

Thoughts on the Translation and Open Source Intelligence workshop

Leszek Luszowicz, former Monitor for BBC Monitoring

The Programme for the workshop on Translation and Open Source Intelligence was clearly structured and ensured all those attending got involved and provided input. Objectives were perhaps slightly ambitious in view of number attending and amount of ground that had to be covered, but the workshop was very enjoyable and well worth it.

Visitors (non-BBCM attendees)

Not clear to me what our learned and distinguished guests got out of it. Because of the different workflows and working practices, team sizes and inputs/outputs that were described by former BBCM staff during the day, I got the impression that the picture conveyed to our guests of what went on in the white building on the hill was quite fuzzy and confusing. Sorry about that.

Home team (ex-BBCM staff)

For me it was certainly interesting to hear people you had worked with for years flesh out their pre-BBC Monitoring background and describe some of the problems they faced at work and how they overcame them. In particular, I was struck by how much more ruthless the editors “upstairs” had to be with the material they handled because of their strict page allocation.

BBCM material on show

Had there been time, I think it might have been useful to try to work out why some of the “raw” material provided at the session, and which looked pretty useless, might have been selected and transcribed in the first place. Monitors had traditionally a much freer hand than editors in deciding what material they would process. But they also had strict guidelines for mandatory material that was not required by our editors upstairs and could be quite boring. But it still had to be processed for other consumers. And in the early days, we were told that a confessional system was in force for vetting what was transcribed by junior monitors.

Quantity v Quality

What amazed me most, however, was the sheer volume of “raw” material (15 million pages from 1939 to 1982) from BBCM that had accumulated in IWM hangars near Duxford. The big question, I suppose, is how much, if any, is worth retaining.

Leszek Luszowicz started off as a Russian monitor in January 1975, transcribing material from Radio One News Agency (TASS), but was not involved in editing and publishing the transcripts. Although Leszek was not recruited to work as a Polish monitor, the election of a Polish pope in October 1978 and the ‘Birth of Solidarity’ pro-democracy movement in September 1980, resulted in him spending more and more time covering the Polish media, both in Caversham and BBC Monitoring’s small office in Berlin. Apart from monitoring Russian and Polish, Leszek also worked as a Listening Room supervisor in the early 1980s. The supervisor was the interface between the various language teams and Monitoring’s internal editorial departments and external partners.