

# Britain's International Broadcasting

By Rajesh Mirchandani and Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar



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# **Britain's International Broadcasting**

Rajesh Mirchandani and Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar

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## **BRITAIN'S INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING**

Rajesh Mirchandani and Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar

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## **The BBC and British Diplomacy: Past, Present, and Future**

By Rajesh Mirchandani

“There is no doubt that the period ahead is going to be difficult and sad—both personally and professionally.”<sup>1</sup> With these words Peter Horrocks, Director of the British Broadcasting Corporation’s World Service, concluded a speech to staff on January 26th, 2011 in which he laid out deep cuts to the global network that has been described by many as the ‘Jewel in the Crown’ of the BBC,<sup>2</sup> and which, in 2010/2011, enjoyed a weekly global audience of some 166 million.<sup>3</sup>

In an atmosphere of growing gloom, Mr. Horrocks detailed annual revenue savings of 20% in the three years up to 2014. At that point, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the British Government will stop direct funding of the World Service after nearly 80 years. Funding will be transferred to other income sources (explained later).

Simply put, paying for the BBC World Service represents the most public way the British Government carries out public diplomacy. This follows from the definition of public diplomacy as the ways in which an international actor tries to influence foreign publics,<sup>4</sup> and from Cull (1995)<sup>5</sup> who categorized the ways in which governments carry out public diplomacy, including international broadcasting (IB). Cull states: “Thanks to the achievement of the BBC World Service, IB has long been the most widely known element in British public diplomacy.”<sup>6</sup>

The BBC is, of course, not alone: the U.S. government funds Voice of America, the Germans pay for Deutsche Welle and small, oil-rich Qatar funds the increasingly influential Al Jazeera. There are many more. We will see how the BBC differs intrinsically from other such broadcasters but, on the face of it, removing government funding from the World Service should suggest a seismic shift in British public diplomacy.



I argue that this may not necessarily be the case. Through forensic scrutiny of the BBC's history and structure, we shall see how its much-vaunted and jealously-guarded editorial independence plays an important public diplomacy role in generating soft power — a role that pre-dates government involvement and that, given the rise of the BBC's international commercial services, does not depend on government funding. Yet, at the same time, that very independence may actually make the BBC an active, if unwitting, tool of British public diplomacy.

### **History and Structure of the BBC**

The British Broadcasting Company was first established in 1922 as a commercial enterprise: “a consortium of radio manufacturers brought together by a government fearful of the kind of unrestricted development of the new medium they saw in the USA. It was, however, an unusual company with considerable idealism and a strong sense of the importance of the work it was carrying out.”<sup>7</sup> On December 20th 1926 it was incorporated as a public body by Royal Charter, becoming the British Broadcasting Corporation.

The Royal Charter established that the BBC, then a radio service, would be funded by a license fee: effectively, a tax paid by anyone buying a radio (as TV began to dominate it became the Television License Fee, still payable by anyone who owns a TV set and receives broadcasts). The individual annual license fee in 2013 was £145.50 (approx. US\$235) per set and total BBC license fee income was £3.66bn (approx. US\$5.68bn).<sup>8</sup> This pays for UK domestic services, which currently include 10 TV networks, 15 national and regional radio stations plus a network of 40 local radio stations and substantial online output ([bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk)). There are three other major sources of income.

First, international audiences receive programs via the World Service, funded, as described above, by the FCO. Apart from radio broadcasting in more than two dozen languages, the World Service also includes Persian TV (broadcasting in Farsi) and Arabic TV, as

well as websites in English and other languages and news for mobile platforms. The FCO funding, known as Grant In Aid, also covers the cost of BBC Monitoring, the service which monitors the output of foreign broadcasters.

Secondly, BBC Worldwide is a wholly owned commercial subsidiary, which sells BBC programs to overseas markets as well as running channels in foreign territories, e.g. BBC America. BBC Worldwide also distributes BBC World News, the 24-hour English-language global TV news channel, funded by subscription and advertising. Profits from BBC Worldwide enterprises are ploughed back into programming. Lastly, there is income from producing content for other broadcasters and other activities, e.g. concert ticket sales (see Fig. 1).

When it comes to BBC News, there is an overlap of funding. The majority comes from the license fee including the pay of many of the BBC's foreign correspondents. Additionally the World Service (i.e. the UK FCO) pays for much reporting and distribution of news; BBC World News also contributes (including funding World News America, broadcast on PBS in the U.S.). Thus, the BBC World News viewer in Chicago may see a story by a reporter paid for by the UK license fee; a listener to domestic BBC Radio 4 in London may hear a report from Egypt by a World Service reporter.

Source of Income	Amount in £ (\$ equivalent Nov 2013)
License fee	3,656.2m
FCO Grant In Aid (World Service and Monitoring)	264.7m
Commercial Operations (incl BBC Worldwide)	1097.9m
Other revenue	83.5m
Total income	5,102.3m

**Fig.1: BBC revenue. Source: BBC Annual Report 2012/13**

On a busy story there is often no separation of tasks by funding stream. For example, on location in the swing state of Colorado during the 2012 Presidential election, I reported for BBC domestic news programs (license fee), BBC World Service (government

money) and BBC World News (private money). In 2010, during the rescue of 33 Chilean miners trapped underground for two months, I was part of the large BBC operation on location around the San Jose mine. We were broadcasting around the clock — sometimes simultaneously on three TV networks, three radio networks and live streaming online, at the same time as gathering and preparing recorded material — for the entire build-up to and execution of the extraordinary rescue. Our coverage was planned and in that case there were separate reporters for the World Service, World News TV and domestic news. But as events unfolded at speed and unpredictably, all correspondents found themselves filing for any and all networks as needed. There was no demarcation according to who was paying your way and certainly no difference in the story we were telling. Similarly, while covering the typhoon in the Philippines in November 2013, my colleagues and I reported for all BBC networks as required, regardless of funding source.

