

**Statement for the Record of Amanda Bennett
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Before the House Select Committee on the CCP
November 30, 2023**

Introduction

Chairman Gallagher, Ranking Member Krishnamoorthi, and members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to highlight the U.S. Agency for Global Media’s work to counter disinformation in the global information space, and specifically our work countering the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) information manipulation.

Thank you for your steadfast support of independent media. The support of Congress is absolutely critical to our success.

Through the work of our six entities: Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), and Open Technology Fund (OTF) - USAGM provides fact-based news and information to parts of the world that do not have a free and open press. Our networks inform, engage, and connect people all around the world in support of freedom and democracy.

A Critical Moment in the Global Information Space

We are at an inflection point in the global information environment. This is a moment USAGM was built for, as it was during World War II.

We should be alarmed, but optimistic – alarmed because we are being vastly outspent, but optimistic because the quality and impact of our reporting is unmatched.

In times of crisis, audiences seek and trust USAGM’s networks to report the truth because their own governments often hide the truth from them. As news of the Israel-Hamas war spread, audiences faced with growing disinformation deployed by authoritarian regimes such as the PRC turned to us for news they could trust. MBN experienced an 85% increase in organic video views on October 7-11 compared to the previous five days. As of this month, USAGM networks have 10 journalists in Israel, 3 in Gaza, 4 in the West Bank, and more than 30 in Lebanon,

in addition to a large network of freelance contributors across the region who continue to bravely deliver breaking news from the frontlines of an evolving war.

We still have a chance to secure our competitive advantage if we act now, but if we miss the opportunity to make targeted investments to counter the inroads the PRC is making, we run the risk of losing ground in the global information environment.

The PRC is Making Heavy Investments to Expand its Global Influence

As we speak, authoritarian regimes in the PRC, Russia, and Iran, among others, are making heavy investments in to manipulate the information environment in favor of their geopolitical goals. These tactics often involve the use of official state media and proxy networks to create, share and amplify propaganda and false information. Doing so obscures the truth, making it difficult for the public to decipher fact from fiction. The PRC has invested billions of dollars to construct an information ecosystem in which PRC propaganda and disinformation gain traction and become dominant. The PRC is deliberately and effectively extending its reach far beyond the Indo-Pacific, rapidly moving into Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.

In Latin America, the PRC is conducting extensive marketing campaigns and offering media executives lavish trips to China to promote the placement of PRC controlled media content.

In Africa, the PRC is installing low-cost satellite dishes to provide poor and rural citizens with limited, government-controlled programming. I recently travelled to Africa for a conference USAGM convened to meet with over 40 media CEOs from multiple countries. The PRC is pressing them for influence and access like never before with offers of free high-quality content and new physical and digital infrastructure. They report overwhelmingly preferring our fact-based and unbiased content, but the allure of inducements from the PRC is strong and growing stronger. PRC government representatives are even known to pay newspaper editors to run their content under a trusted masthead without attribution – distorting local information environments and reducing the ability of publics to make fact-based assessments.

The PRC is also exporting its surveillance and censorship technology across the globe, facilitating greater government control of information and media.

The PRC's degree of success in closing off its own society, , as well as societies across the globe, from independent information underscores the urgency of investing now in the regions it targets, particularly while we still have the strategic advantage. In one potent example of how these heavy investments in malign influence have unfolded over the years, the PRC now prevents traditional audience surveys in China for public broadcasters and heavily restricts many media research firms. USAGM is no exception to this industry-wide trend. In place of traditional surveys, USAGM's Office of Policy and Research is in the process of updating its methodology for measuring audience in the PRC to align with the industry and adapt to the barriers the PRC has put in place. USAGM's measured audience for VOA and RFA was 65 million adults in 2017, however, we anticipate a meaningful change in the size of USAGM's audience in China as we look ahead.

USAGM Still Leads the PRC in Key Markets

The PRC has invested heavily in its state-owned media over the past decade. However, measurable data shows we are outperforming them and other authoritarian state-controlled media in key markets, including Eurasia, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. USAGM's networks have made significant gains in getting information to audiences in China and diaspora communities outside of the country, while bolstering our network of 4,000 media partners, including in regions targeted by the PRC.

One of our critical advantages is the professional training we offer journalists and media partner organizations in highly contested markets. USAGM trained over 1,400 journalists across the globe in FY23, including many journalists on the African continent and in Latin America.

VOA and RFA represent some of the only sources of credible information for people living in China, while OTF increases their access to information – and their combined impact is powerful. In key markets like Cambodia, despite a government crackdown on the free press, RFA and VOA reach 14 times the audience that China's state-controlled network, CGTN, reaches.

Trust earned through decades of principled reporting has given us a lead in many markets, but the next two years will be absolutely critical.

Countering PRC Influence

As one of the largest news organizations in the world with extensive reach into even the most closed societies, USAGM and each of its networks are well-positioned to counter PRC influence.

