Written evidence from BBC Media Action (GMF0024)

BBC Media Action

1. BBC Media Action is the international development and media support charity of the BBC. With an annual income in 2018/19 of over £30 million pounds and a global reach of over 80 million people, it is one of the largest media support organisations in the world. It has more than 100 capacity strengthening partnerships and operates at scale and with strong, measurable impact in 26 mostly fragile and conflict affected states. Its income is derived from more than 20 bilateral development agencies (such as Global Affairs Canada and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), foundations (such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), UN and other bodies. BBC Media Action features in the top 20 of all “suppliers” to the FCO and FCO provided approximately 20% of the organisation’s budget in 2017/18 (in the same year DFID provided approximately 8% of the organisation’s income).

2. FCO support to BBC Media Action has typically been concentrated (but not restricted to) fragile or transitional states. FCO and/or the Conflict and Stability Fund has included support to Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Nepal, Nigeria, Tunisia and Ukraine. Its focus is typically on training, capacity strengthening and institution building of independent media organisations, supporting media capable of engaging young people in democratic processes, the transition of state broadcasters to independent public service media and support for media that enables dialogue, political participation and social cohesion in conflict affected countries.

3. BBC Media Action dedicates around 10% of its budget to research which, together with its extensive project experience, country presence and policy relationships, provides the basis for this submission.

4. This submission briefly summarises BBC Media Action’s overall assessment of threats to media freedom in the settings in which it works, highlights the organisation’s main activities in response to these threats, and makes some propositions for appropriate policy responses. It complements other evidence already provided to the enquiry including that provided by the BBC World Service.

5. Our central argument is that the acute challenges confronting media freedom are not only political. They are also economic as the financial foundations of independent media are being rapidly eroded. The effects on both democracy and development worldwide are acute and the crisis confronting independent media is an increasingly existential one requiring far greater action from governments. Such action is largely lacking and the UK – both through the FCO and DFID (and through more joined up approaches across the two departments) is in a position to play a leadership role in that response. Among our recommendations is that a new Global Fund for Public Interest Media be established.

The Threats to Global Media Freedom in fragile and resource poor settings

6. Attacks and killings of journalists have, as the enquiry has already heard, accelerated and intensified in deeply concerning ways in recent years. We strongly welcome the Secretary of State’s campaign to defend media freedom and have been engaged constructively with the FCO (for example by co-organising a meeting in London in January for international media support organisations across Europe to feed ideas into the campaign).
7. Our analysis of the threats to media freedom focuses on a set of issues that go beyond attacks and killings. BBC Media Action has been documenting the threats to media freedom in fragile states for well over a decade. We have especially focused on the growing and often opaque cooption of independent media by political and factional forces, the fragmentation and fracturing of information and communication spaces and implications for social cohesion, and the growing crisis of market failure affecting the financial viability of independent media. We have also sought to understand the impact of these changes on politics, development, peace (including violent extremism) and society.

Growing co-option of media and fracturing of information spaces

8. For much of the 1990s and 2000s, liberalisation of media and increased access to new technologies greatly increased the diversity and pluralism of independent media and drove a widespread expansion of media freedom worldwide. The implications for democracy were overwhelmingly positive.

9. In this decade many of those advances have been reversed. Early assumptions that social media and increased access to the internet and mobile technologies would entrench the shift to democratic norms and systems of government and improve social cohesion have been overturned. Authoritarian, populist, extremist and other anti-democratic actors have been adept at manipulating, capturing and undermining democratic information and communication spaces. Cooption and capture of the media by political and factional forces has become increasingly the norm.

10. Information and communication spaces have consequently become more fragmented and fractured, often along political, religious, ethnic or other factional lines. This has enabled the growth of identity politics with particularly intense consequences in fragile states where politics was already largely demarcated along identity, rather than ideological, lines. BBC Media Action supports media in diverse and distinct settings, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Zambia. While uneven, this fragmentation, fracturing and co-option of information and communication spaces has been a clear trend over recent years.

11. Cooption makes the profession of independent journalism more and more difficult. BBC Media Action provides professional skills development, business mentoring and other capacity building support across its portfolio, but increasingly journalists report that they cannot put into effect the skills they have learned because of the editorial policies of the organisations they work for. The dangers confronting journalists are, as the Committee has already heard, intensifying, but the institutional foundations necessary to safeguard journalists from security and other threats are degrading. Journalists typically do not have recourse to legal support, security training, or other professional support which journalists working for the BBC (for example) do have.

