

**BBC WORLD SERVICE KOREAN:
A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY**

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It always comes as a surprise when you tell people that the BBC World Service doesn't broadcast in Korean. Although there is no former colonial link between Great Britain and Korea (in many respects a blessing), 1,000 British servicemen did give their lives in the Korean War - a war which claimed three million lives.

Today there are huge economic and cultural British-Korean links spreading from Seoul to New Malden (England's "Little Korea"). And of course there is a diplomatic presence in North Korea, in Pyongyang, where English is now increasingly taught and has become the second official language.

Self-evidently there are many significant security, human rights and humanitarian reasons for maximum engagement on the Korean Peninsula. Throughout the Cold War and during China's Cultural Revolution the voice of the BBC became synonymous with words like truth and freedom. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that we do not broadcast to the Korean Peninsula - north or south.

It would be a tragedy if purely financial considerations prevented the possibility of what would be a widely welcomed extension of World Service programming. If necessary, new forms of sponsorship might be explored by the BBC, if public funds really do not exist.

In 1980 on my first visit to China, I remember being approached by a group of Chinese who knew I was English. They wanted me to tell people in London how grateful they were to the BBC for keeping them informed and for breaking the sense of isolation. I had similar experiences in the former Soviet Union.

I also recall the much more recent words of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who she said that during her years of house arrest that only came to an end in 2010, "Because of the BBC, I never lost touch with my people, with the movement for democracy in Burma and with the rest of the world."

It would be a tragedy if loss of nerve at the BBC, or austerity, became the factors that determined Britain's future role in the world. I therefore hope that this proposal to launch long overdue World Service programmes for Korea will come to fruition.

Prof. Lord Alton of Liverpool

BBC WORLD SERVICE KOREAN | A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

The BBC World Service is the world's largest international radio broadcaster, one with a proven track record of providing objective news and information in a timely manner to people living in a wide range of media environments. Notably, it is a major provider of news to peoples who are otherwise ill-served by local broadcasters in their respective markets for political or other reasons. This includes but is not limited to languages such as Tamil, Burmese, Pashto and Chinese.

However, while the BBC currently broadcasts the World Service in a total of 27 languages, there remains no dedicated Korean-language version.

Despite this, the BBC World Service is not completely absent from the Korean Peninsula. The English-language market in the Republic of Korea (hereafter ROK) is served to a limited extent by a shortwave (SW) English service. The same service is also available via the subscription digital satellite broadcaster Skylife. However, the SW signal is weak, meaning that it cannot be heard well in much of the country, while the subscription-only nature of the Skylife service places it beyond the reach of low-income families; Skylife had just 3.6 million registered subscribers in total as of September 2012, amounting to just 7.2% of the population.

The situation is even more unfavorable in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK). Pyongyang's one-party dictatorship permits only the state broadcaster to operate and does not yield to the universal right to freedom of information in any meaningful way. Academics and outside observers regularly single out the DPRK as among the most information-starved countries in the world, and cite this stifling of information flows as a key factor in retarding economic and societal progress inside the country.

Conversely, increasing a population's access to a wider range of information is judged by analysts of not only the DPRK but all dictatorial states to be one of the most effective ways of accelerating economic and political progress.

Therefore, there is a compelling case for the BBC to launch a Korean-language service that reaches out to the entire Korean Peninsula, with a strong MW signal that can be enjoyed by anyone with a radio.



In front of Pyongyang Station during the London Olympics | ©KCNA

THE “GREAT” BRITISH BRAND IDENTITY

2012 has been a hugely successful year for the British brand identity on the Korean Peninsula. Since the start of the year, the British Embassy in Seoul has been spearheading the ‘Britain is GREAT’ campaign, advertising the virtues of doing business in and with Britain. This has included a summer visit to Seoul by

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. In addition, the subsequent London Olympics were spectacularly successful thanks to record medal hauls achieved by both the ROK and Great Britain. The two countries were in close competition on the medal table until very close to the end of the Games.

