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THE ACT OF LISTENING: RADIO MONITORING, 1930–1990

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KEYWORDS International broadcasting; broadcasting history; twentieth century; audiences; comparative media history; transnational media; BBC; radio monitoring

Radio monitoring is a significant but under-researched aspect of the history of international radio broadcasting and, in more general terms, of a transnational history of technology, media and (mass) communication.¹ From the very beginnings of radio in the early 1920s, those involved in experiments with this new medium were aware that the ‘ether knows no boundaries’, and that radio signals could reach audiences well beyond state borders. No previous medium, as Michele Hilmes points out, possessed the ability to ‘defy barriers of both time and space, to travel unseen through the air and enter the ears of private citizens in their homes’.² This ‘free-for-all of the airwaves’ has inspired scholars working on the use of radio as an instrument in international relations. For them, broadcasting practices, and the power of radio to influence people abroad as a form of ‘public diplomacy’, prompt a multitude of questions.³ Very shortly after its introduction the new medium of wireless, as it was then known, became one of the primary means of communication, facilitating the ‘transportation of information’ which had become an integral part of modern state building and surpassing the then existing arsenal of communication technologies.⁴

Beyond the straightforward account of information exchange across the air waves, however, there is an important story of rivalry in the ether. To properly understand this story, one has to consider the interaction between transmitting and receiving—and the latter in particular has not been especially well researched. International broadcasters did not merely send their message abroad, they also listened with considerable attention to broadcasts from other countries, and used that information to shape their own outputs. When researching broadcasting, therefore, one has to consider the basic inseparability of the spheres of ‘information’ and ‘intelligence’—their interwoven nature a manifestation of the modern state.⁵

These anxieties materialized for the first time in the late 1930s, when officials in various countries, for example French colonial Algeria and Nazi Germany, considered foreign broadcasts a threat to their regimes.⁶ Deeply conscious of the potential impact of radio on society, these officials began ‘listening’ to foreign radio stations in a manner which was far from passive, but rather undertaken to achieve political goals. If radio creates, as Carolyn Birdsall

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

suggests, an ‘imagined *listening* community’,⁷ then radio monitoring tries to obtain a glimpse of these imagined listeners or ‘listening publics’, as Kate Lacey has termed them.⁸ Just as the voice emitting from the radio resonates with the listener, so the broadcasts received through headphones from foreign stations resonate with the monitor.⁹ In addition to these motives, it is also important to consider the practical circumstances and strategies used by monitors to obtain and pass on information. Radio monitoring, as Hilary Footitt has pointed out, can even be considered to be ‘performative’ because monitors form part of a ‘complex chain of listening and reproducing this listening’.¹⁰ This special issue of *Media History* is intended to give the reader a better understanding of how these processes worked, and an insight into radio monitoring as an ‘act of listening’.

The papers derive from two international research projects which took place between 2015 and 2019. *Listening to the World* was an AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council)-funded international network that investigated the value to academics of the very extensive collection of transcripts compiled by the BBC Monitoring Service, the listening organisation set up just before the Second World War, whose work continues to this day. This collection, which was stored at the Imperial War Museum in 1964, had grown by 1980 to around 15 million sheets of paper. The collection remained housed at IWM’s stores at Duxford Airfield in Cambridgeshire—where it filled most of the ground floor of a large former RAF building—until 2016 when it was transferred to the BBC Written Archives at Caversham. The project was carried out in collaboration with the BBC and with BBC Monitoring.

The second research project is *Connecting the Wireless World. Writing Global Radio History*, which ran between 2016 and 2019 with a grant from the Leverhulme Trust.¹¹ The main goal of this project, which was co-ordinated by a team of seven members from different countries, was to explore the role played by wireless in forging links between different countries from the interwar years onwards. Three international workshops were held where invited scholars presented case studies on various topics in radio history, including technology and soundscapes. The first of these, held at the University of York in September 2016, drew academics from several different countries who each presented papers on the cultures of radio monitoring and surveillance.

As this volume shows, the main purpose of ‘monitoring services’ is to generate a flow of information relevant to political decision-making and foreign policy objectives.¹² In addition, the process of listening to and monitoring foreign broadcasts trigger practices that are not only political, but also cultural, involving adjustment, adaptation and appropriation—processes which are comparable to how vernacular societies ‘absorbed, assimilated, and adopted broadcasting as a cultural expression and practice’.¹³ As such, monitoring practices are relevant for both domestic and international intelligence.

