

The BBC in the Firing Line: From John Reith to Jerry Springer

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By modern standards, the 1920s in the United Kingdom were hardly an age of leisure. It was not until 1938 that paid holidays became available to the majority of the population, and even easy personal travel grew only gradually between the World Wars. Nevertheless, one major leisure pursuit emerged in the early 1920s, that of listening to the wireless.¹ Unlike the United States, where the potential of a new medium of communication and entertainment had been realised at the start of the 20th century, the British had largely limited the use of the airwaves to maritime, military and scientific purposes during the Great War. The ending of hostilities in Europe opened the way for the UK to explore other possibilities too, with a view both to public consumption and commercial gain. At this time, the lead was taken by companies manufacturing wireless sets, the six largest of which amalgamated in 1922 to form the British Broadcasting Company and appointed John Reith as their first General Manager. As a means of controlling transmissions at a time of limited frequencies, the British government supported the creation of the new consortium and granted it a licence to broadcast programmes, which took effect on 1st January 1923. The Company had the legal right to transmit sponsored broadcasts, like those in the United States, but declined to do so, relying on a tax on the sales of wireless sets and on a licence fee paid by listeners to provide the necessary funds.

The cultural and educational advantages of radio were considerable, offering those of relatively modest means access to events which would otherwise have been beyond their reach and the popularity of the new recreational activity was shown by the growth in the number of licenced sets from 600,000 in 1923 to 3.4 million in 1930. Even at this stage, however, the new medium was not free from controversy and many of the issues raised still have their relevance today, over 80 years later. Doubts were expressed, not least in the pages of the *Radio Times*, as to whether passive listening at home might not take the place of more vigorous and healthy pursuits. If this criticism applied especially to the broadcasting of sporting events, and thus to what might be classed as entertainment, other more profound concerns were equally the subject of debate. Although it was taken for granted that radio should be regulated by the Government, and those who were familiar with the commercial excesses of American broadcasting had few doubts on this score, questions nevertheless remained as to how this control might best be exercised and more fundamentally as to the purposes and deontology of radio itself, a

¹ Although the BBC's programmes were announced by its own publication, still called *Radio Times*, 'wireless' remained the standard British term until after the 2nd World War.

consideration which was likely to have repercussions for the type of programming to be offered. These abiding issues lie behind the controversies mentioned in this article, which will concentrate on the different challenges faced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) during its foundation period, in the years when it was compelled to respond to the demand for popular programming and in today's world of global competition and Government hostility.

The Founding of an Institution

The BBC was founded in 1927, but the policy and ethos of broadcasting had already been largely determined by the Company, not least because of the continuity offered by the long reign of John Reith, who became the first Director-General of the Corporation, oversaw almost the whole of the pre-World War II period and left his imprint on the service long after his departure in 1938. He was not alone in his estimation of the value (and values) of radio: the first Controller of Programmes at the Company, Charles Lewis, emphasised the need 'to keep on the upper side of public taste'² and to avoid anything smacking of the sensational.

The Crawford Committee was appointed to advise on broadcasting after the Company's initial licence expired at the end of 1926 and laid the foundations for what is still today's British Broadcasting Corporation.³ Very much in the spirit of the times, the new body was to be a public corporation,⁴ run by a Board of Governors appointed by the Crown and answerable to the Postmaster General. The BBC was to be incorporated by Royal Charter, renewable every ten years, and financed directly from licence fee revenues collected by Government. Crawford recommended that the broadcasting monopoly be maintained, with the Corporation 'acting as Trustee for the national interest, [...] that its status and duties should correspond with those of a public service' and that 'every effort should be made to raise the standard of style and performance in every phase of broadcasting'. The expression of diverse opinions was authorised, Crawford concluding that 'a moderate amount of controversial matter should be broadcast, provided the material is of high quality and distributed with scrupulous fairness'.⁵

The criteria for what was to become a national institution were thus established; the monopoly was maintained, the notion of 'public service broadcasting'⁶ had been accepted and the financial stability of the Corporation was guaranteed. Under Reith's leadership, the BBC flourished: the number of employees rose from 989 at the end of 1926 to over 4,000 twelve years later and the number of

² C. A. LEWIS, *Broadcasting from Within*, London: Newnes, 1924, p. 48, quoted in Anthony SMITH (ed.), *British Broadcasting*, Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974, p. 42.

³ The term actually suggested was British Broadcasting Commission.

⁴ Similar 'public corporations' between the World Wars included the Central Electricity Generating Board, the Port of London Authority and the London Passenger Transport Board.

⁵ *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting, 1925*, Cmd 2599, 1926, pp. 14-15.

⁶ Reith's biographer Andrew Boyle observes: 'Reith's claims to have coined both the concept and the phrase 'public service broadcasting', and to have offered these to Sykes as a 'personal opinion' at the first meeting of the committee is [sic] not confirmed by the facts.' Andrew BOYLE, *Only the Wind will Listen*, London: Hutchinson, 1972, p. 142.

radio licences purchased reached nearly 9 million by the end of 1938. In 1932, the Corporation moved to prestigious new headquarters, Broadcasting House at Portland Place, which seemed to capture more adequately than almost anything else its ethos and aspirations. The outside of the building still impresses by its sheer size while the Entrance Hall was dominated by a plaque bearing a formal Latin dedication⁷ composed by Montague Rendall, one of the Corporation's first Governors and former headmaster of Winchester College, accompanied by a statue of the sower by sculptor Eric Gill combining the notions of 'broadcasting' in its literal sense with the analogy of the spreading of the 'good seed'.