The key point is that the British Government pays for the World Service, but it doesn't buy influence. A BBC correspondent whose job is part-funded by the license fee and part by the World Service says: "We are not told by the FCO this is the agenda for the year, now please disseminate... There have never been any directives, there's never any email coming from anyone in the Government saying please say this on air. If this was the standard at the BBC I don't think many of us would be working for it... But coming from the developing world where TV stations, newspapers are often tools of the government I understand why it's sometimes difficult for people in those countries to accept that while the BBC gets funding from the Government it is not a tool of the Government." In fact history portrays a relationship that has been both cozy and confrontational.

### **The BBC and Public Diplomacy**

The FCO has been providing funding for the World Service since the 1930s, when it was called the Empire Service and broadcast only in English. The British Government wanted to counter the spread of Nazi propaganda by increasing English language broadcasting

around the world. In 1937, Britain's then-Foreign Minister Anthony Eden acknowledged: "It is perfectly true, of course, that good cultural propaganda cannot remedy the damage done by a bad foreign policy, but it is no exaggeration to say that even the best of diplomatic policies may fail if it neglects the task of interpretation and persuasion which modern conditions impose."<sup>9</sup> In 1938 the BBC began broadcasting in Arabic to the Middle East, soon after to South America in Spanish and Portuguese, and then in several European languages. During this time, the activities of the BBC can be said to align most closely with the definition of public diplomacy: here was an actor (the British Government) attempting to influence foreign publics (via the BBC) for specific foreign policy goals (to counter Nazi propaganda and bolster British interests).

During WWII, the British Government used the BBC to further its foreign policy goal of persuading the U.S. to give up neutrality and side with the Allies. As Cull reminds us<sup>10</sup>, there were several ways in which the broadcaster encouraged Americans to identify with the British cause: CBS Correspondent Ed Murrow was allowed to use BBC studios to report the war to the U.S. (an American voice, it was felt, would give greater credibility to the reports). In addition, unbiased BBC news reports reflecting both positive and negative sides of Britain helped neutralize the odor of propaganda (this feature of BBC news will be explored in greater detail later); a radio soap opera about life during the Blitz was broadcast to U.S. audiences and helped to re-frame the issue of the war in American minds; and Churchill's speeches too were re-broadcast in the U.S., crafted with a clear mastery of persuasion techniques. This last point is worth diverting for.

Churchill made speeches that did not explicitly beseech the U.S. to end its neutrality. Rather, he was heard as if speaking to the British people and hoping out loud that the Americans would come to their help. The effect was that Americans felt they were 'listening in' to a conversation between the besieged British people and their leader. According to modern social psychologists, eavesdropping is an effective method of persuasion: hearing something not intended

for you can give it greater credibility<sup>11</sup>. More than sixty years later, the British Minister for Europe Jim Murphy recalled how: “Winston Churchill successfully presented the largest empire the world had ever known as a plucky underdog to win over U.S. hearts and minds.”<sup>12</sup>

The British Government during WWII went even further in its use of the BBC for public diplomacy. When General Charles de Gaulle escaped Nazi-occupied France and fled to Britain, he broadcast a rallying cry to the French from Studio B2 at BBC Broadcasting House in Central London on June 18th, 1940. His message that “whatever happens, the flame of French resistance must not be extinguished and it will not be extinguished” became the founding call for the Free French Forces and the Resistance to the Nazis. De Gaulle was subsequently allowed to broadcast for five minutes each day on the BBC French Service.<sup>13</sup> On the 70th anniversary of that broadcast, in 2010, French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited the studio where it was made and underlined its significance by declaring of the French “We are all the children of 18 June.”<sup>14</sup>

WWII marked a period of unusual closeness between the BBC and British authorities. The echoes of that relationship can still be heard, as the BBC is often accused of being a mouthpiece for government. BBC Correspondents, myself included, hear such accusations frequently when reporting both in the UK as well as overseas. They are professionally insulting, but par for the course when the way the BBC is funded and structured is so complicated.

### **Government vs. the BBC**

Since 1949, the UK Foreign Office has funded the World Service entirely. Along with government funding for BBC Monitoring, in 2011/12 the allocated budget was approximately £277m, in 2012/13 close on £265m<sup>15</sup>. However, that figure represents barely 5% of the BBC's total income for 2013. Furthermore, British Government funding did not establish an overseas service; rather it paid to expand the existing Empire Service. (The BBC's first Director General, John

Reith, tried and failed to persuade the government to contribute in earlier years; it took looming war to open up official coffers).

In reality, however, the British Government has often struggled over the years to have its point of view dominate the airwaves of the national broadcaster. BBC history is littered with clashes between the two institutions. In its infancy, 1926, with Britain in the grip of a crippling General Strike that halted production of, among other things, newspapers, then-Chancellor Winston Churchill urged Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to commandeer the broadcaster to control a key tool of communication with the people. After forceful lobbying from Director General John Reith, Baldwin decided the BBC should keep its independence.

Other examples had more dramatic results. In 1956, Prime Minister Anthony Eden resigned over his disastrous handling of Britain's military intervention into Egypt following President Nasser's decision to nationalize the Anglo-French company that controlled the vital Suez Canal trade route and seize control of it. Eden was incensed that the BBC broadcast UK political divisions over the campaign, including to Middle East countries. He too considered seizing editorial control. Three decades later, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was furious that the BBC cast doubt on Government information sources during the Falklands Conflict with Argentina. When pushed by a BBC interviewer about whether she had ordered the sinking of an enemy ship, the General Belgrano, that appeared to pose little threat, the Iron Lady turned on her BBC interviewer: "I think it could only be in Britain that a prime minister was accused of sinking an enemy ship that was a danger to our navy, when my main motive was to protect the boys in our navy."

