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Radio New Zealand International:
A Soft And Reasonable Voice

By

John Craig
RADIO NEW ZEALAND INTERNATIONAL: A SOFT AND REASONABLE VOICE

A film comedy of the sixties THE MOUSE THAT ROARED described in an amusing and fantastical way how a tiny country triumphed against all odds. The analogy holds some truth for Radio New Zealand International... New Zealand is a tiny country, some 3.3 million people the last time we counted in this year's census (and some eighty million sheep, give or take the odd million). Radio New Zealand's Shortwave Service is a Mouse that has had an occasional roar although compared to the giants of the Shortwave Broadcasting world at best probably registers only a persistent squeak.

Perhaps a more accurate analogy would be that of a drowning man. In 1976 the Shortwave Service went under when the service was terminated, and reinstated following media and public clamour after 17 days (we in New Zealand Broadcasting are used to holding our breath for long periods waiting for government support of Public Radio). In 1982 the Service was within days of once again being turned off when it was thrown a leaking life raft which barely kept it afloat; and now in 1986 the waves are once again breaking over the head of the service.

It was in a letter written to Radio New Zealand at the time of the impending termination of the service that the term I use to title this paper A SOFT AND REASONABLE VOICE first appeared. The letter was written by Ian McFarland, then an announcer-producer of Radio Canada International's African Service. In the relevant paragraph he wrote:

"When one considers the very loud Shortwave presence of so many countries which have a political or ideological axe to grind and we hear about the plans of some other countries to put a dozen or more 500kw transmitters into operation to make good and sure that the message gets through, it is indeed very sad to hear that one of the 'soft' and more reasonable voices of the international shortwave bands is about to be silenced. What this world needs in this era of increasing international tension and ideological conflicts are more stations like Radio New Zealand on shortwave, not fewer."

When I tell you about the transmitter power of Radio New Zealand International you will understand the allusion to 'soft'. The 'reasonable' I will leave you to judge for yourself.

Shortwave broadcasting began in New Zealand in a manner which, with hindsight, had an ominous ring for the future operation of the service. Not for Radio New Zealand the purchase of brand new powerful transmitters. The then Government Department secured two war surplus 7.5 kilowatt transmitters from the departing American Armed Forces. That was in 1948. Oh well, you may think, that is a reasonable stop-gap for a small country emerging from the economic privations of the Second World War. In 1986 those same two transmitters are still in operation - just!
New Zealand International must be the only shortwave service in the world which is younger than its transmitters. The medals that could be awarded to anyone for their services to New Zealand shortwave broadcasting must be few, but if I had any they would go to the transmission engineers who keep the two transmitters happily modulating with loving care and attention. As you can imagine spares for the transmitters have long since disappeared... they make their own. The irony is that the transmitters are sited at Titahi Bay, just out of Wellington, alongside a 100kw, 60kw, and two 20kw modern domestic transmitters. Even the choice of frequency and aerial sitings are not free of hazard. As the area has become more built up over the years, the complaints of interference with domestic electronics, video recorders in particular, have forced a redisposition to less desirable configurations.

The service was originally funded by the national public broadcaster (At that time called the New Zealand Broadcasting Service; then New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation. It is presently operated by Radio New Zealand, a service of the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand, which also operates two domestic non-commercial networks and over 30 commercial talk-based and contemporary music stations). In 1975 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took over responsibility for the shortwave funding from the Grant-in-Aid Vote. Well, they did for a year and when they withdrew, the 17 day period of dead air I referred to earlier ensued when the Broadcasting Corporation Board announced that it couldn't continue the service. The Foreign Affairs funding was reinstated and lasted six years this time until it became a casualty of an across the board 3% reduction in Government expenditure. The Foreign Affairs reaction is understandable when it is realised that the cost of running the shortwave service took a sizeable bite out of their Grant-in-Aid funds. The Ministry has always supported the aims and objectives of the service, but has argued that it should be funded directly by government or through Foreign Affairs by a vote additional to the present level. That argument continues to this day. The reprieve in 1982 came from the Broadcasting Corporation which didn't ultimately feel justified in terminating the service and abrogating New Zealand's claim to the frequencies used, perhaps permanently. Since that time the Corporation has continued to make a case and press the government for funding, while resolving annually to allocate the bare minimum necessary to modulate the transmitters with a sustaining programme feed.