Conscious of the need to understand their audiences, and borrowing practices from the United States, in the 1930s several governments and broadcasters started to analyse the listening habits of their own domestic audiences, collecting observations from listeners and commissioning audience research by means of surveys and interviews to identify domestic programming preferences. By studying listening behaviours in this way, broadcasters were able to feed that knowledge back into the planning of programmes.¹⁴ It was for this purpose that the BBC set up its first Listener Research Section in 1936.¹⁵ While such investigations served as a means to ‘anchor a sense of (national) identity’,¹⁶ especially in times of political upheaval or war, audience research during times of war could serve very different

purposes. The Cold War era was a notable episode in the political and ideological struggle over listeners on both sides of the Iron Curtain.¹⁷ In the 1950s, Hungarian party officials received summary transcripts and analytic reports from their monitoring sources and by the late 1960s the Hungarian Party had set up a special unit to coordinate responses to hostile Western propaganda.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Communist Romanian leader, established a so-called 'Ether' unit within the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, to monitor those Romanians who were listening to Radio Free Europe, as well as specific individuals mentioned in the radio programmes.¹⁹

Monitoring became prominent in the mindsets of government officials who readily found funds for its expansion. The French state, for instance, as Rebecca Scales has shown, installed a radio listening service in 1935 to monitor the content of foreign broadcasts in French as well as a 'colony-wide surveillance web' to monitor Algerian radio listening habits.²⁰ Yet, monitoring as surveillance practice did not always serve merely political ends. Surveillance, as Torin Monahan reasons, can also serve democratic ends if it builds upon and triggers 'openness, transparency, accountability [and] participation,' for instance in the transnational field of media and communication.²¹ Against this backdrop, this special issue is interested in exploring how not only 'radio broadcasting technologies' but also certain monitoring techniques 'met demand for information.'²²

It is only in the last few years that the history of radio monitoring has started to receive rigorous scholarly attention.²³ The literature that does exist is mainly about the BBC Monitoring Service established in Britain just before the Second World War, and the United States' Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS).²⁴ Asa Briggs, who wrote a five-volume book on the history of broadcasting in the UK from 1922 to 1974, made regular reference to the BBC Monitoring Service in his third volume, *The War of Words*, which dealt with the Second World War years. Briggs explained how: 'Work at Wood Norton (BBC Monitoring's first home) very quickly expanded into a continuous rota of 24 h a day, 7 days a week, with the help of recordings on wax cylinders. Members of the staff were recruited mainly from foreigners resident in Britain, many of them men and women not only of great linguistic ability, but of great intelligence, who were to be prominent in many walks of life after the end of the war. As their numbers grew, Wood Norton became a genuine international centre, almost a kind of international university.'²⁵

Aside from Briggs's work, there has been relatively little attention paid to BBC Monitoring's history. The only monograph was published in 1986 and describes the Service's early years.²⁶ In books on the history of the BBC and the BBC World Service, radio monitoring is occasionally mentioned but only in passing.²⁷ There has been some interest from scholars working on intelligence services and media diplomacy in radio monitoring as an open source of information but again the field of enquiry remains relatively undeveloped.

Archives deriving from monitoring inevitably constitute a vast amount of data. In addition to the sheer bulk of the paper retained, the appearance of monitoring transcripts can often be dense, with narrowly spaced continuous typescript, and annotations pencilled in by those in charge of the monitoring operation. In Diya Gupta's words in this issue, 'they convey to us, in their materiality, the sense of "raw histories" being unearthed' and are huge treasure troves for scholars with an interest in media history, as well those studying diplomacy, politics, economics, and numerous other topics. At the same time, however, they pose considerable intellectual challenges. How are we to find our way through these

endless labyrinths of historical data? And what meanings can be teased from the endless sheaves of type, often compiled by monitors who—though determined to be impartial—were inevitably conditioned by the geopolitical environment they inhabited, and the numerous rules and regulations set down by their institutions?

The authors in this special issue have taken up this challenge and dug into various collections to explore and analyse the monitoring resources they have found. Their articles offer thoughtful critiques of this source material, which, as we have seen, cannot be taken at face value. All address two aspects: first they reflect on the historical contexts in which radio monitoring took place. What were the ideological motives and geo-political circumstances that gave rise to foreign broadcasts being monitored? Secondly, they offer a critical assessment of the actual monitoring practices. What strategies did the monitors use to generate data and what kind of information did they highlight in their transcripts and reports? By addressing these two elements, the individual articles provide the readers with rich case studies of the use of radio monitoring at various key-moments in twentieth-century history.

