

A sensory experience

BBC correspondent Audrey Russell reporting (and remembering) the Second World War

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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.’¹ One key feature of this transformed soundscape was the radio. Radio was to take centre stage in British daily 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 in the home, the workplace, and on the battle front. The British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, entertained factory workers, the forces, and listeners at home with morale-building popular music.² Variety and comedy created what Anne Karpf has called ‘a kind of audio home front’, with recognizable characters and catchphrases that ‘became enormously reassuring, providing an aural anchor in turbulent times.’³ There were also other developments. Radio came into its own as ‘a rapid news medium’ in wartime.⁴ The recording of shellfire in the First World War brought the front into the home and audiences closer to an understanding of the sound of war.⁵ This was to become even more prevalent in the Second World War due to the 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.

‘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.⁶ One such radio war correspondent was Audrey Russell (1906–1989). Russell has been credited with being the first woman radio war correspondent at the BBC—and possibly even the first woman BBC news reporter.⁷ 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 organization in its own right.’⁸ 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. Eyewitness 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 Strait of Dover that produced a somewhat sensational commentary: “Oh, we’ve just hit a Messerschmitt! Oh! That was beautiful.”⁹ A Listener Research report, done in response to the commentary, indicated that the ‘broadcast aroused enormous interest’ and that a large majority of respondents gave it ‘full approval’ and wanted more.¹⁰ 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.’¹¹ Between 1941 and 1943 the BBC began to develop frontline broadcasting. After D-Day in June 1944, it launched the pioneering *War Report*, the ‘most technically challenging, topical and thrilling radio programme of the war.’¹² In the first programme listeners heard the 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 from Normandy.¹³ 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 by radio war correspondents. First of all, I am interested in how the characteristics of radio—its codes being auditory—shaped the mediation and representation of war in 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.¹⁴ While technically, radio did not offer visuals, it is still worthwhile considering Tim Crook’s question: ‘What is the philosophical difference between seeing physically with the eye and seeing with the mind?’¹⁵ 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 were recorded. Andrew Crisell describes radio commentary as ‘the improvised description or word-picture of an event.’¹⁶ Importantly, the commentator has to act ‘as our eyes and to a large extent our ears.’¹⁷ Taking inspiration from recent scholarship exploring ‘sensory culture’ and ‘sensory history’, I would like to draw attention to the embodied and sensory experience of radio war reporting.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ This, as I will argue, is particularly fitting in relation to the radio war correspondent.

The development of BBC war reporting during the Second World War has received considerable scholarly attention. The focus is often 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 with the government and the Ministry of Information, are often foregrounded.²⁰ 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 broadly absent from mainstream media history.²¹ And so this chapter aims to take up Hendy’s call, providing an alternative analysis of the BBC radio war correspondent.

To explore a sensory dimension of war reporting, I consider the work

of Audrey Russell. The reasons for this are twofold. First, despite being credited as 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’ and is often omitted from research focused on women and journalism.²² The extent and quality of her wartime reports have therefore remained relatively unknown. While it is true that, compared to some of her male counterparts, she did not produce a wealth of war reports, she nevertheless contributed a number of shorter reports, eyewitness accounts, and interviews between 1941 and 1945. The attention here will be on her wartime output, to which end I have analysed the surviving sound recordings, manuscripts, and transcripts.²³ The chapter is less concerned with Russell’s internal BBC career, concentrating instead on bringing to light her actual reports from the war, which to date have received little analysis.

Secondly, by looking at Russell’s wartime reporting, the chapter will provide a different perspective by shifting the focus from the traditional battlefield to the *civilian* experience.²⁴ I will concentrate on two case studies from 1944. I begin by exploring her dispatches from Dover and Folkestone, where she reported on the last days of German long-range shelling. I then explore a report on the destruction of a V-2 rocket. Field Marshal Montgomery banned women war correspondents from travelling with British forces or even covering them.²⁵ This complicated the access women had, and consequently the stories they could tell. Frontline battles were mainly covered by men, and women were instead limited to stories about hospitals, nurses, or other ‘stories then deemed peripheral to the principal events of war’²⁶ BBC News was dominated by men, and in Russell’s case there was clearly a gendered aspect in terms of what stories she reported. As will be discussed, this also reveals the ‘politics of the senses’,²⁷ which I will develop while analysing her wartime output, but I also return to the point in the final part of the chapter—a brief discussion of her *memories* of reporting war.

