Transcript 5

Poetic Voices, Writers, Producers – Inside the World Service

Wednesday 19th December 207
16:00 – 17:00

Chair:

JVH – Judith Vidal Hall (Index on Censorship)

Panelists:

JT – Sir John Tusa (BBC), Platforms or Programs – which should come first?
NC – Neil Cameron (Takeaway Media), London Calling: Inside the BBC World Service – A Filmmaker’s View of the World Service in Action
BH – Bill Hayton (BBC News), Manufacturing Consensus and Telling Stories – Producing News in the Broadcast Media
ZZ – Zinovy Zinik (BBC World Service), Tall Stories from Bush House

Discussant:

PS – Paddy Scanell (University of Westminster)
Judith Vidal Hall: I’m going to start because we’re running a bit late already and this is the last show of the two days and it’s been a fascinating, entertaining and illuminating two days, I think you’ll all agree. But I hope that this last panel will be a little different from what you’ve listened to so far. It’s unique in one sense, that with the exception of Paddy who is our discussant, a distinguished academic, we are all practitioners on this platform. All of us at one time or another – yes, a bit of ganging up, as the man says – well, I’m going to introduce the panel very briefly in a moment, but firstly let me thank everybody who brought us here, all the organizers and our hosts. It’s been wonderful to be here and I’m deeply privileged to be chairing the last session. Two things have struck me very forcefully in the course of the program. One, I’ve been around for quite a long time now and it strikes me very powerfully that ideas have their moment. Ideas cycle round. In 1978 I was a founding editor of something that some of you may remember: Guardian Third World Review. It was the first time that a mainstream paper had actually devoted time and space to voices from the third world and from the diasporas of that world. The idea being that it was time we gave them a say and if we listened, we might hear something rather different from… we, the commentators from outside. Well, I don’t think people listened, it was not a huge success, and after a brief time it folded. But however I note now that one of the dominant themes of this conference has been, and its been very encouraging to listen to, that all of you have the sense that the time has come both to talk to but also to listen to the various communities outside, and in particular to the diasporas in this country. That I find exciting and encouraging. The other thing that has struck me, and this is not terribly serious. My label states that I’m an independent scholar. I am independent, but I’m certainly not a scholar. And one of the things that struck me quite strongly is the distance that still separates we journalists from you academics. The perception of what media is, might be, can do, will do, is some way apart still. So let me first of all introduce a really distinguished and varied panel of practitioners. John Tusa is almost a national treasure, how about that John? But he started as a journalist and indeed remained a journalist. He became director general of BBCWS and is now very much engaged with the arts in this country and is the director of the Barbican. And he’s going to talk I think about programming and the choices that must be made. Paddy Scannell is going to sum up for us, and he’s a distinguished academic and the most fitting person to do that and we don’t at all mind you being with us Paddy, thank you. Bill Hayton has really done a great many things. You mention any great name in media and he’s sort of been around it. Sky, Al Jazeera…

Bill Hayton: Actually, I should point out that Sky was four nightshifts…

Judith Vidal Hall: Oh right, well that’s fine! He’s cut a hard row; he’s been freelance on the front line. That ain’t easy, believe me. He’s been everywhere; he’s been on the front line. And I think you’re going to talk to us about the balance of risk. In getting the story, remaining impartial and actually staying alive and reporting from the front line indeed can be very much about that. Neil Cameron. I’m not going to tell them what you’ve done because they can look in their programmes. Neil’s an independent film maker, director, producer and has a unique insight into the BBCWS. I think we’ll wait for you to reveal all. And Zinovy Zinik is a broadcaster with BBC World. He has a weekly magazine program, West End. It’s witty, it’s funny, it’s irreverent, it’s satirical. And you’re going to just… he’s a writer of fiction! Need I say more? So John, would you like to open the session for us?

