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Peter Vaselopulos in Conversation with Hadi Gharabaghi and Bret Vukoder

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Interview Information

Peter Vaselopulos, now retired, is the former deputy chief information officer and deputy director of information technology at the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM). Beginning with a photography internship in 1981, his career spanned four decades at USIA and its later iterations, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and USAGM.

In this conversation, we discuss the key roles Vaselopulos played in developing and realizing emergent media technologies for the agencies while exploring political, ideological, and aesthetic questions related to his experiences and USIA more broadly. In the 1980s and 1990s, Vaselopulos served as both a producer and head of marketing for Worldnet, USIA's satellite television technology channel, which some identify as the first truly international satellite television network. Known for its "dialogues"—programs in which journalists, leaders, and citizens could speak to prominent politicians and figures from the United States over satellite in real time—Vaselopulos provides fascinating details, insights, and (sometimes harrowing) anecdotes on his experiences with Worldnet. He then describes his pivotal work in creating the Voice of America's first website, voanews.com. Though the site materialized online alongside other prominent news outlets in the late 1990s, it was unique for its on-the-ground, transnational journalism network and localized "in-language" material, which continued the legacy of VOA's radio programming during the Cold War. Finally, we discuss possible pedagogies and historiographies that may aid our collective understanding of USIA's complex history.

Early Career with USIA As Photographer and Producer at Worldnet (1981–1993)

Hadi Gharabaghi: This is an interesting time to come to this conversation. From the standpoint of our field, even though we talk about film and media, we have somehow managed to render certain things invisible or avoid having a conversation about it. So we are very excited to have this conversation session.

Bret Vukoder: Can you describe how your career began with USIA? What initially interested you in the agency? How did your career start, and what did that first position look like?

Peter Vaselopulos: I was a student at American University and working at the time. I started my master's program in international communications in 1981. The Ronald Reagan era had just started, and I had gotten familiar with the United States Information Agency at graduate school. That summer, they had posted a position for a GS-5 photographer. I applied and got it. I was lucky because in undergrad, I had gained experience as a photographer, and I had a portfolio, which I was able to present. The head of the photography section was Lee Battaglia, a former *National Geographic* photographer. They were looking for someone that had already some type of media

background, and I stepped in. They equipped me with state-of-the-art Nikon 35-millimeter cameras with a huge bag full of lenses. I was paid to take pictures from May to September. I thought, “What a great assignment!” Besides, it was on Pennsylvania Avenue, where the World Bank is located now. But at the time, USIA was just a block away from the White House. Every morning, I would be given an assignment saying that Ambassador So-and-so is coming to the White House and I needed to go and take pictures. There would be some publication for Africa or for the Middle East, and they submitted those photographs [I took].

At the time, there was a treaty with the Soviet Union that allowed both the United States and the Soviet Union to distribute a magazine within the other country. So the United States distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of our magazine, *Amerika*, within the Soviet Union. If I was lucky, I would have an assignment that would get published in *Amerika*. It was a big deal to get published in *Amerika*. It was what I envisioned as being a photojournalist. I think we take it for granted that back then, photographs were very powerful, just as films were. And we were just at the cusp of using video.

Imagery was very important for telling a story, and the use of imagery has always been an essential part of the United States’ mission to communicate America’s story by visualizing it, by giving people around the world access to images of what life was in America. People all around the world wanted to know what was going on in the United States. So for me to be a photographer, go to the White House, and meet with other photographers, it was exciting.

I had to carry three cameras when I would go into the Oval Office. We were herded in like cattle and would go through and then outside to the Rose Garden. I remember the first time I went to the Oval Office. I was so mesmerized, looking around and saying, “Here I am with the president of the United States, and I can hardly wait to call my parents and tell them.” It was very distracting at first, but then it became very normal. I did that for five months, and that was what got me started with USIA.

After getting my master’s, I realized that I wanted to work for USIA. But my first real job in media was with CNN in the early ’80s as a photographer, taking stills. One day someone quit, and they asked me to carry the sound equipment with the boom microphone. Next thing I knew, I was on Capitol Hill interviewing congressmen. So that was my entrée into broadcast media, all because I had that photojournalism background.

BV: So you learned a lot of skills with moving-image productions on the fly with CNN?

PV: Right. But I understood media production. Then, at some point in late 1984, I heard that USIA was looking for assistant producers for Worldnet, which was this new television service. I saw some of them on the playlist you sent me.

[*The editors sent Peter a short playlist of Worldnet “dialogues” and* TV Satellite File *episodes before the interview.*]

Some stuff is before my time, and some stuff I’m aware of. The Warren Burger interview—I was there. I don’t remember if I was the producer for that show, but I was there the day that he arrived. He was speaking about the two-hundredth anniversary of the Constitution, and he had these little Constitutions that he was handing out, signing them. I actually still have a copy, along with a script that he signed. [*Laughter*]

The Worldnet studios were at a separate building—the Patrick Henry Building, it was called.

And I can't remember why they had built studios. It wasn't originally for USIA. It was right by Chinatown, so there was always good Chinese food available. So from that time, from 1985 until like 1992, I was producing all these Worldnet shows.

BV: Did your position in '81, while you were still a graduate student taking still photography, inform your decision to come back in 1985?

PV: Absolutely.

BV: In what ways?

PV: Well, I just inherently understood what the mission was. And I understood the rudiments of the photography and how it was being used. I was always cautious to use the right words, but it was a bit like tourist photography. In a way, it was promoting the United States and sharing the idealism of democracy and the concepts of what made America a great country.

The hunger for that information was very strong in the 1980s. There were a lot of people who couldn't get enough information about what was going on in the United States. We have to kind of walk back to that moment in history, when global information was challenged. You had so many gatekeepers that were controlling information, and the ability to get fresh, new information about the United States—there was a hunger for it. The United States wasn't unique in doing this, but it capitalized on media specialists and used the network of American embassies, libraries, and cultural centers. The United States government really had a methodology that was effective. Students would come to the cultural centers, and they'd have access to magazines, to movies, to these films, to visiting scholars, etc. And in 1981, I realized I wanted to be part of that.

BV: Were there particular things about moving images that you thought were especially important toward the USIA mission? Or did you just want to be involved with USIA more generally?

PV: I mean, originally, I just wanted to be a part of it. Then I got more familiar with what USIA was doing with international media, especially broadcasts. That type of a two-way communication didn't exist, or it only existed for governments and certain media agencies that had the money to do it. USIA was on the cutting edge of technology, and for me that was exciting. Having worked at CNN, I understood that this was a very powerful medium, and the ability to do these satellite conferences was something that I was very interested in.

Describing Worldnet, the USIA Television Initiative

BV: Speaking of Worldnet, within scholarship that we've read, it's kind of fraught how people talk about it. There's a lot of competing definitions, competing understandings. So I'd be really curious to hear, in your own words, how you describe Worldnet as a technology and as a medium for content. Then, what were some elements of your day-to-day working with Worldnet?

PV: All right, so two parts. When I first got interviewed for the job and came in as a production assistant, I think it was clear. At this point, I'm coming from a CNN perspective, when they were just starting to be global. CNN was nowhere near where Worldnet was. Satellite communication at the time was very limited. I remember when I came in, one of the first things you learned was how to do

cables to embassies and telecom organizations to get permission to do a satellite program into a particular country. So when we were first doing those interactives, the “Dialogues,” the producers would have to be working with these telecommunication organizations representing individual countries, seeking permission to allow the broadcasts to be beamed into the country.

