

Introduction

1. For more than three decades the Association for International Broadcasting (AIB) has represented the interests of its members, comprised in the main by broadcasting organisations around the world (in the Pacific, Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America) who serve audiences internationally. The BBC is a member of the AIB.
2. Over the past 30 years the Association has developed a unique understanding of the international media marketplace and the changes that have occurred in territories worldwide as well as audience behaviour. This extensive and unique knowledge base has informed this submission.

Submission

3. BBC World Service is arguably the world's most trusted, most influential and most consumed international broadcasting service. In recent years, however, BBC World Service has come under increasing pressure from alternative media sources in all the marketplaces it seeks to serve, whilst having to address the impact of significant reductions in its funding – in other words, having to do more with fewer resources in a more complex international media arena.
4. At the same time, other nations are increasing their international broadcasting operations, seeking – as they always have – to attract audiences away from BBC World Service. In addition, the immeasurable increase of misinformation and disinformation, often promulgated by state actors, means that the work of BBC World Service is harder to achieve, yet is more important and more valuable for the UK and its taxpayers than ever.
5. To provide historical context, BBC World Service was financed for many years by annual Grant-in-Aid from the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In 1984, the Perry Review recommended that the Grant-in-Aid should be determined at the same time as the Licence Fee, and for the same period.
6. BBC World Service was first financed by the new "Triennium" system in 1985/6. This provided the ability for the organisation to plan its operations more efficiently and with a greater degree of continuity and certainty than the annual budgetary allocation provided.
7. In April 2014, the Grant-in-Aid system was replaced and since then, BBC World Service has been funded by limited FCDO grant, alongside a more significant allocation from the UK domestic TV licence fee, plus the income from limited commercial activities.
8. Cost pressures in the media sector together with inflation have eroded the licence fee base in the past half decade, and this has increased the challenges to funding of the BBC World Service.
9. The present funding system means the BBC could make legitimate financial decisions in the interest and benefit of its UK listeners and viewers concerning the application of the licence fee that will be to the detriment of the BBC World Service and its global aims. This could consequently negatively affect the UK's international diplomacy.
10. This paper seeks to address questions that the Committee may have and the AIB stands ready to provide additional information and responses if these will help to inform the Committee's deliberations.

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

11. Free and accurate information is an essential element for healthy democracies – and for countries on the path to becoming democracies. Without it, harmonious international relations are impossible to achieve. It is in the British national interest that free information should be available, and that it should

be the UK that provides this, both as an end in itself (an international public good) and as a necessary condition for constructive dialogue with other nations. A free and peaceful world cannot of course be created or guaranteed by freely supplying information, but it certainly cannot exist without it.

12. UK interests abroad can be pursued more effectively if the UK and the country's values are known and understood. A wider acceptance of those values would make the world a safer and more agreeable place to live in.
13. BBC World Service practises the values of impartial reporting, open debate, exchange of diverse opinions and tolerance of disagreement. In delivering these, it offers a demonstration of the UK's values and traditions in action.
14. It is important to recognise that in addition to news and current affairs, the work of BBC World Service in delivering programmes about science, literature and music enriches the lives of its audiences by sharing the full range of British cultural experience with them. This positive cultural environment is taken for granted in the UK and other advanced democracies; much of the world does not enjoy this luxury.
15. BBC World Service plays an important role in holding power to account in territories across the world, fulfilling a role that domestic broadcasters in many markets are inadequately resourced to meet, or where the editorial strength does not exist.
16. As just one example, BBC Africa Eye carried out a year-long investigation – *Sex for Grades* – that triggered a rapid high-level reaction to the epidemic of sexual harassment of women students in top universities in Nigeria and in Ghana. The investigation provided *prima facie* evidence of sexual misconduct that led to the suspension of senior lecturers at the University of Lagos and the University of Ghana.
17. BBC World Service has the immense strength of being editorially independent of government. Against the background of increasing numbers of government-controlled international media services, the role of an arm's length body such as BBC World Service can only become more significant in UK public diplomacy and soft power.
18. A further strength of BBC World Service is its integral part within the world's largest public service broadcaster, and the flexibility that staff have in the BBC to meet colleagues from other departments on a daily basis to exchange ideas and knowledge. There are few other, if any, international broadcasters in the world which possesses this unmeasurable – and likely immeasurable – benefit of producers of TV, radio and digital productions, working in both domestic and international services with fluid movement between the divisions, to share programme-making ideas for audiences at home and abroad.
19. The reputation of BBC World Service has been developed over 92 years and despite the exponential growth in competing services on multiple delivery platforms, remains held in high regard in most, if not all, the markets it serves. One example of this is the readiness of most politicians around the world – together with opinion leaders from business, the Arts, and other sectors – to be interviewed on BBC World Service programmes, in English and other languages.
20. A further indication of the regard in which the BBC World Service is held are the efforts that some nations continue to expend to prevent their citizens from accessing it. While the days of shortwave jamming are (mostly) ended, switching off access to the BBC's digital platforms or other platforms that carry BBC World Service output is commonplace in closed societies, and sometimes occurs in democratic societies that are regressing towards forms of authoritarianism, dictatorship or totalitarianism.

