

Background Research  
Gates Forum I

# Assessing U.S. Historical Strategic Communications: Priorities, Practices, and Lessons from the Cold War through the Present Day

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November, 2022



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# 1. Introduction

Administrations come and go, but America's pursuit of influence with foreign leaders and publics as central to our national security is surprisingly durable. As a case in point: the last five national security strategies, issued by Republican and Democratic leaders, underscored that the United States must sustain and renew its capacity to project influence on a global stage (White House, 2006, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2022).<sup>1</sup> Starting with this end in mind, influence is fundamentally about changing the attitudes or behaviors of target audiences in ways that advance U.S. national interests. Strategic communications<sup>2</sup> (SC) is critical to this endeavor, as it amplifies preferred messages, cultivates shared norms, and forges common bonds with foreign counterparts to "want what [America] wants" (Nye, 2011). As Cull (2022) argues in a companion paper to this one: reputation is not an "optional extra in diplomatic life, but a vital part of statecraft." As we argue here, it is also instrumental to America's ability to exert influence.

Unfortunately, America's strategic communications toolkit—in this paper we focus on international broadcasting and public diplomacy—has atrophied following years of comparative neglect. Rhetoric is powerful, but resourcing is a more revealing indication of one's true priorities. By this metric, civilian influence efforts are an under-funded mandate. In 2020, the U.S. government devoted just 0.03% of total federal expenditures to public diplomacy and global media activities. Leadership is another barometer of relative priority, and here too, U.S. actions do not match its rhetoric. The most senior position in U.S. public diplomacy, the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, has been vacant for an estimated 40 percent of the time since its inception (ACPD, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> President George W. Bush (White House, 2006) acknowledged that while "we do not seek to dictate to other states the choices they make, we do seek to influence the calculations on which these choices are based." President Barack Obama (White House, 2010 and 2015) saw that rebuilding the sources of American influence was essential to shaping an "international order capable of overcoming the challenges of the 21st century" and the "trajectories of historic [global] transitions underway." President Donald Trump (White House, 2017) argued that bolstering America's influence was paramount for the U.S. to compete with near peer rivals within international institutions and provide an example that "penetrates the gloomy regions of despotism." Most recently, President Joseph Biden (White House, 2022) emphasized investing in the tools of American influence bilaterally, as well as working with allies to expand our collective influence to solve shared challenges and shape the global strategic environment.

<sup>2</sup> We define strategic communications as: the systematic design and implementation of communication initiatives by a political entity (a state actor or non-state actor working on a state's behalf) to achieve predefined goals that advance broader national interests. This definition has been adapted from noted scholar R.S. Zaharna (2010), from her book on U.S. strategic communications and public diplomacy after 9/11.

Although responsibilities for broadcasting and public diplomacy cut across multiple agencies, there is little formal coordination to ensure that these disparate efforts add up to more than the sum of their parts. The U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy's consistent recommendation—that the White House establish a “policy coordination committee” for information statecraft within the National Security Council with representatives from the Departments of State (DoS) and Defense (DoD), as well as the Intelligence Community (IC)—has fallen on deaf ears year after year (ACPD, 2019, 2020, 2021b).

Until recently, U.S. government personnel (e.g., foreign service officers, local employees) tasked with implementing core strategic communications responsibilities were operating within a “50-year old legacy structure” from the 1970s, using tools designed for the analog age rather than an increasingly digital world (ACPD, 2021a). Practitioners and politicians alike, albeit for different reasons, lament that America's legislative frameworks hamper, rather than facilitate, U.S. efforts to tell its story well to foreign publics, mobilize domestic support for making these investments, and crowd-in complementary expertise from non-governmental and private sector actors.

As a result of this status quo, U.S. leaders are constrained in their ability to counter negative narratives spread by competitors who seek to challenge America's global leadership—from conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns to more traditional public relations stories. Nor are we well prepared to promote more positive stories of America's role in the world. Why is this and how can we fix it? The starting point of any reform effort begins with a sound diagnosis of where we are and how we got here.

In this background paper, we take a retrospective look at U.S. strategic communications across three critical junctures in U.S. history: the Cold War (1946-1990), the post-Cold War and 9/11 period (1991-2007), and the contemporary era (2008-2022). At each juncture, we systematically examine how America's international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts have been resourced, organized, coordinated, and targeted. Our intent with this paper is one part baselining (i.e., what has been the state-of-play), one part problem identification (i.e., what is working, what is not, and why), and one part groundwork laying for subsequent papers to assess options that will best resolve chronic pain points and strengthen U.S. strategic communications in an era of intensified great power competition.

Specifically, we answer several overarching questions:

- How have U.S. strategic communications goals and capabilities evolved over time? To what extent have these efforts been successful or not—and why?
- Where has strategic communications fit within the broader U.S. foreign policy apparatus—from national security strategy to day-to-day operations? How has this positioning enabled or constrained the U.S. in effectively resourcing, evaluating, and coordinating its efforts?
- What lessons learned can be derived from past attempts, both successes and failures, to reform U.S. strategic communications to date?

In answering these questions, the AidData research team at William & Mary's Global Research Institute employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. First, we analyzed U.S. congressional activity and executive policy across the three periods of interest to pinpoint the extent to which SC was a stated priority of the U.S. government at the time: what commitments were made, how were these promises to be fulfilled and operationalized in practice, and with what authorities and resources?<sup>3</sup> Second, we analyzed historical funding for America's broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts across the three time periods to assess revealed priorities in how U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts have been resourced and targeted.<sup>4</sup> Third, we conducted extensive desk research to examine operating documents and evaluations produced by USG agencies and third parties to understand how SC was organized, coordinated, and whether it was effective.

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<sup>3</sup> To inform the legislative analysis, we collected data on 2,136 results from Congress.gov using a series of targeted searches that yielded an initial dataset of 757 unique pieces of legislation. After reviewing the initial dataset and assessing the relevancy of individual pieces of legislation, we conducted a second round of targeted searches on Congress.gov to gather additional data and conducted a second relevance assessment. This two-stage process yielded a final dataset of 130 pieces of relevant legislation, from which we gathered 557 data points with information pertinent to the historical impact of Congress on U.S. strategic communications and public diplomacy.

<sup>4</sup> The data on State Department Public Diplomacy Activities were collected from the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy's Comprehensive Annual Reports on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting. Where available, the topline funding to public diplomacy was used, along with specific agencies and programs identified. Funding to thematic cross-agency themes, such as Education and Cultural Exchange, and Broadcasting, was also recorded. Our team identified a total expenditure of \$88 billion dollars (constant USD 2021) to broadcasting and public diplomacy activities between 1949 and 2020. Reliable topline data is available from 1980-2020. For years prior to 1980, our team estimated figures based on individual programs and their reported budgets, though these likely represent only partial figures.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Sections 2-4 provide a deep dive overview of how U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy was organized, resourced, coordinated, and targeted in three time periods: Cold War (Section 2), post Cold War and 9/11 (Section 3), and the contemporary period (Section 4). In Section 5, we provide a concluding assessment of successes, failures, and lessons to feed forward into Gates Forum deliberations about how we might reimagine America’s strategic communications capabilities to be fit-for-purpose in an era of intensified strategic competition within a multiplex world.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 elaborates the evaluation criteria and supporting questions we used to assess each time period.

Table 1. Evaluation Criteria and Supporting Questions

Evaluation Criteria	Supporting Questions for Consideration
Strategic Directions	What were the stated objectives of U.S. efforts at key junctures in U.S. history, as compared to the present day? Who were the primary target audiences of interest? What strategies and approaches were employed to operationalize these in practice?
Operational Practices	How has U.S. strategic communications been organized, resourced, and coordinated across the interagency at key junctures in U.S. history compared to the present day?
Revealed Priorities	How has the volume and distribution of financing for U.S. strategic communications (particularly public diplomacy) varied over time, by agency, and focus?
Authorizing Mandates	To what extent did U.S. strategic communications enjoy Congressional, executive, and popular support at key junctures in U.S. history compared to the present day?
Results and Lessons	In what ways did U.S. strategic communications appear to succeed or fall-short of its stated objectives at key junctures in U.S. history and against what metrics? What lessons learned should we take away from this period that should be applied to future U.S. strategic communications (i.e., success criteria, blind spots to overcome)?

<sup>5</sup> A multiplex world features a multiplicity of actors vying for influence and growing complexity in the form of trans-boundary issues that are multidimensional, unpredictable, and require collective action.

## 2. Cold War Era: Strategic Communications to Contain Communism (1946-1990)

Many scholars and policymakers point to the Cold War era as a “golden age” of U.S. strategic communications (Center, 2013). America certainly had several advantages in its favor at this key juncture in history: a clear opponent (the Soviet Union), a compelling objective (to protect democratic life from encroaching Communism), prioritized target audiences (citizens of the USSR and its allies), and a consistent message to put forward to the world. Moreover, the U.S. consolidated oversight of much of its strategic communications apparatus under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), which from 1953 until 1999 managed most of America’s international broadcasting and exchange programs.<sup>6</sup>

In parallel, U.S. strategic communications enjoyed high-level political support, as President Dwight Eisenhower “invited the USIA’s director to sit in both his cabinet and National Security Council” and President Ronald Reagan “appointed his closest friend, Charles Wick,” to direct the agency (Cull, 2022). Two hallmark pieces of legislation—the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961—provided the authorizing mandate for broadcasting and public diplomacy programs. Congress also established the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) in 1948, which has played a crucial role in evaluating civilian strategic communications efforts and promoting greater public understanding of, and support for, these activities. Nevertheless, as we discuss in this section, U.S. international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts still faced several challenges during this period.

### 2.1 Strategic Directions, Authorizing Mandates, and Operational Practices

The contest for primacy between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’ following the end of World War II heavily influenced America’s broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts until the fall of the Soviet Union (USSR). Strategic communications grew in importance as a

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<sup>6</sup> As Cull (2022) in the companion paper to this one explains, “the USIA was created out of a patchwork of pre-existing federal communications activities [including] WWII programs such as Voice of America and the Office of War Information’s embassy posts known as the U.S. Information Service. [It also] absorbed information elements of the allied occupation of Germany and Japan such as the Amerika Hauser in Germany and its information work.”

means of ideological competition when conventional and nuclear forces were at a stalemate (Cull, 2022). Engaging citizens of communist countries who lacked access to information and free speech behind the Iron Curtain was a consistent priority of Congress and the executive branch, as evidenced by a spate of new pieces of legislation and special initiatives. This “arsenal of nonmilitary assets” would prove to be of “critical importance in the long contest with the Soviet Union” (Gates, 2021, p.5).

During the administration of President Harry Truman, Congress passed the Smith-Mundt Act in January 1948 to “promote the better understanding of the United States among the peoples of the world and to strengthen cooperative international relations” (US Information and Educational Exchange Act, 1948). In 1953, President Eisenhower established the USIA, with the intention to move foreign information initiatives out from under the purview of the State department, including the broadcast of Voice of America (VOA, 2017). In 1961, the Fulbright-Hays Act (i.e., the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act) expanded upon several prior pieces of legislation for a more comprehensive authorizing framework for all U.S. government educational and cultural exchange programs.<sup>7</sup>

On an annual basis, the USIA received Congressional appropriations to fund specific budget line items, which regularly included: broadcasting operations, acquisition of facilities, exchange programs, and international events. Exchange programs administered by the USIA that received regular funding included: the Fulbright and International Visitors Programs, the Humphrey Fellowship Program, and the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship, among other programs. However, implementation was hamstrung by congressional insistence that the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs be responsible for cultural and exchange work, even as they did so primarily by “subcontracting USIA officers in the field to deliver these programs,” at least until reforms during President Jimmy Carter (Cull, 2022).

Broadcasting entities also received regular funding through the appropriations process, including: Voice of America (VOA) and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which oversees Radio and Televisión Martí (established in 1983 and 1990).<sup>8</sup> Initially, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) was considered a private organization and funded by the

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<sup>7</sup> This includes the Fulbright Act of 1946, the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, the Finnish Educational Exchange Act of 1949, and the 1952 Mutual Security Act. By 1971, there was some form of academic exchange in place with 100 countries.  
<https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/about-fulbright/history/early-years>

<sup>8</sup> Radio Marti was established in 1983, followed by the addition of Television Marti in 1990.



Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) until 1971,<sup>9</sup> when it too began directly receiving congressional appropriations and was later placed under the oversight of the bipartisan Board for International Broadcasting in 1973 (Pomar, 2021 and 2022).

VOA served as a global flagship broadcaster: the “national voice” to explain American policies and tell American stories (ibid). RFE/RL had a larger goal “not simply to inform their listeners but also to bring about the peaceful demise of the Communist system and the liberation of what were known as satellite nations” (Puddington, 2000, ix). The radios pursued these goals by serving as surrogate home radio services and alternatives to the “controlled, party-dominated, domestic press” (ibid). RFE targeted satellite Soviet states, while RL targeted an audience inside the Soviet Union (Congressional Research Service, 2016). Former Director of RFE Ross Johnson described the RFE/RL mandate as providing “listeners with an intellectual bridge to Western Europe and the United States and a factual basis for comprehending their own lives and the world around them, so as to preserve the independent thinking that the controlled domestic media sought to prevent or suppress” (Pomar, 2021).

As the USSR began to loosen its grip on client states in Eastern Europe, Congress sought to exploit a window of opportunity via legislation to increase exchange programs and diplomacy with citizens of the Communist Bloc. This included outreach to Warsaw Pact members such as Hungary and Poland to establish Fulbright Commissions, sister institution relationships, and reciprocal cultural centers. With former USSR countries, the U.S. opened up interparliamentary, educational, legal, and business exchange programs with citizens of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and ultimately Russia itself. Congress also passed acts that established additional diplomatic facilities in newly independent states of the former USSR.<sup>10</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, Congress began to broaden the aperture of U.S. strategic communications by mandating an uptick in public diplomacy efforts towards regions and countries undergoing political unrest. The rationale for this programming was three-fold: to support citizens in those countries, cultivate goodwill for the United States, and encourage a peaceful resolution of conflicts. In this vein, Congress appropriated funding for scholarships targeted to undergraduate university

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<sup>9</sup> The radio stations were covert operations of the CIA and governed by American corporate boards for the first 20 years of their existence, with the intent of providing a “firewall” between the U.S. government and the broadcasters to increase perceived credibility (Pomar, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989, 1989; Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993, 1991; FREEDOM Support Act, 1992.

students from conflict-prone countries in Central America that were strategically important to the United States.<sup>11</sup> It also passed specific appropriations funding USIA grants to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to support the transition of apartheid South Africa to a non-racial democracy and to encourage non-violence among dissident factions.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of operations and governance, the USIA was its own agency but reported directly to the National Security Council (National Security Council, 1955). This provided opportunities for coordination and cooperation between the various intelligence agencies, the State department, and the White House. Throughout the Cold War period, the USIA also benefited from its directors' personal relationships with the President, which increased the agency's visibility with an important political champion. In fact, one might argue that the salience of the Cold War threat motivated the U.S. foreign policy and national security apparatuses to work more closely together than we have seen in other time periods, often with direct input from the President, to ensure coherent and effective strategic communications efforts.

President Dwight Eisenhower gave his USIA Director a seat at the table in both his cabinet and the NSC, as did President John F. Kennedy with Edward Murrow (Director of the USIA in the early 1960s).<sup>13</sup> This political backing may have aided Murrow's efforts to modernize the USIA, with an increased focus on developing countries in Latin America and Africa, and to hire a more diverse workforce for the agency (Belovari, 2008). Leonard Marks was the lawyer for the Johnson family communications business before becoming USIA Director under President Lyndon Johnson (Cull, 2022). President Ronald Reagan hired his close friend, Charles Z. Wick, who served as USIA Director for most of the 1980s (ADST, 2022).

Of course, this hand-in-glove relationship was not the case for all directors of the agency. Frank Shakespeare, USIA Director under President Richard Nixon, threatened to tender his resignation before being allowed to attend NSC meetings (Fisher, 2011). Meanwhile, Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, sought to exclude

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<sup>11</sup> Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1985, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1986 and 1987, 1985; Dire Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Assistance, Food Stamps, Unemployment Compensation Administration, and Other Urgent Needs, and Transfers, and Reducing Funds Budgeted for Military Spending Act of 1990, 1990; South African Democratic Transition Support Act of 1993, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> As Cull (2022) notes, this close working relationship may have been aided by the fact that some of Murrow's deputies were personally connected to "Kennedy's inner circle."

Shakespeare from decision-making processes (Cull, 2022). There were also cases of a breakdown in communications between the White House and the USIA, most noticeably between the Johnson administration and then-USIA Director Carl Rowan, as the President saw global polling on perceptions of the U.S. as a threat to U.S. elections in 1964 (ibid).

