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US INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING:

Recommendations from the Eurasian Experience

Thomas Kent



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Cover: Signboard on the headquarters building of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty international organization in Prague. *Alexey Vitvitsky/Sputnik*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & INTRODUCTION

Russian information operations are carefully curated for each country that Moscow targets. For their own citizens, Russian media describe their country as all-powerful, yet the victim of constant plots and slander. Moldovans are told a predatory European Union (EU) is impoverishing the country and tearing it from Moscow's benevolent orbit. The message to Ukrainians is that their country is a corrupt and incompetent state ripe for an extremist coup. In Georgia, Moscow aligns itself with those who claim the EU and NATO are bent on destroying the nation's social and religious values.

Perhaps the most important US tool for contesting these narratives, directly to the populations Moscow targets, is US international broadcasting. A far cry from the precarious shortwave operations that did battle with Soviet jammers in the Cold War, US government-funded networks now pump out content on television, radio, the web, and social networks, operating in sixty languages. Audiences in the formerly Soviet countries of Eurasia are a particular target of these services.

The United States invests nearly \$800 million a year¹ in the five networks, which are overseen by the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), formerly known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors. The networks, which USAGM says reached 345 million people weekly

in fiscal year 2018,² not only produce and distribute their own programming, but also help develop independent journalism in the countries they serve.

Yet, despite their broad array of content and growing audiences, US international media, such as the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), have been targets of constant domestic criticism. Congress has questioned the networks' structure and effectiveness, ordering repeated, disruptive reorganizations. The policy debate has only intensified in recent years as influence operations from Russia and elsewhere have grown more far-reaching and effective.

This paper will look first at fundamental issues of principle and mission that continue to fuel the debate over US international media. It will then assess the broadcasters' challenges and performance in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The paper concludes with recommendations on USAGM operations in those four nations and on the agency's work as a whole. The recommendations address the perpetual question of whether the networks should be a public diplomacy tool or independent news sources; the value of the networks' individual brands; the need to make audience research a far more central element of network operations; and the importance of better preparation for worst-case scenarios.

1 FY2017 spending was \$794 million. "2018 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting," United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, December 2018, p.30, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/287683.pdf>.

2 "Record audience growth for independent reporting aided by demand in China, Iran and Russia," USAGM press release, November 20, 2018, <https://www.usagm.gov/2018/11/20/record-audience-growth-for-independent-reporting-aided-by-demand-in-china-iran-and-russia/>.

THE MISSIONS OF US INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

Why do US international media exist? Few debate the need for a strong US capacity to speak to the world, particularly amid the disinformation and propaganda of the present day. But the message to be delivered by those media has often been controversial. VOA, which started broadcasting in 1942, was a frequent object of Cold War debate about whether its core job was news reporting or serving US foreign policy.³ Meanwhile, additional congressionally funded broadcasting networks were created to promote democratic values internally in the nations they targeted: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty for Russia and its satellites in 1950, Radio y Televisión Martí for Cuba (initially a radio-only service) in 1985, Radio Free Asia (RFA) in 1996, and Middle East Broadcasting Networks in 2004.

At present, USAGM's operations are under scrutiny again:

- ◆ The administration has nominated a new CEO for the agency, triggering a confirmation process, and in turn another debate about USAGM's *raison d'être* and structure.⁴
- ◆ The White House, impatient with a "tepid and fragmented" US response to disinformation by rival nations, has vowed to "re-examine legacy delivery platforms for communicating US messages overseas"—including the USAGM networks.⁵
- ◆ Congress, which dramatically overhauled USAGM's management structure in 2016 to give a single CEO sweeping powers over all the

networks, continues to review some of those decisions.⁶

- ◆ The president's proposed FY 2020 budget calls for sharp cuts in USAGM operations, including eliminating four services. While the cuts may well be restored by Congress, the effectiveness of these services may be closely reviewed.⁷

Some of the debate about US broadcasting stems from contradictions in the fundamental law that governs USAGM operations. The International Broadcasting Act (IBA) of 1994⁸ tasks the broadcasters with "advancing the goals of United States foreign policy," supporting "freedom and democracy," and assuring "clear and effective presentation of the policies of the United States Government."

Yet the act also states US broadcasting must uphold "the highest professional standards of broadcast journalism" and guarantees the networks' "professional independence and integrity." USAGM and the networks have long pointed to this wording as a "firewall" that prevents the networks from becoming a government mouthpiece.⁹ However, congressional and administration figures have often argued that the networks should be at least an extension of US public diplomacy, and at most a weapon against US adversaries.

The idea of US international media serving administration goals was enhanced by congressional changes to the IBA in 2016.¹⁰ The amended act abolished the bipartisan Broadcasting Board of Governors, which had overseen the networks since 1994, and transferred its

3 "VOA Through the Years," VOA Public Relations, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.insidevoa.com/a/3794247.html>.

4 The nomination of Michael Pack was sent to the Senate June 4, 2018, and he was renominated on January 16, 2019.

5 "A Budget for a Better America," Fiscal Year 2020, The White House, retrieved March 21, 2019. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/msar-fy2020.pdf>.

6 S.3654, which limits the CEO's powers and provides more oversight of his activities, was approved November 28, 2018, by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. It did not progress further in the 115th Congress but its advocates remain. See Thomas Kent, "More oversight of America's international media networks a good idea," *The Hill*, last updated December 3, 2018.

7 "US Agency for Global Media FY 2020 Congressional Budget Justification," US Agency for Global Media, accessed March 21, 2019, https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/USAGMBudget_FY20_CBJ_3-15-19.pdf.

8 United States International Broadcasting Act of 1994, as amended, Title III of Pub.L. 103-236 (1994), <https://legcounsel.house.gov/Comps/United%20States%20International%20Broadcasting%20Act%20Of%201994.pdf>.

9 "Rumors, Myths and Untruths," USAGM, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.usagm.gov/rumors-myths-untruths/>.

