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## THE TRAVELLER WHO CAME CALLING: A SHORT HISTORY OF RADIO JOURNALISM

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### The importance of radio journalism

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Journalism is an activity that we primarily associate with newspapers, magazines and television. Indeed, among the many who turn to sound broadcasting as a source of background music, few may be aware that *radio* journalism exists. Hearing an occasional ‘capsule’ of news within the sequence of records, they perhaps assume that compiling it is about as challenging and glamorous as Cinderella’s day job.

In this book we are going to be making some rather large claims for the importance of radio journalism. But we should begin by pointing out that it requires skills which, even in the preparation of capsule news, are additional to the investigative and literary abilities that every journalist should possess. On radio, the drafting and delivery of news copy is not a simple matter. Like television’s, but unlike those of the newspapers, its words are constantly dissolving or *evanescent*: but unlike television’s, they are wholly invisible, as are the people who utter them. Consequently, its listeners seldom give radio their undivided attention. Its news copy needs to be written and presented with these factors constantly in mind – to adopt an easy and intelligible speech idiom even as it strives to do justice to the often complex and detailed character of events.

Yet the case for the importance of radio journalism rests on something other than the fact that it is more demanding and skilful than might be supposed. Most of us accept that journalism – the reporting and analysis not simply of ‘the news’ but of current affairs in their broadest sense – is at the heart of the BBC’s public service endeavour, and since television commands much larger audiences than radio, this is often taken to be ‘television’ journalism. However, we will suggest in this book that it is often on *radio*, with its ability to handle facts, issues and ideas without visual distraction, that this endeavour is most effectively performed.

## The origins of journalism

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A career in radio journalism is thus highly worthwhile, but to make the case for its current and future importance we need to know something of its past. Its origins lie in the natural human desire to know more about what is going on in the world that lies beyond the compass of our horizons and our own experience. Even that information, which the early travellers brought to a community, recounting what they had seen or been told by someone else, could not wholly satisfy this desire. So the development of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg around 1450, with its ability to disseminate news, information and comment on a mass scale, first demonstrated the potential of humankind to produce and consume something that would become recognisable as journalism.

The print medium firmly established itself as a conduit through which a discourse could elaborate the results of journalistic activity. On the audience's behalf, someone could find, collate and digest a considerable amount of information and then synthesise from it an account which was presented in such a way as to satisfy the audience's natural curiosity, amuse, entertain it and even call it to action. Today, print still performs this important role, but because technological advance tends to be exponential, the last century produced increasingly rapid developments in distribution technology. This resulted in new mass media that would provide other popular platforms for the practice of journalism. The cinema newsreel, pioneered in 1910 by *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, offered audiences new experiences in the form of moving images to accompany text and eventually a *spoken* narrative. Yet because newspapers and newsreels required both mechanical processing and distribution over land, even today print and film lack a compelling advantage possessed by the news-bearing travellers of old: immediacy (Starkey 2007: 115–16).

## The development of radio

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The invention of the first of the electronic media, the telegraph, provided that immediacy. It allowed point-to-point communication over long distances in real time, although a direct connection by wire was required, and rather than being a medium of mass communication it, like the telephone a little later, offered only person-to-person transmission. It was the development of radio (initially known as 'the wireless') that brought the benefits of mass distribution which were previously confined to the printing press. Radio broadcast over wide areas by sending electro-magnetic waves into the air. Its messages were available to anyone within range who had a suitable receiver, to large, real-time audiences who could hear of events quite literally within milliseconds of their occurrence.

Among the early pioneers were Guglielmo Marconi, who first demonstrated transmission and reception but was slow to spot radio's potential as a mass medium, and Reginald Fessenden, who in 1906 broadcast the first programme of voice and music, but who failed to capitalise on his idea, so is merely a footnote in the history of broadcasting. These early delays in the exploitation of the medium tempt one to the conclusion that new media technologies are introduced into society only in so far as their potential for disrupting the *status quo* is limited (Winston 1998). Certainly, in various hands radio could be a powerful force in a number of different ways, a point we shall return to later. However, it was destined to become as important a medium as print – durable, as its hundred-year history attests, and, as the popularity of podcasts demonstrates, capable of exploitation through twenty-first-century distribution technologies. By today's standards it took a remarkably long time for Fessenden's pioneering broadcast to be imitated on any grand scale, but over the following two decades sporadic experimental broadcasting gradually gave way to regular services – in Britain under Marconi, in the United States under Fessenden's successors, and even in communist Russia, where in 1917 revolutionaries had used wireless telegraphy rather than speech transmissions to proclaim their victory and try to foment a worldwide uprising.

