

## A sensory experience. BBC correspondent Audrey Russell reporting (and remembering) the Second World War.

The Second World War transformed the everyday soundscape in Britain. A ‘Total War’ on the home front, as James Mansell writes, ‘altered what people heard in their daily lives and how they listened.’<sup>1</sup> One key feature of this transformed soundscape was the radio. Radio would take centre stage in British everyday life during the Second World War. It was no longer simply a medium for private enjoyment but had an important function providing public information and entertainment for the home, the workplace, and on the battle front. The British Broadcasting Corporation (hereafter the BBC) entertained factory workers, the forces, and listeners at home with morale-building popular music.<sup>2</sup> Variety and comedy created, what Anne Karpf has called, ‘a kind of audio home front’, with recognisable characters and catch phrases that ‘became enormously reassuring, providing an aural anchor in turbulent times.’<sup>3</sup> There were also other developments. The war made radio come into its own as ‘a rapid news medium.’<sup>4</sup> The recording of shellfire in the First World War brought the front into the home and audiences closer to an understanding of the sounds of war.<sup>5</sup> This was to become even more prevalent in the Second World War due to the expansion and development of radio broadcasting and recording technology. The immediacy and speed of radio gave it an advantage over newspapers and it became a key platform for the reporting and mediation of war at home and abroad. The radio war correspondent was to play a key role in this mediation.

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<sup>1</sup> James G. Mansell, *The age of noise in Britain: hearing modernity*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> Christina Baade, *Victory through harmony: the BBC and popular music in World War II*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Karpf, *The human voice: the story of a remarkable talent*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006, p. 242.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Crisell, *An introductory history of British broadcasting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Routledge, 2002, p. 61. Compare the discussion by Qvarnström in this volume on slow Vs rapid media.

<sup>5</sup> Elodie A. Roy, Worn Grooves, *Media History*. doi:10.1080/13688804.2016.1190639. 2016; Louis Goddard, ‘“A few feet of film run backwards”’: tracing the sonic construction of shellfire, 1914–30, in *The auditory culture reader*, Michael Bull & Les Back (eds), pp. 293–303, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

‘Hello BBC. This is Audrey Russell speaking from an airfield somewhere in Britain. I’ve just landed in a Lancaster with 24 ex-prisoners of war whom we went over to fetch in France this morning.’<sup>6</sup> One such radio war correspondent was Audrey Russell (1906-1989). Russell has been credited as being the first woman radio war correspondent at the BBC<sup>7</sup> – and possibly even the first woman BBC news reporter. During the Second World War, the BBC adopted new production techniques and ‘shifted from being a conduit of news from other sources to a news-gathering organisation in its own right.’<sup>8</sup> This meant it relied more on collecting information through war reporters and correspondents (or ‘observers’ as they were initially called), and making use of recording cars and newly developed portable recording technology. Eye-witness accounts and recorded actuality were introduced into news presentation and reporting. This would also have a dramatic effect on how news sounded. One such early attempt from July 1940 was Charles Gardener’s exciting commentary, recorded live, of an aerial ‘dogfight’ over the Straits of Dover that produced a somewhat sensational commentary: “Oh, we’ve just hit a Messerschmitt! Oh! That was beautiful”.<sup>9</sup> A Listener Research report, made in response to the commentary indicated that the ‘broadcast aroused enormous interest’ and that a large majority of the respondents gave it ‘full approval’ and wanted more.<sup>10</sup> In essence, this was news reporting and presentation more appropriate to the *sound* medium. For example, BBC’s *Radio Newsreel*, introduced in 1940, had been designed to imply “‘immediacy’”, and deliberately sought “‘radiogenic stories’”.<sup>11</sup> Between 1941 and 1943 the BBC began to develop front-line broadcasting. After D-Day in June 1944, the Corporation launched the pioneering, *War Report*, the ‘most technically challenging, topical and thrilling radio programme of the war.’<sup>12</sup> In the first programme listeners heard war correspondent Howard Marshall describing the landing in France with the Allied forces, and other two prominent war correspondents, Richard Dimbleby and Frank Gillard, reported

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<sup>6</sup> 24 May 1945, Prisoners Home by Air, Transcription, BBC WAC Radio Talks Scripts pre 1970 RUS R450.

<sup>7</sup> Siân Nicholas, *The echo of war: home front propaganda and the wartime BBC, 1939–1945*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 213; Audrey Russell interviewed by Madeau Stewart Oct and Nov 1977, Oral History Transcript BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter WAC) R143/10, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas, 1996, pp. 6–7.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Hugh Chignell, *Public issue radio: talks, news and current affairs in the twentieth century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 49. For a more detailed discussion of the impact of Gardener’s commentary and listener reactions see Nicholas, 1996, p. 197.

<sup>10</sup> ‘A Listener Research Report’. ‘Air Battle Commentary by Charles Gardener’. BBC. 24 July 1940, pp.1-2. Access via <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/battleofbritain/11432.shtml?page=1>

<sup>11</sup> Asa Briggs, *The history of broadcasting in the United Kingdom: the war of words 1939–1945*, vol. III, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas, 1996, p. 190.

from Normandy.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, listeners were able to follow the Allied advance, as if they too, were at the front.