10 United States International Broadcasting Act of 1994 as amended, Title III of Pub.L. 103-236 (1994) as amended through Pub.L. 114-328 (2016), retrieved Dec. 18, 2018, <https://legcounsel.house.gov/Comps/United%20States%20International%20Broadcasting%20Act%20Of%201994.pdf>.

authority to a single USAGM CEO.¹¹ This presidentially appointed official was given sweeping power to “direct” all five networks, hire and fire their chief executives and move funds among them with little limitation, irrespective of the specific appropriations Congress makes for each network.

For its part, USAGM has sometimes emphasized that the networks are adjuncts of US policy and at other times accented their independence. In March 2018, the agency announced that its five-year strategic plan would “advance America’s national interests and work

“In Russia’s view, however, there is no question that the USAGM networks are all US government influence tools.”

in tandem with the Administration’s National Security Strategy.”¹² Its CEO, John F. Lansing, declared on September 12 that the agency “has fully joined the information battlefield.”

The next month, USAGM publicly reasserted in a news release that the agency is “an independent federal agency that provides accurate, professional, and objective news,” but also that its global priorities “reflect US national security and public diplomacy interests.”¹³

In fact, while the networks are obviously headed by executives who endorse broad American principles, they operate free of day-to-day government diplomatic or strategic control. In my time at RFE/RL, no State Department, embassy, or congressional official ever tried to give me orders on content (though they

did sometimes offer opinions). Over time, the USAGM networks have probably taken as much criticism for *not* being tightly aligned with US strategic interests¹⁴ as for supposedly being organs of US propaganda.

In Russia’s view, however, there is no question that the USAGM networks are all US government influence tools. Not only is it tactically advantageous for Russian officials to make such accusations, but they seem incapable of imagining otherwise. Margarita Simonyan, director of Russia’s RT television network, has declared that “there is no objectivity” in international media.¹⁵ To Russian officialdom, the fact that the US secretary of state is an ex officio member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors only confirms that the USAGM networks are cut of the same cloth as RT, Sputnik, and other official Russian outlets.

Further complicating the structure of US international media is the fact that VOA and the Martis are themselves governmental organizations under USAGM, while Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and Middle East Broadcasting Networks are private companies with non-federal employees. They are financed by congressional grants, which USAGM administers.

Some of the differences between government and private broadcasters are administrative, but while others go deeper. VOA’s mission is to “tell America’s story.”¹⁶ By contrast, the grantees’ job is to advance democracy by serving as “surrogate” domestic media in countries where robust, free media do not exist.¹⁷

Thus, the grantees are a voice less of America than of democratically minded people in the countries they serve. The grantees’ status as private companies, rather than US government agencies, adds critically to their authenticity as the voice of local people. It helps maintain their effectiveness whether or not the American administration of the day considers human rights a

11 The board continues to meet because of technicalities pending its official dissolution.

12 “US international media’s approach aligns with National Security Strategy,” USAGM, March 14, 2018, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.usagm.gov/2018/03/14/board-meeting-march-14/>.

13 John F. Lansing, “US Government Media Agency Rebrands,” Broadcasting Board of Governors news release, August 22, 2018, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/us-government-media-agency-rebrands-300701142.html>.

14 For instance, an independent study of US international broadcasting in 2015 concluded that the networks “are not independent news agencies, as if they were CNNs that happen to receive their funding from the US government. To justify the investment, its activities must be tied to America’s strategic interests. Purveying ‘objective journalism’ is by itself insufficient reason for US international broadcasting to exist.” S. Enders Wimbush and Elizabeth Portale, “Reassessing US International Broadcasting,” *Wilson Center*, March 2015, p. 5.

15 Alexander Gabuyev, “Нет никакой объективности” [There is no objectivity], *Kommersant*, April 7, 2012, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1911336>.

16 “Celebrating 75 years of Voice of America,” Broadcasting Board of Governors news release, February 1, 2017 accessed February 18, 2018, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/celebrating-75-years-of-voice-of-america-300400574.html>.

17 A typical elaboration of this difference is contained in David A. Hennes, “U.S. International Broadcasting: An Assessment for Reform,” Congressional Research Service, Report CRS-25, August 1, 1991.



USAGM CEO, John F. Lansing declared on September 12, 2018, that the agency has “fully joined the information battlefield.” Photo Credit: Laurie Moy/BBG (VOA) <http://tinyurl.com/y3uadoo9>

major concern. The grantees’ staffs in repressive countries can also avoid being labeled as reporting directly to employees of the US government.

Since audiences in some twenty languages¹⁸ receive programming from both VOA and a grantee, maintaining the distinction between the two missions is essential. The responsibility for this lies ultimately with USAGM,¹⁹ which oversees the finances and strategy of all five networks.

In the past, the individual networks, at times, have competed before Congress for funding. Trying to end this spectacle, USAGM has worked hard to make them an integrated force, with USAGM’s own leadership front

and center as the networks’ boss. However, USAGM efforts to increase unity among the networks have the potential of blurring the distinction between the government networks and grantees.

USAGM has encouraged the networks to run each other’s material and to undertake joint projects. Examples include the Russian-language Current Time²⁰ television and digital network, an RFE/RL project in cooperation with VOA; a refreshed Persian television and digital network launched February 9 (VOA-RFE/RL, led by VOA);²¹ a combined reporting project by all five networks on China’s worldwide influence;²² and co-branding of VOA and RFE/RL fact-checking sites.²³

18 “FY 2017 Performance and Accountability Report,” Broadcasting Board of Governors, November 15, 2017, p.13, accessed December 18, 2018, https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/BBG_FY_2017_PAR.pdf.

19 In the view of the authors of the 2015 Wilson Center report, “The traditional division of US international broadcasting into public diplomacy and surrogate missions should be strengthened and deepened. Both roles are critical but distinctions must be drawn more sharply. Today, however, tension over the public diplomacy and surrogate roles has grown, diluting mandates and creating duplication. The surrogate function should not be jumbled together with public diplomacy.” Wimbush and Portale, *Reassessing U.S. International Broadcasting*, p. 4.

