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To Monitor and be Monitored—
Radio Free Europe and Radio
Liberty during the Cold War

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TO MONITOR AND BE MONITORED – RADIO FREE EUROPE AND RADIO LIBERTY DURING THE COLD WAR¹

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Monitoring of Soviet bloc radios was an important input to Radio Free and Radio Liberty broadcasts during the Cold War. RFE and RL also monitored the official print media and interviewed refugees and travelers. Soviet bloc officials in turn monitored RFE, RL, and other Western broadcasts (while jamming their transmissions) to inform themselves and to counter what they viewed as “ideological subversion.” On both sides, monitoring informed media policy. RFE and RL monitored their radio audiences through listener letters and extensive travel surveys, while the Communist authorities monitored those audiences through secret police informants and secret internal polling. Both approaches were second-best efforts at survey research but in retrospect provided reasonably accurate indicators of the audience for RFE, RL, and other Western broadcasters.

INTRODUCTION

Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL, merged in 1976 as RFE/RL) were radio stations. Their purpose was to reach audiences behind Iron Curtain during the Cold War with news and information focused on developments within the countries to which they broadcast. Their programs were transmitted on short wave (and some medium-wave) radio frequencies.²

RFE and RL, like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), and other Western broadcasters, were objects of “counter broadcasting” by Soviet bloc regimes in the

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop, “Knowing your Enemy (and your Friends): Cultures of Radio Monitoring and Surveillance,” organized by the “Connecting the Wireless World: Writing Global Radio History” project, University of York, September 15-16, 2016, <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/research/global-radio-history/>

² See Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*; Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*; Mickelson, *America’s Other Voice*; Nelson, *War in the Black Heavens*. Full references are given in the Bibliographic References.

form of technical interference, commonly known as jamming – broadcasting noise or other radio programs on the same radio frequency.³

RFE and RL broadcasts were outputs in the form of radio programs reaching audiences through terrestrial radio. In preparing their programs, the stations relied on inputs of information, one of which was monitoring of Soviet bloc radios. And in turn RFE and RL broadcasts were monitored by the Communist regimes that so diligently attempted to jam them.

MONITORING OFFICIAL MEDIA

RFE and RL were unique substitute home services intended as alternatives to regime-controlled domestic media and practicing what came to be known as surrogate broadcasting. This focus on local developments required information from what were denied areas inaccessible to RFE/RL journalists and most Western reporters. One important source for RFE/RL programs was information gleaned from Communist bloc radio and print media, which albeit the censored official line provided local context, a certain amount of factual information, and official statements.

RFE and RL could not for this purpose rely on the excellent English-language monitoring bulletins produced jointly by the BBC and the U.S. Government's Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS).⁴ RFE and RL needed on-site real time monitoring in the local languages of the countries to which they broadcast. So from the outset, RFE and RL organized and operated their own monitoring services, in parallel to but not duplicating BBC-FBIS monitoring.

RFE monitoring was based at [Schleissheim](#), outside of Munich and with a subsection at nearby Mossback. The technical challenge was to monitor in Munich medium-wave transmitters located in Eastern Europe and intended to reach only domestic East European audiences. By 1957 RFE was monitoring 35 Soviet bloc stations regularly and 6 others occasionally in 12 languages. Selected Russian, Albanian, GDR, Yugoslav and Western stations (including BBC and Radio Vatican) were also monitored. This resulted in up to 50,000 words daily of transcribed aural

³ Useful primers on jamming are Woodard, "Cold War Radio Jamming," and Pleikys' <http://www.radiojamming.info/>

⁴ Webb, *London Calling*, 85-88; Leetaru, "The Scope of FBIS and BBC Open-Source Media Coverage, 1979–2008."

monitoring plus automated monitoring of news services (telex, Hellschreiber, Morse) of up to 150,000 words.⁵ All monitoring was transcribed in the respective East European languages and the most important material compiled in daily monitoring bulletins.⁶ Extracts were translated into English and circulated in a “Monitoring Highlights” bulletin for use by other broadcast services and by management and policy officials.

