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CHAPTER 16

‘The Brightness You Bring into Our Otherwise Very Dull Existence’: Responses to Dutch Global Radio Broadcasts from the British Empire in the 1920s and 1930s

Vincent Kuitenbrouwer

In 1934, the Dutch radio announcer Eduard Startz visited Jodhpur in India, en route (by plane) to the Dutch East Indies. He was received enthusiastically by British colonial expatriates, who tuned in regularly to his shows, and with them, he listened to a radio broadcast from the Netherlands. For the first time, he experienced the emotion of hearing radio from the Netherlands so far away from home, and he was particularly touched when his companions stood up to pay their respects when the Dutch national anthem was played.[1] Startz later recounted this story to show how global radio broadcasts increased the prestige of the Netherlands in the British Empire.

This anecdote brings us to the heart of what Ann Stoler calls the ‘politics of comparison’ in the history of empires. In discussing this concept,

[1] Eduard Startz, *Even naar Indië* (Amsterdam: Strengholt, 1935), 41–43.

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her main focus is on historiography, but she also briefly remarks that it is important to historicise it, as colonial powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used comparisons to legitimise their rule overseas.[2] In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of this phenomenon amongst historians. In the introduction to the volume *European Empires and the People* (2011) in Manchester University Press's *Studies in Imperialism* Series, John MacKenzie points out that there were 'complex webs of "othering"' that operated between different colonial empires in the modern age.[3] This key insight suggests that an important research agenda would be for historians to (re)visit archives on a hunt for primary sources that reveal these complex histories of trans-imperial interactions.

This chapter aims to contribute to this quest by addressing the responses of listeners in the British Empire to Dutch radio broadcasts in the 1920s and 1930s. At the time, the advent of wireless radio technology was welcomed by pro-colonial pundits in Great Britain and the Netherlands as a powerful tool to strengthen the bonds between the metropoles and peripheries of their respective empires. This shows that contemporaries were aware of the fact that radio waves transcend geographical boundaries. The inherently transnational nature of radio has indeed been recognised in the historiography of broadcasting in the British and Dutch empires.[4] Another factor links the British and Dutch cases as well, for in both countries shortwave technology, operated respectively by the BBC Empire Service and the privately owned Philips Omroep Holland Indie (PHOHI), was used to allow direct transmissions from the metropoles to the peripheries of the two empires beginning in the early 1930s. In the French and Portuguese empires, in contrast, such transmissions were implemented later and on a smaller scale.[5]

[2] Ann Stoler, 'Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies', *Journal of American History* 88 (2001), 27.

[3] John M. MacKenzie, 'Introduction', in John M. MacKenzie, ed., *European Empires and the People: Popular Responses to Imperialism in France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 11.

[4] Simon J. Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and René Witte, *De Indische radio-omroep: Overheidsbeleid en ontwikkeling 1923–1942* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1998).

[5] Rebecca P. Scales, '*Métissage* on the Airwaves: Toward a Cultural History of Broadcasting in French Colonial Algeria, 1930–1936', *Media History* 19 (2013), 305–21.

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One aspect of the history of radio broadcasting, however, has been relatively absent from the historiography. The shortwave pioneers of the interwar years were aware that listeners in their empires could tune into stations operated by other imperial powers. In the 1930s, radio broadcasters from different countries tried to surpass their rivals by creating new technologies and broadcasting formats. In the book chapter 'Propaganda and the BBC Empire Service, 1932–42' (1987), MacKenzie showed that officials in Broadcasting House were alarmed by reports that many radio owners in the British Empire tuned into foreign stations. Although, from the mid-1930s, most of their worries were about the fascist German and Italian stations at Zeesen and Bari, reports in the BBC archives also repeatedly mention Dutch stations that were popular amongst listeners in the Empire.[6]

This chapter highlights this history from the Dutch rather than British perspective, using material from the Philips Company Archives. Particular focus will be on listeners' letters from British-controlled territories to the producers of the 'Happy Station', an experimental show that began in 1928. In 1936, the annual report of the Philips radio broadcasters stated that they received 9300 letters from listeners outside the formal Dutch sphere of influence, which suggests that they received tens of thousands of letters in the decade as a whole.[7] Although only a small percentage of these letters survive, it seems highly likely that a substantial number of radio owners in the British Empire tuned into Dutch radio broadcasts. This chapter undertakes a qualitative analysis of the surviving letters, preceded by an analysis of the pioneering years of radio, to examine the interaction between the Netherlands and Britain in the sphere of global radio broadcasting.

In order to interpret the listeners' letters, this chapter engages with a key concept from MacKenzie's *oeuvre*: propaganda. In his seminal book *Propaganda and Empire* (1984), MacKenzie argued that this word, which had been previously been absent from the historiography of empire, was crucial to an understanding of British imperial culture.[8]

[6] John M. MacKenzie, 'Propaganda and the BBC Empire Service, 1932–42', in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *Propaganda, Persuasion and Polemic* (London: E. Arnold, 1987), 37–54.

[7] *Over de wereld weerklinkt Neerlands stem. De Nederlandsche kortegolfomroep. PHOHI, PHI, PCJ 1936* (Eindhoven [1937]), 3.

[8] John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880–1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 2–3.

