



House of Commons  
Foreign Affairs Committee

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**The Work of the BBC  
World Service 2008–09:  
Responses from the  
Government and BBC  
World Service to the  
Committee's Third  
Report of Session  
2009–10**

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**Second Special Report of Session  
2009–10**

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# Special Report

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The Foreign Affairs Committee published its Third Report of Session 2009–10, *The Work of the BBC World Service 2008–09*, on 5 February 2010, as House of Commons Paper HC 334. The Government’s response to this Report was supplied to us in the form of a letter from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the FCO, Chris Bryant MP, dated 25 March 2010, with a response from the BBC World Service attached. These responses are appended below.

## Government response

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### Letter to the Chair of the Committee from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 25 March 2010.

I read with interest the Foreign Affairs Committee Report *The Work of the BBC World Service 2008–09*, which was published on 5th February 2010. I attach the response from the BBC World Service to the Conclusions and Recommendations in the Report.

I fully agree with your conclusion that the BBC World Service is of key importance in providing a source of high quality and politically independent broadcasting worldwide. It is the envy of many of our partners. We are working with them to see how we can better align our priorities, whilst still respecting their editorial and operational independence. We both consider that regular meetings between our respective staff will help foster a greater understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing each organisation.

We concur that the Persian TV service is providing a valuable service to the people of Iran. To an extent, its value can be demonstrated by the efforts that the Government of Iran is expending to jam the signals. We have worked hard, including at the highest level with our European partners, to persuade the Iranians that this behaviour is unacceptable. We will continue to do so.

The current financial climate has put a strain on all budgets across the public service. The BBC World Service cannot be exempt from that. We are in close consultation over the forthcoming CSR round. You have identified the challenges of moving from short-wave to other platforms—this may result in difficult decisions having to be made by the BBC World Service in terms of continuing specific services.

On the specific FCO-related points that you raise in the Report:

**(Recommendation 7) We conclude that the partial liberalisation of media access to China during the Olympic Games was a temporary phenomenon, and that this is deeply regrettable. We welcome the World Service’s efforts to overcome obstruction and restriction in China, and welcome the subsequent success of bbcukchina.com. We recommend that the Government should continue to insist to China that the broadcasting restrictions which are currently in place serve no useful purpose and should be lifted. (Paragraph 52)**

Restrictions on internet freedom, access to information and freedom of expression in China continue to be a real concern for us. During the last round of our Human Rights dialogue in January 2009 we urged China to provide full access to BBC and other websites. We will continue to follow this issue closely.

We have made numerous representations in Beijing on the business problems BBC Worldwide (an independent corporate arm of BBC) are experiencing in China, most recently on 11 February 2010. We will continue to raise this as appropriate.

**(Recommendation 10) We conclude that it was very disappointing that the BBC World Service was taken off the air in Rwanda, and that the Rwandan Government refused to give interviews to the Great Lakes Service. We welcome the fact that the Rwandan Government are now giving interviews, and recommend that the Government through its mission in Rwanda take active steps to support the World Service in re-establishing confidence in its coverage in that country. (Paragraph 61)**

The Kinyarwanda-language service of the BBC World Service was suspended by the Rwandan Ministry of Information on 25 April 2009. Services in English, French and Swahili were not affected. The British High Commission in Kigali was active in support of Jerry Timmins, Africa Director of the World Service, to have this suspension lifted. I was pleased that the Minister of Information lifted both the suspension, and a boycott of the Kinyarwanda-language service by Rwandan Ministers and senior officials that had been in place since late 2008, on 23 June 2009. During this period the issue was raised at the highest level in Rwanda, including with President Kagame himself. Since the resumption of the Kinyarwanda service there have been no problems of substance between the BBC and Rwandan authorities.

As a confidence-building measure, we have (through the High Commission's bilateral programme budget) funded a secondment scheme where Rwandan journalists working for the state broadcaster ORINFOR are seconded to the BBC World Service in London for three months. They are trained and then work alongside the BBC World Service team. Three Rwandan journalists have participated in the scheme so far.

**(Recommendation 11) We conclude that the ban on international radio broadcasters in Azerbaijan is unacceptable, and detrimental to the interests of the people of Azerbaijan. We recommend that the Government support the BBC in its attempts to resolve this difficulty and to restore the transmission of BBC FM broadcasting in Azerbaijan. (Paragraph 63)**

On 1 January 2009, following months of speculation, the Azeri National Radio and TV Broadcasting Council (NRTBC) brought into force a 2002 law banning all foreign broadcasters from using national (FM) radio frequencies. This effectively closed down the only remaining foreign broadcasters - the BBC World Service, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Since the ban's enforcement, the Azeri Administration has stated a willingness to open negotiations on an inter-governmental or reciprocal basis, which might provide a way to permit foreign broadcasts to resume. BBC World Service representatives have visited Baku recently. We continue to raise this issue (and the importance of press freedom) with the

Azeris, including during President Aliyev's visit in July 2009 to the UK. However, it is for the BBC World Service to negotiate directly with the Azeri authorities.

