

## Wireless Internationalism and Distant Listening: Britain, Propaganda, and the Invention of Global Radio, 1920-1939

In June 1932, the BBC periodical *World Radio* published an article by the English writer Louis Golding about his encounter with wireless listening in a New York speakeasy. Wowed by Louis Armstrong's trumpet playing, non-plussed by a word picture from the top of the Chrysler Building, it was an unexpected sound that had stopped him in his tracks. With the controls transferred briefly to London, he heard the chimes of Big Ben. As Golding wrote 'each stroke of Big Ben struck that chord in my heart ... and opened up to me the wildly romantic possibilities of radio for the homesick traveller' (p. 201).

Golding's experience of 'distant listening' is one of the themes that Simon Potter examines in his excellent new book on transnational wireless; a book that explores the hopes, fears and possibilities of global broadcasting in the interwar years. *Wireless Internationalism and Distant Listening* takes us from the Utopian optimism of the 1920s, that wireless could promote international peace and understanding, to the bleaker reality of the late 1930s, as its potency as a tool for democracy became increasingly one of social control through the projection of national viewpoints and the pursuit of political agendas overseas. With a focus on Britain - predominately the BBC - Potter contends that rather than being a prelude to the post-1939 'serious business' of international broadcasting (p. 231), the twenty years prior to the Second World War was when the basic principles of running an overseas service were forged. He argues that the mid-1930s were particularly crucial to this, potentially more significant than the war years in terms of attitudes and approaches.

As broadcasting became established in the early 1920s (the BBC was set up in 1922) it quickly became apparent that this was not a technology that recognised national boundaries. Wireless, by its very nature, was transnational. The issues that individual countries grappled with - of oscillation, transmitter strength and wavelength allocation - were common to the international stage. So how might the world share this magical new medium? How might a 'chaos of the ether' be avoided? And into this collective space, what sort of programmes might there be? Potter charts the role of organisations such as the IBU (International Broadcasting Union) in bringing national networks together - albeit predominantly European at first - to formulate policy on these issues. It meant, for example, that on 25 July 1931, a production of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* from Salzburg was broadcast simultaneously by more than fifty European radio stations in ten different countries as well as by several stations in the USA (p. 61).

While music might be an obvious international language, the same could not be said of the spoken word and this is where Potter takes a divergent view from published histories. Much of the book is about the BBC's attempts to establish its voice overseas; how should it present itself to the wider world, especially in terms of news? This was not just through the launch of the Empire Service in 1932, which Potter has written widely about before and expands upon here, but also through its first foreign language services, in 1938, for the Arab World and Latin America. Scabbling to keep up with Germany and Italy, whose fascist regimes were already broadcasting 'propaganda' to these parts of the globe, Potter shows how, through a 'gentleman's agreement' between the BBC and the Foreign Office, the BBC was guided to avoid items that painted Britain in a negative light. The BBC did not consciously lie, rather it told a selective truth. Potter asserts that this tacit cooperation between the

BBC and the British government in the late 1930s, was a strategy the BBC was willing to embark upon in the hope that it would not be taken under state control during the war.

As well as providing a new reading of BBC/government relations before the war, Potter also sets out to question assumptions about the BBC's relationship with its overseas audiences; claims that, in connection with the Empire Service, firstly that it was not interested to know what listeners thought and secondly that its programme policy was primarily driven by notions of 'uplift'. In fact, the BBC received tens of thousands of letters from Empire Service listeners in the dominions and colonies which were trawled for details about content and reception. As a result, there was an awareness that the requirements of British expatriates overseas were quite different to those of the home audience; as one listener from the tropics expressed it, 'It is very hot and wet, and so light entertainment and interesting talks are all I can be bothered with' (p. 188).

*Wireless Internationalism* is not just about how the world might view Britain but also about how listening to broadcasts from overseas shaped the way that British audiences viewed the world. As the methods of transmission advanced so did the means of listening, with wireless receivers becoming increasingly sophisticated. As early as 1930, an advertisement for 'Radio Gramophone De-Luxe' boasted that, with the choice of over thirty stations, 'you are immediately master of the world' (p. 57). As well as tuning-in to overseas stations, British audiences could also hear transnational fare via the BBC, like *The Barber of Seville*. This was through a process of carefully organised relays and it was a system that was reciprocal. One of the themes that could have been further expanded upon in the book was the BBC's own Foreign Department which negotiated thousands of hours of listening for audiences in Europe and the USA, and vice versa. Two BBC staffers, Isa Benzie and Janet Quigley, were central to its success (Isa Benzie was Foreign Director from 1933-38) and this is a further omission in the book, women. Potter does name-check Benzie and Quigley and the few pages dedicated to 'Distant Listening, Masculinity and the Modern Girl' (216-20) are welcome but more could have been made of the gendered nature of broadcasting and the role of women in transnational work.

There is a final thread to the book; a plea by Simon Potter for greater recognition of the importance of wireless and broadcast sound to media history as well as to wider histories of the 1920s and 30s. By enhancing our understanding of the interconnections between broadcasting and the more well-established social, cultural and political histories of the interwar years, *Wireless Internationalism* certainly fits within this.

(1068 words)