John Tusa: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, fellow broadcasters and many members of the, former members of the BBCWS. First of all, I don’t know why we’re so beastly about academics. Actually if you think about it, the whole of the London
School of Economics used to broadcast at the World Service and indeed the World Service output depended on them; many of them raised their families on their broadcast and some of them had their careers enhanced. And there were some of them who didn’t, who were regarded as spending too much of their time in the World Service studios. But if you think of the contribution that the LSE and SOAS, and great academics like Professor John Erickson at the University of Edinburgh who was probably one of the greatest experts on the Soviet Military and Soviet Diplomacy in the Cold War, the relationship actually between academics and journalists is very much closer than on this occasion we’re choosing to say. So there. Now, I’ve called this… no, I don’t mean ‘so there’, so there… now, I’ve called this contribution to this very important seminar ‘Programs not platforms,’ as a way of raising an issue that I believe is not sufficiently or explicitly addressed, perhaps in the BBCWS as it happens, but certainly in the BBC as a whole. And what it is is a debate about priorities. Not so much about resource priorities, though it does have resource implications, but about the relative priorities attached to broadcasting and program values as distinct from technological drivers. Looked at like this, it reaches deep into the core values of an organization because the answer’s given to the question – Programs or platforms? – cast a searching light on core values and core purposes. And the answer to the question of course isn’t a black and white one. But the way its addressed and ultimately answered does involve choice, does reveal priorities and sets a broadcasting course of a particular kind. Now, this has become an issue in broadcasting whether domestic or international, because technology has provided so many new ways of reaching the listener, new paths to their ears, new roots to understanding, new opportunities for communication. But are these technological innovations to be regarded as imperatives or rather, facilities to be selected according to their ability to serve programming needs. And the answer to that question leads to very different results on air, very different results for the audiences and to a very different character for the organization making those choices. Now, there is of course nothing new about this interplay between technological innovation, technological availability and broadcasting. From the time that medium wave transmitters became feasible, available, they were rightly seen as a powerful addition to the World Service’s existing short wave signals. Over the years, those transmissions on a medium wave, typically from Cyprus to the Middle East, or from Oman to the Gulf States – incidentally the frequency that the Americans were desperate to get hold of during Gulf War One but we didn’t give it to them – those frequencies helped the World Service to make major inroads into audiences in those particular areas. Other famous medium wave signals included 648 to Western Europe, a signal outdone in its penetration to Europe only by the long wave frequency used for World Service programs overnight. I once asked BBC domestic engineers, who’s transmitters carried the World Service signal on long wave, whether there wasn’t a cost that the World Service should be carrying for those hours of broadcasting. They replied with absolutely straight faces, ‘Ooooh, don’t think so, by the time we’ve powered the transmitters and then powered them up again, its no more expensive just to keep them going through the night for you.’ One BBC indeed. The first real breakthrough in exploiting additional frequencies came with the agreement in 1987 to relay the entire output of the BBC Finnish service onto an FM station in Helsinki. While this was seen both as an innovation and as an opportunity it was also the only way that we could think of from saving the Finnish service from Foreign Office prescription cuts. Now the techniques to get the radio signal to the Finnish partner broadcaster were unbelievably cumbersome. Satellites were in their comparative infancy then. And
while the whole idea of FM broadcasting rapidly became increasingly popular, and
increasingly valued, continuing technological rigidity, real enough at the time, and
political vulnerability, so visibly demonstrated by the recent loss of the BBC’s
Moscow FM stations. These raised question marks about the amount of reliance that
should be attached to such relays. Since that first experiment twenty years ago, the
FM re-broadcasting drive has rightly become a mainstay of the varied ways in which
the World Service reaches its audiences. For the future the mouthwatering prospects
of FM relays in India and China, albeit both fraught with political and regulatory
barriers, are just that: mouth watering. Yet, here is where the dilemma starts to
emerge. The BBC as a whole, and the World Service in particular, have also invested
heavily in the digital online routes to the audience, or should I say members of the
audience. In particular, in North America, the decision was made to switch off short
wave transmissions because audience access to BBC Online was regarded as so
pervasive, as was direct listening through re-broadcasting via the affiliated stations of
Public Radio International. And successful as this has undoubtedly been, it does not
follow that the switchover has been cost free in audience terms, or that it hasn’t
flagged up issues of principle about how you reach audiences, and what kind of
audiences you reach depending on the medium chosen for doing so. And here it’s
worth looking dispassionately at the moment at the virtues and the importance,
historic and present, of that workhorse for the BBCWS, the short wave signal. Its
shortcomings are all too easy to set out. Building transmitters is hugely expensive.
Acquiring sites on other people’s territories around the globe is politically sensitive.
Running the relay stations is a major drain on the annual World Service revenue
budget. Finding the signal, tuning into the broadcasts requires patience and
determination or a degree in physics. The signal varies, and it does vary, from the
amazingly good to the chronically elusive. The signal is only partly directional; just
when you thought you’d tuned it to one particular part of the world, listeners report
receiving it in the opposite hemisphere. It has a life and it seems, a mind of its own.
How inconvenient. No, how wonderful! Make no mistake. The BBCWS is what it is
today, has achieved what it has over seventy five years, is heard, loved and respected,
not despite the short wave signal, but because of it. And the reason is simply stated.
Shortwave gets everywhere, the places you’d hoped for, the places you hadn’t
expected. Unfriendly governments can’t switch it off and the lessons of Cold War
jamming by totalitarian regimes were that the jamming was very inefficient, very
expensive and of limited real impact. Shortwave is a free spirit, universal, the true
open access medium, democratic, audience friendly and full of surprises. It is a good
friend to broadcasters and audiences alike. And it is a neutral medium by which I
mean that it’s characteristics as a broadcasting platform do not dictate the nature of
the programming it carries. Through out it’s existence, shortwave has willingly and
successfully carried whatever programs BBCWS has determined and has
accommodated itself as the networks themselves have evolved their particular
characteristics over time. Correction. That is not true. In one sense of course
shortwave is indeed neutral, but it is easy to overlook the strong characteristics I
mentioned earlier, openness, universality, getting everywhere, being widely
accessible. This does indeed have an effect on the programming that it carries. The
programming too has been open universal, appealing to wide audiences because that
was and is the nature of the medium on which it was and is carried. It was and is
broadcasting and not narrow casting. There can be no doubt but that the success of the
World Service has been because it has been a broadcaster and not a narrow caster. It
has always accepted that while it targets specific audiences, it does so thinking in
large categories rather than small ones and it has accepted the fact that if occasionally,
and indeed quite often, it reached audiences that it might not have identified and
didn’t altogether expect, then that was a cause for celebration. Yet one of the BBC’s
odd characteristics over time, has been to reject audiences that are not, so to say,
under its control, that have not been defined, that have not been predicted. What do I
mean? The most celebrated instance of this was in 1991 when the BBC was anxious,
domestically to create an entire rolling news channel on domestic radio, and
incidentally an idea that looks very dated and of its time today, and decided to give
away Radio 4’s long wave frequency to this rolling news channel. When research
McKinseys established that only 15,000 listeners would be affected by the loss of
long wave for Radio 4, the BBC immediately announced that Radio 4 would no
longer carry Radio 4, but would be the home of BBC rolling news. The wave of
opposition was huge, far more than the notional 15,000 potentially dispossessed
listeners. If you want the details for this story, David Hendy’s new book on Radio 4,
an absolutely brilliant book, carries it all. Tidal wave of opposition. But here’s the
point. Many of the most vociferous listeners were listeners throughout Western
Europe. The BBC response to them was that since they didn’t pay the license fee,
their complaints were irrelevant. What an extraordinary reaction. Of course, the idea
to pinch long wave had to be abandoned, and rightly so. But this idea of the ‘right’
audience, the audience defined in some social or policies theory, the audience targeted
by marketing, has always lurked in the thickets of BBC World policymaking. The
FCO in particular, regularly urged us, and no doubt does today, to concentrate on the
elite audience, the opinion formers, political elites. Why broadcast to audiences who
didn’t matter? Parading audience research as we did, no doubt we still do today,
showing that a particular language service reached millions of listeners, was
sometimes dismissed as irrelevant to the needs of British foreign policy making. Well
the World Service was, is, and will be a broadcaster, not a policy maker. But here is
