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By email

April 28, 2020

The Honorable James E. Risch
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bob Menendez
Ranking Member, Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Preservation of editorial independence at Voice of America

Dear Chairman Risch and Ranking Member Menendez:

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press writes to express its deep concern with recent White House statements attacking Voice of America. The statutory “firewall” protecting VOA’s editorial independence, which Congress again affirmed three years ago, is essential for its work. Any attempt by government officials to interfere with the independence of publicly funded media raises the specter of state control and coercion, which should be anathema to all Americans. We ask you in your oversight role to protect VOA’s autonomy.

As the Committee is aware, the firewall has three components.

First, VOA’s charter, drafted in 1960 and signed into law under President Gerald Ford in 1976, mandates that VOA news will be “accurate, objective, and comprehensive” and that it will not represent any “single segment of American society.”¹ VOA must present “a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions.”²

Second, the 1994 International Broadcast Act, signed by President Bill Clinton, set out a series of standards and principles for U.S. international broadcasters when it consolidated authority over non-military U.S. international broadcasting under the United States Information Agency and the new Broadcasting Board of Governors, which was then a component of the USIA.³

For instance, broadcasting must “be conducted in accordance with the highest professional standards of broadcast journalism”⁴ and broadcasters must produce “news which is consistently reliable and authoritative, accurate, objective, and comprehensive.”⁵ The 1994 law also mandated that the director of the USIA and the BBG “respect the professional independence and integrity” of U.S.

international broadcasting services, including VOA.⁶ When the administration of U.S. international broadcasting moved to the BBG and the USIA was abolished in 1998, Congress retained that language unchanged (save for substituting the Secretary of State for the director of the USIA).⁷

Third, the National Defense Authorization Act for 2017, which created the U.S. Agency for Global Media and vested administrative authority over U.S. international broadcasters in the chief executive officer of the USAGM, again retained the requirement that the administrators of U.S. international broadcasting “respect the independence and integrity” of the broadcasting services, including VOA.⁸ That requirement is codified in federal statute.⁹

Taken together, these elements of the firewall are essential protections for VOA’s editorial independence, particularly when reporting on high-profile, politically sensitive stories such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The firewall has allowed VOA to become America’s largest international broadcaster and a trusted news source around the world—particularly in countries with state-controlled media or widespread censorship. Congress must ensure that this journalistic autonomy is not eroded.

The recent White House attacks on VOA misrepresent its reporting in a way that suggests that the ultimate target is VOA’s special editorial protections from political interference. In its coverage of the COVID-19 crisis, VOA has nearly 20 times debunked Chinese misinformation.¹⁰

On April 8, 2020, the day before the White House attacked VOA, a VOA website posted a fact-check detailing why China’s official timeline on when it identified the first COVID-19 cases is false.¹¹ In late March, VOA reported that China was undercounting positive COVID-19 cases by omitting asymptomatic carriers, and that the death toll in Wuhan was estimated to be far higher than the official figure.¹² VOA has reported extensively on Chinese misinformation efforts, including dubious claims that the People’s Liberation Army has seen zero cases.¹³

Indeed, like other news outlets in the United States, most of VOA’s reporting staff has been “effectively barred” from working in China.¹⁴ We are dismayed that China has sought to interfere with independent reporting on this global crisis by revoking credentials for reporters from the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal.¹⁵

But even with China’s attempts to frustrate factual reporting on the pandemic, VOA Director Amanda Bennett has made clear in responding to the White House’s attacks that “VOA continues to bring news from inside China to its global audiences and to Chinese citizens.”¹⁶ Bennett also cited the firewall in VOA’s response to the White House: “One of the big differences between publicly funded independent media, like the Voice of America, and state-controlled media, is that we are free to show all sides of an issue and are actually mandated to do so by law”¹⁷

In contrast to the extensive record cited by Bennett showing VOA reporting fairly, objectively, and comprehensively on Chinese misinformation, the White House has inexplicably attacked VOA for spreading Chinese “propaganda.”¹⁸ The one news story referenced in the White House broadsides is an Associated Press report picked up by VOA that stated: “The

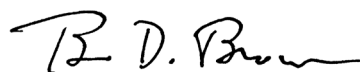
lockdown that served as a model for countries battling the coronavirus around the world is set to end after 11 weeks: Chinese authorities are moving to allow residents of Wuhan to once again travel in and out of the sprawling city where the pandemic began.”¹⁹ The same story also reported “questions about the veracity of China’s count [of COVID-19 cases].”²⁰ No reasonable reader could see the story in question as simply regurgitating Chinese misinformation.

