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SECTION THREE

Who Were the Listeners and What Did They Hear?

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Listeners to Radio Liberty

Both Western radio in general and Radio Liberty in particular showed their greatest relative appeal among males with a secondary or higher education living in urban areas.[1] It can be argued that this description also fits those most likely to be interested in politics, as well as those owning radio receivers capable of picking up a signal through jamming. This profile also corresponds to the type of programming carried by Western radio, which apart for some music programs targeted at youth was designed primarily for an urban intelligentsia.

The following charts (Figures 16–19) show weekly listening trends to Radio Liberty among different demographic groups from 1980 through 1989, the first year the station benefited from an un-jammed signal.

Men dominated Radio Liberty audiences throughout. It's noteworthy that the lifting of jamming at the end of 1988 led to a doubling of the listening rates of both the male and female audiences.

The relative appeal of Radio Liberty to different age groups shows an interesting shift throughout the 1980s (see Figure 17).

In 1980, at a time when increasing Soviet engagement in Afghanistan led to the US boycott of the Moscow Olympics, the highest weekly rate of listening to Radio Liberty was among

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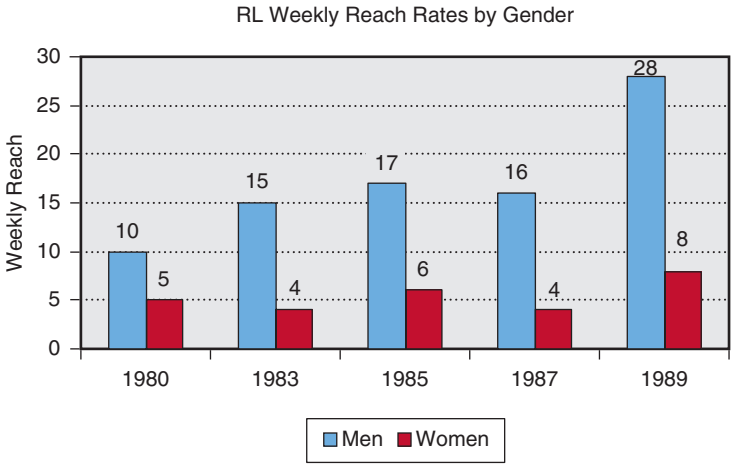

FIGURE 16. Weekly Reach of Radio Liberty by Gender: 1980–1989

those under 30 years of age. In 1983, the highest listening rate returned to the 30–49 year group, where Radio Liberty's appeal was always traditionally strongest, while the younger group dropped by more than half. In 1985, younger listeners came back, but the 30–49 year group remained dominant. In 1987, when jamming ended on VOA and BBC, the younger group again left Radio Liberty, presumably for the un-jammed stations. In 1989, with an un-jammed signal, listening rates among

