

## CHAPTER 6

# In It Together: Wartime Radio

“Columbus discovered America in 1492: America discovers Great Britain in 1942.” So William Holt, a former Yorkshire weaver, said in a recent broadcast to the U.S.A. The American army is over here; and our broadcast programmes are over there.

—T. O. Beachcroft, *Calling All Nations*, 1943

Of course, the war began in Britain more than two years before America became involved. The earlier part of this chapter attempted to keep this in mind, dealing with British events mostly before 1939, and with US developments before the end of 1941, when America entered the war. However, some elements of the transatlantic story do not separate out quite this way; they are intimately involved with the fact that, during the intermediary period, some things were possible—and indeed necessary—based on the imbalance between Britain at war and America balanced on the edge of neutrality. We have already traced the tale of WRUL, and noted the influence of debates over national identity and ideology as reflected in the US public service documentary dramas of the late 1930s. Between 1939 and 1942, startling innovations would take place in radio practice. Broadcast news would develop as an important and inseparable part of radio's service on both sides of the Atlantic, bringing the war into homes around the world and shaping the news format that we take for granted today. The first British radio domestic serial would be originated on the North American Service as a propaganda vehicle designed to draw the US into the war, with far greater impact on British broadcasting than on American opinion. Significant careers would be built in the interstices between Britain and America, public

service and commercial broadcasting, political involvement and neutrality, such as those of Edward R. Murrow, Norman Corwin, and Alistair Cooke.

Then, from 1942 until 1946, US and British broadcasting converged. With the advent of the US Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS), and specifically the American Forces Network (AFN) based in England for the duration, Britain had American broadcasters directly in its midst, invading not only its airspace but its cultural domain. In the context of war this was perhaps not as dramatic a disruption as it might have been, but its effects would be lasting as the BBC re-established its autonomy after the war, reorganizing its structure and rethinking its public service mission—and eventually introducing commercial television. Similarly, being located on British soil and operating alongside the BBC affected how Americans thought about radio. Pressures to reform the American system would build up during the war and break out shortly thereafter, leading eventually not only to publication of the “Blue Book” (traced in Chapter 7) but contributing to later developments like the quiz show scandal, the rise of television news and documentary, and the evolution of educational broadcasting into an established national service under a whole new regime of foundation sponsorship.

#### New: News

Ed Murrow of CBS[’s] nightly broadcasts to America will for ever stand out as the classic day-by-day account of Britain at war. Wherever there was action or anticipated action Ed would be knocking at the doors of authority to be allowed to participate – whether it was in a bomber flying over Germany, or watching the cities of Britain burn, or a raid on the coast of France. . . . He remained in England for the duration of the war enjoying the friendship and complete confidence of Churchill, Cabinet ministers and Service chiefs while his nightly broadcasts gripped even larger listening audiences back home.

—Ronald Tree, *When the Moon was High*, 1975 (188–89)

Today, when broadcasting is mentioned, one of its most prominent aspects is the provision of news programs, or entire channels, that keep nations and the world up to date on breaking events and public affairs. But as late as 1936 neither the American networks nor the BBC considered the provision of frequent, regularly scheduled coverage of breaking news to be one of their primary functions. Both had experienced a troubled history of conflict with newspaper publishers and wire services over their right to become news-gathering organizations, and both worked under institutional conditions that militated against the initiation of centralized news coverage. But even



more, both the BBC and the major US networks regarded the provision of nationally networked news as one of the least significant parts of their service—not only was it difficult, in fact news presented a minefield of dangers for national networks, both public and commercial. Potentially disruptive and controversial, news coverage left a network open to charges of bias, sensationalism, and unfair competition for both content and (in the US) advertising. Further, with sound recording and transmitting technology cumbersome, bulky, and studio-bound, the kind of live coverage on location that we now consider obligatory simply was not possible.

In England, the BBC had fought against the severe restrictions imposed by the Post Office from the beginning, under pressure from the wire services, over how much and what kind of news they could provide, and at what times. Hilda Matheson established a News Section within the Talks Department in 1927 but was not allowed to develop it due to pressures from the powerful Newspaper Proprietors Association combined with the Post Office, whose income from wire service revenue was threatened. Though Reith and his producers in the Talks Department continuously pressed for greater freedom, as late as 1936 the reporting of breaking news was still limited to three five-minute broadcasts per day, in the morning and late evening (so as not to scoop the press).

