

Testimony of Jeff Shell
Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
November 17, 2015

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak to the unique role that the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and United States international media play in advancing our national interests.

I am pleased to be joined today by my colleagues Governor Ken Weinstein and CEO John Lansing. Alongside the rest of the Board and staff at the International Broadcasting Bureau and across the BBG, we are working diligently to shape the Broadcasting Board of Governors into a unique and powerful tool in the U.S. foreign policy toolkit. The BBG team deserves a lot of credit for their consistently excellent programming and I want to use this opportunity to thank them.

Let me also thank the Members of this Committee for shining a light on the important work that the Broadcasting Board of Governors carries out on behalf of the United States. Many Americans are not aware of Broadcasting Board of Governors, its unique mission and growing role in international media.

Put simply, our job at BBG is “to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.” To do so, we oversee all nonmilitary international broadcasting supported by the U.S. government, including the Voice of America (VOA), the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), and BBG-funded grantees Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA) and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN).

We use these resources to provide news and information to overseas audiences that lack adequate sources of objective news and information about their countries and societies, their region, the United States, and the world. In short, we put fact-based journalism to work, on a global scale, on behalf of the American people.

Our reach is global. BBG radio, television, Internet, and mobile programs are consumed by more than 226 million people each week, in more than 100 countries in sixty-one languages – many of them in communities and countries that face organized misinformation campaigns.

Global media is an area that I understand well. As Chairman of Universal Filmed Entertainment Group, my day job, I oversee worldwide operations for Universal Pictures. And prior to taking on my current role, I served as Chairman of NBCUniversal International in London, where I was responsible for overseeing the operations of all NBCUniversal International businesses, and as President of Comcast Programming Group.

In my professional experience, international media is marked by complexity. In my current job it is my responsibility to ensure that Universal's programming remains successful in a rapidly changing global media environment. I note similar challenges through my role at the BBG, where we not only must contend with a dynamic media landscape but also the asymmetric challenge of state and non-state actors, often well-funded, who effectively deploy media and digital tools to challenge the United States, our values of democracy and freedom, and the very existence of objective truth.

It is critical to acknowledge that in the recent past the BBG has not responded as effectively as it could to these growing challenges. As with any media organization, be it Universal Pictures or the BBG, the responsibility for organizational breakdown and inertia starts at the top. Some of our past problems derived from Board dysfunction and the failure to link the work of the Board to the day-to-day operations of the BBG's global team, and the growing sense of irrelevance and inability to "join the fight" that these challenges engendered.

But despite past challenges, two facts remained enduring. First, the BBG's mission remained unassailably critical to U.S. foreign policy. Second, we boast a team of brave and hardworking individuals who work around the world, in relative obscurity and often outright danger, each and every day to fulfill the BBG's mission to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.

These facts informed the work of the Board as we sought to overcome past challenges and ensure the meaningful impact of BBG efforts across the globe. I am happy to report that we are making significant progress on this front.

Our biggest change is that our current Board is fully united behind the changes we need to make to ensure BBG's success, and the ways we need to operate to do so. We are non-partisan and comprised of media and foreign affairs experts who deeply believe in the BBG mission and the need to lead the U.S.' fight against the "weaponization of information" by our adversaries and challengers. The level of

cooperation and expertise on this Board is the best I have seen, be it inside government or outside.

Most importantly, we recognize that the Board's role cannot be operational. The BBG is a complex institution and it is beyond the ability of any appointed Board, comprised of appointees with day jobs, to manage it effectively. Recognizing this fact, the Board elected to shift all the powers it could legally delegate to a Chief Executive Officer, who would oversee all aspects of U.S. international media and provide day-to-day management of BBG operations.

A critical act in this regard was to select John Lansing to serve our CEO. John's experience and temperament make him the perfect person for this job. He is a recognized leader in media management, having served nine years as President of Scripps Networks, where he is credited with guiding the company to become a leading developer of unique content across various media platforms including television, digital, mobile and publishing. Equally important, he is a journalist at heart – formerly an award-winning photojournalist and field producer, assignment manager, managing editor, and news director at multiple television stations earlier in his career.

