

President Trump Criticizes VOA Coverage of China's COVID-19 Response

April 28, 2020

The President's Criticism of VOA's Coverage of China

On April 10, 2020, the White House included in its online “1600 Daily” summary of key news and events a [statement](#) entitled “Voice of America Spends Your Money to Speak for Authoritarian Regimes.” The statement referred to a [Voice of America](#) (VOA) story and two posts that, it asserted, “amplified Beijing’s propaganda” about Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The statement criticized VOA for running an Associated Press [article](#) on its website on April 7, 2020, which referred to Wuhan’s lockdown as a “model” for other countries battling the coronavirus. The White House statement provided an [image](#) of part of a March 31, 2020, VOA Facebook [post](#), which included a graphic showing that the U.S. COVID-19 death toll had surpassed China’s then-official tally. On April 7, 2020, a VOA [tweet](#) showed a video of a light show put on by the Wuhan government to mark the end of the city’s lockdown. VOA operates under the [U.S. Agency for Global Media](#) (USAGM), an independent, federal entity whose mission is to “provide unbiased news and information in countries where the press is restricted.”

Voice of America released a [response](#) to the White House statement, asserting that “VOA has thoroughly debunked” Chinese government and state-run disinformation and propaganda related to the pandemic, and that “we are free to show all sides of an issue and are actually mandated to do so by law,” unlike Chinese media. VOA also emphasized that due to its “independent” and “factual” reporting, VOA journalists have been “effectively barred by the Chinese government from working inside China.”

VOA in China

VOA, which offers international and U.S. news in over 40 languages, targets audiences in China with English, Mandarin (Chinese), Cantonese, and Tibetan television and radio broadcasts, as well as digital content. Mandarin service [program areas](#) include reports on major news developments related to the United States, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), U.S.-China relations, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, American culture and sports, and English language learning. USAGM’s VOA-[Radio Free Asia](#) (RFA) Global Mandarin initiative, expected to be fully launched in 2021, intends to target 400 million young Mandarin speakers in and outside of mainland China, and aims to counter China’s growing media influence around the world.

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IN11365

The Chinese government regularly jams and blocks VOA and RFA Mandarin, Cantonese, and Tibetan and RFA Uyghur radio and television broadcasts and Internet sites; VOA English language services receive less interference. According to USAGM's [FY2021 Congressional Budget Justification](#), despite censorship and other restrictions, VOA Mandarin service's audience has continued to grow, particularly for its YouTube programs, which have reached roughly 100 million viewers. During the past year, VOA Mandarin reported on numerous topics that are sensitive to the PRC government and generally banned, including Chinese dissident views, the mass detention of Uyghurs, political protests in Hong Kong, politics in Taiwan, and PRC "misinformation" efforts. VOA also published articles in English and Chinese questioning China's COVID-19 [numbers](#) and [timeline](#) of events. VOA Mandarin's website received over 68 million visits from April 2019 to April 2020, including 4.5 million article views related to COVID-19 coverage.

VOA's Broadcasting Mission, Standards, and Principles

The White House's criticism of VOA's reporting, reliance on certain sources, and use of private U.S. media sources raises [long-standing questions](#) concerning the mission, standards, and limitations of VOA reporting and U.S. international broadcasting to [China](#) and elsewhere. VOA's [mission](#), codified in legislation since the 1970s, requires that its broadcasts "present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions," "the policies of the United States," and "responsible discussions and opinion on these policies." Among other things, the [principles](#) governing all U.S. international broadcasting require news broadcasts that are authoritative, accurate, objective, and based on reliable information, all in accordance with the highest journalistic standards. [Limitations also exist](#) on the scope of U.S. international broadcasting: governing [law](#) states it should not "duplicate the activities" of [private U.S. broadcasters](#) or government-supported broadcasting from other democratic nations. All U.S. international broadcasting is [required](#) to "be consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States."

Independence of U.S. International Broadcasting from Interference

Since the early days of the Cold War, there has been [disagreement](#), including within [Congress](#), about whether U.S. international broadcasting should be an instrument of U.S. foreign policy, advocating for U.S. interests against foreign propaganda alongside State Department public diplomacy and other influence communications, or an independent source of news comporting with journalistic independence and integrity, creating trust in foreign publics by providing objective, unbiased reporting. Beginning in 1994, Congress [decided](#) in favor of objectivity and independence, setting out in law the requirements discussed above, and [establishing](#) the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), a bipartisan supervisory entity that would shield U.S. broadcasters from direct federal government influence. In 2016, however, concerns with BBG's leadership structure led Congress to [replace](#) the BBG with a Chief Executive Officer as the head of U.S. international broadcasting. While Congress did not alter the principles that apply to U.S. international broadcasting, the changes left the authority to direct U.S. international broadcasting in the hands of a singular agency head appointed by and answerable to the President, and [required](#) to "consult regularly" with the Secretary of State for "foreign policy guidance," possibly weakening the structural independence of the broadcasters.

Possible Issues for Congress

Congress confronts potential legislative and oversight issues related to the role and the structure of U.S. international broadcasting as it responds to alleged foreign government, particularly Chinese, disinformation and lack of transparency, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. China's expanding official foreign media empire, cooperative programming with foreign media, and various forms of pressure on foreign media, [reportedly](#) have helped to support its propaganda and policies around the

world. Some policy observers [argue](#) that VOA suffers from a lack of direction and funding, and a sufficiently aggressive approach toward countering Chinese propaganda. Others [suggest](#) that the Trump Administration's recent accusations that VOA supports Chinese propaganda are overblown, and that VOA's independence from U.S. government pressure should be protected.

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