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The production of '*From Our Own Correspondent*' on BBC Radio 4: A popular geopolitical analysis

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Abstract

The production of radio, a medium with the power to shape listeners' geographical imaginations, has received little attention in geography, particularly in comparison to visual media such as photography, television and film. This paper redresses this imbalance by examining the production of *From Our Own Correspondent* (FOOC), one of BBC Radio 4's longest-running programmes which has broadcast dispatches from journalists around the world since 1955. It explores the representational power of FOOC to script the world for listeners by constructing geographical imaginaries of distant people and places; interrogates who 'Our' correspondents are and the structures which underpin whose voices are heard; and reveals the concealed practices, spatialities and temporalities which shape the programme's production and geopolitical scripts it broadcasts. In doing so, the paper makes a significant and timely contribution to popular geopolitics, a subfield of political geography which has traditionally focused on deconstructing geopolitical discourses and imaginaries in 'texts', at the expense of investigating where, how and why media are 'made'. It draws on original interviews conducted with FOOC's presenter, two producers and four correspondents, and reflects on what the programme's production reveals about how FOOC understands, conceptualises and portrays the world. By exploring FOOC, the paper offers important insights into the hidden geographies of production which govern BBC radio journalism as a sonic medium of popular geopolitics.

KEYWORDS

BBC Radio 4, geographical imaginations, media, popular geopolitics, production, radio

1 | INTRODUCTION

First commissioned in 1955, *From Our Own Correspondent* (FOOC) has been on the BBC's airwaves for 69 years, singling it out as one of the corporation's longest-running radio programmes. FOOC is a pre-recorded show which airs twice weekly on BBC Radio 4 and comprises five, 5-minute dispatches from journalists around the world; a format which immediately signals its geography as listeners are invited on an imaginative journey across countries and continents. The

transportive power and potential of FOOC is captured by producer Polly Hope (2020, p. 1) who notes that 'over more than 60 years on the air, FOOC has done its best to take listeners to parts of the world where they have never been, and perhaps never would go in their lives'. FOOC therefore encourages listeners to travel vicariously through its correspondents who offer imaginative encounters with faraway people and places.

The flagship programme is revered within the BBC as a space of storytelling and reflection for journalists cut loose from the conventions of day-to-day reporting. As Hope (2020, p. 1) makes clear, correspondents are 'encouraged to break the usual mould of news reporting' with an 'unusual amount of leeway allowed for personal reactions'. Former producer Tony Grant (2005a) agrees that for many, writing for FOOC is a 'cathartic process', providing journalists with a welcome opportunity for creative storytelling and personal reflection. It is these two striking characteristics—imaginatively mapping the world for listeners and championing a different style of journalistic storytelling—that act as a critical point of departure for a popular geopolitical analysis of FOOC. The BBC's status as Britain's leading public service broadcaster, and Radio 4's reputation as the most listened to non-music speech radio station, reaching 10 million weekly (BBC Media Centre, 2023), reinforces their importance as popular spaces of geopolitical knowledge production.

Critical geopolitics examines the 'practices by which political actors spatialise international politics and represent it as a "world" characterized by particular types of places' (Kuus, 2017, p. 1). Whilst 'practical' and 'formal' geopolitics attend to politicians, policy-makers, and think tank researchers, 'popular' geopolitics studies media and popular culture, turning to broadcasters, scriptwriters and filmmakers as 'agents of geopolitics' who operate within 'the broader cultural milieu in which particular geopolitical claims thrive' (Kuus, 2017, p. 14). Since the 1990s, scholars have examined discourses and imaginaries in magazines (Sharp, 1996), newspapers (McFarlane & Hay, 2003), comic books (Dittmer, 2007) and films (Funnell & Dodds, 2017). However, this body of work is characterised by a preoccupation with visual, rather than aural, media and culture (Hughes, 2013), and an emphasis on the site of representation, at the expense of production and consumption (Dittmer & Bos, 2019); two trends which this paper seeks to address.