The VOA firewall is in place precisely so that U.S. international public broadcasting is *not* seen as propaganda by viewers, listeners, and readers around the world. Rather, the animating principle behind publicly funded international broadcasting is that an objective, unbiased, editorially independent international broadcaster—one that is free to report critically about the United States itself—is a stronger tool of public diplomacy than state-controlled media. “The long-range interests of the United States are served by communicating directly with the peoples of the world by radio,” reads VOA’s charter. “To be effective, the Voice of America must win the attention and respect of listeners.”²¹

During a public health crisis the government should be leaning into, not away from, protections for the editorial independence of news organizations, especially when those organizations receive government funding, a group which may grow as Congress addresses the economic fallout from the ravages of COVID-19 on local and regional media. Legal and structural protections, like the VOA firewall, are essential to protecting the independence of all publicly funded media. We urge the Committee to continue to defend the VOA and preserve the independence of U.S. international broadcasting from any political pressure.

Please do not hesitate to contact Gabe Rottman, director of the Technology and Press Freedom Project at the Reporters Committee, grottman@rcfp.org, with any questions.

Sincerely,



Bruce D. Brown
Executive Director
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Gabe Rottman
Director of the Technology and Press Freedom Project
grottman@rcfp.org

cc: President Donald J. Trump

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader, United States Senate

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader, United States Senate

1 Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Pub. L. No. 94-350, 90 Stat. 823, § 206 (1976)
2 *Id.*
3 Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Pub. L. No. 103-236, 108 Stat. 382, § 303 (1994).
4 *Id.* § 303(a)(5).
5 *Id.* § 303(b)(1).
6 *Id.* § 305(c).
7 Pub. L. No. 105-277, 112 Stat. 2681, § 1323(i) (1998).
8 *See id.* § 305(c); National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, Pub. L. No. 114-328, 130 Stat.
2000, § 1288 (2016).
9 *See* 22 U.S.C. § 6204(b).
10 Press Release, A Statement from VOA Director Amanda Bennett (Apr. 10, 2020), <https://perma.cc/G7SE-9V6K>.
11 Fatima Tlis, *China's Official Coronavirus Timeline Starts Out Weeks Too Late*, Polygraph.info (Apr. 8, 2020), <https://www.polygraph.info/a/fact-check-china-covid-timeline/30542129.html>.
12 John Xie, *In China, Officials Exclude Asymptomatic COVID-19 Carriers From Data*, Voice of America (Mar. 28, 2020), <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/china-officials-exclude-asymptomatic-covid-19-carriers-data>; Radio Free Asia, *Estimates Show Wuhan Death Toll Far Higher Than Official Figure*, Voice of America (Mar. 27, 2020), <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/estimates-show-wuhan-death-toll-far-higher-official-figure>.
13 John Xie, *China Claims Zero Infections in its Military*, Voice of America (Apr. 6, 2020), <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/china-claims-zero-infections-its-military>.
14 *Press Release, supra* note 10.
15 *See* Open Letter from William Lewis, Fred Ryan, and A.G. Sulzberger to the Chinese Government (Mar. 24, 2020), <https://www.nytc.com/press/an-open-letter-to-the-chinese-government/>.
16 *Id.*
17 *Id.*
18 *Amid a Pandemic, Voice of America Spends your Money to Promote Foreign Propaganda*, 1600 Daily (Apr. 10, 2020), <https://perma.cc/CV82-7A2L>.
19 Assoc. Press, *China's Virus Pandemic Epicenter Wuhan Ends 76-Day Lockdown*, Voice of America (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/chinas-virus-pandemic-epicenter-wuhan-ends-76-day-lockdown>.
20 *Id.*
21 Pub. L. No. 94-350, § 206.