Monitors for Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary worked in the main RFE English Garden building in Munich; the others worked at the Schleissheim facility in the 1950s.⁷ Monitors worked closely with broadcasters and often attended daily editorial meetings of the respective broadcast department. Monitoring Bulletins had some limited distribution outside RFE and RL, although they evidently did not reach the VOA and BBC Polish Services.⁸

Two examples indicate the utility of monitoring for the RFE Polish Service. Listeners sometimes asked how RFE editors in Munich could know accurately the weather forecast for Warsaw; the simple answer was that RFE monitored the 5.00 a.m. weather forecast broadcast by Radio Warsaw.⁹ RFE got its first inkling of unrest and repression on the Polish Coast in December 1970 by monitoring Radio Gdansk. The monitors immediately contacted Polish Service editors, and RFE was able to report these developments to listeners throughout Poland within 30 minutes.¹⁰

Radio Liberty organized a similar radio and news agency [monitoring operation](#), located entirely in its Oberwiesefeld Munich building. Radio monitoring gave RL early texts of Pravda editorials, since they were read in full on Radio Moscow. RL also benefited from monitoring TASS Hellschreiber transmissions for Eastern Europe. RL veteran James Critchlow recalled:

“The Hellschreiber transmissions were beamed to TASS clients in Eastern Europe and used an unfamiliar Russian transliteration based on Polish phonetics. Often TASS would move the news to Eastern Europe faster than to its own domestic clients, probably because the latter were entangled in additional layers of bureaucracy. By using Hellschreiber, we managed to score some journalistic coups on stories of interest to our listeners: we often got the news of

⁵ “Radio Free Europe’s Broadcast Operations”; Holt, *Radio Free Europe*, 98-103.

⁶ See Appendix for extracts from a Polish Monitoring Bulletin.

⁷ Kadiev, *In the Heat of the Cold War*. This memoir includes a description of his work as a Bulgarian monitor in the 1950s.

⁸ Personal communications from Ted Lipien, former head of the VOA Polish Service and Eugeniusz Smolar, former head of the BBC Polish Service, September 2016.

⁹ Text in the Appendix.

¹⁰ Nowak, *Wojna w Eterze*, 566-567.

government personnel shake-ups or decrees that radically affected their lives to our listeners before they heard it from Radio Moscow.”¹¹

Radio monitoring, while important, was only one of the methods utilized by RFE and RL to obtain information from the countries to which they broadcast. They supplemented radio monitoring with monitoring of the official print media, received in Munich directly or through intermediaries throughout Western Europe. RFE compiled significant articles in daily Press Surveys for internal and limited external circulation.¹² In later years RFE and RL comprehensively monitored underground literature – samizdat.¹³ RFE also collected and compiled information reports from refugees and travelers on matters large and small. This information was distributed internally through the 1960s in “information items” and later in informal memoranda.¹⁴

MONITORING THE AUDIENCE

RFE and RL (later as RFE/RL) organized audience research to determine numbers of listeners (“reach”), reactions to specific programs, and public opinion.¹⁵ For information on the audience, RFE and RL first relied on anecdotal reports, chiefly letters and interviews with refugees. Unfortunately, little of this record is preserved in the archives. Partial opening of the Iron Curtain in the 1960s permitted sanctioned travel to the West and allowed RFE and RL to organize survey research among travelers, using computer simulation to compensate for non-representative samples. Between 1960 and 1990, 100,000 interviews were conducted with East European travelers and 50,000 interviews were conducted with Soviet travelers, most commissioned through survey institutes in Western Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The largest number of East European interviews were conducted by Intora in Vienna, headed by Helmut Aigner.¹⁶ A separate Soviet-area audience research project interviewed 25,000 refugees in Israel. Survey

¹¹ Critchlow, *Radio Hole in the Head*, 72-73.

¹² See Appendix for a Polish Press Survey cover

¹³ Boiter, *The Radio Liberty Register (RLR) of Samizdat material*; Pronobis, “The Research Institute of Radio Free Europe - Polish Independent Press Unit.”

¹⁴ Information Items are available in the Blinken Open Society Archive at <http://www.osaarchivum.org/digital-repository/osa:484d852e-1334-4570-a2be-e41230b9e36a>

Informal memoranda are available in hard copy at BOSA.

¹⁵ The methodology and findings of RL audience monitoring are described in Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener*, 75-82. Parta oversaw RL and later RFE/RL audience and opinion research. We lack a comparable guide to the methodology of RFE audience research, headed for many years by Henry Hart.

¹⁶ Aigner, Oral History Interview with R. Eugene Parta,

instruments were not limited to questions about listening to RFE and RL but covered all Western broadcasters and the results were shared. Individual travelers also provided anecdotes. One early case involved a message for Radio Liberty given to a West German visitor at the 1957 Moscow Youth Festival.

