“RFE/RL Today and Yesterday”

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It’s a pleasure to be here today with people who know the history of RFE/RL so well. I grew up in the 1950s and remember the Radio Free Europe TV commercials. In fact, as a high school student, I actually sent them money.

My goal today is to talk about how RFE/RL has evolved since the time of the Cold War, and also about how our history remains with us today.

First, a few words about RFE/RL in 2017.

RFE/RL remains a private, non-profit news organization, incorporated in Delaware and now based in Prague rather than Munich. We’re publicly financed by Congress, through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. But we’re not part of the State Department or any other large government agency. I’m not a government employee.

Although we were originally set up as a private group to conceal CIA funding, our private status remains very useful. We have more operating flexibility as a private company than a government agency.

And our content is our own. Our journalism is required by law to be professional, objective and free of government control. That law also applies to other U.S. international media, like the Voice of America, Middle East Broadcasting Networks, Radio Free Asia and Radio-TV Martí.

There’s a long history to this editorial independence at RFE/RL. Even when we were funded by the CIA, RFE/RL was known for its accuracy and objectivity.

These days, we focus on three parts of the world, all of them fairly tough neighborhoods.

One area is the Balkans. Their citizens are the target of a blizzard of propaganda from authoritarian regimes, corrupt business interests and from ISIS, too.

We also focus on the former Soviet Union, from Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus in the West to Russia proper, the Caucuses and Central Asia. Many of these areas also suffer from authoritarian rulers, press control by oligarchs, a flood of disinformation and extremist ideology.

Finally, we focus on Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

All in all we operate 24 hours a day to 23 countries in 26 languages.

In the Cold War, shortwave radio was our big thing, when we weren't using helium balloons to float leaflets behind the Iron Curtain. We have some shortwave even today, especially to Central Asia and Iran.

But shortwave is only a small part of how RFE/RL gets its message out. We do satellite television, cable television, websites, video streaming, apps, podcasts, AM radio, FM radio, social networks. We're getting more than a billion views a year on our websites, 300 million plays of our videos on YouTube. We have 225 million engaged viewers on Facebook.

Last month we formally launched Current Time, a 24-hour Russian-language news and information channel on cable, satellite, internet, smart TV apps, mobile apps and social networks. It's based in Prague, with U.S. coverage from the Voice of America. It's the first time anyone's offered a Russian TV and online network on this scale that's not controlled from Moscow.

I'm still amazed myself by the breadth of RFE/RL's work. You can hear us in Russian in your car in St. Petersburg. There's a daily TV newscast in Kazakh. Eighteen hours of radio a day in Georgian. An investigative TV show in Ukraine. Special broadcasts and websites for occupied Crimea and Donbass. Websites in Chechen

and two flavors of Tatar. Radio, television and a Facebook page for Iran. A breakfast show for Afghanistan. A wire service for Central Asia with more than 700 subscribers.

The Voice of America is also active in parts of our region, but we have different missions. VOA's is to tell America's story and cover major international news. Ours is to be a surrogate local media service, reporting internal news in countries where a free press is banned by the government or not fully established.

Our mission statement calls on us to promote freedom of expression, free markets and clean government, and to oppose intolerance and extremism.

We focus a lot of our local-news journalism, not on cosmic principles of freedom, but on our audience's daily lives. How do issues like freedom of speech and rule of law play out in these countries? Should people face arrest for liking the wrong thing on Facebook? What happens when businessmen fear success because that makes their companies ripe for takeover by corrupt officials? Why is it important to vaccinate your family against polio, despite what the extremists say? Is it right that in some countries, the penalty for blasphemy should be death?

We create platforms for free discussion of subjects that are often taboo in local media. Our question about the death sentence for blasphemy brought 600 comments from Iranians on our Persian Facebook page.

As the former standards editor of The Associated Press, I'm very interested in the ethics of what we do. Sometimes people ask if there's a contradiction between being professional and objective on one hand, and promoting democratic values on the other. Can you report the news while also serving a cause?

I've come to feel that ours is in fact a particularly honest and transparent form of journalism, combining balanced reporting with full openness about what we hope it will achieve.

Our standards for news reporting are identical to those of other professionals. Our stories tell the truth. We acknowledge

different views. When a politician says something that's wrong, we point it out. When we make a mistake, we correct it.

At the same time we focus, through the choice of subjects we cover, on topics central to our mission. We consider democracy, tolerance and clean government to be highly newsworthy. Therefore, news about advances and setbacks for these causes is our natural priority for news and investigative reporting.

So think of us as you would a newspaper that conveys its idea of what's important by selecting certain stories for page one … while making sure each story, in itself, is balanced and dispassionate.

I've also thought at length about whether RFE/RL and our sister networks, which are supported by taxpayer money, should see their jobs as advocating for the United States.

Some people disparage us for already being, in their view, a U.S. propaganda mouthpiece. An opposite camp – which believes hostile foreign propaganda is overwhelming the West -- wants to make counter-propaganda and "strategic messaging" our lifeblood, the more belligerent and one-sided the better.