12. Journalism continues to be an extremely poorly paid and often low status profession and the prevalence of brown envelope journalism persists. More generally, we are witnessing media systems that increasingly exist to further specific political, factional or other interests and a continued decline in, and access to, public interest media.

13. The implications have been profound. Elections are increasingly susceptible to manipulation by those adept at exploiting big data (and those who pay for such manipulation), hate speech is on the rise and social cohesion, already often weak in fragile states, increasingly undermined. Misinformation and disinformation has become endemic and access to trusted and trustworthy
information from domestic media has declined (trust in media, especially social media, has worsened often dramatically). Independent journalism capable of holding government to account has not only been weakened and attacked but also coopted as institutions increasingly fall under the influence of government, political parties or other interests prepared to invest in media to ensure they are not held to account. The capacity for society’s to negotiate difference has also been undermined as channels for public debate, shared public spaces and trusted reference points for national public conversation have often disappeared. Suspicion and often blaming or stigmatising of the “other” in society has grown.

The Financial Crisis confronting independent media.

14. Concerns over the financial crisis confronting independent media run across all societies, but they are most acute in fragile and resource poor settings. Business models capable of supporting independent, public interest media are decreasingly available and there are increasingly clear signs that the crisis in many countries is existential. In other words, even if the political conditions for public interest media improve, the increasingly hostile economic and technological environment shows every sign of worsening.

15. Independent media in these societies face several challenges that are additional to those confronting media in more industrialised societies. The challenges of media cooption have already been highlighted, but media in resource poor settings face special challenges in adapting to the digital transformation that has had such dramatic impact on independent media everywhere.

16. Revenues from advertising in countries with weak economies have always been scarce, but they have until recently been sufficient to underpin a robust, free and independent media in many such settings. In countries like Kenya, a growing economy and a need for advertisers to expand their markets fuelled a media boom in the 2000s. Even in very fragile settings like Afghanistan, commercial media entrants have, until recently, been able to make reasonable profits.

17. That picture is changing dramatically. Even as economies have grown, the availability of advertising to independent media has fallen. This is partly because media with close ties to entrenched political and economic interests are, as democratic systems have weakened, recapturing the advertising markets that do exist (including the often lucrative advertising from government). It is partly because the market itself has weakened (in Ethiopia, for example, the depreciation of the Birr in recent years has hit the media advertising market hard).

18. As digital technologies spread, advertising is - as it has in the West - increasingly migrating online. Fragile and resource poor markets are generally assigned a low tariff for advertising from the technology platforms meaning that, even if they are able to build online audiences, these do not generate revenue in the same way as they would in the West and, of course, the advertising which forms the backbone of social media business models is less available in these settings.

19. To take one example, BBC Media Action has supported one of the most trusted sources of news and information in Iraq for 15 years. Originally established as a radio station, Al Mirbad has diversified into an online platform and, as part of its strategy to build a loyal and engaged audience and increase revenue, taken a highly creative approach in using political satire. Some of its satirical video clips attract an audience of in excess of 10 million views each on YouTube, its total cumulative Youtube visits now number in excess of 900 million and it has more than 4 million subscribers - the kind of traffic which would yield substantial revenues in the West. It also has more than 2 million Facebook followers. Despite such traffic, Al Mirbad’s total combined revenue from social media is less than $40,000 per annum. This experience, together with many others,
suggests that an available economic model for financial sustainability in such settings is an extremely remote prospect.

20. Even in the most advanced markets, highly agile media entrants like BuzzFeed and Vice, have struggled to become sustainable, but the prospects for media in fragile states look impossible. More than 70% of global advertising is now taken by Google, Facebook and other global technology actors a trend which, as global digital transition continues to accelerate, continues to grow. There are successful digital public interest media operations, such as Malaysiakini in Malaysia, but these acknowledge that the business model works (and then only barely) because they are middle to high income societies.

21. There are no easy answers to the financial crisis confronting independent media. There is considerable innovation taking place within BBC Media Action and across the media development sector more broadly in refining and creating new approaches. These include innovative business mentoring models, low cost publishing and broadcasting approaches, efforts to boost advertising available to public interest media, membership and subscription models, diversified income streams (such as events and services) and public subsidy models.

