

Challenges for RFI

Interview with Antoine Schwarz, Managing Director, Radio France Internationale

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Challenging

Interview with Antoine Schwarz*
Managing Director, Radio France Internationale

Diffusion: A year after your arrival at the head of RFI you have been able gauge the scale of the challenges facing international broadcasting. What are they, especially in terms of RFI?

A. Schwarz: They fall into two categories: technological and – we shouldn't be afraid to admit it – political.

The technological challenge consists of using present-day technologies as best we can to meet the need to reach all potential RFI listeners around the world. These listeners are not only French expatriates, but all French-speakers and also, in some regions, listeners who are responsive or attached to a message coming from a country such as France that represents for them a set of values and a vision of the world that are somewhat different from the usual vision and – why shouldn't we say so? – the standard vision of the English-speaking world. I'm not saying that all visions from these nations are standardized; let's just say it is just that small difference that we would like to continue making, including in a few selected foreign languages.

Faced with this general challenge, which is to remain present with all

available technologies, we need to review some of our broadcasting resources. This is the technological challenge.

And the political challenge?

The political challenge consists of looking after our geostrategic priorities. We cannot constantly broadcast in all languages. We need to make a choice and since I took up my job I have been thinking of the right way to go about it. We are now at a crucial stage and I am starting to have a certain number of ideas that I have not yet been able to discuss with my management staff. We will have to start choosing our priorities in June. I have merely drawn up a list of criteria to help us define these priorities.

In this regard it was interesting this morning to hear Radio Canada International explain what criteria it used to reposition itself. The Germans are going through the same process and we know, through the press, that the British, the BBC, are also undergoing the same process.

We will not escape from a broad, general and in-depth re-evaluation of our missions based on certain geographical objectives, but also on target populations that we will need

to pinpoint. Once we have defined these objectives, we need the resources to achieve them.

With this in mind, the Middle - East is a priority target for Western countries, and for France in particular. The CII (Chaîne d'Information Internationale – French international news channel) won't be broadcasting in Arabic, contrary to what was announced. Radio Monte Carlo Moyen-Orient (RMC-MO) will therefore remain the main French antenna in the Arabic world. Are you planning to reposition it, or reinforce it to face up to the competition?

Yes, we are planning to reinforce RMC-MO, RFI's Arabic station. We will do this no matter what happens to the TV channel. I'd actually prefer CII to have an Arabic channel. I think that would be a good idea and in these sectors radio and television can support each other rather than compete with each other.

Whatever happens, we see the reinforcement of the Arabic station as a priority. We are somewhat lucky in that RMC-MO has built up a good image and a residual audience that is still large, with 6 million listeners

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Antoine Schwarz

during the week which is not negligible. However, we used to have more so we can legitimately hope that a profound shake-up of our programmes will enable us to achieve positive results in the two or three years to come.

We have been in a similar position to the BBC for a long time now: a little bit higher, or a little bit lower, depending on the country. The BBC is our major competitor. It should be noted that the BBC's Arabic Service is more focused on information whereas RMC-MO is a general-interest station, even though it sets aside a lot of room for information.

[Do you think that Radio Sawa** has changed anything?](#)

Absolutely, it has changed the lay of the land. It's a success, we have to admit that. Two things have changed the Arabic broadcasting environment.

First of all, the proliferation of [pan-Arabic] television channels, especially news channels that are stiff competition for radio, and they represent even greater competition in that they often get the information before radio stations. That's a fact and not only in the Arabic world.

Secondly, the Americans have carried out an in-depth analysis of the market. They have defined a product that was apparently fairly well adapted to the market, albeit not perhaps well adapted to the wishes of the American government, but that's another issue. However, the results are there: they have taken listeners from other broadcasters, and from us in particular. So, obviously, we need to define our goals in relation to this too.



[You mentioned cooperating with other international broadcasters. Is that an option to help you reinforce your position?](#)

I prefer the word partnership to the word cooperation, which could suggest a relationship in which we help broadcasters that are less developed than we are.

We see these partnership relations on a very broad scale as we have just signed an agreement of principle with Deutsche Welle (DW) to share schedules and transmitters for Arabic and Russian. For Arabic we will be broadcasting DW programmes on RMC MO, whereas RFI programmes in Russian will be broadcast by DW transmitters in Moscow and St Petersburg.

I believe this type of relationship is destined to become more common by the very nature of things and one of the aims of my attending this meeting of international radio stations is firstly to sound out the opinions of those present and possibly to drum up support for the idea that international radio stations must work together rather than thinking in terms of competing.

In any case, European radio stations must not only work together as much as possible but they must also think of what their common future would be in a Europe that may one day need a single international radio station of which we are the cornerstones.



[With regard to CII, fears have been expressed, and in particular by TV5, about its funding which might, in the more or less long term, be at the expense of TV5. Are you similarly worried at RFI?](#)

For the time being, nothing has been decided. It is true that there has been a lot of talk about this. And if such a threat existed, it would be my job to avert it. No-one would understand, either in house or outside, and in particular in parliament, that a major initiative being developed in television were carried out to the detriment of what exists already, provided that what exists already is working well. Of course, that isn't the point. The president's initial intention was to promote new programming through a French news channel and I feel certain that in his mind the aim was not to reduce the funding allocated to others.

We are also aware that there are large-scale budgetary pressures in France and in other European countries. So any additional spending must be balanced out by cuts elsewhere. However, in my opinion this is not something that must be balanced within one and the same ministry but rather at the overall, governmental level. I'm therefore keeping an eye on things but I'm not particularly worried about it.

[The project that has been chosen is to set up a company comprising France Télévisions and TF1. Will RFI still take part in the project?](#)

It won't put up capital as was discussed at one time, but we have proposed – and the idea has been



welcomed – a whole range of services that we can provide – and sell – to the future international news channel. We will support this idea 100%.

There's a lot of talk about China at the moment. What are your plans for this country where you are already present?

Our presence is real, our audience is real, but it's all based on a schedule that is fairly limited in duration. I feel that the future of our presence in China goes more through Europe. I don't believe that each European country that wants to broadcast to China can manage it alone.

Briefly, to sum up, what sort of future do you see for RFI?

I think that the two key words for the future are those I mentioned this morning: Europe and Internet. RFI will pursue its future in the very long term through these two dimensions.

* *Carried out on 17 May 2005 at a special meeting of international broadcasters held at EBU headquarters in Geneva.*

** *Radio Sawa ("Together") was launched in March 2002 to replace the Voice of America's Arabic service. Aimed at the under '30s it broadcasts a mix of Western and Arab music, news, analyses, interviews and social issues in five regional Arabic dialects. It is distributed by medium-wave and local FM relays.*



Orientalist watercolor of Augustus O. Lamplough