Sound pictures of Hellfire Corner

Russell was not a trained journalist nor did she have a journalistic background. Instead, she had studied drama and theatre and joined the BBC in her thirties more or less by chance.²⁸ Initially, she gave a series

of short 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 have been the first female reporter for *Radio Newsreel*, a news programme regularly broadcast from 1940 for the Overseas Services, and for the General Forces Programme from 1944. She was made a fully accredited war correspondent in the autumn of 1944, and travelled abroad to Belgium, the Netherlands, and France.²⁹

Having examined the source material, I can say that Russell clearly had a natural flair for radio. Her stories are descriptive and carefully composed for the ear. Russell remained interested in drama and theatre, and particularly in the spoken word and poetic drama.³⁰ It is not strange that she understood how important words, voice, and tone were to radio broadcasting. Her interest in theatre and poetry may well have helped shape her way of reporting. Street makes the point about radio's poetic qualities that 'poetry is made for voice and ear', and that 'a good poet has a voice and a good producer has a voice. It is a "voice" that can show you pictures.'³¹ For example, one of her earliest reports was a visit in September 1941 to an air force station where WAAFs were completing their training as barrage balloon operators. In March 1941 women had been conscripted into war work, and the BBC was to encourage this type of recruitment.³² Her 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.'³³ The main function of radio language is to describe the real world, and this is particularly characteristic of radio news, documentary, and commentary.³⁴ Any physical object, activity, setting, or atmosphere has to be described. The details given are then 'pictured' by the listener. As 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.'³⁵ The use of our imaginations or inner minds to 'see' these sound pictures makes radio an 'inward, *intimate* medium.'³⁶ The first example from Dover is a useful illustration of this.

On 1 October 1944, *War Report* was given over to the civilian

experience of Dover's Hellfire Corner.³⁷ The bottleneck of the Dover Strait was a key target for German long-range shelling from the Pas-de-Calais coast, and saw heavy bombardment from 1940 to 1944, and over the course of the war the repeated shelling and bombing of the narrows gave it the nickname Hellfire Corner. The broadcast featured several dispatches from Russell who had spent nearly three months with the anti-aircraft battery, covering the shelling of the Dover area.³⁸ In September 1944, Allied forces intensified their operations to capture the German guns in Calais. In the first recording, from 27 September 1944, Russell reported from Dover, and the last days of German shelling. The recording was not made on location, instead it appears to have been recorded inside a studio or some other closed space. It featured just Russell's voice, her words clearly articulated and tone serious. She functioned 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.³⁹

The passage described the situation, and the sounds she heard as she lay in her bath, and later as they moved through the town—warning sirens and explosions. For many people the sound of warning sirens were the most familiar sound of the wartime soundscape, and therefore easy to imaginatively 'hear', although no sound effect was actually included. The description of the town with its deserted streets, the cliffs pitted with shell holes, provided a clear illustration for the listener of the impact of war. In the report there were several descriptions of

hearing and seeing, including ‘we could hear our bombers going out towards the opposite coast, we watched them out of sight, but it was only a matter of seconds before pillars of black smoke rose up on the horizon.’⁴⁰ Using the word ‘we’ not only emphasized her presence on location, giving a sense of authority or credibility speaking from first-hand experience, but it also made it more personal, more involved.

The radio commentator was also expected to read events, making connections that were not self-evident.⁴¹ Thus the next passage again provided striking visual clues and detail of a badly hit Dover, in which Russell also provided 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.⁴²

Dover’s caves provided shelter for civilians during shelling, so on one level her words implied that the civilians were protected by the strength of the caves. However, by changing tone and placing the emphasis on the words ‘are strong’ there was an emotional change of tone creating a new meaning. Pitch, volume, and tempo are key in how we colour our voices.⁴³ Russell’s voice has been described as an ‘attractive voice’ and a ‘soothing voice’, as well as a ‘voice that conveyed confidence.’⁴⁴ Speaking is itself shaped by bodily experience. ‘Emotions produce changes in muscle tension, breathing patterns, the brain.’⁴⁵ 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 voice.⁴⁶ This part of the brain also impacts on hearing, and

there are therefore clear links between speaking, hearing or listening, and emotion.⁴⁷ On another level, then, the strength of the caves can also be read as a metaphor for the people. The people of Dover are still standing strong. Making the point that Dover's caves 'are strong' provides reassurance, evoking a sense of duty that reflected the BBC's wider wartime purpose to 'maintain national unity and to secure the nation's morale'.⁴⁸ Siân Nicholas argues that in contrast to other media, radio could provide the intimacy of the spoken word, which meant that it had a more 'direct relationship' with the listener, whether at home or at work.⁴⁹ Most dispatches also open with the words 'This is Audrey Russell speaking from—', which also produced a familiarity. The radio, more than newspapers or newsreels, could carry a 'sense of the individual', that promoted a closer relationship between speaker and audience.⁵⁰