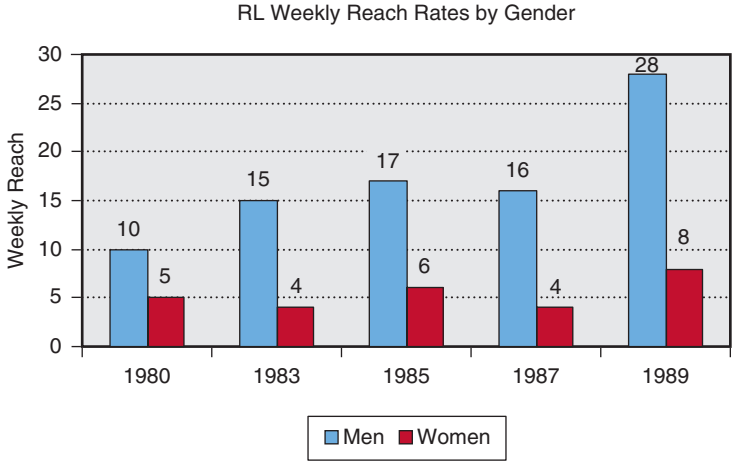

FIGURE 17. Weekly Reach of Radio Liberty by Age: 1980–1989

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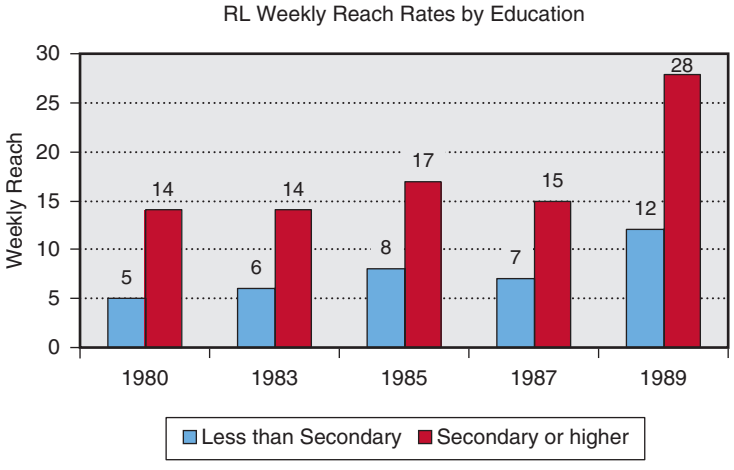

FIGURE 18. Weekly Reach of Radio Liberty by Education: 1980–1989

the young more than doubled, while listening rates among the 30–49 year group and the over-fifties increased, but not quite as dramatically.

Listening rates by education showed a consistent trend throughout the 1980s. People with secondary or higher education usually listened at rates about twice as high as those with lower educational levels (see Figure 18). The highest rates of all were found among those with higher education.

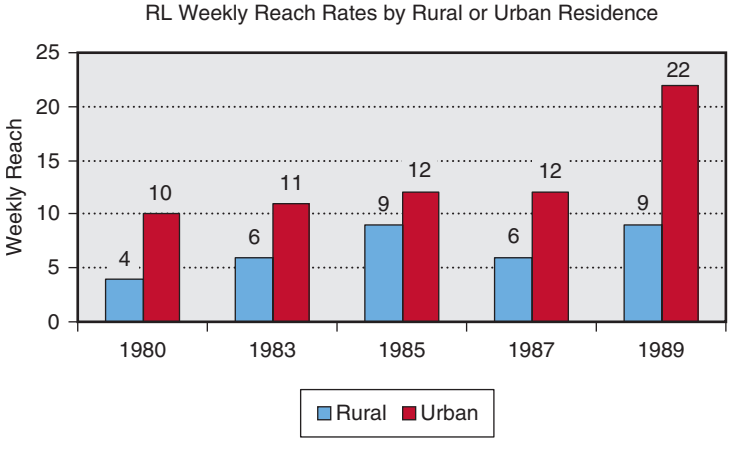

FIGURE 19. Weekly Reach of Radio Liberty by Rural or Urban Residence: 1980–1989

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After cessation of jamming, weekly rates among the "educated" almost doubled from 15% in 1988 to 28% in 1989.

Despite the fact that audibility of Radio Liberty was usually better in rural than in urban areas, the station appealed essentially to an urban audience. For one thing, educational levels were higher in urban areas, for another, Radio Liberty's programming was essentially targeted at an educated urban audience.

3.2. Western Radio Listening by Attitudinal Type

It is hardly surprising that personal political orientation was a major determinant of Western radio listening. Not only was this an important predictive indicator of listening to Western radio, it also correlated in different ways with specific international broadcasters.

In 1984, SAAOR published an attitudinal typology of urban Soviet citizens based on over 3,000 interviews with Soviet travelers to the West in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[2] Five questions, determined on the basis of a factor analysis, provided a scale that broadly segmented the population on a spectrum from "hardline" to "liberal" according to their attitudes toward civil liberties in the USSR. Figure 20 gives the breakdown of the urban population of the USSR in terms of these five attitudinal types.