Summing up the policy of the early BBC in a few words is a daunting task. Many of its features now seem quaintly antiquated, many of the details appear trivial but the debt owed to Reith was enormous and for long years the criterion of Reithian standards was the yardstick by which programmes and policy were judged. In general terms, Reith believed that the quality of the medium was paramount and saw his mission as that of '*bring[ing] the best of everything into the greatest number of homes*'. With this in mind, the idea of using radio purely for entertainment was as undesirable as it was impracticable. In *Broadcast over Britain*, Reith continued:

*It is impossible to occupy all the available hours in transmissions which would normally be described as of an entertaining nature. Entertainment, pure and simple, quickly grows tame; dissatisfaction and boredom result. If hours are to be occupied agreeably, it would be a sad reflection on human intelligence if it were contended that entertainment, in the accepted sense of the term, was the only means of doing so.*⁸

In an age when most people's formal education came to an end at 14, this argument had a certain validity, and even if, by the mid-1930s, music took up the bulk of broadcasting time (64%),⁹ it too could be educational. *The Foundations of Music*, broadcast for ten minutes a day, five times a week, for ten years was intended to demonstrate the theoretical and practical bases of all modern music. Behind everything lay Reith's absolute conviction of the accuracy of his own judgement, and his right to impose it. In 1924, he wrote, '*It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need — and not what they want, but few know what they want, and very few know what they need.*'¹⁰

Reith was a complex and controversial character, some of whose contradictory aspects can be glimpsed in the titles of chapters of Boyle's biography, the

⁷ The English translation reads: 'This temple of the arts and muses is dedicated to almighty God by the first governors in the year of our lord 1931 John Reith being director-general and they pray that good seed sown may bring forth good harvest and that all things foul or hostile to peace may be banished hence and that the people inclining their ear to whatsoever things are of good report may tread the path of virtue and of wisdom'. The significance of the references to St Paul's epistle to the Philippians (IV, 8) and to the parable of the sower was, of course, familiar to most visitors in the 1930s.

⁸ J. C. W. REITH, *Broadcast over Britain*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924, p. 147.

⁹ Information based on figures for '*One Week in October 1934*', in Asa BRIGGS, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol II*, Oxford: OUP, 1965, p. 51.

¹⁰ J. C. W. REITH, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

opportunist, the visionary, the autocrat and the paternalist. His insistence on standards, inspired by his own upbringing as the son of a Church of Scotland minister, led to a number of contentious decisions: presenters were required to wear dinner jackets as a mark of respect for other contributors, the first woman presenter, Sheila Borrett, was appointed only in 1934 and Chief Engineer Peter Eckersley was forced to resign when cited in a divorce case involving another member of staff. Reith himself played a major role in all new appointments and, although sometimes unexpectedly open-minded, he *'would not allow any kind of staff association or recognise trade union membership for BBC employees'*.¹¹ The BBC was run along lines akin to those of a select club, a feature which survived long after Reith's departure. John Sergeant, who was a BBC journalist for thirty years, rising to the rank of Chief Political Correspondent, stresses both the idiosyncrasy and the insularity he found on joining the Corporation ... in 1970:

*I discovered that the BBC was a world of its own; many senior staff were convinced that anything which might carry too much of the flavour of ordinary life was better left outside the imposing entrance of Broadcasting House [...] [T]he impression was still given that you had signed up to an exclusive club and the sooner you adapted to its rules and manners the better.*¹²

In these circumstances, it was not surprising that independent thought should be restricted, that the BBC should consider itself as part of the Establishment to which the Governors undoubtedly belonged,¹³ and that, inevitably, the Corporation should be subject to a whole range of attacks from without. Some of these may seem trivial or anecdotal, but they are indicative of a state of mind where the BBC was either regarded as a legitimate target because of its favoured status, or alternatively esteemed as a guardian of standards and public morals whose slightest *faux pas* gave rise to the gravest concern. As early as 1926, an Advisory Committee on Spoken English was set up to ensure announcers used 'correct' pronunciation, but this did not stem the stream of listeners' complaints lamenting such horrors as the enunciation of 'suit' as if it were 'soot'. Eric Gill's statues on the outside of Broadcasting House, depicting the naked figures of the wise Prospero and the ethereal Ariel, also caused offence. The generous size of the spirit's private parts triggered sufficient embarrassment and indignation to the more susceptible of passers-by for the Unionist MP for St Pancras, Mr G. G. Mitcheson, to ask in Parliament that the whole group should be removed on the grounds of impropriety. In fact, the Governors had already taken steps to limit controversy, as recounted by D.G. Bridson:

The BBC Governors had been invited to climb up to the platform where Eric Gill was putting the finishing touches to the statues behind a tarpaulin screen. They were startled by what seemed to them a palpable exaggeration in the size of Ariel's pudenda. [...] As one of the governors happened to be the ex-headmaster of a famous public school, he was held to be better qualified than the rest to express an opinion as to whether the figure was in any way abnormal. After careful thought, he is reported to have given his verdict thus: 'I

¹¹ Leonard MIALI, *Inside the BBC*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994, p. 10.

¹² John SERGEANT, *Give Me Ten Seconds*, London: Pan Macmillan, 2001, p. 105.

¹³ Details may be found in Asa BRIGGS, *Governing the BBC*, London: BBC, 1979, p. 146 ff.

can only say, from personal observation, that the lad is uncommonly well hung'. Like Michelangelo before him, Gill was tactfully asked to remount the ladder and cut things down to size.¹⁴

In fact, the whole of Broadcasting House occasioned adverse reactions. Staff familiar with the former Company's headquarters at Savoy Hill found it impersonal and intrinsically hierarchical, while jealous outsiders were more inclined to see the structure as a symbol of empire building on a grand scale. One such critic called it 'a leviathan of a building', and went on, 'Not the dove or the eagle but the white elephant should be its crest. Savoy Hill was suitable for the pioneering stage of the BBC, and maybe Broadcasting House is suitable for its bureaucratic stage.'¹⁵

The major reproaches levelled at the BBC were nevertheless of an entirely more serious and lasting character, touching on the central and frequently linked issues of programming and competition. Newspapers feared that the new medium would make them redundant and proved obstructive. The *Radio Times* was launched in 1923 as a direct reaction to their refusal to carry programming details.¹⁶ Furthermore, as it was the news agencies which supplied the Company with its bulletins, newspaper publishers allowed no broadcasting of news before 7 p.m. in order to protect evening paper sales. Even then the bulletins carried a copyright notice indicating the origins of the information given. Although the 1930s saw the progressive emancipation of the BBC, regular times remained restricted to 6 p.m., 9 p.m. and 11.30 p.m. until the outbreak of the Second World War.

