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# La BBC dans le paysage audiovisuel britannique

Principes fondateurs, mutations  
et contenus (1922-1995)

Renée Dickason





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# General Introduction

Appreciating written and audio-visual or broadcasting media requires some knowledge of “civilization studies” based on the physical, philosophical, historical, cultural, or more broadly, the intellectual discovery of a country. This information facilitates understanding of the various facets of representing a culture; it mirrors the preoccupations, interests and aspirations of a particular society. In this regard, I agree with Frédéric Barbier and Catherine Bertho-Lavenir when they say that:

*Every human society functions on the basis of material elements (techniques, tools, etc.), modes of organization and social practices, but also on the basis of a global imagination, of an abstract culture, which enables it to situate itself in time, to give meaning to its existence and experience, and to define the desirable future direction. Culture alone can give its true dimension to a social construction: only its cultural mirror allows society to represent itself and to exist, according to the precise parameters that it sets itself<sup>1</sup>.*

To claim that the history of the media is the history of the most elaborate social bond is not neutral: indeed, the history of the media reveals the more or less clearly acknowledged intentions and objectives of a democracy that is seeking to (re)define its image. Where everything becomes more complicated is perhaps when we try to understand who decides and sets up the system controlling the dissemination of information. Questioning the wishes and potential, or even real, powers of the owners of information and communication networks is relevant, especially since the relationship between broadcasting, the political class and the Establishment is sometimes ambiguous, sometimes harmonious, sometimes conflictual. The multiplication of television channels and the technological revolution – which the 1990s described as “digital” – have stimulated dreams and desires as much as they have

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1. My translation. Frédéric Barbier, Catherine Bertho-Lavenir, *Histoire des médias, de Diderot à Internet*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1996, 7.

caused concern. From the end of the 1980s onwards, several questions were raised, fuelling the debate. Would British broadcasting keep its “Britishness”? In the global frenzy, would it be devoured whole or excluded? Would it be cast adrift in a soulless territory, where the collective memory of a country was reduced to a universal memory, so much of a lowest common denominator that it was no longer differentiated from its “neighbours”? Of course, as the scale is planetary, do not uniqueness and the claim to identity appear derisory? What remains / remained of British television cultural heritage? What are / were its trends and developments? What is / was the reflexion of British society conveyed in television programmes? These are some of the questions that feed into the research of this period but also require to be treated with critical distance, now and in the future.

Writing a book about radio and television might seem somewhat out of fashion in the era of the digital media. In the search for better communication between people(s), the major advantage of the internet and social networks is undoubtedly that of enhancing the absolute interactivity that governs a cyberspace that is now perceived as a new frontier. This revolutionary notion marks a break with the principles of information and communication that favour the national over the international and that, in the end, emphasize the culture of each nation, its political regime as well as its economic and social ambitions. A few remarks on the genesis of radio and television will form the basis of this study of British broadcasting.

## **BACKGROUND AND GENESIS OF THE BROADCASTING SECTOR IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

Following the human and humanitarian tragedies of the First World War, the 1920s in Great Britain were animated by “follies” and “dreams”, including in the developing fields of transport, new technology and media communication. The feverish enthusiasm unleashed by the inventions of new modes and instruments of communication throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries took on a particular magnitude with significant advances in the fields of electromagnetic and radio waves and in high-definition optics and broadcasting.

Ingenuousness, doubt and criticism coexist with enthusiasm and optimism when it comes to confronting innovative, avant-garde principles likely to challenge the established order. The media revolution,



coupled with the film revolution, saw the light of day in the 19th century. The mid-1850s, a pivotal period as mentioned by Stephen Koss<sup>1</sup>, saw an expansion and a diversification of the means of communication and expression in Great Britain, and after the 1870 Education Act, the level of literacy increased, a godsend for the newspaper proprietors of the time. Quality newspapers of record, such as *The Times*, vied for the attention of readers with a “yellow” press, modelled on the gutter press in the United States, which delighted in a sensationalism that appealed to the people. In this burgeoning communications market, ethics, investigative journalism and competition were among the fundamental issues that fuelled social, political and cultural debates.

At a time when the question of setting up a national radio service in Great Britain was being considered, the interests of the press owners had to be taken into account and the arrival of a new medium was by no means universally welcomed. Far from being of trivial importance, the question arose of how this new communication tool, the radio, was to condition the redesigning of an already complex media space.

It was in an era of gradual and determined construction that wireless telephony was to pass beyond the stage of benevolent and enthusiastic amateurism and lead to the emergence, in 1922, of a radio station in the hands of several opportunistic entrepreneurs, who founded the British Broadcasting Company. The keys to this new institution were entrusted to John Reith, who saw this medium as a useful and necessary instrument for shaping model British citizens, morally, educationally, culturally, socially and politically. This elitist vision guided Reith’s decisions and actions throughout his tenure at the helm of this stately national queen of the airwaves, which it was important to create with noble, rigorous, civilized and patriotic intentions.

Since its inception in 1927, the British Broadcasting Corporation has maintained a strong identity, even though it has periodically suffered the slings and arrows of fierce competition and has had to face the hardships of a long-running financial crisis. Dignity and ambition are intrinsic to the image of the highly-regarded BBC, which has established itself as an exemplar in the UK and around the world. A temple of knowledge, a model for news gathering and processing, in the pure tradition of investigative journalism, an example of public service, the

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1. Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, London, Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1984.

BBC is an inspiration. Like the monarchy, it occupies a central place in the life of the British nation and has done so with so many generations since its birth that it has acquired affectionate nicknames such as “The Beeb”.

