



## Full Length Article

## Radio geopolitics: Imaginative geographies of Europe's migration 'crisis' on BBC Radio 4

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## ABSTRACT

Geographers have examined the history, materiality, and geopolitics of radio but there has been relatively little interest in contemporary radio broadcasting and its capacity to shape geographical imaginations. This is surprising given the ubiquity and popularity of radio, and its enduring role in communicating global news and current affairs to mass audiences. This article reflects on the power of media to represent people and places, and regulate imagined communities of identity and belonging by exploring how BBC Radio 4 constructs imaginative geographies of forced migration to, and refugee settlement in, Europe between January 2014 and March 2019. It joins recent efforts in geography to engage in methodologies of listening through a thematic analysis of 172 radio broadcasts that reveals two contrasting imaginative geographies of migration: first, a geopolitical imaginary of 'crisis', exemplified in news broadcasts, that reports from a top-down, state-centric perspective and is articulated by 'expert' voices, principally politicians; and second, a place-based, immersive, multi-sensory imaginary, exemplified in 'feature' programmes, that explores personal stories and experiences 'on the ground', and is articulated by multiple voices, most notably refugees. Radio 4 emerges as a diverse and contradictory space of journalistic storytelling which invites multiple ways of listening to, understanding, and imagining people on the move. By focusing on Radio 4 and the audible story of Europe's migration 'crisis', the article demonstrates how imaginative geographies are constructed through sounds and the spoken word, and evidences radio's imaginative, discursive, and sonic power.

## 1. Introduction

The imaginative power of radio has long been recognised by practitioners and theorists of the medium. [Shingler and Wieringa \(1998, p. 77\)](#) suggest "one of the key features of radio is its propensity to stimulate its audience's imagination"; [Elmes \(2008, p. xii\)](#) emphasises "the sheer power of sound and story to conjure up a picture, a situation [...] a scene"; whilst [Lloyd \(2015, p. 4\)](#) argues radio "demands imagination. When a story is well told, by a presenter or within a news package, a picture will be painted in the mind of every listener". Despite clear consensus within the radio community, there has been relatively little interest in political geography in the power of radio to shape geographical imaginations. This is surprising given [Pinkerton and Dodds' \(2009, p. 12\)](#) efforts more than a decade ago to "shift the centre of gravity towards radio for the purpose of broadening popular geographical/geopolitical horizons". Such work includes exploring radio's capacity to represent people and places, inhabit spaces of broadcasting and reception, and engage listeners in everyday settings ([Pinkerton & Dodds, 2009](#); [Pinkerton, 2014](#)). Whilst [Weir \(2014, 2020\)](#) heeds their

call to attend to technologies and infrastructures of radio, the power of contemporary radio journalism to construct geopolitical imaginaries, narratives, and soundscapes remains underexplored. This article therefore makes a significant contribution to radio geopolitics by examining the imaginative, discursive, and sonic power of BBC Radio 4's reportage on migration.

The status and popularity of the BBC in British media, society, and popular culture affirms its geopolitical power and significance. The BBC is Britain's leading public service broadcaster and Radio 4 is the corporation's flagship news, current affairs, and factual speech radio station. Despite commercial competition, Radio 4 commands an average weekly audience of 10 million people, while the BBC's audio streaming platform, BBC Sounds, reaches 4.5 million ([BBC Media Centre, 2023](#)). These listenership figures capture Radio 4's reach and single it out as a site of national commentary, debate, and storytelling which warrants close attention and analysis. Although [Pinkerton and Dodds \(2009, p. 16\)](#) acknowledge listening to Radio 4 is "an important daily ritual for many citizens in the United Kingdom", the station has escaped the ears of political geographers. I begin to rectify this omission by exploring

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Radio 4's representational power to conjure up potent imaginaries of people and places, and communicate geopolitical stories to mass audiences.

The story considered here is Europe's migration 'crisis' between January 2014 and March 2019; a period that witnessed escalating arrivals of refugees and a heightened focus on migration around the Brexit referendum in 2016, with March 2019 marking the date the UK was initially due to leave the European Union (EU). My focus is therefore forced migration to, and refugee settlement in, Europe, defined as the involuntary displacement of people away from their home region and the cross-border movement and practice of claiming asylum. It is important to make clear the label 'Europe's migration 'crisis'' is not used uncritically. I share *Dines et al.'s* (2018, p. 439) contention that 'crisis' is "a powerful narrative device that structures knowledge of migration and shapes policy decisions and governance structures". Similarly, I take seriously *De Genova and Tazzioli's* (2016, p. 5) call to challenge "the taken-for-granted meaning of the term 'crisis' by looking at the productive dimension that the declaration of a state of 'crisis', of 'emergency' generates". My research therefore provides empirical evidence of how Radio 4 differentially invokes a language and imaginary of 'crisis' over time, and the ways in which its programming variously re-articulates and problematises this narrative framing.

Whilst media narratives of migration in print and photojournalism have attracted significant attention, there have been few, if any, analyses of radio broadcasting. I aim to redress this imbalance through a comprehensive analysis of how Radio 4 broadcasts produce imaginaries, narratives, and soundscapes of migration, and invite listeners to imagine and affectively respond to refugees. After all, representations in radio are not seen or read but heard and imagined, which raises critical questions around who is amplified and silenced, and how imaginative geographies are constructed through sounds and voices. In doing so, I join and develop recent efforts to foreground sounds and listening in geography, and provide rich empirical evidence of radio's potential to shape geographical imaginations.

I begin with a review of relevant literature before detailing the qualitative methodology that underpins the research. My analysis is then split into two sections that identify two contrasting imaginative geographies: first, a geopolitical imaginary of 'crisis', exemplified by the news reportage of *The World Tonight*, that analyses migration from a top-down, state-centric perspective, is anchored in the space of the studio, animated by soundscapes at Europe's sea and land borders, and articulated through 'expert' voices, principally politicians; and second, a more localised, place-based, multi-sensory imaginary, exemplified in 'feature' programmes, which explores personal stories and experiences on the ground, creates space for nuanced engagement with migration, and is articulated through multiple voices, most notably refugees. I highlight overlaps between the two imaginaries and conclude by suggesting that Radio 4 emerges as a diverse and contradictory space of representation which invites multiple ways of imagining Europe's migration 'crisis'.

## 2. Sounding out the literature

### 2.1. Sonic and radio geopolitics

This research contributes to critical and popular geopolitics as sub-disciplines of political geography interested in the power of media to tell stories about the world and people within it. They treat geopolitics, not as an unproblematic description of the world political map but rather, as "discourse, as a culturally and politically varied way of describing, representing, and writing about geography and international politics" (*Ó Tuathail, 1998, p. 3*). Three categories specify different sites and discourses of geopolitics across intellectual, political, and public arenas: namely, formal, practical, and popular geopolitics. Although not easily divisible, the latter explores the construction and circulation of geographic narratives and imaginaries in media and popular culture,

such as magazines (*Sharp, 1996*), cartoons (*Dodds, 2007*), comic books (*Dittmer, 2007*), films (*Shapiro, 2008*), newspapers (*Mawdsley, 2008*), video games (*Bos, 2018*), and political memoirs (*Whittaker, 2022*). This body of work, however, reflects a longstanding interest in how geopolitical discourses are articulated in visual, rather than aural, media and culture.