Still worse, the Hutton affair in 2003/04 led to a string of resignations and a suicide. In the run-up to the Iraq War, the BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan broadcast live on BBC Radio 4 that the Government had 'sexed-up' an intelligence dossier to make it look as though Saddam Hussein posed more of an imminent threat than in reality. It was claimed Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair misled

Parliament in order to better make the case for going to war to the British people. Despite demands for an apology, the BBC stood firm. Soon after, the BBC's source for the story was exposed as a government weapons expert, Dr. David Kelly, who was grilled about his actions by MPs. A week later he committed suicide. A subsequent inquiry, chaired by Lord Hutton, severely criticized the BBC, forcing the resignation of both the Director General Greg Dyke and the Chairman of the BBC Gavyn Davies. It was a bitter episode that most current BBC journalists remember, and which demonstrates the sometimes deep divide between the British Government and its national broadcaster. To say that the BBC is a tool of the British Government may be to fundamentally misunderstand its position in British society, its structure, and guiding principles. And it begs the question of how, then, does the BBC fit into British public diplomacy?

### **Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation<sup>16</sup>**

The BBC is Britain's national broadcaster, not the government's broadcaster. The separation is enshrined in its founding document. Article 6 (1) of the BBC Royal Charter states: "The BBC shall be independent in all manners concerning the content of its output, the times and manner in which this is supplied, and in the management of its affairs."<sup>17</sup> But the Charter goes further. In Article 3 (1), it states that the BBC "exists to serve the public interest" and Article 4 sets out the six Public Purposes of the BBC:

- (a) *sustaining citizenship and civil society*
- (b) *promoting education and learning*
- (c) *stimulating creativity and cultural excellence*
- (d) *representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities*
- (e) *bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK*
- (f) *in promoting its other purposes, helping to deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services and, in addition, taking a leading role in the switchover to digital television*

The last Public Purpose is a modern addition, the rest are long-standing. Purpose (e) is of most interest to us here as it concerns the functioning principles of the World Service and, increasingly, the BBC's commercial, international-facing services such as BBC World News and BBC.com (online content available outside the UK).

The Royal Charter (renewable every ten years) established the BBC Trust as the Corporations' sovereign body to guide its strategic direction and the Executive Board to carry out its services. In December 2007, the Trust published details of how the BBC should fulfill its Public Purposes. In Section 1(a), the Trust says the BBC should:

*1(a) Provide international news broadcasting of the highest quality;*

*The BBC's journalism for international audiences should share the same values as its journalism for UK audiences: accuracy, impartiality and independence. International audiences should value BBC news and current affairs for providing reliable and unbiased information of relevance, range and depth.<sup>18</sup>*

Thus it is clear that the BBC was founded upon not just principles but *legislation* that places at its very core a rock-solid guarantee of independence from government editorial interference. Furthermore, notwithstanding government attempts to use Charter Renewal as a lever of influence, the Royal Charter pre-dates any funding from the British Government. In this sense, the UK Foreign Office did not pay to set up a broadcasting arm to spread its message to foreign publics; rather it bought into a pre-existing, and increasingly influential, global network. In this fundamental way the BBC differs from public diplomacy tools such as Voice of America or CCTV. Yet, the BBC remains an important element of British public diplomacy because the independence of BBC News enhances British soft power.



## The BBC and Soft Power

Nye defined soft power as the ability to make others want what you want.<sup>19</sup> Soft power is characterized by qualities that are seen by foreign publics as attractive. That which the BBC represents may be what makes the BBC valuable: a society—Britain—that values a free press, independent thought and healthy (critical) debate. These attributes may be said to demonstrate the strength of Britain's democracy: it can withstand sharp criticism. Freedom of thought and expression are the soft power assets and the BBC is the tool used to leverage them.

Broadcasting into countries such as Burma, Iran, and the former Soviet Union shows how the BBC achieves its Public Purpose of “bringing the UK to the world” by delivering “reliable and unbiased information of relevance, range and depth.” (see above). Mikhail Gorbachev, the former Soviet leader, recalled how ‘the BBC sounded best’ while under house arrest during a coup attempt in 1991;<sup>20</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese pro-democracy leader, who spent decades under house arrest, has praised the World Service not only for its news content but also for a pop music program called “A Jolly Good Show”.<sup>21</sup> Of the radio she said, “we listen[ed] much more carefully because that’s really our only line to the outside world.”

Research in key international markets shows that many audiences have a perception of the BBC as independent and place value on this. They also appreciate its long history as a global broadcaster. In a survey of Afghan radio listeners carried out for the BBC in 2007/8, 57% of adult radio listeners had listened to BBC Radio in the previous week, while 90% felt they could trust the information provided by the BBC.<sup>22</sup> One female respondent said: “BBC radio broadcasts impartial news and programs even from the past years when war existed in Afghanistan and has never lost its trustworthiness.”

Viewers of World Service-funded Arabic TV in six Middle Eastern countries were polled in 2009<sup>23</sup> and the results again reflected a reputation for impartiality, credibility, and objectivity.

Some participants also made a link between the BBC and Britain, highlighting the broadcaster's important role in the area of British soft power. But the Afghan research also found challenges to the BBC's lofty standing from the huge increase in media outlets available to Afghan consumers, particularly on television. They offer an alternative view of the world to the BBC's version.

This was an observation also made by researchers at the University of the Punjab in 2010<sup>24</sup> who conducted surveys of the BBC Urdu service in Pakistan and among the Pakistani diaspora. The Urdu Service is one of the World Service's key language networks, broadcasting to around 9 million people<sup>25</sup>. The study began with the assessment that: "BBC World's [sic] Urdu Service is deemed as an important, free and fair mass medium in Pakistan," but went on to quote respondents' comments:

- Aamer: *"I think it is futile to expect fair and impartial reporting from BBC Urdu [while] their forces are engaged in Afghanistan, and they need Pakistan support in the "war on terror"..."*
- Saleem: *"The West and Western media will support those who they consider are loyal to them and can serve their interest in the region..."*

The researchers concluded: *"that the so-called "war on terror" being fought by Britain along with America has damaged the reputé of the BBC Urdu service among its users. The war on terror is considered generally in Pakistan and the Pakistani diaspora as a war against Islam and Muslims. The BBC was viewed as an agent of public diplomacy instead of an impartial and objective international broadcaster."*

Such an assessment has a negative impact not just on the perceived independence of the BBC, but also on British soft power. An FCO official explains: "[The World Service is a] huge part of [our] soft power arsenal. That's the point of government funding it...One could argue it's a purer form of soft power than, e.g., the British Council, which although it operates as a charity, is expected

to tie in much more closely with FCO objectives. The point about the World Service is that it simply reflects British values and a relatively impartial take on the world which acts as a beacon for the UK.”

