

Defence Committee

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [BBC Monitoring](#), HC 748

Tuesday 25 October 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 October 2016.

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Members present:

Defence Committee: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Douglas Chapman; James Gray; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Ruth Smeeth; Mr John Spellar.

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee: Mr Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Paul Flynn; Mr Andrew Turner.

Questions 1-66

Witnesses

[I](#): Rt Hon. Lord Campbell of Pittenweem CH CBE QC, and Keir Giles, Associate Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House.

[II](#): Admiral (ret'd) Lord West of Spithead GCB DSC and Air Marshal (ret'd) Chris Nickols CB CBE DL.

[III](#): General (ret'd) Sir Richard Barrons KCB CBE ADC Gen.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Campbell of Pittenweem and Keir Giles.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this special session on the future of BBC Monitoring. We have three panels today. The two members of the first panel are in place, so I will invite them to introduce themselves for the record and make any short opening remarks that they might feel appropriate.

Lord Campbell: I am Lord Campbell and I was a Member of the House of Commons for 28 years, during which time I served on the Defence Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and, perhaps most relevant to today, the Intelligence and Security Committee. The evidence I hope to give will be based upon that experience and a continuing interest in intelligence matters.

Keir Giles: My name is Keir Giles. I am currently an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia programme at Chatham House. From 1992 to 2006 I was employed by BBC Monitoring; I later worked for the Ministry of Defence and was therefore a customer for BBC Monitoring material, and more recently I am a user of its material at Chatham House, so I am looking forward to the opportunity to comment on what is happening now from both sides of the fence.

Q2 **Chair:** For the sake of people who are listening in and might not be familiar with the work of BBC Monitoring, would you both say a word or two about open source intelligence, what it is, and what BBC Monitoring does?

Keir Giles: Certainly. BBC Monitoring provides a window into what other countries are telling their populations by scanning the media for items of interest to the national security purposes of this country. It looks at the media of a range of different countries in co-operation with its American partner organisation, Open Source Enterprise. It previously attempted global coverage, but that is now being amended. The information it provides gives insights into what is happening that are not available through other sources. It provides a unique way of getting first-hand knowledge of what is being reported and informed within countries that are of interest to us for national security purposes.

Q3 **Chair:** And it began in the second world war, didn't it?

Lord Campbell: In 1939, Chair. No doubt in response to what was conceived of as a threat at that time. It has continued in existence ever since then.

If I might pick up the threat issue, I don't think anyone would argue that the threat is not substantially different now from what it was even five or 10 years ago. We now have people publicly talking about a second cold war. I think that is rather overblown rhetoric; none the less, our relationship with, for example, Russia is as poor as it has been for a long time. In those circumstances, it seems to me that the security and



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continuity that BBC Monitoring has been able to produce over the years is absolutely fundamental to the security of the United Kingdom.

If I may, I will refer to something that in a sense sums up exactly what I feel about this. I don't know whether the Committee has got the eighth report of the session of 2003-2004 of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but I will read out for the record paragraph 167 on page 68: "We conclude that it is utterly perverse that the future of BBC Monitoring should be placed in doubt at the very time when its services are arguably most important to the country's security and diplomatic needs, and when it is being almost universally praised by its users. We recommend that BBC Monitoring be given financial security by the FCO and its other stakeholders to ensure its future." It may have been 12 years ago, but respectfully it seems to me to sum up certainly my attitude towards what we are discussing this afternoon.

- Q4 **Chair:** As we are looking back, I think it is true to say that we discovered a common interest in this, Lord Campbell, when we were both serving on the Intelligence and Security Committee and we heard that as a result of negotiations around the licence fee, it was being decided that the funding of BBC Monitoring in future should be borne by the BBC and not by a ring-fenced Government grant. Perhaps you would like to share with the Committee what we thought would happen if that change went through.

Lord Campbell: Of course, it was not just BBC Monitoring that was included at that time; it was the BBC World Service. We are not concerned with that today but it does indicate that the BBC, at the time when the licence fee was being reviewed, was under very considerable pressure to take on additional financial responsibilities. There are those who say, although it is not vouched, that the threat against the BBC at the time was, "If you don't take on Monitoring or the World Service, we will impose upon you the responsibility for those over 75." What has come to pass since then is that they took on those two responsibilities and the third has been added.

My understanding of the situation is this. There is a most helpful review by the National Union of Journalists, which Members may have had before them, that goes through Committee by Committee over the past 10 or 12 years showing that virtually every Select Committee of the House of Commons—DCMS, Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Intelligence and Security, which is a Committee of Parliament rather than of the House—has expressed anxiety about the future of BBC Monitoring and about the extent to which it was being properly resourced for the objectives that have just been so eloquently described.

- Q5 **Chair:** Finally, before I hand over to my colleagues, would it be fair to say that BBC Monitoring, as a centre of excellence, is for open source intelligence what, in a way, Bletchley Park and its successor GCHQ were for secret intelligence?

Keir Giles: I think that is a fair comparison, not only for the purpose that it fills and the customers that it serves, but for a very undervalued



resource, which is the people within it. There are decades of experience of studying target countries that have accumulated in the staff of BBC Monitoring, all of which gives rise to the capability, which is often underused, for serious in-depth analysis of what exactly is happening in those countries. In that respect, there is a parallel as well.

Lord Campbell: May I just add a short point? It is very unwise to rely on one particular source of intelligence, as we found in relation to the suggestion that weapons of mass destruction were still being held by Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Indeed, the person who was a source of that ultimately recanted and said that he had always known it was not right. The point I want to make is that if you are trying to reach an intelligence picture, it is a bit like a jigsaw. You need bits and pieces—human intelligence, signals intelligence—but often the open source intelligence is confirmative of other things.

If it is not too flippant to say this, I remember in my youth that if one watched the May Day parade in Moscow, it was pretty obvious who was going to be sent to a power station in Outer Mongolia by the number of places they were away from the Secretary of the Communist Party. That is rather flippant, but the point is that that is exactly the kind of so-called innocent information, which, added together with other information, can complete the whole picture.

Q6 **Ruth Smeeth:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. I think we know your answer to this question, but can you tell me whether you believe the BBC Monitoring service to be in our national interest?

Lord Campbell: A one-word answer: yes.

Keir Giles: It depends whether you mean the service that BBC Monitoring provides or the organisation itself. The service—without a doubt, yes. It is crucial, irreplaceable and unique. The organisation, unfortunately, is a slightly different picture, because the current trend is for the BBC to push BBC Monitoring as an entity further and further into irrelevance.

You could say that it is entirely reasonable that now that funding it has been foisted upon the BBC, it should be up to the BBC what it gets for its money, and that includes value for money in BBC terms. The problem is that making the monitoring service follow a BBC news agenda, as opposed to the agendas of the media that they are supposed to be watching in other countries, means that the original purpose of BBC Monitoring is being eclipsed.

You can actually see that quite clearly in BBC Monitoring's own statements. The so-called monitoring scheme, which was agreed in 2013 as part of the handover to the BBC, said the purpose of the organisation was to undertake monitoring that meets key customer requirements and, in addition, meets the needs of the BBC. Look at BBC Monitoring's website now and it says its purpose is "to provide news, information and insight to BBC journalists." As a footnote, it says "We also provide services to UK government customers". That is already a flip through 180° for the core



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priority for the organisation. Customers such as my colleagues in Chatham House and, I hear, in Government Departments as well, are feeling the deterioration in the service as a result.

Q7 **Ruth Smeeth:** Already?

Keir Giles: Yes.

Q8 **Mrs Moon:** I just want to get some clarity. No one else is doing this; no one else is providing this service. Are you clear in saying that the national interest is being damaged, and our capacity to gather open source information is being damaged, by the BBC seemingly withdrawing but also changing the focus?

Lord Campbell: It is a little more complex than that, because it is understood that, since the range of what is provided by BBC Monitoring is being reduced, certain of the intelligence agencies are beginning to set up their own units for the same purpose, to analyse open source intelligence. My argument is that that is unnecessary duplication, because we have an organisation—more to the point, a centre of excellence, as I think the Chairman called it—that has been built up over many years and has expertise and experience. It seems to me that if you have that in existence, it makes a great deal of sense—for the sake of not very much money, if I may say so—to maintain its activities in their present form.

Keir Giles: The previous Committee reports that have already been referred to identified repeatedly that this was a unique service and that to replicate it elsewhere would be unnecessary duplication and more expensive than keeping it concentrated in BBC Monitoring. In answer to your question, yes, I do believe decisions are being made at the moment that are damaging to the national interest. They will remove a capability that is important for our defence and national security structures, not just because of the lack of access to this important information but also because it appears that there is likely to be a detrimental effect on our defence and security relationship with the United States as a result of the damage that this will do to the relationship with Open Source Enterprise. They are being made homeless and some of the key sources that they rely on for their own coverage are being removed.

Q9 **Chair:** We will be coming to that in detail a little further on, but as the question of duplication has come up, it might be worth dealing with one point at this stage. Am I right in saying that the staff who do this very specialised work are often émigrés with special knowledge and backgrounds that mean that, for various reasons, they would not be able to pass high-level vetting to work for a Government agency? Is it correct to say that if any of this work migrated internally to Government agencies it would then have to be done by different specialist staff who had had to be vetted in that way, and we would lose the services of unvetted but highly skilful people?

Lord Campbell: And also the dynamic that all of that creates, taken together. You are quite right, Chair, that if a member of the BBC

Monitoring team were invited to join the Ministry of Defence, he or she would be vetted at the highest possible level, and for very good reason.