The power of radio as a means of entertainment and propaganda was swiftly demonstrated, yet it did not immediately produce radio *journalism*. In compiling his first programme, Fessenden omitted all news, even though the concept of news reporting was well established in the press. He played recordings of music and read a passage from the Bible, but had he thought of it he could have included the world's first news bulletin and quite legitimately led on the historic significance of his own actions. Alas, radio's great potential as a platform for journalistic activity was yet to be perceived: this great inventor of dozens of patented devices missed a golden opportunity, and as we shall see, it fell to others to perceive and exploit radio's potential to bring immediacy to the task of reporting the world to mass audiences.

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### The distinctiveness of radio journalism

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What, though, is *radio* journalism, and how does it differ from other types of journalism? What do they have in common, and what are the reasons for the differences and similarities? How do these different traditions in presenting factual narratives coexist, and where radio journalism is distinct, why is it so? Just as print journalism is more than the front and back pages and includes reviews, in-depth analyses and comment, which also solicit the attention of the reader, so radio journalism is much more than 'the news'. It is to be found in factual output of many kinds: in programming as much as

in bulletins. It is also expensive to produce, requiring more effort to source and to evidence, to illustrate and to communicate, than does the playing of pre-recorded music or the relaying of spontaneous conversation. The many forms in which radio journalism exists today could no more be invented overnight than Fessenden could conceive of a news bulletin for in his first broadcast. They developed slowly, often beginning as the spark of an idea, always a product of the institutional context from which they emerged, and, once established, mimicked and extended by rival radio stations.

Some institutional contexts were more conducive to the development of radio journalism than others, and in different countries radio industries developed in different ways. The Marconi Company was a private business (Crisell 1994: 18), but in the United Kingdom the private ownership of radio stations was short-lived. This was because the governmental Crawford Committee of Inquiry – the second of many – recommended that broadcasting should be publicly owned (Crawford Committee 1926). In the United States, radio remained largely in the hands of commercial operators and these two sharply contrasting models of institutional ownership influenced the development of radio journalism in different ways in different countries. This distinction between the public and private sectors of the radio industry, one larger or smaller than the other depending on the country one cares to examine, is an important one. We consider it important enough to provide a framework for our analysis, and it is a theme that will run through this book.

### **Journalism, news and the development of the BBC**

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Today, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is the United Kingdom's oldest and, by common consent, pre-eminent broadcasting institution. Its role has always been to provide a comprehensive 'public service' that transcends the mere market, and we are used to the idea that news and current affairs are at the heart of this public service provision. As relatively recently as 1992, it published a policy document, *Extending Choice*, in which it posed the question: 'What, then, are the defining characteristics of the BBC's public purpose?' And it replied: 'Firstly, the BBC should aim to provide the comprehensive, in-depth and impartial news and information coverage across a range of broadcasting outlets that is needed to support a fair and informed national debate' (Franklin 2001: 103).

This aim is nowhere more apparent than in radio. Over its networks and stations as a whole, that which is not music is overwhelmingly journalism: news and what we might term 'contemporary information' – current affairs, sport, and other matters of perennial public interest, such as health, consumerist and lifestyle issues. There are exceptions, drama, light entertainment

and phone-in conversation among them, but with the exception of the latter they are also expensive to produce, which explains why they are almost entirely the preserve of a public service broadcaster. But all the other genres fall within the province of journalism. Music is the main concern of Radios 1, 2 and 3 (although Radio 2's flagship midday show, presented by Jeremy Vine, has a current affairs theme), but Five Live is wholly given over to news and sport, while news, sport, 'factual' and current affairs make up just over two-thirds of the output of Radio 4 (BBC 2004: 143). Finally, the extensive provision of news and information is the means by which BBC local radio seeks to distinguish itself from its commercial rivals (Crisell and Starkey 2006: 18). There have been periods during which these provincial outposts of the corporation have broadcast nothing but speech, but more recently they have favoured a diet of speech punctuated by music.

