

Under fire, US eyes Internet to reach Chinese

April 7 2011, by Shaun Tandon



Photo illustration. The US broadcasting agency Voice of America said it saw the Internet as the future for reaching the Chinese public as it came under fire from lawmakers for slashing short-wave radio service.

The US broadcasting agency said it saw the Internet as the future for reaching China despite its firewall, as it came under fire from lawmakers for slashing short-wave radio service.

Under a budget proposal for next year, Voice of America would close its longtime radio and [television broadcasts](#) in Mandarin and eliminate its Cantonese service entirely, cutting 45 jobs and saving \$8 million.

The belt-tightening comes as China ramps up global distribution of its own state-run radio and television, an effort symbolized by the official Xinhua news agency's efforts to secure a spot in New York's Times Square.

Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a staunch critic of China, called a congressional hearing to voice alarm at the cuts and questioned if President Barack Obama's administration was trying to curry favor with Beijing.

"The \$8 million 'saved' will do far more to weaken our efforts in a dictatorial and belligerent China than it will to balance the budget," said Rohrabacher, a Republican from California.

He questioned the shift to an Internet platform, noting that China has worked tirelessly to build a firewall that blocks out online searches for politically sensitive topics.

In response, S. Enders Wimbush, a board member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, said the autonomous US government agency "did not plan to make it easier on Chinese authorities. In fact, we plan to make it more difficult for them."

"We are going heavily into digital because that is where the audience is and, particularly, that's where the demographic is that we seek to reach," he testified.

Launched in 1942, Voice of America was active during the Cold War as the US government's international broadcaster. It stopped live broadcasts in Russian in 2008.

The 2012 budget still funds radio and Internet broadcasts in Mandarin and Cantonese by Radio Free Asia, a separate service founded after China's Tiananmen Square crackdown that focuses on providing news within closed Asian societies.

Wimbush acknowledged concerns about the firewall but said that US broadcasters were working to circumvent it.

"One can debate merits of different approaches, but the long-term approach is pretty clear: The Internet, which can be filtered, is going to play an increasingly important role; short-wave, which can be totally blocked, is going to play a less important role," he said.

Traditional radio is rapidly declining in China, with 24 percent of Chinese adults listening to radio sets for news in 2006 but only eight percent doing so in 2009, Wimbush said.

A survey last year found that just 0.1 percent of Chinese had listened to Voice of America's Mandarin service the previous week, he said. Some 0.4 percent listened to short-wave from any foreign broadcaster, including US services, the BBC, Radio France Internationale and Deutsche Welle.

By contrast, China now has more Internet users than anywhere else. Within five years, more than 550 million Chinese -- nearly twice the whole US population -- are expected to have third-generation phones with online access.

But Robert Reilly, a former director of Voice of America, said that the United States would still lose six million Chinese listeners.

He said that Voice of America, unlike Radio Free Asia or commercial broadcasters, had a mission to explain the United States -- a vacuum that Chinese state media would gladly fill.

"Do we need no longer explain ourselves to the world? Do we no longer need to give it our reasons? Be sure that others are willing to give reasons for us," he told the hearing.

The next budget would also eliminate Voice of America's Croatian service due to improvements in press freedom in Croatia.

Wimbush said Voice of America had no plans to eliminate live [radio service](#) entirely and boasted that US-run broadcasters reached 165 million people worldwide including in key nations such as Myanmar, North Korea and Zimbabwe.

The BBC in January also announced cuts which spell an end to live [radio](#) programming in seven languages including Mandarin and Vietnamese.

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