## 2.2 Revealed Priorities

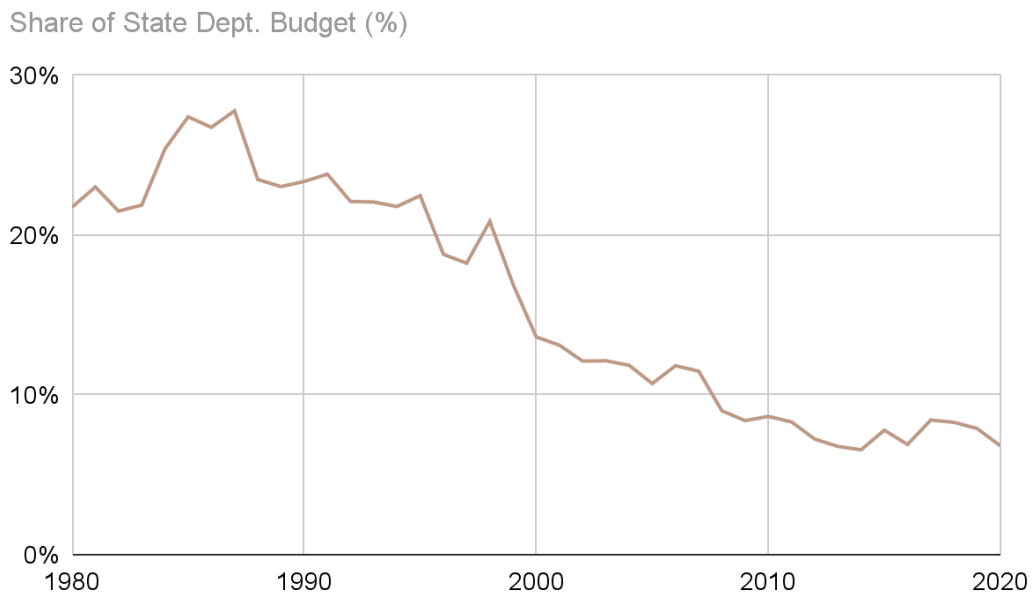
The late 1980s appear to have been the high-water mark for resourcing civilian strategic communications over the past four decades—not necessarily in total dollars spent, but rather as a share of funding for the State Department budget programming (Figure 1) and in overall federal spending (Figure 2).<sup>14</sup> In 1987, for example, the Department of State and the USIA expended US\$2.1 billion (constant USD 2021) to support global media and public diplomacy activities. This resource envelope represented 28 percent of the total US\$7.4 billion (constant USD 2021) available to these agencies and approximately 0.10% of total federal spending.

Although the total dollar amounts have increased in subsequent decades, there has been a declining share of funding available for civilian strategic communications within the DoS budget and as a proportion of total federal spending. As a case in point: these activities attracted only 7 percent of the DoS budget in 2020 and represented only 0.03% of total federal expenditures.

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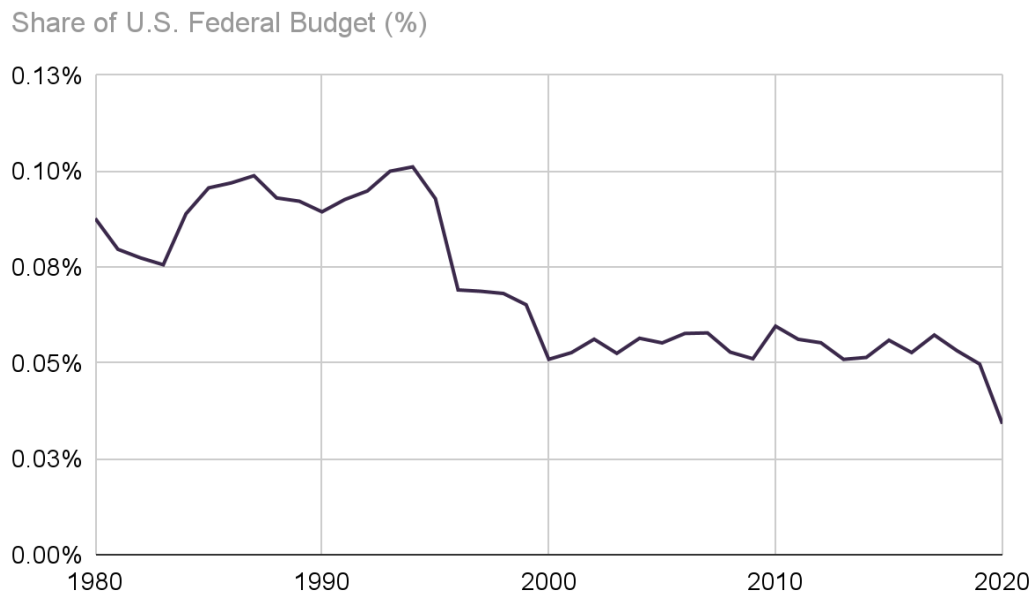
<sup>14</sup> Data availability was relatively sparse to provide a complete picture of aggregate resourcing for civilian strategic communications prior to 1980.

**Figure 1.** U.S. Funding for Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy as a Share of the State Department Budget, 1980-2020



*Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) as a share (percentage) of overall financing available to these agencies. The underlying financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021. Overall financing for the Department of State was obtained from the Office of Management and Budget's Historical Table 4.1—Outlays by Agency (1962-2027). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historical-tables/>*

**Figure 2.** U.S. Funding for Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy as a Share of Total Federal Government Expenditures, 1980-2020



*Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) as a share (percentage) of overall federal government budget expenditures. Underlying financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Source: Data manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021. Overall federal expenditures were obtained from the Office of Management and Budget's Historical Table 4.1—Outlays by Agency (1962-2027).*

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historical-tables/>

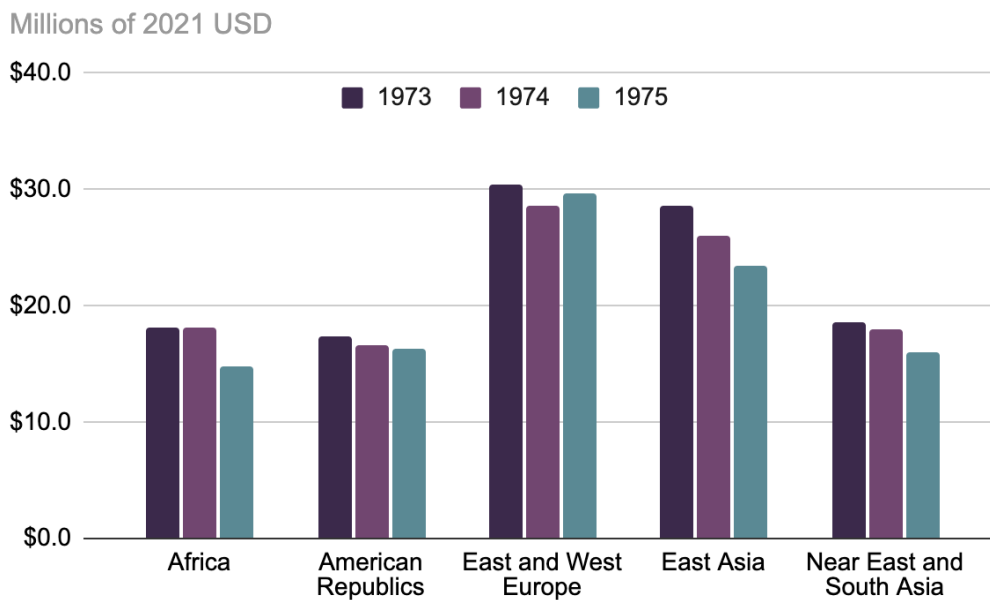
These overall numbers provide a useful picture of the relative importance of civilian-led strategic communications within the U.S. government budget; however, this does not tell us about whether and how these resources were ultimately targeted to advance U.S. interests. Fortunately, even with relatively sparse historical data, some disaggregation is possible to get a better pulse on America's primary target audiences and preferred tools to reach these publics during this period.

Geographically, East and West Europe attracted the lion's share of resources, followed by East Asia, consistent with the strategic imperative to counter the rise of communism and hasten the USSR's decline. Notwithstanding the spate of legislation and appropriations made by Congress to expand broadcasting efforts into Cuba,<sup>15</sup> strategic communications expenditures tended to deprioritize U.S. neighbors in the Western

<sup>15</sup> Primarily oriented towards the Office of Cuba Broadcasting's Radio Marti and later TV Marti.

Hemisphere (i.e., the “American Republics” in the original budgets). Similarly, the Near East and South Asia were relative afterthoughts when it came to SC funding. Figure 3 provides an illustrative breakdown of resourcing for public diplomacy by region for the period of 1973-75.

**Figure 3.** Regional Breakdown of Public Diplomacy Financing (Excluding Broadcasting), 1973-1975



*Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian public diplomacy efforts (educational and cultural affairs spending, exclusive of broadcasting) overseen by the Department of State, broken down by region for each of the years 1973, 1974, and 1975. A comparable regional breakdown for international broadcasting is unavailable for this time period. Financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Region names reflect State department regional groupings at the time, as reflected in line items. Source: Data manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from State Department reports.*

Exchange programs were an early U.S. resourcing priority in the immediate post-WWII period. In the 1950s, there was substantial emphasis on bolstering people-to-people ties between U.S. citizens and counterparts in other countries. Such programs were aimed at not only promoting broader post-war peace and reconciliation efforts, but also projecting U.S. norms and narratives with key publics to thwart the USSR’s sphere of influence. In 1950 alone, the U.S. government committed \$180.8 million (constant USD 2021) to such education and cultural exchange efforts.

Although there is little data available on United States mass media broadcasting budgets prior to 1980, once we pick up the resourcing trail in 1980 onwards, these activities far outstripped the funding devoted to smaller-scale exchange programs. In 1983, for example, the USG deployed nearly two times the amount of funding to global media activities as it did to education and cultural exchange: US\$358 million versus US\$180 million (constant USD 2021). This revealed preference for investing in broadcasting over people-to-people ties remained consistent throughout the period.

Activities carried out by the Department of Defense also played a crucial role in amplifying U.S. messages abroad and strengthening military-to-military ties, particularly via exchange programs. Notably, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reported that military exchange programs accounted for 61 percent of the total US\$2.8 billion (constant USD 2021) the U.S. government spent on “scientific, military, educational, and cultural exchange programs” (ACPD, 1982, p.23). Not only do these programs provide valuable points of contact between the U.S. and our allies, but they have the opportunity to share American norms and values with leaders in our partners’ militaries. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of publicly available budget data to accurately gauge the size of these DoD-led exchange programs, such that we focus here primarily on civilian-led efforts.

Private sector funding played a small but important role in this era, as executive branch agencies courted the business and philanthropic communities to fund both broadcasting and exchange activities. The USIA crowded in US\$18.3 million (constant USD 2021) in private funds for “exhibits” via the International Bureau of Expositions, and US\$1.4 million (constant USD 2021) to support television broadcasting of the program “Let Poland Be Poland” in 1982 (ACPD, 1982, p.29). In 1983, President Reagan sought US\$10 million dollars in matching funds from private businesses to support his signature International Youth Exchange Program for youth aged 15-25 in the U.S. and counterpart countries (ACPD, 1983, p.29).

### 3. Post-Cold War & 9/11 Era: U.S. Strategic Communications to Counter Terrorism (1991-2007)

U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts during the post-Cold War and 9/11 era reflect the need to navigate multiple transitions: a bipolar to a unipolar world, analog to digital communications, centralized to fragmented information, Europe to Asia and the Middle East, and a singular purpose to multiple competing priorities.

The early years of the period were marked by the vacuum created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Washington responded with a major restructuring of the strategic communications apparatus, including the privatization and consolidation of legacy broadcasters, as Congress and the executive branch sought to defund redundant programs designed to counter threats they felt no longer existed. In parallel, there was a search for alternative use cases for broadcasting and public diplomacy, as the prior emphasis on reaching citizens in Communist bloc countries was no longer the focus. The result was a diffusion of priorities—from enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Iraqi sanctions to tackling global climate change—reducing clarity of purpose and coherence in messaging (PDD 68, 1998; Taylor, 2006).

The later part of the period was indelibly shaped by the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 and their aftermath. This proved to be a consequential pivot point for America's strategic communications, as the crisis triggered a harsh "realization that foreign perceptions had domestic consequences" (Zaharna, 2010). For a brief window, "public diplomacy [became] a national security issue," as U.S. leaders viewed civilian efforts to win hearts and minds as central to winning the war on terrorism (ibid). The episode also triggered substantial introspection in Washington as it reflected on two dissonant realities. U.S. strategic communications were of critical importance to rebuilding relations with the Arab and Muslim world, as well as deterring future threats. Yet, America's broadcasting and public diplomacy did not sufficiently deter the events of 9/11. This prompted "more than a dozen" special commissions, task forces, studies,



and reports that all sought to analyze the deficiencies and propose recommendations to “fix...repair...invigorate” America’s strategic communications toolkit (ibid).<sup>16</sup>

### 3.1 Strategic Directions, Authorizing Mandates, and Operational Practices

The relative success of U.S. strategic communications during the Cold War period was bittersweet, as it provided an opportunity to claim a political victory, but opened the door to discussions of reaping a “peace dividend” by cutting programs seen as having outlived their usefulness (Pomar, 2021). As a case in point, then-candidate Bill Clinton made the idea of a peace dividend central to his campaign for the presidency in 1993 and “zeroed out funding for RFE/RL” in his first budget sent to Congress (ibid). This enthusiasm for cost-cutting was not limited to the executive branch alone, and Senator Russ Feingold became a major advocate for the closure of the radio stations (ibid).

In this respect, the 1994 International Broadcasting Act—which said that RFE/RL should be privatized before the end of 1999<sup>17</sup> and merged VOA into the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) as a cost-saving measure<sup>18</sup>—may be thought of as a strategic “compromise” (Pomar, 2021). Although it consolidated the U.S. SC apparatus and laid the groundwork to reduce resourcing, the legislation did manage to preserve the operations of some of America’s most successful broadcasting tools.

At the start of the period, when the USIA was still the central authority managing U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts, Congress funded the organization, its subsidiaries, and grantees through the same appropriations structure as it had during the Cold War. This changed as President Clinton sought the reorganization of the USIA under the State Department with the goal “to strengthen public diplomacy through its integration into the policy process.” Congress formally abolished the USIA in 1999 and

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Zaharna (2010) provides a lengthy discussion of several of the major inquiries during this time, including: the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) 2001 report “Improving the U.S. Public Diplomacy Campaign in the War Against Terrorism,” the CFR 2002 Independent Task Force on “Public Diplomacy: A Strategy for Reform,” and the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy 2002 Annual Report. In 2003, there was a series of reports, including the Heritage Foundation’s report on “How to Re-invigorate U.S. Public Diplomacy,” the Center for the Study of the Presidency’s report on “Strengthening U.S.-Muslim Communications,” CFR’s report on “Finding America’s Voice: Reinvigorating Public Diplomacy,” and numerous Government Accountability Office assessments. In 2004, this included the Djerejian Commission report “Changing Minds, Winning Peace” and the 2004 Strategic Communications report from the Defense Science Board, a Pentagon advisory panel.

<sup>17</sup> Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

reassigned its international broadcasting duties to the BBG and its public information and exchange programs to the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.<sup>19</sup>

Following the dissolution of the USIA, Congress shifted away from earmarking resources for specific initiatives or entities<sup>20</sup> to authorizing broader appropriations to fund “international broadcasting operations” or “public diplomacy international information programs” writ large.<sup>21</sup> There were two exceptions to this general rule—the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB) and the BBG—which both continued to receive program-specific appropriations within budget legislation.

Why did this shift occur? It could be that as Congressional leaders viewed strategic communications as less of a political priority, in the absence of the singular threat of the USSR and spread of Communism, they became more detached from earmarking funds to specific priorities. This rationale might also explain the one outlier to this trend—the OCB—which continued to receive dedicated carve-outs of funding in appropriations processes. The Cuban-American community in Florida is a powerful political constituency in a swing state and traditionally had been vocally supportive of U.S. broadcasting efforts to penetrate Cuba’s restrictive information space (Cull, 2022).<sup>22</sup>

Alternatively, this shift could have reflected new thinking within Congress that providing flexibility of funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy programs would empower the implementing agencies to do what needed to be done with minimal restrictions. However, this seems less likely than the political salience argument, given Congress’ continued practice of heavily earmarking funding for specific priorities in other facets of international affairs, such as foreign economic and development assistance.

With the end of the Cold War, U.S. leaders’ attention turned from “fostering mutual understanding” with citizens in Communist bloc countries (Taylor, 2006) to a much more diffuse set of priorities, audiences, and topics. From the early to mid-1990s, Congress expanded U.S. broadcasting and exchange efforts in Asia. Initially, this consisted of

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<sup>19</sup> Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1999, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> I.e., Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

<sup>21</sup> Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994. This included the Fulbright and International Visitors Programs, the Humphrey Fellowship Program, the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship, and private sector programs.

<sup>22</sup> However, Cull (2022) acknowledges that the Cuban American lobby was a “mixed blessing” for strategic communications, as the bloc substantially skewed broadcasting content to focus on “anti-Castro” messages, regardless of whether this would play well with or be heard by Cubans on the island.

