



## Radio Wars: Broadcasting in the Cold War

Linda Risso

To cite this article: Linda Risso (2013) Radio Wars: Broadcasting in the Cold War, Cold War History, 13:2, 145-152, DOI: [10.1080/14682745.2012.757134](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.757134)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.757134>



Published online: 17 May 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1977



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

## INTRODUCTION

# Radio Wars: Broadcasting in the Cold War

Linda Risso

Department of History, University of Reading, Reading, UK

If the Cold War was a war of ideas and ideologies for the ‘soul of mankind’<sup>1</sup>, radio was definitely one of the weapons of choice. Radio played an important role in the ideological confrontation between East and West as well as within each bloc and, as archival documents gathered here reveal, it was among the most pressing concerns of contemporary information agencies.

Radio broadcasts could penetrate the Iron Curtain and directly address the ‘enemy’. This was extremely important in the early Cold War. For the audiences behind the Iron Curtain, Western broadcasting opened an alternative channel for the flow of new information and ideas and it contributed to the erosion of public support for the government. If recently published figures are correct, one-third of Soviet urban adults and around half of East European adults were regular listeners of Western broadcasts.<sup>2</sup> Given the widespread listenership and the perceived destabilizing role of Western programming, it is not surprising that the Communist regimes spent considerable time, energy, and resources fighting foreign broadcasts through jamming, censorship, and a renewed propaganda effort of their own national radio broadcasts.

---

Linda Risso is Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Reading. Her research interests focus on the history of European integration and of the Cold War. She is currently finalising her monograph on *Propaganda and Intelligence during the Cold War: The NATO Information Service* for Routledge. Correspondence to: Dr Linda Risso, Department of History, School of Humanities, University of Reading, Reading RG6 6AA, UK. Email: [l.risso@reading.ac.uk](mailto:l.risso@reading.ac.uk). The articles gathered in this special issue were presented, among others, at a one-day conference on ‘War of the Ether: Radio broadcasting during the Cold War’, which took place at the University of Reading in December 2010. The conference and this publication have been supported by the Leverhulme Trust through its Major Research Programme at the University of Reading on ‘The Liberal Way of War’.

<sup>1</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta (eds.), *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2010), p. 345.

Radio was equally important to keep sustained levels of support among the home public and the public of friendly nations. In the early Cold War in particular, listeners in the West had to be persuaded of the need for higher defence spending levels and a policy of containment. Later, even if other media – and in particular television – had become more important, radio continued to be used widely. In the 1970s, the public had to be told about the challenges that came with détente, when Western governments had to carry out costly weapon modernisation programmes while at the same time engaging in diplomatic talks about arms reduction with the East.

There is already an extensive body of literature on radio propaganda during the Cold War. Several titles have been produced by practitioners in the field. These works have the merit of introducing the reader to the everyday organisational problems faced by the people on the ground and of presenting an interesting portrait of the mentality, priorities, and concerns of the information officers themselves. Radio Free Europe (RFE), Voice of America (VOA), and Radio Liberty (RLT) have been at the centre of numerous studies of this kind.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the authors rarely provide a broader analysis of the institutional history of the radio broadcasting corporation in question and of its relationship with other propaganda agencies of the West. The result can lead to an overestimation of the role and importance of specific information programmes. Historians too have studied the role of radio as a tool in the Cultural Cold War. The VOA has been at the centre of a particularly rich body of literature.<sup>4</sup> The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and particularly its foreign broadcasts, has also been extensively studied by historians both in terms of the BBC's links with the Foreign Office and the intelligence services as well as in terms of the Corporation's attempt to assess the impact of its broadcasts on foreign audiences.<sup>5</sup> Research into other Western

<sup>3</sup> Among the most recent contributions are: Johnson and Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting*; Richard H. Cummings, *Radio Free Europe's "Crusade for Freedom": Allying Americans Behind Cold War Broadcasting, 1950–1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010); R. Eugene Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener: An Assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR During the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2007); A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Robert W. Pirsein, *The Voice of America. An history of the international broadcasting activities of the United States government 1940–1962* (New York: Arno Press, 1979); Holly Cowan Shulman, *The Voice of America. Propaganda and democracy, 1941–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); David F. Krugler, *The Voice of America and the domestic propaganda battle, 1945–1953* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); Alan L. Heil, *Voice of America. A history* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Simona Tobia, "Advertising America: VOA and Italy", in *Europe Americanized? Popular Reception of Western Cold War Propaganda*. Special issue of *Cold War History* 11, n 1 (2011): 27–47.