VOA

VOA's coverage is a window into the U.S. and the world for many inside China: one loyal audience member described how she started listening to the Mandarin Service on a shortwave radio in 2001 and continues to listen to this day through the network's digital platforms. Last year, VOA's Mandarin Service content on YouTube earned nearly double the video views as the PRC's CCTV.

In contested markets across the globe, VOA's reach vastly exceeds that of the PRC's local-language brands. For example, in Nigeria VOA reaches a third of all adults while China Radio International reaches less than 3%.

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict, VOA's China Branch has diligently monitored and reported on PRC disinformation related to the conflict. VOA has sent some of their best journalists to Israel, and from the start of the crisis on October 7 through November 15 their coverage has garnered nearly 148 million social media video views.

RFA

Even in the context of the PRC's sophisticated internet censorship, RFA's coverage of the 2022 protests in China broke records for web traffic and social media engagement. RFA Mandarin gained 75,000 new followers on Twitter between November 24 and December 1, 2022 and saw a 233% increase in traffic from mobile Google searches. One RFA Mandarin Service video showing these protests was viewed over 4 million times on Twitter.

RFE/RL

The PRC's state-controlled media presence is expanding across Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia, and RFE/RL's journalists increasingly witness and report on growing connectivity between disinformation from the PRC and Russia. From Serbia and Hungary, to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and inside Russia itself, they cover Beijing's growing military, technological, and investment footprint across

the region. RFE/RL is also working with RFA to uncover the PRC's newest online censorship methodologies and find ways to counter them before they are widely adopted.

Fact Checking

USAGM fact-checking services debunk dangerous mis and disinformation campaigns deployed by the PRC and other authoritarian regimes, including the recent PRC-led disinformation campaign that the U.S. military was behind the August wildfires that swept across Maui in August, among many other false narratives. RFA's Asia Fact Check Lab operates in both Mandarin and in English as does VOA's Polygraph. Recently, RFA debunked claims circulated through Chinese social media that the deadly Maui wildfires were caused by a U.S. weapons test. OCB's two projects, StopFake.org and Martí Verifica, combat disinformation circulating in Cuba in the Spanish language. Finally, MBN has a weekly digital fact-checking series 'Did It Really Happen?' in Arabic, in addition to a television program 'Alhurra Investigates.'

OTF

Even the very best journalism is of no use if people cannot see or hear it. As authoritarian censorship and surveillance has become more pervasive and complex, OTF is ensuring USAGM's networks and their audiences are able to breach digital barriers through secure, reliable, and accessible tools. OTF supports leading VPNs in China, which help over 4 million monthly active users securely access the internet and our journalism.

New USAGM Initiatives to Stay Ahead

In response to the PRC's increased propaganda efforts, USAGM intends to launch new initiatives in critical areas, including creating a Global News Service and transforming our technological capabilities.

We are launching a Global News Service that will introduce VOA and RFA's high quality, original Chinese language content to new audiences and significantly expand the reach of each story to the global Chinese diaspora. We are currently researching the areas where this need is greatest as we develop our rollout plan for a China-focused news service grantee that would disseminate content on China in English and Mandarin from VOA, RFA, RFE/RL, MBN, and OCB.

USAGM will also undertake a significant expansion of content produced in Mandarin, Russian, and English, with a greater diversity of content to include lifestyle, cultural, and “solutions” journalism. VOA and RFA will provide additional content on popular platforms like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. VOA will respond to intense interest in US-China relations by significantly ramping up its coverage with breaking news and sophisticated analysis of economic, political and military policies.

Major news broadcasters and cable services are experiencing a technological revolution that is breaking down silos, enabling sharing, automating processes, and speeding up the creation of new broadcast operations from years to weeks. Embarking on a technological transformation of our own would enable cost-savings by allowing journalists to work simultaneously on many shows, manage shows remotely, and use technology to automate many time-consuming tasks, dramatically increasing our reach. This technological transformation will enable the agency to improve all facets of our journalists’ work and address many challenges. Specifically, this transformation covers four general areas: technology, content management, cybersecurity, and newsroom management.

Conclusion

Our true power lies in our ability to harness the reach of the entire USAGM network for greater global impact.

With the support of the Congress for our FY 2024 budget request of \$944 million, USAGM will continue to find new ways to reach audiences, improve our infrastructure from digital security to physical safety -- including enhanced safety training, improved policies and forms of support for journalists, and dedicated safety personnel at each entity -- lead new forms of engaging content, and leverage this global reach. The request will sustain the momentum necessary to meet this historic moment and further enhancements to expand our capabilities around the world.

In order to continue this momentum and meet this historic moment, USAGM anticipates further enhancements to expand our capabilities around the world in FY 2024, FY 2025, and beyond.

Through a growing network of over four thousand media partners, we are positioned to serve larger audiences around the world for just pennies per person.

With outsized and scalable impact worldwide, our work represents a powerful investment.

We cannot do this without the support of Congress. Chairman Gallagher, Ranking Member Krishnamoorthi, thank you again for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record.