

# **The BBC's global role**

**Richard Sambrook**

*The importance of the World Service*

In 1989, as a young BBC news producer, I stood in front of the Berlin Wall watching protestors hack lumps out of it. There was a mood of euphoria – everyone recognised this was an historic turning point, ending the Cold War and opening an era of opportunity. It was the start of the satellite age – with dishes lined up along the wall to broadcast events to the world. The internet had not yet arrived. It seemed the culmination of the West’s long campaign against communist repression.

The BBC’s response to the historic changes of 1989 was much as it had been for the previous 50 years – to bear witness, to offer accurate information and to connect audiences at home and around the world in a unifying moment. Among the more paternalistic responses, the BBC’s World Service launched “The Marshall Plan of the Mind” to help Warsaw Pact countries move from command to free market economies offering innovative programming and media support.<sup>1</sup> It was the beginning of globalisation, a more connected and interdependent world and an expansion of democracy. The BBC rose to that moment of optimism and growth, and in the years that followed, exploited the arrival of the internet, digital platforms and the multi-channel world to reach out to global audiences.

Today, following the invasion of Ukraine and the rise of autocracies around the world, we see that moment differently. This also feels like an historic turning point, but a rather darker one. A new Cold War with lines drawn between Russia, China and the West seems inevitable. Major countries like India and parts of Africa appear ambivalent about which side

---

1 Westlake S (0000) ‘Building the BBC-branded NGO: overseas development, the World Service, and the Marshall Plan of the Mind, c.1965–99’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 33(1)

they will favour.<sup>2</sup> We could also be entering a new nuclear age. And, as the latest reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) make clear, the impact of climate change will be felt in the short as well as the medium and long term.<sup>3</sup> The economic outlook is uncertain too following the global Covid-19 pandemic and the political shock of Russia's aggression. In that context, what should the global role of public service broadcasters be?

### **“A new Cold War with lines drawn between Russia, China and the West seems inevitable”**

The BBC World Service – originally The Empire Service – was launched a decade after the BBC itself. But over the past 90 years it has become a celebrated part of the BBC's offer, which has frequently had to adjust to new geopolitical priorities.

The BBC was established in the shadow of a traumatising world war and a global flu pandemic, followed by economic depression, with the next war on the horizon. The British Empire was breaking up, provoking questions about national identity. From the outset, the new organisation was conceived as a project to consolidate and unify public opinion through the innovative technology of radio.

Since then, one of the secrets of the BBC's success is its ability to reinvent itself according to the pressures of social, technological or political change. This agility, surprising in what is often seen as a sclerotic institution, has ensured it still occupies a leading position in both the UK and international media markets. For all the frenzied debate about competition, funding or relevance, its reputation and audience reach stand high.

The start of the World Service was less sure-footed, although not lacking in ambition. An early policy paper suggested the BBC's global purpose should be to “prevent the imperial ideal from being swamped by local nationalism”.<sup>4</sup> Today we might substitute globalisation for imperialism and autocracy for local nationalism. To that extent at least, the BBC has always been pro democracy, and pro Western values.

2 Brand Finance (2022) ‘Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2022’, Brand Finance website, 15 March 2022. <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/global-soft-power-index-2022-usa-bounces-back-better-to-top-of-nation-brand-ranking>

3 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022) *IPCC Sixth Assessment Report*, IPCC. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

4 Mansell G (1982) *Let Truth Be Told*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson

In 1932, speaking in the World Service's opening broadcast, the director general, Lord Reith, declared that radio was: "an instrument of almost incalculable importance in the social and political life of the community. Its influence will more and more be felt in the daily life of the individual in almost every sphere of human activity, in affairs national and international ... The service as a whole is dedicated to the best interests of mankind."<sup>5</sup>

Through the 1930s and into the Second World War, the BBC's editorial values were consolidated, recognising that accurate reporting, set against Germany's propaganda, was more effective. Trust was cemented as the core of the BBC's relationship with its audience.

Then through the 1950s, from Suez to the start of the Cold War, the World Service found its defining purpose – broadcasting to audiences that otherwise lacked access to accurate information.

