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# PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

## THE NEW WORLD OF U.S. INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING — RADIO

### What's New

- Technological changes and the end of the Cold War have revolutionized international broadcasting.
- All Voice of America delivery technologies are now tied to satellites.
- VOA and RFE/RL are placing programs on AM and FM stations throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.
- U.S. radios face fierce competition from local and international radio and television broadcasters.
- USIA's global satellite television network and 278 dish antennas now carry VOA for local placement.
- In 1991, VOA successfully tested direct broadcasting by satellite (DBS) of digital quality sound to a moving vehicle.
- The 1992 World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC) assigned the first frequencies to DBS radio.

The U.S. government is number one in international radio with 2,078 hours of direct broadcasts per week. The U.S. leads second place China at 1,537 hours, rapidly fading third place Russia at 1,318 hours, and nearest Western rival BBC at 818 hours. With operating and capital budgets for U.S. broadcasting agencies that exceed half a billion dollars, questions of tradeoffs and "how much is enough" logically occur.

Add new technologies and extraordinary political developments in the communist

### What Should Be Done

- Reorder U.S. international broadcasting priorities and consolidate assets: less shortwave and more local placement, less radio and more television.
- Realize the promise of Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) radio technology.
- Increase market and audience research.
- Reduce the number of VOA language services.
- Pursue the installation of AM and short-wave transmitters in Kuwait.
- Terminate construction of the Israel relay station and direct savings to other U.S. international broadcasting needs.
- Implement the policy to phase out Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.
- Rather than build a costly new Radio Free China, use enhanced VOA broadcasts to carry news and information about internal events in Asian countries.

world, and it is small wonder many are studying U.S. international broadcasting.

Within the past two years, reports have been issued or studies undertaken by the National Security Council, the Policy Coordinating Committee on International Broadcasting, a Presidential task force, a Congressionally mandated task force on broadcasting to China, the General Accounting Office, a study group within the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), and this Commission.

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These studies can contribute to sound public diplomacy, but only if U.S. policy-makers view them as a prelude to, not a substitute for, setting priorities and acting on them.

## Satellite Technology

Imagine an Argentine fishing captain in the South Atlantic. He activates a Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) receiver and finds the exact location of his boat. Using another satellite, he calls a fish processing agent in Buenos Aires on a cellular phone, but gets the answering machine. Then he flips on his Direct Broadcasting by Satellite (DBS) radio receiver, scans the dial past a music program from Brazil, a French lesson from France, a talk show from Canada, finally locking in on a news broadcast in Spanish from the Washington studios of the Voice of America.

All this could happen before the end of the decade. All the technologies exist, and are utilized in some form today.

Indeed, all VOA delivery technologies are tied to satellites now, from feeds to shortwave relay stations to transmission for rebroadcast on foreign AM and FM stations.

**Digital signals.** The technology of international broadcasting now makes it possible to encode sound and pictures in digital signals, as with compact discs, and send them via satellite to anywhere within the footprint of that satellite. Footprints can be as narrow as a small country or as wide as a continent.

There are an estimated two billion radios in the world, which can tune in one or another kind of analog signal — AM, FM or shortwave. About a quarter of them can receive shortwave. But none will decode a digital signal, so none can receive broadcasts directly from satellites.

**Local placement.** USIA's Worldnet TV service in 1983 began to make programs accessible to U.S. embassies for direct use and placement on local TV stations. As installation of USIA's TV dishes progressed around the world, VOA was able to put audio into the spectrum used by Worldnet,

with no discernible loss in quality to either video or audio and at practically no extra cost.

This means VOA can deliver broadcast-quality radio programs via satellite to dishes at USIA's posts or directly to local stations. It puts VOA on the air to completely new audiences with AM or FM quality far beyond shortwave's well-known audio defects.

But local placement also means surrendering the unrestricted access that is possible with VOA's shortwave broadcasts, which are transmitted from Washington to audiences without a filter. Placement involves foreign intermediaries, or "gatekeepers," such as local station managers and government communications ministries. More than ever, this means programs must be compatible with local tastes and competitive with other local radio.

This is not easy, because programs must be good radio and good foreign relations — worthwhile for audiences and worthwhile for U.S. taxpayers. "How to do it" programs in democracy building and free market economics serve important U.S. interests but are hard to make into competitive mass audience radio. Sophisticated audience and media research is indispensable.

**DBS radio.** VOA now occupies a world between yesterday's shortwave and tomorrow's DBS radio. What is usually meant by DBS radio is "CD quality" digital sound broadcast into cars and homes in media-rich countries, or AM quality sound into remote villages to meet the needs of developing nations. DBS would have the access of shortwave and the sound quality of placement on local AM and FM stations.

There are major problems to surmount: technological, financial, and regulatory. But DBS radio is coming, experts agree, perhaps by the mid to late 1990s. The 1992 World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC) assigned three regional frequencies to DBS, a significant advance on the regulatory front.

One likely scenario, sketched by U.S. international broadcasters, sees VOA local placement audiences continuing to grow.

Shortwave audiences likely will remain flat until the late 1990s, when DBS radio will begin to erode shortwave by three to five percent a year. By 2005, there will be significantly larger worldwide audiences for VOA programs delivered by placement and DBS, and significantly decreasing audiences for shortwave. Older shortwave transmitters would be taken off line progressively.