Russell's words were also striking because they were spoken by a woman. Women's voices were naturally a key feature of wartime output. They were frequently heard in talks, entertainment, variety, and comedy, and were a key component of the so-called kitchen front programmes. However, the news genre was different. At the BBC, news was mainly a male preserve and associated with the male voice. For a long time the perception was that women's voices were not suitable for radio news reporting or announcing.⁵¹ Listening to Russell's voice, then, was also significant because she had encroached on a space otherwise dominated by male voices. As David Howes and Constance Classen point out, the way we are sensing things affects 'not only how we experience and engage with our environment, but also how we experience and engage with each other'.⁵² This is an important observation, since hearing or listening to a woman's voice in a male-dominated genre represented a small but significant challenge to the social order, since 'who is seen, who is heard' played an important role in establishing or challenging positions of power in society.⁵³

Listening in on Folkestone

Most radio reports were not transmitted live, but were recorded. However, they still managed to convey a sense of immediacy, liveness, and, more importantly for the listener, presence. 'Liveness' is a key aspect

of radio's characteristics, with some even calling it a 'present-tense' medium, offering an 'account of what *is* happening rather than a record of what *has* happened.'⁵⁴ This was evident in a second recording used in the same programme, recorded on 30 September 1944, which featured recorded sound, or 'actuality', which helped to create a sense of presence together with the commentary. Actuality became a key feature of BBC wartime output, enabled above all by the development of portable disc recorders, mobile transmitters, and good engineering support.⁵⁵ At the end of September 1944, Allied forces had captured the German guns in the Pas-de-Calais, and consequently this ended the German cross-Channel shelling of the British coast. The following example featured the celebrations in Folkestone at the end of German long-range shelling. It started with the Mayor of Folkestone expressing his relief and joy now that the shelling had come to an end. The Mayor's speech was followed by Russell reporting from a churchyard, where a service of thanksgiving was about to begin. It was recorded outside, and the listener could clearly hear the noises of someone in the open air. An aeroplane was heard in the background as she described the scene, as people gathered for the service:

This is Audrey Russell on Saturday the 30th 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 announcements 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 Eanswythe.⁵⁶

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

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.⁵⁷

Listening, you can hear the sound of the people singing, which breaks through in the background and fades in, creating a touching atmosphere, and the footsteps of people walking into the service are also audible. What is striking here, however, is the direct exhortations 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.⁵⁸ As John Durham Peters writes of radio communication, ‘dialogic forms were another technique of simulating presence.’⁵⁹ He continues that ‘the remote audience was invited to become an imaginary participant in the world of the characters and of its fellow auditors.’⁶⁰ The listener was addressed directly by Russell, and invited to participate. The sensory and cognitive relationship between proximity, distance, and presence was transformed. The listener was transported to the church service. These radio examples from the South Coast were in stark contrast to a British Pathé Newsreel, from the *Pathe Gazette*, also reporting on the last days of German long-range shelling at Hellfire Corner.⁶¹ The newsreel contained upbeat dramatic orchestral music and a male narrator, who in an equally dramatic manner described the events unfolding, producing a detached viewing and listening experience overall, and one that was less cognitive since visuals were provided.

Similar techniques to the ones described in the examples from Dover and Folkestone are found in other reports. For example, in an interview for *Radio Newsreel* on 4 May 1945, Russell spoke to Wing Commander William Smith of 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 the mission, was asked, ‘Can you tell *us* what the trip was like today?’ and ‘Where did you go today if *we* may know?’⁶² 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, there is other testimony that

suggests this new style of reporting was well received.⁶³ 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 home to listeners, literally, ‘unsoftened by distance.’⁶⁴ 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.’⁶⁵ This also produced a more emotional experience while listening. Robertson continued, saying she was ‘intensively moved’ by hearing the British war correspondent Howard Marshall report from the thanksgiving service in France; hearing French voices ‘singing through tears’ conveyed a better understanding than any newsreel picture of what ‘the restoration of France meant to her citizens.’⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ *War Report*, for example, had an audience of between 10 and 15 million listeners in Britain. Its popularity boiled down to a combination of immediacy, sound footage, and commentary, which gave listeners a sense of presence.⁶⁸ Actuality and first-hand reporting clearly added to the listening experience.