A more sonic sensibility is revealed in geographical engagement with music, which provides important context to a geopolitical analysis of radio. *Smith (1994, p. 238)* made an important intervention by calling for "the more explicit incorporation of sound generally, and of music in particular, into research in human geography", concluding that "music is integral to the geographical imagination". *Leyshon et al. (1995, p. 425)* amplified her call and sought to "show how geographical issues [...] are present in the production, performance, transmission and consumption of music". Since then, there has been a steady stream of research on the connections between music, space, and place (*Bell & Johansson, 2009; Stahl & Percival, 2022*). Running through this work is a twin interest in the representational and more-than-representational aspects of music (*Doughty et al., 2019*); that is to say, how music is performed and heard in particular locations (*Street, 2013*), constructs geopolitical discourses (*Liu et al., 2015*), and operates through sonic registers, rhythms, and modulations (*Kirby, 2019*).

Interdisciplinary scholarship on radio, a medium of both music and speech, is diverse, examining its role in transmitting social, cultural, and political events to mass audiences (*Scannell, 1989*), shaping national identities and sensibilities (*Douglas, 2004*), constructing imagined communities of belonging (*Liebes, 2006*), and crossing regional and national borders (*Birdsall & Walewska-Choptiany, 2019*). Radio has therefore been conceptualised in multiple and historically contingent ways (*Lacey, 2018*): as a broadcasting institution, cultural phenomenon, tool of international diplomacy, and source of information, entertainment, and connection. The BBC World Service has been a focal point of analysis, theorised as an expression of soft power that helps manufacture the BBC's international reputation for reliable, objective, impartial broadcasting (*Gillespie & Webb, 2013; Webb, 2014*). Previous incarnations as the Empire and Overseas Service underpin framings of the BBC as an agent of cultural and social power, with *Robertson (2008, p. 468)* suggesting that the network's rebranding as the World Service in 1965 marked its repositioning "in a global rather than imperial context". Whilst international broadcasting has garnered significant attention, domestic and contemporary BBC radio remain a deaf spot in geography (*Pavia, 2018*).

Indeed, radio has received modest and fragmented attention in political geography with most research focusing on historical geographies of broadcasting. *Pinkerton (2008a, 2008b)* analyses the role of radio in times of conflict and instability, notably the Cold War in South Asia and Falklands War of 1982, whilst *Weir (2014, 2020)* examines the governance and regulation of radio in the 1920s and 1960s, focusing on the BBC's Middle Eastern Relay System. *Weir (2020, p. 963)* directs attention from representations "made audible in popular geopolitical texts" towards "the materialities [...] that act to distribute and broadcast them". Such a move heeds *Thrift's (2000, p. 380)* call to engage with "the little things" - objects like microphones, wires, and cables - which he considers "crucial to how the geopolitical is translated into being". It also reflects a theoretical shift from studying media's representational meanings to how media are produced, disseminated, and consumed. Recent scholarship in popular geopolitics therefore evidences "a more embodied, performative dimension [...] that shifts attention away from screens and texts and instead thinks through *what we do* rather than *what we see*" (*Dittmer & Bos, 2019, p. xii*). There is no doubt geographers need to investigate how audiences engage with media and how "representations of the world are made intelligible and meaningful in an everyday setting" (*Dodds, 2006, p. 199*). However, there remains critical work to be done on the discursive power of contemporary radio broadcasting and its role in shaping geographical imaginations.

## 2.2. Media and migration studies

The interdisciplinary field of media and migration studies is similarly concerned with the representational power of media to construct narratives and imaginaries of mobility and displacement. Most research to date has focused on print and photographic journalism, echoing the visual bias of critical and popular geopolitics. Thematic analyses of European newsprint reveal how media portray people on the move in binary terms as ‘villains’ or ‘victims’, ‘entrepreneurs’ or ‘threats’ (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). These binary framings have also been identified in photojournalism which invites divergent affective responses. Chouliaraki and Stolic (2019, p. 325) suggest images of men at border fences stir insecurity and suspicion, while humanitarian imagery locates refugees “within an imagination of mass victimhood”. Both engage in “symbolic bordering” and construct “an a-historical vacuum where migrants emerge as ‘naked’ humans, as pre-political figures without voice and a story to tell” (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2019, p. 325). The erasure of refugee voices is telling, illustrating how representation rests on unequal relations of power and limits opportunities to forge inclusive geographical imaginations: a necessary precursor to rendering refugees human beings with “biographical contexts and geopolitical histories” (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019, p. 599).

Research also reveals how European media frame migration as an unprecedented, linear, and continuous movement of people towards Europe, which masks realities of fragmented, multidirectional journeys punctuated by long periods of waiting and short bursts of mobility (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016). The complexity of migrant decision-making is similarly overlooked due to a journalistic preoccupation with geographic sites of drama and spectacle, such as sea crossings and border fences, which animate discourses of ‘crisis’ (Crawley et al., 2018). This has the two-fold result of masking how Europe is historically entangled in the conflicts and political instability from which people are fleeing, and obscuring decades of EU migration management at and beyond its territorial edge (Mayblin & Turner, 2021). In an analysis of European newsprint, Trilling (2019) suggests “the effect, all too often, was to frame these newly arrived people as others; people from ‘over there’, who had little to do with Europe”. Narratives of ‘crisis’ therefore obscure histories of empire and mobility, and global geographies of conflict and displacement, and re-articulate Orientalist imaginaries of difference and otherness (Crawley et al., 2016; Mayblin & Turner, 2021).

Rhetorically, Lindley (2015) outlines how the signifier ‘crisis’ is used to denote a moment or period of discontinuity relative to a longer trajectory of stability. Bigo (2002) illustrates how political and policy discourses invoke a language of crisis to justify exceptional, securitised migration measures, while Williams (2016, p. 27) argues that narratives of humanitarian crisis are mobilised by states to position “greater border security [...] as the means to increase migrant safety”. Lindley (2015, p. 9) reminds us this rhetoric is strategic and taps into a history of viewing migration “as dangerous, deviating from a spatial order which naturalises people’s connections to place”. Media that re-produce these state-centric narratives fail to interrogate the logic or effects of ‘crisis’, focusing instead on stories and sites that frame migration as an emergency. Whilst recent work has explored self-representation by refugees using digital technologies like smartphones (Gillespie et al., 2018), there remains critical interest in journalistic storytelling around migration (Maurer et al., 2022). This article therefore contributes to timely debates about media representations of migration through an analysis of Radio 4 broadcasting.

