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'A cocktail for a misinformed world': why China and Russia are cheering Trump's attacks on media

Michael Savage, Media Editor, The Guardian, May 3, 2025 (abridged)

As Donald Trump's executive order in March led to the shuttering of Voice of America (VOA) – the global broadcaster whose roots date back to the fight against Nazi propaganda – he quickly attracted support from figures not used to aligning themselves with any US administration.

Trump had ordered the US Agency for Global Media, the federal agency that funds VOA and other groups promoting independent journalism overseas, to be “eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law”. The decision suddenly halted programming in 49 languages to more than 425 million people.

In Moscow, Margarita Simonyan, the hardline editor-in-chief of the state broadcaster RT described it as an “awesome decision”. The Global Times, an English-language Chinese state media publication, crowed that the broadcasters had been discarded by the White House “like a dirty rag”, ending their “propaganda poison”. Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, whose regime has been accused of repressing political opposition, described Trump's move as “very promising”.

Domestically, Trump has continued to target the media, whether by taking outlets including CBS News and ABC to court, attempting to block political access to the White House by the Associated Press, or defund National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service – institutions he has described as “radical left monsters”.

For many senior media figures around the world, there has been a tipping of the scales as authoritarian regimes are emboldened by a US administration not only attacking the media at home, but also withdrawing from the fight for free information overseas.

As the world marks Press Freedoms Day on May 3, observers are now warning that in countries where free media is weak, America's withdrawal from this geopolitical balancing act will have far-reaching effects.

As well as VOA, which was founded in 1942 at the height of the second world war and broadcasts in nearly 50 languages, Trump has withdrawn funding from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), which was founded during the cold war and broadcasts to countries including Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.

The head of the US-funded Arabic-language news outlet Alhurra, Jeffrey Gedmin, has said the decision to cut its staff and services would “silence America's voice in the Middle East”.

At the same time, there are signs that media freedom elsewhere is eroding, with arrests and deportations of journalists in Turkey, including the BBC's correspondent Mark Lowen, and dire warnings over threats to press freedom in Serbia. [...]

While a federal judge has blocked the attempt to dismantle VOA, RFE/RL and other related organisations, the uncertainty continues and a government appeal is expected. Meanwhile, the EU has been unable to step in to replace the lost funding.

The exit of US-funded media has come at the same time as the BBC World Service, which has also played a powerful role in bringing independent media to audiences, faces its own financial squeeze from the erosion of the licence fee.

Jonathan Munro, global director of BBC News, says: “Three-quarters of countries around the world don't have free media, and that figure is getting worse, not better.

“It's not just the lack of free media. It's the proactive and aggressive march of disinformation and misinformation, which arrives on people's phones 24 hours a day. That's a cocktail for a very badly informed, or misinformed, global population.”[...]

Given Trump's early determination to push back against media at home and defund US-backed free media overseas, some of the damage being done could be irreversible, says Baron.

“It's highly destructive, with no good rationale whatsoever and it will be very hard to recover. 587 words