

BBC World Service – Written evidence (TRC0025)

Lords International Relations & Defence Committee inquiry *The UK's security and trade relationship with China*

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Introduction

This evidence seeks to set out the facts around challenges the BBC is facing, both currently and potentially in the future, in the global media landscape as well as in China specifically.

The BBC's global news services (including the World Service, BBC World News and BBC.com) are available online, via radio and television reaching 438m people around the world every week across 43 languages, more than any other international broadcaster. It is the world's most trusted and best-known international news broadcaster, with CNN its nearest competitor¹ as consistently shown by independent research.

BBC World Service is chiefly funded by the UK Licence Fee. The Government decided in 2015 to supplement Licence Fee funding, through an annual grant from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of £86m a year currently being reviewed and agreed annually (funding for 2021/22 will be announced shortly). This additional investment has enabled the World Service's biggest expansion since the Second World War, including 12 new language services aimed at Africa, India, Serbia and the Korean peninsula, enhanced programming in English, Arabic, Thai and Russian, and new bureaux in Delhi, Nairobi and Lagos. These investments have led to an increase in audience figures of 11% over the last year demonstrating that at a time when accurate, trusted and reliable news and information is hard to come by more people than ever across the globe are turning to the BBC.

Commercially-supported BBC World News (and website – BBC.com) is a vital part of the international news offer, giving the BBC both impact and reach overseas. As part of wider changes to the BBC's commercial subsidiaries this year, responsibility for BBC World News is being transferred to the Public Service, operating in future under the World Service licence (with commercialisation delivered by BBC Studios on behalf of BBC News).

It has been virtually impossible for the BBC to provide news in Chinese to a Chinese audience in mainland China for some time. BBC News webpages are constantly blocked in China - in both English and Chinese. Shortwave radio transmissions in English have also been blocked for

¹ BBC Global News Brand Tracker conducted by Kantar Media and other independent surveys

many years, which affects reception in countries adjacent to China. It is widely recognised that China has become more aggressive in its attacks on independent media in reaction to information and news that it does not like. Most recently – in February 2021 – the BBC World News TV channel was taken off air completely in China.

Meanwhile, China's investments in terrestrial television and mobile phone infrastructure place the Chinese in a position, should they so wish, to influence and control the channels available to the population in many countries.

The BBC in the global media environment

The media landscape has changed significantly over the last few decades – technology has transformed the way people access and share information, we're more connected than ever and better educated but at the same time the spread of disinformation is increasing, media freedom is in decline and the need for trusted news and information has never been greater.

Current market conditions, including changes in the advertising market, make it difficult for commercially-funded Western news providers to build large audiences at a time when Chinese and Russian state funded services are doing just that, across Africa, Asia and beyond. The consequence is that the biggest global players in news broadcasting are increasingly funded by state sponsors with no commitment to impartiality. Since 2014 the number of followers on Facebook of China's CGTN has grown 91% annually and in 2019 reached 77m, more followers than any other news site in the world, bigger than the BBC, CNN and the New York Times.²

The pandemic has exacerbated online misinformation trends that were already well known – creating what the World Health Organization has called an 'infodemic' of misleading and false information. State-backed news services of China and Russia have also used the Covid crisis to continue to build their media presence, and where they have done so, trust in their version of the news has risen.³ The BBC is one of the few global news providers which can counter their influence at scale in the decade ahead.

The BBC now has bureaux in 58 countries and 74 cities and correspondents on location in more countries than any other broadcaster. The record global news audience achieved as a result of the government's

² In 2014 China's global television network – CGTN – had 3m Facebook followers, this had grown to 77m by 2019. The Economist, [China-is-using-Facebook-to-build-a-huge-audience-around-the-world](#), April 2019

³ BBC Global Audience Measurement (GAM) 2020 - research carried out in Nigeria and India showing slow rise in trust for RT and CGTN

investment has included growth of 31% in the USA, 26% in East/South East Asia, 17% in South Asia and 8% in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2019/20⁴.

As part of its work in tracking, translating and analysing local media sources BBC Monitoring has also helped to tackle misinformation across the globe contributing to the role the UK plays in countering the potential for it to undermine security, economic wellbeing and health (including baseless claims and rumours about vaccinations).