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In the Netherlands, the term propaganda is an even bigger taboo, as it fits uncomfortably with both the historical self-image of the Dutch people and national historiography. The standard wisdom is that the Netherlands, as a small state with a large overseas empire, kept to a strict policy of neutrality in the beginning of the twentieth century, which meant that propaganda about issues related to international relations was strictly forbidden by the government. In the interwar years, journalists in domestic media, both print and radio, were actively monitored and sometimes even prosecuted in order to prevent controversial statements about other countries.[9] Officials also urged radio broadcasters not to offend foreign powers in their transmissions.

To properly asses the character of Dutch colonial broadcasts, one also needs to consider the domestic media landscape at the time, which was quite different from Britain, where the BBC had a broadcasting monopoly. In the interwar years, Dutch society was undergoing a process of 'pillarisation', which meant that civil society came to be increasingly stratified along ideological lines: Orthodox Protestant, Catholic, Social-Democratic, and Liberal. These 'pillars' originated in the political parties in Parliament and stretched deep in the social fabric, as they all had their own organisations, ranging from academic think tanks to working man's clubs. These divisions also shaped the domestic media landscape in the 1920s and 1930s, as each pillar had its own media outlets, including radio corporations. This fragmentation in the Dutch national ether prompted debates over if and how this plurality in the domestic media should be reflected in broadcasts abroad. Some people in the industry argued that there should be one national broadcasting organisation to prevent 'party-propaganda' from being disseminated over the global airwaves, while others argued that different radio corporations should be involved in programming in order to display the diversity within Dutch society.[10]

[9] Huub Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie. Overheidsbemoeiing met radioprogramma's 1919–1941* (Amsterdam: Stichting Beheer IISG, 1988); and Frank van Vree, *De Nederlandse pers en Duitsland 1930–1939. Een studie over de vorming van publieke opinie* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1989).

[10] I have explored this debate in my article Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, 'Radio as a Tool of Empire: Intercontinental Broadcasting from the Netherlands to the Dutch East Indies in the 1920s and 1930s', *Itinerario* 40 (2016), 83–103.

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Documents about Dutch colonial radio broadcasting, whose authors were influenced by these internal and external factors, shunned the word 'propaganda'. It is, however, a useful historiographical concept through which to analyse this material. The fact that contemporaries argued that their broadcasts were 'neutral' does not mean that this was actually the case. Instead, the development of Dutch global radio broadcasting was a direct attempt to manipulate audiences abroad in order to secure national interests—particularly the unity of the colonial empire—in the aftermath of the First World War. These attempts were geared towards preserving the geopolitical status quo and guarding the territorial integrity of both the Netherlands and its colonies in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean. This meant that broadcasts were mainly aimed at encouraging the goodwill of listeners abroad. They focused on transmitting an optimistic image of Dutch modernity, which was symbolised by the pioneering experiments in radio technology, and on providing accessible forms of entertainment for foreign audiences that could display the specificities of Dutch society. The pages below will show how both broadcasters and listeners in various parts of the British Empire engaged with these key elements of early Dutch colonial radio.

1 Pioneering the Ether, 1917–1927

The birth of Dutch global wireless broadcasting must be seen in the context of the First World War, a time when the Dutch Empire largely relied on submarine telegraph cables controlled by the British for its communication. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Dutch government could not muster enough investors to fund an independent telegraph connection between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies. Instead, a deal was struck with Reuters to link into its line between India and Australia, and thus the Dutch East Indies tapped into the 'all red route' that connected the different parts of the British Empire. In peacetime, this was a reliable and cost-efficient way to operate Dutch colonial telegraphy. In times of war, however, it was more problematic, as was demonstrated during the South African War (1899–1902), when the British feared that the Dutch, who supported the Boers, would pass on secret

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messages via the East Indies and therefore forbade the transmissions of coded messages via the Reuters cable.[11]

The Dutch government tried to decrease its dependency on British cables by creating an alternative route. In 1909, a German-based company succeeded in connecting the East Indies to China, and there tapped into a trans-Pacific network. Soon after the outbreak of the First World War, however, the British sabotaged this connection, which meant that the Dutch were again dependent on the Reuters line for their colonial communication, and this time the British imposed even more restrictions than previously. In addition to banning coded messages, they generally prioritised their communications over those from the Dutch, which meant that it was never clear if messages that were sent between Batavia and The Hague would actually make it through.[12] This colonial communication crisis contributed to the destabilisation of the Dutch colonial regime in Southeast Asia and added to the social upheaval that was spreading throughout the Indonesian archipelago, where scarcity led to food riots and other forms of unrest.[13]

In the midst of this turmoil, a game-changing idea emerged. It was hatched by C. J. de Groot, an engineer for the colonial Post Office Board, who conducted experiments with long-range radio transmissions on Java and Sumatra. On leave in the Netherlands in 1916, he defended his Ph.D. thesis at the Eindhoven College of Technology. In it, he argued that the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies could be connected via a direct wireless radio connection without relay stations. Up to that moment, the Dutch government had barely spent any money on experiments with wireless technology, but in 1917, De Groot received five million guilders to build a radio station in Java. De Groot, who believed that the 12,000 kilometres separating the Netherlands from Java could be bridged by longwave technology, built a station at Malabar in the foothills of the Bandung District, with a huge antenna spanning a two-kilometre-long gorge. In the Netherlands, a station was built at

[11]Martin Bossenbroek, *Holland op zijn breedst: Indië en Zuid-Afrika in de Nederlandse cultuur omstreeks 1900* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1996), 201–2; Kees van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 12–14; and Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, *War of Words: Dutch Pro-Boer Propaganda and the South African War 1899–1902* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 107.

