

# US Soft Power: An Investigation on the Effects of USAGM's Shutdown

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## ABSTRACT

In March of 2025, President Trump signed the executive order “Continuing the reduction of federal bureaucracy,” which shut down various agencies that the administration considered to be wasteful, including the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM). Critics were quick to condemn USAGM’s defunding, arguing that abandoning such an outlet would result in a significant decline of US soft power. However, such critiques have not analyzed the impacts of USAGM’s defunding on US soft power through a replicable methodology, failing to establish what soft power is, how it is measured, and situate USAGM’s defunding within such contexts. This study seeks to fill this gap, answering the question of how USAGM’s defunding will impact US soft power in a way that more thoroughly explores the trajectory of US soft power to this point and USAGM’s impact on it. Conducting a comparative review of global soft power indices and an analysis of website traffic data, this paper ultimately concludes that, while US soft power is in decline, USAGM’s defunding is not a significant driver of this trend. These results imply the existence of a cyclical decline in US soft power caused by factors other than USAGM’s defunding, as well as a long term need to shift soft power projection away from traditional media outlets.

**Keywords:** soft power; united states; executive order; USAGM; media outlets; Trump; foreign policy

## INTRODUCTION

In February of 1942, the Voice of America (VOA) aired for the first time on radio with the words: “We bring you voices from America. Today, and daily from now on, we shall speak to you about America and the war. The news may be good for us. The news may be bad. But we shall tell you the truth” (1). In the eighty decades that followed, the VOA was consolidated

with similar organizations through various pieces of legislation, ultimately coming under the umbrella of the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM) (1). It and its counterparts, under USAGM, played crucial roles in spreading accurate information surrounding not only foreign developments such as the Cold War with the Soviet Union and the pro-democracy movement in China’s Tianmen square, but also an objective coverage of US actions in the Vietnam War and Watergate (2). As of 2019, USAGM has overseen seven federal and non-profit entities: the VOA, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), Radio Free Europe (RFE), the Radio Free Asia (RFA), the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MEBN), the Open Technology Fund, and the Frontline Media Fund (3). As of 2025, USAGM has been ordered to “reduce the performance of their statutory functions

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and associated personnel to the minimum presence and function required by law” under the executive order (EO) ‘Continuing the reduction of the federal bureaucracy’ signed by President Donald Trump (4).

In one fell swoop, President Trump and his appointed senior advisor of USAGM, Kari Lake, gutted the decades old agency; an agency that they had characterized as a “giant rot and burden to the American taxpayer” (5). The EO has not gone without challenges, however, as there have been legal victories battling the abrupt shutdown. RFE mounted a lawsuit against USAGM, with a district court judge granting a temporary restraining order that mandated USAGM to release RFE’s congressionally appropriated funds (6). Patsy Widakuswara, the VOA’s White House bureau chief, managed to win a temporary injunction against the EO, with the judge, Royce C. Lamberth, ordering operations and employees in the VOA, RFA, and the MEBN to be restored to their status previous to March 14th (7). Still, despite these temporary victories, the Trump administration seems to have achieved its goal: as of June, USAGM is operating at their statutory minimum of 81 employees, and affiliates such as the VOA have faced an 85 percent reduction in employees (8). Furthermore, the legal victories for funding were proven to be short lived. The court of appeals opposed Judge Lamberth’s decision, citing a lack of jurisdiction of the courts over USAGM’s personnel actions (9).

