

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the BBC Radio Galaxy

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Lecturer: Ania Mauruschat, mail@aniamauruschat.de

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Introduction

The subject of the course "*Special Sound – The BBC, the Radiophonic Workshop and its Legacy*" was the history of the BBC as a core institution of British culture in the 20th century. Within our general engagement with the BBC we focused on its radio programme and especially the *BBC Radiophonic Workshop*, its output, development and meaning: Set up in 1958 to create new sounds for progressive radio and television shows like "*The Hitchhiker´s Guide to the Galaxy*", the *BBC Radiophonic Workshop* coined famous sound marks of the collective cultural memory of Britain, like the "*Doctor Who*" theme.

Besides the acquaintance with the *BBC Radiophonic Workshop* as an important acoustic laboratory of the 20th century it was also the aim of the course to introduce students to its context, to the BBC as a complex institution and as the most famous and important radio broadcaster of the world: Set up in 1922, the BBC was the first public broadcaster established under a Royal Charter and funded by licence fees, for which its first Director-General Sir John Reith (1889 – 1971) declared as its mission "to inform, educate and entertain".

Still quite lively today the BBC currently goes through a lot of changes, especially due to the digital revolution. By courtesy and generosity of the *Department of English* it was possible to invite Deborah Wilson David, who worked for 25 years for the BBC and is now Acting Head of the *School of English and Journalism* at the *University of Lincoln*, as an expert and guest lecturer to the seminar. To prepare for her talk on "*The Enduring Relevance of the BBC in the Digital Age?*" the students researched collaborative on the current six main radio stations of the BBC and listened regularly to their own exclusive selection from over 850 radio programmes. The result of this cooperation is this "*Hitchhiker´s Guide to the BBC Radio Galaxy*". So if you ever wondered what to listen to while correcting seminar papers, doing footnotes and bibliographies or if you are just interested in the BBC radio programmes – *don´t panic!* May this "*Hitchhiker´s Guide*" help you to find what you are longing for.

A co-production of

Iris Baumann, Tina Bieri, Eric Franklin, Jennifer Green, Emily Harries, Fabienne Haupt, Patrick Im Obersteg, Silva Lanfranchi, Ania Mauruschat, Neve Müller, Sophia Reichel, Stepahnie Riva, Susanna Sargsyan, Kath Saxer, Johanna Schüpbach, Lea Schüpbach, Mara Schwab, Lea Stein, Manuel Sturdy & Marco Ziegler



By Tina Bieri, Susanna Sargsyan & Mara Schwab

HISTORY

The historical importance of the *BBC World Service* is undeniable. As Adam Gabbatt wrote, "... the service has covered many historic moments, from Churchill's speeches to the first man on the moon. A *BBC* reporter was one of the first to see a Nazi concentration camp ..."¹. Originally the *BBC World Service* was established in 1932 as the *Empire Service* which, according to Andrew Crisell, was "the first of an interlocking range of external services ..." (Crisell, 21). It was mainly aimed at English speakers in the outposts of the British Empire.

It was the first Christmas broadcast on the *Empire Service* by King George V in 1932 that became especially famous. The idea of a Christmas speech came from John Reith in order to "inaugurate the *Empire Service*"². Even though King George was uncertain about the unproved medium of radio, on the Christmas Day, he addressed 20 million listeners of the Commonwealth with the words: "I speak now from my home and from my heart to you all; to men and women so cut off by the snows, the desert, or the sea, that only voices out of the air can reach them."³

World War II entailed a change of name for the *Empire Service* in November 1939, it was renamed the *Overseas Service*. It was then that the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain used the BBC to tell people that Britain was at war with Germany. Hence, the BBC was part of the war effort. The *BBC World Service* received its new name on 1 May 1965 to "reflect a new emphasis on world affairs"⁴.

As the name suggests, the *BBC World Service* is of a special importance not only in the UK, but also abroad. In relation to this, in the article "*BBC World Service as a Public-Sector Broadcaster*", John Tusa states, "Whatever the exact title, its formal function has constantly shifted too, from the original purpose of communicating with the far-flung Empire, to being a fighter against Fascism, to a broadcaster with a key role in keeping hope alive during the Cold War, to a broadcaster

¹ Gabbatt, Adam. *BBC World Service: The voice of history*. The Guardian, 26th of January 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/jan/26/bbc-world-service-history>

²The official website of The British Monarchy: A history of Christmas Broadcasts <http://www.royal.gov.uk/imagesandbroadcasts/thequeenschristmasbroadcasts/ahistoryofchristmasbroadcasts.aspx>

³ see above

⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070122_html_60s.shtml

responding to the new political configurations produced by decolonisation and the Third World, to a broadcaster with today's mission to give a global perspective on international events to a global audience" (Tusa, 230).

The role of the *BBC World Service* today is still important. In a survey period from June 2014 until September 2014, a total amount of 1,310,000 listeners tuned in to *BBC World Service* in a week.⁵

CURRENT APPEARANCE & OUTSTANDING SHOWS

As the government of the UK states, "The *BBC World Service (BBCWS)* is the world's leading international radio broadcaster, providing impartial news reports and analysis in English and 27 other languages"⁶. The programmes range from education to news and entertainment. According to the official homepage of the *BBCWS*, the radio station "aims to inspire and illuminate the lives of its audience by bringing the world together, making connections and helping listeners to make sense of the world"⁷. The target audience is international and rather educated.

On *BBCWS* music is played rarely, and it is mostly speech that provides the main discourse. Sometimes short musical extracts are inserted, and they are always somehow related to the programme. The jingles are mostly in the background while the presenter informs about the next programme. The presenters are always very well informed on the subject they present. They do not have to be of British origin. The duration of some of the programmes is an hour. The hourly programme "BBC News" is an important part of the *BBC World Service*.

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldserviceradio/help#about>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/bbc-world-service>

⁷ see 5

PERSONAL RECOMMENDATIONS⁸

■ My favourite programme is the "The History Hour" on the BBC World Service. The host Max Pearson and his reporters vividly recount historical events, mostly by interviewing eye witnesses. One learns a lot from this programme, and the stories of the witnesses make you feel that you are experiencing the event yourself. The programme is very accessible and well-informed.

Mara Schwab

Sat, 2:05 GMT & Sun, 9:05 GMT: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p016tmg1>

■ The programme I listen to is called "BBC Trending". It features trends (clips, hash tags, discussions) on social media, such as Twitter and Facebook and covers information from all over the world. It tries to explain why these trends became so popular and provides the audience with information on the social, cultural, political, and economic context of the trends and their influence on society. In order to do this, the presenter sometimes interviews the initiator of the trend, people affected by it, and/or a journalist working for BBC in the respective country.

Tina Bieri

Sat, 11:32 GMT & Sun, 4:32 & 23:32 GMT: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01kdgrn>

■ The programme that I am especially interested in is the "World Book Club". The most famous writers from all over the world are invited to discuss their recent and most famous novels in the scope of this programme. The host of the programme is Harriett Gilbert. Questions from listeners are addressed throughout the program which creates bidirectionality of the material presentation and analysis. The programme is available since 2002. It started at the Edinburgh Festival. In December 2004, for instance, Paulo Coelho ("The Alchemist") was the guest of the show, while in May 2014, Maya Angelou ("I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings") was invited to be the guest of the programme.

Susanna Sargsyan

Sun, 20:05 GMT & Wed, 9:05 GMT: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003jhsk>

⁸ All following show times are GMT which, of course, has to be taken into consideration when listening to BBC Radio in Switzerland and the rest of the world.