



## World Service cuts, NUJ briefing

*December 2022*

### Introduction

The BBC has announced it is cutting the World Service's budget by £28.5m per year from April 2023, with 382 posts (almost one in five) to go. This is a result of the freezing of the licence fee, soaring costs, inflation and to fund the BBC's move to a digital-first service. Seven Asian-language services, Chinese, Gujarati, Igbo, Indonesian, Pidgin, Urdu, and Yoruba will become digital-only, meaning that almost half of the 41 foreign-language services will be digital-only. The 41 (foreign) Language Services have a weekly audience of 313m, almost two-thirds of BBC's global audience of 489m. BBC Language Services have played a vital role in covering protests in Iran, war in Ethiopia, and pro-democracy protests in Myanmar. This work has come at a huge personal cost for BBC's journalists

Some TV and radio programmes will stop, including BBC Arabic radio and BBC Persian radio. BBC Persian radio has broadcast for more than 70 years. At a cost of around £900,000 per annum it produces one-hour a day radio news programme, acts as BBC Persian TV's breakfast news show, has a podcast, and produces content for social media.

The World Service provides unrivalled journalism which shines a light on all parts of the globe. It is the world's largest external broadcaster in terms of reception area, language selection and audience reach. It provides many millions with trustworthy and impartial news they are unable to get at home. As the Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated, radio remains a crucial way to reach audiences who might find their access to trusted news via the internet suddenly cut off.

As a leader in the Observer said: **“For Iranians suffering a violent crackdown by a repressive regime opposed to free speech, independent media and open debate, trusted sources of unbiased, factual information are of critical importance. For this and other**

**reasons, the announcement that the BBC is to end Persian language radio broadcasts is both dismaying and shortsighted...Yet the BBC is not solely to blame. These cuts were forced upon it by Conservative ministers who dislike the national broadcaster more than they value the national interest.”**

The union is concerned that as some of the language services currently based in London are closing and the offices moving to Asia, dozens of unnecessary job losses will result because many of the journalists will not be able to relocate owing to human rights issues in the countries.

- **MPs and peers must call for these services to be funded directly by the Foreign Office and not the BBC, as they were prior to 2011.**
- **The BBC must seek additional funding from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office.**

**BBC World Service: Soft power and funding challenges:** [House of Lords briefing](#).

It delivers news in over 40 languages, including English, via TV, radio and digital services and has been described by the former secretary-general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, as “perhaps Britain’s greatest gift to the world this century”. Overall, the BBC has a global weekly reach of 492 million people, with the bulk of this figure being the international weekly audience for BBC News. BBCWS has a weekly reach of 365 million people.

### **Global press freedom**

Just 15 per cent of the world lives in countries where they can express themselves freely, with over one third (35 per cent) of people living in places where free expression is “in crisis”, according to the 2022 Global Expression Report by human rights organisation Article 19. As well as jailing journalists a new favourite tool of the digital-era autocrat is internet shutdowns – those happened 182 times in 2021 in 34 countries. This makes the World Service a moral imperative, with many countries receiving the truth about what is going on in their own country by tuning in to the BBC.

BBC Africa staff in London say that they would not be able to effectively cover sensitive stories like this if they were based in Nairobi or Lagos, as per the current proposals. The BBC’s proposal is to move services to a digital-first model, but with data prohibitively expensive many Africans still only have access to radio and TV to stay informed, especially those in rural areas with connectivity challenges, or countries like Ethiopia, Cameroon, Sudan and Uganda, now frequently experiencing internet shutdowns. State surveillance of journalists is a real threat in many countries. The space opened up by cutting back the World Service and Language Services is likely to be filled by media outlets controlled or funded by countries such as Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia. Members at BBC Arabic radio say by cutting its services drastically, the BBC is giving its Arabic competitors, mainly Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, a golden chance to steal its audience and its well-trained journalists,

“This is sadly history repeating itself as Al Jazeera was itself established out of the ruins of the first incarnation of BBC Arabic TV in the 1990s”.

