

Heritage Lectures

No. 1195
Delivered May 25, 2011



Published by The Heritage Foundation

September 8, 2011

Radio Silence in China: VOA Abandons the Airwaves

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Abstract: *On October 1, 2011, Voice of America's (VOA) Chinese radio service will go silent, as U.S. international broadcasting abandons the airwaves and moves to the Internet. In the burgeoning age of new media, many, including the management at Voice of America, seem to be questioning the continued relevance of shortwave radio. Yet, while the Internet offers great potential, U.S. public diplomacy cannot rest exclusively on the use of a single platform. This is particularly true where the prevalence of Internet censorship is high. Just this past May, China announced the creation of its State Internet Information Office, intended to expand and enhance China's information dissemination policy, and leading many to question whether abandoning the airwaves is truly the best way to reach America's audiences throughout the world. On May 25, 2011, three expert panelists—the senior editor at VOA's China branch, the CEO of Continental Electronics Corporation, and VOA's former director—discussed the current U.S. strategy for its international broadcasting.*

HUCHEN ZHANG, Senior Editor, Voice of America China Branch: My name is Huchen Zhang; I've been working at Voice of America's (VOA) China branch for 20 years. I'm speaking to you today as a professional journalist and private citizen. What I'm going to say are my personal observations and opinions. They do not represent the official policy of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB), or VOA.

On Valentine's Day, the BBG announced to all the employees of the VOA's China branch its proposal to

Talking Points

- On October 1, 2011, Voice of America's (VOA) Chinese radio service will go silent, as the U.S. abandons shortwave broadcasting in favor of the Internet.
- While China's online industry is expanding, the government's Internet control is becoming more and more sophisticated: Only Web sites with pre-approved domain names are allowed to connect to the physical network; Internet users are required to prove their identity before registering any online account; and the Chinese government employs the largest Internet police force in the world.
- Limiting VOA's China outreach to the Web makes VOA vulnerable to censorship and blocking. Unlike surfing the Internet, listening to shortwave radio broadcasting cannot be detected, and it requires no special infrastructure or skills.
- Ending shortwave transmissions to China would be the biggest blunder yet in the history of U.S. international broadcasting and public diplomacy.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/hl1195>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies
of the
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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eliminate VOA shortwave radio and TV broadcasts to China on October 1. By switching to Web-only operations, the BBG told us, \$8 million would be saved. Forty-five journalists (38 Mandarin and seven Cantonese, 59 percent of the branch's full-time employees) would lose their jobs. In keeping with the spirit of Valentine's Day, we were told that the decision had nothing to do with the performance of the China branch. In fact, we were told that we had been doing an excellent job. The decision was based, the BBG said, on the increase of the number of Internet users and decline in shortwave listenership in China.

Beijing's crackdown on political dissent has been ruthless. In recent months, hundreds of activist lawyers, bloggers, artists, and clergy have been questioned, detained, confined to their homes, or have simply disappeared.

More than three months have passed, but I'm still shocked and bewildered by the BBG's decision. Being a reasonable man, I've been looking at the issue from different angles. I have even tried to put myself in the BBG's shoes. But no matter how I look at it, I always come to the conclusion that the BBG's decision is based on faulty information and wrong judgment. It comes after the BBG has already abolished VOA radio and TV programming in Arabic and Russian, two vital strategic United Nations languages. If approved by Congress, ending shortwave transmissions to China would be the biggest blunder yet in the history of U.S. international broadcasting and public diplomacy.

In the next few minutes, I will try to put the BBG's budget proposal into perspective and show you how I have come to this conclusion. Let's first look at the bigger picture of China's rise and U.S.–China relations.

In the past 20 years, the Chinese economy has been developing at a breathtaking pace, thanks largely to the high efficiency of one-party totalitarian rule. Now China is the world's second-largest economy. Many experts predict that the size of the Chinese economy will surpass that of the United States in real terms in 2020; some say even sooner.

In addition, China is the largest holder of U.S. public debt. The United States pays China \$73 million a day in debt interest.