However, as noted in the previous section, such restrictions did not apply to the Empire Service, and by the mid 1930s the BBC felt some pressure to provide news from a British point of view to compete with the shortwave broadcasts from Germany and Italy, among others. This time Reuters and the Post Office went along with it, and the first news bulletins went out on January 4, 1932 from Chelmsford, though not for domestic audiences (Briggs 1965, 383). A news department was set up within the Empire service in September 1934, under J.C.S. MacGregor, with three sub-editors under him. It grew exponentially, in several languages, as war approached.

At home, Charles Siepman as Director of Talks after Matheson controlled a small News Section from 1932 to 1933. Under his aegis an experimental *News-Reel* program was tried out, in which “news and comment were welded into a continuous fifty-minute programme, with switch-overs to Manchester and Paris, gramophone and Blattnerphone [wire recorded] excerpts” covering not only news but sports, interviews, and historical topics—what we might call today a newsmagazine-style program. This groundbreaking experiment was produced by John Watt, from the Variety department, but lasted only from July to December of 1933; it was, as Briggs comments, “too expensive to survive in the conditions of 1933.” It now seems oddly prescient of forms to come, but before its time. In August 1934 John Coatman, a former colonial administrator, was brought in as news director and as a conservative balance to what were perceived as Siepman’s

left-leaning tendencies. According to Briggs, conflict between the two led not only to the establishment of a separate news division but also to Siepmann's banishment to the regions, as Director of Regional Relations (Briggs 1965, 146–47)—something one suspects Reith regretted once the “Charter of Regional Rights” landed on his desk.

Coatman built up the division by hiring experienced newspaper journalists R. T. Clark and Kenneth Adam, both from the *Manchester Guardian*. The BBC began to do some independent reporting, with Reith's full support and attention. As mobile recording units became part of the BBC's practice, on-the-spot news and coverage of important sports and news events crept delicately in, despite formal press restrictions. By 1938, with war impending, the BBC news staff expanded to 31 and again to 39 in 1939, providing 95 minutes of news time on National and Regional networks combined between 6 pm and midnight (Scannell with Cardiff 1991, 121), with two main newscasts now at 6 and 9 pm.

This commitment to news as a national public service is what Edward R. Murrow observed and admired as he pursued his career in England. Appointed CBS Director of Talks in 1935,<sup>1</sup> he was dispatched to London in 1937 to take over the role of Caesar Saerchinger, arranging interviews with celebrities and important officials, providing shortwave relays of significant events, and generally functioning “as a light entertainment impresario” (Persico 1988, 118). From the sidelines, he watched a serious news organization grow inside the BBC, one that contrasted sharply with the situation at CBS back at home, where radio journalism at the time he left consisted of “the facts in five-minute news capsules, the drama of pseudo-news through *The March of Time*, and analysis by a handful of commentators” (Persico 1988, 128). Or, as another Murrow biographer writes, “To a generation familiar with the worldwide operations of CBS News, the Columbia setup of 1935 would seem almost laughable—a handful of people, five or six at the most, including White, Murrow, Jap Gude, formerly of the *New York Telegram*, now doing publicity and news editing, an assistant or two, and Bob Trout as the voice on the air” (Sperber 1986, 86). Even in 1938, “There was no studio for news broadcasting at CBS, only a suite of offices on the seventeenth floor for the Special Events and Talks staff” (Sally Bedell Smith 1990, 170). But in London, Murrow witnessed what news could become. More important, his “on-the-job training” all came at the BBC. Murrow had no journalism background or experience whatsoever before coming to England; whatever he learned about journalism, he learned in England at the BBC. He would continue to draw on his BBC experience for the rest of his professional life. Charles Siepmann would become a particular mentor.

Much has been written about Murrow's groundbreaking albeit seat-of-the-pants coverage of the Nazi invasion of Austria: in Vienna to broadcast a



boy's choir, he found himself on the evening of March 12, 1938, in the midst of the crisis, frantically found a telephone and called in reports to CBS. On Sunday March 13 at 8 pm the first American "news roundup" was pieced together by Murrow and his fellow reporters, consisting of "live reports from Murrow in Vienna, Shirer in London, and newspaper correspondents moonlighting as CBS broadcasters in Paris and Berlin" (Sally Bedell Smith 1990, 171). This multi-point live hookup did not become a regular feature of CBS news until the Munich crisis in September; both the America networks and the BBC recognized at that point that radio news had moved into a new era and began to expand their operations intensively.

