

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The Incredible Shrinking Voice of America ^[1]

In the classic 1957 film "The Incredible Shrinking Man," the character played by actor Grant Williams is enveloped by curious fog while anchored on his small boat. Within days, his clothes begin to loosen and he gets smaller by the hour. "I was continuing to shrink, to become...what? Would others follow me?" he wondered.

Yes, others would follow. The Voice of America would follow.

The VOA is shrinking almost by the hour, from an odd cloud in the Cohen Building in downtown Washington, D.C. The molecule-shrinking mist is identified by today's technology as coming from down the hall in the Cohen Building, wafting into the VOA's studios from the nearby offices of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees the VOA, and wants to cut its English language "News Now" program service.

"For what?" the Voice of America might ask.

"To help pay for a new VOA television service for Iran," is the answer.

"Can you imagine the BBC cutting its English language news?"

"Of course not. The BBC will go on the air next year with its huge new Arabic television service to the Middle East, but it will cut ten other language services to help pay for it, not English. The World Service radio in English won't be touched."

"So why can't the VOA pay for its new television service to Iran and keep me, its English service, like the Brits have theirs?"

"The BBG thinks the audience for English language shortwave broadcasts is too small. They feel it's obsolete and a relic of the Cold War, and something's got to go to pay the Middle East broadcasting bill."

"Well, isn't the BBG a relic of the Cold War? Why not eliminate the BBG too, since it's a relic of the Cold War like me?"

"You have a point, VOA. But some would say that the BBG really came into being only in 1999, to oversee all U.S. non-military broadcasts when they were thrown together after the U.S. Information Agency was disbanded. Others would argue that it's just another acronym to replace the Cold War era Board for International Broadcasting, which administered grants and acted as a firewall to protect Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty from government influence."

"Let me get this straight. The firewall is to keep me protected. And if the BBG is to administer grants and act as a firewall, why are they making program decisions? Does it really make sense to eliminate the flagship service of the VOA, while others, like Russia, China, and even France, are just starting English television news channels so

they can tout themselves to the world in English? Have I left anyone out?"

"Al-Jazeera."

"Of course. And after several delays, it looks as if Al-Jazeera's English news channel will finally start broadcasting in May. It has a big new help wanted ad in *The Washington Post* listing a bunch of jobs it needs to fill for its Washington, D.C. bureau."

"So when the VOA's English "News Now" program service goes dark, some of its staff may wind up across town working for Al-Jazeera?"

"You can bet on it. Now let me make another point. Some decisions don't stand the test of time. You mentioned the U.S. Information Agency that went belly up after the Cold War. Things would have been a lot different after 9/11 if that old war horse had been around to communicate abroad. Like the USIA, it took decades to build VOA English, and once it's gone, it will take another decade to build it up again. And next month National Public Radio replaces the VOA in Berlin, Germany, so folks can drive the Autobahn and listen to "Fresh Air" and "Car Talk," and not to me, "News Now." My old boss, Kevin Klose, heads up NPR, and pretty soon he'll own Berlin. I've been broadcasting in Berlin since after World War II, and now I'm stuck in the Cohen Building. I'm getting misty."

"Cheer up. I just thought of something. Now that satellite radio is becoming so popular in the U.S., why does VOA "News Now" have to be shortwave, or medium wave or FM? Why can't it be satellite radio in cars, on iPods and all that?"

"Right, and that's not even thinking out of the box, which is what the BBG ought to be doing. But listen, I don't think I want to be in this movie any more. The incredible shrinking man wound up living in a doll house, then a match box, and was chased by his cat."

"Not to worry, VOA. You give the master class in winning wars of ideas. Just wait them out."