The BBC and the origins and development of the notion of Public Service Broadcasting

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'The history of broadcasting is short but tremendous. At the end of the first (*sic*) World War broadcasting did not even exist; by the beginning of the second it had covered the world'[1].

The aim of this chapter is to provide an historical account of the beginning of the British Broadcasting Company (later Corporation) and to consider the early years of the notion of Public Service Broadcasting as it developed under the watchful eye of John Reith, Managing Director then Director-General of the BBC. The chapter will explore how and why broadcasting in Britain was shaped along the public service model, as opposed to a purely commercial model adopted in the United States, and the impact that this approach had on those listening and viewing to early radio and television programmes. Due to limitations of space, the chapter will conclude at the time of the advent of the second television channel in Britain, the advertising-funded–yet still public service–broadcaster, Independent Television (ITV).

Defining 'public service broadcasting' or PSB, in a sentence is notoriously difficult. For proponents of PSB, the phrase embodies ideas of quality, 'the best', a cornerstone of a healthy democracy and a pluralist society. Detractors of the notion, on the other hand, might argue that it is a covert method of state interference and influence over what we listen to and watch. Paddy Scannell has argued that

1. Maurice Gorham, *Broadcasting and Television since 1900* (London: Andrew Dakers Ltd, 1952) 9.

a distinction needs to be made between public service broadcasting as defined by the state and public service broadcasting as defined by the broadcaster[1]. In the UK, the Government decided that broadcasting would operate by a single company via a licence from the General Post Office. The shortage of frequencies necessitated a regulated approach to the airwaves and the utilisation of these airwaves in the nation's best interests. This was the framework in which the early British Broadcasting Company operated. The interpretation of the framework, or the way in which the public service should operate, was the broadcaster's, and in particular the architect of British broadcasting, John Reith. We'll return to this point later, but it is worth outlining how the BBC came about before exploring the ways in which public service broadcasting developed in the early years.

Formal broadcasting in Britain began on 14 November 1922, when the British Broadcasting Company first broadcast programmes from the 2LO transmitter in London. However, the roots of wireless (or radio) broadcasting can be traced back further. Point-to-point communication between sender and receiver became possible in the 19th Century, firstly through telephony, and then through telegraphy. The First World War saw the use of wireless technology for communication purposes and this, in many ways, laid the foundations for the development of radio. The first major experiment in wireless broadcasting (that is, from point of transmission to a number of receivers) took place on 15 June 1920, when the Australian opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba, sang from the Marconi Company studio in Chelmsford in Essex. Sponsored by the *Daily Mail* newspaper, the transmission sparked a great deal of interest in this potentially new and exciting method of communication–and in the commercial possibilities. A number of wireless companies were established, all wishing to set receiving sets to members of the public. The government decided that companies would need to apply for a licence to broadcast and so in 1922, companies began to broadcast locally in London, Manchester and Birmingham. However, it soon became apparent that interest in wireless broadcasting was growing and a solution had to be found so as to ensure that the frequencies, scarce as they were, could be used in the best interests of the listeners. The government therefore decided that a single company, formed initially from the three existing companies, should be licenced and so the British Broadcasting Company was formed. The initial aim of the company

1. Paddy Scannell, 'Public service broadcasting: the history of a concept' in Buscombe, E. (ed.), *British Television: a reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 45.

was not to provide a national public service, but to provide material or content which would allow the manufacturers to sell sets. As the Welsh historian, John Davies argued, '… public broadcasting came into being, not because of a desire to enlighten, educate and entertain the citizenry, but because manufacturers of wireless receivers were concerned to sell their products'[1].

The appointment of the BBC's first Managing Director, (Sir) John Reith, would soon change the emphasis of the company and would shape British broadcasting for the future. There is no doubting the influence and impact of Reith on the shape of British broadcasting, both radio and television. As Asa Briggs has stated, 'Reith did not make broadcasting, but he did make the BBC.'[2] In his perceptive assessment of mass communication in inter-war Britain, D.J. LeMahieu argues that 'among the progressives of the inter-war era, Reith was the most influential and he occupies an important place in the social and cultural history of twentieth-century Britain.'[3] From the outset, Reith ensured that the BBC strived to be a public service, although for the first four years of its operation it was, technically, a commercial enterprise. He made clear his view of the role of public service broadcasting in his book–effectively a manifesto–*Broadcast Over Britain*, published in 1924. In it, he talked of broadcasting being uncharted seas and that he was, in effect, on a voyage into the unknown. The blank canvas presented to Reith allowed him to shape broadcasting according to his own vision. He approached broadcasting with a missionary zeal, believing that the dissemination of knowledge through broadcasting could have a major role in democratic society and that the wireless was a valuable instrument of public good. Reith also believed–as did David Sarnoff, Chief Executive of broadcaster RCA in the United States–that informing, educating and entertaining were the trinity of public service broadcasting, and Reith took them strictly in that order. To focus on entertainment alone, he wrote in 1924, would be a 'prostitution of powers' of broadcasting[4].

