Reflections on the BBCM-IWM workshops

Chris Greenway, Monitor for BBC Monitoring since 1981

For someone still working at BBC Monitoring, I found the IWM's workshops in June 2015 fascinating, and I would first like to thank all those who organized and ran them. Two running themes for me at the sessions were, firstly, just how much has changed in our work since the 1939–1982 period covered by the archives stored by the IWM, but also how some other things have stayed the same - or at least evolved while remaining recognizable.

A series of revolutions in monitoring

Firstly there was the wide-scale coverage of TV – which could only start once we began installing satellite dishes in the early 1980s. Up until then, our sources had largely been limited to radio broadcasts, supplemented by news agency output, and by some limited transcripts of press material (largely supplied by our US partners, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)). Although they had been used in broadcasting since the 1960s, it did not become practical for us to monitor satellites until the former Soviet Union introduced a new generation, called Gorizont, in time for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. A large receiving dish was erected at Caversham around 1982, and further dishes were installed at Crowsley from 1983. As well as giving us Soviet TV, the large dish also had the bonus of providing access to facsimiles of the pages of the next day's Pravda, etc. which were transmitted each afternoon from Moscow to the Soviet Far East. Tomorrow's news today!

Secondly, there was the computerization of our editorial operation, phased in from 1989. This allowed electronic publication direct from editor to customer (from 1995), so removing the frustrating limits to the volume of material that we could publish on paper. The strict overall limit to the size of the Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB) came up in one of the workshop sessions, when it was recalled how the regional SWB sections would regularly trade page allocations amongst each to take account of particularly lengthy stories that one section might have on a particular day.

Thirdly, the significant growth in the number of broadcast sources after the end of the Cold War – a development not confined to former communist countries.

Fourthly, the arrival, from the mid-1990s, of the internet. This greatly added to the volume of sources to monitor, but also provided its own solution to the problem of source access, which had been a headache for Monitoring since its inception.

And finally today we cover social media, which means that we are no longer restricted to following developments 'from above', as presented by officially-controlled outlets or from the detached viewpoint of independent sources. Instead, we have, from 'below', a multitude of raw voices –often disjointed but heavily engaged –of individual participants in events. (I recall our coverage of social media first coming into its own at the time of the 2009 disputed Iranian presidential election.)

The role of the monitor

During the workshop at Caversham we discussed the recruitment and training of new monitors, and the requirements that were put on them once they had been 'made operational' (a rite of passage always marked by a formal memo to all offices!).
It struck me that the work of a monitor in, say, the 1960s and 1970s, was part-journalism, part-intelligence-gathering, but wasn’t seen by many (perhaps most) of those doing it at the time as being either of those things.

Instead it was something else—unique in fact. This determined both a monitor’s recruitment (many/most of those who joined Caversham saw it as a way of using their languages, rather than as a route to becoming a BBC, or any form of, journalist) and their training (much of which was about learning rules, routines, and procedures).

We now describe such a heavy focus on ‘process’ as ‘commitment-based monitoring’. This is best illustrated by the daily shift rotas with which all of the workshop participants will have been familiar. These rotas set out—on a hour-by-hour basis—exactly what a monitor would be doing during their shift: which news bulletins from which stations would be monitored, and when the monitor would be allocated time to listen to pre-recorded bulletins, watch the output of news agencies, or transcribe material listened to earlier.

This routine was backed up in many teams by a ‘bulletin log’, listing all of the team’s commitments, which would have to be ticked off as the day progressed.

**Story-based journalism**

Today, while we certainly still have plenty of procedures to follow, we encourage our monitors to follow a less regimented working day.

Instead of covering a series of ‘commitments’ in a linear fashion we ask them to start with the story and then select and watch a variety of sources to tell it. This is what we call ‘story-based journalism’.

This has influenced our recruitment. Linguistic skills are as important as ever, but we now look to recruit journalists who can tell a good story, including background and insight.

*Chris Greenway has worked for BBC Monitoring since 1981. First employed at the Crowsley Park receiving station, in 1983 he joined the team producing Monitoring's daily newspaper, the Summary of World Broadcasts. Chris's jobs have included coverage of Africa and the Middle East, and reporting developments in the media itself across the world. He was based in Monitoring's Nairobi office for eight years. Since 2006 he's been a Coordinating Editor, with daily responsibility for the service’s global operations and output. Chris picks as his highlight of the past 34 years the fall of Somalia's President Siad Barre in 1991. He says: "At one point, signals from the sole station in Mogadishu became very erratic. To pick them up I arranged to stand on the roof of the US Consulate in Mombasa with a portable radio and feed them back to my Somali colleagues in Nairobi."*