## 2.3. Imaginative geographies in radio: sounds and voices

This discussion about the representational power of media provides essential background to my central ambition to connect the medium of radio with Said’s (1978) theoretical concept of ‘imaginative geographies’. The concept emerges from Said’s (1978, p. 54) *Orientalism* and

builds on Bachelard’s “poetics of space” to examine how space becomes invested with emotional or rational significance through representation. Said (1978, p. 55) highlights the asymmetry of demarcating ‘us’ from ‘them’ and ‘here’ from ‘there’ which “help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatising the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away”. Gregory (2009, pp. 369-370) therefore defines imaginative geographies as “representations of other places, of peoples and landscapes, cultures and natures, that articulate the desires, fantasies, and fears of their authors”. Inspired by Said (1978), geographers have examined how media produce imaginative geographies. Gregory (2004, p. 60) analyses media and political rhetoric in the aftermath of 9/11, which he argues invoked a critical line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, placed the power to construct identity within the West, and reduced a diversity of cultures “into one diabolical landscape”. Such “performances of space” are constructed by diverse cultural forms and practices with the capacity to shape geographical imaginations (Gregory, 2004, pp. 17-19). Said (1978, p. 54) led the way in exploring novels, travelogues, images, and academic texts, however geographers have yet to investigate how radio similarly participates in the “universal practice” of imagining spaces, places, and times and imbuing them with meaning. I therefore develop previous research by analysing how imaginative geographies are constructed through sounds and voices in broadcasts.

Sounds have been the subject of burgeoning interest in geography in recent years as alternative ways of knowing, understanding, and representing the world (Gallagher et al., 2017). Gallagher and Prior (2014, p. 269) seek to foreground audio media and sound recordings that reveal the “audible features of people, places, spaces, and environments”. Soundscapes have emerged as a pivotal concept, defined by Schafer (1994, p. 7) as “any acoustic field of study”, including a “radio program”. Following Schafer, Gallagher and Prior (2014, p. 275) also identify radio broadcasts as soundscapes which evoke a sense of place and invite listeners “to imagine that they are in the place where the recording was made”. Wissmann and Zimmermann (2015, p. 809) similarly suggest audio drama encourages audiences to construct “a fictitious world” in their imaginations, which holds rich potential for an analysis of speech radio and the ways in which it invites listeners to imagine spaces, places, and people. Soundscapes foregrounding everyday spaces of migration and displacement, such as those recorded in the *Refugee Hosts* ‘Spaces and Places, not Faces’ project (Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, 2017), seek to challenge visual representations of refugees, encourage reflection on shared experiences and connections, and invite listeners to re-imagine refugees as ‘people like us’. Whilst my research focuses on aural representations in BBC journalism, it shares an interest in the power of radio to produce soundscapes of Europe’s migration ‘crisis’.

Voices, as well as sounds, construct imaginative geographies in radio. The presence, absence, and mediation of voice highlights the power of journalism to frame people and places, and determine who is heard. Couldry (2010) discusses the ‘politics of voice’ to capture debates about who speaks in the media and in what capacity. The amplification or silencing of refugee voices plays a critical role in determining their identity and status in a media landscape that often speaks for, and about, people on the move (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). Journalism is thus conceptualised as a performative site that “names refugees as particular kinds of subjects and inscribes our relationship to them in specific affective and moral registers” (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 6). Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017, p. 17) identify a “hierarchy of voices” in newsprint which privileges politicians and has the potential to lead readers into a “triple misrecognition of refugees as political, social, and historical actors”. This raises a critical question for sonic representations of migration: namely, are radio programmes doomed to rearticulate Orientalist tropes of the voiceless ‘Other’ (Spivak, 1988; Malkki, 1996), or can they create space for refugees to speak and be heard?

In addition to refugee voices, the discursive power and resonance of journalistic voices cannot be underestimated. Pinkerton (2013, p. 448) describes journalists as “geopolitical ‘agents’” with the power to frame,

communicate, and explain events to audiences 'at home'. The process of selecting and framing stories reaffirms that imaginative geographies are not neutral reflections of the world, but power-laden constructions of it, and the authorial decisions of journalists must be interrogated. Interestingly, [Kangieser \(2012, p. 348\)](#) encourages us to attend "not only to the content of speech, but to its soundings", including pace, tone, and intonation. Radio therefore brings into sharp relief different styles and methods of communication, as well as the discursive content of broadcasts, which play a part in constructing imaginative geographies over the airwaves.

### 3. Methodology: listening to BBC Radio 4

[Gallagher and Prior \(2014, p. 267\)](#) argue persuasively that "the erasure of audio media within geography silences a rich seam of empirical data", obscuring how sounds can tell different kinds of stories and represent places and people in new and exciting ways. Whilst recent research in critical and popular geopolitics has shifted from questions of representation towards practices of production and audiencing, there remains critical work to be done on how radio produces narratives and imaginaries in sonic, as well as visual, registers; a line of enquiry that requires geographers to expand their methodological toolkits and "develop broader sonic sensibilities" ([Gallagher et al., 2017, p. 620](#)). [Gallagher et al. \(2017, p. 630\)](#) make the case for "expanding listening in human geography", outlining how researchers might engage with sound archives, audio media, and multi-sensory geographies. Whilst recent work has favoured a more-than-representational approach to sound ([Doughty et al., 2019](#); [Margulies, 2023](#)), my research shares a methodological interest in the sonic realm and practices of listening.

It is important to first explain how Radio 4 broadcasts on migration were identified and categorised. Radio 4 stores the majority of its programmes online, which enabled me to access broadcasts aired between 2014 and 2019. Its programming spans news, current affairs, drama, comedy, science, and culture, and this diversity of output meant I began by distinguishing between 'news' and 'feature' programmes. This was essential to cut through the BBC's maze of programme classification and provide a systematic way of capturing broadcasts in my sample. There are four daily news programmes on Radio 4: the morning *Today*, lunchtime *World at One (WATO)*, afternoon *PM*, and evening *The World Tonight*. The latter airs weekdays from 10 to 10.45pm and was selected as a proxy for Radio 4's overall news output. Crucially, past episodes are catalogued by date and headline news issue, which was essential to gather a purposive sample on migration. By contrast, BBC Sounds excludes past editions of *Today* beyond one calendar month and categorises episodes by date alone. The latter also applies to *WATO* and *PM*. These factors supported the selection of *The World Tonight* and in total, I identified 86 broadcasts. I then coined the term 'features' as a catch-all for programmes that fall outside of Radio 4 news. Broadcasts were discovered using key search terms: specifically, 'forced migration', 'irregular migration', 'undocumented migration', 'migrants', 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', 'Europe's migration crisis', 'Europe's refugee crisis', 'Europe's migrant crisis', 'refugee settlement', and 'displacement'. Again, I identified 86 'feature' programmes.

