Tuning in to football on the BBC World Service

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Tuning in to Football on the BBC World Service

James Wylie, Kath Woodward and David Goldblatt

Introduction

This article explores the archive as an object and a place which is part of the life of football and a space in which we can understand some of the meanings and experiences of the sport through the persistence of mechanisms of broadcasting. The BBC archive at Caversham is home to hundreds and hundreds of files on sport which detail the broadcaster’s bureaucratic procedures and administrative processes. Scattered amongst these documents are examples of the theory and practice of BBC policy-making, while the language and attitudes of the archives voices illuminate the social-cultural and political imperatives behind the BBC’s coverage of sport, and how this changed over time. Although the archive only begins to tell the story of the BBC’s complex historical relationship with sport, it does offer a small window on this world and an illuminating aside on a number of debates in football history. The BBC World Service as a public service broadcaster, which has global reach and international reputation has also been central to the framing of national identities, with a particular focus on Britishness, which has sometimes been translated as Englishness. Sport plays a key role in this. There have been and still are, however, assumptions that the BBC is a privileged public service broadcaster which is advantaged by the licence fee and, in the case of the World Service which is supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, that the broadcaster is the voice of the establishment, retaining echoes of its institution as the Empire Service in 1932.

Firstly, the records remind us of the enormous significance of radio as a medium for spreading and shaping the culture of football. Radio is not only empirically still a
major broadcast medium, it also has a special place in sport, especially in football, for being able to deliver the immediacy and exhilaration of the sport as it happens for those on the move and in different parts of the world; radio offers more than the results (Woodward, 2009). While most contemporary debates rightly prioritise television and the internet as agents of economic and cultural change, the role of radio has been somewhat lost. The desire for real time sports reporting was evident, in the USA and Great Britain around the turn of the twentieth century, as evidenced from the use of telegraphs and tickertapes, as well as public chalkboards and scoreboards, updated manually or mechanically. With radio, the sounds of the game and the crowd, the uninterrupted flow of events and real time information made sports broadcasts utterly compelling. Long before the advent of television, vast imagined communities of sport, radio was extending the reach and shaping their identity of clubs, sports and nations. The BBC’s early choice of sporting broadcasts, such as the FA Cup, The Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race, Wimbledon and The Derby all helped create a sporting calendar that reflected a distinctly upper class timetable (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). The diasporic audiences of the earlier period of the World Service were initially British ex pats, although the configurations of diaspora and of World Service audiences have been radically transformed In Argentina the arrival of national radio networks airing football commentaries in the 1930s, coincided with the dominance of Boca Juniors and River Plate in Buenos Aires; at a stroke acquired a generation of provincial fans were created, the teams ceasing to be clubs of the capital alone, but national institutions. In Brazil radio, before the arrival of television, provided the laboratory in which the football and Portuguese Brazilian could be mixed to create the rich and distinctive vocabulary, routines and rhythms of football commentary that is almost as influential as the play on the field.
Secondly, while the archive is predominantly composed of documents generated inside the domestic BBC and its sports and outside broadcast departments, there is also a considerable haul of BBC World Service documentation and records which touch on two interesting issues. The reticence of the English football establishment to agree to live broadcasts, in either TV or radio is well known turning on the fear of club directors that live broadcasts would diminish their main, indeed only source of income – tickets and refreshments. The testiness of the relationship between league, clubs and the BBC is reinforced in the Caversham archive. However, less well known and amply confirmed there, was the enthusiasm of the Football League and the FA to put live football out on the BCC World Service. Given that the World Service’s listeners could not be dissuaded from attending games, due to their location on another continent, the usual objections did not apply. Either side of the Second World War the World Service had easily the largest global audience and reach of any of the various government funded radio global radio networks and was alone in broadcasting football. In this light, the contemporary cultural resonance and commercial reach of the largest English clubs is not merely a function of the current economic and broadcasting power of the Premiership but is built on a deeply layered global popular acquaintance with English football mediated by BBC World Service radio for over seventy years now.

