

What can an understanding of the operation of the BBC Monitoring Service during WWII tell us about the value of the transcripts?

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The majority of the papers given today will consider the potential value of the BBC Monitoring transcripts to an understanding of particular aspects of the Second World War. As my research has focused on the operation of the BBC Monitoring Service, I thought it would be helpful to add some context from this perspective regarding the collection as a whole.

First, I will look at collection priorities: what the BBC Monitoring Service was collecting and why.

Second, I am going to focus on editorial selection, as I should like to make clear what the differences are between the monitoring transcripts and the edited *Daily Digests*, which were circulated to customers. This is important because copies of the *Digests* are held elsewhere and are available on microfilm. One of the main purposes of this network, as well as raising awareness of the BBC Monitoring Service, has been to assess the particular unique value of the transcript collection. So I think we have to be clear exactly what extra information this transcript collection provides. In relation to this, I am also going to talk about a small quantitative assessment I made to assess the uniqueness of the transcript collection.

Finally, as well as the extra volume of material that the transcript collection contains, it also provides some additional types of information that the *Digests* do not. I will therefore conclude by mentioning some aspects of this additional value of the transcript collection.

For my paper I have looked at the material concerning the period 1939-1945, but I note that this is a small subsection of the BBC Monitoring Collection which spans 1939-1982.

Collection priorities

Considering which broadcasts BBC Monitoring listened to and how these were reported can provide an indication of what the collection of transcripts contains.

The transmissions listened to by BBC Monitoring were extensive, both in terms of the languages monitored and in the number of broadcasting countries covered. At the outbreak of war in September 1939, monitors had been recruited to monitor six core language broadcasts: English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and Polish. With this core team they covered transmissions in these languages from Germany, as well as a number of broadcasts from Italy, France, Belgium, Spain, the USSR and the USA. Over the following year, the Monitoring Service expanded rapidly. With the help of some very talented multilingual monitors, the Service was reporting on broadcasts in over 20 languages and from approximately 30 countries by the end of 1940. By then it would be fair to say that the BBC Monitoring Service had attained global coverage.

This does not mean total coverage, however, as explained in a memo by Richard Marriott, the head of interception at Monitoring, in October 1939:

I must point out here that there is all the difference in the world between keeping a general eye on what is being said by other countries, and doing a complete 24-hour coverage. The only country we do this with now is Germany, and it means that nearly half the monitors are employed on it, and more than half the total

output of requests is devoted to it.¹

It remained the case for the rest of the war, that broadcasting from Germany and German-occupied territory occupied about half of BBC Monitoring's resources and that other countries' broadcasting was consequently monitored more selectively. For instance, coverage of radio from the USSR was less than might be imagined, largely due to its sheer scale, but also because of technical difficulties in reception. By 1942 only three Soviet transmissions were being monitored in full with others being monitored for important items only. Monitoring also gave up on extensive coverage of the USA because of the sheer scale of the task. In 1941 it was estimated that it would take an additional staff of 40 people to cover American broadcasting adequately, an expense that was ruled unjustified.²

As far as other transmissions were concerned, the Monitoring Service's correspondence with its customers makes it clear that there was an emphasis on reporting transmissions that broadcast new information or used a different style of presentation.

It was the Monitoring Service's customers (those who received the broadcast reports they produced) who really directed Monitoring's coverage. Monitoring had key customers both from the BBC itself, from various government departments, the Service departments and even from the governments of other countries including America's monitoring service, FBIS.

What monitors reported was thus directed, where possible, by customer's expressed needs. For instance, on behalf of the Admiralty, they recorded information about shipping movements, mine warnings, reported shipping losses, and also enemy propaganda relating to naval warfare. For the Air Ministry, they recorded air raid warnings from neutral countries, reports of Allied air raids over enemy territory, reports of allied losses and also broadcast lists of casualties. MI5 wanted enemy broadcasts intended for listeners in Britain to be recorded, especially those likely to impair allied morale, and the Ministry of Information was interested in monitored material from the view of counterpropaganda in neutral, allied and home countries. So there were both specific requests for particular types of information and quite broad requests, which needed to be interpreted by the Monitoring Service according to what was being broadcast on a daily basis.³

Different transmissions were thus reported in a different style according to their value to BBC Monitoring's key customers. Speeches by major leaders and military communiqués were often monitored verbatim, sometimes even in their language of origin (generally German) as well as in translation. German broadcasts in German and in English were also often reported verbatim or fairly extensively. Sometimes what was reported extensively is slightly surprising. For instance, there was extensive coverage of agricultural reports from Germany, which had been specifically requested by the Ministry of Economic Warfare.