I then split 'features' into 6 categories which reflected their varying formats, tones, and editorial remits: 'debates', such as *Moral Maze*, are studio-based roundtables that feature interviewees with opposing points of view and discuss migration through a particular lens, like morality or security; 'monologues', such as *Four Thought*, are readings or spoken-word addresses, sometimes to a live audience, by an academic, author, or policy figure; 'analysis' refers to studio-based programmes, such as *The Briefing Room*, that discuss an idea or issue, often with guests, and differ from debates by taking an informative, rather than confrontational, approach; 'magazine' captures general interest programmes that feature an item on migration within their regular format, for example, female experience of detention on *Woman's Hour*; 'documentary' refers to long-form broadcasts, around 30 minutes in length, that explore

migration from a ground-level, eye-witness perspective, such as *Crossing Continents*; and 'current affairs' captures news-orientated reportage, as well as output re-packaged online for future listening, such as the 'Ordinary Italians' for *PM*. Overall, I identified 4 debates, 7 monologues, 7 analysis, 21 magazine, 17 documentary, and 30 current affairs programmes.

I downloaded and digitally recorded each broadcast, which enabled me to upload files to the online transcription software *TRINT*. Transcripts, though artificial given radio is heard and not read, facilitate an analysis of the discursive, as well as sonic, content of broadcasts. Whilst [Gallagher and Prior \(2014, p. 271\)](#) suggest "transcription reduces sound recordings to communicated meaning, silencing everything that cannot be easily interpreted", transcripts enabled me to simultaneously listen to and 'read' broadcasts, attending to the representational aspects of radio and sonic features not reducible to the spoken word. I added sounds and music to the transcripts before analysing language and imagery, together with voice and tone. I followed a methodology of "close listening", ensuring I was attentive to "the features of the voice of the speaker [...] accent, pauses, background noises - in short, everything one can hear on a recording" ([Hoffmann, 2015, p. 75](#)). This method of analysis is likely to diverge from everyday practices of listening, highlighting room for future studies exploring audience engagements with radio.

The 172 broadcasts were then analysed thematically. 'Codes' included imaginative geographies of migration, narrative framing of broadcasts, headline news issues, locations, migration statistics, spaces of displacement, interviewees, frequency and gender balance of voices, music, sounds, source countries and drivers of migration. Digital spreadsheets helped organise my analysis and identify emerging patterns, tropes, and motifs. It was an iterative process of listening and reading, working back and forth between the recordings, transcripts, and spreadsheets.

### 4. The geopolitical imaginary of 'crisis': *The World Tonight*

A geopolitical imaginary of 'crisis' is constructed in the migration reportage of *The World Tonight*, a programme that seeks to offer listeners "in depth reporting, intelligent analysis, and major breaking news from a global perspective" ([The World Tonight, n.d.](#)). Its coverage reveals a propensity to report from a top down, state-centric perspective that invites a fearful affective response to migration as a threat to the safety, stability, and sovereignty of Europe. This geopolitical imaginary is animated by soundscapes of 'crisis' at Europe's sea and land borders, and articulated through 'expert' voices; principally politicians who are given considerable time and space to articulate their policies and perspectives. The narrative framing of migration as a geopolitical issue is therefore reflected in its editorial selection of politicians as the dominant 'voice' in broadcasts: 121 politicians are heard, 92 from continental Europe and 29 from the UK. By contrast, 71 migrant voices are heard. Whilst creating space for migrant voices counters media representations that silence refugees altogether, individuals on *The World Tonight* are usually heard in short, illustrative voice clips, as opposed to in-depth interviews, and balanced by studio interviews with politicians privileged as the final voice. Although migrant voices numerically eclipse other 'elite interviewees' - evidenced by 59 humanitarian voices and 25 academic voices - they are more decorative than central to broadcasts.

The peak of the 'crisis' in 2015 and early 2016, defined by the number of refugees arriving in Europe, is reflected in the frequency of broadcasts over time. The greatest number was 36 in 2015, bookmarked by 16 in 2014 and 23 in 2016. There was subsequently a significant, steep decline with migration almost entirely falling off the news agenda: 5 broadcasts in 2017, 5 in 2018, and 1 in early 2019. Whilst arrivals certainly declined during this period, the story of migration continued with people trapped in camps in southern Europe and reports of illegal pushbacks at sea. Geographically, Europe is the dominant location in the coverage, which is perhaps unsurprising in light of the British

listenership, but given the global geographies of displacement, conflict, and refugee hosting, speaks to a Eurocentrism at odds with an editorial ambition to report from a global perspective.

#### 4.1. *Shifting imaginaries of crisis*

##### 4.1.1. *Crisis of numbers*

From 2014 to the summer of 2015, forced migration is constructed by *The World Tonight* as a ‘crisis’ borne out of the number of people arriving in southern Europe. Broadcasts are filled with abstract statistics, articulating a state-centric discourse of emergency that invokes imaginaries of a continent struggling to cope with arrivals (Crawley et al., 2018). The Mediterranean is focalised as a space of danger, animated by soundscapes of sea crossings and smugglers. This discursive framing is illustrated in a news bulletin from January 2nd, 2014, that reports on the Ezadeen ship, reportedly “carrying 450 migrants” and being towed into the Italian port of Corigliano. Newsreader, Alan Smith, cites the EU which vows to “fight the new tactic used by people smugglers of abandoning ships full of migrants”, while World Affairs correspondent, Rob Watson, describes passengers as “part of an often unreported wave of human misery and hardship” driven by “war and instability in the Middle East and poverty in Africa”. The EU’s securitised discourse, which displaces attention onto smugglers, is cited uncritically, while migrants are represented using a water metaphor as an unstoppable “wave” from geographic zones of insecurity and scarcity. This representation enacts a two-fold imaginary of victims and threats: humanitarian sufferers who fell prey to exploitative smugglers and undifferentiated Others whose presence poses a risk to European security.

The bulletin is symptomatic of the programme’s wider reporting which engages in a politics of counting and enacts a “spectacle of statistics” (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016, p. 22). This is not to say the number of people arriving in Europe is insignificant or unnewsworthy, but rather to point to a trend of reporting numbers without contextualisation or reflection, and to highlight their role in producing a political discourse of migration as a ‘problem to be solved’. The ‘crisis’ in 2014 is therefore located in the numerical scale of arrivals, which constructs imaginative geographies of a continent under siege, with Italy foregrounded as a country that, by nature of its physical geography, is at the frontier of Europe’s ‘crisis’.

##### 4.1.2. *Humanitarian crisis at sea*

This editorial focus on sea crossings and statistics of arrival invokes imaginaries of a humanitarian crisis that threatens to engulf Europe. Eyewitness reports by correspondents, which precede studio-based interviews with politicians, seek to transport listeners to Europe’s ‘frontline’. Soundscapes of crisis and emergency recorded ‘in the field’ are therefore followed by formal conversations recorded in the “acoustically controlled” space of the studio (Gallagher, 2015, p. 562). This sonic juxtaposition of chaos and order positions policymakers as providers of ‘solutions’, rather than actors complicit in the production of irregular and precarious maritime mobility (Crawley et al., 2018). In the summer of 2015, boat arrivals in Greece are the dominant soundscape, illustrated by correspondent James Reynolds’ report from Kos on August 7th:

[Sounds of waves lapping against the shore]

**Reynolds:** My colleagues and I are scanning the dark waters for migrant boats. Shortly after 2.00 in the morning we spot a dinghy carrying more than 30 men, women, and children.

