

## Written evidence submitted by BBC World Service (TFP0035)

### Introduction

1. The BBC's global news services (including the World Service, the BBC World News TV channel 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 competitor<sup>1</sup> 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** in order to tackle disinformation and further improve the BBC's digital offer taking the total annual figure up to £94.4m<sup>2</sup>.
3. FCDO 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.
4. **World Service audience figures grew by 11% in 2019/20<sup>3</sup>** 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. Government investment in the World Service has played a major part in this growth, helping it to target new audiences and adapt and serve its audiences on the platforms they prefer to use.
5. BBC News digital audiences have nearly doubled since the start of the funding (from 80m in 2016 to 151m in 2019/20). **For the first time, digital platforms are now the most popular means of accessing BBC News - surpassing syndicated TV and radio**.
6. **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 has transferred to the Public Service, operating under the World Service licence (with commercialisation delivered by BBC Studios on behalf of BBC News).
7. The BBC's global news services play a major role in enhancing the UK's standing and reputation overseas through the provision of trusted and objective international news services. A recent Ipsos MORI survey found that **awareness of BBC World Service is strongly linked to a range of positive perceptions of the UK** including trust and intentions to interact with the UK in the future<sup>4</sup>.
8. This evidence highlights how the World Service is keeping pace with emerging technologies in order to continue to reach its audiences. It also sets out the **challenges and opportunities around working with the global tech platforms and the areas where the UK Government can offer support**.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Global News Brand Tracker conducted by Kantar Media and other independent surveys

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2021/world-service-funding>

<sup>3</sup> BBC GAM 2020

<sup>4</sup> British Council perception survey 2020, fieldwork and analysis by Ipsos MORI (young people targeted)

## The BBC in the global digital market

### Media landscape challenges and the rise of misinformation

9. **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 and better educated but at the same time the spread of misinformation is increasing, media freedom is in decline and the need for trusted news and information has never been greater.
10. The last decade has also seen the **rapid proliferation of news sources beyond major broadcasters/print outlets** and the omnipresence of news in everyday life. Much of this is related to the growth of and increased competition from new digital technologies including social media.
11. Perhaps the most important shift in news behaviour in recent years has been **audiences increasingly encountering news online without necessarily meaning or expecting to**. This changing relationship between audiences and seeking out/stumbling upon news has profound implications – not just for news brands such as the BBC, but also the nature of factual information and public discourse worldwide. However, during the pandemic, the trend was reversed with trusted news destinations including the BBC seeing an increase in online audiences.
12. Further change has seen many of today's global players in news broadcasting increasingly funded by **state sponsors with no commitment to impartiality**. Whilst digital reach for the World Service is still more than double CGTN's, the impact of state broadcasters such as CGTN and RT has led to an erosion of trust in news across the board.
13. **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.<sup>5</sup> The BBC is one of the few global news providers which can counter their influence at scale in the decade ahead.
14. China has invested heavily in media globally, particularly in Africa<sup>6</sup>. Its focus on infrastructure and technology investments is also worth highlighting: **China is currently promoting a new method of managing internet traffic<sup>7</sup> that will, if successful, provide an easy means to inhibit the flow of international media**. While there are still many stages to be passed before these mechanisms are adopted internationally, there is nothing to stop such systems being implemented autonomously within states as could be achieved through investment in internet and mobile phone infrastructure. The UK and many other countries are not supportive of these changes to the way the internet operates, however, if the proposal from China reaches an international ballot within the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), there is a strong possibility that they will secure sufficient votes for it to be approved.

### The BBC's response

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<sup>5</sup> BBC Global Audience Measurement (GAM) 2020 - research carried out in Nigeria and India showing slow rise in trust for RT and CGTN

<sup>6</sup> Deutsche Welle article - [China's growing media influence in Africa](#) 29.01.21

<sup>7</sup> Future Vertical Communications Networks (FVCN)

15. The BBC is committed to providing the widest range of global news coverage to ensure maximum exposure to trusted impartial news. It 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 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 2019/20<sup>8</sup>.
16. **In most emerging markets the median age in media consumption is very young and digitally skilled**. The World Service recognises that there is an existential challenge to be relevant to the younger generation today via digital in the way it has mattered to older generations via broadcast.
17. **New video, mobile and social media services have been launched across languages**. Global digital explainers and infographics about Covid-19 have driven digital growth as the pandemic remains among the most-search topics on BBC sites across the world.
18. **BBC World Service is also a key player in the podcast market** - the *Global News Podcast* is the BBC's most downloaded podcast. Other recent success stories include *Africa Daily*, a new series aimed at young podcast audiences in Africa, *The Climate Question* which makes use of the BBC's unique global network of reporters to report weekly on the global climate crisis and *The Lazarus Heist*, a true crime story about North Korean hackers.
19. **The BBC has pioneered new ideas in digital provision**, such as delivery of news on Chat Apps, 'social-only' pop-up services and innovations including award-winning 'virtual reality' documentaries, early steps into algorithmic content recommendation, new formats such as 'vertical' video and a World Service English App<sup>9</sup> which offers choices in how to access content at the lowest possible cost in selected areas where mobile data is expensive or limited. In response to media freedom challenges in authoritarian countries, the BBC has launched a circumvention service to get around the blocking of its news website.
20. **The BBC's global digital news services, in English and across languages, have grown significantly, increasing their reach by 53% year on year in the last period measured**. The BBC is the world's top English language news website.
21. **There is a significant opportunity to further grow the reach and impact of the World Service and support its digital transformation**. 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.

