

Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970

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Brett Bebbler

Simon Potter's second major effort to map out the history of the flow of information within the British world follows many of the same lines of analysis presented in his first book. While *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System* (1) charted the advent of imperial media discourses and the organizations that sustained them from the late nineteenth century through the First World War, his most recent volume chronicles the role the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) played in unifying and developing broadcasting across the British world from the 1920s forward. The BBC had a significant role in the advancement of public and semi-public broadcasting corporations across the dominions – especially the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and the New Zealand Broadcasting Service (NZBS), as well as their predecessors – and attempts to integrate them into a more unified imperial broadcasting system. The uneven story of the interactions of these bodies, as well as others from the colonies and South Africa, is a tale that Potter warns defies a neat chronological or even steady progression. Instead, the piecemeal attempts at empire broadcasting reflected the centralizing goals of the BBC and the state's use of the BBC as a 'subcontractor for cultural diplomacy' (p. 7), but also resulted in only intermittent cooperation and irregular exchanges.

Potter appropriately centres the narrative on the BBC, and all of the interactions it had with the other corporations and services from London outward. This isn't to say that he hasn't traveled widely to collect documents. Potter's findings are meticulously documented and drawn from a wide array of collections across the British world, and will satisfy any skeptical empiricists. But it remains a story of the centralizing pull and appeal of the BBC, and how the other developing bodies interacted with, rejected, and followed the

British model for technological advancement and cultural improvement. The book is a testament to the author's ability to find organization in chaos: tracing the development of multiple broadcasting networks was most certainly a very messy job. Potter has done well with it, playing up the interplay between the BBC and its dominion counterparts in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and elsewhere. The blow-by-blow account of legislative battles, technological innovation, officers' debates, and programming struggles could drive one mad if not for Potter's ability to remind the reader of the importance of the outcomes. While some sections do digress into minute details that might make the uninitiated yearn for the point at hand, Potter's usually steady guidance proves effective.

One initial goal, the BBC's effort to build an 'empire broadcasting network' that would take the high-brow programming produced in London to British expatriates across the world, provides a thread that unites the first three chapters. In the first, Potter sketches the initiative's origin under John Reith, the BBC's first general manager and later director-general. Reith was certainly committed to the domestic service first and foremost, and to lifting British culture above the American dross and mass culture popular in the early 20th century. But he also displayed a Victorian imperialist's spirit, and dreamed of an international role for radio that would not only demonstrate the high modernist's belief in the progress of technology, but also advance 'the structure of civilization' (p. 35). The 1920s, then, saw the BBC explore the establishment of imperial broadcasting in India under the short-lived India Broadcasting Corporation, and more successful efforts in the dominions. Though hampered in building an actual integrated broadcasting system by the slow development of short-wave radio, the BBC set up an Empire Department that aimed to find ways to stir up Britannic sentiment among dominion listeners, especially British expatriates.

The interwar period, covered in the second and third chapters, seriously challenged the prospects for success of this fledgling dream. New Zealand, Canada, and Australia all established independent or quasi-independent broadcasting bodies, more or less patterned after the successful model of the BBC. Potter adeptly follows industrial documentation here to outline how each body dealt with questions of government independence, funding and licensing schemes, and program development, all with an eye towards measuring their growth against the BBC. As they developed, each flirted with cooperating with the BBC to borrow its technological and industrial acumen. More importantly, they were attending to their own agendas and local commercial demands. By the late 1930s, the groups had managed to agree on the exchange of programmes, acceptable prices for transcriptions, and a steady diet of ceremonies, holiday specials, sport, and royal speeches. These became the trademarks of a very raw multinational institutional endeavor.

Because of their mutual, yet indeed largely different growth trajectories, the four major broadcasting corporations struggled to further practically integrate their services until the Second World War, when all of the corporations participated heavily in morale building and information services. The BBC expanded its target audiences to include the European mainland and the US as well, and flows of information in all circles were expedited. The results of Potter's survey of wartime activity are fairly predictable – both the technology and the funding for transmissions improved as national governments looked to utilize broadcasting for a variety of morale-building activities – and the wartime broadcast schedules were sprinkled further with programmes about the Empire and the dominions. This was the height of their cultural exchange, as ideas of imperial and wartime unity spread across the British world via radio.

As Potter relays in the fifth and sixth chapters, the BBC's role in postwar society became clear even as the war ended: to fend off challenges from American private broadcasting and re-institute order by restoring Reith's mission of 'cultural uplift'. The specter of American media production always loomed as a potential threat, not only because of its different cultural cache, but also because its commercialization threatened the BBC's public broadcasting model. Potter notes that at this key juncture, the BBC's commitment to non-commercialism limited the transmission of materials that could further improve the imperial unity the BBC sought. Opportunities to connect with private broadcasters were ignored, and the External Services Unit (formerly the Empire Service, then the Overseas Unit) made haphazard progress in exchanging programming with the dominions. It also turned over the early television market to Hollywood, concentrating instead on cheaper radio production. By the time Ian Jacob, director-general from 1952–60, assumed the reins the BBC's fortunes mirrored Britain's colonial and international decline. Jacob's

'unadventurous and uninspired' leadership resumed the paternalistic language of high cultural standards and failed to ward off the Beveridge Committee's decision to allow commercial competition (p. 174).

Potter's narrative concludes with an evaluation of the 1960s, declaring that the function of the BBC's integration with other dominion broadcasters remained, even if it was drained of its imperial fervor. This final chapter is something of a disappointment. Potter chooses to maintain his focus on the themes developed in the first half of the book, paying close attention to how the BBC organized conferences to promote Commonwealth broadcasting structures and how each entity dealt with increasing commercial pressures, looking to one another for guidance. But one gets the sense that the 1960s were an important period that deserved more scrutiny: the BBC took television production seriously, it continued to promote an evolving national sentiment, and it adopted forms of programming that challenged the propriety of previous generations. Besides the internal institutional pressures, the BBC's expanding programming drastically influenced international standards and interests, even as they adopted more American fare. While Potter touches on these themes, the topic cries out for a contextualized interpretation of how the BBC navigated the 1960s, changing and reflecting the multiple cultural attitudes – including the postimperial anxieties – that were circulated and reproduced by its programmes.

Throughout the book, Potter's mapping of the different corporations and their development certainly becomes more institutional than imperial. The minutiae of plans and problems with technical and organizational development take precedence over how the BBC attempted to transmit British cultural unity across the internal boundaries of the Empire. Because of this focus, he is only intermittently able to gauge the influence or effectiveness of this particular attempt at empire-building on Britons domestically and dominion citizens abroad. That is to say, registering the goals of the BBC, and outlining the jagged implementation of a partially integrated system is certainly a useful enterprise, but analyzing its actual influence on building imperial feeling is a more difficult task, one that isn't entirely finished in this volume. Nonetheless, it's a staggering achievement on the whole, worthy of attention by scholars of popular culture and British imperialism, in addition to those interested in the business of radio and television.

Notes

1. Simon Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System* (Oxford, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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