It may therefore come as a surprise to learn that news and current affairs were not always at the heart of the BBC's public service endeavour. In the early years of broadcasting, they formed a marginal, derivative and rather meagre component of its programming. This was partly due to factors outside its control and partly a matter of perceptions and values. A body that saw more clearly than many into radio's potential as a rapid news medium was the Newspaper Proprietors' Association. Noting the threat that it would pose to the press, the Association lobbied the government to place a news embargo on the British Broadcasting Company. Launched in 1922, the company was prohibited from transmitting bulletins until the evening and obliged to take all its news from the press agencies. Moreover, the governments of the 1920s and 1930s feared that the new medium could be used to win public opinion to seditious views. While in the United States and elsewhere radio was left to commercial companies to develop (Starkey 2007: 23–4), the prevailing view in the United Kingdom was that it was too important to be left to the private sector. When, on 1 January 1927, the BBC was transformed from a private company into a public body, the British Broadcasting Corporation, its charter forbade it to editorialise and restricted the kinds of political content it could carry. Among governments, the fear that broadcasting can promote sedition, first articulated by Crawford (Crawford Committee 1926: 14–15), persists to this day.

Finally, John Reith, who was the Managing Director of the company and then the first Director General of the Corporation, took little interest in news and politics (Boyle 1972: 173, 222) – and in this, he was not wholly untypical of his time. In the great scheme of things, news did not always rate highly. This was partly because people were less bombarded by news and information than they are today. News provision, almost entirely in the hands of the press, was intermittent – daily rather than continuous – and thus recognised as 'old' even as it was being consumed. In its infancy, the BBC sometimes broadcast no news on certain days because, in its view, no news had occurred (Scannell 1996: 160).

## The impact of radio on the character of the news

Yet radio itself would soon transform the character of the news and thus help to change the perception of it. This began with the General Strike in 1926, a major confrontation between millions of workers and their employers. The government had armed troops at its disposal in case any physical outbreak of class war were to threaten the nation's security. Because much of the press was shut down by striking print workers, the news embargo on the BBC was lifted for the duration of the strike, and its five daily bulletins provided information of a topicality that could not be matched even by those newspapers that were still appearing. To the now rapidly growing body of listeners, it must have seemed as if a traveller had, indeed, come calling, with stories to tell of what was happening elsewhere. Families would gather round the wireless, enthralled by what they heard. This was the consumer electronics revolution of its time – and the first in history.

The sensation of immediacy prompted a new habit of tuning in to the radio to find out what was going on in the world, and the 1930s were marked by improvements in the production of radio news. Bulletins were drafted in language that was less 'literary' and rather more suited to the ear. Magnetic – hence instant – recording technology arrived, and the BBC gradually freed itself from some of the restrictions that the government and newspaper industry had imposed. Certain major stories broke that radio could cover more contemporaneously and more vividly than the press. Among these were the great fire at the iconic Crystal Palace in London, the last illness of George V in 1936 and the Munich crisis of 1938, which seemed to pull Europe back from the brink of all-out war. Eye-witness accounts were not just factual in content, like those of the press, but emotively coloured by the voices in which they were heard.

During the Second World War (1939–1945), radio journalism achieved a certain level of maturity. In times of war the public hunger for news is insatiable, and for the first time in history a technology existed to feed it. The BBC's war reporters were given the same battle training as the troops, equipped with portable disc recorders and despatched to the front line, whence they were able to send back detailed descriptions combined with a modest amount of actuality. The volume of material they produced was such that, for the first time, extended news programmes could be broadcast. *Radio Newsreel*, which began in 1940, and *War Report*, launched in 1944, contained not merely a bald recitation of events, but eye-witness accounts of them and recordings of the sounds they made. The very word 'newsreel', which was borrowed from the cinema, affirms the BBC's confidence that radio could now match some of the iconism of film (Crisell 2002: 61). Finally, in 1944, the BBC acknowledged the enhanced status that broadcasting had helped to confer on the news by ceasing to rely on second-hand and

often print-focused accounts of foreign affairs and appointing its own overseas correspondents.

For ten years or so after the war, radio news enjoyed relatively plain sailing: though the march of communication technology was quickening, the fledgling television service posed no threat since it, too, was a BBC monopoly, and all broadcast news was in the hands of a single controller (Briggs 1995c: 63). Moreover, such is human conservatism, that just as radio news had initially been thought of in terms of the press, so now television news was being thought of in terms of radio. Apart from a 10-minute newsreel which was shown on five evenings a week and aped that of the cinema, television news between 1946 and 1954 consisted only of re-broadcast radio bulletins accompanied by a still photograph of Big Ben. Even after 1954, when a slightly more pictorial bulletin was introduced, the newsreaders remained invisible, declaring themselves only as 'voice-overs' behind photographs, film clips and caption cards.