The other thing was that there were two components to USIA television. There was the news component, producing a live television newscast called *America Today* [Figure 1]. That was intended to be in English [and] kind of [serve as] a daily newsfeed, similar to a half-hour network morning show. And the other component was the “Dialogues”—the “interactives,” we called it. It’s funny, the term was “interactive,” but the technology relied on each participating embassy having a sufficient satellite dish—a C-band dish—that would enable them to bring down the signal. Then, by telephone, we would welcome participants that were invited to the embassy or the cultural center to ask questions of particular guests. The topics were very regionally specific, but if we had a topic like the Constitution, we would do a multitude of shows for the particular embassies.

Figure 1: America Today (1987), title screen
Designed to serve a similar function of shows like NBC's Today and ABC's Good Morning America, America Today was a daily feature of Worldnet programming. [NARA 306-WNTDY-870807] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMvZ3xmsKN0&t=102s&ab_channel=TransdiffusionBroadcastingSystem]

I think the formula was interesting. We were in a studio setting and would usually have a setup video—that I was very good at producing. Then, if it was in another language, we had to get the script done and versioned in the appropriate language, making sure that there were live simultaneous interpreters.

I think the “Dialogues” were pretty formulaic, but people like Warren Burger were excellent guests. He really understood the subject matter. And how often do you get to talk to a chief justice of the Supreme Court? That’s very powerful. He was just one of many top-notch guests that represented the elite of American subject matter experts.

BV: I’m fascinated by some of the names, like Jeane Kirkpatrick, Warren Burger. They made frequent appearances. I think I saw maybe five or six entries with Warren Burger. Considering how quiet and off-the-record many of the Supreme Court justices are nowadays, it’s really fascinating that Warren Burger was that public, forthright, and open to discussing America, especially considering it was for audiences other than the American public.

PV: I haven’t had a chance to go back in my files to see who the producer for that show was. If it was me, I would be calling up the Supreme Court and saying, “Can we get Warren Burger?” I was a producer for a show with Ted Turner, and it was like, “Hey, Ted, come on over!” We had Charlton Heston once. When he came in, everyone’s going, “Moses is here! Moses is here!” We had top-notch sports personalities, media personalities, and Hollywood actors. I think [the guests] really got it. They understood what we were doing. And I don’t think anything we did was controversial, in the sense that we weren’t asking anyone to say anything that they didn’t believe. I think that’s an

important takeaway.

Worldnet worked because we were asking honest questions, and the participants responded honestly. There was no, “Hey, Warren, you got to say this.” There was none of that. If someone asked a hard question from the audience from England or from whatever country participated, we didn’t give [the guests] any, “Oh, my God, you can’t say this or that.” Who’s going to tell a Supreme Court justice what to say or not to say?

BV: Did you find a lot of the questions from media and audiences of Worldnet to be critical, challenging the guests? Did they push them in any productive or interesting ways? Is there maybe one case that stands out to you that exemplifies this?

PV: I don’t remember anything that would have been that controversial, even with some of the harder topics, like when we did programs on civil rights. It was difficult subject matter back then and still is today, but we did it. It’s amazing when I look back. We were producing shows on Black history, and a lot of the stuff that we did was groundbreaking, especially considering it was a Republican administration. When the subject matter did not necessarily paint the brightest picture, it was still honest because we were giving people the opportunity [to respond on their own terms].

[For example,] John Lewis was a guest. I remember very clearly when he was talking about the civil rights movement. This was a gentleman who was beat up for being a civil rights advocate. And let’s face it, that doesn’t necessarily paint the United States in the best light. But it does represent the fact that, here he is, now a congressman, coming on a show and talking about his connection with Martin Luther King Jr. That was groundbreaking. I wish we could still do that type of stuff. That’s what’s needed, basic honesty. There were difficult times in American history, and we were giving people access to some of the people that actually lived that history.

BV: Absolutely. And seeing the list of some [Worldnet programs] that are available but are yet to be digitized, the list of guests is just incredible. It kind of gives you hope that democracy still can be grounded in dialogue after seeing that model from the 1980s with these Worldnets.

PV: Hopefully, that’s the end result of what you two are trying to achieve here. There was a time when this was a no-brainer. The technology of the day was satellite. It was the only way, and [it was] only [possible] by using and leveraging the embassies’ relationships with local media. That’s how you would get a journalist invited to an embassy, get a recording of the interview, and then be able to disseminate it through their channels. Because at this time, we didn’t have access to local media. And let’s face it, in the early ’80s, a lot of countries were still licensing and controlling media. So it was a big challenge to truly do global media.

Discussing the Impact and Meaning of the Smith–Mundt Act

HG: Were you aware if these interviews were also available to Americans inside the US, or was there a specific protocol determining if something would be aired to a particular country? For example, if there was a deal with the embassy in London for a program, would it also go to other places after that? It’s a question of dissemination.

PV: The Smith–Mundt Act was very drilled into us. There was no possibility of distribution in the United States. Rarely, as in the case of the Polish uprising, they did a program like *Let Poland Be*

Poland, where they got special permission to make it available in the United States. But no, it was quite clear. Everyone knew about the Smith–Mundt Act, and I think technology limited our ability to distribute.

HG: Though you say the Smith–Mundt Act was clear for you all, did you feel it made sense for these programs not to be aired for Americans? These seem like great interviews. [*Laughter*]

PV: I think it goes back to the whole concept of international media. For government organizations, their purpose is not to influence US audiences. This goes back to the whole concept behind USIA. You can throw a lot of terminology at it and debate the various words that describe the effort, but it was clear that our goal was to assist foreign policy by sharing this type of information. These stories gave [other countries] access to US guests that US audiences already had access to. Media organizations in the United States could interview Warren Burger whenever they wanted. But for a journalist in London, or someone in North Africa or Asia, their ability to get access to someone like Warren Burger was limited. Plus, there was an incentive for Warren Burger to promote the two-hundredth anniversary of the US Constitution. It was a quid pro quo. He gets to promote the longevity of the US Constitution around the world, and people around the world get to ask him questions of what made the US Constitution unique. What was the secret sauce that the founders of this country were able to foresee the processes two hundred years from now?

You know, my wife just became a US citizen, and I was helping her learn the questions that you would have to respond to [in a citizenship test]. And what is one of the questions? "What are the first three words of the US Constitution?" It's "We the people." Let's face it, a lot of people around the world still struggle with that concept. Another question asked what the foundation of the American government is. And that's the rule of law. A lot of people around the world would be amazed that that's still embedded in our consciousness as US citizens. I think for Warren Burger, [sharing these ideas] was very important back in 1987.

HG: So the guests also knew that they were not going to be aired in the United States?

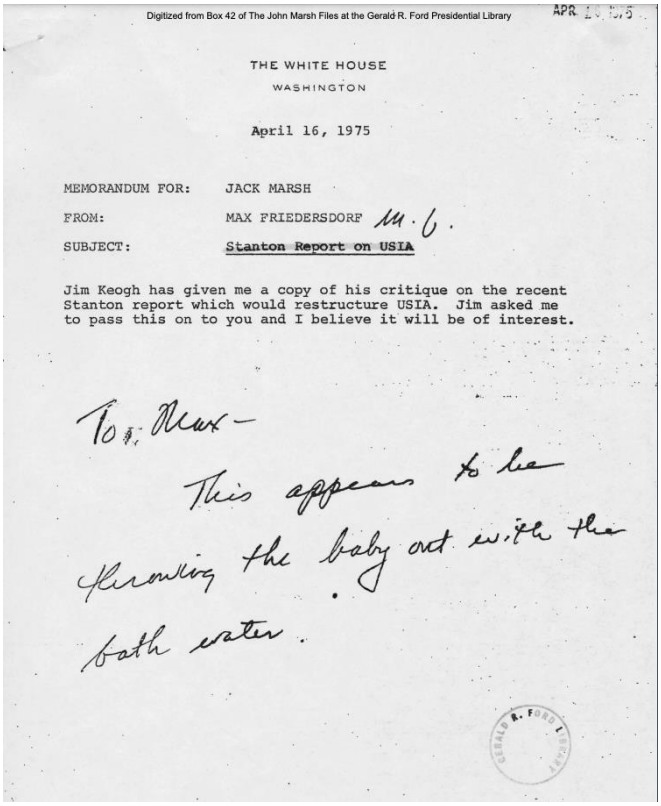
PV: Yes.

