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Ethnic Entanglements: The BBC Tamil and Sinhala services amidst the civil war in Sri Lanka

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Ethnic Entanglements: The BBC Tamil and Sinhala Services Amidst the Civil War in Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

The BBC has a major presence within the Sri Lankan media landscape and critical reporter on its longstanding ethnic conflict. In this article, the BBC's two regional language services in Sri Lanka, BBC Tamil and BBC Sinhala are examined. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in BBC Tamil and Sinhala Services at Bush House in London, and archival research at the BBC's Written Archives in Caversham, UK, the article suggests that the BBC, far from being a global dispassionate observer, is imbricated in Sri Lanka's fractured ethnic landscape. It argues that the two services became both ethnicized but also ethnicizing 'love objects'. The two audiences, and the exchange of confidences between diasporic journalists and audiences, are analysed as constituting separate 'knowable communities', in Raymond Williams' terms. Through an analysis of a mutual mirroring – or the ways in which BBC journalists imagine Sri Lanka, and how Sri Lanka's ethnically segmented audiences imagine the BBC, I explore how the BBC World Service both mediates and is structured by local cultural and ethnic identities.

Keywords GLOBAL MEDIA, IMPARTIAL TRANSLATION, SRI LANKA,
ETHNIC CONFLICT, COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGY

At times when we fear we are doomed, forgotten and uncared for, there is a distant voice that assures us it is aware of our misery and that it will stand by us and sting the conscience of the world. That voice is the BBC.

Listener's letter, Sri Lanka, (BBC Tamil Service ACR 1986) ¹

The BBC World Service is 'Sri Lankan' for most Sri Lankans. For many, the BBC provides the most recognized and listened-to radio stations and has done so throughout its 60 year history of broadcasting to the island. BBC Sinhala service captures around 9 percent of the Sinhalese listening public, and the BBC informally estimated that in 1998 around 20 percent of Sri Lankan Tamils listened to the BBC Tamil service during the civil war years. The listener I quoted at the beginning this article views the BBC as a global voice that will 'stand by us'. While we are used to discussing the BBC World Service as a global mediascape 'bringing the world to locals', here the BBC is lauded for bringing Tamils to the world and to 'ourselves'. The BBC provides a window onto a world but, dialectically, also a mirror in which people can see themselves reflected.

The BBC is a familiar name within the Sri Lankan media landscape, itself a highly media savvy multi-station listening public ((BBC MS Feb/March 1995). ² Furthermore, while

BBC Tamil covers both South India and Sri Lanka, its Indian listenership has declined in the last twenty years as its Sri Lankan listenership has risen. In this article I concentrate on BBC Tamil and Sinhala output in regional languages because they command the greatest media presence. In 1998, listenership for BBC Tamil and Sinhala rose in comparison to listenership in English (MS Jan/Feb 1998).³The English language BBC in 1998 attracted the smallest stake in Sri Lanka, accounting for only 1.8 percent of the population as opposed to BBC Sinhala which had a weekly audience of around 9.1 percent of the Sri Lankan population. It is the regional language services that *re-present* the BBC in Sri Lanka.

BBC Tamil (Tamizhosai), started in 1941, broadcasts across national boundaries to Tamils in both South India and Sri Lanka, and from modest weekly newsletters it gradually moved to its present format as a daily half-hour broadcast accounting for 3.5 hours of radio time. BBC Sinhala, started in 1942, was discontinued in 1976, but reinstated in 1990, moving quickly to offer the same provision as the Tamil service. Both stations have latterly offered websites. Most importantly, since 1997 both services have been re-broadcast on an FM wavelength by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). The local FM wave re-broadcastings also changed the listeners' profile by attracting relatively younger and more rural audiences⁴, this in contrast to the BBC's small English language audience, which, a BBC survey concluded, tended to be older and highly educated (MS Feb/March 1995).⁵

These different publics and their relationships can only be understood through the specificities of how language, ethnicity and social mobility were and are intertwined in colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka. The BBC's services underwent two different kinds of phases: first the BBC assuming the role of a media service for aspirational listeners; in the second, it was seen as a guardian of impartial reporting about civil war and suffering. The move between the two were produced by an interaction between Sri Lanka's shifting political climate and the BBC's own imagination of Sri Lanka from "model British colony" to war raked island. Here, I discuss how the two BBC services, formerly routes to social mobility, become entangled with the ethnically fractured landscape of Sri Lanka. Broadcasting to two discrete linguistically and thus ethnically constituted audiences, attachment and understanding of the two language services by their audiences is thus also ethnicised. I draw upon extensive archival research within the BBC's own written archives stretching back over sixty years comprising of program schedules, internal memos, letters, complaints as well as more current compilations of letters to the BBC and other material kept within the BBC's Bush house etc. This archival research was supplemented by structured and semi structured interviews with BBC Sinhala and Tamil journalists (singly and in groups) and observations of working schedules and meetings at Bush house. This article aims to place this opening at BBC headquarters in Bush House and its own archives within the larger world of the Sri Lankan conflict which I have researched elsewhere from the vantage of ordinary Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims in Sri Lanka and in London and Toronto (Thiranagama 2007, 2010, forthcoming). In this article, I both illuminate the world that journalists shared at the BBC headquarters in Bush house, at the same time as showing the

complex ways in which broadcasts acted and were enacted within Sri Lankan media audiences to produce two distinctively attenuated spheres of objectivity. Thereby the article argues towards a more subtle understanding of how impartiality is out to work, forcing us to think of these concepts as embedded and animated by specific social universes. I do not set out here to question the BBC's own ideas of journalistic values, but in keeping with a more anthropological agenda, to see how these broadcasts circulate and are embedded within local universes.

