

science on radio

Bush House bonanza

John Gribbin and Eleanor Lawrence

One of the strangest economies proposed in the latest round of British belt-tightening is to cut back drastically on the funds available to the external services of the BBC, which operate from Bush House, London. These services have already suffered a small decline in the amount of cash available to them—which represents a significant decrease in real terms, after inflation has done its worst. Yet the BBC continues to be held in the highest esteem by listeners around the world, who find its services informative and, relatively, free from propaganda. Of course, even the BBC is not completely unbiased: its science, industry and agriculture unit, for example, makes no bones about the fact that although it hopes to report fundamental developments in pure science wherever they are made, technological applications with commercial applications are generally only 'promoted' if they are British. But that understandable bias is hardly in the same league as the political propaganda of the other giants of world broadcasting.

Compared with the domestic services of the BBC (and, indeed, the internal broadcasting services of other countries) Bush House provides a veritable scientific bonanza. Out of 168 hours of broadcasting in English each week, there are two half-hour programmes devoted entirely to science (each of them repeated twice), a nature notebook and a programme for farmers. With more or less regular scientific features (12 to 20 a year, each running for 30 minutes) and the tit-bits of science found in news and current affairs programmes, the total is something like 5 percent of the weekly output.

This is achieved with a very restricted budget, roughly half of the amount available for comparable domestic programmes (such as the late, lamented "Kaleidoscope"); if the funds of the science unit are cut back at all there seems no way in which economies could be made except by reducing the number of programmes. It may not happen, and it certainly should not happen, to judge from the quality, as well as the quantity, of these programmes.

Of the two main science unit programmes, "Science in Action" aims "to inform and sometimes amuse" the non-

specialist listener. We were a little surprised by the high scientific standard of this programme—but of course it is broadcast in English, and therefore its audience overseas must be better educated and more well-informed than the average population. Audience response and a recent survey indicate that medical items are most popular, with communications and astronomy following some way behind. Questions asked by listeners indicate how successfully the programme communicates with its intended audience: would two children brought up together in isolation from birth learn to communicate and what are hypertension and vertigo?

At a high level, "Discovery" aims to be by scientists and for scientists, and beats anything else we have heard on domestic radio or elsewhere hollow. In the half-hour programme, two or occasionally three scientists are interviewed about their own work and given free reign. The result is something like a radio version of the "News and Views" section of *Nature*.

In one programme we heard, Dr V. Marks from the University of Surrey talked about gut hormones and insulin control, and Dr Jeffrey Manning from the Rutherford Laboratory explained their current accelerator research programme. This did not duck what seemed to us the contentious question—especially to an audience in the developing countries—of whether an accelerator costing £15 million is justifiable. But it seems that there is, in fact, a more general recognition of the value of fundamental research in the countries which can least afford it themselves.

This raises another interesting point: the lively postbag received by the science unit includes contributions from the poorest countries, where the cost of posting a letter to Britain can be as much as 50 percent of a week's earnings, yet many listeners feel it worth the cost of responding in this way. One correspondent, an Indian doctor, said how much he valued the programmes as his only effective means of keeping up to date, since the cost of "the literature" is quite prohibitive for him.

Part of this listener interest must stem from the immediacy of the programmes. Special features, such as one discussing the causes and implications of the present droughts in sub-Saharan Africa, can be put together within 72

hours, and in a "Science in Action" programme broadcast in the week ending April 6 Dr Simon Mitton, of the University of Cambridge, could be heard giving details of the Mariner-10 observations of Mercury which were certainly new to us. This immediacy is aided, of course, by the happy relationship between Bush House and active scientists, who are, it seems, often pleasantly surprised at the difference in approach between the external services and the domestic TV services.

As well as the programmes broadcast from London, the BBC also provides a service for radio stations around the world in the form of taped programmes. And this really is a service—a weekly fifteen minute tape programme, for use intact or to be cut up and inserted into other programmes, costs only £1.50 plus postage, and there is no obligation for the user even to credit the BBC when an item is used. One of these tapes, "Science Magazine", has a link with *Nature* in the form of a weekly contribution from one or more members of the editorial staff: this programme is a mixture of short items and a long interview, almost a combination of "Science in Action" and "Discovery". It has not always come off as a programme in itself, although at the giveaway price excerpts find outlets around the world, not just in developing countries but also on American public and campus radio. We have, however, heard a pilot of a 'new look' "Science Magazine", with more punch and a lively signature tune: this format seems more likely to provide a good listen and makes more sense for users who wish to broadcast the programme intact.

All in all, the science output from Bush House is difficult to fault. The fundamental reason for this seems to us to be that the producers themselves and most of the presenters all have scientific training, although the audience is not entirely science oriented, as correspondence from insomniacs and long distance lorry drivers in Britain indicates. Far from reducing this valuable output, the powers that be should be encouraged to promote it as a valuable string to the BBC's bow, in the best traditions of Reith. Perhaps they could even take note of the most common plea from those insomniacs and list the programmes, in as small a print as they like, in the *Radio Times*.