

Lessons in media change from top BBC man



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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[Richard Porter](#), the head of [BBC global news](#), was in South Africa recently to attend a conference on broadcasting. Porter, whose division includes the [BBC World Service](#) (in English), [BBC World News satellite TV channel](#) and the [international BBC News international website](#), told Bizcommunity.com how his people are adopting new platforms, integrating radio, TV and online plus responding to audience demands for more breaking news - and why he's more concerned about BBC World News being the most-trusted broadcaster on the planet, rather than the most-watched.



Richard Porter, head of BBC global news

■ We all know the BBC World News Service as the great post-war radio service that covered Africa so comprehensively, and many South Africans listened to it on short wave during the apartheid years to get accurate information about our own country. But where is the World Service today?

Richard Porter: Well, I think the BBC as a whole sees Africa as one of its key priorities. It has a very fast developing media market. Obviously this is inconsistent; it depends on where you are. It's not just one market - it's many, many markets but it adds up to an awful lot of things that are happening here.

The BBC has been broadcasting to Africa for nearly 80 years but we don't think of ourselves as a heritage brand. We think that the things that made us relevant and important in people's lives over a long period are still as relevant today, so the issues for us of trust and having broadcasts which are impartial and accurate and fair and trying to the best they possibly can be - those are values that are as relevant today as they were many, many years ago. And [they] still make us relevant to a market where there is exploding choice and competition and where people are looking to who they can trust and who they can turn to to produce high-quality services of the kind that we do.

So I think the basis of what we do is the same as it always has been but what we have to actually do is different. We have to adapt to changing technology, obviously. We have to be where the audience is and, increasingly, the audience is in different places to where we've been used to. You mentioned short wave - that's a much smaller proportion of our broadcasting in radio than it has been. And obviously we're expanding rapidly on digital platforms... Radio is still a very significant platform for us...

With the World Service (English) globally, we've had an extremely good year. Audiences are up more than 10% for the year and some of our biggest audiences do come from the African market. And TV and online are similarly expanding, so the evidence is that there is more demand.

■ So how does one get the World Service these days - not purely on short wave?

Porter: It's received here [in SA] on short wave. If you're in West or East Africa, a lot of people receive it there on short wave but if you take East Africa, for example, we have a number of partnerships with FM stations there - and that's where a lot of our listening comes from. We have some partnerships in Africa - and we'd like to have more - and not only for our BBC news output in the traditional way. Sometimes it will be for five-minute news bulletins; sometimes it will be for an English Premier League update; and sometimes for a longer-form news programme.

■ So what is the audience in Africa - millions of people?

Porter: Oh yeah, absolutely. It's something like nine million a week in Nigeria.

■ Why are your audiences up around the world, do you think?

Porter: I think news consumption is - despite all the disruptive stuff going on with new technology - still extremely popular. People want to know what's going on in the world and I think that international news is in demand right now because, I think,

we've all realised that our lives are much more connected than they used to be, and people want to know how something that is happening in Europe or Asia is making an impact on their lives in South Africa or wherever they happen to be. I think that's the role that international news channels play.

■ ***So obviously, the advent of [Al Jazeera](#) hasn't dented the audience for BBC World News [satellite TV] channel.***

Porter: No.

■ ***There's obviously room for a lot of natural growth.***

Porter: Absolutely. It's partly because there is space in the market for more than one organisation to do what we do. Al Jazeera is not the same as the BBC. I have a lot of respect for them and a lot of my former colleagues work there and they produce high-quality services. But they're doing a different job from us.

They say, themselves, that they're bringing the voice of the south to the north... We aim to bring a global perspective. We don't represent any national interest or any commercial interest - and I think we bring all those years of learning and experience that enable us to do the job as well as we do do it.

The measures we look for - more than audience size - are reputation and trust. I'm more concerned about being the most-trusted broadcaster than being the most-watched broadcaster.

■ ***So, looking at the BBC World News channel, what do you think you have done well over the past year in terms of journalism?***

Porter: I think if you look at our coverage of the Middle East this year, it's been very strong. Our correspondents in all the key locations have done a brilliant job in giving us the stories as they develop but also the context and the insight, which is equally important as far as I'm concerned. And so we invested massively in that right from the beginning. We've had people on the ground throughout Egypt and Libya and Syria - and we've done an extremely good job...

The other thing we've done in the last 18 months is to modernise the channels, to make them look more contemporary, to make them more accessible - in response to audiences saying that that was one of our weaker points. I think it [all] feels fresher and brighter and better-presented.

■ ***What have been the main challenges, would you say?***

Porter: There are lots of challenges. We're not immune to what's going on in the global economy and we want to make sure we're maintaining our revenues in order to continue investing in what we do - that's a challenge. And the fast-changing rate of technology - and trying to keep on top that - is a challenge. We've expanded into pretty much every platform there is but it's a huge job to try keep on top of it.

■ ***I would imagine so, considering the size of the BBC.***

Porter: Yeah, large organisations can be harder to shift sometimes.

■ ***Breaking all that content down into the different channels must be tricky. I really like the BBC breaking news Twitter feed ([@BBCBreaking](#)), where it really only does updates on big, breaking international stories.***

Porter: You'll see more of that kind of thing developing, actually. We're running a pilot at the moment, where on our website there's more live breaking news - it's a bit more raw in comparison to how we tend to present it [usually]... And that, then, becomes available on whatever mobile platform you might be using. That sense of news as it happens is something we'll develop alongside all the other stuff we do - in terms of more depth and analysis. It's not either/or; it's both. We have to offer both.

■ ***How many reporters do you have out there? Hundreds of people?***

Porter: It's actually very hard to give a number. It varies all the time. And we put more people in some places and take them out, according to where the story is. We're in 95 different places in the world. The way we work is that all the BBC correspondents are available to all BBC outlets...

■ **So would the BBC World News people also work for the World Service?**

Porter: Yes, absolutely...

■ **OK, South Africa's [public] broadcaster brought TV and radio news people together a while ago and now a key thing is to converge with online. Is this also a big thing for you?**

Porter: Every news organisation has done this to some degree. It's a difficult balance, actually. If you're listening to the radio, what you want to hear is excellent-quality radio services. You don't want it diluted by the fact that someone who is working for the radio service is also trying to serve online or TV. Equally, there are ways you can be more effective and more efficient by bringing things together and all of us in the media world are experimenting with that - trying to find the perfect balance.

But we've certainly gone down a route of more integration in production [at the BBC] and will continue to do that even more. So when we move to our new news headquarters building next year in central London, that will bring together people from different platforms and all the language services, as well as the English services. It will give us opportunities to collaborate and demonstrate what the BBC is capable of in ways that we haven't been able to do before.

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