

Global Journalist: The future of Voice of America

Abstract: On this program, journalists discussed what's going on with Voice of America and the future of the organization.

Host: Levi Moltz-Hohmann

Guests:

- [David Ensor](#)
- [Danforth Austin](#)
- [Vardha Khalil](#)
- [Grayson Clary](#)

Producers: Cam Denmark, Regan Mertz, Annie Le, Ziye Tang

Directors: Travis McMillen

Audio Engineer: Aaron Hay

Mentioned: Voice of America, United States, U.S. Agency for Global Media, Michael Pack, Joe Biden, president, journalism, government, America

Runtime: 28:59

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 0:05

Welcome to Global Journalist. A show by journalists, about journalists, and for journalists and the people who depend on our work. During World War II, journalism was a weapon in freedom's arsenal. The United States government created Voice of America, a radio broadcaster that beamed news into then-Nazi Germany. "We shall tell you the truth," the VOA promised in its very first broadcast to Germany in German on February 1, 1942.

VOA 1942 broadcast 0:31

...aus America, aus America im Krieg...to you about America and the war. The news may be good or bad. We shall tell you the truth.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 0:43

That reputation for straight talking has made the VOA and sister broadcast outlets such as Radio Free Europe and Radio Marti trusted news sources in regions of the world where free speech is stifled. But is that about to change?

Over the summer, the U.S. Senate, at the urging of President Trump, confirmed a news director for the U.S. Agency for Global Media, the umbrella agency for Uncle Sam's broadcast outlets. Since taking over, Michael Pack has cleaned house, firing the heads of all the broadcast agencies, terminating longtime board members and putting foreign language broadcasters on

notice that their visas will not be renewed. Pack has also refused to release \$18 million that Congress earmarked for the Open Technology Fund. The OTF is a small group of government hackers who create software such as the popular encrypted messaging app Signal. That allows journalists and democracy activists to elude government censors. All this has even some of Trump's staunchest allies on Capitol Hill expressing concern, but Pack refused a bipartisan subpoena to testify before the House Foreign Affairs Committee earlier this fall. Representative Michael McCaul, a Texas Republican, complained that he can't even get Pack to return his phone calls. We invited Michael Pack to appear on this program, but got no reply. We have several guests here today to discuss what's going on. We'll start first with two recent former directors of the Voice of America, Danforth Austin and David Ensor. Let me just start by saying gentlemen, thanks for being here. And I guess we'll just start off with a very basic first question. So, most Americans don't ever get to hear VOA or any of the other broadcast outlets that the US Agency for global media runs. So, tell me why should Americans care? And Mr. Ensor, let's start with you.

David Ensor 2:29

Americans should care because the truth matters and journalism, honest journalism matters. And it is actually one of the most powerful exports the United States has. Voice of America is basically a soft power agency that exports journalism, honest journalism, and in particular, especially to countries where there isn't any.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 2:52

And Mr. Austin, what about you?

Danforth Austin 2:55

I can remember being asked by a U.S. senator from Mississippi, as I recall, you know, why should the folks in Tupelo, for example, care about Voice of America, what it is? My answer was pretty much the answer that David gave — that you need to know what we're telling the world, what we're reporting and you need to know what the world is telling us. And it's a two-way street. VOA facilitates an awful lot of that conversation and I think it's pretty important.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 3:26

And do you guys think that the distinction that VOA is producing good, honest journalism as opposed to just being a mouthpiece for the US government? Do you think that's an important distinction?

David Ensor

That's everything. That is the issue. The whole point of Voice of America, and it's in the law, there's a VOA charter passed by Congress and signed by then-President Gerald Ford. It says that VOA is going to try to tell the truth. I mean, it puts it in other ways, says aim for objectivity, balance, and so forth. But the reason is, I mean, look, Radio Moscow had the most powerful shortwave radio signal during the Cold War on the planet, but nobody listened to it. Why? Because it was just propaganda. It had nothing to say that was particularly interesting to anybody, unless you wanted to know what the finer points of the propaganda of the Russian

Communist Party were. So the difference is VOA tells the truth. And when the news— truth is bad news about our country, we try to be honest about that. That impresses foreigners and causes them to feel that the VOA is credible. And that causes them to listen to when VOA is talking about their societies as well as ours.