Other types of items, particularly talks and features, were summarised or partly summarised. Some items were reported even more briefly, by slug or headline, which consisted of accounting briefly for the different items in a bulletin without going into detail of what was said.

Entertainment programmes were generally not reported as part of normal monitoring, although a separate Y unit did listen to these items and produce special papers, for

¹ Memo Marriott, to Clark, 1 Oct. 1939, BBC Written Archives Centre (BBC:WAC) E2/408/2.

² Memo Burns (DMS) to DG, 16 Dec. 1942; Memo Marriott to AC(O) & DES, 8 Oct. 1941, BBC:WAC E2/408/2.

³ Note BBC Monitoring Service, 6 Dec. 1939, BBC:WAC R34/476.

instance on the German use of music.⁴ Such entertainment items were also sometimes picked up on by customers as potentially useful and were monitored on a temporary basis. For instance, the BBC Eastern Services organiser requested the recording of certain Hindustani broadcasts in 1943 after they were briefly mentioned in the *Digest*.⁵ Local news items were also often not reported, although this depended on the country and time of the war, for instance MI9 (the escape service) particularly requested to know about internal regulations.⁶ As D-Day approached, internal conditions in the areas behind the proposed landing beaches became of great relevance again.

So overall, the transcript collection does *not* include everything broadcast during the war. There were constraints due to staffing, equipment and the reception of certain transmissions, but what was collected was managed by experts in radio with an eye to customer requirements and to the evolving international situation. The transcript collection is also all in English, which makes studies looking across different sets of language transmissions much easier.

Editorial Selection

Having looked at what is likely to be in the collection of transcripts produced by monitors during the war, it is important to indicate what might be in the transcript collection that is not reproduced in the collection of printed *Daily Digests* available elsewhere. It was the editorial process employed by BBC Monitoring during the war which determined the differences between the two collections.

Ernst Gombrich, the art historian, who worked at the BBC Monitoring Service during the Second World War, commented thus on the wartime editorial process:

Many of the monitors were academics, while most of the editors were seasoned journalists, and their points of view of what was important differed considerably. In the morning, when the monitors checked what had been reported in the *Digest* of their work, they felt often frustrated because points they considered interesting had been neglected in the summaries.⁷

So due to space constraints in the *Digest*, not least those imposed by wartime paper shortages, editors would leave out both whole transcript reports prepared by monitors and also parts of transcripts. When, for instance, the broadcast of a major long speech required a lot of space in the *Digest*, this tendency was exaggerated, and yet more material was left out.

It is quite difficult to make generalisations about what was left out during the editorial process. Sometimes the reason material was left out was obvious, such as this list of seemingly light-hearted end of bulletin news stories reported in the transcript of a Soviet broadcast from September 1939 and left out of the *Digest*:

...description of giant horse weighing one ton, of largest artificial leg in the world, and of hybrid tomato and potato plant at agricultural exhibition.⁸

The whole transcript of this bulletin was about three pages and was summarised to five very short bullet points, which was quite a typical reduction at this stage of the war.

⁴ 'Standard of Music in BBC Transmissions in Germany' (n.d.); 'The Place of Music in German Broadcasting', 15 Sep. 1941, BBC:WAC E2/414.

⁵ Memo C. Lawson-Reece (Eastern Services) to ADMS, 3 July 1943, BBC:WAC E2/408/1.

⁶ Note BBC Monitoring Service, 6 Dec. 1939, BBC:WAC R34/476.

⁷ Ernst Gombrich, "'Swansongs' from 1945", *Umění*, XLVI (1998).

⁸ Moscow (Soviet Union): News in English: 06.00 13 Sep. 1939, BBC MST K1.

Military points in the transcript were reduced to headlines while agricultural items were left out altogether.

Near the end of the war, the details of agricultural, economic and industrial subjects were again not reported as extensively in the *Digest*. Many items selected for immediate teleprint transmission to Monitoring's customers (so called Flash items) were also not included in the *Digest*. These were often military items that had immediate value, but did not have a relevance to many of the Monitoring Service's customers 24 hours later when the *Digest* was published.