"Liberals" and "hardliners" were at roughly equal strength in the urban population, with one in eight subscribing to one or

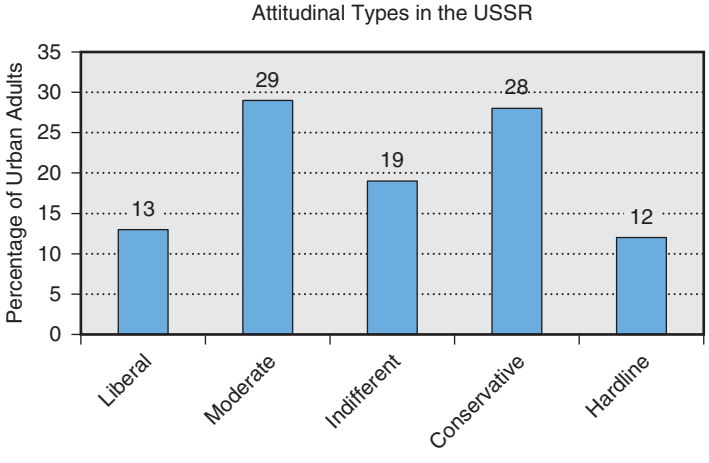

FIGURE 20. Attitudinal Types in the USSR (Urban Population)

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the other position. "Moderates" and "Conservatives" mirrored each other as well, with approximately three in ten in each camp. About one in five urban Soviet citizens could be classified as "indifferent" or neutral, holding down the center of the scale.

In terms of media use, the "liberals" were significantly more likely to be listeners to Western radio than any of the other types. Almost 80% of the group said that they listened to the broadcasts (see Figure 21).

"Liberals" used word-of-mouth as an information source at higher rates than any other group, suggesting that information gathered from Western radio sources received an amplifier effect by being passed on through word-of-mouth communication. "Moderates" also used word-of-mouth communications at relatively higher rates than their more conservative counterparts, again giving a booster effect to the messages conveyed by Western broadcasters. "Hardliners" tended to rely on domestic TV as their main information source and made little use of Western radio broadcasts.

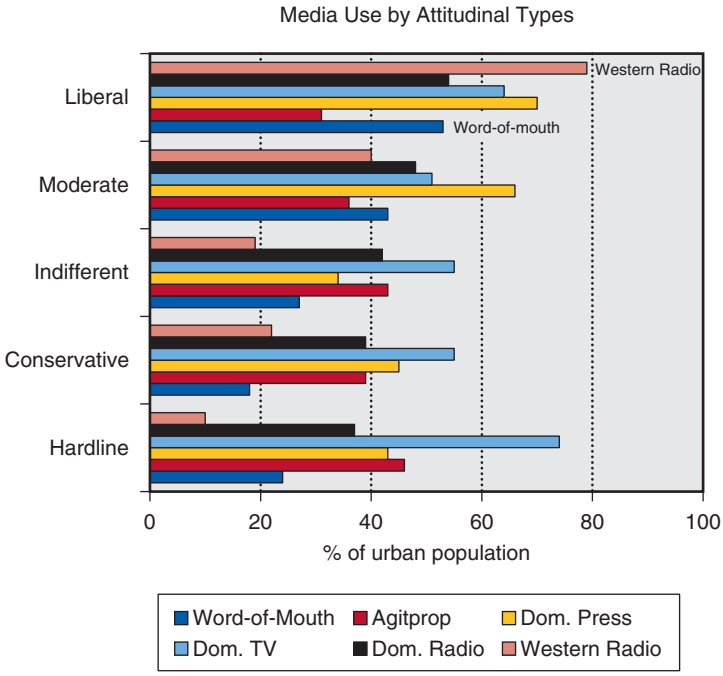

FIGURE 21. Media Use by Attitudinal Types in the USSR

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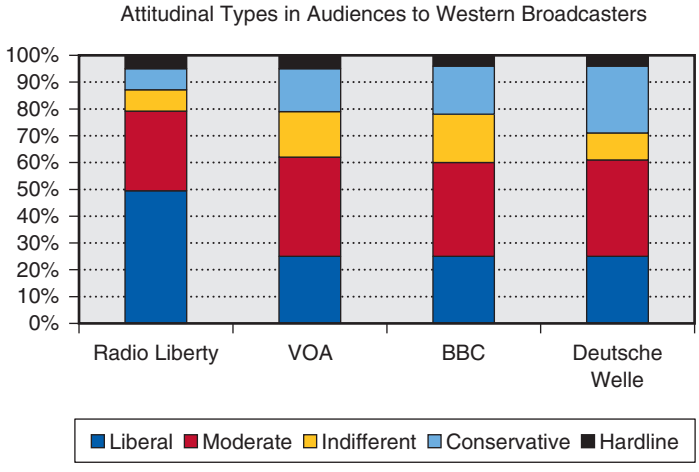