Keir Giles: However, I should imagine that it would not be impossible to arrive at a situation where you had people doing this work without the necessity for a security clearance. After all, that has been the situation for the last few decades. The tasking is presumably the sensitive point here and the reason why people would need security clearances: to be pointed at specific targets enough to collect on them. However, up until now people working within BBC Monitoring have quite happily been working to broad guidelines, with occasional specific requests, with no need for security clearances whatsoever. If the structure were to be set up more directly related to a Government Department, although not necessarily the Ministry of Defence, I don't see that it should necessarily be impossible to retain the expertise that is there at the moment.

- Q10 **Chair:** But often, if it were taken internal to a Government Department, the staff who would then be doing the work might have to have been vetted for other reasons, and that would exclude these staff who work at Caversham Park, who don't have to be vetted because they are dealing with open source intelligence. That is the situation, surely.

Keir Giles: Potentially. It is a matter of personnel policy for that Department.

- Q11 **Mr Spellar:** You have been talking about the relationship with various clients. I would like to tease out a bit further what sort of input there is from the clients as to what is relevant to them and what they are looking for. I am not talking about direct requests for a particular issue, but generally directing the direction of travel. Obviously we are particularly interested in the MoD. First, what sort of input do they have? Secondly, what concerns have they registered, as far as you are aware, about this current direction of travel?

Keir Giles: Let me deal with the concerns first. It is some time since I was associated with the MoD, so I cannot comment on what the internal conversation has been. For the first part of your question, there is an account manager from the Ministry of Defence who liaises with Caversham, and as I mentioned broad guidelines are set. There is one part of BBC Monitoring that has a direct two-way relationship with part of the Ministry of Defence, and it is what they refer to as the Video Unit, which talks to the Defence Intelligence Fusion Centre at RAF Wyton. That is the area where the most direct tasking interaction takes place, and it is a unit that is to be cut under the current proposals, with its duties added to the duties of people who are undertaking other forms of monitoring. How exactly that liaison function is to survive is, as far as I am aware, not yet made clear.

- Q12 **Mr Spellar:** That particularly comes back to your question about the levels at which people are vetted and the degree of informal assurance people have about dealing with people whom they know well.



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Keir Giles: I am sure it does. To the best of my knowledge, there was no vetting required even for this direct work.

- Q13 **Mr Spellar:** No—exactly—but there is an established relationship, as opposed to a much more diverse relationship, right the way across the piece.

Keir Giles: Yes.

Lord Campbell: To go back to the joint experience of the Chairman and myself at a time when Defence Intelligence was being cut to a large extent within the Ministry of Defence, the Intelligence and Security Committee argued that it did not make a great deal of sense for Monitoring to be similarly treated because there had always been a very productive continuing relationship between Defence Intelligence and Monitoring. I am not able to say what priority is attached to these matters within the Ministry of Defence—it is probably classified—but looked at from the outside it is a reasonable presumption, based on what has been said already, that the MoD, faced with a reduction in this capability to which they have access, would have to try to replace it in some kind of way with, as we have already agreed, unnecessary duplication.

- Q14 **Mr Jenkin:** I am here as Chairman of another Committee, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, because this line of funding used to come from the Cabinet Office. We have already established that you perceive a decline in the quality and volume of relevant output. How certain are you that this process of decline will continue?

Lord Campbell: The BBC fund it, and Mr Giles pointed rather graphically to the fact that the objectives are set out in one form, with a by-the-way footnote about monitoring. It seems to me that if, as is sometimes described colloquially, it continues to be story-led, that can only have a further impact on the ability.

Keir Giles: The staff at Caversham have been asked to focus on BBC priorities in the manner that I described a moment ago. Other processes that are under way, such as the cutting of the Video Unit, the cutting of Monitoring and the research database facility, and source management—all the things that were essential for managing the open source information collection function, but are less so for BBC priorities like news management—will point the way.

For example, staff there are now being encouraged to use a system called Quickfire, which is for breaking news alerts within the BBC but is not made available to customers. Put that together with what has been made public so far about the upcoming plans for the restructuring of monitoring—particularly its move away from its current base at Caversham Park—and you see that it undermines some of the key priorities that were laid down in the 2013 scheme about coverage being global, adaptable and surgeable. There will no longer be, for example, the capacity to replace coverage of a particular area that has been cut but needs to be restored.



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Caversham has an unfortunate track record of deleting coverage of specific regions at exactly the wrong time: the coverage of Afghanistan was deleted in 2000 and the coverage of Georgia was deleted in 2007, right before what was happening in those countries suddenly became very interesting. At that time, it was possible to reconstitute rapidly, because the individuals concerned had not actually left the building, but that is no longer to be the case under the current plans.

Q15 Mr Jenkin: What is the consequence of the loss of that data for the security services and the MoD?

Lord Campbell: It must be that they are less well informed than they would have been, unless they are able to provide a substitute. A point I have already made is that they will not have the acquired and accumulated expertise and history, and that understanding of getting that information.

Q16 Mr Jenkin: Can you put flesh on the bones and give some kind of perhaps hypothetical example of what that would actually mean?

Keir Giles: Let me choose one from my own particular area of expertise, which is Russian defence and security studies. One thing that currently appears very unlikely to survive the change in priorities is not news media at all but coverage of Russian official websites, on which you find, for example, strategic documentation and doctrinal statements—information on what exactly the Russian military and defence and security services think they are doing. Translations of that are extremely important for people who do not have a grasp of Russian. I would expect that to be a future casualty, given that some of the most important sources on Russian defence and security topics—such as the main news agency, which covers it, and the Ministry of Defence television station and so on—are no longer being watched. Instead of having the general brief of keeping an eye out for this kind of thing, staff at Caversham are, for example, tasked to report globally on reactions to Bob Dylan being awarded the Nobel prize.

Lord Campbell: There is another point on this Russian question, which is that as the proposals being made by the BBC are understood, there is to be a substantial reduction in the number of Russian speakers. I hope it is not too facile to say that if you take away half the Russian speakers, it is difficult to image there not being an impact on capability when it comes to seeking open source intelligence from Russian sources.

Keir Giles: I should clarify that that is half the Russian speakers in the UK. The Russian employees of BBC monitoring in Moscow are not suffering any job loss, although they of course operate with the indulgence of the Russian state authorities, which can be withdrawn at any time. That leaves coverage of Russia hostage to good relations with Russia, which are not looking promising at the moment.

Lord Campbell: Not helped by the Royal Bank of Scotland's withdrawal of financial facilities.

Q17 Chair: I believe a degree of telepathy is going on here, because I was just



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about to say that the recent withdrawal of banking support from Russia Today—Russia’s propaganda-oriented channel—presumably means that there is always the prospect of retaliation against any BBC employees based in Russia. The actual figures for the proposed reduction in the number of Russian-speaking monitors alone is from 15 to just nine. That obviously bears out what you have been saying.

I promised we would come to the question of—

Lord Campbell: Before we do, can I make one last point about Russia? Colleagues will remember that some years ago the British Council in Russia sustained a considerable amount of interference and intimidation. Let me put it this way: they have form.

Q18 **Chair:** Yes. It is also true to say, isn’t it, that the monitors that we deal with here are particularly skilled, because they have to deal with all sorts of colloquial dimensions and iterations of the Russian language? Is that not the case?

Keir Giles: That is true. It takes a very high degree of language skill to do this job.

Chair: Okay. We promised that we would come on to the question of the relationship between BBC Monitoring and Open Source Enterprise. Keir, you said right at the beginning that they’re going to have to move out. Is it true to say, first of all, that the relationship between BBC Monitoring and its American counterpart is analogous to the secret intelligence relationship between this country and the United States? The information we have is that BBC Monitoring covers the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and North and East Africa, whereas OSE covers the rest of the world, and that therefore, according to a Foreign and Commonwealth Office estimate, BBC Monitoring provides 25% of the output under the burden-sharing agreement with OSE, and OSE provides the other 75%. Obviously, therefore, there is a huge balance of benefit in terms of the flow of information.

What do you anticipate would happen if Caversham were closed down, some BBC Monitoring staff did not wish to relocate to London—presumably not all of them would wish to—and OSE found itself looking for new premises that are separate from Monitoring’s?

Lord Campbell: I think their noses would be quite badly out of joint. You’re quite right to refer to the closeness of the relationship. As you know, Chairman, we frequently talk about the special relationship, but certainly when it comes to intelligence the relationship is special, because the United Kingdom does not share with any country other than the United States that level of intelligence exchange.

There is also the advantage of co-location, because if something comes up you don’t have to spend time trying to find things; you might be able just to go downstairs, knock on the door and say, “What do you think about this?”. My understanding is that OSE is not best pleased about any of these proposals but recognises that of course it’s a matter for the BBC and, I suppose, indirectly, the United Kingdom Government. However,



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anything that would disturb—actually or potentially—that relationship would seem to me to be against, to use an expression that was used before, the national interest.

- Q19 **Chair:** Before you answer, Keir, may I draw your attention to the fact that at a previous hearing in which members of this Committee took part, the head of the BBC World Service made reference to the unsuitability of Caversham Park as a building, in particular referring to the fact that it was not an open-plan building? However, we have since had information that in 2006 BBC Monitoring spent £4 million converting part of the building to an open-plan office. Are you in a position to throw any light on this discrepancy?

Keir Giles: This is actually something that I have taken up with BBC World Service as well. They were kind enough to supply me with the background briefing that you were provided with before that hearing.

I asked a number of questions about the current estate and compared it with the informal conversations that I've had with BBC Monitoring and OSE staff. It does seem a little strange to describe the building as being not open plan. Certainly, it is not completely open plan—it has rooms in it—but, yes, the Monitoring operation takes place in a large, open-plan space.

Caversham Park is presently under-occupied, mostly as a result of the continuing programme of cuts, which has reduced the headcount there, so there are fewer people to fill the building, but the upper floors are occupied by the OSE, which it seems will have nowhere to operate from as a result of the planned move.

