

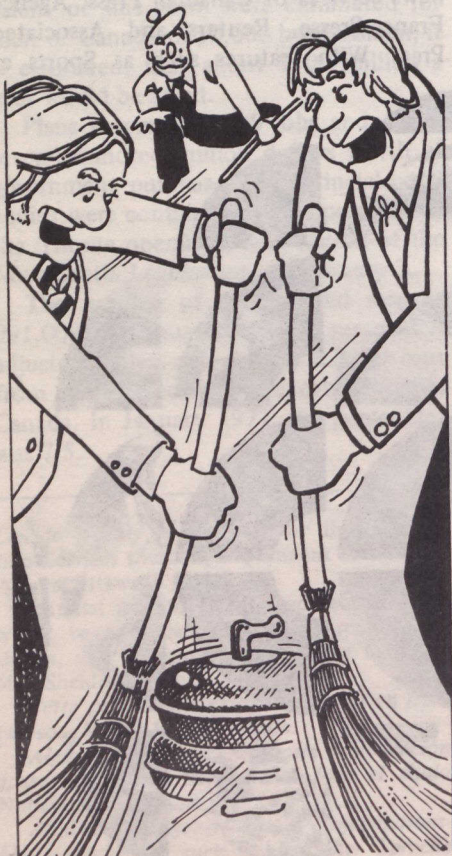
météo, Sie fragen, wir antworten, libros de hoy, Vědy a techniky and This Week in Science, it short-waves thousands of sound pictures to people scattered from Port-au-Prince to Kinshasa and Kiev. It has about 150 program hours a week reaching millions of listeners with music, drama, documentaries, short-story and lecture material as well as short feature items.

Strong competition

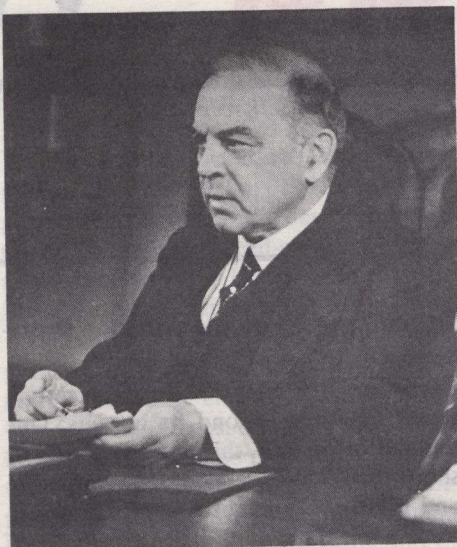
To stand out on the crowded airwaves and catch the attention of an eclectic and cosmopolitan audience, however, the message must be arresting and original. Otherwise government money and the work of the broadcasters is wasted. It is all too easy for a listener to travel from Moscow to Paris, from London to Belgrade, merely by moving a needle on the dial.

Our short-wave service has to compete with giants such as the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Both broadcast more than 1,000 program hours weekly and both enjoy a large dedicated audience, committed to various shades of Marxism, from Leninism to Maoism, throughout the world.

The BBC holds a justly deserved,



Canadian curling mania defies description



Prime Minister Mackenzie King inaugurated Radio-Canada International's short-wave news service in 1944.

world-wide reputation of superior quality in programming. The global presence of the Voice of America (VOA) also brings to people of all languages and races an almost overwhelming presence on the airwaves. BBC and VOA broadcast between 600 and 800 hours a week.

Yet success is not the exclusive preserve of large nations. Switzerland's short-wave service, for example, handles its four national languages with astonishing ease and has a faithful audience.... Canada has carved out its own following in this international market. Surveys indicate that RCI has an impact out of proportion to its size. Gallup surveys, for example, indicate that close to a million Americans listen to RCI each week.

Little by little, we are changing an image. It has not been easy: traditionally, Canadians are known for deprecating their politics, artists and especially climate. But, just as predictably, they heap praise on hockey players, tell stories about the vastness of the land, limitless forests and enormous spread of moose antlers. They tend to become emotional when they talk about folk heroine Maria Chapdelaine.

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The short-wave service has had to shake off this conventional image of Canadians, to thread its way past the dangers of stereotypes. But a personality, an image, an identity which is distinctly Canadian, has emerged, often by the activities of various Canadian ethnic minorities speaking in their own language to the people of their former native lands....

Descriptions sometimes difficult

Programming must appeal as much to the Canadian living abroad as to the executive in Europe, the plantation worker in Haiti, the farmer in Dahomey. Programming must be structured without reducing it to the lowest common denominator so that it maintains substance and prompts interest.

The international broadcaster attempts to understand the perspective of the European, the Caribbean or the African listener. This is no simple task and there are pitfalls. An example: I did a program, broadcast last March, called Exodus of the Lemmings, about the annual flight of Canadians to the sunny beaches of Florida. A listener from Paris later wrote to tell me she had to consult a reference book to understand the connection between these tiny, suicidal animals and hordes of Canadian tourists fleeing blizzards and cold.

Or try describing the Canadian curling championships for an African audience. I chose to present it in these terms: "Curling is the sport of dignified, slightly rotund gentlemen; they throw stones, somewhat the shape of hot water bottles, along a sheet of ice while other gentlemen, equally dignified and armed with preposterous brooms, sweep the ice with an energy bordering on apoplexy. Their shouts sound as if they came from beyond the grave." This was done in as caricatural a manner as that used by Gustave Aymard, the armchair traveller and humorist from Quebec, to describe Prairie Indians. Then I added that the sport was practised by some 700,000 Canadians.

Search for relevance

The end of the Gutenberg Galaxy, announced more than ten years ago by Marshall McLuhan, still preys upon our time. We are haunted by the search for relevance, the substance and balance of which can so easily slip away.

Despite the advent of telecommunication satellites, direct broadcasting and global television in the concluding years of the twentieth century, Radio Canada International short-wave programs must continue that search if it is to inform and entertain Canadians scattered around the world and its share of foreign listeners.

The foregoing article by Bernard Wilhelm, director of the Centre for Bilingual Studies at the University of Regina, is from In Search, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1977.