An earlier study of the Caversham material compared a variety of sports, with special emphasis on cricket as the Imperial game par excellence, and found that each one played a role in projecting an image of Britain as a great nation with a global presence, an intrinsic part of the matrix of national identity. This article focuses on
football and the BBC. The aim has been to map a history of the BBC’s radio coverage of the game for both domestic and international audiences, and the corporation’s two-headed relationship to the sport’s governing bodies, between 1935 and 1975. Broadly the period lies between the beginning of radio broadcasting and the arrival of widespread television ownership that diminished radio’s centrality. As much as possible, we have tried to allow the documents to speak for themselves: to give a flavour of the character, nature and tone of the language used at the time and to provide a unique insight into the mindset of BBC decision-makers and their negotiations.

**Relations between the BBC, The Football league and the FA domestic coverage**

An internal memo written in late 1959 about ‘Sports Coverage and Output in Sound Broadcasting’ presented an overview of football coverage on the BBC and its ongoing relationship with the sport’s governing bodies. Unlike the cosy deals that existed between the BBC and the administrative organisations of other sports, such as cricket, tennis etc, the Football League and the FA were reluctant to give the broadcaster the access it wanted when it came to domestic coverage.

This issue of live broadcasting was at the heart of the conflict between the governing bodies and the BBC. Unlike other sports that welcomed extensive radio coverage the FA, the Football League and the clubs themselves, were excessively worried that radio would severely undermine attendance at matches, cutting the gate receipts that were their chief source of revenue. This attitude persisted throughout the period covered by the archive at Caversham. Commenting on the pre-war set up, the memo states that “there were very strong pressure groups within the league against
broadcasting league matches’, vi while the FA was hardly any more generous, ‘on an average six to eight games per season’. vii

Despite this resistance from the authorities the BBC was determined to secure more airtime for football on the Home network. As war approached the broadcaster saw the opportunity to appeal to their patriotic sense of duty, as made explicit in a letter to the Football League dated 26th September 1939, ‘we hope that under present conditions the existing ban on Saturday afternoon football broadcasts may be lifted. We feel that we should be doing a great service to listeners at the present time we were to provide them with a regular Saturday afternoon sports period, in which Football league games were the main source of material’. viii However, this appeal fell on deaf ears.

Nevertheless, the war did engender a new spirit of cooperation and openness between the two. By 1941 league matches had been suspended altogether. The broadcaster’s main focus, working in tandem with the War Office, was on either inter-service matches, eg Army v Navy, or Inter-Allied matches, such as the tournament organised in the spring of 1941 that featured games between Belgian, Czech, Dutch and Norwegian teams over a period of eight weeks. The propaganda value of this event was underlined in a letter to the BBC, ‘I think that the interest in these matches is very considerable among Dutch circles in England, and even more so in the Dutch East Indies’. ix When games were organised between British and Dominion troops there was a similar degree of interest, as with the match arranged against the Canadian forces in 1942, ‘the War Office is very keen for us to take a broadcast, and I believe we will get good value...I’d like to cover the second half of the match’.
Neither the FA nor the Football League interfered with these fixtures or BBC access to them. A letter from the FA, dated September 22nd 1944, indicates how far they were prepared to bend their pre-war guidelines to accommodate the war effort, “members of the War Emergency Committee...decided to allow the BBC to give a ‘flash’ of the first half as well as the second half for the benefit of the Forces overseas”.

As the war ended the BBC were optimistic they could still trade on the camaraderie it had fostered, as revealed in a letter to the Football League from the Director of Outside Broadcasts, ‘We are still in the transition between war and peace and I hope you will feel that it is as important as ever to provide occasional commentaries on league matches for men who haven’t a hope of getting to them in person’.

However, the BBC’s hopes were swiftly dashed. Negotiations for the 1946/7 season followed a familiar pattern. Though the broadcaster was granted the right to transmit coverage of one match per week, it was ‘still only allowed to broadcast the second half of any league match, and was not allowed to disclose the venue of the broadcast beforehand’.