China's military might is growing as its economy expands. It has test-piloted its first stealth fighter jet. Its first aircraft carrier will soon be commissioned. It has demonstrated the ability to destroy a satellite in space. Its defense budget this year is 12.7 percent bigger than last year's. More important, the military hardliners are having a greater say in the country's decision making.

Emboldened by its economic and military power, China is vying with the United States for dominance in international affairs. Results of various latest public opinion polls show that over half of the American people surveyed believe China is America's No. 1 potential adversary.

In the past two years, China has spent \$7 billion to expand its overseas propaganda operations through its state media outlets: the Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), the *People's Daily*, and China Radio International, not even including the pseudo-official Phoenix TV.

Domestically, Beijing's crackdown on political dissent has been ruthless. In recent months, hundreds of activist lawyers, bloggers, artists, clergy, and members of independent religious groups have been questioned, detained, confined to their homes, or have simply disappeared, apparently to prevent the seeds of the Arab Spring from reaching China. "The human rights situation in China has gone from abysmally bad to worse," remarked Congressman Chris Smith at a House hearing on May 13. "In fact, we've not seen this level of blatant violations of human rights since the crackdown on Tiananmen Square protestors in June 1989," he said.

At the same time, the Chinese government has further tightened its grip on the press. This includes traditional media and new media. The Internet and other high-tech communications in China are so rigidly controlled that the Communist regime can, in theory and in reality, track the movement of any individuals it wants to monitor. The Chinese government recently announced that it will use cell phone GPS technology for "crowd management," as all cell phone users in China are already required by

law to provide their identity before signing up for mobile phone services.

While China's Internet industry is expanding, the government's Internet control is also becoming more and more sophisticated. China is adopting a "white list" system to manage the Web. Only Web sites with pre-approved domain names are allowed to be connected into the physical network. Internet users in China are required to prove their identity before registering any Internet account, and the Chinese government employs the largest Internet police force in the world. Routers to the networks in the outside world are tightly controlled and monitored. Some call Internet in China the "Great Chinese Intranet." A Chinese dissident in Shandong province told VOA that Chinese government security authorities would call him seconds after he made any tweets and would even read out the exact words to him.

Furthermore, any Internet company, including Internet giants Yahoo and Google, are forced to "cooperate" with the Chinese government. Foreign social media, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, are effectively blocked out of the Chinese market. The Chinese have developed their separate systems of social networks called "micro-blogs," monitored by censors and protected by the Great Firewall from "outside invasion."

The official filtering of information from abroad, in fact, is so pervasive that Communist Party leader Hu Jintao's admission during a joint news conference with President Obama in Washington earlier this year that China "has a long way to go in improving human rights" was deleted by censors from all official Chinese media.

In the eyes of some Chinese "netizens," Professor Fang Binxing, the Father of the Great Firewall, has become the Public Enemy No.1. Last December, he opened a micro-blog on Sina.com, the largest Chinese-language infotainment Web portal. Within three hours, nearly 10,000 users left messages for him, most of them very critical of his leading role in blocking the World Wide Web. Fang had to shut down his account after a few days. On May 19, eggs and shoes were thrown at him while he was giving a speech at central

China's Wuhan University. After the incident, his name and the word "shoe" became "sensitive" words, and couldn't be searched on the Web.

It is against this backdrop that the BBG announced its plan to end VOA's shortwave radio and satellite TV broadcasts to China, citing the following reasons, as *The Washington Times* reported on April 11: "The Chinese government has jammed shortwave radio broadcasts for many years, and shortwave listening is in dramatic decline while TV, Internet and mobile use are all increasing. Meanwhile, the Internet is censored but not completely blocked."

It is a fact that Beijing has jammed Western shortwave broadcasts for many years. The People's Republic of China has spent millions of dollars to do so. Why give the Chinese government a gift of this magnitude by unilaterally abdicating the airwaves? Both Britain's BBC and Germany's Deutsche Welle are doing just that in 2011. Can we in good conscience allow the West to lose its most significant radio and TV voices to the world's most populous country, one whose media have been consistently ranked by Freedom House as "not free"? This is fiscal laryngitis at its most damaging.