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

Russell was a regular contributor to *Radio Newsreel*. The programme’s synopsis was tellingly described in the BBC’s *Radio Times* as ‘close-ups from the world’s battle-fronts’ or ‘close-ups from the war fronts of the world’—an interesting choice of words, drawing on cinematic language, that obviously played on the suggestion of being within close range and offering a detailed and intimate experience.⁶⁹ The focus of one such close-up was the civilian experience of the impact of the V-2 rocket explosions in London. The example used ‘inserts’ of interviews recorded on location, mixed with a scripted commentary

by Russell (recorded in a studio by the sound of it), which guided the listener and provided narration for the news story similar to today's radio news packages. As in the example from Folkestone, by hearing the actuality the listener was brought closer to the event. The focus was on the first-hand experience of the detonation of a V-2 rocket, but also individual 'earwitness' 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'.⁷⁰ 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'.⁷¹ Russell continued, 'She was holding court with the neighbours when I went up to her with a microphone',⁷² and she almost sounded a little embarrassed at the fuss being made when she was 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 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.⁷³

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. Before the war, the working class had been marginalized

on national radio both as an audience and as a subject.⁷⁴ 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 featured Mr Crickman, who also had a local accent and who had been 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 [tails 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.⁷⁵

Crickman provided a horrifying description, momentarily losing one of his senses, his sight, and consequently his direction and sense of the place. Together with Mrs Johnson and Mrs Cunningham, his were visual clues to the horror and destruction of the V-2 explosion, with falling debris, fire, and smoke. The listener was able to imagine what the destruction might have been like. And, again, hearing the voices of individuals involved made it more personal and therefore powerful, since eyewitness accounts are not just factual but 'emotionally coloured by the voices in which they were heard.'⁷⁶

What is also striking about these accounts, however, was that the civilians interviewed act as our earwitnesses; their function was not only to describe what they saw and experienced, but particularly to reflect on what they had heard (or in some cases, had not heard). During the Second World War, new noises were introduced to the soundscape, including air raid and warning sirens, exploding bombs, and enemy fighter planes.⁷⁷ Civilians learned to listen out for V-1 flying

bombs, also known as doodlebugs or buzzbombs for the buzzing sound they made before impact. There were widespread concerns about the lack of sleep among the civilian population, because people were lying awake listening for incoming planes or bombs.⁷⁸ The V-2 missiles were silent, however, because they descended faster than the speed of sound. They began falling on London in September 1944, causing great destruction. Their unexpectedness made them particularly malicious, a point also made in the BBC report for *Radio Newsreel*. Russell interviewed an Air Raid Precautions Controller, who concluded, '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.'⁷⁹ The remainder of the recording focused on the fact that these ballistic missiles did not give away their position by sound, but that it might be possible to see them. The final insert was an account by one of their own newsroom sub-editors, who talked about the rocket he had seen 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 tracers of shell that I've seen snaking up from flying bombs.'⁸⁰ So the piece ended with visual clues of what to look out for.

Remembering war

In 1945 Russell travelled abroad, following the path of the Allied advance, and reporting from Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. After the war she joined the Home News Reporting Unit and her work moved 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 Queen Elizabeth II's first royal tour in 1953, for example.

Time creates distance from the events themselves, prompting a different experience of war. Later in life, in her autobiography *A Certain Voice* published in 1984, Russell reflected on her wartime experiences. 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 was on her individual experience rather

than the organizational context. These accounts are often ‘anchored in the personal experiences of the reporter in confronting the horror of war, negotiating their relations with military personnel and civilian victims and dealing with psychological trauma.’⁸¹ And, as Williams suggests, the autobiographical genre therefore allows correspondents to ‘use their memoirs to explain or justify their reporting.’⁸² Nevertheless, this type of self-reflexivity will generally be framed in a particular way. Russell’s autobiography constructed a new narrative of her war experience, a type of war remains—and one clearly shaped by gender.

