

Tuning In:
Diasporic Contact Zones at BBC World Service

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This project investigates intra- and cross-diasporic “contact zones” through the prism of BBC World Service: its programming, production processes, creative personnel and audiences. Contact zones are sites of transnational and cross-cultural encounter, spaces of creativity and representation, and fora of cultural dialogue and translation.

The World Service has long been “a contact zone” for diasporic (including exilic and refugee) artists, writers and intellectuals, providing them with a creative ‘home’ as well as political opportunities. Set up in 1932 as the Empire Service, it has provided a “home from home” for the worldwide British diaspora. Audiences for its 32 foreign language services (radio; internet; Arabic TV station planned for 2007) also include diverse diaspora populations. Little is known about why and how certain diaspora groups connect with their home countries via the World Service, but some (Somalis, Nigerians, Sudanese, Iranians and Arabic speakers) praise its objectivity and, increasingly, use it as a forum of debate. At times of political or ecological crisis, it becomes a lifeline mediating between home and diaspora. Its authoritative reach across national and diasporic boundaries may seem paradoxical given that it is funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and has a remit to serve British interests abroad. But, surprisingly, little academic research exists on the historical and contemporary work of cultural brokerage and public diplomacy performed by BBCWS. This project plugs that gap.

BBCWS is in transition. After its Empire and Cold War phases, it is a less centralised global institution. Regionally devolved production involves negotiating issues of “fit” between local and diasporic values, and maintaining the key BBC brand value, “impartiality”. These issues often hinge on *the politics of translation* (particularly of controversial or culturally sensitive terminology as well as of genres and formats) which is one of six project themes. Others include: ***drama for development; religious transnationalism; diasporic nationhood, sports across diasporas; and musical migrations.***

Research Questions

1. How does BBCWS function as an intra- and cross-diasporic “contact zone”, and agent of cultural and public diplomacy?
2. How does BBCWS mediate conflicts and debates over cultural, ethnic, religious and political identities?
3. How does BBCWS contribute to co-shaping diasporic identities -- and vice versa?
4. How do choices about language and translation affect the meanings of texts, and how are texts translated and transformed by audiences, in everyday acts of interpretation?