There is a significant opportunity to expand the reach and impact of the World Service still further, evidenced by the impact of the supplemental Government investment. In particular, this could support digital transformation of the World Service around the world. However, this would require additional resources beyond current levels of investment and depend on both the next Licence Fee settlement and level of additional Government grant funding over this Charter period.

Current challenges for the BBC in China

The Chinese authorities have banned BBC World News in China following baseless criticism of the BBC for its reporting on coronavirus and the persecution of ethnic minority Uyghurs. Subsequently BBC World Service in English and Cantonese was taken off air by the BBC's partner RTHK in Hong Kong.

The BBC has condemned these decisions by the Chinese authorities which follow British media regulator Ofcom revoking state broadcaster China Global Television Network's (CGTN) licence to broadcast in the UK. In a statement issued by the BBC, Director General, Tim Davie said: *'The latest developments in China, including the banning of the World Service in Hong Kong, are deeply worrying developments. The BBC should be able to do its reporting without fear or favour. It is of deep concern when our journalists are restricted and their work curtailed.'*⁵

World News distribution in mainland China was limited to international hotels and compounds but it is nevertheless a symbolically and financially significant loss. The BBC will continue to work hard to get the services back over the coming months and to defend its journalists and their work in China robustly.

Governments and media groups across the world have called out China's actions. In a joint statement the Global Task Force for public media, a group of leading public service broadcasters, said: *"All of those who believe freedom of expression is a fundamental human right will be deeply concerned that BBC News has been banned in China and that BBC*

⁴ BBC GAM 2020

⁵ [Statement by BBC Director General, Tim Davie](#)

*content has dropped from the RTHK schedule.”*⁶ Others including the European Broadcasting Union⁷, Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab⁸, the US State Department and the EU⁹ also added their voices to calls for the decision to be reversed.

All of this takes place in the context of an increasingly difficult working environment in China for international media. The Foreign Correspondents Club of China, in its recent annual survey¹⁰, outlined tactics used by the government to inhibit and intimidate journalists from covering stories that the Communist Party does not want reported. Constant harassment of teams whilst filming is a regular occurrence. Visa and accreditation durations are often shortened to destabilise international journalists. Local staff are regularly questioned by the authorities. Bureau chiefs are called in regularly and criticised both privately and publicly by government ministries and state-controlled media including through social media bots and so-called ‘influencers’.

There have been numerous expulsions from China of American and Australian media. The BBC’s China correspondent, John Sudworth, whose reporting exposed truths about the Xinjiang detention camps including sexual violence against Uyghur women, has now moved to Taiwan following pressure and threats from the Chinese authorities¹¹.

Globally, China uses its own state-sponsored linear media and social media to attack the work done by independent media, particularly around reporting of Xinjiang, on a regular basis.¹² BBC Monitoring reports point to an ongoing disinformation campaign against the BBC by China in an attempt to undermine its reputation for impartiality.

The new wolf-warrior ethos of China’s overseas diplomats has meant higher-profile appearances on local media and higher visibility on western social media including regular attacks on any broadcast or published criticism of China. The Chinese Embassy in London posted a statement on its website saying it had written to the BBC ‘*expressing dissatisfaction*’ and urging the BBC to ‘*abandon bias, correct its mistake and report China in an objective, fair and balanced manner*’. The Information Department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodged ‘*stern representations*’ with the BBC Beijing office ‘*over its Xinjiang-related fake news*’. The BBC should take China's solemn representations seriously, abandon its ideological bias and double standards, and stop deliberately smearing and attacking China, the statement read.

⁶ [Statement by Global Task Force for Public Media](#)

⁷ Statement from the European Broadcasting Union available [here](#).

⁸ Foreign Secretary statement available [here](#).

⁹ The EU called for the decision to be reversed, available [here](#).

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-media-idUSKCN2AT182>

¹¹ [Online article](#) by John Sudworth on his move to Taiwan and Beijing’s moves to shut down reporters – 2/4/21.

¹² Report by think tank, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, [Disinformation on Xinjiang](#)

Following an inaccurate report about the World Service, its operation, governance and funding by Chinese broadcaster, CCTV, BBC World Service issued a statement setting the record straight¹³.

Since 2013 China has also persistently jammed BBC World Service international shortwave transmissions, despite these being approved by the global process of which China is a member (for their own China Radio International transmissions). This jamming extends significantly into neighbouring countries affecting BBC audiences in Nepal, northern India, parts of Bhutan, northern Thailand, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Laos. Discussions continue at the highest level in the International Telecommunications Union (ITU, a UN body), after extensive bi-lateral engagement between UK and China has not resolved the issue.

