

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The English Invasion ^[1]

The latest international television satellite channel, Russia Today, debuted this week, after securing a bank loan of \$30 million to cover start up costs. It will broadcast in English, as do satellite networks from the BBC, the Chinese government, and the proposed Al Jazeera channel. The satellite news bandwagon is getting more crowded all the time and English will be the language of choice as new channels develop.

Russia Today is a 24/7 all-news channel, with a staff of more than 300. It began beaming English-language programs to the United States, Europe and Asia to provide a modern-day image of President Vladimir Putin's Russian Bear. The language is not the only import at Russia Today - the network is also built on the BBC and U.S. government broadcast models. An independent Board of Governors oversees the broadcast services and provides a firewall to keep the government from influencing news content and ensure objectivity. Seventy-two non-Russian journalists, including many Americans and Britons, are on the news staff to give the network a coveted international flair.

Russian news is simply the latest example of English rapidly becoming the "in" language in international satellite television. Other languages - Russian, Chinese, even French - are passé in this medium, and Arabic is only now beginning to gain steam. Content and presentation of the English-language channels are usually developed by American and British mercenaries, who are making a cottage industry of getting the networks off the ground and on the air. CNN International has long been on the air around the world, but it targets the most "influential" 10 percent of the world's population who speak English and are often traveling and watch in hotel rooms and airports. The newcomers to the English-language satellite business want to reach a mass audience in the United States and around the world - a lofty goal in a risky and competitive market filled with long-established channels.

Al Jazeera's English-language channel will be beamed to the United States and Australia and is planning to broadcast in 2006. That service is also top heavy with British and American news teams, including professionals with impressive news credentials, such as Editor Kieren Baker, formerly of CNN, and Managing Director Nigel Parsons, formerly of the BBC and Associated Press Television News. British talk show icon Sir David Frost will be Al Jazeera International's top news interview personality and Josh Rushing, a former U.S. Marine public affairs officer in Iraq, will report from Al Jazeera's Washington, D.C., bureau. Two of the four primary news bureaus will be located in Washington and London.

As predicted, because Al Jazeera's Arabic channel rose to world prominence with the help of its Bin Laden and kidnapper videos, cable systems in America have been loath to sign agreements with the controversial channel. If the network does not have access to large audiences in the most influential country and richest commercial market in the world, they will be crippled from the outset. They have failed to make any deals with American carriers as of yet, but Al Jazeera's desire to be a major player in the West in general, and Washington, D.C., in particular, seems to outweigh the risks in their minds. They are refusing to be left behind in

the English-language craze and are slated to launch in the spring.

China's new English-language television news channel is all the rage in South Africa, reported Adam Powell, a senior fellow at the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy. Powell, who recently attended an international broadcast conference in Nairobi, Kenya, said, "China is making its move on TV. As with CNN and the BBC, CCTV9 - the English-language news channel - is on in hotels in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Nairobi. And now, as with CNN and the BBC, African 'terrestrial' broadcasters are carrying CCTV9. It's on right now on KBC - Kenya's government-owned BBC look-alike. The global broadcasters here are buzzing about it. They say it has caught the U.S. unawares, burying [Voice of America] TV - and bumping it from multi-channel platforms and hotel rooms."

More efforts to reach into Africa via television could be in the works soon. A report by an independent task force sponsored by America's Council on Foreign Relations notes that "Africa is of growing international importance, playing an increasingly significant role in supplying energy, preventing the spread of terrorism, and halting the devastation of HIV/AIDS," and that "40% of African states are now electoral democracies." Can additional English language channels be far behind?

The French, however, have ignored the trend. The government's plan for an international channel is modeled after CNN International's quest for elite audiences, but will be for French-speaking travelers. They will be able to view programs expressing "French values and vision to the world," said President Jacques Chirac.

Additionally, the BBC, which has had its own international World Service television channel in English for some time, will debut its new Arabic television service in the year 2007.

But despite these few anomalies, global news of the future will largely be reported in English and conceived by Americans and the British. English-language programming will come out of Beijing, Moscow, Atlanta, Cape Town, Qatar, Washington, Kuala Lumpur, London and elsewhere, and be transported to tiny villages, plush hotel rooms, government offices, airports, cafes, teeming marketplaces, and I-Pods everywhere.

What Voltaire said in 1761 stands the test of time in today's instant communication age: "The first among languages is that which possesses the largest number of excellent works."

Archived Comments

helmut bracke on December 30, 2005 @ 10:50 am:

Very informative article.

I hope that global news will eventually be influenced by the acceptance of positive voices from Africa, the Middle East and the Orient.

Gary Thomas on January 31, 2006 @ 6:26 am:

Then why, pray tell, is VOA whittling away at English broadcast hours, with more cuts in English airtime expected?

kassim mohamed on March 8, 2006 @ 4:04 am:

brilliant idea, go! go...for the best.
