



LOUD AND CLEAR

Don't Kick Voice of America When It's Down

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VOA's alleged mishandling of a Chinese insider's interview shouldn't overshadow the important work done by it and the other U.S. government-sponsored broadcasters.

The Voice of America (VOA) celebrated its 75th anniversary in March, but it didn't have much time to savor its diamond jubilee. Just a month later, the U.S. government-supported news and information agency was engulfed in controversy over the abrupt termination of a live television interview with exiled Chinese businessman Guo Wengui. The target of a PRC-initiated "red notice" on Interpol, Guo is no dissident or conscience-stricken whistleblower; on the contrary, he was a player in the Chinese system who, having decamped to New York in 2015 after a failed acquisition deal, is now waging a one-man campaign against a long list of his former partners in cronyism.

Guo's alleged shady business dealings, however, don't make him any less newsworthy. In April the *New York Times* and the *Economist* reported on his claims, treating them, appropriately, not as facts but as unsubstantiated allegations. Two Chinese-language television channels, Mirror Media in Long Island and the VOA Mandarin service, hosted live interviews. And on May 6 the *Australian* stated, "Guo has a massive Twitter following and threatens to trigger a political earthquake."

Should that earthquake occur, VOA will be part of the story—but not in a good way. VOA deserves kudos for being one of the first U.S. news organizations to pay serious attention to Guo. But because of missteps in the planning and execution of the interview, the agency's many critics at home and abroad are now accusing it of having yielded to pressure from the Chinese government.

Here's what happened. In early April, the VOA Mandarin service contacted Guo,

who insisted that the interview be live and held in his Manhattan penthouse. As seasoned journalists, the VOA team members were not happy with these terms, but, judging the interview important, they agreed—while also setting their own terms, which included examining Guo’s documents in advance, conducting a lengthy pre-interview, and warning him that they were going to challenge his claims and cut off any unfounded accusations against named individuals.

On Friday, April 14 (five days before the scheduled date), VOA began promoting the interview as a three-hour program, the first hour broadcast live on VOA’s satellite television channel, and the second two hours live-streamed on VOA’s Facebook page. The following Monday, April 17, the Chinese Foreign Ministry invited the chief of the VOA Beijing bureau to “tea,” meaning a friendly chat that just happened to include a subtle hint that, if the interview went ahead as scheduled, VOA staff might lose their visas and other “conveniences” provided by the Chinese authorities.

That same Monday (12 hours later on the east coast of United States), the VOA team members were driving to New York when they received a call from upper management expressing concern about the interview. Accounts differ, but everyone I spoke to agreed that no decision was taken at that time, either to shorten the interview or to record it in lieu of doing it live.

That decision was short-lived. The next day, Tuesday, April 18, the VOA team received more calls from Washington, as well as an email from VOA director Amanda Bennett, who was visiting VOA outposts in East Africa. Here again, accounts differ. But the gist seems to be that VOA’s leaders were worried about possible blowback from the interview, while the journalists were upset at having their professionalism impugned.

On Wednesday, April 19 (the day of the interview), the Chinese Foreign Ministry admitted ordering an Interpol red notice against Guo. The United States rarely acts on such notices, especially when initiated by authoritarian regimes. There was a time when Interpol itself refused to issue notices that were political in nature. But that seems to be changing, especially now that the new Interpol President (elected in November) is Meng Hongwei, a former Deputy Minister of Public Security in China.

In the end, the VOA interview proceeded as planned for the first hour, but twenty minutes into the Facebook part, it was shut down—not by the censors in Beijing, but by the higher-ups in Washington. Chronology is not causality, but let’s not kid ourselves. Amid a domestic political climate that is, at best, indifferent to the kind of work that VOA does, the optics here are bad.

That’s why I want to end with a defense of VOA. As the largest of five networks in a \$778 million media organization providing news and information in 61 languages to 100 countries around the world, VOA is hardly the Cold War relic some believe it to be. On the contrary, both it and its sister networks (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and others) are highly adept at using every existing media platform, from radio to television to digital to mobile, to reach audiences in some of the poorest and most closed societies on earth.

Indeed, these networks may be more skilled in this respect than their commercial counterparts, which do not even try to reach such audiences, they do not constitute lucrative markets for advertisers. That’s why VOA needs government support. But that doesn’t make it a “government mouthpiece.” Along with fellow public broadcasters PBS and NPR, not to mention the hallowed BBC, VOA strives to reconcile editorial independence with a mission that extends beyond the commercial incentives of most private-sector media, as well as the political priorities of most state-owned media.

Simply put, that mission is to further the nation’s agenda as forcefully as possible without engaging in propaganda. This is nothing to apologize for. Despite the occasional mistake, VOA has always sought to uphold the American tradition of truth-based persuasion, rooted in constitutionally protected freedoms of speech, press, and debate. That tradition is now imperiled in every corner of the world, including the United States. So by all means, let’s

investigate what went wrong with the Guo Wengui interview. But please, not in a spirit of recrimination.

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