20 “Current Time Fast Facts,” accessed December 31, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/y2q9wk5j>

21 Charles S. Clark, “U.S. Global Media Agency Launches Farsi Service to Reach Iranians,” Government Executive, September 18, 2018, <https://www.govexec.com/defense/2018/09/us-global-media-agency-launches-farsi-service-reach-iranians/151346/>.

22 “The Dragon’s Reach: Tracking China’s Economic Power Play,” accessed December 18, 2018, <http://silkroadregained.com/>.

23 The English fact-checking site Polygraph.info is largely run by VOA and the Russian site Faktograph.info by RFE/RL. However, both bear double branding.

Joint projects take advantage of each network's specialties, but they can also make it appear to foreign audiences like all US networks are the same, giving audiences little reason to follow more than one US brand when US rivals are constantly spinning up the number of their news brands and proxies. Merging the products and missions of the distinct networks could lead repressive regimes to act against multiple outlets, even

when their complaint is with the content of one entity. In addition, such merging minimizes the special nature of the three grantees, both as surrogate domestic broadcasters and as private companies. Should, someday, a new administration at USAGM seek to impose a propaganda mission on the USAGM networks, the additional insulation provided by the grantees' private status could be critical in defending their independence.

US INTERNATIONAL MEDIA IN EURASIA

Audience and content

US international media in the post-Soviet countries of Eurasia vary greatly in audience penetration, a fact that reflects both their content and distribution.

In the past decade, USAGM has largely shifted from shortwave transmission to content distribution on websites, social media, and smart TV apps, as well as local radio and TV stations willing to broadcast USAGM content. Almost no local broadcasters carry US content in Russia. The two US outlets have local broadcast partners in Ukraine in Georgia and Moldova

“US networks face the daunting task of providing news content that is so consistently interesting and reliable as to stand out from all local and international competition.”

USAGM’s content itself is also a constraint, often consisting of news shows, roundtables, and investigative reporting. This is consistent with the networks’ required missions, but news alone no longer guarantees mass audiences. In Soviet times, citizens spent hours trying to tune in to foreign news because their own media were so blatantly censored. Now, those who were once behind the Iron Curtain usually have easy internet access to news from anywhere in the world; to some young people, USAGM stations are what Grandpa listened to. Even on local channels, news programs are far more attractive than those of Soviet days, albeit with messages controlled by governments or oligarchs.

If the battle for listeners is to be fought over news, US networks face the daunting task of providing news content that is so consistently interesting and reliable as to stand out from all local and international competition. Sometimes that is exactly what USAGM’s courageous reporters offer. But the battle for audience is often not primarily fought over news. Viewers may tune in primarily for entertainment or sports programs. In formerly Soviet countries these may be glitzy productions from Moscow, broadcast in a block with propaganda-laced newscasts on government- or oligarch-controlled TV. With current budgets, USAGM content has little chance of competing with these expensive productions, with their implicit Russian political and social values.²⁴

As president of RFE/RL I was asked more than once on Capitol Hill whether we could produce a *House of Cards*-quality program for Russian audiences about life in the Russian elite. My answer was that such a project (Netflix reportedly paid \$100 million for two thirteen-episode seasons)²⁵ was far beyond the capabilities of RFE/RL, whose entire annual budget is about \$128 million. US entertainment companies, which in another era might have contributed their productions to help USAGM’s penetration, can now sell them to local entertainment enterprises in post-Soviet countries that compete with USAGM for audiences.

USAGM in Russia: Barely tolerated

Everything about USAGM’s mission is anathema to the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin. VOA seeks to tell a balanced version of America’s story; Russian media see no need for competition with their own version. RFE/RL’s mission to advance democracy and model a free press inside Russia is similarly unwelcome. RFE/RL, the larger US broadcaster to Russia, spends upwards of \$10.3 million per year on its services, and VOA \$8 million.²⁶ By comparison, the US Embassy spends \$14.4 million on its public diplomacy efforts.²⁷

24 A notable exception is Current Time television, which seeks out and commissions documentaries by filmmakers inside Russia, many of them fascinating looks at Russian life.

25 Rebecca Greenfield, “The Economics of Netflix’s \$100 Million New Show,” *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/02/economics-netflixs-100-million-new-show/318706/>.

26 VOA and RFE/RL spending figures in this paper are 2017 actual expenditures as shown in “2019 Congressional Budget Justification,” Broadcasting Board of Governors, accessed December 18, 2018, https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/BBGBudget_FY19_CBJ_2-7-18_Final.pdf.

27 Post spending figures on public diplomacy in this paper are from “2018 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting.”



In Ukraine, while useful to the government vis-à-vis Russia, USAGM and particularly RFE/RL have infuriated senior officials and their business allies by relentless coverage of official corruption and waste. Photo credit: RFE/RL Ukrainian Service https://gdb.rferl.org/FA2D95E6-7EBA-43F2-8COA-59513DCB7BA2_cx0_cy8_cw85_w650_r1_s.png

Broadcasting to Russia has long been a top priority of US international media and a barometer of US-Russian relations. The Soviet Union jammed VOA and RFE/RL for decades until Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, took power. Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, let RFE/RL open a Moscow bureau in 1991 and acquire radio frequencies in more than thirty cities; under Putin, the frequencies were shut down. In 2017, amid a dramatic decline in US-Russian ties, Russian authorities declared RFE/RL and VOA “foreign agents” and began imposing strict administrative regulations on their work.²⁸ Even so, the Moscow bureau continues to operate, along with stringers elsewhere in the country. However, should Russian authorities go a step further and declare RFE/RL or VOA “undesirable” foreign organizations—or use even newer laws²⁹ against them—the outlets could be dealt a serious blow, likely leading to consequences for RT in the United States.