This chapter focuses on the mediation of war through the radio war correspondent. First of all, I am interested in how the characteristics of radio – its codes being auditory – shaped the mediation and representation of war in radio war reporting. Radio's 'blindness', as David Hendy suggests, allows radio to create and stimulate images in the listener's mind, thus a form of 'co-production' takes place that forces a more cognitive activity.<sup>14</sup> While technically, radio did not offer visuals, one might still consider Tim Crook's question: 'What is the philosophical difference between seeing physically with the eye and seeing with the mind?'<sup>15</sup> Secondly, the radio war correspondent played a key role, as a mediator, in the mediation and representation of war. Most radio war reports were not live running commentary but instead recorded. Andrew Crisell describes radio commentary as 'the improvised description or word-picture of an event.'<sup>16</sup> Importantly, the commentator has to act 'as our eyes and to a large extent our ears.'<sup>17</sup> Taking inspiration from recent scholarship exploring 'sensory culture' and 'sensory history'<sup>18</sup>, I would like to draw the attention to the embodied and sensory experience of radio war reporting. In mediating and representing war, radio created a more personal, intimate and emotional experience. Listening and hearing, as well as seeing (for the listener albeit imaginatively) produced not only a sense of intimacy but also *presence*. In a text exploring war, cognition and the media Michael Bull – applying ideas from Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger and John Durham Peters – points to the transformed 'sensory and cognitive relation between proximity, distance and importantly presence' brought by media technologies.<sup>19</sup> This, as I will argue, is particularly fitting in relation to the radio war correspondent.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 212.

<sup>14</sup> David Hendy, *Radio in the global age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002, pp. 115–122.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Crook, *Radio drama: theory and practice*, London: New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Crisell, *Understanding radio*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> Crisell, 1994, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> Mansell, 2017; Bull & Back, 2016; David Hendy, *Noise: a human history of sound & listening*, London: Profile Books, 2013; on the impact of media technology on listening and ways of seeing, see also Robert Jutte, *A history of the senses: from antiquity to cyberspace*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, pp. 281–309; David Howes, Introduction: "Make it new!" – reforming the sensory world, in *A cultural history of the senses: in the modern age*, David Howes (ed.), pp. 1–31, London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Bull, War, cognition and the media: training the senses in a fully mediated world, in *The auditory culture reader*, Bull & Back (eds), pp. 303–319, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, p. 305.

The development of BBC war reporting during the Second World War has received considerable scholarly attention. Here focus often lies on the institutional context and developments, for example, the expansion of news, news production and presentation techniques (due to new portable recording technology), the appointment of war correspondents, and consequently the introduction of new programming (such as the pioneering *War Report* in 1944). In addition, issues with regards to censorship, and the often complicated relationship to the government and the Ministry of Information, are also often foregrounded.<sup>20</sup> A ‘sensory’ dimension – exploring the role of the media in ‘reflecting and shaping our minds, our perceptions, our emotions’, as David Hendy has pointed out, still remains fairly absent in mainstream media history.<sup>21</sup> And so, this chapter aims to take up Hendy’s call, providing an alternative analysis to the BBC radio war correspondent.

To explore a sensory dimension of war reporting, the chapter analyses the work of Audrey Russell. The reason for this is twofold. First, despite being credited as being the first woman war correspondent at the BBC, Russell has received relatively little attention from radio historians. She is not as well-known as other ‘celebrity reporters’<sup>22</sup> and often remains omitted from work focused on women and journalism.<sup>23</sup> The extent and quality of her wartime reports have therefore remained fairly unknown. While it is certainly true that she did not produce a wealth of war reports compared to some of her male counterparts, she did nevertheless contribute with a number of shorter reports, eye-witness accounts, and interviews between 1941 and 1945. The attention here will focus on her wartime output and I have analysed surviving sound recordings, manuscripts and transcripts.<sup>24</sup> The chapter is less concerned with

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Briggs, 1995; Nicholas, 1996; Crisell, 2002; Richard Havers, *Here is the news: the BBC and the Second World War*, Chalford, Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007; Guy Starkey & Andrew Crisell, *Radio journalism*, London: Sage, 2009; Chignell, 2011; Brian P. D. Hannon, ‘Creating the correspondent: how the BBC reached the frontline in the Second World War’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 28 no. 2 (2008), pp. 175–194. doi: 10.1080/01439680802077220.

<sup>21</sup> David Hendy, ‘Listening in the dark’, *Media History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2010), pp. 215–232. doi: 10.1080/13688801003656249, 217-218.ly

<sup>22</sup> Angela Smith and Michael Higgins suggest that the rise of radio during the Second World War, further produced ‘celebrity reporters’ such as the British war correspondent Richard Dimbleby (BBC), who was the first war correspondent in 1945 to enter the concentration camp at Belsen, or American broadcast journalist Ed Murrow, who during the London Blitz, produced *This is London* for CBS. See Angela Smith & Michael Higgins, ‘Introduction: Reporting war-history, professionalism and technology’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2012), pp. 131–136. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jwcs.5.2.131\\_7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jwcs.5.2.131_7).

<sup>23</sup> Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner & Carole Fleming, *Women and Journalism*, London, New York: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> The author would like to acknowledge and thank the staff at the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading, UK.

Russell's internal BBC career and instead more focused on analysing and bringing to light her actual reports from the war, which to date has received little analysis.

Secondly, by focusing on Russell's wartime reporting the chapter will provide a different perspective by shifting the focus from the traditional battlefield to the *civilian* experience.<sup>25</sup> I will mainly concentrate on two case studies from 1944. The first and second part will explore dispatches from Dover and Folkestone where she reported on the last days of German long-range shelling. The third part will explore a report on the experience and destruction of a V-2 rocket. Field Marshal Montgomery banned women war correspondents from travelling with and also covering the British forces.<sup>26</sup> This complicates the access women had and consequently the stories that they told. Front-line battles were covered mainly by men and women were instead limited to cover stories on hospitals, nurses, or other 'stories then deemed peripheral to the principal events of war'.<sup>27</sup> BBC News was dominated by men and in Russell's case there is clearly a gendered aspect in terms of what stories she reported. As will be discussed this also reveals and reflects a 'politics of the senses'.<sup>28</sup> I will develop this aspect while analysing her wartime output, but also return to this point in the fourth part of the chapter, where a brief discussion of her *memories* of reporting war will be in focus.