## Key issues – working with global tech platforms, tackling misinformation and the future of direct international broadcasting

### Working with the global tech platforms as distribution partners

22. **To achieve audience reach, BBC World Service content is distributed through third parties, including global tech platforms** and their local equivalents in certain markets. However there are a number of issues we need to mitigate for when working in partnership:

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<sup>8</sup> BBC GAM 2020

<sup>9</sup> [BBC World Service English low cost news app](#)

- Our distribution priorities are to secure data, prominence, attribution, curation and links back to BBC owned and operated services and products. However, in working with global tech platforms **the risk of our content becoming harder to find and source is real**. There is also a **threat of losing the direct relationship with the audience, a lack of first party audience data and audience insight** leading to 'value' passing to global tech platforms rather than the originator of the content.<sup>10</sup>
- The BBC news brand is trusted worldwide but **if audiences fail to attribute and credit the BBC with the news they consume, then they are less likely to return** and we will fail to establish a sustainable audience in the future, and audiences will have less access to impartial news.
- The business models of global tech companies typically have a focus on maximising reach, retaining users and providing user specific advertisements that **can leave organisations open to editorial interference from states**. In addition, **users of such services may have difficulty remaining anonymous** and fear they are vulnerable to regimes being able to track their use of services and opinions expressed. Technologies such as Virtual Private Networks, The Onion Router (TOR, using the encrypted 'dark web') or proxy servers do offer protection but their usage is limited.

23. **While global tech platforms provide valuable routes to audiences for World Service content (BBC News has one of the largest presences on social media of any major news brand<sup>11</sup>), there are considerable downsides.** There are many questions about the influence of authoritarian governments on the dissemination of content, and about platforms' own moderation policies and other censorious practices. Their uneven commitment to free speech does not always sit well with the BBC's international mission. The BBC is working with some companies in a united effort to tackle the spread of misinformation on the internet – as described in the following section.

### Tackling misinformation

24. **As the spread of misinformation increases and is amplified online the need for trusted news and information has never been greater.** During the pandemic, anti-vax disinformation has continued to be a very real concern, especially in countries which have high levels of 'vaccine hesitancy'. At the same time anti-establishment agendas are being fuelled by social media activity.
25. We have also seen the **growing use of disinformation as a tool for democratic disruption**. For the state-backed actors of Russia and China, the provision of news is first and foremost an extension of state influence. In the UK, Russia's RT was fined by Ofcom for serious and repeated breaches of our impartiality rules and China's English-language news network, CGTN's, Licence was revoked for breaking the rules on Licences being held by political bodies, in this case the Chinese Communist Party.
26. The BBC has a role, not only in its continued commitment to the provision of impartial and accurate news and information, but also in **thinking through the problems plaguing our current information environment** and collaborating with partners to find solutions.
27. **The BBC is working in partnership with other content publishers and platforms to tackle the problem and promote trusted sources of news and public information.** It plays a leading role in the Trusted News Initiative (TNI)<sup>12</sup>, an industry collaboration of major news and global tech

<sup>10</sup> Recent research has shown that it is PSB players that provide attribution for PSBs. Tapestry Research for the BBC, UK adults 16+, 2020

<sup>11</sup> The BBC News Facebook page has 50m followers

organisations working together to stop the spread of disinformation where it poses risk of real-world harm. The TNI has successfully launched an early warning system so news organisations can alert each other and work together when they discover disinformation which threatens human life or disrupts democracy during elections to ensure publishers do not unwittingly republish it.

