

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has traced the development of facilities and programming of one of the most important network and outlet systems belonging to the world-wide American Forces Radio and Television Service. The system in the Republic of Vietnam grew from a very modest beginning in August, 1962, to become the largest--in terms of primary audience served--and most powerful--AM, FM, and TV broadcast power--AFRT service, broadcasting its television signal for the first time in a combat zone. The network was the first to adopt five-minute news summaries hourly, generally accorded the distinction of leading AFRT in the quality production of local command information announcements and programs, and a leader in responsive programming. It was also assigned the unique mission of assisting the Government of Vietnam in the establishment of Vietnamese television facilities.

First opening in August, 1962, with borrowed, jury-rigged equipment and manned by a full-time staff of five men and several volunteers; AFVN set out to meet the growth of American advisory personnel with fifty-watt "provincial radio station" kits, strategically placed throughout the Republic. The inadequacy of this scheme was first noted,

officially, by Department of Defense personnel in December, 1964, and the U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) initiated actions to immediately correct the situation. Initial plans for a high-power, AM radio system were sidetracked during 1965, when more ambitious plans originated in Washington to bring television into the country ahead of any improvement in the radio service. This action coincided with the generally unannounced build-up of American forces and significantly influenced the subsequent growth and development of the service.

The information gathered tends to indicate that initially more high level significance was attached to establishing television for Vietnam, rather than in South Vietnam for the entertainment of American servicemen. The former was viewed as a vital vehicle for psychological warfare, nation-building and education of the Vietnamese people. The priority of television for Vietnam over improvement in AFRT facilities was only temporary, however, and the command information, news, and entertainment service of the U. S. military commander in Vietnam grew dramatically in late 1966, and throughout 1967. The American Forces Vietnam Network was designated on July 1, 1967.

AFVN's role of providing assistance in the building of Vietnamese television facilities was limited entirely to engineering and technical functions coordinated through the appropriate U. S. aid agency. There is nothing in the

literature to suggest the American military network's control or involvement in Vietnamese broadcasting except from a purely technical base. This study does not address the involvement of other U. S. agencies.

Facilities of the network left nothing to spare. Even when the wartime environment is taken into consideration, the network comes out among the top of its sister AFRTS stations and many of its brother commercial broadcasting stations in the United States . At its peak, five high-power AM stations, five FM stations, and eight television stations, and an assortment of rebroadcasting units effectively "blanketed" the country. Production facilities at the key station in Saigon have been described as "the best in the world."

The network's programming development from the *first* outlet may be characterized as responsive to audience needs and desires. It would have been a relatively simple matter to rely on AFRTS-LA package materials for the majority of programming--as had to be done on television--on radio. AFVN chose, instead, to produce over fifty per cent of its radio air time locally under disc-jockey, combo-type operations, with emphasis on youthful appeal. Relatively comprehensive audience surveys assisted the network in determining audience programming tastes, and the results were instrumental in revising *formats* on a *periodical* basis. These changes are not necessarily *reflected* in radio program

schedules since the music selection and composition, rather than show or program titles, received the most discernible adjustments.

From an overall production standpoint, the writer draws on his own personal impressions, interviews with former network staff members, and audio tapes supplied by the network, to suggest that AFVN AM and FM programming would be more appealing than the average commercial, popular music station formats at home. There is no reason why this should not be so when taking into consideration the source of all AFRT programming materials, the lack of commercial constraints, and the highly professional composition of AFVN's staff.

Although in this study it is impossible to sufficiently document, the researcher has gathered the impression that the majority of AFVN's production and news personnel were only once removed broadcasters and journalists, selected on the basis of their previous experience in radio, television, and news to fill billets in a large, rapidly developed military radio and television network.

AFVN, operating in a combat situation, displays itself as an extremely resourceful organization. Duty at the network during the major building period could hardly be characterized as "choice." The construction hardships alone make it a demanding military unit. Add to this enemy attacks at five of the eight outlets country-wide during a

seven-month period, a respectful appreciation developer for the service which has as its mission the programming of radio and television information, news, and entertainment for all U. S. servicemen in Vietnam. The same resourcefulness which enabled AFVN to return to broadcasting Christmas carols after being bombed by enemy terrorists in December, 1964, was still with the network when a typhoon blew down all the antennae of the Da Nang outlet in October, 1971. In both instances, and all others in between, AFVN returned to its normal operation in the shortest possible period of time.

AFVN television, without discounting its morale factor, suffered in production quality (kinescope recordings for much of the programming materials), availability and use of receivers and lack of facilities for live, stateside coverage of events. Inappropriate as the comparison may be, AFVN-TV achieved no advantage and probably has less appeal than the stateside commercial version. The writer subscribes to the reported opinion of the officer assigned to coordinate the initial stages of establishing the television service in Vietnam--and who was also the first Lieutenant Colonel to serve as the network officer in charge--that a TV network is incongruous in a war zone.

In AFVN's 1971 survey it is recalled that almost forty per cent of the audience sampled never watched television and that an additional twenty-five per cent watched it once or twice a week. The survey notes, as would be expected,

that combat troops watch television half as much as non-combat troops. The question of TV set ownership was not addressed in 1971; however, in the 1970 survey only sixteen per cent of the respondents indicated ownership of a television receiver in Vietnam.¹ As in the survey which followed, fifty per cent of the audience sampled in 1970, hardly ever or never watched AFVN-TV. One would expect the most recent period to be particularly favorable for television viewing with the general winding down of construction and combat activities and of the U. S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

The results of the surveys may be diagnosed in terms of the characteristics of television viewing--the medium commands much more audience attention and is completely preoccupying at times, compared to listening to radio.² An individual assigned to logistics or administration could easily listen to radio all day during the performance of his duties, whereas television viewing would certainly interfere with his work. As experienced by the author, a seven-day, seventy to ninety-hour work week prevailed in Vietnam, with four to five evenings and one afternoon available each week

¹Ownership of a TV set in Vietnam is not truly reflective of receiver availability. A television set could be found in most military clubs and in lounge or day-room facilities of berthing quarters.

