

A Turning Point for International Broadcasting?

By John Figliozzi



International broadcasting is much more than just a mode. The BBC's relay site on Ascension Is. uses both shortwave and satellite technology.

What does the future hold for shortwave?

It's a question one hears frequently these days, spurred by the advent of new distribution technologies, the downsizing and outright closure of some services and stations, and unsettling announcements of changes and "new directions" by long-relied-upon "establishment" broadcasters.

Let me say at the outset that I possess no crystal ball nor gift of clairvoyance. But neither, it seems, does anyone else. Having said that, though, it is possible to learn both from history and from the experience of those in the field and, thus, we may discern some trends on this question.

■ What do we mean by "shortwave"?

As a start, though, we need to agree on what we're talking about. To the pure hobbyist, the term *shortwave* refers simply to the part of the radio frequency spectrum roughly between 2 and 30 megahertz, segments of which are reserved by international agreement for a range of distinct uses. Just flipping through the pages of this magazine will give you a sense of the wide and divergent nature of these services and modes.

The fact that shortwave is being put to so many uses may alone be enough to guarantee its viability as the focus for a range of radio hobby interests for many years to come. But for many, shortwave is — and has been for

some time — the place to find the programming of international broadcasters. For these listeners and hobbyists, international broadcasting provides a deeply valued source for information and entertainment that is simply unavailable via domestic media. Indeed, for this group the terms *shortwave* and *international broadcasting* have always been synonymous.

However, as we will see, this is no longer the case. Therefore, for our purposes, let's agree that the term *shortwave* refers to a broadcast delivery technology and that the term *international broadcasting* refers to a product that is carried over it.

■ Some Background

While there were, in fact, international shortwave stations on the air from the early twenties, most of these were experimental broadcasts usually serving to extend the reach of domestic broadcasters, who themselves were in their infancy.

The BBC commenced its Empire Service in 1932 to provide a British radio service to British colonies spanning the globe. International broadcasting specifically targeted to foreign audiences really began in earnest in the 1930s when Germany commenced shortwave broadcasts to the rest of Europe with programs designed to foster acceptance of the German view of current events as they were unfolding on the continent. These broadcasts were soon countered by the BBC with its European services, and soon many other nations had begun broadcasts of their own.

World War II brought almost all private, international broadcasting to an end. The medium took on a politically bi-polar, largely government-sponsored, and often propagandistic nature. The ensuing Cold War only served to reinforce this model until the breakup of the Soviet empire less than a decade ago began to force some radical changes in approach.

In short, it was World War II and the Cold War that provided international broadcasting with a longstanding *raison d'être*. During those years, there was no real need for broadcasters to justify their existence or their budgets because their missions were bound up in a global struggle centered around two competing world views. Each side's fear of the other created its own dynamic. Whether it was megatons or megawatts, almost no expense was too great in this battle for supremacy.

■ An Unforeseen Challenge

But when the Berlin Wall came down, the underpinnings of nearly all of the assumptions upon which life had been based and lived on this planet for decades were rocked at their core. Coordinately, international broadcasters almost immediately lost the justifications they had long relied upon for their programming choices, their budgets, and even their existence. And the swiftness with which these changes arrived understandably caught nearly all of them unprepared.

The sponsoring governments held a mostly one-dimensional view of the worth of broadcasting. With that single dimension now dis-

CHALLENGES FOR INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING

It is a credit to **Radio Canada International** that, even when it was in its darkest hours and under continual threat of closure, it perceived and acted on a need for the international broadcasting community to meet and consider its collective future. For the past eight years, RCI has sponsored and hosted a biennial conference of global international broadcasting organizations, academics and professionals under the banner *Challenges for International Broadcasting*.

Some of the conclusions reached at the most recent meeting held in Ottawa between May 17 and 21, 1998, include:

- International broadcasters need to forge new alliances or reinvigorate existing ones with the domestic arms of their parent organizations. They also need to identify and develop relationships with constituent groups within their countries (such as businesses seeking international markets) for whom international broadcasting could prove helpful.

- There needs to be much more study in academia of international broadcasting, both in terms of its historical role and importance as well as its various structures and missions around the world.