Previous to the EO’s passage, the USAGM boasted an extensive international network with broadcasts in 64 languages and more than 400 million viewers and website users every week. Notably, its affiliates—following WWII-era VOA tradition—placed a large emphasis on reporting in countries with no or limited free press (10). Due to this tendency to counter propaganda from authoritarian regimes, USAGM has been labeled a “beacon of freedom” (11). As it is an agency associated with the US as a whole, positive perceptions towards USAGM serve to prop up the country’s soft power. First coined by Joseph Nye, an American political scientist, soft power refers to “ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment” (12). In the case of USAGM, it is the viewpoint of some that since it exudes values of journalistic justice and freedom, the perceptions towards it results in its propagator, the United States, being attractive to individuals in foreign countries. This begs the question, how will USAGM’s recent gutting impact US soft-power projection in the international landscape? In order to answer this question, this study

will do the following. First, it will establish whether or not US soft power is experiencing a decline. Second, it will determine whether USAGM’s shutdown had any causal links to this soft power trajectory. Lastly, it will analyze any implications derived from a reduction or lack of reduction in soft power.

## **DEFINING SOFT POWER**

Before an analysis of soft power or USAGM’s effect on soft power can be conducted, soft power must be defined in the context of the field of international relations. Broadly speaking, soft power can be defined by contrasting it to its counterpart hard power. Hard power refers to the ability of countries to get what they want through the “coercive use of economic power and the application of military force” (13). Hard power can be seen fitting into the framework of political realism, which determines national security to be the primary concern of states, with states engaging in power struggles to achieve it (14). It can be quantified through measures of a country’s military and economic might. Soft power however, with its emphasis on non-direct coercive means—means of attraction—fits into the theoretical framework of liberalism. This framework puts emphasis on the interdependence between states, encouraging free trade, participation in international organizations, and the propagation of democracy (15). In recent years, as waging wars has become a task increasingly burdensome and mutually damning, the role of soft power in diplomacy and international politics has risen to the forefront.

The United States, up until recent years, has effectively advertised itself as a just and democratic country, amassing significant amounts of soft power. This buildup of soft power mainly began in the 1950s, with the US’ conscious deployment of popular jazz icons such as Louis Armstrong on goodwill tours and its use of agencies such as Radio Free Europe to generate a reputation for truth (16). However, with the recent shutdown of key international broadcasting agencies such as USAGM, experts suggest an end to US soft power dominance is imminent. Researchers from think tank CSIS suggest that the loss of affiliates such as Radio Free Asia will result in the US seceding the information war against China in Southeast Asia (17). This sentiment is echoed in an article put out by the Soufan Center, which highlights how US cuts to soft power have the effect of handing control over narratives to oppositional actors in key areas such as Africa. Both

think tanks point out the dangers of other superpowers such as Russia and China, and how the US has been unable to rise to the soft power conflict that these rivals pose. A former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges at NATO even likens it to a “soft power suicide”, emphasising how this is an action that the US will not be able to recover from (18). These statements put out by experts in various fields do seem to be supported quantitatively, with an annual study done on global perceptions of democracy ranking the US below China (19). Yet these prevailing thoughts on the perniciousness of USAGM’s shutdown is not without critique.

The most glaring flaw in current literature is that the causation between the shutdown of USAGM and the decline of US soft power is not analyzed in a methodological manner; in the aforementioned editorials and think tank pieces, soft power is only broadly addressed and predictions concerning the future of US soft power are asserted. There have not yet been any academic attempts at exploring how exactly the EO might affect US soft power, likely due to the recentness of the event. In the following section this gap in literature will be addressed. US soft power’s trajectory over recent years will be analyzed through a review of literature, determining how it has fluctuated if at all. Then, whether USAGM’s shutdown had any causal links to US soft power fluctuations will be explored through a replicable method utilizing website traffic data.

## **MEASURING US SOFT POWER**

Unlike hard power, which can be measured relatively easily through an observation of troop numbers, weaponry, money, and similar resources, soft power is not so easily quantifiable. Part of the difficulty lies in the sheer multifaceted and often subjective nature of soft power. It relies on multiple mechanisms that range from a country’s cultural exports, foreign and domestic actions, and media influence; all factors that shape a state’s reputation. Thus, it is often difficult to make definitive assertions concerning soft power and its fluctuations.

