



FEATURE



Tuning in to World Radio Switzerland

Switzerland's only English-language radio station morphed from World Radio Geneva, a regional, commercial station, to World Radio Switzerland, a national, public service station, in 2007. We asked WRS director and managing editor Philippe Mottaz to play back some of the new station's first year highlights, plus provide a preview of what's to come.

By Gail Mangold-Vine | World Radio Switzerland (WRS) now has an average of 140,000 listeners.

"The figure ... paradoxically does not include the Anglophones [English speakers] that are not part of the audience panel. I reckon if we include them, we're closer to 180,000 around the country. We have grown the on-air and online audience by about 15 per cent around Lake Geneva and with added cable and satellite listeners in the Swiss-German part of the country," says Mottaz.

Much of the credit goes to Mottaz, the 55-year-old Swiss journalist with 30 years experience in print, broadcast and new media, who was hired to convert WRG to WRS, and forge the new station's identity. He sees WRS's role as "... explaining Switzerland to expats, but also bridging different language groups of native Swiss with a neutral language – English".

Headquartered at the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) building in Geneva, WRS employs a staff of just under 20. It features music, news and 11 commercially sponsored contributors for specialised programmes devoted to books,

food, gardening, health, gadgets and more. All the presenters are native English speakers. More expat, as well as Swiss, on-air contributors will likely be added this year.

The station broadcasts 24 hours a day – with WRS's own programmes beginning at 6:30 and ending at 19:00 – on 88.4 FM around Lake Geneva, cable in the rest of Switzerland, and progressively via Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB), which is expected to ultimately replace FM. It is also available via satellite in the rest of Europe. During the station's 'off-hours', news, features and music are provided by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service.

Radio rebirth

The radio station's makeover hasn't been a simple process.

Mottaz describes WRS's first year as rocky, and says, "Phase One has been a steep climb. On the one hand, we faced the challenge, which I think we've successfully met, of finding a way to go national without losing our core local and regional audiences."

However, he adds, "going public has meant programming changes, like putting a greater focus on news, and of course we no longer needed such a large commercial team to sell advertising. That meant laying off the commercial team – outplacement was provided and all of them found jobs – and hiring more journalists. Inevitably, there were tensions between old and new cultures along the way."

Some of the tensions culminated in local press criticism over the way in which Mottaz handled matters.

The validity of the SBC – a public broadcasting, not-for-profit entity largely funded by radio and television license fees – allocating a 3.9 million franc annual operating budget to a station that would broadcast in English was also publicly questioned in the media. And, some businesses voiced disappointment in press interviews over no longer being able to advertise their products and services on air, which public service broadcasting precludes.

Six months in, local press reports quoted some WRS listeners as saying





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WRS station director and managing editor Philippe Mottaz

they liked the station better when “they were more local” or even that they missed the ads, but the general consensus was that both music and news coverage were better. On-air and online figures climbed steeply during those first few months, and Mottaz was quoted as saying they seemed to indicate “we must be doing something right”.

Next on the WRS play list

Mottaz says WRS has weathered these issues and is “now finally in a position to make choices. We’re in Phase Two – honing, refining and polishing an original style, a distinctive voice”.

A propos, Mottaz says this: “I very much appreciate the American/English journalism style of trying to get to the bottom of things, being independent, taking a probing look at how society operates. I also like the way the English-language press seeks to make things comprehensible, help people, give them easy access to the information and the issues as opposed to the attitude of presupposition – that people already know all the background, understand all the

references – that you often find in the Swiss press.”

The WRS approach will be to make information accessible to listeners – as well as make things enjoyable, he adds. “It’ll be more about shedding light than being confrontational.”

“Presently,” says Mottaz, “WRS has less talk than music – adult contemporary music and top-of-the-charts favourites going back to the ’80s. But over the next six months, the [station] will start to change with the introduction of new shows and segments.”

Programmes on Swiss politics, science and technology, foreign policy, and trends and travel are some of those planned. However, with Swiss news and BBC world news programmes peppering its three popular main shows – the *Breakfast Show*, *On the Beat* and *Drive Time* – WRS is already very much a news channel. It also enhances its online news service through links to web-based news provider *swissinfo* (SBC-owned) and the BBC, *News at a glance* summaries, and various reports and special series.

Mottaz’s journey into journalism

Philippe Mottaz is originally from Yverdon, Canton Vaud. He attributes the seeds of his passion for journalism to his father.