Ethnic aspirations on the air waves: the post-imperial BBC

Once Britain ruled the waves (ocean); now the BBC rules the waves (air).

Listener's letter from South India to BBC Tamil Service (ACR 1986)

As Benedict Anderson (1991) and others have documented, the rise of imagined national communities is integrally linked to the Herderian idea that languages carry the legacies and longings of collective identities along with the possibility of authentic self-expression (Ergang 1967). Language has been a critical grammar of difference in the colonial and postcolonial ethnicization of Sri Lanka, and BBC Sinhala and Tamil must be understood through colonial and postcolonial relationships between English, Tamil and Sinhala.

BBC Tamil and Sinhala are mapped onto a basic bi-partite pattern of language. The majority community (74 percent) is Sinhalese. Tamil speakers are subdivided into different ethnic groups, the largest being the Sri Lankan Tamils, whose *pre-war* numbers comprised around 12.7 percent of the population (though this has declined considerably due to war and migration), also significant are the Malaiyaha Tamils (Hill-country Tamils), descendents of nineteenth century plantation labour and the Muslims (7-8 percent), classed as a separate ethno-religious community. When the civil war broke out in the 1980s, most commonly (and problematically) represented as a Sinhalese-Tamil war, it pitched the Sri Lankan state against the separatist LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), its warzone, the northern and eastern provinces.

What has emerged most coherently from the vast literature devoted to the Sri Lankan conflict is that the ethnic conflict is not a primordial conflict expressing an ancient enmity between Tamils and Sinhalese (see Tambiah 1986, Spencer 1990, Nissan and Stirrat 1990). Tambiah puts it most elegantly when he points out that “Sinhalese and Tamil labels are porous sieves through which diverse groups and categories of Indian peoples, intermixed with non-Indians (most notably the Portuguese in the island’s period of modern history) have passed through” (1986, 6). Instead as he and others point out, the long historical story itself of ancient enmity, and the positing of stable “ethnic” identities to these formerly rather fluid labels, is itself the product of a second much more recent history of colonial historiography, the racialisation of Sri Lanka’s diverse population, and the recent post colonial history of ethnic conflict and discrimination (Spencer 1990, Jeganathan and Ismail 1995).

The British, the third and final of Sri Lanka's European colonial rulers, perceived Sri Lanka's socially and religiously heterogeneous populations to be the result of empirical differences of race. They fully sedimented 'racial' classifications couched through linguistic, regional and religious categories, into legal and governmental structures (Nissan and Stirrat 1990; Gunawardena 1990). Thus the categories of Tamil and Sinhalese came to assume great significance and substance within the political and administrative structures of the island. Ideas about language played central roles in nineteenth racial theories, with philologists (such as Muller) arguing for a common origin for Indo-European language as Aryan races (Gunawardena 1990). Alongside the identification of Aryan languages, Robert Caldwell developed his categorization of the Dravidian languages, the South Indian languages, arguing in the meantime that there was no affinity between Sinhalese and Tamil (ibid). These theorizations gained increasing acceptance by the colonial authorities, indigenous elites and nationalist historians (Gunawardena 1990). It is in this context that linguistically differentiated audiences could become understood tacitly as racially differentiated audiences.

BBC Tamil has to be understood within this linking of race to language, language to authentic self expression, and race to representation. Tamil played the central ideological and aesthetic pole around nineteenth and twentieth century modern Tamil nationalism in South India emerged (Bate 2009, Ramaswamy 1993). The constant invocation of the necessity of broadcasting 'beautiful Tamil' one found throughout the history of the Tamil service comes out of this history of a Tamil cultural nationalism in

which the use and evolution of Tamil was the supreme aesthetic means by which any cultural media could be evaluated and situated (Bate 2009).⁶ Furthermore, BBC Tamil beckoned to an invisible but continually performed community of Tamil-speakers who are kin across national borders by virtue of being Tamil-speakers. Increasingly, Sri Lankan Tamils tuned in to BBC Tamil as it came to represent part of the world that linked them to India and beyond Sri Lanka from which they felt ever more alienated.

This alienation was from newly independent Sri Lanka (in February 1948), where by 1956, Sinhalese nationalist movements were uniting around the slogan of 'Sinhala only' (De Votta 2004). Tamil was fast becoming the language of increasingly disempowered minorities, while Sinhala became the dominant symbolic and governmental language of the country. Sri Lanka's postcolonial ethnic conflict has been extensively covered (e.g. Tambiah 1986, 1996; Sivanandan 1984; Spencer 1990; Krishna 1999, Manogaran and Pfaffenberger 1994 etc.) so I am brief here. The postcolonial state's discrimination against Tamil minorities ranged from the progressive Sinhalicization of the economy, the institution of Buddhism as the state religion in the 1972 constitution, to successive anti-Tamil riots in 1956, 1958, 1971, 1977, and 1983 (Moore 1990, Krishna 1999, Tambiah 1986). This saw the formation of multiple small Tamil militant groups and the rise of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) which became the primary combatant against the Sri Lankan state by 1986. Discrimination and militarization of Tamil youth had led to further empathic and political differences which were, as an unintended consequence of *swabasha* education in separate Tamil and Sinhala mediums, encased by separate linguistic worlds.