One thing concerning soft power that is quite clear, however, is that the US enjoyed unprecedented domination in the reputational arena in the period right after the Cold War. At the time, columnists such as Charles Krauthammer were coining this the “new unilateralism”, showcasing the strong belief that many

held concerning the United State’s place in the world (20). Nowadays however, with the rise of China as a global superpower and the general diffusion of power in the international landscape, it is clear that the US no longer holds the same hegemonical power it used to enjoy in the 1990s.

Several attempts have been made to quantify and rank the soft power of countries; the most recent by Brand Finances, who compiled the Global Soft Power Index (GSPI) (21-25). Having published yearly since 2021, the GSPI has ranked the US as number one in the world with regards to soft power consistently, displaying a rise in US soft power across time. However, one issue lies in the methodology this index uses to approach soft power— it uses a perception survey as its primary measure. While the view that people around the world hold concerning a country is partially indicative of soft power, this ignores various other metrics, including immigration rates, cultural buy-in, diplomatic accomplishments, etc. Thus, while the index can be used to make claims concerning how the US is perceived by the respondents, it cannot be used as a comprehensive measure of soft power.

A more holistic index lies in the Soft Power 30 index, which ran from 2015 to 2019 (26-29). It took into consideration both objective measures of culture, education, engagement, digital, enterprise, and government along with subjective data collected through polling. The subjective data encompasses perceptions concerning cuisine, tech products, friendliness, culture, luxury goods, foreign Policy, and liveability. Therefore, while it does utilize similar subjective perception data as used by the GSPI, it combines this with more objective measures, allowing for more reliable conclusions regarding soft power. Based on these measures, Soft Power 30 indicates that, after being ranked first in 2016, the US’ soft power slowly declined from first place to fifth place between 2016 and 2019.

This data is corroborated by more recent data from the Democracy Perception Index. The 2025 Democracy Perception Index indicates a net negative perception of the US, which since 2024 has faced a sharp incline (30). Specifically, the index highlights how negative perceptions of the US are most rampant around the Middle Eastern and North African regions, along with its immediate neighbors of Mexico and Canada. These two indices, representing both perception data and objective data relating to soft power, contradict the findings of Brand Finances, with the relatively

holistic nature of the Soft Power 30 dataset bolstering its comparative credibility. Thus, overall, it can be established based on existing indices that US soft power has, indeed, faced a decline in recent years.

The next question that must be answered is whether USAGM's shutdown through the EO 'Continuing the reduction of the federal bureaucracy' has had any significant impact on its soft power projection. The following section will attempt to answer this question through an analysis of USAGM's efficacy, determining whether USAGM's shutdown indeed caused the observed reduction in US soft power or if other variables played a more significant role.

### EFFICACY OF USAGM AFFILIATES

USAGM's primary focus is in using foreign media to reach audiences in authoritarian regimes where local media outlets might be heavily regulated. They attempt to "inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy", bolstering the US' image as a bastion of Western democratic values. Through such characterization, the attractiveness of the US and the ideals it represents increases, resulting in increased soft power. However, the efficacy of USAGM in achieving its soft power goals is dependent on the reach it is able to generate in its target countries. Extending this logic, USAGM's shutdown can only be labeled as harmful to US soft power if its reach was of a significant enough degree that there would be a distinctive void in media without it. To assess the reach of USAGM, the methodology utilized by Wang *et al.* to examine the effect of VOA on US soft power will be replicated (31). Website traffic data from Similarweb, a third party data analytics service, disaggregated by country, will be analyzed in order to explore the efficacy of USAGM. This will allow for a determination on whether the USAGM affiliates' audiences exert real influence in their target regions.