FIGURE 22. Audiences to Western Broadcasters by Attitudinal Type

The individual Western stations attracted different types of listeners in terms of political orientation. Figure 22 shows that half of Radio Liberty's audience was composed of "liberals," and that another 30% were "moderates," giving it a sharper ideological profile than the other major broadcasters. In light of the more hard-edged political broadcast style of Radio Liberty this is not surprising. The audiences to VOA, BBC and Deutsche Welle were all dominated by "moderates," who outnumbered the "liberals" two to one in the urban population.

These findings imply that if Radio Liberty had wanted to increase its audience in 1984, an apparent strategy might have been to re-position the broadcasts to increase their appeal to "moderates." Since the station was the prime target of the Soviet jamming network, however, this seems problematic, given that only the most committed listeners were willing to make the extra effort to tune in through constant intense jamming. A blunting of its political edge could have cost Radio Liberty listeners among the "liberals" without adding many among the "moderates," who listened to the other western broadcasters.

3.3. Motivations for Listening to Western Radio

As their primary motivation for tuning in Western radio broadcasts, Soviet respondents to the SAAOR traveler surveys cited the desire to hear uncensored news, followed by the need to

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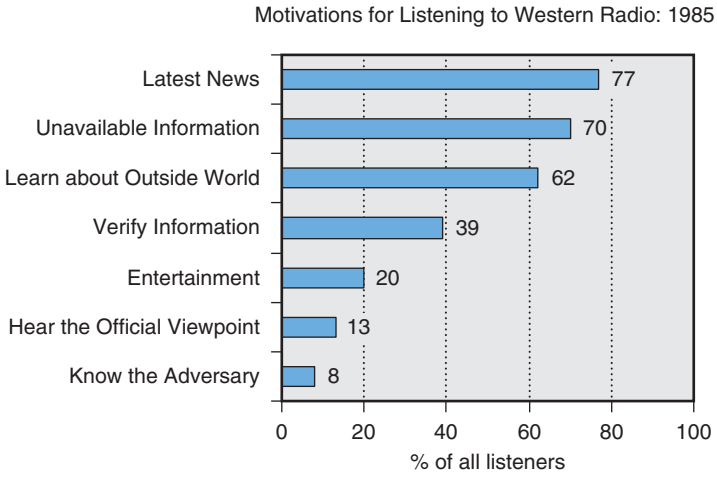

FIGURE 23. Motivations of Soviet Citizens for Listening to Western Radio Broadcasts: 1985

obtain information not available from sources within the USSR (see Figure 23).[3] A third reason was to learn first-hand about the outside world from non-Soviet sources. Another important motive was to verify or disprove information already received from the Soviet media. Seeking entertainment was also a motivation for listening but, at 20%, it ranked relatively low in the SAAOR traveler surveys. This may underestimate the real interest of Soviet audiences in the music and entertainment programs of Western radios. Listener mail to these programs was considerable, and there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence attesting to their popularity. The relatively low rating for entertainment in the traveler surveys may be an artifact of the methodology. Travelers as a group were likely to be much more interested in politics than the average Soviet citizen, while younger people who listened heavily to music programs were less likely to be able to travel outside the USSR.

Hearing the "official viewpoint," a category usually reserved for government-sponsored stations such as VOA, BBC and Deutsche Welle, was important to about one in seven listeners. A few claimed that they listened to Western broadcasts in order to better understand their Western "adversaries." Whether this was a genuine motivation, or merely a disingenuous response, is difficult to gauge, but it was a reason occasionally cited, notably by Communist Party members.