<sup>5</sup> Laura M. Calkins, "Patrolling the Ether: US-UK Open Source Intelligence Cooperation and the BBC's emergence as an Intelligence Agency, 1939–1948" *Intelligence and National Security* 26, no.1 (2011): 1–22; Michael S. Goodman, "British intelligence and the British Broadcasting Corporation. A snapshot of a happy marriage" in Robert Dover and Michael Goodman (eds.), *Spinning Intelligence. Why the media needs Intelligence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009): 117–132; James R. Vaughan, "A certain idea of Britain: British cultural diplomacy in the Middle East, 1945–57" *Contemporary British History* 19, no.1 (2005): 151–168; Marie Gillespie, Alban Webb, and Gerd Baumann (eds.), *BBC World Service 1932–2007: Cultural Exchange and Public Diplomacy*, Special Issue of *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*,

broadcast corporations has also brought to light interesting findings about the role of other national broadcasting corporations.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to the work of historians like Christoph Classen, Klaus Arnold, and Stephen Lovell, just to mention a few, we have now gained a first insight into the Eastern broadcasting policies too.<sup>7</sup>

Radio propaganda is of course part of a wider debate on the character and importance of the ‘cultural Cold War’ and it is now widely accepted that the Cold War had as much to do with ‘winning hearts and minds’ as it did with the arms race.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, research on the cultural Cold War has contributed to the wider debate about the development of a Western cultural model and about the actual role of the USA in shaping Western Europe’s culture, economy, and politics. The twin concepts of ‘Americanisation’

---

*Footnote 5 continued*

28, n. 4 (2008); Alban Webb, “Auntie Goes to War Again: The BBC External Services, the Foreign Office and the early Cold War”, *Media History*, 12, n. 2 (2006): 117–132; Marie Gillespie, Hugh Mackay, and Alban Webb, “Designs & devices: towards a genealogy of audience research methods at the BBC World Service, 1932–2011”. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 8, n. 1 (2011): 1–20. James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting and Internet in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Charlotte Lepri, “De l’usage des médias à des fins de propagande pendant la guerre froide”, *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2 n. 78 (2010): 111–118; Christian Brochand, *Histoire Générale de la Radio et de la Télévision en France*, 3 volumes (Paris: la Documentation Française, 1994–2006); Hervé Glevarec (ed.), *Histoire de la radio: Ouvrez grand vos oreilles!* (Paris: Musée des arts et métiers / Silvana Editoriale, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Christoph Classen, “Between political coercion and popular expectations: Contemporary history in the radio of the early German Democratic Republic” in Sylvia Paletschek (ed.), *Popular Historiographies in the 19th and 20th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 89–102; Stephen Lovell, “How Russia Learned to Listen: Radio and the Making of Soviet Culture”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12 n. 3 (2011): 591–615; Christoph Classen and Klaus Arnold (eds.), *Zwischen Pop und Propaganda: Radio in der DDR* (Berlin: Ch.Links, 2004). Klaus Arnold, *Kalter Krieg im Äther. Der Deutschlandsender und die Westpropaganda der DDR* (Münster/Hamburg/London: Lit 2002);

<sup>8</sup> The literature on the history of the Cultural Cold War is very rich. Among the most important contributions in English are: Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997); Gary D. Rawnsley, *Cold War Propaganda in the 1950s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999); Scott Lucas, *Freedom’s War: The US Crusade Against the Soviet Union, 1945–56* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 2000); David Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Giles Scott-Smith and Hans Krabbendam (eds.), *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe, 1945–1960* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003); Kenneth A. Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). David Ellwood, *The Shock of America: Europe and the Challenge of the Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The Cultural Cold War is of course also discussed in the recent *Cambridge History of the Cold War* edited by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, 3 volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); the chapters by Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht (“Culture in the Cold War”, vol. 1, pp. 398–419) and by Nicholas J. Cull (“Reading, viewing and tuning in to the Cold War”, vol. 2, pp. 438–459) are particularly relevant for this special issue.

