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British Public Diplomacy: A Case Study of the BBC Hausa Service

By Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar

Perhaps the most reputable broadcaster in the world, the BBC World Service is Britain's most recognizable soft power resource. Combining the leverages of a long-established institution with a wide network of reporters, well-resourced journalism and skillful deployment of distribution technologies, the World Service has managed to maintain an edge over rival broadcasters. But the inherent contradiction of providing "impartial" news service and promoting British public diplomacy presents a formidable dilemma, as do its dwindling funding conditions and the declining fortunes of Britain in the contemporary global setting. This article looks at the BBC World Service in terms of its engagement with audiences in Africa and its relationship with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, within the conceptual framework of soft power and public diplomacy. Using documentary research technique and individual and focus group interviews, the study specifically examines BBC's relationship with Nigeria—its largest radio market in the world—to unveil both the effectiveness and limitations of its public diplomacy role.

Introduction

When nations or organizations seek to increase or maintain their attraction and relevance in the world, they turn to institutions and activities that could help them to do so. International broadcasting is one such activity and Britain appears to have done well in it. The international arm of British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC World Service, has over the years emerged as a leading force in the field.

This paper examines specifically the relationship between the BBC World Service and its audiences in Nigeria (the corporation's largest radio market in the world) to assess the effectiveness of its public diplomacy role. Documentary research technique (analyzing BBC's publications, audience surveys reports, press releases, FCO publications, committee reports, and academic works)

and in-depth individual interview and focus group methods were employed for the study. The in-depth interviews were conducted with five BBC personnel (the executive editor for the African region, the Abuja bureau editor, the World Service correspondent in Nigeria-turned-producer, senior correspondent, and the ex-senior producer) in London and Nigeria between December 2009 and October 2012. It was around the same period that individual interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted with BBC audiences in Northern Nigeria. The six groups that cut across different socio-economic, educational, occupational, and professional backgrounds were categorized as the working class, the lower middle class, the middle class, the political class, the peasant class, and youth/student groups.

International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy

As a former foremost colonial power that once controlled over a quarter of the world, Britain carries both the baggage of colonial domination and the advantage of historical head start in public diplomacy work and exercise of soft power. Britain does employ several strategies for public diplomacy,¹ its key area of strength is international broadcasting,² and it clearly gains greater benefit from it than the other leading public diplomacy actors such as China and the United States. While the Chinese and U.S. international broadcasters are often associated with their countries' propaganda³—though on completely different scales—the BBC World Service, the conveyor of prestige to Britain, has a reputation of journalistic independence and credibility.⁴ It is that reputation that helps Britain's public diplomacy and enhances its soft power, though the country's ailing economy and shrinking global influence are now harming the World Service.

The remarkable thing about international broadcasting is that it not only functions as a key element of public diplomacy, but it also overlaps with its other components: listening to foreign publics, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and exchange.⁵ Ironically, though, its effectiveness lies in *not* being brazenly used as an instrument of public diplomacy. In its early conception, international broadcasting was

seen as strictly state-sponsored transmission of messages (usually through shortwave radio) to foreign publics, but the involvement of non-state actors and advances in communications technologies have long altered that.⁶ It is now defined as the work of state or non-state actors aimed at engaging foreign publics through the use of technologies of radio, television, and Internet.⁷ Its relationship with both public diplomacy and soft power was recognized since the emergence of the two concepts. Browne reports that it was in 1967 during a conference on international public diplomacy at Tufts University that international broadcasting was identified as an “instrument of public diplomacy.”⁸ And Nye has always regarded it as a significant soft power resource.⁹ International broadcasting did, of course, predate the two concepts, though not the activities associated with them.