Competition from other fields was caused less by established interests than by the self-imposed inflexibility of the BBC's own programming. In the 1920s, listeners had no choice. The dearth of wavelengths limited the BBC to a single service, broadcasting hours were restricted and programming was decided according to the strict principles established by Reith himself. Nevertheless, such seriousness was not to everyone's taste and, from 1931, stations based on the continent and in Ireland (notably Radio Normandie and Radio Luxembourg, but also Radio Athlone, Radio Eireann and Radio Lyons) soon established an audience. This competition was real; moreover, the *Radio Pictorial*, which called itself 'the magazine for every listener' gave full details of the programmes proposed by the foreign stations and also published opinions castigating the BBC, notably from journalist Garry Allighan, himself a biographer of Reith. Two extracts from his contributions in 1938 and 1939 give a clear flavour of his definite, but far from isolated, views on the BBC's inflexibility and dogmatism, which for him were linked to the question of the monopoly and licence fee:

It has always been my contention that the B.B.C. do their 'good' programmes well and their 'popular' programmes poorly. That is, in my view, because the B.B.C. believe they have a mission — to elevate the taste of the public. Which is,

¹⁴ D.G. BRIDSON, *Prospero and Ariel*, London: Gollancz, 1971, p. 41.

¹⁵ R.S. LAMBERT, *Ariel and All His Quality*, London: Gollancz, 1940, p. 150.

¹⁶ Various describing itself as *The Official Organ of the BBC* and the *Bradshaw of Broadcasting*, the new publication rapidly gained regular readers. By 1938, it had a circulation of almost 2.9 million and newspapers had long since repented of their folly and agreed to print schedules.

*to put it politely, bunkum and baloney [...] [I]t is neither fine, laudable nor right that people should have 'mental, moral and spiritual' improvement forced upon them. Nor is it honest that the entertainment for which listeners pay should be replaced by education which they don't want.*¹⁷

The most specific source of contention was the place occupied by religious broadcasting coupled with complaints about the BBC's Sunday programmes. Reith's view on the question was uncompromising:

*Christianity happens to be the stated and official religion of the country. This is a fact which those who have criticised our right to broadcast the Christian religion would do well to bear in mind. [...] We simply decided that the Christian religion was, or should be, non-controversial. The decision was made to do what we believed to be right, and because we believed it to be right.*¹⁸

Weekday broadcasting therefore started with *The Daily Service* and ended with *The Epilogue*, but this was nothing compared with the severity of the Sunday regime. In order not to interfere with church attendance there were initially no programmes at all before 3.30 p.m. with another break between 6.15 and 8 p.m. when the evening Sunday service was transmitted. This silent period was filled in 1933 but other changes only came slowly. In these circumstances, listeners had little choice but to tune to foreign stations¹⁹ and were understandably dissatisfied with the BBC. Kenneth Wolfe gives the following neutral summary of the situation:

*The demand for more popular material on Sundays went hand-in-hand with the common complaint about paying licence fees and being forced over to foreign stations on a Sunday morning. The churches had gained yet more control over Sunday morning by the institution of the Sunday morning service at 9.30 a.m., which was followed by silence.*²⁰

Moreover, the BBC's alternatives to religious services remained unrelentingly uplifting, with pleasure or entertainment coming a poor second to seriousness and improvement, even in the case of music. A Bach cantata was transmitted every Sunday from May 1928 to June 1931, which was '*perhaps the most utterly typical enterprise of Reith's Sunday policy. He had no love of Bach.*'²¹ Predictably, others were less willing to mortify the flesh and less measured in their criticism. Garry Allighan's open letter to Mr Ogilvie lamented the constraints in the following terms:

The B.B.C. has always acted as if Sunday was a day during which man should not enjoy life. Under the 'Reith policy' [...] light entertainment was forbidden, the sun was taken out of Sunday and the microphone hung with crepe. It is still

¹⁷ 'B.B.C. Complacency Must Stop', *Radio Pictorial*, March 18, 1938, p. 9 and 'Dear Mr. Ogilvie, a provocative letter to the B.B.C.'s Director-General', *Radio Pictorial*, January 6, 1939, p. 7.

¹⁸ J. C. W. REITH, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁹ 'Over 1 million households, it was estimated, were listening to Luxembourg between 1 o'clock and 2 o'clock on Sunday afternoons,' Asa BRIGGS, *op. cit. (History)*, p. 364.

²⁰ Kenneth M. WOLFE, *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956*, London: SCM Press, 1984, p. 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

*the same. Sunday is a different day.*²²

Despite increasing dissatisfaction, BBC policy remained largely unchanged until the Second World War.

Facing the challenge of populism

In these formative years, the BBC could boast a considerable number of achievements. It had become a national institution, with a reputation for the quality of its programmes and impartiality in news gathering, the television experiment was successful, while the extension of foreign-language services enabled it to act as the voice of Britain in Europe and the Empire. Nevertheless, its very status meant that it was always in the public eye and could never be above reproach, either from those who disliked its seriousness and obvious association with the Establishment, or from those who considered that any move away from rigid standards was a surrender to populism. The Corporation was bound to be controversial over issues pertaining to taste and decency and over the management of change, questions which the Second World War was to put into a sharper perspective. In September 1939, the BBC put itself on a war footing, stopping television broadcasts and combining the National and Regional Services into a single Home Service.²³ Many departments were evacuated from London to supposedly safer areas in the provinces and remained there until 1945. News was, by common consent, of paramount importance; the old restrictions finally disappeared and a total of ten daily bulletins became available.