**“Trust was cemented as the core of the BBC’s relationship with its audience”**

But if the Cold War provided a clear purpose for the World Service, when the Berlin Wall came down it had to find a new rationale. One was eventually provided by the 9/11 attacks on New York and the upsurge in Islamist terror attacks. Resources were redirected to the Middle East and services serving Eastern Europe were closed to help fund a new BBC Arabic TV news service. Later, BBC Farsi TV was launched for Iran. Meanwhile, Pashto services in Afghanistan were strengthened and media development initiatives for the region launched. Today the World Service broadcasts not only in English but in 42 other languages as well as reaching half a billion people a week – its highest ever audience<sup>6</sup>

The 20th century was an age where democratic values were fought over and, we thought, won. Today we see the return of autocracies around the world, from Moscow, to Beijing, Budapest, Manila, Riyadh, Delhi and more, with an alleged “decline of the West”.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, even the political stability of the US – so vital in the last century – is unclear. And as climate change advances, we can expect more political disruption fed by shortages of resources, increased migration and rising inequality.

5 Webb A (2014) *London Calling: Britain, the BBC World Service and the Cold War*, Bloomsbury

6 BBC Media Centre: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/2021/bbc-reaches-record-global-audience>

7 See: <https://www.ft.com/content/9779fde6-edc6-4d4c-b532-fc0b9cad4ed9>

Now with a new front opening in Ukraine, attention is once again turning to Europe. But the challenges of the 21st century require more than a simple reprioritising of budgets and services. They need a vision as bold as that of 90 years ago.

There is a raft of new competitors: a noisy disputatious digital realm where prominence – or even facts – can be hard to find; and the outbreak of ‘fake news’ or deliberate disinformation designed to mislead rather than inform, further undermining trust in media and politics. The World Service now faces better-funded competition from state-funded channels, with no commitment to impartiality, and multiple online news outlets with their own agendas. This at least provides the World Service – committed to supporting Western democratic values – with a clear purpose: the provision of accurate, impartial information for those who seek it.

**“we can expect more political disruption fed by shortages of resources, increased migration and rising inequality”**

The global Covid-19 pandemic illustrated the value of public broadcasting around the world – raising its authority in the face of a global crisis and the urgent need for reliable information. The World Service, among other public sector broadcasters, offered what Netflix and Amazon couldn’t in terms of accurate relevant news to audiences across the world.

It has adapted well – moving online, moving onto messaging apps, offering digital video, innovating its output and helping users circumvent censorship via the dark web. Yet further reform is inevitable. Investments in new digital operations will have to be balanced against a continual call for budget cuts – even as the case for providing reliable information strengthens.

Where once it was fully funded by Foreign Office Grant-in-Aid, the Conservative-led coalition government withdrew support in its 2010 spending review as a means of forcing cuts on the domestic BBC. Now the BBC’s international news services are a complicated mix of licence fee funding (which some argue protects it from political interference), targeted government funding for specific projects focused on Russia and countering disinformation (about £95 million per year) and commercial funding for English language TV and online news. Cuts to the core BBC licence fee,

which has been reduced by 25 per cent in real terms over the past decade,<sup>8</sup> now inevitably impact the World Service as well.

The debate about the future of the BBC tends to be technocratic, focusing on distribution, reach, platforms and partnerships – the ‘how’ of production. The new era deserves a fresh commitment to ‘why’ public broadcasting has much to offer a world facing increasing threats.

The BBC is seen as a declining power set against the major streaming organisations like Netflix and Amazon. And although its global reputation partly rests on British drama and entertainment, it can never match the commissioning budgets of the streaming giants. But the BBC’s soft power – the international influence it brings back to the UK – rests firmly with news, which the digital giants have neither the experience nor appetite to offer.

The emerging threats of this century provide at least as strong a rationale for the BBC’s global services as those of the past. Post Brexit, Britain needs the BBC’s international reach more than ever.

**“The new era deserves a fresh commitment to  
‘why’ public broadcasting has much to offer”**

Just as I recognised in Berlin more than 30 years ago, today’s journalists on the front line in Ukraine realise that history is again turning. The World Service has to develop a new purpose, with a modern tone of voice, which can continue to make Western values relevant to a new generation who are swamped with choice and less trusting of the media. It will require confidence of purpose, at a time when Britain seems less sure of what it stands for, and it will call for the subtlety of vision and leadership with which it has reinvented itself so often in the past.

**Richard Sambrook is an emeritus professor at Cardiff University and former director of BBC Global News.**

<sup>8</sup> Voice of the Listener & Viewer (2021) ‘BBC funding cut by 25% since 2010’, VLV website, 27 July 2021. <https://www.vlv.org.uk/news/bbc-real-terms-public-funding-in-2020-21-25-lower-than-it-was-in-2010-11/>