[12]Van Dijk, *Netherlands Indies*, 141.

[13]Van Dijk, *Netherlands Indies*, *passim*.

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Kootwijk in the desolate Veluwe region; the main building was a true 'radio cathedral' that housed the huge generators that were needed to power the longwave connection. After years of experimentation, a direct, but unreliable, wireless telegraphy service between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies was inaugurated in May 1923.[14] Attracting visitors and journalists, the Malabar and Kootwijk stations quickly became known worldwide as impressive symbols of the pioneering role Dutch engineers were playing in the development of radio technology.[15]

In only a few years, however, these longwave stations, together with de Groot's views on intercontinental radio broadcasting, became outmoded due to the advance of shortwave technology. After successful tests were conducted in the United States, Dutch engineers began experimenting with shortwave transmitters that were far more efficient than longwave stations, as they required significantly less power and enabled the broadcast of sound via modulation. The Philips company at Eindhoven became an important centre of these experiments after its chairman Anton Philips ordered the production of radio receiving sets in the mid-1920s. At the time, the company, which up until then was mainly known for its light bulbs, had embarked on a great campaign of diversification. Radio technology became central to this process as it offered commercial opportunities to develop a large range of new products ranging from x-ray machines for medical use to complete radio receiving sets for everyday use. To achieve the latter goal, Philips took over the Nederlandse Seintoestellen Fabriek (Dutch Transmitter Factory) in Hilversum, which previously had been partly owned by the Marconi Company. This takeover ensured that Philips became the single most important radio manufacturer in the Netherlands and one of the largest in the world. In contrast, radio production in Great Britain was far less centralised, and in consequence, Marconi lost its leading role in the global radio production.[16]

Philips developed various strategies to seduce consumers all over the world to buy its radio sets. The company strongly invested in design and

[14]Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, 'The First World War and the Birth of Dutch Colonial Radio', *World History Bulletin* 31 (2015), 28–31.

[15]Rudolf Mràzek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 170.

[16]Ivo Jules Blanken, *Geschiedenis van Philips Electronics N.V. Deel III (1922–1934)* (Leiden: Nijhoff Uitgevers, 1992), 265–69.

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was the first to market a fully integrated radio receiving set that looked like a stylish furniture item rather than a functional communication device for specialists.[17] The company's pro-active public relations division made sure that potential consumers were aware of these innovations by creating large global advertisement campaigns in a great variety of languages. As a result, Philips became the leading global radio brand and occupied a strong position in various markets outside the Dutch sphere of influence, such as Indochina.[18] The most direct way, however, to promote the company's radio sets was via contact over the ether and to that purpose a shortwave laboratory was built at Philips headquarters and operated by J. J. Numans, who conducted experimental shortwave transmissions over long distances. Although Dutch law banned radio advertising at the time, the station itself, which had the name Philips in its call sign, was a strong symbol of the technological power of the company. In this laboratory, engineers played a record in front of a microphone on 11 March 1927, and to their surprise, they received telegrams the next day that their signal had been received loud and clear by a radio amateur in Bandung, about ninety miles southeast of Jakarta, and by operators in other parts of the world. This was the first time in history that sound was transmitted across the globe via wireless radio.[19]

Anton Philips seized the moment and organised a series of events to promote his company's experimental radio transmissions, which were broadcast using the station-code PCJJ. (In 1929, this acronym changed to PCJ, following international regulations.) On 28 April, the Philips transmitter relayed Ludwig von Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, including its famous 'Ode to Joy', played by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and conducted by Willem Mengelberg in the Amsterdam Concert Hall. Emphasising that his laboratory had made the global transmission of Beethoven's masterpiece possible, Anton Philips himself introduced the broadcast.[20] A month later, Queen Wilhelmina and Princess Juliana visited the Philips factory in order to deliver a brief address to the Dutch

[17] Blanken, *Geschiedenis van Philips Electronics*, 279–81.

[18] Erich DeWald, 'Taking to the Waves: Vietnamese Society Around the Radio in the 1930s', *Modern Asian Studies* 46 (2012), 147–48.

[19] For a detailed account of this experiment, see an undated historical memorandum, Philips Company Archives (PCA), file 814.23. See also: Hans Vles, *Hallo Bandoeng. Nederlandse radiopioniers 1900–1945* (Zutphen: Walberg, 2008), 91–100.

[20] *Algemeen Handelsblad*, evening edition, 29 April 1927.