While it is hard (but not impossible) to listen to VOA in big cities in the coastal areas in China, VOA Chinese broadcasting cannot be effectively jammed in the vast countryside. The BBG claims that VOA Chinese broadcasting has "virtually no audience," but the BBG's own findings, cited by its principal research contractor Intermedia Survey, shows that VOA's China branch has a reach of more than two million listeners and viewers every week. That is roughly 40 times the number of weekly visitors to the VOA Mandarin Web site, according to the latest BBG Language Service Review report. Under Web metrics, the LSR report says, there are 52,725 visitors a week to the VOA Web site. A footnote to those numbers says: "These audience figures are based on surveys conducted in politically repressive environments that are generally hostile to international broadcasting. Because individuals in these countries are discouraged or even prohibited by their governments from listening to U.S. international broadcasts, actual audience numbers may be higher than the ones listed here."

The BBG's assessment is also drastically different from previous BBG studies. For instance, the State Department and BBG Office of Inspector General's Report of Inspection of VOA China Branch (July 2010) states that, "since access to the Internet is more easily controlled than access to shortwave radio, international radio, and satellite broadcasts such as VOA's remain the only dependable source of political news, especially during crises."

BBG claims it is "the leader in circumventing Internet censorship." The fact is, although the number of Internet users in China has increased exponentially, research results show that from 2007 to 2010, annual visits to VOA's Chinese Web site remained virtually unchanged (except a short period in 2008 during the Beijing Olympics when the Chinese government temporarily lifted its ban on the Internet). Even though the BBG's circumvention technology might work to a certain extent, the circumvention tools would endanger on-the-ground activists, as pointed out by many Internet-freedom groups.

Unlike surfing the Internet, the beauty of listening to shortwave radio broadcasting is that it cannot be detected. By the same token, any attempt to measure the exact listenership in China is bound to be futile, as we know the Chinese government has designated VOA as an "enemy station."

Let me give you some different numbers. The 2009–2012 Radio Industry Competition and Strategic Investment Report conducted by a well-known Chinese think tank states: "Radio broadcasting covers 60.2% of the Chinese population. The current size of radio audiences has reached 653 million. Of these 653 million, 394 million reside in urban areas, while 257 million are located in rural areas." The report goes on to say: "Shortwave radio markets in China are still very robust, with their sales averaging tens of millions of sets per year." The report adds: "As listeners move quickly from analog broadcasts to digital broadcasts, the output of digital radio sets is expected to reach 25 million in 2010."

Other research done by Chinese scholars says that VOA Chinese broadcasts attract more than 10 million listeners. (*General Theory of International Broadcasting*, by Wang Yuezhi and Zhang Chao, 2009, Shandong Education Press).

Technological development has opened up new horizons for radio broadcasting. VOA's radio programs in Chinese are now broadcast 24/7 via satellite just like our TV shows. Currently, they are not jammed or blocked by the Chinese government. Anyone in China who owns a satellite dish can listen to or watch them crystal clear.

Digital shortwave radio is another area that needs to be explored. According to the industry report, Chinese manufacturers produced more than 120 million FM radio chips for cell phones in 2009. If these chips have a shortwave function or if suitable apps are developed for mobile phones, millions upon millions of people will be able to listen to VOA Chinese broadcasting on their portable listening devices, such as cell phones, while tilling the land, driving, taking a walk, or doing household chores, when reading on the Internet is not an option.

Unlike surfing the Internet, the beauty of listening to shortwave radio broadcasting is that it cannot be detected.

At an IBB town hall meeting held in late February, we were told that the BBG believes that China's economic stake in the Internet is so big that Beijing wouldn't dare to shut it down completely. Yet we all know that after the riot broke out in Xinjiang in July 2009, the Internet was totally shut down in the region for several months. Not even a single phone call, text message, or e-mail could get through to the vast Xinjiang region.

