

December 2, 1957

Letter, Howland H. Sargeant to Eugene Lyons

Citation:

"Letter, Howland H. Sargeant to Eugene Lyons", December 2, 1957, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Released by the Central Intelligence Agency on October 16, 2019 in response to Mandatory Declassification Review request EOM-2018-00930. Contributed by A. Ross Johnson. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/290906>

Summary:

AMCOMLIB President Sargeant informs founding AMCOMLIB president Eugene Lyons of steps he has taken to monitor and insure the quality of RL broadcasts.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Blavatnik Family Foundation

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

RL

cited in F.A. ✓
12

December 2, 1957

Mr. Eugene Lyons
c/o The Readers Digest
Pleasantville, N.Y.

Dear Gene:

I have been thinking of our brief talk on Tuesday afternoon about the basic policy governing Radio Liberation broadcasts and the quality and terms of reference of the output. None of this is a new problem -- either to Radio Liberation or to international radio in general. In a more complicated form I struggled with this same problem from 1946 to 1953 in the VOA. Almost the first thing I encountered on entering my assignment with the American Committee in October 1954 was a host of conflicting allegations and apprehensions about the output as it was then being developed.

On my return from my first visit to Munich in early February 1955, I set to work to make a start on two things:

1. To develop a radio programming policy manual which would be the bedrock on which those concerned with the output could take an assured stand; and
2. To beef up and improve both the evaluation of Radio Liberation programs and the kind of assessment of listener reactions that we usually call "audience research".

We took a wide variety of steps, too numerous to be chronicled here, but these included the May 1955 two-day seminar with Soviet specialists of MIT and Harvard; a comprehensive review of our statement of mission and operating objectives discussed in semi-final form in February 1956 while Bob Kelley was back here on home leave, with the participation of yourself, Don Levine and other key advisors; the hiring and dispatch of Max Halls to Munich in April 1955 to set up a program evaluation and audience research unit; the issuance of the approved Radio Programming Policy Manual in June 1956 -- which has required no major change despite Poland and Hungary and its rigorous scrutiny through two of Wilbur Schramm's annual conferences.

Page 2.

Incidentally, during the first year I was in office, an analyst of Radio Liberation scripts expressed the same kind of concern as was voiced to you, both in Munich and in New York. I provided for a completely independent analysis of exactly the same scripts.

On September 2, 1955, there was submitted to me an analysis of the scripts by a four-man team of experts, two American scholars, one Russian scholar of the old emigration and one of the new. May I quote from the covering memorandum:

"As an interesting sidelight, it should be noted that none of the analysts detected any 'Marxist' or even 'leftist' tendencies in the scripts reviewed, although this same group of NYFB scripts had been severely criticized on these grounds by a former Committee script analyst. Moreover, both Russian members of the team are considered conservative, middle-of-the-road or right-of-center, in the emigration."

I have given you enough of these details so that you will see the problem of what Radio Liberation's output actually is and of obtaining judgment as to its probably impact and effectiveness on the audience. Since I have lived so constantly with this problem, I am more than vaguely aware of the difficulty that confronts you or anyone else who has only limited time to satisfy himself about the programming. I have reviewed with Gene King and Mike Thayer what we might do to help you reach your own judgment, since there doesn't exist as yet a summarized general assessment of what all the evaluators as well as actual listeners to Radio Liberation programs have told us.

Our first approach has been to review the background of the evaluators, both in New York and in Munich. These gentlemen have been responsible for the submission of approximately 240 evaluations during the current year. The reports are divided as follows: 195 have been received from Munich, and New York has contributed about 45. The number of people involved is 27.

To refresh your memory, the panel in Munich is composed of trained specialists in Soviet affairs as well as highly qualified people in various fields such as economics, history, etc., in addition to recent defectors with a fresh approach. Our New York panel is composed of writers and others trained in Soviet affairs. We have catalogued the participants in these panels as well as our individual evaluators, and have come up with the following general results.

Politically, nine can be categorized as rightists, four as being in the middle of the road politically, three are social democrats, and three are known not to be connected with any emigre group. We do not have any information concerning the other eight that enables us to tell how they should be classified in terms of their political philosophies.

Page 3.

From Ray Bauer's analysis, plus Max Ralis' recommendations, plus the results of a two-week study of our program evaluation and audience research efforts by Wilbur Schramm in late August of this year in Munich, we have made some further important advances:

1. All panels, whether in New York or Europe, review the same portion of Radio Liberation output so that comments and criticisms are addressed to the same section of programming.
2. Standard questions are now uniformly answered by all evaluators, so that there is a basic core of opinion concerning the most important elements of the broadcast.
3. Max Ralis has devised a mathematical scale which enables us to keep a rough trend line of what evaluators think of the broadcast (an example is his evaluation of the first and second parts of the Russian language broadcasts from March through September of this year).
4. Radio Liberation Desk Chiefs and Program Advisors are now required to discuss and to report what action has been taken on the specific suggestions and criticisms offered by evaluators in the period of the most recent week or two.

I have tried to set down in a general way some of the more important steps we have been taking. I don't claim that these will fully lick the problem. In fact, so long as a radio is broadcasting to a society which in many respects is still hermetically sealed off from broadcasters, there will continue to be major imperponderables that cannot be resolved on the basis of what communications people would call adequate facts. But we make progress and you have only to study a summary of the most recent Schramm conference (September 1957) to see how much more we know today about the USSR and communication to its citizens than we did even just one year ago.

Now I consider that it is of the greatest importance that you satisfy yourself about Radio Liberation broadcasts. We have for your reading all of the evaluations that I have mentioned. We have all of the programs to which these evaluations refer. In the long run, however, I hope that you could arrange to take enough time to listen yourself to a few of Radio Liberation's programs. We could lend you tapes (and a tape recorder if this would be helpful) so that you could listen at home. One hour a day for a week would enable you to listen

Page 4.

to the bulk of the entire output in Russian by Radio Liberation for this week. If you would prefer to read some programs we could give you a random sampling of Radio Liberation scripts to take home and look at when convenient. The important thing to me is that you should feel, as the first President of this Committee, that you are able to say that you have a first hand knowledge of the policy governing the broadcasts and of the actual output as it is going out over the air today. I hope you will sit down with me and Gene King when you come into the office this week to see how we can meet your convenience.

Sincerely yours,

Howland H. Sargent

HHS/epi

cc: Don Levine