Radio broadcasting began at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it was communist Russia's pioneering broadcast on shortwave radio in 1925 that is generally recognized as the commencement of international broadcasting.¹⁰ This was quickly embraced by other competing nations, and it progressed so fast that by the early 1930s, Germany's propaganda chief Josef Goebbels was already speaking of it “as a powerful instrument of international diplomacy, persuasion, and even coercion”—a view shared by many state and non-state actors.¹¹ By the late 1930s, Browne notes, “international broadcasting was being employed by national governments, religious organizations, commercial advertisers, domestic broadcasters and even educators to bring their various messages to listeners abroad.”¹² It enjoyed rapid rises during the Second World War, at the height of the Cold War and in the post-September 11 period: “The Second World War saw an explosion in international broadcasting as a propaganda tool on both sides” and the subsequent Cold War arising from the falling out of the victorious Allies—the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist West—gave rise to “communist propaganda” and “capitalist persuasion.”¹³ The collapse of the communist bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s ended the Cold War, and funding for propaganda outfits began to decline. However, the 11 September 2001 attacks in

the United States “revived the need for public diplomacy” and led to the resurgence of Western-funded international broadcasting as part of efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Muslims.¹⁴

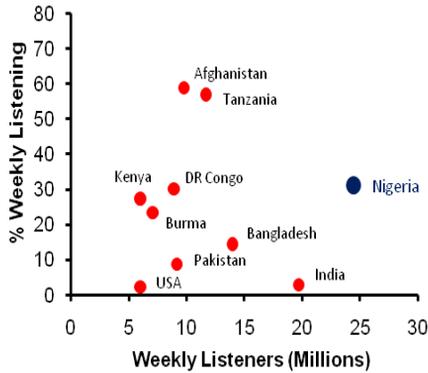
The roles of the BBC World Service before and during those phases have been the subject of wide academic discourses, and are as diverse as the issues dictated by the changing times.¹⁵

The case of the World Service’s role in Nigeria

The BBC Hausa Service presents a remarkable example of the BBC’s dual role of providing international news service and promoting British public diplomacy. Established in 1957 “to appeal to special local interests,”¹⁶ the BBC Hausa Service has ever since been targeting Hausa-speakers in Africa, particularly the mainly Muslim Northern Nigerians, with Western cultural goods, which to this day constitute a large chunk of their global media diets.¹⁷ The service expanded steadily in the last decade, entering into partnership with local radio stations and employing new technologies to deliver its products, gaining the largest audience figures among all the language services of the BBC.¹⁸ This makes Nigeria, a former British colony, increasingly significant to the World Service, particularly because it has met the key criteria of strategic importance, impact, and cost effectiveness of its services.¹⁹ Combining the English and Hausa language audiences, Nigeria has consistently emerged as the largest radio market for the BBC World Service, with average weekly audience figures of about 25 million.²⁰

As can be seen in the diagram above (of the BBC-commissioned audience survey released in May 2009) showing the ten largest consumers of BBC radio products, in terms of weekly percentages and number of listeners in millions, Nigeria comes in at the top with 24.4 million listeners, followed by India with nearly 20 million listeners. Although Afghanistan and Tanzania have the highest percentages of their adult population listening, they fall below Nigeria in terms of the number of listeners because Nigeria has a much higher population figure.

Top 10 BBC Radio Markets in the World



Source: BBC GND/Ipsos MORI (2009)

The Findings

Data gathered through in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions with audiences in Northern Nigeria for this study have indeed revealed evidence of high consumption of BBC products in the region. They show that Northern Nigerians interact regularly with a wide range of international media and that the BBC is the one they have the highest level of interactions with. One by one, as individuals and as groups, the vast majority of the respondents rated the BBC as the most credible global broadcaster. The criteria they used in making their assessments include accuracy, timeliness, use of diasporic personnel with whom they share cultural affinity, and depth and perceived impartiality of BBC's coverage of global and Nigerian events. Assessing the cumulative impact of their interactions with global broadcasters is difficult because, as many researchers rightly observe, the existence of intervening variables makes measuring of media effects very difficult.²¹ Still, though with some caution, it is clear from the audiences' narratives that international media do exert significant influence on their lives. Whether in the more general form of affecting their everyday lives through the basic media functions of informing, educating, and entertaining them, or in the more specific form of enhancing their comprehension of international

and national affairs, raising their awareness of their civic rights and responsibilities and influencing specific personal decisions and professional endeavors, the audiences have given accounts of how useful their engagements with international broadcasters have been. They do, however, express their concerns over the propaganda role of global broadcasters, their perceived penchant for the protection of their owners' interests, and their alleged capacity to erode local cultural values. The facts that the audiences themselves said they prefer the BBC to other broadcasters and that they consume its products more than others' suggest that the BBC probably exerts more influence on their lives than the other international broadcasters do—as their comments suggest:

[The international broadcaster] I enjoy most is the BBC because if I spend a day without listening to the BBC, I feel uncomfortable. This is why wherever I am—either in a vehicle or while walking—I have my radio set, day and night, so as to listen to the BBC (*Shop owner* in the Lower Middle Class Group).

I do not doubt all the reports I get from the BBC. I believe whatever it reports. Why? Because there is no media organization that explains to us the way things are as the BBC does (*Farmer-student* in the Peasant Group).

However, both the credibility rating of the BBC and the station's apparent influence on the audiences need to be viewed with caution. Despite their admiration for the World Service, the vast majority of the respondents expressed views that clearly reveal unfavorable disposition towards the West (United States and Britain in particular). They are very critical of the United States and Britain largely because of the two countries' role in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the contemporary period, and historically because of the latter's role in the colonization of Africa. So their favorable ratings of the BBC are not absolute; they are limited to the comparing of the station with other international broadcasters, such as the Voice of America (VOA), Germany's Radio Deutsche Welle, and Radio France International (RFI)—all of which equally broadcast to Nigeria in both Hausa and English languages. They see the BBC as more credible than those

broadcasters. But generally they believe that both the West and its media have been unfair to the Islamic world and to Africa.

Ah, honestly, the things they [America and Britain] do are good in some cases, but some are bad. Their relationship with Islam is not good. They suppress Islam far more than imagined. This is why we Muslims dislike them; they suppress us; they are not fair to us (*Motorcycle mechanic* in the Working Class Group).

Well, you see, their true belief is that Islam is [an] aggressive religion. We're always fighting and fighting and fighting (*Trade unionist*).

There is a one-sided flow of information: good is from the West, bad is from the developing world. You can hardly hear anything coming from Africa except that of conflict, except that of war, except that of coups, except that of corruption (*Graduate student*).

The respondents did not exclude the BBC from this charge of bias. Although they rate it as more credible than others, they still regard it as a classic Western medium that portrays the West positively and the Islamic world and Africa negatively. These complaints are rampant in their responses, ranging from the description of the BBC as “*typical Western media*” (by a deputy editor in the Middle Class Group)—a subtle way of accusing it of showing pro-Western bias—to outright accusations of being “*partisan and in some ways even anti-Muslims or anti-Arabs*” (as claimed by a female ex-editor); or even a more blanket accusation as shown in this claim by a Muslim cleric in the Lower Middle Class Group: “*The problem with the BBC is that it would...not report something positive about Islam.*” Significantly, these people were among the respondents who had earlier in the interviews rated the BBC as the most credible international broadcaster. When reminded of this contradiction, they were quick to stress that they do distinguish what they believe to be accurate reports from propaganda. It becomes clear then that favorable perception of a medium does not prevent what Stuart Hall calls “critical,” or “oppositional,” reading of some of its texts.²² After all, as previous studies show, audiences’ predispositions do influence

their perception of media messages.²³ Joseph Klapper's conception of audience selectivity—selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention—does indeed play a role in media consumption.

This tends to affect the role international broadcasting plays in public diplomacy. With the BBC World Service being funded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it was obvious from the onset that it would always be seen as an instrument of British public diplomacy.²⁴ But the Corporation's claim of being an impartial broadcaster—and an open attempt to be so, coupled with the belief by many that it is so—produced a complex picture. The BBC personnel interviewed for this study and the responses from the audiences interviewed offered divergent perspectives on the issue. Still, the aggregate views reveal a general belief that the BBC does indeed serve as an organ of British public diplomacy. The audiences were able to distinguish the BBC's dual but contradictory role of being both a provider of "impartial" news services and a promoter of British public diplomacy—as previously observed by others.²⁵ They note that although the BBC does provide credible news and analysis, it still acts as a propagandist.