HG: Please correct me if I'm not representing this accurately, but there was this understanding that the government wouldn't advertise itself to its own citizens? Was it an understanding that it was okay for the US government to be funding programming to other people, as you aptly described—providing voices, facilitating, making available the resources that otherwise wouldn't be available to people outside of the US? But the government doing that to the American people would be a problem?

PV: I wouldn't dare to present myself as an expert on Smith–Mundt, and I'm not a lawyer. But it was explained to me early on in my career that the root of Smith–Mundt goes back to the 1940s. I think you have to understand that in countries like Great Britain, where they adopted a model where the government was heavily influencing national broadcasting, they had a model where if you bought a television set, you paid for a license whose fee went to programming. Whereas in the United States, the model was different. You've got to go back to the origin of American broadcasting. The red-white-and-blue networks that became ABC, NBC, and CBS were very wary of the United States government getting involved in national broadcasting. There was a little bit of lobbying going on, and

you had the whole McCarthy thing going on in the 1950s. Smith–Mundt reflects a perspective, a fear, that the United States government could be caught up in trying to be very persuasive, and in [the network executives'] mind, they were advocating for a free and open press that was not encumbered by any government restrictions.

If I may be so bold as to encourage you to look at [your question] in a different way. I think throughout the whole life of the agency—whether we were called the International Communication Agency, the United States Information Service, the United States Information Agency, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the International Broadcasting Bureau, or now the United States Agency for Global Media—every so many decades, journalists and government leaders take a step back and kind of want to get rooted in [asking], "Why are we doing this? What's the purpose of this?" I would say that the purpose is to be able to manage knowledge and information and disseminate it to people around the world in as many languages as possible, to allow people to look at America, as we would always say, "warts and all"—an open, honest viewpoint of the United States, which has a lot of great things. But we also have our problems, like any other country.



Digitized from Box 42 of The John Marsh Files at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library

APR

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

April 16, 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: JACK MARSH

FROM: MAX FRIEDERSDORF M.F.

SUBJECT: Stanton Report on USIA

Jim Keogh has given me a copy of his critique on the recent Stanton report which would restructure USIA. Jim asked me to pass this on to you and I believe it will be of interest.

To: Max –

This appears to be throwing the baby out with the bath water.

GERALD R. FORD

Figure 2: "A Critique of the Stanton Report on Information" (May 17, 1975), USIA, cover page

While many within USIA sought vast institutional changes in 1975 and agreed with some general suggestions of the Stanton Report, they expressed concern regarding how they went about structural change. In essence, the found the report to misunderstand the nuance of agency operations and intricacies of budgeting. ["United States Information Agency," Box 42, John Marsh Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0067/1563224.pdf]

If you go back in the 1970s, they did hearings on it. They invited the president of CBS [Frank Stanton] to come and do a retrospective on why the agency exists [Figure 2]. [In these cases,] the Voice of America, which is the news component, usually faces the real challenge. That's always going to be the more complicated [component], asking why do we need the United States government doing international news.

I think it always reflected some views of the Founding Fathers of the United States. For example, how Benjamin Franklin [was interested in the role of] the post office and newspapers. It was basically the internet or email of his day. He was spreading information through the colonies. That was the root of independence, and they understood that a free media was necessary. The electorate, Jefferson even said, needed to be given the information that was required to make wise and informed decisions. I think that's the root of why we need the Voice of America, and I would always be supporting that. We live in a world today in which people around the world are still not getting unfettered news and information in their language. When you look at all the news components of USAGM—whether it's Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Middle East Broadcasting . . .

HG: VOA Persia . . .

PV: . . . the Office of Human Broadcasting—ultimately, no one would deny that news and information in language is critical to electorates around the world. Now, how has that changed?

I think your exercise here reflects that. What was available to us back in the ’80s that is not available to the people at USAGM today? Time. We had a lot more time to be thoughtful in putting together program content. Today everything is so quick. Everything requires speed. We live in a world where information has to get out there, and we have to be cautious. There’s a balance between speed and veracity—the truthfulness of the information. That’s not to say that anyone’s purposefully not being truthful. It’s just that when you, as a media organization, are rushing to get information out because of the competitive nature of media, you have to be wary that incorrect information is sometimes going to get out. We have to make sure, at least when it comes to representing the United States, there’s a mindfulness that we’re not competing with commercial media. I suspect that VOA in this new era is going to go through another “Why are we doing this?” type of thing. But I would hope that in doing that, they would go back and say, okay, in the 1980s, we had Worldnet, and we had VOA. Why is it that we don’t have Worldnet today? People could question that. I think they serve two distinct missions. In regard to Smith–Mundt, people now have no problem going to voanews.com and having direct access to VOA material. We don’t stop that [anymore].

Serving As the Head of International Marketing for Worldnet for the USIA Office of Affiliate Relations and Stories of Installing Worldnet Infrastructure (1993–1999)

BV: You even got the app now. The app is actually really nice. It’s pretty easy to navigate. And given we’re talking about more recent technologies, maybe we have a bit of a natural segue. I know you had two positions before your most recent one . . .

PV: I was part of the Office of Affiliate Relations. I was responsible for marketing television.

BV: How would you describe that position? What were some of the constraints, difficulties, opportunities?

PV: Around 1993, after having been a producer for seven, eight years, I applied for and got a job doing marketing [at USIA]. You have to remember, in 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. You’re starting to see a huge expansion of free media in Eastern European markets. VOA, Worldnet, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty realized that the future was going through rebroadcasting. That means with the explosion of FM radio stations in Eastern Europe, there’s a whole spectrum of commercial media that was worthwhile for us to deal with. But rebroadcasting American media [produced by] the United States government isn’t a top market. So we were looking for opportunities to establish relations with national government media, trying to get rebroadcast on FM radio. The technology of the ’80s was shortwave, and during the Reagan administration, there was a lot of money spent on rebuilding shortwave technology. In fact, the United States government invested a lot of money in building our own satellite network.

We hired a lot of former NASA engineers, and they ended up working for USIA helping—alongside contractors—establish all the transmission facilities around the world, using a satellite network for us to put up our radio programming and video and bring it back down. To be able to reach audiences around the world, you still had to develop new technologies to do that. Only a government agency had the money to purchase the type of satellite bandwidth to put out those streams, to create a network to be able to deliver programming all around the world.

"We hired a lot of former NASA engineers, and they ended up working for USIA helping—alongside contractors—to establish all the transmission facilities around the world, using a satellite network for us to put up our radio programming and video and bring it back down...Only a government agency had the money to purchase the type of satellite bandwidth to put out those streams, to create a network to be able to deliver programming all around the world."

In my case, a couple of years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Czech government invited the United States government to move Radio Free Europe from Munich to Prague. All of this is occurring in the early '90s. After I got hired [in my new position], there were a lot of these media conferences all around the world. I got to travel to Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and do marketing conferences where we would create video promotions of our programming content. During the '90s, we were working very closely with public broadcasting, and they were letting us repurpose some of their content and distribute that internationally. I was leading the marketing part of that, letting media organizations learn what was available.