**From Patrick Smith from Africa Confidential and Africa Report:** *“Across the continent’s 55 states – from souks in Casablanca, university common rooms in Dakar, daily papers’ newsrooms in Lagos, to stockbrokers’ offices in Nairobi – Focus on Africa’s live broadcasts at 15.00, 17.00 and 19.00 GMT are like a call to prayer for the news hungry, specifically those in search of breaking news from a reliably independent source.”*

This is what NUJ members working for the World Service say:

### **BBC Persian**

- For the past three months, BBC Persian service has played a key role in covering the women-led, widespread anti-regime protests across Iran, and also the brutal, violent crackdown they have been met with. These protests are not covered by the local media, due to the heavy censorship imposed by the authorities.
- BBC Persian has an average weekly audience of 18.9m, through its TV, radio, website, and social media channels.
- While dozens of Persian service journalists were spending day and nights informing people of the protests, the BBC announced its plans to cut BBC Persian radio, resulting in the loss of nine journalist jobs. The saving is understood to be less than £1m per annum.
- BBC Persian radio broadcast for one hour a day and is estimated to have a weekly audience of 1.6m people. It is much more than a classic short-wave radio. It produces a daily podcast. It is visualised, and therefore acts as BBC Persian TV’s breakfast news programme. It also produces material for BBC Persian website and social media.
- Closing the radio means that from midnight to 5pm the next day, for 17 hours a day, BBC Persian has no scheduled live broadcast. That space may be filled by a Saudi-funded channel.
- Iran is notorious in its censorship of internet. Thousands of websites, including foreign media outlets such as BBC Persian are blocked in Iran, as well as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and most other major social media platforms. Others can also be blocked at will. The Iranian government also has a history of shutting down the whole internet at times of crisis.
- So, while BBC Persian reaches roughly half of its audience through digital and online platforms, these platforms could become inaccessible.
- The journalistic work has come at a huge personal cost for BBC Persian journalists, and their families back in Iran. For more than a decade, Iranian authorities have embarked on a campaign of harassment and intimidation of the journalists and also

their relatives in Iran. Relatives who have lost their jobs, summoned, interrogated, arrested, and put under their pressure to get these journalists to leave the BBC.

- BBC Persian journalists cannot go back to Iran, as they face arrest and imprisonment. Most of them rarely see their parents, and usually have to travel to third countries to see them.
- Iran imposed an asset-freeze order on BBC Persian journalists back in 2017, that also affects their families in Iran. Just a few weeks ago, the Iranian Foreign Ministry labelled BBC Persian as a terrorist organisation, with punishments such as asset seizures, which could have even more catastrophic consequences for journalists' families.
- BBC Persian journalists face a barrage of daily abuse and threats online, simply because they are doing their professional job as independent, impartial journalists. In March, the BBC World Service, supported by the NUJ, filed an urgent appeal to the United Nations against Iran over the online violence faced by women journalists working for BBC News Persian, saying they face daily, relentless online attacks and harassment, including threats of rape and death. Women working for the service have reported suffering significant and serious mental and physical health issues, including anxiety, anxiety attacks, psychological trauma and depression, requiring therapy and medical intervention.
- A common trick by the Iranian authorities is to spread lies about women, saying they are not married to their husbands, and doctoring porn videos by superimposing their heads on to women in the film and then disseminating them by social media.
- BBC Persian is a great example of the vital role BBC's Language Services play across the globe. Its work as independent, impartial, trusted sources of news is a great asset for the UK.
- Cutting BBC Persian, at a time of widespread protests across Iran, will be celebrated by those who rule Iran. Shrinking such services may help dictators around the world in their fight against accountability, democracy, and human rights

### **Ukraine and Russian services**

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, millions of people turned to the BBC in Russian and Ukrainian for independent, accurate information. Audiences to the Russian website more than tripled at the start of the war. In the face of Russian attempts to block international news content, the BBC stepped up its efforts to reach audiences however it could. The BBC launched new TikTok channels, issued advice on circumvention tools enabling people to reach news websites, offered BBC TV news programmes free of charge to other European TV networks, and launched two new shortwave frequencies of World Service English programmes.

NUJ reps in the **Russian Service** say:

- To make the required savings the Russian Service management proposes to reduce London's team from 54 to 43 posts (to lose 11 positions).
- A good number of the Russian Service employees live and work in the UK on a visa basis. Many of them are terrified of the possibility of losing their job and their right to live in the UK. The Russian 2022 Laws Establishing War Censorship and Prohibiting Anti-War Statements put those people in a vulnerable position if they return to Russia. Even those who have ILR, or British passports would struggle to find jobs in the media industry as English is their second language.
- The Russian Service team are hardworking individuals, passionate about what they do. But with the smaller number of people and the escalating war between Russia and Ukraine, it is not hard to predict that output is going to struggle.
- It is very difficult to gain viewers and followers but would be very easy to lose them to our competitors.