Their disappointment is evident from a letter written to the FA at the time, “We know that there are some clubs who are still doubtful about the affect of such broadcasts on gates generally, and therefore in this first “back to normal” season we have limited our Saturday League match broadcasts to the last half hour-even though the Football league did not stipulate this...I very much hope that your Council may still be prepared to reconsider their decision”. They weren’t.

Over the next decade, though the fees charged by the FA and Football League rose steadily year-by-year, from £2,000 for the 1951-2 season to £4,000 by 1958, and
despite repeated requests by the BBC for ‘extended coverage’, the restrictions remained in place. The frustration felt at the BBC about the limits placed upon it and the intransigence of the governing bodies is evident from the tone of the 1959 memo cited earlier, ‘it is useless at this stage to attempt any general expansion of coverage as far as the League is concerned. They are unreceptive to suggestions for widening the scope of live sound broadcasting’. xv

The negotiating process barely changed over the next decade, fees continued to rise but the BBC remained tied to its agreement to broadcast only the second half of matches with scant pre-publicity. Not that the BBC stopped trying to get greater access, wrangling over the minute details and fine print of their contracts, as a memo from 1968 indicates, “permission may still be granted for “Radio Times” billings for matches, providing the names of teams are not included, and for broadcasts agreed at a later stage e.g. FA Cup replays, we may still trail after 7.00am on the day...but again, no names of teams. These details must not be released until time of kick-off”. xvi

An incident recorded in the archive illustrates how territorial the governing bodies were and how quick to act if the BBC stepped the slightest bit out of line. Disputes over a match between Blackburn Rovers and West Bromwich Albion, played on Saturday April 13th 1963, demonstrate the latent hostility of the Football league to the whole BBC project. The first shot across the bows was a letter from the Football League to Max Muller, Head of Outside Broadcasts, ‘I have received a complaint from Blackburn Rovers which they consider to be a very serious one, and I must admit that it is something that will need more than just a mere apology’. xvii The offence? ‘After the Eamonn Andrews Sports Review it was announced that the BBC

would be broadcasting the second half of the above match, naming the teams, which is a direct breach of contract’. The Football League wanted the BBC to pay compensation and a fine. Not for the first time. An internal memo from Max Muller to the BBC’s solicitor refers to ‘a similar occurrence in 1957. I attach the appropriate file with the two letters concerned flagged. As you will see, an ex-gratia payment of £100 was made’. Under pressure the BBC raised its price to £200 and issued a grovelling apology, however this was not enough for the Football League, in a letter dated 28th May, the committee was of the opinion that ‘the ex-gratia payment of £200 would not be sufficient compensation for the inconvenience and loss caused to the two clubs concerned’, and then issued a threat that this ‘genuine mistake’ could have a wider impact on their relationship, ‘this unfortunate occurrence could have unfortunate results when the arrangements for broadcasting next season are being discussed’. The BBC was forced to meet their demands.

This incident shows the paternal attitude of the governing bodies to the clubs themselves, adopting an ultra-defensive stance to any encroachments by the broadcaster. At the same time the clubs were equally wary of the BBC. Was this purely a financial concern or can we detect evidence of a more profound culture clash? One document emerged from the files. A letter dated 5th August 1966 to Max Muller from the Football League complained about the BBC’s attitude, ‘You will remember that Manchester City F.C. refused to have a sound broadcast last season, and a number of other clubs complained to me when BBC representatives behaved in a rather offhanded manner with Club officials. If we can stifle some of this before we start, it is better for your people, and it makes my job much easier’.
BBC Football Coverage and the global audience

The endless conflicts between the BBC and the game’s governing authorities over the extent and nature of domestic coverage were all to the benefit of overseas listeners.