BV: How would you describe the essence of that type of pitch when you're going to these conferences? Was it tied up with the agency's mission? Was it a technological pitch?

PV: I think you have to understand the economics of entrée media organizations, even in the United States. In the late '80s, we created a program for FM radio in Europe with a mix of news and music called *VOA Europe*. [At the time,] there were a lot of anti-American protests going on in Europe because Reagan and Gorbachev were struggling for international recognition [concerning the] short-range missiles that the United States put in the European theater. A lot of Europeans were being encouraged to protest. So, we [went with a] music and mixed format that worked very well with a lot of FM stations who [were interested] in—from eleven o'clock to five o'clock in the morning—using this VOA programming for free. You basically could put on this music with about a five-minute newscast. Who cares [they thought], no one's listening. We actually built up a network of three hundred FM stations in Europe, and it became very popular. This was all happening in the '90s, and then [Czech president] Václav Havel invited all of that [infrastructure] to come to Prague. I ended up getting an assignment in 1995 to go and live in Prague, and we moved our marketing [operations] for that area to the Czech Republic. We had an office in the former Czechoslovakian parliamentary building, which I always found to be incredible. Here I was in an office where former communist officials worked. Also, at that time, the internet was becoming well known, and I was able to listen to Hawaiian ukulele music from the United States in Prague. That's when I started to recognize, "Oh, my God, the internet is going to change everything." I know we want to talk about the internet, but before we do that, understand the dynamics of the evolutionary media markets in Eastern Europe.

Struggling radio stations would seek out our news content, in language, because at that time we had Czech, Slovak, Polish, and some of the Eastern European languages that don't exist now [in

our content]. And we were producing news content they could use for free. This was a no-brainer for them. It wasn't very difficult to market. On the other hand, television stations were very interested in the public broadcasting material that was language-versioned, and some of the stuff was very, very good. Much of the stuff from PBS was top notch. For example, *MacNeil/Lehrer* and some of the science and technology programs, we were giving them access to all this. It didn't cost them a dime.

HG: So you said you traveled to Europe, different countries. Can you describe the process of contacting talent and experts outside of the country? Was it primarily through embassies? Was it through special offices dealing with USIA technology issues? Was it through the foreign governments' infrastructure? How did USIA communicate with other countries in order to give them access to or provide them with media?

PV: You have to understand, let's say, with the Voice of America, they have about 3,500 people from countries all around the world. They're plugged in to the media. Primarily, a lot of the language services were producing three to four half-hour-long-format programs for radio. And they were just starting to develop television in the early '90s. The volume of television for VOA was limited, but it was just starting. It was the embassy or journalists who had media contacts in their countries—all of the above, from what you listed. All of them would have been [involved]. "Hey, this particular organization would like to rebroadcast this FM broadcast, this Worldnet show, this film," or whatever. There was a defined process, especially if we granted them equipment. For example, if you're an FM station, and you can't afford to get a digital receiver and a satellite dish, we would provide that. We had technicians. I even went to Sarajevo in 1994 and delivered [materials like this] for an FM radio station during the war. I flew in on a C-130 with another colleague, and we had to get picked up by an armored carrier truck. We arrived at the FM station, and it was called Radio ZID. *Zid* means "wall" [in Bosnian]. I remember the logo [Figure 3] of the radio station was based on this Renaissance painting of the plague, where one of the figures in the painting was a man banging his head against a wall. [*Laughter*] That was the logo!

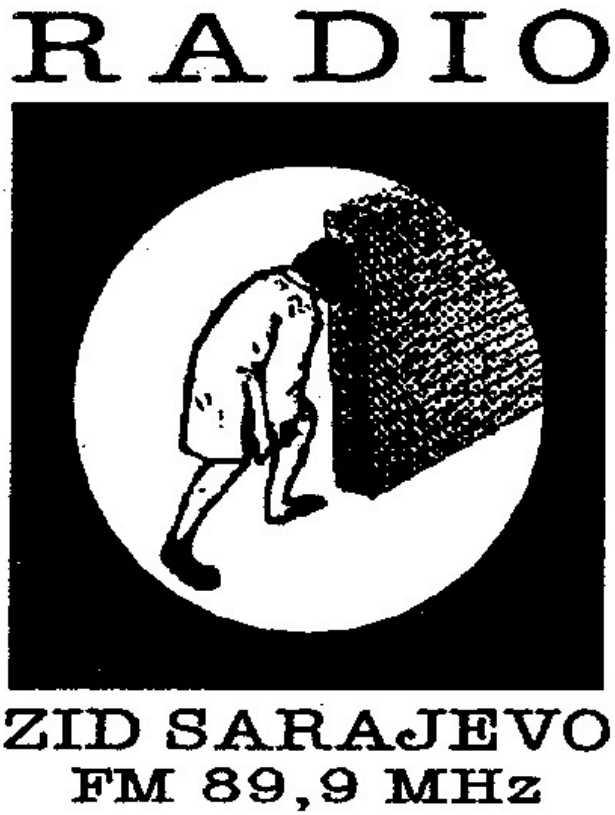


Figure 3: Radio Zid Logo
[Source: discogs.com]

One day—I just happened to be in Munich at the time—my colleague said, "Hey, we just got permission from the US military to catch a C-130 flight from Frankfurt." We got the dish, and I went to the technicians at Radio Free Europe or at the transmission station that was in Munich, and they showed me how to use a television set, look at the satellite—because it was still analog then—and be able to kind of plug in the satellite dish to then find the FM signal. So I called my wife and said,

“Hey, I’m going to Sarajevo. They tell me it’s safe.” My poor wife said, “Sure, go ahead.” We flew in and got picked up by this armored carrier provided by some journalist organization. We brought the equipment, we went immediately up to the roof of the radio station. They had hired a local technician, who was wearing a white jumper. And I’m sitting on top of a roof hearing sniper fire and US jets flying AIR CAP [Combat Air Patrol] over Sarajevo. I kept on looking at him going, “Could you pick anything besides white?” He was so visible on top of the roof. There was even shrapnel all over the roof from whatever was happening in the city when they were fighting, some of which I picked up and brought it back. But we installed the dish and went back into the studio, thankfully. I was like, “Phew, made it.” They turned it on and got the VOA Europe broadcast, and they were also able to do the Serbian and Croatian broadcasts.

I feel very proud of being a part of that. At the time, we did not have a Bosnian service, and because of our meetings with the local Bosnian media, we were able to get VOA to start a Bosnian service. Looking back on it, seems like a no-brainer, but back then, there was a little bit of, “Oh, Serbia and Croatia—it’s all the same.” But for the Bosnian FM radio station, they were like, “No, that’s a Serbian voice. That’s a Croatian voice. We need someone who’s Bosnian.” It’s like the distinction between speaking English from the Caribbean, the UK, or the United States. So it meant something to them, and I think it was important.

BV: That’s incredibly illuminating. What an incredible story!

HG: So, to clarify this process further, was USIA in direct contact with governments during these exchanges? Or were they in contact with nongovernmental entities in these foreign countries?

PV: In terms of contact with governments, [remember] that at the time, a lot of the media was [still] government-controlled media. In Serbia, for example, I would be meeting with representatives from state media. Those would have been government officials. And we were trying to get permission to rebroadcast our programming on state radio and TV. In a lot of countries, that still goes on today. Until recently, we worked with Doordarshan in India, which was still state-controlled media. Now it is privatized. If you wanted to get on air in India, you had to deal with government. Now, depending on a country’s relationship with the United States government, it could be good or bad.