Now let me talk a little about VOA. VOA has been broadcasting in Chinese for 70 years. Millions and millions, generation after generation of Chinese, have depended on VOA for timely, reliable, and otherwise unavailable information. This has been true during the Cultural Revolution, the downfall of the Gang of Four, and especially during the 1989 democracy movement. At every twist and turn in modern Chinese history, the Chinese people would tune in to VOA for unfiltered information. Disgraced Chinese leader Zhao Ziyang's daughter told a VOA China branch reporter during a 2005 interview that Zhao Ziyang loved to listen to VOA Chinese, "especially the reports on China

and the world.” She said, “VOA has some special reports which know China’s situation well. I always remember that my father would bend his waist to listen to that tiny radio during a certain time in the day, holding the radio almost up to his ear.”

As the name suggests, Voice of America is the voice of the American government, American society, and the American people. To millions of Chinese people, it has been and still is a symbol of the United States of America. To eliminate VOA’s broadcasts in Chinese has a symbolic meaning larger than anybody could imagine. That’s why the Chinese Communist Party’s mouthpiece the *People’s Daily* lost no time in hailing the BBG’s decision as a “historical end,” and many ordinary listeners have called in during our shortwave and TV shows to say they would personally donate money to fund VOA’s broadcasts in Chinese.

By stressing the importance of shortwave radio and satellite TV broadcasts, I am not saying that we should not further develop our Internet capabilities. On the contrary, I believe we should strengthen our broadcasting and Web site at the same time. Our Web site is supported by all the content created by radio and TV journalists. To eliminate our radio and TV broadcasts and cut 59 percent of the staffers is like “taking away the firewood from under the cauldron.”

We all understand budgetary constraints and know that Congress is struggling to cut deficits. What makes the BBG’s fiscal year 2012 budget plan interesting is that it proposes a 2.5 percent increase in overall funding (\$19 million more than FY 2010’s \$748 million). In addition, the BBG just received \$10 million from the Congress for developing Internet circumvention technology. While cutting \$8 million from the China branch, there will be an increase of \$9 million for BBG and IBB management; while eliminating 45 core journalistic positions, the BBG and IBB will have 48 more managers.

Retaining vital frontline broadcasting can be done even in times of fiscal austerity. It’s only a matter of prioritizing. Communicating via all U.S. government-funded media to China is a national security imperative. It is important now, and it most

assuredly will be for the protection of our children and grandchildren. To quote Congressman Dana Rohrabacher: “The \$8 million ‘saved’ will do far more to weaken our efforts in China than it will to balance the budget.” Now, we see clearly that there are alternatives for identifying that \$8 million that are far less damaging to the U.S. national interest. It’s now up to the Congress to make it so.

DAN DICKY, CEO, Continental Electronics Corporation: The United States, as the world’s sole remaining superpower and leading democracy, has an obligation to share its beliefs about political and economic freedom with the world. Ever since the days of Radio Free Europe, the U.S. has not only been the voice of freedom for millions of people living under authoritarian regimes, but it has also been the leader in developing the means by which those critical messages are transmitted.

During World War II, the founder of Continental Electronics Corporation learned the value of cross-border communications in winning hearts and minds. That became the foundation for Continental Electronics over 60 years ago. Today we continue to provide the means for mass communication around the country, the world, and even our solar system and beyond. Continental supplies long-distance communications gear to navies around the world, to Radio Free Europe, NASA, and many others. Continental is an American company, employing American workers, supplying American technology to transmit American ideals to the world. We’ve been doing it for more than 60 years!

Given our position as the world’s leading supplier of high-powered radio transmitters, we are able to easily recognize trends in the marketplace that point to some disturbing facts. As the U.S. has shifted increasingly to Internet- and satellite-based mediums for its public diplomacy, we’ve noticed that many other countries are embracing shortwave radio capacity—both to refurbish aging systems and also as new investments in national and regional radio coverage. Russia, for instance, is on the verge of a \$500 million nationwide plan to enhance its government-owned shortwave radio capacity. India has embarked on a five-year plan to completely modernize all of its local and interna-

tional broadcasting networks, which reach billions of listeners. Nations in the Middle and Far East are installing shortwave networks that will cover their entire regions and well beyond. All of these networks are being designed to deliver analog and digital media, making them relevant for decades into the future.

