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# Transcultural journalism and the politics of translation: Interrogating the BBC World Service

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When George Orwell worked for the BBC Eastern Services during the Second World War, he regarded it as ‘an organ of colonial discourse propagating the word and world view of the metropolitan centre to its peripheral subject people’ (Kerr, 2002: 473–90). Orwell’s misgivings about his own journalistic practice and the BBC Eastern Service’s suspected ideological functions may pose an enduring dilemma for some journalists, but many are delighted to endure the processes of recruitment, induction, training and enculturation into the BBC’s hegemonic, globally diffused brand of impartial journalism. This is called, with some self-irony, ‘being BBCed’ by journalists working in, or for, Bush House. The BBC’s overseas services (now the World Service) have long relied on an army of diasporic translators and ‘the right kind of voice’ to disseminate news across the globe. The long-standing reputation of the BBC World Service (BBCWS) among the world’s pre-eminent broadcasters and its credibility have depended on the largely undocumented and unexplored everyday transcultural encounters and translation practices that have taken place in the diasporic and cosmopolitan contact zones of Bush House. This special issue draws on a collaborative empirical research project on the BBC World Service to examine wider issues of the politics, ethics and practices of transcultural journalism and the politics of translation.<sup>1</sup>

Media Studies has been quite slow to wake up to issues of translation although there are some notable recent exceptions (Ang and Hawkins, 2008). It could be argued that all

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forms of representation are forms of translation. Certainly Hartley (1992) makes a strong case for news production being seen as the 'translation' of events into the meaning-system and values of news organizations. As global news organizations proliferate and as international stories become part of daily news coverage – whether adequately so or not – interest in not only linguistic but broader cultural translation is starting to develop (Conway and Bassnett, 2006). Approaches are developing which challenge, as Bassnett puts it:

... the very definition of translation itself. Since news translation is not strictly a matter of interlingual transfer of text A into text B but also necessitates the radical rewriting and synthesizing of text A to accommodate a completely different set of audience expectations, criteria applicable to the analysis of the translation of print documents, whether technical or literary, no longer serve the same purpose. Moreover, in news translation there are enormous constraints of time and space to which translators of other text types may not be subject: twenty-four hour breaking news is now a global expectation, and the succinct, brief item of news rather than an extended account is what twenty-first century consumers demand. (2006)

Indeed, as Gambier (2006) points out, a focus on translation opens up and reframes some of the key issues in journalism theory, including concepts such as gatekeeper, manipulation, adaptation, trans-editing, mediation, news management, and media framing theory.

The BBC World Service provides a unique cross-cultural laboratory for the detailed analysis of journalistic practices of translation across its (currently) 32 different language services, all of which operate under the insignia of BBC objectivity and impartiality (BBC Trust, 2007). Each language service employs nationals and ex-nationals from the regions to which it broadcasts. For many years, diasporic broadcasters simply translated or ventriloquized news produced by a centralized news unit for the services in languages other than English (LOTE). They had no editorial independence and little creative freedom. During the Second World War they were also regarded with a high degree of suspicion. 'Language Supervisors' (usually British-born linguists) were employed to translate their work back into English to ensure they were not distorting or manipulating news bulletins to suit ideological convictions (Scammell, 2003). They would often work through the night monitoring broadcasts often in several languages and at the least suspicion of such 'malpractice' a 'switch censor' would switch the sound off. Translators were seen as potential traitors and translation as a possible betrayal of the original meaning of a text. But as John Tusa, former Managing Director of the World Service, points out at the end of an elegant essay on translation practices at Bush House:

Translators then are not simply traitors. They are more complex than that. Jugglers, conjurors, mind readers, psychologists, games players, poets, social scientists. At the end they are cultural porters, offering the use of one language an imaginative equivalence of the meaning expressed in another. The question is not whether they get it wrong. The wonder is that so much of it is right. (Tusa, 1992: 109)

The rather servile position of these translators and 'ventriloquists' has given way to different priorities in manufacturing and adjudicating culturally suitable translations, and the translating journalists now exercise far greater autonomy and editorial control.

