

“...the work performed by the international broadcasting entities...can hardly be described as a typical government function. Cynics may deride their work as ‘propaganda,’ but in fact the broadcasters are journalists, reporting the news of the United States and the world to foreign audiences. The news gathering and reporting functions of the broadcasters must continue to be independent and objective. The broadcasters themselves understand the importance of this imperative.”

U.S. House. Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act, Conference Report (to Accompany H.R. 1757). (105 H.Rpt. 432).

USAGM’s Editorial Independence

The editorial independence of the journalists and broadcasters at USAGM’s networks is a bedrock principle. This independence is enshrined in both law and practice, including by a legislated firewall protecting the professional independence and integrity of our broadcasters, their content, and staff from government interference. This structure, combined with USAGM’s commitment to supporting freedom of expression and information as universal human rights, ensure that its networks operate as public service media organizations, similar to the BBC or NPR.



THE FIREWALL EXPLAINED

An essential guarantee of the journalistic credibility of USAGM’s networks is the firewall. The networks enjoy full editorial autonomy, free of influence from other U.S. government entities and authorities, to include the USAGM CEO and the Secretary of State. The International Broadcasting Act of 1994 (22 U.S.C. §§ 6201 et seq.), as amended, the agency’s authorizing legislation, contains provisions which establish this autonomy and protect the complete professional editorial independence of USAGM and its networks. These provisions, referred to as the firewall in the legislative history of the Act, are a recognition by Congress of the “need for journalists and broadcasters to maintain their professional independence in order to produce factual, unbiased and balanced work products.”

Within any credible news organization, a firewall exists between those carrying out the journalism, including journalists and editors (often referred to as the “newsroom”) and everyone else in the organization. For purposes of USAGM, this firewall is understood to protect against those outside the newsroom from interfering with the independent editorial decisions of the Network. In other words, it protects against influence that would undermine the journalistic and editorial independence, and thus the credibility, of a USAGM network.

KEY PROVISIONS OF LAW

- 22 USC 6204(b), requires the CEO and Secretary of State to “respect the professional independence and integrity” of VOA, OCB, RFE/RL, RFA, and MBN.
- 22 USC 6202(a)(5), requires that agency programming meet the “highest professional standards of broadcast journalism”
- 22 USC 6202(b)(1), requires that agency news broadcasts be “consistently reliable and authoritative, accurate, objective, and comprehensive.”
- S. Rep. 103-107 (to accompany S. 1281) July 23, 1993 “protects the independence and journalistic integrity of the broadcasting entities.”
- S. Rep. 103-107 (1993) “secures the professional independence and integrity of [the agency’s] broadcasting services.”

JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS & THE FIREWALL

The firewall is critical to ensuring that the editors, reporters, and other journalists make the final decisions on what stories to cover and how they are covered, and that those decisions are ultimately governed by the highest standards of professional journalism, as required by law.

To that end, all USAGM employees, regardless of their roles, and including the CEO, are required to take training that explains the legal and operational role of the firewall. Additionally, the firewall is enforced as part of the broader set of professional standards that are required of all USAGM networks’ journalists and are codified in each network’s journalistic standards. These standards reflect the best practices of the highest quality of journalism across the industry.

USAGM’s journalistic standards have teeth: conduct involving violations of these standards have resulted in the suspension and even termination of employees.

As appropriate, if its programming is called into question, USAGM may consult with independent journalism experts to produce independent analyses of whether the network has followed the highest standards of professional journalism, including implementing the expert recommendations.

The firewall is not meant to discourage USAGM journalists from interviewing government officials, or USG officials from appearing on USAGM programs. It is, however, central to the credibility of its networks, and notably differentiates the agency from state-sponsored propaganda operations.

Together, USAGM’s journalistic standards and statutorily mandated firewall reinforce one another, enabling its journalist workforce to produce authoritative, accurate, objective, and award-winning journalism free from undue political interference.

FIREWALL RULE

Historically, a bipartisan Board also served as a guarantor of this independence by serving as a physical firewall around the agency. However, changes to the agency’s authorization act under the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), removed this additional layer of protection. To protect against this loss, the agency codified a specific rule detailing the operation of the firewall. This rule is currently codified in an agency guidance, appearing in Part II, section 531 of the USAGM Broadcasting Administrative Manual. The agency is awaiting the results of an independent review looking at ways in which the firewall may be further strengthened, and it intends to republish the Firewall Rule in the Federal Register and the Code of Federal Regulations. Furthermore, language incorporated into the conference report accompanying the Appropriation Act currently governing the agency calls upon the agency to comply with this rule.