Since I have known the United States and Britain and other parts of the world well, whenever I hear BBC I feel like they are just propagating their masters' voice (*Trade unionist*).

Although there are claims of independence by British and American media, they have their limits... So I assure you that we are selective [on which aspects of their reports we believe], to avoid becoming victims of their propaganda (*Supervisory councilor for education in the Political Class Group*).

The most serious issue thrown up by this perspective is that audiences tend to reject media messages they perceive to be propaganda or even advocacy and believe what they consider to be impartial reports. The following two comments provide further illustration of such tendency. "Those [BBC programs] that they do for humanity, we accept them; the ones they do to deceive people, we listen to them, but reject them," remarked a mason in the Lower Middle Class Group. Another member of the group, the Muslim

cleric, was equally emphatic on what he would do with those BBC reports that he feels are not impartial: “*Foreign propaganda will not help me. In this respect I won't believe the BBC.*” And in that respect the public diplomacy objective—if the “propaganda” or slanting of stories was meant to achieve it—may become unattainable.

But advocacy of a cause or positive projection of a country or agency is just one aspect of the media's role in public diplomacy; and less, or even a complete lack of, success in that does not mean failure in others, as will be seen later. In any case, it is not in all situations that audiences identify and reject slanted reports. Similarly, the perspective of the BBC personnel on the issue of the broadcaster's role in British public diplomacy differs from that of the audiences. First, the personnel interviewed rejected the claims that the BBC does engage in “propaganda” or slanting of stories to advance British public diplomacy. They also denied claims of interference in their daily operations from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). “*I have been here with the BBC for more than 20 years and I cannot recall any instance where FCO actually asked us to cover this or not to cover that,*” says the BBC executive editor for African region echoing what other personnel have declared about editorial non-interference. However, what they do admit is the existence of a subtle but significant interference in the overall work of the corporation. They point to the basic fact that it is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that decides for the BBC World Service which language services it should operate and where its target areas should be.

Well, as you know, we are a public service broadcaster, the BBC World Service, and we are paid for by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office through grant-in-aid. They decide what languages or target areas we should be covering, but they have no say in the contents and contributors of any given program in any given language service or target area (*Executive editor, African region*).

As a broadcaster, the BBC resents being seen as an instrument of public diplomacy, and all the personnel interviewed rejected

suggestions that they were working to serve that interest. What they did not resent, though, was the idea of the BBC's credibility generating admiration for Britain. Their unanimous view is that the BBC's image as a credible broadcaster does serve as a source of goodwill for Britain—an ideal soft power resource.²⁶ A former BBC World Service correspondent in Lagos (Nigeria) who later became a producer at its headquarters in London asserts that “*people have a better impression of Britain and so on because of the BBC; it is the British Broadcasting Corporation and people know it is the British Broadcasting Corporation.*” Indeed, this is one of the key benefits the Lord Carter review committee firmly believes that the BBC does bring to Britain.²⁷

Public diplomacy is arguably not the primary objective of the World Service, but it is inevitable that in providing an internationally renowned and highly valued service that there will be positive public diplomacy gains for the country associated with that brand.²⁸