As I understand it, the OSE is maintaining a very diplomatic silence on everything that is going on, at an official level. Informally, I think it's fair to say that the individuals I have heard from are bewildered and appalled by what is going on.

You mentioned the division in coverage between the United States and this country. Yes, it dates back to the 1946 agreement on intelligence-sharing, the notion being that there should be a free and complete exchange, which provides an enormous amount of benefit to this country, because naturally the relationship is lopsided. The vastly greater amount of resources, capabilities, money and people that the Americans can devote to this problem is one reason for that. The other reason is that OSE is an integral part of the United States national security apparatus, whereas BBC Monitoring was set up in a peculiarly British way as part of a public service broadcaster, in a way that partly made sense in 1939 under the very peculiar circumstances of the time but has now become more and more anachronistic, with the result that we now have the situation where it is the unwanted stepchild that, as we heard previously, the Cabinet Office, before them the FCO and now the BBC does not really want to fund.

Coming back to the division with OSE, it has already been the case that OSE has picked up vital commitments of BBC Monitoring that BBC



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Monitoring has dropped in order to take up the slack. The perverse situation is that, when you talk to members of the US intelligence community and ask them which products of BBC Monitoring they particularly value, they have a tendency to point to ones that BBC Monitoring has already dropped and have been replaced by OSE.

- Q20 **Douglas Chapman:** The BBC has suggested that, by transforming their monitors into what they call digital journalists, they will be able to provide a much broader range of skills. I don't know if that is something that has come across your radar, but how might that impact on the end product?

Lord Campbell: I am not sure what is meant by this proposal, but I assume it is going to involve a greater use of more modern technology. With respect, it seems to me that if you have the opportunity for more modern technology and if you have a history of having to withdraw from other areas of interest, the thing to do is to use that technology to replace those areas from which you have withdrawn. It should be by way of an enhancement of existing capability rather than, as appears at least to some of the people who work at Caversham, an opportunity to take out 99 posts compared with the present establishment.

We have all heard—have we not?—in pretty well every sphere of life about how we are going to take advantage of information technology and how everything is going to be revolutionised as a result. There are plenty of illustrations, not least in the public sector, where that has proved anything but the case.

These people are not journalists in the sense that the BBC employs journalists. They are observers and analysers. If “journalist” is to be construed as what I understand in the usual way, you are asking them to change quite rapidly from the particular skillset they have to another.

Keir Giles: This is another topic on which I sought some clarification from BBC World Service as well as from current monitoring staff. According to BBC World Service, this new title will allow new additional focus on digital skills. As I understand it, that is adding to the monitoring, editing and analysis function and also some of the specialist functions such as those carried out by the Video Unit and Monitoring Research that I alluded to before. What is not clear is how exactly a smaller number of people are supposed to take on a greater number of tasks and still maintain the service. As far as I am aware, that has not been clarified either by BBC Monitoring or, indeed, internally to staff; so something has to give.

- Q21 **Douglas Chapman:** My second question is related to languages. Members of the Defence Committee will know that we have discussed this long and hard for a long time, especially in terms of Russian but also Persian, Arabic and so on—the crucial instability hot-spots around the world. Do you feel that UK-based foreign language speakers, such as of Arabic, Persian and Russian, present a risk? If it does, can that risk be dealt with in some other way, or are we destined to maintain this level of service that we have currently, as opposed to trying to degrade it?

Lord Campbell: When you say risk, do you mean a risk to the capability?

Douglas Chapman: Yes.

Lord Campbell: I would have thought that, self-evidently, if you halve approximately the number of Russian speakers in BBC Monitoring based in the UK, it is very difficult to see how you could replace that by some kind of digital revolution. I go back to a point I think was made by the Chairman about the colloquialism, the unusual use of a phrase or a metaphor. Those are essential parts of a language. Unless you are particularly skilled—native skilled, if you like—in the language, it seems that you may have a lot of trouble picking up that kind of nuance. As we know, intelligence and all that is frequently much more nuanced than tabloid newspapers would allow.

Keir Giles: This is inviting further risk. The operation in Moscow is just the most prominent example. Monitoring's overseas offices tend to be in countries that are not necessarily friendly to the UK or, indeed, to journalism, whether that is open source collection or the apparently innocent operations of the BBC. Placing greater emphasis on the overseas offices is inviting risk.

Q22 **Douglas Chapman:** Some numbers were reported for Russian speakers. Do we have similar numbers for Arabic?

Keir Giles: I do not have those numbers, I am afraid.

Lord Campbell: On the point you made about particular spheres of influence, something has occurred to me most acutely in the past six or seven days. Rory Stewart, a Government Minister who is skilled beyond his current responsibilities, went on to the Marr programme and said—and these are not quite his words—"Look, if ISIS, or Daesh, is being driven back militarily in Syria and Iraq, there could well be a displacement of effort."

The displacement of that effort could take advantage of those hundreds of people who left Britain to fight for Daesh, some of whom have come back and more of whom may come back, if Daesh is under pressure, to take advantage of the particular skills they have learned. Since so much of that is conducted on the internet and in languages other than English, it seems that if you want to argue the case for BBC Monitoring and the level of the threat—rather as happened in that paragraph that I referred to a moment ago—it could hardly be more urgent to continue monitoring of the kind we are discussing.

Q23 **Chair:** Is not part of the problem that the role of a journalist is to put messages out to the public, whereas the role of monitors is to gather open source information and bring it in? It has been suggested to me that the BBC seems intent on dissolving BBC Monitoring into the BBC News operation, which is a reversal of the flow of open source or news information. Will that even save any money?

A lot of people may be relocated from Caversham, where they live in its



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surroundings, to London. Keir, do you have any indication whether that would mean that a lot of people would decide that they would rather cease working for the organisation? Do you have any information on what sort of room there would be in a rather busy new Broadcasting House physically to accommodate the staff that decide to relocate and, presumably, would have to be paid London weighting and all the other extra expenses of the move to London?

Keir Giles: I do not have a firm grasp of the numbers. It seems slightly opaque and counter-intuitive in some respects. I have not conducted enough interviews to say, necessarily, that a lot of staff are not willing to move to London. All I can say is that none of those who I have spoken to intend to do so.

From outside the organisation, it seems odd why, given the current situation with Caversham Park, the BBC would wish to close it and relocate everybody to an overcrowded central London location at greater expense, rather than make use of the facilities it has in Caversham Park by expanding into that location instead. It is very hard to say what the rationale behind that particular element is, because it exposes things to greater risk. However, the underlying drive for making this a BBC operation, rather than a national security operation, should not be seen as anything new.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, when I joined BBC Monitoring, there has been a tension between the conflicting requirements of the three different main customers: Open Source Enterprise, which was FBIS; the British Government; and the BBC. What we are seeing now is not a sudden flick of a switch, but the culmination of a long ongoing process that has been continuing over the past few decades.

Lord Campbell: May I say that I have some sympathy for the BBC in this? This may go beyond the scope of your inquiry, but it was given a very hard deal in 2010, with the licence fee settlement—of that there is no doubt. Since then, as I think it has freely admitted, it has been under pressure to reduce costs. That is perfectly understandable, but—again, not to be too flippant—we are not talking about the quality of “Strictly Come Dancing” here; we are talking about the provision of information that, properly obtained and properly used, has an essential part to play in the security of the United Kingdom at a time when everyone accepts that the threat has changed but may be just as severe. For the BBC to find itself as the arbiter of this seems to me far beyond the nature of the responsibility that the charter provides for it.

To pick up very quickly on the point about journalists, suppose you said to all the journalists in the BBC, “Right, you’re off to Caversham to be analysts,” what would they say to that?

Q24 **Chair:** We are talking about a total budget, including fixed costs, of about £20 million to £25 million a year. The operating budget within that is currently £13.2 million, which is proposed to be cut to £9.45 million. By the standards of Government expenditure—of course it is not



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Government expenditure but licence payers' expenditure—these sums are really rather small beer, are they not?

Lord Campbell: Indeed. Perhaps I can put that into context for you. I looked back to November last year, when Prime Minister Cameron made an announcement in the House of Commons that the security services were to get another 1,900 officers employed and that an additional £2.5 billion pounds was to be made available to them for their activities. I hesitate to say that what we are talking about is nothing—obviously, any million-pound figure is not nothing—but if you put the sum you have just indicated into the context of an additional £2.5 billion for security purposes, it seems to me quite extraordinary that it cannot be argued forcefully that the funding for something so essential to our security should come from the taxpayer, rather than from the licence fee payer.

Keir Giles: As far as I could gather from the slightly convoluted conversation about funding that happened in the Foreign Affairs Committee session, the £13.4 million is the key figure because the rest—baseline functions like IT, HR and premises—have already been absorbed into BBC budgets. The key figure is the drop from £13.4 million to £9 million.

Chair: Yes. I think it is actually from £13.2 million to £9.45 million—I may be wrong about that—but thank you; the point is taken.

Q25 **Paul Flynn:** Lord Campbell, may I take you back to a point you made earlier about changing attitudes towards weapons of mass destruction? You told the House in September 2002: “We can also agree that he”—Saddam Hussein—“most certainly has chemical and biological weapons and is working towards a nuclear capability. The dossier contains confirmation of information that we either knew or most certainly should have been willing to assume.”

We know now from the Chilcot report that there was no shortage of information. There was a great wealth of information, but the key document, written by a relative of Saddam Hussein, was quoted in the first part as saying that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and that was in the dossier; but he also said later on in the same document that they had been destroyed years ago, and that was not in the dossier. Do you now feel, with your great experience in these matters, that what matters is not the volume or even the quality of monitored information, but the spin that is put on it by politicians with an agenda?