Over the course of that fall and the spring of 1939, CBS head William S. Paley "authorized [Ed] Klauber and [Paul] White in New York and Murrow overseas to build a staff capable of covering the widening story" (Sally Bedell Smith, 1990, 172). By 1941, when Murrow briefly returned to New York, "the news floor was almost unrecognizable, transformed wholly from the small setup he remembered into the hub of a global news operation, with correspondents in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East; Moscow and Chungking; the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies" (Sperber 1986, 202). Crisp, factual reports broadcast from their source, frequently featuring the voices of active participants in the events at hand began to replace, or at least to compete with, the measured pronouncements of commentators. News bulletins interrupted regular programs, and found a greater presence on their own in the broadcast schedule. By 1941 news made up nearly 10% of the schedule on both the BBC and the US networks.

The fertile interchange between the BBC news operation and the new breed of American radio reporters was nourished, and controlled, by a special organization set up within the BBC called the American Liaison Unit, under the direction of Roger Eckersley. This unit worked closely with the Ministry of Information's American Division and with the Foreign Office (Cull 1995, 42). Eckersley saw clearly the crucial role that radio would play, surpassing even that of the traditional press, in getting Britain's message to America. In a report reviewing the year 1939, he lamented that government officials "seem unable to get British conditions out of their minds" in terms of the prominence of radio in the US compared to Britain, and went on to say:

We hope, however, that this Department has been on the whole successful in persuading Government departments to begin to realize that the American broadcaster in London, speaking as he does to so many million people with the human appeal of the living voice, carries far more weight than a paragraph written in an American newspaper, or a printed news item emanating from Europe, which

has been edited and altered by the time it reaches the American public to such an extent that the original is often scarcely recognisable . . . the problem of ramming home the British point of view to American audiences is one of extreme difficulty, and in the short time at their disposal the American broadcasters certainly do give a vivid picture of life in England.<sup>2</sup>

This “new breed” of newsman (and most were men, as in “Murrow’s boys;” a few women, however, elbowed their way to the frontlines despite opposition<sup>3</sup>) possessed a greater ability to shape the news than ever before. The radio newsman possessed “a power in his own right . . . [able to] address a nationwide audience directly—no editors, no rewriters, no headlines shoved over his copy—beating the newspapers by hours, reaching millions otherwise dependent for their foreign news on provincial papers, a rising national figure with direct access to the vast American public that was beyond the reach of the great metropolitan dailies” (Sperber 1986, 131–32). This was also increasingly true in Britain, though ironically, since Britain was already at war and America not, US reporters could often supply news via shortwave across the Atlantic that was denied for security reasons to British audiences.

Though Murrow’s experience with the BBC and with the exigencies of wartime reporting may have spurred and influenced the build-up of CBS’s news department, most accounts credit Paul White, CBS News Director, with overseeing the development of the modern network news organization. It is the documentary and interview forms with which Murrow would primarily associate himself for the remainder of his career, and his innovations here should be placed in the context of the emerging drama/documentary practice discussed above, and continued below. Murrow’s famed intimate style, his focus on the first-person conversational narrative, owed something to BBC influence: “Ed noticed that BBC reporters didn’t write; they dictated their scripts to someone who would transcribe them. Ed, a former speech major, copied that practice and dictated a narrative to Kay Campbell, who then wrote his script” (Edwards 2004, 53). But Murrow also innovated in the arena of unscripted broadcasts from a variety of locations; before the war he delighted in bringing ordinary British voices onto the air in programs like “Saturday Night in the Spread Eagle Pub at Little Barfield, Sussex” and his first-person reports from various war locations remain unequalled. When Murrow and his reporters cooperated with D. G. Bridson on the developing use of “scripted actuality” in such programs as *Britain To America* (discussed below), a new aural form was born.

