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Radio News With A British Accent

By David Pitts

You may have noticed there are a lot more British accents on our airwaves these days. The BBC World Service has become a fixture on WETA and WAMU, bumping the local programming that once was dominant WETA-FM, for example, now airs at least four hours of BBC World Service Radio – unfiltered -- each day. WAMU-FM also is airing much more BBC programming, including on its overnight schedule.

Many listeners like receiving the BBC broadcasts because they include more foreign news than is generally available from U.S. radio broadcasters. But it is disturbing that a foreign broadcaster has taken such a prominent role in U.S. public radio.

Few people realize that BBC World Service Radio is not funded through the general license fee that pays for BBC domestic radio and television in Britain, but through a special grant from the British Foreign Office. This has been the case since BBC international radio began as the “empire service” in 1932.

Overseas, BBC World Service Radio is the main competitor of the Voice of America, which is funded by the U.S. government. A prohibition on domestic dissemination of Voice of America radio has been based on government funding that makes it, at least to some degree, a propaganda organ.

So while Voice of America broadcasts are banned within the country, BBC programming – funded by the British Foreign Office – is allowed. Defenders of this anomaly say that the BBC has developed a well-earned reputation for fairness and impartiality, much more so than at the Voice.

But for years, British conservatives have blasted BBC programs for left-wing bias -- even dubbing it the Baghdad Broadcasting Corporation during the first Gulf War. Despite the British government’s support for the Iraq War, those same critics have alleged a similar anti-war bias in current BBC programming – which to some extent seems to validate the BBC’s claim of independence from the British government.

Careful listeners, however, have noted that negative stories about the U.S. presence in Iraq abound on the BBC World Service, while far fewer critical stories critical of the British involvement there are aired. Perhaps that is because the U.S. presence is far larger and concentrated in a much more volatile area of Iraq. But it also could be connected to the BBC’s funding.

In any case, should our local public radio stations be carrying programming of an organization that is funded by the British Foreign Office without carrying an advisory for listeners?

The real solution is for our local public radio stations to originate more of their own programming to serve the needs of their audiences for foreign as well as local news. With so many sources in the Washington area, this shouldn't be too difficult.