#### *'Hellfire Corner': sound pictures*

Russell was not a trained journalist nor had a journalistic background. Instead, she had a background in drama and theatre and more or less joined the Corporation in her thirties by chance.<sup>29</sup> Initially she conducted a series of shorter talks for the BBC Home Service about the Women's Auxiliary Airforce (WAAF), the female auxiliary of the Royal Airforce created in 1939. In 1942 she was appointed to the BBC's Overseas Service where she became what appears to be the first female reporter for *Radio Newsreel*, a news programme regularly broadcast from 1940 in the Overseas Services, and in the General Forces Programme from

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<sup>25</sup> In the historiography of BBC's war reporting there is usually a focus on dispatches from the battle front and from abroad.

<sup>26</sup> Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004, p. 204.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 214.

<sup>28</sup> David Howes & Constance Classen, *Ways of sensing: understanding the senses in society*. London: Routledge, 2014, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> At the outbreak of war Russell volunteered for the London Fire Brigade, or the Auxiliary Fire Service as a firewoman, and was posted at a central Fire Station in London only a few minutes from the BBC. During the Blitz she was interviewed by BBC reporters gathering news stories about the Blitz and civil defence. This connection would eventually transfer her temporarily to the Corporation. Audrey Russell interviewed by Madeau Stewart Oct and Nov 1977, Oral History Transcript BBC WAC R143/10.

1944. She was made a fully accredited war correspondent in autumn of 1944 and would also travel abroad to Belgium, the Netherlands and France.<sup>30</sup>

Having examined the source material, Russell clearly had a natural flair for radio. Her stories are descriptive and carefully composed for the ear. Russell had an interest in drama and the theatre, she was also particularly interested in the spoken word and poetic drama.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore not strange that she understood how important words, voice and tone were in radio broadcasts. Russell's interest in theatre and poetry might have helped and shaped her way of reporting. Street makes the point about radio's poetic qualities, 'poetry is made for voice and ear'<sup>32</sup> and that 'a good poet has a voice and a good producer has a voice. It is a "voice" that can show you pictures'.<sup>33</sup> For example, one of her earliest reports was a visit in September 1941 to a WAAF training site where women were completing training as barrage balloon operators. In March 1941 women were conscripted into war work and the BBC would also encourage this type of recruitment.<sup>34</sup> The short report is really about showing that women can do the work usually done by men and gives a vivid impression through the detailed descriptions: 'girls in Navy Boiler-Suits ... daubed with oil and grease, crawling under the huge lorries, apparently quite enjoying themselves.'<sup>35</sup> The main function of radio language is to be referential of the real world and this is particularly characteristic of radio news, documentary and commentary.<sup>36</sup> Any physical object, activity the environment and wider atmosphere have to be described. The details given are then 'pictured' by the listener. As Andrew Crisell suggests, the listener 'must imagine not only a character's thoughts and feelings but also her expression, total appearance, physical situation, and so on.'<sup>37</sup> The use of our imagination or our inner mind to 'see' these sound pictures makes radio an 'inward, intimate medium.'<sup>38</sup> The first example from Dover further provides a useful illustration.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 10–17.

<sup>31</sup> Audrey Russell, *A certain voice*, Bolton: Ross Anderson Publications, 1984, pp. 10–26.

<sup>32</sup> Sean Street, *The poetry of radio: the colour of sound*. London; New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Street, 2012, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas, 1996, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> 12 September 1941, WAAF Training, 1.0pm (Home Service), Programme as Broadcast Transcript, BBC WAC Radio Talks Scripts pre 1970 RUS R450.

<sup>36</sup> Crisell, 1994, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 11. Emphasis original.

On 1 October 1944 *War Report* was fully dedicated to the civilian experience of Dover's 'Hellfire corner'.<sup>39</sup> The Dover Straits across Calais was a key target for German long-range shelling and saw heavy bombardment from 1940 to 1944. Over the course of the war, the repeated shelling and bombing of the area had given it the nickname, 'Hellfire corner'. This programme featured several dispatches from Russell who had spent nearly three months covering the shelling of the Dover area with the anti-aircraft battery.<sup>40</sup> In September 1944 the Allied forces intensified the operation to capture the guns in Calais. In the first recording, from 27 September 1944, Russell reports from Dover, and the last days of German shelling. The recording contains no actuality, instead appears to have been recorded inside a studio or some other closed space. It features solely the voice of Russell, her words are clearly articulated, and the tone serious. She functions here as the listener's 'eyes' and 'ears':

This is Audrey Russell speaking from Dover. Yesterday was a bad day for this town. Things started pretty early, indeed the first shelling warning went when I was in my bath. I heard a few distant explosions but by breakfast time the all clear went but it didn't last for long. As we drove through the town on our way to visit a gun site on the cliff the warning went again. And as we rounded a corner we saw a party of school children being shepherded and scurried into a shelter – they seemed pretty accustomed to it and in no time at all the streets were completely deserted. We were rather glad when we got to the top of the cliff, there is something ominous about those empty, battered, shattered streets grimly waiting for what may come. And although the cliff is pitted with chalky shell holes it feels safer up there than out in the open.<sup>41</sup>

