



VOICE OF AMERICA REACTS TO SHIFTING GLOBAL POLITICS

March 5, 2007

Due to changing goals in technology and global politics, the Voice of America -- a TV and radio broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government that turned 65 in February -- may soon scrap English altogether and focus on news programming in Arabic, Farsi and Korean.

VOA debuted in 1942 with a radio broadcast into Nazi Germany. Its mission was stated clearly: "This is a voice speaking from America. Daily, at this time, we shall speak to you about America and the war. The news may be good or bad. We shall tell you the truth."

The service now reaches more than 115 million people worldwide through its TV and radio programming in 45 languages, as well as millions more through the Internet.

History and mission

After World War II, the service broadcast on shortwave frequencies to people in closed communist societies where information was controlled by the government.

During the ideological struggles of the Cold War, VOA was accused of diverting from its mission to deliver objective information due to political pressure to promote pro-American views.

Partially in response to the criticism, VOA's charter, written in 1960 and signed into law in 1976, states the goal as delivering accurate, objective and comprehensive news, while also presenting the policies of the United States clearly and effectively.

Reaching new audiences

As it turns 65, VOA is still changing in reaction to shifting global conditions.

In coordination with the Bush administration's war on terrorism, VOA is looking for ways to reach out to audiences in the Muslim community, in North Korea, and in parts of Latin America.

The service currently broadcasts four hours of satellite TV a day in Farsi, the language spoken in Iran. Before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, VOA broadcasted one hour a day in that language.

Setareh Derakhshesh, who anchors a newscast called "News and Views," said on the Jan. 26 NewsHour that she is "trying to reach everyone in Iran -- the young people in Iran, the activists, the everyday people."

Derakhshesh, who left Iran as a young girl, said it's a critical time to be reaching Iranians, whose media is controlled by the government.

Broadcasting in Dari and Pashto, the official languages of Afghanistan, also has become a priority.

Shaista Sadat, who anchors "TV Ashna," which means "friend" in Pashto, said in the same NewsHour segment that the goal is to "connect, actually, people in the United States with the people of Afghanistan right over there. We are like a window of the Western world to them. They have never had this."

Yet, expanding TV broadcast hours in foreign languages comes at the expense of English-language programming and radio. VOA's budget for 2008 would eliminate all TV and radio broadcasts in English except for its limited-vocabulary broadcast to Africa that is designed to help people learn English. It also cuts broadcasts in Croatian, Turkish, Thai, Greek, Albanian, Russian and Hindi.

At a crossroads

These changes have been met with criticism both from inside and outside the organization.

Neil Currie, anchor of VOA's international English-language radio newscast "News Now," told the NewsHour he is against de-emphasizing radio. "There's no opportunity to sit down and say, do you realize that it only costs a penny per listener per week to reach [foreign audiences] with radio? You can't send them a postcard for that price. It's a very efficient medium."

Sanford Ungar, who headed VOA from 1999 to 2001, said he opposes a practice begun in 1981 of adding daily editorials, or statements of U.S. policy drafted outside the news department.

Ungar thinks that the editorials get confused with straight news and make VOA broadcasts less credible.

In a 2005 article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, he went as far as accusing former VOA director David Jackson of pushing more positive stories about the Iraq war. Jackson denied the claims.

Meanwhile, VOA's new director, Dan Austin, said the service does not broadcast propaganda and that it is in the best interest of the United States for VOA to be a model news agency in places where a free press does not exist.

"We believe that the interests of this country are served by having people around the world understand us. We're not asking people to like us. Those are policy issues. And we don't do policy at -- at Voice of America," he told the NewsHour.

Broadcasts to Iran are set to increase to seven hours a day starting in the spring.

-- *Compiled by Noah Buhayar for NewsHour Extra*

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