Monitoring the output of the media for diplomatic purposes is far from being a modern practice: because the construction of foreign policy must begin with the gathering of accurate information, diplomats – both at home and stationed overseas – have valued journalists and news organizations as crucial sources of open intelligence since the dawn of the media age. With the growth of the electronic media, the need to monitor their output assumed an added urgency, especially given the propensity of radio and television signals to penetrate national borders, bypass governments and appeal directly to public opinion. In what has been described as an ‘era of geopolitical redefinition’, it is becoming increasingly important to understand how the flow of information across national borders can have a profound impact on the way that societies construct an identity of themselves, and of each other. Modern communications technology means that the idea of a national sovereignty cooened by impervious borders is fast becoming an anachronism.

This chapter seeks to understand the problems caused by such developments, but demonstrates how monitored radio and television broadcasts can profit the diplomatic process provided they are used selectively and with a sensitivity for the difficulties associated with their application. The discussion will centre on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Monitoring Service and its American partner organization, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS); although at least eleven other countries are known to have developed systems for monitoring foreign broadcasts, including France, Germany, Japan, Russia and most recently Australia, none are organized on a basis comparable to either the BBC or FBIS.

In Britain, the systematic monitoring of international broadcasts owes its origin to the fear of revolutionary politics. In 1930, Hugh Dalton at the Foreign Office received an anxious letter which described how the writer had listened to a wavelength ‘indicating
Innovation in Diplomatic Practice

Leningrad or Moscow’, and had heard a transmission in English ‘urging revolution repeatedly. Evidently,’ he speculated, ‘the ob­ject is to disseminate Revolutionary ideas amongst British sailors and others, probably in India and other of our dominions.’ In re­sponse Dalton suggested that the Post Office should make tran­sripts of these ‘objectionable’ transmissions. 2

But it was the outbreak of war in 1939 and the role envisaged for radio propaganda in its prosecution which prompted the estab­lishment of an organized monitoring service, originally financed by the Ministry of Information and run by the BBC. Its importance at this time was suggested by the work of the Special Operations Executive which tried to determine Hitler’s intentions by interpreting German radio propaganda. Immediate strategic importance was therefore attached to German broadcasts, but as the war widened transmissions from throughout the world were monitored and re­ported on a 24-hour basis. By August 1944, the service was moni­toring 1.75 million words in thirty languages every day. 3

Despite its long history, the BBC Monitoring Service (now lo­cated in the space and tranquillity of Caversham Park, near Read­ing) 4 only achieved its prominence and international fame during the Gulf crisis of 1990–1. The world’s media descended on Caversham Park in recognition of the fact that the Monitoring Service was the single comprehensive source of reliable news and intelligence on developments within Iraq itself.

Such information that is gathered at Caversham Park is collated and published on a daily basis in the Summaries of World Broadcasts (SWB). These are divided into five parts to cover the principal geo­graphic areas of the world, 5 and each is supplemented weekly by a detailed economic report. They are then sold to ‘customers’, rang­ing from government departments and the more affluent university libraries to interested companies and individuals. 6 Yoel Cohen’s seminal study of Media Diplomacy is critical of the monitoring re­ports, suggesting that because they ‘only summarize important pol­itical statements’ they are of little value to serious diplomacy. 7 Not only is this an erroneous accusation – the BBC Monitoring Service is willing to supply translations of the full text on request, but gen­erally finds that official customers appreciate the carefully edited versions much more – but Cohen then challenges the thrust of his own argument by relating how one desk officer in the British Foreign Office Research and Analysis Department (RAD) described the monitoring reports as ‘a major source’ of information. 8