

## **The Trumpets of Autocracies and the Still, Small Voices of Civilisation: Hilda Matheson, Emmanuel Levinas, and the Ethics of Broadcasting in a Time of Crisis**

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From its inception, British broadcasting was both a technological and a cultural phenomenon; or, to borrow Raymond Williams's formulation about television, broadcasting was both a technology and a cultural form. As a cultural form, British broadcasting, and its institutional embodiment, the BBC, functioned as a point of intersection for several related discourses—social, political, and aesthetic. As a public utility service in the national interest, molded according to Arnoldian assumptions about the nature of culture and about the role of culture in everyday life, the BBC was also an institution that officially promoted, sometimes explicitly and often tacitly, a particular moral agenda. At the very least—and this is a fact too-often overlooked in the history of radio criticism—the BBC served as a site of both open and implicit ethical discourse; in other words, if the BBC was a technocultural institution, then one of the constituent aspects of “culture” was the ethical. The BBC was a technocultural institution, and more specifically an electronic mass telecommunications institution, whose founders and early administrators embraced radio as a means of elevating the nation's moral ideals and standard of conduct through a quasi-Arnoldian dissemination of culture, “the best that has been thought and said in the world,” to a mass listening public. As the Listener's 14 May 1930 editorial on “Literary Values” put it, “broadcasting serves, as no other medium does, both for a vehicle of cultural diffusion, and for a means of undisturbed expression by the highest type of critical mind. Broadcasting can therefore assist to keep alive the spirit which animated men like . . . Matthew Arnold.”

The general purpose of this paper is to explore the ethics of broadcasting in a time of crisis—specifically, the early 1930s—with the aid of a critical lens afforded by the philosophical work of the French poststructuralist ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose works have been central to the so-called ethical turn in literary and cultural studies over the past decade or so. My specific focus is on the theoretical, administrative, and editorial work of Hilda Matheson, an early Director of the Talks Department at the BBC. Matheson formatively influenced the sound of the BBC through her development of the “intimate” mode of address beginning in 1927. After leaving the BBC in 1931, she continued to comment, from an ethical perspective, on British broadcasting and, increasingly, on German broadcasting under Joseph Goebbels, in a column for the Week-End Review. Then, in 1933, she published Broadcasting, one of the best-informed overviews of early British radio.

Ethical concerns played a central part in Matheson's vision for radio as a vehicle of cultural uplift and ethical progress. Central to her vision for broadcasting was the intimate mode of address, a speaking style that, she hoped, would encourage an understanding of radio broadcasting as a medium for communicative acts, not between a broadcaster and a listening public—one man or woman talking at the masses—but between a broadcaster and individual listeners: one man or woman speaking to another man or woman in a transaction repeated thousands or even millions of times

simultaneously. In *Broadcasting*, Matheson puts it more succinctly. “[T]he basic fact of broadcasting,” she writes, is “that the microphone transmits an intimate voice to the individual; it is not a megaphone shouting at a crowd.” She elaborates: “Early experiments with broadcast talks showed that it was useless to address the microphone as if it were a public meeting, or even to read it essays or leading articles. The person sitting at the other end expected the speaker to address him personally, simply, almost familiarly, as man to man.” Matheson is writing here of British broadcasting, and she is writing with the clear awareness that other experiments had been tried, and were even then being tried, elsewhere—in the United States, for example, where cultural elevation and education had from the beginning taken a back seat to broadcasting as popular entertainment and where broadcasting had begun as a commercial activity rather than as a public service. She is also thinking of the ways that totalitarian states such as Germany, Italy, and Russia were developing broadcasting on what she saw as the “tub-thumping” propagandistic model of “a megaphone shouting at a crowd.”

This paper brings several basic Levinasian ethical ideas to bear on the ethics of style in early British radio as Matheson conceived it. Matheson’s conviction that “the . . . microphone transmits an intimate voice to the individual; it is not a megaphone shouting at a crowd” grounds Matheson’s broadcasting philosophy. What, as Matheson understood the situation, were the ethical uses of radio in the 1920s and 1930s? How did broadcast styles signify specific ethical purposes? How does the desire to speak to and not at listeners resonate with a Levinasian injunction to attend to the face of the Other? How well does Levinas’s ethics as first philosophy, with its emphasis on seeing, translate into analysis of a verbal and aural communications medium in which the other is never directly encountered? How useful here are Levinas’s concepts of the Saying and the Said? How does the intimate mode of address embody an ethics of responsibility that challenges what Levinas called the “philosophy of Hitlerism” in Nazi radio with its exhortatory, megaphone-shouting-at-a-crowd style designed to “awaken . . . elementary feelings” of identity and to enlist the listening population into a fundamental order of the Same? And what, finally, are the ethical resonances of the ethical mode of address that Matheson pioneered?

To address such questions is to illuminate a fundamental yet still obscure aspect of early radio theory and practice in Britain and in Germany, at a time of growing political crisis in which radio played a central role.

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