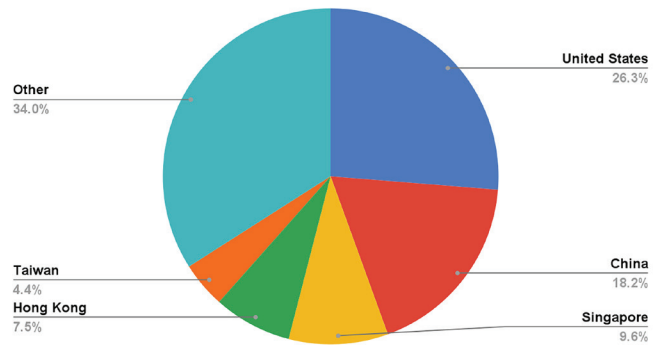
Figure 1 indicates that Voice of America Chinese, a website in Mandarin run by the VOA gets the most of its audience from outside of its targeted region. The US is indicated to contribute the largest amount of traffic, at 28.41 percent. This is despite the VOA not even being able to broadcast within the US prior to 2013, with the agency mainly intending to cultivate foreign audiences (32).

Figure 2, which displays data for the RFA, shows higher alignment with its intended audience with Vietnam ranking as the top source of visits. Of course,

Vietnam, despite historic conflict, is considered to have strong bilateral ties to the US (33). The necessity for strong RFA viewership within the particular country can be called into question, as it may be within US interests to hold a larger audience from countries such as Cambodia, which is less sympathetic to the US (17).

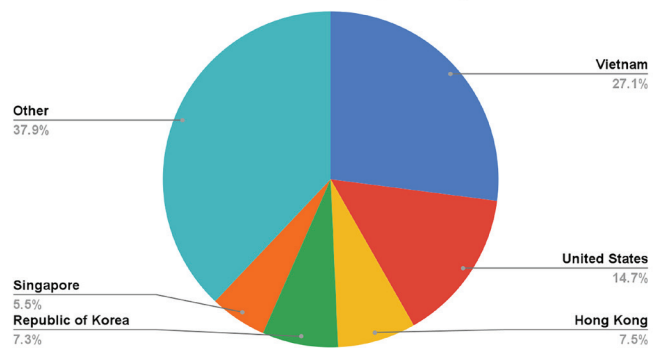
Figure 3 shows data for Martí Noticias, a news website run by the Office for Cuba Broadcasting (OCB). There is clearly a very heavy US based website traffic, with nearly 50 percent of its 63,401 visitors being from

Distribution of VOA Chinese Website Traffic by Country



**Figure 1. Distribution of VOA Chinese Website Traffic by Country.** The top five countries contributing to www.voachinese.com's website traffic are displayed with an 'other' section depicting the rest of the contributing countries.

Distribution of RFA Website Traffic By Country



**Figure 2. Distribution of RFA Website Traffic by Country.** The top five countries contributing to www.rfa.org's website traffic are displayed with an 'other' section depicting the rest of the contributing countries.

the US. Partially due to the heavy discouragement poised by the Cuban government on viewing foreign media, along with its tendency to block foreign radio, the OCB has not been able to fulfill its goal of penetrating Latin American audiences.

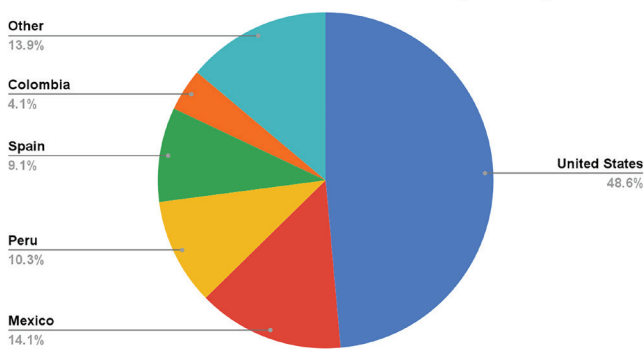
Figure 4 displays data from the RFE, which, similarly to Martí Noticias, displays a strong US-based audience, with 27.62 percent of its traffic originating from the US. Despite strong viewership from Uzbekistan taking up second place with 7.67 percent of website traffic, the majority of visitors consists of either individuals from

the US, or countries where such a broadcasting system may be unneeded for soft power projection, such as the UK. Out of the USAGM affiliates, Alhurra television, overseered by the Middle East Broadcasting Network, seems to exhibit an audience most consistent with its intent.

