

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Tuning in: diasporas at the BBC World Service

Journal Item

How to cite:

Woodward, Kath (2011). Tuning in: diasporas at the BBC World Service. *M/C Journal*, 14(2)

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2011 The Author

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/320>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Tuning In: Diasporas at the BBC World Service

This article looks at diaspora through the transformations of an established public service broadcaster, the BBC World Service, by considering some of the findings of the AHRC-funded *Tuning In: Contact Zones at the BBC World Service* <http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/> , which is part of the *Diasporas, Migration and Identities* Programme. *Tuning In* has six themes each of which focuses upon the role of the BBC WS: the *Politics of Translation, Diasporic Nationhood, Religious Transnationalism, Sport Across Diasporas, Migrating Music* and *Drama for Development*.

The World Service, which was, until 2011, funded by the Foreign Office, was set up to cater for the British diaspora and had the specific remit of transmitting ideas about Britishness to its audiences overseas. *Tuning In* demonstrates interrelationships between the global and the local in the diasporic contact zone of the BBC World Service, which has provided a mediated home for the worldwide British diaspora since its inception in 1932. The local and the global have merged, elided, and separated at different times and in different spaces in the changing story of the BBC (Briggs). The BBC WS is both local and global with activities that present Britishness both at home and abroad. The service has, however, come a long way since its early days as the Empire Service. Audiences for the World Service's 31 foreign language services, radio, television, and Internet facilities include substantive non-British / English-speaking constituencies, rendering it a contact zone for the exploration of ideas and political opportunities on a truly transnational scale. This heterogeneous body of exilic, refugee intellectuals, writers, and

artists now operate alongside an on-going expression of Britishness in *all* its diverse reconfiguration. This includes the residual voice of empire and its patriarchal paternalism, the embrace of more recent expressions of neo-liberalism as well as traditional values of impartiality and objectivism and, in the case of the arts, elements of bohemianism and creative innovation.

The World Service might have begun as a communication system for the British ex-pat diaspora, but its role has changed along with the changing relationship between Britain and its colonial past. In the terrain of sport, for example, cricket, the “game of empire,” has shifted from Britain to the Indian sub-continent (Guha) with the rise of “Twenty 20” and the Indian Premier League (IPL); summed up in Ashis Nandy’s claim that “cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English” (Nandy viii). English county cricket dominated the airways of the World Service well into the latter half of the twentieth century, but the audiences of the service have demanded a response to social and cultural change and the service has responded. Sport can thus be seen to have offered a democratic space in which new diasporic relations can be forged as well as one in which colonial and patriarchal value are maintained. The BBC WS today is part of a network through which non-British diasporic peoples can re-connect with their home countries via the service, as well as an online forum for debate across the globe. In many regions of the world it continues to be the single most trusted source of information at times of crisis and disaster because of its traditions of impartiality and objectivity, even though (as noted in the article on Al-Jazeera in this special issue) this view is hotly contested and not shared by everyone.

The principles of objectivity and impartiality are central to the BBC WS, which may seem paradoxical since it is funded by the Commonwealth and Foreign office, and its origins lie in empire and colonial discourse. Archive material researched by our project demonstrates the specifically ideological role of what was first called the Empire Service. The language of empire was deployed in this early programming, and there is an explicit expression of an ideological purpose (Hill). For example, at the Imperial Conference in 1930, the service was supported in terms of its political powers of “strengthening ties” between parts of the empire. This view comes from a speech by John Reith, the BBC’s first Director General, which was broadcast when the Service opened. In this speech, broadcasting is identified as having come to involve, a “connecting and co-ordinating link between the scattered parts of the British Empire” (Reith).

Local British values are transmitted across the globe. Through the service, empire and nation are re-instated through the routine broadcasting of cyclical events, the importance of which Scannell and Cardiff describe as follows:

Nothing so well illustrates the noiseless manner in which the BBC became perhaps *the* central agent of national culture as its cyclical role; the cyclical production year in year out, of an orderly, regular progression of festivities, rituals and celebrations--major and minor, civic and sacred--that mark the unfolding of the broadcast year. (278) [Italics as in the original]

State occasions and big moments, including those directly concerned with governance and affairs of state, and those which focused upon sport and religion, were a big part in these “noiseless” cycles, and become key elements in the making of Britishness across the globe.