RFE/RL has a weekly Russian audience of 6.8 million. Current Time television has 3.9 million viewers via

internet and satellite, and VOA 3.2 million. Controlling for those who follow more than one US service, USAGM as a whole has a weekly audience in Russia of 7.7 million, or 7.5 percent of the adult population, up from 4.9 percent in 2016.³⁰ Social networks play a particularly important part in USAGM’s penetration of Russia: Current Time videos were viewed more than 270 million times inside Russia in 2018, and the service has nearly 1.3 million followers and subscribers on social networks.³¹

“VOA seeks to tell a balanced version of America’s story; Russian media see no need for competition with their own version.”

VOA, RFE/RL, and Current Time provide distinct news brands for Russia that often challenge official narratives. VOA focuses on the United States, including US-Russian relations, and other world news. It provides live, simultaneously translated coverage of major presidential and congressional events as an alternative to Russian media retellings. RFE/RL’s Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty) covers internal Russian news, including topics like the deaths abroad of Russian mercenaries,³² that state-controlled media minimize. Current Time, distributed in nineteen countries, targets the whole Russian-speaking world. Its offerings include a program called *Smotri v Oba* (Look Closely) that seeks to build resilience against false narratives by analyzing different press treatments of the same event. Russian authorities seem particularly annoyed by the in-depth local reporting of the regional RFE/RL operations: the Siberia service, the North Caucasus Service, and the Tatar-Bashkir Service for the Volga region. The latter service, for instance, has reported on police torture of suspects and on government efforts, through so-called parents’ groups, to reduce Tatar language instruction

28 Russian authorities portrayed the “foreign agent” designation for RFE/RL and VOA as simply a reciprocal countermeasure against the US Department of Justice’s designation of RT as a foreign agent in 2017. However, Russian authorities had been restricting US international media operations in Russia well before the US measure.

29 “Russia’s Putin signs laws banning fake news, insulting the state online,” Reuters, March 18, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-fakenews/russias-putin-signs-law-banning-fake-news-insulting-the-state-online-idUSKCN1QZ1TZ..>

30 Statistics presented at the November 14, 2018, meeting of the USAGM Board of Governors. “New programming, MBN transformation the focus of USAGM Board of Governors’ meeting,” web video, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.usagm.gov/2018/11/14/board-meeting-november-14/>.

31 “Current Time Fast Facts.”

32 For an example of mercenary coverage, see “Проект ‘Мясорубка’: Рассказывают три командира ‘ЧВК Вагнера’ [Project ‘Meatgrinder’: Accounts from three commanders of ‘Wagner Corp.’], Radio Svoboda, March 7, 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29084090.html>.



In Ukraine, RFE/RL's reporters are regularly stonewalled by officials, threatened on social networks, and followed in the streets by unknown persons. *Photo credit: RadioSvoboda.org (RFERL) https://gdb.rferl.org/DO6D2A8B-ED2E-4AA2-9DC9-D3422F4262C1_cx11_cy3_cw89_w650_r1_s.jpg*

in schools.³³ (The service offers content in Tatar and lessons for those who wish to learn it). Its investigative reports have sometimes spurred official inquiries and policy changes, indicating its penetration is such that authorities cannot simply ignore it.³⁴ USAGM's FY 2020 budget proposal, in which it was obligated to reflect the White House's demands for less federal spending, calls for eliminating the Tatar-Bashkir and North Caucasus services.

In reporting on Russia, USAGM's networks try to avoid a steady stream of anti-regime content. They do devote substantial attention to human rights and politics, including live coverage of anti-government demonstrations. However, as media produced by Russians for Russians, they also celebrate the best of Russia. They look for stories about tolerance, charity, and entrepreneurship, including ordinary people who have started successful businesses or volunteered in

their communities. VOA produced a twenty-six-episode television series on Russians living in the United States, showing what Russians can accomplish in freer circumstances.

Measuring the effect of this programming, beyond the impact of individual investigative stories, is difficult. At first glance, survey results are encouraging: 40 percent of USAGM's Russian audience shares content from the outlets each week, 49 percent of VOA's Russian audience finds its reporting credible,³⁵ and two-thirds of RFE/RL and Current Time audiences believe those outlets' content.³⁶ However, given that many Russians genuinely support Putin and all are subjected to intense denunciations of foreign media,³⁷ a credibility number that high suggests the US broadcasters may be primarily reaching a segment of the population that already is open to Western ideas, or whose views are not yet formed.³⁸ That segment may well be politically important—even a critical mass of activists who could have enormous significance—but there is a need for detailed data on who these people are.

In addition to their broadcasting, Current Time and Svoboda have become substantial journalism schools. Despite official Russian denunciations of both outlets, RFE/RL's Moscow bureau attracts Russians eager to work or intern there. Current Time holds training for its field reporters and producers—not only on technique but also on Western journalistic ethics. Radio Svoboda has built bridges to young Russian media creators with its “Young and Free” competition for documentary filmmakers and “Freedom of Choice” contest for video bloggers.

USAGM in Ukraine: Appreciated by authorities, and not

Ukraine's war with Russia has left most of the population viewing the West as its greatest source of security.

33 See this report on a questionable organization asking the Russian government to reduce Tatar instruction in schools: “Сообщество анонимных родителей: войну татарскому объявила тайная организация” [Community of anonymous parents: a secret organization has declared war on Tatar], *Volga Realities*, December 14, 2018, accessed December 31, 2018, <https://www.idelreal.org/a/29636916.html>.

34 “Реальные итоги. Как материалы ‘Idel.Реалии’ повлияли на жизнь героев” [Real results: How “Volga Realities’ stories affected the lives of the stories’ subjects], *Volga Realities*, December 31, 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.idelreal.org/a/29677171.html>.

35 “2018 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting.”

36 “New Programming, MBN Transformation.”

37 Russian surveys show very low general confidence in foreign media. For example, see “ТВ, Интернет, газеты, радио: доверяй, но проверяй?” [TV, internet, newspapers, radio: Trust but verify?], All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), 2016, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115679>.

38 45 percent of USAGM's audience in Russia is under 35 years of age. “Audience and Impact: Overview for 2018,” US Agency for Global Media, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018-Audience-and-Impact-Report.pdf>.