1. John Davies, *Broadcasting and the BBC in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), 2.
2. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Volume I. The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.
3. D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: mass communication and the cultivated mind in Britain between the wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 142.
4. John Reith, *Broadcast Over Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), 17.

Interestingly, media historian David Hendy, has argued that in order to understand the influence and impact of great figures such as John Reith and David Sarnoff (of RCA in the United States), we need to remember that these were people conditioned by prevailing thoughts and ideology of the time. Hendy points not only to ideas of Victorian paternalism, in particular those ideas espoused in Matthew Arnold's essay *Culture and Anarchy* published in 1869, but also a sense (which was prevailing amongst the middle and upper classes in Britain at the time) that 'mass culture' was crass and even dangerous[1]. The notion of providing 'the best' in music, literature, the arts, talks *for all* fed into Reith's conception of broadcasting. Culture (by which Reith meant 'high' rather than 'popular' culture) was a way of improving the human condition.

What, therefore, was Reithian public service broadcasting? It was founded on four principles. Firstly, a lack of profit motive. The licence fee, which was introduced during the early years of broadcasting, ensured that the Company (and later Corporation from January 1927 onwards) had an assured source of funding of 10/- from everybody who owned a wireless set. This would allow the company to focus on producing 'quality' programming for all, rather than having to pander to popular taste as would be the case in an advertising-funded system.

Secondly, Reith's public service broadcasting adhered to the principle of availability to all. The service would be a national service for the whole of the UK and would serve everybody, regardless of class or status. This principle is not without problems. From the perspective of Wales or Scotland, the BBC was seen to be a very 'English', even London-based organisation, not only in terms of its organisation but also in the programming. In many ways this reflected Reith's belief that 'the best' in cultural terms emanated from the 'great cities', of which London was, of course, one. On more than one occasion, for example, deputations from Wales went to the BBC's headquarters in London demanding more time for programmes in the Welsh language for the 600,000 or so Welsh-speakers in Wales. As media historian Kevin Williams has argued, Reith's major contribution to British broadcasting was 'the imposition of a certain set of cultural values on the whole of Britain and the centralisation of these values at the expense of local,

1. David Hendy, *Public Service Broadcasting* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 14-24.

regional and national differences'[1]. The promotion of a unified sense of national (i.e. British) identity was at the heart of the Reithian endeavour and some might argue is still there at the heart of the BBC. As a counter to this argument, however, broadcasting historian Thomas Hajkowski has argued convincingly that the BBC did, in fact, promote the regional and national differences in the UK, particularly in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and did not centralise power as much as has been suggested in the past[2].

The third major principle was that of monopoly and unity of control. Reith believed fervently that this was the only way to ensure that standards were upheld and that the 'best' programming could be produced. In his evidence to the Beveridge Committee in 1949, Reith argued:

> It was the brute force of monopoly that enabled the BBC to become what it did; that made it possible for a policy of moral responsibility to be followed. If there is to be competition it will be of cheapness and not of goodness. The usual disadvantages and dangers of monopoly do not apply to Broadcasting; it is in fact a potent incentive[3].

Finally, the provision of the best was paramount to Reith's vision of public service broadcasting. In a famous phrase in his 1924 book, he stated that it was always better to overestimate the mentality of the public than to underestimate it[4]. The BBC, through its National Programme and Regional Programme, offered the listening public a mix of talk, drama, classical music, religious programming–all designed to uplift, improve, inform and educate. Entertainment was, of course, permitted but only if it fitted in with the overall vision. On the one hand, one might argue that this was an extremely paternalistic attitude, forcing or imposing highbrow culture on an unsuspecting audience. However, one might also argue that the Reithian approach to public service broadcasting was, in fact, liberating

1. Kevin Williams, *Get Me a Murder a Day! A history of mass communication in Britain*. 2nd edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 101.
2. Thomas Hajkowski, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain, 1922-53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).
3. Quoted in Medhurst, 'Beveridge and Broadcasting in the 1950s' in Medhurst, Jamie, O'Malley, Tom, and Nicholas, Siân (eds.), *Broadcasting in the UK and US in the 1950s: historical perspectives* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) 33.
4. Reith, *Broadcast Over Britain*, *op.cit.*, 34.

and democratising. Through the wireless set, people of all classes, statuses, and occupations could access material that they might not otherwise have a chance to access.

The focus in the chapter has been radio, for it was primarily through this medium, in the period before the Second World War, that public service broadcasting principles were developed. However, the BBC was, from 1929 onwards, involved in developing television, initially collaborating with the Baird Television Company and then, between 1932 and 1935, offering a service which it administered itself. Television was in its experimental stages at this point and although programming was transmitted on a regular basis, it was not until November 1936 that the BBC launched its regular public television service from Alexandra Palace in north London. Reith was involved in the early development of television although he viewed it with a great deal of suspicion. I have argued elsewhere that the commonly-accepted narrative of him having nothing to do with television is somewhat simplistic, but there were reasons–some of which were related to his notion of what public service broadcasting should be–for his distrust of the new medium[1]. Reith, however, left the BBC in 1938 to become Chairman of Imperial Airways but remained vocal in his views on broadcasting for years to come.