Traveler interviews were admittedly second-best audience research, all that was possible at that time.¹⁷ After the collapse of the Communist regimes it became possible to compare the results of the traveler surveys with confidential internal surveys made public after 1989 and with post-1989 retrospective internal surveys. These new sources largely validated the findings of the travel surveys.¹⁸

COUNTER MONITORING

RFE and RL and other Western broadcasts were carefully monitored by the Soviet and East European regimes who jammed their broadcasts. These regime monitoring efforts were major undertakings that resulted in a stream of products including transcripts, excerpts, and analytic studies that were made available to Party leaders and senior officials in a series of restricted publications.¹⁹ Party leaders including Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Wojciech Jaruzelski were attentive readers of the transcripts, registering disagreement with a point or asking subordinates for more information about an issue.²⁰ Party leaders and other officials in effect used monitoring to conduct their own private dialogue with Western broadcasters. An official of the Jaruzelski Presidential Administration told this author in September 1989 that he was a faithful *reader* of the Polish Service broadcasts.²¹ Other leaders turned in. Vasil Bilak, the hard-line Czechoslovak

¹⁷Today when credible audience surveys cannot be conducted in countries such as Cuba and Iran, second-best research involves telephone surveys through call-ins from other countries. That was not possible during the Cold War.

¹⁸Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener*, 83-93.

¹⁹Key documents from East European and Soviet archives on counter-monitoring are published in translation in Johnson and Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting*, 351-561 and available online in the Wilson Center Digital Archive at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/cold-war-broadcasting>.

Additional hard copy documentation from East European and Soviet archives is deposited at the Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project.

²⁰Jaruzelski's use of monitoring transcripts is recounted in Urban, Oral History Interview with Jane Curry. Gheorghiu-Dej's use of monitoring transcripts is documented in the Securitate Archives as described in Ratesh, "Radio Free Europe's Impact in Romania."

²¹Curry, *The Media and Intra-Elite Communication in Poland: The Role of "Special Bulletins"*. Counter-monitoring of Western broadcasts is preserved in various archives of the former Soviet bloc. Analytic reports provide insights into the thinking of regime officials. Raw transcripts may help make up for gaps in the broadcast scripts and recordings in Western Archives. To date, Istvan Rev has reviewed the Hungarian monitoring of RFE Hungarian broadcasts by MTI. Prokop Tomek has surveyed the STB archives for monitoring of RFE and Dorota Mueller has

Politburo member, said on Bratislava Radio on November 17, 1989 that he “listened, as I always do” to the RFE Czechoslovak Service – and heard his world crumble around him.

MONITORING FEEDBACK

Did interaction between monitor and monitored create a feedback loop affecting the content of Western and Soviet bloc broadcasts? One scholar has suggested such an interaction,²² which may be depicted hypothetically as follows:

1. RFE program broadcast to Hungary
2. RFE program monitored, transcribed by Hungarian monitors
3. Transcript evaluated in central committee and instructions given to official media
4. Hungarian Radio broadcast reflecting official policy guidance
5. Hungarian radio monitored and transcribed by RFE monitors
6. Hungarian monitoring excerpts translated into English, telexed to USA
7. Policy guidance issued by New York or Washington officials to RFE in Munich
8. New RFE program broadcast to Hungary incorporating policy guidance
9. RFE program monitored, transcribed by Hungarian monitors.
10. Etc. Etc.

This is an intriguing hypothesis. In the view of this author, however, RFE and RL were too autonomous of the U.S. Government and too internally decentralized and there was too much “friction” in the monitoring operations for a monitoring feedback loop to regularly affect the content of broadcasting. Communist Party instructions to official media in reaction to RFE

surveyed the CTK monitoring of RFE preserved in the Czech National Archives. Information on holdings of monitoring of Western broadcasts in other archives is needed.

²² Istvan Rev, “Just Noise? Impact of Radio Free Europe in Hungary,” in Johnson and Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting*, 251-252.

broadcasts were generally delayed and irregular, while day-to-day RFE and RL policies and editorial decisions were set in Munich and not in New York or Washington.

A related argument is well worth consideration, i.e., that Hungarian monitors' evaluations of Western broadcasts that treated positively the Hungarian "New Economic Model" as partial liberalization helped the Hungarian Party leadership sell "compromised half-measures as genuine changes both to the population and to themselves."²³ Similarly, RFE Romanian broadcasts welcomed Romania's autonomous foreign policy as a challenge to Soviet control of Eastern Europe, and the Ceausescu regime could attempt to use that RFE message to support its domestic legitimacy.

²³Rev, op. cit, 255.