In a recent survey, 63 percent said they trust NATO,³⁹ 40 percent feel warmly or very warmly toward the United States, and 41 percent are neutral.⁴⁰

However, Russia's assault on Ukraine since 2014 has included extensive information operations. A dizzying array of Russian narratives⁴¹ appeal to citizens who are disgruntled with the government of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, have conservative social values, or harbor nostalgia for Soviet times. With Russian TV channels banned in Ukraine, the main sources of Russian narratives are social media and those Ukrainian television channels and websites that are sympathetic to Moscow.

“Ukrainian authorities have praised RFE/RL’s work in Crimea and Donbas, and helped transmit USAGM content to occupied regions.”

RFE/RL and VOA's distinct personalities in Ukraine make it worthwhile for audiences to consume both. RFE/RL, with spending of \$3.8 million, has a strong presence on radio, television, and the internet and a clear brief to cover local news in Ukraine and Russian-occupied territories. Its services include an extensive Radio Liberty service for Ukraine itself, the Krym. Realii (Crimea Realities) brand for Crimean audiences (it also operates in Crimean Tatar), and Donbas. Realii for Ukraine's partially occupied east. VOA, which spends \$2.4 million per year on Ukrainian operations, is best known through its world news programs on local TV channels and its reporters serving as a “Washington bureau” for major Ukrainian media. Embassy public diplomacy spending in Ukraine totals \$11.6 million.

Both American outlets expose false narratives and work closely with similarly minded Ukrainians. The

local STOP-FAKE organization regularly uses material from RFE/RL and draws from Polygraph.info. A recent Crimea Realities report on the release of toxic substances in the Crimean city of Armyansk led officials to backtrack on their assurances that there was no health risk and to evacuate children from the area.⁴²

Ukrainian authorities have praised RFE/RL's work in Crimea and Donbas, and helped transmit USAGM content to occupied regions—not a simple matter due to a shortage of transmitting towers, the mountainous geography of Crimea, and Russian jamming.

But USAGM's operations in Ukraine also pose a problem for some of Ukraine's most powerful people. USAGM and particularly RFE/RL have relentlessly covering official corruption and waste. RFE/RL maintains a large investigative reporting team focused on issues of government honesty and transparency. Its weekly television program *Shkemy: Korrupsiya v detalyakh* (Schemes: Corruption in detail) has exposed the luxurious cars driven by some employees of the Ukrainian security service, the use of public money for officials' family events, and a secret vacation Poroshenko took to the Maldives.

For their pains, RFE/RL's investigative reporters are regularly stonewalled by officials, threatened on social networks, and followed in the streets by unknown persons. In August, the Ukrainian prosecutor-general demanded a year of data from the cellphone of Natalia Sedletska, *Schemes'* lead reporter, including her location at every moment.⁴³

Another problem for USAGM in Ukraine is distribution. VOA and RFE/RL both depend on local stations to carry their radio and television programs. This enmeshes them in the vested interests of the Ukrainian media market, where major television channels are often controlled by oligarchs.

USAGM also fulfills a journalism training role. Perhaps no other country has been the recipient of so much media training from abroad, with multiple programs

39 “Annual Survey Report: Ukraine,” European Union, Spring 2018, p. 7/45, accessed December 18, 2018, https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2018-07/EU%20NEIGHBOURS%20east_AnnualSurvey2018%20report_UKRAINE.pdf.

40 *Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine: March 15-21, 2018*, International Republican Institute, May 21, 2018, p. 52, accessed December 18, 2018, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-21_ukraine_poll_presentation_0.pdf.

41 “Топ-10 фейков, которые развенчал StopFake в 2018 году” [The top 10 fakes that StopFake unmasked in 2018], StopFake.org, December 28, 2018, <https://www.stopfake.org/top-10-fejkov-kotorye-razvenchal-stopfake-v-2018-godu/>.

42 “Kids Evacuated After Crimea Chemical Leak,” English version of Russian-language Crimea Realities story, RFE/RL, September 5, 2018, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/crimea-chemical-leak/29473563.html>.

43 RFE/RL took the case to the European Court of Human Rights, which issued an injunction against authorities accessing the data. It is unknown whether Sedletska's cellphone company had turned the data over to the government before the injunction took effect. “ECHR Extends Ban on Ukrainian Government Access to RFE/RL Journalist's Data,” RFE/RL news release, December 13, 2018, accessed December 18, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/y4zjkmp5>

being conducted by the EU, foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and governments. Yet many such programs last just a few days, or find Ukrainian journalists so intensely anti-Russian that training in objectivity is unwelcome.⁴⁴ The Ukrainian government can also be hostile to journalists who express pro-Russian views.⁴⁵ To the extent that there is patience at all in Ukraine for balanced reporting, long-term training by news organizations with Western values is essential. RFE/RL provides this for its some one-hundred full- and part-time staff in Ukraine, but the need for additional training is great.

USAGM in Moldova: A pivotal role?

Moldova lives on a knife-edge between Russian and Western influence. Only a percentage point or two separate the number of Moldovans who consider the EU their best political and economic partner, and those who see Russia in that role.⁴⁶

The split has led to constant tests of strength between pro-Russian President Igor Dodon and the government of pro-Western Prime Minister Pavel Filip. The government banned news from Russia from Moldovan airwaves in February 2018, but there is no shortage of pro-Russian messaging. Russia's Sputnik news service broadcasts locally in Russian and Romanian through its Moldovan subsidiary. Russian entertainment programs, often with implicit political content, are still allowed and attract wide audiences. Although Moldova's population is ethnically only 5.9 percent Russian, two-thirds of the public prefers or can understand Russian-language material.⁴⁷ Moldova's own media market is sharply polarized into factions controlled by political parties and oriented toward Russia or the EU.