BBC internet services to China have been blocked for many years, initially focussed on specific web pages, the blocking now affects the entire BBC website.

In response to these challenges and requests from BBC Chinese users, the BBC has launched a circumvention service to get around the blocking of the news website which allows access to all BBC Services in mainland China. Access to World Service radio is also available via satellite across Hong Kong and Eastern China.

In addition, the World News channel and the BBC website in English and Mandarin is available in Hong Kong. In Taiwan, World Service radio in English is available via FM partners and Chinese languages are available online via digital partners.

China's potential to control access to international media in Africa and beyond

China's investment in Africa's media has been widely reported¹⁴. Its focus on infrastructure and technology investments is also worth highlighting.

China's activity in the international media space is typified by benevolent activity in some markets/sectors and in other markets, controlling, limiting or prohibiting access to international media contrary to Article 19. There is growing disquiet about the potential China has in future, in Africa, to limit access to international media on the internet.

China is sponsoring activity to put in place a new method of operation for the internet. Now called Future Vertical Communication Network, it was previously called New IP. This will allow network operators to manage the

¹³ BBC statement in response to CCTV accusations available [here](#).

¹⁴ Deutsche Welle article - [China's growing media influence in Africa](#) 29.01.21

flow of information by message type, thereby easily permitting the exclusion of media from networks. Chinese efforts to secure international adoption of this standard continue with considerable vigour. It is currently being tabled for adoption as an official workstream of the ITU in 2022.

The annual European Broadcasting Union/Digital Video Broadcasting survey shows that there is Chinese investment in Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) infrastructure in at least 12 African countries. This has released the radio frequency spectrum needed to operate 5G mobile services, the most likely method of access to internet services in developing countries. With a Chinese supplied infrastructure this internet could operate FVCN (whether or not it is adopted internationally) and inherently filter or block external media sources.

It is known that sponsored training visits for African journalists are arranged to China aimed at building cultural ties. China currently transmits over 900 hrs per week of shortwave broadcasts to Africa compared with just over 600 from the BBC. Typically it will use frequencies given up by the BBC for their CRI English Language transmissions.

Meanwhile, following the recent decision by Ofcom to revoke CGTN's licence to broadcast in the UK, CGTN has turned to the French media regulator, CSA, in a bid to regain its right to broadcast in Europe (the UK had been CGTN's European broadcasting hub up until 4 February 2021 when Ofcom made its decision). The CSA has said¹⁵ in a statement that it acknowledges that CGTN is under French jurisdiction. This means that in principle CGTN is not violating any rules if broadcasting to the UK on Eutelsat satellites. However, the CSA has said that it will pay specific attention to CGTN's coverage to ensure it '*guarantees respect for human dignity as well as honesty, independence and pluralism of information*'.

Conclusion

World Service journalism is reaching large audiences as the pandemic remains among the most-searched topics on BBC sites across the world.

In this climate, the BBC has provided access to free, trusted, and accurate news and information, and original journalism, such as the recent investigation into Xinjiang 're-education camps' which produced revelations the Chinese authorities did not want the world to know.

The BBC stands by its journalism and totally rejects accusations of inaccuracy or ideological bias by China. It will continue with its strong editorial coverage of important international issues in its coverage of

¹⁵ [CSA statement](#)

China such as Hong Kong and the imposition of Chinese security legislation, Covid, the persecution of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang province and China's role in climate change.

The restrictions applied on access to international media within China, disruption to services in neighbouring countries and the potential for China to extend these restrictions well beyond their own borders, are all in stark contrast to the freedom with which CGTN and CRI are able to operate internationally.

Given the challenges the world faces from misinformation, digital disruption and the need for trusted sources, the role of the World Service has never been more important.

This year's increase in the BBC's global audience figures show very clearly how the World Service can deliver audience reach growth as a direct result of investment in its services. With the help of additional government investment, the BBC has a plan to reach a much larger global audience which, combined with the enormous trust audiences have in the BBC, will secure wider benefits for the UK. A strong World Service makes other objectives – a Global Britain, the promotion of open societies sharing UK values and economic growth through trade – easier to achieve.

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