Translation and trans-editing remain central features of all international broadcasting of all news organizations, and the BBC World Service provides a prime site for the analysis of a far wider set of journalistic ‘translation’ practices that we have called ‘the politics of translation’.

A common analytical framework was devised for the purposes of the research to enable comparative analysis. We subdivided the politics of translation into four separate journalistic practices which we have dubbed: (1) transporting, (2) translating, (3) transposing / trans-editing, and (4) transmitting. By (1) transporting, we mean all processes involved in feeding information into the BBC World Service’s centre at Bush House, London, and/or its regional desks and hubs around the globe, a unique and unequalled infrastructure of global news coordination. Transporting may look like a simple technological infrastructure. Yet just on the days that it matters most, it makes a globally electrifying difference. Faced with a scoop, local stringers or even citizen journalists will know trustworthy locals who can position their mobile-phone camera in the right place and time, dub the local report instantaneously, and generate instant worldwide translations into newsroom languages in order to achieve an exclusive broadcast from Bush House distributed all over the world.

By (2) translating, we mean the techniques, crafts, and possibly grafts, of language-to-language transformations. Even the seemingly simplest linguistic transformations are evidently transformative in journalistic practice, be it by contents or by the discursive tone implied or smuggled in. Examples abound in all our contributions.

By (3), transposing and trans-editing, we refer to implicit, and often silent, discursive re-intonations, while trans-editing emphasizes the simultaneity of translating and editing processes. The two, however, belong together, and go hand-in-glove at most instances that we could research in detail.

Finally, processes of (4) transmitting were examined for converging or conflicting patterns which often determine which audiences and users get which news and BBC commentaries in which areas and at which, accessible or inappropriate, times. These times can differ by hours or even by days, and the differences can be crucial for regarding the BBC as a help or a hindrance to understanding ‘the world out there’ or indeed, especially in so-called crisis markets or among diasporic audiences, ‘the world around us’.

This common analytical framework allowed us to compare a number of contrasting but complementary case studies of the BBC World Service. They raise the same few questions from different angles: (a) to what extent does the BBC World Service merit its reputation of impartiality or is it more correctly described as an ‘aura of impartiality?; (b) how, and how precisely, do its journalists exercise their crafts and skills of translating and trans-editing?; (c) how do the BBC’s professional ethos, ethics and guidelines come to bear on conflicts over translation practices and politics?; (d) how do new digital technologies and translation tools and multi-platform journalistic practices affect the politics of translation?

First, (a), the legendary and much vaunted impartiality of the BBC may appear highly dubious to many audiences around the world given its status as a state-funded broadcaster.<sup>2</sup> The BBC World Service, after all, depends almost entirely on periodically renegotiated government funds paid by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO); and from successive governments that have been implicated in a series of colonial and

post-colonial conflicts, some of them historic but many others enduring as armed interventions at present. Many users of BBC news services know this, and yet its reputation as an impartial broadcaster persists, even as the BBC World Service faces ever more competition from rival media both global and regional. So despite its chequered geopolitical and media-geographic past and present, the BBC World Service still enjoys some aura of impartiality and accessibility. Its weekly global averages of users are staggering when one compares them with all competitors, except perhaps CNN.<sup>3</sup> Yet such comparisons promise little analytic merit. The BBC World Service distinguishes shifting markets as world history changes each part of the globe, and it thus constantly readjusts its foci between habitué or elite users, multiple cross-users who integrate it into their ever more mobile and multi-tasking media routines (often zapping between several news providers, platforms and languages), and crisis listeners in war zones that must rely on BBC shortwave radio transmissions to get anything approaching factual news about their own situations. The feat of sustaining loyal audiences and acquiring new users owes most to the BBC's differentiated targeting of their audiences. Next to this, it owes much to an impressively industrious audience research department (housed within Marketing and Communications) and routine, reflexive collaborative-analysis and evaluation of programmes.<sup>4</sup>

