

The BBC Monitoring Collection: a comparison with similar activities by the Dutch Government in Exile in London, 1940-1945

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There are some interesting parallels between the work of the BBC Monitoring Service and the Dutch Government in Exile in London during the Second World War for they engaged in similar activities. In the latter case, work was carried out by the staff of the free Dutch radio, which broadcast from London as Radio Orange (Dutch: "Radio Oranje"). My approach for this workshop is to focus on the extent to which the results of both institutions overlapped and the extent to which they are in fact different. I have tried in particular to consider the similarities and differences in the methods used by both institutions. What were their approaches and areas of interest?

I explored and analysed the Dutch and Indonesia (former Dutch East Indies) parts of the BBC Monitoring Collection in Duxford in October last year, and while doing so had in mind the approach of the monitoring section of the Dutch Government in Exile. This section, called the Listening Service (Dutch: 'Luisterdienst'), was, as mentioned, part of Radio Orange, the Dutch-language radio programme on the BBC European Service managed by the Dutch Government in Exile and broadcast to the occupied Netherlands from 1940 until June 1946. Fifteen-minute programmes went out from London every evening at 9pm. The first broadcast as Radio Orange was on 28 July 1940, when Queen Wilhelmina addressed the Dutch people, although a Dutch section of the BBC had in fact started on 11 April 1940 and became a vital means of communicating from London after the German invasion in the Netherlands on 10 May 1940. The BBC and Radio Orange played a major role in keeping the Dutch resistance alive. Listening to either programme was forbidden and in mid-1943 the Germans made it illegal for the Dutch to own radio receivers. About half the sets were confiscated - the rest went underground.

Radio Orange was initially housed in Stratton House on Piccadilly, headquarters of the Dutch Government in Exile, but on 1 November 1942 the Dutch radio service moved to Bush House on Aldwych, headquarters of the BBC European Service.

Like the BBC Monitoring Service, the Dutch Listening Service listened to, transcribed and summarised official radio programmes broadcast by the Dutch in the occupied Netherlands. There was strong collaboration between the two services, so when the BBC was unable to monitor a particular radio broadcast, it used the Dutch record and vice versa. The Dutch Listening Service started their activities in the summer of 1941. That means that for the record of what was broadcast during period May 1940 - June 1941 we must rely wholly on the BBC Monitoring transcripts.

The archive of the Dutch Listening Service has been housed since the end of the war in the NIOD, the Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. This Amsterdam-based institute was founded on 8 May 1945 to map the history of the Second World War through independent research. In recent decades the Institute has broadened its remit so that it is today a centre of research into the impact of war, the Holocaust and other genocides on individuals and society.

The archive of the Dutch Listening Service is an open source collection and the texts are typed and bound. The collection is complete, although most of the texts are summaries, rather than verbatim transcripts. It is worth noting that the NIOD also holds a voluminous archive of German censorship records. All programmes broadcast from Nazi-occupied Netherlands had to be approved by the German authorities and up until September 1944, transcripts of around 80 percent of broadcast programmes were preserved. From September 1944, Holland was a battleground and, in the chaos that followed, the record was discontinued.

So what were my findings from my visits to Building 6 at Duxford? Firstly, the two monitoring operations had rather different purposes. The Dutch monitored broadcasts from the Netherlands in order to keep the government and Dutch community in exile informed about what was happening in their country. Summaries of some broadcasts were distributed in England (and forwarded to the United States and, until the beginning of 1942, to the Dutch East Indies). This is a different approach from that of the BBC which was gathering information for intelligence purposes.

Broadly speaking, the Dutch Listening Service was focused first and foremost on political issues. What were the consequences of the German occupation for Dutch society? What political moves were afoot in the Netherlands? What about the mood of the population? Was it possible to get an impression of people's political leanings? What, for example, was the role and influence of the Dutch National Socialist Party (Dutch: "Nationaal Socialistische Beweging" or NSB)?

The BBC was interested in these issues as well, but its principal focus was on the conduct of the war. News related to the battlefronts was inevitably the focus of close scrutiny. We can compare how the two organisations approached a particular programme – in this instance an episode from "Talks of the Armed SS" about Dutch volunteers sent with German forces to the Eastern front. The Dutch Listening Service was interested in the volunteer's political motives, his relationship with the Germans, the mood among his comrades and their political beliefs. Listening to the same item, the BBC Monitoring Service was more focused on where he was stationed, the situation at the front and the morale of the troops.