Lord Campbell: That may fall outside your terms of reference.

Chair: I will allow you to reply if you want to.

Lord Campbell: I know from long experience that when you get your teeth into something, you are not likely to let it go, Mr Flynn. I was deceived like everyone else. I can tell you the story of that dossier: a copy of it was brought down to Brighton, where the Liberal Democrats were in conference. Charles Kennedy and I travelled to the House of Commons the



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following day; the Prime Minister made a statement, and then there was a debate at which I made a speech. I, like everyone else, was deceived, but quite quickly I began to realise when Dr Blix, representing the UN, and Dr el-Baradei, representing the International Atomic Energy Agency, came back to say, "We have searched, and we can find nothing." That was the point at which, from my point of view, the scales fell from my eyes.

To go back to your point, of course spin matters, but that ain't the responsibility of BBC Monitoring. BBC Monitoring's responsibility is to produce material that is as intellectually sustainable as they can find it, based on their expertise.

Q26 Paul Flynn: Thank you very much for that answer. You call it an "unwanted lovechild." There seems to be an extraordinary history of how this gone around from Department to Department, section to section, and the violent changes in the funding. In 2004 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office cut its contribution by two thirds, and they have been asked again and again to produce the same output on fewer resources. Do you think the Government should be funding BBC Monitoring? You have partly answered this in the past, but what is your ideal solution in the long term?

Lord Campbell: I think direct funding, then the Government could be held accountable for the amount of that funding. They would have to justify it, either above or below the level at which it was set. There would then be proper recognition of the fact that this function is a function of national security and not of broadcasting.

Keir Giles: I would agree, with caveats. As you have just alluded to, direct funding in the past has not protected BBC Monitoring from having the funding rug pulled from under it. Even at a time when the Cabinet Office was supposed to be providing a ring-fenced amount of funding, in direct contravention of the memorandum of understanding that pertained at the time the funding was cut, leading to yet another reduction in BBC Monitoring headcount and, consequently, services.

I would say yes, Government funding is the right answer, but subject to certain conditions. For example, ensuring that there is control over the priorities of BBC Monitoring and that you are not in the current situation where it is the BBC that is the arbiter of what is supplied for national security purposes. We must ensure that any additional funding that is provided to BBC Monitoring at the moment does not simply go into the broader BBC pot, vanishing without enhancing the services.

It is a quirky situation that has arisen where this national security function ends up in an organisation that really has no interest in providing it but is having to pay for it. The way out of that does need radical change, whether it is maintaining the organisation in its current state but with very different funding arrangements or, potentially, using the individuals who are to be shed by BBC Monitoring in one of the other organisations under the Ministry of Defence that have already been alluded to, because their



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skills, their depth of experience and their analytical capabilities are extremely valuable not to the BBC but to the Government.

Lord Campbell: Can I add the word “dedicated” to my answer? We need direct and dedicated Government funding.

Paul Flynn: I am grateful for those answers.

Q27 **Mr Turner:** Given the distrust among some sections of the public of Government-produced information, does the brand of BBC Monitoring give a legitimacy to Government policy based on it?

Lord Campbell: The BBC has a very good reputation, and the World Service has a very good reputation for all the reasons we know. I would not take away the BBC brand—it serves the purpose to which you have referred—but I would certainly like it not to be the responsibility of the broadcasting part of the BBC. It seems to me that the only way to achieve that is by funding it from another source. I have already indicated my view, and Mr Giles has indicated a more qualified view. If it is the BBC, people believe it, although I have to tell you that in the referendum in Scotland and in the recent referendum in the United Kingdom not everyone adhered to that view.

Keir Giles: I am not sure that that question arises at all. Given the range of uses to which information from BBC Monitoring is put, the source of the information is entirely opaque. Whether it feeds into a Government decision or, indeed, into BBC News output, you don’t see a by-line for BBC Monitoring at the bottom, so I am not sure that that makes any difference whatsoever. Were that same service—that same output—to come from an entirely different source, and it was a Government source, nobody except its direct consumers would be any the wiser.

Chair: I thank both panel members for an extremely valuable session. Thank you so much.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Admiral Lord West of Spithead and Air Marshal Chris Nickols.

Q28 **Chair:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. Thank you very much for agreeing to form our second panel on the future of BBC Monitoring. Will you please identify yourselves for the record and say a word or two about the Armed Forces posts that you both held at different times?

Lord West: I am Admiral Lord West; the posts in which I made use of this sort of material were when I was Director of Naval Intelligence for three years and then, some years later, when I was Chief of Defence Intelligence for three years. I also made use of it as a Chief of Staff on the Chiefs of Staff Committee, as Commander-in-Chief Fleet, and when I was the Minister for Security and Counter-terrorism.

Air Marshal Nickols: I am Air Marshal Chris Nickols. The principal jobs in which I made use of the BBC Monitoring service were when I was running the Air Warfare Centre; integrated within that organisation is the air



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intelligence side for the MoD, and then, following on a couple from Lord West, when I was Chief of Defence Intelligence, during which time Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya happened.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q29 **Ruth Smeeth:** Gentlemen, thank you so much for coming this afternoon. Do you believe BBC Monitoring to be important to the national interest?

Lord West: I think BBC Monitoring is a jewel in the crown of open source reporting and it has been underestimated. A lot of people in positions of power who have affected its funding have no understanding of how important it is.

When I was Chief of Defence Intelligence back in 1997, I made a decision that we needed to strengthen the whole open source reporting area, because it was quite clear that we were being squeezed for money in some of the other intelligence areas, and also that there was much more data and material available. I was aware of BBC Monitoring when I was Director of Naval Intelligence but had not had a lot to do with them, but they have been looking at these sorts of areas since 1939. They had a pool of real expertise and were able to pluck real gems out of the ether—literally out of the ether—which they could put together and, in a sense, start the analysis off. Then they would give it to the deep analysts we had in the Defence Intelligence Staff, of whom there were far too few—we have removed analysts throughout Whitehall; they have gone from the Foreign Office and from everywhere else—and it meant that they had material they could work with. To my mind, it was absolutely crucial to get a real flavour of and feel for areas of the world where something was going to happen and then try to nip it in the bud.

Air Marshal Nickols: I would certainly echo most if not all of that. I would make a couple of other points. First, whether you are talking about Defence Intelligence or the wider intelligence architecture, they clearly do not have the resources to cover the whole world in any depth whatsoever. BBC Monitoring was absolutely key to indicators and warnings, as we would call it in intelligence terms, because by its very nature it is probably covering areas that you don't really have many analysts looking at in any detail. That is one of the areas where BBC Monitoring is so useful to Defence Intelligence. The other, of course, is the languages. Defence intelligence and defence more widely has only a limited language capability in a limited set of languages, whereas BBC Monitoring offers a much wider capability, particularly to Defence Intelligence but again across the intelligence world.

Lord West: May I add a comment regarding the Open Source Enterprise of the United States. Because we cannot cover everything, we do share things with the US. In my experience, the US saw the BBC Monitoring as really important; it covered areas that they were not covering, and they would share data with us from the areas they were covering. I have warned over the past 12 months or so, having realised that there were more cuts coming, that this is something that is at risk. This is a real



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problem. There is a feeling among Americans that other countries are not pulling their weight and here is another area where that is happening. That would be very unfortunate.

- Q30 **Ruth Smeeth:** You have actually answered this but could you give a more tangible answer to how you think we should measure the value and importance of BBC Monitoring?

Air Marshal Nickols: As you say, I have already partially measured that. I think to Defence Intelligence it is of most use in areas where we are not focusing at any given time. Of course, there are wide areas of the world where that is not the case. In what defence would call perhaps mature theatres of operation—Afghanistan in my time would have been the classic example—by that stage, of course, you have quite a lot of intelligence assets looking at that theatre and you have a much better picture yourself.

Measuring the output of BBC Monitoring has always been difficult. It has always been difficult measuring the output of intelligence. What we tend to find is people always remember when intelligence failed, but they very rarely give us any credit when intelligence succeeded, or at least partially succeeded by giving some warning.

To a certain extent, I think we have to take the word of the analysts. When the analysts who are looking at a particular problem say that the BBC Monitoring output is really important to their assessment of whatever the issue or region they are looking at, we have to take their word for it, because they are the ones who are seeing the totality of the intelligence that we are getting.

Lord West: It is difficult to be specific. There are lots of examples one can come up with, such as the issues with Russia and Georgia and within Iran. There are lots of examples where one can say, "The first heads-up was this."

That does not just lie within the DIS, of course. It is much broader across Whitehall, and it is very good in terms of indicators and warning. Here we are at the moment talking about sending penny packets of soldiers to various countries, such as South Sudan and other places. You need to know what is going on there.

One thing that went wrong in Helmand, I believe, is that we did not know what the hell was going on there. BBC Monitoring are able to give you a flavour of this from all of the reports they take. What we have been doing, of course, is cutting and cutting and there are fewer and fewer places that we can do that. It seems the Government indication is that they want to send people out to more places to stop wars happening; well, we need to know what the hell is going on. If you send them where you do not know what is going on, you are in a very high-risk strategy.

- Q31 **Mr Jenkin:** I am here as the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which looks after the Cabinet Office, and that is the budget that has been raided in order to put BBC



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Monitoring in this situation. We have established that there is a decline in the quality and volume of relevant output. What do you think will be the consequences of that today, if that continues?

Lord West: I think we are less able to identify in advance when there is a real risk of conflict or rising tension or civil war—those sorts of things—and the impact of decisions we are making in this country on those other countries. We are going to have less and less ability to understand those. Yes, they affect the MoD, the FCO and all of our agencies; I think it affects DfID as well, where we are still spending this great whack of money around the world. All of those people need to have this sort of intelligence—I am calling it “intelligence”; it is open source, but effectively it is intelligence—to know what’s going on in that region, to make decisions about who they might deploy, about what needs to be done, and is it an area that we’re particularly worried about?

