

WHAT WILL BE THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD SERVICE AS IT COMES UNDER THE LICENCE FEE IN APRIL 2014?

THE BBC WORLD SERVICE, often referred to as the 'voice of Britain abroad', is well known to over 183 million people around the globe who regularly tune in or log on to one of its 27 language services. But the British public, with the exception of intrepid travellers and insomniacs who listen to BBC Radio 4 in the dark hours of the night when World Service programmes are broadcast, know little about it.

This is a shame because from April 2014 British citizens will pay for its services and will need to understand why. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will no longer fund the World Service as one of its public diplomacy partners, and subsequent changes in its governance, funding cuts and its integration into the BBC's Global News Division will bring opportunities but also pose significant threats. These changes matter greatly for how Britain is perceived around the world and for its ability to influence by attraction – its exercise of what Joseph Nye refers to as 'soft power'.

At a time when the rising powers of BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) are investing in international media and public diplomacy initiatives to project themselves onto a world stage, European powers are cutting investment in these services. Some see international broadcasters like BBC World Service and France 24 as remnants of a bygone era, colonial relics and Cold War propaganda tools that have no place in a media-saturated, multi-polar world, but that ignores a rich history of cultural encounters and translation activities that enabled the BBC to forge a unique brand of corporate cosmopolitanism.

For the last 80 years, the World Service derived much of its intellectual, creative and diplomatic significance from the non-British broadcasters who have been at the heart of the BBC's foreign language service, broadcasting to home countries, but these broadcasting diasporas have remained largely absent from the public understanding of the World Service. Successive waves of exiled, refugee, dissident and migrant intellectuals and writers have been essential to establish and renew the BBC's reputation as one of the world's most credible and trusted international broadcasters.

A MATTER OF DIPLOMACY

The Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) 'Reframing the Nation' research theme and its affiliate Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded 'Tuning In' project have produced the first interdisciplinary analysis of the relationship between these exiled, refugee, dissident and migrant broadcasters and the diplomatic imperatives that have shaped the overseas operations of the

OPINION

THE VOICE OF BRITAIN ABROAD

By Professor Marie Gillespie

It would be a sad loss if the World Service was to lose its distinctive diasporic voice

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BBC since its inception as the Empire Service in 1932. The research has brought together international scholars and CRESC researchers to collaborate and examine, for example, the evolution of world music, global sports and drama for development as well as a range of more conceptually focused themes including diasporic nationalism, religious transnationalism and the politics of translation. The book ranges from an examination of British expat audiences in the 1930s through to World War Two political satire and the problems of reporting Jewish persecution, to the historical role of the BBC in South Asia, the Middle East and Iran. It ends by examining the way new interactive online media are transforming audiences, creating digital diasporas and challenging established journalistic principles. The study develops an analysis of the attitudes, working methods and intercultural experiences of programme makers, as shaped by corporate, journalistic and strategic interests. It shows the complex cultural and diplomatic value of the World Service, and how British voices, attitudes and government policy (national interests and values) have become part of a wider narrative exchange with the BBC's overseas audiences.

The cultural bridge to audiences created by successive generations of diasporic staff at the World Service is important and remains the underlying currency of the Service's continued success as an international broadcaster and a diplomatic force. It would be a sad loss for Britain if the World Service was to lose its distinctive diasporic voice and its associated diplomatic cultural value. ■

www.cresc.ac.uk/our-research/reframing-the-nation

