

Authoritarian governments on the rise; Independent media under threat; why the world needs the BBC

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Good afternoon. First of all, let me say how happy I am to be here as speaking to members of an organisation that opens its website with the statement “The British Broadcasting Corporation is the best in the world.” Thank you David Attenborough for those kind words. Perhaps the next sentence is less welcome – “but now its future is threatened...” At first glance that seems overly pessimistic. With newly secured funding through our Charter, independence through our licence fee, and the new grant money from the Foreign Office to expand the World Service, we are in a more privileged position than most.

But the themes of your conference this year do in fact strike at the heart of the challenges the BBC faces - threats that go far beyond the latest charter settlement. “How to ensure the citizen dividend” is one of the key roles the BBC can play all over the world. But as I shall explain, we are up against a number of obstacles.

The first of these is well known and understood. We are experiencing a revolution in digital technology that gives audiences what feels like unlimited access to information. In a couple of clicks you can view what bombing has done to the cities of Mosul and Aleppo; you can follow the politics that interest you; Audiences across the globe can interact... like... comment... share... just about anything. The trouble is – you may not always know whether or not what you are seeing is true.

There are other assaults on news. We have a US President who both campaigns against and circumvents the news media; we are witnessing audiences and advertisers move away from traditional media in alarming numbers and we see around the world a growing crackdown on journalism which presents a challenge to those in power.

Which is why I believe that in the face of all these threats, the BBC values of honesty, reliability and independence are needed more than ever ... when sometimes the news is fake, false, factually challenged, when the algorithms just feed you self-reinforcing views – so called filter bubbles; when arrests of journalists and blocking of websites are growing not declining – then a source that you can presume is accurate and has checked its facts, is vital.

And we are not just patting ourselves on the back. Here in the UK with the snap election on June 8th, we will be working hard to make sure we bring these values to you, our domestic audience.

It’s worth reminding ourselves that conventional wisdom was wrong before the 2015 election, wrong before the referendum, and wrong before Trump won the White House. And, already we are seeing with this election, people second-guessing the outcome. I want to assure you that the BBC will be the place you can come to for expert coverage ... not to for speculation and forecasting the race ... by being the place you come to for real impartial news.

During this General Election campaign the BBC's focus is rightly on serving the listener and viewer. A General Election, is determined by the voters not simply the politics of campaigning. We want the public to feel more informed by coming to the BBC. We want you to understand the full range of policy choices, not just the personalities in the contest. We want you to feel connected to the BBC; to feel it is reflecting your concerns and questions in our coverage.

And this commitment to these values goes across all our output.

It is at the heart of why the BBC World Service is expanding some of our existing teams and opening 12 new language services.

The film we're about to play shows you some of the powerful stories that have made an impact both around the world and here in the UK – stories generated by our language services ... From the taboo breaking Shame Season, to a perfect illustration of our how our journalists often "live the story", I'm starting with this excerpt of a reunion between BBC Arabic's Basheer Al-Zaidi, and his brother in Mosul.

[FILM EXCERPT FROM BBC ARABIC]

Having bureaux on the ground in 72 cities across the globe means that we can provide a unique perspective for you our UK audience, and for citizens of the world, at a time when the established media face huge pressure on their Newsgathering budgets; where the space they are vacating is now being occupied by well-funded state players – China's global television – CCTV, RT formerly Russia Today, even the Turks have launched a 24 hour TV news platform.

I have recently returned from a trip to Thailand and Vietnam where I met government officials to discuss improving the freedom to operate for both of these language services. In Vietnam, our website is regularly blocked and our journalists have been told that if they return to the country they face the risk of arrest after we ran a story accusing a high ranking official of corruption.

In Thailand, which many of us perceive to be a carefree holiday destination, there are also severe constraints on journalists. Arrests and punitive laws are creating fear and self-censorship in an increasingly controlled media landscape. We had already re-opened the Thai Service following the military coup in 2014. We then expanded this small Facebook Page service onto a full webpage last November, just before the death of the old King.

Many of you will be familiar with the Lese Majeste laws in Thailand – basically it is against the law to "violate the dignity of the Majesty", meaning in practice it is almost impossible to voice criticism of the King. Following the death of the last king the BBC published a Profile of his son and successor on its websites in English and then in Thai, early last December. We included material that although in the public domain, was not flattering, and was not being written about in the Thai media.

King Vajiralongkorn is these days seen in the company of a former Thai Airways flight attendant, Suthida, who has been made an officer of the Royal Household Guard, with the

rank of Lieutenant-General. He also famously promoted his pet poodle Fu-Fu to the rank of Air Chief Marshall. The severity of the lese majeste law has prevented any open discussion of the new king's suitability inside Thailand.

It was necessary for our London team to write this piece to protect our journalists in Bangkok from being charged under Lese Majeste laws. Even so our office was raided, and our staff had to stay at home for a number of days. Our head of service is now working from London along with his family and is unsure whether or not he would face arrest if he tried to return.