If these measures were understandable, others were less logical and reflected an unawareness of the potential power of broadcasting. Hours were filled by 'scores of official announcements, lasting for at least one hour a day, hundreds of gramophone records, pep talks by Ministers, of which there were thirteen before the end of the first week in October, and by civil servants, and large doses of Sandy Macpherson (23 [hours] in the first week and 22 in the second), unruffled and inviolate at the Theatre Organ'.²⁴ Macpherson's contribution lasted only a couple of weeks but unimaginative programming remained a source of irritation to many listeners, some of whom²⁵ were sufficiently disillusioned to turn to German propaganda broadcasts from Hamburg, made by a renegade Irish American, William Joyce, nicknamed Lord Haw Haw. At a time which required national mobilisation in the war effort, this was a disquieting development. When hostilities began with the German occupation of Norway, followed by the invasion of the Low Countries, Belgium and France, news bulletins were frequently ill-conceived. Over-optimistic Swedish and French reports were widely quoted, only for embarrassing amendments to be subsequently required. The Battle of France had nevertheless begun, and so

²² Cf. note 17 above.

²³ Early in 1940, a second Forces Service was added, lighter in tone and destined especially for members of the Armed Forces in training in the UK, but widely accessible to the general public. By 1942, it was attracting 50% more listeners than the Home Service.

²⁴ Asa BRIGGS, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol III*, Oxford: OUP, 1970, p. 96.

²⁵ An official report for the Ministry of Information in January 1940 showed that one adult out of six tuned regularly to Hamburg and another three were occasional listeners.

had what Asa Briggs justly calls the 'war of words', in which the Corporation became fully and effectively involved, under the control of the Ministry of Information, for although it managed to avoid being taken over, the BBC was subject to the same levels of censorship as the other media.²⁶

Although the Corporation's broadcasts to occupied Europe and particularly France earned it an international reputation, what pleased the British people was the change in tone and content of much of its broadcasting, which may be seen as having made the Corporation's propagandist output more acceptable and having initiated changes which continued after the War. The early *Postscript* broadcasts by novelist J. B. Priestley did much to sustain morale at the time of Dunkirk, not least since the contributor's Yorkshire accent contrasted with the prevailing public school tones of other speakers and was to open the way for the wider use of regional accents. In some quarters, Priestley's advocacy of social reform also struck a chord. The BBC contributed much to the education of the people in the war effort on the home front, through an endless stream of advice and information about how to dig for victory, make do and mend or simply be up early in the morning to stay healthy, but sustaining morale was arguably the Corporation's most important role. The *Brains Trust*, in the BBC tradition of the educational spoken word, provided lively and entertaining discussions of important scientific, moral and social questions, but it was in the field of pure entertainment that the greatest progress was made. *Sincerely Yours*, a selection of sentimental music sung by the 'Forces' Sweetheart Vera Lynn, attracted a huge following, but even this was surpassed by *It's That Man Again (ITMA)*, a comic programme which came to appeal by its range of stereotyped characters each with their own catch phrase, and especially by the sparkling nature of its verbal humour and its topicality. In the first wartime series, the star of the show, comedian Tommy Handley, appeared as the Minister of Aggravations and Mysteries, working next door to the Office of Twerps.²⁷ At its height, *ITMA* attracted 15 million listeners.

The success of such popular wartime programmes presented the post-war Corporation with a dilemma. Opinions were divided between those who pointed to the need to continue to retain the listeners who had been attracted during the War, chiefly through the Forces Service, and others who maintained that nothing less than a return to the pre-war standards of taste would suffice. A further challenge lay in the fact that television was likely soon to make a reappearance and its content would also have to be decided. The solution adopted under the new Director-General, William Haley,²⁸ and the reaction to it, say much about the inherent resistance to change within an organisation like the BBC. Haley planned three radio services, the

²⁶ Anyone who had friends or family in the services was aware of the existence of censorship and the whole population was constantly reminded, through numerous poster campaigns, of the dangers of 'careless talk'. In this total war, the strategic and restrictive management of news brought few objections.

²⁷ Thinly veiled references to the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Works, whose bureaucracy was a by-word for incompetence.

²⁸ Appointed in 1943 (Sir William from 1946).

Home Service, Light Programme and Third Programme,²⁹ but without abandoning the idea of improvement. Explaining his policy in a public lecture at the University of Bristol, he stated:

It rests on the conception of the community as a broadly based cultural pyramid slowly aspiring upwards. This pyramid is served by three main Programmes, differentiated but broadly overlapping in levels and interest, each Programme leading on to the other, the listener being induced through the years to discriminate in favour of the things that are more worth-while. [...] The listener must be led from good to better by curiosity, liking and a growth of understanding.³⁰

What was controversial from the point of view of BBC traditionalists was that the three services provided different programmes aimed at different audiences, which was anathema, for instance, to Reith for whom the new system was an absolute abandonment of what he stood for. The public view was much less critical, especially as some of the more popular wartime programmes continued, sometimes under new titles, and many successful instructive and entertaining new broadcasts were created.³¹ The Light Programme became home to several strikingly good comic programmes, which were to leave their mark on radio and the best known of which (e.g. *Hancock's Half Hour*, *The Glums* and *The Goon Show*) were later successfully transferred to television. With this diet available, the more down-market Light Programme made rapid strides: by 1948, it had audience figures of 63% with a regular Light Programme listener hearing nine hours of broadcasts a week. Admittedly, old habits died hard and the Corporation insisted on banning songs whose titles suggested impropriety,³² and especially anything which smacked of Americanisation, but to most listeners these were only minor aggravations.