Congress approving the establishment of exchange programs,<sup>23</sup> funding scholarships for students,<sup>24</sup> and establishing broadcast facilities<sup>25</sup> in countries across East and Southeast Asia.<sup>26</sup> Congress created Radio Free Asia (RFA) in 1994 via the International Broadcasting Act with the mission to provide news and commentary to countries in Asia with limited domestic media ecosystems.<sup>27</sup> Through the end of the decade and into the early 2000s, Congress followed the establishment of RFA with a series of specific appropriations for the expansion of broadcasting services within China.<sup>28</sup>

The Middle East was also an emerging political priority, initially due to the Gulf War and later with respect to the Global War on Terror. Congress passed legislation adapting RFE/RL to engage the public in Iraq and the region. In 1998, it authorized funding to support the Iraqi democratic opposition via broadcasting assistance. It later instructed RFE/RL to establish surrogate radio broadcasting for the Iraqi and Iranian people via two new stations, Radio Free Iraq broadcasting in Arabic and Radio Free Iran broadcasting in Farsi.<sup>29</sup>

Alongside changing geographic priorities, U.S. leaders had to contend with a dramatically different information environment than the Cold War period. The rise of the 24-hour news cycle increased the speed with which global citizens could access information about events in real-time. In parallel, the growing accessibility of computers, smart phones, and Internet connectivity effectively democratized the production of information by reducing the cost and distance to communicate to local, national, and even global audiences with the stroke of a button. Citizens now had the opportunity to see more clearly how other countries governed themselves and the rights and freedoms their counterparts enjoyed, such that they could demand democratic norms for themselves (Wriston, 1997).

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<sup>23</sup> Exchange programs were established between Cambodia, China, Myanmar, and Tibet, with the specific aim of encouraging participation by human rights and democracy leaders.

<sup>24</sup> Scholarships to study in the United States were provided for Vietnamese, Cambodian, Burmese, and Tibetan students.

<sup>25</sup> The USIA was authorized to initiate the process of establishing offices in Vientiane, Lhasa, and Hong Kong (PRC).

<sup>26</sup> Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993, 1991; United States-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, 1992; Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994; Human Rights, Refugee, and Other Foreign Relations Provisions Act of 1996, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> These were the Strom Thurmond National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1999, 1998 and the Consolidated Appropriations Act in 2001, and 2000; they authorized the extension of nondiscriminatory treatment (normal trade relations treatment) to the People's Republic of China and established a framework for relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

<sup>29</sup> Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, 1998; 1998 Supplemental Appropriations and Rescissions Act, 1998; Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1999, 1998.

The 24-hour news cycle created a powerful “CNN effect,” whereby “real-time communications” related to globally important events such as the Tiananmen Square protests, the outbreak of the Gulf War, or the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. could provoke rapid responses from both citizens and political elites across the world (Robinson, 1999). Rather than relying upon its own broadcasting channels, the U.S. could piggyback on independent media to advance its interests and preferred narratives. For example, during the Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush directed his Press Secretary to respond to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein over CNN, knowing that Hussein would be watching, rather than conduct diplomatic negotiations through traditional channels.

Nevertheless, access to technology and more diverse sources of information also created new challenges for U.S. strategic communications to navigate. During the Cold War, U.S. communications channels such as the VOA and RFE/RL were seen as the only trustworthy alternatives to state propaganda readily available for citizens in Communist bloc countries living behind the Iron Curtain. As Gates (2021, p.38) notes, “the United States [was seen] as a standard-bearer for freedom.” In the post-Cold War and 9/11 period, however, global audiences, particularly in the Middle East, did not trust the U.S. (ibid).

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, there was a renewed interest in strategic communications within Washington as a means to combat international terrorism. Al Qaeda made powerful use of propaganda to mobilize recruits and recognized the importance of information as “an asymmetric weapon against powerful nation-states” (Taylor, 2006). Osama bin Laden spoke directly to an international audience via the Al Jazeera network (Hoffman, 2002). U.S. leaders also made use of the megaphone offered by mass media to reach a larger audience more quickly. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, for example, appeared on MTV in February 2002 to “answer questions from young people around the world about what America represents” and make a direct appeal to an “estimated 375 million households in 63 countries worldwide” (CRS, 2006).

America’s broadcasting and public diplomacy after 9/11 had two overarching goals to advance America’s foreign policy interests: “promote U.S. values” and “marginalize...terrorist messages” (Zaharna, 2010). In 2002, Congress authorized the BBG to establish Radio Free Afghanistan as a subsidiary of RFE/RL to operate along

similar lines as Radio Free Iraq and Iran. The new news service provided broadcasts in both the Dari and Pashto languages.<sup>30</sup> Congress also passed the 2002 Freedom Promotion Act, which represented a substantial increase in funding for public diplomacy budgets, particularly those focused on the Arab and Muslim world (Zaharna, 2010).<sup>31</sup> It followed this later that year with appropriations funding for broadcasting operations and facilities with the express purpose of combating international terrorism.<sup>32</sup>

In 2003, Congress started making regular appropriations to fund the BBG's newly established Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN), which was established as a televised news service broadcast in Arabic.<sup>33</sup> In 2004, Congress passed the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act which reaffirmed the importance of public diplomacy as a critical foreign policy tool. The Secretary of State and the BBG were instructed to develop a strategy with long-term objectives to counter anti-U.S. propaganda.<sup>34</sup>

With legislative and executive branch interests aligned around the imperative to counter international terrorism, the administration of President George W. Bush spawned a series of innovative public diplomacy initiatives that were unique in the degree to which they sought to incorporate private sector best practices from the world of advertising and marketing. Under the leadership of Charlotte Beers, Bush's first Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and a former advertising executive, the U.S. government launched a full-scale multi-media campaign worth an estimated US\$12 million to help rebrand America into something that one could "sell to the Islamic world" (Zaharna, 2010). Stated strategic communications goals included: "informing the world swiftly and accurately about the policies of the U.S. government;" "representing the values and beliefs of the American people, which inform our policies and practices;" and "promoting American values" (ibid).

Cultural appeals such as Radio Sawa (2002) and the lifestyle magazine *Hi* (2003) targeted Arab youth via pop music and celebrity, respectively (Zaharna, 2010). The U.S.

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<sup>30</sup> Radio Free Afghanistan Act, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Zaharna (2010) estimates that the bill "injected 497 million annually into public diplomacy budgets," an increase by "9 percent overall and more than 50 percent in the Arab and Muslim world."

<sup>32</sup> 2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act for Further Recovery From and Response To Terrorist Attacks on the United States, 2002; Department of Defense and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Recovery from and Response to Terrorist Attacks on the United States Act, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Emergency Wartime Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2003, 2003; Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense and the Reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, 2004, 2003; Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief, 2005, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, 2004.

launched the Arabic language Al-Hurra satellite TV network to compete with Al Jazeera or Al-Arabiya (ibid). In the realm of values promotion, the Shared Values campaign “sought to build bridges” by emphasizing “America’s religious tolerance” and commonalities between Muslim-Americans and counterparts overseas by emphasizing “faith, family, and learning” (ibid). These higher price point efforts<sup>35</sup> were also accompanied by more traditional programming, as the State Department ramped up in-person and virtual<sup>36</sup> exchange programs for youth and working professionals, expanded the number of American Corners to serve as libraries and gathering places for information and events about the U.S., and invested in cultural ambassadors (ibid).

In a bid to marshal a whole-of-government approach, the DoS worked closely with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on joint initiatives such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI),<sup>37</sup> programming related to independent media development, and an online communications portal “Telling Our Stories” to crowdsource impact stories from beneficiaries of aid projects (Zaharna, 2010). With an expanded resource envelope from Congress in 2003, the Peace Corps also launched complementary efforts to place additional U.S. volunteers in the Arab and Muslim world to build personal relationships (ibid). DoD was also a major player in SC, establishing various initiatives: a “global response team of spokespeople” to counter anti-U.S. narratives, an “Office of Strategic Influence to promote favorable views of the U.S. military,” an “embedded journalist program to accompany U.S. troops into Iraq,” and the Iraqi Media Network to facilitate free and independent news (ibid).<sup>38</sup>

Karen Hughes (a close confidant of President George W. Bush) continued this spate of innovations during her term as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, but relied more heavily on public-private partnerships to mobilize resources and operationalize her ideas. For example, Hughes crowded-in US\$800 million in private sector funding to increase the number of participants in U.S. exchange programs from 30,000 to 50,000, as well as broker partnerships between the Aspen Institute and U.S.

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<sup>35</sup> Many of the new initiatives were multi-million dollar efforts to launch: Hi magazine (US\$ 4 million), Radio Sawa (US\$ 35 million), Al-Hurra (US\$62 million for one year of operation) (Zaharna, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> For example, the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs offered a series of virtual programs with assistance from non-governmental organizations working in the realm of Internet-based education (Zaharna, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> MEPI was a multi-faceted effort to “bridge the job, freedom, and knowledge gap” by working with Arab partners on programs in education, political and economic reform, and women’s empowerment (Zaharna, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> In fact, Cull (2022) describes Beers as being “frustrated with the [civilian] channels available [for strategic communications] and looking to the U.S. military to take on more of the burden of engaging foreign publics in MENA.”

communications schools to facilitate training for foreign journalists to study in America (Zaharna, 2010). Hughes also heavily emphasized media capacity—forming new regional media hubs and a counter-terrorism communication center, as well as instituting a Rapid Response Unit to monitor and respond to incoming questions from journalists or the public (ibid).

After Hughes' departure, James Glassman substantially changed the emphasis of U.S. strategic communications, pivoting away from broadcasting in favor of more targeted social networking, such as leveraging alumni of U.S. exchange programs and new digital technologies such as YouTube and social media as part of a new "U.S. Public Diplomacy 2.0" (Zaharna, 2010). An even larger shift was one of tone, rather than channel, of U.S. strategic communications. Glassman made the case that the U.S. should be less worried about promoting its own brand and more focused on destroying its competitors' brands (ibid).

When it comes to the coordination and organization of U.S. strategic communications, the post-Cold War and 9/11 period was a tale of two countervailing trends. On the one hand, there was increasing consolidation, with the privatization of RFE/RL, the merger of VOA into the BBG, and the dissolution of the USIA. On the other hand, there was a proliferation of new actors, with new broadcasting outlets formed, the mobilization of additional agencies' contributions, and an increasing use of public-private partnerships with companies and non-governmental actors. According to (Nakumara and Weed, 2009), there were "14 cabinet-level departments and over 48 independent agencies and commissions" actively involved in "at least one form of official public diplomacy...most often exchanges and training programs" during this time. There were numerous ad hoc attempts to put in place interagency coordination mechanisms for strategic communications, but these were largely intermittent and ultimately deemed to be ineffective.

In 2002, President George W. Bush instituted two attempts at coordination vehicles for U.S. strategic communications. He established a Strategic Communications Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) within the National Security Council (NSC) and tasked this body to create a national strategy. Bush also created a new White House Office of Global Communication (OGC) that same year with a mandate to "coordinate strategic communications overseas that integrate the President's themes and truthfully depict America and Administration policies" (White House, 2003a). However, the OGC in

practice operated in more of an advisory role than a coordination function, with specified functional responsibilities to: (i) formulate messages that reflect the SC framework and priorities of the U.S; (ii) develop strategies in consultation with the DoS and the National Security Advisor; (iii) work with other agencies to stand up temporary teams of communicators for short-term placement in areas of high global interest and media attention; and (iv) encourage the use of new technologies to convey messages to foreign publics (White House, 2003b).

With minimal formal authority to dictate how agencies targeted their resources, implemented programs, or evaluated results, the OGC was understandably hamstrung in overcoming the fragmentation of U.S. SC efforts across myriad actors. Even the NSC PCC on strategic communications was unsuccessful in achieving its objectives, as it produced a draft strategy that was not released publicly and was then subsequently disbanded with the outbreak of the Iraq War (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). It is perhaps unsurprising then that a Government Accountability Office (GAO) review of public diplomacy efforts conducted in 2003 found that the “the United States lacked a government-wide, interagency public diplomacy strategy, defining the messages and means for communications abroad...[despite] a number of aborted attempts to develop a strategy...which complicates the task of conveying consistent messages, which increases the risk of making damaging communication mistakes” (GAO, 2006).

In April 2006, President Bush established a new Policy Coordination Committee on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication under the direction of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (GAO, 2006). The committee included representatives from the DoS, the DoD, Treasury, the NSC, the IC, and other agencies. Its stated mandate was to coordinate interagency activities to ensure that: (i) all agencies work together to disseminate the President’s themes and messages; (ii) all PD and SC resources, programs, and activities are effectively coordinated to support those messages; and (iii) every agency gives PD and SC the same level of priority that the President does” (ibid).

The committee did issue a National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications in 2007, the “first interagency approved communications plan for the U.S. after 9/11” (Zaharna, 2010). But it was criticized for “failing to clearly define agency roles and responsibilities” and for poor implementation in the absence of “agency-specific plans” (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). The national strategy identified



three objectives for U.S. strategic communications to: (i) offer a positive vision of hope grounded in our basic values; (ii) marginalize violent extremists who threaten our freedom; (iii) and nurture common interests and values between Americans and other countries, cultures, and faiths (ibid). However, the strategy's emphasis on form (i.e., a plan to tick the box) over function (i.e., mechanisms to ensure the plan is operationalized effectively) may reflect the episodic nature of a committee that did not meet regularly as a group and instead relied on individual members to coordinate bilaterally (ibid).

## 3.2 Revealed Priorities

In total dollars spent, the U.S. initially doubled down on funding for strategic communications following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Budgets for broadcasting and public diplomacy held steady from the peaks of the 1980s and even grew in some years. This reached a high of US\$2.5 billion (constant USD 2021) in 1994 that would not be matched again until 2010 and exceeded any annual budget in real terms after 2018. However, there was a substantial reversal of fortune for strategic communications in the late 1990s, as funding levels began to plummet; this lasted until there was a later resurgence of interest after 9/11 (Figure 4). Examining these funds in isolation obscures the fact that even as funding in absolute terms for strategic communications was increasing during the post-Cold War and 9/11 period, in relative terms it was attracting a declining share of the State Department budget and overall federal spending (as shown previously in Figures 1 and 2). Both measures are useful, but tell us different things about the relative health of U.S. strategic communications.

Funding in absolute terms helps us approximate the total resource envelope available for broadcasting and public diplomacy activities between 1991-2007, as compared to previous and later periods. What is immediately visible from this vantage point is that there was a much higher degree of volatility in funding available for strategic communications during the post Cold War and 9/11 period than any other period we consider in this paper. This dynamic likely reflects the strategic ambiguity of SC early on, as Congress and the White House branch questioned the continued relevance of broadcasting and public diplomacy in the absence of a single existential threat from a rival power. As Washington saw a use case for strategic communications to counter terrorism subsequent to the 9/11 attacks, there was an increased resolve and

follow-through in funding levels for these activities; however, support was still muted relative to what had been seen at the height of the USSR's power. This point is reinforced by the fact that funding for strategic communications as a share of both the State Department budget and overall federal expenditures began a sharp descent as early as the late 1980s that persisted through the post Cold War and 9/11 period and through the present day.

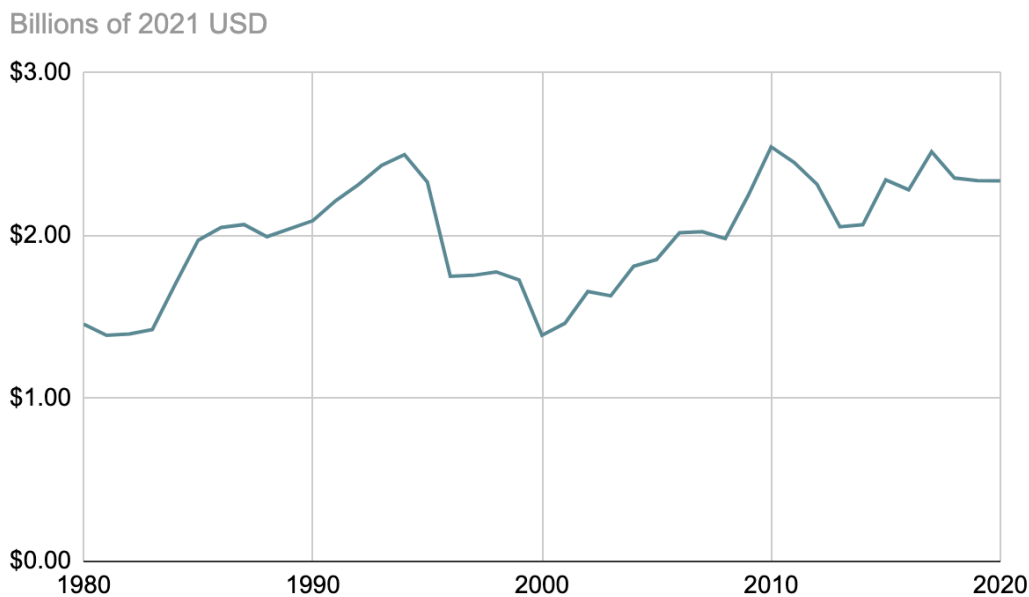
By 1996, budget cuts under President Clinton hit many executive agencies, and strategic communications was one of the first programs on the chopping block. Over US\$578 million (constant USD 2021), a quarter of the strategic communications budget, disappeared in one fell swoop. The share of the DoS budget devoted to strategic communications dropped from 22 to 19 percent of the total envelope. The USIA's allotted budget of US\$1.6 billion (constant USD 2021) in 1996, though roughly comparable to its financing in the 1980s, once again declined as a share of overall strategic communications resources.