Danforth Austin 4:37

Absolutely. I mean, I think that is absolutely in the VOA DNA, if you will. I mean, from the very beginning back when it was part of the Office of War Information in 1942, the very dark days of the second World War, we were losing Europe and we were losing the Pacific, etc, VOA went on the air and it said the news may be bad, the news may be good, we shall tell you the truth. And by sticking to that we became credible. Even when the Nazi propaganda machine and Imperial Japan, were saying the opposite people listen to us and they knew that when we reported defeats and setbacks for America, they could believe us when we reported advances and success for America. And so that issue of credibility has been there all the years since and it's so very important.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 5:26

A week after the election, Joe Biden named transition teams for a host of government agencies. Most are high profile cabinet level agencies, but the US Agency for Global Media is one of them. Are you surprised that the agency is getting so much attention from the newly elected president and what do you think that means? Mr. Austin, let's start with you this time.

Danforth Austin 5:50

I'm not at all surprised, before the US Agency for Global Media came into being it was the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and a key member of that Broadcasting Board of Governors was Ted Kaufman, who is now heading the transition for the president-elect and was involved as then-Senator Biden's chief of staff when the whole legislation creating the BBG and the whole framework was enacted into law back in the 90s. So, I'm not at all surprised that it's top of mind the president-elect as well as to the chief of his transition team.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 6:29

All right, Mr. Ensor.

David Ensor 6:30

No, I also am not surprised. The campaign put out a statement during the campaign that the gentleman, Mr. Pack, who runs USAGM, the US Agency for Global Media right now, will be fired immediately after January 20th. And frankly, I think that was appropriate.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 6:49

Let's see. Before coming to VOA, you both had extensive careers in journalism to say the least. Mr. Austin after graduating from Kansas University, which we here at Mizzou might forgive you for, you went on to work at the Wall Street Journal, first as a reporter, and then moving over to the business side, eventually becoming a top executive for Dow Jones & Company. And Mr. Ensor, you were an award winning correspondent for more than 18 years, before moving over

to diplomacy and now you're currently the director at George Washington University for the Project for Media and National Security. So, Michael Pack has made documentaries with, among others, conservative strategist Steve Bannon. Can you talk about what difference your level of experience makes? And is it unusual for someone with so little experience in actual reporting to occupy the job that he has? Mr. Ensor, why don't we start with you?

David Ensor 7:44

Yes, well, I think experience matters. Journalism is a craft and it's like, I used to say to people, it's like being a carpenter. The first table you build is rougher. The 10th table is getting better. If you work at journalism, you learn to do it better, quite frankly. It's neither an art nor science, it's a craft. And so, someone who hasn't had experience doing that is never going to be as good at understanding what's effective and what's important about journalism. I will feel better if President-elect Biden appoints someone to lead USAGM and certainly to lead Voice of America, who has some background in journalism. Journalism. Not propaganda documentaries.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 8:35

And Mr. Austin.

Danforth Austin 8:36

Right. I don't know Mr. Pack. I do recall that at one point, he was involved in a precursor VOA television called, I think, WorldVision, but it was on the technical side. I'm not sure what experience he's actually had as a journalist as opposed to a, you know, filmmaker, I guess. But it's absolutely right. I mean, the whole idea of journalists to be able to fairly and accurately talk about what's going on in the world and telling other people about it in a way that they can trust and believe, is so important. And if you don't have that background, and you don't have that experience, heck, if you haven't made mistakes, trying to do it, you really don't understand the process. And you know, I shared it was a concern. I mean, we need somebody running that agency who understands its true purpose.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 9:36

And one follow up for you, Mr. Austin. So you served under different presidents and presidents of different parties. Did politics ever intrude during your tenure at VOA, and if so, how did you handle that?