### **BBC Africa services**

- The BBC's Africa services have been trusted and cherished for more than 60 years. Services like Focus on Africa radio were launched at a time when only 17 countries in Africa had yet gained independence. Since then, the BBC has been the voice which guided millions during civil wars, military coups, and natural disasters.
- The BBC is still depended on today, despite other international media houses competing for the audience, including Russia Today and Chinese Central Television Africa which are both investing heavily in the region, even distributing satellite TV equipment through Beijing's '10,000 Villages Project'.
- Currently, the BBC's Francophone services reach 20.9 million each week, and are more popular than international competitors with bigger budgets and more correspondents, thanks to quality international news coverage. BBC Hausa reaches 16.8 million. English language coverage reaches 29.4 million.
- The BBC is uniquely placed to cover stories and ask questions which local stations cannot. The BBC's Somali service reaches 5.7 million people per week and is considered the only media where Somali speakers can get reliable and impartial international news, and the only program where those in power can be held to account without fear. The Swahili service reaches 8.7 million per week and is relied upon to cover challenging political situations which local journalists are afraid to speak out on. The BBC also plays a crucial role in supporting suppressed local media in the region - highlighting the abuse and suppression of local journalists when they are punished for their work. BBC Africa staff in London say that they would not be able to effectively cover sensitive stories like this if they were based in Nairobi or Lagos, as per the current proposals.

- During Covid the BBC has provided trusted, accurate information and advice, debunked rampant misinformation, and held authorities to account when emergency powers in particular states were stretched and abused.
- During major international events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the BBC provides clear impartial information on what is happening, in a media market where misinformation is rampant, not only to those on the continent, but also large diaspora populations. BBC Africa's coverage of the plight of African students and diaspora trapped in Ukraine prompted governments to act, setting up schemes to help those affected get to safety.
- The BBC's language programs provide crucial public services. Many of our audiences in Africa are being badly affected by climate change. BBC services raise awareness of the new dangers and measures that need to be taken, and hold those in power accountable, such as with the wildfire disaster on Mt Kilimanjaro.
- The BBC's proposal is to move services to a digital-first model, but with data prohibitively expensive many Africans still only have access to radio and TV to stay informed, especially those in rural areas with connectivity challenges, or countries like Ethiopia, Cameroon, Sudan and Uganda, now frequently experiencing internet shutdowns. Closing TV and radio services prematurely to concentrate on digital platforms risks losing that unique connection with millions of listeners and viewers across the continent.

**From Joel Kibazo – former Head of Communications for The Commonwealth Secretariat**

*In a world that boasts a wide range of solid, accurate, authentic and dependable news providers, it can be difficult to fully appreciate what the absence of such a service means and portends for those without it. For many years, Focus on Africa has played that crucial role for the continent as it offered accurate news, insights and analysis of events. It is not only the first port of call for the real story but it has also become a model to emulate for those starting down the road of impartial broadcasting in Africa. The time will come when Focus in Africa is no longer needed. However, that time is not now, not yet.*

**From Patrick Smith from Africa Confidential and Africa Report**

*Across the continent's 55 states – from souks in Casablanca, university common rooms in Dakar, daily papers' newsrooms in Lagos, to stockbrokers' offices in Nairobi – Focus on Africa's live broadcasts at 15.00, 17.00 and 19.00 GMT are like a call to prayer for the news hungry, specifically those in search of breaking news from a reliably independent source. For over 60 years, listening to the latest bulletins, interviews and analysis on BBC Focus on Africa*

*has become a family ritual for millions across a continent where live radio remains the most popular and most trusted medium. Its outstanding team of presenters, editors, producers and reporters have become household names in a region where trust in journalism has been eroded by serial disinformation campaigns and state-sponsored propaganda.*

### **BBC Arabic Radio**

- The BBC proposal to shut Arabic radio and limit the hours the rolling news channel Arabic TV will be live mean the loss of 73 jobs in the UK and 51 posts overseas in Cairo, Amman, Beirut, and Baghdad.
- The announcement of the plan to close BBC Arabic Radio, an 84-year-old iconic institution, has caused a wave of anger and concern throughout the Arabic world. A BBC Arabic journalist recently addressed a UK parliamentary committee saying: “For millions in the Arab world, BBC Arabic Radio (Huna London, or This is London), is what Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, Doctor Who, London Underground is... so, if you accept that all these cultural and historical icons are closed for ever, then let the BBC management go ahead and implement its plan to close BBC Arabic Radio!”
- The Arabic Service will be sacrificing a weekly radio audience of 4.8 million out of a total weekly audience of 39.2 million across all BBC Arabic output. We know that prisoners throughout the Arab world listen to Arabic radio for vital information which authoritarian leaders cannot control. Its closure will also disadvantage vulnerable people who cannot afford access to digital media.
- The BBC seeks to reach audiences where they are, and Arabic digital has a unique remit to challenge many of the taboos in Arab society and reflect a young audience seeking freedom in many spheres. We are concerned that by moving this team from London to Amman, it will be heavily restricted and its space for freedom of expression radically reduced.
- By implementing these proposals the BBC will not only jeopardise its own editorial values and principles but also the safety and security of its own staff. A BBC Arabic journalist who has been put at risk of compulsory redundancy under the proposed changes said: “If I will go back to my home country, my life will be at risk and that of my family too.”
- By cutting its services drastically, the BBC is also giving its Arabic competitors, mainly Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, a golden chance to steal its audience and its well-trained journalists. This is sadly history repeating itself as Al Jazeera was itself established out of the ruins of the first incarnation of BBC Arabic TV in the 1990s.