The passage describes the situation; the sounds she heard as she lay in her bath, and as they moved through the town; warning sirens and explosions. For many people the sound of warning sirens would have become a familiar sound of the wartime soundscape, and therefore easy to imaginatively 'hear', although no sound or actuality is actually present. The description of the town, the empty and deserted streets and the cliff pitted with shell holes, further provides a clear illustration and an image for the listener of the impact of war. In the report there are several descriptions of 'hearing' and 'seeing', for example, 'we could hear our bombers going out towards the opposite coast, we watched them out of sight but it was

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<sup>39</sup> Nicholas, 1996, p. 213. Some of these dispatches were also reproduced on the 5 Oct 1944, in BBC's *The Listener* magazine. Audrey Russell, 'The Relief of Hellfire Corner', *Listener* [London, England] 5 Oct, 1944: 369+. *The Listener Historical Archive*. Web. 10 July 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Audrey Russell interviewed by Madeau Stewart Oct and Nov 1977, Oral History Transcript BBC WAC R143/10, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> 27 September, 1944, Audrey Russell, 'British correspondent's account of German long range shelling of Dover, GB, 26/9/1944', BBC recording, catalogue number: 1884, access *Imperial War Museum*, London.

only a matter of seconds before pillars of black smoke rose up on the horizon.’<sup>42</sup> Using the word ‘we’ does not only emphasise her presence on location, giving a sense of authority or credibility speaking from first-hand experience, but it also makes it more personal, more involved.

The radio commentator is also ‘reading the event’ making connections that are not ‘self-evident.’<sup>43</sup> For example in the next passage, again providing striking visual clues and detail of a badly hit Dover, Russell also provides a metaphor for the state of mind of the people referring to the strength and shelter of the Dover caves.

Street after street with police traffic diversion signs – street after street of gaping windows and rubble all over the place. Yet – there was order even in that chaos, no crater was [small stumble] was without a red hurricane lamp to show where it was, and no damaged street was without a notice neatly roping it off. Today there is no gas or water in Dover, and the police and civil defence workers – flogged dead beat as they must be – are making the most of the present merciful lull to clear up the mess. Casualties are miraculously light when you think of the desolation – but Dover caves are strong, some fifty-five shells fell in the vicinity yesterday. So far the figures are seven killed and about forty seriously injured.<sup>44</sup>

Dover’s caves provided shelter for civilians during shelling so on one level her words implies that the civilians were protected by the strength of the caves. However, by changing her tone and placing the emphasis on the words ‘are strong’ there is an emotional change in the tone creating a new meaning. Pitch, volume and tempo are key in how we colour our voices.<sup>45</sup> Russell’s voice has been described as an ‘attractive voice’ and ‘soothing voice’, and a ‘voice that conveyed confidence’.<sup>46</sup> Speaking is itself shaped by the bodily experience. ‘Emotions produce changes in muscle tension, breathing patterns, the brain.’<sup>47</sup> The nerves from the larynx, which helps us produce the sound of the voice, pass through the limbic area of our brain, the so-called “‘emotional brain’”, meaning that our emotional state impacts on the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Crisell, 1994, p. 134.

<sup>44</sup> 27 Sep, 1944, Audrey Russell, ‘British correspondent’s account of German long range shelling of Dover, GB, 26/9/1944’, BBC recording, catalogue number: 1884, access *Imperial War Museum*, London.

<sup>45</sup> Karpf, 2006, p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> Radio Lives (sound), made by: BBC Radio 4 (Production company) 1993-03-25 BBC radio programme recalling the broadcasting career of war reporter and state commentator Audrey Russell 1939-1945, catalogue number: 13176, access *Imperial War Museum*, London.

<sup>47</sup> Karpf, 2006, p. 134.

voice.<sup>48</sup> This part of the brain also impacts on hearing, there are therefore clear links between speaking, hearing or listening and emotion.<sup>49</sup> So, on another level the strength of Dover's caves can also be read as a metaphor for the people. The people of Dover are still standing strong. Making the point that Dover caves 'are strong', provides reassurance and evoke a sense of duty reflecting BBC's wider wartime purpose to 'maintain national unity and to secure the nation's morale'.<sup>50</sup> Siân Nicholas argues that in contrast to other media, radio could provide the intimacy of the spoken word which meant that radio had a more 'direct relationship' with the listener, whether at home or at work.<sup>51</sup> Most dispatches also open with the words 'this is Audrey Russell speaking from...', which also produces a familiarity. The radio could, better than the newspaper or a newsreel, carry a 'sense of the individual', that promoted a closer relationship between speaker and audience.<sup>52</sup>

Russell's words are also striking since they are spoken by a woman. Women's voices were naturally a key feature of wartime output. They were frequently heard in Talks output, entertainment, variety, and comedy, and a key component of the so called 'kitchen front' programmes. However, the news genre was different. At the BBC, news was mainly a male domain and something associated with male voices. For example, for a long time the perception was that women's voices were not suitable for radio news reporting or announcing.<sup>53</sup> Listening to Russell's voice then, is also significant because it challenged a space otherwise dominated by male voices. As David Howes and Constance Classen point out, the way we are 'sensing affect not only how we experience and engage with our environment, but also how we experience and engage with each other.'<sup>54</sup> This is an important observation since hearing or listening to a woman's voice in what was a male dominated genre, represent a small but significant challenge to the social order, since 'who is seen, who is heard' plays an important role in establishing or challenging positions of power in society.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 135.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Douglas, *Listening in: radio and the American imagination*, London; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp. 22–39.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 202.