Existing research in geography on radio and media production provides important context. Pinkerton (2008; 2014) has spearheaded research into radio as a geographical medium which occupies spaces of broadcasting and reception, and has the capacity to shape listener perceptions of people and places. Pinkerton and Dodds (2009, p. 10) lay the foundations for a 'radio geopolitics' which explores broadcasting as a tool of communication, diplomacy and propaganda, and invite further research on 'radio cultures, broadcasting infrastructure and technology, and ... affective impacts of radio on audiences'. Weir (2014) heeds the second tenet of their call by conceptualising radio as an assemblage of human and non-human components, which reflects a theoretical shift from studying media's representational meanings towards the production, reception and circulation of media. More recent work therefore aims to foreground audiences to uncover how 'representations of the world are made intelligible and meaningful in an everyday setting' (Bos, 2018; Dodds, 2006, p. 199). Yet as Dodds observes, 'the production side of popular geopolitics needs further encouragement' (Dittmer, 2018, p. 13). Media geography has important insights to offer. Rodgers (2014, p. 69) considers media production to be 'enacted through particular practices and material settings', theorising space as a container for creative practices. This is illustrated neatly in Fregonese and Ramadan's (2015, p. 803) analysis of hotels as important geopolitical spaces in the reporting of overseas conflicts: 'gathering places for the international media' and 'essential platforms for seeing and reporting war'. Their work highlights the value of attending to the sites and spaces in which journalists operate and challenging the taken-for-granted geographies that shape journalistic practices and representations of the world.

Nevertheless, Adams (2013, p. 267) is justified in pointing out that 'what we might call geopolitics of the eye, broadly defined, has attracted far more attention than the geopolitics of the ear'. This is not to ignore recent interest in sonic geographies (Gallagher et al., 2017), but to highlight an imbalance of the senses in popular geopolitical scholarship. A notable exception is Kirby's (2019) analysis of the geopolitics of instrumental film score, but again, he privileges the site of representation over production and audiencing. Pinkerton (2013, p. 441) is therefore correct in arguing that 'while the material output of journalistic endeavour ... have provoked considerable scholarly interest, the crucial role of journalists (among others) in their production, interpretation and circulation has been somewhat occluded behind a kaleidoscope of geopolitical "visions" and "imaginaries"'. The root cause is thought to be methodological. Muller (2012, p. 3) frames media organisations as 'black boxes' given that internal processes, actors and ways of working are often concealed, whilst Dittmer and Bos (2019, p. 63) stress the 'difficulties in contacting and communicating with media and cultural institutions'. This paper therefore makes a significant contribution to popular geopolitics by engaging with BBC producers and journalists to examine the production of FOOC.

The research is important, focusing on the BBC as one of the world's preeminent international broadcasters, and timely given the recent rise in podcasting, as well as radio broadcasting, which highlights the popularity of sound media in a 'golden age of audio' (Ganesh, 2016). It draws on interviews conducted in 2016 with FOOC's two producers at

Broadcasting House in London, and the presenter and four foreign correspondents via Skype. The interviews sought to uncover FOOC's production practices and were transcribed before being analysed thematically. The paper proceeds through a three-step analysis that: first, examines FOOC's representational power to construct geographical imaginaries of people and places; second, reflects on who 'Our' correspondents are and the structures which underpin whose voices are heard; and third, explores spatialities and temporalities of production which specify where, and over what timeframes, FOOC is 'made'. In doing so, the paper joins and develops research interested in media and 'the practices and processes by which geographical information is gathered, geographical facts are ordered, and imaginative geographies are created' (Craine, 2014).

2 | SCRIPTING AND CURATING THE WORLD FOR LISTENERS

Through its selection and framing of dispatches, FOOC scripts the world for listeners. Producer 1 explains that FOOC aims to combine 'hard news analysis' with 'more colourful but possibly less immediate reports'. This is corroborated by Producer 2 who identifies an 'arc' to the programme from the 'hardest, most urgent, breaking newsiest story at the top' through to 'more considered, essay-like writing', 'travel writing' or 'memoir' at the end. FOOC is therefore characterised by a mixture of dispatches with different styles, tones and remits. This 'arc' is not set in stone. Producer 2 describes a flexible structure, insisting 'if we had five stonking hard news pieces … we'd put them all in'. However, FOOC aims to broadcast a diversity of stories that engage in varying styles of journalistic storytelling. The programme's structure highlights the power of producers to order stories into hierarchies of importance and influence listeners' affective 'moods' (Tebbutt, 2006, p. 859).