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As categories are not always comparable, specific motivations for listening from previous surveys are not given here, but they follow the same basic pattern. Information always scored much higher than entertainment as a primary motivation for listening. Survey data from 1987 showed that 91% of respondents said they listened to get information of various kinds, while only 13% noted entertainment as a primary motive.[4] It's noteworthy that in the *perestroika* year of 1987 13% claimed "moral support" as a motivation for listening to Western broadcasts.

Motivations for listening to specific stations generally followed this basic pattern, with a few important nuances. Radio Liberty was singled out for its coverage of the USSR and its nationality programming, and was also used as a way to verify domestic Soviet information, or to get otherwise unavailable information. VOA was often cited for its coverage of the West and generally high quality programming, including entertainment shows, while BBC was noted for its "objectivity."

3.4. Choice of Programming from Radio Liberty

In terms of the type of programming they preferred to hear on Radio Liberty, listeners invariably selected the latest news, and information focused on the USSR. However, in the decade spanning the period 1975 to 1986, from the time of the Brezhnev *zastoi* (stagnation) to Gorbachev's *perestroika,* a number of interesting shifts can be seen in other areas (see Figure 24).[5]

While *samizdat* was a key audience favorite in the Brezhnev years, singled out by 6 in 10 listeners, by 1986, when *perestroika* was underway and the Soviet press had begun to shake off some of the shackles of censorship, the rate had dropped in half. What formerly could only be expressed in *samizdat* form could, in the *glasnost'* period, often be openly debated in the Soviet press, thus denting part of the unique appeal of Western radio.

Political analysis and programs on life in the West remained important throughout Radio Liberty's history, but showed an increase in 1986. At this time, straight information was much more available in the USSR than hitherto, but there was often a lack of relevant analysis. Survey respondents throughout the *perestroika* period frequently noted that they now had access to information, but lacked competent analysis to place it in context and make sense of it.

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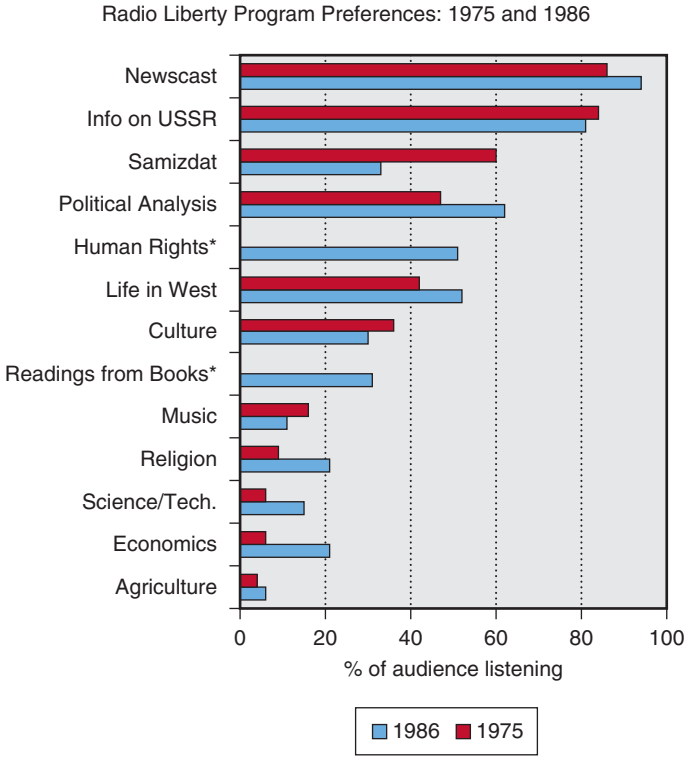

FIGURE 24. Listening to Different Types of Programming on Radio Liberty: 1975–1986

"Human Rights" and "Readings from Books" (usually books that originated in the USSR but were not allowed to be published there, such as works by Solzhenitsyn or Pasternak) were a continuing staple of Radio Liberty broadcast fare and resonated strongly with its "liberal" audience.

