

The Importance of BBC Monitoring for Intelligence

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During my seven years as a member of the UK Joint Intelligence Committee, I came to know the huge previously unsung value of the BBC Monitoring service (BBCM), for improving understanding in government, of the world outside our borders. Not a part of the secret intelligence community, BBCM provided us with a service of up to date information from the study of foreign TV and radio broadcasts, conventional print media and wire services, and today no doubt from the monitoring of digital media and websites. That open source information is as essential to the practice of diplomacy and international policy-making, as it must be to modern BBC programming.

Sometimes it would be a unique insight from the interpretation of a foreign leader's broadcast at a time of impending crisis, or those of his opponents. Sometimes it would be enhancing background understanding, from reporting on the evolution of opinions that matter over a period, all carried out by analysts whose language skills and cultural awareness enabled them to interpret the other.

During the Cold War BBCM was able to provide a window into the social and economic evolution of otherwise largely closed societies behind the Iron Curtain, and even today there are still nations where the ability to monitor and interpret state-controlled media is essential. Much of the earlier Cold War period material has been archived and will increasingly become available to scholars of the period, providing new lines of research, from studying the open information that would have been available to decision makers in the West, at crucial times of tension.

I do not think it was an accident that BBCM was set up in 1938-1939, at the same time as the great expansion of secret intelligence capability, when war with Germany seemed likely. Indeed, the US counterpart of BBCM, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), was set up by President Roosevelt in 1941 as the US looked likely to enter the war. Both open and closed intelligence sources are necessary complements to each other, and become essential when dangers threaten the nation. My definition of the overall purpose of intelligence, is to help improve the quality of decision-making by reducing ignorance. Secret intelligence is that small but unique contribution, that comes from information that those that mean us harm are determined that we should not be able to access. But like any single piece of information, the meaning of a secret intelligence report depends upon understanding of its context. And that comes from those who understand the languages and cultures of the region concerned, how their leaders wish the outside world to interpret them, and what message (sometimes subtly different) they are sending to their own people. In putting the individual pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together knowing the overall theme of the picture helps, as does having a good idea of which pieces come from another puzzle, or have been thrown in to confuse us. And just sometimes the BBC has identified individual pieces of the puzzle, such as the accidental discovery by the BBC in September 1940 of an entirely new broadcast radio signal for the German Air Force.

The media landscape that characterised the first 70 years of BBCM's history is, however, being replaced by a very different one today. BBCM now has to be engaged in the Internet monitoring world, as well as the old-fashioned broadcast and print media. And rightly, since for young people around the world, their views are not shaped by newspapers, or even these days by television, but by the blogs and websites they follow. SOCMINT is the term I helped coin for intelligence derived from the study of social media. In this globalised post-Cold War world, where the volume of Internet enabled communication is growing rapidly, it really helps to have the SOCMINT insights that come from expert monitoring of social media use overseas. To achieve that capability, BBCM has had to become a leader in digital technology itself, and to be able to provide its customers rapid reporting of situations that can flare-up at short notice, as we saw during the upheavals in North Africa in recent years and today in the Middle East.

We should also recall the importance of understanding the propaganda war waged by Moscow against NATO and the EU, after the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014, and the propaganda justification for direct Russian intervention in Syria in 2015. What the Russian population is being told by their State-influenced media does matter. Today we would see open sources as vital to any intelligence assessment, as recognised by the US Director of National Intelligence in the creation of the US Open Source Centre, intended "to gather and analyse information from the web, broadcasts, newspapers and other unclassified sources around the world". That is just the latest step in the unique open source partnership that the BBC has developed over many years with its US equivalents, providing both peer review of output and a degree of division of labour, that greatly extends the range of coverage of the world available to BBCM customers, concerning around 150 countries and derived from more than 70 languages.

The media landscape that characterised the first 70 years of BBCM's history is, therefore, being replaced by a very different one today. We can nevertheless, without exaggeration, still refer to BBCM as the missing dimension in the study of overall British intelligence. From the archive of BBCM, scholars can now establish what the analysts writing British Joint Intelligence Committee assessments or formulating policy advice inside 10 Downing Street, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, would have known of the public pronouncements of a Hitler, Stalin, Nasser, Tito, or Jaruzelski, and in the future no doubt of the evolution of public opinion in flash points across world.