



Voice of America
Morand Fachot, Media Officer, EBU



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“America’s best-kept secret”

The Voice of America (VOA), which – until very recently – broadcast more than 1,000 hours of programmes in 55 languages to an audience of some 94 million people worldwide, is the world’s second largest international broadcaster, yet within the US itself it is “America’s best-kept secret”. In spite of all this, the Voice is nearly unknown in the US, thanks to provisions of the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which banned the dissemination of VOA products within the country.

Alan L. Heil, Jr*, who spent 36 years at the Voice, was uniquely placed to write *Voice of America: a history*, a comprehensive and captivating insight into a “great, sometimes heroic, but fragile and endangered national institution”, stretching from the launch of the service in February 1942 to its 60th anniversary.

Pearl Harbor

Ever since going on air for the first time in German 79 days only after Pearl Harbor, telling its listeners, “Here speaks a voice from America . . . The news may be good. The news may be bad. We shall tell you the truth”, the Voice has been constantly striving to uphold its editorial independence in

the face of persistent political and funding pressures.

Political interference

Heil’s detailed account of the Voice’s advances and setbacks, always set in the broader US and international contexts, shows the importance attached by successive US administrations to international broadcasting in their public diplomacy strategy. Yet Heil’s record of the often considerable pressures from all official quarters involved in foreign policy – from the White House down to US diplomats abroad – to influence editorial content, shows how US public diplomacy itself has suffered (and continues to suffer) from this constant interference into VOA’s operations. A central lesson from this book is that Washington would best benefit from its considerable ‘soft power’ (defined by Joseph S. Nye¹ as “the ability to achieve desired outcomes in international affairs through attraction rather than coercion”) by guaranteeing VOA’s independence (and thus its credibility).

The last chapter of the book, ‘VOA in the 21st Century: The Struggle Goes On’, indicates that Heil does not

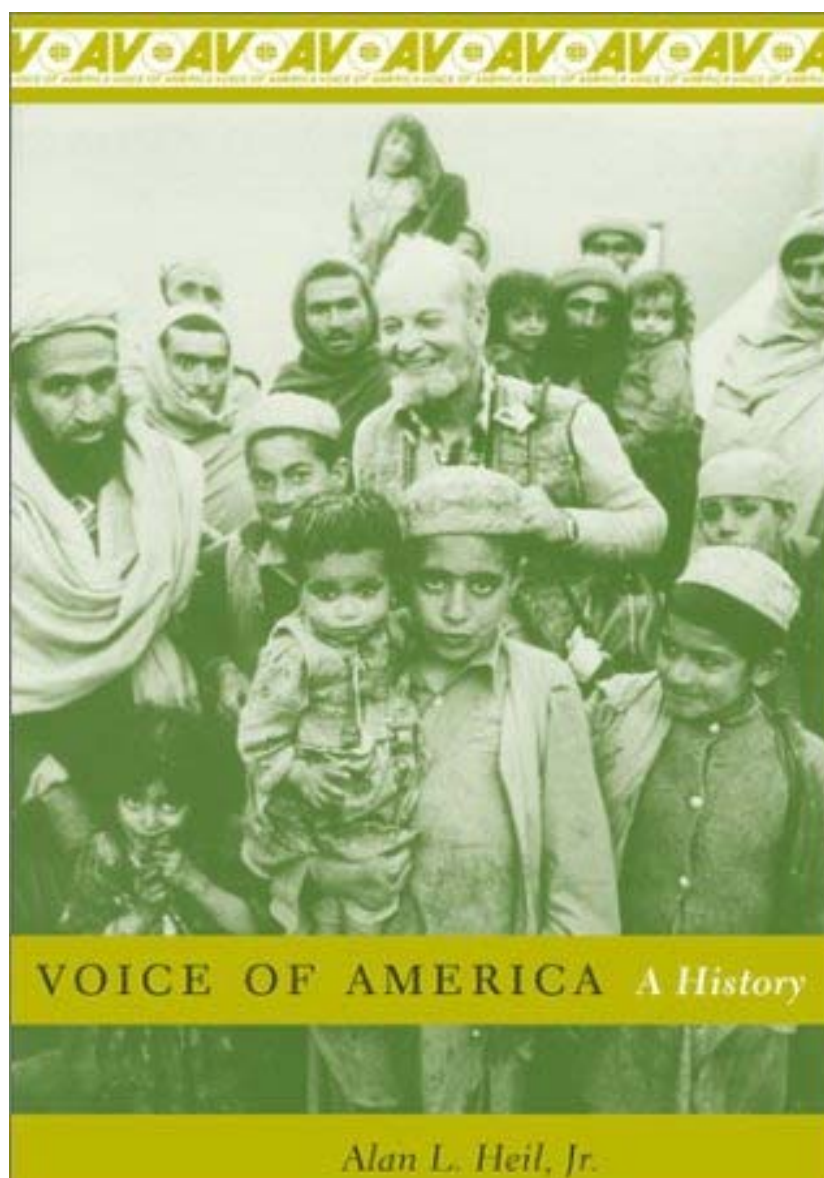
see an end to political interference in the running of the Voice on the part of current and future US administrations.

