



## **NUJ briefing on effects of cuts to BBC Monitoring**

July 2016

The BBC has announced a radical restructure of the Monitoring service at Caversham Park, Reading, to save £4m a year. One in three of the workforce will go, including 40 per cent of UK staff, and the UK part of the operation will move to central London.

Monitoring was originally established to study propaganda broadcasts during World War Two. Its remit soon broadened to monitoring the world's media, keeping a constant and global watch. It covers the full range of sources: broadcast, print and digital, from major state outlets to streetwise social media.

It was responsible for providing the translation of an obscure radio broadcast by Nikita Khrushchev which ended the Cuban missile crisis when it was rushed to the White House and it broke the news to British audiences of the death of President John F Kennedy.

Today, BBC Monitoring surveys the world's broadcast and print media, selecting and where necessary translating reports from 150 countries in 100 languages. It provides an essential service for the wider BBC, the UK government, foreign governments, NGOs, universities, embassies, security groups, think tanks and international businesses.

Monitoring has always had an eye on the news agenda, but much of its output has been of more interest to government departments such as the FCO, MoD and Cabinet Office. They have in the past been responsible for its funding, but under the 2010 charter agreement of the BBC, it became part of a suite of organisations whose budgets were transferred to the BBC and paid for by the licence-fee payer. It does retain some commercial income.

Monitoring's budget has been hit many times in the past. After a large downsizing in 2004, there have been a number of cuts since the BBC take-over, in 2011 and in 2012. Its budget was £20m when it came under the auspices of the BBC; is now approaching half that. As it is not a core function of the BBC, it has been seen as a soft target as the corporation seeks to protect programme making.

But as Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said when these latest cuts were announced: "As the UK faces an unprecedented uncertainty following Brexit, as tensions between Russia and the West increase and so-called ISIS spreads terror around the world, the work of Monitoring is vastly more important. What a crazy time to be making such huge cuts. We will now be in consultation with the BBC and aim to minimise the damage."

The 2011-12 cuts led the then director of Monitoring to say that the service's viability was in doubt. The current restructure, if it proceeds as proposed, will spell the end of Monitoring's ability to carry out its function, providing a constant global watch.

The BBC said the budget is set for the next three years, but further cuts are bound to come after that. It seems highly likely that after the move to central London, Monitoring will be absorbed into the World Service and lose its separate and distinct identity.

Stuart Seaman, NUJ Father of Chapel at BBC Monitoring said: "This is a classic case of knowing the cost but not the value. Users have always praised our reporting on other countries through their media. But all too often, our paymasters have seen Monitoring as an easy target for savings. The world is an increasingly difficult place and we need to not only know what is happening but to make sense of it as well. Monitoring helps us to do exactly that. We should be making the most of this unique and economical resource, not cutting it to the bone."

Monitoring should not be exempt from the need to economise, but for more than a decade it has been doing the same for less through careful budgeting and the dedication and professionalism of its staff. It is a unique and highly economical resource that saves its users far more than it costs.

At a time when the UK is reducing its physical presence abroad, the value of Monitoring surely grows. Especially as other countries, such as Russia, China, Iran, are not withdrawing from media outreach but, on the contrary, investing heavily in it.

In its Eighth Report, in 2004, the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs urged that BBC Monitoring be given financial security. "We conclude that it is utterly perverse that the future of BBC Monitoring should be placed in doubt at the very time when its services are arguably most important to the country's security and diplomatic needs, and when it is being almost universally praised by its users," it said.

In 2016, this remains true.

The NUJ proposes that unless Monitoring's funding is changed the UK will lose this unique service provided by experienced personnel. Therefore, it should be taken of the BBC's books and properly by government.