The Director of the World Service, Peter Horrocks, sees things slightly differently. At a public diplomacy seminar at Birkbeck College in London in June 2011<sup>26</sup> he was asked about the BBC's role in British soft power: “Our aim isn't to be part of soft power ...our aims are editorial ones. But of course paradoxically [it] has the effect of enhancing Britain's soft power...because of the objectivity and the reputation of the BBC and then subsequently for Britain that's created by that...And I think we can legitimately feel proud of that. I mean it's a good thing to be able to say we contribute to greater British influence. But if there's ever a moment when the interests of soft power as seen by the UK government or UK institutions might contradict the BBC's editorial principles, of course those editorial principles come first.”

However, the conclusions of the BBC Urdu survey, above, as well as opinions in other media markets that question the BBC view of the world (and in the increasingly pluralistic media landscape, such opinions are heard more frequently) raise an important issue about the nature of impartiality. To explain this further, let us go back to the BBC's governance structures. Alongside the Royal Charter sits The Agreement with the Secretary of State<sup>27</sup> which reinforces the Corporation's editorial independence but makes certain requirements. For example, in Article 6:

*(6) The BBC must agree with the Foreign Secretary, and publish, general long-term objectives for the World Service, including —*

*(a) the provision of an accurate, unbiased and independent news service covering international and national developments;*

*(b) the presentation of a balanced British view of those developments*

It is the curious phrase “a balanced British view” that sparks interest. Can a British view be a balanced view? Does one not necessarily contradict the other? Or is there in fact an overlap between the objectives of the British Government and even an impartial, independent BBC?

Each year most BBC employees are required to undergo a performance review in which our work is assessed against publicly-stated values: independence, impartiality, honesty, quality, and respect for diversity.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the Agreement requires the BBC to facilitate a “global conversation” among audiences. Such a framework clearly places great emphasis on the practice of free speech, open debate and self-determination. Now compare that with UK FCO objectives, from a 2008 assessment of public diplomacy:

“[Our] foreign policy priorities respond to the key threats facing our interests today; to stop terrorism and weapons proliferation and tackle their causes; to prevent and resolve conflict; to promote a low-carbon, high growth, global economy; and to develop effective international institutions.”<sup>29</sup>

Such priorities also benefit from the spread of democracy, free speech, and a relaxation of authoritarian rule. Even though it is a long time since the BBC was involved in such overt public diplomacy as giving airtime to de Gaulle or colluding with Churchill to encourage U.S. entry into WWII, it is possible to see an alignment of BBC values and current UK FCO priorities that suggest the BBC may do more than passively enhance soft power to the benefit of the UK government; through its cherished and brandished independence the BBC may actually be an active—if unwitting—promoter of specific UK foreign policy goals.

At the Birkbeck College event mentioned above, Peter Horrocks, director of the World Service, was asked “Is fairness propaganda?” He replied thus:

*“I do accept that what we do is to impart a value, which is generally broadly held in Britain, which is that impartiality and an independent*

*view of the world is how we think the world is best understood and if, in doing that, we are doing something which you [the questioner] choose to call propaganda then from your perspective that may be a legitimate way of describing it. I wouldn't call it that because doing your journalism as independently and impartially as possible is about reflecting a broad range of views and the UK Government's views are only part of that."*

A former BBC UN Correspondent was more resigned: "I used to get invited to events by the [British] Ambassador," my colleague told me, "I'd be seated next to him but I used to wonder 'why am I here? And why am I being shown off to the world?' And then you realize it's because we're still poodles of the British Government, doing its work in promoting the idea of a liberal democracy."

We may start to draw our strands together at this point. We have seen that the BBC's public diplomacy role has changed since its incorporation in 1926, that nowadays it is relied upon and valued by the UK for enhancing Britain's soft power through its impartiality and editorial independence from government. We have also noted that the BBC has embodied these principles since before government funding of any of its services, and that nowadays those same goals of balance and independence stretch to all its services, regardless of how they are funded or who they are aimed at. But if, as we have suggested, the BBC's very independence makes it still a tool of British public diplomacy, then one big question arises: will there be any public diplomacy difference when the FCO stops funding the World Service?

### **The Future: Priorities and Realities**

As we saw at the beginning of this paper, the World Service is experiencing a period of transition. This includes job losses as well as changes to broadcast output.<sup>30</sup> Five language services have closed entirely: Portuguese for Africa, Caribbean English, Macedonian, Serbian, and Albanian. Radio programming has ceased in seven more languages: Azeri, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Ukrainian. These services will continue to

broadcast content on alternative platforms such as television, online, and mobile phones.

In addition, axing or scaling back shortwave broadcasts is underway in Hindi, Indonesian, Kyrgyz, Nepali, Swahili, and the Great Lakes service for Rwanda and Burundi. These services have delivered millions of listeners over the years but shortwave, the traditionally favored medium of government public diplomacy efforts in international broadcasting, is seen as being in long-term decline while other platforms grow, in particular FM radio, TV, and mobile phones.<sup>31</sup> Their availability through local providers means a greater range of voices in international media markets, with inevitable consequences for BBC penetration and influence. The BBC estimates that these changes will result in the loss of 16m listeners, a substantial fall.