Second, (b), the crafts and graft of translation in the narrower linguistic sense make for the next third of all our contributors' data. As journalists and linguists know, there is no such thing as a literal translation and nor can there be. How different discourses are broadcast or received is always subject to contexts and to contested readings of the same contexts. Audiences and users intuit this just as infallibly, especially when they talk back to the BBC on its various 'Have Your Say' interactive platforms and social media experiments, a matter that again returns in all our contributions and is given documentary weight (Tusa, 1992). At the same time, the BBC goes into painstaking detail to standardize translations into the most variegated global contexts, and it periodically reviews these with an almost philological passion for reflexive self-analysis. Admittedly, the BBC World Service in radio and TV (TV being a commercial operation) in English can sometimes sound and look like 'white Brits telling the world what it's like' (unlike the new Arabic and Persian television channels which recruit from a wider range of regional and local accents). Yet the apparent metropolitan style of presentation relies on an enormous network of casual (some might add exploited) 'stringer' labour, as well as an army of BBCed journalists, and the diasporic intellectuals in every language service who adjudicate suitable or unsuitable translations in their daily meetings with colleagues and feed in their regional insights, as well as feeding-back their ease with, or unease about, established translation practices in ever-changing circumstances.

Third, (c), there are three explanations for BBC's user figures holding up despite vastly increased regional competition. One of these, already mentioned, is the deliberate and painstaking effort to serve acute 'crisis audiences' on the often-maligned shortwave radio services. Victims of war or civil war simply cannot get any verifiable news in Darfur or in war-torn parts of Sri Lanka (Thiranagama, this issue) to learn what might happen to them that very day. Where hundreds of people share one cranked-up shortwave radio, and know that they cannot depend on local FM stations, whether paid by 'the government' or 'the rebels', shortwave radio draws huge audience figures despite

commercial losses.<sup>5</sup> How easy it is, by contrast, to broadcast a local Hizbollah-funded *Al Manar* report from war-torn Beirut to the Arab world (see Jaber, this issue) or beam report from Belgrade, deemed to be subversive at the time, into a Sarajevo subjected to sniper fire (see Bulić, this issue)? As Bulić points out, copyright considerations, disguised by lawyers under the rubric of ‘branding’, nearly made such translated retransmissions impossible; but the BBC World Service, quite rightly, brushed these aside, so that its classic shortwave broadcasts could be rebroadcast by local FM outlets.

In sum, so far, the journalistic reputations or the merits of the BBC World Service rely on far more than a spurious aura of impartiality. The global news of the BBC World Service presents both an impartial-sounding voice and a purposive factory of good old info-nomics, a hybrid practice that veers between telling everybody everything and telling nobody too much. Caught as it is in an intriguing paradoxical position of (financial) dependence and (editorial) independence, the BBC World Service must walk a tight-rope, and all our contributors show both its merits and its shortcomings with empirical and analytic precision in their own exemplary fields.

Aneta Podkalicka bundles the mutually conflicting aspects of translation under three metaphors: translation as factory, as dialogue, and as network. These do not exclude each other, let alone represent historical evolutions. Instead, each dimension was and is always present in any act of translating and trans-editing. The three metaphors provide a handy formula to ‘get into the thick of things’, the detailed study of how daily multi-platform translation practices proceed. Engagingly, Podkalicka rejects any attempt at positing a model of evolutionary progress in the politics of the BBC’s translation politics and practices. Instead, she argues for the necessity of analysing the simultaneity of mutually contradictory models of translation, ranging from the assertion of an authoritative voice to a, potentially, free-for-all consumer cult on the global airwaves.

Sharika Thiranagama, writing on the two language services in Sinhala and Tamil that the BBC adds to its English-language service beamed out to Sri Lanka, shows the World Service as both insider and outsider on the island. Far from being a dispassionate global observer, the BBC has ethnicized, but has also been ethnicized, by the civil war on the island. It helped to establish, and cordon off from each other, two distinct ‘knowable communities’, to use a metaphor of Raymond Williams (1975). At the same time, trust between BBC journalists and their publics across the ethnically contested island provides the BBC with a role, whether wanted or not and whether successful or not, as a post-colonial ‘peacemaker’. The dialectics are palpable across the sources that Thiranagama collected, ranging from historical documents to the audiences responding to the BBC and including the journalists now working cheek-by-jowl at Bush House. All three parties to the conversation showed highly sophisticated skills in reading, and then re-reading, the BBC as a global news service amid its local and world-political contexts. The interest lies in the ethnographic detail that Thiranagama is able to provide after fieldwork in both Services, and the application of anthropological theory to offer a fresh and original analysis of practices of transcultural journalism and translation politics.