Functionally, broadcasting continued to be the preferred vehicle for promoting U.S. messages to foreign publics and leaders. For every dollar the U.S. government committed to education and cultural activities (at least those conducted by civilian agencies), it spent nearly two dollars on international broadcasting in the early 1990s. VOA benefited from expanded resources in the early 1990s. Previously in the 1980s, VOA's budget had dropped by a third between 1986 and 1989, from US\$378 million to US\$254 million (constant USD 2021), but once again expanded in the wake of the Gulf War to US\$392 million in 1993 (constant USD 2021).

By 1996, however, three of the main U.S. broadcasting entities (VOA, RFE, RL) were vulnerable to proposed budget cuts, a reflection of the growing criticism that these Cold War "relics" had outlived their usefulness (Pomar, 2021). Although Congressional action protected broadcasters from the full impact of President Clinton's earlier proposal to "zero out" funding, their resource envelope was still drastically reduced. VOA and RFE/RL had their shares of the overall strategic communications budget cut in half in 1996, receiving US\$164 million and US\$153 million (constant USD 2021), respectively. Overall funding for strategic communications continued its descent until it hit a low of US\$1.4 billion dollars (constant USD 2021) in 2000, accounting for just 14 percent of the Department of State budget.

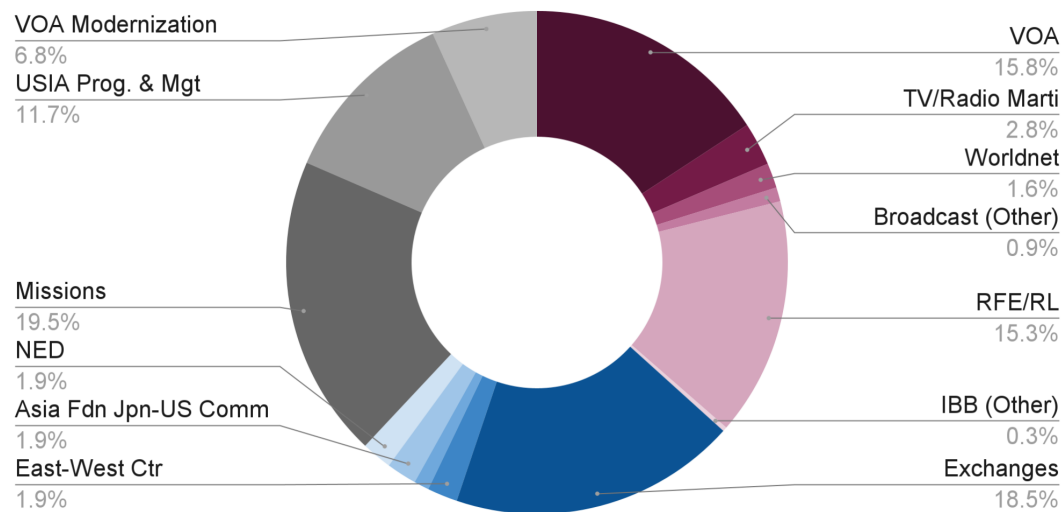
In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, funding for U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy did make up some ground, as it was seen as a central part of the War on Terror; however, this did not appear to have the same galvanizing effect on mobilizing resources as did the imperative to counter the USSR's influence during the Cold War. Later in the 9/11 period, funding did increase to US\$2.0 billion (constant USD 2021) in 2006 and 2007, but this growth did not keep pace with the rest of the DoS' mandate. In terms of preferred tools of strategic communications, there was an uptick in funding targeted to education and cultural exchange between 2003 (2.6 percent of the DoS budget) and 2006 (3.3 percent), though even this financing was down from the start of the period (4 percent in 1993). Disaggregated data for broadcasting, particularly VOA and RFE/RL, is not available after 1996.

**Figure 4.** U.S. Funding for International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy, 1980-2020 (constant USD 2021)



*Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) in absolute dollars. Financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021.*

**Figure 5.** Illustrative Breakdown of Funding for International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy Activities by Sub-Category, 1993 only



*Note: This visual shows the breakdown of individual line-items within the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) for the year 1993 only. Broadcast activities are shaded pink, exchange activities are shaded blue, while other administrative items from the public diplomacy budget are shaded gray. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021.*

## 4. Contemporary Period: U.S. Strategic Communications to Compete with Near Peers (2008-Present)

In the contemporary period, from 2008 to the present day, countering international terrorism continued to be a foreign policy priority for U.S. leaders. By extension, monitoring and countering the efforts of non-state actors like ISIS and al-Shabab to use digital communications channels to recruit terrorists and cultivate sympathizers for their cause were important emphases of U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts (Hoffman, 2017).<sup>39</sup>

This period has also been marked by intensifying great power competition with Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in a bid for primacy that transcends traditional peace and war (Jones, 2021; Robinson et al., 2019). Strategic communications are an essential capability in this struggle—both to proactively advance the U.S.' preferred narratives and build trust with target audiences, as well as resist and counter an increasing proliferation of disinformation which aims to disrupt societies and displace existing alliances. An examination of other great powers' strategic communications efforts in relation to U.S. interests is beyond the scope of this paper, but will be covered in depth by three companion works under the Gates Forum theme, *Assessing U.S. Strengths and Weaknesses vis-à-vis Strategic Competitors*. Instead, we will only touch on this here briefly in the context of how great power competition has shaped U.S. strategic communications' stated and revealed priorities, as well as day-to-day practice.

Irrespective of specific foreign policy priorities, professionalization of U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts—in light of an evolving digital communications space, changing audience demands, and optimal allocations for America's finite resources—were also an emphasis in this period. Congressionally mandated changes to the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the executive branch-led Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative were two of many reforms pursued to redefine how U.S. strategic communications was resourced, organized, and coordinated over the last decade.

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<sup>39</sup> One of ISIS' propaganda mantras argues, "don't hear about us, hear from us," and al-Shabab live tweeted throughout the 2013 attack on Kenya's Westgate shopping center in 2013 to gain visibility for its own version of events for those that might support its efforts (Hoffman, 2017, p. 232-233).

## 4.1 Strategic Directions, Authorizing Mandates, and Operational Practices

At the start of the period, the BBG and the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs continued to be the primary conduits for U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts. There was also a fair degree of consistency in the regional priorities from the previous period, though the context shifted in later years from an initial counterterrorism emphasis on non-state actors towards great power competition and countering the influence of authoritarian regimes: Iran, the PRC, and Russia.

The Middle East and Afghanistan continued to be important in the eyes of Congressional and executive branch leaders, though Congress changed how it appropriated funding for broadcasting to the region. Instead of specific line items, appropriations legislation during this period favored more flexible language mandating the BBG (and its successor, the USAGM) to “make and supervise grants for radio and television broadcasting to the Middle East” as one of its responsibilities under “International Broadcasting Operations.”<sup>40</sup> Iran was an exception to this rule, as Congressional legislation sought to counter the Iranian regime’s influence in the region as a whole<sup>41</sup> and specified funding for RFE/RL’s Radio Farda and VOA’s Persian News service.<sup>42</sup>

With the PRC growing more assertive in projecting global influence, while constricting the free flow of information for its own citizens behind a Great Firewall, Congress prioritized broadcasting efforts in Asia by extending organizational mandates and legislating policies to confront the PRC. In 2010, Congress reaffirmed the RFA’s work since 1994 to provide accurate news services for countries where the free flow of information is compromised and authorized permanent funding for the broadcaster beyond the expiration of its initial mandate.<sup>43</sup> In response to the PRC’s treatment of

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<sup>40</sup> Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009, 2009; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012, 2011; Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015, 2014; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014, 2014; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, 2017; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, 2018; Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Although much of the emphasis in policy discussions related to disinformation have centered on Russia and the PRC, to a lesser extent, Iran is a major distributor of intentionally falsified content. For example, a Reuters special report on Iran’s disinformation distribution network found that the regime employs “over 70 websites affiliated with the International Union of Virtual Media based in Tehran to push out propaganda to 15 target countries” (Stubbs and Bing, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, 2009; Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> RFA’s initial mandate was scheduled to expire on September 30, 2010. A bill to permanently authorize Radio Free Asia and other purposes was passed in 2010.

ethnic Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Xinjiang (including RFA journalists and their relatives living in China), Congress directed RFA to expand its Uyghur language service in 2020 and to commend its journalists operating in Xinjiang.<sup>44</sup>

Seeking to counter the Kremlin's increased aggression, Congress had a renewed focus on Eastern Europe, enacted several pieces of legislation in the 2010s. This included directing the BBG and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to expand their broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts in countries in Russia's periphery, within Russia itself, and in its ally in Belarus. In 2012, Congress directed RFE/RL and VOA to initiate Belarusian language radio and TV broadcasts to counter President Alexander Lukashenko's repressive regime.<sup>45</sup> This was followed in 2014 by the Ukraine Freedom Support Act and the U.S. International Programming to Ukraine and Neighboring Regions bill which instructed the BBG and the NED to surge their programming in former Soviet states bordering Russia and support civil society programs in those countries.<sup>46</sup> Congress subsequently directly appropriated or transferred funds to operations in Eastern European states to counter Russian aggression in each of the next three years (2015-17).<sup>47</sup>

As media consumers began to rely more on the Internet as a source for news, Congress passed legislation mandating that the BBG advocate for a free and open Internet and prioritize its digital media outputs. Beginning in 2010, Congress began appropriating funds to the NED to expand access to the Internet as a component of its efforts to promote democracy.<sup>48</sup> Open access to information via the Internet remained a priority through the end of the decade, with Congress regularly authorizing the BBG, and later the USAGM, to utilize funding appropriated initially for other purposes to research threats to Internet freedom and develop tools to circumvent those threats.<sup>49</sup> The U.S. has long been interested in ensuring citizens in countries with compromised information spaces can reliably access independent news, but pushing for greater Internet freedom

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<sup>44</sup> Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> A bill entitled "United States International Programming to Ukraine and Neighboring Regions", 2014; Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Continuing Appropriations Resolution, 2015, 2014; Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017, 2016; Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2010, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, 2011, 2011; Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015, 2014; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, 2017; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, 2018; Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, 2019; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, 2020; William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, 2021; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, 2022.

was also necessary to compete with authoritarian actors who exert extensive control over what their own citizens can access online, while exploiting the openness of other countries' information systems (Walker and Ludwig, 2017; Brandt, 2022).

In a similar vein, Congress passed the Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act of 2016 to bolster the ability of the U.S. to identify and counter foreign propaganda and disinformation against the U.S. and to build the resilience of partner countries to do the same. The new legislation established the Global Engagement Center (GEC) at the State Department to synchronize interagency efforts to monitor, analyze, and respond to foreign propaganda and disinformation. The GEC was authorized to request US\$60 million annually for two years from the DoD to support its efforts. The proposed DoS Authorization Act of 2022 contains provisions to extend the GEC's mandate for a further three years and its special hiring authorities for an additional five years (Portman, 2022). However, President Joseph Biden's attempts to institute a domestically-focused Disinformation Governance Board under the Department of Homeland Security to combat false information and complement the GEC's international focus raised considerable pushback and was ultimately shut down a mere three weeks after it began (Cull, 2022).

Under the theme of promoting the professionalization of U.S. strategic communications, Congressional and executive branch leaders embarked on what would become one of the more controversial reforms of this period—abolishing the bipartisan nine-member BBG board and establishing a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) position to be appointed by the President with the consent of Congress (Weed, 2016). Previously, concerns had been raised over a highly politicized and dysfunctional BBG board structure that featured nominations delayed for years, infighting between board members and with staff, “perceived interference” by board members in operations, and the lack of a strong executive (ibid).

There was also a desire to see the BBG become more efficient in targeting resources, as the GAO estimated that “two-thirds of the [agency's] services overlapped in language with another service”, and become more strategic in its use of new technologies (ibid). Relatedly, Congress had a growing interest in the potential for burden sharing with other like-minded democracies, such as the UK, France, and Germany, which all produce their own international broadcasting efforts (e.g., the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio France International, and Germany's Deutsche Welle).



Yet, the BBG often cited Congress's own restrictions via the appropriations process as hampering its ability to enact meaningful reforms. For example, the agency had long wanted to reduce its language service offerings and refocus resources away from short-wave radio to deliver news via social media and cell phones to be responsive to changes in audience consumption patterns (Weed, 2016). However, appropriations processes would often inhibit the BBG from making these changes—requiring the agency to sustain language offerings at current levels and resisting attempts to reduce radio coverage (ibid).<sup>50</sup>

In the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, Congress formalized the new CEO position, transferring all the powers that originally were held by the BBG board and more to the new role.<sup>51</sup> The result was a far-reaching set of responsibilities and authorities, including the ability to: change the name of the agency, appoint the heads of federal (VOA, OCB) and grantee (RFE/RL, RFA, MBN) broadcasters, establish new broadcasters, appoint the board of any broadcaster, condition future grant funding on the merger of broadcasters, and direct all broadcasting activities under the agency's purview (Weed, 2021). This legislation required the President to establish a five-member advisory board to assist the CEO, including the Secretary of State (or their designee) and four other individuals.<sup>52</sup>

In reality, this process of bringing online a new CEO role to oversee U.S. international broadcasting efforts began much earlier. The BBG began crafting the role as early as 2011, as it sought to provide stronger executive leadership in day-to-day operations of the agency and free up the board to “focus on strategic direction and oversight” (Weed, 2021). By 2015, the BBG's board had preemptively created and filled the CEO position before Congress had even authorized it in legislation (ibid), voluntarily devolving many of its authorities to the new role between 2015-2020, before Michael

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<sup>50</sup> According to Weed (2016), some, though not all, of the overlapping language service offerings stem from legislation that bifurcates VOA coverage (with a mandate to present news on U.S. policy to the world) from that of the network of surrogate/grantee broadcasters (with a mandate to serve almost as an alternative source of local news in countries with a less free media). With regard to shifting from short-wave radio to social media and cellphone delivery of news, proponents of that strategy cite declining use of short-wave outside of Africa, while those in opposition remain concerned that newer technologies are less resistant to jamming (ibid).

<sup>51</sup> The nine-member board was originally composed of eight members appointed by the President with the consent of the Senate and the Director of the USIA (later the BBG). National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, 2016; Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, 1994.

<sup>52</sup> The legislation specifies that board members should be U.S. citizens who are not full-time Federal employees at the time of their selection and are recognized as experts in public diplomacy by the Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, Ranking Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, Chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, or the Ranking Member of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate.

Pack assumed office in June 2020 during the administration of President Donald Trump (ibid).

Initially, there were positive reviews of the transition of oversight for day-to-day operations from the BBG board to the CEO position. Two separate DoS Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reports conducted in 2019 and 2020 found that the acting CEOs John Lansing and Grant Turner had helped improve executive direction of the agency (renamed the U.S. Agency for Global Media, USAGM, in 2018), while maintaining journalistic standards and independence (Weed, 2021). This rosy outlook changed shortly after Michael Pack's arrival in June 2020. As the first Senate-confirmed CEO, Pack "represented a test of the expanded executive powers and position" (ibid).

Pack announced three goals for his tenure—increase effectiveness, no interference in news reporting, and improve morale—before applying the CEO's newly vested authorities to enact far-reaching changes across the agency and its broadcasters (Weed, 2021). Within a month of taking office, Pack removed the heads of RFE/RL, RFA, and MBN (ibid). He dismissed the incumbent boards of the grantee broadcasters (replacing them with his own selections), suspended numerous USAGM executives, removed the VOA standards editor, withheld funding from grantee broadcasters, and allowed the work visas for 100 foreign USAGM employees to expire, triggering their employment termination (ibid). Pack repealed the so-called firewall regulation,<sup>53</sup> which protected newsroom operations from interference in programming, and modified the corporate by-laws and agreements with grantee broadcasters to prevent any changes for at least two years and only for cause thereafter (ibid).<sup>54</sup>

In response to perceived overreach by Pack, Congress enacted amendments to the 1994 International Broadcasting Act within the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 with the intent of safeguarding journalistic independence and curbing the USAGM CEO's authorities in some areas (Weed, 2021). This tumultuous period may explain why President Biden, upon taking office, slow-rolled the process of nominating a new Senate-confirmed CEO to immediately take over for Pack, instead installing

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<sup>53</sup> As Pomar (2021) describes, the firewall was intended to maintain sharp distinctions between federal broadcasters such as the VOA and private grantees such as RFE/RL, RFA, and MDB.

<sup>54</sup> After a raft of whistleblower complaints were filed against Pack, inquiries conducted by the U.S. Office of the Special Counsel in 2020 and the State OIG in 2021 found no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the terminated and suspended employees, instead determining that they were the targets of reprisals by Pack.

acting CEO Kelu Chao. In late September 2022, the Senate confirmed Biden’s ultimate nominee for the post, Amanda Bennet (a former VOA Director).

Comparatively, reforms to U.S. public diplomacy efforts under the DoS during this period were less politically fraught and lower profile outside of the agency, but no less impactful. Driven by the executive branch, reforms centered around ensuring that the DoS complement of field-based public diplomacy professionals were well equipped for the 21st century and instituting the merger of the agency’s DC-based Bureaus of Public Affairs (PA) and International Information Programs (IIP).

In FY2014, the Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources under the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R/PPR) quietly embarked on a human resources initiative to revise the position titles and job descriptions of 2,600 locally employed (LE) staff in 186 missions worldwide that had not been updated since the 1970s (OIG, 2021).<sup>55</sup> By FY2020, this effort was integrated within a comprehensive PD modernization agenda for the digital age including elements focused on updated tools, training and professional development, and revisions to PD roles.