The Shortwave Service was started with the simple aim of representing to listeners abroad an accurate picture of life in New Zealand. The broad objectives today are to provide programmes which will attract an overseas audience for the purpose of further developing an international awareness of New Zealand and a New Zealand identity. The aim is to reflect the realities and quality of New Zealand life and culture, national interests and policies, and diverse viewpoints on national and international affairs. Other motives for maintaining a service are shared with all shortwave broadcasters, particularly keeping in touch with nationals abroad; prompting understanding between nations; disseminating news with accuracy and objectivity;
fostering the national culture and reserving places on the broadcasting spectrum against future needs. Additionally, as New Zealand is very much a South Pacific nation, the service (or at least a redeveloped service would have the ability to) supports the government’s South Pacific Priorities:

- To encourage the development and strengthening of New Zealand links with the South Pacific countries for mutual benefit.
- To assist the South Pacific countries to promote the economic and social development of their people.
- To create within the Pacific Islands countries a climate of good will and understanding in which decisions affecting New Zealand will be taken.

The primary target area has always been the Polynesian Pacific Region, Melanesian countries and Australia. Depending on the vagaries of international reception well known to broadcasters the transmission from those 'soft' 7.5kw transmitters are regularly heard in many other parts of the world, in particular Japan, USA and Europe... sometimes with remarkable clarity. I have always treasured the image of a devoted American fan barreling along the freeways of California with tapes of the shortwave service transmission blaring from his stereo with his bumper emblazoned with a self-produced sticker proclaiming "I listen to Radio New Zealand International". That actually happened and must really have puzzled the natives! Inevitably, a gradual deterioration in the reception quality has been recorded over the years. This is due to a combination of the ageing of the transmitters and the rapid growth in the power and numbers of other country’s transmissions in the shortwave bands, the details of which have been well-documented.

The programme content of Radio New Zealand's transmissions currently is probably unique among international broadcasters and is certainly no cause for pride. Referring back to the 1982 decision of the Broadcasting Corporation to maintain the Service at subsistence level, that is exactly what happened. The transmissions consist entirely of the relay of a domestic network, principally Radio New Zealand's National Programme, which is a News Current Affairs and Information-based programming strand. Naturally the language is English, although there is a daily news and magazine segment in the Samoan, Niuean, Tongan and Cook Islands languages. The total transmission hours are 21 hours daily in four main blocks, morning, midday, early evening and late evening with the transmitters split between the South Pacific Central Service Area and the Pacific West, Australia, Papua New Guinea Service Area. The five frequencies used are in the 16, 19, 25, 31 and 49 metre bands.

So the shortwave transmissions programme content is decided by the programmers of the domestic network.

Morning
- News, Current Affairs & Sports
Midday
- News, Current Affairs, Rurals, Children's programmes
Early Evening
- News, Current Affairs, Light Entertainment and News and Magazines in Pacific Island Languages
Late Evening
- News and Light Entertainment
Language instruction also occurs inadvertently in the daily programmes from the Correspondence School produced by the Department of Education. The languages covered in addition to English are Maori, French, German and Japanese. The Education Department provides text materials to its registered pupils.

Now we come to the question of staffing and it's here that I must ask you to suspend disbelief, or at least keep audible sounds of mirth down to a reasonable level. I will solemnly work through the East West Centre's checklist for this paper.

**Question:** How is your organisation structured?
**Answer:** As Controller of Programmes for Radio New Zealand's general programming, I am responsible to the Director General for the shortwave service.

**Question:** What and how many departments?
**Answer:** Ah, the hard questions first. Please refer to the answer to the next question.

**Question:** How many individuals are employed?
**Answer:** One.

**Question:** Do you have branches, offices or relay stations in other countries?
**Answer:** No. However, we do have a very efficient monitoring service reporting from the USA, Papua New Guinea, Australia, Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga and Western Samoa, which enables the transmission engineers to achieve the surprising results they do with the ancient transmitters.

I should mention the name of the lone staffer, Rudi Hill, who knows the Pacific Islands and the needs of the Pacific Islands stations in particular and in return is well-known and respected in the area. Rudi is in fact past normal retiring age (like the transmitters) but he stays on in a caretaker capacity living on the hope, as we all do, of, of someday seeing the beginning of an upgrading of the service he loves. Although this conference is devoted to shortwave broadcasting it is worth mentioning in passing that Rudi masterminds the packaging and production of some 13 programmes for weekly dispatch to the Pacific Island stations through Radio New Zealand International’s tape transcription service. The programmes include Current Affairs, Sport, Religious Programmes, Pop and other Music programmes and notably PACIFIC LINK, a programme in which Radio New Zealand facilitates the islands to talk to themselves. Each island station contributing files a weekly piece to Wellington. Rudi compiles a 30 minutes programme from the pieces which is then re-fed to the stations. This venture has won consistent plaudits. Also included in the tape transcription service are a range of newsletters in the vernacular languages. Ten stations place an average of 4 hours each, weekly of this transcription material in their schedules.
Now to funding. As I mentioned the original funding was by the Broadcasting Service, derived from a domestic licence fee; then for 7 years it was taken over by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and when that lapsed, funding again became the responsibility of the Broadcasting Corporation, in practice from Radio New Zealand's operational budget. The domestic non-commercial or social services of the Broadcasting Corporation are in theory funded by the licence fee. I say in theory because for many years now the level of the licence fee has been grossly inadequate to fund the capital investment programme and operating budgets of the non-commercial services. The system has remained workable only because the non-revenue earning activities have been subsidised by the profits of commercial radio (and Television).