### **Urdu Service (Closing 10 roles out of 19 in London; opening 3 roles in London)**

- BBC Urdu's flagship programme, Sairbeen, has been taken off air on a number of occasions by our partner TV channel Aaj due to pressure from the military establishment. Early last year, Aaj TV failed to restore transmission, and as a consequence we start a shorter digital version of the programme for YouTube and social media. Moving all online production to Islamabad may expose our colleagues to pressures from the government, military and non-state actors (militants). Presently, they use the team in London as an excuse when faced with such pressures.
- **CIVICUS** (<https://monitor.civicus.org/about/aboutcivicus/>) **16 August 2022 reports:** Individuals have been detained for critical tweets, while journalists have been assaulted, detained, and harassed. Some face multiple charges for criticising state institutions. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has issued directives warning the media against criticising state institutions. Protests against disappearances and electricity cuts have been met with arrests or excessive force.
- **CIVICUS 3 March 2022 reports:** The government has enacted amendments to the cybercrime law which threatens to stifle online dissent while journalists have been harassed, criminalised and even allegedly tortured. Further, a new law to protect journalists has imposed new censorship mechanisms. A social media activist was assassinated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Enforced disappearances have affected hundreds of families.

**BBC Burmese** (closing 8 out of 16 roles in London, 5 in Yangon; opening 1 role in Yangon and 9 in Bangkok)

- Myanmar is currently a very challenging country to work from due to the military government. Journalists in Myanmar are required to report their addresses to the Junta. There are clearly considerable security concerns and risks associated with our operation in Myanmar, where the rule of law cannot be relied on.
- A freelance presenter who worked for the BBC's charity branch Media Action is currently in prison in Myanmar serving three years hard labour. Her "crime" was allegedly disseminating false information "designed to foster public animosity towards the military government".
- BBC Journalists in London have taken part in pro-democracy protests in Myanmar. This has come at a huge personal cost to them. One was a political prisoner in Myanmar and is unable to return to the country. Another had to go into hiding and lived in the jungle for several years before claiming asylum in London. This also means they have great personal contacts among the current activists in Myanmar, and have secured key interviews for the BBC. Most of these journalists are language specialists, which makes it harder for them to secure any other job in the UK, and going to Myanmar is not an option in the present situation.



- **CIVICUS, 15 Sept 2022, reports:** In recent months, the junta executed four activists leading to global outrage, However despite this, reports of torture of detainees have persisted as well as the arrest, detention of lawyers as well as activists. A report published found that trade unions and civil society organisations are facing an existential threat. There have been ongoing anti-coup protests and arrests while journalists continue to remain at risk.

**Bangla Service** (Closing all 7 roles in London, 5 in Dhaka; opening 4 role in Dhaka, 3 in Calcutta)

- Bangladesh is not a fully democratic country; the way local journalists, political workers and members of the civil society are treated by the current regime is appalling.
- There are concerns about potential government interference and increasing risk in the run up to elections next year.
- Internet access is not in the reach of poor people in the villages, and radio is their only means of information.
- **CIVICUS** 2020 reports says: The Bangladesh authorities are intensifying their crackdown on the media and critics. The authorities are forcing all news portals to register with them, raising concerns among journalists about press freedom.
- A critical news website on Bangladesh, Amar Desh, has been blocked by the authorities.
- Journalists are facing attacks for their reporting as well as being criminalised under the draconian Digital Security Act.

**Korean Service** (Closing all 8.4 roles in London, 1 in Seoul; opening 2 in Seoul)

- Risk of editorial pressure from the South Korean government.
- The argument of “closer to the audience” does not hold true in the case of the BBC audience in North Korea.
- The UK is neutral territory as it maintains relations with both N and S Korea.
- The available talent pool in Seoul of N Korean specialists is lower than in London where there is less stigma of being a North Korean .
- The personal risk for staff in Seoul will increase as there will not be any buffer in London.

