

Written evidence from the BBC World Service in Myanmar (MYA0049)

Introduction

1. 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 week¹ 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 competitor² as consistently shown by independent research.
2. 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 (FCDO), which is renegotiated at each Spending Review. This funding was increased by £8m in 2021/22 taking the total annual figure up to £94.4m. The funding from government 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 other languages, and new overseas bureaux. These investments have enabled significant audience growth with reach increasing by 11% in 2019/20³ 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.
3. This evidence seeks to provide useful background information to the Committee's Myanmar inquiry in terms of the impact on the lives of the people of Myanmar and their ability to access independent news and information during the current crisis. It focuses on the BBC's experience.

Background on the BBC in Myanmar

4. The BBC Burmese Service has a place in the hearts and minds of millions of Burmese people as a source of reliable and trusted information and has played a vital role in the provision of independent and impartial news to Myanmar since September 1940.
5. Following its reporting on the 1988 student uprisings, the then military government took a particularly hostile view of broadcasters like the BBC and Voice of America. State media called these two broadcasters a "sky full of lies" or "assassins on air".
6. The slogan, "The Tatmadaw [the Myanmar military] will never betray the national cause" resonated across the country. Until the easing of censorship laws, it was mandatory to print it across Page Two of every newspaper, every day.
7. A transition to democracy began in 2010-11 and agreement was reached that the BBC could establish a presence in Myanmar the following year.
8. Strict censorship laws began to be eased and the Burmese Language Service gradually increased its newsgathering ability, initially from its base in Yangon and then via the stationing of reporters in Nay Pyi Taw, Mandalay, Rakhine and Kachin.
9. Currently, the BBC has the largest presence of any international news provider inside Myanmar and shares a compound with BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity.

¹ BBC Global Audience Measurement (GAM) 2020

² BBC Global News Brand Tracker conducted by Kantar Media and other independent surveys

³ BBC GAM 2020

10. BBC News Burmese produces and publishes Burmese language news content on bbcburmese.com, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. It broadcasts a TV news bulletin on weekday evenings, a 7 day a week morning podcast and shortwave radio news and current affairs programme as well as a weekly analysis video offer. It has a total headcount of 33 spread across Myanmar and the UK.
11. Prior to the coup, BBC Media Action employed 65 staff and produced radio, TV and digital content that tackled ethnic and religious conflict, social cohesion, labour rights, public health and misinformation. Some project work primarily in the areas of health and migration continues.

Media scene since the coup

12. Since 1st February 2021, the Myanmar military has resorted to increasingly brutal tactics to silence its critics and crush anti-coup protests, killing many hundreds of civilians and detaining thousands of others.
13. It is at times like these that we are reminded of the unique and crucial role of the BBC World Service, providing impartial and accurate news to audiences in acute need.
14. Since the military takeover, freedom of expression and access to independent media in Myanmar have been severely curtailed. The licences of independent media companies have been revoked and frequent internet and mobile network shutdowns have been used to restrict news coverage and access to information.
15. Access to Facebook (which in Myanmar equates to the internet) has been outlawed and anyone caught with Facebook on their phone faces arrest. The use of VPN is banned.
16. Most international TV news channels including BBC World News, CNN and Channel News Asia have been blocked. CGTN in English remains on air.
17. Two independent media groups, Mizzima and the Democratic Voice of Burma, have continued to operate, at incalculable risk to their staff, from bases on the Thai-Myanmar border. Khit Thit Media and Myanmar NOW, which were also banned, continue to publish news online. Others such as Myanmar Times have simply closed down their operations altogether.
18. BBC News Burmese reporter, Aung Thura, was detained by Myanmar military intelligence along with a fellow journalist in broad daylight while reporting outside a court in the capital, Nay Pyi Taw, on 19th March. Fortunately, he was released three days later⁴.
19. Dozens of other journalists, almost exclusively Burmese nationals, have been detained and jailed under the country's colonial-era sedition laws⁵.

Coverage of the coup

20. Unlike 1988, this is a video revolution unfolding on digital platforms. Citizen journalism has boomed and activists have been live streaming protests online, sometimes with disastrous

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-56480098>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-57110486>

consequences for their own safety, self-incriminated by videos, pictures and messages they have exchanged.

