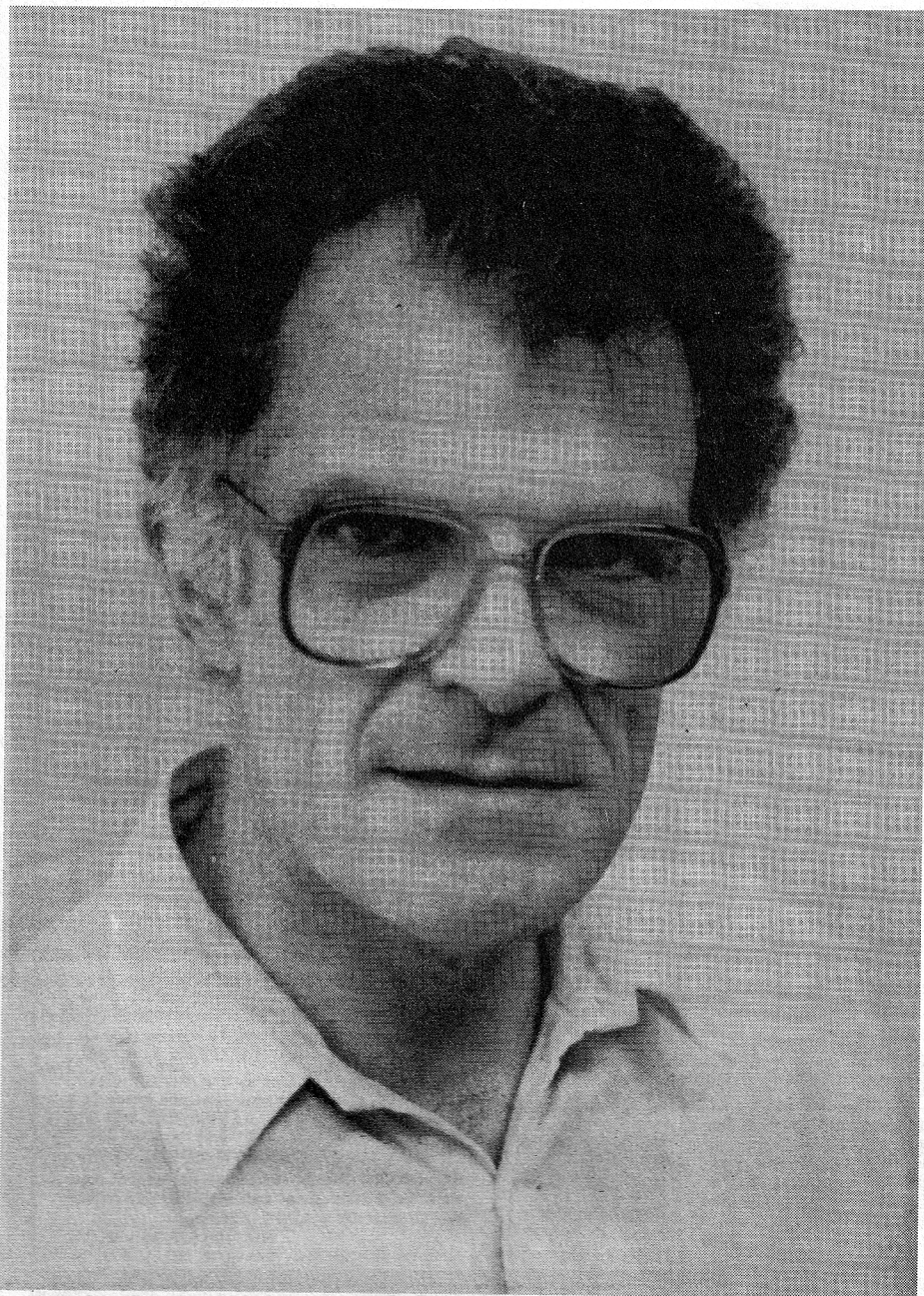


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# Who's Listening to Shortwave?

## An Interview with Graham Mytton

Head of International Broadcasting and Audience Research,  
BBC World Service



**W**ho listens to shortwave? Why? How do we know? These are the kinds of questions tackled by Graham Mytton for the B.B.C., which has the largest audience research department in the free world.