With estimated completion by the end of 2023,<sup>56</sup> the Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative (PDSI) has been described as “one of the most important transformations in U.S. public diplomacy since the merger of USIA into DoS in 1999” (ACPD, 2021a). The PDSI seeks to make DoS public diplomacy “audience focused [and] results-driven” in a dramatically different information space than the last century (OIG, 2021). With this end in mind, DoS strategic planning documents for 2020 set out to: restructure public diplomacy (PD) operations within U.S. missions abroad around audiences, content, and resources rather than traditional functions or programs; revise staff position descriptions to emphasize PD skills and responsibilities; and facilitate closer linkages and collaboration between PD personnel and other mission staff (OIG, 2021, ACPD, 2021a).

The PDSI aspired to address one of the chronic challenges that has hamstrung U.S. strategic communications capabilities since the merger of the USIA into the DoS in 1991: how PD professionals are recruited, trained, evaluated, and integrated in ways

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<sup>55</sup> Given relatively short rotation schedules and a dearth of experienced PD-focused foreign service officers, local PD employees hold even greater importance in providing “continuity and consistency in executing...programming” (ACPD, 2021).

<sup>56</sup> As of February 2022, the ACPD annual report for 2021 disclosed that DoS had completed implementation of the PDSI at 17 missions and initiated the process at 19 additional missions. It will begin implementing PDSI in the remaining 47 posts in 2022 (ACPD, 2022).

that best advance America's foreign policy goals. One of the implications of the shift of personnel from the oversight of the USIA to the DoS was the dilution of the public diplomacy aspects of their jobs. This included the treatment of public diplomacy officers (PDOs) as managers to tackle administrative responsibilities,<sup>57</sup> the exclusion of PD competencies within the evaluation systems used to determine promotions and compensation,<sup>58</sup> and a mismatch in placement of PDOs in non-PD positions, despite chronic shortages of experienced PD professionals (Nakamura and Weed, 2016).<sup>59</sup>

The PDSI replaced a "50-year old legacy structure" inherited from the USIA (Figure 6), departing from the traditional bifurcation between information and cultural functions and emphasizing digital over analog technologies (ACPD, 2021a). The revised structure affects all mission staff, and though the new job descriptions pertain only to local employees, it is hoped that this will create a catalyst in future to revise FSO positions and also DC-based operations (*ibid*). The DoS also pursued complementary efforts to improve PD training (via a new Foreign Service Institute PDO tradecraft course) and evidence-based decision making (via a Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation unit in Education and Cultural Affairs).

Earlier evaluations conducted by the OIG (2021) and the Advisory Council on Public Diplomacy (2021) indicate that while the PDSI has made important strides in modernizing PD within the DoS for the 21st century, it still has some pain points to navigate in realizing its goals. Particularly, these early evaluations indicate the need for: stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; more robust training to support local audience analysis; better coordination with regional bureaus and embassy management to overcome resistance to changes; and fewer disconnects between field and domestic PD structures, as PDSI exclusively focused on the former without tackling the latter (*ibid*).

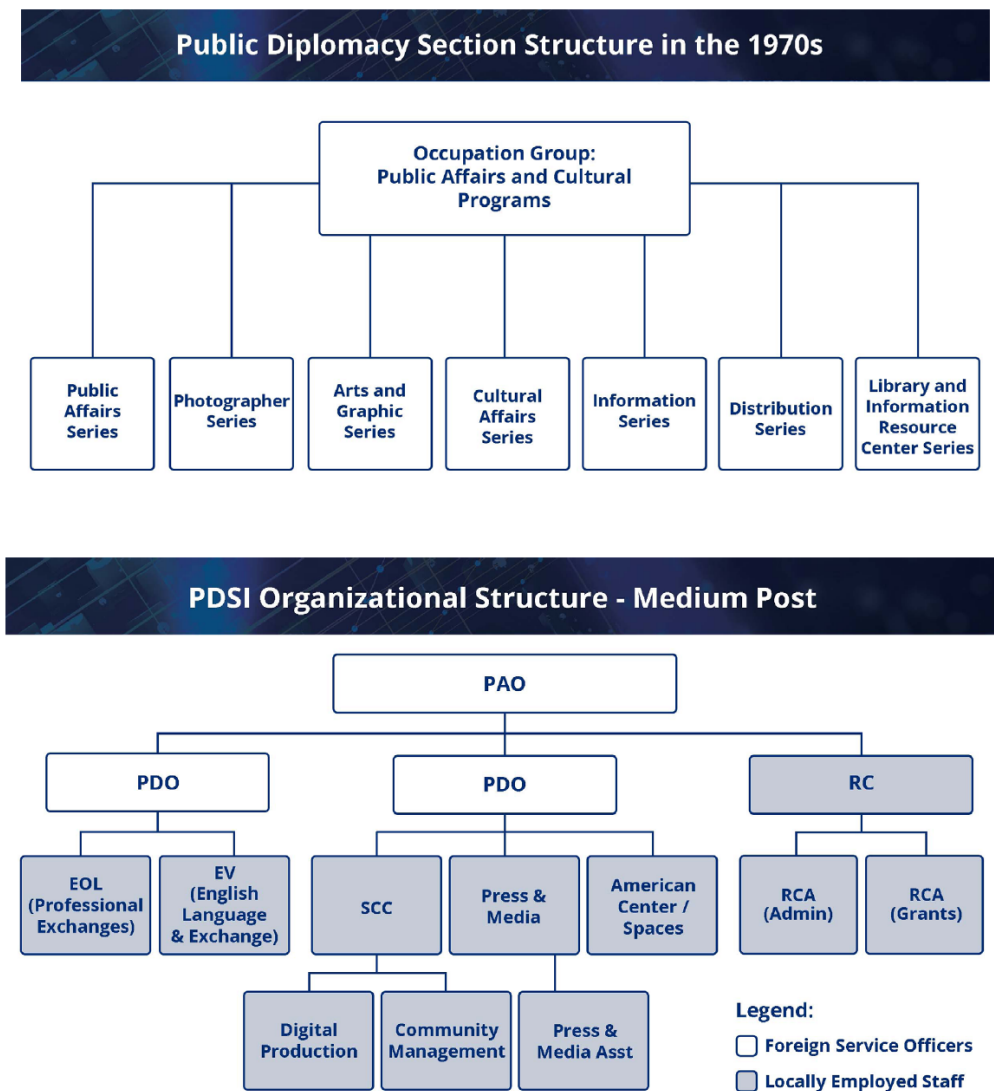
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<sup>57</sup> For example, Nakamura and Weed (2009) report that in the "work requirements statements of some PDOs, only 1 of 11 job requirements described substantive public diplomacy outreach and nine were administrative in nature."

<sup>58</sup> Nakamura and Weed (2009) report the concern that PDOs are "promoted at the lowest rate of any professional track" within the DoS and that the "employee evaluation report (EER) used to determine promotions does not contain a section devoted to public diplomacy" competencies.

<sup>59</sup> Given the low career advancement rate for PDOs within DoS, it is perhaps unsurprising to hear that Nakamura and Weed (2009) also report chronic staffing shortages for PD staff as the number of both "civil servants and locally engaged staff assigned" to, or specializing in PD has plummeted compared to the Cold War. Yet, there is also a severe mismatch between the supply and demand for PDOs that do exist. Nakamura and Weed report that PDO position vacancies "ranged near 20 percent in recent years" on the one hand, and yet a large percentage of PDOs end up placed in non-PD positions, like general FSOs with other specializations are shoe-horned to fill the PD vacancies.

Figure 6. Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative Changes to Field-Based PD Structures, 1970s vs 2021



Source: This image is from the Advisory Council for Public Diplomacy's 2021 Special Report "Putting Policy and Audience First: A Public Policy Paradigm Shift." Notes: The visual compares the structure and positions of PD-focused operations under the USIA in the 1970s versus the new PDSI structure for field operations in 2021. Acronyms: PAO: Public Affairs Officer; PDO: Public Diplomacy Officer; RC: Resource Coordination; EOL: Established Opinion Leaders; and SCC: Strategic Content Coordination.

The second major SC-related reform at the DoS in recent years was the May 2019 creation of the Bureau of Global Public Affairs (GPA) from the merger of the former Bureaus of Public Affairs and International Information Programs. This organizational shift was described by DoS itself as "the largest restructuring at the State Department in

the last 20 years” (DoS, 2017-2020). PA was always housed within the DoS since its formation in 1944 with a mandate to engage “domestic and international media and the American public to communicate official U.S. foreign policy” (ibid). IIP, by contrast, was grafted into the agency with the 1999 merger with the USIA and had a remit to “support people-to-people conversations and other engagement with foreign audiences about U.S. policy priorities and values” (ibid).

The argument given for the restructure was to increase the speed and efficiency of DoS global communications efforts at the “tempo of modern diplomacy;” the move affected “more than 500 positions across five bureaus or offices” (ibid). The new bureau oversees the U.S. and international media strategy, including six regional media hubs and two Foreign Press Centers; however, it redistributed several other programmatic functions such as American Spaces, the U.S. Speaker Program, TechCamps, and the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy to other bureaus (ibid).<sup>60</sup>

Beyond the BBG/USAGM and the DoS, the DoD’s role in SC continued to expand during this period, building upon a trajectory that began with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The DoD spent an estimated US\$10 billion on information operations between 2001-2009 (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). Although it does not disclose its spending on SC and PD within its annual budget requests to Congress, this conservative estimate would put DoD allocations in this area at approximately US\$1.1 billion a year on average. It is perhaps unsurprising that one of the arguments that has been given for the DoD to play an active supporting role in U.S. strategic communications is to augment the more limited resources available to civilian efforts.

The DoD played a significant leadership role in SC in other respects beyond budgets. It issued guidance for its headquarters staff and regional combatant commands, such as the 2008 Principles of Strategic Communication, the 2008 Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept (JIC), and the Commander’s Handbook for Strategic Communications, which built upon an earlier 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Strategic Communications Execution Roadmap that sought to operationalize the DoD’s

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<sup>60</sup> The Education and Cultural Affairs Bureau took on American Spaces, the U.S. Speaker Program, and TechCamps. The Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs absorbed the Advisory Commission on PD, along with other programs.

commitments in areas outlined by the QDR pertaining to strategic communications.<sup>61</sup> The DoD also experimented with coordination mechanisms internal to the agency (the Global Strategic Engagement Team) and across the interagency (the Global Strategic Engagement Coordinating Committee, established in 2009 under Michele Flournoy, after she abolished the office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense for Support to Public Diplomacy created in 2007).<sup>62</sup>

Yet the DoD's outsized role in nonmilitary communications and public diplomacy activities is not without controversy, particularly among those concerned about creating confusion or stoking distrust among target audiences. The root of this concern stems from the fact that the DoD has a unique dual-role in this realm that is different from its civilian counterparts. In addition to its work to "inform foreign publics about America and U.S. policies in a truthful manner" it also engages in covert activities, including the use of deception in information operations to achieve military objectives (Nakamura and Weed, 2009).

The executive branch experimented with a variety of ad hoc mechanisms for interagency coordination of U.S. strategic communications efforts during this period. In 2009, President Barack Obama established the Global Engagement Directorate (GED) within the NSC with a stated mandate to "drive comprehensive engagement policies that leverage diplomacy, communications, international development and assistance, and domestic engagement and outreach in pursuit of a host of national security objectives" (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). Obama envisioned the NSC holding "weekly interagency policy committee meetings...on public diplomacy and strategic communications issues" (ibid). One of the first tasks facing the GED was producing a new national strategy for PD and SC, required by Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2009, given their assessment that the 2007 strategy was "deficient in construction and implementation" (ibid).

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<sup>61</sup> The Principles document was intended to "standardize SC education;" the JIC was more of an operational document laying out "challenges, solutions, capabilities, and resources required for a joint force commander to implement a comprehensive approach to SC" alongside civilian counterparts; the Handbook was a reference guide that incorporated best practices and organizational processes for SC; and the Roadmap delineated 55 specific tasks, with accompanying plans and milestones for completion (Nakamura and Weed, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Nakamura and Weed (2009) note that, in a review of the previous Office of Support to Public Diplomacy, concerns were raised regarding its performance, particularly its failure to meet "DoD standards of accuracy and transparency in the guidance provided to military commanders."

The last three administrations each appointed an individual to serve as the point person for strategic communications within the NSC, envisioned as coordinating interagency efforts.<sup>63</sup> Yet, an Achilles' heel for these coordination efforts was a chronic leadership vacuum within the DoS, as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has remained unfilled for "roughly 40 percent of the time since its inception" (ACPD, 2022a). As the senior DoS leader for strategic communications, the Under Secretary directs the agency's own public diplomacy efforts, has been tapped to coordinate the efforts of other agencies, and often represents the DoS on the BBG (later the USAGM) board.

Although the DoS has an acting Under Secretary step in, in the absence of a Senate-confirmed incumbent, these individuals typically lack the authority, mandate, and personal relationships with the White House of a political appointee. The absence of this role and the relatively short tenures of those who have held it—517 days on average (MountainRunner.us, 2022)—are major impediments to direction setting, interagency coordination, and reforming U.S. strategic communications to be efficient and effective in advancing America's foreign policy goals. Table 2 breaks down the position holders and vacancy rates for the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs position by administration.

Table 2. Missing in Action: Vacancy Rates of the Senior DoS Leader Role for Strategic Communications

President	Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Position holders	Days position filled	Days position unfilled	% of days position vacant
George W. Bush (2001-2009)	Charlotte Beers (Oct 2, 2001 - Mar 28, 2003) Margaret Tutwiler (Dec 16, 2003 - Jun 30, 2004) Karen Hughes (Jul 29, 2005 - Dec 14, 2007) James Glassman (Jun 5, 2008 - Jan 16, 2009)	1832 days	1084 days	37%
Barack Obama (2009-2017)	Judith McHale (May 26, 2009 - Jun 30, 2011) Tara Sonenshine (Apr 5, 2012 - Jul 1, 2013) Richard Stengel (Feb 12, 2014 - Dec 7, 2016)	2246 days	626 days	22%
Donald Trump (2017-2021)	Steve Goldstein (Dec 3, 2017 - Mar 13, 2018)	100 days	1312 days	93%
Joseph Biden (2021-present)	None	0 days	641 days	100%

<sup>63</sup> For example: Ben Rhodes (Obama administration), Monica Crowley (Trump administration), John Kirby (Biden administration).

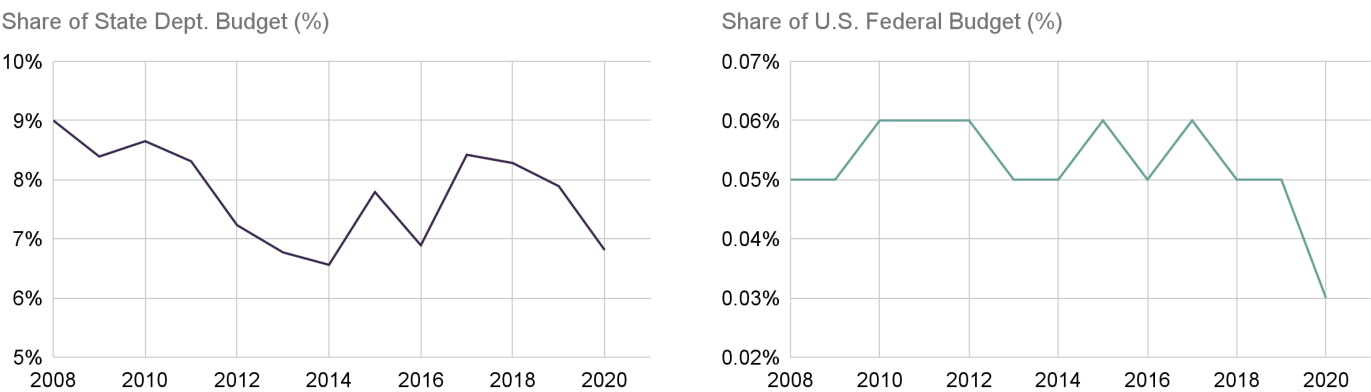


Source: This table has been adapted and aggregated from source inputs gathered by Matt Armstrong, who has meticulously tracked the vacancy rates for the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the Department of State since 2011 (MountainRunner.us, 2022).

## 4.2 Revealed Priorities

Similar to the dynamics observed in the post Cold War and 9/11 period, funding for U.S. strategic communications from 2008 onwards was driven by two conflicting trends: budgets increased in absolute dollar terms, but the share of resourcing strategic communications received declined yet again. On the one hand, absolute funding remained steady, with a modest increase from US\$1.7 to US\$1.9 billion (constant USD 2021) annually on average over the thirteen years of available data for 2008-2020. In fact, SC funding levels for the years of 2010 and 2017 were nearly identical to the previous high point of 1994, all hovering around approximately US\$2.1 billion (constant USD 2021). Yet, this rosy picture belies a more sobering reality: the U.S. was focusing less and less on strategic communications as a relative share of its overall spending. Continuing the slide that began in the 1990s, U.S. international broadcasting and public diplomacy accounted for roughly 9 percent of the State Department budget in 2009, dropping to just 7 percent by 2020 (Figure 7).