The goal of monitoring is to systematically gather information from broadcasts from other nations, or sometimes from within the home country. Usually monitors compile extensive raw transcripts of what they hear, which are in turn edited into monitoring 'reports' that contain selected excerpts or summaries of the broadcasts that are deemed most relevant. The editorial process is influenced by the specific demands of the various user groups. Throughout the twentieth century diplomatic and intelligence officials, in the UK and US but also in other countries, read monitoring reports to familiarize themselves with regions in the world details of whose current affairs were otherwise difficult to access. The BBC outputs—supplied on a daily basis to a range of customers across the UK government—were and continue to be an extremely valuable source and Monitoring at times manages to provide information about certain events faster than news agencies.²⁸ Monitoring reports were also a vital instrument in psychological warfare. By analysing the broadcasts of their adversary, officials and broadcasters could fine-tune their own communication strategies—an activity that is amplified in the majority of articles in this volume.

The practices and procedures of monitoring were and continue to be to a large extent shaped by their specific institutional environment. An organization that aimed to monitor international radio on a large scale required, in addition to a substantial amount of technological hardware, a large staff of linguists. The BBC Monitoring Service is notably extensive, employing many native speakers from the dozens of countries it is monitoring. The organization's headquarters, located in Caversham Park since 1943, can be seen as the quintessential monitoring outlet: a community buzzing with the hum of many different languages. Most articles in this special issue (Kuitenbrouwer, Gupta, Webb and Busch) use material that has been generated by BBC Monitoring or comparable organizations.

There were, however, also monitoring strategies that required other modes of information-gathering. As the article by Kind-Kovács uncovers, Radio Free Europe 'monitored' not primarily the official national broadcasts behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. As this type of monitoring in the Communist period—due to massive censorship—was neither very insightful nor useful, Western broadcasters relied simultaneously

on another, unorthodox method of 'monitoring' the target country and their listeners inside. Here we broaden our understanding of 'radio monitoring' and include interviews with clandestine listeners that had escaped to the West as one way of gathering knowledge on distant audiences and everyday life behind the Iron Curtain. Such types of less formal 'monitoring' of radio broadcasts, also included the gathering of material that was clandestinely received by those enduring persecution and forbidden to even own or have access to radio sets. Clandestine listening also took place during the Second World War when radio in occupied Europe provided a vital source of information on the course of the conflict. Ferenc's paper about the monitoring of news by the Oneg Shabbas organisation in the Warsaw Ghetto shows how their activities, carried out in exceptionally difficult conditions but with precision and regularity, could provide a unique source of information about the outside world to a community under constant threat.

The contributions in this volume highlight that the trajectory of radio monitoring is closely connected to the use of radio broadcasting for propaganda purposes, mainly in times of geopolitical tension and military conflict. In many respects the main catalyst of radio monitoring was the outbreak of the Second World War. Following the occupation of Western Europe by Nazi Germany in 1940, Britain became a bulwark against the Nazis, not just in military terms, but also in the ether where a fierce 'war of words' erupted. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) became a formidable propaganda-machine, transmitting, and listening, to all parts of the world in a plethora of languages. In this context the BBC Monitoring Service 'grew from the humblest of beginnings to a vast organization in its own right, supplying both the BBC and PWE [Political Warfare Executive] with invaluable information'.²⁹ Confronted with highly dynamic circumstances of the war, British radio makers did work closely together with people who had fled Nazi-occupied countries. The example of the Dutch government-in-exile's response to Dutch-language broadcasts by the Nazis and their collaborators is examined in the article by Kuitenbrouwer.