Christine Sylvester has argued that war should be studied as a social institution, where people’s experience of war is affected by their social experience.⁸³ Her approach further highlights the body and its centrality to the social institutions and individual experience of war. War, Sylvester writes, is ‘experienced through the body’ both physically and emotionally.⁸⁴ The body is neither a neutral nor a 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.’⁸⁵

Russell’s autobiography was published in a very different context with an evolving feminist agenda, and her memories were clearly shaped by a feminist interpretation of events.⁸⁶ In it, Russell recalled that being the first BBC woman war correspondent inevitably meant she had the lesser news stories, and she often had to focus on the so-called woman’s angle, while the men were covering the hard news.⁸⁷ Her gendered body was a prominent feature of this narrative. Describing her new appointment as a war correspondent, travelling Europe, she wrote about the clothes and the fit of her uniform, and how it had to be worn 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.’⁸⁸ She continued by describing the rest of her clothing, and in particular how the uniform transformed her into 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.’⁸⁹

Carrying the portable recording equipment, she kept the blank discs

under her blouse of her battle dress (having been told to keep them at a reasonable room temperature), which caused some teasing in the camp 'because it made me look a very curious shape in front'.⁹⁰ Following the advancing 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 described how her presence as the only woman initially caused some embarrassment. Russell placed her bodily needs firmly in the story by describing how in the camp she managed to wash her hair and dry it over the 'electric pop-up toasters' left by the Germans, which were soon converted into an efficient hairdryer.⁹¹

Other women war correspondents' memoirs have similar remarks, suggesting that many of them took pride in maintaining their feminine identity.⁹² Some also used their memories of the war to highlight the heightened sexualization of women reporters, and the attention their bodies received.⁹³ One American female radio correspondent based in Europe during the Second World War was told to 'keep her voice pitched low'; another that her voice was 'too young and feminine for war news'.⁹⁴ The Second World War opened up new opportunities for women, and saw many move into jobs and roles that previously had been men's; however, women moving into what had been male-dominated jobs or industries was not uncontroversial, and was a source of resentment among the remaining male workers, fuelling resistance to equal pay for equal work. In Britain, the Second World War came to reinvigorate the feminist activists, who pursued women's rights to contribute to the war effort and to do so for equal pay, and for equal compensation in the event of injury.⁹⁵ The war on the one hand did open up new opportunities for women, but, equally, gender difference continued to be expressed and applied. Russell's memoirs of the war, clearly shaped by her gendered experience, were 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.⁹⁶ This chapter has explored the embodied and sensory experience of radio war reporting during the Second World War by looking at the case of the BBC reporter Audrey Russell. The aim has

been to shift our attention from the institutional histories of radio war reporting to the sensory experience produced by the radio war correspondent—and in so doing, to introduce a ‘sensory’ dimension to mainstream radio and media history.

Radio arguably changed the way war was mediated and represented. It brought the sounds and ‘visions’ of the battlefield and 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 perceptions of proximity and distance. Visualizing the impact of war by ‘seeing’ images imaginatively also produced a more personal, intimate, and arguably more emotional experience. On another level, the mediation of war by a 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 listeners to participate. Radio war reporting should therefore be considered a multilevel sensory experience. A sensory dimension helps us to understand how radio penetrated listeners’ minds and personal space by bringing the experience of war closer. The use of war correspondents allowed the BBC to realize and utilize the strengths of the radio medium, incorporating techniques and strategies that we still find in radio reporting today. Arguably, the embodied and sensory experience of radio is key to its longevity.

By exploring Audrey Russell’s war reports, it can also be concluded that the mediating and representation of war is also shaped by social institutions and social experience, reflecting a ‘politics of the senses.’ Who is seen and who is heard *does* matter, as does whose stories are told. This reinforces the notion that ‘understanding people’s experiences with/in war is essential for understanding war.’⁹⁷ The role of the media in challenging or reinforcing different war experiences remains paramount.

Notes

- 1 James G. Mansell, *The age of noise in Britain: Hearing modernity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 145.
- 2 Christina Baade, *Victory through harmony: The BBC and popular music in World War II* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