Given that assessing the *types* of content only available in the transcript collection is difficult to summarise, I also made an exploratory quantitative study to estimate the amount of material unique to the transcript collection. In order to conduct this assessment, I chose a 24-hour period and compared all the transcripts produced during that time with the edited *Daily Digest* in which they should have been reported. The day chosen was 19 August 1942, the day of the Dieppe Raid.

The results (summarised below) were quite surprising. BBC written documents from the wartime period generally state that there was between 10 and 20 times as much material in the transcripts as there was in the *Digests*.⁹ In my findings though, which I must stress covered just one day and may be untypical, I found that the transcript material contained about twice as much as was in the *Digest*. So the figure of 47.13% (below) represents the material unique to the transcript collection. This figure does not include any identified repeated material which was taken out of the calculation.

Percentage of transcript material not included in the <i>Digests</i>	47.13%
Transmissions from Germany and German-occupied territory	41.83%
Transmissions other than those from Germany and German-occupied territory	53.15%
Percentage of monitor's transcripts not included in the <i>Daily Digests</i>	18.27%
Transmissions from Germany and German-occupied territory	3.45%
Transmissions other than those from Germany and German-occupied territory	29.09%

Broadcasting from Germany and German-occupied territory was reported more fully in the *Digest* than non-German controlled broadcasting. Approximately 53% of the reporting of non-German broadcasts was thus completely unique to the collection of transcripts, whereas only about 42% of reports of German broadcasts were unique to the transcript collection. The larger part of this additional material in the transcript archive consisted of additional reporting of broadcast transmissions included in some form in the *Digests*. A much lower percentage of only about 18% of whole monitor's reports were left out of the *Digest* and were thus completely unique to the transcript collection. It is notable, however, that there was a wide divergence between the inclusion of reports of German transmissions in the *Digest*, where only 3.5% whole reports were unique to the transcript collection, and reports of non-German broadcasts, where about 30% of whole reports were unique to the transcripts.

So to conclude, my sample indicated that the amount of unique material in the transcript collection was more modest than expected – a factor of two rather than of ten or twenty.

⁹ Report BBC Monitoring Service, Feb. 1940, BBC:WAC E8/209/1; A. White, 'BBC at War' n.d. (c.1943), p.27, IWM Duxford.

This may be because I chose an untypical day, or it may be that not all transcript reports were archived. A ratio of almost twice the quantity of unique material is, however, still very significant and of value. The results also indicate that if people are interested in non-German broadcasting during the war, the transcripts are likely to be of even more value over and above the *Digests*, as they contain a higher proportion of unique material.

Additional value of the transcript collection

As well as additional reporting, the transcript collection also offers a number of other potential advantages over the collection of *Digests*.

First, the transcript reports from this period are heavily annotated. It is possible to see where the wording of reports has been changed by editors, often to make them read better in English. So the transcripts are in a sense a step back nearer to the bulletin as broadcast. Notes by monitors about the tone or truth of a broadcast are also sometimes present on transcripts and these are not always included in the *Digests*. There is also occasionally an indication of the eventual intended destination of a report: for instance, an early report mentioned when an item was going to Woburn Abbey/Department EH. Additionally, the transcript collection alone records which material was selected for immediate Flash transmission to government customers. This record could be useful to understanding when government departments or the BBC first received certain information.

Another advantage of the transcript collection over the *Digest* is that the name of the monitor who wrote the report is included at the top of each transcript. There is scope here, particularly using a linguistic or translation approach, to see how different language teams and individuals within language teams approached their work. For instance, research could explore how much comment they gave or whether different styles of reporting or translating were in evidence.

As a final point, it is worth mentioning the Indexes. An index record section existed during the war to help the BBC Monitoring Service answer enquiries from their customers and the Monitoring Service collection still contains some of this Index. It started on a small scale in 1940, then expanded and continued to be added to right up to the end of the Second World War. Each broadcast item in monitors' transcripts from German and Italian-controlled broadcasts was headlined and indexed. Items could also be cross-referenced in different index subdivisions. Records show that the central index was composed of 146 main subject and country headings, and over 3,000 subdivisions.

The ultimate aim of this AHRC network would be for the BBC Monitoring Service collection to be fully digitised and made available to all. The BBC is currently in the process of cataloguing the collection, so in due course it will be possible to access it via the BBC's Written Archives.