In the *perestroika* period, we also saw increasing interest in programs on religion, and in applied topics such as science and technology and economics. Now that reform was on the Soviet agenda, listeners sought out practical information on how to live in a society that was moving beyond traditional Marxist-Leninist ideological strictures. Radio Liberty's programming adapted to these new circumstances and evolved from a largely "dissident" perspective in the Brezhnev years to a more all-round focus on politics and information by 1986.

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3.5. Listeners' Perceptions of Major Western Broadcasters

Data from the *perestroika* period show how listeners perceived the major broadcasters in terms of "relevance" to the listener, the "credibility" of the information heard, the relative friendliness or sharpness of the broadcast "tone," and assessments of the stations' overall "professionalism." Figures 25–28 provide net scores in these four areas for 1985 and 1987.[6] (Net scores are determined by subtracting negative from positive assessments.)

By 1987 Radio Liberty was seen as the most relevant of the Western broadcasters, slightly ahead of VOA (see Figure 25). This was no doubt largely due to its focus on current affairs in the USSR and especially to its coverage of *perestroika.* Radio Liberty was becoming a participant in the internal debate on reform in the Soviet Union. It was the only Western radio to increase its relevance rating between 1985 and 1987, while the Soviet press was growing more lively. By adding greater coverage of USSR affairs to its mandate to explain America to Soviet listeners, VOA managed to stay at much the same score. BBC and Deutsche Welle, while both scoring positively, trailed somewhat on relevance. Both stations had less on-air time than Radio Liberty, with its round-the-clock transmissions, and they were required to spend a proportion of their broadcast time covering British and

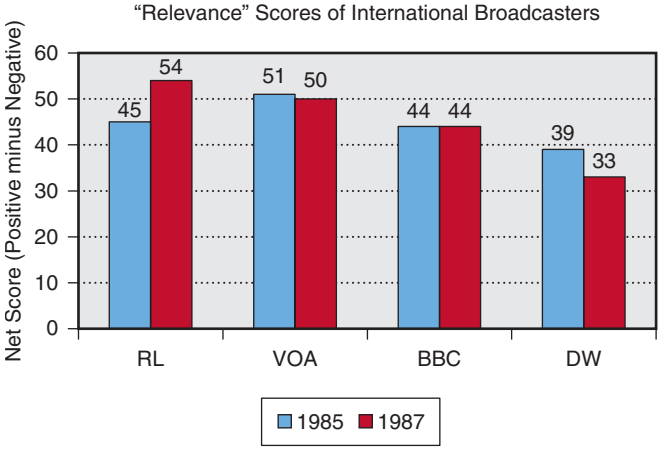

FIGURE 25. Trends in Perceived "Relevance" of International Broadcasters: 1985–1987

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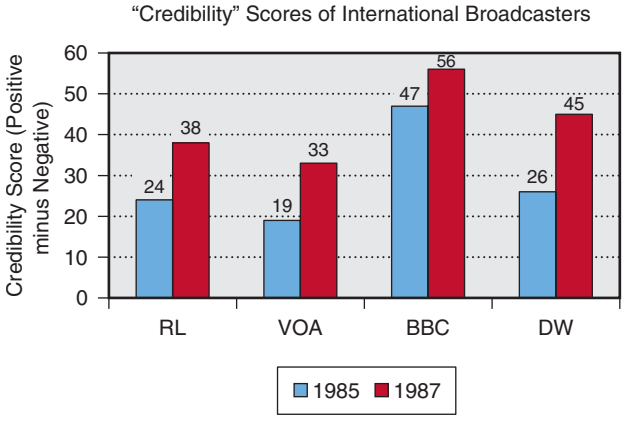

FIGURE 26. Trends in Perceived "Credibility" of International Broadcasters: 1985–1987

German affairs, both topics of secondary interest to the Soviet population.