FOOC's curation of the world into a series of dispatches illuminates the representational power of media to produce imaginative geographies that shape how audiences picture, understand and engage in the world (Said, 1978). Gasher (2015, p. 127) considers journalists to be 'cartographers' who 'map the "news world", selecting from a constellation of current affairs which events, issues, peoples, and places warrant their audiences' attention'. This is pertinent to FOOC as Producer 1 strives 'to have a good spread of the world … if we can have a piece from Asia, one from Africa, one from America, one from Europe and one from–where's left? Antarctica—we'd probably be very happy'. FOOC's producers evidence an awareness of the programme's geographical coverage and a transportive impulse to take listeners on an imaginative journey. There are imperial undertones to this ambition, reinforced by Producer 1's interest in featuring reportage from 'far flung places'. It conjures up an imaginary of Broadcasting House as a 'centre of calculation' in the metropolitan core (Driver, 2004, p. 84), sending out correspondents to render the world intelligible for audiences 'back home'. This is exemplified by FOOC's aim to illuminate 'how people live their lives in foreign places and the differences between their lives and the lives of people we know back home' (Producer 1). The term 'differences' is instructive, recalling Said's (1978) observation that imaginative geographies delineate between a familiar space as 'ours' and an unfamiliar space as 'theirs'. The programme's title could also be heard as an imperial echo, predicated on 'Our' pioneering correspondents. However, as Section 3 details, such a reading fails to account for the criticality and self-reflexivity of journalists featured on the programme or interrogate who, exactly, are 'Our' correspondents.

Journalists, like cartographers, make representational choices. In FOOC, these choices are linguistic and acoustic, as well as geographical, circling around the selection of words and phrases, and the intonation of voice and tone. An extraordinary amount of time and effort goes into crafting dispatches to capture listeners' attention and activate their geographical imaginations. Producer 1 lists questions they typically ask journalists to elicit colourful and imaginative storytelling: '"Tell us a bit more about that woman, she sounds a real part of the story but yet you haven't described her" … "What was on the cooker?," "Was there any cooking smells in the air?"'. Producers direct the journalistic 'gaze' to sights and smells, and work hard to convey a sense of time and place. Hope (2020, p. 2) acknowledges that many 'would wonder at the extraordinary pains taken on FOOC to … ensure each description conjures a clear picture'. Unlike McCormack's (2013) framing of live radio commentary as a spontaneous outflow of unplanned observations and reflections, FOOC's pre-recorded dispatches are highly crafted and designed to shape, frame and linger in the imagination.

The absence of place-based sounds in FOOC heightens the importance of this creative writing. Correspondents are encouraged to 'get literary' and 'write beautiful, evocative English' (Producer 2). This is a power-laden process for as Chouliaraki (2013, p. 152) reminds us, language, imagery and sound are 'aesthetic choices' which performatively bring a world into being. Contrary to its claim to offer a 'window on the world' (Presenter), FOOC produces and shapes perceptions of the world. Correspondent 4 references 'smells', 'scents' and 'sounds' to activate listeners' senses, whilst correspondent 2 suggests FOOC demands 'painting the pictures with the words'. Reliance on the spoken narration of journalists

fosters an intimacy with listeners, likening FOOC to 'an old-fashioned radio talk' (Grant, 2005b) and calling to mind the term 'radiogenic' to describe programmes particularly suited to the medium of radio (Chignell, 2009). FOOC has a distinctive style and sound, engaging in reporting that shares similarities with fictional writing, is subject to significant editorial intervention, and harks back to traditional radio broadcasting.

Uncovering these creative practices reaffirms that 'geopolitics is about storytelling in which protagonists play roles as parts in geopolitics scripts that they tell about the world "out there"' (Agnew, 2013, p. 23). Journalists in FOOC play an active role in shaping how audiences imagine and understand the world. The occasional theatrical designation of correspondents as 'the cast of FOOC' by Radio 4's continuity announcers further frames the programme as a staged, performative event. The presenter conducts the programme like a narrator, topping and tailing dispatches with short contextual cues. These act as introductory 'pegs' on which correspondents hang their dispatches, summarising forthcoming content and providing background information. The hands of journalists and producers in co-writing these cues is invisible to listeners, but the production team reveals them to be highly crafted. Like directors of a play, FOOC's producers coordinate an ensemble of storytellers who curate the world into a series of dispatches and encourage listeners to picture them in their geographical imaginations.