28. The partners within the TNI are: AFP, AP, BBC, CBC/Radio-Canada, The Daily Maverick, European Broadcasting Union, Financial Times, First Draft, Google, YouTube, Facebook, The Hindu, Instagram, the Mail and Guardian (South Africa), Microsoft, Reuters, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Twitter and the Wall Street Journal.
29. **The World Service has commissioned a new research project, led by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, to examine the effectiveness of different interventions that seek to prevent the spread of disinformation**, which is supporting the work of all TNI partners.
30. **The BBC held a virtual Trust in News conference in March 2021** at which the preliminary findings from the research<sup>13</sup> were shared. The 3 day conference brought together expert speakers from across the globe to share information about the emerging disinformation landscape and what news organisations and tech platforms around the world are doing in response<sup>14</sup>.
31. Another disinformation initiative spearheaded by the BBC, Microsoft, CBC/Radio-Canada and the New York Times is **Project Origin which covers the engineering approach to detecting the provenance of media and fighting deep fakes**. The ambition is to make it a global standard used everywhere.
32. BBC output challenges misinformation through *Reality Check*, the principal fact-checking service available in the UK and internationally on TV, radio, on the website and via social media, with specialists in Delhi and Nairobi. **The BBC has created a dedicated specialist unit debunking misinformation daily – bringing together Reality Check, BBC Monitoring, BBC Trending<sup>15</sup> and its expert correspondents in the UK and around the world**. As well as providing a vital service during the pandemic, the team were at the heart of the BBC coverage of the US election.
33. **The BBC has been central in fighting the ‘infodemic’ caused by Coronavirus myths and rumours**. The focus for recent work has been around the spread of anti-vax misinformation.<sup>16</sup>
34. 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, and has introduced a specialist disinformation newsletter<sup>17</sup>. BBC Monitoring’s mapping of anti-vax groups across the world, including the UK, gave important data to underpin the stories of human harm done by misplaced vaccine scepticism<sup>18</sup>.
35. Special World Service programming and media education content across languages from *Beyond Fake News*<sup>19</sup> have **given audiences the tools and information to tackle disinformation**. *Africa*

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<sup>12</sup> [Trusted News Initiative](#)

<sup>13</sup> <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/how-evidence-can-help-us-fight-against-covid-19-misinformation>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/beyondfakenews/trustinnewsconferencehighlights>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01kdgrn>

<sup>16</sup> [BBC Trending series, The Anti-vax Files, gave in depth reportage about the key players sharing and amplifying anti-vax sentiment in vulnerable communities](#)

<sup>17</sup> <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/inside-bbcm/33>

<sup>18</sup> <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c202gf9v>

Eye has raised the bar for investigative journalism in Africa and held power to account using pioneering techniques and a large network of on-the-ground reporters. Its episode on the killing of civilians in Cameroon won the 2019 RTS Award for News Technology. The BBC has also **equipped the young with the skills to spot misinformation through media literacy initiatives** such as *BBC Young Reporter*<sup>20</sup> and *BBC My World*<sup>21</sup>, a new YouTube channel targeted at 13-16 year olds, which brings context and relevance to running news stories via explainers and pioneering 'YouTube Shorts' across languages.

### The future of direct international broadcasting

36. While audiences are increasingly turning to digital services, **there is still an important role for direct broadcasting by radio and direct to home (DTH) satellite.** Internet services are potentially vulnerable to interruption within a territory and many of the world's population cannot access or afford to access such services. Meanwhile, international broadcast services are free to consume and allow users to remain anonymous.
37. For nearly 90 years, BBC World Service transmissions on the **shortwave band** have reached across the globe crossing borders and entering hostile regions. As media markets have evolved, **these transmissions have become focussed on the regions with highest level of need** and currently they reach around 36 million people.
38. **Technology has existed for some time to 'digitise' the transmissions** and in so doing it revolutionises the listening experience and eases access to the services. **Investing in both digital transmissions and suitable receivers will deliver social benefit** to those, who for many years to come, will not be able to access the internet. UK designed technology<sup>22</sup> is becoming available that will in time permit \$10 radios to receive international radio broadcasts, allowing the user to tune by brand, listen to interference free audio and access text information transmitted along with the audio.

### Conclusion

39. Given the global media challenges faced by the world from misinformation, digital disruption, the decline in media freedom and the need for trusted news sources, **the role of the World Service has never been more important.**
40. In order to safeguard the future reach of the World Service, **continuation of its digital transformation is vital.** Whilst there has been significant progress through the FCDO's investment, there is further to go to keep pace with the global audience's media needs. **BBC World Service is submitting proposals to the autumn Spending Review to further expand and transform services to keep pace in the digital age.**
41. The BBC aims to continue to be a **global leader in digital products and innovation.**
42. There is growing disquiet about the potential China has in future to limit access to international media on the internet. **UK influence at the ITU will be key to future decisions on the way the internet operates internationally.**

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/beyondfakenews/>

<sup>20</sup> *BBC Young Reporter* offers media literacy resources to secondary school children in countries beyond the UK including India, Kenya, Brazil, Nigeria, Serbia, Ukraine and Myanmar

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQPss\\_g3lak\\_a0PmvrGvH8w](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQPss_g3lak_a0PmvrGvH8w)

<sup>22</sup> A joint venture between Cambridge Consultants and CML Ltd

43. There is an increasing **opportunity to bring BBC content directly to large audiences, through direct-to-consumer online services**, avoiding the complications of working through partners and ensuring engaged reach. However, we must make sure that we have routes to markets where that is not possible, in particular those that are highly constrained.
44. **Tackling misinformation remains an editorial priority** and through the TNI we will continue working in partnership with global tech companies and facilitating cooperation between content providers and platforms to protect what is in our mutual interest: trust in news media.
45. Whilst digital transformation is key to our future, we will **continue to serve those who cannot access or afford internet services through the retention of direct radio and satellite TV broadcasting. If resources are available we will invest in digitising these transmissions.**
46. 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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