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colonies in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia via wireless. The mainstream press in the Netherlands, which generally supported colonialism, was jubilant about the Queen's speech and asserted that wireless radio technology would strengthen the unity of the Dutch overseas empire.[21] These successful broadcasts showed that the colonial communication crisis of the First World War had been overcome, as the Dutch now possessed an independent means of communication with the East Indies. Indeed, in the spring and early summer of 1927, journalists repeatedly mentioned that the Dutch had surpassed the British in the ether and eagerly referred to envious pundits in the British press who brought up the successful Dutch shortwave experiments.[22]

These expressions of British public opinion came at a crucial moment in the development of the BBC Empire Service. In the spring of 1927, the BBC's leadership contemplated setting up a network of medium-wave relay stations that could pass on signals from Britain to all the parts of the Empire. Chief engineer Peter Eckersley preferred this system over direct broadcasts via shortwave, which he saw as an unreliable technology.[23] Avid shortwave amateurs throughout the Empire, however, hoped to establish a direct connection with the British metropolis, while in Britain itself shortwave enthusiasts, headed by Gerald Marcuse, set up an advocacy group named the Radio Society of Great Britain. In May, he offered to conduct shortwave experiments in cooperation with the Marconi Company for the BBC.[24] When the BBC proved reluctant, Marcuse conducted a media campaign, mainly through the influential and Marconi-linked engineering magazine *Wireless World*, to argue for an imperial shortwave station. Editorials hailed the Dutch radio experiments and disparaged the British government for failing to emulate them. In response to the broadcasts of the royal speeches, the magazine published a cartoon that compared Philips' radio broadcasts with the Dutch naval dominance of the seventeenth century.[25] By 1927, the Dutch had thus gained significant prestige via their command of the airwaves.

[21] See, for example, editorials in *Algemeen Handelsblad, Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, and *Het Vaderland*, 2 June 1927.

[22] See, for example, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 18 June 1927; and *Het Volk*, 21 June 1927.

[23] Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 38–39.

[24] BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), file E4/1, Memorandum, G. Marcuse, 28 May 1927.

[25] *Wireless World*, Vol. XX, No. 23 (8 June 1927), 2.

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Dutch radio superiority was demonstrated when the BBC discreetly asked Philips to relay its broadcasts to distant parts of the British Empire, such as South Africa and Australia.[26] This was not, however, an ideal solution. On 24 May, Philips, insisting that 'tonight's programme has been already completely arranged', refused to relay Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's Empire Day speech, which had already been announced in the British press.[27] In August, a representative of the Australian High Commissioner had to fly from London to Eindhoven in order to give a radio speech to listeners back home.[28] These difficulties were a source of frustration to British proponents of shortwave radio. As the editors of the *Evening News* commented, 'Obviously we cannot expect a Dutch station to do the work of relaying British broadcasts throughout the British Empire. We should regard an equivalent request from any foreign country as odd indeed'.[29] The mounting public pressure compelled the Postmaster General's Office to order the BBC to drop its resistance to shortwave technology, which paved the way for experimental shortwave broadcasts in cooperation with Marconi in October.[30]

In the years that followed, broadcasters in both Britain and the Netherlands worked to develop a regular service that transmitted directly from the metropole to the colonies. The BBC Empire Service was inaugurated on 19 December 1932, followed a month later by the PHOHI. Not only did the British manage to achieve this objective earlier than the Dutch, but the BBC also aired a far more extensive programme, broadcasting several hours every day, while the PHOHI offered only five two-and-a-half-hour broadcasts each week. This large gap in programming time can be explained by the business models of the two organisations. Although the budget for the Empire Service was seen as tight

[26] Asa Briggs only mentions the Eindhoven broadcasts briefly in a footnote. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, Volume II: *The Golden Age of Wireless* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 371.

[27] PCA, file 814.23. [Unreadable] of Philips office in London to A. Philips, 24 May 1927.

[28] PCA, file 814.23. Cutting *Meyerijsche Courant*, 17 August 1927.

[29] PCA, file 814.23. Cutting *Evening News*, 24 May 1927.

[30] BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), file E4/1, Memorandum of telephone conversation with Mr. Phillips of the Post Master General's Office, 16 September 1927; and Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 38.

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by the broadcasters and plans to obtain additional funds from both the British and colonial governments failed, the BBC had a reliable source of funding through its monopoly and its ability to increase licensing fees in Britain.[31] In contrast, PHOHI depended on voluntary funds from private contributors and, in addition, faced competition from other radio stations in the Netherlands.[32] Initially, the great enthusiasm for Philips' pioneering work attracted generous contributions from Dutch companies with colonial interests, known as the 'colonial lobby'. The main ideological incentive for this group was the idea that the Dutch East Indies were a vital asset for the Dutch economy: the 'cork' which kept the Netherlands afloat.[33] They hoped that the radio connection would strengthen the bonds between the Netherlands and its main colony. In this way, they argued, it would become easier for Dutch expatriates to relocate to the more isolated parts of the Indonesian archipelago and generate more profits for companies in the metropolis. The idea was that, after an initial investment, PHOHI would be able itself to raise enough money for its operations. In the years that followed, however, it appeared that this was not the case. The main problem was that it was not permitted to raise licensing fees, while the government granted monopolies to domestic broadcasters in the Netherlands and to the medium-wave station NIROM in the Dutch East Indies. Moreover, PHOHI was not allowed to air advertisements, and the station's attempts to collect donations from its listeners in the Dutch East Indies did not yield much return. As a result, the station depended on private funding from colonial entrepreneurs throughout the 1930s, which was barely enough to keep it on the air.[34]

In addition to its financial woes, PHOHI also faced a political struggle as a result of the fragmented media landscape in the Netherlands. In 1927, the commissioners, who in addition to Anton Philips consisted of the most influential colonial entrepreneurs, demanded from the Dutch government a concession that would grant them a monopoly on all broadcasts to the East Indies. The Dutch listeners in the colony, they

[31] Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 41–43.

[32] This paragraph and the following one draw from the first sections of Kuitenbrouwer, 'Radio as Tool of Empire'.