Clearly, the Cabinet Office has to focus all of this activity. I wouldn’t say it is Cabinet Office money; I think all of those Departments should be paying for it. There probably is a little bit that the BBC should pay for still, but putting it all on the BBC, and given the way that all the cuts have gone, inevitably the BBC don’t see these things as core issues for them, and I think that’s a real worry. We are talking in operational cost terms about £4.1 million or so this time. To lose the capability that we’re going to be losing for that seems to me extraordinary.

Q32 **Mr Jenkin:** What implication will it have on the way our allies rely on us for our intelligence?

Lord West: I think it will have a huge implication for the US tie-in with us.

Q33 **Mr Jenkin:** Surely they do this sort of stuff themselves?

Lord West: Actually, they are under pressure as well. They do it, but effectively the world is a bit divided up and we look at different parts of it. That is what has been done in the past. I cannot predict what they’ll say, but they will have to spend more money, they will have to cover other areas, and they have always rather admired our input. I think that is very unfortunate.

As far as Europe goes, to be quite honest we have always helped Europe out in all of these things, whether it is defence or security. In security terms, we have actually helped them move forward and they are still going to need that from us whatever happens in terms of Brexit. They need it because they are not as good at it as us. We have actually been able to bring them on a lot, and the sort of information that we get is enabling us to do that.

Q34 **Mr Jenkin:** So, if we continue to degrade this capability, we will actually be reducing our global influence?

Lord West: Absolutely. I absolutely believe that it will reduce our global influence, because we will not be able to use our very limited resources to influence things around the globe properly, because we don’t know where we should be applying that pressure.



Mr Jenkin: Anything to add, Air Marshal Nickols?

Air Marshal Nickols: I think that any relationship, whether it is with the US or with anybody else, is clearly not dependent just on a single thing, but yes, the US appreciates what we do. I think the important thing about what we do, or what the BBC does, is that it has an understanding about certain parts of the globe, because of our history and such like, that perhaps the US does not have or that the US particularly appreciates, and that might be true for other partners as well. It is not just a transactional arrangement with another partner. It is actually the quality that we bring to that as well, and that is obviously one field where the BBC is very strong, particularly in certain parts of the world.

Chair: I am going to change the batting order slightly; it's to do with keeping quorate for both Committees that are here today. So I call Paul Flynn next and after him I will call Andrew Turner, for reasons that will be obvious to aficionados on the Committee.

Q35 **Paul Flynn:** On the question of languages, I think we'd all agree that we need to make sure that there are enough speakers of Arabic, Farsi and Russian. However, there was an incident yesterday after which we needed speakers of Balochi, regarding the atrocity that took place yesterday; I presume it was to understand what was going on. However, in Afghanistan alone, you mentioned not knowing what was taking place in Helmand—I believe you said that—but is it ever possible to get through, when there are 30 languages spoken in Afghanistan, to get a pool of speakers of all of them, so we really know what is going on, in all the 30 languages in just one country?

Lord West: I think the answer is no; you can't do that. However, when you have people who have years of experience of monitoring the media output within countries and they know which paper is doing what, who has changed to what and what is actually being transmitted by various stations, and who are now aware of social media and what's being talked about, they get a very good flavour of these things. And as long as you've got a number of the languages there, I believe they are able to give us an indication.

I think it would be foolhardy to try to train someone to speak all of those languages; I think that would be a silly thing to do. But the people in a country have a very good feel and can give you a very good flavour of what is going on there, because they are able—with their experience—to draw on what's being said, and they know the background to these things: "This lot always used to do this. They work for these people." They are able to pull it together and give you some sensible sort of readout. That has to be good because it enables people to do things before things develop to a war. That has to be good because it enables people to do things before things develop to a war. The last thing one ever wants to do is to have to use our forces to actually fight the war. You want them to be seen to be powerful and to be seen to be able to do something, so that we do not end up having to fight. This help is part of that.



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- Q36 **Paul Flynn:** I recall stories about the last war in which Welsh was used. It totally baffled the German interpreters because not a great deal of Welsh is spoken in Germany.

Lord West: I used to use Glaswegians as a tactic on my ships when the Russians were nearby because there was absolutely no way they could understand it. They were meant to be speaking English, apparently.

- Q37 **Paul Flynn:** We have the same problem here, I am afraid. I have a final point. Generally, we have been poor traditionally at learning languages, and it is getting worse. Would you like to see some initiative taken to learn minority languages in our education system?

Lord West: I certainly think that we should put more effort into learning languages within the military, probably more so in the Army than anywhere else. We have been quite bad at that. We need to think about whether there is some way of incentivising people learning these languages to make more people learn. Will those languages help people in their career? Those things need to be looked at.

- Q38 **Chair:** Anything to add, Air Marshal?

Air Marshal Nickols: No, just that defence's problem with languages is that every operation is in a different part of the world. Suddenly, you need a lot of speakers of one particular language. A few years later, it is another language, so it is a very difficult issue for defence. That is one reason that it is useful to have people such as BBC Monitoring looking across languages over a longer period.

Chair: Now, of course, we find ourselves going back to a more traditional potential adversary in the form of Russia. Andrew, you have a question about NATO.

- Q39 **Mr Turner:** What is your understanding of how other NATO members conduct monitoring services similar to those provided by BBC Monitoring? How do we interact with them?

Lord West: I know how we interact with the Americans. I am not aware from my time in any of those jobs that any of our allies within Europe, on a broad general basis, do monitoring in the way in which we do. They do focus. BND, for example, used to have a team that focused and did stuff for the Germans in the Balkans. The French have in-depth knowledge of West Africa, and they have people who are clearly following what goes on there. Quite a lot of those are actually on the ground. There are a surprising number of French still on the ground in a number of independent countries there. I am not aware of any of the European countries having an all-pervasive monitoring service like our BBC. I may be wrong, but I am not aware of that.

Air Marshal Nickols: Likewise. As far as I am aware, it tends to be much more focused on their areas of particular interest.

- Q40 **Mr Turner:** Is there duplication? How will reductions in funding and output have an impact on our influence in NATO and our support for



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NATO allies?

Lord West: I am worried about what it does for our ability, as we are now looking outwards and we still wish to be able to deploy globally because we believe that that is the way of stopping and nipping in the bud things that might develop to wars that we end up having to fight in. I see that as most important.

We have been able to provide—and do provide—advice. Our European allies within NATO are desperately grateful for the advice we give them across the whole area of broader intelligence, a lot of which is open source reporting. A little leavening of bits of intelligence there makes a real difference to their knowledge of what is going on in certain areas. That is something that they will still need.

It will be quite interesting in negotiations and things because they absolutely need this—in the context of NATO, yes, but in the context of the EU trying to do something on their own, it will be quite interesting to see how they get that data and information. It is not completely permeable between NATO and the EU if it is an EU force, for example. I think that there will be some real difficulties, and that is something that I would worry about.

Air Marshal Nickols: I would say exactly the same. We are second only to the Americans in terms of what is provided to NATO in intelligence terms. The open source part of that from places such as BBC Monitoring is a key part of what we provide. All NATO nations know that; they know how much we provide to it, and they know the quality of our products.

Douglas Chapman: I am tempted to ask a question in Glaswegian.

Lord West: Actually, I can get it, because I went to Clydebanks High School—so you have to watch out. I keep it quiet.

Q41 **Douglas Chapman:** How can the collection of open source information assist the MoD in policy development and policy making? How does the MoD actually blend the information and analysis that it gets from BBC Monitoring with the open source content that it picks up? How does it all work?

Lord West: The blending is done within Defence Intelligence Staff. There are more analysts in the Defence Intelligence Staff than there are anywhere else in the UK now—I think we have made a terrible error in reducing our number of analysts in the Foreign Office and across Whitehall.

I will let the Air Marshal answer further, but as for how it will help us, what I would say is that we have made a decision to look outwards around the world and to deploy globally to try to nip things in the bud. A classic example of that is the Queen Elizabeth carrier, and the carrier battle group. That carrier battle group will be able to sail from the UK and go out for 500 miles a day, way out around the world—to the Far East, the Middle East or wherever. If you are operating that, with its fixed-wing aircraft and



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probably with Marines on some of the ships, you need to know very clearly what the problems are, where the difficulties are, what impact the movement of your ship has, where you want to be seen to be doing something, where it would be useful, where it would ease tension and where it would actually increase tension so that you don't go there.

You need to know all those things. This data gives you that ability, which is very important. At a time when we are doing that and are sending small groups from the Army to various countries, to reduce this—for £4.1 million—seems to me the height of folly. I find it absolutely extraordinary, which is why I have asked so many questions about it over the last year in the Lords. But perhaps you want to talk more about the fusion aspect, Air Marshal Nickols.

Air Marshal Nickols: Your best chance of getting a good intelligence picture is using every source you possibly can. We call that all source intelligence, and it is what the analysts do. As Admiral West said, Defence Intelligence has the largest pool of all source analysts anywhere in the UK, but sometimes the number of sources may be very limited. You do not always have lots of different sources from secret intelligence and suchlike. That is the point that I made very early on: for indicators and warning, open source information may actually be the only information you have. If you do not have secret collection on a particular place, because it has not been of great interest or because your resources are limited, open source may be the only source you have.

Lord West: When you don't have any information at all, in Defence Intelligence, we call that "urint"—a feeling in the water.

- Q42 **Douglas Chapman:** Is there any particular service provided by BBC Monitoring that you would single out as having a significant impact, in your experience over the years? You both have experience.

