



Introduction: Researching (Post)Colonial Broadcasting

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Introduction: Researching (Post)Colonial Broadcasting

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Communication technologies have played a central role in the rise and fall of empires throughout history. Harold Innis's (1950) pioneering work offers a broad view on the phenomenon, through a comprehensive analysis that extends from stone and papyrus to the printing press. However, when considering the empires of the 20th century, no other communication technology was more influential than broadcasting, which was used to promote and to fight colonialism and different political ideologies.

The center stage assumed by radio in the interwar period led European imperial nations to be among the first group of countries to invest in overseas broadcasting, aiming to unite the home countries with those living in the far reaches of the empires. The audio medium was then perceived as a powerful tool for creating “a sense of national heritage and history” (Hilmes, 2002, p. 10) within national borders but also overseas in territories under European domain mostly in Africa, Asia and the West Indies, where a community of white expats were believed to be eagerly expecting to be kept in contact with the home countries.

Imperial broadcasting was, from its inception, a problematic operation for many reasons, starting with the stations' lack of knowledge about those who were actually tuning in to the transmissions. This led the stations to depend on the feedback from listeners living overseas and who, in the Dutch, British and Portuguese cases, wrote to the broadcasters from the early days of the transmissions (Kuitenbrouwer, 2016; Potter, 2021; Ribeiro, 2014). While ceremonial events were prioritized for their potential of creating a sentimental bond among expatriates in the colonies, light entertainment, news and informative talks also made up a significant portion of the programming schedules.

One of the characteristics shared by imperial broadcasters until the end of the Second World War was their lack of interest and/or capacity to reach the majority of the colonial population who did not speak European languages. In many territories under European domain, namely in Africa, language fragmentation was the norm, which made it difficult and expensive to reach non-Europeans. The large investments required to broadcast in different

languages contrasted with the low number of radio sets owned by the nonwhite population. There is also another important reason that helps explain the lack of investment in transmissions targeted to the African and Asian populations. As Potter (2012, p. 14) points out when analyzing the case of the BBC, “the white British world was perceived to be the most important part of the empire.” The same mind-set was prevalent in other European empires. Nonwhite inhabitants were simply excluded from the imagined nation and thus were not a priority when it came to allocating broadcasting budgets. Instead, resources were mobilized to reach the Europeans who lived “in the bush” and had to deal with what were far from ideal reception conditions. Noise was an integral part of the experience of listening to shortwave broadcasts and it was described in many letters sent to the stations by those tuning-in overseas (Potter, 2021, pp. 208–2013)

Colonized cultures would only acquire visibility (i.e. audibility) on the airwaves during the Cold War. The BBC significantly increased its investment in transmissions in African languages in 1960s (Ritter, 2021, pp. 122–131) while in the Portuguese Empire, the radio clubs set up in Angola and Mozambique started to air programmes targeted at the black population in the late 1950s. Until that time, the radio clubs set up by the white settlers, had only seldom aired African music which was mostly depicted as an exotic feature offered on the broadcasts (Santos, 2020). The article authored by Morten Michelsen, published in this symposium, adds to this discussion by demonstrating how Danish and British interwar radio also offered European listeners the opportunity to listen to “exotic music” produced overseas.

Even though the grand narrative about the role of broadcasting in the creation of a sense of nation overseas may indicate otherwise, most histories of imperial broadcasting are histories of failure, not only due to the technological challenges and the lack of knowledge about who was listening, but also because state and radio officials were frequently hesitant about which strategies to follow in order to assure the existence of a broadcasting ecosystem capable of creating effective connections with those living overseas. Three articles in this symposium by Thomas Leyris, Nelson Ribeiro and Sílvia Santos address such failures by looking into the development of broadcasting in the French and Portuguese empires. While Leyris’s work demonstrates how it was only in the 1950s that France seriously invested in putting together a strong overseas broadcasting network, Ribeiro discusses a similar situation in the Portuguese case and demonstrates how the Salazar dictatorship relied on private stations set up in the African colonies to counter the messages of the independence movements before and during the wars of liberation that ignited in the early 1960s. By focusing on the case of São Tomé and Príncipe, Santos’s manuscript also provides an illustration of the lack of an articulated overseas broadcasting policy by the Lisbon regime, which only decided to invest in the installation of

regional stations of the Portuguese State broadcaster in Africa in the late 1960s, thus reaching populations that had been, until then, disregarded by the official station. Together these works demonstrate how the two colonial powers assumed the deficiency of their own broadcasting strategies by struggling to establish effective radio models in Africa when their empires were faced with the winds of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. The BBC also took until the late-1950s to add a significant range of African languages to its Overseas Service, in what can be perceived as a kind of desperate action to retain some of its influence in the continent at a time which it was facing increased competition from stations established in the new-born countries in Africa along with hostile propaganda aired by Radio Cairo (Potter, 2012, p. 158).

