



Institute for
Global Prosperity



CreativePower

Global Reach, National Impact:

The soft power impact of the
BBC World Service to the UK

Authored by: Giles Winn

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About CreativePower

CreativePower is a new research organisation, developing methods to measure, assess and explain soft power at an institutional level, so that the debate around how we develop and strengthen our national soft power assets can be better informed. CreativePower provides organisations with the tools to better articulate this strategic status and soft power value to the UK.

About the Institute for Global Prosperity, University College London

The Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) at UCL is dedicated to rethinking what prosperity means in the 21st century, moving beyond traditional economic measures like GDP to focus on human flourishing, social cohesion, and planetary sustainability. With a commitment to innovative, transdisciplinary research, the IGP works with governments, businesses, and civil society to develop new models for a fairer, more resilient global future.

About Fast Forward 2030

Fast Forward 2030 is a network of impact entrepreneurs hosted by the UCL Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) to encourage transformative enterprises that challenge the status quo and deliver sustainability and prosperity for all.



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Report Author:

Giles Winn is an experienced creative sector policy specialist. He has worked for three broadcasters – Sky, Channel 4 and Channel 5 – and in Government, where he was Special Adviser to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Editorial Team:

Professor Dame Henrietta Moore is Founder and Director of the Institute for Global Prosperity and the Chair in Culture Philosophy and Design at University College London.

Dr Fatemeh Sadeghi is a Political Scientist and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Global Prosperity.

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Key Findings

“When I was travelling around the world as Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary, I was in no doubt that for the price, the World Service is a good value deliverer... it’s extremely good value for money.”

– Philip Hammond (Lord Hammond of Runnymede)

► The BBC World Service makes an **outstanding** contribution to the UK’s global soft power, having built an unrivalled global reach and trusted presence over nearly a century.

► It’s a **strategic national asset**, contributing indirectly to the UK’s **foreign policy and security objectives**, while remaining independent from political pressure.

► Its activities **closely align with British values** – and it is **strongly associated with positive perceptions of the UK**.

► It plays a **significant role in tackling disinformation** – a recognised threat to global stability.

► **However**, it now operates in an **increasingly competitive global environment** and is being **outspent by its rivals**, ready to move in as soon as the BBC cedes ground.

► Furthermore, the World Service is already paying the price of **continued funding uncertainty and instability** – with **diminished global reach due to recent cuts**.

► This **perfect storm of competition, demand and decline** puts the World Service at a crossroads – with a choice to either pursue **sustained growth** or **accept managed decline**.

► Our recommendations are in three categories (full recommendations on page 51):

- **Funding:** The World Service should receive long term, stable funding, primarily from Government, sufficient to support sustained growth.
- **Growth:** The BBC and the Government should develop a strategy to expand the World Service’s audience, exploring new markets where it can build trusted reach.
- **Platforms:** The World Service should pursue ambitious digital growth – particularly on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok – and develop a more coherent television strategy for international news.

► Our panel have given the World Service a **Soft Power Impact Index rating of 86%**. This score reflects both the World Service’s enduring credibility – but also the emerging risks to its future influence.

Foreword

The Rt Hon Rory Stewart OBE

Author, broadcaster, and former Secretary of State for International Development



For nearly a century, the BBC World Service has broadcast independent, trusted news across borders and languages – reaching hundreds of millions of people each week in parts of the world where few other British institutions are present. It is respected not because it speaks for Britain, but because it speaks fairly. That credibility is a form of influence – and one that has served the UK's interests quietly, consistently, and effectively.

This report offers a timely and rigorous assessment of the World Service's role in projecting British values, contributing to national interests, and strengthening the UK's global reputation. It confirms what I have witnessed around the world: that the World Service is not just a cultural asset, but a strategic one – indirectly supporting the UK's national security and foreign policy goals by building a reputation for trusted service in places beyond the reach of the state.

That role is more vital than ever. We are living through an era of profound geopolitical realignment – of democratic backsliding, authoritarianism, conflict, protectionism, and isolation. The contest for global trust and legitimacy is intensifying. Nations are not only competing through military and economic means, but through ideas, values, and narratives. The BBC World Service is one of the UK's most credible vehicles in that contest. Because it stands at its best not for politics but for values of objectivity, and truth.

But soft power does not sustain itself. It must be actively maintained and properly funded. In today's world, a serious national security strategy demands not only investment in defence, but in the institutions that uphold our values and amplify our voice abroad – values, which if correctly understood, continue to be the foundation of peace and prosperity far beyond Britain.

This report issues a clear warning. Cuts have already reduced the World Service's global reach, while others are expanding their presence. Unless action is taken, then managed decline will not just be a possibility, but a likely trajectory.

The recommendations are clear and necessary: provide stable funding, invest in the most visible platforms, and match the ambition to the scale of both opportunity and need. The World Service is not a luxury – it is one of the most cost-effective soft power assets we possess. If the UK is serious about sustaining its global influence and soft power, and championing understanding and truth, then the World Service must not be allowed to fade. It should be championed, protected – and strengthened.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Rory Stewart'.

Foreword

Professor Dame Henrietta Moore

Founder and Director,
Institute for Global Prosperity



The concept of soft power is often invoked but rarely interrogated in a meaningful, measurable way. As the world undergoes profound geopolitical and cultural change, the question is no longer whether soft power matters, but how it is understood, exercised, and evaluated. If we are to take it more seriously – as a tool of diplomacy, a source of influence, and a means of shaping global values – we need a new level of rigour. That starts by asking not just what countries do, but how institutions contribute to that.

This report is a major contribution to that effort. By exploring soft power at an institutional level, it begins to answer vital questions about purpose, impact, and value. It recognises that influence is not abstract: it is embedded in organisations, shaped by history, and impacted by decisions made every day.

The BBC World Service is one of the UK's most enduring soft power institutions. For nearly a century, it has built trust in places where trust is scarce, and offered a platform for truth in environments saturated with misinformation. But in today's fast-shifting information landscape, its role cannot be taken for granted. It must be scrutinised, understood, and supported with the same seriousness we apply to other instruments of international strategy.

This report does just that. It combines analysis, evidence, and lived experience to provide a compelling case for why the BBC World Service still matters – and what must be done to ensure it continues to serve as a symbol of credibility in a contested world. It deserves to be read widely, and acted upon with urgency.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Henrietta Moore'.

Introduction and Methodology

'Getting others to want what you want'

Power isn't just about armies and economies – it's also about ideas. This was the insight of the late Joseph Nye, who first coined the term 'soft power' in 1990 to describe a different kind of influence, one that moves nations without armies and shapes alliances without treaties.¹

In a world where conflicts are often fought as much in the information space as on the battlefield, the ability to inspire, persuade, and project values is a strategic advantage.

Nye argued that in an interconnected world, soft power can be as effective as traditional expressions of power at achieving international outcomes: *"When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive."*

// A strategic approach to soft power requires more than just pride in these assets – it demands a clear understanding of the inputs required to sustain them.

Since the concept was developed, the UK has been seen as a global leader in soft power. Across arts and culture, the creative industries, media, sport and higher education, the UK has some of the world's best soft power assets.

Soft power strategy

However, policy decisions affecting these sectors rarely reflect their strategic status. The UK Government's enthusiasm for soft power has ebbed and flowed since its emergence as an accepted term – and the recently appointed 'Soft Power Council' is an encouraging sign that soft power policy could find a home at the heart of Government.

But the past decade has seen a weakening of parts of our soft power infrastructure – just as it becomes an increasingly competitive international space, and a sought-after geopolitical tool. The BBC saw an effective 30% real terms cut to its income in the decade to 2010, and the British Council, a key institution in promoting British culture and education globally, has also faced significant funding pressures.

A strategic approach to soft power requires more than just pride in these assets – it demands a clear understanding of the inputs required to sustain them. We must try to measure, assess and explain soft power at an organisational level, so that the debate around how we develop and strengthen our soft power assets at home can be better informed.

Britain's greatest gift to the world?

Around the world, BBC World Service is widely regarded as one of the UK's strongest soft power assets. Former UN Secretary-General, the late Kofi Annan, once described it as 'perhaps Britain's greatest gift to the world'. He said that *"for many communities around the world, BBC short wave broadcasts in their own language are a lifeline, a window to the outside world, an opportunity to learn and develop"*.

And yet at home, the BBC World Service faces an uncertain future, with funding cuts, service closures, and job losses threatening its ability to sustain long term global impact. The next few years will be pivotal for the BBC World Service, as it grapples with uncertainty over the future of funding from the UK Government, and questions around how it could be impacted by the BBC Charter Review.

That's against a backdrop of increasing need for what the BBC World Service represents and projects – accurate, impartial and fair reporting in the face of an onslaught of disinformation.

But could its future look more secure if there was a greater understanding of its contribution to Britain's global soft power? Former UK Chancellor of the Exchequer and Foreign Secretary Lord Hammond told us that *"if you go around the world and you ask people to think for a moment and give an example of soft power in action, I'll bet you get the BBC World Service cited more than any other single intervention."*

It's against that backdrop that this study seeks to measure, assess and explain the soft power impact of the BBC World Service.

Areas of focus

To fully capture the BBC World Service's soft power impact, this report considers four key metrics, which form the basis of our main chapters:

- **Global Reach**, where we consider the breadth of the World Service's audience;
- **National Strategic Value**, where we examine the value the World Service holds for those at the forefront of executing foreign policy;
- **Promoting British Values**, where we explore the extent to which the World Service promotes and projects UK values and Britain's brand;
- **Resonance**, where we assess the depth of the World Service's global reach through focus groups in two key international markets.

Methodology

We have used a mix of subjective and objective data for this study, both from existing sources and those that have been newly commissioned for this report.

Original Data:

- In-depth interviews with leading figures across policy, diplomacy, security and academia;
- Focus groups conducted in Kenya and in Lebanon (two countries identified by BBC Director General Tim Davie in recent comments about cuts);
- Exclusive polling conducted by JL Partners to test the World Service's reach in more developed markets.

Existing Data:

- The BBC's Global Audience Measure, and other data provided to us for this report;
- Select Committee hearings (particularly evidence from BBC Director General Tim Davie, BBC News Global Director Jonathan Munro, and former Director of the BBC World Service Jamie Angus).
- Media coverage, including that of the World Service's international rivals.

Scoring:

- Finally, this report uses a bespoke scoring framework designed to provide a fair, comprehensive, and repeatable method for evaluating the World Service's contribution to the UK's soft power.

Interviewees

We are hugely grateful to the following interviewees for their time:

Lord Hammond

Lord Hammond of Runnymede is a Conservative peer and a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary.

Dame Sue Owen

Dame Sue Owen is a former Permanent Secretary at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). She has also held senior roles in the Foreign Office, HM Treasury, and the Department for International Development.

Sir John Sawers

Sir John Sawers was Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) from 2009-14. He has also served as the UK's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador to Egypt, and as Foreign Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister.

Lord Sedwill

Lord Sedwill of Sherborne is a crossbench peer and former Cabinet Secretary, National Security Adviser, and Ambassador to Afghanistan.

Dr Melissa Nisbet

Dr Melissa Nisbet is a senior academic at King's College London, and one of the UK's leading experts in soft power.

Lord Parkinson

Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay is a Conservative peer and former Minister for Arts and Heritage at DCMS from 2022-24.

Lord Vaizey

Lord Vaizey of Didcot is a Conservative peer and former DCMS Minister of State for Culture and the Digital Economy from 2010-2016.

Matthew Barzun

Matthew Barzun is a former US Ambassador to the United Kingdom (2013-17) and Sweden (2009-11). He is also Chair of Tortoise Media, which owns The Observer newspaper.

James Purnell

James Purnell is a former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. After leaving Government, he became Director of Radio at the BBC (where he launched BBC Sounds), and then Vice-Chancellor for the University of the Arts London. He is now CEO of Flint Global.

Eliza Easton

Eliza Easton is an expert in creative sector and soft power policy, and founder of Erskine Analysis. Previously, she was Deputy Director at the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre.

Chapter One: Global Reach

In many parts of the world, the first British voice people hear isn't a diplomat or a trade envoy – it's the BBC World Service. Few UK institutions operate at such a truly global scale. Fewer still are invited into millions of people's homes, phones and minds each week. If global soft power is the ability to pursue positive outcomes at an international level by attracting and persuading (rather than coercing), then measurable global reach is vital for any institution to support meaningful soft power impact. This chapter explores the extent of the BBC World Service's global reach.

Speaking to the world

In the digital era, many of the traditional barriers to achieving global reach have been removed. But the BBC World Service has a reach that is unrivalled. Today it operates around the world in 42 languages, across television, radio and digital platforms.

While its most popular language service is English, the other languages in the top ten by reach demonstrate enormous breadth.

Exhibit 1: Top 10 BBC World Service Language Services by Weekly Reach (2023–2024)²

	Language Service	Weekly Reach (millions)
1	English	84.2
2	Hindi	39.3
3	Arabic	35.0
4	Swahili	29.7
5	Hausa	20.0
6	Persian	17.1
7	Tamil	11.9
8	Mundo	8.7
9	Bengali	8.6
10	Telugu	7.2

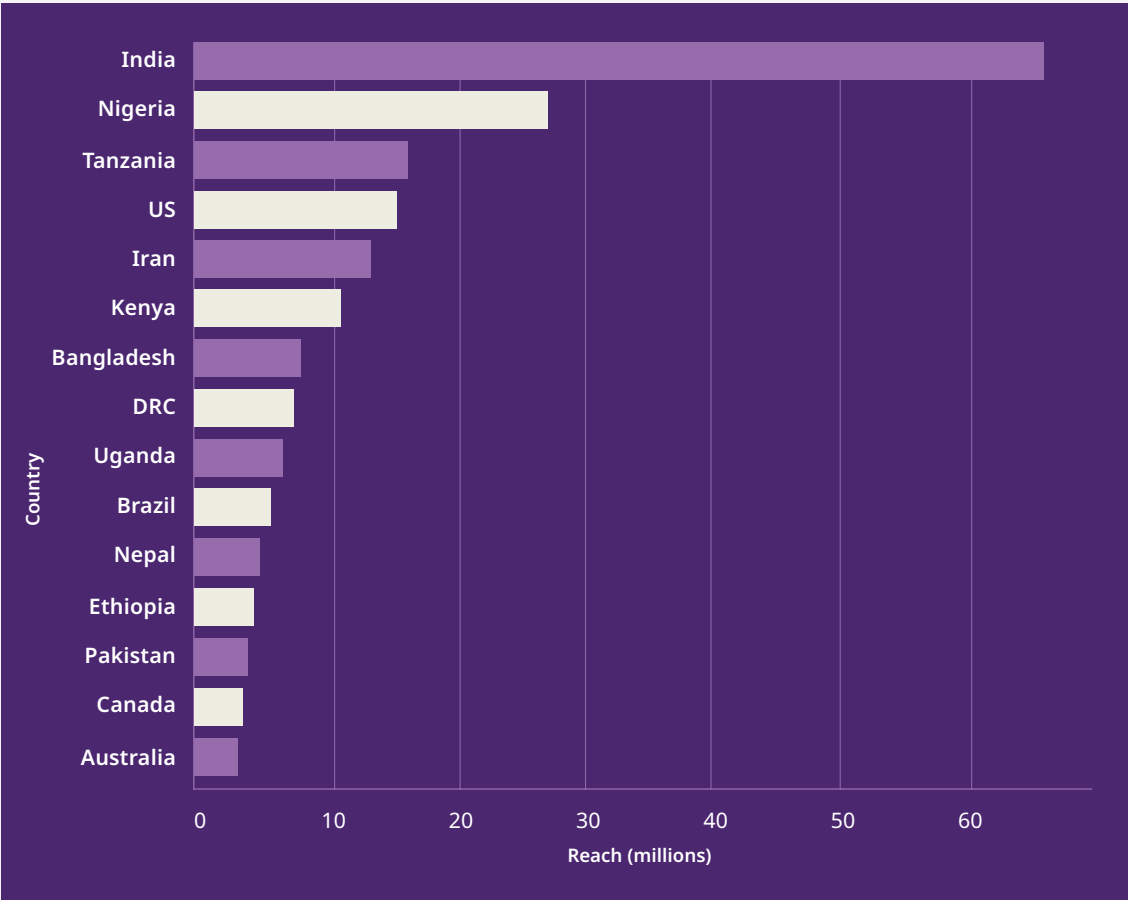
The BBC World Service reaches a truly global audience, with its largest markets spanning every continent. Exhibits 2 and 3 show that India, with a weekly audience of 66.1 million, leads by a significant margin, reflecting the enduring strength of BBC Hindi. Key African markets, including Nigeria (27.6m), Tanzania (16.4m), and Kenya (11.4m), underline the BBC's role as a trusted news source across that continent, while substantial audiences in Iran (13.5m) and Bangladesh (8.1m) highlight its influence in complex and often politically sensitive environments.

Exhibit 2: Top 15 global markets for the BBC World Service by weekly reach

Country	World Service Reach	Total BBC News Reach
India	66.1	71
Nigeria	27.6	31
Tanzania	16.4	17
US	15.7	50
Iran	13.5	14
Kenya	11.4	14
Bangladesh	8.1	9
DRC	7.8	9
Uganda	6.8	8
Brazil	5.5	6
Nepal	4.9	5
Ethiopia	4	5
Pakistan	3.8	6
Canada	3.6	8
Australia	3.3	6

Source: BBC Global Audience Measure 2024

Exhibit 3: The BBC World Service's Top 15 Global Markets



Source: BBC Global Audience Measure 2024

However, reach without trust has limited value – and trust takes years to build. In the case of the BBC World Service, almost 100 years.

A history of reach

The history of the World Service is firmly entwined with Britain's changing role on the world stage. First established as the 'BBC Empire Service' in 1932, the BBC World Service began by broadcasting to English-speaking expat audiences across the British Empire. It was small in scale to begin with, but the outbreak of the Second World War rapidly transformed the Service's role and purpose: it began to target non-English audiences and became an important source of news for occupied countries.