Nevertheless, the medium of the future, television, posed substantial problems as many of the BBC editorial staff were well versed in radio broadcasting, but had no experience of television and were at best indifferent to the new medium. Moreover, the dilemma arose of how to maintain standards, while producing programmes entertaining enough to induce viewers to pay the increased television licence fee. Worries about finance raised the issue of possible additional sources of income for the BBC through advertising and sponsorship and, from here, it was but a short step for the Corporation's monopoly to be called into question. There were several arguments against a television monopoly. Former Director-General

²⁹ The first two followed on naturally from the wartime Home Service and Forces Programme, while the Third Programme was consciously highbrow and only started transmitting in September 1946 after certain technical difficulties had been resolved. By 1949, the Third Programme was attracting only 1% of listeners.

³⁰ Sir William HALEY, *Lewis Fry Memorial Lectures*, University of Bristol, May 1948.

³¹ *ITMA*, *The Brains Trust*, *Desert Island Discs* and *Saturday Night Theatre* were joined, for instance, by the soap operas *Mrs Dale's Diary* (1948) and *The Archers* (1951), along with *Dick Barton Special Agent* (1946), *Round Britain Quiz* (1947), *Any Questions?* (1948) and *Woman's Hour* (1946).

³² For instance, *Get Up Those Stairs Mademoiselle* and *Two Old Maids in a Folding Bed* were prohibited in 1948.

Frederick Ogilvie and Chief Engineer Peter Eckersley³³ were among a number of important ex-BBC figures to evoke the issue of freedom of choice versus cultural dogmatism and, in any case, the limited number of frequencies available, which had justified the radio monopoly in 1922, did not apply to television. Moreover, it was claimed that a limitation of the number of broadcasters meant a restriction of trade and potentially hampered post-war economic recovery. In addition, the example of the United States had shown that commercial television was a very lucrative market, which attracted the greedy gaze of other media operators and financiers. A substantial public debate began with strong opinions on both sides. The Beveridge Committee (1949) was appointed to evaluate the rival claims. Ten of its eleven members favoured the maintenance of the monopoly, with seven of them opposed to the use of advertising, but it was Conservative MP Selwyn Lloyd's Minority Report which ultimately prevailed. He called for competition to be introduced into radio through the licensing of national and local commercial services, and advocated that the same process should apply to television, leaving '*a public service non-commercial programme financed by the licence fee and alongside it one or more other agencies financed commercially*'.³⁴

The election in October 1951 of a Conservative Government led by Winston Churchill gave new impetus to moves towards competition and the White Paper on Broadcasting, published in May 1952, contained one significant paragraph effectively announcing plans to end the monopoly and allow commercial broadcasting: '*the present government have come to the conclusion that in the expanding field of television provision should be made to permit some element of competition when the calls on capital resources at present needed for purposes of greater national importance make this feasible*'.³⁵ What followed was a period of discussion and debate between defenders of the BBC and advocates of commercial broadcasting. The battle-lines were drawn opposing Lord Derby's *Popular Television Association* which advocated the need for individual freedom, choice and a range of viewing and Lady Violet Bonham Carter's *National Television Council*, which emphasised the maintenance of standards and the sanctity of the medium. The parliamentary debates on the White Paper were lively and at times acrimonious, but Reith's outburst during the Lords debate³⁶ had little impact and commercial television started broadcasting in September 1955.³⁷

That ITV got off to a slow start was inevitable; the service was provided regionally and only became available to the whole of the population in 1962. Moreover, a new aerial and sometimes a new set were necessary to receive ITV programmes which, at first, were at least as serious as those of the BBC. By 1957, however, the tide had turned and the BBC found itself under severe pressure. ITV's

³³ Cf. SMITH, *op. cit.*, pp. 47 and 84-85.

³⁴ *Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1949*, (Cmd 8116), p. 210.

³⁵ *Memorandum on the Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1949*, (Cmd 8550), p. 25.

³⁶ Reith compared the potential ravages of sponsored broadcasting to those of smallpox, bubonic plague and the Black Death.

³⁷ Commercial television was controlled by a public corporation not dissimilar to the BBC, called the Independent Television Authority (ITA), whose members were appointed by the minister in charge of broadcasting.

new populist programmes had twice as many viewers, its advertising revenues and therefore the capacity for new programming were limitless, while the Corporation had to make do with the licence fee which reached £4 only in 1957. Indeed, BBC television was fundamentally vulnerable. Although the Corporation could argue that the most successful ITV programmes, like game shows and American series, were the sort of programmes which it, as a public service broadcaster, should not show, this verdict was elitist at a time when the feelings of the viewing public were exactly the opposite. Nor could the argument truly be made that ITV neglected aspects of the public service. It was an ITV company, Associated Rediffusion, which produced the first televised schools programmes. Outside broadcasts of religious services were made, the *Armchair Theatre* series offered high quality drama and the news bulletins, prepared by a wholly-owned subsidiary ITN, had, from the start, exploited the visual opportunities of the new medium much better than the BBC.

It was evident that the Corporation would have to change its approach radically if it were to prosper, or even survive, which for an institution still rooted in the past was to require a considerable effort and a remarkable Director-General. Hugh Carleton Greene was appointed in 1960 with the twin tasks of achieving parity with ITV in viewing figures and ensuring that, when the third television channel became available, it would be the BBC which ran it. In this, Greene was successful. By 1962, the BBC had as many viewers as ITV and its case for the Pilkington Committee was so thoroughly prepared that there could be no other decision than to grant the third television channel, with the first use of the 625-line system enabling colour broadcasting, to the Corporation. It was a sign of changing expectations that, beyond this recommendation, the Pilkington Report remained largely a dead letter. In particular, its criticism of ITV programming³⁸ aroused adverse comment from such divergent sources as the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Worker*. The Government agreed with the press. Its White Paper in July 1962 praised ITV as a 'novel partnership between public and private enterprise' which had produced 'lively and certainly popular television' and brought competition which had enlivened the medium as a whole.