Building voanews.com within the Growing Internet Landscape (1999–2005)

BV: To keep moving, we talked about content. It is interesting to hear about the formation of voanews.com. You were central to the formation of the voanews.com content, is that right?

PV: Not necessarily the content, but the system that managed the content. We’re actually approaching the twentieth anniversary of voanews.com. We started the process in 1999. Up until that point, individual language services were pretty much left to their own devices. If you go to the Wayback Machine, it’s kind of funny to see the evolution of voanews.com. [Figure 4] It’s kind of embarrassing [to look back at it]. But design aside, the ability to provide journalists with a productive and basic content management system that allowed them to post video, pictures, and audio and make that available in language [was significant]. At the time, we had to design it for fifty-four languages. Things like universal character sets or UTF [Unicode Transformation Format]—that was still relatively new.

Figure 4: voanews.com (November 9, 2000), image capture of homepage
[https://web.archive.org/web/20001109172200/http://www.voanews.com/]

We did this all using ColdFusion. At the time, conceptually, I was caught up in a lot of deep technical conversations with my IT staff, who insisted that everything be on-site. They wanted it all to be Unix. And I said, “No, we’re going to use Windows servers.” And they said, “Windows servers? Are you crazy?!” And then I said I’m going to be using a contractor to host it off-site. And they said I couldn’t do that. The word “cloud” didn’t exist. But the wonderful thing is that when you’re being given an assignment like that, you have to just cut to the chase. The only way to have done this was what we did. We used the technologies that were available twenty years ago. Obviously, we’ve learned so much since then, but the problems back then persist today. Fundamentally, [we dealt with] the issues of news XML [eXtensible Markup Language], and we never were successful in adopting news XML. I remember going to a World Wide Web Consortium, and I got very interested in these cross-lingual information retrieval studies. The technology was very limited, but the idea that

someday you would be able to take text, translate it, and make it available [was exciting]. Now, twenty years later, that's all come to reality. If I'd had access to that technology twenty years ago, it really would have been a different story. That, to me, is the final chapter that still needs to happen. Machine learning, and natural language processing, and all that. That's still in an evolving state. Obviously, again, [it's] only media organizations or government institutions that have the resources to invest in all that. You don't see CNN producing content in fifty-four languages. It's not marketable. Even Microsoft hasn't fully invested in making two hundred languages available for that type of translation.

BV: That's in part what I was curious about. Twenty years ago, when you're establishing voanews.com, content had already begun to proliferate on the internet. For lack of a better phrase, was the competitive advantage for voanews.com its capacity to work in multiple languages along with VOA's [long-standing] on-the-ground journalistic infrastructure? Was that a key engine to its success within the increasingly crowded market [of information]?

PV: I learned something in Sarajevo. I noticed that in the midst of a war, journalists working at these different radio stations basically transcribed CNN on the fly. And that was their wire.
I realized when we launched voanews.com that our story text was going to be the valuable commodity, like a newswire. A lot of my journalist friends at VOA probably don't remember this, but there was a lot of resistance for radio broadcasters to leverage the internet first, as a primary source. They saw the internet as a secondary source. In their mind, radio was still the higher priority, and if they had a breaking news story, they still believed disseminating it through radio was the higher goal. It was hard to challenge seasoned journalists and tell them, "I'm sorry but I think you're missing the bigger picture here."

You have to look at where the world was with media back in 1999–2000. Broadcast radio and television were still the media of preference. The internet's ability to reach a whole different type of audience was not [fully] understood at that time, the conceptualization of SMS [short message service], email newsletters, APIs [application programming interface], and social media—all the cool stuff—was about to unfold. We were really on the cusp of that back in 2000. It evolved, and I remember it was a whole big thing. "Social media, and new media!" But people were struggling because they were working so hard just to do their radio or TV program. They felt, "Wait a second, now I'm doing three jobs." It's evolved. It's become a specialty. One could almost make a case, "Yeah, get it on the internet right away. Boom. Social media, get it on. Instagram, get it on. That's where you're going to hit your audience." [We began to] understand the stratification of audiences. The fifty-year-olds or above—they're listening to radio. But the people who are [between] eighteen [and fifty], they're now going to the internet. They're going to social media. And I think it took a while. [Over the past twenty years,] we've gone through major changes, and it's amazing to see the energetic young people that are working now. They get "new media." I'm not sure why we even use the term anymore. I mean, media is media. It's a very powerful thing, and twenty years ago, it was a whole different story.

By the way, there were people that were pushing to have the website be voa.gov. And I fought them. I personally had to buy the domain name voanews.com. That was because voa.com had been acquired by Volunteers of America. I thought to myself, voanews—let's buy that and all the deviations of that.

I did my best to buy them all up. [It was in my personal name,] but eventually the organization took over the name. We were very creative with the resources that we had. I think the

biggest problem that we had was that we didn't realize at the time how quickly the internet was going to take off. We were creating stories, and the servers were just getting bigger and bigger, and the site was getting slower and slower. So we had to learn how to archive content and how to narrow the search fields, making sure that a single person searching was not going to take the site down.

The best story I have—one day, the site was coming to a grinding halt, and I said, "Oh God, what now?" I contacted the host to ask what was going on, and they said, "This particular site is scraping your site. They're trying to grab all our content." And I said, "Do you know who they are?" They were hesitant at first, and then said, "Yeah, it's the CIA." I said, "What?" So I called the CIA. I can't even remember how I was able to do this, but I figured out who to call. And I said, "Hey, this is Peter Vaselopolous at VOA. What the heck is going on?" Now, I wasn't as polite as that, but I basically said to them they were doing a denial-of-service attack on our website. And the guy I spoke to said, "We're scraping your content because you're the only site that's got fifty-four languages, and we're trying to use this." At the time, they were beginning to work on artificial intelligence, and what better resource than to get news content in fifty-four languages. I said, "Stop. Time out. You can't do it." And they figured out a way to do it without shutting down the site. But it just shows that what we were doing in the beginning was so unique, being able to provide all that multilingual news content. It was a great asset. A lot of people came to us wanting to use the multilingual news content because it had great value.

BV: Has that infrastructure—the wide, international infrastructure—remained through today? And is it still a distinguishing factor in what VOA and USAGM offer?

PV: In the year 2000, a destination website was a big deal. As far as the infrastructure is concerned, I think today it's about load balancing. Early on we used Akamai—what's called a content delivery network, or CDN. We leverage a company like Akamai, which basically delivers our content, and they do it through a caching network around the world. So when people come to VOA News, it's content that's been cached locally on ISPs [internet service providers] all around the world. They're not coming to my server. That's a widely adopted practice. Normally, when you go visit a major company or news website, you're not going into a server inside some physical, hosted location [on the premises]. Someone goes to a web page, and they cache it locally. The next person that comes, they just benefit from the previous person bringing it down locally. And that's part of a global ecosystem that exists. CDNs have now grown, but at the time, so many years ago, Akamai was one of the bigger players.

We understood that we would never be able to build with the internet what we did with the satellite network. So the mindset change with internet was that we needed to move things off-site—it's not a homegrown thing. And that was a change in mentality and in our IT infrastructure. What we did prior to 1999 was not sustainable moving forward. We were going to need professionals who were keeping up with the technology constantly. But it wasn't necessary for us to always have it on prem. Everything's in the cloud now.

Multinational Talent at USIA, Editing Processes, and the Journalistic Traditions at Voice of America

HG: This was really illuminating. I come from the generation that experienced VOA Persia, an entity of its own. VOA has now evolved to become a multisite entity online. It sounds like a much broader discussion than we were getting into. You described it well—how it kept up and how we have a lot of

young people coming in. And if I'm correctly framing it, you're producing multilingual content that comes from multilingual people. In other words, we have all these different types of talent that are coming in, producing local media, and are in touch with the ways of generating news media from different countries.

