CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk
Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript:

Nation Speaking Peace unto Nation: The BBC's Global Mission

Mark Thompson

Director-General, BBC

12 May 2010

Mark Thompson:

A few weeks ago I had a chance to visit the studios where one of the BBC's most successful and popular soap operas is made. It's not Eastenders. It's not The Archers. Yet, despite being set thousands of miles from Loxley or the Queen Vic, despite the fact that the actors speak in two languages neither of which I understand, it's unmistakably a BBC programme.

It's called New Home, New Life. It's made by the BBC World Service Trust in both Dari and Pashto and for the past 16 years it's been broadcast every week by the BBC Afghan Service.

New Home, New Life tells the story of life in a cluster of villages in rural Afghanistan. Some of the story-lines – especially the agricultural ones – really could have been transposed from Ambridge. Others not.

One of the characters, for instance, lost his leg in a mine accident. The drama of how Jandad and his family raised the money for an artificial limb and then how he retrained as a tailor kept our listeners gripped for months.

HIV and AIDs prevention, children's health, the highly controversial topic of dowries, why should you vote and how do you do it – these are some of underlying educational themes and messages New Home, New Life has been able to deliver.

The skill of the writers and producers is to encapsulate these messages in a vivid and unmissable drama, which is why New Home, New Life reaches two-thirds of all radio listeners in Afghanistan every month.

And it's become part of Afghan national life. The characters are so well-known that real public figures sometimes compare each other to them.

When the Taliban controlled the country, they allowed New Home, New Life to continue – though a group of them did turn up at the studios in Kabul, demanding to see what was going on.

When it was explained to them that the BBC's commitment to impartiality meant that we'd really prefer it if they didn't barge in, their faces fell. "Every week you let in cows, goats, chickens – we've heard them – so why not us?" This, I think, is the first recorded encounter between the Taliban and a BBC effects disc.

New Home, New Life and its many off-shoots – a second radio drama series, books, magazines, pamphlets – employ well over a hundred people, almost all of them Afghan.

But the programme and the rabbit-warren of studios and offices which I was lucky enough to visit last month are only one important part of what the BBC does in Afghanistan and one part of our global mission.

There are many other programmes of music and culture for the Afghan service.

There's the work of BBC Monitoring, which has helped academics here at Chatham House make sense of the world for over 70 years.

And of course – centrally in Afghanistan just as it is central in the UK and in every other country where the BBC operates – there is news. News for Afghans. News for the wider region, for instance through the BBC's Urdu and Persian services, including our new Persian TV service. And news for Britain and the world.

Our operations in Afghanistan are a good example of what the BBC actually does on the ground all over the world – and also of the values and principles which the BBC at its best aims to bring to all its international operations.

Every BBC person I met in Afghanistan knows exactly what the BBC, and in particular BBC journalism, stands for: accuracy, impartiality, independence, seriousness.

They uphold those values day in, day out, covering one of the world's most difficult and dangerous stories.

But, beyond consistent values, there are other things that mark out the BBC's approach.

We're in it for the long term. We've been in Afghanistan for decades and intend to be there for decades to come – whether Western forces are still present or not.

We believe in enabling correspondents to build up their knowledge and expertise and contacts in a country by living there for years if possible – if not, then by repeated deployments.

As a result, John Simpson, Lyse Doucet, who was last night named as news journalist of the year at the radio Sony Awards, Ian Pannell, David Loyn and many other Western BBC correspondents, have become what would have once been called 'old Afghan hands'.

But even more important has been our practice over many years of recruiting outstanding Afghan journalistic and programme-making talent.

Long before ISAF or even the Russians began to ponder how to 'Afghanize' security and defence in the country, the BBC was building up an outstanding cadre of Afghans to report their country to itself and to the world.

The BBC and its international audiences today

Now I could have told a very similar story about Pakistan, or Somalia, or Kenya and much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, or about Russia or China or many other countries around the world.