However, Sinhala itself struggled under the shadow of English the language of Sri Lanka's political elite. Independence in Sri Lanka was a polite handover to 'brown sahibs' (Spencer 1990) and Anglophone elite culture lingered on. Under colonial rule 9.4% of the population five years of age and over) were literate in English (Kearney 1978: 526).]English represented for many young Sinhalese not only the colonial past but the continuing dominance of an English speaking political and social elite and it is no accident that in Sinhalese English is often called by the slang term 'kadawa' meaning the sword. On one hand Sri Lanka's political class sought to bridge the gulf between them and their voting population with a new 'vocabulary' of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, that moved criticism onto the perceived colonial privileging of ethnic minorities such as Tamils (Spencer 1990). On the other hand, the dominance of the post-colonial political elite, whether left or right rested on their shared mastery of English and on continuing to be educated, mix and marry in the same social circles (Obeyesekere 1974). The BBC's authority within Sri Lanka was crucially linked to an elite culture to which the British remained central, even as it addressed the populace in their "own" languages. The BBC's regional language services and the BBC World Service were thus always placed in invisible reference to the colonial past and English and Britishness as a mark of elite culture. At the same time, given the history of the broadcasting in Tamil and Sinhala the BBC also set bars for the new standard idioms that the two ethnicized languages would take on.

The BBC Sinhala service concentrated on vignettes of British life in carefully constructed Sinhalese. It provided a means for listeners to access previously elite worlds of 'Britishness' and English life-styles, yet now in Sinhala. This trend continued, as even in January and February 1969, programmes broadcast by the Sinhala service included: 'Our views of Marriage in Britain' where four different presenters examined different aspects of marriage in Britain and explained that 'marriage in Britain is similar in some ways to the marriage customs of Ceylon'. New items centred in January and February 1969 on issues such as the British car industry. The rather staid nature of such programming is made clearer by a regional comparison: BBC Urdu and BBC Burmese were dominated by international news, features on current geo-political issues such as Vietnam peace talks and emergency in Spain. The nature of the global in Urdu and Burmese were clearly different from BBC Sinhalese in which imperial enjoyment and aspiration inflected programming and listening. Such insularities may explain that the BBC Sinhala Service was unceremoniously axed in 1976. Most indicative of BBC Sinhala's inflection on aspirations towards British life, was that it broadcast such material at a time of immense upheaval in Sri Lanka; a decade that saw both increased discrimination against Tamils, but also a major insurrection against the state in 1971 in which thousands of Sinhalese youth were killed and arrested.

BBC Tamil shared a similar emphasis on language aesthetics and class aspiration; yet as its broadcasts were to South India (until the 1980s) more than Sri Lanka, its programming included far more international news, Indian news and debates, and a special emphasis on science and information programming. Content also heavily

focused on cultural features and self-improvement shaped by the language itself. Broadcasters and listeners accorded prime importance to 'beautiful Tamil'. Thousands of letters were received in the twenty-year reign of BBC Tamil's most famous broadcaster Shankaramurthi. As one listener from South India wrote in,

You are different from other broadcasting stations whose broadcasters stand aloof and alienated, reading a paper for others to listen to. But when Shankar deals with a subject he creates an atmosphere in which we feel there is someone sitting in front of us, explaining matters in a simple, fluent, appealing language, not to our ears but to our hearts. (Annual Correspondence Report 1986) ⁷

Letters praised Shankar's Tamil introductions to major western classics from Shakespeare to Shaw, and he was for two generations of Tamil listeners the official Tamil voice of culture and refinement, deserving him the honourable title of Shankar Anna, (Elder Brother).

The BBC's prime place in local aspirations has a useful parallel in Appadurai's (1996) analysis of the other quintessentially British thing next to the BBC. Cricket, he argues, is 'a hard cultural form that comes with a set of links between value, meaning and embodied practice' (1996: 24) linked to Victorian British values. Yet as he also points out, it has somehow ended up as the most decolonized and indigenized remains of the empire, while still retaining a clear link to Britain. Appadurai suggests that cricket in its

early history in India, cross hatched English and Indian social hierarchies and distinctions. This is only one part of Appadurai's argument, but one can easily transfer it to the BBC, whereby it could occupy a continuing place in Sri Lanka through possessing a hard form which also interpolated various social, class, and ethnic distinctions much the same way it did in Britain. Dreams of social mobility could be accessed through the BBC's authoritative voice, one in which through regional languages one could paradoxically experiment and enjoy being modern through an imperially endowed authority. These sorts of dreams of mobility only began to transform in the late 1980s when the Sri Lankan civil war began to penetrate even the BBC, BBC Tamil shifted from its emphasis on the aesthetics of Tamil culture to switch its focus from pan-Indian news into making Sri Lankan news its *raison d'être*, and BBC Sinhala was re-commissioned again in 1990 as a decidedly news-focused radio service.

New(s) Visions: The Transformation of the BBC's Services in Sri Lanka

On the 13th of September 1990, I received a message from the local police to go to the police station.... On the 11th of March 1991, I was transferred to Boosa detention camp. I am still here. I supported my mother, wife and two children by working as an unskilled casual labourer working in plantations....I am 53 years old and my eyesight is failing. I cannot hear very well. I still do not know why I am here. I do not understand politics. Please read this letter in your

programme and ask them at least to prosecute me. Then I will know my sentence and a date of release. Listener's letter to Sinhala Service, Boosa detention camp, (IAC & ACR January 1993) ⁸

I am a Tamil of Indian origin living in the central region of Sri Lanka on a tea estate. When we were attacked by the Sinhalese mobs, two weeks ago, there was either a blackout or a distorted version in the BBC quoted in our Government news....We are stateless, now suddenly rendered homeless, and perhaps by your lackadaisical attitude, helpless too. It is the BBC that the Sri Lankan Government fears most. If you could take a firm stand on fair play then we would receive protection.