- 3 Anne Karpf, *The human voice: The story of a remarkable talent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 242.
- 4 Andrew Crisell, *An introductory history of British broadcasting* (2nd edn, London: Routledge, 2002), 61; cf. Qvarnström in this volume on slow Vs rapid media.
- 5 Elodie A. Roy, 'Worn Grooves: Affective connectivity, mobility and recorded sound in the First World War', *Media History*, DOI: 10.1080/13688804.2016.1190639; Louis Goddard, "'A few feet of film run backwards": Tracing the sonic construction of shellfire, 1914–30', in Michael Bull & Les Back (eds.), *The auditory culture reader*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 293–303.
- 6 BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading (WAC), Radio Talks Scripts pre 1970 RUS R450, Prisoners Home by Air, Transcription, 24 May 1945.
- 7 Siân Nicholas, *The echo of war: Home front propaganda and the wartime BBC, 1939–1945* (Manchester: MUP, 1996), 213; BBC WAC Oral History Transcript R143/10, 10, Audrey Russell interviewed by Madeau Stewart Oct. and Nov. 1977.
- 8 Nicholas 1996, 6–7.
- 9 Quoted in Hugh Chignell, *Public issue radio: Talks, news and current affairs in the twentieth century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 49; for a more detailed discussion of the impact of Gardener's commentary and listener reactions, see Nicholas 1996, 197.
- 10 Charles Gardener, *A listener research report: Air battle commentary by Charles Gardener*, BBC, 24 July 1940, 4 pp., <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/battleofbritain/11432.shtml?page=1> (accessed 20 Dec. 2017).
- 11 Asa Briggs, *The history of broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, iii: *The war of words 1939–1945* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 45.
- 12 Nicholas 1996, 190.
- 13 *Ibid.* 212.
- 14 David Hendy, *Radio in the global age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 115–122.
- 15 Tim Crook, *Radio drama: Theory and practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 54.
- 16 Andrew Crisell, *Understanding radio* (London: Routledge, 1994), 127.
- 17 *Ibid.* 128.
- 18 Mansell 2017; Bull & Back 2016; David Hendy, *Noise: A human history of sound & listening* (London: Profile, 2013); for 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, 2005); David Howes, 'Introduction: "Make it new!"—Reforming the sensory world,' in id. (ed.), *A cultural history of the senses in the modern age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–31.
- 19 Michael Bull, 'War, cognition and the media: Training the senses in a fully mediated world,' in Bull & Back 2016, 305.
- 20 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, 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 & Television*, 28/2 (2008), 175–94.

- 21 David Hendy, 'Listening in the dark', *Media History*, 16/2 (2010), 215–32.
- 22 Angela Smith and Michael Higgins, 'Introduction: Reporting war history, professionalism and technology', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 5/2 (2012), 131–6 suggest that the rise of radio in 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; Deborah Chambers et al., *Women and journalism* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 23 The author wishes to acknowledge and thank the staff at the BBC Written Archives Centre in Caversham.
- 24 Looking at the history of BBC war reporting, there is usually a focus on dispatches from the battle front and from abroad.
- 25 Chambers et al. 2004, 204.
- 26 Ibid. 214.
- 27 David Howes & Constance Classen, *Ways of sensing: Understanding the senses in society* (London: Routledge, 2014), 5.
- 28 At the outbreak of war Russell volunteered for the London Fire Brigade or 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 air raids and civil defence, and this connection eventually saw her transfer temporarily to the BBC (BBC WAC Oral History Transcript R143/10, Audrey Russell interviewed by Madeau Stewart Oct. and Nov. 1977).
- 29 Ibid. 10–17.
- 30 Audrey Russell, *A certain voice* (Bolton: Ross Anderson Publications, 1984), 10–26.
- 31 Sean Street, *The poetry of radio: The colour of sound* (London: Routledge, 2012), 5, 7.
- 32 Nicholas 1996, 116.
- 33 BBC WAC Radio Talks Scripts pre 1970 RUS R450, 12 Sept. 1941, WAAF Training, 1 p.m. (Home Service), Programme as Broadcast Transcript.
- 34 Crisell 1994, 61.
- 35 Ibid. 9.
- 36 Ibid. 11, original emphasis.
- 37 Nicholas 1996, 213; some of these dispatches were also reproduced on 5 Oct. 1944 in the BBC's *The Listener* magazine; Audrey Russell, 'The relief of Hellfire Corner', *The Listener*, 5 Oct. 1944: 369+. The Listener Historical Archive (accessed 10 Jul. 2014).
- 38 BBC WAC R143/10, 8 Oral History Transcript, Audrey Russell interviewed by Madeau Stewart Oct. & Nov. 1977.
- 39 BBC recording, catalogue number: 1884, access Imperial War Museums, London 27 Sept. 1944, Audrey Russell, 'British correspondent's account of German long range shelling of Dover, GB, 26/9/1944', my transcription.
- 40 Ibid.