[Indeterminate shouts]

**Reynolds:** Hello. From the BBC. Hello, you’re in Europe. How are you?

**Unidentified male voice 1:** I’m fine, now. Now I’m freedom. I’m a human being now! Here are our people.

**Reynolds:** Where are you all from?

**Unidentified male voice 2:** We are from Syria.

**Reynolds:** Why did you come here?

**Unidentified male voice 2:** Because came from war. From IS, IS.

**Unidentified male voice 3:** Syria, Syria.

Although Reynolds attempts to humanise refugees through inclusion of their voices, they remain nameless, defined only by their migration from Syria to Greece. This lack of identification, although understandable given the circumstances, feeds into media narratives of unease and insecurity around who is arriving and why. Although the emphatic cry of one man who shouts, “I’m a human being now”, invites empathy, Reynolds’ breathless questioning against a disorientating sonic background of disembarkation constructs imaginaries of chaos and disorder. Male voices are privileged and the report leaves little room to uncover the biographies of those fleeing Syria or understand “what happens [...] after the spectacularized scene of perilous arrival” (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016, p. 27). Instead, Reynolds’ ‘live’ reportage rests on heightened drama and encourages listeners to imagine they are witnessing unknown Others emerge from Greece’s foreboding “dark waters”.

##### 4.1.3. *Crisis at Europe’s land borders*

Whilst narratives of ‘crisis’ dominate *The World Tonight*’s coverage throughout 2015 and 2016, the geography of its reportage switches from sea to land borders. Soundscapes of ‘crisis’ therefore evolve over time, too, from boat arrivals to violent clashes between refugees and security guards at borders in southern, eastern, and northern Europe. Listeners hear governments enforce ad hoc measures inconsistent with an EU-wide approach to migration which begins to signal how the ‘crisis’ “is a geopolitical one rooted in [...] divisions in Europe” (Colyer & King, 2016, p. 6). Tellingly, De Genova (2017, p. 11) notes that by the late summer of 2015 “from week to week and even day to day, the apparent frontline of European border struggles was repeatedly dislocated from one country to another”; with the result that listeners hear in real-time states wrestle with intractable refugee movements through Europe. This is exemplified by ground-level reports by correspondents from the Greek/Macedonian, Austrian/Hungarian, Hungarian/Serbian, Italian/French, and French/British borders which collectively produce a soundscape of disorder, dislocation, and displacement and act as sonic precursors to studio-based interviews with politicians.

This pattern of representation is evident in *The World Tonight*’s broadcast from August 27th, 2015, when correspondent, Bethany Bell, reports on migrants found dead in a lorry at Austria’s border with Hungary. Rather than illustrating how “people’s bodies pay the cost of geopolitical bickering over burden-sharing” (Mountz & Loyd, 2013, p. 181), the programme again focuses on smugglers, shifting attention away from politicians and failing to interrogate how the EU creates precarious border crossings through a lack of safe and legal migration pathways. Bell’s report and an accompanying voice clip from UNHCR’s Melissa Fleming are used as a springboard to an interview between presenter, Matthew Price, and former Conservative MP, Anthony Steen:

**Price:** Do you agree with Melissa Fleming that the problem here is a problem of trafficking?

**Steen:** Well, it’s a mixture. It is trafficking. It could be political. It could be refugees. It could be economic migrants. You can call it what you like. It’s ghastly. It’s appalling. And it’s about people trying to escape the horrors of their own country. Whatever the reason, whatever you call it, it’s the horror of more and more people wanting to get out of their own areas. And we can’t hold back the tide of humanity just like King Canute found many years ago ...

**Price:** So it can’t be held back? There is nothing that can be done to prevent tragedies like today’s?

**Steen:** I think a number of things can be done to reduce it ...

**Price:** Such as?

**Steen:** Well, you can work upstream, as the new phrase is, with gangs that operate. But you're dealing with swathes of population, millions of people. And the [...] traffickers will always be there. And so where there is money to be made and there's misery, the two will actually meet. And so you can try and reduce the number of traffickers by working upstream, which I did when I worked as the envoy for the Home Secretary. But you don't solve the problem.

This exchange captures a tendency to turn to politicians for comment and analysis. Steen constructs an imaginative geography of Europe being overwhelmed by "a tide of humanity", "swathes of population", and "millions of people"; hyperbolic descriptors which are neither challenged nor situated within a historical or global context. He frames migration as "a problem" and "unprecedented event" - a "single coherent flow of people that came 'from nowhere'" (Crawley et al., 2018, p. 2) - and diverts attention towards "gangs" of "traffickers", notably not called smugglers, blurring distinctions between voluntarism and coercion (UNHCR, 2021). This is not to deny the scale of migration in 2015 or downplay atrocities perpetrated by some facilitators of migration, but to highlight a political discourse, re-articulated in broadcasts, that produces a sense of crisis while absolving policymakers of responsibility.

#### 4.1.4. Political crisis

In 2016, the 'crisis' is located in fragmented EU attempts to find political solutions to migration, underlining how the story evolves from a crisis of numbers into "a crisis of political solidarity" (Crawley, 2016, p. 13). Broadcasts adopt a state-centric perspective, reporting on emergency summits and late night talks in Brussels, and providing a detailed insight into policy debates, alliances, and fissures. The Calais camp, EU-Turkey deal, and Brexit vote loom large as the programme examines the sustainability of Schengen, threat of visa-free travel for Turkish citizens, and Britain's relationship with continental Europe. As Crawley et al. (2018, p. 2) conclude, "this was very much a view from Europe" with migration discussed in geopolitical terms of borders, security, and mobility.

EU-Turkey relations are a dominant feature in the coverage which frames migration as a threat on Europe's eastern periphery. On February 4th, the programme reports that "tens of thousands" of people are fleeing towards Turkey's border as fighting around Aleppo escalates, and four days later, estimates "60,000 Syrian refugees could mass at the border". Correspondent, Mark Lowen, outlines a geopolitical dilemma whereby the EU is reminding Turkey it has a legal obligation to help refugees, while warning it must stop migration to Europe. Cleverly, he observes that "caught between the two messages are 35,000 refugees stuck on the Syrian side of the closed border" and closes with the striking imaginary that "Syria's descent into hell is still playing out on Europe's borders". This discursive framing of refugees as pawns caught between nation states illustrates how narratives of 'crisis' in 2016 are presented as a geopolitical issue of migration management.

