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America's int'l news deficit may benefit BBC by Steve Brennan

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Who would have thought that the cynical adage “no news is good news” could in fact be the best calling card Britain’s BBC might have when knocking on the door of the potentially gigantic U.S. market for its storied news operations?

But the fact is that the perceived dearth of international news and analysis on U.S. mainstream broadcasters is one of the big marketing ploys the BBC is using to create a bigger footprint in the U.S. for its global TV news. BBC World News’ slogan is “See the world you’ve been missing.”

The campaign approach follows a recent research study carried out by U.S. pollster Frank Luntz for BBC World News, which outlines viewers’ dissatisfaction with stateside news outlets’ provision of international news and sees them as “sensationalist,” “superficial” and offering only a “narrow news agenda,” according to executives at “the Beeb.”

A spokeswoman says that the availability of BBC World News as a 24-hour service is being hyped on the popular BBC America as well as on the Internet. The general idea is to get Americans to flood their local cable and satellite providers with demands for serious international coverage in the form of BBC World News.

This might seem boldly optimistic: Fewer Americans read newspapers than ever in the country’s history, and Americans’ taste for news seemingly always has drifted to the domestic angle. But the BBC is -- in the words of Mel Gibson in “Braveheart” -- “out to pick a fight” in America.

“There has been unparalleled interest in international news in the U.S. since 9/11, and (the) latest nationwide research results clearly show BBC World News is compulsory viewing for anyone who wants to keep on top of global news and current affairs,” BBC World News CEO Richard Sambrook says. “The demand for the channel -- which is known throughout the world for its depth of analysis -- can only be encouraging news to cable operators across the U.S. who are looking to offer their subscribers and viewers the news behind the headlines from the world’s largest global broadcasting newsgathering operation.”

Among the findings of Luntz’s BBC-commissioned survey last year:

-- Sixty-five percent of people questioned believed it is extremely important or very important to have access to international news.

-- There is a significant gap in the amount of international news demanded and what is being supplied.

-- Forty-seven percent of those questioned rate current coverage of international news as only fair or poor.

-- The biggest frustrations with national cable news are too many tabloid stories (40% name it as their biggest or next-biggest frustration), too repetitive (32%), biased (31%) and too much politics (20%).

“Americans increasingly recognize the importance of international news,” Luntz says, “and they perceive a gap between what they are getting and what they need.”

The BBC World News service reaches a tiny 3 million viewers in the U.S. If the BBC’s marketing campaign pays off, it should see a sizable increase. If not, well, it would be fair to quote another adage: “Plus c’est la meme chose, plus ca change.”