
Rezensiert von: James Schwoch, Department of Communication Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston/IL

Any good history of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has the same dependable story lines: the time frame, angle or approach, the archival and secondary literature utilized – well, none of these narrative differences change the dependability of a good BBC story. Alban Webb has written a good history of the BBC, so the question at hand is how the author treats the story lines. To answer that, this review utilizes this dependable historical arc of the BBC story to examine „London Calling“. These story lines are all important, and they are all found over and over again in studies of the BBC. These ever-emerging story lines, plot twists, and narrative arcs are among those elements which make a good BBC history akin to a good detective novel. Briefly, these story lines are the outside critics, the lack of money, and competition.

There must always be a chorus of critics and outsiders, not part of the BBC itself, who nevertheless always know what the BBC could do, what the BBC should do, and what the BBC must do. The fact that these critics, outsiders, do-gooders, and knowledgeable concerned citizens rarely, if ever, actually understand what it is that the BBC actually does, why the BBC does what it does, and that in the main the BBC does what it does in a way that is at the very least satisfactory, matters not to these concerned citizens. These outsiders are as a sort of self-appointed Greek Chorus, articulating their supposed truths and revelations about the BBC that the BBC cannot find a way to say about itself. Who are these people? Well, all sorts of different characters have filled this role in historical works about the BBC: examples beyond the actual listeners include parsons, pub denizens, London cabbies, Oxbridge Dons, Midlanders, the Scottish (and, less so, the Welsh), and of course angst-filled youth.

„London Calling“ sensibly casts its chorus from Whitehall. Much of the book is devoted to an ongoing dialogue between Whitehall (and by extension, the British Cold War government) and the BBC. This moves beyond dialogue into a discursive formation articulated throughout various British government ministries and by the extension of the British society. In this sense, it might be said that „London Calling“ is not a global study, but rather a study of a robust yet very local London-based conversation, which might seem a paradox for a book about the BBC World Service. Yet, because of the Cold War setting, this local conversation is not a paradox, but exemplifies the Cold War era, particularly as it was lived in major national capitals of the world. Some of the most heated, passionate, and significant Cold War dialogue did not take place across borders, across the Iron Curtain, or across cultures: it took place within capital cities or similar seats of power. This discourse deeply plumbed and interrogated all government agencies and ministries regarding Cold War thoughts, opinions, leanings, and actions, as well as institutions such as the BBC (or, for that matter, Hollywood.) Alban Webb has found a requisite chorus, and „London Calling“ clearly demonstrates this Whitehall chorus promulgates the attributes of criticism, advice, instructions, directions, mandates, and similar regarding the BBC, while at the same time the Whitehall chorus demonstrates that its knowledge of what the BBC actually does is, to be diplomatic, usually incomplete.

Another dependable story line of any good BBC history is money: namely, the endless lack thereof. Underfunded from Day One and underfunded to this day, rest assured a good BBC history will detail the chronically lean revenues, budgets often shrinking in direct response to – and unlike earlier, this is a paradox, indeed a double paradox – the constant self-realization of the BBC that the BBC needs to do more, combined with the demands of the chorus of outsiders clamoring for the station to also do other things that the chorus, whomever they may be, does not understand the BBC does not do.

„London Calling“ shows in depth the never-ending assault on BBC funds from a variety of fronts: Whitehall, the Treasury, and Parliament. This, predictably but told herein...
poignantly, increasingly hamstrings the BBC throughout the 1950s in its efforts to provide more radio broadcast hours to global listeners, particularly those in Western Europe. And, of course, it is not only broadcast hours that are at stake: Webb pays close attention to the BBC Monitoring Service, an important open-source intelligence gathering unit that provided summaries and analyses of radio broadcasts and news reports by stations and networks around the world. The BBC Monitoring Service is an example of a BBC wartime necessity that, as it turned out, could not be shut down after Victory in Europe Day, due to the rising Cold War tensions. The author does a good job of narrating the importance of this service to the BBC and to the British Government, showing that this was an example of an expense that had, during the war, been seen as something that would no longer be a BBC expense once the war was over, but became an expense that had to continue during the Cold War, straining (along with everything else) the ever-tightening station’s budget. Monitoring exemplifies something the BBC did – and in fact did extraordinarily well – that may not have been fully appreciated by most outsiders as a BBC accomplishment of the first magnitude.

Magnifying and complicating the ongoing BBC budget problems is another dependable story line from histories of the BBC: there will be competition. „London Calling“ details the growing competition on the global radio dial from entities such as the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Moscow, and the always-interesting-and-always troubling Cold War radio services offered by broadcasters such as Radio Free Liberty (RFE) and Radio in the American Sector (RIAS). However, there is more: competition also crops up from other British entities, such as the semi-clandestine radio propaganda services run by the Voice of Britain (VOB) over a purportedly commercial station (Sharq-al-Adna) first in Lebanon, then later in Cyprus. This VOB radio station also used a transmitter that would have been extraordinarily useful for BBC services in the Arab Regions; if VOB had been willing to abandon its propaganda campaign and turn the Sharq-al-Adna transmitter over to the BBC. And still more: competition from within the BBC itself. Although not narrated in detail, Webb offers occasional gleanings about the growing role of BBC television, including its potential for TV program exchanges with the Soviet Union. In a wonderful passage, the author also details an effort called Western Union Broadcasting, a failed attempt in the early 1950s to coordinate the BBC with other broadcasters in the Western European Union for shared programming – but, as the author rightly points out, one of the earliest manifestations of what would eventually become Eurovision. And, of course, every time a British colony achieved political independence, it meant a new radio competitor for the BBC, as these new nations invariably launched their own national radio services.

Finally, a good, dependable BBC history will tell the reader new things about the BBC, and will also leave the reader wanting more. „London Calling“ has the requisite information, plus a few new nuggets, about Cold War broadcast history mainstays such as jamming. Two in-depth case studies, on Hungary in 1956 and on the Suez disaster, are very well told, and offer new insights on both of these watershed Cold War moments for the world and for the BBC; I particularly liked the story of Suez and its relationship to the BBC Arab Services. Yet, I must admit I wanted more. I found myself wondering what the BBC told its global listeners about all sorts of things, such as the Olympic Games, the Commonwealth Games, race relations, atomic weapons testing, Algeria, psychoanalysis, existentialism, and Elvis Presley. Wrapping up its narrative with the end-game fiasco of Suez in early 1957, I also wanted the book to go on into the 1960s and explore how the BBC told the world about 1960s things: Sputnik, the Berlin Wall, Cuba, the Beatles, hula hoops, and hippies. But this is what a good history should do: both reveal new narratives as well as whet our anticipation for other good stories that might be told. Alban Webb has given us in „London Calling“, with all the hallmarks, a good BBC history. Perhaps the author will produce more research about the BBC. I hope so. I also suspect he knows that for Great Britain in the 21st century, the sun may now be finally setting on the Union Jack. But Alban Webb also knows and shows that for media historians, the sun
shows no signs of setting on the history of the BBC.