Using social media to distribute stories adds to the offence. A blogger who simply shared this article on social media is in custody and faces up to 20 years in prison. Yet despite this, the story had more than 1.3 million hits – mainly from audiences in Thailand. So whatever laws the Thai authorities put in place – it has not dimmed the appetite of its own citizens to know of these issues.

So it is a depressing picture for independent media. Turkey has over 150 journalists in prison. The “great firewall” means the BBC website is blocked in China; our Persian Service has no presence inside Iran; we were taken off air in Rwanda after a BBC documentary caused offence. But despite these examples, we see a huge desire from people all over the world to circumvent their own government’s determined efforts to prevent them having access to information. BBC Persian, despite the blocking and the jamming has an astonishing audience of nearly 18 million people, eager to hear about life beyond their borders, to hear about some of the politics and news *within* their borders that local media don’t report.

Our journalists often pay a high price for working for us. Our Persian service staff can’t go home. When there are family illnesses or bereavements, they cannot attend the funeral without fear of detention.

WHAT ARE WE DOING

And this is why we believe that our plans to open 12 new language services is so timely. One of them is targeted at the Korean peninsula. North Korea is the most closed country in the world. We will need to draw on all our powers of clarity and simplicity to explain the world to a population who were not told by their own media that Donald Trump had won the US election until days later.

Our aim with this it to try to provide the people of North Korea with information about the world and about the region they live in – as is their basic human right.

We will be broadcasting a half hour programme with News, features and a module to enable English language learning on radio. It will be repeated over a four hour period during the night – a time we feel is safer for people to listen to a radio. We also know that the regime does less jamming at night as they seek to save energy. Jamming requires a lot of electricity. We have been testing the transmissions and are optimistic that our new service will be heard.

The service will be available of course for all Korean speakers around the world North and South Korea, New Malden and Los Angeles, via our website.

Other services are targeted at Eritrea and Ethiopia, again - hardly bastions of liberal democracy.

Our other expansion plans include new languages for India and Nigeria. A big expansion of TV services for Africa. Enhanced services for Russian speakers. We are providing new Arabic services on radio and TV specifically targeted at the Maghreb and the Gulf.

But we are also aware that the tried and tested formats we have used to reach audiences are not necessarily going to work in the future. While there are some parts of the world where people still listen to us on radios in villages, those places are getting fewer and fewer. The developing world is very much part of the digital revolution. We need new means of attracting audiences. That's why we are developing new talent like Satirist Ikenna Azuike who's strand *What's Up Africa* takes a popular look at the serious and not so serious side of African life – like this spoof on the life of an *African* Premier League star:

[EXCERPT FROM WHAT'S UP AFRICA]

And we hope we may be seeing more of Ikenna here in the UK in the future.

As well as opening more language services, we are also offering new programmes in English that are focused on sharing solutions – programmes that help our audiences with the “how” in their daily lives – like World Hacks’ We’ve just had a very successful season looking at solutions to air pollution, called So I Can Breathe. We are offering programmes where you, the audience, set the agenda – like CrowdScience. So far questions have ranged from fun ones like “Why do we have so many breeds of dog?” to questions that have the power to transform lives, like “How should we deliver fresh water?” Although we are constantly looking at digital innovation, radio is still a major platform, but now many of our programmes have a strong complementary digital offer as well. Here is a flavour of what World Service RADIO is producing for the digital sphere.

[EXCERPT FROM BBC WORLD SERVICE ENGLISH]

These programmes are incredibly popular with the audiences we need to attract, younger audiences, people less consumed with geopolitics, and more interested in how they can solve local problems, and share global solutions. Much of this output gets translated and shared right across the BBC. The short version of that Fog Catcher video has had over one million views. Some of our World Hacks digital clips have had incredible interaction – a short video on the potential for Circular runways had over 35 million views on Facebook. Sometimes I think my predecessors as the Directors would be amazed and possibly horrified at what the World Service is now. But whatever mechanisms we are using to reach people, the essential purpose and values are the same.

When the Empire Service was started in the 30’s it was a time of growing international tension. We were in a competition with other empires for influence in the world and other countries had already begun international transmissions. Our engineers developed shortwave to reach audiences everywhere. Here was a technology that could reach above the heads of governments and talk directly to the people.

The Second World War saw the beginning of our language services, starting with German in 1938 – launched at the time of the Munich Crisis. By 1943 the BBC was broadcasting in 54 languages. New research of our Official Archive by Exeter University show some surprisingly modern approaches to wartime content. They have discovered that the BBC transmitted news about Britain’s *military setbacks and defeats* to Germany, as part of a sophisticated operation to win over the hearts and minds of the German people and so help combat Nazi propaganda. The ambition was to make the BBC German service a trusted source of objective and independent information.

Some of those old programme formats have a real resonance today. One BBC German show played recordings of a variety of Hitler’s speeches to highlight how he regularly contradicted himself. Here’s what he said before, now listen to what he says now. We thought our “Reality Check” slots – now rolling out at speed across BBC outlets in time for the election – was a new and original idea. But clearly our colleagues of 75 years ago had much the same idea.

