**Hearing Study: Colonial voice**

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GESSEN: [Independent Russian news channel] TV Rain started running a round-the-clock live broadcast covering the war in Ukraine and calling it a war. From the moment the invasion began. And the thing is that you would think that that's what a normal television station would do, right? Part of what the Russian state television does to disguise the fact that the country is waging war is not only not calling it a war but also not changing its broadcast schedule or tone in any way. So formally, I think it was TV Rain using the word war, using the word aggression, using the word invasion when they were describing what was going on there. But considering that the Russian government has blocked every single source of independent information in the last week, those things were just pretexts. It’s that the state is in the process of establishing final total monopoly over information.

-Misha Gessen, from an interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, 10 March 2022

*Hearing Study #6* asks us to listen to speech to find patterns: repeating phrases; dynamic variance; tonal and timbral qualities. By identifying repetition and variance, it tells us, we can better understand musical—as well as social—order.

If, during an aggressive war on a neighbouring country, reporters on Russian state television do notalter their tone in any way, as Russian journalist and political theorist Masha Gessen says, what does that tell us about how speech patterns and vocal tone emerge in totalitarian regimes?

If speech patterns and vocal tone are mechanisms through which state power asserts itself, we should be able to find examples closer to home as well.

I listened to British television broadcasts on the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s to hear the aural traces of British state power: to hear how speech patterns mapped onto social order.

I heard English voices describe British Army’s role in Northern Ireland as that of ‘keeping the peace’. No-one used the word ‘occupation’ then, just as the Putin government forbids the use of the word ‘war’ today. There was seemingly no awareness that this was censorship or propaganda.

I observed that British reporters’ voices were uniformly English and male; deep and even toned; serious, measured, and concerned. Their tonal and timbral qualities underscored the idea that British soldiers in Northern Ireland were under threat, even though they were a violent and well-equipped occupying force. The received pronunciation and even quality of the voices lent credibility and authority to reports: they were sonic symbols of British state power and indeed of Englishness.

I noted how the voice was instrumentalized in the British colonial project then, just as it is in the Russian colonial project today.

As part of this hearing study, I learned about the 1988-1994 British broadcasting voice restrictions[[1]](#footnote-1): an unsubtle and even comical censorship tool by the British government which forbid broadcasting the voices of Irish republican groups on state television and radio. The *content* of Irish republicans’ speech was not banned; only the *sound* of their voices. This led to many absurd instances of overdubbing and subtitling of their voices on British television and radio. The ban was eventually overturned, deemed incompatible with a free society.

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1988%E2%80%931994_British_broadcasting_voice_restrictions> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)