

Getting Sirius—A Mixed Blessing

by Rich Moseson, W2VU

This month, in honor of the BBC World Service's 75th Anniversary (it began broadcasting in 1932, but our three-month lead time has this issue going to print in December), and donating just a little more ink to the Sirius news coverage, we turn "Tuning In" over to the meditative musings of Rich Moseson, W2VU, Pop'Comm's editorial director and editor of sister publication, CQ magazine.

—Editor

I've recently become a regular listener to the BBC again, thanks to a new car that came with a satellite radio receiver and a three-month free subscription to Sirius Satellite Radio (a nasty but highly effective marketing ploy—I was addicted within five minutes). But as much as I've been enjoying listening to those British accents and the BBC's vastly better coverage of world news than any news outlet in the United States, I've found cause for concern as well. Listeners are regularly reminded that BBC World Service programming is available via satellite, on the Internet, and—almost as an afterthought—on shortwave radio.

One of the programs currently running is a series of short pieces celebrating the BBC's 75th Anniversary. One item was an interview with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who noted that while he was under house arrest during the abortive coup attempt by Communist hardliners in the late 1980s, he found out what was really happening in Moscow by listening to the BBC. There was no streaming Internet radio then, but if there had been, Gorbachev's Internet access certainly would have been cut off anyway. The only way for him to keep up with events was via shortwave radio. It would likely be no different today.

It's wonderful that I can now listen to the BBC whenever I

want, in the car via satellite or at home over the Internet (there's even a radio you can buy with built-in WiFi, so you can listen to Internet radio over your wireless local area network without being tied to your computer). But this is all access for people in wealthy countries or wealthy people in other countries. The people who most need access to the comprehensive and objective news coverage offered by the BBC probably don't have cars with satellite radios (if they have cars at all) or high-speed Internet access (or computers). The ever-more-limited shortwave service of virtually all international broadcasters is increasingly denying access to those people who need those voices the most.

Another problem I noticed was that, while Sirius offers 24-hour access to the BBC and Radio Canada International, those are my only choices among international broadcasters. If I want to listen to the Voice of Russia or Deutsche Welle, well, it's not available on Sirius. And one could hardly expect to be given the option to listen to Radio Havana on a system that calls its liberal talk channel "Sirius Left" and its conservative talk channel "Sirius Patriot." Gimme a break.

But the real point is that my access to international broadcasts on my satellite radio is limited by what somebody else is willing to make available to me. Whether the choice of available programming is made for economic or political reasons, or a combination of the two, the fact remains that someone else is deciding what I can listen to. The same goes for the channels I can watch on cable TV, and in certain cases—China is a good example—what I can access on the Internet.

The bottom line here—one that needs to be remembered by those concerned with the bottom line in deciding what funding to provide to international broadcasters—is that the only medium that offers truly unfettered access to a broadcaster's message is not satellite, not the Internet, but shortwave radio. Just ask Mikhail Gorbachev.

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