The BBC is “noiseless” because the time-table is assumed and taken for granted as not only what *is* but what *should* be. However, the BBC WS has been and has had to be responsive to major shifts in global and local -- and, indeed, glocal -- power geometries that have led to spatial transformations, notably in the reconfiguration of the service in the era of post- colonialism. Some of these massive changes have involved the large-scale movement of people and a concomitant re-thinking of diaspora as a concept. Empire, like nation, operates as an “imagined community,” too big to be grasped by individuals (Anderson), as well as a material actuality. The dynamics of identification are rarely linear and there are inconsistencies and disruptions: even when the voice is officially that of empire, the practice of the world service is much more diverse, nuanced, and dialogical. The BBC WS challenges boundaries through the connectivities of communication and through different ways of belonging and, similarly, through a problematisation of concepts like attachment and detachment; this is most notable in the way in which programming has adapted to new diasporic audiences and in the re-workings of spatiality in the shift from empire to diversity via multi-culturalism. There are tensions between diaspora and multi-culturalism that are apparent in a discussion of broadcasting and communication networks. Diaspora has been distinguished by mobility and hybridity (Clifford, Hall, Bhaba, Gilroy) and

it has been argued that the adjectival use of diasporic offers more opportunity for fluidity and transformation (Clifford). The concept of diaspora, as it has been used to explain the fluidity and mobility of diasporic identifications can challenge more stabilised, “classic” understandings of diaspora (Chivallon). A hybrid version of diaspora might sit uneasily with a strong sense of belonging and with the idea that the broadcast media offer a multi-cultural space in which each voice can be heard and a wide range of cultures are present.

Tuning In engaged with ways of re-thinking the BBC’s relationship to diaspora in the twenty-first century in a number of ways: for example, in the intersection of discursive regimes of representation; in the status of public service broadcasting; *vis-à-vis* the consequences of diverse diasporic audiences; through the role of cultural intermediaries such as journalists and writers; and via global economic and political materialities (Gillespie *et al.*). *Tuning In* thus provided a multi-themed and methodologically diverse exploration of how the BBC WS is itself a series of spaces that are constitutive of the transformation of diasporic identifications.

Exploring the part played by the BBC WS in changing and continuing social flows and networks involves, first, reconfiguring what is understood by transnationalism, diaspora, and post-colonial relationalities: in particular, attending to how these transform as well as sometimes reinstate colonial and patriarchal discourses and practices, thus bringing together different dimensions of the local and the global. *Tuning In* ranges across different fields embracing cultural, social, and political areas of experience as represented in

broadcasting coverage. These fields illustrate the educative role of the BBC and the World Service that is also linked to its particular version of impartiality; just as *The Archers* was set up to provide information and guidance through a narrative of everyday life to rural communities and farmers after the Second World War, so the Afghan version plays an “edutainment” role (Skuse) where entertainment also serves an educational, public service information role. Indeed, the use of soap opera genre such as *The Archers* as a vehicle for humanitarian and health information, has been very successful over the past decade, with the “edutainment” genre becoming a feature of the World Service’s broadcasting in places such as Rwanda, Somalia, Nigeria, India, Nepal, Burma, Afghanistan, and Cambodia. In a genre that has been promoted by the World Service Trust, the charitable arm of the BBC WS uses drama formats to build transnational production relationships with media professionals and to strengthen creative capacities to undertake behaviour change through communication work. Such programming, which is in the tradition of the BBC WS, draws upon the service’s expertise and exhibits both an ideological commitment to progressive social intervention and a paternalist approach drawing upon colonialist legacies.

Nowadays, however, the BBC WS can be considered a diasporic contact zone providing sites of transnational intra-diasporic contact as well as cross-cultural encounters, spaces for cross-diasporic creativity and representation, and a forum for cross-cultural dialogue and potentially cosmopolitan translations (Pratt, Clifford). These activities are, however, still marked by historically forged asymmetric power relations, notably of colonialism,

imperialism, and globalisation, as well as still being dominated by hegemonic masculinity in many parts of the service, which thus represent sites of contestation, conflict, and transgression. Conversely, diasporic identities are themselves co-shaped by media representations (Sreberny *et al.*). The diasporic contact zone is a relational space in which diasporic identities are made and re-made and contested.

Tuning In employed a diverse range of methods to analyse the part played by the BBC WS in changing and continuing social and cultural flows, networks, and reconfigurations of transnationalisms and diaspora, as well as reinstating colonial, patriarchal practices. The research deconstructed some assumptions and conditions of class-based elitism, colonialism, and patriarchy through a range of strategies. Texts are, of course, central to this work, with the BBC Archives at Caversham (near Reading) representing the starting point for many researchers. The archive is a rich source of material for researchers which carries a vast range of data including fragile memos written on scraps of paper: a very *local* source of *global* communications. Other textual material occupies the less locatable cyber space, for example in the case of *Have Your Say* exchanges on the Web (<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas>).