²Joseph T. Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communication (Glenco, Illinois: The Free Press of Glenco, Inc., 1960), pp. 104-105.

for personal or free time. However, AFVN radio is not necessarily to be viewed as a competitor to AFVN-TV as a source of entertainment for U. S. troops. Almost nightly, military special service activities and United Services Organization (USO) shows vied with television to provide a welcomed diversion and frequently unique entertainment experiences.

Television, as an information and entertainment medium, is at its best and attracts its largest audience in the presentation of live coverage of special events. But despite the tremendous effort of the 1968 election returns and the Apollo coverage, special events were ordinarily dated by five to seven days by the time they were broadcast on AFVN-TV; and it would require an extremely devoted sports fan to sit through a play-by-play showing of a contest, the results of which were already known.

An obvious solution would be to afford the network a satellite path for the presentation of live television coverage, and the author understands such a move was being contemplated for AFVN in 1971;³ but, unless this service was also extended for entertainment programs, justification for television could hardly be measured in terms of average

³Letter from Lieutenant Colonel Francis K. Price, U. S. Army, Officer in Charge, American Forces Vietnam Network to Charles B. Moore, Texas Tech University, February 3, 1971.

viewing habits. There is simply not that much appeal in television reruns.

This is not meant to cast the blame on AFVN for problems inherent in any perceived television service in an active war zone, such as Vietnam. The network took every reasonable step to make its programming as attractive as possible, but it still had to rely on material, the majority of which the "average GI" had undoubtedly viewed prior to being sent to Vietnam.

As AFVN's American audience grew in Vietnam, so did its unintended Vietnamese audience. Although it is impossible to document, it seems reasonable to suppose that the local national radio audience was at least as great as the U. S. military audience; listening to AFVN for its intelligence value is one thing, but attempting to ban certain music for Americans because they were listened to by Vietnamese is another.

With this in mind, there is every reason to suggest that AFVN was continuously aware of its large secondary audience. This consideration would, quite naturally, enter into any judgment affecting news pertaining to Vietnam, even if it were intended for American consumption only. The situation is regrettable, but unavoidable. It is more easily appreciated when the reader understands that the Government of Vietnam imposed varying degrees of wartime censorship throughout AFVN's history and operated broadcasting

facilities belonging to the Republic under state control. On the other hand, the United States, without a declaration of war by the Congress, barred its military command from exercising censorship characteristic of World War II and even the Korean War.

The news staff of AFVN began what may be termed a tradition of gathering and reporting news (albeit on a minor scale) when wire services and timely commercial news reports on the Vietnam situation were inadequate or not available to the network and the audience. This apparently continued after adequate news services were available to the network and other sources (other than AFVN) of news were available to the audience. Newsmen of the network interviewed visiting dignitaries, attended press briefings, and produced news programs for AFRT use world-wide.

Directives pertaining to the operation of AFRT facilities discourage news reporting except that which pertains to internal activities of the military. AFRT outlets are interpreted as special interest facilities serving American enclaves abroad. News attention is focused and devoted to the world back home, with minor attention given to local events except as the events pertain to the American enclave inclusively. In Vietnam the situation is altogether different in view of existing conditions and the detailed press coverage of the military's activities. The local events naturally became the prime focus of news over AFVN.

The controversy over news censorship was related to many things: dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War, mutual distrust evidenced in military-press relations, and internal problems at AFVN itself. It is also linked to similar problems with other media of the U. S. military's internal information program. It is significant that the criticism of AFVN's news policies was virtually limited to the coverage of war news and news of the Vietnam situation.

The criticism of AFVN regarding the handling of war news seemed to rest in the perceived conflict of missions between AFVN and the U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Office of Information. Although the potential for withholding unfavorable information regarding the military certainly existed, and a more autonomous relationship between AFVN and the "public" components of the information office might be desirable--given a situation other than the Vietnam conflict it may not be necessary--, the charges of censorship at the unique, military radio and television service in Vietnam were dismissed. This is not meant to imply that the issue was resolved or resolved itself entirely. There will always be those who disagree with editorial judgment exercised by the military or in any other government controlled broadcasting facility. In defense of the system, it should be noted that the criticism originated from within the military, even in "official" reflections long before the public events, charging censorship, occurred.

It is in these last two points that the author finds particular confidence in a system, even in the military, that guarantees a free, unrestricted flow of news to its servicemen wherever they may be stationed.

However, it was not singularly the "system" which was at fault in Vietnam; it was also the people for whom AFVN was many things: For some it was the local commander's outlet to build and maintain the morale of his troops through information, news, and entertainment programming. For others it was interpreted as the official voice of the U. S. military in Vietnam. It was undoubtedly a source of intelligence for the enemy. It was a house organ of a giant military corporation functioning to provide a good corporate image to its employees and the world. Still others viewed AFVN as a broadcasting station much like the ones back home, with the same range of discretions afforded to the broadcasters in the United States. The fact remains that editorial judgment had to be exercised at AFVN; the local military commander bore that responsibility; and sensitivities of the host government, information that would aid or abet the enemy, and even the safety and well-being of American troops were all deemed to be legitimate considerations affecting that judgment.

In the Republic of Vietnam, the American Forces Vietnam Network continued to broadcast command information, news, and entertainment as a military radio and television network.

AFVN may never have been designed to be anything more, and the U. S. Department of Defense certainly intended from the beginning that it never be anything less.

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