Danforth Austin 9:50

Yeah, I was appointed to my job by the Broadcasting Board of Governors. It was not a direct presidential appointment, and I came in under the Bush administration, but I made it pretty clear that because of my background at the Journal, and where the conflict of interest policy is very, very strong that I'm not a member of a political party, I don't donate to political parties, etc, etc. And I can remember somebody in the George W. Bush personnel office asking me, "Well, did you vote for the president?" when I was under consideration. I said, "That's really none of your business who I voted for." And it was some younger person, and they said, "Oh, okay. And did you give money to the president?" I said, "No, I don't give money to any political campaign. You know, what is your question?" Yeah. So anyhow, as I got into the agency, I

mean, there were people, especially on the Hill, who had some very partisan ideas about what VOA should be and they had no problem expressing themselves to me. Attended a few hearings on the subject, but for the most part, got support both sides of the aisle, actually, on the fundamental importance of good journalism at VOA, and I remember being invited over to the White House for a meet and greet and talk with George W. Bush. And I told him, I said, "Mr. President, our job is to do good journalism." And he looked at me and said, "You're damn right." And, okay, yeah, that's fine. And the same with the Obama administration, there were people at the State Department who sometimes would not be happy with some of our programming and they would call me and issue what was sort of a polite demarche, just basically saying, "You shouldn't be doing this." And I'd say, "Well, thank you very much. Why don't you have your secretary call my chairman. Have a nice day." And I'd never hear anymore about it. I heard sometimes from the Pentagon, from the military, and they were actually probably the most supportive, which was kind of a surprise to me. But they understood very well the importance of VOA and its separate independent status.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 12:05

And Mr. Ensor, you only served under Obama, but kind of the same question to you. Did politics ever intrude during your tenure?

David Ensor

It was my job to make sure that the journalists were protected from the politicians. And so sure, I was the firewall in a way. Yes, I got an Assistant Secretary of State calling me in because one of the countries that was being very helpful on national security issues and so forth, was angry at how much human rights coverage we were doing of their country when the problem was they had a really dreadful human rights record and I couldn't very well tell the journalists to tone it down. That would have been a violation of the VOA charter and something I would never have done as a journalist. So, I listened politely to the Assistant Secretary of State, I said, "If the government that you're getting complaints from has any specific complaints, please pass them on to me." I mean, if there's something wrong with our journalism, I'm all over that. That's part of my job. But they never did offer anything specific. They just wanted us to leave them alone and we weren't going to do that. The United States Government has to be able to walk and chew gum. That's cooperate against terrorists, with the government, same government that it also reports as a bad human rights record. So, the same thing happened on Capitol Hill a few times. I remember a powerful Republican congressman calling me and saying, "You're not beating up on the Ayatollah enough in your Persian service." And I said, "But Congressman, have you seen the VOA charter? We don't do beating up. We report as accurately as possible. And it's a fairly disagreeable government, the Iranian government, so we say so on the air, but we're not going to just beat up on them and that's all we're gonna do. We're gonna report objectively bad in a balanced fashion. If you want that change, Congressman, change the law."

Danforth Austin 14:02

Yeah, I mean you can look at the surveys about the trust, the VOA programming in genders in the many of the markets where we broadcast. People, for the most part, believe what they

hear and these are people who are in many cases subjected to propaganda all the time. So they know it when they hear it or see it.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 14:30

Some reporters whose visas have not been renewed already have had to return to their home countries and do either of you have any concerns about that?

David Ensor

I'm very worried about those people. I'm worried about their families. People take a risk and decide to come and to be a consultant or to come help us with our journalism and they come on a special type of visa that we were able to issue. And now the president leadership is shutting down that avenue and sending people home. In some cases, these people have no safe way to go home, and yet they're forced to do so. I don't think this is a humane way to handle things and it's also very damaging to the ability of Voice of America and the other broadcasters, to get good people from around the world to come and do the kind of first class journalism that we want.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 15:23

Mr. Austin, what's your response?

Danforth Austin 15:26

Well, I mean, both of us, I think, have had the horrible experience of having one of our journalists or maybe more die because of their work overseas, so these folks do not operate always in a safe and secure environment. And to send them back into that, in some cases, is just beyond the pale to me. We've had people that we labored mightily, in fact, to get out of some of those countries because of their reporting and the subsequent threats against them and their families. And having those J-1 visas and other things like that available, to get them to the United States and out of particular countries has been invaluable. To send somebody like that back into some of those environments is just unthinkable to do that. But, yeah, it's a big issue. I mean, I will hasten to add, we do that and carefully of the people that we do bring in, you know, worked overseas or residents or citizens of other countries, we do that too pretty carefully. I mean, you could all you always want to double check because clearly VOA would be a target for any foreign intelligence service, for example. So, we have measures to prevent that sort of thing from happening. But no, to send people back into some of those places with the reporting that they've been doing, just would be very unfortunate.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 17:08

How would you characterize what's going on at your own agency in the current moment? So Mr. Ensor, how about we start with you.