I hope you find these responses useful.

*Chris Bryant MP*

## BBC World Service response

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### Performance in 2008–09

**(Recommendation 1) We conclude that the strong performance of the BBC World Service across all media in 2008–09 is to be welcomed. We particularly welcome the unprecedented growth in online audiences, which exceeded all targets. (Paragraph 16)**

BBC World Service has for some years been pursuing a strategy of making content available on a variety of platforms as relevant in different markets, in order to maximise impact. Targets agreed with the FCO and exceeded have demonstrated this is a successful approach online. BBC will be seeking to build on this strong performance across all media, although radio usage, and in particular short-wave listening, is likely to decline over the coming years.

### BBC Arabic television

**(Recommendation 2) We conclude that the early indications are that the BBC Arabic television service, now broadcasting 24 hours a day, has established itself as a trusted and valuable provider of news and discussion across the Middle East, and that it proved its worth during the recent Gaza conflict. We recommend that the World Service should supply us with the results of its latest survey of BBC Arabic television audience figures, broken down by country as soon as they are available. We further recommend that the BBC provide updated ratings for trust and impartiality, and comparable data for the BBC's main competitors, including Al Jazeera. (Paragraph 22)**

BBC World Service has recently carried out surveys on viewership and reputational ratings (trust etc) for BBC Arabic Television in Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Iraq, the results of which will be made available in Spring 2010 when BBC World Service's total annual audience figure is announced.

### BBC Persian television

**(Recommendation 3) We conclude that the new BBC Persian television service provides an invaluable service to the people of Iran and to other Farsi speakers in the region by supplying an objective news service at this period of great tension. We further conclude that congratulations are due to all the BBC World Service staff involved in launching and delivering this service, despite difficult circumstances and active opposition. (Paragraph 34)**

**(Recommendation 4) We welcome the temporary extension of the service to 24 hours of broadcasting, and regret that this was not able to continue due to financial restraints.**

**We recommend that the provision of a 24-hour BBC Persian service should be a top priority for the World Service in 2009–10. We further recommend that all possible technical expedients should be used to ensure that the Iranian Government's attempts to block their citizens' access to objective news from the BBC does not succeed. (Paragraph 35)**

The extension of BBC Persian Television to 24 hours is being considered by BBC World Service as part of its strategic review for the next Spending Review bid. BBC World Service has responded to attempts to jam BBC Persian Television by using alternative satellites, and is making every effort to be available on the most popular satellites in Iran. Jamming of international broadcasters to Iran increased in February 2010—BBC responded by issuing a joint statement with VOA and Deutsche Welle calling for satellite operators and regulators to take action against Iran. The case is being referred to the international regulators, ITU.

### **Other language services**

**(Recommendation 5) We conclude that the changes to the BBC Turkish and BBC Afrique Service are in line with the strategic themes and priorities outlined by the BBC World Service. We recommend that the BBC World Service closely monitor the impact of these changes on audience levels and customer satisfaction, with a view to evaluating the impact of its strategic priorities. (Paragraph 41)**

#### ***BBC Turkish***

BBC WS will continue to evaluate the Turkish changes. Audience research has recently been carried out in Turkey, and results should be available within the next month. BBC World Service has also agreed online syndication deals with major news portals hurriyet and haberturk, and has also co-hosted a recorded as-live TV debate with partner NTV using social media to interact with audience attracting an audience of 1.7 million.

#### ***BBC Afrique Service***

The new production centre in Dakar, Senegal is now due to open in the Spring, enabling prime time dawn output to be produced from West Africa for the first time and further schedule enhancements are planned as a result. The measured audiences to BBC Afrique have increased from 10.8 million listeners weekly in financial year 2008/09 to 11.1 million in 2009/10. Further audience measurements are planned for the coming year.

