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"Switzerland needs Swissinfo"

It's not only politicians who are against the planned dismantling of Swissinfo. Renzo Respini, member of the board of directors of swissinfo/SRI, is at pains to understand the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation's decision.

"Swiss Review:" *Can Switzerland afford to do without a media presence abroad?*

Renzo Respini: The Swiss government actively participates in the UN, has involvements in the Middle East, promotes development cooperation on several continents, et cetera. Moreover, our country earns every second franc abroad. The government wants to promote our country as a centre of business, and Swiss companies are increasingly operating in Asian markets. Unquestionably, therefore, Switzerland needs a professional outward-looking media presence that presents and provides information on our country around the world.

Has discontinuing the short-wave radio service already proved a mistake?

The short-wave service and the traditional daily satellite radio broadcasts fell victim to cost-cutting measures. Swissinfo had no other choice: there was no more money to continue paying for expensive radio channels. Swissinfo management decided to use the remaining cash for journalists and to establish the Internet as the main medium. The annual budget has now shrunk from CHF 45 million to CHF 28 million. Yet last year, another 26 jobs had to be shed due to parliament's budgetary measures. Now, thank goodness, when the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation is planning to make further cuts, politicians are rallying to the cause.

What would the country lose if Swissinfo were dismantled in line with the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation's plans?

Switzerland's international voice would fall silent. Because the few English journalists that still remain would be no more than a handful of translators. Incidentally, virtually no other European country offers such a minimal solution. The majority of industrialised countries stand by the principle of an informative presence abroad.

Why is it not enough just to have an English service? Why must information also be provided in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Portuguese and Spanish?

With its nine language services Swissinfo reaches around 85 percent of the world's online population. With English alone it only reaches 30 percent. Moreover, English is the wrong language to use if, for example, one is aiming to disseminate information in Arabic-speaking countries.

People are always saying that anything can be found on the Internet even without the presence of Swissinfo. What more can Swissinfo offer than the usual range of Internet services?

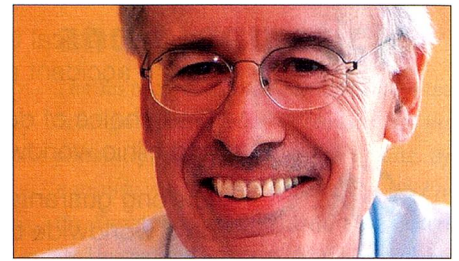
Swissinfo produces special content and services tailored for a specific public. This ranges from specially selected news and journalistic reports, background reports and in-depth dossiers, to newsletters and interactive forums. And within the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, only Swissinfo can offer this.

Is it important to broadcast the Swiss standpoint around the world? What interest is this to the Chinese?

Solid, professional information of the type to be found at www.swissinfo.org is the best way to banish the clichéd "Heidi" view of Switzerland. That goes for the Chinese too; whether as an important trading partner for the Swiss economy, or for the thousands of Chinese that visit Switzerland as tourists every year.

Does Switzerland's neutral stance still play an important role in disseminating information abroad (as was the case with short-wave radio during and after the war)?

For Arabic-speaking countries this is still partially true, even if the West-East con-



Renzo Respini

frontation is a thing of the past. For instance, the Arabic service of Swissinfo explains Swiss values such as democracy and federalism. And journalists explain developments in Arabic-speaking countries against this backdrop. These reports are perceived as fair and objective and are regularly used by regional media. It's also an established fact that the public appear to appreciate the unbiased nature of Swissinfo information. After all, the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation is not a private enterprise.

How important is Swissinfo for Switzerland's image abroad?

It's difficult to answer that from a Swiss perspective. The fact is that Swissinfo has a legal mandate towards Swiss nationals living abroad. However, by law Swissinfo must also promote "...Switzerland's presence and an understanding of its concerns". So parliament assumes that a high-quality media service for a public outside Switzerland also serves to promote Switzerland's image abroad.

Are Swissinfo's services also important for the Swiss economy?

More than 80 percent of Swiss imports come from countries where one of the nine Swissinfo languages is spoken. For Swiss exports the figure is 75 percent. It's reasonable to assume that companies who trade with Switzerland want access to a certain level of information about our country. Swissinfo tries to meet some of this requirement for information and thereby promote an understanding of Switzerland, as stipulated in its mandate.

The interviewer was Heinz Eckert

Translated from German.