And we have taken steps to modernize our operations as well. For instance, in 2014, we undertook a comprehensive review of the efficacy of shortwave radio as a distribution platform for U.S. international media, which resulted in a shift in focus to digital and mobile tools as our future tools of choice, because that is where our audiences are now and where they will be in the future. CEO Lansing will address our aggressive shift to digital media in his testimony.

Additionally, the BBG is embracing new tools to support the fundamental right of information freedom. Through the Internet Anti-Censorship Program and Open Technology Fund, we are supporting journalists, bloggers, civil society actors, and activists to use the Internet safely and without fear of interference.

Finally, through the strong presence on the Board of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Richard Stengel, we are more coordinated with the Department of State than ever before. Closer coordination has allowed the BBG to use its unique resources to impact in some of today's most important foreign policy arenas, such as on the digital battlefield in Ukraine or the global threat of violent extremism.

We recognize we also need to be better coordinated with Congress, which is why we are deeply appreciative of the opportunity to speak to this Committee today. In taking the above listed steps, and many others, the current Board has demonstrated its clear commitment to positioning BBG to succeed in the modern media environment. We look to Congress to provide certain additional authorities that will further ensure our success.

First, and foremost, we need the Congress fully enshrine the CEO as the operational lead at BBG. While the Board has elected to delegate key powers to the CEO through its own volition, it is clear that we need to institutionalize this role through legislation so that all future Boards can benefit from expert operational leadership.

Furthermore, we not only need to enshrine the role of the CEO, but we also need to fully empower the position to serve all relevant functions as required by the Board. As I mentioned previously, the sitting Board elected to delegate all authorities that it legally could to the CEO – but unfortunately the Board lacks the authority to fully modernize in this regard. We require legislation to authorize the Board to delegate the remainder of its authorities, required for effective and efficient day-to-day operation of the agency, to the CEO, so that the Board may focus on strategic oversight and governance.

This includes the currently “non-delegable” authority of the Board to reallocate even the most *de minimis* dollar amount of funds across the various bureaus and federal and grantee broadcasting entities of the BBG when requirements change. In other words, in order to move even one penny between the entities, even under the most urgent of circumstances, the CEO must seek a vote of the full Board.

Beyond these management fixes, we also need to ensure further structural and operational agility, if we are to successfully counter today’s dynamic challenges in the information space. Unfortunately, many of our existing authorities, a number of which date back to 1948, or thereabouts, are either obsolete or incomplete for our purposes as a 21st century organization.

A key area in this regard is surge capacity. When crises arise, BBG is often asked to surge its efforts to the affected region quickly. The International Broadcasting Act requires the agency to do so by providing for “the capability to provide a surge capacity to support United States foreign policy objectives during crises abroad.” But, as a surge generally requires increased content and broadcasting, we require not just enhanced authority to operate notwithstanding certain standard processes,

but also the ability to turn to a ready source of funding. For us, this means the authority to receive or fully utilize funds from other agencies, or to make use of a no-year fund established for this purpose.

With these fixes, the BBG will be best positioned to thrive in its mandated role as a unique tool in the U.S. foreign affairs toolbox, and will be a powerful force for countering the challenges posed by the growth of misleading or propagandistic information globally.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to conclude on a more personal note. As Chairman of Universal Filmed Entertainment Group, I have been lucky enough to lead an organization that has secured its most profitable and successful years in memory. We released films such as “Jurassic World,” “Furious 7,” and “Straight Outta Compton” to critical acclaim and commercial success. I am immensely proud of that success. But that pride at these successes pales in comparison to how proud I am to serve my country as Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and the incredible progress we have made over the past two years on behalf of the American people. I look forward to working with the Congress, and this Committee, on our work still to come.