Listener's letter, Sri Lanka (Tamil service, ACR 1986)

Research with BBC staff and also remarks by BBC surveyors show that one of the major reasons for the rise in BBC listenership in the last decade in Sri Lanka has been what is called 'crisis listening', with the BBC moving towards becoming wartime news producer. The changing demand was obvious. One survey commissioned by the BBC in 1996 from the commercial Lanka Market Research Bureau (LMRB) and carried out with respondents in selected areas in southern Sri Lanka showed the overwhelming

feeling that being in touch with news was indispensable to life. As one young woman from Kalutara told the interviewer: 'If you live in this country, you better listen to the news, you don't know when something will happen' (LMRB, 1996: 18).⁹ As the research confirmed: 'In times of upheaval or instability in the country, such as a bomb blast or a terrorist attack the frequency of listening was greater....the BBC was considered to be a reliable and accurate communicator of current affairs and news' (LMRB: xi). As censorship by both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government had increased, listeners turned to the BBC as an arbiter of independent news coverage. The importance laid on 'independence' was shown by the unease revealed across all demographics and ethnicities in the 1998 BBC survey about the rebroadcast of BBC radio on SLBC and the fear that this compromised the BBC's 'trustworthiness' and its ability to be impartial (MS Jan/Feb 1998).

This emphasis on trustworthy news reflected a general distrust of the polarized nature of Sri Lankan media and the high stakes for journalists in Sri Lanka. Both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state managed, by harassment and threats to journalists, to inculcate a mixture of repression and self-censorship into most Sri Lankan news media. The LTTE violently cracked down on dissident opinion and took over or controlled much of the Tamil media broadcasting and printing in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora (Nallainathan 2007). In southern Sri Lanka, regular parliamentary elections and the re-establishment of democracy in 1994 promised better, though as the Sri Lankan journalist Waruna Karunathilaka writes, this did not halt increasing control of Sri Lanka's formerly 'vibrant' print and electronic media (*The Observer* 29.04.2001). Since 2004 the re-escalation of the war has seen the state public enjoin journalists to consider patriotism and national

interest as the preeminent values of a 'good media', with Tamil journalists in particular being targeted. Critical reports on the status and security of journalists have been issued by both the International Federation of Journalist(www.ifj-asia.org) and *Reporters sans Frontieres* (www.rsf.org) with the Geneva based Press Emblem Campaign naming Sri Lanka in 2007 as the world's third most dangerous place for journalists.

Thus Sri Lanka's political crisis transformed the audiences of the BBC to news-hungry crisis listeners, a shift which has seen both BBC Tamil and BBC Sinhala increasingly become broadcasters who 'publicize suffering', a legitimacy that their own previous history within Sri Lanka provided. These changes were both endogenous and exogenous, as the BBC World Service changed its own ideas about Sri Lanka and its role toward the island. The BBC's increased responsiveness to the civil war news was not just a chronological shift, but also an imaginative shift on the part of audiences and broadcasters, a mutual interlocked gaze between producers and consumers. Changes in both language services' broadcast content and framing of themselves also emerged from their own institutional imaginations and visions of their audiences. One may think of Bourdieu here: 'The external determinations that bear on agents situated in a given field.....never apply to them directly, but affect them only through the specific mediation of the specific forms and forces of the field' (1992: 105). The BBC in Sri Lanka was produced at the intersection of a figure of eight, where on one side the BBC pursued a particular imagination of Sri Lanka and on the other Sri Lankan audiences too imagined the BBC in highly specific ways.

The crisis market was imagined as neglected in the BBC Tamil Services, as news production increasingly shifted towards Sri Lanka, as South Indian listenership began to fall after the media revolution in India.¹⁰ The BBC aims to represent itself a 'political need' for countries in crisis, the BBC WS as "the best estimate of truth is being offered you, often *in regimes where that is in very short supply*" (Nigel Chapman, head of BBC WS in *Independent* 09/07/07).¹¹ Three of BBC Tamil service's Indian journalists confided in me that India with its functioning democracy, large spectrum of news media and stable political situation 'did not need the BBC'. It was Sri Lanka they said with its worsening situation and censored news media that "needed" the BBC's intervention.

On the island itself, the war made it impossible even to estimate numbers of Tamil-speaking BBC listeners, given that it was impossible to survey the Tamil and Muslim majority northern and eastern provinces.¹² BBC surveys in Sri Lanka in 1995 and 1998 (the first since 1967) could only survey Tamil-speaking listeners in Southern Sri Lanka, mainly concentrated in Colombo and the central highlands with their large minority populations of Muslims, and Malaiyaha ('Indian') Tamils as well as Sri Lankan Tamils. Surveys estimated the audience for Tamil speakers in Southern Sri Lanka at 3.3 percent of the population surveyed, around 350,000 adults (smaller numbers than for the Sinhalese service). However, listening levels *among* the Tamil minorities were considerably higher than among Sinhalese with 27 percent of Tamil speakers listening weekly to the BBC in Tamil (as opposed to 10 percent of Sinhala speakers) (MS Jan/Feb1998).