The result of this combination of our founding values, our dedicated people, our determination to rely not just on British journalists but on indigenous reporters and producers – is that the BBC continues to enjoy a level of trust from audiences across the world which is unique among international news-providers.

But a sceptic could listen to all this and perhaps be forgiven for saying: has the world changed, does the world no longer require a BBC that broadcasts internationally?

Britain no longer has an empire. The Berlin Wall fell years ago. Perhaps more importantly, there has been an explosion in the provision both of international news – CNN and Al-Jazeera stand out, but there are many others – and in indigenous media, across nearly all of the developing as well as the developed world.

The means of media production in the digital age, whether of an FM radio station for a Nairobi slum or of a piece of citizen-journalism for YouTube, are widely available even in many relatively poor societies.

Surely, perhaps with the exception of a handful of failed or near-failed states – countries like Somalia where the BBC Somali service remains really the only source of available news – the need for a BBC World Service or for any form of global mission for the BBC has gone?

And that brings me to the central point I want to make tonight – which is that, not just despite but in many ways because of the way the world has changed, the BBC's international mission is as vital as it's ever been.

First, if I could spare Francis Fukuyama's blushes, because history did not end with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Repression of free speech, suppression and sometimes the persecution of local and international journalism has not disappeared.

Far from it – if anything, it is on the rise, and not just in failed or marginal states but in many advanced societies.

The jamming and blocking of BBC Services. The harassment of BBC journalists and local staff working for BBC bureaux. These are facts of life in 2010 in some of the most influential and sophisticated societies in the world. In some countries there has been a significant deterioration in recent years.

Secondly because of what has happened to international newsgathering.

You might have imagined that the arrival of digital would lead to a golden age in the provision of, and access to, high quality journalism as the barriers to entry and national boundaries fell away.

In fact, the impact of the new technologies has been to undermine many traditional print and broadcast commercial business models around the world and the effect has been a drastic cutting back on investment in international journalism.

Once, for instance, the US networks encircled the globe with their newsgathering operations. I ran the BBC's news operations in Beijing during much of the Tiananmen Square crisis – and when the American networks arrived, it was like watching a series of carrier groups sailing into harbour.

Today it's a different story. When Benazir Bhutto was assassinated a few years ago in Islamabad, the US networks reported the story from Baghdad, because that was the closest place in which they had a correspondent.

"There's much less call for international news," one network executive told me shortly afterwards: "Apart from anything else, our audiences find it rather dispiriting."

In a world where in-depth international reporting is increasingly restricted to a handful of agencies and to news providers who are directly under the influence of sovereign governments and who have no tradition of editorial independence, the BBC's journalism, its objectivity and impartiality, our ability to put people onto the ground and keep them there over years, is more, not less, important than it used to be.

The third and final reason is a positive one. Around the world, we believe people want access to the cool-headed, fair-minded spirit of Britain – and the BBC – at their best.

In the United States, not a country with any lack of choice when it comes to news or indeed anything else, the BBC is more salient today than it's ever

been. Audiences for our radio news, extensively rebroadcast on National Public Radio, have gone up 20% in the past year.

But it's also because of TV news, and of course our website which is at the centre of the second revolution we've seen in our global mission.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the BBC News application was one of a handful of news apps selected by Steve Jobs and Apple to support the launch of the iPad or that it continues to be one of the most popular applications in the iTunes Store.

But although there is value in the fact that so many American opinion-formers make the BBC part of their news diet, given the plethora of alternatives and the freedom of the press there, the United States is a less critical territory for the BBC's international mission than other regions: the Islamic world, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, for instance.

What do audiences in those parts of the world make of the BBC's current international offering? To help answer that question, we recently commissioned the consultants Human Capital to research attitudes to the BBC and other international news services in four countries: Kenya, Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey.

As always, there are some interesting and important lessons for the BBC to learn from the survey. Some of the respondents, for instance, complain that our delivery of the news is sometimes too formal for their tastes and that it can lack the energy of some of our rivals. But overall the strength of support for the BBC is very striking.

