Monitoring Moscow and South Africa during the Cold War and apartheid

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I joined Monitoring in March 1980 as an English monitor, with specialised knowledge of southern Africa and the role of Moscow, Cuba and China in supporting southern African liberation movements. My workload was a mixture of monitoring, selecting and transcribing material from a plethora of radio sources – Radio Moscow’s broadcast in English to Africa, Asia, Britain and the United States; South Africa’s Radio RSA broadcasting to Africa, the Middle East, Europe and America: Nigerian and Ghanaian broadcasts; Kabul radio; Tehran’s external service; All-India Radio, Pakistan’s external service; and Israel’s external service and Israel Defence Force Radio. Other stations might be added according to world events and BBC or Foreign Office interest.

It was fascinating and we produced full text transcripts, excerpts, summaries, news flashes and also the running orders of what was in entire bulletins. Some was sent by the New Bureau to BBC newsrooms, a large portion selected and edited for publication in the Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB) and much else bagged up and sent to the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence. The material produced contained a wealth of fascinating political, economic and military information, as well as an insight into what other countries wanted to tell the world and how they slanted or selected their news to meet their particular priorities. The most obviously interesting information on reporting of events and commentaries by the stations went into the SWB, but for analysts of particular countries, of radio behaviour and for academics studying particular periods or regions, the unpublished material is a largely untapped mine of information.

As the papers at the seminar at the Imperial War Museum demonstrated, the full transcripts and the ability to see what was and was not covered in bulletins and subtle differences between what was told to home and external audiences, shed a fascinating light on the output, especially at times of crisis. But there was also the ability, by comparing different services of say radio Moscow, reporting the same events to tease out the different lines of propaganda used for different target areas. The same is true of the very sophisticated way that Radio RSAS reported news and termed its commentaries, to play down the hugely negative human, social, political and economic effects of apartheid and play up South Africa’s self-appointed role as a bulwark against communism in Africa and a defender of “the free world”. It was interesting that the station chose announcers with very “English” accents and not ones with strong Afrikaner twangs, and to pick up the tone of injured innocence they often adopted when they had to refer to apartheid.

Because of my African expertise I was lucky enough to be sent to monitor in Malawi in 1981-1982. The main target was newly-independent Zimbabwe. I was the source of the BBC World Service’s first reports that Mugabe had sacked his deputy, Joshua Nkomo, after huge arms finds were made on farms belonging to Nkomo’s ZAPU party – monitored in Malawi, telexed to Caversham and broadcast by the World Service before the correspondents had reported the events.

When I returned to Britain and resumed monitoring I was thrown straight into the global reactions to the Falklands War – including monitoring Argentina’s clumsy propaganda station, radio Liberty. It was established by the intelligence service of the Argentinian armed forces and only broadcast for a couple of weeks in June 1982, as the British task force
assaulted the islands and recaptured them. In that time, it seems, the Britain task force commander, Admiral Sandy Woodward, committed suicide several times and the same British aircraft carrier was sunk a couple of times.

After the end of the war, it was back to more routine monitoring, until the death of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev on 10 November. I was monitoring Radio Moscow’s World Service in English that evening. Around 11pm or midnight, the station cut its jaunty Moscow Nights theme and started playing solemn classical music. This was totally out of character and so was duly flashed to Bush House and the Foreign Office. By the time I left at two in the morning, nothing had been announced, and it was only when I woke up the next day that what we had suspected was announced – Brezhnev had died. Then monitoring of every word from Moscow was done with even more care than ever to detect every nuance on wording and try to piece together the clues about who would succeed to the leadership of the Communist Party and the presidency.

Soon after I moved to the editorial team producing the Middle East, Africa and Latin America SWB, where I stayed, concentrating on Africa or being editor of the day, up until when I moved to Bush House in 1988. My period at Monitoring was fascinating. I now write and teach about journalism and propaganda. My book Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred was published in 2012. From my experience as monitor and now as an academic I am convinced of the immense research value of the Monitoring transcript archive.