The significance of Syrian displacement and EU-Turkey relations to listeners is reaffirmed on February 18th when *The World Tonight* reports on an EU summit where Brexit and migration are high on the agenda. Presenter, Razia Iqbal, interviews François Crépeau, UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, who discusses the politicisation of migration. He is critical and reflexive, suggesting the 'crisis' has exposed deep divisions in the EU and noting the absence of refugee voices in public debate. This reflexivity continues as Quentin Peel, Brussels correspondent for *The Financial Times*, draws comparative geographies of refugee hosting and points to a discursive conflation of forced and labour migration by the Vote Leave campaign:

**Peel:** "We have had almost no refugees coming to this country, while Germany, Sweden and Greece and Italy have had hundreds of

thousands. But there is of course a connection between the two issues of the refugee crisis and the British decision of whether it leaves the EU or not because those who would like Britain to leave the EU are conflating the two issues of refugees and EU migration".

Interestingly, Peel foreshadows the outcome of the Brexit vote on June 23rd, suggesting "the worse the refugee crisis gets, the harder it will be for the Remain campaign to win the referendum this summer"; echoing Outhwaite's (2018, p. 94) analysis that "the refugee crisis had already created the image of a Union unable to handle the situation" and "migration came to be a defining issue in the Leave campaign, giving a sharper focus to the slogan of 'taking back control'". The broadcast therefore represents a key flashpoint in *The World Tonight*'s coverage as it positions Europe's migration 'crisis' within the context of Britain's vote on EU membership.

This narrative of political 'crisis' crescendos in the summer of 2016 as the programme reports on the EU-Turkey migration deal and potential for Turkish accession. On May 3rd, presenter Ritula Shah reports "As the European Commission looks set to grant Turkish citizens visa free travel in the Schengen area, we hear from critics of the move who say Turkey isn't meeting the mark". Although the broadcast is weighted towards condemnation of human rights violations, correspondent, Chris Morris, frames accession as a real but unlikely possibility. He references the 3-month limit on visas and explains how accession is tied to "the one-for-one migrant deal", meaning "Turkey does have a big bargaining chip to play and this is that we have seen this flow of people from the Turkish coast to the Greek islands reduced comparatively to a trickle". This illustrates how, by 2016, the 'crisis' is located in attempts to manage migration and political discussions slowly replace soundscapes of arrival. Whilst the programme offers insights into policy debates, it falls short of illustrating how leaders invoke narratives of crisis to justify exceptional and securitised migration measures (Bigo, 2002; Lindley, 2015; Williams, 2016). Instead, *The World Tonight* constructs a geopolitical imaginary of Europe as a continent determined to manage migration, but politically torn apart by divergent state responses.

## 5. A counter imaginary of migration: 'feature' programmes

The story of Radio 4's migration reporting becomes more complex in 'feature' programmes, which are diverse in format, tone, sound, and approach. While monologue, debate, and analysis programmes broadly mirror and rearticulate the geopolitical imaginary, magazine, documentary, and current affairs programmes - the most frequent genres in the sample - adopt a bottom up perspective that privileges the scale of the individual and experiences 'on the ground'; an optic that recasts refugees as human beings and invites an empathetic response. Journalists reveal people behind the headlines, scrambling tropes of victimhood and threat through storytelling that humanises migration.

This human-centric reporting is reflected in the frequency of migrant voices, the dominant 'voice' in broadcasts: 118 migrants are heard, 105 of whom are named and 13 unnamed, 75 are male and 30 female. Whilst the latter reflects a bias of amplifying male over female perspectives (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017), this privileging of migrant voices is striking and challenges a trend of silencing people on the move. These are followed by 58 humanitarian voices and 56 citizen voices. In contrast to *The World Tonight*, only 30 politicians are heard, 17 from the UK and 13 from continental Europe. The frequency of broadcasts over time also contrasts with Radio 4's news coverage with a stable number between 2015 and 2018: 4 in 2014, 22 in 2015, 16 in 2016, 21 in 2017, 20 in 2018 and 3 in early 2019. This is consistent with the editorial focus of 'features' which are more reflective in tone and approach; that is, broadcasts are less tied to the daily news agenda and offer insights into migration post the spectacle of arrival (De Genova, 2013).

The second half of this article begins by considering the minority of programmes that overlap with the geopolitical imaginary before tracing four key characteristics of the counter imaginary: namely, people behind

the headlines; multiple voices; histories of migration and local geographies of refugee settlement; and place-based, immersive, multi-sensory reporting.

### 5.1. *Overlaps with the geopolitical imaginary of 'crisis'*

A geopolitical imaginary of 'crisis', similar to that in news, is produced by debate programmes which frame migration as an invasion that threatens Europe. Broadcasting from the space of the studio reflects a geographic separation from the people and places they discuss, privileges abstract, conceptual thinking, and silences migratory experiences 'on the ground'. This is exemplified by *Moral Maze* from June 13th, 2015, which explores the UK's "moral duty" towards migrants. In his introduction, presenter Michael Buerk uses the pronoun 'we' - asking listeners in an exasperated tone "What can we do?", "What should we do?", "How could we cope with them all?" - and produces divisive imaginaries of 'us' and 'them'. He renders migrants in Greece anonymous Others and characterises smugglers as "crooks" who carelessly "chuck" people into the sea. Countries are essentialised into zones of insecurity as Eritrea is deemed "one big concentration camp", Somalia "a failed state", and Libya "an anarchy of competing warlords". Buerk therefore participates in a cartographic mapping of the world into 'no go' zones of "poverty and violence" that threaten Europe's safety and stability, and are responsible for an unwelcome outflow of humanity (Andersson, 2019). As De Genova and Tazzioli (2016, p. 13) argue, "such imaginings and representations [...] suggest not only that 'Europe' is confronted with a 'crisis' that originates 'elsewhere', but also that 'Europe' is a kind of 'victim' of unfathomable conflicts erupting elsewhere". Buerk does not acknowledge the irony of disclosing he has "just spent a month sailing" around the Greek islands, nor reflect on the unequal hierarchies of mobility which his maritime holiday reveals. Instead, he poses a series of rhetorical questions that foreshadow a programme which features white, middle-class commentators who debate the movement of nameless and silent refugees.

The tendency for debate programmes to broadcast out of the studio, silence refugees, and echo the 'expert' soundscape of *The World Tonight* is shared by analysis and monologue programmes. However, the latter diverge by emphasising historical and global geographies of migration and displacement. This is illustrated in *How Syria Changed the World*, from May 29th, 2018 in which Fawaz Gerges, a professor of International Relations, points out "the overwhelming vast number of refugees [...] are in three countries neighbouring Syria. More than 2 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, between 1.5 and 2 million in Lebanon, and about 600,000 refugees in Jordan". Here Gerges disrupts narratives of a 'crisis' in Europe by comparing the scale of displacement and refugee hosting in countries neighbouring Syria. The geopolitical imaginary therefore begins to be interrogated in broadcasts that create space for nuanced analysis by academics, think-tank researchers, and policy experts.

