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House of Commons International Development Select Committee inquiry: Future Funding of the BBC World Service

What soft power advantages does the World Service provide for the UK and the projection of its values?

The BBC World Service (BBCWS) provides significant soft power advantages for the UK by projecting its values through global news services. As the most trusted and well-known international news broadcaster, the World Service is an essential tool for promoting the UK's values of accurate, impartial, and independent journalism. With a truly international presence, its journalists and supporting staff based around the world contribute to the BBC's mission to act in the public interest.

Alongside details about and examples of the BBCWS contribution to UK soft power and the projection of its values, this submission highlights UK government recognition of these facts. It further argues for the increasing importance of the BBCWS in a world of geo-political turmoil in which both authoritarianism and AI-empowered misinformation constitute areas of growing concern.

Commitment to Press Freedom and Reliable Information

The BBC World Service's dedication to impartial journalism, particularly in regions where media freedom is under threat, underscores the UK's commitment to press freedom and the public's right to reliable information. This is especially significant in an era where misinformation and media manipulation are rampant. The BBCWS's presence in these regions acts as a beacon of truthful reporting, providing citizens with an alternative to state-controlled or biased media.

In countries where freedom of the press is limited, such as Russia and China, the BBCWS offers a rare source of independent journalism. This commitment to impartiality not only provides critical information to those who need it but also showcases the UK's dedication to upholding democratic values on a global scale. By championing the cause of free and fair journalism, the BBCWS aligns itself with broader efforts to promote human rights and democratic governance.

Additionally, the BBC's proactive stance against the harassment and intimidation of its journalists, particularly in hostile environments, further highlights the UK's resolve to protect journalists and ensure the flow of reliable information. For instance, in places like Iran, where media practitioners often face severe threats, the BBC's advocacy for its staff's safety and freedom is a testament to its commitment to press freedom.

Soft Power and Global Influence

The concept of "soft power," coined by US political scientist Professor Joseph Nye (1990), refers to the ability to influence others and achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment. The BBC argues that the provision of trusted, impartial information via the World Service significantly enhances the UK's soft power. This claim is supported by various commentators and extensive research.

A 2020 Ipsos MORI survey found that awareness of the BBC World Service is strongly linked to positive perceptions of the UK (Advanced Television, 2021). This finding underscores the World Service's role in shaping global opinions and fostering goodwill towards the UK. The Soft Power 30 index, which measures global soft power, consistently cites the BBCWS as a major institution contributing to the UK's international influence (e.g., McClory, 2019).

The UK government also recognizes the BBCWS's role in enhancing soft power. The integrated review of security, defence, development, and foreign policy (2021) identified the BBC as one of the UK's key "soft power strengths." This acknowledgment underscores the strategic importance of the World Service in advancing the UK's foreign policy objectives and promoting its values worldwide.

In February 2022, the UK government described the BBCWS as "invaluable for our soft power and influence globally" (Evennet 2022) in response to questions about its role in supporting UK international diplomatic objectives. This statement highlights the government's recognition of the World Service as a critical tool in the UK's diplomatic arsenal.

Government Recognition and Support

The UK government's support for the BBC World Service is evident through various initiatives and funding allocations. For example, in March 2022, the government announced £4.1 million in emergency funding for the BBCWS to support its Ukrainian and Russian language services. This funding aimed to counter disinformation about the war in Ukraine by providing trusted and independent content. The World Service's role in challenging the Kremlin's disinformation highlights its strategic importance in geopolitical conflicts.

During a debate about the protests in Iran, FCDO minister David Rutley emphasized the importance of the BBCWS, noting that the government supports its work on disinformation. This support underscores the World Service's role in providing reliable information in regions where press freedom is under threat and disinformation is prevalent.

The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee report 'Licence to change: BBC future funding,' published in July 2022, further emphasized the importance of the BBCWS. The report noted that the BBC continues to provide an essential international service that promotes UK democratic values and informs people across the world. In an era of declining press freedom and rising authoritarianism, the World Service's role is more crucial than ever.