[33] Arjen Taselaar, *De koloniale lobby. Ondernemers en de Indische politiek 1914–1940* (Leiden: CNWS, 1998).

[34] Witte, *De Indische radio-omroep*, 55–57.

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claimed, wanted relaxing programmes rather than 'party propaganda' from their home country. The draft asserted that the pillarised corporations should thus not be granted airtime, a view that was supported by the Ministry of Colonial Affairs and the colonial government in Batavia. Simultaneously, however, a domestic radio law was passed which ensured proportionate airtime to all ideological and religious pillars. On the basis of this law, the corporations, supported by their allies in the Cabinet and Parliament, demanded access to the colonial airwaves and effectively blocked the PHOHI's concession. It took over five years, and much backroom negotiation, to resolve this political stalemate. Eventually, the PHOHI commissioners gave in and permitted the Catholic corporation KRO and the Liberal Protestant corporation VPRO to broadcast to the East Indies, in exchange for a degree of censorship that ensured that they would only transmit 'neutral' programmes.

Due to these institutional problems, it was now the turn of Dutch pundits to look enviously across the North Sea. From the start of their radio ventures, Philips had advocated a national radio organisation similar to the BBC.[35] In government circles, however, there was resistance to the BBC model. In 1934, Pieter Gerbrandy, a member of the influential advising body the Radio Council, published a pamphlet in which he argued that the current pillarised radio system reflected the 'vitality of the Dutch people' (*volkskracht*) and enjoyed a good reputation internationally.[36] The next year, Gerbrandy set up a special committee to devise a plan for a pillarised world service with programming specifically intended for the colonies and for foreign audiences. That proposal, however, also met with political opposition, and nothing was done prior to the German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940.[37] At first glance, it might seem a miracle that the Philips managed to broadcast at all in the 1930s, considering the institutional problems it faced. But a closer look reveals that the fragmentary media landscape in the Netherlands also

[35] Blanken, *Geschiedenis van Philips Electronics*, 273.

[36] Piet Gerbrandy, *Het vraagstuk van de radio-omroep* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1934), 17.

[37] The Second World War was a watershed in the history of Dutch international radio broadcasting. First of all, the Germans put an end to PHOHI. In London, where de Dutch government in exile stayed, the station Radio Oranje started broadcasting in the Summer of 1940, using BBC hardware. This station was the direct predecessor of Radio Nederland Wereldomroep (RNW) that was founded in 1947, which was modelled on the BBC World Service.

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provided opportunities for experimentation with broadcasting formats, which had an effect on the content and style of Dutch colonial radio.

2 Broadcasting 'PCJ': Peace, Cheer, Joy

In the first two decades of its existence, the BBC, with its centralised and hierarchical structure, had strict principles governing its broadcasts, which largely came from John Reith, the first director. Reith was a strong believer in the British imperial mission, and he thought that radio could be used as an instrument to strengthen the unity and enhance the 'civilising mission' of the Empire. Programme managers who shared a similar outlook and who worked in close cooperation with imperial lobby groups such as the Empire Marketing Board and the Empire Day Movement developed a view of broadcasting that was aimed at edifying the listeners.[38] They primarily targeted British expatriates, which meant that the programmes emphasised themes that would be of interest to them and avoided topics geared towards non-western audiences.[39] MacKenzie has argued that in its early years, the Empire Service succeeded with 'flagship programmes' that marked imperial events, such as Empire Day.[40] Day-to-day broadcasts, meanwhile, mainly contained news and items steeped in 'Kipling-esque sentiments' to cement ties between British colonials overseas and the metropolis.[41] Despite, or perhaps due to, their strong sense of imperial mission, BBC broadcasters struggled with finding the right tone for their programmes, which they did not want to be too 'lowbrow'.[42] As a result, the BBC Empire Service was regularly criticised as being too 'highbrow' throughout the 1930s.

[38] MacKenzie, 'Propaganda and the BBC Empire Service', 38; Thomas Hajkowski, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain, 1922–53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 25.

[39] MacKenzie, 'Propaganda and the BBC Empire Service', 39; Emma Robertson, '"I Get a Real Kick Out of Big Ben": BBC Visions of Britishness on the Empire and General Overseas Service, 1932–1948', *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television* 28 (2008), 459–73; and Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 46.

[40] John M. MacKenzie, 'In Touch with the Infinite: The BBC and Empire, 1923–1953', in John M. MacKenzie, ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 167. Historians have only paid attention to the spoken word of BBC broadcasts, and no analysis of the musical program exists.

[41] MacKenzie, 'Propaganda and the BBC Empire Service', 48–50.

[42] Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 25.