Russian messaging to Moldova concentrates on a small number of *temniki*, or themes, that are emphasized repeatedly. They leverage the nostalgia for Soviet days felt not only by many older Moldovans but also by young people who have heard idealized stories of that time. The challenges Moldova faces today—corruption,

poverty, and brain drain—are portrayed as the result of exploitation by the EU. Other assertions are that the EU wants to warehouse refugees in Moldova and that Romania's NATO membership threatens peace. (53 percent of Moldovans mistrust NATO)⁴⁸. Russian messaging benefits from many Moldovans' conservative social values and respect for the Russian Orthodox Church.

USAGM media operations for Moldova are the sole responsibility of RFE/RL's Radio Europa Liberă, which must cover both local and world news. Its budget is about \$1.8 million annually for radio, television, web, and social media products in both Romanian and Russian, including a special service for Transnistria. The expenditure, the smallest USAGM spending for any country studied in this paper, compares to \$6.3 million in embassy public diplomacy spending. RFE/RL reopened its service for Romania in January of this year, which will provide additional Romanian-language content of interest to Moldova.

Moldova's own media market is sharply polarized into factions controlled by political parties and oriented toward Russia or the EU."

With an impressive audience of 31.1 percent of the adult market,⁴⁹ Radio Europa Liberă has a significant opportunity for influence.

Europa Liberă content acknowledges Moldovans' worries about poverty, emigration, and corruption but resists many of the Russian narratives about them. It reports on the pluses and minuses of the EU. It also tries to paint an accurate picture of life in Soviet times. Television programs include Pur și Simplu (Clear and Simple), a ten-minute program that centers on issues of democracy and civil society. While Russia

44 "Facing Reality After the Euromaidan: The Situation of Journalists and Media in Ukraine," Reporters Without Borders, June 2016, accessed December 18, 2018, https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/journalists_and_media_in_ukraine_-_rsf_2016.pdf.

45 "Ukraine Detains 'Pro-Separatist' Journalist After Deportation From Russia," RFE/RL, January 17, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-detains-pro-separatist-journalist-after-deportation-from-russia/29715215.html>.

46 "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova: February-March 2018," International Republican Institute, July 26, 2018, p. 49, accessed December 18, 2018, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-3-29_moldova_poll_presentation.pdf.

47 Tamara Cărăuș and Ivan Godarsky, "Măsurarea percepției consumatorilor de media din Republica Moldova asupra știrilor social-politice" [Measurement of perceptions of socio-political news among media consumers in the Republic of Moldova], Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent, 2015, accessed December 18, 2018, <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-web2.pdf>.

48 "Annual Survey Report: Moldova," European Union, Spring 2018, p. 10/45, accessed December 18, 2018, https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2018-07/EU%20NEIGHBOURS%20east_AnnualSurvey2018report_MOLDOVA.pdf.

49 "FY 2017 Performance and Accountability Report," Broadcasting Board of Governors.



It is clear to most Georgians that Russia has little to offer their country politically or economically, especially in contrast to the political and investment resources the West has fielded.” Photo credit: Beka Beridze https://gdb.rferl.org/A5891D86-3C55-47F6-9224-894ABA7EEC92_w650_r1_s.png

USAGM in Georgia: A different challenge

Georgia is not an easy mark for Russian influencers. It is distinct from Russia geographically, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically. Though it has a long-shared history with Russia, deteriorating relations with Moscow and the 2008 Russian invasion have left many Georgians wary of their neighbor.

No doubt realizing the difficulties of romancing a country it still partly occupies, Russian information operations directed at Georgia are not aimed primarily at burnishing Russia’s image. Russian media and surrogates are inclined mostly to speak of the value of “mutually beneficial” relations with Moscow, such as in business. It is clear to most Georgians that Russia has little to offer their country politically or economically, especially in contrast to the political and investment resources the West has fielded.⁵³

promotes federalization of Moldova, which would assign specific rights to each ethnic group, Clear and Simple has highlighted examples of people living together in tolerance.

Pro-Western local media, along with Europa Liberă, have created a media climate where Russian messaging is far from dominant. Nearly half of stories about Russia in Moldovan media are negative, and the same proportion of stories about the EU positive.⁵⁰ The number of Moldovans with a positive image of the EU rose 5 percent, to 48 percent, from 2017 to 2018.⁵¹

However, high-quality Russian entertainment programming continues to draw many Moldovans toward Russian narratives. In 2018 the US Embassy in Chisinau advertised for bids for a \$2 million program to dub US and European entertainment shows for Moldovan television and create native Moldovan programs “to challenge the oft repeated assertion that Romanian language programming and local productions cannot be competitive against Russian language programs re-broadcast and/or repackaged from abroad.”⁵²

In fact, some openly pro-Russian institutes and organizations have become less active or vanished entirely in Georgia in recent years.⁵⁴ In their place, Georgia presents a different challenge to USAGM: a rise in native right-wing organizations leaning to nationalism, fascism, xenophobia, and anti-gay sentiments—a phenomenon also seen in Ukraine, Moldova, and Russia itself. While the Georgian groups’ links to Russian operators may not be obvious, their activities serve Kremlin purposes and Kremlin-aligned news outlets promote their narratives.⁵⁵ The groups oppose tolerant Western values, promote suspicions toward the EU, NATO, and the United States, and undermine national stability. A Georgia divided over its basic values and political direction is less likely to join NATO or otherwise be geopolitically useful to Western interests.

Most Georgians still lean heavily toward the West. 81 percent back the government’s goal of joining the EU, and 75 percent want to join NATO.⁵⁶ Georgia’s own high-quality entertainment programs squeeze

50 Antoaneta Dimitrova et. al., “The Elements of Russia’s Soft Power: Channels, Tools, and Actors Promoting Russian Influence in the Eastern Partnership Countries,” *EU-STRAT*, July 2017, accessed December 18 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/y5kwdp4e>

51 “Annual Survey Report: Moldova,” p. 5/45.

52 “Funding opportunity: ‘Television Content Fund’ program,” US Embassy in Moldova, April 20, 2018, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://md.usembassy.gov/funding-opportunity-television-content-fund-program/>.

