

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Stirrings to Extend TV and Radio Marti's Live Digital Broadcasts ^[1]

Miami, Fla. -- Worldcasting's suggestion in an earlier posting that TV and Radio Marti programs be produced for all of Latin America -- not only for Cuba in a post-Fidel Castro world -- is receiving guarded reaction in Washington, DC.

At the U.S. government's Office of Cuba Broadcasting studios here in Miami, where the Martis are headquartered, senior news executives politely refuse to comment on our idea that their broadcast portfolio be expanded throughout the Southern hemisphere. They direct us to Washington, DC and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees the U.S. government's non-military broadcast services -- including the Martis -- after budget approval from Congress.

Worldcasting has learned that while at least one of the BBG's nine members endorses our concept of broadening TV and Radio Marti programs to include lands beyond Cuba, we were reminded that Voice of America already has a broadcast service for Latin America.

While this is so, VOA's Latin American service operates with a meager annual budget of \$4.6 million, which "includes a popular Creole service to Haiti," says the BBG, compared to the \$37.5 million budgeted annually for the Office of Cuba Broadcasting.

Another difference is that the two international broadcast services are built on different models.

The model for VOA's Latin American service was fashioned in the 1990s. Its concept was, and is, that programs are produced mainly for placement on "affiliate" stations in friendly countries, rather than going directly to listeners and viewers in nations abroad with oppressed democracies, and where broadcasts by indigenous state-run systems would not be available for the transmission of U.S. government programs. "Although shortwave is used, most of the listening audience comes from affiliates," Worldcasting is informed by BBG spokesperson Larry Hart.

Joshua Fouts, VOA Deputy Chief-of-Staff in the 1990s said, "We worked on syndicating VOA to local FM affiliates throughout the country by giving them satellite transponders to pick up VOA's programming." Fouts, now the director of the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy, continued: "The Latin American service was still strong in Spanish and Creole, but on the decline in Portuguese to Brazil, which, though it still had state run evening news every night at 6, was considered a maturing democracy."

Today the placement of programs on affiliate stations remains the norm for VOA's Latin American broadcast service. "The (VOA) radio programs have a wide audience on affiliates downloaded from satellite," contends the BBG's Larry Hart. "The ability to expand TV rests on

funding, not desire."

Today's challenge is reaching audiences in areas where state leaders are not friendly toward the U.S. and do not promote democratic values. Such areas include Venezuela, whose President Hugo Chavez, a Fidel Castro disciple, has seized control of his nation's oil industry and says he intends to nationalize his country's electricity and telecommunications industries. The new president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, a follower of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, likewise plans to assert himself into the country's private sector. The new president of Nicaragua, left-leaning Daniel Ortega, met in mid-January with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who also visited on his Latin American trip with Presidents Chavez, and Correa. The new president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, also fashions himself after Castro.

There are several reasons why the Martis are well-positioned to take the lead for U.S. government international broadcasting in Latin America:

- * Miami, headquarters for the Martis, has the largest percentage of immigrants, at 60%, than any city in the world and is the U.S. gateway to Latin America.
- * Miami's sub-tropical climate is a draw for many who trade-off traditionally lower wage scales in return for a pleasant lifestyle. The Martis' federal civil service wage schedules, and government job stability, are a draw to skilled broadcast professional with strong resumes who work there.
- * Marti technicians and news personnel have experimented for some two-decades on how to penetrate Castro's broadcast jamming devices to reach out directly to the people of Cuba. Applying this know-how from Miami to a Latin American-wide audience is a logical next step.
- * Castro would not take the hugely expensive and intensive efforts to block the Martis' broadcast signals from reaching Havana if they were not doing their job.
- * There is evidence that U.S. government and commercial broadcast signals are freely accessible to the rest of the island outside Havana where signals are not jammed.
- * The commercial, satellite- delivered DirecTV now provides access to Cuba by TV Marti, and could be extended throughout Latin America with the flick of a switch. Satellite signals beamed from space are difficult to jam -- more so than terrestrial radio signals, for example -- and satellites carry hundreds of channels from countries around the world, which would not take kindly to someone messing with the satellite which they use.

The distribution of Martis' programs could be enhanced via additional digital channels to Latin America, Worldcasting is told by Don Mansfield, Radio Marti's chief of technical operations. "Additional (broadcast) channels could be easily added to the transmission path," says Mansfield. "Our digital audio editing and playback system can easily handle one or two more language services and be very easily (and cheaply) expanded." He adds that there are "additional audio channels on our Hispasat (satellite) signal that could be used to add other services or a news network feed to Latin America."

It is time to address the VOA's 1990s model for reaching the Latin American public.

The next installment of Worldcasting will examine the highly competitive Latin American international broadcast marketplace, and how TV and Radio Marti could expect to compete.