Informally, it is acknowledged that the BBC Tamil functions as the only real radio service (alongside LTTE radio) operating into LTTE controlled areas in the north and east. One broadcaster told me that some limited focus group research showed that the listenership among Tamils in rebel areas could be as high as around 7 out of 10. Moreover, uncensored by the LTTE and the state, BBC Tamil service was able to secure and broadcast interviews with Tamil politicians, LTTE leaders, and even Tamil dissidents. It functioned as the last vestige of an uncensored public sphere.

New audience perceptions changes among the Sinhala-speakers were equally dramatic when it was re-commissioned in 1990. If in 1969, broadcasters discussed marriage in Britain, listener correspondence reports in the 1990s are equally revealing of the new kind of audience that BBC Sinhala was pitching itself towards. In their own summary of correspondence for 1992, BBC Sinhala concluded that 'correspondents wanted more news about Sri Lanka. They complained that they only get to hear the official version. Our correspondents wanted the BBC to find out the "other side" of the story, as the official version was always available in the local media' (Sinhala Service IAC & ACR 1992).¹³ Journalists in the BBC Sinhala service deliberately promoted a news coverage which was both different from official government news and widened the national agenda, thus also broadcasting about Tamil circumstances in Sinhalese for Sinhalese. In 1993, when the service had been acquiring steadier audiences for three years, most letters were about news and political and social turmoil. The respondents often used the BBC to 'publicize suffering'. Thus both services were embedded differently within Tamil

and Sinhala media audiences in relation to other Tamil and Sinhala media and the political possibilities restricting or being afforded for particular forms of reportage and production.

The most striking thing that BCB surveys can tell us about both services, is the segregation of audiences.¹⁴ The BBC itself noted that “there is very little overlap between the regular audiences to the BBC in different languages [I]t therefore seems the case that each of the separate language services is reaching a somewhat different target group, distinguished mainly by differences in language ability and ethnic background’. (MS 1991).¹⁵ The 1995 survey found the overlap of Tamil speaking and Sinhala audiences for its two services in surveyable areas was a negligible 0.3 (MS 1995). Thus it is not surprising that in 1998, the near national BBC survey concluded that ‘there is very little cross listening across languages, particularly Tamil and Sinhala (MS 1998: 1) and that ‘the BBC Sinhalese and Tamil weekly audiences are largely discrete’. The BBC in Sri Lanka entered intimately into Sri Lanka’s fractured ethnic landscape, gathering associations, histories and attachments around its services which were as due to the circulation of its broadcasts within local universes, and its own colonial and postcolonial history and associations, than the specific intent of those higher up at BBC Bush House in London.

Knowable communities

In Raymond Williams’ groundbreaking ‘*The Country and the City*’ he suggests that different novels often represent different knowable communities. Contrasting Jane

Austen and George Eliot, writing about the same 'countryside' but which for both are differently populated, Williams points out that that ' what is knowable is not only a function of objects - of what there is to be known. It is also a function of subjects, of observers - of what is desired and what needs to be known'. In Sri Lanka, different knowable communities were co-structured by the creation of ethnically discrete audiences for the two services, audiences whose expectations embodied sharply contested claims of ownership. Interactions between the audiences, their ethnic polarization, and the political situation in Sri Lanka animated distinct practices of impartiality. This helps us to understand the BBC World Service, not as a monolithic voice and canon of values, but as a constantly re-negotiated hybrid.

Segregated audiences did not reflect Bush House, the BBC headquarters. Both BBC Tamil and BBC Sinhala shared the same open front office and the atmosphere was one of friendly camaraderie, very often with collaboration between individual reporters and the heads of the services on tracking a story, exchanging information, and more general conversations across the room. They followed the same time-determined routines with meetings in the morning with the regional desk followed by internal service meetings, and both services followed the BBC policy of ensuring impartiality by rotating producers by daily or two-day slots. Thus journalists at Bush house were very much placed within and committed to a BBC shared universe of expressed BBC values and practices. Whatever autonomy either service could muster came from its coverage of regional (not global) news and 'packages', either as presentations on particular news items or as long running features on cultural events or personalities. Each broadcaster could thus show

their ability to *construct* news as opposed to simply reading out standard copy.¹⁶ Within Bush House, BBC Tamil and Sinhala could hardly compete with the ‘hot spots’ of BBC expenditure such as TV in Arabic (2008) or Persian (2009). However, as soon as broadcasts to Sri Lanka left Bush House, their influence spread rhizome-like. Listeners and even political parties in Sri Lanka credited the BBC regional services with immense power, influence, and even agency within the Sri Lankan political and mediascape, and journalists were well aware that their broadcasts could have real consequences.