53 Giorgi Kanashvili, “Russian Soft Power in Georgia: Exploits, Limitations and Future Threats,” *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, October 16, 2017, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://ge.boell.org/en/2017/10/16/russian-soft-power-georgia-exploits-limitations-and-future-threats>

54 Dzvelishvili, Nata, “From a Pro-Russian to a Pro-Georgian Narrative,” *The Foreign Policy Centre*, July 18, 2018, <https://fpc.org.uk/from-a-pro-russian-to-a-pro-georgian-narrative/>.

55 For example, Sputnik Georgia was among Georgian media that spread a false narrative that Georgia’s support for the UN Global Compact for Migration meant that immigration to Georgia from Africa and Asia would increase. “Sputnik’s Manipulation on UN Compact and Increased Migrant Flow,” *Myth Detector*, December 20, 2018, <http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/sputniks-manipulation-un-compact-and-increased-migration-flow>.

56 Laura Thornton and Koba Turmanidze, “Public attitudes in Georgia,” *National Democratic Institute and CCRC Georgia*, March 2018, accessed December 18, 2018, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_June_2018_Presentation_Public_ENG_vf.pdf.

out Russian productions. However, plenty remains in Georgian society for illiberal forces to exploit. 62 percent of Georgians think being Orthodox is very or somewhat important to being “truly” part of the nation.⁵⁷ The church is an active propagator of conservative social positions.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Georgians have dwindling confidence in other institutions that should be strong guarantors of civil society: parliament, the government, the judiciary, the media, and NGOs.⁵⁹ 30 percent of Georgians aged eighteen to thirty-five believe the end of the Soviet Union was a negative development, and 57 percent of Georgians say Stalin played a positive role in history.⁶⁰

US international media in Georgia are budgeted at \$3.2 million annually, compared to \$7.2 million for embassy public diplomacy operations. They include VOA’s Georgian-language television and internet products, which focus mainly on American and Georgian-American themes. VOA also produces correspondent reports for Georgian broadcasters’ news programs. The proposed presidential budget for FY 2020 calls for elimination of RFE/RL’s Georgian Service. RFE/RL’s Radio Tavisupleba (Radio Liberty) concentrates on domestic affairs, particularly breaking news, politics, and problems of democracy. Its *Perspective* television program lists its mission as reporting “what is hindering and what is helping us on the road to democracy.”

RFE/RL also operates Ekho Kavkaza (Echo of the Caucasus), offering an hour-long daily radio program, website, and social media feed for Russian-occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Beyond its internet services, USAGM depends on local media in Georgia to distribute its programming. As in

Ukraine and Moldova, some local outlets are controlled by political groups or politically aligned business interests. In 2017, the Georgian Public Broadcaster dropped two regular TV programs from Radio Tavisupleba, one about Georgia’s Soviet past and the other on government accountability and political debate. The network said it was simply overhauling its schedule, but critics saw the move as silencing independent voices.⁶¹

“A Georgia divided over its basic values and political direction is less likely to join NATO or otherwise be geopolitically useful to Western interests.”

The same year, RFE/RL faced difficulties when it considered placing programming on Georgia’s popular Rustavi 2 network, which is associated with former President Mikheil Saakashvili and other opposition figures. The Tavisupleba staff resisted putting programs on Rustavi because it was not politically neutral, and eventually the idea was dropped. However, the question will continue to arise in many nations: is USAGM’s most important goal to reach the audience it wants to target, or is audience size less important than the distributors it associates itself with?

57 “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” Pew Research Center, May 17, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2017/05/CEUP-FULL-REPORT.pdf>.

58 Oana Popescu and Rufin Zamfir, “Propaganda made-to-measure: How our vulnerabilities facilitate Russian influence,” *Global Focus*, German Marshall Fund, February 2018, p. 165, accessed December 18, 2018, <http://www.global-focus.eu/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Propaganda-Made-to-Measure-How-Our-Vulnerabilities-Facilitate-Russian-Influence.pdf>.

59 “Propaganda made-to-measure,” p. 168.

60 “Propaganda made-to-measure,” p. 35.

61 “Georgian Public Broadcaster Terminates RFE/RL Programs,” RFE/RL, June 16, 2017, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/28559326.html>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The governance and organizational issues of USAGM, and the particular challenges of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, suggest the following steps to improve the performance of US international media:

Cross-regional recommendations for USAGM:

- ◆ Government advocate or not? The staffs and audiences of the USAGM networks are entitled to clear guidance about whether their job is to advance American foreign policy objectives, or whether they are to be truly independent. Middle courses are also possible.⁶² The question has been in dispute for decades. It requires discussion and resolution. The administration and Congress then should then hew to the understanding reached.
- ◆ Separate missions. Congress and USAGM should respect the separate missions of the government and surrogate broadcasters. USAGM should limit multinet network projects that could blur these distinctions. If Congress continues to see value in the grantees being private companies, it should consider completely severing them from the USAGM structure, making them direct reports to Congress, and removing the secretary of state from their boards.⁶³ The extensive powers that the USAGM CEO has been given over the private grantees since 2016 risk violating language in the International Broadcasting Act stating the grantees should not become federal entities.
- ◆ Research and promotion. USAGM spends only \$4 million per year for its central research unit;⁶⁴ research budgets for the individual networks are similarly modest. Depending on the country,

in-person audience surveys are conducted from every twelve months to every four years, gaps far too long to accurately judge the effect of radio and TV programming. (Analytics tools help with social media and web services, but could be used much more extensively). The networks must have timely and detailed information about their audiences, and adequate marketing support when they pick audiences to target.

“USAGM must be better prepared to immediately promote and deploy proxies and other software to help audiences reach its content.”