where the supposed attractions of the new broadcasting platforms really come into
play. For they offer the vision of the atomized, discrete, particular listener receiving
programs in a very particular way. The listener, the audience can be identified and
targeted; they’re almost defined by the medium with which they get the programming
and they can be targeted as specific individuals and specific types. They are indeed
the elites, technologically defined, media aware and fittable into a segmented
marketing niche. Three deadly words. Marketing, audience segment and niche. And
here is the Faustian bargain. Modern platforms deliver niche audiences in an atomized
experience. Modern marketing offers the promise of successfully delivering the
programs to the niche audiences. I’ve no doubt that it does but the next step is to tailor
programming output to the identifiable needs of the niche audiences. After all, why
bother with the others? The logic is irresistible. Why bother with general programs
disseminated inaccurately and unmanageably to audiences that ‘you’ (in inverted
commas) have decided that you do not want and may have decided that you do not
need. Well, both the imperatives of technological advance and marketing
sophistication should never be used as drivers for broadcasting policy. They’re the
servants of program making, not its masters. Like Mephistopheles, they offer the
poor, self-deluding broadcaster Faust the promise of total control, of identifying an
audience, targeting it and then reaching it. And in this language, knowing your
audience means controlling it. But in the transaction of equals that genuine
broadcasting involves, ‘we don’t have to broadcast, you don’t need to listen, unless
you define your own need,’ such prescription language has no place. And what is lost
in the process of such a marketing of such a marketing and technology driven
process? Well, that very universality, that very inclusiveness, that very generosity of
outlook and spirit that has made the BBCWS at 75 the great institution that it is. If it
remains driven by values and beliefs, coherent, visionary, articulate, strongly held,
then it will continue to keep a place in the very densely people ranks of the
international media. It will remain distinct, unique perhaps, special certainly. But if it
becomes another broadcaster so obsessed by the availability of platforms, so obsessed
with the specificity of the targeting they allow, even demand, by the deliberate
tailoring of programs to the platforms rather than to the listeners, it could become just
another media and marketing vehicle. No more but a great deal less. Platforms are a
means to an end; programs are the ends in it. Happy Birthday World Service!
JVH: Thank you John, and I forgot to mention that I heard you on Radio 4 this
morning and I think you called the BBCWS a ‘defining’ British institution.
JT: I may have done. I stand by that.
JVH: Thank you. Neil, will you go next?
Neil Cameron: Hello, well, I’m here because I had the privilege to spend
eighteen months as an outsider making a series of films about the World Service
which have actually just been shown on BBC television. I don’t know, has anybody
seen them? Do you want to put your hands up if you’ve seen them? So many of you
know what I’m talking about anyway. But just briefly for those who didn’t, the
concept of this series came about because the BBC has made a lot of series about
institutions in Britain, it’s wanted to show how the National Trust worked, it’s wanted
to show how the Opera House works, various institutions have let the BBC cameras
in. Myself and a colleague for a long time asked the BBC, ‘Well, why not allow the
cameras in to the BBC itself?’ And to move on nearly ten years, we finally made a
series inside the BBC, but inside the BBCWS. When Marie asked me to come to this
conference, she said could I tell her something about the World Service that I found
surprising. And I think the first surprise really was the surprise I got a long time ago,
when I first, I worked briefly in the World Service in the 1990’s, and discovered this
institution which was absolutely fascinating and the big surprise was that it existed,
that something that was so British and so important a British institution and had such
influence around the world existed at all, and had, it was clearly born in the days of
Empire, it had, whilst the Empire had shriveled away the World Service was still
going strong, stronger than ever, perhaps. And an institution which is very,
quintessentially British, but for me as an outsider looking at it, absolutely fascinating
and something that one wanted to explore to see who worked in it, what it did and
why it was so successful. So I hope that the three films that we made tried to address
some of those questions. I was also asked if I would show some clips from the films,
which I’m going to do, partly because there were things I found which were
particularly interesting. So I’m going to do that. Just bear with me because I work in
television; anybody who works in television who tries to play something to an
audience on a screen, almost always comes a cropper. Something doesn’t work, but
lets see, here goes.
Clip one: Interview with the parents of a hostage (2’25”)
NC: I should have asked before but could people hear and see that? No. I don’t
know if we can drop these lights. That was, to explain what that was, that was Ahmad
Budeiri, the correspondent who’s based in Jerusalem for the Arabic service. He was
the only Arabic service reporting from Israel or the occupied territories in 2006. And
there he was interviewing the parents of one of the soldiers who was captured by
Hezbollah and he was the only journalist in the Arabic media who actually went to
interview those parents. But what I thought that illustrated was the extraordinary
situation that the Arabic BBCWS has to deal with, in that it has to explain properly
the Israeli position in the Middle Eastern political situation, and yet its talking to an
Arab audience who are probably very unsympathetic by and large to Israel, but he has
to report on Israel. And as you saw there, he has to engage with people who his
audience probably would not particularly identify with, but he shows them as human
beings and of course by the end of it, he’s saying well, he’ll come to the party when
their son is released. And as far as we know, the story hasn’t moved on in that sense,
we don’t know what’s happened to chap who was captured. But I though, that to me
was just a very very fine balance that Ahmed or someone in his position has to deal
with. So the next clip and I’m going to have to fast-forward to it… we’re going to see
a training session for new journalists arriving at the BBC. So this is Ian Hawe who
was giving the briefing about…
Clip two: 1’30”
NC: So that was Ian Hawe who was an editor in the BBC talking to newly recruited
journalists who are on a broadcast journalist course. And I thought what was
interesting about this was how they put him under pressure, how they were quite
skeptical of the idea that the BBC was broadcasting impartial, objective, independent
news. But he explained it rather freely and rather well. So I think, I suppose part of
the surprise was that people were so, to me, one of the surprising things was that the
people were so skeptical, but perhaps I shouldn’t be. So, I’m now going to show you a
piece from the final program. Those clips came from the second program which was
essentially a program about the BBC’s Arabic service and focused on the coverage of
the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. The final clip I’m
going to show you is from the last program which is a program about the World
Service in Africa. Now I’m sure you know that about half the World Service’s
audience is in Africa, and some of the services still very much operate as the main
sources of information for the people in some of the countries that the BBC
broadcasts to. So I’m going to show you a clip of Yusuf Garad, who is head of the
Somali service. It’s about half way through the program so this is going to skip
through for a while. One of the things I should say about Yusuf: they had to cover the
Ethiopian troops going into Somalia at the end of, about a year ago, at the end of
2006. And as the head of the service, he had about ten reporters and they were finding
it extremely difficult to report in Somalia, because there was a war going on, it was
very unsafe. And he, I’ll tell you after the clip, but some of the access he has was
extraordinary. But that will be shown by this clip as well. So in the clip I’m going to
show you, Yusuf is reporting that, the Somali service is reporting the closure of some
of the radio and television stations in Somalia after the Ethiopian troops have, well,
we cant say invaded because they were invited to come in by the United Nations. This
is more interesting in real time.
Bill Hayton: That was the bit where you showed an on-air cock-up. Were you under
any pressure not to show it?
NC: No I wasn’t under any pressure not to show any cock-ups, I could have shown
a lot more, obviously. With an organization that works on such slender means, I’m
surprised there aren’t more.
Clip three: 1’56”
NC: So, actually you can put the lights back up now, cos that’s the last clip I’m
going to show. I thought the extraordinary thing about that was that Yusuf Garad, the
Somali service is on-air reporting that the new Somali government has closed down
several radio stations and the Al Jazeera television bureau and ten minutes into the
program, Yusuf gets a call on his mobile from the Somali government themselves
wanting to put their side of the story in the program. Of course what happens is that he actually goes and records an interview which he then edits for a later program on the Somali service. But that to me, it encapsulates the influence and the respect I suppose that the Somali service in Africa has, and that extraordinary amount of influence that it has. I was covering the… the period I covered when I was making these films began in late 2005 when the announcement to close ten of the language services, most of them European, was made, and ended with the, well, there had already been an announcement then that Arabic service television was going to start. By the time we transmitted the program, Arabic service TV was well underway, Farsi TV had been announced. So it was an extraordinary period of change in the World Service, it continues to be an extraordinary period of change. Very challenging for the people who work there. There are many other observations I could make but I can’t monopolize the entire afternoon, so please ask any question later and thank you very much.