RFE AND RL MONITORING ARCHIVES

Many RFE and RL monitoring transcriptions are preserved at Hoover Library and Archives and Blinken Open Society Archives, and some audio and later video monitoring is preserved as well. RFE Hungarian monitoring transcripts for 1988-1990 are available at BOSA

at <http://www.osaarchivum.org/digital-repository/osa:8971ff25-e237-4b40-8713-c375c7c37e71>

RL video monitoring of Soviet TV is online at BOSA at <http://www.osaarchivum.org/digital-repository/osa:ed645793-91bb-4168-9515-7a223fed242a>

Selected RFE audio monitoring of Czechoslovak radios is available online at the Czechoslovak Documentation Center of the Czech National Museum.

<http://www.nm.cz/Historicke-muzeum/Oddeleni-HM/Ceskoslovenske-dokumentacni-stredisko/Zvukovy-archiv-Radia-Svobodna-Evropa/Zvukovy-archiv-Radia-Svobodna-Evropa-Monitoring-ceskoslovenskeho-rozhlasu-a-televize/>

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APPENDICES

POLISH MONITORING BULLETIN

(Blinken Open Society Archive)

RADIO FREE EUROPE
ROZGŁOSNIA POLSKA

KOMUNIKAT NASŁUCHU RADIOWEGO
POLISH MONITORING BULLETIN

Poniedziałek, 13 lipca 1981

Rok XXXI/ Nr 194

WAŻNIEJSZE WIADOMOŚCI

Przed ZJAZDEM: 3, 5-7, 18, 20-21, 25-26, 28, 36, 50, 52
Delegacje zagraniczne: 3, 19, 23, 31, 36, 51
Sprawozdanie międzyzjazdowe: 7, 9-11
Echa zagraniczne: 13-15, 39, 44-49
Dziennikarze zagraniczni: 31, 38
OTWARCIE I TRANSMISJA OK. 11.50: 35

ZZ: 24, 42

SOLIDARNOSC: 3, 8-9, 15-16, 19, 29, 41

WAFESA: 9

- SOLIDARNOSC a Zjazd Partii: 52

O POZBAWIENIE PROMINENTOW/ ODZNACZEN: 38-39

GOSPODARKA: 18, 21-22, 24, 27, 41

Grożba KATASTROFY ekologicznej: 23, 25

Emigracja ZAROBKOWA: 30, 33-35

Raport o Stanie Gospodarki: 37

Z SEJMU: 43

PRL-ZR: 41

WIES: 9, 16, 24, 29

PRL-DANIA: 51

SOLIDARNOSC RI: 29, 41

KALENDARZ: 4 PRASA: 5, 9-12, 18, 25-26, 37

ZYCIE PARTII dwutygodnikiem: 17

NAUKA, OSWIATA, KULTURA: 3, 4, 9, 16, 42

GROT-ROWECKI: 21-22

POLONIA: 32

13 July 1981 - 15 July 1981

13.7.81

-2-

/kt/

Radio WARSZAWA I

/Godz.05.00/

Przewidywana p o g o d a dla Polski na dziś:

Zachmurzenie umiarkowane, miejscami przejściowo duże, z przelotnymi opadami i z lokalnymi burzami. Najwyższa temperatura od 22 stopni na zachodzie do 28 na wschodzie. Wiatr słaby i umiarkowany, przeważnie południowy i południowo-zachodni.

POLISH PRESS SURVEY

(Blinken Open Society Archive)

Radio Free Europe - East Europe Research & Analysis

POLISH PRESS SUMMARY

No. 237 - 6848 Date November 13, 1973

DZIENNIKI : Życie Warszawy, 4-5.XI i 6.XI, Słowo
Powszechne, 30.X, 31.X, 1.XI, 3-4.XI, 5.XI i 6.XI

PERIODYKI : Kultura, 11.XI, Prawo i Życie, 28.X (dok.),
Tygodnik Powszechny, 4.XI

W NINIEJSZYM NUMERZE m.in.:

	<u>str.</u>
A. Wasilkowski : Przesłanki historycznego optymizmu	3 - 4
J. Rowicki : Nowe zadania komitetów rodzicielskich - Wspólny interes	6
K. Lisicki : Nasi artyści rozrywką za granicą - Droga pełna udreki	7
S. Polonica : "Szczęśliwa wyderzenie" Mroźka - Z Teatru 12	
A. Kantowicz : Świat 1973 - Siedem dni w Moskwie	13 - 14
J. Oleksiewicz : Rzecz o dziewczynach biznesu (prospek- cja)	15 - 18
KTT : Kuchnia polska - Cholewy na szyję	18 - 19
J. Muszyński : Partia i wojsko	20 - 21
S. Malinowski : Krótka synteza maoizmu	22 - 23
K. Cieślakowski : Akta w sprawie karnej gen. W. Zagórskie- go	24 - 29
Niepodp. : Kardynał Döpfner w Polsce	30 - 32