‘Public Forum’ v. ‘Truth Producer’: The Different Spheres of BBC Tamil and Sinhala

While BBC Tamil and Sinhala convivially shared the same working routines in relation to Sri Lankan news, one could still see distinctive roles for BBC Tamil and BBC Sinhala. The Sri Lanka war with its high human toll and multiple shadowy actors generates particular journalistic dilemmas. For example in the case of the many assassinations and bodies recovered, naming who the killers are is often near impossible. In most cases the killers are known or at the least can be guessed with a high degree of accuracy, but naming has dangerous consequences. Naming was viewed as a partisan act, and a taboo for a news service such as the BBC which has strict rules about authenticating sources and rules of “impartiality”. BBC Tamil’s solution was to come up with complex and ingenious ways to code ambiguous perpetrators, using well-known phrases that ordinary Sri Lankan Tamils themselves use to refer to different kinds of perpetrators, to ‘point without pointing’. In the pro-LTTE media, all killings by the

security forces are identified while those by the LTTE are named as 'unidentified gunmen'. There are other codes, often those killers who arrive in a white van are often linked to the state security forces or groups associated with them, those killers on motorbikes and bicycles are often LTTE, and most of all assassins who survive are never LTTE as all suicide bombing is a clear signature of the LTTE. BBC Tamil would often fix upon one of these phrases or its own phrases for an ambiguous perpetrator and then consistently use the same ambiguity for the same perpetrator, building up thus a complex code of communication between it and its listeners. Journalists recognized clearly the multi-layered nature of truth within the Tamil community. Broadcasts thus assumed an intimacy between audiences and broadcasters, an ethnic intimacy premised on the way that secrets circulate *within* the Tamil community.

Furthermore, BBC Tamil faced some major constraints on its broadcast material. While BBC Sinhala maintained an active journalistic presence within Sri Lanka, it had a Colombo office and head and also Tamil and Sinhala stringers scattered all across the island. BBC Tamil possessed nothing like this presence in Sri Lanka, they were a much smaller operation and they could not guarantee the safety of Tamil journalists in Sri Lanka. Fear of the LTTE and the state within the Tamil community meant local Tamil journalists shied away from broadcasting on such a public and well-known Tamil forum. In most cases BBC Tamil had to rely on news from BBC Sinhala stringers, which they could report and re-interpret. All the Tamil service journalists found this frustrating, they spoke of their own desire to push further into stories against the constraints placed upon them by dangerous situation in Sri Lanka. BBC Tamil's Indian journalists, in particular,

spoke of their difficulties in negotiating the fear in the Sri Lankan Tamil community and the levels of extremism and polarization in Sri Lanka.

However, while BBC Tamil could not investigate or follow up news items in Sri Lanka and focus on 'alternative truth production' instead it could function to report up to date accurate and non-partisan and trustworthy news. Its distinctive feature was the telephone interview. BBC Tamil used on-air telephone interviews and its featured interviews on the Tamil website to perform the most significant function it could within Sri Lankan Tamil society - it acted as a *public forum* in a situation where there was no public forum. LTTE and Government officials were asked searching questions over the phone on live air. Tamil dissidents were also interviewed about their opinions on what was going on in Sri Lanka. Public events which would not have normally been covered by the Tamil media were covered Thus BBC Tamil did not speak, but panoply of other voices spoke instead, and assembling this polyphonic voice through the features and telephone interview is BBC Tamil's current means of finding a place within the Tamil media. It provided less 'news' than the many Tamil Internet news websites but it provided something that others could not, an undivided public forum which even LTTE officials could not avoid having to participate in.

BBC Sinhala also constantly feared reprisal against its Sri Lankan based journalists, especially in relation to its few Tamil stringers. However, given their emphasis in reporting to southern Sri Lanka and exposing southern actors, their stringers faced greater danger from the state and state linked Tamil actors rather than the LTTE, with

one of their journalists Nimalrajan murdered in 2000 by a state allied group. They constantly had to consider whether to pull reports from their stringers on grounds of security. However, while BBC Tamil journalists saw themselves operating a Tamil media muzzled by the LTTE, BBC Sinhala faced constant challenges within a very different southern media landscape. While journalism in southern Sri Lanka has undoubtedly become ever more dangerous nonetheless there are multiple English and Sinhala language newspapers and multiple private and public radio and TV stations. BBC Sinhala acknowledged this dense media landscape and journalists imagined their role as steering a ship which did not bend to pro-government or nationalist pressure and attempted to cover war news in a non-partisan manner. In the files of clippings that BBC Sinhala journalists kept, alongside much-valued letters from listeners thanking them for news items and coverage, was a collection of all their bad press. One journalist showed me these with some pride. The majority railed against the Sinhala service for being 'biased', 'unpatriotic', 'traitors' and "LTTE lovers". On the 15th of March 2006 a demonstration by Sinhalese protesters outside Bush house handed over a petition to the BBC and brandished banners reading 'Biased Broadcasting Corporation' and 'BBC, Stop Supporting Terrorism in Sri Lanka'.¹⁷ In 2000 the BBC correspondent in Colombo was assaulted by protesters at a march he was reporting on. These incidents only spurred the journalists on. The greater the influence the Sri Lankan media and listeners letters accorded them the more it shored up their ability to translate their minority status within the BBC into a meaningful player within Sri Lanka.

While BBC Tamil produced itself as a 'public forum', BBC Sinhala instead saw itself as an alternative 'truth producer'. It was able to *produce* different kinds of news through its stringers. Often its presence on the ground meant that it could investigate further news items from letters written to it, thus in a very real way performing the 'publicizing suffering' role attributed to it by some correspondents. It also could use telephone interviews to ask sharp and critical questions of major actors in news items. It expanded into a truth telling role, one in which official news was contradicted and the news agenda itself was widened to include the voices of those who would not have otherwise been heard, from broadcasting to its Sinhalese audience the situation of those Tamils living in the war zone to exposing news about government corruption scandals. The BBC Sinhala head told me of periods when the national SLBC news broadcast would be followed by the rebroadcast of BBC news flatly contradicting every item of the national news. It was a foreign owned radio station that was becoming more the national news than even the national news. These roles that both BBC Tamil and Sinhala play are thus, highly specific to themselves and the different media landscapes they inhabit within Sri Lanka.