Bill Hayton: I’m afraid this is radio, the old fashioned way. Judith mentioned that I had worked at Sky extremely briefly, and it reminded me of my first night that I freelanced there and the news editor was complaining what a boring night it was, and how he had nothing to put in his breakfast program, and then the woman on the intake desk said, ‘There’s a plane gone down in the Atlantic, TWA jet!’ And the first thing the overnight producer said was, ‘Great!’ And then I realized that I worked in a different world. And for the past few years, while working in different areas of the BBC and other news organization, I’ve been trying to reconcile what appear to be mutually exclusive accounts of the reasons that news organizations present news in different ways, particularly when they’re accused of bias, and reflecting on my day-to-day experience, and these accounts tend to fall into two camps. One which you might tend to label ‘conspiratorial’, the Chomsky explanation, or the Glasgow Media Group explanation which tries to demonstrate, sometimes with the support of statistics, that news organizations are systemically biased in favor of certain interest groups. People with power, governments, corporations, organized lobby groups and so on, and then there tend to be defenses from journalists, who argue that its more like cock-up, that they do a fair and honest job and that any deficiencies in their work is largely due to funding constraints or lack of information or whatever it might be. And I think there is plenty of evidence to support each account, but I haven’t yet come across a convincing explanation from a journalist perspective that tries to unite the two, if you like, find out why you can sometimes find evidence for both of these accounts. So two apologies. First of all, this is a rather simplified and perhaps reductive version and it sort of minimizes what individuals do in order to bring out bigger pictures about agency and structure. And secondly, a partisan apology. I’m simply going to take it as a given that the BBCWS is the most accurate and least biased broadcaster on the planet, you can take issue with me if you like. I don’t know how you could construct any index to measure that but in terms of the range of stories covered, the range of voices included, and its attitude to people both with power and without power, I don’t think it has an equal. And I think there are basically four broad reasons for this. One is that it’s radio. To cover a story from a faraway location as you saw requires little more than a telephone connection. Compare that with TV, which requires satellites, large numbers of specialist technicians and journalists, often a ten-fold increase in costs, slower response times and greater susceptibility to interruptions. Its entirely possible to change a program at short notice, much more difficult to do that with television except in extreme circumstances, although its worth saying that actually radio is becoming less flexible as managers demand greater sound quality, so we need
greater digital communications and these are less flexible than things used to be done
the old way. So that’s a kind of caveat perhaps worth mentioning. Secondly, the
funding base. With no advertisers to please, and a reasonably secure stream of cash,
then risks can be taken which might not be possible elsewhere. So correspondents can
be dispatched to places which commercial broadcasters might not find viable.
Subjects can be investigated which advertisers might not like and so forth. And as for
government interference, all I can say is that I’ve never seen it. I mean I’ve never seen
an editorial decision that couldn’t be explained by the editorial or practical
considerations. And we all know that, as you heard, that strategic priorities are set by
the Foreign Office, the decision to create the program World Have Your Say was
clearly the result of the financial settlement, but the content I’m convinced remains
the preserve of the producers and presenters. Three, the audience. Journalists in the
World Service, and I’m talking mainly about people working in the English language
news and current affairs here, but also, and I’ve worked in the European region with
the European language services, many of which are now no longer. Journalists are
being listened to by people all around the world, from the very poor to the very
wealthy, they know they have to catch their interest and sustain their attention. So
each story has to be justifiable in the face of any of them. A story about Kashmir
would have to be justifiable to both an angry Indian and an angry Pakistani for
example. And with a quarter of the English language audience in West Africa, that
part of the world has to be covered in much greater depth than many other
broadcasters might be bothered to provide. But that too is changing, as Sir John was
saying, as media markets develop and diversify, the World Service is aiming at their
upper segments, known as ‘cosmopolitans’ and ‘aspirants’. People have a global
outlook and actively seek out information from other parts of the planet, in other
words those who have an interest in the World Service agenda. And to come onto
some more general points. News organizations always have a trade off between
telling the truth and winning the audience. Now by truth I don’t simply mean whether
a story is accurate or not, but how much of the total sum of human knowledge can be
included in a news program. Six billion people on the planet, each carrying out tens of
billions of actions each day so only a tiny fraction of them will ever get into a news
program, so in the face of this, what’s the role of a news organization. The answer can
only ever be partial. Since there's no single definition of what’s important among our
six billion people, so there can’t be a single news agenda from which to measure
deviations. And while some outlets – we heard about CCTV earlier today – might be
happy to just broadcast into the ether, for most organizations, the primary purpose has
to be to win and sustain an audience. And the audience, will be the judge of the
station performance. And outside of North Korea, people have a choice. A news
organization can choose to broadcast coverage about in-depth things that it’s own
staff regard as important, but if it fails to win an audience, then what’s the point. And
the World Service is increasingly aiming its output at market segments which want to
consume a global news agenda. News 24 on the other hand, the BBC’s domestic 24
hour TV station that I work for at the moment, is aimed at people who like a domestic
British agenda with plenty of sport and celebrity. There’s no point expecting either of
them to change unless their audience does. So from the perspective of people like you
attending a conference like this, you might consider the BBCWS to be ‘better’ than
News 24, but that’s because it’s intended to appeal to you. It’s a broadcasting
tautology. What’s significant is that the people who enjoy listening to the BBCWS are
the same people who run the world in many cases, and have the power to set a
hegemonic cultural agenda. If I’m using too much jargon then shoot me. My wife is
an academic. And the World Service is part of that agenda setting. But I must return
to the reasons why the World Service is different; this is my fourth one, and the fourth
is the internal culture. And you saw some examples in Neil’s films. And the culture of
course is partly a function of the bigger objectives set for it by its funders and the
need to serve it’s audiences. But its also, and this a key point I think, an autonomous
phenomenon. The culture exists within the organization sometimes in defiance of it
funders and its managers. The newsroom, for example, doesn’t take kindly being told
what to put in its output. I remember I was working on the Aids series a few years ago
– the World Service had a whole series of programs about Aids – and there was a
request that the newsroom might try to have a few more news stories about HIV and
Aids in it, and this went down extremely badly. Even on a subject as benign as HIV,
because it was construed as the thin end of a very thick wedge. The culture can be
idiosyncratic. The wearing of cardigans with leather elbow patches is particularly
tolerated. But specialization is generally admired and pedantry generally respected,
and the organization obviously hires people that have an experience of and an
enthusiasm of far away parts of the world. The problem is at times of cost cutting like
at present, then specialist knowledge can often be seen as a piece of fat to cut away
from the muscle of the organization if you like. But that’s not to say, despite my four
reasons for the specialness of the World Service, that its some kind of flawless prism
through which all events are perfectly refracted and focused for the consumer. Despite