Foreign-language broadcasts were introduced – first in Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese, and then in Turkish, Burmese, Hindi and Persian. Wartime resistance networks across Europe relied on its foreign-language services for uncensored information and coded messages – so much so that listening to the BBC was made punishable by death in Nazi Germany.³ By 1944, the BBC was broadcasting in 16 languages.⁴

This wartime expansion was key to creating long-lasting reach, by developing familiarity and building trust across a range of countries. It's even been argued that without the Second World War, the BBC probably wouldn't have the reach and reputation that it enjoys today.⁵

After the war, the Service continued to expand and adapt in ways that aligned with broader national themes, such as Britain's transition from being an imperial power and the emergence of the Cold War. The second half of the twentieth century saw it expand into the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Sub Saharan Africa and the Middle East. As some central European language services were curtailed, others were launched – for example in Hausa, Swahili and Somali – and the hours for the Arabic Service were increased.⁶

The World Service's presence in countries where media was tightly controlled by the state offered a rare connection to the outside world for millions of people – but it also highlighted the Service's defining strength: its independence from government.

// The BBC World Service's reach has more than doubled since the end of the Cold War, while other hard power metrics have moved in the opposite direction.

For example, BBC Persian has built an impressive audience over eight decades – now reaching 13.5 million people each week in Iran (a fifth of the adult population) – one of the world's most repressive countries for journalists, and where UK commercial activity is subject to significant restrictions.⁷

In the 21st century, the World Service has become a multi-platform media organisation, embracing television, FM radio, online, and social media – all the while grappling with funding challenges and increased competition internationally.

As traditional British power has waned, the balance between hard and soft power has shifted: the BBC World Service's reach has more than doubled since the end of the Cold War, while other hard power metrics have moved in the opposite direction.

Last year, the World Service's weekly reach was 320 million – making up the lion's share of BBC News' 414 million – and representing more than two thirds (71%) of the global reach of the BBC as a whole.

Shaping reach

While history and the English language have had a significant influence on the shape of the BBC World Service today (the United States, Canada and Australia are all top 15 markets), decisions on where to invest and expand are based largely on local need. The BBC's current Director General Tim Davie told MPs last year that a number of factors are taken into account, including whether there is a democratic deficit, a shortage of trusted information and market failure – and where the World Service can add the most value: *“The conversation I am having [when making operational decisions] is not just about chasing reach at all costs, but the right reach.”*⁸

The World Service Licence also stipulates that the BBC should target areas *“where there is a gap or shortfall in the provision of high-quality news”*.⁹ Thus, as the nature of the UK's global influence has evolved, the World Service has spilled into hard-to-reach areas that the state cannot, filling the gaps left by Britain's diminished global role.

This remit has given it a strong skew towards less-developed countries – and today more than three quarters of the World Service's audience reach is in the Global South: 34% is in Africa; 25% in South Asia; 10% in the Middle East and North Africa; 8% in the Near East (including Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan); and 4% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Just 20% is shared between Europe, North America, East Asia and Australasia.¹⁰

Funding

Funding has been a significant factor in the Service's recent history and has been a dominant theme of our interviews and research.

Until 2010, the World Service was funded directly by the UK Government. But at the 2010 Spending Review, then Chancellor George Osborne announced that funding for the World Service (and BBC Monitoring) would be transferred to the BBC – and ultimately to Licence Fee payers.

Exhibit 4: BBC World Service Reach by Region (%)

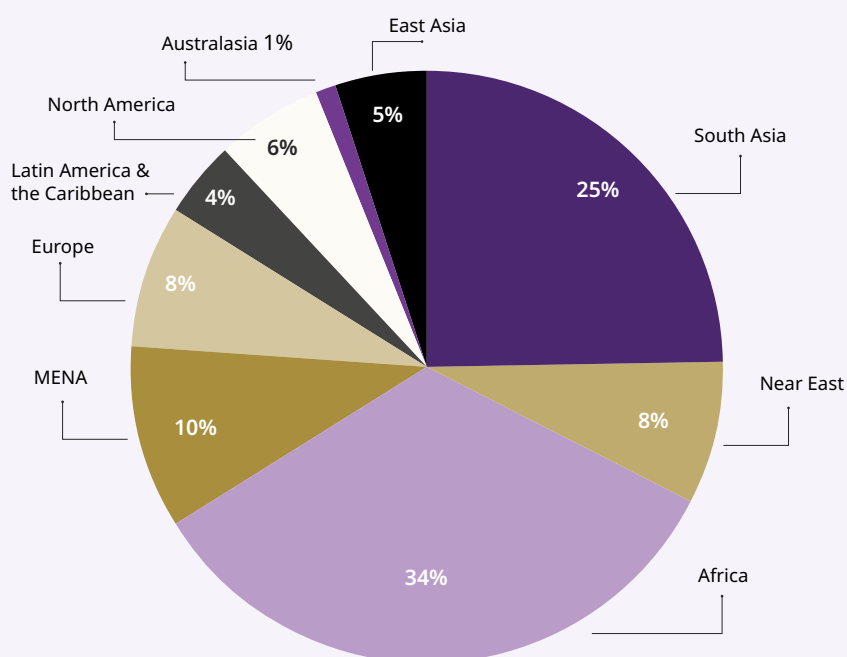
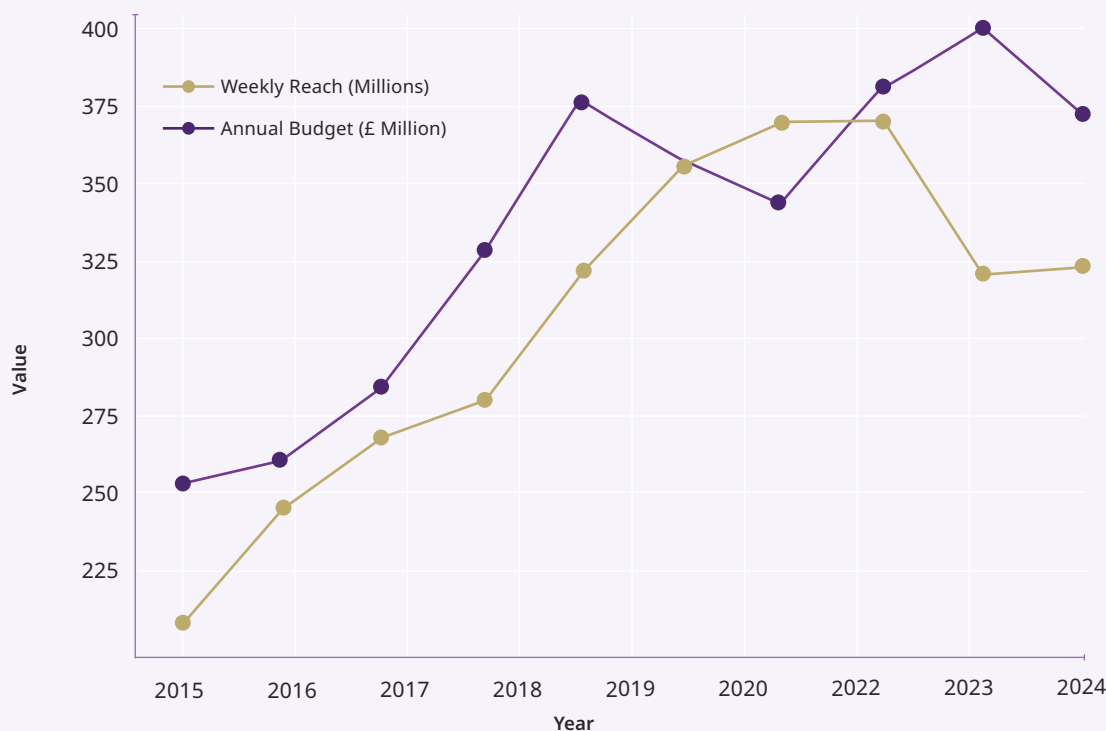


Exhibit 5: BBC World Service Weekly Reach and Annual Budget (2015-2024)



The funding model is now a mixed one, with roughly a third of World Service funding coming directly from the Government, and two thirds from the Licence Fee. But in the decade to 2020, the BBC as a whole saw a 30% real terms reduction in its overall budget, creating pressures for the World Service.

Last year, the total World Service budget was £366 million, down from £392m the year before.¹¹

Viewing the World Service's funding alongside global weekly audience figures (which have declined from a peak of 365m in 2022), suggests there is a strong relationship between investment and reach.¹²

"Of course, part of the problem the World Service has always faced is budgetary", Sir John Sawers (Former Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, and Permanent Representative of the UK to the UN) told us in his interview for this report. "The BBC World Service and also the British Council have often missed out when they haven't been the highest priority for the Foreign Office in negotiations with the Treasury."

This is a sentiment echoed by former BBC World Service Director Jamie Angus, who lamented that *"the World Service is never the BBC's biggest problem and never the Government's biggest problem"*.¹³

This forces difficult decisions at the BBC. In 2022 the World Service announced it would have to find £28.5 million worth of savings. As part of these cuts, BBC Arabic Radio and BBC Persian Radio were closed, and a range of other services were cut back, including in Africa.

These funding decisions have measurable impacts: the Service's weekly reach in Kenya dropped by almost a fifth following the cuts (see Exhibit 6); and globally the BBC estimates the audience loss was 40 million as a result of the changes.¹⁴

At the 2024 Autumn Budget, the UK Treasury announced a funding uplift of £32.6 million (31 per cent) in 2025/26, taking the FCDO's total contribution for that year to £137 million.¹⁵ This has enabled the BBC to maintain all of its existing language services, but it hasn't prevented a further round of cuts – a net reduction of 130 jobs – to make a £6 million saving.¹⁶

However, former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary Lord Hammond told us he believes more funding is unlikely – but possibly also unnecessary: *“I think there would be no appetite for spending more. I don’t think that’s a realistic proposition. I think at a time when foreign aid has been slashed, the idea that we’d increase spending on broadcasting is for the birds. But I don’t think we need to because the Russians, the Chinese, the Emiratis, the Qataris can spend any amount of money on broadcasting – but people know they’re listening to propaganda... But when people listen to the BBC World Service, I think at least a significant proportion of them think they are listening to an independent international broadcaster, not to the British Government and its agenda. And therefore I think £300 million worth of BBC World Service is probably worth £3 billion worth of Russia Today or [Russian broadcaster] Sputnik.”*¹⁷

Jamie Angus also agrees that funding for the World Service represents value for money: *“Every pound that we have spent has additional leverage because of the brand... Any investment has an outsized return because there is already a propensity among the audience to trust and engage with what is being provided.”*¹⁷

In addition to calls for more money, a strong case has been made for more stable funding for the World Service. “It is not even the amount so much as the ability to plan to invest”, says Jamie Angus. He told MPs that since 2020, “there has been a series of in-year or ad-hoc agreements made between the Government and the BBC. That is not a good climate to invest in very long-term things.”¹⁸

Another former World Service Director, Richard Sambrook, said the World Service is being “undermined from within” by budget uncertainty: *“If the BBC is living hand to mouth from year to year, it is incredibly difficult to be able to adapt to the very volatile environment.”*¹⁹

Our interviewees painted a picture of an institution that is admired by policymakers abroad – but the approach to funding is met with bemusement. *“When I talk to people in Washington who work on disinformation, they can’t understand the UK’s approach to the World Service”,* creative industries policy expert Eliza Easton told us. *“They find it completely baffling. They’ll say, ‘Why do you have this incredible asset, and yet you seem to be abandoning it?’ Of course, the US itself has pulled back from some of its own radio and disinformation efforts, so these things can change quickly. But I think the World Service is still seen as a major positive, for example in the fight against disinformation”.*

A number of funding proposals were presented during our interviews and research. These are explored in the Recommendations chapter.

Exhibit 6:

In 2023 the BBC World Service made cuts to services in Kenya as part of a larger round of cost saving measures. 13 TV programmes were discontinued, including:

1. Health – *BBC Life Clinic* (weekly) – produced in English and Kiswahili
2. Women weekly programme – *The She Word*
3. Children weekly programme – *What’s New* produced in English
4. Business – *Smart Money* (weekly) and *Money Daily* – produced in English and Kiswahili
5. Sport – *Sport Africa* (weekly) – produced in English and Kiswahili
6. News and Current Affairs – *The Breakdown* – analysis, explainers, myth-busting and fact-checking – produced in English
7. A news and current affairs co-production with KTN News Kenya Connects broadcast at peak time.
8. Somali TV news bulletin produced every weekday

It is worth noting that these cuts were made to TV services – and it is radio that delivers the highest audience for the World Service in Kenya, followed by TV, with digital significantly lagging in third place. Nevertheless, following these cuts, the BBC’s weekly audience in Kenya dropped by 19% across all platforms from 14.1 million in 2022 to 11.4 million in 2024.²⁰

The advantage this wide reach afforded the BBC World Service over its competitors is as significant as the direct audience impact. It has been widely reported (including by the BBC’s Director General Tim Davie)²¹ that Kenya’s state broadcaster KBC has since taken up Chinese output to fill the gaps the BBC has left. The Economist has reported that Xinhua (a Chinese state-run news agency) has done a deal with Kenya’s Nation Media Group, to gain access to its significant audience across TV, radio, social media and print. Additionally, Russia Today – a state-controlled news outlet, banned in the UK since 2022 – is steadily building a presence across Africa, and reportedly has contracts with more than 30 TV stations across the continent.²²

This highlights the jeopardy in some of the strategic decisions the Corporation has been forced to make due to funding constraints – and that even in a high-impact, high-audience market, the World Service is not shielded from cuts.

Independence and Trust

One of the Service's greatest strengths is its independence from government. Many of our interviewees told us that the fact that the World Service independently promotes freedom of speech, democratic participation and the provision of impartial information²³ – without editorial pressure from the government – is what gives it credibility. *"The reputation of the World Service is that it's independent – and that's incredibly important"*, Dame Sue Owen, former Permanent Secretary at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, told this report.

This is recognised by foreign diplomats too. Matthew Barzun was US Ambassador to the UK from 2012-17 and told us the World Service *"just gets on with it. It doesn't pander, it doesn't patronise – it just does the work of reporting out what it sees."*

Being a media organisation that is state-owned but not state-controlled puts the World Service in the minority – but its independence seems to be key to building and maintaining one of its most valuable assets: trust. In a global survey carried out by Tapestry for the BBC across multiple countries this year, 75% of mass users and 86% of influential users said the BBC was their most trusted source of international news.²⁴ However, both of these figures are down slightly on the year before, highlighting the fragility of trust in a competitive environment.²⁵ *"Trust is the most important thing we have"*, Jon Zilkha, Contoller of BBC World Service English, told MPs last year.²⁶

Dr Nicholas Westcott has represented the UK overseas as Ambassador to Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Togo and Niger, and High Commissioner to Ghana. He told MPs in November 2024 that the World Service's independence is not only an advantage, but a 'core value': *"The BBC World Service... is respected because it is regarded as not pushing a British Government line or a particular line but being open to all"*.²⁷

Perhaps surprisingly, our focus group conducted in Kenya (the results of which can be seen in the Chapter Four), found evidence that the BBC's ownership by the UK Government is not universally known. Lord Parkinson (DCMS Minister for Arts and Heritage from 2022-2024) emphasised to us the need for the BBC to make the World Service's independence more explicit: *"I think its independence is an important thing to project. It's hugely valuable for the UK that we're known as a nation with a robust and independent media – one that holds our leaders to account... and in an age where, for example, American presidents single out broadcasters and dismiss them as fake news, it's really important that we've got a visibly independent, robust broadcaster that people can rely on."*

Adapting to technological change

Organisationally, the BBC World Service has learnt over time that to consolidate and expand its global reach, it must adapt to technological change – and in recent decades, it has significantly expanded its digital presence to complement its broadcast provision (see Box 2).

"In west Africa, growing numbers of people... get the bulk of their news not from radio broadcasts but from social media", Dr Nicholas Westcott told MPs last year. "Therefore, it is very important to be present and make sure that you have a visible and attractive presence on social media."

This expansion includes a multi-lingual offering online, on social media and through podcasts, which have enabled it to reach a broader, global audience. The BBC has also recently announced that it will use artificial intelligence to improve its digital platforms, such as translating content into new languages and creating live text pages from broadcasts.

The World Service's global weekly digital audience is currently 124 million, largely from YouTube, Facebook, and BBC-owned sites (see Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7: World Service digital reach

Platform	Audience (millions)
Total global digital audience	124.3
YouTube	43.9
Facebook	34.6
BBC owned sites	25.3
Instagram	20.2
Twitter	3.0
TikTok	2.0
Podcasts	1.9

In developing its digital offer, the BBC has found that platform popularity varies hugely between regions, and that it therefore must meet audiences where they are. For example, BBC Persian's Instagram page is vastly more popular than any other BBC foreign language Instagram page – with 22 million followers (more than CNN's main account, and comparable to the 28 million for BBC News' English language page), and BBC Hindi's YouTube account has more subscribers than the English language one.

Nevertheless, some of our interviewees felt there was more to do here. Former DCMS Minister Lord Vaizey told us in his interview: *"If I was the new controller of the BBC World Service, I would want to look very hard at social media...I'd want to have a hard think about the main social media channels that people use in different parts of the world and what BBC's presence is on those."*

Sir John Sawers warned that as digital consumption habits shift, the BBC World Service must balance reach with impact: *"I do think there's an opportunity here, firstly for us all to recognise the BBC World Service's reach beyond just radio – for example on YouTube, social media, and podcasts, but also for the BBC to ensure they're making the most of those platforms...We need to think about targeting it on the places where there is a real need and where it can have the greatest impact and not just the greatest number of people."*

Exhibit 8: World Service reach across a range of platforms

Platform	Reach/context	Delivery channels
Radio	Core in low-infrastructure regions; crisis lifeline	FM, AM, Shortwave, Satellite
Television	Targeted language TV (e.g. Persian, Arabic); co-productions	BBC Arabic TV, BBC Persian TV, Partner TV content, BBC News Channel opt outs
Digital/Online	Websites in 42 languages; streaming and podcasts	BBC websites, On-demand audio
Social media & Messaging	Part of a global digital reach of 124 million for the BBC overall	TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, X, WhatsApp etc
Partnerships	Via local broadcasters, NGOs, and emergency alerts	Local stations, NGO partners

// Organisationally, the BBC World Service has learnt over time that to consolidate and expand its global reach, it must adapt to technological change.