and ‘Westernisation’ have been recently at the centre of a hectic historiographical debate. They both postulate a transatlantic community of values. Americanisation draws attention to the adoption by Western Europeans of the American lifestyle, cultural habits, and production techniques. According to this view – and this is a simplification of a complex historiographical debate – Europeans absorbed American values and slowly became Americanised in what could be described as a one-way process.

Other scholars have pointed out that American-style political, social, and cultural values were not simply imported but were interpreted and adapted. According to this view, American influence was selective and limited. While it recognises the strong cultural, political, and economic influences coming to Europe from the United States, the Westernisation concept stresses the degree of reciprocal influence and cooperation between Americans and Western Europeans whereby a new shared community of values emerged by means of cultural transfer. Far from being simply bystanders, they actively engaged with American ideas and values and adapted them to suit their own needs and culture, and were in turn able to export their own version of such values and cultural elements back to the United States in a mutual and continuous dialogue.<sup>9</sup> As discussed below, the articles gathered here stress the degree to which cooperation among different radio broadcasting corporations led to a process of continuous dialogue and constant reciprocal influence and therefore seem to validate the Westernisation concept.

### Measuring impact and qualifying success

Historical research on the cultural dimension of the Cold War has been faced with the problem of defining ‘success’ and of measuring the impact of the information initiatives on the target audiences. Despite the insightful work of historians like Victoria De Grazia and Walter Hixson, and the theories of audience research analysis imported by media studies, the ‘relevance’ question is destined to remain open.<sup>10</sup> The study of radio propaganda is no exception. Radio broadcasters – like all practitioners of public diplomacy – needed to get a sense of the actual impact of their programmes. Their reports

---

<sup>9</sup>For a summary of the debate on Americanization and Westernisation, see Holger Nehring, “‘Westernisation’: A New Paradigm for Interpreting West European History in a Cold War Context” *Cold War History* 4, n. 2 (2004): 175–191; Volker R. Berghahn, “The Debate on ‘Americanization’ among economic and cultural historians” *Cold War History* 10, n. 1 (2010): 107–130; Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht, “Cultural Transfer”; in Michael J. Hogan and Tom Patterson (eds.), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 257–78; *Europe Americanized? Popular Reception of Western Cold War Propaganda*. Special issue of *Cold War History*, edited by Simona Tobia, 11, n. 1 (2011). Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, *Wie westlich sind die Deutschen? Amerikanisierung und Westernisierung im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999). Ellwood, *The Shock of America*.

<sup>10</sup>Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*. Among the most influential works by Victoria De Grazia are: *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); *Irresistible Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005).

brought together data gathered through surveys and questionnaires and anecdotal information extrapolated from the listeners' letters and comments. To a certain extent, this was done to create a feedback cycle for improved practice but also to justify funding for certain programmes and possibly also for the information agency itself.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as Graham Mytton has written in this journal a couple of years ago about his role as a BBC research analysis expert, 'most of us are less impressed with representative statistical data and much more with stories about real people and what they say'.<sup>12</sup> If practitioners were indeed more impressed by anecdotal information than by detailed statistics, this poses a challenge for historians as it becomes necessary to differentiate between the *perceived* success of an information programme and its *actual* success – it seems that the two may not necessarily have much in common.

While it is possible to get a fairly precise sense of the perceived success of certain radio programmes through the reports produced by the broadcasters, it is much more difficult to assess the actual impact that the programmes had on the public. Surveys, statistics, and documents produced by the information agencies themselves often put forward partial – and possibly even inflated – data. Hard evidence to assess the actual impact of any information programme is scarce. Scholars can do nothing more than rely on anecdotal and partial information; as a result, their conclusions can only be careful educated guesses, which often do not stray far from the perceived success of the practitioners of the time.