all its differences, it’s still a media organization and subject to the same criticisms that
we make of others. So I’m going to try to turn back to my question in the beginning:
how to reconcile these two competing views of how these organization produced their
output. And I’ll begin with a meeting that took place at 9 o’ clock on Monday the 8th
of November 2004, which is the daily editorial meeting which takes place in centre
block in Bush House. A few hours before the meeting, a joint Iraqi-American
operation had begun to recapture the Iraqi city of Fellujah, which had been widely
anticipated in the preceding days. Now such meetings are opened by a senior editorial
representative from the World Service news and current affairs department. The
newsroom editor generally runs down the current stories, the foreign duty editor
outlines what coverage is planned from which correspondents, and then the discussion
passes around the table – there’s usually about twenty to thirty people there – and on
this occasion a representative of what was then the Africa region, asked for a
 correspondent to provide for an explanation of why Fellujah had become such a hot
bed of insurgent activity, why in short this battle was taking place at all. And I
remember the response of the editor chairing the meeting. He said, ‘It’s a bit late for
that now.’ And I sat there utterly torn, because the part of me which was the listener
and an advocate for the importance of speaking truth to power, felt that that was an
outrageous limiting of the news agenda. But the part of me which was the news editor
recognized that the request was indeed a bit late. And I realized that in those seven
words, he had articulated the difficulty of reconciling the conspiracy and the cock-up
views of media behavior. News has its own logic. Things have to be done in a certain
order. Think about a plane crash. It’s sudden, unplanned for and usually dramatic. But
the news media’s response to it, news media’s response, usually follows a set
formula, so the first hour the emphasis is what happened, you know, where, which
plane was involved, how many people affected. Then you go onto the human
reactions, grieving relatives, apologetic airline companies, and so on. And there’s a
phase in which questions may be asked about how it happened and what might have
gone wrong and then, only then do you get a discussion about the safety of air travel
and the pros and cons of expanding airports and so forth. Each phase has its place in
the sequence. And if you begin at step four immediately after hearing the news of the
crash, for most people, most journalists, most audience members, that would be seen
as inappropriate, and it would be obvious to them that it was inappropriate. And its
that word obvious that I want to focus on. Because it’s only obvious to people that are
familiar with the ways of a certain kind of journalism, which is dominant in the
English-speaking world. I mean we could imagine, I suppose, a form of journalism
which never asked questions about where and when and what, and only asked about
how and why. But it wouldn’t be news journalism. News isn’t about what’s
important. News is about what is new and measured in terms of the effects on human
lives. The main issues facing people on earth are not terrorism or crime, but poverty
and diarrhea. The problem is that these issues were important yesterday and the day
before, in short they’re not news. News doesn’t deal with issues, it deals with stories.
And stories a special kind of assembling of certain kinds of stories in a particular
order. They involve characters within a linear narrative with a defined beginning and
end. Now, something that I’ve thought about quite a lot is, how much information
people need to have in the back of their heads to understand a news story that we give
them. This is what I’ve been using. People who work in psycholinguistics call this
common-ground knowledge; the knowledge which the writer has to presuppose exists
in the audience’s mind. In short, how the world works. So for example, if we’re
writing a story about an earthquake, we don’t have to explain plate tectonics, and the
frailty of building structures in order for people to know why an earthquake has
destroyed a city. But where does this common ground knowledge come from? And I
would argue that it’s coming form the power of stories themselves. Now,
psychologists don’t know very much themselves about how information is stored in
the brain. But many assume that its actually stored in little synaptic packages with
strong neural links between elements of the story and those links are reinforced with
story telling. In other words, the psychologists reckon, we actually hold knowledge in
the form of stories in our heads. Now stories come in certain defined forms based on
shared cultural understandings. And anybody that’s ever read a story to a three year
old will know that such shared understandings are not innate, they have to be learned.
The stories that I’m reading to my three year old: men rescue women, paupers long to
be princes, money can’t buy you happiness, and human and mermaids are
incompatible. As a child grows up, these stories, or discourses take on new forms and
meanings, spelling out how men and women should get along, the rightful role of
authority, conflicts between desire and power, relations between ethnic groups and so
on. It’s the cultural intelligence that a person requires to navigate their world, the
conventional wisdom, if you like. And just as cultures are different, so are the stories
that are told in those cultures. And the stories which journalists write can do nothing
but repeat the forms of stories that they’ve learnt throughout their lives. Struggles of
crash, power, conflict between groups and rejection of authority and so forth. And the choice
of a trope, of a narrative style, is of huge importance. Is the Darfur conflict a story of
a wronged minority taking what is rightfully theirs, or a clash between the forces of
good and evil? Who is the minority and who is good? And propagating these story
forms, extending these shared understandings, is perhaps the most important an
ideological role of the BBCWS, perhaps more so than broadcasting the stories
themselves. And that’s because they define the western sense of proper rights of
individuals and authority, and the relations between peoples and between states. And
the power lies in the fact that it is not a deliberate propagation, it’s a subconscious act.
But listening to the World Service means opening the door to those shared
understandings and understanding their implicit values. Nine months after the
Fallujah meeting, on the 6th August 2005, the people of the Japanese city of Hiroshima marked the 60th anniversary of the destruction of their city by an American atomic bomb. The various English outlets of the BBCWS produced a total of 68 stories about the event. The amazing thing was that only nine of them mentioned which country had dropped the bomb. Now this is bizarre. They all used the passive phase: ‘the bomb was dropped’. And why was this? One reason might be that journalists and editors just thought that everybody knew who dropped it. But these are the same people that everyday write ‘the American president George Bush’, even though they must assume that people know who he is. Perhaps its an expression of collective guilt, the writers still feel some shame that their country was involved in the bombing. Or perhaps it’s a bizarre form of politeness, a bit like not mentioning your uncle’s drink driving conviction at Christmas or something, you know, somehow the writers of those 59 stories felt uncomfortable ascribing responsibility for the deaths of 140,000 people to the United States. And it’s these kinds of conventions, of politeness and things, which I think play out in stories and allow a sort of cultural hegemony to reproduce themselves in the work of journalists. And I think the process of news planning is crucial in this regard. Most news doesn’t arrive out of the blue. Court cases, official visits, government announcements are pre-announced and planned for. And in that planning process, there’s an expectation of what is likely to happen, and that’s introduced into the news narrative. So camera crews are deployed to certain locations. Presenters prepare certain questions. And that’s where the dominant assumption about the way the world works find their first expression in the news discourse. News planning is where hegemony begins to shape the agenda. So I’m afraid that’s been rather a cursory summary, we can maybe extend it in questions, but I hope I’ve suggested some plausible explanations for the ways in which dominant cultural forms of story telling and the reporting of news persist, despite many efforts to change them. I could go on, but as the editor said three years ago, ‘It’s a bit late for that now…’

