

How Biden can undo damage to U.S.-backed news outlets that counter authoritarian propaganda

Opinion by **Jamie Fly**

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Authoritarians have long practiced the cynical art of manipulating information to stifle dissent and shape international perceptions of their regimes. But in the digital age, they are armed as never before, reaching into other countries to influence political discourse and spread conspiracy theories.

How should the United States counter these unrelenting, damaging campaigns by Russia, China, Iran and others? How should we reach out to global audiences inundated with disinformation and slick lies?

To some, such as [Michael Pack](#), the Trump administration's chief executive of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, the apparent answer is more government control of federally funded, multimedia international broadcasters, which include the federal networks Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and the private entities overseen by the USAGM: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and Middle East Broadcasting Networks. The latter organizations are intended to function as sources of unbiased news in regions where the free press is beleaguered or nonexistent.

With increased federal control of these outlets comes more control of their programming — risking the confidence of audiences and appropriators in Congress.

After taking office in June, Pack fired the heads of all the private networks funded by his agency (I was among them, at RFE/RL). He filled their previously bipartisan corporate boards with loyalists to President Trump, and he repealed the editorial “firewall” protecting journalists from political interference. Pack also began deriding the work of the thousands of journalists under his purview, accusing them of bias and branding them as potential spies.

Since then, Pack has primarily focused on Voice of America's mission, turning his apparent frustration with the federal network's perceived failure to fulfill its mandate to present U.S. policies into an indictment of all federally funded news agencies.

But in the past week, even as the Trump administration winds down, Pack has moved to name new heads of RFE/RL and the other private networks. In a recent interview with the conservative Epoch Times, Pack argued that these organizations should, like Voice of America, promote American values and institutions, as well as present the current administration's policies.

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His comments touched on an inherent tension within U.S. international broadcasting. Congress established these news outlets with the goal of promoting truth but also, in the case of Voice of America, explaining U.S. policy to the world.

During the Cold War, RFE/RL played a crucial role in toppling Soviet communism — a success that lay not in covering American politics or promoting U.S. policies, but in providing objective news and information free from political interference. Nowadays, the journalists of RFE/RL expose corruption and government malfeasance across Eurasia, from Belarus to China’s western border, broadcasting in 27 languages. In attempting to hold authoritarian regimes to account, RFE/RL journalists have been beaten, detained and even sometimes killed.

After the Cold War, when RFE/RL faced congressional elimination in the 1990s, Joe Biden — then a Democratic senator from Delaware — was instrumental in saving the broadcaster. And he cautioned in a 1993 Senate report that if federally supported networks “become direct agencies of the U.S. Government, they will maintain neither the appearance nor the reality of journalistic independence.”

Now the president-elect will have an opportunity to protect these broadcasters from future attempts to politicize them. His administration should work with Congress on bipartisan reforms to firmly establish how the U.S. government explains its policies to the world and how it bolsters truth in the digital age.

RFE/RL and the other non-federal networks should be granted more independence from the federal government. Their independence and adherence to the truth even when that runs counter to U.S. policy are what attracts the loyalty of audiences and differentiates them from their authoritarian competitors.

The broadcasters must also bolster their relevance by adapting better to the digital age. They should forge partnerships with social media platforms to expand their reach with key audiences. Doing so would help break through the static of 21st-century information overload and counter authoritarian messaging on the platforms.

Government-funded media is not the only answer. The United States and its democratic allies should support nongovernmental independent media outlets throughout China’s immediate neighborhood and countries in Africa and Europe facing significant Russian and Chinese influence.

Perhaps most important, explaining America to the world should not be the role of independent journalists. It should be the responsibility of officials and diplomats through a reformed State Department public diplomacy staff that includes communications professionals.

The U.S.-funded broadcasters can still play a central role during this new era of great power competition, just as they did during the Cold War. But central to their success then and just as relevant now, in the post-truth age, is an adherence to the objective journalistic standards that authoritarian-funded outlets disdain.

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