## A BROADCASTING LANDSCAPE AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN DISCIPLINES

To have a thorough knowledge of the content of BBC radio and television broadcasts is an ambitious task. That is why, in the context of this book, choices have been made, choices that take into account several parameters: the innovative nature of some programmes, their longevity (*The Archers*, for example, has been broadcast continuously on BBC Radio 4 and its predecessors since 1950, celebrating its 70th anniversary in 2020), their specificity, internal BBC statistics, data from such bodies as the British Film Institute (BFI) and the Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board (BARB), and also the inevitable subjectivity of the author, who has been observing the British broadcasting landscape for almost forty years.

A few pointers need to be given now. Research on the British media is growing steadily, mainly in English-speaking countries and in Europe. Several theoretical approaches have found their place in the vast field of cultural studies adopting gendered, feminist, Marxist, historiographic, linguistic, semiotic, philosophical or anthropological readings, for example, along with studies on the place of women or ethnic and sexual minorities, all of which are beyond the scope of this monograph.

Moreover, any chapter dedicated to programme contents cannot be comprehensive, and I have chosen to focus on educative and educational television. References to other categories of programmes can be found in, for instance, two of my publications, *Radio et télévision britanniques* (1999, PUR) and *La Société Britannique à travers ses émissions télévisuelles* (2005, Ellipses), and one co-written with Georges Fournier, *La BBC et le service public de l’audiovisuel, 1922-1995. Informer, éduquer, divertir* (2020, Atlande). According to their interests, concerns and preferences, readers are invited to flesh out and progressively deepen their knowledge as they go on and discover new things. Thus, the avenues proposed in this monograph are only some possible means of

access to the vast field of broadcasting, at least as it is currently presented in British civilization studies in France. Indeed, research in information and communication sciences, literature or sociology is not our objective here. This book will mobilize perspectives that focus primarily on cultural and, to a lesser extent, social and political history, following the model of the work of the BBC's official historian: Lord Asa Briggs.

As a societal and cultural laboratory, an observatory on social and political concerns of a changing society, the broadcasting sector offers fruitful approaches that can combine ethical aspects, political agendas and social issues at the heart of research in the fields of British civilization, radio studies and television studies or, more generally, in media studies or cultural studies. It is this methodological positioning that will be adopted in this book.

## THE BBC'S CREATIVE MOULD: RADIO AND TELEVISION INSPIRATIONS AND MATRICES

*'Get another electrician!'*

*'Alas, Your Majesty, England has no Marconi'<sup>1</sup>.*

This lapidary exchange between Queen Victoria and one of her attendants illustrates the first contacts between the world of “crowned heads” and Guglielmo Marconi, who had been invited by Her Majesty to install a temporary wireless telegraph link to establish communication between Ladywood Cottage, part of the royal summer residence on the north coast of the Isle of Wight where she was staying, and the Osborne, the Prince of Wales' yacht, which was anchored at Cowes. The incomprehension of the technical obstacles requiring the placing of a transmitter in the Queen's gardens, and the lack of knowledge of the minute technicalities to be found only in the hands of a highly qualified “electrician”, can only be imagined here. In other words, without Marconi, no transmission was possible. These hesitant early stages heralded a flourishing future for the first advances in radio broadcasting.

Like the monarchy, the BBC, with the sweet name of “Auntie” for those who support this noble house, stands out as one institution that

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1. Degna Marconi, *My Father, Marconi*, London, Frederick Muller, 1962, 65.

contributes to the identity of the nation, from one generation to another. This monograph traces the key moments in the history of British broadcasting from its creation to its mutation towards the digital age, from 1922 to 1995. Experiments and pilot broadcasts are quoted and discussed in order to afford a better understanding of the difficulties encountered, the nature of the debates and the challenges of progress.

As a true cultural ambassador of the British world, the BBC continues to be an authority, both through the quality of its flagship programmes and series, some of which have acquired cult status (*The Wednesday Play*, *EastEnders*, *The Archers*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Yes*, (*Prime Minister*, *House of Cards*, *Dr. Who...*), and which reflect the cultural, social and political concerns of the United Kingdom. Knowledge of the ethical and deontological requirements underlying current affairs (*Nationwide*, *Newsnight*, *Panorama...*) or educational / educative / entertaining programmes (*Andy Pandy*, *Blue Peter*, *BBC Learning Zone...*) is a must. I will therefore focus on a few salient features of the BBC model, which remains an essential reference, and on its particular role in the shaping of the British broadcasting landscape, from its infancy to the emergence of satellite channels. In order to meet the public service criteria required by a Royal Charter, renewable every ten years, BBC broadcasts are expected to fulfil three fundamental missions: to inform, to educate and to entertain.

Novelty and innovation are terms readily applied to broadcasting, both at the beginning and at the end of the 20th century. Each creation of a new means of communication and information calls into question the existing medium. The question in post-World War II Britain was therefore: would radio be abandoned in favour of television? No doubt it was the victim of progress, but was radio going to fade away and be reduced to a secondary role in the history of British media? With hindsight it would seem not, for it still has great vitality. In fact, the enthusiasms and anxieties aroused at the beginning of the 20th century were still alive in the mid-1990s. Current debates around the excesses and conditions of use of the internet fuel arguments that are strangely similar to those that have been going on since the early days of the broadcasting industry in the United Kingdom. The 1990s signalled a major turning point in the history of broadcasting in so far as the internet defended the virtues of multi-faceted, multi-directional communication, claiming to unite all men and thus promoting a form of direct informational democracy, in theory without limits, either in time or