PV: I think that's the next evolution. In my thirty-five years, there's no way I could have seen machine learning and AI basically taking over for the sensitivity of multilingual translation, generating the stories. I think there's a misperception from people who are not familiar with Voice of America—and this might even [pertain] to US leadership and our international audiences—there's this perception that we create a singular story, and it's translated fifty-four times. That is not a true statement. There might be a general story that's disseminated to all of the language services, and each language service gets to take a look at that and say, "Well, for my audience, I think we need to add this component." There might be some stories that are just translated, flat out. But as anyone who speaks multiple languages knows, there's a nuance to news and how you present news and information. I learned early on as a television producer that if you're going to produce news content in multiple languages, especially when digital and nonlinear editing started—and I was at the forefront of that, by the way—you had to put handles on your video to allow expansion if it was required. It's well known. In one language, you can do it in so many seconds, and another language might require additional time to say the same thing. It depends upon the person who's doing the translation.

In the old school, editing analog, you would have to do the program originally in the language that you wanted to do. The first time I did that, I got yelled at because they basically told me, "No, we have language service people to do that. You can't write the script in Spanish and get the narrator to do it in Spanish. We do that." This was in the 1980s, and I was mortified. I basically had to follow the prescribed method with nonlinear editing. You have to make sure that you're providing all those fifty-four languages—forty-four now. You also have to make sure that the video content is malleable enough so that you not only can repurpose the order of the material, but that you have enough overlapping video embedded into each shot selection to provide the journalists the flexibility to expand. Again, that seems very obvious now, but it didn't back then.

Getting back to my point, Voice of America really is not a centralized organization. It's decentralized by the necessities of culture, language, and a mindset of how you create news for that market. I guess there are now certain stories that lend themselves to AI, and I think that will evolve. For example, a lot of media organizations in the United States have adopted machine learning and AI to generate sports stories, financial news, and the weather. They're saving money by having machines generate that content. [These types of stories] could easily be translated, yes. But can you do that for a story about Black Lives Matter? Maybe not. There's nuance to all of this that requires a little human intervention.

If you were to contact me five years from now, and we were to go through where we're at right now—or if you were to find someone else from USAGM five years from now—it will be exciting to see where, editorially, you're making decisions whether a machine can do content and for what purpose. Is it to save money, or is it to help the journalists get news and information out there? Again, with the introduction of every technology at VOA and USAGM, there has to be a little bit of a trade-off. But I do believe at times there are going to be certain stories that lend themselves to that. And why not? That's an editorial process, and people are going to have to weigh in. I don't think you're going to allow machine learning to dictate the editorial process.

BV: Yeah, it will be fascinating to see the extent to which they maintain that labor structure for linguistic and cultural nuance in the reporting of, say, a local conflict in a given region. I think five years down the line, that question will certainly be interesting.

Synchronous versus Asynchronous Programming and Reflections on Information As a "Commodity"

PV: I have to share one observation with you. I retired at the end of June [2020], and it was really a blessing for me to be able to help with people moving out of the building and trying to work from home as I ended my career as deputy chief information officer. I was very involved in the previous X amount of years in helping move to the cloud and leveraging the use of [Microsoft] Teams and all of these cloud-based collaboration technologies.

Like everything else at VOA, people are really entrenched in synchronous programming, or timed programming: "It's eight o'clock. It's time for this news." I think that the whole COVID thing is challenging the mindset of journalists, academics, religious organizations, with synchronous versus asynchronous information. We have to recognize that VOA is a unique media organization. It doesn't have the same constraints that other media organizations have. It's not the highest priority to be first. The question then becomes [how to weigh the expenses of] producing live television and live radio [relative to] the goal of disseminating accurate news and information. That has to take precedence over the live part.

I hope this whole COVID thing is the start toward changing that perception, and maybe it's the next evolution of technology that is going to help VOA reformulate its mission. If you're looking for a future prediction, I would say that COVID is forcing VOA to reevaluate what it was doing and what it needs to do. I suspect that it's forcing us to move forward quickly in a lot of technological arenas, for good or bad. Should we rush to do AI? Well, I think AI is inevitable. It's just a matter of how we want to control it. Should we stop doing scheduled programming? Well, right now, a significant [amount] of the rebroadcasting that's going on is through affiliates, and they are not using live transmission. They're recording it and then rebroadcasting it at another time. So I would predict that's part of the evolution of the agency. [*Gestures to show proportions*] Live is [going to lower], and new content is going to change. Obviously, I can't imagine technology is going to stay exactly the way it is right now.

BV: "Synchronous" and "asynchronous" have become new buzzwords for college professors, addressing whether or not to record a lecture or to do it in real time. These are words that didn't circulate as much [in academia] until COVID times.

PV: If I was a professor, I'd be really scared. [*Laughter*] I learned something. Both preachers and teachers each have this thing, "teacher pay teacher." I don't know if you're aware of this, but teachers can buy lesson plans from other teachers, and preachers have the same thing. Now, imagine journalists are going to do the same thing, like, "I'm going to sell you my story." So if I got a hungry journalist in country X, Y, or Z—and it's not a controversial story, but a story, nevertheless—you're going to have journalists pay journalists. The question then becomes, "If I can get the salary, could I take a certain percentage of it and just buy someone else's hard work?" I mean, it's a different world out there. And from a journalism point of view, do I now need 3,500 journalists in the United States? If now people in my building are working from home, why do I need them in Washington? And if I'm not doing synchronous program content, I don't need them in the studio. I

think it's fascinating. I'm not proposing what will happen, I'm just saying that if you look at all the different fields—whether it's academia, religious organizations, or journalism—the availability of news and information content is now marketable.

BV: I think you're right in saying this is a nexus point. This moment. Right now.

PV: I think we're at a point like with Gutenberg and publishing. I think years from now, you're going to remember this [conversation] and say, "God, that darn Greek. He just had it right." [*Laughter*] I mean, it doesn't pay to be a prophet. And to be a digital prophet today is to basically say, "Well, information has become a commodity." If an organization like VOA really believes that only they can do something, someone else is going to come around and say, "Guess what, I can offer this to you." We had to handcraft a website in 2000, and [at the time], no one could have done that. But now there are organizations that can come in and replicate it. The core technology now is pretty much off the shelf.

USIA's Bureaucratic Chain and Its Effects during the Agency's Charlie Wick Era

BV: Chronologically, we've addressed a lot of the contemporary questions, so maybe we can explore some big-picture ideas? I'm curious about the bureaucratic chain, the connections between the policy goals of the executive branch and resultant initiatives. At Worldnet and at voanews.com, what did that network look like, and how much connectivity was there between presidential policy, as they framed it, and the articulation of that policy through USIA, VOA, and USAGM outlets?

PV: Remember, I came into this in 1985, when I was working at Worldnet. Have you guys come across anything to do with Charlie Wick?

BV: Oh, yeah, I've read Al Snyder's book [*Warriors of Disinformation*, Arcade, 1995].

PV: Okay, so as a young producer, when I first started out, I was doing the character generator, the chyron. I'd be in the control room, and back then, you could smoke in the control room. If you ever watched *Mary Tyler Moore* or *Lou Grant*, the whole atmosphere was kind of like that. There were all these different personalities, and it's live.

Now, this is Reagan's second term when I came back in 1985 [from CNN], and the big thing I remember very clearly was that Charlie Wick was still the big player [Figure 5]. My association with the administration was through his being the director of USIA. When there was an important show, he never failed to show up.