While digital can be more cost efficient than traditional means of communication (television is a relatively expensive medium for delivering content), it is not a guaranteed route to success. Dr Westcott notes that the BBC does not promote content that is designed to outrage (e.g. 'clickbait') and therefore will never be able to exploit algorithms in the way others do: *"it would be wrong to divert too much into social media because it is a world where you are always going to lose".²⁸*

Furthermore, increased reliance on social media will mean that more of the World Service's global reach is mediated by commercial third parties (i.e. tech companies) – a fundamental shift that could carry risks for an organisation that has built trust by mostly broadcasting directly to its audiences.

Nevertheless, digital platforms have played a significant role in delivering audience growth for the World Service over the past two decades. In that time, the World Service has come to better understand pockets of potential on particular platforms. It should accelerate digital growth to capitalise on this experience.

Television

The World Service has a complicated relationship with television, which was raised in a number of our interviews. The BBC previously had two English language TV news channels (domestic and international). However, these were merged in 2023, creating a 'single channel with global reach'.²⁹ This news channel is funded via the Licence Fee and has two streams; one for audiences in the UK and one for audiences based overseas that allows for an 'opt out', for example when the channel is focused on domestic UK stories. Funding for the channel overall falls outside of the World Service budget, but the cost of running the overseas stream is reported as part of the total World Service operating licence expenditure.

This blending of the two channels has had a mixed response³⁰ – and few viewers (even those who have spent their careers around the sector) make a distinction between what is and isn't World Service output, and therefore what BBC News broadcasts globally is often seen as part of a dedicated international package.

Some of our interviewees felt there was room for improvement on television, citing the fact that (despite the organisational complexity) the TV news channel is strongly associated with the World Service abroad.

"I think the BBC is making a mistake with its TV news channel", Lord Sedwill (former Cabinet Secretary and UK National Security Advisor) told us. "Instead of doubling down on its own strengths – namely its international presence – it's trying to compete with domestic outlets like Sky News, ITV News, and Times Radio. That's a missed opportunity. The BBC's unique selling point is its global reach. It should be the best at bringing the world to the British audience – as well as being the best at bringing the world to a world audience. Of course, it has to cover domestic stories, but if they start thinking of themselves as just another domestic news channel, they'll lose the very thing that sets them apart."

Dame Sue Owen told us *"the BBC's international news channel could certainly be improved and used more effectively. If you're abroad and you put it on in a hotel room, you very quickly switch over to CNN or something else. Previously, there was definitely a sense that surely the BBC could do something much more world-class on the TV side – to match the quality of the World Service on radio. I don't know where that debate has gone now, but I still think it's something really worth building up."*

// The BBC's unique selling point is its global reach. It should be the best at bringing the world to the British audience – as well as being the best at bringing the world to a world audience.

Lord Sedwill

Lord Vaizey told us: *"The BBC doesn't really know what its international television news strategy is. It's unclear whether it wants to be the BBC in London doing a mix of domestic and global news, the World Service on television, or a standalone international news channel competing with the likes of CNN... We need to sort out the TV side and develop a proper strategy that asks: what exactly is the BBC trying to do with its world news channel – and is it truly an exercise in soft power?"*

Evidence from our interviewees suggests that, even if TV is steadily fading in significance and share of attention, the World Service deserves a stronger voice on one of the most visible platforms for BBC News globally.

Competition – A global information war

For much of its history, the World Service has faced competition from mostly benign actors – but now, it is operating in an increasingly competitive international space, with long-established as well as newer global players vying for reach and attention.

Its closest competitors have traditionally been from countries closely aligned with the UK at a political level, such as CNN International, France 24, Deutsche Welle, and Voice of America. While often competing for audience share, collaboration between the BBC World Service and its international peers has been significant. *“We do not feel that we are in direct competition with those organisations whose journalism we respect, and we regard as being values-based”*, said Jonathan Munro, the BBC’s Global Director for News, to MPs.³¹

But in recent years as more countries have sought to develop soft power assets more purposefully, and others have engaged in the deliberate spread of disinformation, the World Service has found itself in competition with those promoting different values to the UK, including hostile states. Jonathan Munro believes this represents *“an existential threat to those of us who believe trust should be based on impartial news and value-based journalism, not on propaganda”*.³²

This increased competition, combined with the funding challenges outlined, makes it hard to avoid the conclusion that the BBC World Service is at risk of losing global reach – and influence – to authoritarian rivals. As mentioned in Exhibit 6, following World Service cuts to local operations, the Kenyan state broadcaster replaced BBC content with Chinese programming.³³ But that’s not an isolated case. Radio frequencies previously occupied by BBC Arabic (now closed) are being taken over in parts of Africa and the Middle East. For example, Russian news agency Sputnik now occupies the same FM frequency in Lebanon formerly used by BBC Arabic radio – and former BBC FM radio partners in Jordan, Palestinian Territories, Iraq and Lebanon have been approached by Sputnik and China’s CGTN to occupy the vacated slots.³⁴

Russia and China are believed to be investing £6-8 billion in growing media audiences, mainly in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.³⁵ The World Service has significant reach in those regions – 99 million people per week in Sub Saharan Africa, 33 million in the Middle East and North Africa, and 13 million in Latin America³⁵ – but the sums being spent by rivals dwarf the World Service budget (£366 million in 2024) and demonstrates the value foreign states place on controlling global narratives. China’s biggest media organisation, Xinhua, has 37 bureaus in Africa according to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. They say this overshadows any other news agency on the continent, and is a dramatic increase from just a handful two decades ago.

Lord Hammond believes the objectives of Russia and China could be simply about filling bandwidth to exclude others: *“I don’t think the Russians care whether anybody believes what they’re listening to. What they’re trying to do is crowd out the space, perhaps even discredit foreign broadcasters in general. I doubt anyone in the Kremlin sits there and thinks ‘if we tell people often enough that Russia is valiantly defending itself against an aggressive attack by Ukraine, they’ll believe it’. I don’t think that’s their agenda at all. They just use noise to fill up space. And if people are listening to that drivel, they’re not listening to the BBC or other international broadcasters. So I think their objectives are a bit different from ours”*.

Lord Hammond’s point highlights why global reach and continued presence is so important to preserving influence and trust. But Jamie Angus, former Director of the World Service, says Russia and China are investing for the long term. He told MPs last year that Russia and China *“are not just investing in journalists on the ground...but investing very heavily in technical infrastructure, particularly in African markets but also in Asia. They are entering those markets and offering assistance around radio distribution, television distribution and digital development. Those are almost bottomless.”*³⁶

Recent developments at Voice of America (VOA) underscore these challenges. At the time of writing, VOA remains off the air after the Trump administration issued an executive order that effectively dismantled the US Agency for Global Media. This raises (at least) two questions: the first is, what happens to independent media if journalists live under the threat of cancellation by state funders; and the second is, who will fill the space left by the VOA? If part of the BBC World Service’s value is acting as a bulwark to new and aggressive state media actors, then its job just became much harder.

Investments by other countries appear to be paying off, since early evidence suggests they are winning trust as a result. Take Nigeria as an example. The BBC enjoys trust levels of around 90% (according to the Corporation itself), but investment by Chinese broadcaster CGTN there saw its trust rating grow from 54% to 61% in three years, and RT from 51% to 67%.³⁷ BBC Monitoring has also recently reported that Iran is continuing to invest in global media and is well-placed to exploit some of the gaps left by VOA, particularly through its Spanish-language Hispan TV, and in English and French through Press TV.³⁸

“By being present in a country, [states like Russia and China] automatically increase their trust”, Jonathan Munro told MPs last year. “For example, in Egypt, where there is a lot of money being spent from Beijing and Moscow, the trust scores for those state organisations have gone up simply because they are more present than they used to be.”³⁹

As BBC Director General Tim Davie has warned: *“there is nothing bad actors would like more than to see the World Service squeezed out of key regions and diminished.”⁴⁰*

The impacts of competition extend to resourcing, especially as state media actors like Turkey and China are poaching staff: *“Before the [2023] Nigeria elections, [Turkish broadcaster] TRT took three quarters of our Hausa team”, Fiona Crack (Controller of Language Services for BBC News), told MPs last year. “That was just before the elections, which is exactly when you need that BBC journalism in a country. There are unseen effects of instability.”⁴¹*

“Where you have presence, you build trust”, according to Jon Zilkha, Controller World Service English, BBC World Service, “there is a direct correlation between the two”. But that works both ways: “Where we have to recede from somewhere...and others step in, that builds trust in those organisations.”⁴²

Reaching beyond the Global South

While the World Service has traditionally focused on regions with limited media freedom, its ability to reach and resonate with audiences in mature, highly competitive media markets is another important measure of its soft power.

To test this, we have drawn on exclusive polling conducted in the United States for CreativePower. The United States is an important ally for the UK, and a focus of trade negotiations. It is also a cultural superpower itself, with significant global influence.

However, it is also a deeply polarised media market, where democratic norms are being tested and public trust in journalism is under pressure. Understanding the World Service’s impact here provides insights not only into its potential reach outside the Global South, but also into its ability to cut through partisan noise and promote British values in a complex and often adversarial media environment.

The BBC World Service reaches a total of 15.7 million people a week in the United States, a relatively small proportion of the total BBC News audience there of 49.6 million (in most other markets discussed in this report, the World Service makes up the vast majority of BBC News reach in that country).

Our research was conducted by leading research company JL Partners, who polled a sample of 1,003 registered US voters between May 13 and May 14, 2025, finding the following:

Familiarity:

- 49% of voters saying they are very familiar or somewhat familiar with the BBC (including the BBC World Service).
- Only 16% said they are not at all familiar (see Exhibit 9).
- Perhaps surprisingly, familiarity is greater with younger people – and declines with age. Exhibit 10 shows that 18-29 year olds and 30-49 year olds are more likely to be aware of the broadcaster than their older peers.

Exhibit 9:

49% of respondents showed some level of familiarity with the BBC, with only 16% saying they’re not familiar at all

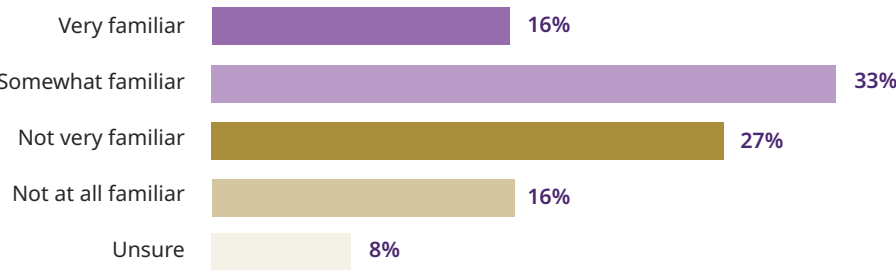
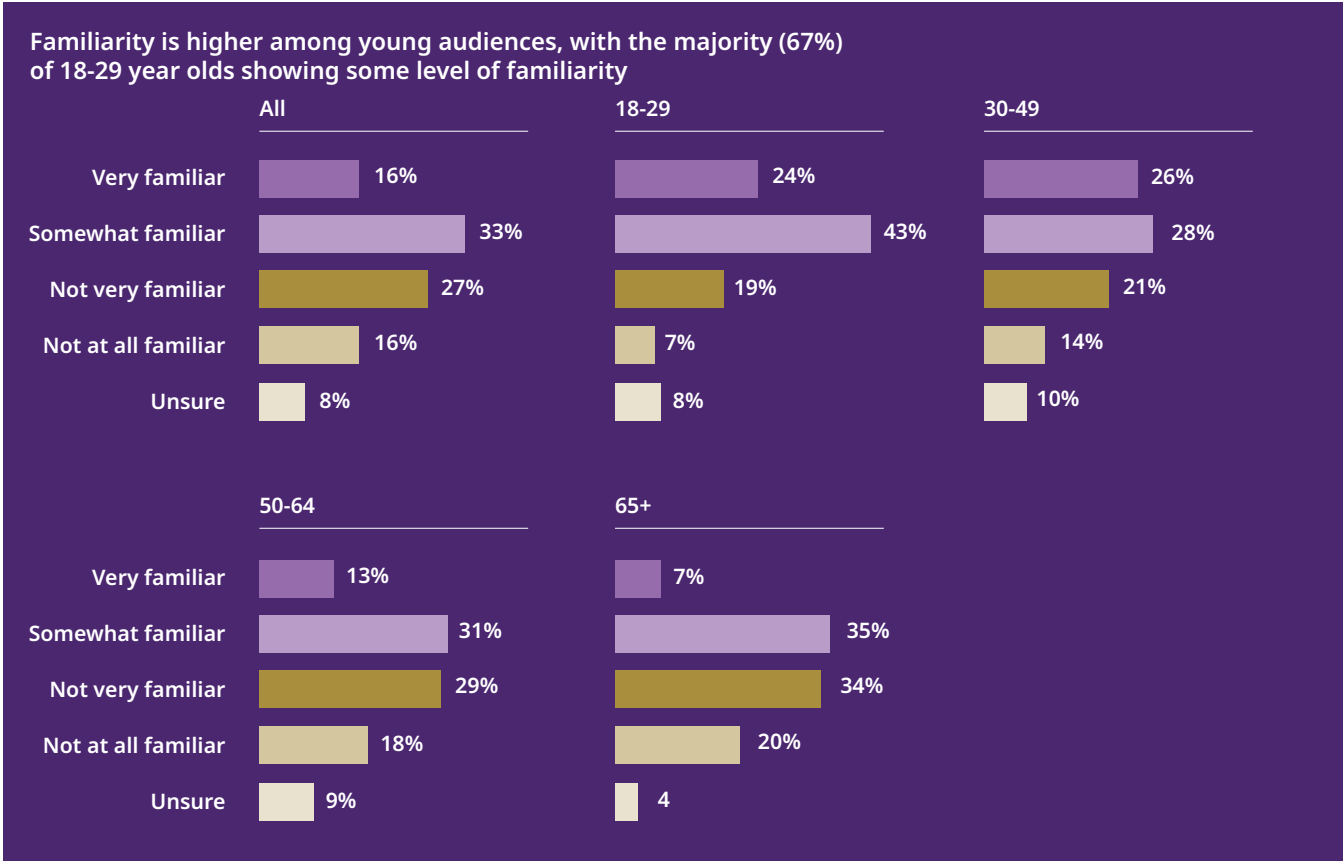
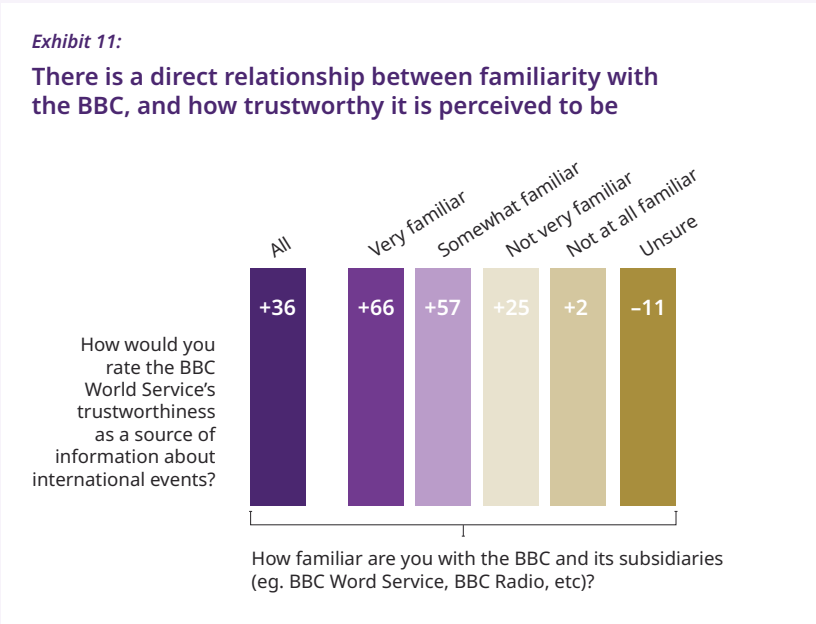


Exhibit 10:



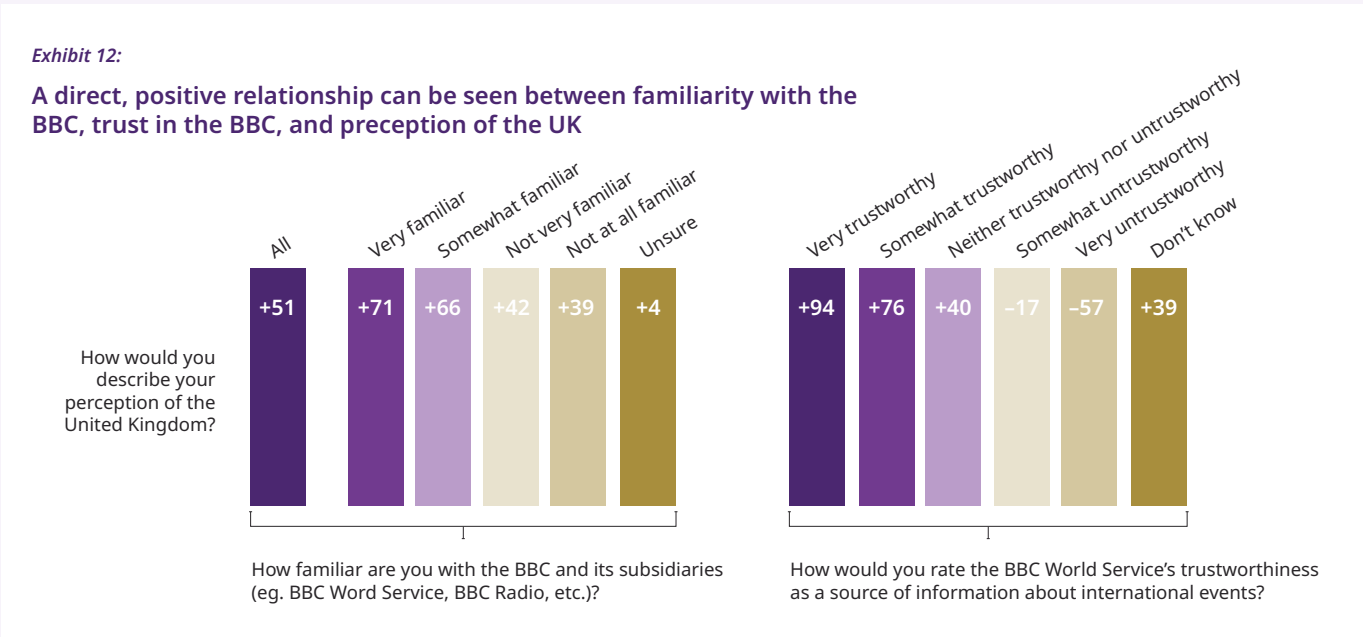
Trust:

- 47% of people say the World Service is somewhat trustworthy or very trustworthy.
- Only 11% deem it untrustworthy.
- There is a direct relationship between level of familiarity with the BBC, and how trustworthy audiences perceive the World Service to be (see Exhibit 11).