Other international broadcasters buy BBC research reports in order to plan and schedule the most effective programming. Even the BBC program changes last fall were the result of audience research.

As Mytton indicates, some broadcasters take their listener mail very seriously. If listeners hope to influence the quantity and quality of programming, they ought to write with both complaints and suggestions.

Contrary to the common stereotype, many broadcasters are not monolithic bureaucracies with little regard for the listening public.

Mytton was interviewed by Dr. Quentin Schultze of the Department of Communication at Calvin College during a recent visit to the United States.

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**Q:** What are your responsibilities as head of audience research for the BBC World Service?

**Mytton:** It's two-fold. Half of my job involves looking after the 500,000 letters a year we get in thirty or so different languages. I oversee the analysis and translation. We look for trends in the mail: where they come from, who writes, what kinds of

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things they say, and what other matters are reported on.

The other half of the job is audience research. Letters don't tell you how many listeners you've got and what kind of people listen -- only which kinds are willing to write to us. So we commission random-sample audience surveys in countries around the world. We also buy surveys or polls commissioned by other organizations.

Our goal is to determine the size of our audience, its demographics, how frequently and for how long people listen and how much they tune in to the BBC as compared to other national and international broadcasts. It's also very important what language they listen to and what times of the day they listen.

We are increasingly interested in how much people watch television, and how TV and video have affected their radio listening habits, especially in the Third World countries where television is growing rapidly.

Related to both of these jobs is my task of monitoring the overall trends and developments in the international broadcasting scene. That comes partly out of these surveys and partly out of our other research. I should add that it's not all number crunching. We do quite a lot of ethnographic, qualitative research using focus groups or group discussions and other forms of research.

Q: Do we really know how many people around the world listen to shortwave radio?

Mytton: Yes, although we have not actually computed it that way. Instead, we at the BBC concentrate on how many people listen to the BBC regularly or how many people listen to Voice of America or Radio Moscow or whomever. We estimate that about 120 million people listen to us at least once a week in one or

another of the 37 languages in which we broadcast.

Q: How do you get accurate audience information in countries such as the Soviet Union and Eastern European nations?

Mytton: It's impossible to go with a clipboard down the main streets of Sophia, Bucharest, or Moscow asking questions about what radio stations people listen to!

Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty each operate research departments which do their best to get around this problem by interviewing travelers. However, the people who travel are not typical of the populations as a whole.

It is possible to do all sorts of weighting, correcting for those parts of the population who are not fully covered by that interviewing. It's still a bit difficult.

In addition to that, we do our own interviewing, for example, among Bulgarians. East Germans are not covered by interviewing done by Radio Free Europe. So we're hoping to develop that. We hope it is becoming easier to do research actually in Eastern Europe and we are having very friendly discussions with the Polish radio and television research people. We hope to do some research in cooperation with them.

Q: Who are the major shortwave broadcasters in terms of their world-wide audience?

Mytton: Well, first of all it's the BBC, followed by the Voice of America. Then it's quite a gap. Among the worldwide broadcasters, Deutsche Welle is next. However, Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe are very important. They have very large audiences in East and Central Europe and that makes them really the next most important ones overall after the BBC and VOA.

Q: How do you account for the relatively poor audiences for Radio Moscow?

Mytton: Radio Moscow's programming has left a lot to be desired. With a few important exceptions, it's been dull. Even when some of the programs are fascinating and are well put together, they are not up to date.

Also, they are often unreliable. Radio Moscow includes propaganda with the news. Our research shows that people are put off by propaganda -- and that includes listeners to the Voice of America.

Q: What are the favorite BBC programs in North America?