### 5.2. *People behind the headlines*

This discussion sets up the first of four ways in which 'feature' programmes depart from the geopolitical imaginary: by featuring personal stories of migration that challenge representations of refugees as a mass of "anonymous corporeality" and reveal people behind the headlines (Malkki, 1996, p. 388). This is exemplified by *From Our Own Correspondent* (FOOC), a programme which champions human-centric journalism. Its predication on the spoken narration of journalists alone precludes listeners from hearing from refugees directly or being immersed in place-based soundscapes. However, journalists recite people's stories, biographies, and testimonies, and appeal to listeners' senses and geographical imaginations. This is evidenced by Nick Thorpe's dispatch from Hungary on September 16th, 2017. His report is contextualised by the announcement that Viktor Orbán's government opposes EU plans for states to accept quotas of refugees, but its focus is

three asylum seekers: Mohammed from Iraq, Saman from Iran, and an unnamed 17-year-old boy from Afghanistan. Thorpe sets the scene by describing "hot southerly winds" blowing across the Hungarian/Serbian border and "the rustling of leaves" which "drowns out the shouts of asylum seekers behind the razor wire fence". This literary writing appeals to listeners' senses and acts as an evocative substitute for sound recordings. Thorpe then shifts his attention to the experiences of refugees whom he quotes directly. After five months in a camp, Mohammed is quoted as saying, "I'll be able to forget the war in Iraq. I'll even forget the Islamic State group. But I'll never forget what we suffered in Hungary". Mohammed's account is corroborated by the Afghani teenager: "I was just praying to God to free me. I'd never been in jail before. I'm not a criminal. For eight weeks I was in a small metal container". This striking amplification of refugee perspectives continues as Thorpe finally quotes Saman: "I am grateful to the government for granting me protection in Hungary and I am grateful to the NGOs and all my friends for looking after me here". Relaying these testimonies foregrounds the central protagonists of Europe's migration 'crisis', highlights varying experiences of displacement and detention in Hungary, and counters a trend in media coverage of "depriving refugees of humanity and voice" (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2019, p. 1164).

### 5.3. *Multiple voices*

The second characteristic of the counter imaginary is its articulation through multiple voices: most notably, refugees and freelance journalists who evidence critical engagement with migration scholarship. Most 'feature' programmes move away from the studio and amplify sounds and conversations in the field, which re-cast 'the migrant' "as a speaking and acting subject" who is situated in the world (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017, p. 1174). This is exemplified by *The Boat Children* from December 29th, 2015. The broadcast opens with sounds of an accordion player on the streets of Catania in Sicily, which orientates listeners sonically and geographically in Italy. The presenter, Hashi Mohamed, goes on to foreground the stories and voices of 5 unaccompanied child migrants who outline their reasons for migrating to Europe and paint vivid imaginaries of journeying over land and sea. 17-year-old Herman describes fleeing forced conscription in Eritrea, crossing into Ethiopia on foot, and travelling through Sudan before departing from Libya. His odyssey resonates with 12-year-old Shorehom from Afghanistan who travelled through Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Greece before smuggling himself onto a ferry by "clinging to the underneath of a truck"; a perilous journey reinforcing how people are forced to "traverse longer, more dangerous routes" (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016, p. 244). 17-year-old Blues from Gambia similarly describes travelling through Niger, Libya, and on to Italy, disclosing he left home to "wipe out the poverty in my family" so "the next generation can be educated". Articulate but softly spoken, the children's youth is detectible in their tones of voice, which reinforces their adolescence and vulnerability. Nevertheless, by privileging children's voices, Mohamed re-casts people on the move as human beings with agency, resilience, and aspirations, and reveals mixed motivations behind migration which blur neat distinctions between 'refugees' and 'migrants' (De Haas, 2011).

'Feature' programmes also amplify different, often freelance, journalists to those heard in news who demonstrate engagement with academic research on migration. This is evidenced in 'Greece's Haven Hotel' for *Crossing Continents* from April 9th, 2018, where freelance journalist, Maria Margaritis, reports on City Plaza, a hotel turned refugee squat in Athens home to 400 refugees. The broadcast is filled with ambient sounds of refugees cooking in the kitchen and resting quietly in their rooms, which take listeners on a sonic and imaginative tour of the building and collapse distance and difference through familiar and relatable activities. Margaritis describes it as "an experiment in living" and "space of possibility" where refugees from 16 countries live and work alongside Greek citizens. Strikingly, she uses the Greeks' preferred term "solidarians" and explains its meaning is to erase

unequal relations of power between refugees and citizens. This echoes scholarship which explores the relationship between displaced people and supportive citizens, and critiques hierarchical relations implicit in the terms ‘volunteer’ and ‘humanitarian’ (Cohen & Van Hear, 2020). By adopting the same language and discussing its purpose, Margaroni reveals an awareness of academic ideas and debates, and introduces listeners to a counter-politics of hidden humanitarianism in Europe. This contrasts with the state-centric framing and tone of *The World Tonight*, and highlights room for multiple discourses and imaginaries across Radio 4’s programming.

#### 5.4. Histories of migration and local geographies of refugee settlement

The third way in which ‘feature’ programmes diverge from the geopolitical imaginary is by highlighting histories of migration and local geographies of refugee settlement. Although broadcasts stop short of examining the relationship between migration and empire - essential context which helps explain why people are journeying to Europe and entangles ‘our’ space with ‘theirs’ (Mayblin & Turner, 2021) - journalists mobilise a historical lens which subverts narratives of ‘crisis’ and counters a “systematic politics of forgetting” in media (Polońska-Kimunguyi, 2022, p. 10). Their extended length contrasts with news broadcasts constrained by short reports and fast-paced production cycles, and creates space and time for nuanced, reflexive journalism.

This is exemplified by Chris Bowlby’s documentary ‘Germany at the Centre’, from February 15th, 2016, which situates Germany’s contemporary response to refugees within historical frames of reference by foregrounding a family with a rich migration history. It opens with a convivial acoustic atmosphere of the family enjoying coffee and cake at their home in Kassel; banal, everyday sounds which invite listeners to recognise that familial histories of mobility are commonplace and routine, rather than exceptional or spectacular, in Germany. Bowlby interviews grandmother, Adel, who recalls fleeing former Eastern Germany as a child in 1945 and juxtaposes the movement of ethnic Germans from East to West Germany with the recent displacement of Syrians. Adel’s marriage to a Turkish guest worker after a second wave of migration to Germany in the 1950s and 60s further develops this historical narrative and reminds listeners that contemporary arrivals are not without precedent. By recording an intergenerational conversation, Bowlby counters “historical amnesia” in migration coverage and highlights how Germany’s history contextualises its recent responses to refugees (Polońska-Kimunguyi, 2022, p. 10).