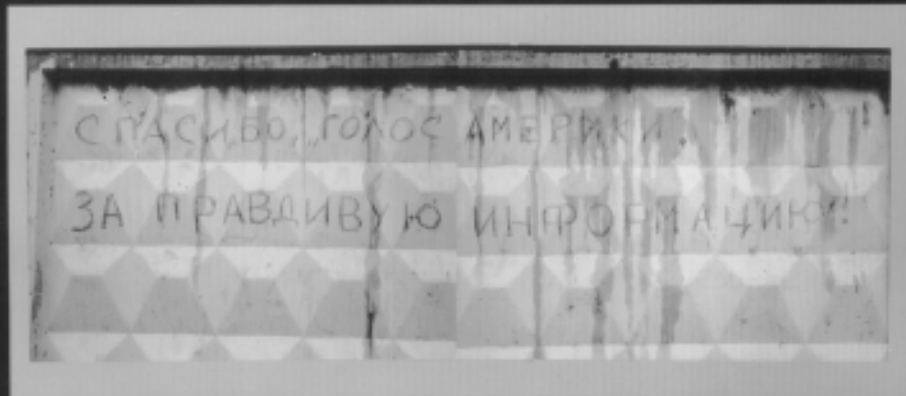
- While its growth and introduction will vary from place to place, the future for international broadcasting is definitely digital.

- While there is interest in new distribution technologies, average spending on implementing them over the past year averaged only about 3% of budget for the 40 or so broadcasters attending the conference. Shortwave is still — and will remain for the foreseeable future — the dominant delivery technology.

- In the end, international television is not a threat to international radio. The latter will thrive on its own merits.

A sixth conference is tentatively scheduled for the year 2000 in Montreal on the subject of programming. More information on the Challenges series can be obtained via the Internet at <http://www.rcinet.ca/biennial/index.htm> or by writing to: Challenges V, RCI, P.O. Box 6000, Montreal, Canada H3C 3A8. For books on the subject, go to amazon.com and search on "international broadcasting." Many thanks to Elzbieta Olechowska of RCI for her kind assistance in providing material for this article.

"Thank you Voice of America for the correct information."



Graffiti found on the wall of the Moscow White House facing the American Embassy after the August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow. The translation reads: "Thank you Voice of America for the correct information."

After the Cold War, international broadcasting lost its primary reason for being.

solved, governments began to view international broadcasting as no longer necessary and, therefore, dispensable. This view has been almost certainly helped along by a new, fierce competition for economic resources.

Politicians looking to slash public bureaucracies and corresponding budgets, first see international broadcasting — as provided by public organizations with public funding — as a Cold War relic. And in an age newly enamored of "markets" and the private sector, politicians are quick to look askance at any public benefit activity that may conceivably be provided commercially. Caught off-guard by the speed of these events and the arguments they have raised, international broadcasters have struggled to find and offer new justifications to counter this rush of impressions.

The fact is that many of these justifications — such as promoting cross-cultural understanding of a less globally influential country, explaining different geo-political points of view, and introducing a country's products to potential overseas customers — existed side by side with the Cold War imperative all along. But they were never well articulated or, if so, perhaps only in the context of that bipolar struggle. As with any longstanding and unchanging situation, a degree of stagnation had clearly set in — which became glaringly apparent when the Cold War ended.

■ The Broadcasters' View

The singular intention of the international broadcaster is to identify and serve audiences. It stands to reason that, in an era of restricted funding and skeptical masters, demonstrating that this is being done — and being done in the most effective way possible — would be a

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matter of the highest importance for the broadcaster.

It was much easier to do this when the prime motivation was to impart hard information to a self-motivated listener from a competing social system, using the only medium practically available and suited to this purpose. But recent history has changed all that. Governments are not as keenly interested, or in some cases have become wholly uninterested, in communicating with foreign, off-shore audiences. For their part, audiences are less interested in straight, hard, factual information than they are in softer, more entertaining and personally relevant fare. And since they have an ever-growing roster of alternatives — both in terms of technology and content — they now have to be enticed to both sample and become committed to the product.

Consequently, international broadcasters find themselves, perhaps for the first time, in a truly competitive posture — competing for funding, competing for resources, competing for attention, competing for audiences with other media. In short, they are seeking to effectively articulate a new *raison d'être* to their existing and potential audiences, their masters, and — perhaps most importantly — themselves. The pressure of competition and the swiftness with which changes continue to come does not leave them with the luxury of much time in which to do so, either.

Is there any wonder, then, that many of the changes put in place appear less than well thought out, or are withdrawn or altered almost as quickly as they are implemented, or that some simply look at the situation and decide they simply cannot compete?

■ More Challenges for Broadcasters

For most of its existence, international broadcasting has been available to its audience only via the medium of shortwave radio.



Broadcasters must decide (1) what can the audience afford? (2) what programming is important enough that they will listen? (Courtesy BBC)

More recently, however, broadcasters find themselves with other alternatives that can be used to deliver their product. Dr. Kim Andrew Elliott of the Voice of America has identified four such methods or technologies. They are:

- shortwave
- satellite
- local placement
- Internet audio

Each of these has its own advantages and disadvantages and is still in a period of evolution as a means of delivering international broadcasting. To illustrate, consider the following examples.