21. The line between journalism and activism has become steadily more blurred. Anyone with a phone who is apprehended with pro-democracy material on it risks severe consequences. Poor discipline within the Myanmar police force means they do not distinguish between a bona fide professional journalist going about their duties or an eyewitness protestor filming on their mobile phone.
22. Already Myanmar, which had only recently opened up to the outside world, had a very shallow and short exposure to the traditions of journalism. The independent body that represented broadcasters and publishers, the Myanmar Press Council, has been eviscerated. The lack of professional journalistic discipline or teaching of ethics or editorial standards have led to the widespread and routine use of emotive language such as “terrorist junta” to describe the military government.
23. On the other side, the state run broadcaster MRTV and its sister military-run channel, Myawaddy, have been sharply criticised and criticised by protestors for broadcasting “fake news”. Three weeks into the coup, Facebook banned the military’s main Facebook page, saying “the risks of allowing the Tatmadaw on Facebook and Instagram are too great”.⁶ The military continues to operate its Tatmadaw True News Information Team online and has retained Israeli-Canadian lobbyist, Ari Ben-Menashe, to improve its public image.
24. Protestors were quick to shape the narrative; firstly with peaceful street parades marked by a festival spirit in large public spaces in urban areas; to mounting barricades with home-made protective shields in neighbourhoods and townships; more recently to an emergent insurgency which has seen an increase in improvised explosive devices and weaponry and guerrilla-style attacks on the security forces.
25. The sustained Civil Disobedience Movement has brought many aspects of everyday life in Myanmar to a halt. Those regarded as cooperating with the military’s State Administrative Council have been trolled online, boycotted and physically attacked.
26. Against this highly charged atmosphere, the space for impartial journalism has radically shrunk and the BBC is under great scrutiny due to its uniquely trusted position as a source of independent and objective news. Our mere presence at the military’s periodic news conference to pose challenging questions with the intent of holding the government to account has become a focal point for online trolls.

Audience reaction

27. Burmese speaking audiences continue to access BBC News Burmese online in record numbers, bypassing internet restrictions. Audience research in Myanmar in 2019 found that the BBC’s journalism is regarded as independent and professional.
28. Prior to the coup, BBC News Burmese already scored highly on trust and brand awareness; since the takeover, it has been transformed into a lifeline service. In the first week of February, 85% of the adult internet population in Myanmar (16.5m) accessed Burmese language news content on digital platforms (bbcburmese.com, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram). Anecdotally, audience

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-56191657>

trust and reliance on the BBC have been routinely demonstrated by people calling publicly on the BBC to report raids by the security forces on their neighbourhoods.

29. In the first quarter of 2021, BBC New Burmese was the second highest performing Facebook page across all the South East Asia region, with 126 million interactions. Considering Facebook has been outlawed in Myanmar, this is a significant achievement.
30. It has not been possible to measure TV and radio reach since the coup. But according to the most recent measurement by BBC Audiences, weekly reach for BBC Burmese TV and radio is 4.1m.

Risk management

31. Keeping the BBC Burmese language editorial team safe and able to produce high quality news content in the middle of a military coup and a global pandemic is a major challenge. BBC journalists regularly face hostile environments in the line of duty and Myanmar is no exception.
32. Our BBC Burmese team is made up of talented and dedicated colleagues and they are led by an extremely competent editor. Faced with increased exposure to risk to colleagues inside Myanmar and their families, as well as highly restricted communication, commerce and freedom of movement, we have adapted our production workflows as well as our editorial offer. Risk management is a daily and sometimes hourly consideration.
33. Were Myanmar to fall into the same category as Afghanistan, ie descent into civil war or a failed state, it is an emergency that the organisation has dealt with before. In October 2019, the Director of News, Fran Unsworth, publicly stated the BBC's commitment to serve Burmese speaking audiences while on a visit to Myanmar⁷.

Conclusion

34. BBC News Burmese has once again become a lifeline service for Burmese speaking audiences. Under previous military regimes, shortwave radio was the means to reach audiences. Since the transition to democracy a decade ago, we have been operating in a very different digital and connected world.
35. The young Burmese anti-coup protestors who form the bulk of the self-styled Generation Z grew up with full access to the internet. They are hungry for information and nothing shows their connectivity to the outside world more than the three finger salute adapted from the Hollywood blockbuster film series, The Hunger Games, used to show opposition to the military government⁸.
36. These audiences are savvy and they can circumvent many of the restrictions put on the internet and mobile data. The Myanmar military is widely considered as not having the means to put in place a China style firewall. It is reliant on open access to the internet to communicate and conduct business.
37. In the face of restrictive measures imposed by the State Administrative Council, the BBC is continuously exploring new ways of reaching audiences who are acutely in need of independent

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2019/bbc-news-myanmar>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-56289575>

and impartial news. The FCDO has also been supportive of freedom of expression and the work of journalists in Myanmar.⁹

38. The BBC is in an unrivalled position as a global news provider with a local presence, uniquely placed to provide impartial and independent news, combat misinformation and report on the unfolding narrative of a country in grave upheaval, without fear or favour.

May 2021

⁹ Media Freedom Coalition statement on Myanmar: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/media-freedom-in-myanmar-media-freedom-coalition-statement>