<sup>53</sup> Karpf, 2006; Kate Murphy, *Behind the wireless: a history of early women at the BBC*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Howes & Classen, 2014, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

*Listening-in to Folkestone: intimacy and presence*

Most radio reports were not transmitted 'live' but recorded. However, they still managed to convey a sense of *immediacy*, *liveness* and more importantly, for the listener, a *presence*. 'Liveness' is a key aspect of radio's characteristics, some even call it a "present-tense" medium, offering an 'account of what *is* happening rather than a record of what *has* happened.'<sup>56</sup> This is evident from a second recording from the same programme, recorded on 30 September 1944, which features recorded sound, or 'actuality', which helps to create a sense of presence together with the commentary. Actuality became a key feature of BBC wartime output, particularly enabled by the development of portable disc recorders, mobile transmitters and good engineering support.<sup>57</sup> At the end of September 1944, the Allied forces had captured the German guns in Calais and consequently this ended the German shelling of the British south east coast. The following example features celebrations in Folkestone at the end of German long-range shelling. It starts with the Mayor of Folkestone expressing his relief and joy now that the shelling has come to an end. The Mayor's speech is followed by Russell reporting from a churchyard where a service of thanksgiving is about to begin. It is recorded outside, and the listener can clearly hear the 'noises' of someone being outside in the open air. An aeroplane is heard in the background as she describes the scene and the people gathering for the service:

This is Audrey Russell on Saturday the 30<sup>th</sup> of September speaking from Folkestone. We've just driven down to this town and to see what celebrations are going on now that the people know that the channel guns are captured. An aircraft has just gone overhead as I speak. The announcement of the capture of the guns were made so suddenly this morning that as far as I can see no one has had time to put out any flags or banners yet. And the mood of the people isn't one of celebration anyway. I'm sitting on the churchyard wall of the old parish church overlooking the channel; the parish church of St Marys and St Benswith.<sup>58</sup>

The listener is introduced to the scene and the location, and then invited to take part, or at least, *is made to feel as if present*:

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<sup>56</sup> Crisell, 1994, p. 9. Emphasis original.

<sup>57</sup> Hannon, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> 30 September, 1944, Audrey Russell, 'Actuality of celebrations to mark the end of German long range shelling of Folkestone, GB, 30/9/1944', BBC recording, catalogue number: 1885, access *Imperial War Museum*, London.

The service is going on now – maybe you can hear, the people singing a hymn. I watched them walk to church and they had quiet, unsmiling faces. But there was a serenity there that I haven't seen for a very long time. This night – the first night when they know they may be free of shelling the mood is one of thanksgiving, the celebrations will come afterwards. Listen to them singing a hymn.<sup>59</sup>

By listening you can hear the sound of the people singing, which breaks through in the background and fades up, creating a touching atmosphere, and footsteps of people walking into the service is also audible. What is striking here, however, is the direct address to the listener; 'maybe you can hear' and 'listen to them sing'. Radio's communicative manner and style is conversational, chatty and personal, often using 'I', 'you', and 'we'. Broadcasters had to develop forms of talk that 'spoke *to* listeners', making them a part of the conversation.<sup>60</sup> As John Durham Peters writes on radio communication, 'dialogic forms were another technique of simulating presence.'<sup>61</sup> He continues 'the remote audience was invited to become an imaginary participant in the world of the characters and of its fellow auditors.'<sup>62</sup> The listener is addressed directly by Russell and invited to participate. The sensory and cognitive relation between proximity, distance and presence is transformed. The listener is transported to the church service. The radio examples from Dover are in stark contrast to a British Pathé Newsreel, from the *Pathe Gazette*, also reporting on the last days of German long-range shelling from 'Hellfire corner'.<sup>63</sup> The newsreel contains upbeat dramatic orchestra music. A male narrator in an equally dramatic manner describes the events unfolding, overall producing a 'detached' viewing and listening experience, also less cognitive since visuals are provided.

Similar techniques to the ones described in the example from Dover are found in other reports. For example, in an interview for *Radio Newsreel* from 4 May 1945, Russell speaks to Wing Commander William Smith, from the Royal Air Force (RAF) about humanitarian food drops made by the RAF to the Dutch people to prevent a famine. Wing Commander Smith who flew on this mission is asked, 'Can you tell *us* what the trip was like today?' and 'Where

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Paddy Scannell, *Radio, television and modern life: a phenomenological approach*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 24. Emphasis original.

<sup>61</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the air: a history of the idea of communication*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 216.

<sup>62</sup> Durham Peters, 1999, p. 216.

<sup>63</sup> 'Hellfire Corner filmed by Pathe Gazette cameraman Pat Gay'. British Pathé. 5 October 1944, film id: 1125.20 access via: <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/hellfire-corner-aka-hell-fire-corner/query/Hellfire+corner>