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There is no evidence to suggest that the broadcasters at Philips had strict ideas about the edifying content of their radio shows, as they mainly wanted to provide entertainment. There were constraints on their broadcasts, particularly those meant for the Dutch East Indies via the PHOHI, but they were of an entirely different nature than those faced by the BBC. Following the compromise over the PHOHI's concession, the Radio Council installed an Indies Programme Committee (*Indië Programma Commissie*) whose members, who were representatives of all the pillars that could be found in the Indies, read all programme scripts two weeks before they aired. The committee had the authority to order amendments or even ban texts altogether, though this happened in less than one per cent of the cases. Their main focus was on political and religious content that could be interpreted as propaganda, and as a result, the IPC carefully scrutinised programming on these topics.[43] Such serious content, however, made up only a small part of PHOHI programming, which was mainly aimed at the entertainment of colonial expatriates. One scholar estimates that 60 per cent of airtime consisted of popular music.[44] Although some members of the IPC, mainly those representing religious pillars, regularly grumbled about the 'vulgarity' (*laag-bij-de-grondsheid*) of the programming and the 'kitsch pornography' (*edel-pornografie*) that could be found in some of the song lyrics, the protection of public morality was not their priority.[45]

It seems that the experimental Philips transmissions on PCJ received even less scrutiny, as there is no evidence of any censorship of that station. This was due to the fact that its programming was not primarily aimed at the Dutch East Indies but rather at a global audience, and thus, the authorities were less concerned about its potential impact on the colonies. Moreover, the broadcasts were limited, with only one regular programme: a weekly two-hour show focusing on light entertainment that was called the *Happy Station*, which began in November 1928. No recordings of the live shows from the interwar years are known to survive, but the programme, which continued until 1995 with only

[43] Martin Beijering, 'Overheidscensuur op een koloniale radiozender: De Philips Omroep Holland Indië en de Indië Programma Commissie', in Karel Dibbets, Sonja de Leeuw, Huub Wijfjes, Bert Hogenkamp, Rene Witte, Michel Hommel, and Bernadette Kester, eds., *Jaarboek voor mediageschiedenis: Nederlands-Indië* 4 (1992), 49.

[44] Witte, *De Indische radio-omroep*, 47.

[45] Beijering, 'Overheidscensuur', 51.

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a few interruptions, maintains an iconic status in the annals of shortwave broadcasting, which makes it possible to reconstruct some key elements.[46] Before turning to the responses from the British Empire to this show, I will describe several features of the programme in order to give a sense of its content.

Amongst shortwave enthusiasts, *Happy Station* is still considered to be a groundbreaking programme in the global history of broadcasting. It centred on the personality of the announcer, Eddy Startz, who has been described as a pioneering 'disc jockey' or 'master of ceremonies', chatting between the records he played and entertaining his audience with witty puns and one-liners.[47] Spending a substantial part of every show reading out letters from his listeners and playing songs they requested, he cultivated a close relationship with his audience. In an interview with a Dutch newspaper in 1933, Startz boasted how every week he received many enthusiastic letters from 'all over the world'.[48] One listener's description of the *Happy Station* broadcast on 14 July 1936 noted how Startz announced 'one million reports for PCJ', after which the Philips orchestra played Louis Armstrong's 'Thanks a Million'.[49] Startz also reached out to his audience by embarking on several goodwill tours in the 1930s, which brought him to the Dutch East Indies, India, Burma, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, and North America.[50]

The format of *Happy Station*, which was focused on interaction with listeners, originated from the early days of Dutch global broadcasting.

[46] After an intermission during the Second World War (when he retreated from public life), Startz continued with this programme for RNW up until his forced retirement 1969. From then on, *Happy Station* was presented by Tom Meijer up until 1993. RNW management terminated the programme in 1995. In 2009, Keith Perron, a Canadian living in Taipei, revived the show, which can be heard as a podcast via the website of his company PCJ Media. http://www.pcjmedia.com [accessed 11 March 2016].

[47] Jerome S. Berg, *On the Short Waves, 1923–1945: Broadcast Listening in the Pioneer Days of Radio* (London: McFarland, 1999), 72–73. For the term 'disc jockey', see: Robert D. Haslach, *Netherlands World Broadcasting* (self-published, 1983) 22; and http://www.beeldengeluidwiki.nl/index.php/Edward_Startz [accessed 14 March 2016]. The term 'master of ceremonies' was already mentioned in a letter from 1927. PCA, file 814.23. J.E. Davidson, Nairobi to Philips Laboratory, 30 July 1927.

[48] 'The Happy Station', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 22 October 1933.

[49] PCA, file 814.23. P. Prioko, Poland to PCJ, 14 July 1936.

[50] Startz described these trips in the lucidly written booklets *Even naar Indië* (1935) and *Hoe je't ziet* (1941).

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In some ways, the broadcasters of PCJ were handicapped because Dutch was not a major international language, which made it difficult to communicate a clear image of the Netherlands to foreign audiences. But the *Happy Station* turned this weakness into a strength. Before joining Philips in 1928, Startz had been an adventurer who after studying journalism and advertising at Columbia University in New York travelled through the Americas, taking a series of temporary jobs ranging from salesman to assistant steward on a passenger ship.[51] During these travels, he picked up words from many different languages, which became a signature of his polyglot style as an announcer, in which he regularly used English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Chinese phrases. Listeners from all around the world wrote to compliment Startz on his linguistic abilities, especially his pronunciation of foreign words.[52] A letter writer from Bangkok wrote out several phrases in Thai phonetically so that Startz could address his 'large audience in this country'.[53] In this way, Startz broadcast an image of the Netherlands as a country that was open to foreign contacts, and he regularly invited his listeners to 'keep in touch with the Dutch'.[54]

As the title *Happy Station* suggested, Startz's announcing style was upbeat. One letter writer appreciated his 'courteous and genteel manner', because it was 'conducive to a better understanding of each other, which always [leads] toward greater tolerance'.[55] As the years passed, and the world edged closer to war, Startz further cultivated this image of his show, and he rebranded the acronym PCJ as 'Peace Cheer Joy'. This more outspoken style seems to have added to his popularity amongst his listeners, who wrote him ever more admiring letters in the late 1930s. In one of these letters from 1936, the writer suggested nominating Startz for a Nobel Peace Prize: 'the amount of Peace and Happiness you do infuse into your millions or Billions of listeners would fill the 7 seas to overflowing'.[56] Such effusive compliments suggest that 'Uncle Eddie',

[51] A. W. J. de Jonge, 'Startz, Eduard Franz Conradin (1899–1976)', in Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland, http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn2/startz [accessed 11 March 2016].

