

Round-Table on Internet and Free Flow of Information in China

Statement by Edward Kaufman, a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG)

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My name is Edward Kaufman and I am a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The BBG is a bipartisan group of eight private citizens plus the Secretary of State, who oversee all United States Government non-military international broadcasting. This consists of Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), Worldnet Television, and Radio and Television Marti.

Our budget is approximately \$526 million, we have 3432 employees, and we broadcast in 65 languages around the world. We were created by the Broadcasting Act of 1994 as an independent part of the United States Information Agency (USIA) and became an independent federal agency in 1999 when USIA was subsumed into the State Department.

The lack of free flow of information in China has strongly concerned the Board since the BBG's inception. The Chinese policy regarding the internet is just the extension of their policy towards any objective source of information about what is occurring in China or the rest of the world. All levels of the Chinese government are committed to controlling any information that might reach the Chinese population.

The government controls, from Beijing, all radio television and internet dissemination of news throughout China. This is done in what has become a media rich environment. There is the illusion that there are many voices in China, but in reality there is only one. Wherever you travel there are many newspapers, but only one story. Many of these outlets no longer receive subsidies from the government, and must compete for advertising revenue and financial viability. However, competition does not extend to the news and analysis which is closely monitored and controlled by the government.

The Chinese government is especially good at giving visiting Western policy makers and business representatives the impression of a free press in China. CNN and BBC are available at most first-class hotels, and the International Herald Tribune and the Asian edition of the Wall Street Journal are sold in the lobby. However, none of these are available to the most Chinese.

In an attempt to overcome China's internal censorship, and to bring truth and objectivity to China, U.S. international broadcasting provides comprehensive news and objective information to the people of China every day through radio, television, internet, and satellite broadcasts. These services offered in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Tibetan languages by VOA and RFA bring news and information to millions of eager listeners and viewers. However, these channels of communication are often systematically blocked, either by direct jamming of broadcasts, interference from local stations, or other governmental policies that frustrate free access. It was hoped that China's acceptance into WTO would result in a reduction of the jamming. However, since the start of the Chinese New Year, the jamming has increased.

This is especially discouraging because the United States has given unprecedented access to Chinese government international broadcasting. China government television, CCTV, has wide dissemination in the U.S. including California's largest cable network and Washington DC cable. It will soon be on Time/Warner's cable systems including New York City and Houston. China's international radio, CRI, broadcasts into the U. S. without jamming, and is available on AM and FM radio stations across the country.

The lack of reciprocity extends beyond broadcasting to news gathering. The Chinese government has allowed VOA only two reporters in China, both English-only, and no RFA reporters. In addition, they have recently turned down a request for the addition of two Mandarin speaking reporters for Beijing and Shanghai. The Chinese government complains about their coverage, but will not allow native speaking reporters to serve in China.

At the same time China's CCTV, and CRI have numerous bureaus and reporters in the U.S. CCTV has offices in New York and Washington, DC with two reporters each. CRI has two reporters in their Washington DC office, two in their New York office and one in their Los Angeles office.

Because the internet could provide a new means to transmit information, Beijing fears its' threat to their information monopoly. At the same time they recognize the Internet's economic and educational importance. The government has instituted draconian regulations and conducts widespread electronic blocking of particular Web sites, usually international news sources . Once again, the government choreographs all this activity beautifully. When President George W. Bush visited Shanghai to attend the meeting of Pacific Rim nations in October 2001, the Chinese government stopped blocking a number of internet news sites including those of CNN, the BBC, Reuters, and the Washington Post. The blocks were reactivated following Bush's departure.

As a result of all these governmental measures, the Chinese people are woefully short of objective information on the United States and its people. Ironically, they believe that they understand the United States quite well from syndicated sitcoms, movies, and music videos. Over the long-term this prevents development of a healthy China-U.S. relationship. In the short term it is a policy disaster. The Chinese people's responses to the May 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the April 2001 captured spy-plane incident are notable. The Chinese government's monopoly of information media enabled it to orchestrate Chinese public reactions to both incidents. In May 1999, rock-throwing demonstrators attacked the U.S. embassy. In April 2001, Chinese domestic media presented a one-sided version of what happened to the U.S. spy plane, but deliberately toned down its rhetoric, and the demonstrations were minimal. Finding anyone in China who has heard the U.S. version in either case is difficult. Ultimately, in a time of crisis with China, the U.S. president has no way to communicate directly to the Chinese people.

The Chinese people are in the place of the old saying, 'The trouble with most folks isn't so much their ignorance as knowing so many things that ain't so@'. One of our recent surveys found that 68% of the urban dwellers in China consider the United States to be their nation's number one enemy.

The United States cannot afford to have 1.2 billion people, about 18% of the world's population so ill-informed.

What can we do about this?

President Bush, State Department officials, and Members of Congress can demand reciprocity from the Chinese. Stop jamming international broadcasts, and allow more U.S. journalists into China.

U.S. government pressure can be brought on neighboring countries who are reluctant to allow VOA and RFA to broadcast into China from their countries because of Chinese government pressure.

More money can be allocated to the infrastructure required to get our signal through. The U.S. needs refurbished shortwave facilities, access to additional satellites, and leasing of additional medium wave facilities.

The internet can be key. Regular usage is now at 5.8 percent in China and growing rapidly. Among better-educated 21 percent use the Internet regularly. The Internet is the perfect medium for the U.S. to communicate directly with individual Chinese, and the U.S. has to be single-minded in putting pressure on the Chinese to stop blocking U.S. internet sites. In the meantime we should spare no expense in finding ways to penetrate the blocking.

The debate on the Bill which established the Congressional-Executive Commission on China is full of rhetoric that free trade and economic parity for China would lead to the free flow of ideas. If anything, since the passage of that bill the Chinese government has done even more to slow or stop the free flow of information in China.

It is essential for a future of healthy China-U.S. relations that all levels of the U.S. government demand China end censorship, jamming and blocking and deliver on the promise of a free flow of information.