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NUJ briefing on the future of BBC Monitoring

BBC Monitoring (BBCM) is a supplier of open-source information from the world's broadcast, print and, increasingly, social and online media. It selects reports and translates them when necessary to inform its users of political, economic, security and media news.

It was established in 1939 to listen to World War II propaganda broadcasts for the British government. Since then the remit has expanded to global coverage. Its UK base is at Caversham Park, outside Reading, and it has several offices abroad. It also works in partnership with the equivalent US organisation.

Open source offers insight into how other countries see the world and sheds light on places where news is scarce or tightly controlled. It helps to assess the political climate in past and present theatres of conflict, identify future security issues, and understand social unrest and the potential for political instability. It is an important component of soft power, can show how UK policy is perceived abroad, and complements other sources of information.

BBCM's main users are the BBC itself and the UK government, particularly the FCO, MoD, and Cabinet Office. But it has many others with an interest in the political, security and media situation globally or in locations relevant to themselves. They include international and supranational organisations such as NATO, the OSCE, EU and UN; government bodies and embassies of other countries; academic and research bodies; major corporations; UK and other countries' media; and charities and third-sector organisations.

A cursory search of the web finds BBCM often mentioned in the context of intelligence-gathering. But it is important to point out that Monitoring deals only with open-source material, that is, material broadcast or published for public consumption. Some of its output might be used for classified purposes, and BBCM may liaise with such users as it does with all others, but there is nothing classified about what BBCM does. **Its staff are BBC journalists, not intelligence operatives.**

Monitoring has been described as a strategic and irreplaceable asset for the

government. But there is a disconnect between users who value the service and budget holders who see it as an easy target for savings.

A major funding cut led to an independent review in 2005, which confirmed the value and economy of BBCM's service. The recommendation of a ring-fenced budget was accepted but did not last.

In 2010 the government transferred the funding of Monitoring to the BBC licence fee, with effect from 2013, and before that transition imposed further cuts in 2010 and 2011. After several years of flat funding, this prompted Monitoring to warn that it could cease to be viable.

In July 2016 BBC Monitoring announced a comprehensive restructure. It had been set a £2.5m savings target to meet by April 2017, in addition to an ongoing £1.5m shortfall. The overall savings target for BBC News was £10m so the economies required of Monitoring are greatly disproportionate.

Monitoring's budget was £23m in 2010/11. By 2016 some of its parts had been incorporated into the BBC's reporting and funding structures, leaving an operating budget of just over £13m. Faced with the need to cut £4m from that already reduced amount, it is shedding 40% of UK staff and 21% of staff in offices abroad. The total number of employees falls to just 220 - less than half the number of 20 years ago.

The restructure includes the closure or significant reduction of departments specialising in research and information management, video footage for government users, thematic briefings and analysis, acquisition and cataloguing of media sources, customer support, and media monitoring in priority languages.

The BBC has decided to move Monitoring out of Caversham Park to premises in central London, at a date to be determined. This will inevitably mean the loss of yet more staff who are unable or unwilling to relocate. And it could mean the end of Monitoring as a separate unit serving the priorities and agenda of all its customers, including those in government. Since the transition to the licence fee its focus has shifted towards the BBC. This is only to be expected, since the BBC has become the sole source of finance (apart from limited commercial income).

The BBC values Monitoring but needs less of its services than the government. And having relinquished its part in funding Monitoring, the government will find it hard to maintain its say in Monitoring's priorities and agenda.

"The work of BBC Monitoring at Caversham Park remains as relevant today as it was at the height of the cold war," The Guardian wrote in 2010, during one of those previous funding cuts. "An internet connection gives anyone the opportunity to monitor open sources of information around the world. But few would have the time,

the languages or the knowledge to separate the wheat from the chaff in the press, TV and radio reports from 150 countries in more than 100 languages ... BBC Monitoring is a vital resource, it has proved itself and should be kept.”

(<http://bit.ly/2c4orJn>)