Lord West: It is difficult to do that, but I think the video area is now very useful, and of course they are having to think more and more about web-based stuff and social media. The impact of social media is greater, and that calls for a shift in emphasis. But I wouldn't want to pick one of them, because the next thing you find is that some bastard has cut something else. They are all very important. Sorry, I didn't mean to say that word.

Ruth Smeeth: Yes, you did.

- Q43 **Chair:** It will be suitably redacted. As we understand it, one particularly valuable part of the output of BBC Monitoring was the video streaming that effectively went between the unit that produced it and the MoD client that consumed it. We understand that the plan is for the Video Unit to be closed, but the BBC say they will be able to focus across a wider range of media platforms. Do you think those newer platforms will be able to provide similar information to that provided by the Video Unit? Can you tell us a bit, if you had it, of your experience of the value of the Video Unit?



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Air Marshal Nickols: Certainly, the Video Unit has been very useful in the past. It is a changing area. There is clearly more available on the internet these days than perhaps there was in the past, but of course it has still got to be found, analysed and suchlike. It is a changing area, and video and what you can get from it can be found in a wider range of sources these days.

In terms of what else the MoD might do and what it might plan should the video monitoring unit close, you would probably have to ask the MoD, because we are not inside those discussions day in, day out. In terms of its utility in the past and its utility for that sort of imagery right now, it is very useful for certain aspects of Defence Intelligence.

Q44 **Chair:** There is also an organisation called the Defence Intelligence Fusion Centre, which used to be called JARIC, I believe. I understand that there was quite a close relationship there with BBC Monitoring, wasn't there?

Lord West: Yes, there was, and the video stuff very often, amazingly, popped up to quite a high level of decision making, whether because, the more senior you get, you can only absorb certain things like that, I'm not sure; but it was used at that high level for decision making. You hardly ever found people who said that the material that was provided was no good. Pretty well all of it was used, which makes me believe that it was high quality. The balance is very difficult, because clearly web-based stuff, social media and things have become more important, but I'm not sure about just getting rid of the whole lot.

I have a feeling that there have been certain cuts and things because people are saying, "There is x amount of money. That's how much money you've got. Therefore, this is what we're going to do." There is no thought of what the nation really needs, and nobody then thinks, "Actually, this is a real problem." It has been done the wrong way round.

Q45 **Chair:** As you may know, the Foreign Affairs Committee has been producing a parallel inquiry. I had the benefit of taking part in it as a guest in the same way as Bernard and his colleagues have been taking part in this one. In the course of that, I had the chance to question BBC representatives—in particular, Ms Unsworth, who heads the World Service, and Ms Beck, who appears to be a relatively new head of BBC Monitoring and has perhaps been brought in with a view to making these changes. They emphasised the new role of social media, which has been mentioned today. However, do you accept that, from the point of view of the MoD as consumer, although there may be value in monitoring information that comes from social media used by private individuals, in so far as this vast body of stuff can be monitored, the main social monitoring material that you want would be the social monitoring that derives from the Twitter feeds and such like of Government members or politicians in these countries? Presumably, you are mainly concerned about what is going on at a political level in these countries? Would that be a fair summation?



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Lord West: I would say that the answer is yes. That is reflected in a number of the other feeds that come out. It is an amalgam of all those things that are going on, and then one gets a reflection of all that from some of these other outputs, which they can then pull together with their knowledge of the place, plus who is producing what from which organisation. They then get a flavour of what exactly is coming out.

Q46 **Chair:** I want to be clear, so please tell me if I am wrong. It is basically the monitoring of official, semi-official or quasi-official information in other countries, often broadcast in foreign languages, that is of most direct value, so far as open source intelligence is concerned.

Air Marshal Nickols: I am not sure I would entirely agree with that. Both are vital to the intelligence picture. Some of what we have seen over the past few years would show that. The problem with the Government feed is that you are getting what the Government want to say, and in many of these places it is not the truth. The job of intelligence is to find from other sources what the truth is, but I think we have found in a number of places and in a number of circumstances over the past five years that the feed from the general population—whether it is activists or whatever it happens to be—is incredibly useful to the intelligence picture. Often that will give you the trigger that something has happened way before the Government feed will. Both of them are equally important. It varies, depending on the circumstances. I am not saying that it is necessarily BBC Monitoring's job to monitor all the social media from private individuals.

Q47 **Chair:** There is a potential problem here, in that the BBC's argument for making these changes is in part that they want to monitor more with a smaller budget and fewer people.

Lord West: Yes, but they are not actually monitoring more, are they? When you look at what they are proposing, it is not going to end up with more monitoring. Indeed, they are cutting bits out. I just find it inconceivable that a 30% cut can make the organisation do more. It means that it must have been pretty bloody incompetent before, mustn't it? I just do not see that, I am afraid. Understandably, the BBC people putting this in place have done the best they can with a bad job. The BBC do not want to spend more on this, because they do not see it as fundamental to the BBC, and they are correct. It is fundamental to other parts of Government.

Q48 **Chair:** We mentioned earlier the parallel relationship that BBC Monitoring at Caversham has with the Open Source Enterprise of our American allies. It is parallel to the relationship we have with them in the exchange of secret intelligence. To what extent do you think we are in danger of cutting ourselves off from the 75% of coverage that we get from the American OSE in return for us supplying them with the 25% coverage that we specialise in, which includes coverage of Russia?

Lord West: I don't think one can predict exactly what they will do, but it is death by a thousand cuts. In all sorts of areas we seem to be reducing what we are doing, whether it is in defence, intelligence or open source terms. If you look at the political base in the US, both parties are already



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saying, "Hang on. People in Europe cannot go on getting a free ride." This just adds to that pressure. At the very least, it will mean that you have not got the two organisations joined at the hip. At the moment, the US people are upstairs at Caversham. If Caversham goes, where will they be? You won't have that same closeness and linkage.

- Q49 **Chair:** I think we can assume that the Americans will not be found quarters in Broadcasting House.

Lord West: Part of the reason for the number of reductions in people is that Broadcasting House is fairly jam-packed already. Even if they had wanted to move in the whole lot from Caversham, they would have found it extremely difficult.

- Q50 **Chair:** Anything to add?

Air Marshal Nickols: Not really. I think I said a little while ago that it is not a one-for-one type of relationship with any partner or the Americans. Death by a thousand cuts is perhaps a good way of putting it. The other thing that the Americans always appreciate is that it is not just burden sharing, where we do one part of the world and they do another; it is about the opportunity, particularly with important subjects, to compare assessments and suchlike. That is another thing that would be lost.

- Q51 **Chair:** In terms of individual Departments that are the customers of BBC Monitoring services, would you like to give us a list? Basically, it is the intelligence agencies, the FCO, the MoD—

Lord West: The MoD, the FCO, the Cabinet Office—because the NSC is there, really—and all of the agencies. DfID, I believe, is also one. To a funny extent, also, some of the feed comes into the Home Office. They are not ones you think of initially as doing that, but when I was a Minister occasionally I would ask to see what was being said, because it does have an impact on radicalisation in certain countries and on what is going on.

- Q52 **Chair:** You referred to DfID a little earlier; you mentioned that they are not short of a certain amount of money. Would it be legitimate for DfID money to be used in part-funding the service that they get?

Lord West: I think the rules should be written in such a way that they could do that, because if DfID is deploying people very often, and paying people with NGOs to go into countries, they need to know what is going on there. There is a growing market among private security firms in looking after NGOs. I think it is incumbent on the Government, if we are providing aid within a country, to make sure that we know exactly what the situation is within that country, who exactly we are providing aid to, what exactly is going on and how safe people whom we are deploying to that nation are. So I think it is legitimate.

- Q53 **Chair:** Supposing that this all went badly wrong, that changes were made and the Government client Departments found that they were no longer getting the sort of input that they had been accustomed to receive, could the function of BBC Monitoring then be reproduced by individual Departments? What sort of cost implications might that have, bearing in



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mind, as we discussed with the earlier panel, when you were not present, that of course staff employed by Government Departments have to be vetted, whereas staff employed by BBC Monitoring, because they are dealing solely with open source material, do not?

Lord West: It would be sub-optimal to try to regenerate and rebuild this capability individually in some individual Department. Having a central grouping, which BBC Monitoring is providing, providing this to all of the Departments we mentioned makes a lot more sense. It would cost, I believe, a lot of money, whichever Department decided it was going to try to replicate this. The other Departments would immediately say, "Yes, we would like that information." I believe that not having to be security cleared can be extremely valuable, because you are able to get people who can speak languages much more easily. Quite often, with some of these strange languages, you try and get DV-ing of these people and it is actually extremely difficult, so I think there are benefits from not having to do that.

Q54 **Chair:** In short, do you believe that the Government should be funding BBC Monitoring, as of course used to be the case? I think I am right in saying that at one stage Government funding of the World Service was stopped and then, at least in part, restored.

Lord West: My answer to that would be that I think it should be centrally funded by Government. As for the exact mechanics of working that out, those of us in Whitehall know that it is all shopkeepers and shopkeeping with money, isn't it? Exactly how that is done is a different issue. Of course, we sold the pass when the whole lot was pushed across to the BBC. There were agreements to do with a whole raft of things in the BBC when the money was taken in there, but I think we have to forget all that and say: what is it that the nation actually requires? I believe that that should be funded centrally.

I think it should still be BBC Monitoring. There are administrative aspects that will probably stay in the BBC, so there would have to be some structure to allow for administration and operational matters. There is the question of exactly how it is done. But yes, I believe it should be funded outside the BBC—centrally, effectively, apart maybe from some administrative bits and pieces.