Just as we were all watching our televisions to see the Arab Spring unfolding dramatically, it also became clear that there was a near total blackout of Western media assets in countries like Libya and Egypt. Why? Authoritarian leaders like Muammar Qadhafi went to school on events in Tunisia and Egypt and understood clearly the power that authoritarian leaders had to completely block Internet and satellite-based communications in their countries. The world cannot decry what it cannot see or hear, and protestors striving for democratic reform quickly become isolated when they can no longer hear what the rest of the world is thinking and doing in support of their efforts to overthrow non-democratic regimes.

While systematically blocking Internet communications that it does not control, China is also ramping up its own shortwave capabilities—in English!

A flip of the switch at the main telecommunications complex, a bit of jamming by a mobile satellite truck with its antenna pointing toward the sky, and suddenly the incoming digital information stops. While regimes can easily block or control Internet, satellite, and mobile telephone networks within their borders, they cannot so easily block shortwave radio signals which do not recognize geographic borders. The physics involved are somewhat complex, but it is a fact of nature that shortwave signals can reach any area on the globe without any assets in the target area except for a suitable receiver. Shortwave receivers are cheap, portable, and can be powered by manual or solar energy. No other such broadcasting means exists, and, because of the physics involved, this is unlikely to change for generations.

Here in the U.S., it is easy to believe that satellite and Internet delivery are ubiquitous. Because

these methods of delivery appear less expensive we cling to the mistaken belief that they are also better. But in the regions of the world where our message will have the greatest impact, these so-called cheaper delivery systems are not accessible. Many areas of the world have no infrastructure to support these technologies. Shortwave radio, either in analog or digital formats, requires no special infrastructure. Shortwave does not require any special skills or training on the part of the listener. We have to recognize that even in countries that have ubiquitous Internet or satellite coverage our message can be easily interrupted by choke points established by the local government for that specific purpose. Shortwave broadcasts are much more robust.

At Continental Electronics, we've noticed a complete shift of demand for shortwave radio transmitters away from the U.S. As budgets for upkeep and upgrades continue to shrink, it is my estimation that we are seriously in danger of losing a reliable, time-tested means of communicating American values with the world. The power of shortwave communications coupled with compelling digital content has not been lost on other players who do seek to disseminate their own message. In fact, we've seen a marked increase in shortwave transmitter demand ranging from pre-conflict Libya, to Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and, yes, China.

Which leads us to one of the primary issues of focus today. China, while systematically working to block Internet communications and messaging that it does not control, is also ramping up its own shortwave capabilities—in English! In fact, it would seem that just as Voice of America is contemplating an end to its China service and its broader shortwave radio capacity, China is doing the exact opposite.

I'm not here to say that shortwave radio should be the only broadcasting capability available to transmit America's message of hope and freedom, but there is an important consideration that I think has been lost in the debate. Shortwave radio, while certainly a technology that has been around for a long time, remains a key building block not only for current transmission capability, but can provide the backbone for the digital radio transformation that is inevitably in our future.

As digital technology has revolutionized every other communications medium, it should come as no surprise that shortwave radio has numerous digital tools available. Digital Radio Mondiale is a recognized standard around the world for sending voice, data, and multimedia content over the same shortwave bands that communicated behind the Iron Curtain for decades. It uses the same tools and much of the same content as Internet delivery, but cannot be easily censored by governments who may not appreciate those messages. Many countries are spending modest to moderate sums to upgrade their existing networks with this modern digital delivery system. They know it is cheaper to upgrade than to start from scratch. They understand the “pay me a little now, or pay me a whole lot more later” argument.