### Program Placement

Every day there are new opportunities to reach larger audiences through placement of U.S. international broadcasts on foreign stations and networks. VOA now transmits more than 2,000 hours weekly via satellite in 38 languages for immediate and later rebroadcast on local stations.

A VOA and Worldnet placement office is vying in a fiercely competitive environment with the British, the Germans, the French, and with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). All are leasing time on local transmitters, buying airtime within local program schedules, offering packages of news, information, music, and entertainment.

All VOA programs for Latin America now are produced on the assumption they will be fed by satellite for local placement. Shortwave is becoming only a backup.

Placement also is in the early morning of what may be a long, bright day in the former USSR, where VOA has established relations with more than 20 stations or networks, at least one in each of the local languages in which it broadcasts. VOA is carried locally two hours nightly in Moscow and is negotiating for simulcast of satellite placements everywhere, including far beyond the Urals.

In a dramatic development, VOA in May began sending Arabic programs via satellite to Radio Yerevan in Armenia for rebroadcast into Iraq on AM.

Radio placement is not without risks. Today's opportunities may not last. Local broadcasting laws are still evolving. Paying for broadcast time in Eastern Europe and the former USSR takes advantage of unique circumstances. But some stations inevitably

will fail, while others will succeed and ask for more money. Trade-offs and priority pressures will increase, not diminish.

### Accomplishments

The Commission finds several praiseworthy accomplishments in all this change.

VOA has adroitly seized opportunities by using Worldnet's satellite network for radio transmission, by refocusing "VOA Europe" from Western to Eastern Europe; by initiating local placement in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire; and by negotiating a transmitter site in Sao Tome to replace VOA's relay station for Africa destroyed in the Liberian civil war.

VOA is looking beyond shortwave, giving R&D grants to speed DBS radio prototype development. VOA also is wisely cutting selected shortwave transmissions to fund placement via satellite.

An expanded VOA and Worldnet office in Munich and a new Office of Affiliate Relations and Audience Research hold promise for placement coordination within USIA's Bureau of Broadcasting and among the Agency's field posts.

VOA and Radio Liberty are cooperating to take advantage of unique TV and radio openings in Central Asia, and have developed a unified approach on how much to pay for placement.

### Considerations for the Future

**A blend of delivery systems.** The Commission believes VOA should continue to strive for a balanced portfolio of delivery systems that blends technologies prudently. VOA should continue to take risks on paid placement and DBS radio technology. VOA should invest in opportunities where old shortwave markets are small and new placement approaches are delivering results, as in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.

And VOA should protect its core assets: the control, flexibility and dependability of shortwave and medium wave, essential for front line communications in



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such places as China and Africa, for backup in others, and for crisis capability everywhere.

**Research into markets and audiences.** New technologies, placement opportunities, and a changed political world carry with them the necessity of knowing far more about audiences and local media markets than VOA and Worldnet have known before.

They will have to know what other international broadcasters and the local competition are doing and saying, why audiences listen to foreign programs and indeed to radio at all. It becomes important to know how to compete for listener attention with new or newly energized television stations, domestic and foreign.

**Shortwave transmitters.** VOA and RFE/RL combined have a total of about 160 shortwave transmitters. Half are now aimed at Eastern Europe and western areas of the former Soviet Union. Appropriate as this may have been in the past, shortwave listenership is plummeting in this part of the world.

The Commission believes it is time to seek a new balance, away from where shortwave listenership is falling, concentrating resources on countries where shortwave is still utilized.

**Reduce VOA language services.** Budget reductions, rising research and program costs, and changed international political and media environments have made it impossible and unnecessary for VOA to keep 47 high quality language services on the air. VOA has attempted to cut languages to maintain program quality within budget ceilings. Invariably Congress has resisted such cuts, and indeed added two new languages in the past two years.

The time has come for a determined Administration, working with Congress, to establish language service priorities based on U.S. interests and available resources.

**Consolidating assets.** Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty have served the

country well, but with the collapse of Soviet hegemony, their programs increasingly resemble those of the Voice of America. As shortwave listenership fades and local radio emerges from democratization and privatization, the U.S. will not need two radios competing with each other for audiences and placement opportunities. The phaseout of RFE/RL should not happen overnight. But, in the Commission's view, orderly planning for it, consistent with previously established policy, is overdue and should begin now.

There is no longer a persuasive rationale for a massive shortwave transmitter station in Israel serving RFE/RL and VOA. With the end of the Cold War and the likelihood of a better and less costly site in Kuwait, the U.S. should terminate this troubled, long-delayed project. Funds already appropriated for the Israel station should be used for a Kuwait facility and other U.S. international broadcasting needs.

**Broadcasting to Asia.** America does not need a costly new Radio Free China. Enhanced VOA broadcasts can carry additional news and information about internal events in Asian countries. Resources necessary for a new station would be better used for more worthwhile public diplomacy activities.

**Recognizing limits.** Radio is not the best medium for communicating many kinds of messages, but in closed societies it is often the only medium available. Closed societies are opening, and their citizens are receptive to a broad range of public diplomacy programs. Radio remains important — crucial in a crisis — but it now takes its place alongside television and many other ways of communicating with foreign audiences.

Important as technology is, it must be looked at in conjunction with quality programming and audience interest. "If everyone in the world had a ten cent radio, the question is still whether the listener wants to tune you in," observed one veteran of a half century in international broadcasting.