Zinovy Zinik: I wasn’t sure in which capacity today I’m going to talk today, in a sense I’m not formally speaking BBC staff. I was for six months but that time I published my second novel in French translation and I thought I’m going to be a very commercially successful writer, so I left the BBC and then I decided to go back but couldn’t really stand another session of news coverage, you would be sitting in the canteen one hour and suddenly called to the mike to read the news and then to translate. Anyway, this routine wasn’t for me, so finally a compromise was found between me and this great organization by which I’m doing a weekly radio show called ‘West End’ and the brief was that I would cover cultural events or live effects reflecting culture or visa versa which is outside Russia, anywhere, outside Russia, for the Russian audience, in Russian. And of course the problem was the budget, and I can squeeze about four or three items into twenty five minutes with narration in between, links, plus music, a bit of reportage, and I have to pay £50, no more, to a contributor whatever he is doing, and wherever he is, which is. And that’s it basically. So most of the coverage happened when I’m, happened to be myself abroad, publishing this novel or that, taking part in this conference or that conference, or by people who sitting in New York or in France who don’t mind telling funny stories about life outside them, or cultural lens. But its difficult to find Russian speaking contributor who at the same time knows what’s happening around him because now London is swarming with Russians, but I haven’t got a clue what kind of town they’re dwelling, or visa versa, there are wonderful people in Slavonic studies who speak very, sort of not fluent Russian and they know a lot. So there is a problem of
conveying the complexity of life outside Russia in Russian. But mainly I do it by editing, and editing involves a lot of interference actually. There is, I speak to the person for about half an hour, and then I squeeze it, sometimes changing places of their speech into five minutes for something. And I’m saying this, that although I’m trying to be objective, listening to all this wonderful explanation of how to remain neutral, but in fact we are not neutral, we create certain illusion and we interfere in one way or the other in presenting things to the outside world. And this kind of inner voice of the presenter, how limited his time during the space of the program is, and I’m trying to limit my presence to the bare minimum, to the links, is a good question. It’s a voice of the radio station. And I emigrated in 1975 to Israel and had been doing theatre there and then my first novel was published and I came to France for the launch of the book and I was invited to the BBC in 1976 and I still vividly remember these 1970’s in Moscow. And there was a great man called, a veteran of the BBCWS, called Anatoly Maximovich Goldberg. Some of you probably remember him. And this voice of course was not entirely heard. He was there, going through the heavy jamming. And still, through this jamming, I remember these wonderful cadences of very well tuned slightly husky, very confidential voice of a political commentator, who would say on the one hand, blah blah blah blah, and on the other, something else. And we didn’t hear what actually it was all about, we knew only the tone of the rendering of events, in a very balanced way. And then I arrive in London and I arrived in this wonderful building called Bush House, and I entered the labyrinthian corridors of Bush House in Russian service and then I saw the man. Amazingly he actually, somehow, the image, his appearance fit the image I had from his voice. And he was dressed in a well-tailored suit, leather suit, and it was bow tie, and then much much later, I asked, made a program asking people who had never seen Goldberg, how does he look like in their imagination. And it was accompanied by the music of Goldberg’s variation of Bach, because nobody actually knows who that Goldberg was. And the people gave absolutely diverse, fantastic, diverse answers. But somehow, they were all around a post-Victorian image of a Londoner. He would either smoke a pipe or he would be having a kind of vest, but it would be corduroy and he would have leather shoes and he would have a stick or a boiler hat. And it was all sort of rigmarole of these Victorian paraphernalia and basically people would see him stepping down from a double decker etcetera etcetera. And then when I arrived to Bush House, I suddenly realized that the reality behind his voice totally doesn’t correspond at all to what I thought about London and about Bush House. One of the first scenes in the corridors of Bush House was – I actually exploited it, I’ve stolen it for one of my novels – it was an incident of a quite a character. All studios had heavy doors; they were double doors, and the little lobby there in between two doors, really of the size of a yard or so. And one of rather clumsy members of the Service, he went to the canteen to fetch tea for everyone in the studio, and then he brought a tray full of cups of tea, and he opened a first door by his elbow, and then usually what you do, you open the door then you squeeze yourself and then you turn around and with your posterior, you push another door. And the thing is that you shouldn’t do it when the light is red, that means that the announcer, presenter is already on the air. When he was opening the first door, the light was green, but then when he pushed the door, the light was already red. And then the - I’m describing the material world behind the wonderful façade of Anatoly Maximovich Goldberg’s wonderful post-Victorian voice – the acoustics in this fantastic basements of Bush House were so terrible that a studio manager would put a screen behind the presenter to improve the quality of voice, to concentrate the audio waves to go directly into the mike. And of course when he bumped the second
door with his posterior, the door smashed the screen, the screen fallen on the
presenter, who absolutely, I mean, the Russian’s swear really really nasty, very very
nasty. And immediately followed by Trumpet Volunteer which was the signature tune
of the BBC Russian service. And then, my introduction to the legendary BBC canteen
which happened when I was trying to get a coffee the Russian way, black coffee with
lemon which is very good for your hangover, good recipe. And a lady behind the
counter couldn’t understand what it was all about, she said, Russian tea? Which
means she wanted to give me a tea with lemon, which somehow she could
understand, but coffee with lemon was kind of contradiction in terms. Then I saw the
transformation throughout the years of the (indistinguishable) in the canteen into
somehow a fictitious order which exists now whether its Euro-French menu there.
Everything was not at all like I imagined it’s going to be. It was somehow chaotic,
very much chaotic. The image of the post-Victorian façade didn’t hold any water or
any ether. It was really, my first year, I couldn’t imagine how this organization
produces such a wonderful sound, such wonderful programs. When you start reading,
and it wasn’t just my time, I mean if you read Penelope Fitzgerald’s famous novel,
Human Voices, its called, something, you will read that there was one spoon in the
canteen, chained to the counter to stir the tea and coffee and sugar there, and that was
of course during the war. But anyway if you look at the corridors, if you looked at
what was happening, the disorder, the different, contradictory orders, running, mixed
papers, there were typists, it was a very physical world. It was a world of the
typewriters; it was a world of razors. I mean, do you know in Bush House, in every
editorial room of the BBC, they have packets of accurately packed, very sharp razors,
with notorious acrimonies that would happen between editors and contributors or
whatever, I wonder what would happen, how does it happen that nobody actually hurt
during 75 years of the BBC, that nobody actually used this razor, you know? And
then it dawned on me one day that Bush House – as they say in Russian: Bush
‘ghouse’, house in Russian means ‘house, home’, but ‘ghouse’ in Russian means
‘cows’. So what was hiding behind these monolithic façade of the image that
Goldberg’s voice was projecting was actually cows, and out of these cows, wonderful
programs were coming out. And I’m talking about twenty years ago, thirty years ago,
what was happening, but actually the situation hasn’t changed much. And what is
amazing, that now what is happening in Russia, the situation hasn’t changed much
either. First of all, we’ve been deprived of FM frequencies. So we’re back where we
belonged, that is, short wave bands and medium wave and its limited audience. And
still people listen to it, because they listen with a certain image. And this image is still
very much monolithic, and unfortunately and politically in Russia, people again
returning to the monolithic vision of the nation, its become very patriotic, if not
fascistic, and its become a single party system, if not authoritarian, totalitarian, it
looks like the former Soviet Union going back to again to the vision of the world as a
monolithic universe. And as a counter balance, they want to see Britain or the
Western world as one monolithic institution, as an enemy or as a friend, but
monolithic. My task as a writer, all my life, talking about life outside Russia in
Russian when I write in Russian, or as a broadcaster is to show how disorganized,
how non-hierarchical this world is. How actually unpredictable, and that actually
there is no such thing as Europe as such, there are many many countries and many
many cultures co-existing with each. That is basically it, I can stop telling stories but I
think it’s time, time’s up.
JVH: And so it is. Anarchy in Russia and chaos in London, I think it’s delicious. Thank you. We began the session rather late, so I think if you don’t mind, maybe run on a bit. Danny will probably invite questions. Danny I’m leaving everything to you. Paddy Scannell: Well, folks, you’ll remember that I’m the academic on this platform. And actually I’m quite used to doing gigs at the BBC, as a sort of BBC junkie of many years, I find myself invited from time to time to take part in events like this. The last one that I appeared in was about nine months ago, and very similar in some ways and held by a similarly august pairing between academia and the BBC and not very far from here actually, it took place in the British Library. And it was another anniversary, this is the 75th anniversary of the World Service, nine months ago, it was the 80th anniversary – it reminds you how old the BBC is – of the Proms, and I must say, that was a tougher audience than this one, because sitting out there were lots and lots of promenaders, they’re fiercely protective and fiercely proud of the Proms and know every single program that ever there was, and there were a lot of distinguished BBC broadcasters sitting up there, including Humphrey Burton. And when it came to my time I made the unfortunate flip remark that actually I preferred listening to the Proms on the radio than actually going to the Albert Hall. And when it got round to question time, he rather ate me up. Anyway, as I take it, my function is not so much to comment on what the speakers on this platform have said, but to try and so to speak gather things together a little bit at the end for two days. Its been I’m sure for all of us extraordinarily fascinating two days and I have sat in on a large number of presentations, and as always I’m surprised whenever I attend an event about the BBC, at the extraordinary diversity and range of things that it does. So without mentioning names, but I was informed and entertained by presentations about sport on the World Service, about music on the World Service and the emergence of something indeed called World Music. I was fascinated by a comparative study of soap operas on the World Service which sort of showed that versions of Ambridge were being produced in Cambodia, in Burma and in Africa, each with an unobtrusively didactic, and educative purpose, which of course the Archers has too. I think that one of the things that the conference has covered admirably has been in fact to remind us of the various incarnations of the World Service. That indeed it did begin as an Empire service. That it really did come into its own in the extraordinary circumstances of the Second World War, at which point global broadcasting came into its own very very quickly. And the world, as you know was divided by the BBC into five different color coded networks that covered the whole world. Coming out of the Second World War, and a number of papers commented on this, the role of the BBC as an arm of British foreign policy, the role of the World Service, what was it called then? Was it the external…? Yes, the external services, in Cold War politics was important. And so what we now call the World Service and what we’re now invited to think about at the World Service is, and this is a crucially important thing to bear in mind, something that has historically, continuously developed and adapted to the changing realities and the changing situations and changing circumstances of the world itself. And this is something that we should remember, this is but one aspect, and a very important aspect of the BBC itself, which John Tusa called a defining British institution and I think he is right. And really I just would like to really pick up on a couple of points that John has made, because I find myself in complete agreement with him about those things. Two things. One, the importance of shortwave as a sort of democratic system of transmission and delivery of something, this is the key word, that is truly a broadcast service. And he wanted to emphasize quite rightly the importance of that defining characteristic of the BBC as a broadcaster. Inside Bush House, well as you
all know, at the entrance to Bush House there is a famous statue by Eric Gill of
Prospero and Ariel. But when you go into the entrance, into the lobby, there’s a
smaller sculpture that he made of the Sower, and this is, you’ll remember that Eric
Gill was a Catholic sculptor, and of course it is a reminder of the parable of the
Sower, that Christ gave to a large crowd of people. And the crucial point about the
word ‘broadcasting’ is it’s indifference to its audience, that is to say, it isn’t just
broadcasting to the selected few, it isn’t a service for the chosen ones, it’s a service
for anybody and for everybody. For those that care to listen and that don’t care, for
those that are receptive, for those that may be hostile. And I take John to be saying
that the role of broadcasting at this particular point in history is as important, if not
more important, than ever, given two things. Firstly, that it is now clear to us all, that
we live in a common world. And this sense of living in a common world is partly an
effect of the kinds of technologies of which broadcasting is a crucial early example.
And in this common world, there are now new technologies that can deliver services
on demand, my Sky, my personalized service, my personal video, my personal music
in my ear. In such a world, the role of broadcasting, that is to say it’s public mission,
remains, becomes I think, even more important. And I think that that is what I take
away from these two days. Twenty years ago, it wasn’t obvious. In fact what the role
of the World Service was, after the collapse of Britain’s imperial role and after the
collapse of the Cold War. The fact that it is the broadcaster of the world today, the
fact that its audiences continue to grow is an important indication of the BBC now
not, well not only, and perhaps not only in the first instance any longer, a national
broadcaster, but a world broadcaster that plays an important role in a world language
from London, which is in fact now a world city. So that in all sorts of ways, it now
seems to me appropriate that although I know it is controversial, that the World
Service is moving out of Bush House and now is incorporated into the centre, into
Broadcasting House itself. And I see it as recognition of world broadcasting as a
crucial redefinition and respecification of the public role of broadcasting at the
beginning of the 21st century. Thank you.

