

# How Taiwan breaches censors' barriers

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Breaking the barriers of censorship in China, Myanmar and North Korea is a daunting task, as these countries have built almost impenetrable firewalls against outside news and information. But Radio Taiwan International is successfully using shortwave radio to break through.

“We potentially have 70 million to 1.2 billion listeners who rely on shortwave to get information [from] outside of their country,” said Isis Lee, RTI’s vice president.

On the air since 1928, RTI say their mission is to bring listeners stories they won’t or can’t hear or see on television, radio, online or in newspapers.

“One of our most important audiences to reach is the Mandarin-speaking society in China, which has very limited internet access,” Lee told VOA. “We have a very big audience in China, and they rely on RTI shortwave service to get perspective outside of China in their mother language,” she added.

There are more than 1 billion Mandarin speakers worldwide, and most of them are in China.

Shortwave radio is considered outdated and old-fashioned by many in the digital age dominated by the internet. But two key advantages of shortwave radio for the people who rely on it for information and those doing the broadcasting are that it is difficult for governments to censor it or to track its listeners.

“Chinese central party authorities maintain an extensive censorship regime with the aim of preventing citizens from accessing information from overseas that might be problematic for the party,” said Carl Minzer, a China expert at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Like other authoritarian regimes that RTI reaches, censorship of news and information is Chinese government policy, experts say, and there is no freedom of the press.

“One of the key things they are focused on is Chinese language material that would be easily consumable by the population in China, because that is precisely the stuff that many more people could access, and it would be more troubling from the perspective of Chinese authorities,” added Minzer.

Lee said RTI uses its shortwave radio programming to rebut propaganda, false narratives and disinformation circulating in repressed countries.

Xu Quan started listening to RTI when he was 12 years old and says his favorite programs are "Freedom" and "Cross-Strait News Herald."

“I like to get two types of information through RTI’s broadcasts,” Quan told VOA via email.

“One is news that cannot be heard or seen in mainland China, especially breaking news,” Quan said. “The other is news on the political situation in Taiwan, especially the elections, which can deepen my understanding of Taiwan’s democratic politics.”

Lee said RTI targets China, Myanmar, North Korea and areas of Southeast Asia where there is no free internet and little access to mobile phones and free media.

RTI broadcasts shortwave programs on politics, world affairs, culture, health and music, which they say reach 77 countries where listeners regularly give them feedback. They receive letters and messages on social media and conduct tests from various locations on different frequencies to measure their reach.

Lees says some of the most touching feedback they’ve received is from North Korean fishermen who say they are grateful to get RTI’s shortwave signal loudly and clearly.

RTI also touched American John Van Trieste when he was a boy living in Maryland.

“I had never heard of shortwave before, but I learned that these stations were out there, and I asked for a shortwave for Christmas,” Van Trieste told VOA. “And shortly after that, I came across Radio Taiwan.”

RTI also motivated Van Trieste to learn Mandarin, among the other languages he speaks. He now lives in Taipei and is a journalist at multimedia TaiwanPlus.

“I think it [RTI] is especially important for people in areas like Tibet,” said Van Trieste, who used to work for RTI. “And the Uyghur people of Xinjiang or East Turkestan. They are even further from where the information is. Many people in the big cities of China have VPNs and can get around the firewalls. But if you are in a rural area, maybe the internet is not great, and the government is actively repressing you and your family.”

The use of analog shortwave radio is declining worldwide. VOA and most other international broadcasters have curtailed use of shortwave in recent years, citing dwindling audiences that have migrated to FM and the internet, and electricity costs for high-powered transmitters.

“A lot of people are saying that shortwave is not fashionable and an old way of communication, Lee told VOA. “But to us it is not, because we know that there are still a lot of people depending on shortwave radio to get information.”

Lee added that as long as audiences continue to count on RTI, there are no plans to stop broadcasting.