It seems therefore that the problems connected with measuring impact and qualifying success are here to stay and that historians do not have sufficient evidence to reach solid conclusions. This is often perceived by historians as a dangerous gap in one's research but need not be. Even if historians cannot measure the actual impact of information programmes on the public, they can indeed measure the perceived success of such programmes in the eyes of their promoters and examine the institutional history of propaganda agencies in the light of what their personnel thought were the interests, sensibilities, and concerns of their listeners. What those studying the institutional history of the information agency can do is to focus on the agencies' own perception of their role in the East-West confrontation and on their own assessment of the impact of their information programmes on their target audience. The institutional history of propaganda agencies needs therefore to feed back into the broader political and cultural history of the period and contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of cultural influences across borders and across the Iron Curtain.

The articles gathered in this special issue focus on the information agencies' own assessment of the success of their programmes and on the collaboration between

---

<sup>11</sup> A similar point has been argued by Giles Scott-Smith in his review of "Special Issue: 'Europe Americanized?'" *Cold War History* 11, n. 1 (2011): 1–83, published in *H-Diplo, Roundtable Review*, 13, n. 4 (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Graham Mytton, "Audience research at the BBC External Services during the Cold War: A view from the inside," *Cold War History* 11, n. 1 (2011): 53.

radios in different countries or between radios and groups of individuals (like listeners or émigrés). The common methodological approach that links these articles is their focus on 'off-air politics'. The authors investigate primarily what went on behind the microphone: how topics were selected, scripts written, and schedules put together. Most importantly, the articles address the issue of 'what the broadcasters thought they were doing'. Keeping in mind that – as mentioned above – the information officers' own assessment of the impact of their programmes rarely reflected the true state of affairs, the authors do bring data to the attention of the reader to show this discrepancy wherever possible.

The articles gathered here investigate examples of radio broadcasting directed towards the national public, the public of allied countries, as well as across the Iron Curtain, in a series of case studies that spans the Cold War. The case studies have been chosen either because they were important media players in the cultural Cold War (such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and the British Broadcasting Corporation) or because they were primary targets in the propaganda war as a result of their unique geopolitical position (West and East Germany, France, Italy, and the Soviet Union). Using material from written and sound archives, contributors examine outgoing propaganda themes and techniques and how these changed over time.

This special issue contributes to the current historiographical debate about radio propaganda in two ways. First, the articles gathered here tackle the interplay between Eastern and Western radio broadcasting: they investigate how radio stations were indeed aware of the pressure exerted by their opponents 'on the other side' and felt the need to continuously raise to the challenge and recalibrate the focus and content of their programmes. While the permeability of the Cold War has already been examined more broadly,<sup>13</sup> it has not been fully investigated in relation to radio propaganda, which is a gap this special issue aims to fill. Secondly, these articles question whether the cooperation between different broadcasting corporations entailed a 'leading partner', like the BBC and VOA, and a 'junior' one, and to what extent the junior partner could in turn shape the priorities, themes, and working methods of the bigger broadcasting corporations. Evidence provided here by the authors suggests a process of mutual influence and continuous dialogues. As a result, the relationship between broadcasting corporations appears to be much more complicated than a one-way street whereby the stronger broadcasting corporation could dictate what was to be done. Thus, this special issue argues against the idea of an American – and British – unchallenged leadership in the cultural Cold War.

---

<sup>13</sup> See for example, Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith and Joes Segal (eds.), *Divided Dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War East and West* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Tobias Hochscherf, Christoph Laucht and Andrew Plowman (eds.), *Divided, But Not Disconnected: German Experiences of the Cold War* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2011); Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk, and Thomas Lindenberger (eds.), *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2012).