For his part, Hugh Greene maintained that the ending of the monopoly had enabled the BBC to widen the range of subjects it could deal with and he himself had definite – and controversial – ideas about the nature and role of broadcasting, which he presented thus:

Scepticism is a most healthy frame of mind in which to examine accepted attitudes and test views which [...] have been accepted for too long. I believe we have a duty to take account of the changes in society, to be ahead of public opinion rather than always wait upon it. I believe that great broadcasting organisations, with their immense power of patronage for writers and artists, should not neglect to cultivate young writers who may be by many considered

³⁸ The Committee roundly berated the populism and lack of serious broadcasting on ITV and praised the quality of the BBC and its respect for its public service role. Offered different figures by the BBC and the ITA, the Committee apparently accepted without question those given by the Corporation on the amount of serious broadcasting on the two channels.

'too advanced', even 'shocking'.³⁹

For the viewing public, Greene's principles were manifested chiefly in three types of programmes, all of which earned the epithets 'advanced' or 'shocking', all of which reflected the irreverence of the 1960s and all of which can be seen as ground-breaking or seminal: satire, sharper-edged situation comedy and drama. Equally, they were bound to cause very different reactions from the public, from critics, from politicians, from the Governors and from those with a particular moral or ethical point of view to defend. The chief figure in the latter category was Mrs Mary Whitehouse, a Midlands schoolteacher and mother of three who believed, as had the Pilkington Committee, that television was '*a main factor in influencing the values and moral standards of our society*'. As a devout Christian, Mrs Whitehouse produced a manifesto which was to be at the heart of her Clean-Up TV Campaign and subsequently of the pressure group, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association which she founded in 1966. Her point of view was unequivocal; she wanted the BBC to change its policy to produce '*programmes which build character instead of destroying it, which encourage and sustain faith in God and bring Him back to the heart of our family and national life*'.⁴⁰ Mrs Whitehouse's attitude to the BBC can best be described as one of righteous indignation. She was upset by Hugh Greene's indifference and emphasised the BBC's failure to meet the standards expected of a reputable national broadcaster:

*We have concentrated on the BBC because [...] we regard it as part of our nation's life. [...] Those of us who have watched with pride the development of the BBC into the finest broadcasting system in the world are jealous of its reputation and anxious for its future.*⁴¹

Often a figure of ridicule, whose outbursts brought publicity for the very programmes she condemned, Mrs Whitehouse never obtained satisfaction from the BBC under Hugh Greene, which did not stop her and the NVALA from voicing protests about all matters concerning broadcasting, thereby reflecting the breadth of opinion which the BBC had to try to satisfy.⁴²

It was the most innovative of the BBC's programmes which triggered the liveliest reactions. The satirical *That Was The Week That Was (TW3)* attacked the Establishment in all its forms, including the Government, the Church and the Royal Family. Supported by Greene, tolerated by the Prime Minister and given strong impetus by the Profumo Scandal, *TW3* captured an audience of ten million viewers. It was notable, above all, for its disrespect rather than its subtlety, as Grace Wyndham Goldie remarked:

The vast British public was aroused by its irreverence, impressed by its vitality

³⁹ Speech made to the International Catholic Association for Radio and Television in Rome, February 1965.

⁴⁰ Mary WHITEHOUSE, *Cleaning-Up TV*, London: Blandford, 1967, p. 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴² Mrs Whitehouse continued her work through the NVALA and its magazine until her retirement in 1994. On her death, the organisation took the new name Mediawatch. In its heyday, the NVALA had 150,000 members, Mediawatch now has under 40,000.

*as well as shocked by its mockery of leading political figures and of some aspects of religion. A number of viewers were surprised, as well as shocked, by its schoolboy sexual jokes and lavatory humour.*⁴³

If many viewers were pleasantly surprised by the sight of the august BBC attacking the Establishment of which it was itself a part, the programme was a source of constant worry to the Governors, anxious to avoid a damaging conflict with the Government, not all of whose members shared Harold Macmillan's broad-minded view that it was better to be laughed at than ignored. Controversy of a different type surrounded the programme's demise at the end of 1963, on the grounds of the imminence of a General Election, which was widely seen as a surrender to authority.

Comedy could also be a contentious field. While the zaniness of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* reduced its offensiveness, other popular programmes like *Steptoe and Son*, *The Liver Birds* and *The Likely Lads* dealt with some of the realities of life, but none brought the same critical attention as *Till Death Us Do Part*. This series too may have reflected real working-class life, in the Cockney East End of London, but it unfailingly evoked the less dignified parts. The central character, Alf Garnett, was a boor and a racist, systematically referring to coloured people as 'coons', while his wife and son-in-law suffered the epithets 'silly moo' and 'long-haired git'. Such insults struck an unexpected chord with the majority of the viewing public, many of whom failed to see that the point of Johnny Speight's writing was to mock the ignorant ex-docker and took Garnett as a role model. Both the content and the language of the programme offended. The references to religion and the Royal Family in the first programme of the second series in December 1966 brought 130 letters of complaint, while the second, with the titillating title *Sex Before Marriage*, attracted 400 and moved Mrs Whitehouse to send a telegram to Prime Minister Harold Wilson, which was widely reported in the press. Ironically, of course, Alf Garnett himself claimed to be a supporter of Mrs Whitehouse's views. It was, however, the bad language which occasioned the most criticism, including some from the popular press, whose moral indignation seemed to mask any awareness of standard working-class vernacular. Mrs Whitehouse's opinion was somewhat more rational; for her it was not so much the language as the BBC's elastic attitude to it which was worrying. When she complained that 'one episode of *Till Death us do Part* contained a number of dirty innuendos and six "bloodies"', the Chairman of the Governors, Lord Normanbrook, merely replied: 'The standards of acceptability vary so much from family to family that it would be unwise for the BBC to try to select any one of these standards as its own.'⁴⁴

New drama was equally controversial. The ordinary working-class policemen depicted in *Z Cars* operated in a realistic setting in industrial Lancashire far removed from the cosy East London of *Dixon of Dock Green*, each episode of which was concluded by a brief but explicit moral lesson given by the avuncular, eponymous hero. *Z Cars* achieved larger audiences than *Dixon*, especially among the young, and its brashness and realism caught the national mood. Not everyone was satisfied,

⁴³ Grace WYNDHAM GOLDIE, *Facing the Nation*, London: Bodley Head, 1977, p. 225.