Figure 5 shows that Saudi Arabia leads as the top source of visits, followed by Egypt, Iraq, the US, and Jordan. The large portion of the audience from Middle Eastern countries suggests that Alhurra maintains substantial engagement within its core target region. However, as with other USAGM outlets, there is a notable portion of traffic contributed by the US.

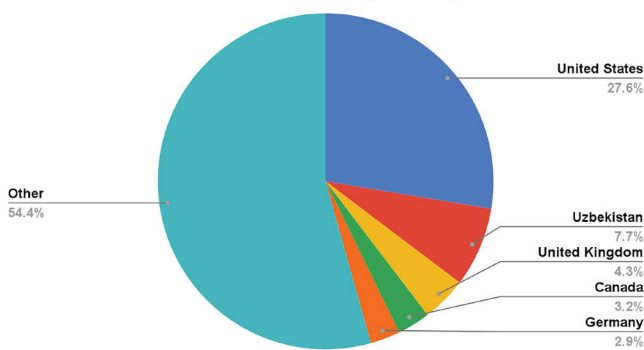
When looked at all together in Table 1, the traffic data from the various USAGM affiliates indicates a clear pattern: a significant portion of online traffic for these outlets is based in the US rather than consisting of the foreign audiences they are intended to influence. Especially for VOA Chinese and Martí Noticias, domestic US traffic constitutes a quarter and half of the total traffic, respectively. Even among affiliates with comparatively strong foreign audience penetration, that of RFA, RFE, and Alhurra television, traffic from the US is still ranked among the top sources, reflecting their continued reliance on US-based audiences. When looking at this data from the context of US soft power, the results suggest that USAGM might have not had a significant influence in bolstering the aforementioned power. This is because translation of media resources into soft power requires a strong domestic audience base in the target countries, a necessity that is not

Distribution of Martí Noticias Website Traffic by Country



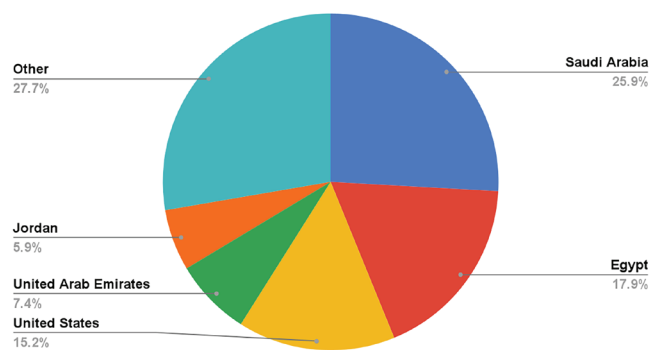
**Figure 3. Distribution of Martí Noticias Website Traffic by Country.** The top five countries contributing to www.martinoticias.com’s website traffic are displayed with an ‘other’ section depicting the rest of the contributing countries.

Distribution of RFE Website Traffic by Country



**Figure 4. Distribution of RFE Website Traffic by Country.** The top five countries contributing to www.rferl.org’s website traffic are displayed with an ‘other’ section depicting the rest of the contributing countries.

Distribution of Alhurra Television Website Traffic by Country



**Figure 5. Distribution of Alhurra Television Website Traffic by Country.** The top five countries contributing to alhurra.com’s website traffic are displayed with an ‘other’ section depicting the rest of the contributing countries.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Website Traffic Distributions for USAGM Affiliate Media

|                           | Percentage of Viewership Originating from the US | Percentage of Viewership Originating from Target Region | Total Visitors | Total Population of Target Region |
|---------------------------|--|---|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>VOA Chinese</b>        | 26.3%  | 39.7%   | 537,652        | 1,409,000,000                     |
| <b>RFA</b>                | 14.7%  | 47.4%   | 1,472,000      | 101,000,000                       |
| <b>Martí Noticias</b>     | 48.6%  | 37.6%   | 59,564         | 10,980,000                        |
| <b>RFE</b>                | 27.6%  | 14.3%   | 937,255        | 744,000,000                       |
| <b>Alhurra Television</b> | 15.2%  | 57.1%   | 266,845        | 411,000,000                       |

The percentage of viewership originating from the US, percentage of viewership originating from the target region, total visitors, and total population of the target regions for VOA Chinese, RFA, Martí Noticias, RFE, and Alhurra Television are displayed.

consistently demonstrated across the data.