22. Because the economic challenge is so acute, the solutions to it are not always obvious and the character of the challenge rapidly changing. BBC Media Action has led calls for increased collaboration between media support organisations internationally to share learning of what works and does not in improving financial viability (as well as tackling other challenges such as misinformation). It has, for example, proposed with the Global Forum for Media Development to establish a “Media Development Lab” to take such collaboration forward.

What the UK Government can do: complement political leadership with strategic, technical and financial leadership

23. BBC Media Action has been advising the OECD Development Assistance Committee on how to improve support to independent media for several years. This section draws heavily on that experience as well as other experience of working with donors and others in the field.

24. While the international community is increasingly agreed on the importance of independent media, the challenges it is confronting and the democratic and development consequences of the decline in independent media worldwide, the international government response to this crisis has been slow, fragmented and insufficient. The UK’s political leadership with Canada in organising the 2019 media freedom campaign is extremely welcome in this context. The conference and campaign is principally focused on increasing the political costs to governments and others who attack journalists. This is vital – but it will not solve the more fundamental issue of how independent media institutions necessary to support such journalism can survive in the face of the political and economic pressures which confront them.

25. The UK has been one of the foremost providers of international support to independent media for many years from both the FCO and DFID and much of this has been delivered through BBC Media Action. International government support to independent media worldwide is poorly tracked but significant support is also provided by Canada, EU, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland and, at least until recently, the US (this is not meant to be an exhaustive list and distinctions between foreign office and development support are not always simple). Only a small number of foreign offices or development agencies have officials specialising in support to independent media. Budgets tend to be relatively small and collectively amount to just over 5% of overall support to governance and democracy programming.
26. As part of a potential response to this lack of administrative capacity and expertise in the international system and the broader financial challenge, BBC Media Action has proposed the establishment of a Global Fund for Public Interest Media. Luminate (part of the Omidyar Foundation) is supporting us to develop the feasibility of such an idea. The Fund would, if agreed, be designed to address the crisis in independent media by providing a clear mechanism through which additional resources can be channelled in ways that ensure maximum impact. It would help crystallise a more strategic, sustained and evidence based approach to supporting independent media whilst maximising innovation. Further details on this proposition can be provided on request.

27. The need (and opportunity) is for the UK to not only take the kind of political leadership it is already exerting, but also to lead or help lead the strategic, technical and financial response to the crisis. The UK has some of the deepest and most extensive media support sectors in the world with unmatched skills and capacities but the support to this sector is inconsistent and piecemeal. Strategic attention to the issue within the FCO and DFID has also been inconsistent or short termist. If a clearer, more determined policy approach to these issues were to be adopted, the UK could establish a preeminent reputation in the international response to a set of issues that are likely to determine the fate of democracy and development for a generation.

The work of BBC Media Action

Our work is rooted in the values and mission of the BBC in its focus on supporting independent media that is trusted, can engage as many parts of society as possible, and that works in the public interest. Our expertise spans financial sustainability; creative, editorial and production capabilities; governance and regulatory environments; and supporting networks to help build media’s resilience to political pressures.

In the last six years alone, we’ve supported independent media to enable informed public debate around more than ten elections, reaching over 124 million people. And we have some great success stories to share from our work with our partners around the world, in some very challenging contexts.

In **Southern Iraq**, public service broadcaster Radio *Al Mirbad* has grown from its founding in 2005 into a fully independent, highly influential local entity, supported by our distance mentoring, production and editorial advice. Some 81% of its weekly audience agree that *Al Mirbad* follows up and monitors the work of government, and 86% agree that it speaks for Iraqi citizens. The dedicated YouTube channel for its popular satirical videos has more than four million subscribers and 900 million lifetime views.

In **Zambia**, we have been working with **local independent radio stations** since 2011, to help them strengthen their capacity and improve their sustainability and community impact. Recent research shows that people who listened regularly to these radio programmes and outdoor debates on local issues were significantly more likely to feel that they could positively influence their community’s politics and governance issues over those who did not listen.

In **Tanzania**, *Haba na Haba* (‘Slowly But Surely’) is the nation’s most widely broadcast radio show. We produce this national, accountability-focused programme with local broadcast partners, who in turn make their own sister shows, each with their own brands and social media presence, which add around 500,000 listeners to the overall *Haba na Haba* audience, which now stands at 5 million people. These shows are
now largely financially self-sustaining. Our team of mentors and producers are supporting these partners to prepare for the ultimate handover of the large national show, by building production skills and improving their commercial viability.

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