Michael Jaber and Gerd Baumann examine the same communicative problem in a non-stop war zone, the Middle East, where the wars started earlier and have still not been ended. The BBC and the Middle East have always shared a special mutual relationship,



framed, for a great part, by mutual misunderstanding (see Sreberny et al., 2010). It was, in fact, the desire to reach and influence Middle East audiences that turned the BBC Empire Service into a BBC World Service in the late 1930s and drove it into television in the late 2000s. To assess the BBC's journalistic merit, as distinct from its public trustworthiness, the authors scrutinize its politics of translation under the four headings just outlined: transporting data from the field to the broadcaster; translating from one language into another; transposing data and message by inflexions of tone; and transmitting the result to selected audiences at selected times. Importantly, they do so from both an etic ('outsiders') analysis of BBC output and an emic ('insiders') analysis of what audiences perceive and respond to by way of critical reactions. The contrast sharpens the discrepancies, and so the authors interrogate not only changing political constellations and in-house editorial mechanisms, but also users' own criteria for media to claim public trust. Public trust, be it by suffering masses in the BBC's 'crisis markets' or among its elite audiences trained to calibrate rival media outlets day by day, is also the topic of the following contributions.

Bulić asks why Serbs still listen to 'the BBC conspiracy'. She points to the cross-consumption and cross-user patterns mentioned in the previous two articles and specifies these in yet another context. The criteria may be surprising at first. Not only is factual accuracy important to audiences, but the aesthetic qualities of measured syntax and stylistically self-certain prosody also play an important role in the BBC's radio markets. The disembodied voice of the radio, after all, stands or falls with its fourfold aesthetics: oral and aural aesthetics in anonymity, yet also familiarity coupled with authority.

How do radio and online processes of gatekeeping, editing and translation compare? Do globally networked media contribute to a dispersal of power and authority? Do conventional gatekeeping and translation practices open up or close down the potential to communicate across religious and political divisions? Hoskins and O'Loughlin's article expands the field of enquiry of this special issue beyond the BBC WS to address these issues and provide a contrasting example of how structures and patterns of translation worm their way across media platforms. They identify a seemingly settled model of gatekeeping and trans-editing, but then show how these patterns are embedded within power structures including mutual monitoring sites that take most texts beyond any single author's or editor's intention. They argue that the structures and processes of trans-editing of jihadist speeches actually prohibit understanding among audiences in the Anglosphere media world of why these texts prove to be so attractive and persuasive for some Arab and Muslim audiences around the world. Further research on multilingual multiplatform gatekeeping, they suggest, will shed light on changing loci and structures of power in the new media ecology.

Implied and implicated in all contributions, multi-language translations are placed centre-stage by Cheesman and Nohl. Their focus is not on a violent flashpoint, but a democratic transition that was broadly welcomed around the world, the election of Barack Obama as President of the USA. They researched how the BBC World Service translated the same factual news, the same near-global hope, or hype, across its most diverse audiences. They provided a synthesis, almost a syntax, of careful textual analysis of BBC internet postings across five linguistic régimes (English, Arabic, Persian, Tamil,

Turkish), each conducted by native language speakers. The analysis of contents, structures and discursive skills and tricks reveal widely differing norms of journalistic needs and skills, but also a unified manner in which BBC language services make assumptions about their specific audiences and how these help structure the news output. The processes of transposing can thus be studied even better by considering the functions of gatekeeping and trans-editing that global media must embrace for themselves and use in global competition.