In summary, the shortwave service is in its present state of stagnancy because the level of licence fee funding is insufficient to support it and in any case there is a real problem in asking New Zealanders to pay a domestic licence fee which can be used in part to finance shortwave radio, from which they get no direct benefits. True, the country does, but isn't that the argument in favour of government funding?

I want now to have a brief look at the topic of audience research - Brief, because there is not much point in undertaking audience research if you are not broadcasting a purpose-built shortwave service and are unable to respond to audience preferences anyway. Radio New Zealand has developed considerable expertise in its audience research for domestic programming and would be able to use the methodology to good effect for international broadcasting when warranted. The last time a serious survey was carried out a good range of important programme considerations were isolated and incorporated into the plans for upgrading the service. Although there is no formal audience research and although the programme content is severely restricted by being domestic rather than international in character, there is still a steady stream of correspondence and phone calls all of which receive a personal answer. Although most correspondents are invariably polite, if not to say kind, occasionally a few home truths fall out of the mailbag:

"Dear Sir
The time has finally come; for me to write and express my opinions and aural observations of Radio New Zealand's Shortwave Service.
Basically it stinks.
Having said that allow me to augment. I have been sailing the South West Pacific in a number of vessels as Chief Officer and Master for the last 7 years... Over this period I have been an ardent DXer having particular interest in New Zealand events... Bitterly frustrating, annoying, sickening, disappointing and embarrassing are some of the more polite descriptions I use to describe the service. Your transmission power and frequency range are quite inadequate. The only transmissions we seem to get reliably are the bird calls... Please do not think of me as being a cynic but as an average DXer giving a realistic appraisal.

I remain, yours sincerely, as a patriot and an optimist."
Unfortunately, the inadequacies remain and one would have to be a super optimist to feel at all hopeful about the future. Before leaving the subject I should note that there is still a Radio New Zealand Listeners Club in Tokyo, comprised of hardy souls who formed their association in the days when a very popular Japanese language programme featured in the schedule; that monitors in several countries report on signal quality; that listeners do not, a but DXers often do including the correspondent previously referred to.

And so to future plans. Considering the history of the shortwave service you must pardon me if I straighten up just a little; if a gleam comes into my eye; if I speak just a little quicker, allowing myself the rare luxury of talking about what could be... what could happen if...

The two main ingredients of an upgraded shortwave service are the development of adequate transmitting facilities and establishment of a staff with the range of skills necessary to once again produce purpose-built programmes for the target areas of transmission.

Any installation of higher powered equipment at the present transmitting site at Titahi Bay is impracticable and undesirable as intermodulation problems already exist and Television and Video recorder interference is a problem for adjacent housing areas. Propagation consultants have found that serious distortion is experienced from the existing arrays and that the site is ineffectual, and after a nationwide survey have recommended the middle of the North Island in an area known as Rangataiki.

The coverage development is intended to be in two stages:

1. Stage One: All of the South Pacific Islands; Australia; Papua New Guinea and parts of Malaysia.

2. Stage Two: South Pacific-West; Malaysia; Japan; China; Pacific Coast of North America; South America; Middle East; Europe.

The project would require a two year lead time for Stage One. Whether Stage Two was ever proceeded with would depend on New Zealand’s political and foreign trade policy. As a Pacific nation, it is Stage One which has the clear and obvious priority.