Changes are being made now to mitigate upheaval in 2014 when FCO funding is withdrawn entirely and the BBC must find upwards of £200m a year from existing license fee and commercial income to pay for the World Service. It has publicly stated its commitment to do so and, of course, is mandated to do so under the current Royal Charter, which will be reviewed in 2016. However, last year the British Government used its authority and froze the BBC license fee at existing levels until that time. So, despite a guaranteed annual income of more than £3.5bn, with inflation the BBC will soon have to pay for more with comparatively less.

From the liberal intelligentsia, opinion-formers, and Members of Parliament has come a cry of outrage at what some see as the inevitable demise of the Jewel in the BBC's Crown. Comments from World Service colleagues include:

- *“It’s at the fringes that you find diversity...I fear we are being rationalized and taken over by the BBC’s domestic agenda.”*
- *“When it comes to making further savings, my concern would be that they will slowly chip away....one language service here,*

*another language service there, until there's going to be nothing left that resembles what the World Service once was."*

The British Government has also been vocal, its gaze firmly fixed, no doubt, on soft power. In fact, in 2011, in response to the outcry over cuts, the Foreign Secretary William Hague announced that £2.2m would be restored to the World Service, aimed mainly at maintaining Arabic TV and radio services. Further, it has been agreed that post-2014, the FCO will retain final say over any proposed closures of World Service language services. In coming years, however, it may prove hard to convince British license fee payers they should fund services they cannot readily access or in languages they do not understand.

That the World Service of the future will inevitably be leaner is a given; whether removing license fee funding is a bad thing, is not. Editorial as well as financial independence from government may, as Peter Horrocks puts it, "be a useful riposte to foreign governments who claim the World Service is doing the Foreign Office's bidding."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it is not inconceivable that British soft power may actually increase as the World Service becomes more transparently free of the 'taint of policy.' The reality, of course, is more complicated. Jessica McFarlane, who, until July 2013 was head of FCO and Stakeholder Liaison at the World Service, explains: "if we maintain our distinctiveness... this is what our audiences want, that we are an independent voice in global media." Her colleague, Tin Radovani, a BBC Global News<sup>33</sup> strategy analyst adds: "we may be in a position to improve our value to British public diplomacy if we can maintain our independence and given our financial independence from FCO we can demonstrate that." Both are talking about the 'paradox of plenty'<sup>34</sup>, which says that in an increasingly crowded media landscape, a surfeit of information sources leads to a scarcity of attention. In that environment, those who do well in the market place for ideas are those who have credibility and a strong reputation.

The BBC may be able to maintain—even enhance—its global reach and influence, despite future potential reductions in World

Service output or audience, through its increasingly important commercial services BBC World News (commercial, global English-language TV network) and BBC.com (international-facing websites). Both are currently enjoying significant growth. Commercial TV and online services are not only making a greater contribution to the Corporation's balance sheet, they are also reaching different audiences than World Service radio, on platforms that are growing in popularity (at the same time, World Service-funded non-English language TV output such as BBC Arabic is also growing rapidly). Crucially, these new audiences are younger, more globally aware and more technologically adept: they may be the opinion-formers and leaders of the future.

Underpinning all the BBC's rising commercial services are the same principles that govern content produced with public money. As Jessica Mcfarlane says: "All our international services are part of BBC Global News just like the World Service... The whole point of the set up of our commercial services is to preserve editorial qualities and brand qualities." Her former colleague Tin Radovani adds: "In markets where the World Service is no longer present, BBC commercial paths are the ones that are preserving soft power and public diplomacy because of the brand quality and brand position."

In a way this idea goes against traditional models of public diplomacy, especially in the U.S., where the rationale for spending taxpayers' money on international broadcasting has been that, if left to commercial companies, the result would be more *American Idol*, less American ideals. While this might rate highly in terms of 'eyeballs,' its public diplomacy impact might be limited.<sup>35</sup> Is it, however, possible that the BBC could be the exception to this rule, if its commercial services display the same level of independence and credibility as its license fee output, and its huge global reach helps to generate British soft power? The British Government may welcome such a development as it would be benefitting from soft power it was no longer paying for.



The cuts and changes at the BBC World Service may reflect broader shifts in the remit and funding of public broadcasting. Or, they may simply be short-term political and economic measures. The impact in terms of British public diplomacy will emerge only over time: it may be negligible if the BBC can afford to maintain World Service output or if BBC international commercial services fill the gap; if not, Britain may witness a decline in its soft power and its influence overseas. The cost to the British Government may end up being greater than the money saved on World Service funding.

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## **Author Biography**

Rajesh Mirchandani is an award-winning BBC journalist with 20 years' experience. Currently based in London as World Affairs Correspondent and anchor, he recently spent more than five years based in the U.S., covering geo-politics and periodically anchoring the BBC's global network BBC World News from Washington DC. He has covered a huge range of stories from two U.S. Presidential elections to the Haiti earthquake, from AIDS in India to the Chilean miners' rescue, from the Oscars in Hollywood to the typhoon in the Philippines. He is a recent graduate of USC's Master of Public Diplomacy program, where he focused on the communication strategies of state and non-state actors, social movements as agents of change, and issues of development and climate change. In Spring 2013, he taught a class in the same program in International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy.



## **British Public Diplomacy: A Case Study of the BBC Hausa Service**

By Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar

Perhaps the most reputable broadcaster in the world, the BBC World Service is Britain's most recognizable soft power resource. Combining the leverages of a long-established institution with a wide network of reporters, well-resourced journalism and skillful deployment of distribution technologies, the World Service has managed to maintain an edge over rival broadcasters. But the inherent contradiction of providing "impartial" news service and promoting British public diplomacy presents a formidable dilemma, as do its dwindling funding conditions and the declining fortunes of Britain in the contemporary global setting. This article looks at the BBC World Service in terms of its engagement with audiences in Africa and its relationship with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, within the conceptual framework of soft power and public diplomacy. Using the documentary research technique and individual and focus group interviews, the study specifically examines BBC's relationship with Nigeria—its largest radio market in the world—to unveil both the effectiveness and limitations of its public diplomacy role.