“My dad was very curious, with a passion for the media, listening to the radio and reading all kinds of publications, including ... *Time* and *Newsweek*. I took after him, and when I was 16 I remember being blown away by Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. I loved the sense of freedom and of wide, open spaces, how going on a long-distance journey could change you. I wanted to share these feelings, but there were no blogs in those days. So I went down to the local paper and asked the editor, a woman, why nobody wrote about such things. And she said: ‘Why don’t you?’ and she published my article.”

Mottaz says reader response was “terrific – and that I could have an impact like that made me feel like I owned the world”.

He was hooked. So much so, that a few years later, impatient to begin his career in journalism, Mottaz, never a fan of school, headed for Zurich and an entry-level position in the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation’s TV newsroom there.

In the ’80s Mottaz worked as the SBC’s New York correspondent, and later became its TV and radio bureau chief in Washington, DC. He spent 15 years in the United States – from 1979 to 1994.

In 1994, Mottaz returned to Switzerland to take up the job of deputy managing editor of the evening news at Swiss TV in SBC headquarters in Geneva. He moved on to become director of news and current affairs in 1996, and then in 2001, director of new technology and new media as well as a member of the executive board.

During the latter part of his SBC days in Geneva, Mottaz was dogged by press articles suggesting staffers did not like his management style. Looking back over his tenure with the SBC in Geneva, Mottaz partly attributes the problem to what he calls being a “cultural UFO” who, based on his U.S. experience, was trying to change “entrenched mentalities”.

“I felt I had a mandate to change the way news was reported,” he says.

Mottaz also faced the imperative to usher the digital age into each aspect of communicating, news gathering and producing, and he is credited with computerising the way Swiss-French news is put together.

Although he has forged the bulk of his career in TV, radio and new media, Mottaz is still very much a print commentator and has toyed with the idea of expanding his writing skills to screenwriting, although he laughingly admits that other creative flights of fancy, such as publishing a “classy West Coast newsletter in three languages: *Wines and Chips*, about Napa and Silicon valleys,” were non-starters.





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Station team (left to right): Mark Butcher, Aurélien Chupin, Hansine Johnston, Paige Revillard, Philippe Mottaz, Pete Forster, Laura Leishman (bottom): Jordan Davis, Julie Varnau (above): Conor Lennon, Nicki Chadwick, Tom McAlinden, Alex Helmick and Michelle Mischler

Broadcasting evolution

WRS is now wholly owned by the SBC. When it was born in 1996 as World Radio Geneva and only transmitted regionally, the SBC held just a 40 per cent stake in its shares.

In 2007, the SBC bought out the other shareholders and became the station's sole owner. Based on the potential it saw for the growth of English-speaking radio in Switzerland (statistical evidence indicates over 30 per cent of the Swiss population speaks English), the SBC used the opportunity to strengthen its strategy to move away from FM and into Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB).

For operating cost reasons and also new federal broadcasting laws, it decided to turn the station into a public service broadcaster – by definition, one that serves the needs and interests of the general public.

According to *swissinfo*, DAB technology is present in all European coun-

tries, particularly in the UK where 85 per cent of households receive it, as well as many Asian countries and Australia. (The United States has its own technology – IBOC, or In Band on Channel.) In Switzerland, DAB technology is expanding rapidly and is presently available in the Suisse Romande, Lucerne and Ticino. Its advantages include a wider choice of radio stations and better reception. Mottaz says wider DAB distribution of WRS is scheduled for this spring.

The right man for a changing media

Mottaz speaks fluent English and is thoroughly experienced with the English/American approach to reporting and programming. As a Swiss, he is also in a position to competently determine how to present Switzerland's complexities to foreign listeners *and* anticipate the interests of the Swiss listeners who are part of the station's audience mix.

Equally, he can bridge the culture of

an English-language radio station with native speakers and the Swiss mother organisation he knows so well.

He will accomplish some of this online. "Quality content is shifting to the net," Mottaz wrote in his English and French blog *Via Digitalis – Musings about a connected world* at www.via-digitalis.org. He was referring to print, TV and movies, but he might as well have included radio.

And indeed, the WRS website, Mottaz says, is a major vehicle as the station continues to make headway on the national media scene in areas where DAB is not yet available, or for people who have not switched to DAB, since most of the content can be heard online. Through news, classifieds, the posting of citizen-reporter style photos, and plans for development that include adding videos, the site encourages active audience use.

Find out more: www.worldradio.ch