The London Olympics were equally successful in the DPRK, which finished 20th in the medal count on 4 gold and 2 bronze medals. Fortunately, the people were able to watch their sportsmen and women achieving great things in both weightlifting and judo. This was because the Pyongyang government arrived at a last ditch deal with the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union to receive Olympic broadcasting rights at no cost on July 25th, just days before events in London began. Over a famously hot summer, Pyongyang citizens regularly came to watch their competitors on a big screen erected in front of Pyongyang Station.



Britain is GREAT campaign poster | ©FCO

THE RESULTS OF CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The government of the DPRK firmly resists outside influences reaching its citizens, especially those who are not members of the Korean Workers' Party. It is prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to control access to information. However, the establishment by Britain of bilateral relations in the year 2000 has placed the United Kingdom in a favourable position. Twelve years of a British government policy of constructive engagement with Pyongyang has meant that Britain's brand image is high in the country, despite the clear political differences between the two sides.

The British government is perceived in Pyongyang as a reliable interlocutor, one that speaks openly on human rights issues but also refuses to sever relations during difficult times. This approach is exemplified by individual interested parties such as Lord David Alton of Liverpool. He regularly assails the lack of basic freedoms in North Korea, but also acts as trustee of the only private university in the country, Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), and has been repeatedly invited to visit in an official and private capacity. Lord Alton and other members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea regularly host Choi Tae Bok (Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly; the DPRK state legislature) in the UK.

There are other private-public partnership programs, including the teaching of English in elite North Korean universities by teachers dispatched by the British Council, and students from Pyongyang studying at Cambridge University. These offer proof of a significant pent-up demand for information about Britain in the DPRK. Even defectors from the country, who tend to hail from more disadvantaged provincial regions, say that the UK has a positive image nationwide and that the state tends to portray the UK in comparatively positive terms.



Pyongyang University of Science and Technology in 2008 | ©PUST

THE ROLE OF RADIO

Due to the media environment in the DPRK, externally funded radio broadcasters are important as the only source of real-time news available nationwide.

Competing sources of information have their own advantages, but all suffer serious limitations: only reaching border areas (in the case of external television broadcasts and Chinese mobile phone coverage) or having to be physically smuggled into the country (at great risk to the smuggler) and then taking time to circulate (in the case of DVDs and information carried on USB sticks).

While listening to foreign radio broadcasts is illegal and set to remain so, ownership of radios is not. The DPRK government requires radios sold domestically to be “fixed” to the frequency of the state broadcaster. However, this is a simple process that is readily undone, and research findings suggest that a majority of these legal “fixed-dial” radio owners do so. In addition, smaller, free-tuning radios, which are normally hidden and unfixed, are steadily making their way into the DPRK across the Chinese border.

Timely, useful and interesting information broadcast via radio is also known to have a large secondary audience. These include people who are not willing to listen to broadcasts personally for fear of punishment, but who prefer to learn the information contained in them by word-of-mouth from listeners. Defectors report that this subsidiary effect of new information flows helps to build mutual trust and more cooperative relationships between the people. This is a crucial development in a country where for decades the government has put enormous effort into creating an atmosphere of mutual distrust and fear in order to prevent the formation of civil society.

A BBG survey included in the 2012 InterMedia report ‘A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment’¹ found that approximately two-thirds (68%) of foreign radio listeners shared information they heard on foreign radio with others.

TESTIMONY TO THE EFFECT OF RADIO IN THE DPRK

The following testimonies are drawn from ‘Testimony of the Twelve Who Escaped Death’, a recent book produced by NKGulag, a Seoul-based NGO, in association with the government of the ROK.

“I took back a radio from China too, and listened to it in secret. I heard South Korean broadcasts on it; radio dramas and South Korean news. I also brought back an action movie on video. Later a member of the security forces was detained for watching the video, because in North Korea even husbands and wives have to watch each other and the wife reported her husband. But the husband had a good background, so he was demoted rather than being sent to a political prison camp.”