Perception of the UK:

- There is a positive relationship between familiarity with the BBC, trust in the BBC World Service, and perception of the UK (see Exhibit 12).



This paints a mixed picture. The relationship between awareness and trust is positive for the World Service. But overall trust is still lower than previous polls have indicated for other parts of the world, suggesting there is still some way to go (should the BBC wish) to build trusted reach in the US.

Creative Industries and soft power policy expert Eliza Easton says the UK has neglected soft power projection into the US for years. *“Somewhere along the way, we stopped putting in the effort to shape perceptions in the US. We assumed that warm words from politicians meant the relationship was solid, and I think that was a mistake. You’ve now got figures like [US Vice President] JD Vance able to say things – or at least imply things – about the UK being a small, declining power, and it’s not clear we have the tools in place to push back against that kind of narrative...If you’ve been paying attention, you can see a changing view of Britain, especially on the American right.”*

Indeed, our polling revealed that Republican voters are three times more likely to distrust the BBC World Service, than Democrats.

Lord Sedwill suggested to us that a change of gear is needed, to *“push the BBC World Service brand in the US as a trusted and impartial source of news, including through social media etc, particularly in a climate where news is politicised”*.

However, the numbers around younger engagement with the BBC in the US are very encouraging, and suggest a bigger opportunity there for developing reach and influence.

Conclusion: Reach at Risk

If soft power depends on presence, visibility, and trust, then global reach is its delivery system. The BBC World Service has a breadth of reach spanning every region of the world, reflecting a long history of adapting to changing audience habits and technological shifts.

However, maintaining this scale is becoming more challenging, as funding pressures make dents in the Service’s reach, and competitors move aggressively into markets where the World Service has traditionally held sway. In Kenya, recent cuts led to a decline in weekly reach of almost a fifth, at a time when the BBC acknowledges that state-backed Chinese and Russian competitors are becoming *“aggressive in their desire to dominate the global media landscape”*.⁴³ The presence of this well-funded competition suggests that any ground ceded will be almost impossible to regain.

The BBC World Service has built its reach – and its relationship with the world – over almost a century. The risk now is not that it disappears overnight, but that its reach is chipped away, its valuable brand is squandered, and a British soft power asset is diminished.

Key Findings: Global Reach

- **Scale:** The BBC World Service reaches over 300 million people weekly in more than 100 countries and 42 languages, making it one of the UK’s most far-reaching global institutions.
- **Independence remains key:** The World Service’s credibility – which supports its global reach – is underpinned by its editorial independence. Protecting this, while securing sustainable funding, is vital to maintaining UK influence.
- **Digital adaptation:** The World Service has expanded well beyond traditional shortwave radio to reach audiences through digital platforms, TV and FM radio – but there is more it can do to maximise its digital potential.
- **Reach under strain:** Budget reductions have already led to service closures and audience losses, with recent cuts causing an estimated global audience loss of 40 million.
- **Competition is increasing:** China and Russia are investing billions in state-backed media across the Global South – filling the gaps left by World Service retreat and gaining audience trust.
- **Geographical focus:** The World Service has a strong presence beyond the Global South, but there is more to do to build trusted reach in more developed markets.

Chapter Two: National Strategic Value

What is 'strategic soft power value'?

The BBC World Service reaches 64 million people every week in 20 of the most fragile states globally, offering trusted, and sometimes life-saving, information in a world where misinformation is on the rise.⁴⁴ This reach, built on decades of credibility, is a powerful asset for the UK. But to what extent does the World Service hold *strategic* soft power value for the UK?

In the context of this report, 'strategic value' refers to the contribution an institution makes to the UK's foreign policy goals and national security objectives, its role in developing and improving global relationships (with populations as well as at a political level), and its ability to enhance the UK's global standing – not through coercion or control, but through presence, trust, and enhanced access.

In his Locarno speech in January 2025, Foreign Secretary David Lammy set out three principles to guide UK foreign policy over the next decade – one of which was to forge closer, more respectful partnerships with the Global South. In this context, the BBC World Service is well established to complement UK foreign policy aims through many of its activities and operations. As outlined in Chapter One, more than three quarters of the BBC World Service's reach is in the Global South.

Through interviewing key figures with extensive experience at the heart of pursuing the UK's strategic objectives, we have found that the World Service is a unique and multifaceted soft power asset for the UK: its ability to build trust with different audiences, counter disinformation, and indirectly lend support to diplomatic efforts, gives it a value that few other institutions can replicate.⁴⁵ This chapter explores five key domains where the World Service delivers strategic value:

- Countering global disinformation
- Providing lifeline news and information in times of crisis
- Bringing news and education to places with limited or no media freedom
- Connecting to the Commonwealth and global diaspora
- Monitoring global media environments for use by UK institutions

In each of these areas, the World Service's output is not limited to broadcast news or information – but often provides indirect soft power value, supporting British influence in key regions around the globe.

Bringing news and education to places with limited or no media freedom

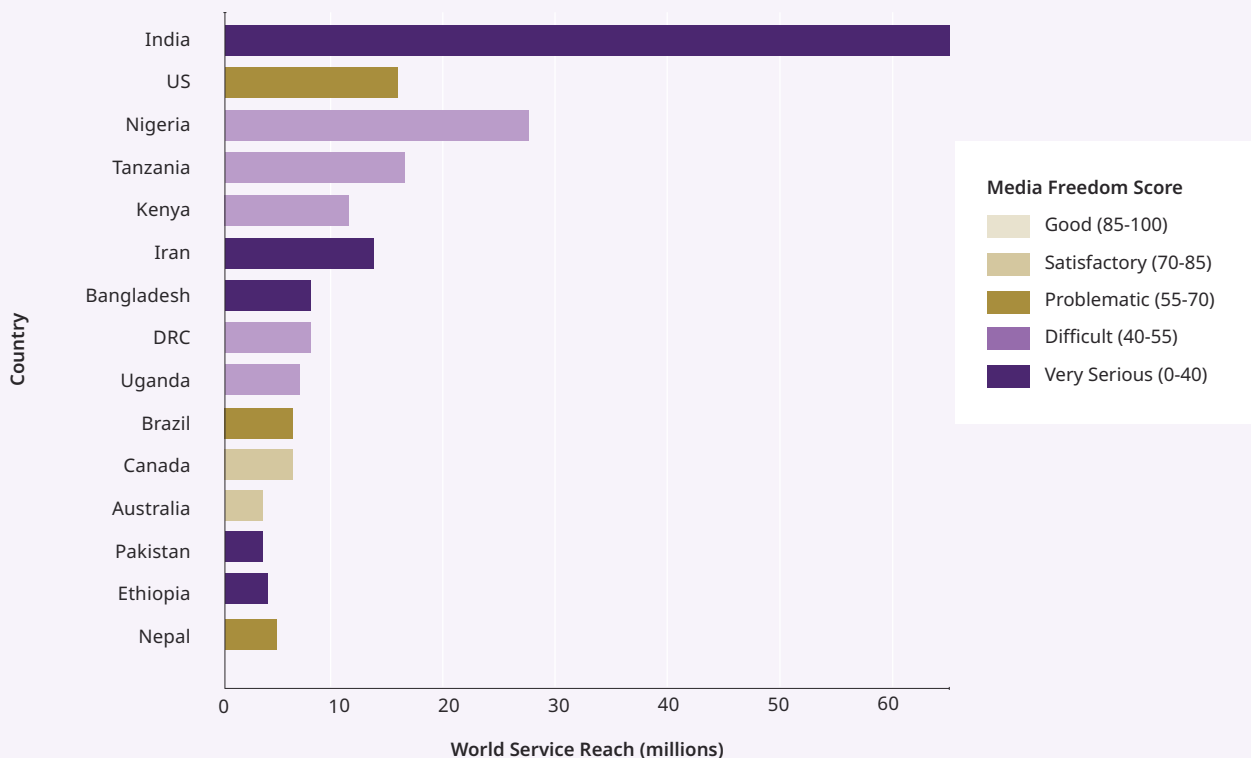
*"One of the most valuable functions that the World Service fulfils is providing news about areas that otherwise cannot receive any news... That plays a role in global security because it enables people to understand exactly what is going on there."*⁴⁶ – Dr Nicholas Westcott, former British Ambassador to Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Togo and Niger, speaking to Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee in November 2024.

One of the World Service's greatest strategic strengths is its ability to reach audiences in some of the world's most restrictive media environments. 72% of its global audience lives in countries with limited media freedom, including Iran, North Korea, and Afghanistan, where it is often one of the only sources of independent news.^{47 48}

// Governments can't do what the BBC does in projecting openness, debate, and critical thinking, because that's not how governments naturally operate.

Matthew Barzun

Exhibit 13: BBC World Service Reach in Top 15 Markets vs Media Freedom Score



Source: BBC and Reporters Without Borders ⁴⁹

Bringing together data from the BBC and from the 2025 World Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders, we have found that 13 of the 15 top markets for the BBC World Service are countries ranked as 'problematic', 'difficult' or 'very serious' for media freedom. These include Pakistan, Uganda, Iran and Bangladesh – which illustrate the World Service's capacity to reach audiences that would otherwise have little or no access to independent news.

This is especially useful in areas where formal diplomatic channels are constrained or closed: the World Service can foster connections with local populations, offering a form of engagement that is often more trusted than direct government communication.

Matthew Barzun was the United States' Ambassador to the UK from 2013 to 2017, and has a valuable perspective on the BBC both from within the UK and from abroad. "What the BBC does in its entirety, both domestically but also overseas" he told us in his interview "is stuff that government in general is incapable of doing. Governments can't do what the BBC does in projecting openness, debate, and critical thinking, because that's not how governments naturally operate."

And for British diplomats travelling the world and working in challenging environments, the BBC World Service can serve as an unofficial ally, helping to set the tone of international relationships. Its ability to reach deep into restricted societies, often in the local language, provides a layer of influence that is difficult to replicate through formal diplomatic channels.

"Diplomats in the British diplomatic service listen to it all the time and use it as a source of information", Dr Nicholas Westcott told MPs last year, "and we liaise locally with its journalists to exchange ideas, contacts and information. From that point of view, it is invaluable."⁵⁰

Sir John Sawers' experience in Damascus vividly captures this dynamic. In the tightly controlled media landscape of Syria in 1982, local broadcasters operated under strict government oversight, with little room for independent reporting. In this context, the BBC provided an unfiltered alternative, and Sawers recalled that the World Service was the primary source of information for ordinary Syrians:

"My first exposure to the influence of the World Service was in Damascus in 1982, when the Sabra and Shatila massacres were unfolding in Beirut. I was tuned into the BBC World Service that afternoon and evening, trying to follow what was going on by the best sources, and I went out for a break and walked up to the local street in the part of Damascus we were living in, and every shopkeeper seemed to be listening to the BBC World Service in Arabic, following exactly the same story. It struck me that no one seemed to be listening to Damascus radio, they were listening to BBC Radio and it was the main source of information at the time. And that brought home to me just how important it is, in controlled societies without independent media, that people should have access to reliable information, and there's a real demand for it."

Sawers' experience in Damascus highlights the World Service's ability to cut through state-controlled narratives and reach audiences directly – a principle that has been tested and proven in some of the world's most challenging media environments.

// In terms of Britain's soft power, I think it is important to be presenting to citizens in countries which live under repressive regimes...that there's a different way forward.

Sir John Sawers

But this ability to connect with people living under repressive regimes or in conflict zones is not just about broadcasting news – it is about presenting alternative models and ideas, inspiring change, and subtly advancing British democratic values.

"You can't always draw a direct line between these things, but it is the case that conflict prevention, support for pluralism, and democratic values are part of our national security agenda," Lord Sedwill told us. "I see the BBC World Service as being in that same category. If you're out there giving people the courage to stand up for their principles, to band together, to stick to their values – as we did during the Cold War, when people listened to it on illicit radios – then that is advancing our national security agenda, even if it's indirect. A world in which people believe in democratic, pluralistic values – and associate those values with the UK – is a world that is better for this country, and where this country is more influential."

Sawers explains why broadcasting reach has real power: *"There's no doubt that the motivation of people to work against their government or to work for a better leadership or better system in their countries is inspired by models from abroad. The access people have to those models from abroad...tends to be through the soft power organisations. And the BBC has the greatest reach of all. In terms of Britain's soft power, I think it is important to be presenting to citizens in countries which live under repressive regimes or immersed in conflict or divided by schisms in religion, that there's a different way forward, there's a different way to do things."*

This was particularly evident during the fall of the Soviet Union, after which the BBC said *"the collapse of the communist empire was fuelled by access to western television and radio, particularly the World Service"*⁵¹ and Mikhail Gorbachev reported listening to the World Service during the August 1991 Soviet coup attempt.⁵² Even Rupert Murdoch – no fan of the BBC – said at the time that *"advances in television technology have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere. They cannot escape the eagle eye of the BBC, ITV, CNN and Sky."*⁵³

Engaging populations in the democratic process is still core to the World Service today. In Iran for example, the BBC's Persian TV service has become a vital source of independent news, despite ongoing government efforts to block its broadcasts.

Sir John Sawers was Political Director at the Foreign Office from 2003 to 2007, and in his interview for this report, he told us he spent a great deal of that period focused on Iran, both in negotiating over their nuclear programme, but also trying to draw Iran down a road of greater openness. One product of this latter track was the BBC's Farsi/Persian TV channel, which launched in 2009:

Exhibit 14: World Service reach in places with limited media freedom

Region/Country	World Service activity
Iran	BBC Persian reaches 13.5 million Iranians each week, making it one of the most popular international media outlets in the country. This reach is particularly significant during times of unrest, such as the Green Movement in 2009 and the anti-government protests in 2022.
Russia	BBC Russian has become an essential source of independent news for Russians in recent years, particularly following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It provides coverage that counters state narratives, often circumventing official censorship through digital platforms, VPNs, and messaging apps like Telegram.
Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan)	In Central Asian countries with tightly controlled media environments, the BBC's Uzbek and Kyrgyz services offer rare independent perspectives, including coverage on corruption, human rights, and political developments that are often ignored by local media.
Afghanistan	The BBC's services in Pashto and Dari provide critical news and educational content in a country where media freedoms have been significantly curtailed since the Taliban's return to power. It also supports educational programming aimed at children and young adults, who have limited access to formal education. Afghan Woman's Hour provides information to women and girls, where they are barred from formal education. ⁵⁴ Such programming reaches audiences that humanitarian agencies cannot.

"Jack Straw was Foreign Secretary at the time...he was supportive of the ideas we were putting to him to launch it, and we allocated some money for it and very rapidly it became the most popular TV channel in Iran, and the main source of reliable information. Of course, the regime did everything they could to block access to it. But it's very difficult when half of Tehran has got a satellite receiver for TV stations."

According to Dr Nicholas Westcott, the fact that the BBC World Service broadcasts in such a breadth of languages is key to penetrating challenging markets: *"The BBC's credibility in Iran is because most of the people there are Farsi speakers, speaking Iranian...but ordinary Iranians will listen to it if they possibly can, because they trust it, it sounds like them and to some extent it is them."*

The table opposite provides some standout examples where the World Service has reached into places with limited or no media freedom, to bring news and education.

Reaching influential audiences

The BBC World Service's ability to engage influential audiences has also brought value to those in senior positions representing the UK abroad. As Sir John Sawers reflected: *"When I talk to senior figures overseas, they often used to say that they had listened to this or that interview on Hardtalk. It was clearly very successful."* 'Hardtalk' – produced by BBC News but aired internationally – has now been cancelled, which brings into sharp focus some of the difficult funding decisions facing the BBC and the trade-offs involved. Its former presenter Stephen Sackur says the show used to reach up to 170 million people a week.⁵⁵

Former UK Business Secretary Sir Vince Cable told us: *"Wherever I travelled as Business Secretary...I met people who regarded the World Service as their best source of accurate and honest news reporting and commentary. It was a great source of Soft Power."*

Lord Hammond told us that travelling internationally on Government business gave him a clear understanding of the World Service's value: *"I've always thought the World Service brings significant value when you look at the benefits that it brings ...the cost of it is actually minimal. It's difficult to quantify these things of course, but anecdotally, you know when I was travelling around the world as Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, I was in no doubt that for the price, the World Service is a good value deliverer...it's extremely good value for money."*

Operating in challenging environments

Despite these successes, it's becoming increasingly challenging for the World Service to operate in countries that are hostile to media freedom. Globally, around one fifth of its language services experience some sort of interference⁵⁶, and there are currently more than 300 World Service personnel operating in exile.⁵⁷

For example, the BBC Persian service primarily relies on satellite broadcast to reach Iranian audiences, where internet censorship can only be circumvented through tools such as VPNs and dark web portals.⁵⁸ While the BBC Persian service has no physical presence in Iran, it nevertheless faces intense harassment from authorities, with approximately 152 staff members having been threatened, harassed, or having had their assets frozen.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the service continues to deliver impartial reporting to Iranians.