### **Online and mobile technology**

**(Recommendation 6) We conclude that the World Service's pro-active response to the rapid growth in online and mobile technology is welcome, in view of the huge potential of this technology for reaching large and new audiences. We agree with the World Service that the key challenge is to develop multimedia platforms while maintaining the quality of the existing radio service. We recommend that the World Service should inform the Committee of the outcome of its review of the mix of services in order to define strategic priorities which identify the most effective and efficient means to disseminate material and to maximise audiences and engagement. (Paragraph 48)**

BBC World Service welcomes the Committee's support for its early recognition of the importance of online and mobile technologies. The BBC will continue to review its portfolio of services and platforms in order to maximise its impact in areas of geopolitical importance and minimise the potentially damaging effects of audience fragmentation. The BBC seeks to anticipate media evolution away from short-wave radio as a dominant broadcasting platform and will increasingly focus on platforms which will offer audience impact, such as FM, TV and online/mobile platforms. In this context, the BBC has already developed a strong multimedia presence in Arabic and Persian by successfully combining its radio, TV and online platforms to drive audience impact. Recognising the huge importance mobile platforms have for areas with poor infrastructure, the BBC has launched a number of mobile sites for key languages in sub-Saharan Africa (Hausa, Swahili, Somali). The BBC will publish its full proposals for mix of services and platforms following the outcome of the next Comprehensive Spending Review.

## China

**(Recommendation 7) We conclude that the partial liberalisation of media access to China during the Olympic Games was a temporary phenomenon, and that this is deeply regrettable. We welcome the World Service's efforts to overcome obstruction and restriction in China, and welcome the subsequent success of bbcukchina.com. We recommend that the Government should continue to insist to China that the broadcasting restrictions which are currently in place serve no useful purpose and should be lifted. (Paragraph 52)**

Traffic for bbcukchina.com pages (on the BBC's own site and on partner sites) has dropped by over 50% to about 45 million page views per month since June 2009, following the ban imposed by the Chinese government on Chinese media organisations making business deals with the BBC. Some key Chinese partners have stopped content partnership deals with the BBC WS and BBC Worldwide.

Meanwhile, the BBC News Bureau in Beijing has on a number of occasions experienced restrictions on its reporting work in China by the Chinese authorities. BBC WS continues to make efforts to maintain a dialogue with Chinese officials to resolve the issues. Richard Sambrook, former Director of BBC Global News, had a very brief meeting with President Hu Jintao during his attendance at the World Media Summit in Beijing in early October 2009, and he also visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and SARFT. Richard Sambrook and Peter Horrocks, the new Director of BBC Global News, also held follow-up meetings with the officials of the Chinese Embassy in London in November 2009 and February 2010 respectively.

## Russia

**(Recommendation 8) We conclude that the continuing difficulty in distributing radio content to audiences in Russia is deeply regrettable. We welcome the success of the World Service's strategy to overcome this by increasing investment in online and non-FM radio services. We particularly welcome the fact that this investment has resulted in expanding the World Service's impact in Russia through reaching new audiences. (Paragraph 57)**

BBC Russian has recently concluded syndication deals with MSN and Gzt.ru in Russia and Tut.by, Belarus' leading online portal.

## Sri Lanka

**(Recommendation 9) We conclude that the decision to allow the World Service to resume broadcasting in Sri Lanka is to be welcomed. We recommend that the World Service notify us of any further delays, should any occur, after the Sri Lankan elections. (Paragraph 59)**

BBC WS has now signed an agreement with SLBC to resume broadcasting on its airwaves on FM by mid-April 2010. Once broadcasting has resumed, BBC WS will continue to monitor the situation to ensure editorial independence is maintained.

## Rwanda

**(Recommendation 10) We conclude that it was very disappointing that the BBC World Service was taken off the air in Rwanda, and that the Rwandan Government refused to give interviews to the Great Lakes Service. We welcome the fact that the Rwandan Government are now giving interviews, and recommend that the Government through its mission in Rwanda take active steps to support the World Service in re-establishing confidence in its coverage in that country. (Paragraph 61)**

BBC WS was also pleased that the Rwandan government reinstated FM broadcasts in Rwanda and Rwandan government ministers are once again taking part in BBC programmes. The British High Commissioner in Kigali has been and remains a keen supporter of the BBC.

## Azerbaijan

**(Recommendation 11) We conclude that the ban on international radio broadcasters in Azerbaijan is unacceptable, and detrimental to the interests of the people of Azerbaijan. We recommend that the Government support the BBC in its attempts to resolve this difficulty and to restore the transmission of BBC FM broadcasting in Azerbaijan. (Paragraph 63)**

The BBC and other international broadcasters have made frequent representations to the Azeri authorities, urging them to find ways of continuing the broadcast partnerships within the complex Azeri regulations.

## Administration

**(Recommendation 12) We conclude that 2009–10 will be a difficult year for the World Service and that further cuts in staff and services should be avoided. We support the crucial work of the World Service and will continue to monitor the situation closely. We conclude that the BBC World Service is of key importance in providing a source of high quality and politically independent broadcasting worldwide. (Paragraph 72)**

As indicated earlier, BBC WS will shortly be discussing its strategic plans for the next SR period (2011/12 to 2013/14) with the FCO before submission to HM Treasury.