

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 28 (2001)
Heft: 4

Artikel: From SRI to swissinfo
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906698>

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From SRI to swissinfo

In March of this year swissinfo/Swiss Radio International (SRI) advised listeners worldwide that its short-wave radio broadcasts were to be gradually phased out by the end of 2004. In addition, all satellite transmissions with the exception of an English-language programme will be discontinued by the end of 2001. swissinfo/SRI operations are now focused on the Internet portal www.swissinfo.org. Nicolas D. Lombard, director of swissinfo/Swiss Radio International, explains the reasons behind this new strategic thrust.

Why this sudden love affair with the Internet?

Nicolas D. Lombard: Short-wave listening has declined significantly in recent years. Moreover, analog short-wave transmission is extremely expensive and the transmission quality is poor. So we had to think of a way round this. At the same time the new medium of the Internet was taking off. This is the real reason why we decided to focus our activities on a multimedia tool, www.swissinfo.org.

So why keep only one satellite radio programme in English?

Nicolas D. Lombard: Our friends in the SRG SSR regions – Schweizer Radio DRS, Radio Suisse Romande, Radio Svizzera di Lingua Italiana – transmit throughout Europe by satellite, providing easy access and good reception from the Arctic Circle to North Africa. So why should we also need to maintain a presence here with German, French and Italian-language pro-

grammes? On the other hand, we are the only ones at SRG who produce programmes in English. We have no desire to give up our "radio know-how" just because we are doing away with satellites. Nor do I want to lose out on this knowledge in other languages, particularly those with larger editorial teams. On the contrary: it should be fostered!

Can you envisage SRI using other broadcasting media in the future, such as digital short wave?

Nicolas D. Lombard: This is a major issue with us. We are now a member of the DRM (Digital Radio Mondial) consortium which conducts digital short-wave trials. Digital short wave has the advantage that it is much cheaper and the quality is much better. So obviously we should take a close look at such developments. This is where our "radio know-how" is needed. It is certainly conceivable that we will use such instruments in future. We are not aiming to operate any 24-hour radio programmes, as previously envisaged in our strategy. We are carefully weighing up the pros and cons of broadcasting smaller productions via digital short wave as opposed to linking up directly with digital satellites. For instance, as a customer of the World Radio Network we can transmit to Africa and soon also to Asia via the WorldSpace satellites. At the moment we broadcast for half an hour in English four times a day and for half an hour in German three times a day. This may well be expanded.

Until such time, swissinfo/SRI will be focusing primarily on

its Internet multimedia offerings. But not everyone is happy with this; often the lack of access by poorer regions and by mobile recipients is criticised.

Nicolas D. Lombard: When you move from one medium to another, you are bound to anger some who have been loyal listeners and enjoyed your service over the years. We are fully aware that the interactive multimedia offerings we are expanding are not the same as radio. While we don't want to simply forget the rest, we do aim to set a new accent. Why? Because our multimedia news and information platform www.swissinfo.org offers a fantastic opportunity to familiarise a foreign public as well as Swiss nationals abroad with Swiss affairs in ways in which radio alone is incapable.

Is the emphasis on the Internet practical in view of the fact that this medium is still far from accessible to everyone?

Nicolas D. Lombard: We are also accused of once more catering to the "haves" and neglecting the "have-nots". This is true, but the fact is that we have always been forced to do this due to the lack of options. To give a simple example: During the heyday of analog short-wave broadcasting, we produced special programmes for Africa in French and English. But what about Swahili, one of the major African languages? We did not include this language because we did not have the resources. So we used an instrument which even then was aimed at an upper class rather than the broad public. We have always tended to aim our strategy at opinion-formers who will spread our message.

Name three good reasons why Swiss Abroad should log on to www.swissinfo.org.

Nicolas D. Lombard: I could name lots, but I'll limit myself to the most important ones. First: As a Swiss Abroad you acquire an unparalleled volume of information which is far better than anything we could provide via short wave. Second: The Internet pages cover not only journalistic reports on the latest news, but also a huge raft of services on all things Swiss. This would not be possible over radio, whereas at www.swissinfo.org a wonderful variety of services can be viewed. Third: With swissinfo as a medium we have the chance to address specific Swiss Abroad needs and inform our compatriots abroad on all the issues in which they are particularly interested, for example votes, elections, AHV problems. The mass medium of radio would not be able to address this task.

But let me name another reason, which I like to think of as the icing on the cake: the huge advantage of the Internet is that you can access the latest Swiss news 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, irrespective of where you are.

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