One weakness of the above analysis is its dependence on website traffic data provided by Similarweb. While reliable for countries such as the US or other democratic regimes in which internet freedom is guaranteed, more authoritarian regimes, notably China and Cuba, have restrictions on which sites its citizens may access. The use of virtual private networks (VPNs) may cause users from China and Cuba to register as having accessed on the websites from other portions of the world, causing inaccuracy in the data. However, even when considering the fact that certain users logged from the US might have been from other countries, the overall website visit number is still accurate. Even under the assumption that all of the traffic for the respective websites were from either China and Cuba, it can still be concluded that there was not a large audience garnered from the two countries. For instance, VOA Chinese had 554,481 visits, which compared to China's population of around 1.4 billion, only makes up around 0.04 percent of the population. In the case of Cuba, Marti Noticias had 63401 visitors which makes up approximately 0.5 percent of the total population. Thus, even accounting for VPN use, both news affiliates do not have a strong audience in either country, making the previous conclusion concerning USAGM's inefficacy reasonable.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to explore whether the US faced any reductions in soft power, and whether such reductions, if any, had any causal links to the shutdown of USAGM via the executive order (EO) "Continuing the Reduction of Federal Bureaucracy." While recent editorials and opinion pieces speculated

on the damning effects of the EO on US soft power, this is the first study that investigates the topic through a replicable methodology drawing on website traffic data. In the previous two sections, it was established that there was indeed a decline of US soft power, and that the USAGM has not actually been effective in recent years at garnering soft power for the US. This section will elaborate on the implications of these two results and conclude by suggesting areas of future research.

The main implication that can be derived from the results is that the shutdown of the USAGM was not causally linked to the decline of US soft power. As the agency and its affiliates were not effective in garnering soft power, its shutdown will not have a drastic impact on the US' power projection, contrary to the claims of think tanks and their policy experts. Instead, it is clear from the trends compiled that US soft power has been on a downward trajectory for much longer than since President Trump's budget-cutting Executive Order. In fact, American soft power has reportedly been in decline since as far back as the early 2000s, in which President Bush's War on Terror caused declining approval of the US (34). Its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were seen as far too unilateral, with Bush's failure to recruit a multilateral coalition or UN support giving a rise to anti-American sentiment.

US soft power faced another sharp decline in 2008 during the global financial crisis, a crisis largely blamed on Wall street and US financial regulations. This reportedly caused negative perceptions of the US' liberal market economy, turning credibility over to its competitor China's (35). This has been described by Martin Wolf, a British economic commentator, as "a humiliating end to the unipolar moment" (36). American unilateralism, whether militaristic or economic, that attempts to leverage its hard power can thus be seen as

the causal force eating away the country's soft power, a trend that can be expected to continue with President Trump's first term in office.

During his 2016-2020 presidency, President Trump wielded radical unilateral power that he used to abandon multiple international organizations and agreements. This included withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, the UN Human Rights Council, and the rejection of the Trans Pacific Partnership (37). Such geopolitical actions, combined with the use of economic power to place sanctions and tariffs against not only nations such as Iran but also ally countries such as Canada and the European Union represented the US' shift into isolation and a focus on "American First" (38). The economic model based on this idea of putting US at the forefront, Trump's nationalist agenda that was opposed to immigrants from Latin American and the Middle East, along with the storming of the capital towards the end of Trump's presidency resulted in a state where "American soft power melted down close to zero" (39).