### **Introduction**

When nations or organizations seek to increase or maintain their attraction and relevance in the world, they turn to institutions and activities that could help them to do so. International broadcasting is one such activity and Britain appears to have done well in it. The international arm of British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC World Service, has over the years emerged as a leading force in the field.

This paper examines specifically the relationship between the BBC World Service and its audiences in Nigeria (the corporation's largest radio market in the world) to assess the effectiveness of its public diplomacy role. The documentary research technique (analyzing BBC's publications, audience surveys reports, press releases, FCO publications, committee reports, and academic works)



and in-depth individual interview and focus group methods were employed for the study. The in-depth interviews were conducted with five BBC personnel (the executive editor for the African region, the Abuja bureau editor, the World Service correspondent in Nigeria-turned-producer, senior correspondent, and the ex-senior producer) in London and Nigeria between December 2009 and October 2012. It was around the same period that individual interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted with BBC audiences in Northern Nigeria. The six groups that cut across different socio-economic, educational, occupational, and professional backgrounds were categorized as the working class, the lower middle class, the middle class, the political class, the peasant class, and youth/student groups.

### **International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy**

As a former foremost colonial power that once controlled over a quarter of the world, Britain carries both the baggage of colonial domination and the advantage of historical head start in public diplomacy work and exercise of soft power. Britain does employ several strategies for public diplomacy,<sup>1</sup> its key area of strength is international broadcasting,<sup>2</sup> and it clearly gains greater benefit from it than the other leading public diplomacy actors such as China and the United States. While the Chinese and U.S. international broadcasters are often associated with their countries' propaganda<sup>3</sup>—though on completely different scales—the BBC World Service, the conveyor of prestige to Britain, has a reputation of journalistic independence and credibility.<sup>4</sup> It is that reputation that helps Britain's public diplomacy and enhances its soft power, though the country's ailing economy and shrinking global influence are now harming the World Service.

The remarkable thing about international broadcasting is that it not only functions as a key element of public diplomacy, but it also overlaps with its other components: listening to foreign publics, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and exchange.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, though, its effectiveness lies in *not* being brazenly used as an instrument of public diplomacy. In its early conception, international broadcasting was

seen as strictly state-sponsored transmission of messages (usually through shortwave radio) to foreign publics, but the involvement of non-state actors and advances in communications technologies have long altered that.<sup>6</sup> It is now defined as the work of state or non-state actors aimed at engaging foreign publics through the use of technologies of radio, television, and Internet.<sup>7</sup> Its relationship with both public diplomacy and soft power was recognized since the emergence of the two concepts. Browne reports that it was in 1967 during a conference on international public diplomacy at Tufts University that international broadcasting was identified as an “instrument of public diplomacy.”<sup>8</sup> And Nye has always regarded it as a significant soft power resource.<sup>9</sup> International broadcasting did, of course, predate the two concepts, though not the activities associated with them.

Radio broadcasting began at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it was communist Russia's pioneering broadcast on shortwave radio in 1925 that is generally recognized as the commencement of international broadcasting.<sup>10</sup> This was quickly embraced by other competing nations, and it progressed so fast that by the early 1930s, Germany's propaganda chief Josef Goebbels was already speaking of it “as a powerful instrument of international diplomacy, persuasion, and even coercion”—a view shared by many state and non-state actors.<sup>11</sup> By the late 1930s, Browne notes, “international broadcasting was being employed by national governments, religious organizations, commercial advertisers, domestic broadcasters and even educators to bring their various messages to listeners abroad.”<sup>12</sup> It enjoyed rapid rises during the Second World War, at the height of the Cold War and in the post-September 11 period: “The Second World War saw an explosion in international broadcasting as a propaganda tool on both sides” and the subsequent Cold War arising from the falling out of the victorious Allies—the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist West—gave rise to “communist propaganda” and “capitalist persuasion.”<sup>13</sup> The collapse of the communist bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s ended the Cold War, and funding for propaganda outfits began to decline. However, the 11 September 2001 attacks in

the United States “revived the need for public diplomacy” and led to the resurgence of Western-funded international broadcasting as part of efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

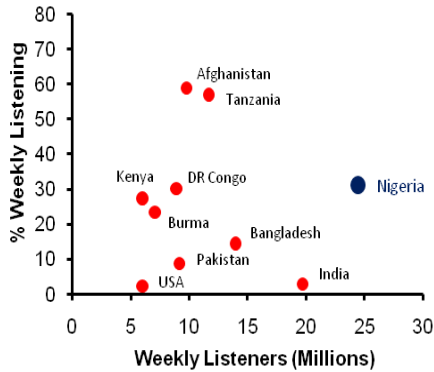
The roles of the BBC World Service before and during those phases have been the subject of wide academic discourses, and are as diverse as the issues dictated by the changing times.<sup>15</sup>

### **The case of the World Service’s role in Nigeria**

The BBC Hausa Service presents a remarkable example of the BBC’s dual role of providing international news service and promoting British public diplomacy. Established in 1957 “to appeal to special local interests,”<sup>16</sup> the BBC Hausa Service has ever since been targeting Hausa-speakers in Africa, particularly the mainly Muslim Northern Nigerians, with Western cultural goods, which to this day constitute a large chunk of their global media diets.<sup>17</sup> The service expanded steadily in the last decade, entering into partnership with local radio stations and employing new technologies to deliver its products, gaining the largest audience figures among all the language services of the BBC.<sup>18</sup> This makes Nigeria, a former British colony, increasingly significant to the World Service, particularly because it has met the key criteria of strategic importance, impact, and cost effectiveness of its services.<sup>19</sup> Combining the English and Hausa language audiences, Nigeria has consistently emerged as the largest radio market for the BBC World Service, with average weekly audience figures of about 25 million.<sup>20</sup>