In Russia, the BBC now actively advises audiences on how to access its content using VPNs and dark web tools.⁶⁰ In China, direct World Service access is limited. As such, reporting is only possible through the use of encrypted online platforms (which are user-driven) or targeted digital outreach reaching Chinese audiences and diaspora communities.⁶¹

The UK Government's 2021 Integrated Review into security and foreign policy notes the World Service's role in 'supporting media freedom', while also recognising that the soft power landscape is changing: *"Those who challenge the values of open and democratic societies increasingly do so through culture: systemic competitors like Russia and China invest heavily in global cultural power projection and information operations. Our allies are also taking a more strategic approach: cultural relations is one of the three pillars of German foreign policy and an important part of French foreign policy. Our perception of other countries – and therefore their soft power – is also increasingly shaped in the digital space, driven by individuals and non-state actors, including through disinformation".*⁶²

Countering global disinformation

The importance of accurate, independent journalism has never been clearer, and disinformation is becoming a defining feature of modern conflict. Recent examples include the spread of false claims that UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, French President Emmanuel Macron, and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz were taking cocaine on a train trip to Kyiv (by US commentators as well as Russian outlets)⁶³ – a fabrication quickly debunked by European authorities.⁶⁴ Similarly, Russia's ongoing 'Operation Doppelgänger' has seen the creation of fake news sites designed to mimic Western outlets like Sky News and The Washington Post, spreading pro-Russian narratives to undermine Western support for Ukraine. Even more striking was a deep fake video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2022, which appeared to show him urging his troops to surrender – a clear attempt to erode Ukrainian morale and sow confusion.⁶⁵

Lord Sedwill was the UK's National Security Advisor at the time of the Russian chemical poisonings in Salisbury in March 2018. He told us about Russian disinformation tactics around the attack: *"We had one clear narrative, which was the truth: it was the Russians, they did it, here they are. The Russians, on the other hand, didn't try to push a single counter-narrative, because they knew that it would fail. Instead, they put out about two dozen different narratives – just to create enough noise to muddy the waters and make it harder for the truth to break through. You see the same thing from the Chinese, though in a more sophisticated way, with more thought given to how they build these narratives."*

These false narratives, amplified by social media, can have serious destabilising effects – and underline the critical role of independent, objective media to provide audiences with verified information.

In May 2025, BBC Director General Tim Davie set out what's at stake: *"The World Economic Forum has singled out disinformation as the biggest short-term risk we face globally – and RUSI, the security think tank, points to malign information...as a direct threat to our security and cohesion."*⁶⁶

We've heard evidence that the BBC World Service is a significant – although underappreciated – media player in countering disinformation. Its global network of journalists, together with editorial independence and access to verification tools, allow it to challenge propaganda in ways that many local media outlets cannot, either due to capacity or lack of freedom.⁶⁷ This is both an example of how the World Service embodies values that are fundamental to its existence (as explored in the British Values chapter), and how it indirectly supports broader strategic objectives of the British state.

In his interview for this report, Sir John Sawers observed that the danger of disinformation extends beyond simply spreading falsehoods:

"The trouble with disinformation is it makes people sceptical about all information because people are not necessarily geared to distinguishing between what's disinformation, what's misinformation and what's information they can rely upon...So deliberate disinformation is very dangerous... It's misleading and it's also corrosive in our own societies, because it leads people to distrust all our institutions – which is one of the goals of regimes like those in Russia."

"But even in this information fog", Lord Sedwill told us, "if we – or our allies – are essentially telling the truth, and the BBC World Service picks that up and transmits it, then that's powerful in the battle for hearts and minds...Most of the world isn't clustering into a simple blue team and red team. Much of it remains non-aligned, and the Chinese are being very thoughtful and sophisticated in building their influence in those regions, using a mixture of information, economic engagement, debt diplomacy, and so on. The Trump administration, by retrenching, is accelerating this multipolarity. We're essentially leaving the field clear for our adversaries. The BBC World Service isn't going to reverse that trend on its own, but it is an important asset for the UK in this competition."

The BBC World Service has made significant contributions to countering disinformation globally, including through fact-checking initiatives and targeted programming:

- **Ukraine:** Since the start of the Russian invasion in 2022, the World Service has played a critical role in countering Kremlin propaganda. It also launched a dedicated fact-checking unit to expose false Russian claims about the conflict, using satellite imagery, open-source intelligence, and eyewitness testimony. BBC Russian's 'Counting the Dead' project reports on military casualties in Russia, providing information that is largely hidden from the Russian people. This reporting is also amplified across the World Service's 42 language services, so that audiences in markets where there is increasing Russian engagement or political discussion around Russia's role, can see the data.
- **Iran:** During the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini, BBC Persian became a critical source of accurate news and verification, as Iranian state media attempted to downplay the scale and significance of the demonstrations. The service also exposed misinformation spread by the regime, including false reports about protester numbers and the causes of civilian deaths.

// The importance of accurate, independent journalism has never been clearer, and disinformation is becoming a defining feature of modern conflict.

- **Africa:** In several African countries, including Kenya, Nigeria, and Sudan, the World Service has partnered with local media to train journalists in fact-checking and digital verification. This effort aims to combat the spread of false information during elections, where disinformation campaigns are often used to disrupt democratic processes. For example, BBC Africa Eye has produced several high-impact investigations that have debunked government narratives and exposed corruption. Local training initiatives can also provide the BBC with a better understanding of local needs and opportunities, for example which digital platforms offer the best potential for growth.

Beyond its own coverage, the World Service has made efforts towards building longer-term resilience against disinformation. Its collaboration with the Nobel Prize Outreach initiative, for instance – 'Whose Truth' – focuses on helping audiences to spot misleading or manipulated information.⁶⁸ Across four episodes, Nobel Prize laureates discuss the spread of disinformation in their fields of work and talk to young people around the world combatting and exposing these distortions.

Providing lifeline news and information in times of crisis

From evidence we've heard and analysed, one of the greatest attributes of the BBC World Service is its operational agility. This has helped it to play an important role in providing lifeline services in situations where local media is censored, disrupted, or otherwise absent. During humanitarian crises and conflicts, it is often one of the few sources of information that people can access and trust – particularly in remote areas where international aid struggles to reach. *"It's important...to remain fleet of foot"*, Tim Davis has told MPs.⁶⁹

The ability of the World Service to respond rapidly to crises and provide context-specific coverage is a critical aspect of its strategic value. This capability supports both national objectives and local needs, reinforcing its potential as a key component of the UK's soft power strategy. Sir John Sawers told us *"it's hard to tell what the actual impact [of the World Service] is, but it's easier to say what the demand is – and the demand is very high"*. Indeed, many of the World Service's emergency interventions are based on demand-led decision-making:

- **Myanmar:** In April 2025, the World Service launched a satellite video channel to ensure audiences could access crucial information in the aftermath of the Myanmar earthquake. This was a demand-driven decision: during the week of the earthquake, the total digital reach for BBC News Burmese quadrupled as people came to the BBC for trusted information⁷⁰.
- **Ukraine:** Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UK Government provided an emergency £4.1 million funding grant to support BBC Russian language services, which tripled their audience in the year following the 2022 invasion. This investment allowed the World Service to counter Russian disinformation, providing credible, independent news to Russian speakers and cutting through the intense information war.

It is not surprising that the desire for news and information increases during times of crisis and conflict – but it's undoubtedly positive for the UK that it is a British news brand that people can turn to in a time of need.

Two further examples of this involve emergency provision of radio broadcasts in Arabic shortly after the BBC axed its dedicated Arabic Language Radio channel after 85 years of continuous service.

- **Gaza:** At the start of the Israel-Gaza conflict in 2023, the BBC launched emergency World Service radio output to provide real-time updates on safety, health, and humanitarian access. During some of the most intense phases of the conflict, the Gaza service reached an estimated 700,000 people a week⁷¹, and the then World Service Director Liliane Landor said that it was BBC Arabic's *"expertise and specialist knowledge of the region alongside the BBC's reputation as the most trusted news provider"*, that enabled them to provide such a service quickly and effectively.⁷²
- **Sudan:** In May 2023, amid escalating conflict that disrupted internet access, the BBC World Service launched an emergency pop-up radio service in Arabic. Broadcasting twice a day on shortwave radio, the service became a crucial means of delivering public health advice, updates on political developments, and guidance on accessing essential supplies. Tim Davie described the service as *"a lifeline"* that was *"crucial at a time of great uncertainty in the country."*

Remaining 'fleet of foot' owes something to the BBC's long history in radio, which continues to be particularly resilient in crisis situations. *"Nobody is sitting in the rubble of Gaza on a smartphone waiting for a data package"*, Jonathan Munro told MPs.

The swift reinstatement of radio broadcasts in both Gaza and Sudan underscores the level of demand, and the BBC's agility to meet it. But it could also be argued that it illustrates a short-sightedness by those deciding which services can be cut.

In Sudan, BBC Arabic was a trusted source of news for many decades, particularly in rural areas where local media often operates under heavy government oversight. According to UNESCO media expert Abdul Qadir Mohamad, the BBC's Arabic service earned a loyal following in Sudan because it wasn't subject to censorship, unlike domestic broadcasters – but also because of practical barriers to accessing alternative news, including poor internet infrastructure and high levels of illiteracy, which makes radio a valuable asset.⁷⁴

In both instances, the speed with which the World Service was able to re-enter the market was no doubt eased by the foothold it had built up over decades. But this only highlights the value that is at stake when cutbacks have to be made. Fiona Crack, the Controller of Language Services for BBC News says the choice to axe BBC Arabic Radio had to be made because of funding pressures – but admits that in hindsight, *"it does not feel like a good decision"*.⁷⁵

Connecting to the Commonwealth and global diaspora

The World Service's role as a global and cultural intermediary has long been established in Commonwealth countries and diaspora-rich markets, with an ability to connect diverse audiences, foster dialogue, and serve as a trusted source of information.⁷⁶ Indeed, as set out in Chapter One, the World Service's original purpose was to connect with the British diaspora overseas.⁷⁷

Over time, this remit has expanded to include the needs of multi-ethnic audiences across the Commonwealth and beyond. In Asia, the World Service's largest audiences are found in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, with services in Hindu and Bengali among the most listened to globally.⁷⁸

Its adaptability to regional and local contexts has sustained its relevance as a 'media home' for the Commonwealth diaspora, providing a platform to connect different Commonwealth diasporas with their own culture, identity, and political events. For example, in 2008, 60% of users of BBC Urdu were based outside the Asian subcontinent (principally in North America, the Gulf, and the UK).⁷⁹

This reinforces the World Service's role in maintaining a 'two-way flow' of cultural exchange, as Lord Parkinson told us: *"I think it's about telling the stories of interconnectedness – of diaspora communities back in the UK, and the exchange that goes on. I think having that sort of two-way flow is really important."*

The 'Voice of the Listener and Viewer', an organisation that represents broadcast audiences in the UK, says the World Service's reach in the Commonwealth and with diasporic communities is undoubtedly positive for UK interests, since it places Britain as a bridge between different identities and perspectives in a globalised world – reinforcing its position as a multicultural hub.

Of the BBC's top 15 markets for its global news services, eight are members of the Commonwealth: India, Nigeria, Kenya, Bangladesh, Uganda, Pakistan, Canada and Australia.

While the World Service is organised primarily by language rather than by country, there is a notable overlap between its language services and the languages spoken in Commonwealth countries, enabling the Service to maintain a strong voice in those regions:

Exhibit 15:

Monitoring global media environments for use by UK institutions

BBC Monitoring – a specialist service that tracks and analyses open-source information around the world, and falls under the BBC World Service umbrella – provides a "crucial, irreplaceable and unique" service that is used by UK Government departments including the FCDO, MoD, Cabinet Office and Intelligence Agencies, as well as corporate clients.⁸⁰ To support its work, the World Service employs linguists and local experts to examine the media environment of countries or regions, especially those vulnerable to insecurity.⁸¹ It then analyses the stories of greatest significance by tracking and developing thematic trends.

But BBC Monitoring has not been immune from the funding challenges affecting the World Service as a whole. Several rounds of job cuts have been announced over the last 15 years, and it was forced to leave its historic Caversham Park base.^{82 83 84}

While BBC Monitoring remains a valuable asset for the UK, these cuts raise questions about the service's capacity to maintain its breadth and depth of coverage. As competition to the BBC World Service increases, the work of BBC Monitoring to assess the impact of disinformation is becoming more, not less, relevant.

Language Services Aligned with Commonwealth Countries:

- **South Asia:** The World Service offers services in languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and Urdu, which are widely spoken in Commonwealth countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- **Africa:** Services in Hausa, Swahili, Yoruba, Igbo, Amharic, and Somali cater to audiences in Commonwealth nations including Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana, and Cameroon.
- **Caribbean:** While there are no specific language services for Caribbean nations, the World Service's English-language programming serves English-speaking Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean, such as Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago.
- **Pacific:** English-language services are also accessible in Pacific Commonwealth countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea.

Soft Power Asset or Strategic Tool?

The World Service is not an instrument of the state or a mouthpiece for the government of the day, and this independence underpins its credibility and effectiveness internationally.⁸⁵

James Purnell was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in the Brown Government, and later a senior executive at the BBC. In his interview for this report, he told us: *“The BBC shouldn’t think about soft power too instrumentally...If it offers a really good new service which gives people a great source of information, that’s a much better way to build influence.”*

However, this does not mean that the World Service cannot better align with UK strategic interests. In a 2007 report, the British think-tank Demos found that the desire to maintain the independence of national cultural institutions (such as the BBC World Service) often comes at the expense of effective collaboration between different emanations of the state.⁸⁶ The report’s authors warned that these missed opportunities allow Britain’s adversaries to capture a competitive edge.⁸⁷

The idea that the Government – likely the FCDO – could take a more active role operationally (but not editorially) in the World Service was explored with our interviewees. Dame Sue Owen, a former senior civil servant, told us she believes there is a case for more strategic use of the World Service, but with careful safeguards to preserve its editorial independence: *“there’s definitely a case for using the World Service more strategically – say, by focusing on parts of the world that are in the UK’s interest. But you’d have to strike a delicate balance with editorial independence”*.

Lord Vaizey, a former Culture Minister, said he was nervous about the idea of greater direction from the Government about how the World Service should spend its money – but said he would be open to exploring whether other models of greater oversight could be applied in order to draw a more direct link between the Service and soft power execution: *“a good example of something that sort of works is Ofcom, whereby ministers are entitled to write a letter setting out their priorities over a number of years. It could be possible to have a formal structure where the FCDO is entitled to make its representations about where it thinks resources should be concentrated and why – and the BBC World Service is duty bound to take those into account, but is still allowed to operate independently.”*

Sir John Sawers, former head of MI6, described a long history of practical, case-by-case alignment between the World Service and the Foreign Office: *“Decisions on which languages the BBC World Service broadcast in have been influenced over the years by the Foreign Office, and rightly so. When Yugoslavia was breaking up, we launched services in local languages in that region. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in the 1980s, we stepped up the Pashto service and later wound it down again. And then when Afghanistan was back as a foreign policy priority post 9/11, we started it up again, in Pashto and also Dari I recall. So it has gone back and forth, in consultation between the Foreign Office and the BBC.”*

A number of our interviewees felt that greater or more formal oversight could threaten the World Service’s independence. For example, Lord Sedwill told us: *“I’m a bit sceptical about [more Government control], for two main reasons. First, governments tend to lurch around, responding to immediate pressures, whereas the BBC World Service has to invest for the long term...There would always be a temptation for ministers to say, ‘Spend more here, cut back there,’ which isn’t how you build a stable, credible media operation. Second...they need to decide for themselves where to invest in linguistic capabilities based on long-term trends, not short-term political direction.”*

Eliza Easton echoes this concern: *“In my experience, a single semi-senior civil servant in Whitehall can have a huge, unintended impact on the direction of an organisation like this, and that kind of top-down pressure rarely leads to good outcomes.”*

Leading soft power academic Dr Melissa Nisbett told us that more government oversight could alter the way the World Service is seen: *“I think the BBC World Service probably already does some of that. Yes, it could align more closely with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, but then you end up with a more instrumental view of what it should be, and that usually means less autonomy”*.

It’s also worth noting public comments made by former Chancellor George Osborne about the relationship between the Government and the BBC. Osborne negotiated the settlement with the BBC in 2010 that saw funding for the World Service transferred fully to Licence Fee payers. Since then he’s warned about the power dynamic between the Government and the Corporation.

Speaking in May 2024, he said was shocked at how much power the Government has over the BBC. *“It’s very easy for me to say this with hindsight, but I don’t think governments should have that kind of control over the BBC, and I regret to some degree using that leverage and I certainly regret, once I realised how much power Government had, not using that opportunity to put in place some protections for the BBC.”*⁸⁸ In any case, BBC Director-General Tim Davie argues that a natural alignment often happens anyway, without the need for formal oversight: *“Where is a service going to add the most value? That often aligns with the UK’s security interests. We are not a vehicle of Government in that way, but it is appropriate that we are looking at where there is a shortage of trusted information and market failures of that nature.”*⁸⁹

This range of perspectives reflects an ongoing debate over how best to balance the World Service’s independence with the UK’s broader strategic interests – a challenge that remains important to the future of the service, as it fights for recognition and funding domestically.

Conclusion

The BBC World Service is an irreplaceable element of the UK’s strategic soft power infrastructure. It undoubtedly supports UK national strategic interests through countering disinformation from hostile states; providing lifeline news and information in times of crisis; bringing news and education to places with limited or no media freedom; connecting Britain to the Commonwealth and global diaspora; and indirectly supporting British diplomatic efforts.

Its reach is particularly strong in the world’s most fragile states, where it provides trusted, independent news in places where British influence is otherwise limited. This reach is not just about broadcasting, but about building lasting relationships and credibility with populations – offering a form of cultural scaffolding that supports UK influence through trust, communication, and consistency, rather than coercion.

The World Service’s capacity to operate as an independent, strategically aligned, non-governmental institution is an important part of its value. However, this influence relies on a careful balance between strategic utility and editorial independence. If the World Service is to remain a trusted voice in a rapidly changing global media landscape, it will need to sustain this balance, ensuring that its strategic value is preserved without compromising its core mission.

Key Findings:

- **Supporting UK Foreign Policy:** The BBC World Service is an indirect but “invaluable” asset to UK diplomatic efforts in regions where formal channels are often constrained.
- **Critical Reach in Fragile States:** It reaches 64 million people every week in 20 of the most fragile states globally, providing vital independent news where other sources are restricted.
- **Countering Disinformation:** The Service plays a critical role in challenging state propaganda and false narratives, supporting broader UK strategic objectives.
- **Operational Agility in Crisis:** It has a proven ability to respond rapidly to crises, overcoming funding and operational challenges to deliver trusted, life-saving information in conflict zones and disaster areas.
- **Debate Over Government Involvement:** There is an unresolved debate about whether the UK Government should play a more active role in the strategic direction of the World Service, without compromising its editorial independence.

