



Editorial Independence

The editorial independence of journalists who work for USAGM and its associated grantees is a bedrock principle of United States International Broadcasting. This independence is enshrined in both law and practice. While U.S. international broadcasting is funded by the U.S. taxpayer and must be “consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States,” the International Broadcasting Act (IBA) also provides that “[t]he Secretary of State and the Chief Executive Officer, in carrying out their functions, shall respect the professional independence and integrity of the [USAGM], its broadcasting services, and the grantees of the [USAGM].”

Editorial Independence Explained

At USAGM, Editorial Independence (sometimes referred to as the “firewall”) is understood to protect our newsrooms from interference from anyone in the U.S. government, including the CEO of USAGM; at grantee newsrooms, the firewall shields journalists from interference by the U.S. government, including USAGM. Although editorial independence means that the USAGM CEO will not weigh in on selecting a news story or influencing how a story is covered, editorial independence does not prevent the USAGM CEO – or the leadership of the grantees – from carrying out their statutory responsibilities to make resource and strategic decisions about the direction of the individual networks, or establishing programming priorities (such as changes to particular language services).

Editorial Independence is essential to ensure the editorial autonomy and credibility of the journalists at USAGM and the grantees, and to keep them free from influence from any U.S. government organizations or authorities (including the USAGM CEO and the Secretary of State). The International Broadcasting Act of 1994, as amended, 22 U.S.C. §§ 6201 et seq. (IBA) (the authorizing legislation for both USAGM and the grantees), established this autonomy. Editorial Independence reflects Congressional recognition of the “need for journalists and broadcasters to maintain their professional independence in order to produce factual, unbiased and balanced work products.” H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 103-482, at 202 (1994).

Journalists at USAGM and its grantees routinely interview and question U.S. government officials, but government officials should not attempt to use their authority to influence what they cover or how they cover it. This critical safeguard differentiates our journalists from those working at state-sponsored propaganda operations.

...the work performed by the international broadcasting entities...can hardly be described as a typical government function. Cynics may deride their work as “propaganda,” but in fact the broadcasters are journalists, reporting the news of the United States and the world to foreign audiences. The news gathering and reporting functions of the broadcasters must continue to be independent and objective. The broadcasters themselves understand the importance of this imperative.



INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING ADVISORY BOARD

U.S. House. Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act, Conf. Rpt. (to Accompany H.R. 1757). (105 H.Rpt. 432, at 127).

Editorial Independence is critical to ensuring that journalists and network leadership make the final decisions about what stories to cover and how to cover them, and that those decisions are governed by the highest standards of professional journalism as required by the International Broadcasting Act.

To that end, all USAGM employees (including the CEO) are required to take training that explains the law and practice underlying Editorial Independence; the grantees provide Firewall training to their journalists and codify it in journalistic standards. These standards reflect the best practices of the highest quality of journalism across the industry.

Oversight of Editorial Independence

In 2020, Congress amended the IBA to create a new federal entity, the International Broadcasting Advisory Board (IBAB), which is charged with providing advice, guidance, and oversight to the USAGM Chief Executive Officer, including with regard to matters concerning the firewall:

[the IBAB is] to ensure that— (A) the Chief Executive Officer fully respects the professional integrity and editorial independence of United States Agency for Global Media broadcasters, networks, and grantees; and (B) agency networks, broadcasters, and grantees adhere to the highest professional standards and ethics of journalism, including taking necessary actions to uphold professional standards to produce consistently reliable and authoritative, accurate, objective, and comprehensive news and information; ...

22 USC 6205(d)(6). The IBA provided additional protection to the broadcasters and journalists, as follows:

The heads of Voice of America, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, RFE/RL, Inc., Radio Free Asia, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, the Open Technology Fund, or of any other grantee authorized under this chapter may only be appointed or removed if such action has been approved by a majority vote of the [IBAB].

Reporting Violations of Editorial Independence

Network staff who believe a violation of the Editorial Independence has occurred should report their concerns to persons designated by their organization to receive such reports. Those concerned that it is not possible or appropriate to report the alleged violation to the designated person should report their concerns to their General Counsel. Suspected violations may also be reported to the network Board of Directors, to the USAGM Office of Program Review (OPR), to the office of the USAGM CEO, or directly to the IBAB.