*As can be seen in the diagram above (of the BBC-commissioned audience survey released in May 2009) showing the ten largest consumers of BBC radio products, in terms of weekly percentages and number of listeners in millions, Nigeria comes in at the top with 24.4 million listeners, followed by India with nearly 20 million listeners. Although Afghanistan and Tanzania have the highest percentages of their adult population listening, they fall below Nigeria in terms of the number of listeners because Nigeria has a much higher population figure.*

### Top 10 BBC Radio Markets in the World



Source: BBC GND/Ipsos MORI (2009)

### The Findings

Data gathered through in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions with audiences in Northern Nigeria for this study have indeed revealed evidence of high consumption of BBC products in the region. They show that Northern Nigerians interact regularly with a wide range of international media and that the BBC is the one they have the highest level of interactions with. One by one, as individuals and as groups, the vast majority of the respondents rated the BBC as the most credible global broadcaster. The criteria they used in making their assessments include accuracy, timeliness, use of diasporic personnel with whom they share cultural affinity, and depth and perceived impartiality of BBC's coverage of global and Nigerian events. Assessing the cumulative impact of their interactions with global broadcasters is difficult because, as many researchers rightly observe, the existence of intervening variables makes measuring of media effects very difficult.<sup>21</sup> Still, though with some caution, it is clear from the audiences' narratives that international media do exert significant influence on their lives. Whether in the more general form of affecting their everyday lives through the basic media functions of informing, educating, and entertaining them, or in the more specific form of enhancing their comprehension of international

and national affairs, raising their awareness of their civic rights and responsibilities and influencing specific personal decisions and professional endeavors, the audiences have given accounts of how useful their engagements with international broadcasters have been. They do, however, express their concerns over the propaganda role of global broadcasters, their perceived penchant for the protection of their owners' interests, and their alleged capacity to erode local cultural values. The facts that the audiences themselves said they prefer the BBC to other broadcasters and that they consume its products more than others' suggest that the BBC probably exerts more influence on their lives than the other international broadcasters do—as their comments suggest:

[The international broadcaster] I enjoy most is the BBC because if I spend a day without listening to the BBC, I feel uncomfortable. This is why wherever I am—either in a vehicle or while walking—I have my radio set, day and night, so as to listen to the BBC (*Shop owner* in the Lower Middle Class Group).

I do not doubt all the reports I get from the BBC. I believe whatever it reports. Why? Because there is no media organization that explains to us the way things are as the BBC does (*Farmer-student* in the Peasant Group).

However, both the credibility rating of the BBC and the station's apparent influence on the audiences need to be viewed with caution. Despite their admiration for the World Service, the vast majority of the respondents expressed views that clearly reveal unfavorable disposition towards the West (United States and Britain in particular). They are very critical of the United States and Britain largely because of the two countries' role in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the contemporary period, and historically because of the latter's role in the colonization of Africa. So their favorable ratings of the BBC are not absolute; they are limited to the comparing of the station with other international broadcasters, such as the Voice of America (VOA), Germany's Radio Deutsche Welle, and Radio France International (RFI)—all of which equally broadcast to Nigeria in both Hausa and English languages. They see the BBC as more credible than those

broadcasters. But generally they believe that both the West and its media have been unfair to the Islamic world and to Africa.

Ah, honestly, the things they [America and Britain] do are good in some cases, but some are bad. Their relationship with Islam is not good. They suppress Islam far more than imagined. This is why we Muslims dislike them; they suppress us; they are not fair to us (*Motorcycle mechanic* in the Working Class Group).

Well, you see, their true belief is that Islam is [an] aggressive religion. We're always fighting and fighting and fighting (*Trade unionist*).

There is a one-sided flow of information: good is from the West, bad is from the developing world. You can hardly hear anything coming from Africa except that of conflict, except that of war, except that of coups, except that of corruption (*Graduate student*).

The respondents did not exclude the BBC from this charge of bias. Although they rate it as more credible than others, they still regard it as a classic Western medium that portrays the West positively and the Islamic world and Africa negatively. These complaints are rampant in their responses, ranging from the description of the BBC as “*typical Western media*” (by a deputy editor in the Middle Class Group)—a subtle way of accusing it of showing pro-Western bias—to outright accusations of being “*partisan and in some ways even anti-Muslims or anti-Arabs*” (as claimed by a female ex-editor); or even a more blanket accusation as shown in this claim by a Muslim cleric in the Lower Middle Class Group: “*The problem with the BBC is that it would...not report something positive about Islam.*” Significantly, these people were among the respondents who had earlier in the interviews rated the BBC as the most credible international broadcaster. When reminded of this contradiction, they were quick to stress that they do distinguish what they believe to be accurate reports from propaganda. It becomes clear then that favorable perception of a medium does not prevent what Stuart Hall calls “critical,” or “oppositional,” reading of some of its texts.<sup>22</sup> After all, as previous studies show, audiences’ predispositions do influence

their perception of media messages.<sup>23</sup> Joseph Klapper's conception of audience selectivity—selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention—does indeed play a role in media consumption.

This tends to affect the role international broadcasting plays in public diplomacy. With the BBC World Service being funded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it was obvious from the onset that it would always be seen as an instrument of British public diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> But the Corporation's claim of being an impartial broadcaster—and an open attempt to be so, coupled with the belief by many that it is so—produced a complex picture. The BBC personnel interviewed for this study and the responses from the audiences interviewed offered divergent perspectives on the issue. Still, the aggregate views reveal a general belief that the BBC does indeed serve as an organ of British public diplomacy. The audiences were able to distinguish the BBC's dual but contradictory role of being both a provider of "impartial" news services and a promoter of British public diplomacy—as previously observed by others.<sup>25</sup> They note that although the BBC does provide credible news and analysis, it still acts as a propagandist.

Since I have known the United States and Britain and other parts of the world well, whenever I hear BBC I feel like they are just propagating their masters' voice (*Trade unionist*).

