not-so-subtle ways distorts the truth, or completely fabricate facts to disrupt and manipulate vulnerable societies.

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

USAGM networks operate in these closed and repressive environments.

Many of our journalists call these places home.



We know firsthand what can happen when societies allow disinformation to fester.

And democracies are not immune.

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

This sophisticated and far-reaching effort essentially weaponized social media platforms through the use of robots and human trolls.

The aim of authoritarian disinformation campaigns of today is to destroy the idea of an objective, agreed-upon set of facts.

From the Kremlin's perspective, for example, in a world where nothing is empty or truthful, any lie will do.

And if everything is a lie, then the biggest liar wins.

That is what we are up against.

Make no mistake the United States is facing information warfare, and I don't use that term lightly.

### **Global Press Freedom**

This past Friday was World Press Freedom Day – a significant day at USAGM and its five networks.



For us, it was a chance to take stock of and address press freedom challenges, shine a spotlight on journalist safety, and honor our fallen journalists.

By all credible measures, the picture is not good.

Global press freedom is at its lowest point in over a decade.

Last month, in its 2019 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders concluded that less than a quarter (24 percent) of the 180 countries and territories are considered “good” or “fairly good” for journalists safety and freedom, down from 26 percent last year.

### **Threats to Press**

Corrupt and repressive governments around the world share a common trait: a desire to control information and suppress free media.

As such, they are threatened by independent journalists and often throwing them into jail for the crime of reporting the truth.

Many regimes and groups go beyond repression to harming and threatening journalists and their families.

The October 2018 disappearance and murder of Saudi journalist and Washington Post contributor Jamal Khashoggi laid bare the regrettable reality that the world is becoming a more dangerous place for journalists.



Out of fear for their survival, many of the region's journalists censor themselves or have stopped writing altogether.

When we lose independent voices, we run the risk of conceding the information space to hostile regimes, extremists, and rogues.

It will take all of our effort to ensure this does not continue to occur.

Treating press freedom as a human right and a universal priority, will take all sectors – civil society, governments, private sector, and media.

Defending media and the free flow of ideas will take all of us here in this room

At USAGM, several of our journalists have personally experienced threats, intimidation, expulsion and sadly even-death.

I'd like to share a video showing some of those instances and honoring the journalists the USAGM family lost last year.

### **Conclusion: National Security**

We want people to make informed decisions.

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

Therefore, I believe USAGM is an essential element of the national security apparatus.



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

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

It's really that simple.

And our internet freedom programs help to ensure access to accurate and timely information in some of the world's most repressive countries.

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

Our journalists are on the front lines every day working to get the truth out—facing threats, intimidation, or imprisonment.

At the U.S. Agency for Global Media, we help people hold their leaders accountable.

There is no silver bullet when it comes to confronting these threats, especially those that are as sophisticated and well-financed as we've seen recently come from the Kremlin.

But this is a battle we can win.





With the unfailing dedication of our journalists, the support of Congress, and power of truth on our side, we have an unmistakable advantage, and we should be proud of that.

This is precisely why positioning our global media networks to be an impactful tool of U.S. foreign policy on the dynamic 21st century information battlefield isn't simply a good media strategy.

It is fundamental to supporting of freedom and democracy around the world.

Doing so has become more vital than ever.

### **Introduce Senator Ted Cruz**

It is my now pleasure to introduce United States Senator Ted Cruz.

He has represented the great state of Texas since 2012.

We're delighted that he has joined us today to share his thoughts on engaging the information battlefield.

Senator Cruz is a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a former member of the Armed Services Committee.

He has been a leading voice in the debate about U.S. foreign policy and the national interest.



Senator Cruz believes in the war of ideas and, I believe, understands this to be a national security issue.

For example, in last year's National Defense Authorization Act, he authored an amendment emphasizing the "necessity" of programs to "expose adversary propaganda and disinformation."

Last year, in a letter to FCC Chairman, Senator Cruz called out the Chinese Communist Party for its efforts to engage in information warfare to undermine democracies all around the world, including here in the United States.

Senator Cruz, thank you again for joining us today to share your thoughts on these important matters.

Please join me in welcoming the Senator to the podium.