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# WHY WE NEED THE BBC

The corporation again proves its value

**B**ritain has always turned to the BBC in a crisis, and when on Thursday 24 February Russian forces invaded Ukraine almost 20-million UK adults watched BBC News programmes on television across the day, plus nearly 23-million visited the BBC News online website.

And not just the UK: in the last week of February, 200-million people turned to the BBC World Service's digital news in languages other than English. Reach on social media in Russian tripled (with the biggest gains on Facebook) and in Ukrainian it more than tripled.

## PREPARED

The BBC had been increasing its coverage, and its people on the ground in Ukraine, for some time before the invasion began.

Bectu members James White and Ian Jonas are location engineers at BBC News and James had been sent out at the end of January with his colleague Eugene Sully to set up an office and small TV studio in Kyiv as the threats from Russian President Vladimir Putin became more intense. "They thought something might happen so we went out with Lyse Doucet. But it was quiet so we were sent back for a week", says White. They left the equipment behind.

They were then sent back to Ukraine, with Ian Jonas replacing Sully on 20 February, and set everything up again as the BBC's main base for presentation, and the invasion started a few days later. They started out "on a roof terrace in a lovely position", says White, with the shining golden domes of Kyiv's churches behind Clive Myrie when he broadcast. "Then the air-raid sirens and the bombs started going off. The siren first went off at 5am on a tannoy after I'd finished work at 1am. There were several times when we had to broadcast from the basement because the sirens were going and there were attacks from Russian artillery in the area." The latest technology was a great help: Jonas says they started off doing some lives with an iPhone 13 on a gimble mount connected to an app that went straight to the BBC's main servers. Then they used a couple of LED lights about the size of a large matchbox and a Sony A7S Mk3



The BBC's outstanding response to Russia's war in Ukraine has brought news not just to the UK, but to 200-million worldwide, reports **Janice Turner**

# WHY WE NEED THE BBC

**Main picture: BBC news broadcasts underground as it is too dangerous to broadcast outside.**

camera which can work at very low light levels: the camera was set at 128K ISO.

"When we were in the "bunker" it was difficult to do *News at 10* live because it's actually midnight in Kyiv and there were people in the room trying to sleep," says White. "If

something hit the building it was the safest place to be." The two engineers split the day between them, with Ian Jonas doing the early shift and White taking over. The local population thanked the BBC and the other news organisations many times for being in the country.



**Above: Ian Jonas (left) and James White (right) and their BBC colleagues in Kyiv. Below: Ukrainian soldiers and members of the media cross a makeshift walkway over the Irpin river under a destroyed bridge**

### **SHEER SCALE**

It is the BBC's size, its multiplatform reach, its public service remit and its funding model that combine to enable it to respond to major crises on a totally different scale from all other broadcasters. While other organisations may be feeding one channel, the BBC's huge output covers multiple TV channels, multiple radio outlets, a huge online presence and not just domestic services but Russian, Ukrainian and world services as well.

On 7 March the BBC announced that it was going to increase access to its independent journalism by making a daily half-hour news bulletin available free of charge to other broadcasters who are members of the European Broadcasting Union.

BBC News also launched TikTok accounts exclusively dedicated to videos about the war, in Russian and in English. The handles are @bbcnews and @bbcnewsrussian. TikTok has fast become a crucial

platform for information (and disinformation) about the war.

The BBC stated: "Although TikTok has suspended new content and live-streaming in Russia, we know that audiences find ways of getting to, and sharing, the content."

The teams of journalists, producers and operations staff in Ukraine are working across all platforms. The BBC has teams from newsgathering, monitoring and the BBC News Ukraine language service operating in different parts of Ukraine and around the border covering all aspects of this invasion across the BBC's domestic and international services.

BBC Monitoring staff in Ukraine and Russia, as well as in London, have provided important background and insights informing and enriching the output. A new disinformation unit based in the UK has been formed to focus on Russia/Ukraine developments. Specialists are monitoring and fact checking the vast amount of viral misinformation posted in multiple languages across many platforms.

The BBC's output has been all the more crucial in the light of the censorship imposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The BBC's Russian language news site more than tripled from 3.1-million to 10.7-million people in the week of the invasion, while its Ukrainian site saw an increase from 1.7-million to 3.9-million.

And when a Russian missile damaged Kyiv's television tower, knocking out transmission and internet services, the BBC immediately stepped up to broadcast shortwave transmissions so that anyone with a transistor

As the situation worsened, for several days they were not allowed out of the hotel. By the time they left, everything had changed outside, with checkpoints and Ukrainian military on the streets. When they left it took them four and a half days to get back to the UK travelling through two countries.

James White felt that their team's visual presence on screen very clearly demonstrated how the war was escalating. "It went from a very sunny, pretty country to everyone wearing flackjackets and helmets and air raid sirens going off."

### **TRIBUTE**

Bectu pays tribute to all media workers from all media outlets who are risking their lives to show the world what is happening to Ukraine. Sky News journalist Stuart Ramsay was wounded in an ambush on 28 February and camera operator Richie Mockler was hit twice on his body armour. On 1 March Ukrainian photojournalist Yevhenil Sakun was killed by the bombing of Kyiv TV tower. And on 13 March US journalist Brent Renaud was killed by Russian forces at Irpin, outside Kyiv, and US photographer Juan Arrendono was wounded.

***The BBC has published online advice on how to access the BBC, for those whose access has been banned. Search "Advice on accessing BBC News"***



radio in Ukraine, Russia or Belarus could listen to reliable, impartial updates about the war. In 2019 it made its international news website available via the Tor network, allowing safe access to reliable independent news.

## UNIVERSAL PRAISE

The BBC's outstanding response to the invasion has won universal praise. Just weeks after announcing the Conservatives' intention to abolish the licence fee, DCMS secretary of state Nadine Dorries paid tribute to the BBC's Russian language service and choked up as she expressed her "heartfelt thanks and admiration to all of those journalists working for the BBC, ITV and other news outlets risking their lives to bring unbiased and accurate news from a live war zone."

But this is of course the second time in two years that the BBC has marshalled its services to serve the nation in response to a global crisis. During the initial months of the Covid

*The BBC's unique ability to respond to national emergencies would be destroyed by ending licence fee funding*

pandemic, 84% of adults relied on the BBC for updates every day.

When parents across the country were expected to become teacher overnight, the BBC stepped up and became Britain's largest classroom, commissioning special programmes and resources to ensure children didn't fall behind because schools were closed. More than two-thirds of primary school students and three quarters of secondary school pupils used BBC Bitesize educational resources during lockdown.

## THREAT

But the BBC's unique ability to respond to national emergencies in such an outstanding way would be destroyed by proposals to end the licence fee funding.

Suggestions from some politicians that the BBC should be forced to directly compete with Amazon Prime and Netflix by operating under a subscription or advertising-based funding model misunderstand the role and purpose of a national



Appealing for help:  
Ukrainian President  
Volodymyr Zelenskyy

broadcaster – or seek to erode it. The funding models of the global streaming giants do not provide a financial incentive to produce some of the BBC's unique and valuable output.

The BBC has been the bedrock of British culture for a century. Despite numerous attempts to undermine the licence fee, no one has yet proposed a different funding model that would safeguard the BBC's unique and critical contribution to the country's economy and cultural landscape and, as we are seeing in the war in Ukraine, its role in overcoming censorship elsewhere. ●

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