Air Marshal Nickols: It is a very necessary capability across quite a large number of Government Departments, and therefore I think it should be funded. How it should be funded is not really up to me, but we do need to find a way to fund this sort of capability.

Q55 **Chair:** Finally—this is not really a fair question to ask of you, particularly Lord West, because you have gone public with your criticisms of this, and I do not know whether the BBC has tried to make representations or given you reassurances—we have been talking a lot about open source intelligence. Do you have any idea why there is this determination to close Caversham Park and to do, as we have heard today, such potential damage to the situation? One could almost say that instead of open



source intelligence, we are dealing with open source stupidity, perhaps.

Lord West: I think I said in my opening statement that I think a whole raft of people have no understanding of what BBC Monitoring does. I think there is a real lack of understanding. Even in the corridors of power, there are people who have no idea of what BBC Monitoring was doing. When some early decisions were made years ago about cutting bits and pieces, and it has now worked up to where we have got to, I don't think people really realised what they were doing.

I am afraid that things gained momentum. There was loss of face and people felt embarrassed. We have all been embarrassed at some time or another. There is nothing wrong with U-turns on something that is crucial for our nation, and I believe that this is crucial for our nation. For so little money, I think this would be such a short-sighted and stupid thing to do. At some stage in the future, we will have to try to regenerate it, and it will cost a lot more money. I am really quite dejected. I have now been raising this for some time, and I have had pretty blank answers about it. Part of that is not because people are anti but because they just don't understand.

Air Marshal Nickols: I have little to add.

Chair: On that note of unanimity, I thank you both very much indeed. We greatly appreciate your time and contribution.

Examination of Witness

Witness: General Sir Richard Barrons.

Q56 **Chair:** Welcome, General Barrons. Although I have just identified you in best *Dad's Army* fashion, will you kindly say who you are and tell us about your post for the record? Can you say a few opening words about your experience of BBC Monitoring in the course of your career?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I am General Sir Richard Barrons, formerly the Commander of Joint Forces Command in the UK Armed Forces. I have now left the Armed Forces.

During my tenure as Commander Joint Forces Command I was responsible for the capability of Defence Intelligence and the delivery of things like defensive cyber, and invested in the relationship with the US intelligence agencies, as well as with our own secret intelligence agencies. One of the key developments that Defence Intelligence was invited to pursue was the evolution of the art of intelligence from its historic origins as a combination of secret sources into something that was appropriate for the modern era—I will use the shorthand “information age”—where much of what people need to know will come from open sources, of which BBC Monitoring is a part.

If I may, I would like to give a little narrative on how I think all this fits together. It may be ground that the Committee has covered, but it will

take me to the place that I would like to get to. I think the place to start is to recognise the role of open source intelligence in the setting in which the UK currently finds itself as a middle-ranking power in a globalised, changing and complex world. We proceed from the assumption that the nation has interests that it must protect and advance, and those interests will cover a whole range of things—clearly security, but also politics, diplomacy, trade, investment and migration. That is a very wide spectrum. In that setting, the UK operates a matrix of relationships with states, non-states, allies and partners. Each of those relationships will be at a different point on a spectrum, which I will describe to you. It starts with co-operation, occasionally in competition, to confrontation, to conflict. That brings our exposure to a world that has pace, uncertainty, complexity and concurrency.

In that environment, the Government and others have to identify the risks to their activities and the opportunities. Most of the responses to those risks and opportunities will be multidimensional. The Committee has talked a lot about hybrid conflict or hybrid relationships; the Foreign Office here would talk about full-spectrum effects. They are the same thing—it is about drawing on all the levers of power in public and private sector, of which the military is a very small part.

To operate well in that environment there is absolutely no possibility that secret intelligence alone will deliver that level of understanding. It is not what it is for. It does not have the capacity and does not even look in the right areas. To operate effectively in the world as it actually is, with all its complexity and concurrency, you have to understand a whole host of things. Most of those things are commonly available: it is data and information and you simply have to acquire it, fuse it and analyse it.

One of the great fallacies, certainly in the military, is that you only conduct an intervention or protect your nation with secret intelligence. That has never been the case and never will be. All of that is compounded by the fact that we now exist in the era of big data—a proliferation of data and connectivity, manipulated by the advances in processing power. I am sure you have had put before you the exponential growth in all of those fields. A lot of the data are searchable by things we all have on our phones, such as Google. Some of it is better done by bespoke systems, created by a data scientist, that pull in pools of unstructured data, fuse them and, with the help of social scientists and experts, understand what it is you are looking at. You need to do that in near real time.

Secret intelligence does not do that. To be effective in the world as it is now, any Government, any industry, any NGO, any actor is going to have to follow social media sentiment. It is going to have to follow what exists across the digital media, what is in the newspapers, commercial reporting, listen to what diplomats and politicians say and bring all of that together. It is that setting, particularly with the advent of digital imagery—stills photography and video—which has become so important. Unless you are following the content of YouTube and what is going on on things like Instagram and Snapchat, you are going to miss an awful lot of information

about what is actually going on in the world. In that context, BBC Monitoring has provided a core capability and it has shown the way to do that and the value, as it has expanded its repertoire into things like online reporting.

We are now in a situation where BBC Monitoring provides a breadth of coverage of what is going on in the world, and that is unbiased reporting. Most importantly, it does that in a large number of languages. It is attaching decision makers in many walks of life to what is actually going on in the world and what is being said and thought.

Q57 Chair: May I intervene for a second? You said that it is unbiased reporting. To what extent does the product actually amount to the inclusion of reporting, or is the main skill in selection and identification of that which needs to be translated, transcribed and transmitted?

General Sir Richard Barrons: My view on that is that the best thing that BBC Monitoring can do is have the widest possible aperture on events and thought in the world. It is important to record matters of fact—things that have happened—as well as matters of sentiment, or what people think, whether they are true or not. As an example, today BBC Monitoring has reported on a French presidential candidate who has got himself into mild political trouble because he did not know the price of a pastry—an issue not unique to France. On the same day, there is a very thoughtful argument on BBC Monitoring about the constraints on press freedom in Pakistan, which is a piece of analysis. Both those things, in their own way, are essential to understanding the world as it actually operates.

BBC Monitoring, as a Government-funded service, provides information to all branches of government, the Armed Forces, the intelligence agencies and, at a price, the commercial sector that attaches them to the world in which they operate. They may say there are other ways of acquiring that information—you could look at output from Bloomberg, Reuters, or a number of another agencies that perhaps specialise in other areas—but those are unlikely to have the span or the broad focus that BBC Monitoring brings to it.

The peril that BBC Monitoring now faces is that we have ended up, bizarrely, in a situation where what it does has somehow become attached to the licence fee and it is competing with light entertainment, when what it provides is a core part of building an understanding of the world as it really is. That is a strange place to be, but it would seem to me incompetent if we sacrificed BBC Monitoring on the altar of *Top Gear*. I do not think there can be any doubt about the importance of this open source reporting or the need to link it to other sources of open reporting and for it to be paid for in a way that reflects its stakeholders.

Chair: Thank you very much for that comprehensive opening, which anticipates some of the questions that we planned to ask. We will obviously adapt them slightly in the light of that, but by referring back to some of these topics they will enable you further to enlarge upon the points that you have made already.



- Q58 **Ruth Smeeth:** I think you have already answered my question extensively and comprehensively, but I wonder whether you can elaborate specifically on how we should measure the value and importance of BBC Monitoring for Defence Intelligence.

General Sir Richard Barrons: Let us set aside the specifics of an actual intervention, which I may come back to. We are following a complex, highly charged world, where we might recognise there are potential risks to our interests and values. Defence Intelligence is able to draw on all the work of our secret intelligence agencies, which is very focused, but none of that work is going to give Defence Intelligence a general understanding of the situation it is contemplating. This is about culture, current events, public sentiment and some analysis of aspects of society about which we may know nothing. Without that, what you are left with is just the specifics of what you have heard, talked to people about or photographed, and that will be much narrower.

In the context of an intervention, were it to be the case, for example, that the Government decided it was necessary to intervene in a place like Libya—I use this only as an example—it is very unlikely that the capacity of our secret intelligence would be entirely focused on that problem and present on the ground. Why would it be or could it be? You will understand what you are going to enter into only by accessing open source intelligence, of which BBC Monitoring is a really key part.

- Q59 **Douglas Chapman:** As Ruth suggests, you have covered a wide range of the topics that we were hoping to ask you about, so perhaps the answers can be short. From a defence and security aspect, do you consider that the service provided by BBC Monitoring is fit for purpose? Is it sufficient for our current national requirements?

General Sir Richard Barrons: What they do is genuinely first-class, because it is a footprint established since 1938-39, with a global perspective, operated by people who are expert in the language and in the cultural fabric they are looking at. What it suffers from is lack of stability—people keep tinkering with its prospects on financial grounds; there is the desperate search for efficiencies—and the threat to scale. The recent cuts announced to BBC Monitoring would trim 98 or so posts.

Let us put it in perspective. BBC Monitoring makes a profit of about £2.5 million a year and costs only £13 million or so to operate. As far as I can tell—I am afraid this research comes from *The Washington Post*, and they got it from Mr Snowden—in 2012, the US Government's bill for open source reporting was about \$358 million. Washington operates an Open Source Center, which until around 2013 was widely available but is now closed because it is operated by the CIA. We might assume from that that the US view on open source intelligence—I have the benefit of having visiting the centre—is that they will spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year on open source intelligence, which is effectively what BBC Monitoring does. They are equivalent organisations.



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There is no doubt about the quality of BBC Monitoring's output, but there is a risk to its completeness because of the lack of scale and stability. I think there is also a risk to it from a lack of understanding about how what it does has to be fused with other sources of data. BBC Monitoring doesn't do that; it is the function of intelligence agencies and companies—you see that done in big industries. If it is at risk of being sliced in order to sustain popular entertainment, that is ridiculous.