The government's response to the committee, published in October 2022, fully recognized the important role the BBCWS plays in promoting UK values globally through its independent and impartial broadcasting. The upcoming review of the licence fee funding model is expected to work closely with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) to ensure that the World Service is given proper consideration.

AI, Fake News, Cybersecurity, and the Need for Reliable Journalism

In an era where artificial intelligence (AI) is advancing rapidly, fake news is proliferating, and cybersecurity threats are escalating, the BBC World Service's role in providing reliable

news is more important than ever. The rise of AI has transformed the media landscape, enabling the rapid dissemination of information but also making it easier for misinformation and fake news to spread. Simultaneously, cyber threats pose significant risks to the integrity of information. In this context, the BBCWS stands out as a beacon of reliability and trustworthiness.

The World Service brings an international perspective, emphasizing fairness and trustworthiness in its reporting. This commitment to unbiased journalism is critical in combating the spread of fake news and misinformation. As a trusted source of information, the BBCWS helps maintain the UK's positive international perception by providing accurate and reliable news.

Moreover, the BBC's ability to provide reliable news in an age of AI-driven content is highly appreciated. As AI continues to evolve, the potential for deepfakes and other forms of digital manipulation increases, making the need for trusted news sources like the BBCWS even more critical. By leveraging its reputation for accuracy and impartiality, the World Service can effectively counter the spread of fake news and contribute to a more informed global audience.

In addition to combating misinformation, the BBCWS plays a crucial role in addressing cybersecurity challenges. Cyber attacks targeting media organizations can disrupt the flow of information, erode trust in news sources, and compromise sensitive data. The World Service's commitment to robust cybersecurity measures ensures that its platforms remain secure and that the information it disseminates is protected from malicious interference. By prioritizing cybersecurity, the BBCWS not only safeguards its own operations but also sets a standard for other media organizations to follow.

The intersection of AI, fake news, and cybersecurity more than ever underscores the need for reliable journalism. The BBCWS's dedication to providing accurate, impartial, and secure information is essential in navigating these complex challenges. As a trusted global news service, the World Service is well-positioned to lead the fight against misinformation and cyber threats, contributing to a more informed and secure global community.

Historical and Linguistic Influence and Cultural Diversity

The BBCWS developed out of a unique set of conditions that will never occur again. It emerged during the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial, at a time when the UK was redefining its role in the world. It is important to recognise this extraordinary international capital, built over decades, that if once lost could never be replaced. The service has become a strong presence in various regions, fostering a sense of familiarity and trust among diverse audiences.

Providing news in languages spoken in regions such as Africa, Asia, and the Middle East underscores its value for communities that might otherwise be underserved. This approach helps to foster a more informed global population and strengthens the UK's image as a promoter of diversity and cultural understanding.

The BBCWS's ability to cater to the UK's diverse linguistic landscape also enhances its relevance domestically. According to the UK's most recent language census (Office for National Statistics, 2021), the UK is very diverse, with many languages spoken that overlap

with those provided by the BBC World Service. This makes it not only a great tool for international communication but also of significant interest to the UK public. It serves as a bridge connecting diverse linguistic communities within the UK to reliable and trusted news sources. Hence, the World Service helps integrate immigrant communities and promotes social cohesion. This domestic impact further strengthens the UK's commitment to inclusivity and multiculturalism.

One of the BBC World Service's significant contributions is its role in protecting and promoting the world's cultural heritages. Its diverse programming plays a crucial role in documenting and preserving cultural traditions, stories, and histories from around the globe. This effort not only enriches the global cultural landscape but also ensures these heritages are recognized and respected. This commitment aligns with the UK's broader values of inclusivity and difference.

The Unique Reach of the BBC World Service

Globally, there is no other news service quite like the BBC World Service, which broadcasts in over 40 languages. While English remains the lingua franca of international communication, local and regional information can easily become obscured and overlooked. The service otherwise ensures that important local information is accessible and not buried under the dominance of generalised English-language media. As a world service, it bridges local linguistic and cultural backgrounds to enable a more connected and informed global community. It provides a platform for international responses to crises, facilitating the exchange of vital information and fostering a sense of global solidarity.

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