- ◆ Preparation for worst-case scenarios. Not only typhoons devastate USAGM operations.⁶⁵ As regimes in even small authoritarian nations seem to grow less concerned about US displeasure, there are likely to be more actions against USAGM operations (web blocking, broadcast jamming, restrictions on local media distribution) and harassment and brutality toward its reporters.⁶⁶ Russia is now planning ways of isolating its internet from the rest of the world. USAGM must be better prepared to immediately promote and deploy proxies and other software to help audiences reach its content. In critical cases, US government assets beyond USAGM’s own may be needed to punch through broadcast jamming and provide internet service despite blockages. USAGM has also had success with offering its content, through websites and

62 One approach is for the networks to focus their coverage on issues like human rights and democracy, but within those topics to adhere rigidly to objective reporting. For an elaboration of this approach, see Thomas Kent, “Does Neutrality Mean Indifference?” Ethical Journalism Network, March 13, 2017, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/neutral-journalism>.

63 The boards of the three grantees are identical to the members of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Giving the grantees their own direct reporting line to Congress is not a new concept. Such proposals were made in H.4490 in 2014 and H.2323 in 2015. They would help reinforce RFE/RL’s position, in Russia and other nations, that it is more an NGO than a government agency.

64 “Audience and Impact: Overview for 2018.” The entities also have some research funds of their own.

65 Typhoon Yutu in October 2018 destroyed massive USAGM shortwave transmitting stations on the Pacific islands of Saipan and Tinian, used for RFA and VOA services to China, Korea, Cambodia, and Burma. Transmissions continued from other points, but less effectively. James Careless, “Super Typhoon Devastates USAGM Transmitter Sites,” *Radio World*, December 20, 2018, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://www.radioworld.com/news-and-business/super-typhoon-devastates-usagm-transmission-sites>.

66 For some of many recent actions against USAGM correspondents, almost all of them citizens of the countries where they work, see “Our journalists, under threat,” USAGM, accessed December 31, 2018, <https://www.usagm.gov/news-and-information/threats-to-press/>.

email distribution, to small websites and broadcasters desperate for reliable content. This is an additional way to keep content flowing if main channels for USAGM material are blocked.

- ◆ Funding. By any reasonable measure, US broadcasters are inadequately funded. As a yardstick, the United States spends \$1.48 billion⁶⁷ a year on State Department public diplomacy efforts, 80 percent more than Congress provides for USAGM operations that arguably reach more people. (The proposed FY 2020 budget slashes total USAGM spending by 22 percent.) USAGM networks would benefit significantly from obtaining and controlling their own full-time broadcast signals. Audience research is expensive; surveys can cost more than \$100,000 per country. USAGM production values need significant improvement, especially in television, to compete with news and other programming produced by hostile powers and oligarch-controlled networks. That said, television isn't the answer to everything. In confronting new challenges, USAGM should consider whether aggressive social media strategies might be as effective as TV, and at lower cost. Always-on TV networks can be reassessed to see if they could become less expensive video-on-demand services; in other locations, including high-priority Iran, radio is still effective and a financial bargain.

Regional recommendations:

- ◆ Russia. The statistics in this paper suggest many USAGM consumers in Russia are already open to Western points of view. However, this is not a static population. Discontent over pensions, economic sanctions, and corruption is such that even population segments that are generally pro-Putin may be open to new perspectives. To grow its Russian audience, USAGM must double down on its social network strategy to seek new, young audiences, build bridges to video bloggers, and encourage independent filmmakers. This risks losing some old-time Radio Liberty followers who harken back to the Soviet dissident community and have a taste for long, analytical text stories, often in a literary style. Narrowly focused regional services should continue to be a priority; a news service's credibility soars when listeners can see with their own eyes that its coverage of local events is correct. The current political turmoil
- ◆ Ukraine. USAGM should continue its two-track approach of covering Russian actions against Ukraine while holding those in power accountable for their own actions. Because of the risks inherent in its aggressive domestic reporting, RFE/RL should prioritize developing its own delivery platforms independent of local distributors; the company is currently planning a 24/7 TV-like YouTube channel. Besides the training it offers Ukrainian journalists through RFE/RL's Kyiv bureau, USAGM should base trainers in Ukrainian media organizations for a month or more and bring Ukrainian journalists to the United States or to RFE/RL in Prague for similarly long periods.
- ◆ Moldova. In this highly polarized country, Europa Liberă's programming must be brought to a higher technical standard and reach out more to younger audiences. To the extent possible, Europa Liberă should collaborate with other pro-Western media and foundations to create entertainment programming that advances appropriate values. The US Embassy's funding efforts can play a role. Europa Liberă's content for the large Moldovan diaspora in the EU, Russia, and elsewhere deserves further development. Europa Liberă should continue its work with reputable Moldovan journalistic training organizations, including sending senior journalists to teach and taking students as interns.
- ◆ Georgia. Radio Tavisupleba has already begun redesigning its coverage to reinforce breaking news and digital operations. Positioning Tavisupleba as a go-to source for local news and investigative reporting should improve its visibility with younger audiences while still serving the more traditional and intellectual human rights community that has long followed the broadcaster. The digital focus will also help buttress USAGM's distribution in the event of new turbulence over carriage by local media. Given the rise of extremist tendencies in some parts of Georgian society, VOA coverage from the United States and other Western nations should emphasize issues of civil society and inclusiveness.

⁶⁷ "2018 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thomas Kent served from 2016-2018 as president and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, based in Prague. Earlier, at the Associated Press, he worked in Hartford, New York, Sydney, and Brussels, and led AP operations in Iran and Russia. He was international editor of the AP and head of the AP supervisory desk. He served for nine years as standards editor, with worldwide responsibility for AP's ethics, accuracy, and fairness in text, photos, and video.

Kent has written and spoken widely on ethics, press freedom, and disinformation. His articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *the American Interest*, *The Hill*, and many other publications. He has led or advised on ethics projects for the Online News Association, the Society of Professional Journalists, the Ethical Journalism Network, and the Global Editors Network, and taught at the Poynter Institute. He has spoken at professional forums in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, the Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, Austria, Latvia, United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. He has also lectured, in English, French, and Russian, to students and faculty of twenty-eight universities in seven countries.

Kent teaches about international reporting, propaganda, and disinformation at Columbia University's Harriman Institute. Previously he taught at the Columbia Journalism School. He has twice been a member of the Pulitzer Prize jury for international reporting.

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