

Airing His Views - An Interview with Soe Thinn

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(Soe Thinn is the director of the Radio Free Asia Burmese Service in Washington, DC. He also worked with the Burmese Service of the Voice of America from 1992 until 1996 and with the Burmese Foreign Service from 1969 until October 1988. He spoke with The Irrawaddy about the challenges of bringing information to the Burmese public and RFA's future plans.)

Question: What role do radio stations play in providing information to people inside Burma?

Answer: I think shortwave radio stations play a very important role, as a matter of fact, an exclusive role in providing real information to the people of Burma; it's the only source they have when it comes to information about Burma. As we all know, the press is very controlled in Burma. The people rely on news from shortwave radio, especially from international radios broadcasting in the Burmese language: Radio Free Asia, the Voice of America, the BBC and the Democratic Voice of Burma-and I say this not because I'm part of it, but because of the feedback that we get from people inside Burma. They all feel unanimously that shortwave radio is the only source of accurate information.

Q: Who is RFA's main audience?

A: It's difficult to really give a definite assessment of who our listeners are, but judging from all the letters we've received from people inside Burma-as you all know the mail is censored, but even in spite of the censored mail we do get letters which come from inside Burma-we get listeners from all strata of Burmese society. We get intellectuals, teachers, farmers, students, rural and urban listeners, even civil servants, and we've occasionally received letters from soldiers-foot soldiers, not the officers. We also get letters from policemen, the clergy, and housewives. It reflects how desperate people are for information.and they cling to whatever information they can get.

Q: Do you think the SPDC listens to the radio?

A: I'm sure they do. The monitoring department at the Burma Broadcasting Service works exclusively to monitor all radio broadcasts, to listen and transcribe them word-for-word and then submit it to their superiors.

Q: How do you feel when you get criticism from the SPDC saying that RFA is biased or presenting false information?

A: We get criticism from all sides and that's a good thing. Criticism is like a tool that sharpens your expertise. You've got to have it; if you don't, then something is wrong, especially in journalism. We get criticism from both sides-the activists blasted us one time on the Internet because of one of our Roundtable discussions. And we also get criticism from the SPDC. When you get criticism from both sides, it means that as a journalist you are doing a good job. That's how I feel.

When people talk about democracy, they tend to focus more on the rights of people in a democratic society; they tend to forget that there are responsibilities of the people in a democratic society.

Q: Did RFA try to prod the opposition, as some listeners suggested?

A: Well, roundtables are meant to create issues for discussion and to provide food for thought, and this is exactly what we're trying to do. We're trying to be as un-opinionated as possible, while trying to provide analysis. When we analyze we don't draw conclusions but provide fodder for a lively and productive discussion. Rather than just making rhetorical statements we create an atmosphere of a discussion and you have to do that. This compels listeners to listen to us.

Q: So in that sense it might sound as if RFA has an agenda to promote the constitution-drafting National Convention and derail the opposition. How does RFA differ from other news agencies?

A: When you have a discussion you have to have a devil's advocate. Without a devil's advocate there's no discussion. I think you have to be as unbiased as possible, but at the same time there also has to be discussion of the pros and cons, regardless of your own opinions. This doesn't necessarily mean that the person who is presenting the SPDC's side actually supports the junta. If you listen to the players on the roundtable regularly, you would know that they are stating positions in order to create a discussion. We're not supposed to present our opinions on the air-that's a known fact.

Q: How does RFA differ from other radio broadcast services?

A: It differs mostly in content. The Voice of America does more American and international news than we do. The BBC provides information to the Burmese people about international events as well. Radio Free Asia, on the other hand, is exclusively Burma news. We're mandated to provide news about Burma to the people of Burma-news that the people of Burma cannot get access to. We also provide a forum for the people of Burma - to give them a voice. Even when we do broadcast international news, we look at it in the sense of how it is connected with Burma, how those events could affect the people in Burma-directly or indirectly.

We also try to bring out soft news, like features, news about public health,

education, ethnic issues-ethnic issues have always been one of our main focuses as well.

Q: Does RFA plan to broadcast in ethnic languages?

A: Yes, as a matter of fact, a couple of years ago we told various ethnic leaders that we would like to broadcast ethnic language programs and asked them for some samples of the kind of work they could provide us. They sent samples which were all in Burmese, of course and we had them translated into English. Our management looked at the samples and came to realize that there 's a lack of professionalism in the writings that they sent us; they're not journalistic enough.

So we've been hiring ethnic people as well as ethnic Burmans as interns and are training them to become radio journalists. If we can train enough people from amongst the ethnic nationalities then I'm sure we'll be able to go on the air. The plan is still there. Senior management is still keen to work on this but of course we just can't start an ethnic language program without any professionalism. That's very important.

Q: In the event that Burma does become a democratic society, how will that change RFA's mandate?

A: Look at Radio Free Europe, for example. Europe is practically free of suppression of the press, but [Radio Free Europe-336] still exists. I suppose what would happen is that Radio Free Asia, at least the Burmese Service, would provide information to the people on how to build a democratic society, how to sustain a democratic society, how to work within a democratic society, establishing norms and how to work within those norms. I think changing to a democratic society is not difficult, but sustaining and building one is a much more difficult job than it seems.

Q: What is the role of RFA after democracy is established in Burma?

A: We would change our programming, that's for sure. We would change our programming to talk more about civil society, what is civil society, what are its duties and responsibilities. When people talk about democracy, they tend to focus more on the rights of people in a democratic society; they tend to forget that there are responsibilities of the people in a democratic society. And those are the sort of things we will try to bring across to the people.

Q: Do you think people need more radio stations?

A: Absolutely. In a democratic society there should be as many radio stations and as many media outlets as possible.

Q: Obvious differences between radio journalism and print journalism exist, especially with the numbers of people you can reach. But what are some of the other ways that radio journalism is more effective than print journalism in Burma?

A: Effectiveness will come about through accessibility, whether it's in print journalism or radio journalism. When we talk about radio, there should be enough receivers and enough airtime. When you talk about print journalism, there should be a distribution network so that you can distribute the news to the people. And of course, they must know how to read-whether it's in Burmese, in English or any of the ethnic languages. You just can't produce news if nobody can access it. In terms of radio, accessibility is very important. A 24-hour radio station would be ideal, with everybody having radio. It doesn't have to be shortwave anymore; it can be FM because the reception is better, clearer and more accessible for listeners.

Q: So what are the current obstacles and difficulties for RFA?

A: One of the main difficulties is getting credible information out of Burma-credible and unbiased information. As a journalist, the most credible information that you can get is what you see with your own eyes and what you hear with your own ears. And if you can't do that, then your credibility is based on your own news judgment-editorial judgment-and that's a very difficult thing to get a hold on. The only way to solve this is through experience. We do make errors because it's a judgment-based decision and people can't be right all the time. But through experience we learn how to get multiple sources for our information to provide credible news to our listeners.