3 | IDENTIFYING 'OUR' CORRESPONDENTS

The title '*From Our Own Correspondent*' implies a single, unitary position from which all journalists report. It is possessive, suggesting the BBC has an assembled team of correspondents who can be relied upon to deliver authoritative, truthful and impartial reportage, and it is reflective of the time in which it was commissioned. FOOC was launched in the mid-1950s, broadcasting to post-war Britain in an age of waning empire when most correspondents were white, middle-aged, middle-class men with cut-glass accents (Hope, 2020). Parallels have been drawn between the placement of the BBC's foreign correspondents and the government's diplomatic network overseas, with financial ties between the Foreign Office and World Service bolstering perceptions of broadcasting as a vehicle for soft power (Pinkerton & Dodds, 2009; Webb, 2014). FOOC tapped into this imaginary, invoking an imagined network of journalists and ambassadors, and creating a lingering sense of Britain's global footprint even as the bounds of empire retreated. Potter (2012, p. 1) argues that overseas activities 'bolstered the corporation's role and prestige at home' and 'the BBC was thus engaged in broadcasting to and about the empire, and in building up a broadcasting empire of its own'. FOOC's retention of its title today evokes a nostalgic aura of power and stability, appeals to the BBC's heritage, and encourages listeners to identify correspondents as voices they can recognise and trust.

An analysis of who now contributes to FOOC, however, problematises the title under which it broadcasts and reinforces that dispatches are always situated and partial (Haraway, 1988). FOOC still rests on 'the base of the BBC newsgathering operation' (Producer 2), meaning where it reports from depends on journalistic 'deployments', 'who is available and who is where'. The BBC has over 250 foreign correspondents operating out of 50 international bureaus (Herbert, 2013). Their locations are tracked daily, and although the producers sometimes register interest in receiving a dispatch before they travel, journalists volunteer most of FOOC's material. The nature of newsgathering, however, is transforming and with it, so are contributors to FOOC. Sambrook (2010, p. 1) recalls that the traditional model 'grew from the industrialisation of news production … when a limited number of organisations had sufficient resources to gather and distribute news'. The growth of digital technologies and citizen journalism is transforming how news is gathered and distributed, and who is trusted to deliver it. Hope (2020, p. 3) observes, 'the BBC … has moved towards using far more "insiders"—reporters born and raised in the countries they're reporting on, or who've lived there for years'. This reflects a shift from parachute journalism towards employing local reporters. As Hope (2020, p. 4) asks, 'How can someone based in a news bureau thousands of miles away, who has jetted in for a few days of intensive coverage and then leaves straight afterwards, really have special insight to offer? Why should it be their voice, rather than anyone else's, that we listen to?'. This reflection speaks to a reflexivity among FOOC's programme-makers about how news is gathered and whose voices should be heard.

The result has been an ambition to diversify the voices on air, to the extent that Freeman (2023) suggests FOOC's title 'doesn't quite ring true … these days, many of its voices aren't the BBC's "own" correspondents at all'. FOOC now welcomes contributions from journalists outside of the BBC, meaning its sound has changed over time, too. No longer, Freeman (2023) argues, 'do you need to speak in an RP voice or be trained in how to enunciate clearly … today many contributors are non-native English speakers'. FOOC's producers collaborate with a range of journalists to craft dispatches that meet the programme's high editorial standards. Producer 1 references an ambition to achieve a gender balance of

contributors, saying 'we don't want it to always sound like five public schoolboys one after another'. Defining 'Our' correspondents has therefore become more complex as the pool of contributors has deepened and the range of accents has broadened. This diversification undermines suggestions that the programme occupies a single or fixed positionality, dispels ideas of a unitary 'Our' correspondent, and challenges characterisations of FOOC as a throwback to an imperial age.