The flexibility of Murrow’s staff and other American network reporters, mixing with and sharing ideas with BBC personnel but not bound by their institutional restrictions, had an effect on many at the BBC as well. A young



Richard Dimbleby innovated along the lines of this new type of radio practice; as Scannell and Cardiff claim, “The on the spot report, the use of recorded actuality sounds from the scene of the action, location interviews with eye-witnesses – these things which are today the very stuff of broadcast news were all pioneered by Richard Dimbleby who, more than any other individual in the BBC, laid the foundations of modern broadcast journalism” (1991, 123). In this he was influenced by developing American news practices. Both Murrow and Dimbleby placed as much emphasis on creating a vivid sense of place in the mind of the listeners through detailed description, including recorded actuality of sounds in the environment—such as the fabled air raid warning sirens and anti-aircraft gun barrages in Murrow’s early broadcasts from London rooftops—and focusing on the interview with its edited bits of real-life dialogue. Murrow also participated frequently in the broadcasts of the North American Service, hosting *Freedom Forum* and producing *An American in England* (discussed below), giving him valuable experience with the interview/discussion and documentary formats that influenced his *Hear It Now* and *See It Now* programs in the US after the war.

In the spring of 1943, the very heart of the war, Murrow received an offer from Brendan Bracken, then Minister of Information under Churchill, to take a position with the BBC. Murrow’s biographer A. M. Sperber describes it as the Director-General’s job; according to him:

Of the two director-generals now working there in tandem [Graves and Foot] the former was ill, his resignation imminent; the latter, onetime manager of a utility concern, unable to run a broadcast operation of his own. They needed, in short, a sort of deputy director-general to take charge of programming, responsible for everything relating to the content of what went out, worldwide, over the BBC. Churchill wanted to know: would Murrow take the job? (Sperber 1986, 221)

This seems a bit incredible; the BBC had only removed its prohibition on employment of non-British nationals a few years before; surely even the liked and trusted Ed Murrow would not be offered the director generalship. In Felix Frankfurter’s account—Murrow turned to Frankfurter, then a supreme court justice but formerly Murrow’s professor and friend, for advice as approved beforehand with Bracken—the post on offer is described as “the program directorship of the BBC” and clearly marked out as the one presently occupied by Cecil Graves, who was seriously ill. Whatever the post, Frankfurter wrote “that the British should ask an American like Murrow to take charge of the BBC is a very extraordinary thing and shows how far they have gone in their determination for collaboration” and advised Murrow to

take it, at least for the duration of the war (Lash 1975, 256–57). But Murrow turned it down, concerned that, in Frankfurter's words, "when peace comes there may be real conflict of views between this country and Great Britain" (Lash 1975, 256). In this he was prescient, as we shall see.

Some of Murrow's most famous broadcasts, like his first-hand account from a bomber over Berlin and his wrenching observations from the Buchenwald concentration camp, followed this moment, as he continued in his usual duties, taking the field of documentary reporting from strength to strength. Murrow returned to the States in 1946 to take up the position of Vice President, not of News but of Public Affairs, at CBS, with the news department just one of his responsibilities. One of his first actions was to create a Documentary Unit at CBS, headed by Robert P. Heller. A contemporary critic described the venture:

They set up a documentary unit which was given talented leadership, a budget, and time to do its work, time to carry into effect what Grierson calls the documentary's first principle, the mastery of "material on the spot," time for the dig-in period for coming "into intimacy" with the material . . . Not until the CBS Documentary Unit was organized under Heller did radio attempt systematically to use its medium in a grand design of large resources, great artistic skill, and the purpose of stimulating action. (Carson 1949, 70)

Murrow drew on his experience with the wartime drama/documentary but even by 1947 announced a break with some of its aspects. In an address to the Institute for Education by Radio, he contemplated a move in a new direction:

I think that future documentary programs will be concerned rather less with production than is the case in most dramatic broadcasts. By that, I mean I believe we will place more emphasis upon the importance of the individual hearing and understanding what is said, rather than over-riding the voice with music or with sound effects of any kind. (Murrow 1947, 380)

The emergence of a pared down post-war aesthetic effectively sounded the death-knell for the radio drama/documentary form; the shift to television, despite its technological limitations, would soon obscure what had been accomplished. But the years between 1943 and 1947 mark a high point in radio creativity never to be surpassed, with the transatlantic relationship at its heart.