The cost to upgrade a single transmitter capable of handling analog or digital broadcasts is between \$1 million and \$2 million. To create the same capability from scratch can easily be 10 times that amount or more. The numbers get even worse when you look at decommissioning an existing broadcast facility either here in the U.S. or abroad. In many cases, it will be impossible to restore that lost capability, no matter the cost. There is a growing arms race in international broadcasting and the U.S. is taking no action except to consider pulling back even further. We are losing this race simply because we are running backwards.

The U.S. closed down its shortwave transmitters in Greece a few years ago. Those transmitters had powered one station that could reach the whole of Europe, the Middle East, Africa, most of Russia, and the former Soviet republics. In fact, it could reach almost every region where there is a crisis today. Now there is a possibility we will make the same mistake that was made in Greece. Here in the U.S., there is talk of shutting down one of the best shortwave stations in the world, located in Greenville, North Carolina. This station is situated such that it can reach Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and South America from within the safety of our own borders. The Greenville station could have kept information flowing into Libya, and still can help ensure that we reach countries of concern to U.S. national interests both now and in the future. How

much more could we do if we made modest investments in a few key facilities like these able to direct U.S. public diplomacy into Africa, South Asia, and the Far East?

In the end, there is a story here that certainly involves U.S. jobs both at my company, as well as here in Washington and the broadcast stations around the world, which helped end the Cold War. It also involves our global competitiveness, but most important, it is a story about maintaining America’s fundamental capability to continue to be the voice for freedom and democracy around the world in the 21st century, the digital century.

DAVID S. JACKSON, Consultant, Burson-Marsteller, and former Director, Voice of America: Being invited to participate on this panel has been a little ironic for me because I’ve always been a big supporter of using the Internet and new media technologies to communicate with international audiences. When I was at Voice of America, I did everything I could to try to convince the Broadcasting Board of Governors to make the kind of investment in new media that this board is now proposing. So I think it’s great that they want to expand VOA’s Web-based outreach, and put some real money into building an online infrastructure that will take the Internet seriously.

But having said that, I have some concerns about the BBG’s proposal:

- The first is that a strategy of reducing VOA’s China outreach to a Web-only, new media platform makes VOA too vulnerable to censorship or blocking. Our broadcasters are very good at evading blocking efforts, but the Chinese are also very good at throwing up new ones. VOA’s broadcasting to China has always relied on a strategy of diversifying our outreach as much as possible so as to minimize the chances that we could be cut off entirely. A Web-only strategy would be high risk.
- My second concern is that the plan to cut the Mandarin-speaking staff by more than half, as this proposal would do, will jeopardize VOA’s ability to cover China and to effectively compete with other media for audiences there.

- Lastly, I worry about the message that will be sent by VOA halting all radio and TV broadcasts, especially at a time when China is launching an international television network to broadcast to the U.S. and other countries.

The ideal solution, to me, would be to expand VOA online—and also keep broadcasting. I just think it's too early to put all of our eggs into the Internet basket.

Voice of America has a long history of broadcasting to China. We've been broadcasting there for as long as VOA has been on the air—almost 70 years. We began with shortwave radio, and in 1994, we added TV.

In 1997, VOA's Mandarin-language Web site went up. Since then, the Chinese government has done everything it could to keep the radio broadcasts—and the Web site—from reaching the Chinese people. The TV broadcasts have never been jammed.

China is one of only three countries in the world that go to the expense and effort of intentionally interfering with VOA's broadcasts: The others are Iran and, at least occasionally, Zimbabwe.

Despite China's efforts, however, VOA has managed to get through, using a variety of tactics, including transmitting on multiple frequencies and at different times of the day. We've learned from decades of broadcasting to information-deprived audiences that people who are denied access to accurate and objective information are not only highly motivated, they're also very creative in finding sources of news and information they can trust.

How do we know we're getting through? For one thing, the audiences tell us. VOA gets hundreds of letters and thousands of e-mails every month from China, sometimes more than 10,000 e-mails in a month. When VOA's radio or television shows open up the phone lines for calls from China, they can get hundreds of callers during an hour-long show.