FOOC's producers suggest this diversification also raises editorial questions. Hope (2020, p. 3) describes 'a difficult editorial tightrope' for 'while an "insider" might have the deepest understanding of the story' an 'outsider' may 'have a wider, more impartial view of a knotty issue'. Whilst some might argue this harks back to colonial suspicion of 'the Other' (Said, 1978), it highlights questions facing BBC programme-makers about how its journalism should be delivered, and by whom. That said, the BBC defines impartiality in terms of 'acknowledging a range of views' and an ability to 'scrutinise arguments, question consensus, and hold power to account' (BBC Editorial Guidelines, n.d.), which begs the question whether these skills cannot be taught and learned, thereby resolving the editorial dilemma and erasing the distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. After all, everyone who works for the BBC is trained in and guided by editorial standards upon which its claims to trust, independence and quality depend. The crafting of dispatches therefore takes on a serious tone as producers operate checks and balances, ensuring contributions meet the mark creatively, grammatically and editorially. Producers send drafts to the programme's editor, and occasionally the editor of Radio Current Affairs, before recording and transmission. As Producer 2 puts it, 'we are ... an extra layer of judgement on top of the correspondents' and above us, there is a further level of editorial control'. This reveals a team of people behind the contributing correspondents who engage in significant decision-making and quality control which shape the geopolitical scripts FOOC broadcasts.

4 | SPATIALITIES AND TEMPORALITIES OF PRODUCTION

Applying a geographical lens reveals that FOOC is produced in multiple locations across a range of timescales. Pinkerton's (2014, p. 58) observation that radio is 'spatially situated and rooted "in place"' informs an analysis of where FOOC is 'made' and how its dispatches emerge from particular spaces and settings. This section develops his analysis by also considering temporalities of production. There are two main sites of production: Broadcasting House and the overseas locations from where journalists report. FOOC's producers sit in the Radio Current Affairs department on the 4th Floor of Broadcasting House. Studios enable producers to work closely with correspondents to pre-record their dispatches either in person or 'down the line'. Producer 1 explains, 'what we really prefer is to get them in a studio here' to enhance the recording quality, eliminate background noise, and advise on pronunciation. This is, however, exceptional with correspondents usually connecting remotely. The presenter similarly pre-records cues 'down the line' from home, working with producers to rehearse the recording and make last-minute changes to scripts. When the 'final' programme has been compiled, it is scheduled for broadcast with Producer 2 revealing it can be 'really tight', coming together '10 minutes before transmission'. The BBC's London office therefore functions as a central production, recording and broadcasting hub.

Correspondents write and record their dispatches 'in the field', revealing the multiple vantage points from which FOOC reports (Gasher, 2015). Correspondent 1 suggests 'there are self-operating studios everywhere' but as Producer 2 notes, 'the more at the sharp end they are, on a battlefield, in the middle of a war, having bombs dropped on them ... the less likely it is that they will have studio-style conditions and time'. This is evidenced by Correspondent 3 who recalls writing for FOOC after a major breaking news story: 'we'd had a hugely manic day just filing ... for every outlet ... And then when we finished everything at about midnight we headed back and ... I just started writing it in the car basically and it was done by the time we got back'. Spaces of production are therefore determined by the story and circumstances. Correspondents are also encouraged to construct makeshift studios. Producer 2 admits 'we get them to do all sorts of bizarre and surreal things, like building themselves little padded tents' with Producer 1 adding, 'under the duvet is a very, very good way of deadening the sound'. Operating in these improvised spaces is not without challenges. Producer 2 stresses it is 'demanding ... they've got to be getting under a duvet, reading from a script which might be on a phone or a computer screen or a piece of paper, into a microphone recording themselves and having us squawking at them in the mobile'. This evocative image provides a fascinating insight into hidden geographies of BBC radio production and reveals FOOC to be a product of formal and informal production spaces, which are conditioned by the location of correspondents and local recording infrastructure.

FOOC is subject to multiple, overlapping timescales which characterise production as a layered, rolling process. Commissioning varies depending on the story and deployment of correspondents. Producer 2 reveals that unlike pieces

tied to the news agenda, 'the more reflective pieces can be commissioned and worked on a long time in advance'. Producer 1 talks to correspondents 'every day ... about this Thursday's programme, about this Saturday's programme', adding 'I've got one or two people who are doing stuff next month and ... further down the year'. Some dispatches therefore have an extended lead time with producers continually communicating with journalists to anticipate future material. To mitigate against having nothing to broadcast, the team has a 'shelf' or back catalogue of dispatches always 'ready to go' and the producers spend time 'date-pegging' when a piece 'has to run on, or by, a certain date' (Producer 2). Producer 1 warns, 'the danger of putting things on the shelf' for future use is they soon 'get out of date', concluding 'shelf life is a precarious life'. The production team therefore performs a delicate balancing act, ensuring each edition is timely but also contains dispatches not tethered to the current news agenda.