Figure 7. U.S. Funding for Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy as a Shar of the Department of State and Federal Budgets, 2008-2020



Notes: The left-hand visual shows the budget for international broadcasting and public diplomacy overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) as a percentage of the Department of State budget for 2008 to 2020. The right-hand visual shows the budget for international broadcasting and public diplomacy as a percentage of total federal expenditures. Underlying financial data was deflated to constant USD 2021. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports.

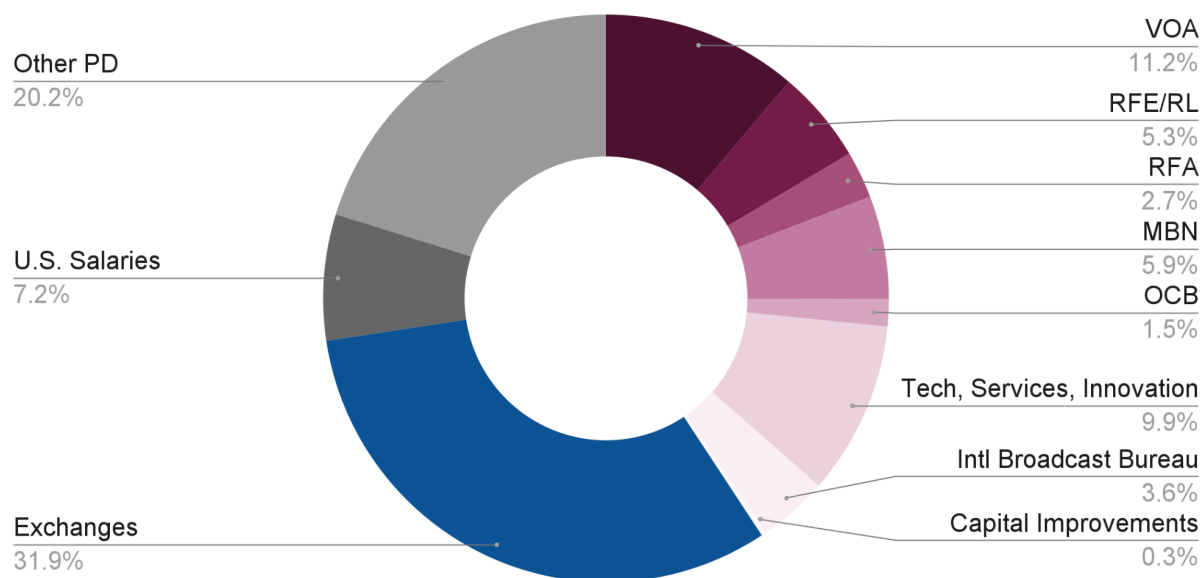
Part of this decline may reflect shifting priorities within the U.S. strategic communications toolkit. In the previous two eras, international broadcasting received far more funding than education and cultural exchange (ECE) activities. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was not uncommon for international broadcasting to attract nearly double the resources of ECE programming, for example.<sup>64</sup> U.S. leaders at that time likely prioritized building shallow ties with large networks of listeners at a distance over cultivating deeper ties with a small number of individuals. However, it also reflects a difference in the cost structures of these activities. Broadcasting operations involve capital-intensive investments to continuously produce and disseminate high quality content over vast geographies. Comparatively, ECE activities have more predictable year-on-year costs per participant (albeit still affected by inflation and rising tuition costs).

In the contemporary period, ECE and broadcasting portfolios reached near parity. Between 2014 and 2020, ECE funds made up 2.3 percent of the total State Department budget on average, while broadcasting funds accounted for 2.8 percent: roughly US\$701 million versus US\$854 million respectively (constant USD 2021). This shift may have to do with cost savings from the adoption of digital technologies in international broadcasting to reduce the capital-intensive nature of programming previously described. This trend could also reflect a strategic pivot away from the mass-media broadcasting that defined much of the Cold War era effort to more targeted efforts to cultivate people-to-people ties with public diplomacy. Alternatively, these changing costs could be the natural extension of the efforts to reform U.S. international broadcasting which emphasized consolidation and privatization of the various U.S. broadcasters, particularly grantees that served as surrogate news sources for countries with less free media to choose from (e.g., RFE/RL).

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<sup>64</sup> International broadcasting received 199 percent of ECE financing in 1983, 246 percent in 1989, 237 percent in 1991, and 189 percent in 1993.

**Figure 8.** Breakdown of Funding for International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy Activities by Sub-Category, 2014 Only



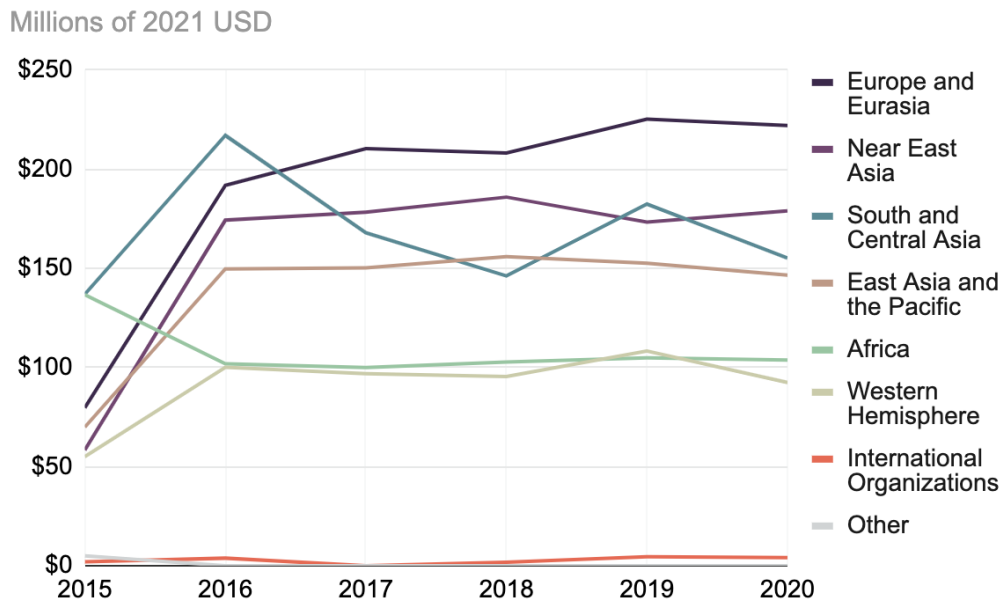
*Note: This visual shows the breakdown of individual line items within the budget for civilian international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts overseen by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (or their predecessors) for the year 2014 only. Broadcast activities are shaded pink, exchange activities are shaded blue, while other administrative items from the public diplomacy budget are shaded gray. Underlying financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Source: Data on funding for broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts was manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reports from 1980-2021.*

Taking a more granular look at the line-item budgets, VOA (the flagship broadcaster) eclipsed the combined budgets of RFE/RL and RFA in 2020, while it previously was about at parity with the two broadcasters in the 1990s.<sup>65</sup> VOA's geographic emphasis might offer a clue as to what drove this relative increase in its budget: roughly one-third of its financial resources were focused on Asia (both South and Central Asia and East Asia and the Pacific) in recent years, in line with the stated priorities of U.S. leaders to focus on countering the PRC's influence in the region.<sup>66</sup> This emphasis on Asia was not unique to VOA and broadcasting, but extended to other aspects of the U.S. strategic communications portfolio as well (Figure 9).

<sup>65</sup> While the two outlets had roughly equal budgets in the 1990s, in 2020 VOA's budget of US\$264.4 million exceeded the combined budget of RFE/RL and RFA (US\$176.4 million). VOA claimed 11 percent of the DoS Public Diplomacy budget, while the radios only captured 8 percent.

<sup>66</sup> Thirty-two percent of VOA's 2014 budget went to its South Asia and EAP divisions, and 31 percent of the VOA budget went to those two divisions in 2020 (US\$73.4 million and US\$81.9 million, respectively).

**Figure 9.** Regional Breakdown of Public Diplomacy Financing (Excluding Broadcasting), 2015-2020



*Notes: This visual shows the budget for civilian public diplomacy efforts (educational and cultural affairs spending, exclusive of broadcasting) overseen by the Department of State broken down by region for years 2015-2020. A comparable regional breakdown for international broadcasting is unavailable for this time period. Financial values for each year were deflated to constant USD 2021 to facilitate comparisons over time. Region names reflect State department regional groupings, as reflected in line items at the time. Source: Data manually collected and structured by AidData staff and research assistants, extracted from State Department reports.*

Beyond financing, VOA also has the highest share of human resources at its disposal, compared to the grantee broadcasters (Table 3). In FY2021, VOA had roughly the same number of full-time equivalent (FTE) positions as RFE/RL and RFA combined. That said, taking the long-view from fiscal year 2008 through 2021, the most recent year of data available, we can see that VOA has a dwindling share of people power to support its programming, shedding 248 FTEs over the 14-year period.

The Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB) also saw a drop in its available workforce by 69 positions. Although the absolute number is relatively smaller than VOA, this loss is likely more consequential for the OCB, as it began with a relatively smaller staff. Its budget was correspondingly reduced by US\$5.6 million between 2014 and 2020 (US\$31.6 million to US\$26.0 million, constant USD 2021). The drop-off since 1993 is even sharper, as the combined budget of TV and Radio Martí that year was US\$69.0 million (constant USD 2021). This refocusing appears to be consistent with an overall deprioritization of the Western hemisphere in the stated priorities of Congressional and executive branch

leaders as they looked farther afield to the Middle East and Asia in light of concerns related to international terrorism and great power competition, respectively.

At the topline level, Europe and Eurasia still received the highest total disbursements, US\$1.05 billion, between 2015 and 2020, and the broadcasters focused on this region, RFE/RL, saw an uptick in personnel numbers by the end of the period. In terms of human resources, MBN came out ahead, netting the largest increase in workforce across all the broadcasters from the beginning to the end of the period.

Table 3. Positions for U.S. International Broadcasters, by Network, FY2009-2021

Network	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	Change From Start to End of Period
VOA	1,197	1193	1230	1206	NA	1117	1115	1,089	1,074	1,096	1,020	971	981	949	-248
MBN	473	657	753	768	NA	771	792	814	869	884	750	725	713	759	286
RFE/RL	480	481	545	511	NA	487	503	571	623	666	698	699	695	696	216
RFA	252	265	266	267	NA	253	240	264	253	262	263	274	272	292	40
OCB	157	151	128	126	NA	116	126	130	117	120	108	100	88	88	-69

*Notes: This visual shows the number of full-time equivalent positions (for both U.S. and local staff) for VOA and each of the grantee broadcasters within the BBG/USAGM network. Please note that VOA has a separate entry for full-time equivalents versus number of positions; we use the former as a more precise estimate of personnel complement. The grantee broadcasters only provide the number of positions without specifying whether those roles are part- or full-time. Sources: Numbers of positions were sourced from the yearly actuals reported in Congressional Budget Justifications (CBJ) for U.S. government fiscal years 2008-2021, as published on the USAGM website. No data was available for FY12. We exclude CBJ estimates for FY22 and FY23, which are available on the website but are only projections and do not yet have posted actuals. Data was manually collected and aggregated for inclusion in this report by AidData staff.*

# 5. Results and Lessons

Despite being under-resourced and over-stretched for many decades, a snapshot of international broadcasting and public diplomacy in 2021 shows a formidable set of assets that U.S. leaders can employ to advance America’s foreign policy goals (Table 4). Influence with foreign leaders and publics is clearly central to U.S. national security, as underscored in the last five National Security Strategy (NSS) documents released by the administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. If changing the attitudes or behaviors of these target audiences is paramount to securing our national interests, then strategic communications is indispensable to that objective.

Table 4. A Snapshot of the U.S. Civilian Strategic Communications Footprint as of 2021

Broadcasting:	Public Diplomacy:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Six networks with channels across various digital and analog platforms</li><li>• Broadcasting 3,000 weekly hours of original programming in 62 languages</li><li>• Reaching a weekly audience of 354 million people in 100+ countries</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 90 exchange programs with nearly 55,000 U.S. and foreign participants</li><li>• 630 American Spaces conducting 427,000+ programs for 14.5 million participants</li><li>• 1.1 million international students studying within U.S. higher education</li><li>• 200 U.S. mission websites in 59 languages with 80 million website visitors</li></ul>

Source: *The Advisory Commission for Public Diplomacy’s 2021 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting (FY2020 budget data) (ACPD, 2022).*

At the end of the day, the success or failure of SC to influence foreign publics rests not on upstream inputs—discrete broadcasting or public diplomacy activities that we control—but the downstream outcomes of how target audiences’ attitudes or behaviors change in response to these efforts. In this concluding section, we assess lessons from past U.S. strategic communications practice to inform how we strengthen America’s capabilities in future. Specifically, we consider the following questions:

- To what extent did U.S. leaders follow through in mobilizing human and financial resources to achieve their stated strategic communications priorities (Consistency)?

- To what extent did U.S. leaders ensure that our strategic communications messaging aligned with America’s broader policies, values, and practices (Coherence)?
- To what extent did U.S. strategic communications efforts reach the intended target audiences and with what response (Salience)?
- To what extent did U.S. strategic communications efforts ultimately change the behaviors or attitudes of foreign publics in ways that advanced U.S. foreign policy goals and interests (Effectiveness)?

## 5.1 Consistency of Follow-Through from Stated to Revealed Priorities

The Cold War period was the high point in alignment between what U.S. political leaders said they wanted to achieve (counter the USSR’s influence) and their follow-through in mobilizing resources and political attention to operationalize these goals in practice. International broadcasting and public diplomacy commanded the highest shares of the State Department budget and federal spending at this time. Interagency coordination was aided by close working relationships between the director of the USIA and the White House, a single animating purpose, and the President’s personal involvement. Of course, even then, U.S. strategic communications was still vulnerable to politics—from criticism that cultural diplomacy was a guise for “leftwing propaganda” and clashes over VOA coverage of specific events<sup>67</sup> to restrictions on the use of funds or sharing materials related to broadcasting and public diplomacy activities at home, which made it difficult to mobilize a domestic constituency (Cull, 2022).<sup>68</sup>

The immediate post Cold War period was marked by two competing dynamics—consolidation and fragmentation—that influenced how U.S. leaders directed human and financial resources for strategic communications. Broadcasting entities were merged, governing structures dissolved, and some legacy outlets privatized in pursuit of cost cutting measures. Yet, U.S. leaders also encouraged a proliferation of activities targeting a much broader range of topics and audiences than had been the case

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<sup>67</sup> This was true over domestic events, such as reporting on Vietnam and Watergate, as well as international events related to the USSR or China. As Cull (2022) describes, tensions over reporting ultimately prompted “bipartisan sponsorship of the VOA charter being written into law.”

<sup>68</sup> This included revisions to the Smith-Mundt Act in the 1970s, but even prior to this, a surge in partisanship during the 1960s triggered legislation which specified that USIA films could only be shown domestically with a special act of Congress (Cull, 2022).

before. The net effect of these two imperatives set the stage for an overstretched, under-resourced, and unfocused strategic communications that became a vulnerability.

The 9/11 attacks radically changed the strategic landscape, provoking substantial introspection among U.S. leaders as to how such an event could have occurred. Financing for broadcasting and public diplomacy increased, though never regaining the share of the budget it had during the Cold War. An ever growing number of actors within (e.g., USAID, the Peace Corps, the DoD) and outside (e.g., private sector companies, educational organizations, women business leaders, Muslim-Americans) of government were mobilized to be part of the solution. New coordination committees and national SC strategies were formed, though questions soon ensued over their effectiveness. Consistent with challenges in the earlier Cold War period, SC practitioners continued to be hampered in increasing the visibility of and support for their work from domestic constituencies, due to strict limitations on their operations domestically.<sup>69</sup>

Arguably, the greatest disconnect between what America says it wants to achieve (greater influence with foreign leaders and publics) and its revealed priorities is the most egregious in the modern era. In this present “age of persistent, asymmetric competition” over shaping media narratives and public opinion (Brandt, 2022), the U.S. only budgeted between 3 and 6 cents on civilian-led strategic communications for every 100 federal dollars spent. Even as a share of the State Department budget, broadcasting and public diplomacy commands a mere 7 percent.

The October 2022 NSS released by the Biden administration views “influence” as a key objective (eight mentions)<sup>70</sup> and acknowledges that America’s contestation with near peer competitors will likely play out in the “information” domain (17 mentions).<sup>71</sup> Yet, in

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<sup>69</sup> The 1985 Zorinsky amendment banned the USIA from conducting activities domestically, while the 1994 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act restricted the use of public diplomacy funds for Department of State to be used domestically and banned the distribution or dissemination of any related programming materials (Nakamura and Weed, 2009). The Clinton administration initially proposed an integrated structure for domestic and international public diplomacy efforts in the National Security Decision Document 68 in 1998, but this attracted substantial resistance which ultimately resulted in it going nowhere (CRS, 2006).

<sup>70</sup> A keyword search for “influence” generated eight results, most often referring to the PRC’s or the Kremlin’s influence over international institutions and other countries, the importance of investing in the underlying sources and tools of American power and influence (undefined), the need to influence the PRC’s and the Kremlin’s external environment, and the need to build a strong coalition of nations to advance our collective influence.

