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by Kim Andrew Elliott

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The Kavala gap

Is VOA still a global broadcaster?

Employees of the Voice of America have been suffering a spate of bad news lately. First, on 1 February, we learned that, in a budget cutting exercise, VOA would eliminate about 250 hours of shortwave transmission daily. That amounted to about one frequency of three used for most broadcasts.

Then, on 6 February, we were informed that VOA would be dropping radio broadcasts on 12 of its language services, including the worldwide English VOA News Now.

And, if that were not enough, an e-mail on 24 February told us that the Greek relay stations of the International Broadcasting Bureau (VOA's parent agency) would be shut down. These facilities include several shortwave and one mediumwave (AM) transmitters at Kavala, and one mediumwave transmitter at Rhodes.



Kavala's big reach

The shortwave transmitters at Kavala officially served Europe, the former Soviet Union, Africa, the Middle East and even East Asia. Signals from Kavala were routinely heard beyond those areas, including (Smith-Mundt law banning domestic dissemination of VOA programmes notwithstanding) the United States.



During special live New year's editions of my former VOA programme Communications World, listeners would call or e-mail me from New Zealand, Japan, India, Africa, Europe, and the United States - and they were all listening to the same frequency from Kavala: 15205 kHz. This amazing relay station is in just the right location to cover most of the globe.

Of the two mediumwave transmitters in Greece, 1260 kiloHertz is a standout. It reached well into the Levant. The frequency was very popular among listeners to VOA News Now (VOA's global English service), including American expats in Israel. In 2002, the new Arabic-language service Radio Sawa took over 1260 kHz. Later in 2002, when Radio Sawa opened a new transmitter in Cyprus, it continued to use 1260 kHz rather than giving it back to VOA News Now. This could well have contributed to the demise of VOA News Now, slated for October.

Strategic importance

I don't know the details of the US agreement with Greece concerning these relay sites. The financial terms or the cost of electricity might be inordinately expensive. It could be that houses are being built closer to the facilities, and it is fashionable these days in Europe to complain about the alleged health effects of nearby radio transmitters. On the other hand, it would be difficult to find a more stable or reliable country in the region to host a relay station.

The loss of Kavala might be offset somewhat by three new shortwave transmitters at IBB's formerly mediumwave-only site in Kuwait. Even though the IBB has eleven other shortwave sites around the world, to maintain true global coverage, additional shortwave capacity is needed somewhere in a triangle roughly defined by Greece, Djibouti, and Kuwait. From this region, many countries that are vital to US interests, and where media freedom is or could soon be lacking, are one or two ionospheric hops away.

The medium of last resort

Why, in 2006, when modern media technologies abound, is it necessary to maintain worldwide shortwave capability? I covered this issue in a previous article on this website, No Comprendo. In essence, 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.

The IBB Kavala and Rhodes relays will be missed. I don't mean this in a sentimental way. I mean that when there is a major global crisis, the United States will need to get accurate information to foreign populations and to Americans abroad.

Modern means of international mass communications will be blocked, destroyed, or swamped from overuse. That is when a global shortwave network will become the failsafe. We reduce that network at our peril.

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Reaction(s):

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Fotios Padazopoulos, 08-05-2006 - USA

Listening to the VOA Greek program (from Thessaloniki, as I recall) was a kind of event in our daily routine back in the 60's and the 70's. Not to mention the English program, too. Politics, finances, technology, personal interests and a other issues unknown to us certainly play a role in all these recent negative changes in SW transmissions. But I do believe that if we unite our voice with passion we can at least affect the arbitrary and mysterious changes.

Mr. Power, 18-03-2006 - Canada

The general public (in the USA) is not going to find out about anything that goes on at VOA-IBB because in post 1990 America -- there is no threat of 'Communist Subversion'. Thus the privately owned US domestic media (TV / Radio, Newspapers) are not going to cover VOA-IBB affairs as it is not in the interest to their bottom line. Even the PBS network shows like NEWSHOUR / NOW / ... avoid coverage of VOA-IBB events like cancer. National Public Radio: Same as PBS per VOA-IBB. VOA only mattered (to American external policy and the American ruling class) during the Cold War Era. VOA-IBB does not matter now to those in power in the US, so its days are numbered. The IBB is not helping matters... VOA-IBB is now (and has been for many years [decades?]) a insipidly corrupt organization where success in the organization depends on nepotism and favoritism. The US Congress: no help at all... Only 15% of those in the US congress maintain passports. These multigenerational aristocrats are not even issued official passports upon election. In a matter of speaking it is a 1.3 Billion Euro waste of money. The only way the VOA as we know it might be saved is: 1. All US IBB SW Relay Stations: immediately privatized -- probably donated to some broadcasting entities on the religious right (with good connections to the Bush family). 2. All VOA language services (even English) must be totally privatized. I would assume that various Haliburton subsidiaries could run groups of language services under multi-year contracts. 3. If VOA were to only transmit in the languages (by the wording of the US general public) off the "Godless devil worshipping heathen and terrorist infedels". That means near elimination of English. As VOA-IBB now exists: it does not deserve one single red cent from US taxpayers.

Mika Suoranta, 13-03-2006 - Finland

Too bad one can these days tune to BBC WS and other broadcasters only at home or within a WLAN hotspot. Broadcasters don't seem to appreciate SW as the only medium for truly portable reception.

Robin Viegas, 11-03-2006 - India

I know what it means to be able to tune in to SW. During the recent deluge in Bombay, we were without power for 56 hours. During this time, there was no Internet, no telephone communications, no newspapers, no TV. However, I kept in touch with the world listening to good old SW for world news & to FM for news in my city. It is times like this that you need the radio. Please don't stop SW broadcasts.

Zoi, 10-03-2006 - Greece

The same thing happened with BBC recently. I cant believe that they cant find funds in the marketing era! Something else is happening. I hope it doesn't have anything to do with the Vodafone/Ericson case about telecommunications in Greece.

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