The distinct roles that BBC Tamil and Sinhala play relate intimately to the fact that they broadcast to very different audiences/, knowable communities who they are ethnically intimate with. The nature of the complaints that BBC Tamil and Sinhala receive are also thus shaped by not only these different roles the two play, but also the intimacy of the relationship created between radio station and audience.

Being Traitors

On my first fieldwork day with BBC Sinhala, I immediately noticed the two cartoons they had pinned up on their notice board. Both of the cartoons were from mainstream Sinhala newspapers. One showed the BBC within a large coffin shaped like a cross, alluding to them as a Western or Christian agency. The other showed the BBC kneeling behind a tiger's behind and whitewashing the 'Tamil Tiger's' stripes, thus insinuating that the BBC had enslaved themselves to the LTTE.

In 2006, Bernard Gabony, the online web editor of the South Asia desk tackled the frequent accusations of bias levelled against the BBC's coverage of Sri Lanka (16/05/2006).¹⁸ Gabony cited the 'white washing' cartoon and listed criticisms launched in Colombo-based Sinhala and English language newspapers about the BBC being anti-government and anti-Sinhalese. Tellingly, he also refers to a pro-LTTE website which bombarded the BBC with e-mails and phone calls alleging that it was taking bribes from the Sri Lankan government. Gabony concluded that 'the two campaigns from opposing ends of Sri Lanka's political spectrum illustrate two things. One is that people really care what the BBC says about Sri Lanka....The second is that, no matter how much we strive to maintain our guidelines of impartiality and accuracy, there will always be people on either side convinced we are biased against them.' What Gabony did not highlight is that these complaints went to different services not simultaneously to both.

BBC Sinhala does not get e-mails from pro-LTTE writers complaining that it discriminated against the LTTE or Tamils, and BBC Tamil, despite the assumption of its pro-LTTE-ness by Sinhala nationalist groups, does not have a Sinhala listenership who

attack it for being unpatriotic. They reserved their opprobrium for their own “ethnic station”.

The head of the Tamil service once told me: ‘We are a room full of traitors...we are Tamil traitors’ and, pointing across the room at BBC Sinhala staff: ‘They are Sinhala traitors’. As he explained to me both the criticisms and appreciations of the BBC in the letters he received focused on ethnic ownership of the BBC: Thus abusive emails were in fact saying all the time “you are *ours*, you are not standing up for us’. He told me in reply “yes we are BBC Tamil but we are not an advocate for Tamils. We tell the news in Tamil, but they expect us to play a partisan role for Tamil nationalism and the LTTE. We cannot perform that role, we perform a professional role.’ This was mirrored, inversely, in the abusive correspondence to BBC Sinhala which in turn accused them of being pro-LTTE and pro-Tamil, anti-Sinhalese and anti-patriotic because they broadcast news unfavourable to the Sri Lankan government. Criticisms, lampooning and abuse are themselves constituted within limited spheres; they are accusations of betrayal of the *inside* by *insiders*; broadcasters were named as *traitors*, that is those who betray not others but ourselves (Thiranagama and Kelly 2010). Thus even though BBC Tamil and BBC Sinhala functioned as part of the same global broadcaster, they were understood as objects of ethnic ownership. While both services explicitly rejected nationalistic stances and ethnic polarization, nonetheless their practices were also shaped by being these ethnic love objects.

These claims of treachery and ethnic betrayal return us to William's knowable communities and the differently distributed landscapes, concerns and actors. The two services approached the LTTE in fundamentally different ways, although they both shared a critical approach to the Sri Lankan state. So the Sinhala service was often accused of being soft on the LTTE by Sinhala nationalists, but also at times by anti-LTTE Tamil dissidents. Its approach to the LTTE was structured by its position within a highly discriminatory southern polity governed by a state pursuing an aggressive military campaign against both the LTTE and ordinary Tamils. Yet even for the most critical Sinhala journalists, the LTTE constituted an unknowable object. For BBC Tamil journalists, conversely, it was the LTTE that embodied the dominant and intimate power for its listeners and the national government that constituted the near-unknowable object. Anecdotally this was a major shift within perceptions of BBC Tamil. Amongst the Tamil community in London and in Sri Lanka, BBC Tamil was under previous management thought of as highly partisan towards the LTTE (this was discussed both approvingly and disapprovingly in many conversations I have heard over many years). More recently many told me when I talked of my work on the BBC that new management and journalists had latterly shifted towards a far more impartial position and has highlighted distance or even dissent from the LTTE and highlighted internal dissension within the Tamil-speaking communities by presenting alternative news items and voices. The differences between the two services' approach to the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state usefully demonstrates how both services operate with differently attenuated notions of what is considered objective.

Defining impartiality depended on two invisible nets of assumptions about obligations shared between listeners and broadcasters for each of the services. These two fields were distributed and populated according to different stakes and positions internal to them. There were different stakes for each of the services in how they understood and reported the same news items about the same actors. So even the same actors' positions were re-attributed in the separate, knowable universes of both the producers and the listeners, although all parties agreed on the value of impartial reporting.