Chapter Three: Promoting British Values

Understanding British Values

The concept of a set of ‘British values’ that underpin British public life is one that is often discussed but rarely defined with absolute precision.

However, there are instances where the UK Government, Parliament and the broader public realm have sought to codify a national set of values. Those include the Government’s Prevent Strategy⁹⁰, curriculum guidance⁹¹, the official test for British Citizenship⁹², think tank reports and a number of Select Committee inquiries.^{93 94}

While there is no consensus on precise wording, through analysing these sources a set of five key principles emerge: **freedom of expression, democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect/tolerance.**

While these five encapsulate a broadly accepted and understood set, other values and definitions have been explored. The ‘Life in the UK’ citizenship test lists **‘participation in community life’** as a national value, and political debates around foreign policy have highlighted **‘the defence of human rights’** and **‘strengthening multilateral institutions’** as integral to Britain’s global role.⁹⁵

In a report on soft power, the think tank Respublica cited **‘transparency and accountability of our major political and cultural institutions’**, which links to democracy, freedom of expression and the rule of law, and is a key tenet of the British media landscape.

Does the BBC World Service reflect British values?

The BBC Charter requires the BBC to “*reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world*”. It says the BBC should “*provide high-quality news coverage to international audiences, firmly based on British values of **accuracy, impartiality, and fairness.***”⁹⁶

The BBC’s World Service Licence echoes this, setting out a requirement to provide “*high-quality news coverage to international audiences, firmly based on British values of accuracy, impartiality, and fairness.*”⁹⁷

These principles – accuracy, impartiality, and fairness – reflect broader British values such as freedom of expression, democracy, and public accountability, and are embedded in its output, particularly in contexts where these principles are under threat.

For Jonathan Munro, Global Director of BBC News, the World Service’s very existence is a promotion of one of its core values: “*The provision of free media is...a human right. That’s why we are not balanced about it. We are not impartial about whether people have the right to know. What they do with that knowledge is a matter for them, but the right to know is something that is deeply grounded in what the BBC stands for.*”⁹⁸

One area where BBC principles and British values clearly align, are in the World Service’s contribution to countering disinformation – as explored in the previous chapter. This neatly fulfils its Charter purpose of **accuracy, impartiality, and fairness**, while also aligning with broader British values including **freedom of expression, democracy, the rule of law, and public accountability.**

It could be argued that parts of the World Service’s output – such as its educational programming – also align with values of **mutual respect, and individual liberty.** ‘Dars’ is a BBC World Service programme that brings education to Afghan children who are not able – or not allowed – to go to school. First launched in 2023 on BBC News Pashto and Dari, it has now expanded to Arabic – serving children displaced by conflict across Sudan, Yemen, and Gaza.⁹⁹

// The promotion of values such as freedom of expression, democracy, and the rule of law is becoming more necessary, as democratic principles face mounting challenges worldwide.

Ongoing programming like *Focus on Africa* tells continental news using regional voices – attempting to achieve the balance of covering issues that matter to African audiences, while maintaining the BBC's standards of impartiality and accuracy, and aligning with broader values of freedom of expression.

Meanwhile, promoting the **rule of law** is demonstrated in the work of the World Service's investigative journalism. The BBC Eye documentary team uncovered a cryptic pregnancy scam in Nigeria, where women were tricked into believing they were pregnant – and fake loan apps in India, where the work of the Eye team led to a change in the law.

While the World Service is best known for its news output, it also broadcasts a wide range of cultural content that promotes British values in more indirect but powerful ways. For instance, *Sportsworld* regularly covers Premier League football matches, and *The Arts Hour* showcases British culture to a global audience. These programmes serve as another channel through which the World Service indirectly promotes a sense of 'Britishness' beyond the headlines, reinforcing a positive perception of the UK through shared cultural touchpoints.

Democracy under threat

The promotion of values such as freedom of expression, democracy, and the rule of law is becoming more necessary, as democratic principles face mounting challenges worldwide.

Freedom House's 'Freedom in the World 2025 Report' found that democracy has been in decline across the world for 19 consecutive years¹⁰⁰. In 2024 alone, 60 countries experienced democratic backsliding, while only 34 made improvements.

"For the past 20 years or so, we've acted as if the core values of liberal democracy – free speech, individual rights, the rule of law – were so obviously correct that they didn't need defending," creative industries and soft power policy expert Eliza Easton told us. But, Easton warns, *"if people around the world start to question the point of free speech, press freedom, women's rights, and democratic accountability – then we've already lost the bigger battle...So for me, this isn't just about keeping a radio station on the air. It's about whether we, as a society, still believe in the values that underpin liberal democracy – and whether we're willing to stand up for those values in a meaningful, sustained way."*

Recent research for the BBC indicates a decline in 'the preference for democracy' across various regions, notably in Asia and the Middle East.¹⁰¹ However, it also finds that audiences engaging with the BBC are significantly more inclined to uphold democratic values and participate in democratic processes, such as voting and civic engagement.

This underscores the BBC World Service's role not only in disseminating information, but also in reinforcing the foundational principles of democratic societies, especially in areas where these ideals are under threat.

Influencing peers

The influence of the BBC World Service extends beyond its own broadcasts, serving as a model for independent media around the world. As Sir John Sawers recalled: *"in Belgrade at the end of the 1990s, [the UK] and others helped set up B92, the radio station in Serbia, which was one of the rare sources of information not controlled by the government in a very conflicted and repressive environment. It contributed directly, I think, to bringing home to ordinary Serbs just how damaging Milosevic was to Serbia's interests and led to his downfall in 2000. That wasn't the BBC directly, but the BBC was the inspiration – B92 aimed to meet BBC style standards – and it was supported by funding from the UK and other European governments."*

// If I have a criticism of the World Service, it's that it can be too UK-centric...The real soft power of the BBC's brand is in being international.

Lord Sedwill

This is a form of 'soft power by example' – where the principles of impartiality, accurate reporting, and editorial independence championed by the World Service become a template for others seeking to provide trustworthy information in restrictive environments.

As outlined in Chapter Two, the BBC has trained local journalists in Kenya, Nigeria and Sudan – and our Kenya focus group in Chapter Four provides evidence that the World Service has been a model for media there.

However, this is not an area where the UK can afford to be complacent. The World Service's Global Disinformation Team have exposed how Russia is establishing operations and infrastructure to influence audiences in Africa, through projects such as the *African Initiative* – a media organisation providing training for local journalists while promoting false narratives about the war in Ukraine.¹⁰² Meanwhile *The Economist* reported in May 2025 that China is offering training and scholarships to journalists through its *China Africa Press Centre*, flying African reporters out to Chinese media outlets for ten-month assignments to absorb their newsroom culture.¹⁰³

Britain's brand

Alongside promoting British *values*, the World Service plays a role in promoting Britain's brand. Dame Sue Owen told us that when she was in Government, the World Service “*was always seen as a kind of jewel in the crown... a massive tool for promoting Britain to the world.*” The very fact that the BBC's name inherently aligns the organisation with ‘Brand Britain’, effectively makes the World Service a flag carrying media platform reaching into corners of the world that very few other British brands do.

In our Kenya focus group, we heard that even when people weren't aware that the World Service was Government-owned, they knew it was British. But this brand association works both ways – and the World Service has to grapple with Britain's legacy in some parts of the world, as we explore in Chapter Four, through our focus groups in Kenya and Lebanon.

We also heard evidence that the World Service seems to contribute to Britain's brand in ways that feel very real for those operating abroad, as Lord Sedwill observed: “*I spent much of my career in the Middle East and South Asia, and there's sometimes a view in those regions that the British have a more sophisticated understanding of the world than, say, the Americans. It's always a bit flattering, but people will say, 'You Brits, you really understand us...That's why we want you involved...Those other guys just come in, clodhopping around, but you really get it.' There's a bit of the Lawrence of Arabia or James Bond mythology about it, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. The BBC World Service is part of that brand. It's about projecting the idea that the UK is the most sophisticated, globally aware country in the world. It's not always true, of course, but it's a very useful part of the brand.*”

Former US Ambassador to the UK Matthew Barzun believes there's something about the World Service's global perspective that makes it distinctive – and reflects something about the UK. “*We just don't think or talk about the world the way you guys do. The World Service looks at the entire world in a way that only a tiny island that had a huge empire would...It's a kind of global perspective that's distinctively British and distinctively the BBC's.*”

But it's important that the BBC retains a self-awareness around the promotion of values that are not universally recognised. While state-backed outlets like RT and CGTN have accused the World Service of promoting Western agendas, this overlooks the crucial distinction between state-aligned media and editorially independent public service broadcasting. The strength of the BBC World Service lies in its ability to stand apart from government influence, operating within a framework of accountability and impartiality that sets it apart from overtly state-driven competitors. This principled approach is a core part of its soft power, reflecting values that resonate globally precisely because they are not dictated by political interests.

Sir John Sawers observes that objectivity is the key: *"independence could mean independence to pursue particular political goals. I think objectivity is a more important yardstick than simply editorial independence. But I know for the BBC, the two principles go hand in hand."*

'Talking up Britain'

Recent evidence suggests the BBC (as a whole) shapes perceptions of the UK in meaningful and material ways. Research conducted for the BBC by Tapestry in 2025 revealed that BBC users are more favourable towards the UK and more likely to think it has global influence – and also that BBC users are much more likely to have invested or are willing to invest in the UK.¹⁰⁴

Despite this, some argue that the BBC World Service could be more forward-leaning in 'talking up' Britain – a delicate balancing act for an institution defined by its independence.

Lord Parkinson was Arts and Heritage Minister at DCMS under the Conservatives from 2022-2024. He told us that *"sometimes, because we're so self-deprecating and so quick to criticise ourselves, we're not necessarily leaving people with a warm feeling about the UK...We often dwell on the difficult parts of our past and seem to accentuate the tricky bits, which can push people further away. I think a lot of parliamentarians would want to ask: are we leaving people with a warmer view of the UK? Are we making them want to have a stronger, more meaningful relationship with us in the future? That's an important outcome. This doesn't tread on the BBC's independence – it doesn't mean it has to say the present British Government is marvellous and doing everything brilliantly. But perhaps we do need to talk up the country a bit more. It's a delicate thing to inject into an independent news service, but I think it's not always done as explicitly as those of us defending its funding might hope."*

Lord Hammond acknowledges the value in promoting Britain's strengths, but stresses that this must be handled carefully: *"The World Service would lose credibility if it started to look like an advertorial, so you have got to be very careful about that. But I also don't think most of the audience would be surprised if they perceived a sort of quid pro quo – that it is funded partly by the British state, and in return it promotes the opportunities that there are for British exports and British trade. But you must do it in a way that doesn't compromise the independent integrity of the message."*

Matthew Barzun is unconvinced: *"I think it would probably go badly. I mean, I'm sympathetic to the feeling that I think is at the base of that frustration. But propaganda is propaganda and people pick up on it fairly quickly."*

Lord Vaizey echoes this caution, suggesting that subtle influence is more effective: *"I think that the definition of soft power is that you don't ram it down people's throats...Would it be better if the World Service was talking about, you know, Britain's lead in AI or whatever? I'm not sure that would make a huge difference. I think by osmosis the World Service makes people think Britain is a great place."*

James Purnell emphasised the importance of subtlety: *"The World Service should go indirectly at soft power. Because, if it's broadcasting to x number of countries, saying 'you must believe in Western democratic values', that's not going to work very well."*

Lord Sedwill takes the view that the World Service should be more global, not less. *"If I have a criticism of the World Service, it's that it can be too UK-centric...The real soft power of the BBC's brand is in being international. It should be even more global than it already is, not less...it isn't the 'Voice of Britain', and if it became that, it would be less effective."*

These views reflect the difficult balance that the World Service must strike – projecting Britain's values without jeopardising objectivity. This tension is embedded in the World Service Licence itself, which sets out a requirement to provide a 'global service', but also 'aiding understanding of the United Kingdom in a world context'. For the World Service, the challenge is to find the line between influence and impartiality – and to stay on the right side of it.

Conclusion

The BBC World Service's strength lies not in declaring values, but in the way editorial independence, freedom of expression, and democratic accountability are embedded in its journalism. Matthew Barzun describes the power of this approach: "It's a strange point to make for an audio platform, but the power of what the World Service does is in the 'body language.' Modelling independence and trust (and humility, humanity, and humour) each day is more attractive than ever."

In short, the World Service's influence goes beyond the headlines. It is a living example of the values it seeks to project, reinforcing Britain's global standing through its broadcasts, posts, podcasts, and investigations.

While British values remain an evolving set of ideas, the World Service reflects a broad set of principles through its commitment to editorial independence, public service content, and trusted information – often in regions where such values are under threat. Yet the Service is more than just a news organisation: through cultural programming it also showcases British creativity and sport; and through training initiatives, it embeds journalistic values beyond the reach of the BBC. These activities provide a cultural bridge that extends the UK's influence in softer but equally powerful ways. It protects and promotes open debate and critical thinking far more effectively than the Government could directly.

However, as the world becomes more contested and multipolar, the World Service faces a complex challenge: balancing its commitment to impartiality with the need to project Britain's values and perspectives in a world where other state-backed media are increasingly assertive. It must continue to walk this fine line, demonstrating that the UK's values are not just broadcast, but lived – and that the power of its message lies as much in its principles as in its reach.

Key Findings:

- **Reinforcing Values:** The BBC World Service reflects and reinforces core values of accuracy, impartiality, and fairness – which are closely related to a broader set of British values including freedom of expression, democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect/tolerance.
- **Countering Disinformation:** The World Service's role in countering disinformation, which exposes hidden truths and challenges state-sponsored narratives, is a promotion of a range of British values, and in the UK's broader interests.
- **Beyond News:** However, international state-backed competitors are investing time and money to influence other journalists and media outlets with a different set of values – intensifying the challenge facing the World Service.
- **Balancing Influence and Independence:** The World Service must navigate the complex challenge of promoting British values without appearing to serve as an instrument of state power, maintaining a principled commitment to editorial independence as a core part of its global appeal.

Chapter Four: Resonance

Assessing the depth of the BBC World Service's reach

It's important to test sentiment as well as reach, to get a better understanding of how global audiences relate to the BBC World Service – and to guard against complacency. Lord Parkinson told us that there can be *“a bit of a British tendency to pat ourselves on the back and assume everyone sees the BBC that way...We need to keep asking: when people see the BBC, do they see an independent British view – or the voice of the UK government? That's something that has to be constantly checked.”*

To better understand how the BBC World Service is perceived on the ground in key regions, two focus groups of influential users were conducted by the Institute for Global Prosperity and CreativePower in Kenya and Lebanon in April and May 2025.

These two countries were singled out by BBC Director General Tim Davie in a speech in October 2024 to illustrate both the aggressive competition faced by the World Service globally, and the consequences of cuts: *“When the World Service retreats, state funded media operators move in to take advantage. In Africa, our TV partners are of course taking programmes supplied by others to fill the gaps we left. Kenya's state broadcaster KBC, under tough financial constraints, has taken up Chinese output on TV and radio, as has Liberia's state broadcaster LBS. Meanwhile in Lebanon, Russian-backed media is now transmitting on the radio frequency previously occupied by BBC Arabic.”*¹⁰⁵

The BBC closed its Arabic radio station in January 2023 after 85 years – and recent cuts made to services in Kenya saw audience numbers drop by nearly a fifth. Nevertheless, the BBC World Service remains a significant media presence in both countries.

The sessions in both countries were made up of five influential users, including a mix of younger and older audiences, with professional backgrounds in journalism, communications, politics and the creative industries.

While not statistically representative, the focus group offers valuable qualitative insights into how the BBC World Service is received and sometimes challenged by audiences in two key markets.

CASE STUDY ONE:

The BBC World Service in Kenya

Kenya has long been one of the BBC World Service's most significant and loyal audiences – reaching 11.4m listeners per week in 2024, out of a population of around 55 million¹⁰⁶. The BBC began broadcasting in East Africa in the 1950s, and Swahili is one of its longest-running language services. Over the decades, the BBCWS has become a trusted news source for millions of Kenyans – and is ranked the No.1 international media outlet there when it comes to trust, reliability, and independence.¹⁰⁷

The discussion explored trust in the BBCWS, its perceived relevance, the influence of UK-focused content, and how it compares with international and local competitors.

A long presence

The BBC's perceived professionalism and historical influence emerged as a recurring theme – particularly in how it has shaped the style of broadcasting in Kenya.

• 'A BBC blueprint'

*“It's different from how other media houses do their news. For example, there's a very big difference between how the BBC presents its news and how others like Voice of America or even Al Jazeera and France 24 do – especially the English-language channels. I think one reason might be that the BBC, at least when it comes to the African continent, seems to have **more African journalists**. Maybe that helps them **connect better to African issues, and it shows in their reporting**. Also, the BBC has been around for a long time in Africa – especially in Kenya. A lot of local stations have copied how the BBC does things: how they present the news, how they curate their programs, their whole style. My mother worked in radio at KBC for years, and I remember she used what was basically a BBC blueprint – for presenting her shows, for interviewing guests, even for how she structured her programs. That influence is still visible today. When I compare BBC News to CNN, for instance, there are big differences. Not just in the content, but in how the story is told and what you take away from it. I think the **BBC is just more refined** – it feels more professionally edited. Not that others aren't professional, but there's **something about the BBC that stands out.**”*

- **'A huge impact'**

*"From what I understand, before independence, the BBC was basically the main source of information [in Kenya] – it's where we got our news. After independence, the BBC became something of a blueprint. Every media station in Kenya looked to it when setting up – how to structure their stations, how to present news, how to operate. So in that context, I'd say the **BBC has had a huge impact in shaping the Kenyan media landscape** after independence. Its influence goes beyond content – it helped define the standard."*

- **'Shaped how media is done here'**

*"If you look at what was happening about ten years ago in radio, it was more or less a copy-and-paste of the BBC and some of its sister stations. Even when you look at TV programmes, we've copied a lot of what the BBC has done... We've either done the same shows or just tweaked them a bit to suit the Kenyan audience. As far as the BBC World Service is concerned, we've done documentaries the same way they've done documentaries. On radio, we've also done plays – especially on stations like KBC and its affiliates. **They've done more or less what the BBC World Service has done. So there's been a very big influence, especially on public opinion at the time – people who watched and listened to those shows. The BBC really shaped how media is done here.**"*

'Inherited trust'

The group were asked to think about levels of trust in the BBC World Service – including the nature of that trust, and how it compares to competitors. While the World Service is still seen as setting the standard for credible news provision, participants raised important distinctions between earned trust and inherited reputation.

