

Why BBC Monitoring must not be allowed to wither on the vine

It broke the news to British audiences of the death of President John F Kennedy and 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.

Today it monitors the world's media, from state broadcasters to streetwise social media. From a Robbie Williams video about Russia to that state's annexation of Crimea, its expert journalists and linguists provide vital information from all corners of the globe to governments, charities, NGOs, think tanks, security groups, businesses, the OECD, the UN and universities. BBC Monitoring remains as relevant today as it was at the height of the cold war.

Serving as Chief of Defence Intelligence, then as Chief of Staff and later a Home Office minister, BBC Monitoring was essential to find out what the foreign media was reporting, including what it had to say about the UK. Monitoring sheds light on countries where news is scarce or tightly controlled. It helps us understand the sometimes distorted way in which other countries perceive the world and present it to their own publics.

However, we are in danger of losing this unique asset. Proposals to save £4m a year has resulted in shedding a third of the workforce including 40 per cent of those in the UK. The plans include closure of Monitoring's UK base at Caversham Park, Reading and relocation to an already overcrowded Broadcasting House. When this happens, still more staff will inevitably leave and the damage will be irreversible. Monitoring will lose its identity and be reduced to a rump within the World Service.

Monitoring was originally established to study propaganda broadcasts during World War Two. Its remit soon broadened to keeping a constant and global watch. It was funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Cabinet Office, plus the BBC. But in the 2010 licence fee deal Mark Thomas, the corporation's director general, let go of Monitoring's government funding and agreed that in future the BBC alone would carry the costs.

In 2013-14 Monitoring was handed over with £20.2m of government money, down from £23m in 2010/11. In subsequent years the budget would be determined by the BBC.

The BBC understands what a fine resource it has in Monitoring but its own funds are always under pressure and now Monitoring's budget is being slashed as the corporation tries to find the savings it needs to protect its programming.

Select committees have warned of the implications of repeated cuts to Monitoring, which included dropping UK-based coverage of Asia-Pacific, Western Europe and the Balkans.

Now as the UK faces an unprecedented uncertainty following Brexit, as tensions between Russia and the West increase and ISIS spreads terror around the world, the work of Monitoring is more important than ever. What a crazy time to jettison a third of its talented and dedicated staff.

As the UK reduces its physical presence abroad, the value of BBC Monitoring surely grows. Especially as the likes of Russia, China and Iran are not withdrawing from media outreach but, on the contrary, are investing heavily in it. BBC Monitoring works in partnership with the equivalent American organisation, but if we continue to run down our service, why would the USA want to continue to share information and do business with us?

Many colleagues in Parliament and those involved in national security share my concern about the damage being done to BBC Monitoring. The current agreement with the government says that Monitoring should be global, sufficient, adaptable and flexible. How can it be this if its workforce is cut by a third after previous deep cuts in 2011 and 2010 that followed years of flat funding and followed deep

cuts in 2005?

I made the case to the House of Commons Defence select committee for a new deal. Unless they want to lose the service, the departments that benefit most, including the MoD, FCO, Cabinet Office and DIFD, should contribute to the cost and not just leave it to the BBC's licence fee payers.

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