What trends are there in the funding and support for internationally focussed broadcasters in countries such as China, the US, France and Russia?

21. The international broadcasting and media operations of China and Russia are constantly growing and the budgets for the various media outlets of these two nations likely significantly exceed those of the BBC World Service and those of nations allied to the UK. Financial transparency is not a hallmark of China and Russia and while anecdotal figures on their expenditure are available, precise and accurate funding data of individual international media arms are not freely available.
22. Russia has deployed a long-term strategy for its international TV, radio and digital services since at least 2008 when then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's government included domestic and international media operations (including ANO "Russia Today" and RGRK "Voice of Russia" as Russia's international TV and radio operations were known then) – in its list of almost 200 core organisations that Putin deemed to be of strategic importance to Russia. At the same time, Russia effectively dusted down the Soviet Union international broadcasting "play book", refreshing it for the TV and digital age and putting into practice many of the techniques the Soviets used during the Cold War.
23. Russia Today TV, founded in 2005, was rebranded "RT", disguising to a certain degree its Russian heritage. It rapidly launched Spanish- and Arabic-language services, with French and German following later. It is in the process of launching a service in the Balkans that will move from a digital-only service to live TV during 2024, according to Margarita Simonyan, the head of RT.
24. Sputnik is the successor to the Voice of Russia radio service (known as Radio Moscow until its rebranding in 1993) that operated up to 70 separate language services, more than any other international broadcaster (including BBC World Service). In 2014, Putin issued a decree that resulted in Voice of Russia undergoing a significant rebranding and restructuring to become Radio Sputnik. This change was part of a broader move by the Russian government to reorganise its international media resources, which included merging several state-run news agencies into Rossiya Segodnya, a new entity aimed at providing multimedia news publishing. Sputnik was launched as a radio broadcaster, digital platform, news agency and picture agency in November 2014, by Rossiya Segodnya, funded by the Russian government through RIA Novosti,
25. Today, RT and Sputnik TV and radio services are broadcast around the world, with a range of national or local distribution agreements for English or language services in countries including, but not limited to Venezuela, Syria, Mexico, Guatemala, India, Pakistan and South Africa. Sputnik hires airtime on local transmitters in the USA and other nations.
26. The global distribution of Russia's international operations is possibly greater than that of Western broadcasters as the broadcasters often pay to access local and national networks. That is not the case for BBC services which in many cases (because of financial imperatives) seek payment from the local operator for the privilege of carrying the BBC's channels.
27. China's international media operations include English-language TV channel CGTN and China Radio International. CGTN also operates French, Arabic, Russian and Spanish language channels. Like their Russian counterparts, these operations have wide international distribution via local and national channels. In Africa, the Chinese-owned Star Times TV service – which has enabled many African nations to meet the international deadline for migration from analogue to digital TV – carries CGTN and many of China's domestic TV channels. China Radio International operates in 45 languages.
28. China is building the broadcasting centres of nations in Africa and elsewhere, in some cases replacing broadcasting facilities that were built by Britain in the past. Examples include the Seychelles, where a new headquarters for the Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation built as part of Chinese "aid" is nearing completion, and South Sudan where this relatively new nation state will have a Chinese-built broadcasting complex. These investments, and that of the Star Times TV system that is now prevalent across much of Africa, demonstrate the long-term strategy China has in gaining and enhancing influence, often to the detriment of Western democracies.