In terms of relative credibility, however, BBC led the field (see Figure 26). With a net score of 56, it placed well ahead of Deutsche Welle, with Radio Liberty and VOA somewhat behind. Both Radio Liberty and VOA broadcasts at this time showed more political commitment than BBC and Deutsche Welle, and this may have influenced responses. While credibility *per se* was rated high for each station (53%), they were also cited for "tendentiousness" more frequently than either BBC or Deutsche Welle, thus lowering their overall net scores.

The way Radio Liberty's listeners assessed its tone was no doubt influenced by the station's forthright engagement on behalf of human rights, its extensive coverage of dissent in the USSR and its political edge. In 1985, many listeners felt its tone was critical rather than friendly. This assessment had changed by 1987 when it moved into a positive score, but Radio Liberty was still considered by its listeners to be more critical of the USSR than other international broadcasters.

BBC, known for its laconic broadcast style, scored highest on the tone scale, and this is probably related to its higher scores for credibility as well. Higher net scores across the board for all radios in 1987 may also be attributed to their adapting to the *perestroika* and *glasnost'* environments. Another factor may be that information that was coming out under *glasnost'* tended to

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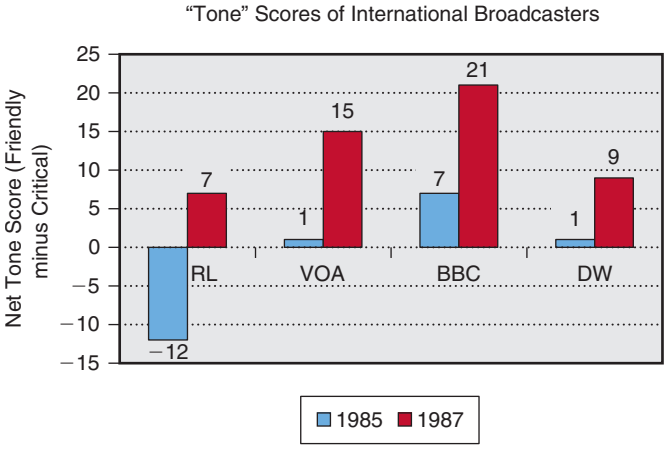

FIGURE 27. Trends in Perceived Broadcast "Tone" of International Broadcasters: 1985–1987

confirm much of what Western radio had been saying about events and conditions in the USSR.

All broadcasters scored relatively high in terms of all-round professionalism (see Figure 28). It's interesting to note that all net scores increased from 1985 to 1987. This may be related to their efforts to cover *perestroika* in the USSR, and the greater access they had to Soviet information sources by this time. In

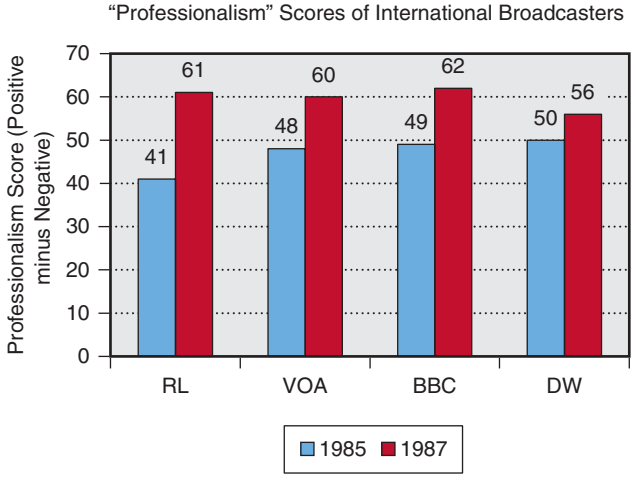

FIGURE 28. Trends in Perceived Overall "Professionalism" of International Broadcasters: 1985–1987

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any event, the professional quality of Western broadcasts in the Soviet media context was rated highly by listeners.

In sum, listeners changed their perceptions of Western broadcasters between 1985, when Gorbachev first came to power, and 1987, when *perestroika* and *glasnost'* were in full swing. This can probably be attributed to two factors: a) the capacity shown by Western stations to adapt their programming to the new environment in the USSR, and b) the audience's increasing interest in the unprecedented developments brought on by *glasnost'*.

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