There is apparent unanimity among both the BBC personnel and audiences that this key public diplomacy objective is being achieved. But then, there are few listeners here, as is the case elsewhere, that do not connect the BBC with Britain at all.²⁹ And even where they do, the benefits gained through positive association need to be backed with concrete action for it to have a long lasting effect because, as the World Service producer observes, the good impression gained through the BBC's good image tends to disappear when a real encounter with Britain reveals that it is not as good as the impression created. “*I think the divergence happens more the more they (BBC audiences) interact with Britain proper,*” he notes. This shows that for the gains to be sustained, the good image created has to be supported with concrete action. That is the basis of public diplomacy's golden rule: action speaks louder than words. “The most potent voice for an international actor is not what it says but what it does.”³⁰ When there is a disconnect between the BBC's image as a credible broadcaster and British foreign policy, the public diplomacy benefits tend to disappear. This was unmistakable in what emerged from the audiences' perspective when in one respect they admired

g'BBC for its impartial reporting, and in another condemned Britain for its role in Afghan and Iraqi invasions; they thus became suspicious of the BBC's coverage of the Islamic world. The clearest picture produced by the perspectives of both the BBC personnel and audiences is that the long-term effectiveness of the BBC's public diplomacy role lies more in its ability to provide impartial international news and analysis than in any attempt to deviate from that.

Conclusions

The BBC World Service is Britain's most recognizable soft power resource, but the country's struggling economy and shrinking influence in the world are forcing spending cuts, and consequent staff reduction and closure of services constitute a major threat to its potency. It is also clear that although the World Service does play a significant public diplomacy role for Britain, its effectiveness depends more on its perceived impartiality than on indulgence in any clever branding devices. The broadcaster's key strengths come essentially from a global reputation of journalistic independence and credibility. Similarly, the BBC's good image can only be as helpful to British foreign policy as Britain's actions correspond with such image. There is both a benefit-by-association and a baggage-by-association: while Britain may gain from the BBC's good image, the BBC's image could be tarnished by Britain's negative actions. The case of those Northern Nigerians who love the BBC for its liberal and credible image but stopped associating that image with Britain as a country because of its involvement in Afghan and Iraqi invasions is one such example. The situation seems to have yielded what Morgan calls the "backlash effect": instead of the BBC's credibility helping Britain, it was Britain's action that harmed the BBC, as audiences began to question its credibility over its coverage of the Islamic world.³¹ It also seems that intervening variables such as cultural, religious, ideological, and other external communication factors that limit media effects do sometimes minimize the impact of international broadcasting in public diplomacy.

Endnotes

1. FCO, 2005
2. Ibid
3. Pinkerton and Dodds, 2009; Ching, 2012
4. Browne, 1982; Briggs, 1985; Rampal and Adams, 1990; Goodwin, 2005; Abubakar, 2011
5. Cull, 2009
6. Browne, 1982; Mytton and Forrester, 1988; Price *et al.*, 2008
7. Price *et al.*, 2008; Cull, 2009
8. Browne, 1982, p.30
9. Nye, 2004a, 2004b
10. Browne, 1982; Thussu, 2006
11. Browne, 1982, p.1
12. Ibid, p.2
13. Thussu, 2006, pp.16-17
14. Thussu, 2005, 2006, p.23
15. See Browne, 1982; Briggs, 1985; Rampal and Adams, 1990; Seaton, 1997; Sreberny *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b; Abubakar, 2011
16. BBC, 1958
17. Abubakar, 2011
18. BBC Global News, 2009; Tangaza, 2009
19. FACOM, 2011, p.17
20. BBC World Service, 2004, 2007, 2008; BBC Global News, 2009, 2010
21. Klapper, 1960; Liebes and Katz, 1993
22. Hall, 1980
23. Klapper, 1960; Morley, 1980; Liebes and Katz, 1993
24. Sreberny *et al.*, 2010a, p. 130
25. Rampal and Adams, 1990; Nye, 2004a, 2004b; Cohen, 1986; Sreberny *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b
26. Nye, 2004a, 2004b; Jisi and Nye, 2009
27. FCO, 2005

28. Ibid, p.25
29. Cull, 2009
30. Ibid., p.27
31. Morgan, 1990, p.232

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Before joining London's City University in 2013, Abdullahi was a visiting research fellow at the Africa Media Centre, University of Westminster, where he was selected as one of the outstanding early career researchers whose works were showcased by the University at the launch of its new Graduate School in 2012. He has written on media, culture and politics.