29. The Russian and Chinese governments see their international media operations as key tools in extending the countries' influence around the world, particularly in developing and middle-income nations. This influence helps Russia and China to portray a positive image of themselves among opinion formers and politicians that in turn can help secure votes in key international fora, including the UN and its specialised agencies.
30. Iran's international media is concentrated around English-language Press TV (which lost its licence to operate in the UK in 2012), Al Alam in Arabic, and Hispan TV in Spanish. IRIB World Service radio operates 15 language services.
31. Iran's international TV and radio services are likely to have some impact in the country's immediate region. What is more significant are the country's attempts to shut down Western media operations – including the BBC Persian service. Iran regularly jams satellites carrying Western broadcasters. More worryingly, agents of the country's government intimidate journalists working for BBC Persian and their families (and that of other Western Persian-language broadcasters). In the most alarming case, a journalist working for London-based Iran International was stabbed outside his home in Wimbledon in March 2024 by agents believed to have been working for Iran.
32. In April 2024, BBC World Service submitted an updated appeal to the United Nations over abuse of national security and counter-terrorism laws against BBC News Persian journalists. This follows the discovery of Iranian documents that appeared to reveal that a number of current and former BBC News Persian journalists were convicted in absentia by a court in Tehran in February 2022 for “propaganda against the Islamic Republic”. The April 2024 appeal update follows earlier appeals to the UN in 2018 and 2020.
33. Other nations are now in the process of establishing their international TV news operations: the AIB's intelligence gathering suggests that India's national publicly funded TV broadcaster Doordarshan will launch an international news channel within the next 18 months; Saudi Arabia is also in the process of establishing an international TV news channel.
34. Overall, almost every Western international broadcaster faces financial pressures and budgetary restrictions while other nations that have anti-Western outlooks appear to have no limit on the resources they are prepared to invest to extend or to create their international media services.

What are the likely financial needs of the World Service in the coming years and the likely damage to its offering in the short-term if funds are not forthcoming?

35. Broadcasting and digital media production is expensive, and especially expensive to do well. It is possible to produce cheaply, but this will not sustain the interest of audiences for very long.
36. Streaming companies have invested enormous sums in the commissioning and production of select very high-quality programmes, from dramas like *The Crown*, *Slow Horses*, and *Bridgerton* to documentaries such as *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*, and *Clarkson's Farm*. Netflix, Amazon Prime and Apple TV, along with newer players such as Paramount+ and Disney+ produce highly polished “marquee” TV programmes but are not in the business of seven day-a-week news and information operations which work in fundamentally different ways, and with different aims and results, to the streaming companies' overall commercial purposes.
37. News is often produced in the most challenging global circumstances and requires significant investment not only in the reporters and crew, but logistics including safety training and personal protective equipment, travel to remote areas with poor transport links, local fixers and translators, and costs of getting the material back to base. Furthermore, with news being unpredictable – from wars flaring up to natural disasters occurring, it is challenging for news organisations to forecast costs in any given year. For this reason, a sensible overhead or contingency must be provided in all financial settlements for BBC World Service to allow it to report the world to the world.

