

BBC World Service under Review, 1960s-1970s

Understanding the value of the BBC World Service relies on the link between its reputation for **veracity and independence**, and the extent to which that allowed it to speak across borders to a multitude of audiences. Of particular importance was the **high value cosmopolitan** output, that spoke to the world in their own tongues through vernacular programming. Balancing these priorities in a turbulent period of political realignment necessitated cuts and the prioritisation of where Britain could feasibly and profitably project itself. The Beeley report of 1967 recognised that the BBC World Service could:

cross political barriers and (at least in theory) reach the masses, including the illiterate; and they enjoy a considerable reputation abroad which derives partly from their performance in World War II (and to this extent is a diminishing asset) and partly from their independence from governmental control. They have a possibly bright but as yet unknown future in the field of television. But they are deficient (although not wholly lacking) in the element of personal presentation without which, it seems to me, propaganda loses much of its impact; and their independence has manifest disadvantages from the point of view of Whitehall and Westminster.¹

This statement provides us with a useful interrogation of many of the themes which have been drawn out in the construction of the Cultural Value Framework. The political value of the BBCWS' reporting is explicit, in that it is able to operate where government is not and cross divides that prevent normal diplomatic channels from being used. Likewise, the ability of the BBC's broadcasting reach was a means of literally crossing borders, often into areas where more outright development was lacking. By identifying a broad audience for BBC World service broadcasts, we get a clear idea of how foreign-language broadcasting can be said to have both humanitarian and political value.

Exactly who received these words was important, and often the main issue of contention in funding reviews. Both the Beeley and Duncan reviews (of 1967 and 1968 respectively) questioned the idea of an "area of concentration" and whether this offer better value to funders. The rationale was that if the BBC cut down on its myriad foreign language broadcasts, then it might be able to better concentrate on English language broadcasts, or to work on developing its infrastructure (particularly the shift from short to medium wave). Although this was discussed, it only saw real force behind it as funding was squeezed tightly after the Conservative victory in the 1970 election.

Edward Heath's election as Prime Minister in 1970 occasioned a stern look at the nation's balance sheet, with no department safe. Yet, coming so soon after the Beeley and Duncan reports had constrained funding for BBC broadcasts overseas, a strong defence was needed to ensure the service remained intact. The Information Administration Department (IAD) of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was tasked with weighing the costs and benefits. Their summation of the BBC World Service's value was an interesting exploration of the concept:

¹ C.E. King, 'Memo on Overseas Representation', 6 April, 1967. FCO 13/280.

We believe that external broadcasting is necessary for the national interest. All major powers with a need to promote the political and economic interests outside their own country undertake it. The BBC with its international reputation for veracity, has achieved a particular eminence (compared, for instance, with its American and Soviet competitors) to the extent that its reputation is inextricably linked with **British prestige** as a whole. It is one of our best known and best respected institutions and serious damage to the BBC's overseas broadcasting would, as a consequence, involve damage not only to our immediate political and commercial interests but also to the British image as a whole.²

This extract summarises the central thrust of the defence, which attempted to prioritise which services offered the most value. Here we can see a pithy exploration of the multi-layered discussion of value that was happening at this point. In particular, the IAD have highlighted the diplomatic and political value as the most important issues. This diplomatic tone was largely a result of the terms of the review, which asked the services to sell themselves to the very top of government. The report goes on to highlight that the BBC World Service has acted "**as a direct instrument of policy**", although acknowledging that it was not a slavish tool of government.³ Indeed, when considering funding options and alternatives, the IAD considered whether an overtly government controlled broadcaster might be more effective. Although it would certainly be more direct in its voicing of "the British view", it would erode independence and therefore trust, undermining its overall value.