As the potential global radio audience gathered round its sets it posed no threat to the ticket receipts of English clubs as the vast majority of these listeners would never set foot inside a UK ground. As a consequence, from the beginning and right through the period, the Empire, then World Service, alongside the General Overseas Services, were granted privileged access to, and extended coverage of, the domestic game. A BBC letter to the Football league, dated 3rd August 1937, sets the tone for a very different relationship with the governing bodies, ‘we shall be glad if you will express to the Management Committee the appreciation of the Corporation for their agreement to the broadcasting of League matches in Empire programmes, on Saturday afternoons’. These games were transmitted live, while the Home Service was only allowed to re-broadcast the material after 6pm.\textsuperscript{xxi}

The response to these broadcasts are shown in a survey of ‘Empire Correspondence during the last three months of 1937’, \textsuperscript{xxii} including extracts from letters received from all across the Empire, tapping into the Imperial Diaspora of the British overseas. From Rangoon came these comments, ‘being a keen football fan, the splendid commentaries on the various soccer games during the past few years have been a great source of joy and pleasure to an exile’. Similar sentiments were expressed by an ex-pat in Singapore, ‘on a dreary wet evening out here it is certainly cheering to listen to some sporting match or other being played at home and to hear the applause of the crowd’, and from Bengal, ‘it was pleasant to be once again at Hillsborough for the Sheffield Wednesday v Sheffield United match’. There was even word from an
American novice in Tennessee, ‘aside from not understanding a few of the technical points of the game, I enjoyed it thoroughly’. \(^{xxiii}\) Empire Service listeners were also granted pre-publicity of matches on the basis that ‘details of such broadcasts would not be published in this country’. \(^{xxiv}\)

This practice continued after the war, though conducted with a great degree of secrecy as a confidential BBC memo from 1954 illustrates, ‘this is to confirm the arrangements...for “trailing” details of Saturday afternoon soccer broadcasts to G.O.S. listeners...details of the match and the name of the commentator in a sealed envelope, with a note attached stating clearly that the contents are confidential and not to be released for G.O.S. before noon on the day of the broadcast, further that the information must not be released in this country before the time of broadcast. This note and sealed envelope will be enclosed within another sealed envelope and dispatched on the Friday afternoon before the match’. \(^{xxv}\) These privileges applied not just to league games but also domestic and European cup matches and international fixtures. For instance, overseas listeners got the first half as well as the second half of the FA cup plus as an added bonus, ‘at half-time the World Service audience will remain at Wembley to be entertained by band’. \(^{xxvi}\) As late as 1975 the World Service received 15 minutes more live coverage of the League Cup final than the domestic audience.

A memo by Bert Kingdon, Head of Outside Broadcasts, concerning the broadcasting agreement for the 1968/69 season, underlines the priority given to World Service listeners visa-vi the prestigious world club championship match between Manchester United and Estudiantes de la Plata at Old Trafford, ‘permissions were obtained for the
World Service to carry live commentary during the second half...Radio 1&2 will be recording the commentary for later placing.

The 1960s saw British clubs competing in Europe. Once again the external audience was better served than the one at home. The Cup Winner’s Cup fixture between Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester United, 1963, is a case in point. While Bert Kingdon had to argue the toss with the Football League over whether they could broadcast the second half of the game on the North of England Home Service there was no dispute over transmitting to the rest of the world, ‘your last letter makes it plain that the Overseas part is ok’.

Concessions were also made over the final that year. Although the Light Programme was allowed to broadcast the 90mins live, it could still lose out, ‘in the event of extra time being played the General Overseas Service will continue to carry commentary’.

The World Service also broadcast extra coverage of the Inter Milan V Liverpool match, 1966, ‘a broadcast has been arranged on this event originated by World Service between 2120-2220 GMT...Light Programme have arranged to join our broadcast at 2135 GMT’. In the spring of 1968, Manchester United flew to Poland to face Gornik Zabzre in the quarterfinals of the European Cup. On the night before the match World Service listeners were treated to ‘Brian Moore live from Radio Katowice studio to World Service programme “Outlook”. Four minute preview’. Domestic listeners had to wait until the next morning to hear a re-broadcast of this material. When it came to the game itself, the World Service got the whole second half live. As soon as the match was finished Alan Clarke, sharing commentary duties with Brian Moore, hooked up with studios in London and recorded a ‘2 minute off the
cuff report of game (for Radio 2 use at 2015) and an off-beat 2 minutes for “Late Night Extra” e.g. interview with Manchester United supporter”. xxii Mere tit-bits compared to the overseas coverage of the game.