<sup>71</sup> “Information” was referenced 17 times, most often in the context of safeguarding the free flow of information without manipulation, the threat of adversaries seeking to weaponize information to undermine democracies, the risk of disinformation crowding out credible news, and the importance of sharing information and intelligence with our partners to subvert terrorist plots and malign influence.



our highest-order national security blueprint to achieve influence, strategic communications was oddly out of sight and out of mind. The typical hallmarks of a strategy to influence counterparts—audiences, messages, messengers, attitudes, and perceptions—failed to make an appearance.<sup>72</sup> “Communications” was referenced only with regard to telecommunications and 5G.<sup>73</sup> America’s key tools to forge goodwill, common values, and shared narratives—“public diplomacy” and “broadcasting”—did not warrant a mention,<sup>74</sup> though references were made to the importance of maintaining the integrity of the media environment.

Infinite aspirations of influence (vaguely defined), limited resources (vulnerable to further cuts), and lack of specificity about how we should define success (what influence, with whom, how, and to what ends) create an unwinnable scenario that risks repeating the same mistakes that have plagued U.S. strategic communications over the last several decades. Although insufficient resources are challenging, merely throwing more money and people at the problem is unlikely to succeed without ensuring the coherence of our messaging and actions, the salience of our content with target audiences, and the effectiveness of our efforts to not only produce outputs but achieve outcomes in line with U.S. goals and interests.

Getting this right requires something more than just resources alone—it also requires leadership, coordination, and accountability. As Gates (2021) observes, when all the instruments of foreign policy work together, they can have the power and impact of a symphony. The opposite is also true: that when these instruments work at cross-purposes with one another, the notes they produce are discordant rather than harmonious. Unfortunately, America is falling short in all three of these areas and has been for some time.

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<sup>72</sup> “Message” was referenced once in the context of the “historic global response to Russia’s war against Ukraine [which] sends a resounding message that countries cannot enjoy the benefits of global integration while trampling on the core tenets of the UN Charter.” “Audience,” “messenger,” “story,” “attitudes,” “reputation,” and “perceptions” were not mentioned, other than one reference to “threat perception.”

<sup>73</sup> “Communications” was referenced nine times in the context of improving telecommunications and 5G capabilities, next-generation communications, and modernizing nuclear-related communications, though “crisis communications” was also mentioned.

<sup>74</sup> Neither “public diplomacy” nor “broadcast” warranted a mention; “exchanges” was mentioned once in a list of programs.

## 5.2 Coherence Between America's Messaging and Actions

U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy generated positive responses from foreign publics when these overtures were authentic and truthful in talking about difficulties America faced—from civil rights unrest to the Watergate scandals—as opposed to sweeping political topics under the proverbial rug. When USIA research surfaced that racial segregation undercut U.S. credibility with foreign publics, particularly in Africa, this spurred a change in approach within the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.<sup>75</sup> Discontent with the U.S. during Vietnam was less an indication of discontent with the coverage of VOA and RFE/RL, which audiences viewed as “credible and honest journalism,” but rather the appearance of hypocrisy between America's values and its actions in the war (Pomar, 2021). The U.S. regained some credibility in the eyes of foreign publics as they saw America living out its values in its willingness to begin impeachment proceedings against President Nixon over the Watergate scandal and his ultimate resignation. Consistent across these examples is foreign publics' lack of tolerance for inconsistency between rhetoric and action, but acceptance and even admiration when the U.S. is seen as acknowledging our faults and following through on our values.

Yet, the response to worsening public opinion towards the U.S. in the post Cold War and 9/11 period was the instinct to go for the hard sell of a highly curated Brand America, in the absence of talking about root sources of discontent in the relationship between America and the Arab and Muslim world.<sup>76</sup> U.S. leaders unintentionally squandered an unprecedented outpouring of international support.<sup>77</sup> Characterizing America's response to 9/11 as a “crusade” (CRS, 2006)<sup>78</sup> against an “axis of evil” was perceived as a “full-fledged assault on Islam” that focused on terrorism at the expense of ignoring underlying causes of conflict and discord with the U.S (Zaharna, 2010). Instead of rebuilding trust, pre-existing stereotypes that Americans and Arabs had of each other became entrenched, as both sides retreated to an “us versus them” posture

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<sup>75</sup> Key informant interviews with external experts.

<sup>76</sup> As CRS (2006) notes, America's refusal to support the “Kyoto Treaty, the International Criminal Court, the Chemical Weapons Ban, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty” attracted substantial negative sentiment abroad. This uptick in expressed discontent with U.S. foreign policy is particularly striking, considering that approval of the U.S. had been quite favorable at the end of the Cold War, when between 50-83 percent of foreign publics viewed the America favorably, according to a Pew Survey conducted in 1999-2000 (ibid).

<sup>77</sup> Polling showed the world “rallying behind America,” with two-thirds of opinion leaders across 24 countries saying that most people were sympathetic to the U.S. (Zaharna, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> In his September 2001 speech, Bush initially referred to “this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while.” The naming of the War on Terror went through various iterations, “Operation Enduring Crusade,” “Operation Infinite Justice,” before landing on “Operation Enduring Freedom.” (CRS, 2006).

(ibid).<sup>79</sup> Foreign publics grew concerned that America's power could be used against them, and our allies grew disenchanted with a perceived lack of consultation in the aftermath of 9/11 (ibid).

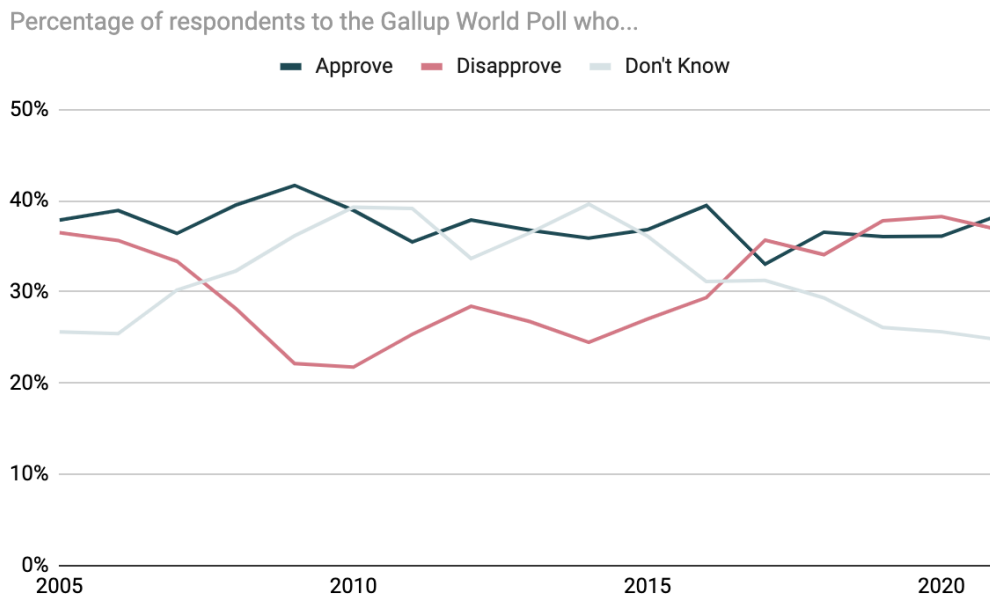
In the contemporary period, we have more robust measures to monitor how foreign publics' perceptions of the U.S. vary over time in response to their country's bilateral relationships with America, as well as broader regional or international events. Between 2005 and 2021, the Gallup World Poll annually surveyed respondents from low- and middle-income countries across the globe, asking them whether they approved or disapproved of the leadership of various foreign powers, including the United States.. America retained a relatively steady base of support among a core group of between 30-40 percent of respondents who consistently approve of U.S. leadership (Horigoshi et al., 2022). But this is juxtaposed with higher levels of disapproval in the mid-2000s, after the Iraq War and Global War on Terror (as expected). Disapproval also surged again in the 2017-2021 period, mostly due to a decrease in those who characterized themselves as "undecided" toward American leadership.

Noticeably, this heightened disapproval is not limited to the U.S., as there are similar reactions along these lines with regard to the PRC as well. Horigoshi et al. (2022) argue that the timing of the onset of this late surge in disapproval may be a reaction to the intensified competition rhetoric between the U.S. and the PRC, in which countries of the Global South feel that they are being forced to pick sides. Perhaps lending further credence to this idea, they find an apparent splintering between member countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (of which the U.S. is a vocal critic and is actively promoting alternatives) versus holdout countries that are generally closer aligned with the U.S. (ibid). This is a useful example to underscore a broader theme across this paper: we live in a world of increasingly porous boundaries, where decisions in one dimension of foreign policy can easily affect outcomes in another.

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<sup>79</sup> Zaharna (2010) describes this as a "mirror phenomenon," whereby countries in which "America's favorability was low or had declined, public opinion of Americans towards those regions were similarly aligned."

**Figure 10.** Citizen Perceptions of U.S. Leadership in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, 2005-2021



*Notes: This visual shows the percentage of respondents from low- and middle-income countries who said they approved (dark blue line), disapproved (red line), or did not know how they felt (light blue line) about the job performance of the leadership of the United States. All responses are weighted. Source: Gallup World Poll, 2005-2021. Graph has been adapted and replicated from Horigoshi et al., 2022.*

## 5.3 Salience of Strategic Communications Content with Target Audiences

In the Cold War, there were several promising indications that U.S. broadcasting and public diplomacy were reaching an appreciative audience within counterpart countries. Cultural and exchange programs deployed to promote postwar “re-education...recovery and integration” with Germany and Japan at the end of WWII were so popular that they prompted the emergence of “jointly funded bilateral exchanges” between the countries (Cull, 2022). The USIA’s Regional Production Centers and RFE/RL were known for putting in the spadework to monitor socio-political trends within target countries, conducting extensive audience analysis and monitoring shifts in public opinion to ensure their programming was hitting the mark (Cull, 2022; Pomar,

2021).<sup>80</sup> Former Communist bloc countries praised VOA and RFE/RL for maintaining their independence as trustworthy journalistic entities, even as they advanced U.S. foreign policy goals, such as curbing USSR influence and protecting democratic freedoms (Pomar, 2021).

This did not mean that the U.S. always got it right when crafting content for its target audiences. Cull (2022) provides examples of failures, such as a backlash against the Eisenhower administration's inclusion of material on Civil Rights during the Brussels expo and the Johnson administration's inclusion of staged combat footage in Vietnam documentaries being tone deaf to the likely reaction of foreign publics. Cultural diplomacy can cause unanticipated harm if the intended target audience takes offense, misunderstands the intention of the content, or the interaction reinforces preexisting negative stereotypes (ibid). More seriously, if target audiences feel their trust has been misplaced or violated, as was the case when cultural leaders in Africa's literary scene realized that they had unknowingly been supported by the CIA, this can create a substantial backlash (Cull, 2022).

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Congressional and executive branch leaders recognized that the U.S. had to rebuild trust in and admiration for America in the eyes of the Arab and Muslim world. Despite following all the conventional wisdom of private sector advertising and marketing,<sup>81</sup> the highest profile SC initiatives of the era only succeeded in generating "more distrust and further erod[ing] America's credibility" (Zaharna, 2010). In some instances, they failed to register with the target audiences despite ample resources and customization, with Al-Hurra Satellite News and Hi

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<sup>80</sup> This included the production of "cutting edge" in-house research reports to capture important events in Central and Eastern Europe and the USSR; media monitoring activities by archivists who maintained comprehensive files on Soviet and European media coverage; the diligent collection of self-published and unsanctioned works (termed "samizdat") from the USSR which would later become a treasure trove of information to highlight the government's growing repression of its own people; as well as interviewing visiting travelers, business people, and immigrants from Soviet countries—all of which fed into the design of RFE/RL programming to increase its salience and relevance (ibid).

<sup>81</sup> These initiatives did everything right on paper. They incorporated expertise from private sector advertising and marketing professionals. They were well-resourced with ample funding, political mandate, and qualified personnel. They leveraged new technologies for unprecedented reach and visibility with the intended target audiences. They followed professional communications best practices and produced well regarded quality outputs.

magazine as two poignant examples.<sup>82</sup> An even worse outcome were well-intended efforts that actually fanned the flame of discontent, such the multi-media advertising campaign, Shared Values,<sup>83</sup> which target audiences decried as “happy Muslim ads” that were tone deaf to their concerns about U.S. policies (ibid).<sup>84</sup>

The contemporary period saw a major breakthrough in the availability of quantifiable measures to assess the salience of U.S. strategic communications. The best example of this is the work of the USAGM to monitor who is consuming the content of its network of broadcasters, as well as whether target audiences view this information as credible and trustworthy. Using historical data on weekly audience metrics, we can see that two U.S. broadcasters have steadily grown their consumer base between FY2011 and FY2021 (the last year of available data), indicating increased demand for their coverage (Figure 11).

The global flagship Voice of America (VOA) has seen the largest expansion in their audience base by far, steadily growing over time from an initial baseline of 141 million to over 300 million by 2021. Radio Free Asia (RFA), also saw a substantial uptick in their audience base, particularly after 2015. It hovered initially around 10 million at the start of the period, but reached a healthy 60 million by 2021, performing the best out of the regionally focused grantee broadcasters. Comparatively, other surrogate networks held steady but did not radically change in audience size.

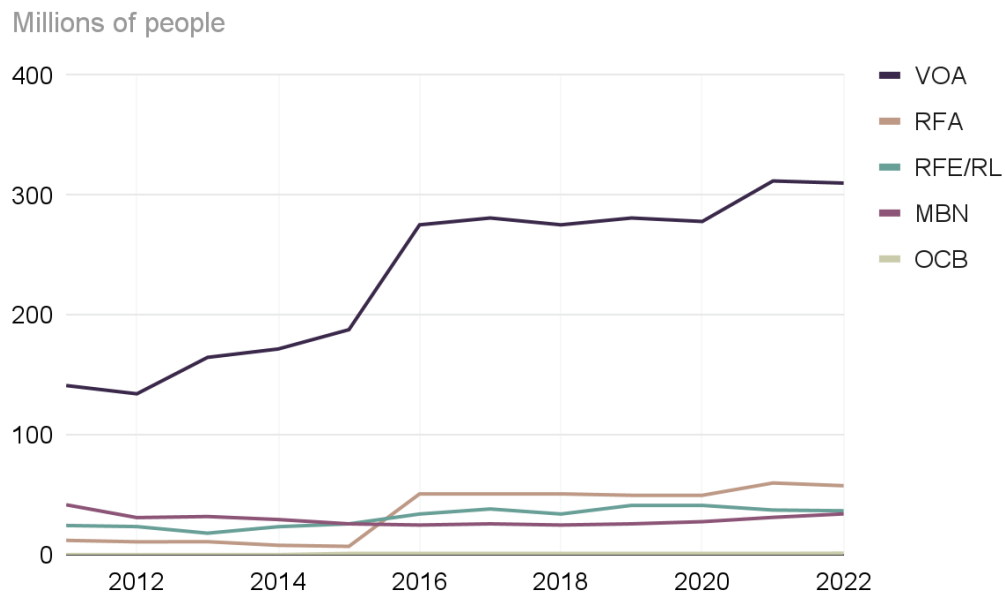
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<sup>82</sup> Al-Hurra satellite news network is probably the best example. Conceived as a 24-hour Arabic language broadcaster, the aim of Al-Hurra was to rival Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya by promoting coverage to counteract negative stories of America in the region. With a budget of US\$62 million per year of operation, the broadcaster “cost more than all of BBG’s projects combined,” but a Zogby poll found that it “barely registered as a primary source of news” with its target audiences (Zaharna, 2010). Hi magazine experienced a similar failure to animate Arab youth with its pages featuring American culture, music, and lifestyles, while eschewing politics (ibid). Bankrolled with a healthy US\$4 million launch budget, the State Department-generated content did not resonate and the project was canceled after only three years of operation (ibid).

<sup>83</sup> Costing an estimated US\$15 million, the Shared Values campaign emphasized common appreciation for “faith, family, and learning” between America and counterparts in the Arab and Muslim world (Zaharna, 2010). With all the hallmarks of a high-end product launch, the campaign featured print, digital, and TV advertisements featuring “Muslim Life in America” over a period of five weeks targeting four countries. Despite extensive market research and testing of the materials prior to roll-out, the ad blitz ended quickly and badly. Countries refused to carry the advertisements, while overseas Muslim audiences derided what became known as the “happy Muslim ads” that sought to sidestep the sources of discontent in their relationship with the U.S (ibid).

<sup>84</sup> This reaction was not limited to overt sales, but also more informational efforts. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the State Department released a factbook, “Network of Terrorism,” to educate foreign publics about the link between 9/11 and al Qaeda (Zaharna, 2010). Disconcertingly, polling actually found that Osama bin Laden had a higher favorability rating and Bush was seen as a greater threat to world order after the publication’s release than before (ibid).