did you go today if *we* may know?’<sup>64</sup> Here the ‘us’ and the ‘we’ represent Russell and the listeners who are made to feel as if the Wing Commander is talking to them directly. Although no listener responses directly related to Russell’s reporting have been identified.<sup>65</sup> There are other examples of testimonies that suggest this new style of reporting was well-received. According to one contemporary commentator immediacy and presence were the strengths of the radio medium. Mrs. Arnot Robertson, novelist and (it should be pointed out) a regular contributor to BBC programmes, wrote in the *BBC Year Book* in 1945, about the sense of immediacy and presence brought by radio war reporting. Robertson suggested radio brought war to the hearth of the fireside, ‘unsoftened by distance.’<sup>66</sup> She continued, ‘the spoken word carries the feeling of immediacy of time and place: we were in the Mitchell bomber, flying low over the places where our men were fighting ... we were there, in the precarious beach-heads, among the ships which landed the army’.<sup>67</sup> This also produced a more emotional experience whilst listening. Robertson continued, saying she was ‘intensively moved’ by hearing British War Correspondent, Howard Marshall, reporting from the thanksgiving service in France; hearing French voices ‘singing through tears’, which conveyed a better understanding than any newsreel picture of what ‘the restoration of France meant to her citizens’.<sup>68</sup> Further evidence of this can be found in listener research conducted by the BBC. Audiences liked the war correspondent’s own voice and immediate impressions whether visual or aural – demanding more of “‘the real thing’” – reports from the fronts were therefore popular.<sup>69</sup> *War Report*, for example, had an audience of between ten and fifteen million listeners in Britain. Its popularity was down to the combination of immediacy, sound footage and commentary, which gave listeners a sense of presence.<sup>70</sup> Actuality and first-hand reporting clearly added to the listening experience.

### *V-2 rocket experience: eye- and ear-witness accounts*

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<sup>64</sup> 4 May 1945, *Radio Newsreel*, North America Edition no 1763 Item 7. Audrey Russell ‘Dropping Food in Holland’, microfilm: BBC Radio Newsreel. Air raid shelters, roll no ½, Sept. 1940 to 1.10.46, BBC WAC. My emphasis.

<sup>65</sup> To date, the author has not been able to identify any listener research specifically commenting on Russell’s reporting.

<sup>66</sup> Arnot Robertson, ‘Listening to war reports: what do you feel?’, *BBC Year Book*, pp. 15–19, Norwich & London: Jarrold & Sons LTD., 1945, p. 16.

<sup>67</sup> Robertson, 1945, p. 16.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>69</sup> Nicholas, 1996, p. 205.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas, 1996, p. 217.

Russell was a regular contributor to *Radio Newsreel*. The programme's synopsis was tellingly described in BBC's *Radio Times* as 'close-ups from the world's battle-fronts' or 'close-ups from the war fronts of the world'.<sup>71</sup> Interesting choice of words, drawing on cinematic language, that obviously play on the suggestion of being within close range and offering a detailed and intimate experience. The focus of one such 'close up' was the civilian experience and the impact made by V-2 rocket explosions in London. The example uses 'inserts' of interviews recorded on location mixed with a scripted commentary by Russell (recorded in a studio by the sound of it), which guides the listener and provides narration to the news story similar to today's radio news 'package'. As in the example from Dover, by hearing the actuality, the listener is brought closer to the event. The focus is on the first-hand experience of the destruction of a V-2 rocket, but also, individual 'ear-witness' accounts describing the lack of sound as the rocket approached and hit its target.

Despite the unexpected explosion caused by the V-2 rocket Russell found the victims calm and collected. She interviews a young woman, Mrs. Johnson who had *heard nothing* but had woken up to find everything 'falling all around me'.<sup>72</sup> And Mrs. Cunningham, an older woman who was sitting in the rubble of what used to be her home with 'a few of her salvaged belongings stuffed into a tin bath'.<sup>73</sup> Russell continues, 'She was holding court with the neighbours when I went up to her with a microphone'<sup>74</sup>, and she almost sound a little embarrassed over the fuss being made as she is interviewed. The actuality is clearly audible with people giggling in the background:

Russell: Well, Mrs Cunningham how are you, you're looking very well considering the experience you've had –

Mrs. Cunningham: Oh, well I feel fine, thank you, after all this lot.

Russell: Where were you when it happened?

Mrs. Cunningham: Upstairs in bed...

Russell [interrupts]: Hm hm, did you hear anything?

Mrs. Cunningham: Nah, I didn't hear nothing but I heard my girl call out for me and I got out and she said the baby were injured...and I rushed to [?] to get the baby out of the cot and I went to the window

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<sup>71</sup> See for example: <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/generalforces/1944-11-01>

<sup>72</sup> 1 November 1944, Audrey Russell, 'British correspondent's interviews with civilians and Air Raid Precautions personnel on experiences of V2 rocket attacks, London, GB, 11/1944', BBC recording, catalogue number: 2350, access *Imperial War Museum*, London.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

to call out for help - of course there were nobody near or by but I see the bomb burning or something in the middle of the road burning and I hollered up for somebody to take me baby cause she was injured...and that was all there was to it until somebody come and rescued baby.<sup>75</sup>

Russell's voice, with her BBC English, or 'received pronunciation', is in stark contrast to the working-class voices of Mrs Johnson and Mrs Cunningham. Their accents are reminiscent of an east or south London accent.<sup>76</sup> Before the war, the working class was marginalised on national radio both as an audience and as a subject in itself.<sup>77</sup> This would dramatically change during the course of the war. By offering these victims the 'microphone' they were allowed to speak for themselves and to share their own individual experience of war. Another interview features Mr Crickman, also with an accent, who was leaving a café carrying a cup of tea for his wife and a bit of fish, when the explosion happened:

I made my way across towards the stall and I was a few – somewhere about 15 yards with a cup of tea in me hand...and a bit of fish in the other when all of a sudden crash bang – there was a terrific eh noise eh I thought I heard [cuts off] It was all black in front of me. I dropped me tea and in the excitement all the fish – and I don't know what had happened and I tried to make me way across to my missus but I couldn't get to her, my eyes were full of grit and smoke and everything else and I had to wait for eh quite eh a few minutes before I could see me way sufficient to get there – when I got there I finally oh terrific state my missus [?] supported by two men, she was in a terrible state - the place around me is awful but thank god my missus is all right.<sup>78</sup>

Crickman provides a horrifying description, momentarily losing one of his senses, his eyesight, and consequently his direction and sense of the place. Together with Mrs Johnson and Mrs Cunningham, he provides, visual clues to the horror and destruction of the V-2 explosion with falling debris, fire, and smoke. The listener is enabled to imagine what such destruction might look like. And, again, hearing the voices of these individuals makes it more personal and therefore powerful, since eye-witness accounts are not just factual but 'emotionally coloured by the voices in which they were heard.'<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> In transcribing the recording I have tried to keep some of the accent, for example, 'my' is pronounced 'me'.