Figure 5: Charles Wick Laughing with President Reagan in the Yellow Oval Room (September 29, 1982) Reagan and Wick were close friends long before either of them reached Washington. Wick's long tenure as USIA Director was very polarizing, but his relationship with Reagan afforded him a large amount of influence relative to former directors. Pictured from left to right: William Wilson, Ronald Reagan, William French Smith, Walter Annenberg, and Charles Wick. [NARA C10382-15A]

He would come—and he was of small stature—and you would know [*whispering*], “Charlie’s here. Wick is here.” So you would know right away whether Wick was going to show up, and it was a big thing. Later, with John F. Lansing [BBG/USAGM director, 2015–2019] and other people, there was no, “Oh, John Lansing is in the control room.” It wasn’t the same.

The other thing regarding that administration, there was a dichotomy between Worldnet and the Voice of America. For Voice of America, their charter from 1976 was still well entrenched, and they had no problem thumbing their nose at the administration. They were not going to kowtow to the administration. They fought very hard for the charter, and it was well publicized. There was definitely an us-versus-them relationship between VOA and Worldnet. Because with Worldnet, it was clear that a lot of public affairs officers and State Department officials worked for USIA, and they were definitely involved in productions and provided “advisory guidance” or whatever. I would not say it was well pronounced, but it was visible, and they were part of a review process to check how we were presenting the information. Remember, it’s live, and there’s no control of the guests.

So, I don’t care what your understanding of USIA is, the moment you bring a guest in, they’re on their own. They can answer however they want to answer. There wasn’t going to be a button someone could press to turn off the satellite. You had to have some degree of confidence that what the person was talking about was within your program. After every program, we would get cables from the embassies, and they would thank us and tell us the impact of it. And it was satisfying to know that we were achieving some positive response. The journalists and the high-level government officials from that country that were invited valued the give-and-take, something that maybe they weren’t used to in their own country.

A lot of public affairs officers and State Department foreign service officers would rotate in and out of Worldnet. And that wasn’t the case at VOA. There might have been people at VOA that were foreign service, but because of the charter, it was quite clear that they were not going to be successful in telling VOA journalists what to write or not to write. Whereas, if I was writing an introduction for Warren Burger, they may want to split hairs because they all thought they were great English majors [*laughter*], but they might not have been good at writing for broadcast. That was always the give-and-take in the creative process—writing for television is a lot different than writing writing. If you’ve never studied writing for broadcast, it’s a visual process, compared to someone looking at the words, saying, “Oh, no, you can’t say that,” or whatever.

Some Reflections on Making Television

BV: For me, this brings up a question of aesthetics. For the people working at Worldnet, the people working at voanews.com, and the people at USIA, more broadly, to what extent was there a consciousness or prioritization of certain aesthetics, a particular style, to what they did? Or were logistics, speed, or accuracy more heavily weighted in the process of producing content?

PV: Understand there’s a lot that’s changed in the last twenty years with aesthetics. Aesthetics are subjective, influenced by their time and place. I don’t think aesthetics were as [important] as understanding that good television is good television. When you produce your videos to get the subject matter introduced, or whatever, it was our opportunity to be creative as producers. So I lived for producing the video. You could get really good at it. And time became [of the] essence. It was a factory.

If I was talking to a media class, I think the two things I could share is that if you want to get good at your craft, you need to work in a sausage factory, because you got to learn how to crank it

out. The problem in the creative process, if you've ever had to do a film or whatever, is that you're sitting there going, "God, if I can only write that first sentence." And then you spend a week thinking about that opening shot. It's great if you got that luxury, but I had to crank out three of these things a week. It was like, "Bang. Bang. Oh, my God, another interactive. Okay, what's the subject matter?" And I didn't have internet. So I'm calling people to get information and just trying to get enough to write that introductory tie-in to the guest.

We did a lot of stuff with media labs, like MIT. I wish I had saved the video, but in 1990 or 1991, I did a show with [Ray] Kurzweil and got a video from Apple. In this video, there's a snapshot of Apple's vision of the future. And I mean we're talking years [before] . . when did the iPad come out?

BV: Maybe 2009, 2010? [It was 2012.]

PV: Oh, it must have been before that. Anyway, the whole concept of the iPhone and all that stuff was on that video. I'm telling you, this was presented to me in the early '90s, and I quickly realized that companies are thinking about the future.

I always love doing programs on technology. We really shined [with these programs]. The world really wanted to hear what America was doing with technology. If there was one arena that we excelled at, it was bringing tech to the forefront. And the tech companies loved it. They were like, "Hey, we get to promote around the world, and we have good subject matter experts." Kurzweil—oh, my God—he was always fascinating.

The Makeup and Dynamics of USAGM and VOA Today

HG: Returning a bit to an earlier thread, why do we now have USAGM and VOA as two separate entities? Are there institutional differences?

PV: It's hard for me to defend the logic of a federal agency, having witnessed the various gyrations over the last three years. [*Laughter*] And now that I'm retired, I don't know. [*Throws hands up, laughs.*] I suspect VOA was created in a different era. Then they created Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty in a different era. And then we added all the other entities, whether it's Middle East Broadcasting, post-9/11 [initiatives], the Office of Cuban Broadcasting, or Radio Free Asia. They all represent someone's idea of a market, and we needed to brand it.

So, who is basically going to oversee this cacophony of media that needs funding? Whether it was a good concept or not to create the Broadcasting Board of Governors [in the 1990s], I'll [leave it to] other people who are better versed in giving you a more authentic bureaucratic answer. I can honestly tell you that for the people at VOA that have been around for a while, I imagine they would love to have gotten back to the state of being just an independent agency, period. Not being involved with all the other stuff. But again, this gets back to the [Stanton Panel] study that was done in the 1970s by the former president of CBS [Frank Stanton]. That's worthy of your research, because I think that commission that Congress asked him to create basically asked, "What's the purpose of VOA?" And I think you can broaden that [out to asking] what's the purpose of USAGM. I think that would give you a good answer.

I'll take you back to the forefounders of our country. They instinctively understood in 1776—and I still think it applies to the year 2020—that an informed electorate is necessary for democracy to thrive. Democracies require unfettered access to news and information to inform the electorate. All of

the entities of USAGM have that as a higher goal, which is making sure that the targeted audiences are getting access to news and information to help them in their ability to be better citizens of their country and, hopefully, encourage and promote governments around the world to lean toward a democratic nature. I don't know if we've always been successful in that, and I would let other people be more vociferous to identify where we have succeeded or failed.

If I can make the case for Worldnet, I would encourage USAGM to reevaluate. What do we need now to support getting the best and brightest of this country, making them accessible to audiences around the world? So instead of this, "Oh, my God, America is going through these gyrations." Well, for those of us that lived in the 1960s, it was pretty difficult back then. And for Americans that lived through World War II and World War I, and—God forbid—and I know this as a Civil War reenactor—you can go back to 1861. There have been historical periods where the United States has gone through some very, very difficult times. And I think audiences around the world need to learn about that. They need to know what allowed Americans to come together and solve those problems, because that's really what I think our track record is as a country. Now, are we doing a good job telling that story? I think we could always do a better job.

"I'm not trying to step on the soapbox, but I'm of a generation that was proud to work for a government agency that had such a well-defined and pronounced mission. I would love to see the leadership of USAGM take a step back, pause, bring in people that are both within the agency and outside the agency, and get them to reevaluate what's working, what's not working. Do like any other corporation—do a three-sixty and ask, 'Where do I want to invest for the future?' Does the agency need to exist? Yes."