Figure 11. Weekly Audience for U.S. International Broadcasters by Network, FY2011-2022



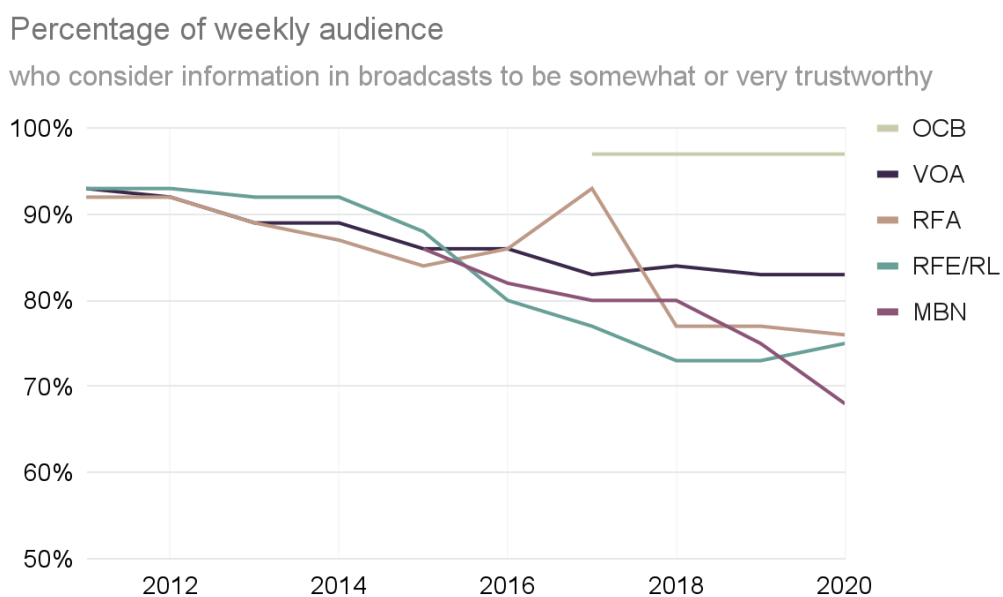
Notes: Since USAGM has not yet published their Performance and Accountability Report for 2022, FY2022 represents the targets for that fiscal year as reported in Congressional justification. Sources: BBG FY2015 Performance and Accountability Report, USAGM Fiscal Year 2020 and 2021 Performance and Accountability Reports, FY2020-2022 Congressional Budget Justifications. Compiled initially by Weed (2016, 2021) and supplemented by AidData staff. The last year of data (FY2022) is only a target, as the actual numbers have not yet been released.

Starting in 2013, the BBG/USAGM began employing a broader set of indicators to measure the effectiveness of its network of broadcasters, beyond weekly reach metrics alone (Osipova-Stocker, et al., 2022; USAGM, n.d.).<sup>85</sup> One of these is worth mentioning as a barometer of salience: the extent to which consumers of U.S. international broadcasting content viewed this information as credible. As shown in Figure 12, three-quarters or more of the surveyed consumers felt the coverage provided by each broadcaster was credible. But all broadcasters experienced a downward trend on this indicator particularly after 2015, with the exception of a brief boost for RFA from FY2015-17. The OCB's performance may reflect the presence of a small, highly motivated constituency, consistent with discussions in earlier sections. VOA held relatively more steady than the remaining broadcasters.

<sup>85</sup> These measures became collectively known as the Impact Model, which the USAGM reports on to Congress via its Performance and Accountability Reports produced each year.

It is possible that this declining credibility could be a reaction to the USAGM's content itself, particularly given concerns expressed of heightened political interference in recent years in broadcaster coverage. However, this could also reflect more general perceptions of U.S. foreign policies or relations with other countries affecting how consumers view the messenger. Noticeably, the timing of the downward trend in credibility of U.S. international broadcasting is consistent with the earlier finding we discussed, on increasing levels of disapproval of the U.S. from 2015 through 2021.

**Figure 12.** Perceived Credibility of U.S. International Broadcasters, FY2011-20



*Notes: Percentage of weekly audience who consider the information in these broadcasts to be somewhat or very trustworthy. The methodology changed in FY2017, such that percentages from that point on are based on weighted averages. In prior years, this was based on simple averages. All responses are weighted from FY2017 onwards. Source: Data and table replicated from USAGM Performance and Accountability Reports for FY2015 and FY2020.*

The highly targeted and customized nature of public diplomacy programs often makes it difficult to obtain easily comparable metrics for education and cultural exchange programs. Nevertheless, since exchange programs require the willingness of individuals from counterpart countries to desire to visit or study in the U.S. (or participate in relevant programming abroad), then the overall volume of participants in these programs over time is a proxy for demand. However, this may underestimate the salience of these efforts, given the finite supply of exchange opportunities the U.S. offers. Since the Cold War, the U.S. has sponsored “roughly 160,000 international



students to study in the U.S. via its Fulbright program and issued more than 250,000 non-immigrant visas annually to international students who self-finance their education or receive university-based scholarships” (Custer et al., 2019).

According to historical study abroad statistics from the International Institute for Education, the U.S. has consistently been one of the top study abroad destinations for students from around the world. Annual rates of international students and scholars studying in the United States steadily increased for most of the period between 1950 and 2019, with a tapering off in 2020-21, largely due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions (IIE, n.d.). That said, Israel and Batalova (2021) argue that there may have been a softening of interest in studying in the U.S. that predates COVID-19, as the rate of new international student enrollments began declining in 2016-17 and has continued since. In a 2018 survey of U.S. higher education institutions, top reasons given to explain the drop-off in new enrollments were a combination of: “visa difficulties, the political climate, competition from other [study abroad destinations] for students, and costs of attending U.S. colleges and institutions” (ibid).

## 5.4 Effectiveness of U.S. Strategic Communications to Advance America’s Interests

Broadcasters such as VOA, RFE, and RL have attracted high praise from leaders in the former Eastern bloc...who credit such programs for playing a pivotal role in “bringing a peaceful end to the Cold War and ushering in a new era of freedom” (Pomar, 2021).<sup>86</sup> Lennart Meri, foreign minister and later President of Estonia, went so far as to formally nominate RFE and RL for the Nobel Peace Prize, emphasizing that both had made a unique contribution to the “rebirth of democracy in the region” (ibid). General population surveys conducted by RFE/RL inside Russia following the fall of the Soviet Union indicated that these views were not limited to leaders, as there was widespread evidence of consumption of the radio stations’ content by the public and respondents underscored the importance of such broadcasts (ibid).

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<sup>86</sup> For example, Pomar (2021) cites extensive quotes from public speeches and conversations from Poland (President Lech Walesa, Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and the Polish Solidarity Movement leader Adam Michnik), Hungary (Prime Minister Jozsef Antall), Estonia (Foreign Minister and later President Lennart Meri), and the Czech Republic (President Vaclav Havel).

Beyond the former Communist bloc countries, other success stories included the efforts of the USIA to expose Soviet disinformation and convince Western European audiences of the USSR's duplicity; the Atoms for Peace campaign under Eisenhower, which "helped decouple nuclear technology from purely military applications"; and the efforts under President Ronald Reagan to "reduce European opposition to intermediate nuclear weapons to allow their deployment" (Cull, 2022).

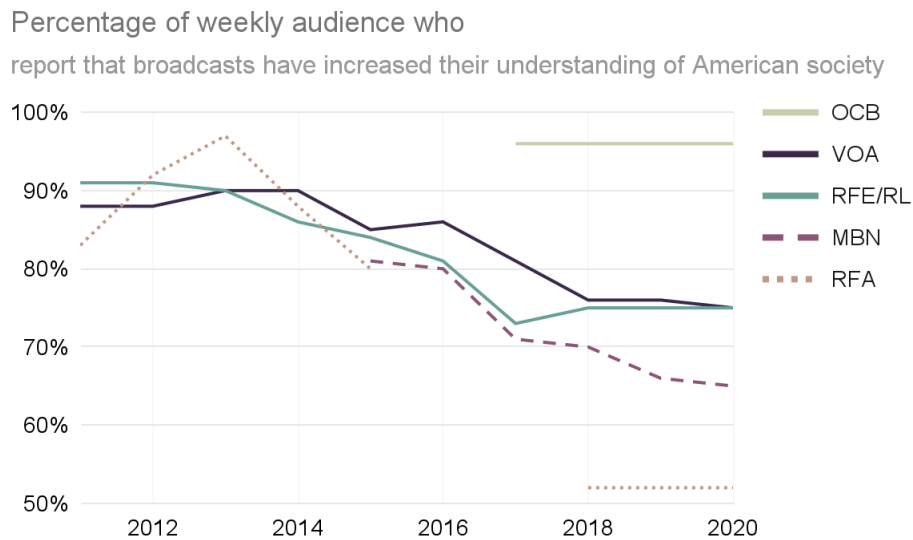
Of course, even when specific initiatives are popular with target audiences, they may still be ineffective in changing attitudes or behaviors about the U.S. This disconnect is perhaps most clearly seen during the 9/11 period with Radio Sawa—originally the inspiration of "Norman Pattiz, a member of the BBG and the chair of Westwood One, the largest radio network in America" (Zaharna, 2010). The radio station was launched in 2002 with a budget of US\$35 million and succeeded in attracting a large audience of Arab youth under 30, with a mix of Western and Arabic pop alongside newscasts (ibid). Yet, an evaluation conducted by the State Department's Inspector General found that Radio Sawa failed in meeting its envisioned outcome of spurring dialogue with Arab youth as a means of "promoting democracy and pro-American attitudes" (ibid). This underscores the importance of not assuming that the inputs or tools the U.S. controls and our potential power will always achieve the outcomes we want of realized influence.

To mitigate the risk of conflating popularity with effectiveness, the USAGM has developed some additional tracking indicators in the contemporary period that provide a modest window to assess the degree to which its international broadcasting activities may be moving the needle of public opinion and behavior in other countries. The first measure is the extent to which consumers of U.S. broadcasting feel that coverage has improved their understanding of American society. This is a stepping stone to behavior change as mutual understanding may enhance willingness to adopt shared viewpoints and preferences. The second measure takes a further step along the continuum from inputs to outcomes by asking consumers if U.S. broadcasting coverage is influential in helping them form opinions on important topics.

For the majority of the period, over three-quarters of international broadcasting consumers surveyed felt that their understanding of the U.S. had improved (Figure 13), though all broadcasters experienced a decline, particularly after 2015. The most noticeable change in sentiment here occurred with MBN (-16 percentage points between 2015 and 2020) and RFA (-45 percentage points between its high point in

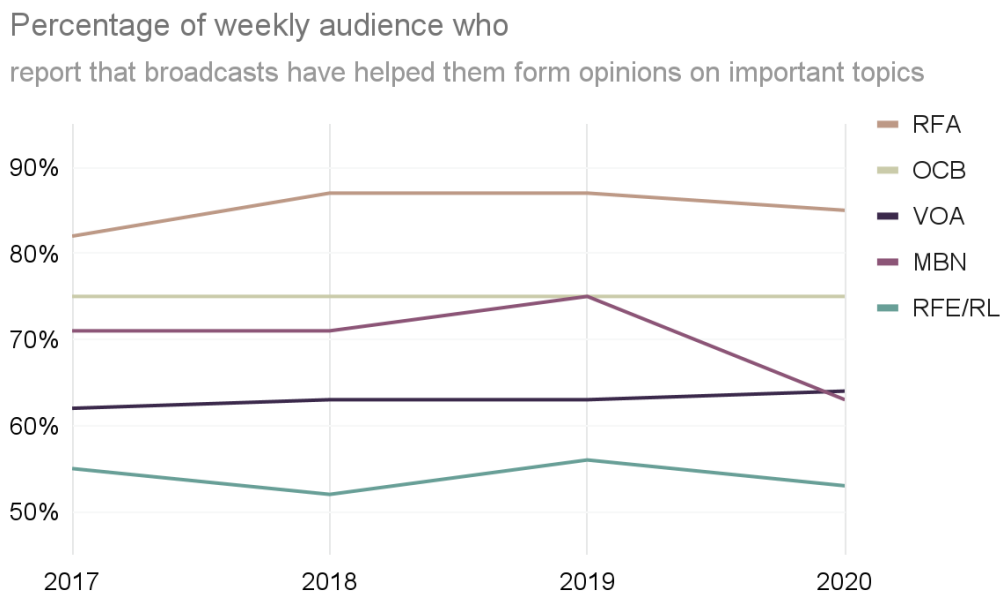
2013 and low points in the last three years). When it comes to influence, there is more continuity within an individual broadcaster's performance across multiple years, than across broadcasters.

**Figure 13.** Increased understanding of American society from U.S. international broadcasts, FY2011-20



*Notes: Percentage of weekly audience who report that broadcasts have increased their understanding of American society. There was a methodology change beginning in FY2017 such that the percentages are based on weighted averages. In prior years, this was based on simple averages. All responses are weighted from FY2017 onwards. Source: Data and table replicated from USAGM Performance and Accountability Reports for FY2015 and FY2020.*

**Figure 14.** Influence of U.S. international broadcasts in helping audiences form opinions on important topics, FY2011-20



*Notes: Percentage of weekly audience who report that broadcasts have helped them form opinions on important topics. This indicator was new as of FY2017 and therefore there is no data available for previous years. All responses are weighted. Source: Data and table replicated from USAGM Performance and Accountability Report for FY2020.*

Influence scores were generally lower than other measures, which makes sense in that this is actually the hardest metric to crack, as there are many factors that affect how consumers think about issues of importance to them. Only one broadcaster was routinely rated as influential by three-quarters of its consumers: RFA. Taken together with the understanding measure, this might indicate that RFA listeners feel that they are already familiar with the United States (hence why performance was lower on this score), but still turn to RFA broadcasting to make sense of current events and the world around them. Alternatively, this could speak to something about the nature of RFA's coverage if it is less focused on socio-cultural stories from the U.S. and more speaks into dynamics on the ground or in the region.

OCB is fairly consistently high across the board on all measures, which again lends itself to the idea of a small, devoted constituency that feels intensely about the broadcaster's importance. The remaining three broadcasters hovered between 50 and 75 percent throughout the period, with RFE/RL trailing on this measure, which is somewhat surprising to see given its perceived importance particularly during the Cold War

period. This could reflect a more contested marketplace of ideas which might be expected given increasing media freedom and coverage following the end of the Soviet Union.

Given the highly individualized nature of education and cultural exchange programs that cultivate deep ties with individuals, it is difficult to pinpoint quantifiable metrics of likely effectiveness. Nevertheless, there are a number of examples on a smaller scale that speak to potential for influence. According to statistics maintained by the Education and Cultural Affairs Bureau at DoS, 590 former and current heads of state have participated in its programming to date. Forty of those individuals were Fulbright program alumni. Training future or current leaders is a powerful way to influence the norms, attitudes, and policies of counterpart countries, even if this may take several decades to see manifest. But exchange programs can also be impactful in other ways outside of the political realm, for Weymouth and Macpherson (2011), found that U.S. trained economists participating in the Fulbright program between 1981 and 1997, for example, were able to catalyze free trade reform efforts in their countries.

## 5.5 Lessons for the Future of U.S. Strategic Communications

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to derive some important lessons and ideas from this historical look at strategic communications from the Cold War to the present day that should feed forward into additional papers and Gates Forum conferee deliberations regarding ways to strengthen U.S. capabilities in this area in an era of heightened great power competition.

### Lesson 1: Empower and Reward USG Efforts to Be Responsive to Target Audiences

- **Idea #1.** Rather than using congressional appropriations to dictate inputs, provide flexible funding that ties resourcing to well-defined outcomes with room for agencies to craft strategies responsive to demand
- **Idea #2.** Maintain strong protections for independent coverage from U.S. broadcasters and reduce barriers to participate in study abroad and exchange which are critical to the salience of our SC efforts

- **Idea #3.** Decentralize more capacity, resources, and mandate for the design and delivery of SC from headquarters (DoS, USAGM) to the missions/grantees with adequate funding and access to future resources contingent on demonstrating local demand and alignment with U.S. goals
- **Idea #4.** Create the right incentives for DoS to fast-track the design and implementation of a headquarters counterpart to the Public Diplomacy Staffing Initiative to ensure more seamless integration of FSOs and functional/regional bureaus with the new audience-focus of missions

## **Lesson 2:** Remember That U.S. Strategic Communications Does Not Occur in a Vacuum

- **Idea #5.** In areas of common interest, burden share with like-minded partners to pool resources and capacity to deliver surrogate broadcasting in information-constrained countries and jointly fund exchange programs for priority target audiences
- **Idea #6.** The President should expedite nominating, and Congress confirming, a new Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs
- **Idea #7.** Require the NSC to work with DoS and the USAGM to develop a U.S. strategic communications roadmap that articulates how broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts should be resourced, targeted, organized, coordinated, and measured to advance the October 2022 National Security Strategy, and report to Congress on progress tied to future appropriations

## **Theme 3:** We Manage What We Measure, and We Measure That Which Others Care About

- **Idea #8.** Increase the budget for DoS and USAGM strategic communications activities, but mandate that three percent of these funds go to research, monitoring, and evaluation to support data-driven programming and performance reporting to Congress and the White House
- **Idea #9.** Institute an interagency coordination committee to facilitate strategic coordination efforts across agencies, in line with the proposed roadmap (idea #7), but

endow it with resources and mandate to reward reform stars, penalize reform laggards, and report regularly to the President and Congress on its results

- **Idea #10.** Form and fund a non-partisan, non-governmental organization (such as in the model of NDI and IRI) to engage the domestic public to raise awareness about international broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts, crowd-in expertise, and create greater accountability for results, while providing safeguards against influence operations at home

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