The use of satellite technology in conjunction with international broadcasting began as a means of delivering programs to shortwave relay transmitters with better quality and more reliability than had been possible using shortwave sideband feeders. Satellite has evolved

today into a direct-to-receiver broadcast vehicle on its own. But to date, the bulkiness and expense of owning receiving equipment limit its applicability to fixed locations in relatively affluent areas.

Local placement has also been around for some time, beginning with the transcription services of various international broadcasters which supply programs on tape or disc to local AM and FM stations. Today, satellite technology is also used to deliver this programming. The clear advantage to the international broadcaster is in delivering its product to listeners in a seamless way on receivers conveniently available and used by nearly everyone. But one disadvantage in a country like the United States is the virtually impossible task of replicating this process literally thousands of times to provide coverage over the entire nation.

The Internet is the newest delivery mechanism on Dr. Elliott's list. It adds some nice convenience features with its ability to digitally store programs, enabling the listener to hear programs "on-demand" and enabling the creation of program archives that can serve as a sort of reference library. But at this early stage of development, the Internet also has some significant drawbacks. For one, the equipment to access it is expensive. In addition, telephone line and access charges can be high, thereby inhibiting use.

The added challenge for the international broadcaster, over and above what it is already faced with, is to tailor the use of each technology to a targeted audience. This is a continuing task, because all four technologies are dynamic. Each also has uses for which it seems best suited and each has advantages and disadvantages vis-a-vis the others. Both the technologies and their interrelationships will continue to change and evolve with time.

Even shortwave broadcast engineers are

WHO IS THE AUDIENCE?

When it comes to audiences, it seems that the "traditional" shortwave listener (SWL) is not the prime — nor even a desirable — target for international broadcasters today. "Radio freaks" was a term used by **Deutsche Welle's** Director General Dieter Weirich at the recent Challenges V Conference in Ottawa to describe the type of listener **DW** was *not* seeking. To be fair, Mr. Weirich used the term more descriptively than derisively, and it was used to illustrate his view that most of the traditional SWLs were interested in listening to station programs and content only to the extent necessary to earn a QSL (verification) card.

Given the challenges being experienced by stations like **DW** today, Herr Weirich's sentiments are understandable and even reasonable. Stations do not exist for hobbyists; they exist for listeners. The listener an international broadcaster seeks is one who is involved with the station because he or she is interested in what the station has to say. When such a listener communicates with the station, it will be on topics like program content, the listener's interests, or his or her opinions on what was heard on the station. It makes far less difference to the station how the listener accessed that content, whether via shortwave, satellite, the Internet or *CBC Overnight*. If the listener's focus is content, the station is interested in hearing from him or her. But if that focus is confined to running up verification numbers, that relationship is not likely to be very welcome.

experimenting with digital transmission modes which, if successfully implemented, would improve the audio quality, reliability and cost-effectiveness of this venerable technology.

■ **Does Shortwave Have a Future?**

Absolutely! While at first glance shortwave may seem to be old technology that has existed virtually unchanged since the beginning, this is untrue. Receiver technology alone has improved markedly over the decades. Transistors, digital frequency readout, selectable sideband synchronous detection and digital signal processing have made today's receivers much more portable, user friendly, and aurally stable than their earlier counterparts.

The use of relay transmitters — whether station-owned, leased or cooperatively shared — have provided listeners with stronger and more reliable signals than "home-bound" transmitters ever could. And, as mentioned above, the coming introduction of digital transmission techniques offer the promise of further improvements for both the broadcaster and the listener.

At the same time, though, the development of other methods and technologies of reaching listeners means that the use of shortwave



Broadcasters find themselves experimenting with new modes and methods of delivery. Pictured is a new 2-button Digital Radio from BBC.

by international broadcasters will change and evolve in new ways. Some of these will result from the fact that the broadcasters' need to identify and reach new audiences will demand that the broadcaster efficiently and effectively use every possible means to do so. Some of that audience would undoubtedly never have been reachable by just using shortwave.

Making predictions can be a foolhardy practice. But it is clear from what has already transpired that this will be a more than short-term trial and error process for both broadcasters and listeners.

■ **What of the Future of International Broadcasting?**

Is it possible to conceive that the world, which has been made ever smaller by communications and technology, might contemplate the end of any mass media as long as it is useful to get messages across? The broadcasters themselves seem confident that they have a future (see "Challenges" sidebar). If anything, there are more points of view, more need for cross-cultural understanding, more commerce to be conducted, more corners of the world vying for attention than ever before. There is more need for communications than there ever has been. And there is more need for it all to be put in some context wider than one's individual or ethnocentric experience will allow.

While many of the details — public service vs. private, the interplay of technologies and more — may be in question, it is that need and desire for a wider context that will ultimately ensure and define the future for international broadcasting.

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 John Figliozzi is "Programming Spotlight" editor for MT and author of Radio Shack's *Worldwide Shortwave Listening Guide*.

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