⁴⁴ Mary WHITEHOUSE, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

however, and the Lancashire Police Force, underwhelmed by the image of officers womanising, gambling and smoking on duty, withdrew its technical assistance. Single plays in the *Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today* series could be even more problematic. The intention was quite deliberately to highlight issues in society like poverty, homelessness, alcoholism and domestic violence, and to shock. The best-known examples include *Up the Junction* and *Cathy Come Home*, produced in November 1965 and November 1966 respectively. Their public reception was very different. *Cathy* was an undoubted success: it was screened twice with Conservative leader Edward Heath, who had missed both broadcasts, requesting an additional private showing, and the play was credited with contributing to the creation of the charity for the homeless, Shelter. On the other hand, *Up the Junction* featured a sex scene on a building site and subsequent abortion. Under pressure from MPs and certain sections of the press, the BBC Governors banned a second showing, a decision for which Mrs Whitehouse, who condemned the whole series as '*dirt, doubt and disbelief*', claimed part of the credit. It was a sign of arguments to come that even supporters of the *Wednesday Play* questioned the motives and judgement of those responsible for producing and screening *Up the Junction*. Peter Black was moved to write: '*I suggest that at least part of the object of Up the Junction was a wish, perhaps an unconscious one, of the Wednesday Play boys to see how far they could go in a television play with sex and cuss words.*'⁴⁵

A Demythified Organisation

In the 1980s, the BBC was faced with a much more hostile political and economic environment. Worldwide cable and satellite competition put increasing pressure on audience figures, while Margaret Thatcher openly resented the degree of independence which the Corporation's privileged status allowed and was ideologically inclined not just to weaken the BBC but to destroy it. She might even have succeeded in doing so, had the Peacock Commission in 1986 given less ambiguous support to the idea of privatisation.⁴⁶ In the event, it was commercial broadcasting which bore the brunt of the reforms, although the 1990 Broadcasting Act brought judicial and administrative changes which served to make the BBC's position seem even more anomalous. The Independent Broadcasting Authority, which had replaced the ITA in 1972 when commercial radio was introduced, gave way to the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and the Radio Authority (RAu). The new bodies were no longer broadcasters but regulators, exercising outside control over programming, while two new bodies, the Broadcasting Standards Council (BSC) and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission (BCC), were to investigate complaints about the invasion of privacy and issues of taste and decency. Although the BSC and BCC's remits covered the BBC as well as commercial broadcasters, internal control was still exercised by the Governors, a situation which was perceived as favouring the BBC, as they were more inclined to defend the organisation than criticise it. This lack of transparency, acceptable enough in the deferential monopoly days of the 1930s, was no longer tolerable at the

⁴⁵ Quoted in Christopher BOOKER, *The Neophiliacs*, London: Pimlico, 1992 (1970), p. 279.

⁴⁶ The Peacock Report failed to advocate privatisation or the end of the licence fee, although it did recommend the (impracticable) sale of Radios 1 and 2, judged insufficiently different from independent radio stations, and the indexing of the licence fee to inflation.

end of the twentieth century, and with the forthcoming renewal of its Charter in mind, the Corporation was forced to open itself up to greater public scrutiny and to explain its actions,⁴⁷ without this unexpected manoeuvre being entirely convincing.

In this more delicate political climate, conflicts with a hostile Government were both inevitable and undesirable, which made the tasks of the current affairs and news sectors particularly delicate. The BBC has always prided itself on its impartiality, even if Governments have not always seen its contributions in the same light. Indeed, according to Margaret Thatcher's former Chief Press Secretary Bernard Ingham, '*the BBC is not so much Left or Right-Wing as anti-government. It feels that it has to challenge political authority of whatever colour*'.⁴⁸ This opinion is not universally held and should be compared, for instance, with the equally categorical assertion made by Australian John Pilger, which casts doubts on any apparently anti-Government stance, '*[p]erhaps in no other country does broadcasting hold such a privileged position as an opinion leader as in Britain. When 'information' is conveyed on the BBC with such professional gravitas, the illusion of impartiality and an essentially liberal ethos, it is more than likely to be believed*'.⁴⁹ BBC coverage of British military activities overseas, from the Suez crisis and Falklands War onwards⁵⁰, has given ammunition to both sides of the argument and raised serious controversy about the Corporation's judgement. In 1982, the attempted impartiality of coverage of the Falklands conflict aroused serious criticism from Government and the Corporation's detractors in the right-wing media. In the Gulf War (1991), the immediate context of Pilger's remarks, the BBC was congratulated by Prime Minister John Major on the quality of its services, which were subject to some surprising and sometimes petty acts of censorship and self-censorship. A ban was placed on the playing of some 68 popular songs which were construed as having an anti-war bias,⁵¹ while events which could have affected public opinion, such as the deaths of civilians in misdirected air-raids and the massacring of Iraqi troops attempting to flee Kuwait at the end of hostilities, were given scant coverage, on the flimsy grounds that the pictures of suffering would have been likely to shock viewers. Over the invasion of Iraq, the BBC once more found itself at loggerheads with the Government, although not with public opinion, which was sharply divided with respect to this latest military adventure. Repeated negative commentary led to accusations that the BBC was pursuing an anti-war agenda, a suspicion confirmed by the broadcasting of an unproved accusation that Tony Blair had deliberately exaggerated the dangers posed by the Iraqi regime in order to justify the decision to go to war. The subsequent Hutton Report heavily

⁴⁷ For instance, *Our Commitment to You. BBC Statement of Promises to Viewers and Listeners*.

⁴⁸ Bernard INGHAM, *Kill the Messenger*, London: Fontana, 1991, p. 354.

⁴⁹ John PILGER, *Hidden Agendas*, London: Vintage, 1998, p. 487.