Journalists in ‘feature’ programmes similarly extend their analytical gaze to local geographies of refugee settlement, which expands reportage that focuses narrowly on spectacles of departure and arrival (Crawley et al., 2018). This is reflected in an edition of *Woman’s Hour* from February 3rd, 2016. The programme contextualises the UK government’s announcement it would accept more child refugees by foregrounding the story of a foster mother in Yorkshire called Karen and her 14 year old foster son Javid from Afghanistan. It reports from inside their home, animated by background sounds of children playing together happily, as Karen explains how initial concerns about fostering a child refugee were dispelled on meeting Javid; a “lovely, kind, generous, amazing boy” who “appreciates everything”. The broadcast has an intimate and uplifting tone as listeners hear Javid laughing when he admits he enjoys his mum’s “lamb chops” and has made “good friends” at school. *Woman’s Hour* therefore situates a geopolitical announcement about migration at the international scale in a local ‘success’ story; human-centric reporting that paints a positive imaginary of refugee settlement and invites an empathetic response.

#### 5.5. Place-based, immersive, multi-sensory reportage

The final characteristic is place-based reportage that immerses listeners in sights, sounds, and spaces of displacement. While spaces of migration form the backdrop to news reports, they are frequently the

centerpiece of ‘feature’ programmes. Spaces provide an insight into the lived experience and politics of migration, with spaces *driving* the narrative, rather than simply animating it. This is exemplified by a three-part series of *iPM*, presented by Luke Jones. Listeners are invited inside the Oinofyta camp in Greece, located on the site of a former chemical factory, as *iPM* documents volunteers’ efforts to teach children in a makeshift school. The tinkling of a handbell signals a new school day and competes aurally with the thundering roar of traffic; recognisable sounds that evoke a sense of place (Gallagher & Prior, 2014), animate familiar routines in exceptional circumstances, and characterise the camp as a dichotomous space of voluntarism and environmental hostility. Jones records star pupil Dina, a 10-year old from Afghanistan, who gushes about her love of learning and describes the camp’s classroom as “beautiful”. Dina’s hopeful tone and testimony exudes happiness and invites empathy, but contrasts with references to frequent fights between teenagers and families squeezed into tents with no natural light. The juxtaposition of these two ‘worlds’ in Oinofyta provides a nuanced portrait of displacement and counters representations of camps as singular spaces of humanitarianism or threat (Hicks & Mallet, 2019).

Suspended between permanence and temporariness, camps are frequently subject to cycles of demolition and reconstruction, and *iPM* reveals Oinofyta to be no exception. Jones returns following the government’s decision to close the camp due to objections to the school. Volunteer Kat explains, “if we’re still here it makes it look like people can stay”, an observation that speaks to state strategies to dismantle infrastructures of care (Hicks & Mallet, 2019). Jones records the complexities of relocating vulnerable families to UNHCR apartments in Athens and listeners hear him hold power to account, challenging a UNHCR representative with Kat’s claim there is no correlation between apartment allocation and the vulnerability of residents. The broadcast closes with Lisa, another volunteer, looking ahead to supporting relocated families who says defiantly: “I am going to stand as a witness. I’m going to talk about what has happened here, I’m going to try to make people understand that we are all human beings”. *iPM*’s decision to broadcast the story of Oinofyta, and amplify the people within it, contrasts with the state-centric framing of Radio 4’s news reporting and unravels narratives of difference by inviting listeners to re-imagine refugees as ‘people like us’. Its journalism reflects a trend in ‘feature’ programmes of immersing listeners in soundscapes, spatialities, and ground-level experiences of migration and speaks to an awareness among some BBC programme-makers that “the lives of others are worthy storytelling material” (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017, p. 1174).

## 6. Conclusion

This article draws on a thematic analysis of 172 broadcasts to examine Radio 4’s portrayal of Europe’s migration ‘crisis’. It explores radio’s imaginative, discursive, and sonic power, and argues that political geography should pay closer attention to the role of contemporary radio broadcasting in shaping geographical imaginations. This is not simply a call to include radio in popular geopolitical scholarship, but an invitation to reflect on the specificities of the medium: namely, how imaginative geographies of migration are constructed through sounds and voices, and its potential to create different ways of representing, thinking about, and relating to refugees. It speaks to broader questions about how geopolitical stories are communicated to audiences, who is heard on mainstream media airwaves, and what kinds of journalistic storytelling are valued by editors and considered of interest to listeners. Whilst critical and popular geopolitics have pivoted away from the site of representation, the BBC’s decision in May 2023 to launch a review of its recent migration coverage - analysing the content, language, and tone of reporting - reinforces the importance of continuing to examine the narrative power of media (Sherwin, 2023).

The discussion was organised into two sections that: first, identified a geopolitical imaginary of ‘crisis’, exemplified by *The World Tonight*, which emerges from state-centric reportage, is broadcast out of the



studio, and articulated by ‘expert’ voices, principally politicians; and second, a counter imaginary exemplified in ‘feature’ programmes, which is more localised, place-based, and multi-sensory, foregrounds people behind the headlines, explores histories of migration and local geographies of refugee settlement, and is articulated through diverse voices, most notably refugees. The geopolitical imaginary is animated by sounds of boat arrivals and clashes at border fences that invoke audible spectacles of chaos and emergency which serve to justify political framings of migration as a threat to Europe’s safety, security, and stability. Meanwhile, the counter imaginary sonically transports listeners into people’s lives, journeys, spatialities, and experiences which evoke familiarity and relatability, and provide a nuanced understanding of migration and displacement over time, on the ground, and in the everyday. This analysis is used to support a conceptual framing of Radio 4 as a diverse and contradictory site of representation which invites multiple ways of hearing, imagining, and interpreting Europe’s migration ‘crisis’. That is to say, the breadth of programming means that Radio 4 perpetuates tropes of illegality, victimhood, and threat, whilst at the same time challenging these reductive narratives in stories of individuals who self-articulate their experiences and reflexive journalism that contextualises recent migration. The article therefore provides rich empirical evidence of the disparate ways in which a single media organisation and radio network can portray people on the move.

Hearing from and imagining refugees in radio has the potential to disrupt imaginative geographies of ‘us’ and ‘them’, and collapse spatial divisions between ‘here’ and ‘there’, by encouraging reflection on shared communities of identity and belonging. By creating space for refugee voices and stories, ‘feature’ programmes capitalise on the performative act of speaking and re-cast “the speaker [...] as a social and historical actor belonging to a political community” (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 16). This develops Chouliaraki and Zaborowski’s (2017) analysis of print journalism on migration by prompting reflection on the sonic power of voice in radio. Of course, voices can enact division as much as connection, and they are subject to editorial decisions and narrative framing. Nevertheless, I contend that the act of *hearing* refugee voices and stories holds important potential for listeners to recognise people on the move as human beings part of ‘us’ and ‘our’ common humanity. This raises critical questions about audience engagements with radio and points to future research that investigates how listeners hear, interpret, and imagine broadcasts on migration. It is a vital task given recent displacement from the war in Ukraine and precarious crossings of the Mediterranean and English Channel which highlight the ongoing story of migration and reinforce the enduring importance of analysing how media represent people and places in sonic, as well as visual, registers. Just as long as we use our ears, as well as our eyes.

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None.

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