This exposure of what we now call “fake news” only worked because BBC German had built a reputation as a truthful broadcaster. It also broadcast entertainment, family reunions,

and other so-called soft items; building up an offer that appealed to a wide range of people, not just those actively involved in resistance.

But where my predecessors did have the advantage, however, was in the ability of shortwave to reach people directly without interference from governments.

While shortwave is still important in some parts of the world, developments in technology mean audiences are no longer willing to accept crackly signals. It was why we went into FM and AM on radio, then TV, and now the digital space. The BBC's technologists have always been adept at adapting to the latest means of consumption

We now have over fifteen hundred (1500) partnerships all over the world ... Local media companies who carry our TV bulletins on their channels, radio stations and local websites all carrying our programmes and content.

But this does make it harder to bypass governments and their regulations to reach people so access to audiences is not as direct as it once was.

If our partners come under pressure from government or from their proprietors, then we do too. In Turkey during the Gezi park protests of a few years ago, our partner dropped our TV bulletin. We have not deemed it worth trying to find a new one in the present climate.

Fortunately in most parts of the world, the digital space is less easily interfered with. It is harder (although not impossible as we know from China) to turn off the internet, without damaging your own economy

But too often today, it seems to me, around the world, governments are seeking to control the message. Or using their regulatory powers to restrict the flow of information.

In Hungary, Prime Minister, Viktor Orban has created a politically-appointed media authority, which can censure journalists for what it deems to be unbalanced or offensive content. In Poland, the Law and Justice party, which won elections last October, has made significant changes to the public broadcaster, passing a media law that gives it the power to appoint its head. Soon after Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, he established control over the three main TV stations. Today, Mr Putin now controls most of the major mainstream media. He appoints editors and general directors, either officially or unofficially. In the 2015 "Freedom House" report Russia had a score of 83 (100 being the worst), mostly because of new laws introduced that further extended the state control over mass-media. It is with that context, we are expanding our Russian Service

Unrestricted by censorship, we have already been covering issues which most local media have to ignore, - such as corruption allegations against the prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, or Russia's role in the Ukrainian conflict.

The challenge for us is to offer a Russian Audience a valuable alternative perspective on the world, whilst not being seen as part of the liberal opposition. To make sure we reflect all opinion in Russia, to see the world from a Russian perspective. It is a tricky balancing act.

The Russian government regards the BBC as a vehicle of western propaganda. We also have in our Russian service an invaluable resource for audiences in the UK and around the world. With the war in Syria getting ever more dangerous as Russian and Americans are becoming perilously close to direct conflict, having a service that brings that insight into a regime ever more reluctant to talk to us, is a valuable resource indeed.

Two days ago I attended the launch of our first daily Television bulletin for Somalia. Civil war, drought, breakaway regions, Al Shabab, pirates, poverty, Female genital mutilation ... an audience of need – YES ... But they are also a diverse and aspirational community and they are a young country – the median age is under 19 years old. Our audience research tells us there is a great deal of excitement about this new programme. The BBC already has a strong reputation in this fragmented and troubled region for being fair and delivering impartial broadcasting since 1957. This is a flavour of today's offer.

[EXCERPT FROM SOMALI TV]

Our mission with all these services is to provide free and independent news as an important building block for a stable world. It is something the BBC is proud of, and something I hope that the British public who fund our endeavour, are also proud to support.

Famously, Professor Amartya Sen, who won the 1998 Nobel Prize in economics, once asserted that there have been no famines in countries where there is a free press and regular elections.

Recently too, the European Broadcasting Union published a survey which suggested that countries with popular, well-funded public service broadcasters encounter less extremism and corruption. Its report says that “in countries where public service media funding is higher there tends to be more press freedom” and where they have a higher market share “there also tends to be a higher voter turnout”. The EBU says “a strong and well-funded public service media is not only about providing people with news, documentaries and entertainment – it's also about contributing to democracy.”

But we cannot in the digital age simply expect that a grateful world will turn to us. There is a huge amount of media available to people now in the developed and developing world. This is why I believe a well-resourced World Service is vital to that mission. I am pleased that this has been recognised and am hopeful the British public who fund us can see the benefits to them also and are proud to support.

We have an ambition to reach a global audience of 500 million people by the time of our centenary in 2022. We are already at 340 million and I am confident that as long as we continue to be properly resourced we can achieve that goal.

We need powerful politicians, major business players, world class artists to speak to the BBC. We need to deliver those people, who influence all our lives, to our audience. And to do that we need to be a major global media player and a byword for excellence.

So whether it is in Punjabi or Pidgen, Swahili or Sinhala, we will do our very best to live up to those standards. And although the Berlin Wall has long since fallen, the desire of governments to control the message has not changed. Too many of them are unable or unwilling or just too fearful of the consequences to want to change their ways.

It makes me realise that our role is as vital now in 2017 as it has been at any period in our history.