The trust value of the service was directly seen to influence the diplomatic and political value of the broadcast. We can see the importance of a number of different audiences: there is an eye turned towards Britain's 'competitors' as well as to those who might listen to broadcasts. The report outlines how different vernacular services might be valued "against the general background of their being designed to make a political, cultural and economic contribution to the projection of our interests in the area concerned."⁴ Services were divided into 3 categories that give us an idea of how each service's importance was judged:

1. Most Important Countries:

In Western Europe, broadcasting was important for its relation to Britain's negotiations to join the EEC, as well as supporting other political and commercial objectives. The Arabic Service was a distinctive and trustworthy news outlet that provided an important lifeline in areas where diplomatic relations were souring. In the Communist World (Russia, China and Central and Eastern Europe), jamming highlighted that BBC World Service broadcasts were ascribed (damaging) value by hostile governments because of the impartial content of reporting. Vernacular broadcasts remained important there as few would be able to access English language broadcasts, limiting listenership to the immediate environs of the embassies.

2. Services of Lesser Importance:

These were seen as useful, though less vital than the previous category and could potentially be abolished "without irreparable long-term damage to British interests." Far Eastern

² 'Review of the BBC's External Services', 10 December, 1970. FCO 26/591

³ 'Review of the BBC's External Services', 10 December, 1970. FCO 26/591

⁴ 'Review of the BBC's External Services', 10 December, 1970. FCO 26/591

Services (Japanese, Indonesian/Malay, Thai and Vietnamese) were seen as important considering government attempts to re-engage with Asia. In Japan, imminent state visits would augment the influence of the BBC, whilst in Vietnam and Thailand the BBC remained the most prominent foreign broadcaster. In all of these countries, vernacular broadcasting represented a crucial tool for communicating with the masses. Otherwise, Swahili and Hausa services were seen to be important to British interests, though there was the potential that the listenership would transfer to English language broadcasting. This was also true in India, although it was noted that, for example, the Bengali service had been of crucial humanitarian value in both India and Pakistan during the crisis following the devastating Bhola Cyclone in November 1970. In Latin America, Spanish and Brazilian language broadcasting was seen to be influential, with a listenership of almost 2 million that was unlikely to access English broadcasts, although the area was not a current priority. The abolition of any of these services would be judged “a drastic, and well advertised step” which was “politically damaging” and would infer that Britain was either “losing interest” in the area or “no longer economically equipped” to pursue a role.

3. Services of Least Importance:

The Services held to be the most dispensable were Somali, Burmese, Tamil, Turkish, Persian and direct broadcasting to Malaysia. These were judged to have small listener bases, although it was acknowledged that all might increase given political developments. Despite being small “they all have some special *raison d’être*” and are useful in the projection of the UK.⁵

These particular judgements were bound to their historical context, yet the ways in which they were assessed give us an insight into how the value of BBC World Service broadcasting (and in this instance vernacular broadcasting) was judged by its supporters.

Interestingly, there are many continuities in which the work of the BBC was viewed. Despite the conflicting recommendations throughout this period, the BBC World Service ultimately survived in better condition than did either the Diplomatic service or the British Council. Its value was altogether more easily expressed by virtue of its ready recourse to public opinion and listenership figures. In a survey of BBC Vernacular broadcasting in Hindi, Bengali and Urdu, following the CPRS review, the value of the service was explored at length, reiterating much of what had been stated in earlier reviews. In particular, the report stressed:

- The potential boon of **Britain's engagement with young developing nations;**
- and, the importance of the **BBC's endurance as a partner during political disturbances and upheaval.**

These twin priorities reflect an interesting parallel with the Cultural Value Framework, specifically the economic and political value for the license payer of the BBC World Service's engagement in the Sub-continent.

