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by Kim Andrew Elliott

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### Dear Lord Carter of Coles

Kim Andrew Elliott's letter to the UK public diplomacy review team

**A small advertisement in the back of the 8 January Economist caught my eye. Lord Carter of Coles is conducting a review of UK public diplomacy, including BBC World Service, and comments are invited.**

Well, certainly I had comments, but I was intimidated to be writing to someone with so melodious a title as Lord Carter of Coles, given that, where I come from, people have names like "Ed". I was also concerned that BBC World Service was considered part of British Public Diplomacy. I always thought that World Service, even though funded by the Foreign Office, considered itself separate from public diplomacy, which is more in the business of advocating British policy.

Nevertheless, I wrote to Lord Carter and his public diplomacy review team. I will spare you all 2,600 words of my letter, but instead share some of the main points.

Britain spends less (\$330 million) on international broadcasting than the United States (\$540 million), but BBC World Service has a larger audience than all of the US international radio services combined. This is mainly due to two factors:

- 1) BBC enjoys independence, which over the decades has built credibility - the key commodity of international broadcasting.
- 2) All of Britain's government-funded international radio is conducted by BBC World Service. This is in contrast to US international broadcasting, which consists of several stations with somewhat overlapping missions that compete among themselves for scarce resources.



So, BBC World Service is doing something right. But it must adjust to the new multimedia era of international broadcasting. From the 1930s to the 1970s, radio - specifically shortwave radio - was the only medium that could travel, uninterrupted, over long distances and across national boundaries.

Now, with the availability of communications satellites and the internet, video and text can bridge these distances and boundaries, and thus are available to international broadcasting.

#### Television

In the development of international television, BBC is conspicuously behind other international broadcasters. To be sure, BBC World is already an important player in English-language international broadcasting.

But in multilingual international television, BBC is largely inactive, while other stations, such as Deutsche Welle, NHK World (Japan), CCTV (China), VOA-TV and others have made significant progress.

The requirement, dating from the Thatcher government, that BBC international television be self-funding through commercial partnerships will probably not work in most languages. Such BBC language services would have limited appeal to advertisers. But as we have seen from the examples of Al Jazeera, CNN International, and BBC World (English), satellite-delivered international television is functioning much as shortwave radio did in decades past. Direct funding of BBC international television will be necessary. And BBC World Service radio and international television could benefit from continued consolidation.

The planned 24-hour BBC Arabic television service should be funded. In most other languages, it will probably not be possible for BBC to maintain full-time television channels. Here, the delivery medium would be a multilingual satellite channel, with programmes of 30 to 60 minutes in each language. Some cable systems in cosmopolitan cities would carry the channel 24 hours, and a few satellite dish owners would receive the channel directly. Most of the audience would come via local terrestrial stations that would downlink and rebroadcast the segments in the appropriate language.

It should be kept in mind that international television is much more interdictable than shortwave radio. Local terrestrial and cable services can opt to, or be compelled to, stop the rebroadcasts of BBC content. Satellite companies can take BBC off their transponders, if pressured to do so. Visually conspicuous satellite dishes can be made illegal and confiscated.

#### Internet

A Website can replace the work that shortwave radio has traditionally done. It can do so more efficiently because the user can read the information more quickly than he or she can listen to that information read by a radio announcer. And the user can choose what information to read, while listening to radio makes such choices more complicated.

For the broadcaster, transmitting web content is certainly cheaper than transmitting via high-powered shortwave transmitters.



Because web users tend to read content rather than listen to streamed audio, if international broadcasting makes the transition from shortwave to the internet, it will also have to make the transition from audio to text.

But, as with television, the internet is subject to interdiction. The BBC and Voice of America websites are blocked effectively in China and other countries. Methods to work around this censorship are generally limited to the internet-savvy.



## Radio

Radio is my favorite medium. But I must conclude that it may become the least effective medium for international broadcasting.

Although radio news magazines and documentaries can be superb productions, my experience has been that, when a television set is introduced in a home, people will watch bad television before they will listen to good radio.

Radio is a good medium for breaking news and emergency information. And, because radio is the most intimate of media, a radio programme featuring a personality with good intercultural communications skills, perhaps incorporating music, is an excellent way to convey goodwill from one country to another country.

Most importantly for international broadcasting, radio remains the least interdictable medium. While shortwave transmissions are jammed, such deliberate interference is rarely 100 percent successful. This is because of the physics of shortwave: transmissions from afar often provide better reception than those from closer transmitters. Thus, jamming transmitters inside the target country cannot always block shortwave transmissions from distant locations. The best way to combat shortwave jamming is to transmit on as many frequencies as possible from as many locations as possible.

Internet and satellite transmission are not granted by the laws of physics any such immunity to interdiction. For this reason, it is important, indeed a matter of British national security, for BBC World Service to retain its global shortwave capability, at least for the time being.



In fact, BBC World Service should keep its frequencies occupied, so that other stations do not take them over, and its transmitters operating, so that they do not fall into disrepair. A good way to do this is through a global English service. Such a service would be appreciated by the motley Anglophone community spread widely throughout the world: travellers, businesspeople, workers, students, diplomats, volunteers, missionaries, aid workers, yachtsmen, ship's crew, expatriates, wanderers and vagabonds. Many are located in remote locations where internet access or satellite reception may not be possible.

The frequencies and transmitters for that English service would be ready for the crises during which BBC FM local rebroadcasters might be taken off the air. We have seen such occurrences recently in Ukraine, Cote D'Ivoire, and other countries. In these cases, the shortwave frequencies can be shifted to other appropriate World Service language services.

## UK public diplomacy

Again, I think of public diplomacy as separate from international broadcasting, the former involving advocacy and techniques of persuasion.

Among the tools of public diplomacy are exchanges, publications and, increasingly, the internet. Many countries have websites where policy statements can be found. The US example of this is [usinfo.state.gov](http://usinfo.state.gov). These websites may not have large audiences, but they are useful resources for journalists, government officials, researchers, and individuals with an uncommon level of interest in international affairs.

The British Foreign Office maintains a number of such websites. But just as people throughout the world know that they should go to [bbcnews.com](http://bbcnews.com) for reliable and independent news, they should also be able to go to a website, with a similarly memorable URL, to learn about official British policies.

I believe there was previously such a site: [Britain-info.org](http://Britain-info.org). It seems to be inactive and perhaps was dropped out of a desire to route web users through the British embassies in their respective countries. But by this procedure, the website must be found through a search, and this process is not particularly intuitive.

In my opinion, the content of a public diplomacy website should not be portrayed as news, or news-like information that accentuates the positive and downplays the negative. Information presented in such a manner loses its credibility after only a few readings, and does not speak well for the sponsoring country. Public diplomacy information is appropriately formatted as press releases, policy papers, transcripts, etc.

For public diplomacy content to reach larger audiences, it would be more effective to join successful media rather than to try to create a popular media outlet from scratch. Here, the use of well placed advertisements can be useful. Depending on the target audience, the advertisements can be placed in print or broadcast media.

The former US Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, Charlotte Beers, tried a broadcast advertising campaign that proved to be controversial. I don't think the message in these ads - that Muslims have religious freedom in the



United States - served any pressing need. But Secretary Beers was on the right track by using the advertising medium to reach large audiences already gathered by successful television channels.



I wished Lord Carter and his team success in their work and thanked them for the opportunity to share my comments.

**Kim Andrew Elliott, expressing his own views, is an audience research analyst in the US International Broadcasting Bureau. His personal website is [kimandrewelliott.com](http://kimandrewelliott.com)**

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