These differences are not just matters of changing perspectives; they are different systems of recognition or even cognition. The larger argument of this paper has been that these systems of recognition are ethnicized and ethnicizing; they constitute and reproduce different knowable communities. Thus, our own notions of the BBC's values of impartiality have to be continually embedded back into the social universes co-produced by the broadcasters and listeners who co-generate them. I have not suggested that the BBC services are ethnic love objects in order to deny them status or even credibility, rather I have pointed to the fact that in Sri Lanka ethnicisation are powerful and potent lived experience, and that the BBC services are also part of this intimate landscape, landscapes in which Tamil and Sinhala speaking BBC journalists seek to exercise critical voices.

Moreover, the BBC 's position as a strong global brand with a long powerful imperial and post-imperial history within Sri Lanka makes it an object par excellence through which issues around ethnic representation and ownership, who 'we' are, can be

projected and evaluated. Listeners participate actively in their letters and complaints and in the weight of their presence as targeted audiences in shaping these possibilities. The two services are ethnic objects, totems that stand in for social universes they are meant to represent and recreate 'accurately'. The nature of this representation is what brings the kinds of abuse and constant criticism that both services face; ethnic objects they always nonetheless fall short of being for their listeners adequate ethnic mirrors, fuelling desire even further. In the Lacanian sense, loving is also a demand for love. The BBC as an authoritative love object is also demanded to then transmit back and prove its own love and award recognition for its subjects. This paper has intimated that the BBC far from providing a window onto the global world, becomes potent for its local listeners by representing possibilities about how the global world may 'know' Sri Lanka, a mirror to ourselves of how and who 'we' Tamils and Sinhalese are. Its slogan 'Wherever you are, you're with the BBC' potently recalls this globally present but nationally and regionally shaped media object, one of the most complex global institutions in our world today.

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who freely allowed me to observe their daily routines, even though I may have got in their way and generously consented to being interviewed. The inspiration and impetus for the research came from my beloved grandfather Alvapillai Rajasingam, one of the BBC's most faithful listeners from his peacetime boyhood through the many years of turmoil and wars. I dedicate the article to his name.

Endnotes

¹ 1986 Annual Report. Tamil Service Annual Correspondents Reports. Appendix C: Tamil Service Listener's Correspondence Summary. WAC E3/579/1

² Media Survey in Sri Lanka, Feb/March 1995. WAC: Box file: S.Asia, Nepal, Sri Lanka

³ Media Survey in Sri Lanka, Jan/ Feb 1998. WAC: Box file: S.Asia, Nepal, Sri Lanka

⁴ The 1998 survey showed that levels of listening to BBC Sinhala were twice as high amongst men as women and ranged across age levels. However, the surveyed Tamil audience revealed that the level of listening to the BBC in Tamil was as high for women as for men (unusual within South Asian regional language services), and there was a more general spread of educational levels in the audience.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ See Ramaswamy for a discussion of the Tamil revivalist movement in nineteenth century Tamil Nadu enjoining devotion and love to Tamil personified as the deity Mother Tamil- 'Tamilttay'.

⁷ Tamil Service Annual Correspondents Reports WAC E3/579/1

⁸ Sinhala Service Annual Correspondence Reports. International Audience Correspondence, Sinhala Service, Annual 1992 and January 1993. Summary of Correspondence. WAC E3/ 575/1

⁹ Lanka Market Research Bureau Limited (commissioned by the BBC) July 1996 research study on attitudes to BBC Sinhala's services educational programmes. WAC Box file: S.Asia, Nepal, Sri Lanka

¹⁰ Moreover, the fabric of the imagined Tamil community across national boundaries has come under pressure; many South Indians abandoned support for the LTTE after the LTTE's assassination of the Indian Prime-Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

¹¹ Chapman in interview with Robert Hanks, 'Why the World Service still matters' *The Independent (UK)* 9th July. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/why-the-world-service-still-matters-456551.html>. Last accessed 10/04/2008.

¹² In both 1995 and 1998, the BBC survey reported that it could not survey 8 districts in the northern and eastern provinces representing around 14 percent of the total national population and all Tamil-speaking provinces with majority Muslim and Tamil populations (MS Feb/March 1995 & MS Jan/Feb 1998).

¹³ Sinhala Service Annual Correspondence Reports. International Audience Correspondence, Sinhala Service, Annual 1992 and January 1993. Summary of Correspondence. WAC E3/ 575/1

¹⁴ This separation of audiences for the two services in Sri Lanka is longstanding. In the April 1971 JVP insurrection in southern Sri Lanka, the staff of the Sinhala service were immediately affected and the station was removed temporarily from its customary rebroadcast on Radio Ceylon at the time of the insurrection throughout April 1971 and

continued to be affected up to 1972. K.C Gould from the Eastern Services Audience Research reported that there had been a 75 percent decrease in letters in 1971 from 1970. A similar report on Tamil listeners' letters for the period between January to June 1971 by the same K.C. Gould reported, without a trace of irony, that in the same period, letters from Sri Lanka to the Tamil service had increased.

¹⁵ The BBC in Sri Lanka: Survey in Greater Colombo. March 1991. WAC Box file: S.Asia, Nepal, Sri Lanka

¹⁶ Otherwise, as one BBC Tamil journalist remarked gloomily, it felt as if the daily broadcast about Sri Lanka was just the same as 'reading out an obituary every day'.

¹⁷ BBC News. (2006) 'BBC 'biased': protest in London'. 15th May. <http://bbc.co.uk> .
http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2006/05/060515_protest.shtml

¹⁸ BBC News. (2006) 'Sri Lanka: Truth, bias and the BBC' 16th May. <http://bbc.co.uk> .
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