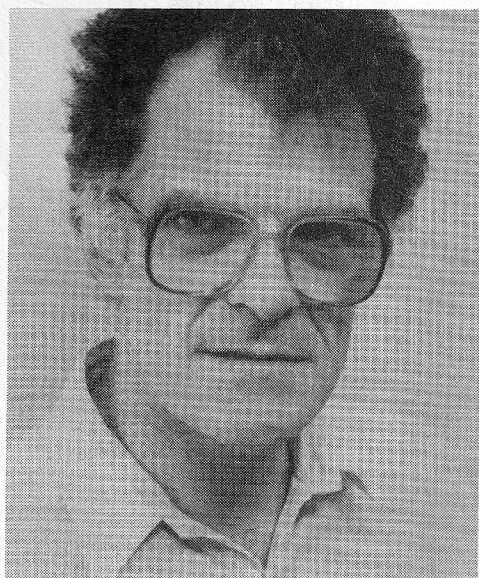
Mytton: Well, everywhere in the world, it's news. The main reason for people listening to the BBC is news. But it varies enormously from area to area. Most North Americans tune in for the bulletins of world news as an alternative to or in addition to the news available in North America.

Q: Are shortwave audiences increasing because of the user-friendly digital receivers?

Mytton: I wish I knew the answer to that. It's probably true, but the impact on the 120 million BBC listeners is tiny. Up to the end of 1987, Sony had sold one million "7600" receivers. So let's just say there's maybe two or maybe even three million digital sets. It's not an awful lot of people.

So it hasn't really made an impact on the business traveler. And if you keep your eyes open you may soon see some advertisements by the BBC in some international travel magazines actually promoting the digital set as the essential tool of the traveler.

Q: What has been the impact of the world-wide explosion of VCRs on shortwave listening?



Mytton: It's difficult to determine, and it's one of the most important things we're about to investigate in surveys in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and, we hope, Sri Lanka, and in the Gulf.

There are a number of projects in the field at the moment. We suspect that the VCR has not affected our weekly audience size but has decreased the amount of time that people listen to any radio, especially in the evening.

Q: Will direct-broadcast radio or TV satellites (DBS) eventually replace shortwave radio?

Mytton: No, unless something else changes. Technology isn't deterministic. The reason why the major international broadcasters have large audiences is that we're riding on the back of the domestic broadcasting activity.

The domestic broadcasters in much of the Third World and even the Soviet Union actually still rely on shortwave in order to get national audiences. North Americans tend to think of shortwave as a hobby for the experts and the like. It isn't in much of the rest of the world.

It has been an essential communications medium for many broadcasters and listeners. The BBC has

ridden on the back of that. As long as people have the radios, they will sometimes hit the BBC instead of tuning in their domestic broadcasting station.

DBS is a different kind of technology. I cannot see DBS succeeding only as an international broadcasting service. Who is going to buy the expensive equipment only for international radio broadcasting? We are not a primary activity. We are a secondary radio broadcasting and listening activity.

DBS would be the answer to the problem of national broadcasting in countries like Zaire, Peru, or Indonesia, if the technology and the sets were available. Then it could be both a national and international broadcasting medium. I see no sign of that happening now.

Q: Does the BBC World Service have any new programs planned?

Mytton: Well, in November of 1988 the BBC had the biggest shake-up of programs ever on the World Service. A whole spate of English programs were begun, including for the first time a whole hour news program.

In addition, we started new programs on business matters and changes in the presentation of programs. Our research showed that World Service had this image of being a little bit stuffy, and also a little bit clumsy in its presentation. A lot of people liked that -- or at least they liked its slowness.

It's important to remember that the BBC World Service in English is listened to by many people whose mother tongue is not English. So it's been a balancing act between sounding a bit old-fashioned and trying to sound a bit more like modern Britain, and at the same time not losing those listeners that we have because we've become too snappy, too rapid, and too quick fire.

It's a difficult thing to achieve. We hope to achieve it.

All the other languages are being subject to similar scrutiny in their programs. Are we doing the right kind of programs? Are we presenting in the right kind of way?

We are carefully examining audience research to decide if changes should be made in other language broadcasts as well. We're also paying attention to what other media are doing.

Q: Do letters from listeners influence such programming decisions?

Mytton: Yes, we especially welcome detailed and well-argued comments about programs. I would personally like to see a broader range of letters. We tend to get letters from people who tend to write letters.

I have a theory about this; people who write to the BBC just to ask for a program guide are a pretty good cross-section of our listeners, whereas people who write in with comments tend to be people who always want to make comments. I wish people who wrote in just for a program guide or schedule would add a few comments.