In parallel, I also think that we have to understand where media technology can help us. I think we're always going to be ambassadors in that sense. We're always going to be journalistic ambassadors to provide news and content in language. I'm not trying to step on the soapbox, but I'm of a generation that was proud to work for a government agency that had such a well-defined and pronounced mission. I would love to see the leadership of USAGM take a step back, pause, bring in people that are both within the agency and outside the agency, and get them to reevaluate what's working, what's not working. Do like any other corporation—do a three-sixty and ask, "Where do I want to invest for the future?" Does the agency need to exist? Yes. But will it [continue to] be the form that it's in? I leave that to the next generation—all those nice young people who are energetic like I was twenty to thirty years ago. We were excited to try and experiment with technologies and try to get the older people to realize there's a different vision out there. But that's always going to be a challenge.

Historiographies and Pedagogies for USIA History: Visibility, Circulation, and Impact of USAGM/VOA Materials in the Current Media Environment

BV: Hadi and I are coming from the position of scholars and teachers, so we're curious—in light of your multitude of experiences with USIA, VOA, and USAGM, do you have any advice on how we, as scholars and historians, should study the history of USIA? And how should we teach it to students that are maybe extremely unfamiliar with this history and its continued existence, at least in the context of the United States?

PV: When I first started, obviously, I didn't know everything about USIA. I didn't know the origins. You

can study things like the history of Voice of America and how it started in New York City [under] the first director, John Houseman, in 1942. The first broadcast is in German. And by now I'm sure you've heard that the first broadcast says [paraphrased], "We're going to deliver, you know, the news. It might be good. It might be bad. But we're going to deliver you the truth." I think from the beginning, they started with a high ideal and set the benchmark really high, like any organization with a very high ideal. For your students, you could start the timeline there, follow it along, and ask, like with any other institution in the United States, "Did it go up? Did it go down?" Obviously, with [something like] the history of the Vietnam War, when journalists basically said, "No, we're not going to do what you say, Mr. President," they quit or protested. And that was the origin of the [VOA] charter. For those of us that worked at VOA, there's pride that we had an editorial firewall that allowed us to claim that we had some sort of autonomy or independence.

Because you had asked a question about the role of the executive branch, I know there's a lot of stories flying around about the future of the agency [under the USAGM director at the time, Michael Pack] and [whether] it's going to be the voice of this president or that president. I think anyone who understands the history of the agency would know that if it ever got to that point, then lights out. Drop the mic. I don't believe we'd be honoring the [message of the] initial broadcast. If you lose that credibility, then you're never going to establish that integrity.

Now, are there times that we've succeeded or failed? Yeah, I'm sure, like with any organization, on a singularity, you could point [out] to the students where we succeeded. Did we succeed with the libraries and the cultural centers? It was a different way of communicating. Did we succeed with the internet? Yes? Maybe? Were we too late getting in to establish a brand? I would say that could be a great paper for students, talking about VOA as a brand and how successful we have been in promoting that. One question that I would encourage you to ask is how does a news organization with zero dollars for marketing sell a brand to eighteen-year-olds who, honestly, would probably shrug their shoulders if you ask them if they are familiar with VOA. Where would they get access to branded advertising? It would probably be by sheer dumb luck on a Google search that they come across VOA.

By the way, that's one question you could have asked. We were a darling with Google because we were one of the top four thousand that Google initially put in as part of the search results. That's because we were producing, on average, like three hundred stories a day on the internet. And 50 percent of our audience, domestic and international, was coming from Google.

BV: So the algorithm would push your content to the surface?

PV: They loved us. I think to this day, they still do. I think it was horrific when we learned that Google was recodifying us as government and not news. That was a big deal.

BV: This speaks to the editorial power of social media sites and Google now, amid this media landscape. They can make these types of decisions, and it greatly affects the flow of information.

PV: Right. But it's important for you to realize that when we started, in the year 2000, we weren't that far behind BBC and CNN and all that. Because they market, they've gone like this [*gestures steeply upward*], and we pretty much have flattened out. I think we're making more inroads on social media.

HG: I agree with you. Every time I asked my students about VOA, the only ones that have said they know it are the ones who come from outside of the US. And they haven't used VOA here. They use it

outside of the US.

PV: Right, but there's a hidden secret. There are a lot of news organizations, like in Bosnia during the Bosnian War, that use VOA material but don't give us credit. No attribution. So, talking about your students now, I think the question that I would ask your students is how to measure impact in today's world. Now, back at the time that I was a producer for Worldnet, I could hire Nielsen. And we did. When they discovered that it wasn't two billion [viewers] but just two hundred thousand, there was an "oh, my God" moment. The question then is do those two hundred thousand people have access to make influential decisions. Are we measuring [impact] the same? Are we basically trying to do like for like [on social media]? I think this is problematic for the future.

For people now [who] are making decisions about the future of USAGM, what are you trying to accomplish? Again, it's always been about influence. You want to reach people who are in specific markets or countries. And they might be young government officials, young academics, young journalists. You want to reach them and at least convey why they should understand what's going on in the United States and the history of the United States, when it comes to democracy, free media, free religion, all that stuff. What makes the United States unique? Why are we the oldest surviving democracy that [may be] a model? Now, Reagan would have said that we're a "beacon on a hill," la la la. But let's face it, right now we're getting beat up a little bit in global media, and more than ever, we need to redefine how we are trying to reach these younger audiences and convey to them what it means to be an American and what we contribute.

Now, I would love to see one of your students come up with a model to measure impact, because they'll probably end up getting a job working at our Office of Research. We have a team of people that rotate every three years. This new group of people comes in and says, "Yeah, we're going to be able to push that boulder up the hill," and they end up getting flattened. And the next group comes in, and they try to figure that out. There's no secret. It's hard work to come up with some computation that would allow you to figure out, for every $1 million you spend, how are you able to justify what you're doing.

BV: It's a fascinating time for all of us. We have access to materials that weren't digitally available until just a few years ago. To go back to this phrase, it's really a nexus point for us as media historians and scholars because we can engage with these materials in new ways with students. So, to your point, we're asking how we can parlay these [USIA/VOA/USAGM] materials in a way that gets our students to think about what media means—what "impact" means in the context of media today.

PV: Yeah, and I would encourage you and your students to do a timeline and map the introduction of new technologies. How did that impact the ways we were sharpening or redefining the mission? Obviously, you're focused on film. So, the '50s, '60s, and '70s—that was the era of film. People were coming from film schools that were impacted by World War II. By the way, you look at that stuff [the films from those decades], and it has the purest of heart. [*Laughter*] I mean, you want to say, yeah, all those were propaganda films. But I think people really believed in the ideals. For example, did

you ever see the film [showing how] Norman Rockwell's paintings are about the core principles of democracy [Figure 6]? He did like four or five paintings, each one with a theme like freedom of religion.

Figure 6: American Illustrator (1962), title screen
[NARA 306.1769]

BV: Yeah, it's a documentary from the early '60s, I think, produced by the USIA [*American Illustrator*, 1965].

PV: And that means something, because these people would be shocked for you to claim they're propagandists. They really believed what they were saying. Again, if I was to get a group of my colleagues that I worked with at Worldnet—none of us believed that what we were doing was propaganda. We honestly believed, in doing something like a live broadcast with Warren Burger, "How can you see this as propaganda?" You're letting someone who's the chief justice of the United States speak to the value of our Constitution. Look, if you don't think that's true, go ahead and ask him [during the live interview]. In a way, I think that's a perfect example.

BV: This has been incredible. We can't thank you enough for giving your time. I've learned so much.

HG: Thank you for talking so candidly.

PV: It's my pleasure, because I truly loved working for my agency. I think you've asked great questions.

BV: Thank you so much again. It's been such a pleasure.

HG: Thank you for offering your time.

PV: This was fun. I mean, it's good to recollect.

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