I feel that in a world where facts are constantly under attack, our best response is to double down on telling the truth, not to join in undermining it. Our audience, having lived so long amid the din of propaganda from their own regimes, can immediately smell messaging that is manipulative and tendentious.

We don't conceal that we're American. We're not broadcasting from Mars. But while the values we espouse are American, they're also universal. I don't think that standing for freedom of expression or against religious extremism is somehow U.S. government propaganda.

So I see our work today as a combination of honest journalism and fundamental human values.

Let me address RFE/RL's presence on the ground in many of the countries we serve.

During the Cold War, RFE didn't have advantage of local news bureaus in East Europe and Russia. We also didn't have the

disadvantages of that. Today we have 17 bureaus across our geographies. Some countries in our territories are pretty welcoming. We've had generally good experiences in places like the Baltics, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Our staff is almost entirely local, and our bureaus are often the best journalism schools around.

Other countries are more passive-aggressive; they let us operate but still harass our people. We do manage to operate there, often in difficult circumstances.

Then there's the third category: countries that fiercely oppose us and our work, and try to block our operations as much as they can. Though diplomats sometimes speak of our work as "soft power," it apparently looks pretty hard to some of our target areas.

We can't operate bureaus in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan or Iran. Our bureau in Azerbaijan has been closed, though our correspondents there continue to operate.

Most alarmingly, we see the most brutal, direct action against our people … and their relatives. Our contributor Mykola Semena is on trial in Russia-annexed Crimea. Another contributor, Saparmakhmed Nepeskuliev in Turkmenistan, is coming up on his third year in jail. Our colleague Khudaybery Allashov had had a very harrowing two months in custody until Turkmen authorities released him in February.

Another reporter of ours there -- she's 67 years old -- has been beaten up twice and run down by a bicycle once by the secret police.

In Uzbekistan, the brother of one of our Prague staff members is serving a five-year jail sentence. The conviction was supposedly on a narcotics charge, but the interrogations were about what his brother was doing for RFE/RL. Other relatives of our people have also been threatened in Uzbekistan. The same has happened in Iran.

Then there's some regimes' jamming and blocking of our broadcast and internet operations. Iran still jams our radio, Cold War-style. It's tried to jam our satellite TV as well. Iran and a host

of other countries, including Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, try to block us on the internet. This is a cat-and-mouse affair, with countries constantly ramping up their technology to block us, while enterprising citizens, with our help, find ways to reach us nonetheless.

I should also mention that in some places, we see direct intimidation of our audiences. There have been meetings at factories and farms in Turkmenistan warning people not to listen to us. Authorities there and elsewhere regularly confiscate satellite dishes.

If you try to send us a text message from inside Iran, you get a bounceback saying you've tried to reach an illegal destination and your attempt has been officially recorded.

But we get through. We're fine with popping up anywhere we can reach our audience -- on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Russian social networks, text messaging, unexpected shortwave frequencies … anything that works.

I'd much rather be the guy putting our content into these countries than those trying to keep it out.

But I'm not complacent; countries are getting better at blocking what they don't want their citizens to see. The Broadcasting Board of Governors has recently stepped up its efforts to make sure all our networks continue to have what we need to get through.

Let me conclude with a few thoughts about the history of RFE/RL and how it's still with us today.

First, we do, as you well know, preserve and respect our history. We've been happy to cooperate with Hoover and other institutions to keep our past alive and accessible, even though it had its controversial side. The hallways at RFE/RL are filled with historic photos. Our orientation for new employees always includes our history.

Second, the covert support we received in the past has made us very aware of the importance of transparency today. Congress

now funds us openly. We make a point of this public funding whenever we talk about our company. We're proud that we're an independent, private news organization that sets its own editorial standards.

We're also transparent about our journalistic ethics -- and how we believe we can be objective and professional while still advancing our public mission.

Our history validates the importance of our surrogate role, reporting local news. Our greatest credibility in the past came from telling listeners what was happening in their own countries – news they could verify themselves. This continued focus enhances our credibility today.

Our history also teaches us that credibility is a long-term project. In the Cold War, people came to know and trust RFE/RL through decades of reliable reporting. No one would say that was a bad investment. In a world that, these days, seems to expect instant results from everything, we know that long-term consistency and reliability are essential to our success.

Finally, because we were cut off from most of our audience for so long, we especially value the close ties we have with them now. The opportunity to interact minute-by-minute with audiences in almost all of our countries creates a bond far stronger than we ever had with the people we serve.

Questions, comments, and criticism of our work flow into our newsrooms constantly, and our audiences can be critical. Sometimes people claim that we're too negative about their countries, that we fail to recognize the good things their regimes do. Others believe the exact opposite: that we should vilify their regimes at every turn. They want us to be full-time opposition media.

Sometimes journalists like to say that if you're being criticized by both sides in a conflict, you must be doing something right. I've never quite bought into that; it's possible to be unfair to everyone.

But we're grateful for comment, even when it's negative. People need to think critically about the information they get. If people

were more cautious about the news they're fed – if they were more media literate – disinformation would never succeed.

At RFE/RL we're grateful for the lessons of our past. We think they've made us stronger today, more vigilant about accuracy and transparency, and more effective in meeting our audiences' needs.