



RW Special Report

04.07.04

Opinion: VOA Should Broadcast in English

by Kim Andrew Elliott

The English-language news on Voice of America is due to be cut back to 14 hours a day this October. It's already been reduced to 19 hours a day.

On Sunday, Dec. 14, at about 4:30 a.m. Eastern time, the news broke that Saddam Hussein might have been captured. By 7 a.m., his capture near Tikkril, Iraq, had been confirmed.

The timing could not have been worse for the Voice of America.

On Oct. 26, VOA News Now, VOA's global English broadcasting service, was reduced from 24 to 19 hours per day. The hours cut were 0700 to 1200 UTC (Coordinated Universal Time), or 2 to 7 a.m. Eastern. Anyone in the world trying to get the American perspective on the capture of Saddam was not able to hear it, in English, from VOA.

It would seem obvious that the international broadcaster of the United States would want to broadcast 24 hours a day in the mother tongue of the United States. VOA English was cut because the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which supervises United States government international broadcasting, has not been impressed with its audience numbers. Indeed, in countries outside of Africa, VOA's English audiences are small.

Global English speakers

Executives of United States international broadcasting may be looking in the wrong places for VOA's English audience. In countries where English is a primary language, such as the Philippines, Singapore and Jamaica, there is plenty of English-language media content available domestically.

This reduces the incentive to listen to foreign radio. But a perusal of VOA audience mail indicates that VOA has many grateful listeners in countries where English is not a primary language, and where local media in English are sparse.

The audiences in these countries are people who use English as a second language, as well as people from English-speaking countries who are expatriates, visitors, workers, students, diplomats, volunteers, etc. The target audience for VOA English is, therefore, not so much in any one country.

Instead, the target audience is the global community of English speaking people. This is an elite audience, the movers and shakers of the world. What they lack in quantity, they make up for in

quality.

In fact, if one adds up all the mostly small English audiences in all the countries, they amount to 15 million, or around 20 percent of VOA's worldwide audience. And those are just the ones who are actually counted. Generally, expatriates and travelers are not included in national sample surveys.

Many in this audience are Americans abroad: workers, students, Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, diplomats, military personnel, etc. Americans overseas have never been considered part of VOA's mandate.

This is curious, given that it is a key mission of the international radio station of virtually every other country to broadcast to countrypersons abroad. Perhaps the old Smith-Mundt law, which prohibits VOA from broadcasting within the United States, is the impediment. But Americans in other countries are not considered "domestic."

Indeed, in an increasingly dangerous world, Americans abroad ought to be considered a priority audience for U.S. international broadcasting. De facto, they already are; when the State Department plans to evacuate American citizens from a country in turmoil, it turns to VOA to make the announcements.

Evidence of Americans listening to VOA is ample in the letters and e-mails received by VOA. For example, Peace Corps volunteer Patricia Bigelow, a Peace Corp volunteer in Kazakhstan, wrote, "You have no idea what listening to your program means to a Peace Corps volunteer serving in Kazakhstan. I share the one shortwave radio with seven other volunteers."

Americans are not the only English-speaking expatriates who depend on VOA. Asian and African guest workers in Arab countries are grateful to VOA for news from their countries, or indeed for any friendly voice on the radio in English.

Some of the listeners are even on the high seas, including Leonid La-Anan Jr., who wrote, "I am a Filipino seaman on board a German container vessel, underway from China to Korea, and a listener to VOA since 1980. Maybe if there is an award for the most hours of listening to VOA everyday, I think I am the winner."

Many of these English listeners are interested in news about where they are from, at least as much as where they are. The VOA News Now service therefore succeeds by remaining global in scope rather than focusing on specific regions.

Shortwave 24 hours works

While English is being reduced from 24 hours, expansion of broadcasting to 24 hours has been implemented, planned or contemplated in languages such as Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Korean. Audience research shows that fans are large during a few peak morning and evening hours, then, not surprisingly, dwindle when people are asleep or at work.

English speakers are not limited to one or two time zones. They are virtually everywhere in world, on land and sea. Every of the hour of the day is prime time somewhere. English is the one language in which 24-hour broadcasting is an efficient use of resources.

One reason for cutting English is the expense of transmitting on shortwave 24 hours a day. The hourly cost of 500-kilowatt transmitters can be a conspicuous line item in a budget.

Less-expensive alternatives to shortwave now are available.

The Internet is definitely cheaper than shortwave, and it may well become the primary vehicle of international broadcasting. However, if a person "accesses" VOA English via the Web, he or she also has access to hundreds of other English-language news sites, many with more news than VOA.

If one listens to VOA on a shortwave radio, it's an indication that he or she lives in an area where the Internet connections and satellite receivers are not available, or are restricted. VOA is just one of thousands of English-language websites, but VOA is uniquely available throughout the globe via shortwave. Only BBC World Service has a comparable capability.

Many VOA non-English language services have dropped shortwave because they are now relayed in their target countries on FM or AM transmitters. While this usually brings larger audiences, it also entails a higher risk. The transmitters can and are turned off when their content incurs the displeasure of the host governments, or during wars, revolutions, or other crises, i.e. when international broadcasting is most needed.

And so the U.S. government's global shortwave network remains a vital insurance policy. It can get into countries when other media are unavailable.

That network should remain viable if it should ever again be needed to reach countries in acute need of information. The way to do this is to keep the frequencies occupied, so that they are not taken over by other stations. And because radio transmitters tend to fall into disrepair if they are not used, they should be kept on the air.

VOA's frequencies and transmitters can be put to good use by using the old BBC World Service concept: Transmit in English on as many frequencies as possible, for as many hours as possible, to as many parts of the world as possible. If this is done, VOA should generally be audible any place in the world at any time. The global English audience would not need a program schedule; they could find VOA by tuning across the dial.

If people in a country find their domestic media restricted by a new dictator or a fresh crisis, they will dust off their shortwave radios and seek news from foreign stations. VOA can respond to this need by switching many of its English World Service shortwave transmitters to the appropriate language.

Affiliation with domestic radio

Another reason the decision makers have reduced the hours of VOA English broadcasts is the cost of personnel required to maintain a 24-hour information-intensive channel. Here, VOA could supplement its own English broadcast team by affiliating with domestic American broadcasting. I am not thinking of hyper-opinionated talk shows, but rather the many creditable news, current affairs, music and special interest programs available from American commercial and noncommercial radio networks.

Just as VOA is retreating from English broadcasting, another international broadcaster is enhancing its English output. On its Dec. 13 "Listener's Garden" program, China Radio International announced that it is expanding its English output to 24 hours.

When Osama bin Laden is captured, will VOA News Now be on the air? Or will listeners around the world have to hear the news from Beijing?

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