38. The need to compete with the highly funded international media services of Russia and China cannot be overstated. If a Western broadcaster cannot afford to maintain a local FM relay or cannot persuade a TV or cable distribution platform to pay for BBC content, a competitor will take over the FM frequency or the TV or cable channel.
39. The BBC World Service has over the past two decades developed a remarkable international network of FM relays and has sought to reduce overheads for many of these by harnessing green energy captured at the relay station. Funding should allow the maintenance and growth of these local BBC transmitters – which can be described as engines of audience growth – and which facilitate access to UK-produced news, information and entertainment for audiences who do not own the technology to, or do not have the ability to pay for, access through digital platforms.
40. This paper has referred to the way in which international media operations run by Russia and China are working to secure audiences in multiple territories. Their media companies do not have the benefit of the heritage and long-term reputation of the BBC. They do however have significant amounts of money to buy their way into local media markets. Politicians and regulators in these markets appear to be increasingly amenable to the charm offensives that these nations are undertaking.
41. It is also worth noting that both China and Russia provide training for journalists in developing nations, often on an “all found” basis. Media companies in LDCs have very limited training budgets and cannot afford the commercial rates that Western broadcasters’ training departments are often obliged to charge. Increased funding for BBC training should be part of future Grants-in-Aid to the BBC World Service to counteract these moves by China and Russia.
42. In an increasingly uncertain and fragmented world, the value to the UK and to Western democracy of BBC World Service cannot be understated. Any reduction in funding will have significant negative impact on its ability to counteract the well-resourced and highly motivated broadcasters of nations such as Russia and China.
43. The level of trust in, and respect for, the BBC remains high in a majority of its global markets, even as the media landscape becomes increasingly fragmented and where social media stories gain traction rapidly, whether or not they are true. The output of the BBC is vital in media markets around the world to counteract false narratives. This helps to reinforce the UK’s values of democracy, tolerance, diversity, understanding and culture among opinion leaders and citizens globally. UK taxpayers have invested in the BBC World Service for nine decades and it is important that this investment is not now squandered through the failure of the UK government to properly fund BBC World Service to allow it to continue its work and maintain its brand reputation globally with commensurate benefit to the UK.
44. It is also worth noting that on occasions when BBC World Service funding has been reduced resulting in the closure of broadcast language services, major political events or natural disasters have occurred. These closures have meant that previously extensive in-country audiences have been unable to access reliable, impartial news about their own country from the UK. As examples: BBC Thai Service, closed in January 2006, was followed by a coup d’etat in September 2006; BBC Persian radio closed in March 2023, with significant domestic unrest following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2023; BBC Arabic radio closed in March 2023, followed by the Israel-Gaza conflict in October 2023.

What are the merits and concerns surrounding the possible funding models for the BBC World Service?

45. The domestic licence fee is not the correct mechanism to fund a key arm of Britain’s international diplomacy. UK licence fee payers expect to derive full benefit from the investment they make in the BBC through programming and digital services that have been produced specifically for them.
46. For 80 years, BBC World Service was directly funded by the UK government. The Foreign Office (later the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) had responsibility for BBC World Service and was able to prescribe languages and priorities for the organisation. As a key tool of UK international diplomacy and soft power, funding for BBC World Service should revert to direct government grant, supplemented where practicable by commercial income. This funding should be of a sufficient level to counter the work of the

overt and covert international media operations of Russia and China, as well as providing adequate funding for BBC World Service in English and non-English languages, and associated distribution and marketing costs.

47. If, as this submission proposes, BBC World Service is returned to government grant-in-aid, it is for discussion as to which ministry should have responsibility for the organisation. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office may be the appropriate ministry if it is believed that the purpose and mission of BBC World Service fits within FCDO priorities and areas of responsibilities. It is worth noting that the FCDO was the original progenitor of the intergovernmental Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) and that since BBC World Service is a beacon for freedom of expression and media, there is a good continuing fit.
48. Alternatively, the Cabinet Office may be an appropriate ministerial department for BBC World Service funding to sit.
49. If it is decided that funding for BBC World Service should return to the UK government in full (excluding any possible commercial income), the arm's length relationship and editorial independence must continue to be fully guaranteed and made public to ensure that the broadcaster cannot be seen as an arm of the State.
50. A minimum of a triennial funding model should be implemented, with quadrennial or quinquennial models explored by a joint government/BBC working party with input from other key stakeholders.
51. This guaranteed funding will allow BBC World Service to:
 - Maintain and enhance the competitiveness of its programmes in an increasingly fragmented media marketplace
 - Identify, market to, and reach new audiences
 - Meet and address the challenges posed by malign actors on the international stage
 - Build on, and deliver continuing return on, the investment that UK taxpayers have made in the BBC's international services over the past eight decades
52. The cost to the UK taxpayer of this considerable soft power tool is small, yet it is highly effective.
53. A continuing investment in BBC World Service to counteract covert and overt influence by the media operations of China and Russia in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America is insignificant in comparison to the cost of arms shipments to Ukraine by the West, and the potential devastating cost of a war in Eastern Europe should that occur.
54. Investment in BBC World Service is one component of an important insurance policy held by the UK and its citizens against malign actors.