JVH: Marie, have we got time for some questions from the audience, and indeed are
there any or are you all… yes, there’s one over here and another at the back there, but
there’s only three, let’s take three questions and then perhaps you can answer
collectively, why don’t we start over here?

Question: Well, as some people will have gathered by now, I work in the
audience research department of the World Service and it’s my penance to sit here
while people occasionally misquote, misuse or to ride the work that we do. But can I
just briefly say a word from somebody else’s perspective. Because in audience
research, our chief function as I see it is to listen. Is to listen to the most important
people of all, and that is the listeners. And beyond that, the non-listeners. Because if
we actually think about what the World Service is for, its to serve the people, who
listen to it, who watch it, who use it. And if the World Service is not going to be
simply a tool of government policy, if its not going to be an ego trip of broadcasters,
then we must listen to people for whom its intended. We must listen to them, and
sometimes its uncomfortable because in audience research, when you’re actually
confronted with the behavior and the attitudes of the people you’re researching, you
discover that these people are infuriating because they have this persistent tendency to
do what they want to do and not what you want them to do. And we have to think
about what it is, where they are, what they want and what they’re going to do with
what you’re offering. And when we talk about targeting, and I could go on for ages
about what we actually do with targeting, and its essence, it is to ask the question,
'Who will use and want and value and benefit from what we have to offer?' And that’s what we try to do with targeting audiences. And it can be uncomfortable because people will use it if they want it, and if they don’t want it they won’t stick with you just out of some sort of loyalty. So just two specific points related to what’s been said here. One, we talked about diaspora communities and the value, one of the points of this conference has been to look at the value of diaspora communities and how we can serve them. Those communities were not typically reached by traditional broadcast methods. It is only with the advent of new media that we have opened up that service to a group of people who would value it. Second, and I think the most telling point, comes from something that’s been said to us by young people in India. We ask them, 'Do you know about the BBC?' They say, some of them say, ‘Yes, I know the BBC, that’s what my parents used to listen to. Now, ask yourself, I say if you want that to be the epitaph of the World Service, that its what people’s parents used to listen to, then lets stay as we are and not change, but ask yourself, ‘Is that what we want to be?’ and if not, how can we avoid that? Question: Its one for John actually. John, you were an instrumental driving force in setting up the World Service television. I won’t ask you what’s right with it, what’s wrong with it? Question: Two quick questions if I might. One for Bill Hayton and perhaps other members of the panel. You didn’t mention the editorial demands and challenges that have been presented by citizen journalism, by blogs, by mobile phone cameras and all the new sources of information that have been presented in emergencies such as 7/7. How do you deal with it editorially, how can any established, any news organization make real sense of that. My second question is to Sir John Tusa, it really relates to the BBC’s coverage of Europe. It seems to me that willy nilly, whether it was a decision of value for money or not, the abolition of all those European language services of countries that have recently joined the EU on the grounds that they’re now part of our club and we don’t need to talk to them has given a very negative impression of the BBC’s attitude towards coverage of European affairs. I asked Nigel Chapman yesterday, and he said the BBC has no brief to either promote or focus on the European Union or Europe as an institution and Mr. Zinik, you talked about Europe as being a whole scattering, a little kaleidoscope of countries, I want to ask you Sir, whether you think that the BBC has a duty to promoting the integration of Europe? JVH: All right, one more, do you want to do it now? Okay, Marie. Question: Birthdays, a time for birthday wishes. And I’m wondered what each member of the panel would wish for the World Service? JVH: Oh, that’s lovely. Yes. All right, John you seem to have been a bit of a target area, why don’t you start? JT: Well, as far as (indistinguishable), I don’t think the BBCWS has a duty to promote anything. I do find it very peculiar the thought that, and I know you’re not suggesting it, that the European Union and that the development of the EU as an institution should not be a subject journalistically worthy of covering, so promoting European Union, no, that’s for politicians to do or not to do. Journalists should certainly cover it in terms of news values. As far as World Service television is concerned, my regret was and is… first of all, World Service television wasn’t started in, where are we, ‘87, ‘88, I mean there were all sorts of political reasons for that, also funding reasons. I think one of the main ones I was always told that the Foreign Office finally persuaded Geoffrey Howe that it would be a good idea for there to be World Service television in English, and it kept getting onto his desk and into his In-tray and it got higher and higher in the In-tray, and when it got to the top of the In-
tray, he took one look at this, he knew that he’d have to go across the road and argue
it with Mrs. Thatcher and it then promptly went to the bottom of the in-tray. What I
always regretted is that a World Service television, which was fully owned by the
World Service, with World Service standards and World Service news journalism was
not set up. As I understand it, it is a hybrid; it has always had to be a hybrid. The
funding from the very beginning was a hybrid and it seems to me still to be an uneasy
compromise and that we’re still waiting for somebody to understand what the rewards
for grasping the potential of World Service television might be. So it’s open to
somebody to do it.