The Second World War had an impact on the BBC in a number of ways. The fledgling television service came to an abrupt end on 1 September 1939 and remained off-air until 7 June 1946. Regional radio broadcasts were ended and a single Home Service was broadcast across the UK. The introduction of the Forces Programme in 1940, primarily to entertain British troops in France, proved to be a popular choice to listeners at 'home' also. Providing a lighter mix of talks, dance music, and light entertainment, it proved a popular alternative to the more staid Home Service which still ran on Reithian principles[2]. Other changes during the War included broadcasting programmes at fixed times during the week so that listeners knew when they could 'tune in' to a particular programme. This

1. Jamie Medhurst, 'Mea Maxima Culpa: John Reith and the Advent of Television', *Media History* 25.3 (2019): 292-306.

2. Thomas Hajkowski, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain, 1922-53*, *op.cit.*, 10.

notion of fixed timing went against the Reithian principle of more serendipitous listening whereby a listener might come across something that he or she was not expecting to hear, and be educated/informed in the process.

When the war ended in 1945, the BBC, therefore, had been shifting its position somewhat from the pre-war public service framework into one which was, perhaps, more populist. Under Sir William Haley, who followed Robert Foot as Director-General of the BBC in 1944, the BBC re-structured the radio service after the war. In 1945, the Home Service focused on news, current affairs, talks and drama. The Forces Programme output of light entertainment and music was transferred to the new Light Programme, and then in 1946 a new service, the Third Programme, was launched to cater for more 'high-brow' (some might say elitist) cultural tastes such as classical music, literature and avant-garde and modernist drama[1]. This new 'cultural pyramid' of broadcasting went against the public service broadcasting principles as espoused by John Reith. No longer would all forms of information, education, and entertainment be available on one service, but each radio station would attract listeners according to his/her own tastes, thus leading to a more fragmented audience.

The BBC's Royal Charter, the instrument through which it existed, was due for renewal in 1946 but post-war reconstruction and other pre-occupations of the post-war Labour Government of Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, resulted in an automatic extension being given until the end of 1951. In 1948 the BBC undertook it's biggest outside broadcast operation in radio and television (the television service having been re-launched in June 1946): the Olympic Games in London. This was a huge task for the Corporation, and one which demonstrated to the people of Britain and beyond that the BBC was capable of providing a comprehensive and valuable public service. The following year, the government appointed a committee under Lord William Beveridge to examine all aspects of broadcasting in Britain. The broadcasting context in which the Committee set about its task was one in which radio was by far the dominant medium. By May 1949, 11,873,950 broadcasting licences had been sold and only 140,850 of these

1. For a survey of British post-war radio drama see Hugh Chignell, *British Radio Drama, 1945-63* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

were combined television licences. It was also a context in which the potential social and cultural impact of broadcasting was acknowledged, as highlighted early in the Committee's Report:

> Broadcasting is the most pervasive, and therefore one of the most powerful agents for influencing men's thoughts and actions, for giving them a picture, true or false, of their fellows and of the world in which they live, for appealing to their intellects, their emotions and their appetites, for filling their minds with beauty or ugliness, laughter or terror, love or hate[1].

The Beveridge Report (as it is known) is an important turning-point in British broadcasting history. I would argue that it helped to shift the Reithian notion of public service broadcasting, firstly by questioning the whole idea of monopoly, one of the bedrocks of PSB up until this point. Although the report ultimately recommended the continuance of the BBC's monopoly on broadcasting, it did so by also introducing a measure of decentralisation and devolution of some powers to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, thereby loosening what some saw as London's grip on broadcasting in the UK (created, in a large measure, by Reith). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly from the perspective of a shifting notion of public service broadcasting, the report ultimately led to the creation of a rival television service to the BBC, one which was founded on public service principles but which was funded commercially by advertising revenue (something to which Reith was particularly averse). Whilst eleven of the twelve members of the Committee supported the idea of not introducing competition for the BBC, one member, Selwyn Lloyd, a Conservative Member of Parliament, argued that competition would be a good thing, not least because of what he saw as the dangers of monopoly:

> The evil lies in the system, the control by a monopoly of this great medium of expression. It involved the concentration of great power in the hands of a few men and women, and the tendency to create a uniform pattern of thought and culture[2].

1. Jamie Medhurst, 'Beveridge and Broadcasting in the 1950s', *op.cit.*, 32.
2. Jamie Medhurst, 'Beveridge and Broadcasting in the 1950s', *op.cit.*, 43.