With the re-election of President Trump in 2025, it appears that he intends to again opt for unilateralism both domestically and internationally. This is evident by the continuation of his trade wars with the US having placed tariffs on over 90 countries as of August 2025, and the fact that he has issued the most executive orders in one year since the WW2 era (40, 41). The goal of such actions internationally seems to be to upend the current economic order, leveraging the US hard power to negotiate more favorable trade deals. Domestically, he has used executive orders regarding the deportation of immigrants to wage war against the courts, oftentimes apparently willfully ignoring court orders in an attempt to expand executive power (42). The effect of such actions on soft power are likely quite pernicious: the US is increasingly being viewed as an unreliable trading partner due to its chaotic and seemingly random tariff actions, and the battle between the executive and judiciary reinforce the perception that the US is marred with instability (43). Thus, the US soft power can be expected to decline as it mirrors the unilateralism that has historically undercut its soft power. However, it is clear that this decline was not significantly linked to USAGM's shutdown, but rather fueled by the recent two decades of erratic unilateral actions.

A secondary implication of the results is the US' shifting focus from soft power to more transactional and bilateral foreign policy models. Rather than using foreign aid, alliances, and trade deals as a way of

sowing goodwill and cultivating soft power, Trump reportedly is recharacterizing them as business deals in which the US, keeping "America First, must see immediate returns (44). This is evident in key actions from the executive such as the shutdown of USAID and by President Trump's continued condemnation of NATO for putting an unequal burden on the US (45, 46). It is clear that the US no longer wishes to be viewed as a benign hegemonical power that, while insistent on democratic values, is willing to give away aid and maintain strong international connections. Furthermore, the US under Trump can be seen as rejecting the multilateral world order forged through international institutions and agreements. Especially concerning trade, a shift towards bilateral agreements can be seen, with Trump believing that such one on one negotiations will allow the US to leverage its economic position better (47). Thus, the new US administration can be characterized by its abandonment of previously cultivated soft power and emphasis on using bilateral negotiations to strong-arm favorability in agreements.

Tertiarily concerns the implication of USAGM's insignificant effect on US soft power, which represents an erosion of old mechanisms of soft power promotion happening on a wider level. USAGM, which relied on more traditional forms of media, proved ineffective in increasing the US' soft power. This aligns with the findings of previous research that indicate how, as the internet developed and alternate sources of information became so widely available, traditional forms of media such as newspapers, news sites, etc. began to reduce in influence and relevance (48). No longer are media outlets such as the VOA the sole source of free press in authoritarian states; social media, which can relatively easily be accessed on through a VPN, resulted in the decentralization and dissemination of information power. This phenomenon creating a high choice environment, combined with the loss of trust that traditional media outlets face, has resulted in such loss of power on the part of USAGM. In order to regain the information dominance that the US enjoyed before the 21st century, it must adapt to the new paradigm, exploring options outside of traditional media.

## CONCLUSION

This study concluded no causal effect between USAGM's shutdown and the loss of US soft power. It determined a cyclical pattern of decline in US soft power, exploring alternate explanations for

such decline in recent days. Furthermore, it defined the shift in foreign policy brought on by the new administration, specifically the Trump administration's strategy of utilizing hard economic power to leverage foreign countries into bilateral agreements. Lastly, it highlighted the erosion of traditional media outlets, and how while USAGM's shutdown might've been the correct move, an alternate strategy of amassing soft power is necessary.

Future research must investigate such strategies: studies should explore which forms of media audiences in target countries are most inclined to, and which broadcasting strategies will facilitate an increase in US soft power. Another direction in which research can go regards soft power itself. As identified in previous sections, soft power is difficult to quantify and only a handful of truly large-scale attempts have been made to track soft power across countries. To better establish a foundation for more research on the topic, researchers should make an attempt to conduct longitudinal studies on the fluctuations of soft power, whether it be for the US alone or a comparative study between multiple countries. Lastly, future studies, using this study as its background, should attempt to qualitatively confirm its conclusions, interviewing citizenry in USAGM's target regions for levels of trust in US sponsored media.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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