Unfortunately, for the post-war period, there is very little documentation in the archive that details how the World Service audience felt about the privileged football coverage it received, no reports about the size or composition of the audience, or the balance within it between ex-pat and indigenous listeners, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the scale of demand for football broadcasts and where that demand originated. However, there are a variety of sources that throw some light on these questions.

A memo from A. Kingdon, head of the G.O.S., to Rex Alston, head of Outside broadcasts, is the earliest indication that the BBC’s football coverage was explicitly targeting the global audience, ‘confirming my telephone conversation it will be greatly appreciated if you would make a standing cue of commentators on Saturday afternoon’s sport to identify the match report and score as soon as possible after 1515 GMT for the benefit of our African and Middle East audiences’. xxxiii Given these areas still fell under the orbit of Empire it’s hard to say how many of these listeners were local as oppose to ex-pat, however documents from the 1960’s, when the international situation was very different and the Empire had almost entirely been dismantled, give a clearer picture of the appetite for coverage of the English game in this part of the world.
Ironically, considering their attitude to domestic radio coverage, the FA and Football League were extremely open to any opportunity to increase the global audience for British football. In the spring of 1964, the BBC facilitated a meeting between Mr Tunde, from the Africa service, and the FA, ‘Mr Tunde has recently returned from a visit to Nigeria and has a letter of introduction from the Secretary of the Northern Nigerian Commission’. A press release by the Football League from 1968 is a startling example of how keen they were to expand the reach of English football and how they worked with the BBC to achieve this, boasting about the live transmission of a league game between Chelsea and Leeds. It also shows the level of North African interest in the league and where it originated, including countries that had not been within the Empire’s reach. The global game is nothing new it seems.

There will be a few thousand soccer fans sitting by their radio sets in the Middle East on Saturday afternoon...the broadcast, transmitted by the BBC’s International Service will be the first of its kind to this part of the world. Countries linked up to the commentary include Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Ports of Kuwait and Bahrain. The interest in English soccer in the Middle East has increased tremendously since the World Cup in 1966 especially in Egypt, where Football league fixtures are used on their football pools. In the past, special matches such as the FA Cup Finals and international games have been broadcast in the Middle East, but until now no League game has been transmitted live. The following year, the Football League agreed with the BBC and its Arabic Service on regular broadcasts to the region, ‘it is now practice for the Arabs to cover one
Football League match each month. The Football League has no objections to this arrangement.\textsuperscript{xxxvi}

In the immediate post-war period and through the 1950’s there was a demand for football coverage from the Latin American audience. A memo from October 1948 requests a ticket for an observer from the Latin American Service to attend 12 league games.\textsuperscript{xxxvii} The following year the same request was made and granted.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} Although this limited the Latin American Service to post-match summaries it was the first step towards live transmissions. 1950 saw the arrival of Racing Club from Argentina and increased access, ‘the above is one of the crack Argentine club sides who are a having a short tour in this country, playing last season’s cup holders...and the League champions...the particular importance of these fixtures is that the Argentines are favourites for winning the World Cup...in view of the interest, I recommend that we broadcast the second half of one of these matches or preferably the last half hour of both’.\textsuperscript{xxxix}

When it came to it the Latin American Service got full live coverage of both games while the domestic audience only got the second half. That year the BBC’s Latin American Service intended ‘to follow the fortunes of Tottenham Hotspur during the coming season, recording commentaries of all or the majority of their matches’.\textsuperscript{xl} By the 1951/2 season, the Latin American Service was asking ‘for the usual facilities for commentaries on the second halves of the following matches’,\textsuperscript{xli} which entailed a full programme of London based league games and the FA Cup.
The FA Cup seemed to hold a particular fascination for the global audience, suggesting that its claim to be the club cup competition was not just idle boasting. Every year from 1960-71 the various different language sections within the G.O.S, asides from the World Service presence, made applications for tickets and commentary positions. There was a consistent level of interest from European countries, including Russia, and the rest of the world, including the Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, Arabic, Indonesian, Malay and Swahili sections at the BBC. Even the amateur cup final of 1964 got requests merely to observe it from Russian, Portuguese, Greek, Arabic, Indonesian and Malay sections. The same event in 1967 hosted two World Service observers and representatives of the Hausa, Chinese, Finnish and Yugoslav sections.