[52] See, for example, PCA, file 814.23. A.R. Rangschari, Madras to PCJ, not dated.

[53] PCA, file 814.23. Phra Nararay [?], Siam to Eduard Startz, 5 January 1938.

[54] http://www.beeldengeluidwiki.nl/index.php/Edward_Startz [accessed 6 May 2016].

[55] PCA, file 814.23. J. Bernstein, USA to Eduard Startz, 26 December 1929.

[56] PCA, file 814.23. C.M. Smith, India to Eduard Startz, 10 February 1936.

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as many letter writers addressed him, became a celebrity to shortwave listeners around the world in the interwar years. This is further demonstrated by the frequent requests for autographed photos of the announcer received by PCJ.

In addition to Startz's on-air personality, listeners also appreciated the *Happy Station* for its music programme, which featured popular tunes. The same writer who wished to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize asked for 'grand old timers' such as 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles', 'Home on the Range', and 'Good Ship Lollipop': 'Rest assured you'll have enthusiastic listeners ever ready to hear them again & again & again & again'.[57] Listeners also requested new hits, such as songs from the Disney film *Snow White* (1937).[58] In addition to playing requests, Startz participated in experimental transmissions with a varied schedule, for which he selected 'musical treats' (*muzikale gebakjes*) from all over the world. Initially, these 'pioneering broadcasts' (*pionier-uitzendingen*) by PCJ were meant to test the reach of the transmission station and to determine the musical preferences of audiences in different parts of the globe. Over the years, however, they became a regular feature of the *Happy Station*, with Startz acting as a guide to introduce his listeners to different music cultures, including examples from Portugal, New Zealand, Argentina, and Bali.[59]

Although PCJ enjoyed a truly global audience, its broadcasters specifically targeted listeners in particular parts of the British Empire. From 1927 onwards, the station received letters from amateur shortwave enthusiasts, many of them from Australia, India, and South Africa. The listeners, mostly white colonials, marvelled at the novelty of directly receiving broadcasts from such a long distance away, which connected them with Europe. One Australian writer thanked PCJ for 'transplanting part of Europe this way occasionally'.[60] A writer from Port Elizabeth in South Africa was 'very keen' to hear 'a sound of our dear old "Big Ben" in London … over the Ether'.[61] Although it was the BBC that eventually

[57] I PCA, file 814.23. C.M. Smith, India to Eduard Startz, 10 February 1936. It is possible that the letter writer meant 'Home on the Range' instead of 'Down on the Range'.

[58] PCA, file 814.23. B. Murphy, L. Bridgnell and R. Kelly, India to E. Startz, not dated [1938]; and H.L. Low, New Zealand, 16 August 1938.

[59] Startz, *Hoe je 't ziet*, 49–50.

[60] PCA, file 814.23. A.O. Schoumer [?], Australia to PCJJ, 22 September 1927.

[61] PCA, file 814.23. J.W. Bushnell, South Africa to PCJJ, 23 [no date] 1927.

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satisfied this listener's desire, the PCJ broadcasts included elements in their programming to please their British audiences.[62] Startz regularly used an English accent to invite his listeners to enjoy a 'proverbial cup of tea' while hitting a porcelain cup with a metal spoon.[63]

Startz's listeners were clearly aware of the competition with the BBC Empire Service. In 1931, one listener approvingly noted how Startz 'after a small interval of "Highbrow music" said "Now Ladies and Gentlemen we are going to be Happy P.C.J. again"'.[64] This jibe suggested that BBC radio producers broadcast elitist rather than popular music. During the 1930s, dissatisfaction with the BBC amongst British listeners abroad grew, as people wrote to Broadcasting House to complain about 'flabby and uninspired' shows. This increased the popularity of other stations, as 'Germany, Italy and Holland were rapidly outstripping the BBC in the quality both of their transmissions and their programmes'.[65] PCJ also received letters that conveyed this sentiment, such as one written by a listener from Tobago who wrote that 'as an Englishman I naturally tune in mostly to Daventry [the location of the main transmitter of the Empire Service], but [wish] that the BBC would realise that we are not all retired savants & intense students of the more obscure works of famous composers!'[66] A listener from a desert station in Western Iraq wrote to thank PCJ 'for the brightness you bring into our otherwise very dull existence'.[67] Such quotations indicate that in the mid-1930s, the *Happy Station*, with its popular format and focus on light music, provided a form of more accessible entertainment to audiences in the British Empire than did the BBC at the time.

PCJ did not just want to fill this niche; its main aim was to use its popularity to spread a positive image of the Netherlands amongst listeners abroad. To achieve this, the makers of the *Happy Station* included

[62] MacKenzie, 'Propaganda and the BBC', 42; Robertson, 'I Get a Real Kick Out of Big Ben', 463.