- 41 Crisell 1994, 134.
- 42 BBC recording, catalogue number: 1884, access Imperial War Museums, London 27 Sept. 1944, Audrey Russell, 'British correspondent's account of German long range shelling of Dover, GB, 26/9/1944', my transcription.
- 43 Karpf 2006, 33.
- 44 BBC Radio 4, *BBC Radio Lives* [radio programme], 25 Mar. 1993, catalogue no. 13176, access Imperial War Museums, London, recalls the broadcasting career of the war reporter and commentator Audrey Russell, 1939–1945.
- 45 Karpf 2006, 134.
- 46 Ibid. 135.
- 47 Susan Douglas, *Listening in: Radio and the American imagination* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 22–39.
- 48 Nicholas 1996, 2.
- 49 Ibid. 5.
- 50 Ibid. 202.
- 51 Karpf 2006; Kate Murphy, *Behind the wireless: A history of early women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 52 Howes & Classen 2014, 6.
- 53 Ibid. 65.
- 54 Crisell 1994, 9, original emphasis.
- 55 Hannon 2008.
- 56 BBC recording, catalogue number: 1885, access Imperial War Museums, London 30 Sept. 1944, Audrey Russell, 'Actuality of celebrations to mark the end of German long range shelling of Folkestone, GB, 30/9/1944', my transcription.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Paddy Scannell, *Radio, television and modern life: A phenomenological approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 24, original emphasis.
- 59 John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 216.
- 60 Ibid. 216.
- 61 British Pathé, 5 Oct. 1944, film, ID 1125.20, 'Hellfire Corner filmed by Pathe Gazette cameraman Pat Gay', <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/hellfire-corner-aka-hell-fire-corner/query/Hellfire+corner>.
- 62 BBC WAC 4 May 1945, microfilm: BBC Radio Newsreel, *Radio Newsreel*, North America Edition no 1763 Item 7, Audrey Russell 'Dropping food in Holland', Air raid shelters, roll no 1/2, Sept. 1940 to 1 Oct. 1946, my emphasis.
- 63 To date, the author has not been able to identify any listener research specifically about Russell's reporting.
- 64 Arnot Robertson, 'Listening to war reports: What do you feel?', in *BBC year book*, (1945) 15–19, quote at 16.
- 65 Ibid. 16.
- 66 Ibid. 17.
- 67 Nicholas 1996, 205.
- 68 Ibid. 217.
- 69 See, for example, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/generalforces/1944-11-01>

- 70 BBC recording, catalogue number: 2350, access Imperial War Museums, London, 1 Nov. 1944, Audrey Russell, 'British correspondent's interviews with civilians and Air Raid Precautions personnel on experiences of V2 rocket attacks, London, GB, 11/1944', my transcription.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Scannell 1996, 37.
- 75 BBC recording, catalogue number: 2350, access Imperial War Museums, London, 1 Nov. 1944, Audrey Russell, 'British correspondent's interviews with civilians and Air Raid Precautions personnel on experiences of V2 rocket attacks, London, GB, 11/1944', my transcription.
- 76 Crisell & Starkey 2009, 6.
- 77 Mansell 2017, 161.
- 78 Ibid. 174–7.
- 79 BBC recording, catalogue number: 2350, access Imperial War Museums, London, 1 Nov. 1944, Audrey Russell, 'British correspondent's interviews with civilians and Air Raid Precautions personnel on experiences of V2 rocket attacks, London, GB, 11/1944', my transcription.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Kevin Williams, 'War correspondents as sources for history', *Media History*, 18/3–4 (2012), 341–60.
- 82 Williams 2012, 349.
- 83 Christine Sylvester, *War as experience: Contributions from international relations and feminist analysis* (London: Routledge, 2013), 3–6.
- 84 Ibid. 5.
- 85 Ibid. 5.
- 86 See also Qvarnström's discussion of later interpretations of Elgström's war stories in a feminist context in this volume.
- 87 Russell 1984, 44.
- 88 Ibid. 51.
- 89 Ibid. 51.
- 90 Ibid. 54.
- 91 Ibid. 58.
- 92 Chambers et al. 2004.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 David H. Hosley, 'As good as any of us: American female radio correspondents in Europe, 1938–1941', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, 2/2 (1984), 141–56.
- 95 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*, 7/2 (2000), 277–89.
- 96 Smith & Higgins 2012, 132.
- 97 Sylvester 2013, 1.

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