David Ensor 17:17

There's a lot of good journalism being done at Voice of America today, as we speak. If you go on the website, there's a lot of interesting stuff, well written, well thought through. So, Voice of America is not irretrievably damaged, but there have been some things and decisions that were

made by the current leadership that have done some damage to Voice of America, and I am very sorry to see that. And I hope that the incoming administration will correct it because fundamentally, I know Dan, and I both believe Voice of America is an enormously powerful tool for the United States to communicate with the rest of the world and to show something very important about America, which is that we have a First Amendment and we have freedom of speech. We take pride in our journalism, we believe in the rule of law and democracy and so forth and journalism that promotes those values, but also tells the truth, is enormously powerful. And some of the most powerful journalism, I think, that has been done at Voice of America has often been quite critical of the United States. When I was director, there was a spate of killings of young black men by policemen in this country and we reported that extensively in multiple languages. We tried to show that we understand that our country has problems. The good thing is though this country is willing to speak about its problems and in that process, you can maybe get to a better situation. That impresses foreigners when we're honest about our own problems. So, I hope we can get to a stage where that is the image that Voice of America has and away from a situation where it seems as if it's being managed by people who don't understand this mission.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 19:12

Alright and Dan, why don't you finish this up?

Danforth Austin 19:14

Sure. I think the biggest fear is the feeling among the staff that is, to my mind, for the most part, highly qualified. I would put that newsroom up against almost any other newsroom in this country, in terms of the quality of the journalists working there, but the fear that they will self censor that they will say, "Oh, boy, what is upstairs going to think about this?" etc, and that we need to move mountains to make sure that that does not happen. Because that's the worst form of censorship in my mind that there could possibly be. I think, if the president-elect carries through on his plan, this will be very short lived. We'll be able to return the sense among our journalists, among the journalists at the Voice of America, that it's really safe and required to be good journalists and let them call the shots and let the chips fall. And I think that long tradition is going to be very hard to totally overturn, but it's been wounded and I think we've got a great chance to recover mission (unintelligible).

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 20:31

You're listening to Global Journalist. We're talking about the controversy around the US Agency for Global Media in turmoil since President Trump's new appointee Michael Pack took over last summer. We just finished discussing the situation with two former heads of the Voice of America. Now we'll hear from a former VOA reporter Vardha Khalil and Grayson Clary. Clary is a lawyer for the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and has been involved in a lawsuit that some longtime USAGM employees brought against Pack. On November 20th, a federal judge on that case ordered Pack to stop meddling with the agency's journalists and their news coverage, but she's not stopping his plan to review visas for the agency's foreign language journalists, which is forcing a number of them to return home. Vardha, until recently, you

worked at VOA. Can you tell us how long you worked there, what you did for the agency and how the relationship kind of ended?

Vardha Khalil 21:25

Yeah, I was working with Voice of America since 2012, as I started as an internee, and then I joined as a contractor in 2014 and 15. And I covered a story about Mr. Joe Biden while he was campaigning for election. So, that story became very controversial for some reason. So, the first action taken by Mr. Pack was to fire four of us, but there is a very, very important point to mention is that there was no formal editorial investigation, which we were involved in. We were approached by a lawyer who worked for Mr. Pack. And I think that it was not a proper way or proper person to investigate, you know, a news story who doesn't have the background of journalism and who doesn't understand the sensitivity of soft diplomacy, but the United States of America trying to do in that region. So that was a very shocking and a controversial thing to do, by Mr. Pack. So, that's how my relationship with USAGM ended.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 22:54

And Grayson, can you tell me what you kind of think about this and are there any similar narratives in the people in the case you're involved with?