When asked how much they would miss the BBC, CNN International, Voice of America and Al-Jazeera, in all four countries respondents said they would miss the BBC most. Egyptian respondents, for example, said they would miss the BBC much more than Al-Jazeera.

Just as interesting, I think, was the way in which the respondents thought the BBC affected their view of the UK as a whole.

They were shown a list of different British organisations and initiatives and asked whether they made them think more or less positively about the country: the British Armed Forces, the British Council, the UK Government, UK Government foreign aid, and so on, and the BBC.

So, for example, across all four countries, 43% of respondents thought that UK Government foreign aid made them think more positively about the UK, while 12% thought it made them think less positively.

No fewer than 80% of people asked said that the BBC made them think more positively about the UK, by the far the highest of all the British institutions mentioned.

The respondents were asked how important it was for the UK to continue to provide international news services to the world. 43% of respondents in Turkey thought it was either essential or very important. In Pakistan, 88%. In Egypt, 92%. In Kenya, 94%. In fact, in Egypt and Kenya Human Capital couldn't find anyone among this group who thought it was either 'not particularly important' or 'not important at all.'

Crucially, when we asked these audiences in Kenya, Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey, all of whom have access to extensive local and international media, whether the BBC was any less relevant today than it used to be, only 6% of them agreed with the statement.

An evolving mission

Quality and relevance are goals which the BBC has always strived for in its international services – though the story began with a very different, and much smaller broadcaster transmitting radio programmes to a very different world.

The BBC World Service grew out of the Empire Service, which was launched before the Second World War to broadcast to all the pink parts of the globe.

Many of the countries where the World Service is particularly strong today – in East and West Africa, for instance, or South Asia – have links to the BBC which go back to these days. But with the war, the BBC's mission abroad expanded.

Next month President Nicolas Sarkozy of France is visiting Broadcasting House to commemorate General Charles de Gaulle's historic broadcast to France in June 1940. In this broadcast, he urged the men and women of France to rally to the Resistance cause. Seventy years on, this broadcast is still indelibly marked in French memory.

In French, German, Polish and in many other European languages as well as in English, the BBC's external services provided objective and credible news, information, debate from the 1940s to the beginning of the 1990s, first to occupied Europe and then, in the Cold War, to countries behind the Iron Curtain – and to other countries under repressive regimes around the world.

For decades, these services were a lifeline, a beacon of truth and reason, for millions of people. Taken together, they represent one of the most notable, perhaps the most glorious even, chapters in the history of the whole BBC, one that will never be forgotten.

The BBC's current international services

And yet, today the BBC reaches more people with its news – some 240 million people outside the UK each week – than it ever did in the Cold War or before. And in many ways, perhaps against expectation, its influence has not diminished, but increased.

In 2010, the BBC's international operations consist of radio, TV and online news and information from the BBC World Service in 32 languages; our global English TV news channel BBC World News; bbc.com, the international version of our website; and the TV channels and other services provided by our commercial arm, BBC Worldwide.

In much of the developing world, radio remains a critical way of reaching audiences, though increasingly that means FM and FM-rebroadcast via local partners rather than traditional World Service short-wave.

But we live in a moment of global media history where radio on its own is not enough to serve audiences even in many developing countries. Indeed the accelerating decline of short-wave listening and the limitations and commercial, technical and regulatory problems associated with FM mean that, were the BBC to have relied solely on radio to bring its news to the world, it would have lost rather than built its audience.

That is why in 1992 we launched our global television news channel. It was also why a few years ago, in consultation and with the support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, we took the difficult, but in my view correct decision to close many of our Central and Eastern European radio services so that Grant-in-Aid funding could instead be directed at two new TV services, the first in Arabic, the second in Persian.

