

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

TV/Radio Marti Boost Their Volume to Cuba, Expanding Their Services ^[1]

MIAMI, Fla. -- TV and Radio Marti may have finally come of age. They are now beamed into Cuba by Miami's runaway powerhouse Spanish language station, and on DirecTV to circumvent the Castro government's broadcast jamming. With Fidel Castro's decline from power, could expansion of the Martis throughout Latin America be on the horizon?

You've got to be kidding, you say? Not so fast.

It was an ignominious debut for the U.S. government's broadcast services to Cuba in the mid- and late 1980s, when program offerings were often laughable and embarrassing, especially on the TV side. Through the intervening years I have attempted, as objectively as possible, to chronicle the Martis' efforts in several articles and a book.

Programs on TV Marti in its formative stage included re-runs of old sitcoms such as Spanish-language versions of the "Gong Show" and "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." The broadcasts were beamed only from a helium balloon nicknamed "Fat Albert," that would deflate into Everglade mangrove swamps. Radio Marti has been frequently tagged by critics as being in the pocket of Miami's Cuban exiles.

But a fair observation in 2007 is that the new Martis have emerged from their elongated, painful learning curve of some 20-years, and are now producing news and information programs in expanded formats that rate placement on commercial broadcast facilities, and big ones, that want programs that attract audiences.

Two local Miami stations have begun to transmit news programs from the U.S. government-sponsored Radio and TV Marti services to Fidel Castro's Cuba, just 90-miles off the southern tip of Florida.

An hour of Radio Marti's news programs are carried each night, midnight to 1:00AM, by Miami's most popular Spanish language station, Radio Mambi (WAQI-710AM), which blankets the island of Cuba with its 50,000 watt signal, although it's jammed in Havana. A low-power Miami TV channel, WPMF-TV, Channel 38, carries TV Marti's half-hour early and late evening newscasts, but the channel is also carried on DirecTV, which is pirated by many Cuban civilians. The Marti news programs fit comfortably into the formats of the commercial stations, with the attractive young anchors who were born long after Castro came to power.

The Martis pay fees through the U.S. government's Office of Cuba Broadcasting to have their programs carried. In six-month contracts, Radio Mambi receives \$182,500, and WPMF-TV \$195,000. The two distributor stations can receive additional revenue through the sale of commercial spots.

Some observers suggest that the arrangement with the Miami stations may violate the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act

that prohibits U.S. government-funded broadcasts meant for overseas audiences to be carried domestically. Representative William Delahunt, D-Mass., the incoming chairman of a sub-committee of the House International Relations Committee, is to launch an investigation of the Martis and hold hearings soon.

But the domestic availability of the Martis in Miami is incidental to the Marti mission of bringing all the news to Cuba. Now for the first time the Martis have private sector help to cut through Castro's jamming to increase audience, and play a greater role when Cuba must adjust to life after Castro.

Smith-Mundt was also enacted after due pressure from US commercial stations in 1948, who convinced Washington lawmakers that the tax supported Voice of America should not compete with domestic private stations, which no longer seems to be the case.

Additionally, a 2005 modification of this act permits the leasing of commercial broadcast facilities when a sufficient level of signal jamming occurs to prevent stations from reaching their intended audiences, and Castro's government jams incoming signals full time.

U.S. government broadcast spokesperson Larry Hart tells Worldcasting that "Castro has gone to extraordinary lengths to jam broadcasts some writers have said are useless.

"Engineers estimate the electricity poor country utilizes 8.5 million watts (8.5 Mw) an hour to jam both radio and TV, enough to power a small industrialized city. Also, the charge in some stories that the contract with Radio Mambi is some kind of political payoff is ridiculous. This is the only Spanish language AM that has a 50,000 watt nighttime signal."

The next logical step for Radio and TV Marti, after Castro, would be to expand their program services throughout Latin America, a vast region long-neglected by U.S. international broadcasting. Everything is in place: a broadcast headquarters in Miami, the recognized U.S. gateway to Latin America, from state-of-the-art broadcast facilities, a production and news staff trained by world-class consultants, and a sound footing in signal distribution from private sector broadcasters.

The first order of business would be to take on Venezuela's dictator Hugo Chavez, who started a TV satellite channel of his own called Telesur, that can be seen throughout Latin America, and plans to shutter a competing opposition station.

Discussions regarding such innovative tasks for the Martis along with a serious rewrite of the Smith-Mundt Act would make for productive sessions at the upcoming congressional hearings.