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by Kim Andrew Elliott
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No comprendo

Why the largest English-speaking country should broadcast to the world in English

The news came suddenly on the morning of 6 February. A Broadcasting Board of Governors press release stated that the budget for US international broadcasting would be redirected mainly to the war on terror.

Accordingly, the BBG proposes to eliminate the Voice of America Greek, Turkish, Croatian, and Thai services, as well as News Now, VOA's global English service.

VOA English-to-Africa and slow-speed Special English would continue. Furthermore, VOA would discontinue radio but carry on with television in Albanian, Bosnian, Hindi, Macedonian, Russian and Serbian.



An essay could and should be written about each one of the affected VOA language services. I will confine myself here to VOA News Now. Many people find it incredible that VOA, the primary public international broadcaster of the largest English-speaking nation, will not broadcast to the world in English.

I confess that, in the past few years, while imagining what VOA services might be eliminated in a budget-reduction exercise, global English has been one of my candidates. This is because, outside of Africa, VOA does not have a large English audience in any one country. The major countries where English is the first language, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, have well-developed domestic media and thus little incentive to listen to foreign radio. Even in India, VOA's high-power shortwave relay in Sri Lanka was not in operation until 1999, by which time many Indians preferred to get their news from television.

Interpreting the figures

VOA's global English audience looks more impressive when it is aggregated across countries. Some five to ten million outside of Africa may listen weekly, although accurate estimates are difficult. Some of this audience is in countries where VOA usually does not conduct surveys. The audience becomes even more impressive when considering that it consists of the elites in non-English speaking countries. Unfortunately, the BBG's spreadsheet is arranged country by country and has no column for such an aggregated Anglophone audience.



Furthermore, VOA is virtually alone among international broadcasters in that it does not include broadcasts to fellow-countrymen abroad as part of its mission. The fact that VOA has never embraced the estimated three to six million Americans abroad as part of its English audience is, I think, a big reason why VOA News Now finds itself in its present predicament. Audience mail shows that Americans overseas do listen to VOA, but they are rarely included in surveys. And if the BBG is shifting its focus to the war on terror, Americans abroad are certainly potential targets for such terror. The US government needs to keep them informed.

Who's listening?

VOA's global English audience consists not only of American expatriates, but also expatriates of other countries. An examination of audience mail finds many people who are in countries other than their home countries: guest workers, international students, travelers, Peace Corps and other volunteers, missionaries, NGO employees, mariners, yachtsmen, diplomats, military personnel, and others who are listening from countries other than their own. They are in places where English offerings on domestic radio and television are sparse. They tune to foreign radio for news from their home country, entertainment, or just plain companionship. This community of English-speaking expatriates is important and influential. It is a virtual target country.

Many in this English-speaking community have access to cable and satellite television. In the television realm, CNN International has become the de facto "voice of America." The Fox News Channel is expanding to many parts of the world and is becoming an "alternative voice of America." The International Broadcasting Act of 1994 calls on US government international broadcasting not to compete with private international broadcasting efforts, so a global VOA English television channel is not a likely prospect.

TV and Internet don't reach everyone

Many in this community also have access to the Internet. VOA will carry on with English-language content on voanews.com, but it will face competition from hundreds of English-language news websites, several of which have more resources to cover world and US news.

But there are many in the global English-speaking community who live in remote, or rural, or politically denied areas, with unsatisfactory access to international television and the Internet. They must get their news via shortwave. And here is VOA's unique advantage: only VOA and BBC World Service have global shortwave transmitting networks capable of reaching all parts of the world.

And even if the audience does have access to television and the Internet, radio provides a personal touch. VOA radio offers voices in American-accented English. It accomplishes this on a portable radio that can be toted to any part of the house, or outside, or to the beach.

FM has its limitations, too

Because the global English community is located virtually everywhere in the world, no number of local FM relays could reach all of these people. A worldwide English service needs wide-area media, such as satellites, Internet audio streams and shortwave. Because shortwave signals are often heard outside of their nominal target countries, transmitting on as many frequencies as possible for as many hours as possible would usually allow a VOA worldwide English service to be heard in any part of the world any time of the day. Because many of these people work unconventional hours, it is best that the signal be audible even during non-peak hours.

There is another important reason for VOA to maintain a global English shortwave service. If VOA services such as Indonesian, Russian, or Swahili should find themselves evicted from their local rebroadcasting outlets, or their satellite links down, or their Internet access blocked, the transmitters and frequencies used for the VOA global English service would be available for VOA language services suddenly needing to get back in touch with their audiences.



Recent developments prove the point

Such scenarios are not only possible - they are likely. In most languages, VOA achieves large audiences by being rebroadcast through local FM and television stations. The governments of the target countries, however, can "pull the plug" at any time. Indonesia's new broadcasting law could prevent - and has in a few cases already prevented - live news from VOA, BBC, Radio Australia and Radio Netherlands being relayed by radio and television inside the country. On 29 January, an editorial in *The Nation* expressed concern that similar regulations could spread to other ASEAN nations. Russia cut off the Moscow mediumwave outlets of BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Radio France International, at least for a few weeks. On 10 January, Tajikistan authorities took the BBC FM relays in that country off the air. Such examples abound, and happen all the time.

Satellites have not proven themselves to be the solution to the free international flow of information. In September 2005, Libya jammed an opposition radio station on Eutelsat Hotbird, taking out several major international television channels in the process. Content via satellites is more commonly stopped by dint of politico-economic pressure, such as China applied to News Corp to take BBC Mandarin off the Star TV bouquet. Or more recently, when Iran kept the United Arab Emirates from allowing the uplink of a Persian-language opposition television channel.

And websites can be blocked, as the VOA, Radio Free Asia, and BBC sites are blocked vigorously and effectively by China. Iran recently filtered the BBC Persian website. Other countries, such as Cuba and North Korea, keep their people from reading foreign websites by prohibiting Internet access altogether.

Shortwave is the failsafe



Shortwave can be, and is, jammed, but rarely with complete success. This is because shortwave, alone among all the media available to international broadcasting, is protected from interdiction by the laws of physics. As we shortwave listeners know, between 3 and 30 MegaHertz, distant incoming signals are often heard better than closer jamming transmitters. As long as shortwave radios remain in circulation around the world, shortwave remains the medium of last resort for international broadcasting. It is the failsafe.

May it never happen, but if a major crisis hits, many modern means of getting news across national boundaries will be interrupted. Concerned people throughout the world will dust off their shortwave radios, turn them on, and spin the dials.

Will they get the accurate information they need?

And will they hear a voice from America?

Dr Kim Andrew Elliott works for the US International Broadcasting Bureau, but is here expressing his own views. His website is <http://kimandrewelliott.com>.

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