Distinctive craft

Heil peppers his account with transcripts of VOA broadcasts and personal anecdotes from dozens of VOA staff and listeners, which give this sizeable book its distinctive – and often moving or amusing – human dimension. In his “Tales of great VOA escapes” Heil describes the extraordinary backgrounds of some of the Voice’s foreign staff who have made a major contribution to its reputation over the years.

Many of Heil’s descriptions of the work at VOA apply to similar services in other countries and depict the very specific features that make international broadcasting such a distinctive craft. In particular, a meticulous respect for the specificities and sensitivities of foreign audiences and the care taken in transposing concepts and ideas in other languages and for people of different cultural backgrounds.

Over the years VOA has developed a number of unique programmes which have contributed to its popularity and to the spread of American values



abroad. Notable among these are music and VOA Special English programmes. The latter, using a vocabulary of about 1,500 words only, are read at a much slower speed than VOA's standard English programmes. Broadcast initially to overcome jamming and improve reception on short wave for news bulletins, Special English has proved very popular since going on air in 1959 and extended to a variety of other programmes.

Music, "the universal language", has contributed to VOA's reputation abroad. Heil recalls, in particular, the role played by Willis Conover in

bringing jazz to millions of listeners throughout the world, most notably in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, for over 40 years.

Unique nature

The book highlights VOA's unique nature in the US broadcasting environment: it is a genuine public service broadcaster, publicly funded and carrying out public service duties. Heil shows how, through "its incessant quest for balanced and credible news reporting", its aspiration to be a "voice for the voiceless", its efforts to assist people worldwide through a number of

humanitarian actions – special family reunification helplines for refugees in Central Africa; public health campaigns in India; human rights awareness programmes in Central America, etc. – VOA has become a "highly respected and valuable broadcaster worldwide".

"Too many VOAs?"

Today, new US-funded stations are indeed appearing (and disappearing) on a regular basis, leading at times to the closure of long-established VOA services, such as that of its respected Arabic service, replaced in April 2002 by Radio Sawa, a fast-paced mix of pop and Arabic music interspersed with short news aimed at young listeners in the Arab world. A closure which Heil – a former Middle East correspondent and director of VOA programme centres in Beirut and Cairo – obviously regrets.

Paradoxically also, the greatest threats to the Voice come from the US administrations – whose changing agenda and interference in the running of the Voice are very unsettling – and the existence of what renowned VOA media analyst Kim Andrew Elliott once described as "too many Voices of America".

The latest examples of this policy are the consecutive announcements of the closure of 10 VOA languages services and 6 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) language services broadcasting to the Baltic region, Eastern and Central Europe, and of the launch of the US-government funded Arabic-language television channel al-Hurra ("the free one") in February 2004.

The latter, described as "a beacon of light in a media market dominated by sensationalism and distortion" by Kenneth Tomlinson, the president of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the federal agency that supervises all US non-military international broadcasting, was

dismissed as “slanted, arrogant and condescending” by Arab newspapers immediately after it launched, on 14 February.

News of imminent and major cuts to VOA’s English programmes this month indicate that even the Voice’s core services are now also under threat.

These latest developments show the topicality of this book.

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www.riia.org.uk

Voice of America: a history. By Alan L. Heil, Jr. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 2003. 544pp. Index. \$37.50. ISBN 0 231 12674 3.

¹ *Dean of the Kennedy School of Government, former US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (1994-95).*

** Alan L. Heil, Jr, who spent 36 years at the Voice, beginning as a trainee newswriter to retire as deputy director after holding several positions including Middle East correspondent and chief of news and current affairs.*



Robert Bauer of VOA’s German Service in 1942



VOA's English call-in show, "Talk to America," in progress in one of VOA's Washington, D.C. studios



VOA radio and TV control room at VOA's headquarters in Washington, D.C.