Take our Czech service. It had played a critical, sometimes heroic role in providing dependable news to the Czech public in the communist years. By the early years of this decade, however, there was a lively and diverse press and broadcasting sector in the Czech Republic and the need for a BBC Service – no matter how good – had receded.

By contrast, the hunger for impartial, uncensored news in Iran was, if anything, growing. Within weeks of the BBC Persian TV service launching, its value was demonstrated during the 2009 Iranian elections and their bloody aftermath.

It is not that BBC Persian TV was on the side of the demonstrators – like every other BBC service, it aims for strict impartiality and, indeed, during the demonstrations tried to make sure that the voice of the authorities was properly represented on the air – but this very even-handedness was itself exactly what many Iranians had found lacking in their existing television choices, both on the state TV services and on other Persian-language international services.

Today we estimate that the BBC Persian TV service has 3.2 million viewers each week inside Iran, and millions more beyond. A report from the Iranian broadcasting regulator noted its impartiality and went on to argue that this very impartiality and believability was the very reason why it was so dangerous.

In the Arab world, where news is rarely impartial, the BBC's Arabic news is consumed by over 22 million people each week.

Paying for the mission

Let me finish with a few words about how this international mission is paid for and the challenges it faces.

First, it is right I believe that in the case of every genre, every programme or service beyond news, the model should remain as now a commercial one.

BBC Worldwide has a duty to maintain the quality and standards that British and global audiences expect from the BBC, to enhance and never damage the BBC's brand and good name, but its international operations should always aim to generate an appropriate return to the British licence-payer who has invested in the programming in the first place.

And it does – in 2009/10, for instance, it will have delivered profits of around £140 million pounds, a significant support for the BBC's UK licence-fee funded services.

The BBC World Service Trust, which commissions New Home, New Life must remain, again as now, a charity – attached to the BBC, but reliant entirely on donors for the work it does around the world.

That leaves news. For the BBC, wherever possible – not just, of course, in the UK, but around the world – we prefer to offer our news in a non-commercial context, so that there is no danger of even a perception of commercial interest or bias.

Since before the war, the UK Government has made a Grant-in-Aid to the World Service to enable it to broadcast on radio in English and in other languages across the globe.

When in the early 1990s, the BBC came to believe that an international English language TV service was essential if it was to fulfill its mission, the then Government took the quite understandable view that there was a limit to what the Grant-in-Aid could be expected to pay for and that, if the BBC wanted to proceed with such a service, it would have to find a commercial model to fund it.

And that is what we did. It has meant that we have been unable to invest as much in the service as we would have wished. But the commercial path has given us a service which is a market-leader in many parts of the world and is the single most widely used of all the BBC's services.

Again more recently we took the decision – controversial at the time – that the only way of giving the BBC's international website the investment it needed to make it relevant and valuable to global audiences was to open up a commercial revenue stream from advertising.

As you've heard, we've been flexible about the mix of services we offer abroad, shutting some and opening others as the strategic and media maps of the world have changed. We've also tried to be flexible in finding ways of self-funding some parts of our global mission.

But we are under no illusions about the limits of how far a commercial approach can go. Independent and impartial Arabic and Persian TV services would not be possible without public funding.

Radio services to front line and strategically critical states like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia would not be possible without public funding.

The English language radio World Service in all its richness and glory would not be possible without public funding.

There is – self-evidently – a market failure in much of the news that the world needs. It is this failure that the Grant-in-Aid seeks to address and as I have argued tonight, it is just as important in 2010 as it was during the Second World War and Cold War eras.

Conclusion

The BBC's motto is 'Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation' – the idea being that access to news, information and debate about different countries and cultures can ultimately help foster mutual understanding and tolerance.

The motto and the services which flowed from it belong to a very different period in world history, but it would be a brave person who claimed that those aspirations are any less necessary today than they were then. They still form part of the bedrock of the BBC. And they still inform our decisions every day, whether in the safety and security of London or Washington or in the cities and lonely places of Afghanistan.

Thank you.