JVH: Anyone else want to talk about it at all?

ZZ: Shall I answer to? As all of us of course regret the closure of eleven services I
think it is? Mainly from Eastern Europe and of course I think its very damaging. I’m
not a member of the management, and not a member of the BBC Corporation any
longer but I still working and I feel how the lack of another voice, even in the
framework of Bush House from Eastern Europe is felt. Its, I don’t know, its just a
kind of empty space in a way. And you used to call people from Poland when you
have a certain question about say, a complicated situation there, and there’s no body
to call now. And I don’t think that a place like Romania is still entirely free in terms
of a freedom of the press, cos its very much came into the European Union with a
legacy of a Soviet past and like in Russia, the freedom of the press is definitely
impaired because its driven by a different power groups and journalists are, if not
scared then playing up to certain powerful forces. So, and it definitely would affect
the workings of the European Union. What I said about the diversity of Europe, I
mean there is a unity and there is diversity. There is a false unity superimposed say on
Russia, like the party called the United Russia, it doesn’t mean that there is no unity
in the nation as such, but there is a false unity, and their impression of the European
Union is a false impression of the unification rather than the diversity. And that was
my point. But this inner voice that I was talking about, this inner voice could be
disturbed by this pseudo-multiplicity and we again would start a discussion about
multi-culturalism, and the BBC certain tone of voice of the Russian service in the
period between ’91, that is the forthcoming of the Russian revolution, first revolution
or second revolution, and Putin’s Russia was due to the fact that the programs in the
BBC Russian service became very much dependant on re-broadcasting and that is that
the format of certain programs had to be mangled to fit the certain standards of the
new Russian media which was very mititative of commercial radio, mainly American,
and I think its damaged the tone of voice of the BBC Russian service, which I hope is
going to be recovered. As to blogs and mobile phones etc, its just that I’ve been
editing my recent issue of my magazine radio show, and there is yet another of Magic
Flute and we called Broadcasting House and ask if they have any actualities, that is
sound effects and such. And they said, ‘Well, yes, no, well, we can send it up, but
actually we’ve stolen it from You Tube’. But it wasn’t a theft because the production
team of this particular opera production, they put themselves the soundtrack of this
particular opera, of the whole opera on You Tube. So definitely it helps.

JVH: Yes, I think in many ways, they’re not so much rivals for attention, as in fact
rather useful adjuncts, when something terrible happens, and the BBC’s not there, I
mean people are now sending in their photos, we’ve seen it, haven’t we.

NC: From my view, blogs aren’t competition in a news sense. They’re competition
in a time sense, in the same way that a Game Boy is a competitor of the BBCWS.
People have to fill their town somehow, on the train reading a newspaper or playing a
Game Boy; in the office looking at blogs or looking at the BBCWS, that’s why blogs
are competition. They’re not a news source. I mean there have always been odd news
letters and specialist sources that have dealt with particular areas and that’s what
blogs are, I mean there are so many blogs that one can’t possibly hope to look at all of
them, or even a reasonable sampling of them. What I think is a threat online is
news.google, because news.google aggregates news, wires from all over the world, all
kinds of specialist websites and things. I mean for example if I want to find out what’s
going on in Vietnam, because I have a continuing interest there, I look partly in the
BBC wires because I know that I’m only going to get Reuters agents, Agance France
Presse, and Associated Press from them. If I go onto news.google, I’ll get a much
wider range of sources in one easy web page but I think you’ve got to remember that
different people are going to want different things. And some people will want to look
at blogs and feel that they’re getting the authentic voice of the American marine in
Fallujah or whatever it is that they think they get from a blog, other people are just
going to want to sit down at the end of a busy day and watch the ten o’clock news
and let the BBC give it to them kind of in 26 minutes without them having to make
any effort and those different audiences will continue to segment and develop and
different people will continue to want different things. I mean I covered the rise of
Indy media which was the first sort of alternative website to allow people to edit and
post things, it was very much associated with the protest movement. That’s not a
short-term threat to the BBC, people who want to look at that will want to look at
other sources, but it’s a long-term threat because it poses a challenge in terms of the
legitimacy of the mainstream media. There’s space there for alternative ways of
writing the news, alternative ways of writing about the world and if the mainstream
media don’t respond to that or think about the way that they write stories and the kind
of stories that they cover then they will just lose people. The danger of that of course
is what people call the ‘echo chamber’, that we will all have our own little media
where we just talk to ourselves and we just get the echoes bouncing back and we
don’t have a central place where we debate key issues and that is a key issue that the
BBC must continue to perform. Organizations with budgets, if they’re sensible,
should be able to use those budgets to constantly think about what their place in the
marketplace, to reposition themselves, to market – I’m sorry Sir John, you’re going to
kill me for this – and they will survive. The ones who think that they can carry on
doing what they’re doing, will gradually decline. But I don’t think there is going to be
a sudden revolution and that some spotty teenager is going to be able to invent some
website that will takeover from the BBC.

Question: I’m sorry, I’m not saying its competition, but to say its not a resource
I’m sorry is demonstrably untrue, I mean 30,000 emails…

NC: No I didn’t mean that, I’m sorry. I thought you were talking about the idea that
people might go and use the Drudge Report or some other kind of blog in preference,
or some guy in Vietnam writing about the way the typhoon affected his life, rather
than go into the BBC website, I thought that’s what you were saying. Yes, photos and
user-generated content are increasingly important to the BBC TV centre, and it has an
entire department dedicated to processing it and getting it into the output. I frankly
can’t be bothered to listen to what most people have to say about most natural
disasters. If someone’s got something to say and its from the place and its an
authentic account of what’s happening, if they’ve got photos, fine, but you know, to
find out that Wayne from Watford thinks that invading Iraq was a bad idea, does it
matter to me? I mean it may matter to someone who was trying to promote the brand
and promote an idea of a responsive BBC, but as a journalist, that doesn’t matter to
me very much, I have to say, that’s slightly reactionary of me to say that, but that’s
what I feel. Now, you mentioned birthday wishes.

JVH: Yes thank you. Would you like to end on that?

NC: Well, I’m probably not alone in wishing the BBCWS well for its 75th birthday.
I suppose one thing that I hope doesn’t happen is that the, television is coming along,
television as somebody who’s worked in television is much more expensive than
radio, I hope that the impact of television on the World Service doesn’t detract from
its range and ambition elsewhere. I hope that the resources and energy and
commitment that’s put into television doesn’t detract from its range and ambition
elsewhere, and that its still thriving in another ten years or more, as far as we can see.

JT: I agree with that.

BH: Just not to sit on its laurels really. I mean don’t do what I did and assume that
its simply the best organization in the world of its type, I mean constantly question
that and find out what people really think.

PS: I wish it will continue to broadcast to America where I work, and I very much
value getting world news from the BBC because I’m not getting it from the American
news that I listen to.

JVH: Zinovy, do you have wishes?

ZZ: Oh, I don’t know, just the government to cough up more money to buy FM
frequency in Russia please, so that we would be able to broadcast live.

JVH: Well, I don’t detect a great many hands, so may I thank you all for a
fascinating session.

Annabelle Sreberny: Can I just terribly quickly thank Marie, Joseen and Karin for
organizing this conference, for really working hard, for getting an amazing range of
academic and professional people here. Can I thank all our chairs, all our panelists, all
our discussants, all our reporters for making it really a very interesting event. Can I
thank SOAS technicians for actually giving us the support that we needed. And thank
everybody that was an active audience, comments, discussions. Our research project
goes on, the World Service goes on. I hope we meet again, perhaps here, perhaps
elsewhere, thank you very much.