Although there are claims of independence by British and American media, they have their limits... So I assure you that we are selective [on which aspects of their reports we believe], to avoid becoming victims of their propaganda (*Supervisory councilor for education in the Political Class Group*).

The most serious issue thrown up by this perspective is that audiences tend to reject media messages they perceive to be propaganda or even advocacy and believe what they consider to be impartial reports. The following two comments provide further illustration of such tendency. "*Those [BBC programs] that they do for humanity, we accept them; the ones they do to deceive people, we listen to them, but reject them,*" remarked a mason in the Lower Middle Class Group. Another member of the group, the Muslim

cleric, was equally emphatic on what he would do with those BBC reports that he feels are not impartial: “*Foreign propaganda will not help me. In this respect I won’t believe the BBC.*” And in that respect the public diplomacy objective—if the “propaganda” or slanting of stories was meant to achieve it—may become unattainable.

But advocacy of a cause or positive projection of a country or agency is just one aspect of the media’s role in public diplomacy; and less, or even a complete lack of, success in that does not mean failure in others, as will be seen later. In any case, it is not in all situations that audiences identify and reject slanted reports. Similarly, the perspective of the BBC personnel on the issue of the broadcaster’s role in British public diplomacy differs from that of the audiences. First, the personnel interviewed rejected the claims that the BBC does engage in “propaganda” or slanting of stories to advance British public diplomacy. They also denied claims of interference in their daily operations from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). “*I have been here with the BBC for more than 20 years and I cannot recall any instance where FCO actually asked us to cover this or not to cover that,*” says the BBC executive editor for African region echoing what other personnel have declared about editorial non-interference. However, what they do admit is the existence of a subtle but significant interference in the overall work of the corporation. They point to the basic fact that it is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that decides for the BBC World Service which language services it should operate and where its target areas should be.

Well, as you know, we are a public service broadcaster, the BBC World Service, and we are paid for by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office through grant-in-aid. They decide what languages or target areas we should be covering, but they have no say in the contents and contributors of any given program in any given language service or target area (*Executive editor, African region*).

As a broadcaster, the BBC resents being seen as an instrument of public diplomacy, and all the personnel interviewed rejected



suggestions that they were working to serve that interest. What they did not resent, though, was the idea of the BBC's credibility generating admiration for Britain. Their unanimous view is that the BBC's image as a credible broadcaster does serve as a source of goodwill for Britain—an ideal soft power resource.<sup>26</sup> A former BBC World Service correspondent in Lagos (Nigeria) who later became a producer at its headquarters in London asserts that “*people have a better impression of Britain and so on because of the BBC; it is the British Broadcasting Corporation and people know it is the British Broadcasting Corporation.*” Indeed, this is one of the key benefits the Lord Carter review committee firmly believes that the BBC does bring to Britain.<sup>27</sup>

Public diplomacy is arguably not the primary objective of the World Service, but it is inevitable that in providing an internationally renowned and highly valued service that there will be positive public diplomacy gains for the country associated with that brand.<sup>28</sup>

There is apparent unanimity among both the BBC personnel and audiences that this key public diplomacy objective is being achieved. But then, there are few listeners here, as is the case elsewhere, that do not connect the BBC with Britain at all.<sup>29</sup> And even where they do, the benefits gained through positive association need to be backed with concrete action for it to have a long lasting effect because, as the World Service producer observes, the good impression gained through the BBC's good image tends to disappear when a real encounter with Britain reveals that it is not as good as the impression created. “*I think the divergence happens more the more they (BBC audiences) interact with Britain proper,*” he notes. This shows that for the gains to be sustained, the good image created has to be supported with concrete action. That is the basis of public diplomacy's golden rule: action speaks louder than words. “The most potent voice for an international actor is not what it says but what it does.”<sup>30</sup> When there is a disconnect between the BBC's image as a credible broadcaster and British foreign policy, the public diplomacy benefits tend to disappear. This was unmistakable in what emerged from the audiences' perspective when in one respect they admired

BBC for impartial reporting, and in another condemned for its role in Afghan and Iraqi invasions; they thus became suspicious of the BBC's coverage of the Islamic world. The clearest picture produced by the perspectives of both the BBC personnel and audiences is that the long-term effectiveness of the BBC's public diplomacy role lies more in its ability to provide impartial international news and analysis than in any attempt to deviate from that.

## Conclusions

The BBC World Service is Britain's most recognizable soft power resource, but the country's struggling economy and shrinking influence in the world are forcing spending cuts, and consequent staff reduction and closure of services constitute a major threat to its potency. It is also clear that although the World Service does play a significant public diplomacy role for Britain, its effectiveness depends more on its perceived impartiality than on indulgence in any clever branding devices. The broadcaster's key strengths come essentially from a global reputation of journalistic independence and credibility. Similarly, the BBC's good image can only be as helpful to British foreign policy as Britain's actions correspond with such image. There is both a benefit-by-association and a baggage-by-association: while Britain may gain from the BBC's good image, the BBC's image could be tarnished by Britain's negative actions. The case of those Northern Nigerians who love the BBC for its liberal and credible image but stopped associating that image with Britain as a country because of its involvement in Afghan and Iraqi invasions is one such example. The situation seems to have yielded what Morgan calls the "backlash effect": instead of the BBC's credibility helping Britain, it was Britain's action that harmed the BBC, as audiences began to question its credibility over its coverage of the Islamic world.<sup>31</sup> It also seems that intervening variables such as cultural, religious, ideological, and other external communication factors that limit media effects do sometimes minimize the impact of international broadcasting in public diplomacy.

## Endnotes

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8. Browne, 1982, p.30
9. Nye, 2004a, 2004b
10. Browne, 1982; Thussu, 2006
11. Browne, 1982, p.1
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15. See Browne, 1982; Briggs, 1985; Rampal and Adams, 1990; Seaton, 1997; Sreberny *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b; Abubakar, 2011
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