<sup>77</sup> Scannell. *Radio, television and modern life*, 37.

<sup>78</sup> 1 November 1944, Audrey Russell, 'British correspondent's interviews with civilians and Air Raid Precautions personnel on experiences of V2 rocket attacks, London, GB, 11/1944', BBC recording, catalogue number: 2350, access *Imperial War Museum*, London.

<sup>79</sup> Crisell & Starkey, 2009, p. 6.

What is further striking with these accounts, however, is that the civilians interviewed act as our ‘*ear-witnesses*’; their function is not only to describe what they saw and experienced but particularly to reflect on what they heard (or in some cases did not hear). During the Second World War new ‘noises’ were introduced to the soundscape such as air-raid or warning sirens, exploding bombs and enemy fighter planes.<sup>80</sup> Civilians learned to ‘listen out’ for V-1 flying bombs, also known as ‘doodlebugs’ or ‘buzzbombs’ after the buzzing sound they made before impact. There were widespread concerns about the lack of sleep amongst the civilian population because people were lying awake listening out for incoming planes or bombs.<sup>81</sup> The V-2 missiles however were silent because they descended faster than the speed of sound. They began hitting London in September 1944 causing great destruction. Their ‘unexpectedness’ made them particularly malicious and this is also the point made in the BBC report for *Radio Newsreel*. Russell interviews an Air Raid Precautions Controller, who concludes: ‘In any case it must have travelled in a terrific height into the atmosphere in order to come down as it did without us having any prior warning of the sound of its approach.’<sup>82</sup> In addition, the remainder of the recording focuses on the fact that these rockets do not give away a sound, but, it may be possible to *see* them. The final insert comes from a testimony from one of their own news room sub-editors, who provides an account of a rocket he saw one night: ‘It was a long way off - just a ball of light falling steeply through the sky, steeply but also sort of lazy sort of action. Much too leisurely to be a shooting star, it reminded me rather of trace of shell that I’ve seen snaking up of flying bombs.’<sup>83</sup> So the piece ends with ‘visual’ clues of what to look out for.

### *Remembering war*

In 1945 Russell travelled abroad, following in the footsteps of the Allied advance, and reported from Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. After the war she joined the Home News Reporting Unit and her work steered more towards reporting for women’s programmes and other ‘softer’ news stories. She left the BBC in 1951 to go freelance and pursued a successful career as a Royal commentator and reporter, covering for example, the Queen Elizabeth II’s first royal tour in 1953.

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<sup>80</sup> Mansell, 2017, p. 161.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 174–177.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>83</sup> 1 Nov 1944, Audrey Russell, ‘British civilians’ V2 rocket experiences, Catalogue number: 2350, *Imperial War Museum*, London, BBC Recording.

Time creates a distance from the events themselves prompting a different experience of war. At a later stage in life, in her autobiography *A Certain Voice*, published in 1984, Russell reflected on her wartime experience. Kevin Williams suggests that reflections on war and the problems of covering war, are commonly found in war correspondents memoirs and autobiographies. Here the focus is on the individual rather than the organisational context. These accounts are often ‘anchored in the personal experiences of the reporter in confronting the horror of war, negotiating their relations with military personal and civilian victims and dealing with psychological trauma.’<sup>84</sup> And, as Williams suggests, memoirs and autobiographies therefore allow the correspondents to ‘use their memoirs to explain or justify their reporting.’<sup>85</sup> This type of self-reflexivity will nevertheless be framed in a particular way. Russell’s autobiography constructs a new narrative of the war experience, a type of ‘war remains’, one clearly shaped by gender.

Christine Sylvester has argued for the study of war as a social institution where people’s experience of war is affected by their social experience.<sup>86</sup> Her approach further highlights the body and its centrality to social institutions and the individual experience of war. War, Sylvester writes, is ‘experienced through the body’ both physically and emotionally.<sup>87</sup> The body is neither a ‘neutral’ or ‘universal’ entity. Rather, it is highly contested and diverse, shaped by ‘gender, race, class, generational, cultural and locational markings that affect and are affected by social experiences.’<sup>88</sup>

Russell’s autobiography was published in a very different context with an evolving feminist agenda and her memories are clearly shaped by a feminist interpretation.<sup>89</sup> In her autobiography Russell recalls that being the first BBC woman war correspondent inevitably gave her the lesser news stories, and she often had to focus on the so called ‘woman angle’, whilst the men were covering the ‘hard’ news.<sup>90</sup> Her gendered body is a prominent feature in this narrative. For instance, describing her new appointment as war correspondent, travelling in Europe, she writes about the clothes and the fit of the uniform, how it had to be ‘worn

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<sup>84</sup> Kevin Williams, ‘War correspondents as sources for history’, *Media History*, vol. 18, no. 3–4 (2012): pp. 341–360. doi: 10.1080/13688804.2012.722426. 351.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, 2012, p. 349.