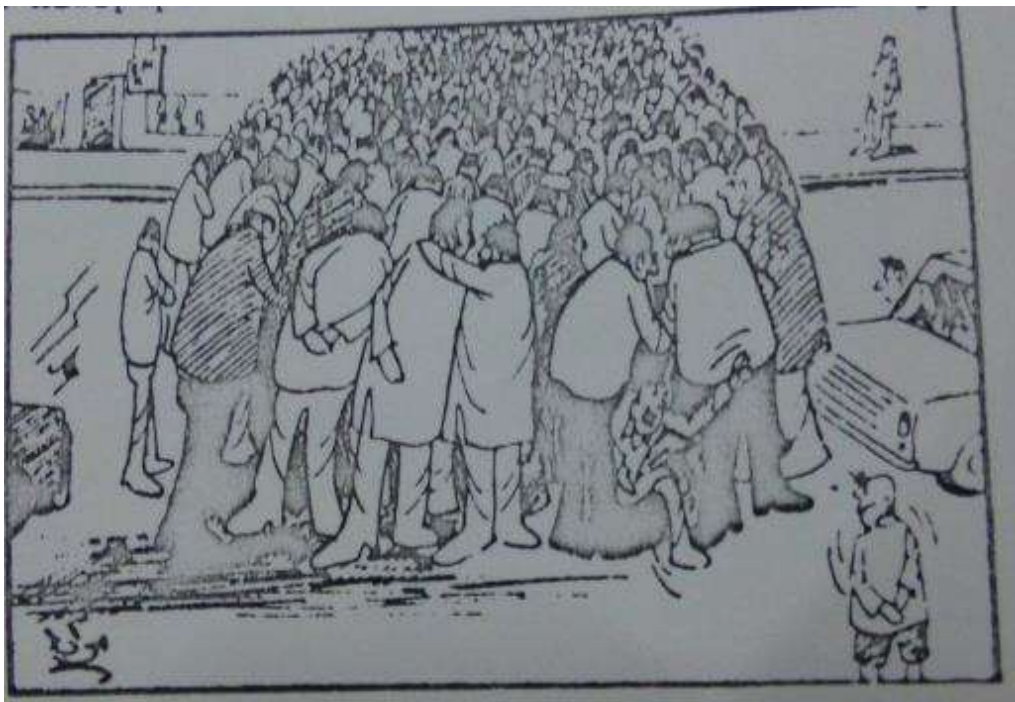
The notion of 'getting in on the ground floor' of development was crucial to the remit of the BBC World Service. This shows the caution in designating vernacular services with comparatively low listenerships candidates for permanent abolition. The report stated that "emphasis is placed on

⁵ 'Review of the BBC's External Services', 10 December, 1970. FCO 26/591

enhancing the image of Britain as an innovatory nation, with advanced technology and competitive industry. [...] The main emphasis is on creating a climate in which governments, government departments and major industrial concerns may "think British".⁶ Likewise, there is a real indication that the continuing presence of the BBC World Service created a cumulative trust value, heightened by its perceived independence. A correspondent from the *Sunday Times* reported that in Pakistan that:

The BBC is so popular, in fact, that my appearance at another demonstration last week was enthusiastically applauded by hundreds of people who thought, wrongly, that I had come straight from Bush House... There is even a local phenomenon called 'BBC rush' when crowds gather round radio sets in bazaars and tea stalls to listen to the 8.15 evening news...⁷

This sense of trust and independence relate the value of the BBC World Services mission to its audience. Yet these are also being related as indicators of the value of the service during the response to the CPRS review, justifying continuing expense within Britain. This divination of value is interesting in that it explicitly considers the cultural value of the services for different audiences as being linked. The value to the funders and producers is augmented by its value to audiences, as can be seen in the presentation of acclaim from audiences and overseas territories.