On the programme side there is a basic need to establish a Shortwave News Service, which is particularly relevant to the South Pacific countries. There is a considerable community of interest between the South Pacific Countries and New Zealand with its large Islander population, and we are given to understand by the island stations, that Radio New Zealand news would once again feature regularly in their schedules just as soon as a reliable signal can be received. Programmes targeted to the specific countries would address the need for regional content and explanation necessary for an overseas audience. Daily news and general programmes in each of the island vernacular languages would be developed again, coupled with the aim of introducing a number of news summaries in pidgin (for the Solomons and Papua New Guinea) French, Malay, Japanese, Cantonese and Mandarin.
In general the spoken programmes would reflect:

- The history and background of the country, the culture and traditions of the Maori people, the European, the new settlers and immigrants, and the development of the country.
- New Zealand as a holiday venue with geographical, historical and tourist information.
- New Zealand life styles, trade, rural and agricultural development, manufacturing, South Pacific magazine and documentary support programmes.
- Suitable material scheduled from the domestic networks.

An extra dimension is sport which even with the less than satisfactory present reception is in high demand when important sport, particularly big rugby and cricket matches are being played in New Zealand. Improved transmission would enable Radio New Zealand sports broadcasters to play a much greater part in Pan Pacific events such as the Pacific Games and in providing high quality coverage of international events such as Olympic and Commonwealth Games which the island stations cannot afford to cover extensively.

It would be important to consult with the island broadcasters to identify their needs, as the greater proportion of the Pacific audience is reached from rebroadcasting by local stations.

Are any of these development plans achievable? Not without government support. When we last did the sums in 1984 Stage One as I outlined it had an estimated capital cost of $3.2M, remarkably modest, while Stage Two had a capital price tag of $9.3M. Annual operational costs would be less than $1M. The Corporation has made cases for the upgrading of the system to successive governments, the latest, which seemed to have a fair chance of success, in recent months. New Zealand is experiencing a period of significant economic and social change including the corporatisation of many government enterprises with a clear division between trading and social services. User pays is the catch cry! Public broadcasting in the country is being caught up in this with the government requiring the Broadcasting Corporation to pay a dividend from this year onward, and although great care has been taken to make it clear that the money sought for shortwave is not for the furtherance of Broadcasting's objectives but rather the country's, it is inevitable that the view in Government circles is of a social service which will require indefinite government funding. Again I find it hard to be cheerful about the prospect of government support. How will it all end? Not with a bang, but with gradual demodulation?

A further option for New Zealand's communication to the Pacific Islands is by way of satellite distribution. There are development plans for Television New Zealand, Radio New Zealand's sister service within the Broadcasting Corporation to begin an experimental service to the South Pacific and it would then be economical to piggy-back Radio New Zealand International programmes on the transmission. This is not truly international broadcasting in the sense that 3 metre dishes would be required to receive the programmes, so the South Pacific stations would have to invest in the equipment necessary and would then
re-broadcast selected items only. Or Radio New Zealand would have to establish satellite-fed AM or FM stations in each island. This option has not been costed in detail but it seems likely that for some time to come shortwave broadcasting will still be the most cost-effective way for New Zealand to talk to the South Pacific.

No doubt with the growth of international television there will be changes to the character of shortwave broadcasting, but I feel equally that there is no doubt that shortwave radio will survive in the way that radio survives and prospers domestically in our own countries in the face of the challenges for the leisure and information-seeking time of the available audience... television, cable television, tele and videotext video recorders, digital audio technology and all the other innovations of the present and future. This must be even more valid at this current stage of development of the Pacific Island countries.

We must be sure and we must communicate our certainty to governments that shortwave broadcasting is alive and well and a valid medium into the 21st century and beyond. No broadcaster would broadcast internationally without a strong belief that the country's interests are being served. This self-interest of countries shows itself in different ways in the transmissions ranging from overt propaganda to more subtle expressions with freer access for a whole array of ideas and ideals. Radio New Zealand International has still to position itself on that spectrum of self-interest.

A report of a Committee on Broadcasting, called the Adam Report, commissioned by the NZ Government said:

"For the 25 years they have operated, New Zealand's external broadcasting services have been too low powered to be effective. More powerful transmitters and an overall improvement in programming for the services would enable New Zealand to begin developing a radio audience in the South Pacific, an objective that has so far been largely beyond reach. The present situation is thus that much of the South Pacific, the area successive New Zealand Governments have described as the one of primary concern for their foreign policies, has gone without being able to receive overseas broadcasts regularly from New Zealand. Although well placed to transmit a dependable broadcasting service to the area, New Zealand has not so far done so adequately, despite the quarter of a century spent in operating shortwave transmitters. Pacific Island stations, as a consequence, have long given up their attempts to relay broadcasts from New Zealand, especially news bulletins. Unless improvements are made New Zealand will continue to have no established and regular radio audience in the Pacific."

That was in 1973... 13 years ago. It is chastening for New Zealand to find that in shortwave broadcasting in 1986 nothing has changed!