<sup>86</sup> Christine Sylvester, *War as experience: contributions from international relations and feminist analysis*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 3–6.

<sup>87</sup> Sylvester, 2013, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> See also Qvarnström’s discussion on later interpretations of Elgström’s war stories in a feminist context.

<sup>90</sup> Russell, 1984, p. 44.

in’’: ‘I was wearing for the first time a khaki battle dress top that looked slightly too large and much too new. Happily the skirt and the beret and the brown calf shoes were fine’.<sup>91</sup> She continues to describe the clothing and in particular how this uniform transformed her to a war correspondent: ‘I was self-consciously pleased with the dark green and gold chevrons on the shoulders neatly indicating ‘British War Correspondent’ with the rank of Junior Commander. I felt rather new all round, for this was my first ever flight in an aeroplane, a bumpy one at that.’<sup>92</sup>

Carrying the portable recording equipment, she kept the blank discs under her blouse of her battle dress (after being recommended to keep them in reasonable room temperature) which caused some teasing in the camp ‘because it made me look a very curious shape in front’.<sup>93</sup> Following the advance of the Allied forces she arrived in the Netherlands, at a former youth hostel taken over by the British Army and used as accommodation for BBC personnel. She describes how her presence as the only woman initially caused some embarrassment. Russell further place her body’s needs firmly in the story describing how in the camp she managed to wash her hair and dry it on ‘electric pop-up toasters’, left by the Germans, that were soon converted into an efficient hairdryer.<sup>94</sup>

Other accounts of women war correspondents have found similar testimonies in stories and memoirs suggesting that many women war correspondents took pride in and maintained their feminine identity.<sup>95</sup> Some also chose to highlight in their memories of war, the heightened sexualisation of women reporters, and the attention their bodies received.<sup>96</sup> One American female radio correspondent based in Europe during the Second World War was told to ‘keep her voice pitched low’, and another one was told her voice was “too young and feminine for war news”.<sup>97</sup> The Second World War did open up new opportunities for women as many moved into employment and roles that previously had been done by men. However, women moving into jobs or industries that had previously been dominated by men did cause controversy; for instance resentment from male workers and the resistance of equal pay for

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>95</sup> Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> David H. Hosley, ‘As good as any of us: American female radio correspondents in Europe, 1938-1941’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol 2, no, 2 (1984), pp. 141 – 156. doi: 10.1080/01439688200260101, p. 143, p. 154.

equal work. In Britain, the Second World War would come to reinvigorate feminist activism who pursued women's rights to contribute to the war effort, and who fought for equal pay and for equal compensation in the event of injury.<sup>98</sup> The war did on the one hand open up for new possibilities and opportunities for women, but on the other, gender difference continued to be expressed and applied. Russell's memories of war, clearly shaped by her gendered experience, are a testimony to this.

### *Conclusion*

Angela Smith and Michael Higgins suggest that 'the changing character and scope of mediation' has its own influence on the representation of the modern war.<sup>99</sup> This chapter has explored the embodied and sensory experience of radio war reporting during the Second World War by using the case of BBC reporter Audrey Russell. The aim was to shift the attention from the institutional histories exploring radio war reporting, and instead draw attention to the sensory experience produced by the radio war correspondent. And by doing so, further introduce a 'sensory' dimension into mainstream radio and media history.

Radio arguably changed the way war was mediated and represented. Radio brought the sounds and 'visions' of the battlefield as well as the civilian experience into the home. On one level listening to war, being able to hear the sounds, the actuality and the voices, created a sense of immediacy and presence, transforming perception of proximity and distance. Visualising the impact of war by 'seeing' images imaginatively also produced a more personal, intimate, and arguably, emotional experience. On another level, the mediation of war by the war correspondent was a highly sensory experience. It is through the correspondent's eyes and ears, that listeners were brought closer to the events of war. The words of the commentator played a key role in inviting the listener to participate. Radio war reporting should therefore be considered a multi-level sensory experience. A sensory dimension help us to understand how radio penetrated the listener's mind and personal space by bringing the experience of war closer. The use of war correspondents allowed the BBC to realise and utilise the strengths in the radio medium incorporating techniques and strategies

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<sup>98</sup> Sonya O. Rose. 'Women's Rights, Women's Obligations: Contradictions of Citizenship in World War II Britain', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, vol 7, no 2 (2000), pp. 277-289. doi: 10.1080/713666747

<sup>99</sup> Smith & Higgins, 2012, p. 132.

that we still find in radio reporting today. Arguably, the embodied and sensory experience of radio, is key to its survival and longevity.

By exploring Audrey Russell's war reports it can also be concluded that mediating and representing war is also shaped by social institutions and social experience revealing and reflecting a 'politics of the senses'. Who is seen or who is heard does matter, whose stories are told? This further underpins the notion that 'understanding people's experiences with/in war is essential for understanding war.'<sup>100</sup> This also points to the role of the media in challenging or reinforcing different war experiences.

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<sup>100</sup> Sylvester, 2013, p. 1.

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What the world's most famous newspaper correspondent saw, and reported, while covering the Civil War. On the night before William Howard Russell left London for New York, he dined at the Garrick Club with William Makepeace Thackeray. Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and many other leading lights of English culture and society also belonged to the private establishment. Although admitted to the Bar, it was as a correspondent for The Times of London that Russell established his reputation. His fame came from his dogged coverage of the Crimean War and, at its conclusion in 1856, he returned a hero. His dispatches brought the war home to readers. He wrote with clarity and vitality about the grand