**Vietnamese Service** (closing all 6 roles in London; closing 2, opening 7 roles in Bangkok.)

- Closing all 6 roles will result in a loss of institutional knowledge in London
- Staff in Bangkok experience harassment and have to submit their articles to the authorities in Thailand every year.

- Salaries for Vietnamese staff are low and their spouses are not allowed to work, resulting in high turnover of Vietnamese staff in Bangkok
- **CIVICUS 17 May 2022 says:** New reports highlight the restrictions on movement for activists as well as increased arrests of media workers and environmental activists. Vietnamese government plans to adopt new regulations to tighten control over social media platforms, while journalists have been arrested and convicted for exposing abuses or for criticism of the state.

### **Thai Service** (Closing all 6 roles in London, 3 in Bangkok; opening 6 roles in Bangkok)

- There are concerns about the use of Lese Majeste Law (reporting on the Thai royal family) if the whole team is based in Bangkok. Currently, they can say stories were produced in London.
- **CIVICUS 22 August 2022 report says:** In recent months, the authorities have continued to arrest and prosecute activists and critics for royal defamation, including a musician who has been jailed for six years. Some activists prosecuted for royal defamation went on a hunger strike to protest the denial of bail. Human rights groups also exposed the use of Pegasus spyware on the phones of dozens of pro-democracy activists as well as academics. The authorities have brought charges against Sitanun Satsaksit, the brother of Wanchalearm Satsaksit, who has been forcibly disappeared while protesters continued to be indicted.

### **Indonesian Service** (Closing all 3 roles in London; no impact on staff in Jakarta)

- In recent months, civil society groups have raised concerns about invasive content moderation regulations and digital attacks as well as harassment and intimidation of journalists.

*Source: CIVICUS, 23.9.2022*

### **Chinese Service** (Closing all 10 roles in London, 1 in Washington, no impact in Hong Kong; opening 3 in Taiwan)

- Media freedom is worsening in Hong Kong following the introduction of the HK national security law.
- In China, the internet is subject to heavy censorship, the BBC website and social media platforms are blocked, and there is a history of internet shutdowns, especially at times of crisis
- **CIVICUS 23 March 2022 reports:** In recent months the authorities have continued to arrest, prosecute and convict activists for their planning, organising and participating in peaceful gatherings and protests. Both sedition provisions as well as the draconian National Security Law were used. The government has also targeted journalists and

media outlets, forcing them to shut down. Visas were denied to a journalist and an academic, while a statue commemorating the Tiananmen massacre was removed. The authorities have also targeted a human rights group working on Hong Kong in the UK.

### **Closure of the News Channel and BBC World**

The BBC is to close the News Channel and BBC World News, with the loss of 70 journalists, and create a new channel by next April. The News Channel is available only in the UK and provides a voice for British MPs, mayors and politicians – and a chance for them to not only to be held to account, but also to raise issues important to their constituents. It can go into greater depth on reports by charities and other civil society organisations. BBC World News is funded by subscription and advertising revenues, not by the UK television licence, and is not broadcast in the UK, though reports and programming are also used by the BBC News channel. It has a weekly audience of about 364 million people around the globe.

Having just the one channel will inevitably diminish the overall breath and diversity of content. There has led to concern that this will result in less UK political coverage, particularly on devolved issues and will have a direct effect on democracy. It will also have a knock-on effect on international coverage, as domestic and international stories will have to compete. Furthermore, the plans have put into question the news channel's ability to respond to breaking news – 22m people tuned in when war broke out in the Ukraine. BBC managers have failed to give the NUJ sufficient guarantees that the staff will be there to scramble into action when a story breaks.

Many of the stories and packages created by the BBC News Channel are used right across the corporation, including the World Service and its language services. The NUJ has called on Ofcom to hold an inquiry and have a public consultation. This is a major change, and the BBC should not have been allowed to do it under the radar and without consultation. It is an insult to BBC staff and licence fee payers. The former head of BBC Television News Roger Mosey said he fears that a service tailored for Britain will be replaced by “the bland fare burbling away in international hotel rooms, including lots of half-hour shows to attract sponsorship from global businesses”. Taken together with the cuts at the World Service, this is a disaster.

The government must urgently provide adequate funding to support the BBC in its reporting and news coverage of events worldwide. The NUJ believes that, while operated by the BBC, the funding for the World Service should once again be delivered by the government rather than from the licence fee.