Kim Kwang Il (detained in Yoduk Political Prison Camp, 1999~2002)

¹ Kretchun, N. and Kim, J., A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment, InterMedia, 2012 (available [here](#))

“I was arrested and imprisoned in Yoduk while on active duty with the Border Guards. I was a member of the 5454th Regiment, a large unit that guarded coastal areas and political prison camps. I was technically a driver for one of the battalion commanders, but since the battalion political commissar was more powerful he used the car. In other words, I was the political commissar’s driver. He was a very open man with an interest in the outside world who listened to South Korean and Chinese broadcasts freely. He even liked to help defectors when he could; however, he was an officer so he had to be cautious. Therefore, helping defectors was my mission.

I was arrested in August, 1991, after I had been facilitating defections for two or three years. Kim Il Sung’s 80th birthday was coming and the competition for loyalty was growing intense. As part of this, regimental regulations were tightened up. It was no different with my battalion, and soon enough the commissar and I were arrested after one woman we had helped to defect was caught in China and confessed to our involvement. The NSA put a wiretap in the car to find more evidence, and found that we listened to South Korean radio there sometimes. In the 1990s, listening to South Korean radio was a rare and serious crime.

The political commissar was sent to a Completely Controlled Zone (CCZ), while I and one other man were sent to the revolutionizing zone; however, the other guy was subsequently released because his father was a high-ranking official on the Fisheries Committee. The political commissar even had a friend in the Central Party, but his crime was simply too serious. When I was released I tried to find him, but neither he nor his family were anywhere to be found.”

Kim Su Chol (detained in Yoduk Political Prison Camp, 1992~1995)

THE COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE OF THE BBC

Although the field for foreign radio stations broadcasting daily into the DPRK now includes a number of NGO stations, there are still only three broadcasters with significant reach; the ROK state broadcaster KBS plus Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, both of which are funded by the U.S. government. Even with the expansion of the broadcasting field, DPRK citizens still remain woefully underserved, and demand for foreign media far exceeds current supply.

At the same time, the BBC is regarded in diverse markets around the globe as “the reference point” for the provision of high quality news and information. Nowhere is this truer than in areas where the domestic media is censored or absent.

The absence of a viable service in the Korean language means this “reference point” for news is missing on the Korean Peninsula, especially in the DPRK. It is self-evidently the case that the BBC would be a welcome presence in the field of broadcasters sending content into the country, if it chose to launch a BBC Korean Service. With its long history and reputation for journalistic excellence, the BBC has the potential to lead by example, increasing not only the overall quantity but also the quality of broadcasts entering the country.

The issue of quality is critical, because the populace of the DPRK is becoming steadily more selective in what it listens to. This is underlined by the aforementioned InterMedia report ‘A Quiet Opening,’ which concludes that the ‘novelty value’ of a Korean-language foreign broadcast and relative dearth of alternatives once led many to just listen to whatever foreign broadcaster they were able to tune to, but that the audience is now more discerning and will be more dismissive of content they perceive as biased. The BBC, seen the world over as an objective broadcaster, can act as a consistent source of reliable outside information to those searching the dial for content they can trust.

THE CASE FOR MEDIUM WAVE

Audibility is a key determinant of radio listenership in North Korea. Put simply, the better the broadcast signal, the more likely it is that people will tune into it. In order to ensure that would-be listeners have access to the high quality content the BBC provides, a Korean Service would need to be broadcast via strong medium wave (MW, aka AM) from South Korea. A strong MW signal broadcast from just across the border greatly increases the likelihood of high listenership in the DPRK. In addition, broadcasting via AM means that the BBC can also be enjoyed by ROK citizens, amongst whom SW radio listening is extremely rare.

CONCERNS OVER HARM TO BILATERAL RELATIONS

“While we recognize that access to foreign media can provide a catalyst for change, and that the North Korean government should allow its citizens access to outside media, we judge that if the BBC allowed this access it would be to the detriment of our ability to engage critically with the North Korean government.”