People also featured in the project, through the media, in cyberspace, and physical encounters, all of which demonstrate the diverse modes of connection that have been established. Researchers worked with the BBC WS in a variety of ways, not only through interviews and ethnographic

approaches, such as participant observation and witness seminars, but also through exchanges between the service, its practitioners, and the researchers (for example through broadcasts where the project provided the content and the ideas and researchers have been part of programmes that have gone out on the BBC WS (Goldblatt- Webb), bringing together people who work for the BBC and *Tuning In* researchers). On this point, it should be remembered that Bush House is, itself, a diasporic space which, from its geographical location in the Strand in London, has brought together diasporic people from around the globe to establish international communication networks, and has thus become the focus and locus of some of our research. What we have understood by the term “diasporic space” in this context includes both the materialities of architecture and cyberspace which is the site of digital diasporas (Anderssen) and, indeed, the virtual exchanges featured on “Have Your Say,” the online feedback site (*Tuning In*).

Living the Glocal

The BBC WS offers a mode of communication and a series of networks that are spatially located both in the UK, through the material presence of Bush House and abroad, through the diasporic communities constituting contemporary audiences. The service may have been set up to provide news and entertainment for the British diaspora abroad, but the transformation of the UK into a multi-ethnic society “at home” alongside its commitment to, and the servicing of, no less than 32 countries abroad, demonstrates a new mission and a new balance of power. Different diasporic communities, such as multi-ethnic Londoners, and local and British Muslims in the north of

England, demonstrate the dynamics and ambivalences of what is meant by “diaspora” today. For example, the BBC and the WS plays-an ambiguous role in the lives of UK Muslim communities with Pakistani connections, where consumers of the international news can feel that the BBC is complicit in the conflation of Muslims with terrorists.

Engaging *Diaspora* *Audiences*
(<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/>) demonstrated the diversity of audience reception in a climate of marginalisation, often bordering on moral panic, and showed how diasporic audiences often use Al-Jazeera or Pakistani and Urdu channels, which are seen to take up more sympathetic political positions. It seems, however, that more egalitarian conversations *are* becoming possible through the channels of the WS. The participation of local people in the BBC WS global project is seen, for example, as in the popular “Witness Seminars” that have both a current focus and one that is projected into the future, as in the case of the “2012 Generation” (that is, the young people who come of age in 2012, the year of the London Olympics). The Witness Seminars demonstrate the recuperation of past political and social events such as “Bangladesh in 1971” (*Tuning In*), “The Cold War seminar” (*Tuning In*) and “Diasporic Nationhood” (the cultural movements reiterated and recovered in the “Literary Lives” project (Gillespie and Zinik)).

Indeed, the WS’s current focus the “2012 Generation”, including an event in which 27 young people (each of whom speaks one of the WS languages), were invited to an open day at Bush House in 2009 vividly illustrates how

things have changed. Whereas in 1948 (the last occasion when the Olympic Games were held in London), the world came to London, it is arguable that, in 2012, in contemporary multi-ethnic Britain, the world is already *here* in (Webb). This enterprise has the advantage of giving voice to the present rather than filtering the present through the legacies of colonialism that remain a problem for the Witness Seminars more generally.

The democratising possibilities of sport, as well as the restrictions of its globalizing elements, are well represented by *Tuning In* (Woodward). Sport has, of course become more globalised especially through the development of Internet and satellite technologies (Giulianotti) but it retains powerful local affiliations and identifications. At all levels and in diverse places there are strong attachments to local and national teams that are constitutive of communities, including diasporic and multi-ethnic communities. Sport is both typical and distinctive of the BBC World Service; something that is part of a wider picture but also an area of experience with a life of its own. Our “Sport Across Diasporas” project has thus explored some of the routes the World Service has travelled in its engagement with sport in order to provide some understanding of the legacy of empire and patriarchy as well as engaging with the multiplicities of change in the re-construction of Britishness. Here it is important to recognise that what began as “BBC Sport” evolved into “World Service Sport”. Coverage of the world’s biggest sporting events was established through the 1930s to the 1960s in the development of the BBC WS. However, it is not only the global dimensions of sporting events that have been assumed, so too are national identifications: there is no question

that the superiority of British/ English sport is naturalised through its dominance of the BBC WS airways, but the possibilities of re-interpretation and re-accommodation have also been made possible. There has, indeed, been— a changing place of sport in the BBC WS, which can only be understood with reference to wider changes in the relationship between broadcasting and sport, and demonstrates the powerful synchronies between social, political, technological, economic, and cultural factors. Notably those that make up the media, sport, commerce are the nexus that drives so much of the trajectory of contemporary sport.