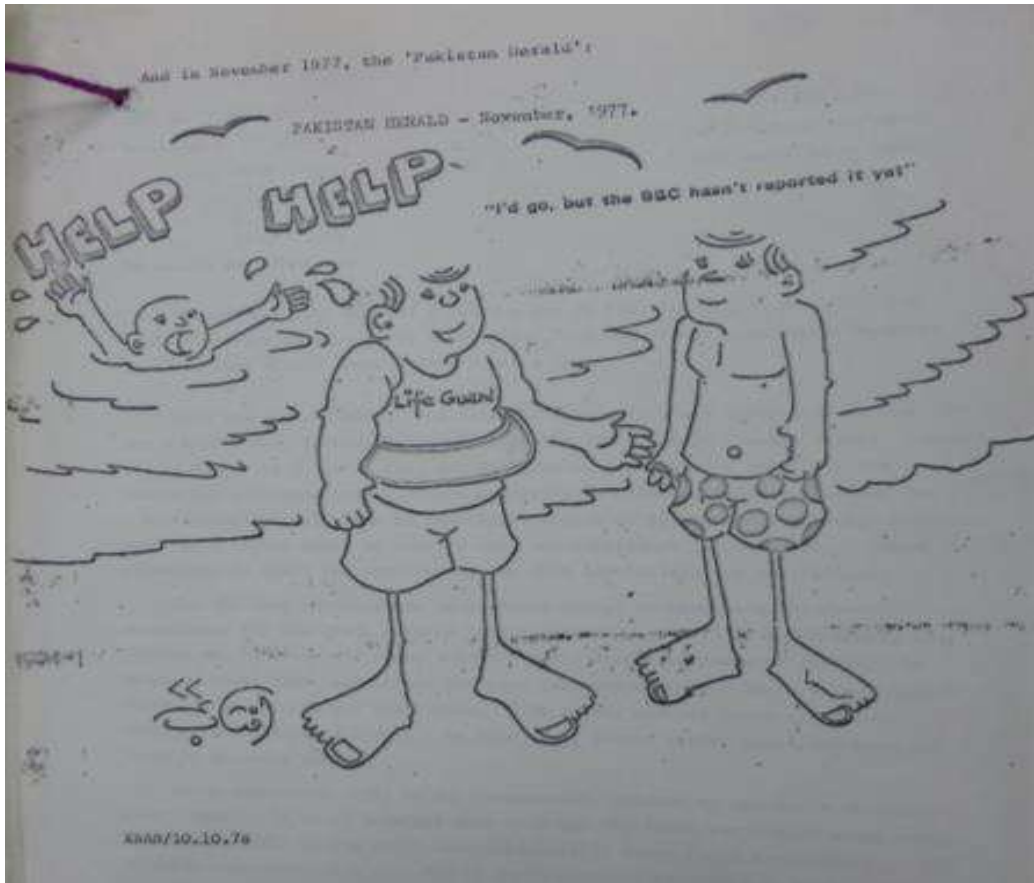
کچھ بھی نہیں ہو رہا ہے بار... لوگ ہی ہی سی سن رہے

The caption explains:

"Nothing is happening, friend...
People are listening to the BBC."

⁶ 'Report on BBC Bengali, Hindu & Urdu Services', 24 October, 1978. FCO 26/1928.

⁷ 'Report on BBC Bengali, Hindu & Urdu Services', 24 October, 1978. FCO 26/1928.



Images: Cuttings from the Daily Jang (April 1977) and Pakistan Herald (November 1977) illustrating Pakistani attitudes to the BBC World Service, from FCO 26/1928.

These Pakistani images cast the BBC World Service as a sort of political arbiter for the masses. The trust value of the service is high enough that it has the potential to define reactions to external political crises by their domestic publics. When one combines this influence on the general public overseas (in defined territories as indicated by specific vernacular broadcasts) with the notion that it might influence "governments, government departments and major industrial concerns" we get a greater picture of how the composite notion of value is being derived. In this sense, when an audience begins to "think British", it is not merely in a commercial or diplomatic sense, but also in a more fundamental engagement with British policy and cultural values.⁸

The idea that the BBC World Service was able to **'speak British' and in turn make audiences 'think British' was central to its polyvalent cultural value**. By cultivating its own "reputation for veracity"⁹ it could convey British interests across national and political borders. This had a number of important benefits for funders and audiences that were passionately stressed when the service was squeezed during funding reviews. Throughout the 1960s, as Britain found its role in the world challenged and sought to redefine its identity, the BBC World Service remained fundamentally 'worth it'.

⁸ 'Report on BBC Bengali, Hindu & Urdu Services', 24 October, 1978. FCO 26/1928.

⁹ 'Review of the BBC's External Services', 10 December, 1970. FCO 26/591

Andrew W M Smith
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