(Minister of State for the Foreign Office, the Rt. Hon. Hugo Swire, MP, in letter to Lord David Alton, Sept. 2012)

The British government’s stated opposition to a BBC Korean Service is based on a questionable assumption. In the recent past, Britain felt able to engage with dictatorial regimes, such as the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union, while simultaneously funding, through the Foreign Office, BBC World Service broadcasts targeting these same countries. These language services were highly successful and never resulted in detrimental spillover effects for those engagement efforts.

Experts spoken to during the making of this report have said with one voice that the government of the DPRK will not allow the launching of BBC World Service Korean to affect the overall direction of bilateral diplomacy.

A STUDY IN SUCCESS: BBC WORLD SERVICE BURMESE

The BBC World Service provides an essential service in Burma, which was frequently compared to the DPRK until the beginning of its recent, cautious opening. As such, a brief overview of the Burmese service is valuable when considering the possibilities for radio in the DPRK.

The BBC World Service Burmese offers news, current affairs and analysis on radio, online, mobile and through social media. An independent survey carried out in 2009 revealed that the BBC's audience share remains constant at 23% of the population, with an estimated weekly radio audience of 8.4m. This makes it the 7th largest audience of the 28 language services offered by the BBC World Service (including English). It is a shortwave service broadcast for 11 hours and 15 minutes per week, a total that includes 8 hours and 30 minutes of original programming).

The 2012/13 budget for the BBC World Service Burmese was just £761,000, with an additional £95,200 for SW distribution.

Importantly, the Ministry of Information in Burma recently gave BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity, unprecedented permission to open a project office there to deliver a training package to help journalists and broadcasting managers improve standards in the rapidly changing Burmese media landscape.

In a recent blog post for BBC Media Action, the director of BBC Global News, Peter Horrocks notes;

“People in Burma have throughout the 50 years of repression listened to the BBC in vast numbers as the most trusted source of news. Now the media community expects the BBC to assist them in this next stage.

Fortunately, BBC Media Action is well placed to respond. Supported by funds from the UK’s Department for International Development and other donors, we have put together a package of training and development for the broadcast sector. And the Ministry of Information has given Media Action unprecedented permission to open a project office to deliver all of the training package we proposed. If all goes to plan, we will be offering long term support to state and commercial broadcasters to help their journalists and managers improve standards. This will not just be technical training, but the full range of BBC editorial and values training - an absolute precondition for us working in any country.

Once BBC Media Action is established in Burma, we will look to develop editorial capacity beyond the news sector, for instance by producing dramas or documentaries that provide information that can help to inform citizens' choices in a county that is desperately impoverished and unequal. BBC Media Action will be talking urgently with our partners and grant givers to explore the potential for programming to help the promised transformation in Burma.

Although there are encouraging signs, the BBC will watch developments here vigilantly. We will be determined to ensure that our training is taken seriously and really alters practice on the ground. And, of course, our BBC News and BBC World Service programmes will continue to test all sides of opinion in Burma, including the government’s. We are forever committed to the independent and impartial journalism that has given the BBC such trust among audiences in Burma.”

As this blog post amply reflects, the latest developments in Burma represent a very practical way in which the BBC is now assisting Burma to improve its own media, one that is only possible due to the BBC's

long-established reputation as a trustworthy source of news in the country, a reputation built on the back of the BBC World Service Burmese.



The Burmese capital, Nanyang | ©BBC

MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHORS

We firmly believe that the BBC World Service Korean is both feasible and capable of having a positive effect on relations between the UK and the people and governments of the ROK and DPRK alike. It will provide the people of the Korean Peninsula with an experienced, objective broadcaster, and at the same time will build the image of the United Kingdom in the region. In addition, if commercial sponsors become involved in funding the service, it will present them with guaranteed corporate social responsibility benefits. However, the most critical asset in this proposal is the BBC World Service name itself, and the active assistance and support of the BBC is essential if this project is to be taken forward.