A letter from Bert Kingdon to the secretary of the Football league regarding the 1968 League Cup final reveals the extent of demand across the board for access to the English game and how few restrictions on this access there were.

In addition to the live commentary of the match in Hebrew and commentaries recorded for later transmissions by the Somali and Finnish services, you will be interested to know that reporters are being sent from Hungarian, Turkish, Czechoslovakian, Bulgarian, Arabic, Burmese, Hausa, Indonesian, Malay, and English (Overseas) services, and it can be anticipated that match reports will be broadcast by all or most of these after the event. This may seem surprising to you, but it is not so when you know that we buy up to a dozen tickets every week for these Services to attend
and report on normal league fixtures in London. It is all part of their job of reporting on the “British” scene.
Conclusions

The struggle between the BBC and English football’s governing bodies over domestic coverage of the game is clearly illuminated in the archive. The details suggest a number of things. Firstly, that they continued to tussle with each other as late as the mid-70s and provides a sharp contrast with the current balance of power between broadcasters and leagues where broadcasting is all-powerful. Secondly, the documents demonstrate the BBC's consistent demand for as much coverage and access as possible. Football was seen as integral to the BBC project. The fact that it was the ‘working man’s’ game made no difference to the largely middle and upper class policy makers. Football has immediacy and rhythms which lend themselves to radio transmission expressed in the rise and fall of the commentary, albeit through the intensities of hyperbole. Sound is central to the experience of football. Football’s origins were English, it was hugely popular round the world and therefore merited inclusion and promotion, not only as part of the BBC brand but as a valuable asset in their mission to represent and articulate Britishness.

Thirdly, the attitude of the Football League and the FA, in collusion with the clubs, reveals that they were, perhaps, more class conscious, or class self-conscious, than the BBC. Putting their fear over box office aside, it seems that their worries were about loss of control, that the BBC would appropriate football, make it its own, robbing the game of its distinctive, even tribal, associations and roots, turning it into a game for all. For them it was a struggle for the ownership of football’s identity.

By contrast, the football authorities displayed considerable largesse when it came to international coverage. The desire to promote the sport abroad was motivated in part
by the idea of extending their power, of asserting themselves against rival claims to football’s soul from other quarters of the globe, of ensuring that what happened between British league clubs mattered to people all over the world. They were joined by the BBC who could help create and service demand and were keen to do so, whether as part of their responsibility to ex-pat diasporic listeners or as a way of preserving colonial linkages with audiences that had gained their independence. This is not to say that these decisions were not also motivated by a love of the game and a simple desire to share it with as many people as possible.

Looking at the evidence, it would appear that this alliance successfully laid part of the groundwork for British football’s huge global following today. By the time satellite TV arrived in the 1990s the BBC had been servicing a worldwide audience through its various overseas services for over fifty years, maintaining and extending the British games influence. Equally well that demand was not purely manufactured, it arose from a genuine appetite that increased steadily over the period, further stimulated by the 1966 World Cup victory and the rise of Manchester United as a European force and then the rise of Liverpool – events broadcast globally by the BBC World Service. The dominance of the Premier League today is more understandable when you allow for the long-term efforts by the BBC and the governing bodies to give the game an international presence.
Bibliography


Last accessed, May 11th 2010


1 The debates over broadcasting and English football are well covered in S. Wagg (1984) and D. Russell (1998)

1 On the role of BBC World Service more generally see Baumann and Gillespie (2007), on the globalization of English football support see C. Sandvoss (2003).

1 See Woodward, Goldblatt and Wyllie (2007)

1 File R30/915/6 FOOTBALL 4b 1957-59

1 Ibid

1 Ibid

1 File R30/920/1 FOOTBALL LEAGUE 1a 1936-46

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File R30/4424/1 FOOTBALL EUROPEAN CUP WINNERS CUP 1960-66
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File R30/4432/2 FOOTBALL MATCHES PLAYED ABROAD 1966
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