## 6 In It Together: Wartime Radio

- 1 Previously he had served as assistant director of the Institute of International Education, a Rockefeller and Carnegie-sponsored organization that encouraged international exchange. He worked specifically with the Emergency Committee to Aid Displaced German Scholars, finding teaching and research positions for European refugee intellectuals—excellent connections for a “Talks” director.
- 2 Roger Eckersley, “Report on the year’s work of the American unit, BBC” 1940. R61/46 WAC.
- 3 Amongst these were Mary Marvin Breckinridge, Dorothy Thompson, and Janet Flanner.
- 4 Julian relates the story that Corwin’s opening sentences, meant to evoke the atmosphere of shortwave exchange—“Hello? . . . Hello? . . . What’s the matter with this line?” (followed by brief silence)—was so successful that NBC engineers assumed the transmission was having real difficulties and dropped it (Julian (1975) 86).
- 5 *New York Times* (Feb 14, 1943) X9.
- 6 “People to People, *Time* (Mar 22, 1943) 65.
- 7 “Radio: An Englishman Looks at the U.S.” *Time* (Jan 23, 1944) 32.
- 8 Letter from Stephen Fry to Warren Macalpine, Jan 31, 1945, E1/110 “Counties-America—Programme Exchange” 1936–50. WAC.
- 9 Memo from Pelletier to DES (Rendall), Jan 15, 1941. R45/30, WAC.
- 10 See Paul Long for a perceptive critique of this tradition in the work of Charles Parker, a later radio documentarist known for his “radio ballads.”
- 11 Hilmes (2007a).
- 12 Quoted in Stursberg (1971) 94.
- 13 Elise Sprott discusses BBC programs for women in Sprott (1938): confined to one hour a day, devoted to instructional material.
- 14 Memo from Gilliam to PO(F) May 16, 1941 “Front Line Family”, R19/1047/1a, WAC.
- 15 Mrs. Ronnie Colley, “Background Material for Subsequent Synopsis on “Front Line Family” Oct 23, 1941, R19/1047/1a, WAC.
- 16 Memo from DFD (Gielgud) to ADF (Gilliam) Dec 11 41, R19/1047/1a, WAC.
- 17 It should be pointed out as well that with the entry of the US into the war in early December, reaching an American audience was no longer of the highest priority for the series.
- 18 Memo from AD Features (Laurence Gilliam) to DEP (S. J. de Lotbiniere) “Front Line Family” 4 February 1942, R19/1047/1a, WAC.
- 19 Ironically, the program was never rebroadcast on an established US network because of its status as a recording—recorded programs had long been regarded as a violation of public service standards in the US and networks prided themselves on their all-live schedules. This, along with the FLP’s awkward generic status—a “nighttime” show in a “daytime” format—kept it from reaching more than the tiny fraction of US listeners who sought out BBC programs via shortwave, or lived near the Canadian border.
- 20 Quoted on the bookflap of Jonquil Antony and Lesley Wilson, *More About the Robinson Family*, a book continuing the story of the serial published “by arrangement with the BBC” in 1948 (London: A & E Publishers).
- 21 Memo from Davenport to DEP (Lotbiniere), May 11, 1942, R19/1047/1b, WAC.
- 22 “Audience Research Unit—Programme Reaction Report—Front Line Family” August 28, 1942. R19/1047/1b, WAC.
- 23 Memo from DFD (Gielgud) to AC (CS), NASD (Gorham) May 8, 1942, R19/1047/1b. In a handwritten note at the bottom, Gorham has scrawled: “Davenport’s memo seems to answer DFD’s question so I shall not need to challenge his claim to ‘quite normal human experience.’”
- 24 Memo COS (Clark) to CP 2 May 43, R19/1047/1b, WAC.
- 25 “Stumpers Across the Sea,” *Time* (February 12, 1945) n.p.
- 26 Memo Royal to Mullen, Mar 31, 1943; letter Trammell to Mullen, Oct 25, 1943; letter Hedges to Kirby, Nov 4, 1943. Box 114 F18, NBC.
- 27 R34/907/1, WAC. Quoted in P. Morley (2001) 14.
- 28 See P. Morley (2001) and Kirby and Harris (1948). For an excellent history of the AFRS, see Brylawski (1985).
- 29 Memo from Laurence Gilliam (Assistant Director Features) to ADT “Programmes for American Troops in England” Aug 10, 1942. R34/913, WAC.
- 30 *Variety* (May 19, 1943) 31.