Grayson Clary 23:01

Sure. So, for one thing, the incident Vardha is describing, the investigation into the Urdu services video about Joe Biden, is very much one of the incidents that the plaintiffs in the case we got involved in, which is called Turner v. U.S. Agency for Global Media, highlight as an example of what Michael Pack has done to undermined the firewall. And it's part of a whole pattern and practice. The lawyer that she mentioned, Sam Dewey, who Pack brought on from outside as general counsel, has been involved in a number of controversial investigations, most of which center on allegations that a particular piece reflected bias against the administration. There have been investigations about whether the coverage of the George Floyd protests adequately conveyed Attorney General Barr's views of what was going on. And then Pack has also taken a number of very concrete actions against journalists who he perceived to be impeding his mission to drain the swamp. He removed the boards of all of USAGM's grantee networks, he froze hiring and spending on all sorts of matters, he reassigned editors who he perceived as an obstacle to his agenda and maybe most dramatically, he refused to renew visas for several VOA employees, some of whom had to leave the country and returned to nations where they might be the subject of very serious retaliation for the kind of reporting that they've done on conditions in other countries.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 24:33

And Vardha, I really wanted to jump back to you. So, what is your own current legal status? Are you in any danger of having to leave the US?

Vardha Khalil 24:42

No, I'm not.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 24:43

Do you personally know any other VOA employees who maybe have had to leave the US and are they worried for their safety?

Vardha Khalil 24:51

Certainly, certainly. My very, very close two colleagues, who both are females and they left Pakistan just to join Voice of America, this thing, it's very important to know that a very large population in Pakistan, and I think any other countries where their extremist ideas still exist, they don't see people like us who speak openly and fearlessly. They see us as a danger to their society or the politics sometimes. So, we are always under threat. So, when I came here to United States, I came as a student and as a student, I was awarded Hubert Humphrey Fellowship, and I was a kind of scholarship where I experienced a normal journalist experience. So, I started to get threats from Pakistan even then that you are there and you're getting trained by CIA to be some kind of like, spy or something. So, we always have this kind of fear and threat that when we're going to go back to our countries, what kind of reaction we're going to receive. Most of my colleagues who go to Pakistan, try to meet their families, they hide, and they try to hide there, visit, and they stay quiet and very quietly, though, they go visit their family and come back because they are afraid if somebody knows they are in Pakistan, they can be attacked. So, this is the case when somebody is going to go to Pakistan, I'm not like, sure what's going to happen to them. Especially, when you people know that you will have worked with Voice of America or with a federal organization, you know.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 26:50

And Mr. Clary, could you tell me why should people in the middle of the country care about the situation that these journalists find themselves in?

Grayson Clary 26:57

Well, I think it helps you take the temperature of the federal government's broader commitment to press freedom or not. From our perspective, VOA matters for a lot of reasons. One is just that the more high quality journalism that's getting published, the better. But also it's, for the better part of a century, been one of the ways that the United States models its values. With the public broadcasters, the government is essentially putting its money where its mouth is and signaling to the world that we really mean it when we say a free press makes us stronger in a way propaganda can't. So, even if they're not themselves, tuning in to the VOA Urdu service, folks around the country should be concerned for what the administration's treatment of VOA means for its views about the press here at home too.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 27:44

And before we wrap up, Vardha, do you have a response to that as well?

Vardha Khalil 27:48

That is a very, very important question. I think I'm always surprised to see that like, people are not aware of the function of Voice of America. And I think that it is one of the very important and a major part of soft diplomacy around the world, and that how we are representing the

United States and how we are reaching to the people around the world, like directly, you know. So, it is not only like telling them the story, telling them the news, what's happening around the world, but treating them in a way that which strengthen the relationship between people of those related countries and the people of the United States. And one more thing, which I really, really want to mention that Voice of America is a symbol of press of freedom around the world. If the symbol is tarnished, if the symbol is affected, then it will affect freedom of press around the world.

Levi Moltz-Hohmann 28:59

That's it for this edition of Global Journalist. You can check out our other work, including the team's earlier episode on Stars and Stripes at KBIA.org or at globaljournalist.org. You can follow us on Twitter, like us on Facebook and find us wherever you get your podcasts. Our director is Travis McMillen. Our audio engineer is Aaron Hay. Our executive producer is Cam Denmark with producers Regan Mertz, Annie Le and Ziyue Tang, I'm Levi Moltz-Hohmann. For all of us at Global Journalist, thanks for listening.

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