We also know we're getting through because the Chinese government occasionally criticizes VOA. It's a back-handed compliment, to be sure, but a revealing one. Another sign is that the Chinese keep

jamming us. If people weren't listening to us, the Chinese government wouldn't be jamming us.

Finally, we also have research surveys. The numbers in China have never been very high, percentage-wise. Five years ago, VOA's combined, unduplicated audience for radio and TV broadcasts was estimated to be around 10 million people. The latest research shows that the numbers have declined to around one-tenth of 1 percent. In a nation of 1.3 billion people, that represents about 1.3 million people.

There's been criticism over the years about the validity of the research surveys that have been conducted in China, and the fact that the Chinese may not want to admit to listening to a foreign broadcaster that their government clearly doesn't want them to hear. On top of that, some of the questions that the researchers have asked have included sensitive ones about their incomes, their use of a computer, and even what they think of the Chinese government. So it's not surprising if the average Chinese citizen gets a little suspicious about giving truthful answers to questions like these.

If people weren't listening to VOA, the Chinese government wouldn't be jamming it.

But even if you put aside the research methodology and accept that the audience in China for VOA radio and television is small, I still think we should continue broadcasting, and do it with a full staff. China is too important economically, diplomatically, and militarily, for us to do anything less. We need to produce content that the Chinese can't get anywhere else, and we need to use all the tools that we have to give it to them, which means television, radio, *and* Web-based technologies.

It's expensive to do it all. But which country is more important? If you say Iran, look at what we're doing there. VOA has built a huge audience in Iran by reaching out on all fronts: television, radio, and the Internet, including mobile platforms. The radio these days comes mainly from Radio Farda, which is broadcast by Radio Free Europe. But when I left VOA, about one in four adult Iranians either watched or listened to a VOA broadcast at least once

a week—and that didn't even include the Internet audience. These are numbers that any U.S. network would love to have in this country.

The BBG's proposal for China is built around the fact that computer use is very high there: about 23 percent of the population now use computers to get news, and that number is growing. The corresponding number for radio is low: about 7 percent. But the number for TV is the highest of all: 94 percent. VOA even has some affiliates in China that will broadcast some of our content if it isn't identified as coming from VOA, so we know there's an interest.

I know from my own experience that the BBG and VOA cannot afford to broadcast on every platform in every language, despite the fact that U.S. international broadcasting is probably the most cost-efficient tool we have in public diplomacy. Every year, the BBG has to make hard choices about how to spend taxpayer dollars the most effective way to reach foreign audiences. Those choices are never popular, but they have to be made because they don't have unlimited funds, especially these days. But again, how many places are more important than China?

One final point: The BBG correctly points out that its proposal will *not* mean that U.S. international broadcasting will go silent in China. It plans to give VOA's best radio frequencies and hours to Radio Free Asia, which will continue shortwave radio broadcasting there.

The problem with that, though, is that Radio Free Asia and Voice of America have different missions. RFA is a "surrogate" broadcaster, which means it's expected to provide the kind of local and regional news that a domestic station would provide if it could operate in a free and open society.

VOA, on the other hand, has been tasked with the unique mission of providing not only news and information, but also feature stories and other content that essentially tell foreign audiences who Americans are and what we believe in. VOA alone has to broadcast editorials and programs that show how our democracy works by featuring balanced discussions with opposing sides about our government and its policies.

No other broadcaster has this role, which is why VOA has the reputation for being the one place where you know you can get an unbiased and accurate description of where the U.S. government stands on the important issues of the day.

Will all this be available on VOA's Web site? Of course. But there's always a chance that if you're an average Chinese citizen and you want to go to VOA's Mandarin Web site, you're going to run into the same kind of blocking that you'd get if you typed the words "Dalai Lama" into your Web browser.

As I said at the outset, I'm a big supporter of Web-based outreach. But in a country as important as China, I believe we need to use both old and new technologies to make sure that our voice can be heard.