⁵⁰ Cf. Renée DICKASON, « La BBC, imperméable à la propagande ? De la guerre des Malouines aux guerres du Moyen Orient », *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'Histoire*, numéro spécial sur la propagande, la communication politique et les médias dans les démocraties européennes, de 1945-2002, dirigé par Christian Delporte, 2003, pp. 71-81.

⁵¹ The list of songs to be banned has almost comic opera overtones. If they included *End of the World* (Skeeter Davis) and *Give Peace a Chance* (John Lennon), which could be conceived as anti-war, the subversiveness of *Waterloo* (Abba), *Boom Bang a Bang* (Lulu) and *Fools Rush In* (Rick Nelson) seems obscure.

criticised the BBC for editorial and management failings which brought the resignations of the Chairman of the BBC Governors and the Director-General. Although, in some quarters, the Report itself aroused widespread dissatisfaction, controversy still surrounds the wisdom of the BBC's obduracy in pursuing an independent line, while doubts must remain as to whether Government and BBC are not involved in an elaborate game of deception, in which the pretence of contestation may be stronger than the reality.

If conflict with Government has occurred on a number of occasions since 1980, the issue of programming, ratings, quality and taste and decency has been ongoing and has done much to call into question the Corporation's special status as a broadcaster. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, BBC television and ITV coexisted happily enough under what was referred to as the duopoly, in the 1980s and beyond, ratings actually mattered. The Corporation's long-delayed move into soap opera, with the launch of *EastEnders* in 1985, was an illustration of the new concerns. After a series of less than successful ventures in the 1960s, this field of popular entertainment had been left to ITV's *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale Farm* and *Crossroads*. The arrival of Channel 4 with its revolutionary soap, *Brookside*, forced the BBC to react, which it did by being more sensational, and more controversial, even than *Brookside*. *EastEnders* had to succeed, and with strong management support it did so, regularly beating *Coronation Street* for top place in the viewing figures.⁵² Despite the undoubted popular appeal of *EastEnders*, critics were quick to see the creation of the soap as a basely commercial move intended to obtain higher audience figures, which contributed to a general impression that the BBC was fundamentally not very different from other channels and therefore deserved no special consideration.

The 1990s confirmed this impression. John Birt, appointed Director-General in 1993, was determined to go further than his predecessor in cost-cutting and financial management: production facilities and assets were sold off, the much-prized library service was downgraded while the fees paid to management consultants McKinsey increased. In particular, Birt strengthened the programme called Producer Choice begun by his predecessor, which separated programming and broadcasting and left producers competing with one another for their proposals to be accepted by the Broadcasting Department which held the purse strings. Birt's critics inside and outside the BBC argued that the new system vitiated the very creativity on which the whole operation depended. For his part, Birt claimed, with some justification, that the financial stringency of Producer Choice had ensured the renewal of the Charter in 1996 and that he was the saviour of the BBC. As competition increased, the pursuit of ratings became an ever-greater priority, affecting even radio. The new controller of Radio 4, James Boyle, ruffled many feathers by altering the scheduling of the last service offering a variety of the spoken word and mixed broadcasting in the Reithian mould. In doing so, he was widely accused, for instance by the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, of 'dumbing down'.⁵³ The same could be said for BBC

⁵² The competition between the two is still a subject of media speculation and interest.

⁵³ The Radio 4 audience is notoriously reluctant to accept change, as is shown by the current arguments about the proposed removal of the *UK theme*, which heralds the start of Radio 4

television's embracing of chat shows and 'reality television', with programmes like *Kilroy* and *Castaway*, but the need to compete was real and other channels were happily screening populist programmes which were even more voyeuristic and even less acceptable, such as *Big Brother* and the *Jerry Springer Show*.

It was Jerry Springer, or at least a representation of him, that sparked the largest-ever number of protests to the BBC, and showed that the arguments over taste, decency and sound judgement are not dead. *Jerry Springer – The Opera* was broadcast live by BBC 2 from the Cambridge Theatre on 8th January 2005, with over 50,000 complaints being made to the Corporation even before transmission. Mediawatch claimed that the show included 8,000 swearwords, a total reached by the ingenious device of multiplying the number of individual words by the number of members of the chorus uttering them, and accused it of both blasphemy and obscenity. The BBC tried to justify the programme on the grounds that it was more of an attack on trash television than on established religion or morality, and that adequate warnings about the content had been given, but the sight of tap-dancing Ku Klux Klan members and of a nappy-wearing Jesus proclaiming he was 'a bit gay' was bound to cause real and feigned indignation. Predictably, the Murdoch *Sun* attacked a scandalous waste of licence-payers' money, while the Conservative Deputy-Leader Michael Ancram accused the BBC of '*deliberately luring more viewers by broadcasting a piece of entertainment that was bound to cause an upset*'. John Beyer, the director of Mediawatch, argued that the show would '*alienate a large number of viewers*' and that licence-payers '*do not expect the BBC to be pushing back the boundaries of taste and decency in this way*'. How much long-term damage was caused remains to be seen, but it is hard to see how programmers could have expected anything other than a hostile reaction, and one may question whether it was worth risking the BBC's reputation as a reliable public-spirited broadcaster, in order to attract what was a total of only 1.8 million viewers.

Although the immediate political threats to the BBC at the beginning of the 21st century may not be as great as might have been feared some twenty years ago, the Corporation remains surrounded by controversy. Its privileged financial position causes jealousy and brings complaints of unfair competition, while it is faced with the impossible task of pleasing all of the (paying) public all of the time. It has produced and continues to offer programmes of the highest standard, and its work remains the reference by which other media are judged, but at the same time it needs to broadcast material which appeals to a large section of the community. What might be called the demythification of the BBC in recent years makes these incompatible objectives even harder to achieve and seems certain to ensure continuing controversy in the future, whatever the short-term outcome of the campaign for the renewal of the Charter at the end of 2006.

broadcasting on Long Wave, at 5.40 a.m., a time when, it is safe to assume, there are only a few listeners.