Diasporic audiences shape the schedule as does what is broadcast. There is no single voice of the BBC in sport. The BBC archive demonstrates a variety of narratives through the development and transformation of the World Service's sports broadcasting. There are, however, silences: notably those involving women. Sport is still a patriarchal field. However, the imperial genealogies of sport are inextricably entwined with the social, political, and cultural changes taking place in the wider world. There is no detectable linear narrative but rather a series of tensions and contradictions that are reflected and re-configured in the texts in which deliberations are made. In sport broadcasting, the relationship of the BBC WS with its listeners is, in many instances, genuinely dialogic: for example, through "Have Your Say" websites and internet forums, and some of the actors in these dialogic exchanges are the broadcasters themselves. The history of the BBC and the World Service is one which manifests a degree of autonomy and some spontaneity on the part of journalists and broadcasters. For example, in the case of the BBC WS

African sports programme, *Fast Track* (2009), many of the broadcasters interviewed report being able to cover material not technically within their brief; news journalists are able to engage with sporting events and sports journalists have covered social and political news (Woodward). Sometimes this is a matter of taking the initiative or simply of being in the right place at the right time, although this affords an agency to journalists, which is increasingly unlikely in the twenty-first century.

The Politics of Translation: Words and Music

The World Service has played a key role as a cultural broker in the political arena through what could be construed as “educational broadcasting” via the wider terrain of the arts: for example, literature, drama, poetry, and music. Over the years, Bush House has been a home-from-home for poets: internationalists, translators from classical and modern languages, and bohemians; a constituency that, for all its cosmopolitanism, was predominantly white and male in the early days. For example, in the 1930s and 1940s, Louis MacNeice was commissioning editor and surrounded by a friendship network of salaried poets, such as W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, C. Day Lewis, and Stephen Spender who wrote and performed their work for the WS. The foreign language departments of the BBC WS, meanwhile, hired émigrés and exiles from their countries’ educated elites to do similar work. The bi-annual, book-format journal “Modern Poetry in Translation” (MPT) which was founded in 1965 by Daniel Weissbort and Ted Hughes, included a dedication in Weissbort’s final issue (MPT, 22, 2003) to “Poets at Bush House.” This volume amounts to a celebration of the BBC WS and its creative

culture, which extended beyond the confines of broadcasting spaces. The reminiscences in “Poets at Bush House” suggest an institutional culture of informal connections and a fluidity of local exchanges that is resonant of the fluidity of the flows and networks of diaspora (Cheesman).

Music, too, has distinctive characteristics that mark out this terrain on the broadcast schedule and in the culture of the BBC WS. Music is differentiated from language-centred genres, making it a particularly powerful medium of cross-cultural exchange. Music is portable and yet is marked by a cultural rootedness that may impede translation and interpretation. Music also carries ambiguities as a marker of status across borders, and it combines aesthetic intensity and diffuseness. The *Migrating Music* project (<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/core-research/migrating-music>) demonstrated BBC WS mediation of music and identity flows (Toynbee). In the production and scheduling notes, issues of migration and diaspora are often addressed directly in the programming of music, while the movement of peoples is a leitmotif in all programmes in which music is played and discussed.

Music genres are mobile, diasporic, and can be constitutive of Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy), which foregrounds the itinerary of West African music to the Caribbean via the Middle Passage, cross-fertilising with European traditions in the Americas to produce blues and other hybrid forms, and the journey of these forms to Europe. The *Migrating Music* project

focused upon the role of the BBC WS as narrator of the Black Atlantic story and of South Asian cross-over musics from *bhangra* to *filmi*, which can be situated among the South Asian diaspora in east and south Africa as well as the Caribbean, where they now interact with reggae, calypso, *Rapso*, and *Popso*. The transversal flows of music and lyrics encompasses the lived experience of the different diasporas that are accommodated in the BBC WS schedules: for example, they keep alive the connection between the Irish “at home” and in the diaspora through programmes featuring traditional music, further demonstrating the interconnections between local and global attachments as well as points of disconnection and contradiction.

Textual analysis, including discourse analysis of presenters’ speech, programme trailers and dialogue and the BBC’s own construction of “world music” – has revealed that the BBC WS itself performs a constitutive role in keeping alive these traditions (<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/core-research/migrating-music>) Music, too, has a range of emotional affects which are manifest the in semiotic analyses that have been conducted of recordings and performances. Further, the creative personnel who are involved in music programming, including musicians, play their own role in this on-going process of musical migration. Once again, the networks of people involved as practitioners become central to the processes and systems through which diasporic audiences are re-produced and engaged.