In the last decades, research on radio and colonialism has looked into different types of broadcasting institutions whose goals determined not only programming but also the relations established with the listeners. Along with histories of imperial broadcasters (e.g., Kuitenbrouwer, 2016; Potter, 2012), several works have emerged focusing on colonial stations, i.e. those set up overseas by the colonial states or the white elites (e.g., Ribeiro, 2017), while others have focused on the entanglements between imperial and colonial stations (e.g., Stanton, 2020). In more recent years, there has also been increased interest for research on the role played by radio in decolonization. Marissa Moorman's book (2019) discusses how broadcasters founded by the two major independence movements in Angola not only served the purpose of creating a community that aggregated those who were fighting for independence, but also describes how the perceived impact of such broadcasts increased the nervousness of the Portuguese authorities about the odds of keeping hold of power. An interesting account of the role played by clandestine stations in several Southern African countries is offered by Sekibakiba Lekgoathi, Tshepo Moloi and Alda Saíde (2020), while Alejandra Bronfman (2016) discusses how radio was both a tool of Empire and an important technology for anticolonial movements in Jamaica.

The audio medium, used by liberation movements to fight colonial states, made a significant contribution to the process of nation building in the postcolonial era, thus demonstrating that radio's ability to foster national and political identities does run deep. The article by Darmanto Darmanto, Masduki Masduki, and Hari Wiryawan published in this special issue offers an enlightening illustration of this, by arguing how radio served as an agent of nationalism in Indonesia during both the colonial and postcolonial eras. Freitas's article also discusses how the broadcasting infrastructure of colonial Mozambique was converted into the main medium for the diffusion of new cultural and political identities in the years that followed the country's independence. The manuscript delves specially into music and how the new independent state created its own sound identity.

The articles that comprise this symposium were faced with the need to reconstruct audio cultures and soundscapes mostly using written sources, which is not an unusual challenge posed to those producing broadcasting histories. Most researchers aiming to reconstruct broadcasting practices ground their work on written documents detailing technological investments, programming strategies, and production routines, along with reception reports or listeners' feedback. The limitations brought about by the absence of sound recordings is a topic that certainly deserves exploration. Even though radio was mostly an ephemeral medium in the 20th century, how words were intoned at the microphone and how these were combined with music and sound effects had a significant influence on audiences' reaction to programming, a fact which is challenging to assess via written documents. Nevertheless, as the articles illustrate, it is possible to understand policies, technologies and production strategies by triangulating different sources, while reception reports and listener feedback help grasp the impact of broadcasting, especially when these include references to people's emotions and reactions to music and sound. In the context of late colonialism and postcolonialism, oral histories can also shed light on blind spots by bringing into the equation people's memories of their own experiences as producers, listeners or policy makers. What also seems crucial when researching imperial and colonial broadcasting is to triangulate the sources produced and kept on record in Europe and in the postcolonial nations, where document selection followed distinctive philosophies and policies. Also important is the need to revisit major historical narratives that have made many radio professionals invisible, and sometimes even listeners, due to gender and racial biases. The article by Yvette Rowe, and Anthony Frampton, published in the symposium, is a good example of how contemporary broadcasting histories can rescue the memory of broadcasters from the Global South, who worked for imperial stations and who have been mostly ignored in historiography. Lastly, talking an entangled media history approach (Cronqvist & Hilgert, 2017) is also a useful exercise that sheds light on the transnational connections between political actors that advocated for the adoption of specific radio models within borders and outside them. The article by Masduki Masduki is an illustration of this. By focusing on the case of the German and Indonesian cooperation on public broadcasting between the 1960s and the early 2000s, it discusses the entanglements between the two radio systems along with the role of radio in post-authoritarian and post-colonial states.

Taken together, the articles in this symposium demonstrate that broadcasting, far from being a mere mediator, was instead an active actor in the process of nation building in both the colonial and postcolonial eras. They also illustrate how the audio medium was perceived as a central tool during

most of the 20th century by states and political movements that aimed to keep intact or disrupt the existing power structures.

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