- **'People still go back to the BBC'**

*"At the end of the day, even with all the alternative media sources we have now – especially digital – **many people still go back to the BBC to confirm what they've heard elsewhere. It's still seen as the benchmark for accurate information.** That said, I think the current audience tends to be more middle class and elite. It's **not necessarily reaching everyone equally, but it definitely still holds influence among those groups.**"*

- **'First mover advantage'**

*"There are pros and cons [for the BBC World Service having had a presence in Kenya for so long]. **They definitely have a first-mover advantage** – that's both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, they've been able to **shape the media landscape in Kenya early on**, even before our local stations came in. Being there first gave them more time to establish themselves and build reach. I'd say the downside is that for a lot of people, the trust they have in the BBC hasn't necessarily been built themselves, or through fact-checking. **It's more like inherited trust.** So because my grandmother used to listen to it, I listen to it. But then when I go online and start looking at the facts and details, I realise 'wait a minute – no, the BBC are not as objective as they say they are.'"*

Editorial style and perceived identity

While the BBC World Service is widely viewed as being more factual and restrained than other international outlets, participants raised questions about its cultural identity and influence.

The BBC was seen not as overtly political, but as subtly projecting a particular image of Britain – one shaped as much by royal events and symbolic coverage as by editorial choices.

Participants did not report any noticeable impact from recent BBC cuts in Kenya, but offered reflections on the saturation of UK-focused content in Kenyan media, and the legacy of colonialism.

// The BBC was seen not as overtly political, but as subtly projecting a particular image of Britain – one shaped as much by royal events and symbolic coverage as by editorial choices.

- **'Projecting Britishness'**

*"There's not a perception that it is directly influenced by [the UK Government]. But there is the **perception that it is projecting the UK or the British in favour**, as a way to influence... It's subtle but for example, **how the BBC are portraying the monarchy is projecting British culture, a British kind of democracy**. I'm not insinuating that this is direct influence by the government...I'm not saying that it's imposing the ideologies of the sitting government. Rather, it's about other influences beyond even government. **The projection of the British as a people – not the government itself.**"*

*"**There's a history behind it – colonialism, the legacy of that. It's not necessarily right or wrong – it just is.** Some of the trust comes from that history, from the fact that Britain was the principal power. For example, if you go to Francophone Africa, they'd rather listen to French stations than the BBC. **It's just by default – it's about history and identity.** And that's both a pro and a con".*

- **'Letting the facts speak'**

*"I think the BBC presents the news in a more **straightforward and focused way**, especially when it comes to news about Africa, I've noticed that....One thing stands out [about the BBC World Service's approach]: the BBC tends to present the story, give the facts, gather a few public opinions, and then move on. It feels concise and balanced. With some other international outlets – like CNN, for example – I feel like they go much further into discussion and debate. Sometimes that adds context, but sometimes the original story or issue gets lost in all the commentary. It can feel like there's more agenda-setting happening. **With the BBC, the reporting seems less about pushing a narrative and more about letting the facts speak.**"*

- **UK-focused content**

*"It depends on who exactly you're asking this question—about the perception of the UK – and where you're asking it. If you ask in a lot of urban areas...**chances are, they don't even consume BBC anymore.** But if you ask someone like myself – as a journalist, and as someone who has to do research every single day on media so I can know what to report, how to report it, and be as objective as I can – then yes, I would say **the BBC probably has shaped my perception of the UK.** But there's also another situation... Every major event in the UK is usually broadcast here for people to watch. For example, every royal wedding in the last 10 years – there's always been special coverage. When the Queen passed away, I think every TV station in the country was broadcasting that event. When Prince Philip died, again, it was **broadcast across every major outlet.** The newspapers had full pages dedicated to it. So what is the Kenyan perception of the UK? It's shaped by all that too – **not just by the BBC.**"*

- **Government-owned**

*"For the longest time, **nobody knew that the BBC was actually owned by the [UK] government.** People just knew that the BBC was a radio station and a media organisation that came from Britain."*

China & Russia

The BBC World Service now operates in an increasingly competitive environment in Kenya. While participants didn't cite any specific impacts from the recent BBC cuts in Kenya, they noted China and Russia's growing investment in Kenya's media landscape – from content production to control of local stations.

- *"When it comes to the media, I know **China is doing quite a lot in Kenya.** They're even buying small TV and radio stations – community stations – taking a 51% share."*
- *"The Russians are doing things I didn't think possible five years ago – publishing in Kenya through Sputnik news and RT news."*

'Like a grandparent'

There was a recognition of demographic challenges for the BBC – that 'YouTube has taken over' for the younger generation.

There was also talk of a great 'familiarity' associated with the BBC World Service, due its long presence in Kenya – but that also came with an expression of fatigue:

- *"We're looking at [the BBC World Service in Kenya] the way we look at our grandparents, literally. **They are old. They know a lot, of course. They have a lot of wisdom, for sure. And they have something to offer. But the question is: do I really want to consume it? Not necessarily – unless I really have to.** And I'm talking from a common Kenyan perspective, you know. Yeah, so this overconsumption of UK media – sometimes it's because it's been **shoved down our throats.** Like I said, every major UK event is usually broadcast here – not just on the BBC but on our local media. And to some extent, people have had enough of it. **Sometimes they'd rather watch a random documentary on YouTube than a royal wedding or a royal funeral** – because that's what we get. When the King and Queen came here a couple of months ago, they were here for what, three days? And there was literally nothing else we talked about apart from their visit. And **it's not relevant.** The common Kenyan – someone in Wajir right now who doesn't have food or water – really doesn't care whether the King and Queen are here. All he cares about is: are they bringing us water? Are they bringing us food? That's what they need to know."*

Key Findings: Kenya

Despite recent cuts, the BBC World Service remains a significant and broadly trusted media player in Kenya. It's also had a strong historic influence on the national media landscape.

Yet the focus group revealed a more complex picture emerging today: one of generational shifts and divides, important qualifiers to trust, and questions of cultural relevance.

The evidence suggests that the World Service faces long-term challenges in Kenya as inherited trust fades. It must also navigate the challenges of audience fatigue, perceived cultural projection, and growing competition from global media rivals. In a media market it helped to shape, the BBC's continued influence cannot be taken for granted.

- **Historic influence:** The World Service has played a significant role in shaping the Kenyan media landscape – but that history comes with baggage.
- **Trust is enduring** – but inherited: Many still rely on the BBC for confirmation of facts, but trust is often generational, not always critically earned. This presents challenges for the future.
- **Perceived cultural projection:** Royal events and UK-centric coverage contribute to a perception of subtle cultural messaging, even without overt political influence.
- **Audience segmentation:** The BBC is seen as more relevant to elite and middle-class audiences, with younger users turning to other platforms.
- **Growing competition:** Chinese and Russian state media are noticeably expanding through both content and infrastructure investment.
- **Familiarity vs fatigue:** The World Service is seen by some as a trusted elder – respected, but not always desirable, in a rapidly changing media environment.

CASE STUDY TWO:

The BBC World Service in Lebanon

Lebanon has a complex and divided media landscape, shaped by decades of conflict and external influence. Despite this, the BBC World Service has managed to establish a significant presence in the country, reaching 891,300 people each week in 2024 (94% of BBC News' total reach there), out of a population of around 5.8 million. In Lebanon, BBC World Service content is available in Arabic and English through a satellite TV, radio (English only), and digital platforms.

The nature of the relationship between audiences and the BBC World Service feels very different in Lebanon compared to Kenya, reflecting broader tensions in the country and throughout the region. However, it remains an important source of international news for certain sections of the Lebanese population.

Divide along generational and geographical lines

Participants highlighted a clear generational divide in how the BBC is consumed and perceived. Several participants noted that older generations, who still rely on traditional TV and radio, are more likely to view the BBC as a trusted source, while younger audiences tend to favour digital news platforms, often turning to local or alternative sources for more immediate and contextually relevant coverage.

- **Generational divide**
"The way people get their news here is really different depending on the generation. For the older generation – people over 50 who still watch TV – the BBC still has a place. They turn on the television, and that's where they get their news. But for us, the younger generation, it's different... We don't have the patience for long, panel-style discussions that go on for hours. We want to choose what news we consume, when we consume it, and how we consume it – more bite-sized updates, not long broadcasts. It's just a generational thing."
- **North-South divide**
"If you pick someone from South Lebanon and ask them about their perceptions of the BBC, it would be different if you take someone from the north. For those living in areas directly affected by conflict, trust in Western media is shaped by lived experience, not just journalistic output."

Trust and Perceived Bias

A recurring theme in the focus group was the question of the BBC's neutrality and its perceived Western bias. While some participants acknowledged that the BBC is still seen as a relatively credible source for international news, many felt it struggles to maintain true neutrality, particularly in its coverage of Lebanese and broader Middle Eastern issues.

- **Perceived Israeli bias**

"For me, the BBC has sometimes felt less like an international channel and more like an Israeli local channel. It's not just about the facts they present, but the tone, the emphasis, the context they choose to include or leave out."

"If you want to gain trust in communication, you need to show both sides of a story. During the last conflict, the BBC was seen taking a tour with the Israeli army but not showing the same kind of access to the Lebanese side. That kind of coverage imbalance is obvious to viewers here and erodes trust."

- **Independent**

"One of the things that used to set the BBC apart was its independence – the sense that it wasn't pushing a particular agenda. Even when you read the English-language coverage, you can rely on it as a source, which isn't always the case with other news platforms. Some channels clearly align with a particular political stance, which is fine – that's the nature of the media – but it makes a difference."

- **'An obvious bias'**

"I'm particularly critical of the BBC's coverage of the Middle East when it comes to Israel. I feel there is an obvious bias, which reflects the UK's broader political stance, and that affects how the BBC covers those issues. That said, I do trust the BBC for other international news. If I want to follow UK news, or other international news, for example, I would go to the BBC for sure. But when it comes to the Middle East, my own experience and my understanding of the region means I view it differently. This is partly because of history, and this often ties back to the legacies of colonisation. But also what one side calls resistance, another might label differently. I tend to cross-check BBC reports with other sources."

"I think specifically when it comes to geopolitics, especially related to the Middle East and Israel, that's where I – and most Lebanese – are most critical of the BBC's coverage and many other Western outlets."

- **Perceptions shaped by conflict coverage**

"Before the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, I used to follow a wide range of international news channels, including the BBC, from different perspectives. But when the wars started, my view changed. As someone from the south of Lebanon who lived through the 2006 conflict, I felt that the BBC's coverage wasn't objective. It didn't reflect what I was seeing on the ground, and it didn't stand up for local journalists who were being killed. I understand that no outlet can be completely neutral, but I expected more balance – at least an effort to show both sides. So, I unfollowed the BBC during the war. I still checked back occasionally, but it only confirmed my decision to rely on local sources instead. In that moment, we were the real sources on the ground."

Framing

Participants reflected on the way the BBC presents its news – including the language it uses and the tone it adopts – and how that can shape audience perceptions. There was also discussion of how perceptions change over time.

- **Difference between English and Arabic service**

"I don't watch the BBC on TV, but I do follow both BBC Arabic and BBC English on Twitter, and one thing that really frustrates me is the difference in tone between the two. You can read the same story, but the language is often quite different. For example, in English, a report might describe a seven-year-old girl as having 'died in mysterious circumstances,' while the Arabic version might say she was 'targeted by bullets.' It can feel like the same story is being told in two very different ways, which can give the impression of bias, depending on the audience."

- **'Becoming more aware'**

"I think there's a kind of halo effect with outlets like CNN and the BBC. For a long time, you just assume they're the gold standard for journalism – you trust them almost by default. But as you become more aware of how news is made, you start to question that. If you're someone who opposes groups like Hezbollah or Hamas, for example, you might appreciate the way these outlets frame those groups as 'terrorists.' That can feel validating and reinforce your trust in them. But for others, this kind of language can feel completely disconnected from their own lived experience and their values. So yes, these outlets have a long history and a big legacy, but it doesn't mean everyone here automatically trusts them."

- **No endless discussions**

"With the BBC, you don't get the endless, often chaotic discussions you see on some other channels, where people talk for hours without a clear direction or without the audience really knowing who the speakers are. You can turn it on, get your news, and be reasonably confident it's accurate."

A British institution

"I wouldn't say the BBC has an explicit agenda, but it's still a British institution, and that context definitely shapes how it covers certain issues. For example, when the BBC reports on conflicts, the way it uses terms like 'terrorism' or 'resistance' can really affect how people see its coverage. In a place like Lebanon, this kind of language matters. If the BBC's tone feels like it's leaning towards one side, it can really undermine its credibility – especially for people who don't have a good understanding of the context or the media landscape. That choice of words can either build trust or break it."

"For some of us in Lebanon, the BBC's status as a British institution shapes how its coverage is seen. This connection to British history in the region – including its colonial past – can influence trust. Some see the BBC as reflecting British interests."

UK/BBC association

"The way I see the BBC is closely tied to my perception of the UK as a whole, and that's shaped by history. When I watch the BBC, I can't separate its coverage from the UK's broader historical role in the Middle East – particularly its role in the colonisation of Palestine and the wider region."

"I think the way the BBC covers political news can shape how people here see the UK. For some, it can feel like the BBC is pushing a particular agenda, which can be a turn-off."

Competitors

Several alternative broadcasters were mentioned in the focus groups, with Russia Today receiving the most attention. France 24 was also mentioned as a relatively trusted source, possibly due to Lebanon's historical connection to France. In contrast, Chinese outlets were barely discussed.

- **Russia Today:**
"Russia Today has been doing a great job in Lebanon, especially in the south."
"I'm sure the Russians have benefited from the gap the BBC left, especially in radio. They moved in quickly to fill it, and that's made a difference. In Syria, especially during the Assad regime, they had a strong influence. They were the ones shaping the narrative in this region, especially in the south, where their politics had a big impact."

- **'Detached':**
"When there's conflict in the south, you often don't see the BBC, Sky News, or even some Lebanese broadcasters on the ground. But you do see journalists from outlets like Russia Today – they're there, even when the situation is intense, like when Israeli forces are firing... But when it comes to the BBC, I don't know if their brand or their rules prevent them from being as present in these situations. It's a different kind of journalism, maybe more detached, and that affects how people here see them."
- **France 24:**
"I follow Russia Today on Twitter, both in English and Arabic, but it's not that prominent in my feed. It doesn't seem to have a strong presence here. Chinese outlets are even less visible – I only really notice them because Twitter now labels them as state-affiliated, so I can tell they're Chinese when they pop up. France 24, on the other hand, has a much bigger presence in Lebanon. I'm not sure if that's because of the historical French connection, but they cover a lot of day-to-day events here, and I generally find them somewhat trustworthy. There's always some bias, of course, but when it comes to internal Lebanese politics, it feels more straightforward."

Cultural Identity and Soft Power

Despite these criticisms, some participants acknowledged that the BBC still holds a particular status as a global broadcaster with unparalleled reach. Its coverage of non-political issues, such as environmental stories or global cultural events, was praised for its depth and quality.

"For me as a journalist, the BBC World Service is one of the sources we can rely on for information. It feels neutral – not obviously affiliated with any particular government, or at least that's the impression it gives. You can sense a difference in how it covers political issues, especially when compared to other Arabic-language channels, which are often closely tied to their respective states."

"When I watch the Premier League... I would say, wow, the UK is amazing. But when I talk about politics, I won't be watching BBC News. There's a clear separation in my mind between the UK in terms of politics and culture."

Key Findings: Lebanon

The BBC World Service remains a significant, if contested, presence in the Lebanese media landscape.

While it continues to attract viewers for international news and broader cultural coverage, its reputation is often overshadowed by perceptions of Western bias, particularly in its Middle East reporting.

Generational divides and the lingering impact of Britain's legacy in the region also shape how it is viewed. Despite this, the World Service continues to be a relevant and widely recognised news source, even as it faces increasing competition from other international broadcasters – and challenges to its reach brought by funding constraints.

- **Generational Divide:** Unsurprisingly, younger audiences favour digital, app-based news, while older generations remain loyal to TV, reflecting a split in how the World Service is consumed.
- **Trust and Bias:** Many participants felt the BBC's coverage of the Middle East cannot be trusted – and is influenced by broader British interests, particularly in its use of terms like 'terrorism'.
- **Regional Sensitivities:** Perceptions of the World Service differ significantly between northern and southern Lebanon, with those in conflict-affected areas often more sceptical of Western media.
- **Language Matters:** Differences in tone between BBC Arabic and BBC English were noted as a source of frustration, with some viewers perceiving bias in how stories are framed.
- **Competition from Other Outlets:** Russia Today and France 24 were seen as significant competitors, with the former praised for its local connections and presence in conflict zones.

Overall findings from Kenya and Lebanon

1. **Generational shifts:** In both Kenya and Lebanon, older audiences remain loyal to the BBC, often relying on traditional radio and TV, while younger users are shifting to digital platforms and local alternatives. This generational divide poses a long-term challenge to the BBC's relevance as media habits continue to evolve.
2. **Trust is complex:** The BBC enjoys a long-standing reputation for trust in both markets, but this trust is often inherited rather than critically assessed and is increasingly questioned by younger audiences. In Lebanon, this trust is complicated by perceptions of Western bias, while in Kenya it is seen as a legacy of early media presence.
3. **Intensifying competition:** In both markets, the BBC faces growing competition from well-funded state-backed media who are investing in local journalism and infrastructure, challenging the BBC's dominance.
4. **Familiarity vs fatigue:** While the BBC is still seen as a respected, trusted brand in both markets, there is a risk of 'brand fatigue' as audiences seek fresher, more locally relevant content. This was noted in Kenya, where the BBC is sometimes seen as a 'trusted elder' that may no longer fully resonate with rapidly changing audience expectations – and in Lebanon where perceptions of bias threaten longer term sustainability.