Another difference is that the BBC monitored international news items in very considerable detail, whereas the Dutch service did not monitor them so intensively. Among the news items broadcast from the Netherlands, the BBC monitored items broadcast such as 'British terror raids on Berlin', 'British submarine "Trooper" lost', 'News from Rome', 'Budapest', 'Lisbon' and an issue about United States mineworkers. The Dutch did not transcribe these items, or even summarise them.

An obvious difference is that the Dutch Listening Service transcribed the broadcasts it monitored in Dutch, whereas the BBC's operation employed translators and the transcripts are thus all written in English. Gradually cooperation between both institutions increased and there was a fuller interaction and useful exchanges of information. (As already noted, not infrequently when the Dutch had no record, they used the texts provided by the BBC Monitoring Service.) Both collections overlap but they also complement each other. Between them, it is impressive to note that the collections cover the entire wartime radio output from the Netherlands.

I found particularly interesting the transcribed broadcasts from the early months of the occupation. It was during this period that the programme 'Question of the day. Answers to correspondents' was broadcast. In these early days of the occupation it was still possible, although the process was somewhat 'controlled', to ask critical questions and to have a kind of debate and 'open' discussion. It was the period of restrained propaganda. Examples of the questions include: 'Is the bombing of Rotterdam an act of terrorism?', 'Could a catholic join the National Socialist Party (NSB)?', 'What is the socialist element of National Socialism?' and 'Is the hasty departure to England of the Dutch Queen and government in May 1940 a cowardly act?'. These questions were answered in a refined but combative tone.

From mid-1940, Dutch Broadcasting became of particular interest for the BBC Monitoring Service, because from this point on the Dutch international radio news was based on German sources and so an insight was gained into how the German authorities were processing and passing on that news.

A footnote to the Second World War story: several of those who assisted the Nazis in their propaganda effort during the war received very heavy sentences for their collaborationist activity. The most hated Dutchman in this regard was not a murderer, a betrayer of Jews or a war criminal in the conventional sense, but a radio propagandist. His name was Max Bloxziel. He was very popular with those Dutch who sided with the Dutch National Socialist organisation. But he was above all very clever and manipulative: he could sow the seeds of doubt among people of moderate views. Every word of his 'weekly talks' - so called 'Burning questions' - was monitored by the BBC. He was arrested directly after the war and his was the first trial against a major collaborator (interestingly not the Dutch National Socialist leader Mussert, or the head of the

German SS). Based on ten quotes from his radio talks, Bloxzijl received the first post-war death sentence in the Netherlands (there were fifty three in all). Bloxzijl became and remains a symbol of betrayal.

Finally, a note on some post-Second World War transcripts. The BBC Monitoring Collection provides particularly useful insights on account of its coverage of radio broadcasts from Indonesia. From 1945 until mid-1946, the so-called Bersiap period, British troops were stationed in Indonesia to keep peace and order. From August 1946 Dutch troops landed in Indonesia to take over the military command and from November of that year broadcasting was under Dutch control. Much can be learned about the insurgent movements against the Dutch from the BBC Monitoring transcripts of the programmes put out by Radio Indonesia of the Indonesian Republican Government such as 'The Voice of Free Indonesia'. Such material does not exist in Dutch archives. For researchers looking at this troubled period these records offer rich material.

In conclusion, the BBC Monitoring files are pre-eminently research sources providing an insight into the function and significance of wartime radio on an international scale. In the Netherlands there has yet to be a detailed academic analysis of Dutch radio propaganda and media history and the BBC Monitoring Collection provides a particularly rich resource for this activity.

It is pity that such an exceptional archival source as the BBC Monitoring Collection has been so little used for historical research so far. As a source it is important not just in relation to the Netherlands and the Second World War but for much broader research questions relating to media history and the use of propaganda, and social and cultural history as well. From my contact with the collection, I fully agree with the conclusions of Laura Johnson in her thesis, that the foremost qualities of the BBC Monitoring Collection for the Second World War years were trust, breadth and adaptability. The added value for the Dutch case is that researchers can involve the extensive archives of the Listening Service of the Dutch Government in Exile as well.

The BBC Monitoring Collection thus invites further research, especially historical comparative research. The archive offers several starting points for research programmes on an international scale. This should be continued.