

WebMemo



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Support Continued Voice of America Broadcasting to China

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Proponents of U.S. international broadcasting to China got some reason for hope last month when a group of congressmen, led by Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) produced a letter in support of continued funding for communication to the vast Chinese populace. The congressmen propose to fence off a portion of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) budget (part of the state and foreign operations appropriations bill):

Of the total amount in this heading, \$15,000,000 shall be provided to Voice of America Mandarin and Cantonese language radio and satellite television. Such funds may not be transferred, reprogrammed, or expended for carrying out any other activity.

This approach makes sense. Millions of Chinese outside the major cities are able to access shortwave transmissions and satellite television broadcasts, and new digital technology allows shortwave to become a far more effective medium than it has been in the past. And broadcasting defies government control of the magnitude and thoroughness that the Internet invites.

How Bad Is Chinese Online Censorship? So complete is the filtering that when President Hu Jintao admitted during his visit to Washington that China “has a long way to go in improving human rights,” it was struck from Chinese official media reports.

“The Great Chinese Intranet,” as some call it, is what the Internet has been reduced to in China, so

tightly controlled that it belies conventional wisdom, which until recently held that cyberspace, a new frontier, was impossible to regulate and control. Not so. Countries like China and Iran have moved quickly to catch up with advances in communications technology. In China, the Communist regime can and does track individual Internet users; all cell phone and Internet subscribers are required to register before signing up for service. Only approved domain names are allowed to register with the physical network.

The Chinese government employs the largest Internet censorship brigade in the world, and social media Web sites like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are beyond the reach of the Chinese Internet user, who is being served by a parallel Chinese network of social media and search engines. And any mention of “subversive” international news gets effectively filtered out—such as the Arab Spring, the news of which is non-existent on the Internet in China. Add the fact that nearly 1 billion Chinese have no access to the Internet—68 percent of the population.

Cutting Exactly What Is Needed. All of which adds up to a strong case for not relying solely on the World Wide Web in U.S. communications strat-

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egy toward China. Yet that is the proposed direction of the BBG's fiscal year 2012 budget, which would eliminate Voice of America (VOA) shortwave radio and satellite television transmission to China by October of this year at a savings of \$8 million. This would be achieved by cutting 45 positions from the Mandarin and Cantonese services, a 66 percent reduction.

This cut should be seen in light of the total budget proposal of \$767 million for international broadcasting and also the fact that the same budget proposal proposes to increase management positions at the BBG itself by 41 percent at a total cost of \$24 million. "All head and no tail" is the current direction this proposal suggests.

Paradoxically, by the BBG Inspector General argued against this strategy last summer: "Since access to the Internet is more easily controlled than access to shortwave radio, international radio, and satellite—broadcasts such as VOAs remain the only dependable source of political news, especially during crises."¹ How one gets from this analysis to the decision in favor of a wholesale cut in broadcasting remains a mystery.

Recommendations. The U.S. Congress should:

- Support continued VOA broadcasting to China, a country that has announced a \$7 billion investment in a global media campaign to match its other global ambitions;
- Ask newly appointed VOA director David Ensor to undertake a review of the BBG's budget request, particularly regarding closing down of radio capacity in favor of over-reliance on the Internet; and
- Exert vigorous oversight of the BBG's strategic review, which is currently in process.

Don't Waste a Great Asset. Unless Congress steps in, there is a real danger that a strategic asset of great value to the United States and to freedom-loving listeners around the world will be wasted. The battle for hearts and minds did not end with the Cold War (which broadcasting can help win, by the way). Far from it.

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1. U.S. Department of State and Broadcasting Board of Governors, Office of Inspector General, *Report of Inspection: Voice of America's China Branch*, July 2010, pp. 10–11, at <http://oig.state.gov/documents/organization/145823.pdf> (June 7, 2011).