Chapter Five:

Assessing the Soft Power impact of the BBC World Service

“If you go around the world and you ask people to think for a moment and give an example of soft power in action, I’ll bet you get the BBC World Service cited more than any other single intervention.”

– Lord Hammond, former UK Foreign Secretary

Over almost a century, the BBC World Service has developed an impressive global presence – but also a deep one. Reaching 320 million people each week in every continent in the world, it enjoys a level of trust that is immensely more valuable than anything we could create from scratch.

From delivering life-saving radio bulletins in Gaza, to countering disinformation from Russia, to indirectly supporting the role of British diplomats abroad and promoting Britain’s brand – the BBC World Service’s ability to reach into people’s homes and their lives enables it to operate more effectively than any of its peers, and far beyond the capability of the state.

Introducing the Soft Power Index Framework

To provide a robust assessment of the BBC World Service’s impact as a soft power institution, this report uses a structured scoring framework. This approach has been developed by CreativePower to provide a fair, comprehensive, and repeatable method for evaluating the BBC’s contribution, ensuring the findings presented here are meaningful and useful to policymakers, media leaders, and cultural institutions.

This approach aims to capture both the quantitative and qualitative scale of the World Service’s influence, while also reflecting the complex nature of soft power. It includes a balanced set of questions that explore audience reach, strategic alignment, values-driven programming, and long-term impact.

How it works

The Soft Power Impact Index (SPII) assessment panel considered the evidence in this report against 30 questions, separated into the main themes of this report (equally weighted): Global Reach, National Strategic Value, British Values, and Resonance. Each question was given a score between one and five, and a total was calculated for each category. Finally, a score was reached for the evidence as a whole – captured with a single descriptor in line with the chart in Exhibit 16, opposite.

The Soft Power Impact Index

Exhibit 16: SPII rating scale

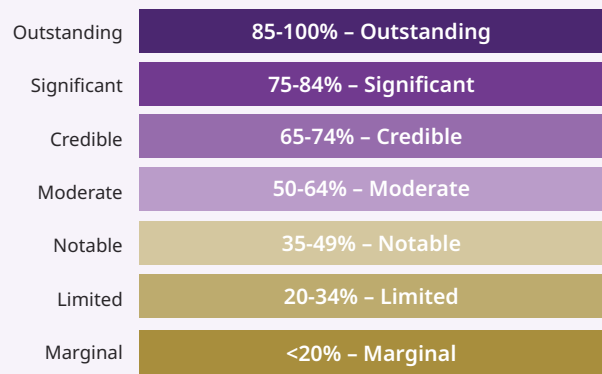
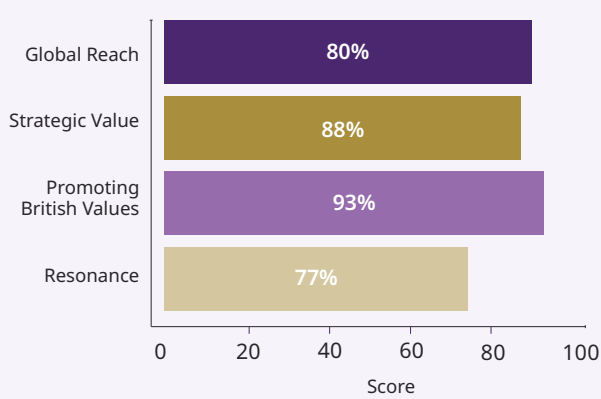


Exhibit 17: BBC World Service SPII rating (by theme)



In conducting their assessment, the panel took into consideration all of the qualitative and quantitative evidence provided – including interviews, focus groups, polling, BBC data, select committee sessions and desk research. The panel also considered the impact that funding instability has had in recent years, and the shadow it casts over the World Service’s future and its ability to maintain its strong position.

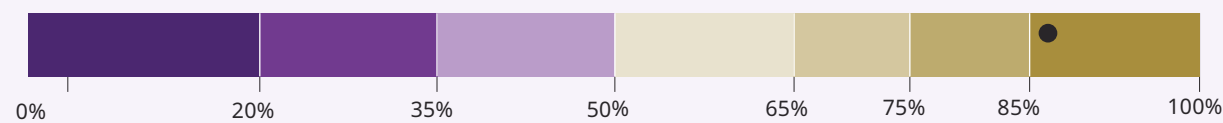
The members of the panel were: Professor Dame Henrietta Moore, Founder and Director of the Institute for Global Prosperity and the Chair in Culture Philosophy and Design at University College London; Dr Fatemeh Sadeghi, Political Scientist and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Global Prosperity; and Giles Winn, Creative Sector policy specialist, media analyst, and author of this report. Considering all the evidence presented, the panel scored the BBC World Service as follows:

- **Global Reach: 89%**
Whilst recent cuts have led to audience reductions, the World Service’s reach across geographical and language boundaries is unparalleled.
- **Strategic Value: 88%**
The World Service undoubtedly has a strategic value that indirectly supports national interests abroad.
- **Promoting British Values: 93%**
It embodies and implicitly projects a set of national values, while also promoting a brand that is broadly positive for Britain.
- **Resonance: 77%**
The World Service has built trust across the globe over decades. But in some parts of the world, that history comes with baggage – and has contributed to a lessening of trust.

The total score across all sub-sections was **86%**, and the panel finds that the BBC World Service makes an **outstanding** contribution to Britain’s soft power.

Soft Power Impact Index rating for the BBC World Service: 86%

Exhibit 18:



Chapter Six: Reflections on the Future & Recommendations

Our interviews for this report explored action that should be taken to protect, strengthen and better utilise the BBC World Service as a soft power asset. Interviewees offered views across a range of categories. Some of these have been explored in our primary chapters – remaining observations are outlined here.

Funding Models

FCDO funding

- One of the BBC's central asks around the World Service is that funding should be restored in full to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. This had a mixed reception among our interviewees. Dame Sue Owen and Eliza Easton felt strongly that this should happen, but Lord Hammond felt that such a move would put the World Service's independence at risk:

// One way or another British citizens are paying for this, but it would be better to channel it through one arm rather than have multiple organisations involved and no-one taking overall responsibility."

Sir John Sawers

"The BBC is a statutorily impartial broadcaster. The Foreign Office isn't, so it's slightly uncomfortable if the Foreign Office is paying the bill. You can't pretend that there's full independence when the people running the thing have to turn up in the Foreign Secretary's office every year to negotiate their package for the following year."

- Sir John Sawers highlighted the need to protect funding: *"I think it's better to have clarity on these things. One way or another British citizens are paying for this, but it would be better to channel it through one arm rather than have multiple organisations involved and no-one taking overall responsibility. That said, funding for the BBC World Service...does need to be protected. What you don't want is for the funds to go into the FCDO pot, and for the permanent secretary to be deciding between how much is spent on the World Service and how much is spent on creating a new embassy somewhere"*.
- Lord Vaizey said that FCDO control over funding would potentially raise interesting questions around governance: *"If it was entirely funded by the FCDO, I certainly think some kind of complete structural independence from the BBC should be something to look at...Because otherwise you'd have a kind of halfway house. Why should the BBC have any operational role in the World Service if its funded entirely by FCDO? You could have a licensing agreement where you have an agreement so that the BBC and the BBC World Service can share resources, studios or whatever. But it would kind of create a sort of clear demarcation between what the BBC is and what the World Service is....For example, should it have complete structure independence, its own board, its own chair and its own chief executive, that's appointed by an independent board, not by ministers. The FCDO could have an observer role on the board, but not an executive role."*
- Former World Service Director Jamie Angus suggested that the BBC remain responsible for World Service international output in English, and the Government would then take on the funding of all the other language services. *"Broadly, that is an elegant, sensible solution, because the Licence Fee payer has a strong connection to services in English"*, he told MPs last year.
- Interestingly, Angus also proposes that oversight of the language services specifically be passed to the Cabinet Office rather than the FCDO, and that Parliament itself might have an oversight role, for example through a parliamentary Grand Committee. *"That reflects much more the way that international broadcasting is organised in both the United States and in Germany, for example—Deutsche Welle and the American services, VOA and USAGM, are funded and overseen through the Parliament."*

Philanthropic Funding

- Both Sir John Sawers and Matthew Barzun suggested philanthropic funding could be used to support the BBC World Service, learning from other media organisations.
- Sir John Sawers told us: *"I think you need to keep open the scope for some philanthropic funding contributions towards the World Service...I don't think we should be shy about opening up our various soft power levers to foundation funding. And obviously it's not commercial funding in the sense you would have Microsoft sponsoring the BBC. But if someone like Bill Gates as a former founder of Microsoft, has his own foundation and wants to contribute say £50 million a year to promoting access to independent information in Africa, that shouldn't be ruled out."*
- Matthew Barzun raised the idea of smaller scale donations. *"Everyone made fun of The Guardian when they decided to just let people voluntarily give money... and it's tens of millions of dollars a year now, with no sales force. It's just a well-written, thoughtful, honest request. It's small amounts, but it adds up to a big number. It's basically done in the spirit of, 'I really benefit from this, I love that this can still be available to people who maybe can't pay.' And that instinct has worked really well."*

The Aid Budget

- Currently around 80% of Government funding for the World Service comes from the aid budget – Official Development Assistance (ODA). Several of our interviewees were strongly supportive of funding a greater proportion of the World Service from ODA (while noting the Government's plan to drastically reduce the amount it spends on ODA). Eliza Easton was cautious about this approach. *"It depends on how many strings come attached with aid budget funding. My experience is that it can significantly reduce an organisation's flexibility...There's also a reputational risk. When you say something is 'aid', it can have a slightly colonial tone – the idea that you're 'helping' people in need. That's not the relationship you want if you're trying to build trust with audiences who may already be sceptical of foreign influence. You don't want people to feel they're listening to a service that's only there to 'help' them, rather than to provide objective news."*
- While tangential to this report, it should also be noted that many of our interviewees mentioned Britain's aid budget as an asset in itself, and lamented its demise as a key source of British soft power. Lord Hammond highlighted the odd juxtaposition between the current UK Government's apparent enthusiasm for soft power, alongside its reduction in foreign aid. *"I think it's very bizarre to be talking about a soft power strategy when you've just eviscerated the aid budget"*, he told us. *"The aid budget was a very important part of our soft power agenda. We've gone from five years ago, being one of the most well reputed aid donors at 0.7% of GDP, with good quality projects, high return on investment – and we've gone to being an absolutely nowhere provider. We're just not in the game anymore. It's totally disingenuous to strip the aid budget from 0.7% to 0.3% of GDP and then say, let's form a council to decide how to build our soft power."*

Regional Focus

- Lord Sedwill told us the BBC should be ambitious in considering new territories for reach: *“For example, where are the areas where China is advancing, and the West isn’t? That might mean focusing more on Spanish language services in Latin America, or other regions where influence is contested. It’s a legitimate conversation for the government to have with [the BBC] – identifying where we really need to be present – without necessarily micromanaging their editorial decisions.”*

Soft power at home

- Former Arts Minister Lord Parkinson told us that greater awareness and understanding of the World Service among policymakers and the public in the UK, could help to provide the support it needs for the future. *“It could be talked about a bit more on the BBC domestically in the UK because I think it’s something we should all be very proud of, but we need to be a bit more informed about what the BBC is doing around the world for different audiences, especially with people taking a greater interest in global affairs and with large diaspora communities here in the UK.”*

Digital reach

- Chapter One explored the World Service’s digital reach. Eliza Easton suggests establishing a digital fund – paid for by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) – to support a digital transformation at the World Service, and use it as a model for other media organisations. *“If DSIT could see this as a genuinely ambitious, tech-forward opportunity...then it could be really exciting. You could develop digital tools and innovations that aren’t just for the BBC, but potentially for other broadcasters as well. There’s also the potential benefit of moving this out of the FCDO’s orbit. If you’re funding digital innovation through DSIT, you’re less likely to have the political strings that might come with Foreign Office funding.”*

The threat of managed decline

- Dr Melissa Nisbett drew comparisons with the British Council – a soft power institution facing serious funding challenges. *“I worry the BBC World Service could end up in a similar situation if it’s forced to rely too heavily on commercial revenue or cost-cutting measures. It’s a reminder that these institutions need a stable, long-term funding model if they’re to remain credible and effective soft power assets... If the Government are serious about soft power, it would be a very strange moment to let these institutions die – they already have the credibility, reach, and experience to do what David Lammy is calling for. If you let them die, what exactly are you putting in their place? Do you start from scratch and spend decades trying to build that credibility again? I just don’t see the strategic logic in that.”*
- Dr Nisbett also articulated one of the choices facing the Government: *“If you allow managed decline – which I think would be the wrong decision – you might as well just cut the funding now and use those resources for something else, rather than letting the World Service slowly dwindle until it’s no longer effective. I just don’t see the point in that.”*
- Finally, Lord Sedwill paints a picture of what’s at stake if the World Service doesn’t receive the funding it needs: *“If the BBC World Service doesn’t get the funding it needs, it will do what hierarchical organisations tend to do – it will try to keep doing everything, but end up doing it all less well. You’ll get a gradual loss of capability, rather than making the tough choices needed to stay world class.”*

Recommendations

The evidence gathered throughout this report suggests that the BBC World Service faces two possible futures.

In 2024, the Government announced extra funding for the World Service. But this didn't shield it from further cuts – and without a long-term funding plan, the World Service will find it difficult to avoid permanent, albeit gradual, decline.

However, in May 2025, BBC Director General Tim Davie set out a bold vision for growth, and an intention to double the reach of the World Service.

Both of these routes come with different costs, and the upcoming Spending Review and BBC Charter Review will present opportunities for the Government and the BBC to consider their preferred approach.

Our global reach tracker (exhibit 5 on page 14) identifies a strong relationship between the World Service's funding and the number of people who consume it. This suggests that extra funding required to double the reach of the World Service is likely to be between £200m and £400m per year.

This puts the World Service at a crossroads – either to pursue sustained growth or to accept managed decline.

The following recommendations are designed to support a brighter future for the World Service:

1. Funding

- a. The UK Government should provide the World Service with a stable funding settlement that allows for long-term ambitious planning.
- b. The World Service is primarily an asset that serves overseas audiences, bringing value to British citizens through its strategic importance, more than its cultural impact at home. As such, it should be funded primarily by the UK Government, not Licence Fee payers. However, appropriate mechanisms should be put in place to ensure the Service's vital independence is (visibly) preserved.
- c. The UK Government should be imaginative and about the level and sources of funding for the World Service. Given its national strategic value, the Government should consider using the defence budget or further aid funding – and not rule out philanthropic contributions as part of the mix.

2. Growth

- a. Expanding the World Service's global reach requires not just funding, but a plan to achieve it. The BBC should develop a Strategy for Growth for the World Service.
- b. As it develops this plan, the BBC should work closely with the UK Government to align its evolving regional focus with national strategic objectives. This should be high level and light touch, to preserve the World Service's independence.
- c. The BBC should consider expanding its reach into regions where, as Lord Sedwill suggested, 'influence is contested', such as Latin America. The closure of Voice of America and the challenges facing media previously in receipt of US funding could present opportunities for expansion that align with UK national interests, for example in Eastern Europe.
- d. The British public should also be involved in the discussion about the World Service's future – to raise awareness of its important work, and to provide a stronger mandate for growth.

3. Platforms

- a. The World Service has pockets of significant strength on some of its digital platforms. The BBC should pursue ambitious digital growth – particularly on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok – to expand its global presence and build trusted reach with new audiences.
- b. In line with comments made by our interviewees, the BBC should develop a clearer, more coherent strategy for the role television plays in its international news output – one with the World Service's brand, ethos and trusted reach at its heart.

Annex

This table provides an overview of the BBC World Service's main international broadcast competitors including funding models, global influence, and estimated audience reach where available. Estimated audience reach is highly speculative, and in some instances relies on self-reporting.

Broadcaster	Ownership/Funding model	Global influence	Est. audience reach (weekly)	Sources and Estimates
BBC World Service	State owned (UK Government) – part state funded, part Licence Fee	Serves audiences in 42 languages, in over 100 countries	320 million	BBC's global audience holds firm despite increased competition
CNN International	Private (Warner Bros. Discovery), USA	Significant global presence, especially in English-speaking regions	~153 million (monthly digital users) Estimated weekly TV + digital: ~70-80 million	CNN Fact Sheet (official digital only) Estimate based on Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 and industry analysis
Al Jazeera English	State-funded (Qatari government)	Strong influence in MENA and parts of Africa/Asia	Official: ~430 million households (technical reach) Estimated weekly individuals: ~40-50 million	Al Jazeera About Us (official household reach) Estimate based on Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 and Ipsos audience measurement
RT (Russia Today)	State-funded (Russian government)	Significant online presence, especially in Arabic and Spanish	Official: ~700 million potential viewers (technical reach) Estimated weekly individuals: ~10-15 million	RT About (official technical reach) Estimate based on Debunk.org , Reuters Institute 2023 , and post-Ukraine ban impact
CGTN	State-funded (Chinese government)	Growing in Africa, Asia; limited trust in Western markets	Official: Available in 170+ countries (technical reach) Estimated weekly individuals: ~30-35 million	CGTN America (technical reach) Estimate based on Reuters Institute 2023 and Statista
France 24	State-funded (French government)	Broadcasts in four languages; notable in Francophone Africa	~100 million	France 24 Official 2024
Deutsche Welle (DW)	State-funded (German government)	Content in 32 languages; strong online presence	~319 million	DW Official 2023 Figures
Voice of America (VOA) – currently not operational	State-funded (U.S. government)	Strong in Africa, Asia, parts of Latin America	~326 million	USAGM VOA Fact Sheet , VOA One Sheet PDF

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- ¹⁰⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/documents/bbc-global-impact-and-influence-research-2025.pdf> BBC-commissioned research report on global impact and influence.
- ¹⁰⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/speeches/2024/future-resilience-forum-tim-davie-director-general> Transcript of a speech by the BBC Director General, Tim Davie, at the Future Resilience Forum in 2024.
- ¹⁰⁶ BBC Global Audience Measure 2024, Official BBC report providing data on the World Service's global audience reach and demographics for 2024.
- ¹⁰⁷ Information and data supplied directly by the BBC, not from a published document.
- ¹⁰⁸ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15004/pdf/> Transcript of Foreign Affairs Select Committee Session, November 2024.



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