## The articles

To a certain extent, radio propaganda directed towards the allies' public, along with all information programmes of this kind, was rather straightforward. It was relatively easy, for example, for the BBC to get a sense of the fears, concerns, and interests of the French public and to examine their response to BBC broadcasts. British information experts had access to the listeners themselves and could carry out their own surveys. Similarly, the Voice of America could establish tight cooperation with the Italians at RAI and make sure that their ideas and information programmes were made more appealing to the public by being presented as part of the RAI's daily broadcast schedule. However, as Hilary Footitt and Simona Tobia demonstrate in their articles, carrying out propaganda campaigns in a country with free media made it more difficult as any broadcast was scrutinised and the communist parties were ready to denounce any evidence of American cultural imperialism and propaganda. In addition, the local information agencies tended to claim increasingly more independence and became progressively more conscious of the need to mediate between the foreign broadcasters' needs and the perceived interests of the audience. Both sides realised the importance of stressing local ideas and local news as opposed to the BBC's or VOA's own interpretation of events.

Broadcasting across the Curtain was a completely different enterprise. During the Cold War, radio broadcasting corporations had to learn to be objective while at the same time avoid being neutral on key issues of freedom and democracy. From a practical point of view, it was essential that information programmes were trusted by the public and this was possible only if they were based on accurate and factual information. Radio broadcasters had also to convey the impression that they understood the culture, interests, and concerns of the public. In order to produce these kind of radio programmes, information agencies had to gather information about life behind the Curtain and this was usually done best through tight collaboration with the intelligence services as well as through collaboration with émigrés. Alban Webb, Friederike Kind-Kovács, Patrick Major, and Christoph Classen agree that listeners in the East 'triangulated' among the various Western stations and regime media sources to obtain information. While they did trust the foreign broadcasts more than their national ones, they were often surprisingly conscious that neither could be fully trusted. Webb, Kind-Kovács, and Major also agree on the crucial role of émigrés for British and American radio broadcasting to the East. First, this was because upon their arrival the émigrés provided the broadcasters with crucial information about the listeners and how Western broadcasts were perceived by the public. Second, the émigrés were often enrolled by the radios to contribute to the production of new broadcasts, which were informed by the émigrés' insight into the concerns, interests, and taste of the Eastern public.

Alban Webb tackles the issue of influence and impact head-on and makes clear that Western radio broadcasts followed rather than led the revolutionary developments in Hungary in 1956. The article compares the different approaches and institutional



cultures of the BBC and RFE and focuses on the latter's decision to broadcast three programs on military tactics and one press review implying, indirectly, Western military assistance. Contrary to the claims at the time that these broadcasts had a the massive influence on the unravelling events in Budapest, none of the thousands of émigrés surveyed immediately after their arrival in the West cited these programs as the primary basis for their belief that the West would intervene to help them.

The role of exiles in shaping the content for radio broadcasts is also central to the article written by Friederike Kind-Kovács. Documents and ideas produced by the émigrés were perceived as being amongst the most powerful weapons in the Cultural Cold War as they mirrored the life and thoughts of the people in Eastern Europe. Émigrés were directly employed by RFE and Radio Liberty and the two stations also supported the circulation of unofficial literature written within the Soviet Union and which was often sent to them for publication (*tamizdat*). The result was the establishment of a communication loop across the Curtain, which influenced the content and staffing of RFE and Radio Liberty and gave hope to the opposition in the Soviet Union, thus encouraging the production of more opposition literature.

The East German audience is at the centre of two articles by Patrick Major and Christoph Classen. In order to strike a chord with the GDR listeners, BBC scriptwriters like Bruno Adler had to immerse themselves in the East German cultural and political environment, which required close reading of the GDR press and official statements. With programmes like 'Letters without signature', the listeners themselves became the scriptwriters. Thus, Major argues, the very definition of 'active' and 'passive' actors in radio broadcasting needs to be radically re-thought. Taking into account listeners' surveys and reports, Classen suggests that most East Germans hardly listened to East German radio for pleasure and consistently found GDR radio overly political, didactic, and simply boring. Interestingly, according to Classen's findings, rather than responding to listeners' issues and complaints by airing their grievances and publicly holding the GDR authorities to account, the radio broadcasters tried to resolve them privately by lobbying behind the scenes on the listeners' behalf. Thus, instead of becoming an outlet for listeners, radio could also occasionally become a hidden channel of protest and change.