

**9th May 2003**

## **Speech at the 2nd Biel-Bienne Communication Days**

Global Information- The sources of information  
in war and peace

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**Nicolas Lombard**

Director SwissInfo

**Casper Selg:** Nicolas Lombard perspective of this issue from a Swiss advantage: Global Information in war and peace.

**Nicolas Lombard:** Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am very please to be here and I am going to be rather different from what you have heard so far, for obvious reasons as you will hear in a moment. It is a special honour to share the podium with my distinguished colleagues from Al Jazeera, the BBC and CNN. Their enterprise and professionalism in covering the news in times of war and peace are exemplary, when speaking of war coverage the reason defensive Iraq remains uppermost in our minds as we've heard. But Iraq is only the latest example how these and other news organisations do an outstanding job. At this point I am sure you understand that I am rather tempted to sort of pick up my papers and go and sit back there where I belong. After all SwissInfo did not have a correspondent embedded in the coalition forces and we did not have a reporter in Baghdad either.



**Nicolas Lombard**

What's more we SwissInfo, Swiss Radio International have no intention of ever doing anything like that. It's different for our domestic friends and we will probably later on come to that point but I am speaking now from the international branch of SBC, Swiss Broadcasting Cooperation SRGSSRideésuisse. So you see the case might be strong sitting down but since I have come this far and am holding on to this desk here allow me to make a comment or two before I do so. SwissInfo has been an international broadcaster for almost 70 years. The beginnings could not have been more modest. It was the 1<sup>st</sup> August 1934, Switzerland's national day, an ideal moment Swiss Broadcasting pioneers thought to say hello to friends and fellow citizens far from home, so borrowed the League of Nations transmitter near Geneva and sent a brief message to Swiss patriots living in South America. That was a time of relative peace. Five years later the world was at war and the Swiss Broadcast Service all of a sudden had a big role to do. After 1939 the neutral Switzerland was a country surrounded by war. The only democracy left in central Europe. Shortwave radio was the direct means of communications we had left.

After 1945 came the Cold War. That too was a tense time. The neutral Swiss came to value that international radio voice even more. The big job was to make SRI the source of information that international audiences could trust. More than ever credibility was the goal. Lets recall that this was a time when the international airwaves were being bombarded non-stop with propaganda, Broadsides and ideological crossfire from all sides. Everybody from Radio for Europe to Radio Tirana seemed to be lobbying something at someone else.

Against this backdrop the Swiss Shortwave Service shifted into top gear in 1970 to the modest degree that our limited sources could allow. We knew we couldn't reach everybody so we aimed high, we aimed at the Opinion Makers. We would focus on providing information and news analyses for listeners who themselves made an impact on their societies and since opinions are formed in open discussions and public debate, SRI concentrated on being a clear and neutral voice in the forum of international affairs. The audience responded well. In 1973 the Gallop Pole in the United States listed the Swiss Shortwave Service as one of the five most credible international radio stations, think of the size of Switzerland.

Things were going quite well but the era of steam radio was drawing to a close. We celebrated that fact with a new name we called ourselves Swiss Radio International. Swiss Radio International also became Swiss Television International. There the door was opened for us by none other than CNN. Ted Turner had the idea for a new CNN programme called World Report, international broadcasters were invited to participate and we did. Soon after we began to produce our own television news magazines as well, we called it Swiss World. Some 80 international TV channels broadcast Swiss World every month. But this was not simply a time for new programming opportunities. It was also a time of exciting technological possibilities. The possibilities meant that we would foresee and could foresee that shortwave broadcasting as our main broadcasting platform would come to an end. In the meantime relay transmitters and satellite transmitters were pressed into service but they were expensive and funding at Swiss Radio International was and always is- tight. And writing was on the wall, the Berlin Wall as a matter of fact. When that Berlin Wall came down 14 years ago, it changed a lot. It signalled the end of the Cold War, it foreshadowed the reorganisation of Europe and it made Switzerland reassess its position in the community of nations.

One thing seemed obvious, with the end of the cold war the importance of Swiss Radio International, as a neutral voice reporting and analysing world affairs had gradually diminished. Radio had served us well for many years, but it was time to move on. Yet another name-change would reflect the new reality, the name was SwissInfo. SwissInfo reflects the greatest technological decision we have ever made, the transition from the voice of Switzerland to the internet and all the mobile devices, a transition that will be completed by the end of the year. That's when the last SRI radio programme will stop. Life on an interactive multimedia platform means many things. There is a mix of hard news and features, services are in nine languages in our case, there are multimedia reports, lots of audio and video content thanks to our domestic friends and the audiences can interact with us as they never have been able to on the radio.

The change also marks a shift in our information policy. 'Swissness' had become our editorial cornerstone but lest you think that puts us squarely on an Alp with Heidi and Peter and all those cows, let me assure you that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century decision or definition means something quite different. 'Swissness' is as defined by SwissInfo is a reflection of who the Swiss are in a world that, for better or worse is more linked together than it has ever been so far. In the coverage of wars, like the one in Iraq, 'swissness' means that we play a very well defined role. It is distinctly different and smaller than the role played by the international news organisations that my colleagues here represent.

What you would have found on the SwissInfo websites during the war in Iraq was the news of the day of course but also reports that emphasised the humanitarian aspects of the conflict. That would have included the work of the Red Cross for example, or the Geneva-based United Nations organisations and Swiss Relief Assistance. The war in the Balkans prompted that approach as well but in this case there was an extra dimension. As these countries struggled to organise themselves to create political systems that fulfilled their needs, the Swiss model Government was one option that they considered. SwissInfo explained how Switzerland's Political system of direct democracy worked, how citizens participated in and shaped official policies and how this experience might be adapted to a post-war region in need of urgent rebuilding. The decision to create a major Swiss presence on the internet and ultimately to fade out our radio operations have already been show to be

right. Recent opinion polls indicate that the SwissInfo Website is doing very well indeed and that around the world. Thank you very much for your attention.

**Caspar Selg:** While Nick Gowing prepares his presentation, let me ask you Nick Lombard the decision to scale down radio to concentrate on the internet means basically that the Swiss voice isn't heard as a voice anymore. The BBC keeps up radio programmes, why was that not possible? Just a brief answer.

**Nick Lombard:** Yes, you see we have one little problem, we don't have the funds and the possibilities that the bigger ones have. We just found out at a conference last week in London that the big organisations are getting al

ways bigger and the small ones are fighting for survival. This is of course what happened to us too. We just have to decide what are we doing? Can we do a job well on radio and on the web and found out that either we do one somehow OK and the other one mediocrly. So if you want to do one job well, concentrate on one and in addition our short-wave transmitting sites were sort of abolished. What choices did we have?

**Caspar Selg:** Thank you very much.