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[Book review] *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970*, by Simon J. Potter

## Journal Item

### How to cite:

Jones, Allan (2015). [Book review] *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970*, by Simon J. Potter. *Technology and Culture*, 56(3) pp. 770–772.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1353/tech.2015.0091>

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***Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970*, by Simon J. Potter. Oxford: Oxford University Press/Clarendon Press, 2013. Pp. 261. \$125.**

Simon Potter's title and subtitle are intentionally ambiguous. Is 'broadcasting empire' the swelling domain of the BBC, or the British Empire broadcasting to itself? Is 'British world' the aggregated concerns of British nationals, or the aggregated diasporas originating from Britain? In fact all these and more are encompassed by Potter's historical study of the BBC's broadcasts directed at British settler audiences in the empire and dominions. It adds to the vigorous, but still relatively young, field of broadcasting history.

Broadcasting historians, unlike other media historians, generally have little or no 'product' to analyse, given the ephemerality of the medium. Potter's method is to examine the institutional context and policies behind the broadcasts rather than the broadcasts themselves. His research draws on the BBC's rich institutional archive of memos, reports, and policy documents, and on archives outside Britain. His thesis is that until the irreversible decline of the British Empire became apparent in the late 1950s, BBC Empire broadcasting (and later dominion broadcasting) was a tool of empire.

The Empire Service was the BBC's first venture directed at listeners outside Britain. It began in 1932, after years of wrangling about the form an international service should take, and was aimed at white populations in British settler dominions such as Canada, South Africa, and Australia. By extending to these audiences the kind of broadcasting enjoyed at home, the BBC hoped to engender enthusiasm for Britain as an imperial power, and to promote communal feelings between settler dominions and Britain. The task failed; according to Potter it was doomed to fail from the start. This is not to say that the broadcasts themselves or the BBC were unappreciated; the record here was variable. But the imperial project itself foundered because the BBC equated it with an expansion of its own model of broadcasting into the target countries, and a suppression of commercial and, in particular, American models. The target countries, however, preferred to do things their own way, or lacked the resources to emulate the British way. Potter makes his case well, but the case is less interesting than the stories that support it.

The Empire Service relied heavily on medium-wave rebroadcasting of short-wave transmissions from the United Kingdom, or disc recordings sent from the United Kingdom. (Later, rebroadcasting from cable was added.) The goodwill and cooperation of national broadcasters in the target countries were therefore vital, but in the early years they were often jeopardized by BBC arrogance and megalomania. Rebroadcasters saw their role as not simply relaying what the BBC dispatched, but

also shaping program content and style to local tastes. This was not always welcome at the BBC. As the empire transmuted into the commonwealth, the relationship between the BBC and its client broadcasters became more reciprocal – but not reciprocal enough for some of the broadcasters. The BBC claimed its domestic audience had little appetite for much of what was offered from the dominions. The same complaint, *mutatis mutandis*, was regularly made by the national broadcasters overseas.

Potter's unit of analysis, the Empire Service and its successors, has an unfortunate consequence of taking the reader from the main show to a sideshow. By the middle of the Second World War what had begun as the BBC's only overseas activity had ramified into a plethora of international services. The General Overseas Service was broadcasting in English to many parts of the world, including the United States, not just to the remnants of the empire. In addition, a European Service was broadcasting in forty-five languages, and the Forces Programme was broadcasting world-wide, daily, in English. In the postwar era, cold war politics dominated the international broadcasting scene. Other historians have covered these later developments, and understandably Potter says little about them. However, against this developing background, services directed at former British dominions start to look like small potatoes. The latter part of the book is therefore somewhat anticlimactic. Nevertheless, *Broadcasting Empire* is essential literature for scholars of the international and imperial dimensions of English-language broadcasting.