For the British the exercise of power in its colonies remained a priority and BBC Monitoring kept a close watch on the Empire, as Gupta shows in her contribution on India. The global reach of BBC operations inspired the US government to start its own Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), a sub-division of the Central Intelligence Agency, in February 1941. The two organizations have worked closely together ever since, dividing the airwaves between them, a bond which was formalized in 1947, making them by far the most wide-ranging radio-monitoring system in the world.³⁰

In the aftermath of the Second World War the attention of BBC Monitoring and FBIS on the Soviet Bloc intensified, as the USSR became their main adversary in the Cold War. At certain crisis-points, such as the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, monitors fulfilled an important role in reporting events as they unfolded in the region, as Webb shows. At the same time, the BBC and the US-based stations Voice of America (founded in 1942) and Radio Free Europe (1949) broadcasted extensively in the region too, which in turn triggered monitoring of their output by the Communist regimes. But the monitors during the latter part of the twentieth century were not only interested in dynamics around the fault line between the Western and Eastern bloc in Europe. They also continued to monitor broadcasts about the non-Western world, where decolonization brought a major transformation

to the media landscape. The contribution by Busch on BBC monitoring of Russian coverage of the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 reveals this global dynamic.

By the end of the twentieth century, the rise of television as the dominant medium provided new challenges for Western monitoring services, which started to analyse international and domestic tv broadcasts from around the world. This kind of monitoring, which had to account for more variables, such as image-framing and subtitles, was more complex than before and increased the need for well-trained monitors.³¹ In this way the BBC Monitoring Service was able to play a significant role in gathering information on geopolitical crises, such as the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gulf War. The rise of social media in the twenty-first century has brought fresh challenges to the organization, as it moves to cover the outputs of new communication tools, such as Twitter and Facebook, juxtaposing them with more traditional media to filter out unreliable information. This fast-changing media environment causes BBC Monitoring to be constantly on the front foot in terms of technological developments, in order to keep up with the enormous amount of data pumped through international communication lines every day, giving insights on flash-points throughout the world. The organization is conscious of its history, however, and the workshops organized for the *Listening to the World* and *Connecting the Wireless World* projects gave a number of its staff, past and present, the opportunity to reflect on its rich past and to highlight the values it continues to represent today.³²

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Notes

1. Ribeiro and Seul ed., *Transnational Broadcasting*; Briggs Burke, *A Social History of the Media*; Turchetti, Herran, and Boudia, "Introduction".
2. Hilmes, *Network Nations*, 2.
3. See: Baumann, Gillespie, and Webb eds., "BBC World Service".
4. McLachlan, "Communication Networks", 194.
5. Pronay and Taylor, "An Improper Use of Broadcasting", 357.
6. Scales, "Subversive Sound".
7. Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes*, 109.
8. Lacey, *Listening Publics*.
9. Lacey, "Speaking Up and Listening Out", 132.
10. Footitt, "War and Culture Studies", 217.
11. For more information see: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/research/global-radio-history/> [06-03-2018].
12. Mowlana, *Global Information*, 77.
13. Enriquez, *Appropriation of Colonial Broadcasting*, 11.

14. Hilmes, *Network Nations*, 88–9.
15. Lacey, “Radio in the Great Depression”, 28.
16. *Ibid.*
17. On audience research in Eastern Europe see: Part II in Johnson and Parta, eds., *Cold War Broadcasting*, 49–144.
18. Johnson, ‘Introduction.’ In: Johnson and Parta, eds., *Cold War Broadcasting*, xxii
19. Nagat, “Ceașescu’s War”, 234.
20. Scales, “Subversive Sound”, 392 and 385.
21. Monahan, “Surveillance as Cultural Practice”, 498. For more on surveillance see: Boersma et al., eds., *Histories of State Surveillance*.
22. Clayton, “The Consumption”, 691.
23. Allen, *Media Monitors Australia*.
24. Johnson, “Establishing Broadcast Monitoring”. For FBIS see: <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/volume-54-number-1/the-scope-of-fbis-and-bbc-open-source-media.html> [18-04-2018]. See also: Horten, *Radio Goes to War*; Somerville, *Radio Propaganda*; Olcott, *Open Source Intelligence*.
25. Briggs, *The War of Words*.
26. Renier and Rubinstein, *Assigned to Listen*.
27. Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 105; Webb, *London Calling*, 81–8.
28. Rawnsley, “Monitored Broadcasts”, 138–9.
29. Briggs, *The War of Words*, 15.
30. Rawnsley, ‘Monitored Broadcasts’, 137–138.
31. *Ibid.*, 141–3.
32. For remarks about the current relevance of historical research see: ‘Interview Sarah Beck, Director BBC Monitoring’, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/research/research-projects/listening-to-the-world-bbc-monitoring-collection-ahrc-research-network> [02-02-2018].

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