

# International Broadcasting in Times of Crisis

By Sarkis Garjarian  
QSLs courtesy Gayle Van Horn

Imagine you are amidst a war conflict. There are no local media: no AM or FM radio, no TV, and no newspapers. Satellite and cable TV are an impossible dream. Advanced technology like a computer or the Internet are unknown in your world; their existence is like a mirage. Or perhaps you are in a region where there is local government-controlled media, but you have no trust in it because of an on-going conflict. As a result you are “starving” for news.

What would you do in such a desperate situation in order to get the truth? Turn to your shortwave radio, of course – often the only way out of such an information black-out.

“International radio works as a ‘lifeline’ for a great many listeners,” said Oliver Zoellner, Head of DW Media Research and Audience Correspondence. “It is generally observed that audiences for international radio grow in times of crises, then fall back to normal once the crisis is over. Cases in point are Ethiopia, Afghanistan, or the Balkans – and there are many more.”

## The Big Three

Three of the most reliable international broadcasters are the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service in London, the Voice of America (VOA) in Washington, D.C., and Deutsche Welle (DW) in Cologne, Germany. Why are they so important, espe-

cially to people living in zones of war and crisis? An answer to this question requires a closer look at their news operations and procedures.

International broadcasters have similarities in news production and broadcast operations. For example, the Voice of America Central News Division is responsible for gathering all reports from its correspondents around the world and preparing news-bulletins. These are made available for use to all the 53 language services on SNAP++, the in-house computer system for news and programs.

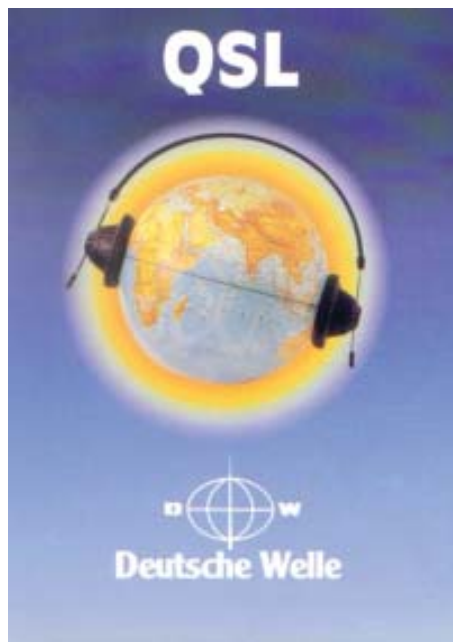
Each language service selects stories from the incoming material (correspondent reports, backgrounders, features, etc.) based on its relevance to the target audience. The text is then translated into the broadcast language and adapted for local listeners. Although the sta-

tions follow the pattern of “one voice in many languages,” each language service has its own stringers that provide local information. However, all language departments follow the overall editorial policy and agenda of its station. In addition, their integrity is ensured and protected through various decrees, mission statements, etc. The same principles are in effect when the stations report war conflicts.

The three international radio services have a major impact due to their large global audiences. BBC World Service broadcasts in 43 languages to an estimated audience of 150 million people weekly. VOA broadcasts in 53 languages and claims a weekly audience of 92 million listeners. DW-Radio reaches a weekly listening audience of about 30 million in 29 languages.

## Reporting in a Hostile Environment

While DW relies almost entirely on wire services when reporting on wars, VOA and BBC have their own permanent staffs in war regions. As BBC European Regional editor, Mark Brayne said, “People who become correspondents tend to be fairly motivated individuals who come into journalism wanting to become correspondents. It is the very motivated members of the profession who find themselves in the position to be selected for foreign correspondents. The individuals who are in the field might find them-





## Policy Differences

Both the BBC World Service and VOA broadcast the news internationally. However, the Voice also presents the U.S. perspective in the news. In addition, the editorials express the opinion of the U.S. Government. They are prepared by the Office of Policy, and the editorial writing procedure has nothing to do with the VOA News operations.

Deutsche Welle focuses on European and

selves in the war zone. In effect, the war comes to them.” As he explained, such a position is very demanding because “most of us don’t join the BBC in order to be a war reporter. It’s a combination of personal abilities, experience and, particularly, journalistic experience.”

“We have a good core of correspondents who have had experience in covering war zones,” VOA Assignments Chief Jack Payton said. “We have people in Israel, Cairo, Moscow, Hong Kong, Africa. Those are the people who we call when we have a war situation.”