[63] Berg, *On the Short Wave*, 73. Footage of this jingle featured in a RNW promotion-film from 1955, when Startz hosted the *Happy Station* for that station, http://verhalen.beeldengeluid.nl/happystation [accessed 8 February 2018].

[64] PCA, file 814.23. H.J. Whittle, India to PCJ, 2 August 1931.

[65] Briggs, *History of Broadcasting* II, 397.

[66] PCA, file 814.23. T.E.T. [?] Thomas, Tobago to PCJ director, 15 June 1938.

[67] Quotation from anonymous letter, 11 February 1935. In: *Over de wereld klinkt Neerlands stem PHOHI P.C.J. 60 landen spreken hun oordeel uit over de Nederlandsche kortegolfomroep* ([Eindhoven], [1935]), 17. Original emphasis.

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'typically' Dutch elements in their shows. In 1938, for example, the programmers promised to send a wooden clog filled with sweets to listeners who wrote to the station.[68] Another way of connecting people to the Netherlands was by reporting about the weather and the passing of the seasons. A recurrent topic every year was the appearance of the tulips in spring, which invoked colourful pictures of the Dutch landscape. In 1938, a schoolgirl from Tasmania mentioned how she wanted to travel abroad after her graduation, although she had never left the island. The idea of visiting the Dutch tulip fields particularly appealed to her: 'I think Holland would be one of the first places I would go'.[69] In this way, as PCJ's broadcasters asserted in the introduction to a volume containing excerpts from listeners' letters, their broadcasts contributed to the general interests of the Netherlands because they enhanced 'the reputation of our country'.[70]

3 Conclusion

The history of global radio broadcasting in the interwar years offers an interesting perspective on the dynamics between the Dutch and British empires in this period. At the time, radio was considered to be a prime indicator of prestige by pundits in both countries. Indeed, the development of long-range wireless radio technology was rooted in the communication crisis faced by the Dutch Empire during the First World War, when the British were able to disrupt telegraph correspondence between the Dutch East Indies and Europe because they controlled the submarine cable. In response, the Dutch restructured their communications network to be less reliant on a foreign power. In 1926, the Philips company entered the radio market, which resulted in successful experiments with global shortwave radio broadcasting in 1927. It was now Britain's turn to depend on Dutch technology, and public opinion compelled the BBC's management to launch its Empire Service using shortwave technology, although it initially preferred a network of medium-wave relay stations. Once the Empire Service was on the air, however, the BBC model, with its monopolies on licence fees and broadcasting rights,

[68] PCA, file 814.23. E. Duprey, Trinidad to E. Startz, 2 July 1938; [unreadable] Woodcock, India to E. Startz, 8 May 1938.

[69] PCA, file 814.23. D. Johnston, Australia to PCJ, 15 March 1938.

[70] 'Goodwill […] voor den naam van ons land'. *Over de wereld klinkt Neerlands stem PHOHI PCJ* ([Eindhoven], [1936]), 3.

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was a source of envy for Dutch broadcasters, who had to operate in a fragmented and competitive environment. These technological, financial, and institutional aspects of global radio broadcasting show the politics of comparison at work in a direct way, as it shaped the ways that different countries organised their overseas transmissions.

Analysing the content of the Dutch radio programmes is a more challenging task, as their specific content is difficult to reconstruct. I have reconstructed some features of the *Happy Station*, which due to its popular announcer Eddy Startz is famed in the annals of shortwave history. Startz employed a variety of strategies to increase international goodwill for the Netherlands, with the goal of maintaining its geopolitical status during the late colonial period. On the one hand, he addressed different audiences in their own languages, provided them with music from their own cultures, and entertained them with references to their particular habits, such as the 'proverbial cup of tea' of the English. On the other, he actively promoted the Netherlands by mentioning 'typical' examples of Dutch culture. Although these elements fit the image of the Netherlands as a geopolitically neutral country, their dissemination, in fact, was not neutral, as it was meant to influence foreign audiences. To further explore the use of this kind of propaganda via radio, more research is needed, for example into the use of music as a tool of Dutch imperialism and public diplomacy.

In the context of international historiography, this chapter raises important points for the history of early global radio broadcasting and interactions between empires. As MacKenzie has pointed out, in the early days of the Empire Service BBC broadcasters were very much aware that listeners in various parts of the Empire tuned into foreign stations, including PCJ, and this propelled them to change aspects of their programming. This chapter has shown that the PCJ's programmers were also aware of this dynamic via criticism of the Empire Service that they encountered in letters from listeners in British-controlled territories. The fact that people actively engaged with foreign radio broadcasts surely means that we, as historians, should make more of an effort to breach the barriers imposed by the historiographies of radio, which are mainly nation-based. This article is merely an exploratory effort, and much remains to be done. In many respects, the British and Dutch, with their settled colonial interests and large overlap in their ideologies, engaged in a friendly form of rivalry in the interwar years, which was acknowledged

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by contemporaries.[71] They were more concerned about the radio broadcasts emanating from fascist and communist countries that were aimed at undermining the geopolitical status quo. To properly understand global interactions in the ether during the interwar years, more work is needed on the looming confrontation between the empires of totalitarian and non-totalitarian countries.

[71] See, for example, *Wireless World*, Vol. XX, No 23 (8 June 1927), 2.

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