The process of writing for FOOC adds an additional temporal layer. FOOC is lauded as a unique space of storytelling in the BBC for correspondents to reflect on the sights they have seen, people they have met, places they have visited, and events they have encountered. This contrasts with media coverage characterised by short reports and fast-paced production cycles. Rather, FOOC 'prides itself on relaying "the stories behind the headlines"—that is to say, the deeper and longer currents which throw up the crashing waves of current events' (Hope, 2020, p. 1). Analysis and reflection demand time and space, commodities in short supply for journalists in a multi-media age. Reflecting on the most recent decade of FOOC, Hope (2020, p. 6) argues 'the most revealing writing came about not in the heat of the moment—when they'd be busy juggling hourly pieces to camera, relentless calling and texting, and the demands of their own technology–but in the quiet hours of the morning, on the flight home, or perhaps months or weeks (even years) later'. Although susceptible to the busyness of correspondents' schedules and unpredictability of breaking news stories, FOOC's lengthier production timescales and format mean correspondents have an outlet for reflective storytelling in 5 minutes of uninterrupted narration.

FOOC's interest in 'the personal', which emerges from its more relaxed temporality, highlights room within the BBC for journalism that pushes the boundaries of objective and impartial reporting (Grant, 2005a). Correspondent 1 suggests, 'what makes a FOOC, or my kind of FOOC anyway, is something which is a personal observation but which throws a light on something bigger'. Correspondent 3 agrees that FOOC is 'much more personal' and 'a different sort of storytelling'. Correspondent 4 goes further, confessing 'I do feel, and I've always felt, the awkwardness of being a kind of voyeur of other peoples' disasters and misery and I think, in FOOC, you can mention that, at least in passing, one's own questions and one's own doubts about one's own role'. A professional obligation to remain objective and impartial is therefore balanced against a human instinct to divulge the complexities and dilemmas of being a witness and commentator. FOOC provides a rare outlet to be transparent about the impact and cost of reporting, and to share with listeners the uncertainties that surround their discipline and craft. It is not without limits—restricted to a 'passing' reflection—but speaks to the powerful potential of FOOC as a space for reflexive storytelling that expands the editorial confines of BBC reporting and nuances our understanding of BBC journalists as detached and objective 'geopolitical "agents"' (Pinkerton, 2013, p. 455).

5 | CONCLUSION

This paper advances research in popular geopolitics by exploring the production of FOOC as one of the BBC's longest-running radio programmes. Dittmer and Bos (2019, p. 62) suggest 'the most underdeveloped aspect of studying popular geopolitics has been the site of production' with little attention paid to how, where and why media are 'made'. Original interview material is therefore used to construct a 'behind the scenes' insight into FOOC's production and make three key contributions to the field. First, the paper provides rich empirical evidence of the relationship between producers and journalists and illuminates the hidden practices, spatialities and temporalities which shape the geopolitical scripts FOOC broadcasts. Second, it demonstrates that while producers perhaps understand FOOC to reflect the world 'out there' for listeners 'at home', its highly crafted production illustrates how FOOC constructs the world and people and places within it. Third, the paper highlights the complexities of defining who 'Our' correspondents are and what BBC journalism sounds like, and reveals the editorial questions raised by featuring freelance journalists who live in the countries and communities from which they report. These findings speak to broader debates about the structures and practices which underpin the representational power of media, the voices amplified and silenced on mainstream radio airwaves, and the evolving contexts and technologies out of which geopolitical narratives and imaginaries emerge. Avenues for further research include a comparative analysis of FOOC on Radio 4 and the World Service, and an exploration of how FOOC is received by listeners and situated within everyday

audience engagements with radio. The latter is critical to assess whether the intentions of FOOC's producers and correspondents are realised in listener responses, and to investigate the programme's success in shaping audiences' geographical imaginations.

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