- Q60 **Chair:** We discussed the funding a little earlier. The BBC was given responsibility to part-fund the monitoring activities, and indeed to finance other activities, such as the BBC World Service, although I believe that decision was reversed, at least in part, and the Government are now significantly funding the World Service again; nevertheless, there have been various accusations that the scale of available output and the quality and standard of broadcasting have declined. You were in post until very recently, and there were obviously earlier cuts along the way. Did you notice any significant decline in the quality and value of output as a result of the previous cuts?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I did not notice a decline in the quality of output, but I noticed a decline in the span of output. In particular, I noticed a decline in the ability to surge to the problem of the moment, because that contingent capability does not exist. They could not stop doing things in order to flex to a more important problem. That is an important point, in that if Her Majesty's Government decide that they want to focus on a particular major issue, they must be able to draw the resources that allow you to focus on the major issue without dropping other important tasks. The ability to do that is being slowly eradicated. The latest round of cuts will accentuate that.

Chair: One proposed further cut relates to the Video Unit. Will you address that point, Ruth?

- Q61 **Ruth Smeeth:** The Video Unit is being shut down by the BBC. The BBC have said that they will be able to focus across a wider range of media platforms. Will newer platforms be able to provide information similar to that provided by the Video Unit—they are obviously going to be talking about digital—and is it an appropriate level of cut?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I think it is a step in entirely the wrong direction. Many of us are still stuck in the email age—we communicate by email—but the generation behind me have moved on; they think email is a ridiculous anachronism and communicate by messages. Now, the issue is about communicating by video. In order to get the best possible view of what is happening in the world, you have to track what is being uploaded to Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and other programmes like that. Whatever we think is this year's programme, there will be another one. If BBC Monitoring is unable to keep up with that, it will become a specialist monitoring organisation that only does part of the job, and the fact is that the job has to be done 24/7 and it has to be done in languages other than English, if you are going to be good enough to spot those key developments in the world.



- Q62 **Ruth Smeeth:** Thank you. coupled with other areas that they are seeking to trim down on, given the current global instability does the narrowing of the areas covered, alongside the reduction in UK-based Arabic, Persian and Russian language speakers, present a risk?

General Sir Richard Barrons: Again, I think that anything that diminishes the span of coverage is a step in the wrong direction, because although Government, by nature, likes to do one thing well at once—it likes to worry about the problems, say, in Afghanistan, or Syria, or Libya—the fact is that we are faced with a whole set of concurrent perils, some of which are enduring, like the discussion between Russia and the West, and some of which might be a bit more episodic, for example the arrival of Daesh in parts of Afghanistan. But as the UK exists as part of this globalised world, how could you argue that you could take your eye off, say, the Gulf, or the systemic issues in Africa, or the problems of the South China Sea, or the problems of the Baltic states? How do you make that choice, because whatever choice you make you will have created a vulnerability?

You then have to look at the price. I mean, £13 million is the change down the sofa of Government, and if it provides absolutely key capability for the understanding of the world, how have we arrived at a place where it's not well up the list of priorities? It seems to me ludicrous.

- Q63 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed.

We asked our previous panel, which, as you may know, was Admiral Lord West and Air Marshal Chris Nickols, both Directors of Defence Intelligence in their time, about what they understood other NATO member countries do, and they were fairly firm in their answers that, other than the United States, we are the main players in this particular game. What I will ask you instead is this: do you think the reduction in funding and output might have an effect in relation to our influence within NATO and our support for our allies? Of course, if you wish to add anything further about whether or not other NATO countries compare in any way with what we produce and what the Americans produce on a much larger scale, please feel free to do so.

General Sir Richard Barrons: I do not believe that within European NATO there is anything that compares with BBC Monitoring, but of course BBC Monitoring has been around for really quite a long time now.

I am absolutely clear that the capability that BBC Monitoring offers is dwarfed by the US Open Source Center capability, which is a much more sophisticated operation that spans a whole range of sources.

I think we should be absolutely clear that some people who are not in NATO and with whom we may have to find a way in a troubled world invest in understanding better than we do what the sentiment is in troubled parts of the world. For example, the way that Russia reads the situation in Africa or the Gulf is very proficient; it is not helped by the language issues, but it is still very proficient.



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I do not believe NATO has a capability, but I think that what this betrays to a degree is that NATO as an organisation still operates an intelligence system that is grounded in the old world of closed information systems—military systems. Nations offer to NATO the stuff they want to offer to it, and military intelligence analysts, and civilians too, fuse and analyse that, and answer the questions from the commander. That model will never work in the future, because the future must be about an intelligence organisation that's built around open source big data, of which BBC Monitoring is an important part, but that operates like a newsroom and tells commanders what is happening and moves into better prediction about what may happen next.

As an indicator of that, there are companies appearing—I will cite one, because it is in my head, called Predata, which makes its living by looking at the social media sentiment and being able to predict to people who pay for the service that things are going to change, within minutes or hours. That is exactly the sort of capability that NATO in the future needs to operate in the digital world.

Q64 Chair: The Foreign Affairs Committee, which is doing a parallel investigation to this one, invited me to take part in its session with the two senior people from the BBC World Service and BBC Monitoring. I questioned them about the fact that they had apparently put it to the Cabinet Office that Government ought to resume funding, and according to them the Cabinet Office was noticeably unenthusiastic about that. We are struggling to persuade a Minister from either the Cabinet Office or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to appear before this Committee, but by hook or by crook we will get something out of them, I am sure.

It was put to the people who are currently running the service that although they were minded, even if they had funding restored, to continue to make some of the changes in operating practices that they wanted to make, it would be much easier for the Government to ensure that the product was tailored to its needs if it was footing the Bill. The response of Francesca Unsworth, the head of the World Service and covering Monitoring as well, was that this would be true—"obviously if they were paying", with "they" being the Government. Would you say it is fairly clear that if Government agencies wish to get the product they have been getting and wish to get in the future from BBC Monitoring, they need to put their hands down the back of the Government sofa, find the £13 million a year and spend it on refunding the service?

General Sir Richard Barrons: My view is that Government Departments should go back to the strategy set in the 2015 SDSR, which talks comprehensively about a union of hard and soft power. The exercise of hard and soft power is only effective if it is based on really sound understanding, as well as the good co-ordination, of a range of effects. What the Foreign Office, the Cabinet Office, DfID, the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury, BEIS, Trade, the Home Office and others get from BBC Monitoring is core capability to understand the world in which they are operating. They are the customers. There is a degree of public good here—it is something Government consumes and also something that civil



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society consumes—but there is also a commercial aspect, as commercial enterprises can subscribe to a level of service from BBC Monitoring. I know nothing about the charging arrangements there.

It betrays a poor understanding of how policy, strategy and operations are linked if you say you do not want to understand what it is you are looking at before you act and decide. I fail to see why people think they should get that for nothing. This is another reflection of very austere times in Government. Everyone would love the bill to go somewhere else. One of the perils for BBC Monitoring is that it supports many stakeholders and it is easy for any one of them to say, “I don’t need to pay for it because surely someone else will.”

- Q65 **Chair:** Well indeed. As you were giving that answer, General, I was jotting down the list of the main clients in the form of Government agencies and Departments. They are three intelligence agencies, presumably, FCO, DfID, MoD, Cabinet Office and, as Lord West said earlier, sometimes even the Home Office. If we do not allow the Home Office, that is still seven bodies, so we are talking about each of these agencies stumping up £2 million a year.

This is the final question, unless any of my colleagues have any other points. You referred to the 2015 SDSR, one of the provisions of which was the establishment of the joint security fund, which could be drawn on through a bidding process by most of the Departments we have just referred to. Do you think that the joint security fund itself could be an appropriate source for the future funding of BBC Monitoring?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I think it is appropriate inasmuch as it supports all aspects of defence and security. But because it covers an awful lot more than defence and security, it would give a free ride to other Departments. I think the way forward would be a better discussion run by the Cabinet Office to identify the beneficiaries of BBC Monitoring and then to apportion out the bill—and to make sure, in doing that, that the aperture is cast where it needs to be. In this open source era, I would argue for expansion in the capability, in the range of things it looks at concurrently, in its ability to surge in a crisis and in its ability to ensure it covers evolution in digital media so that it is a complete service. When you have built that, it will be so good that there should be commercial partners happy to put their hands in their larger pockets too.

- Q66 **Chair:** If it is not funded, either by a couple of million from each of seven Departments or by the joint security fund, and it effectively withers on the vine, could any Government Departments replicate the service for themselves? What do you think would be the cost implications if Departments tried, either individually or collectively, to do so?

General Sir Richard Barrons: I do not think any Government Department would be tempted to do that. Arguably, at a cost of £13 million some could do it very easily, particularly those that are ring-fenced, but I think Government Departments will be tempted to use other commercial providers: they will look at the daily output from Reuters, Bloomberg, Brink’s and people like that, which have very specific focuses.



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Or they may be tempted to cut an arrangement with the US to see whether we can tap into its capability under the Five Eyes arrangement.

But, to be honest, this is so core to the business of competent, independent government of the United Kingdom that it would be folly to take a risk with it. Surely everyone will see that, in a world where we want to exercise hard and soft power well, you start with sound understanding. You will only get sound understanding from a combination of primarily open source data, like BBC Monitoring, and secret intelligence. It seems almost absurd that we are even having the debate about chopping it.

Chair: Thank you. On that note—a trenchant note, I might add—may I thank you very much for your contribution today? We have acquired a great deal of material and we will continue to endeavour to make sure that the Government steps up to our future panels on the subject and makes its case for mending something that does not appear to be broken at all.