Both the BBC and VOA provide training for their employees before they go on assignments in dangerous zones. “We [BBC] have a policy under which anybody who is being sent to a zone of conflict, or as we call it, a hostile environment, has to have the appropriate level of training,” Mark Brayne explained, who is also Director of DART Center Europe for Journalism and Trauma. “We have a policy that designates different hostile environments, such as category one – when there is an imminent danger for their lives, or category two – when hostility might burst out,” he added. Every correspondent should attend at least a six-day training course on coping in hostile environments, military awareness, and first aid. Any BBC journalist going to a category one hostile environment has to have a high-level formal approval.

“As far as the support of the media is concerned, the BBC is easily the best employer in the world,” according to BBC correspondent David Loyn<sup>1</sup>. Payton added that all of the VOA correspondents that are likely to be involved in war coverage have also been trained by two British companies.

In some cases, journalists reporting from war zones find themselves reporting from a foreign-language environment. That’s when they hire native people, known as fixers, who in many cases are experienced local journalists. They serve as translators, set up interviews, obtain information from local sources, and are treated as very reliable contributors.

Although both organizations always have correspondents working in the thick of war conflicts, personal safety is always taken into consideration. “We generally tell our correspondents no story is worth getting killed for, and to take all precautions,” Payton said. “We tell them not to take unnecessary risk.” Even BBC guidelines state clearly: “No story is worth risking your life for.”

German perspectives. “DW endeavors to provide programs to conflict areas which contain the basic information about that conflict from a non-biased standpoint,” Grahame Lucas, Head of Current Affairs at the DW English Service said. “We also try to include international reactions and views of that conflict. The idea is that in this way we can provide information not otherwise accessible to the people in the country concerned. This, we hope, will help them to form their own views on the conflict, rather than accept the propaganda of the warring parties.”

None of the three radio stations is involved in any peace propaganda, except for the Voice of America which adds an editorial. BBC’s Mark Brayne argues that “a world which has access to decent, fair and accurate information and debate is, in my view, probably less likely on balance to need to go to war. To that extent, our broadcasts do ultimately support the processes that lead more to peace than to war. But, no, we do not involve ourselves (consciously at any rate) in any kind of propaganda, either peace or war. What we do try to do is reflect the positions of the people on whose conflicts we report – and that might sometimes be interpreted by different parties in different ways.”

## Maintaining Objectivity

The language services play a very important role in building up a station’s reputation as they are directly involved in the final step of news production by delivering and presenting the information to local audiences. According to correspondent David Loyn who covered Afghanistan in 2001, the BBC “was the main source of independent journalism in Afghanistan, actually the only source of journalism. So whenever you go, people know who you are by name, because they’ve heard your reports translated by the Pashto Service.”<sup>1</sup>

“I am not aware of any of our language services taking sides in a crisis or distorting facts and consider that to be out of the question,” DW’s Grahame Lucas said. But BBC language services are evaluated on a regular basis. VOA also controls its language services, especially in times of crisis, to make sure no incorrect information goes out. Such is the case with the VOA Central and South Asia

language services which followed strictly what the News Division was putting out during the Afghan crisis.

Earlier this year Radio Sawa, the restructured VOA Arabic Service, launched a 24-hour radio network under its parent-entity, the International Broadcasting Bureau. Although it does not use any VOA news and correspondent material, Radio Sawa adheres to the VOA Charter, according to James Hooper, staff director of the network.

## And the Beat Goes On

In a possible attack against Iraq, the stations say they will keep up their efforts as they did in other situations. As Mark Brayne of the BBC said, “We will continue to do our best to provide balanced, rounded information that allows our listeners – wherever they are – to come to their own informed conclusions about what is happening. Our Arabic service already provides 24-hour-a-day coverage, and will obviously devote special attention to the story, bringing together representatives of all parties to the conflict, including the Iraqi side.”

VOA’s Payton said, “we will cover it the same way as any other network or newspaper would do.” VOA News will send reporters to wherever the U.S. military sets up shop. He explained that correspondents would be based throughout the region, including Israel, and other parts of the Arab world to follow their reactions.

Among the four regional streams, Radio Sawa has an Iraqi stream going on the air 5 hours a day. Its broadcasts include news, targeted to listeners in the country, press reviews, Iraqi and Kurdish music, and other information. The network intends to provide the most accurate coverage during any possible strikes.

International broadcasting will continue to have its own future as long as there are conflicts and crises going on, in order to keep its listeners abreast of all the developments in their region and abroad. In such crises, radio stations increase the number of shortwave and mediumwave frequencies and the number of hours broadcast in local languages to turbulent regions, in order to make objective information more accessible to listeners.

<sup>1</sup> Olah, Krassimira. “Afghanistan: The Correspondents War,” Media Development Center, Sofia, 2002. Reprinted with permission of the author.

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