The contradictions that emerge are taken up in a short epilogue, which concerns rules of evidence, criteria of responsibility and the 'normal science' that both journalism and journalism studies must embrace every day. We compare these in the light of the data gathered, and hope our closing reflections might stimulate further research and studies in this field.

## Notes

- 1 This special issue is based on an interdisciplinary collaborative research project entitled 'Tuning in: Diasporic contact zones at the BBC World Service'. It is funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council Programme 'Diasporas Migration and Identities' (Award reference AH/ES58693/1). The project is based at the Open University in Milton Keynes, UK. For further information see: <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas>
- 2 Proposed changes to the future funding and governance of the World Service, following the UK government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, mean that the World Service and its relationship with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, with its overseas audiences, and with British taxpayers are at a critical turning point. This special issue is therefore very timely as the WS is likely to be at the centre of policy debates for some time to come. Not only is the future of its foreign language services at stake and, of course, jobs, but many of the issues that we address across the articles in this special issue – of governance, editorial power, control and independence, range and types of audiences and programming, diplomacy, translation, new technologies and multilingual working practices – are coming to the fore in an emerging public debate and a moment of great uncertainty about its future. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2010/oct/25/csr-bbc-independence-steve-hewlett>
- 3 For global audience estimates in 2009 see: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2009/07/090702\\_annual\\_review2009\\_year\\_in\\_numbers.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2009/07/090702_annual_review2009_year_in_numbers.shtml). It should be noted that there are both principles and politics attached to calculating such 'performance' measures and a requirement on the part of the BBC WS to report annually to the FCO in this regard. See: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2009/07/090713\\_annual\\_review2009\\_measuring\\_performance.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2009/07/090713_annual_review2009_measuring_performance.shtml)
- 4 See: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2009/03/000000\\_ws\\_run.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2009/03/000000_ws_run.shtml) and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/running/bbcstructure/mca.shtml>. Our collaborative ethnographic research has enabled us to sit on countless post mortems of programmes among news producers and the level of self critique is impressively high and feeds into programme-making in an ongoing fashion. Audience ratings are fed to producers such that news production processes and audience research are closely interlinked.
- 5 New technologies are making it easier to translate and make content available to the whole. For example, BBC Newsviz is an experiment in automatically translating and tagging World Service language service content and visualizing the results. It uses Google Translate for translation and Zemanta and Freebase for semantic content extraction. See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2009/12/translating-the-world.shtml>



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## Biographical notes

Gerd Baumann works at the University of Amsterdam. He authored two ethnographies: *National Integration and Local Integrity in the Sudan* (Oxford University Press, 1986) and *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), as well as *The Multicultural Riddle: Re-Thinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities* (Routledge, 1999; translated into Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Yugoslav). Among his 18 co-authored books are *Civil Enculturation in Four European Countries* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004) and *Grammars of Identity / Alterity: A Structural Approach* (Oxford: Berghahn 2004; translated into Spanish). Having worked with Marie Gillespie and colleagues from 2004 to 2010 on the AHRC + Open University project on the BBC World Service, which produced numerous special issues of dedicated journals, his current interests focus on the cognitive homologies between ethics and aesthetics.

Marie Gillespie is Professor of Sociology at the Open University, and Director of the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (<http://www.cresc.ac.uk>). Her research interests focus on issues of migration and media, diaspora and transnationalism in relation to questions of social and cultural change. Recent research projects include a study of the mediation of the attacks of 9/11/2001 and responses of transnational audiences (<http://afterseptember11.tv>) and an exploration of the politics of security via a collaborative ethnography of multilingual news cultures in UK cities (<http://www.mediatingsecurity.com>). She was principal investigator of *Tuning In: Diasporic Contact Zones at BBC World Service* (<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/>).

Annabelle Sreberny is Professor and Director of the Centre for Media and Film Studies at SOAS, University of London. She is President of IAMCR, the major international research association. She has recently become chair of the newly established Centre for Iranian Studies at SOAS, and her new book on the internet and politics in Iran, *Blogistan*, co-authored with Gholam Khiabany, is published by IB Tauris.

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