Conclusion

The BBC WS can claim to be a global and local cultural intermediary not only because the service was set up to engage with the British diaspora in an international context but because the service, today, is demonstrably a voice that is continually negotiating multi-ethnic audiences both in the UK and across the world. At best, the World Service is a dynamic facilitator of conversations within and *across* diasporas: ideas are relocated, translated, and travel in different directions. The “local” of a British broadcasting service established to promote British values across the globe, has been transformed, both through its engagements with an increasingly diverse set of diasporic audiences and through the transformations in how diasporas themselves self-define and operate. On the BBC WS, demographic, social, and cultural changes mean that the global is now to be found in the *local* of the UK and any simplistic separation of local and global is no longer tenable. The educative role once adopted by the BBC, and then the World Service, nevertheless still persists in other contexts (“from Ambridge to Afghanistan”), and clearly the WS still treads a dangerous path between the paternalism and patriarchy of its colonial past and its responsiveness to change.

In spite of competition from television, satellite, and Internet technologies which challenge the BBC’s former hegemony, the BBC World Service continues to be a dynamic space for (re)creating and (re)instating diasporic audiences: audiences, texts, and broadcasters intersect with social, economic, political, and cultural forces. The monologic “voice of empire” has been countered and translated into the language of diversity and while, at

times, the relationship between continuity and change may be seen to exist in awkward tension, it is clear that the corporation is adapting to the needs of its twenty-first century audience.

References

[All websites last accessed November 2010]

Anderson, Benedict *Imagined Communities, Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

Anderssen, Matilda Digital Diasporas, 2010.
<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/cross-research/digital-diasporas>

Bhabha, Homi *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Briggs, Asa. *A History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume II: The Golden Age of Wireless*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.

Cheesman, Tom. Poetries on and Off Air, 2010.
<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/cross-research/bush-house-cultures>

Chivallon, Christine. "Beyond Gilroy's Black Atlantic: The Experience of the African Diaspora." *Diaspora* 11:3 (2002): 359-82

Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Fast Track (BBC website), 2009.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/sport/2009/03/000000_fast_track.shtml

Gillespie, Marie, Webb, Alban and Baumann, Gerd (eds.) The BBC World Service 1932-2007: Broadcasting Britishness Abroad. Special Issue of *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 28 (4): October 2008.

Gillespie, Marie Bauman Gerd and Zinic, Zinovy 2010. Poets at Bush House
(<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/about>

Gilroy, Paul *Black Atlantic*. Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993.

Giulianotti, Richard *Sport: A Critical Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.

Goldblatt, David The Power and the Passion, 2010
(http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2010/06/100603_the_power_and_the_passion.shtml).

Goldblatt, David The Cricket Revolution 2009.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0036ww9>

Guha, Ramachandra *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of an English Game*. London: Picador, 2002.

Hall, Stuart "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Rutherford, Jonathan, ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 223-37,

Hall, Stuart and Du Gay, Paul *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996

Hill, Andrew "The BBC Empire Service: The Voice, The Discourse Of The Master And Ventriloquism." *South Asian Diaspora* 2 (1): 2010, 25-38.

MPT, Hollis, Robert. Norma Rinsler, and Daniel Weissbort, *Modern Poetry in Translation* 22 (2003): Poets at Bush House: the BBC World Service, London.

Nandy, Ashis. *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989.

Pratt, Mary Louise *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Reith, John. "Opening of the Empire Service." 19 December 1932. In "Empire Service Policy 1932-1933," E4/6. (<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/research.htm>) .

Scannell, Paddy and David Cardiff. *A Social History of British Broadcasting, 1922-1938*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

Skuse, Andrew *Drama for Development*, 2010
<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/core-research/drama-for-development>

Sreberny, Annabelle 2010. *The BBC World Service and the Greater Middle East: Comparisons, Contrasts, Conflicts*. Guest Editors: Annabelle Sreberny,

Marie Gillespie, Gerd Baumann Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication
Vol. 3 - No. 2 - 2010

Toynbee, Jason. Migrating Music, 2010.

(<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/core-research/migrating-music>)

Tuning In (2010) <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/index.htm>

Webb, A. Cold War Diplomacy, 2010.

(<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/projects/cold-war-politics-and-bbc-world-service>)

Weissbort, Daniel (ed.). *Poets at Bush House: The BBC World Service. Modern Poetry in Translation*. New Series, No. 22. London: Central Books, 2003.

Woodward, Kath *Embodied Sporting Practices. Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.