Hence, in the United Kingdom radio journalism developed at a pace that today would be considered rather leisurely. Since the absence of real competition encouraged complacency rather than innovation and influences from overseas were slight, the institutional context provided little impetus for change until the mid-1950s. Reith's BBC had been short on fun and long on moralising, serious in its musical programming rather than popular in its outlook (Crisell 1994: 22), so the attempts made during the 1930s to break the BBC's monopoly had focused on entertainment rather than factual content. They had been mounted by privately-owned broadcasters such as Radio Luxembourg, Radio Normandy and Radio Eiffel Tower, which used transmitters on the continent to beam signals across the English Channel.

### The impact of television on radio news

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Hence, if the Corporation was being challenged by rivals in those pre-war years, it was not in respect of its news coverage. What changed everything was the launch of Independent Television (ITV) in 1955, and particularly of ITV's networked news provider, Independent Television News (ITN). Both BBC television and BBC radio were hit hard – radio irreversibly so – but competition had the unforeseen, longer-term effect of moving the provision of news and current affairs nearer to the heart of the BBC's public service philosophy. Indeed, it is arguable that the Corporation comes closest to performing a public service in the *radio* provision of these things. To demonstrate this, we need to look at broadcasting developments over the last half-century.

Unblinkered by a radiogenic past, ITN brought a new and televisual perspective to news reportage and in so doing, took large numbers of viewers

away from the BBC. But by the end of the 1950s, the latter had emulated its rival and lured many of them back. What television did in general was to devastate the audience for radio, and it has been suggested that the fast-moving Cuban missile crisis of 1962, with its images of weapons on the decks of freighters, was the story that would establish television's lasting dominance as a news medium not only over radio but also the press (Hood and O'Leary 1990: 35–6).

Suddenly it seemed as if radio – with journalism now at its core – had been sidelined. Unrelenting technological advance had created a monster that would bring about radio's destruction. Just as the discovery of electromagnetic radio waves had created a platform for a new and immediate journalism of sound that was able to trump both print and film, an even newer technology, offering immediate images as well as sounds, now threatened to kill off radio. From the middle of the 1950s there was therefore an urgent need to rediscover radio's core strengths. With the fortuitous arrival of transistor technology, which enhanced the mobility and portability of receivers, music above all, but also news and information, emerged as forms of content that audiences were eager to consume as a background to their other activities. The first radio sets had been bulky objects that took up a considerable amount of space in the living room and required power from large rechargeable batteries. These were replaced by mains-powered receivers which of course remained in a fixed location where they could be plugged into a socket in the wall. Then, in the 1950s an attractive range of transistor radios appeared: compact by comparison to the old valve wireless set, they could run off batteries similar in size to those used today and, most important, they were *portable*. Now listeners could experience radio in different rooms, they could buy multiple sets, take the radio with them on holiday, even enjoy listening on the beach. The 'tranny' quickly became a 1960s icon and even, in London's fashionable Carnaby Street, a style accessory.

### The revival of radio – and of radio news

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Radio's technological renaissance was fuelled by social change. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a whole generation of 'teenagers' (the word dates from about this time) began to assert themselves culturally, economically and politically. What they craved from their radios was American 'rock 'n' roll' music, to be played round the clock and not just in the miserly doses supplied by the BBC's Light Programme. A burgeoning music scene, a desire to access American hit records and a real sense that the BBC was ignoring youthful tastes led to an invasion of the airwaves by 'pirate' broadcasters, such as Radio Caroline, Radio London and Swinging Radio England. This new challenge to the monopoly of radio that the BBC still enjoyed also



came from across the sea. But this time the commercial operators, as keen as their predecessors to make money from paid-for advertising, were broadcasting from converted ships and disused military forts situated just outside British territorial waters.

These were primarily music stations, whose commitment to journalism extended no further than relaying the news they had lifted from the BBC networks, but they demonstrated the demand for a kind of programming within which news would play a vital role. The impression that the pirate presenters were marooned on the high seas and divorced from the lives of their onshore listeners could be mitigated by the inclusion of almost up-to-date news. The listeners, who were mostly unaware of its source, felt that these stations had their finger on the pulse of the nation: that they were musically more advanced than the BBC, but also just as capable of satisfying that universal human need for news and information.

With radio rescued from extinction by a new generation of listeners whose tastes and interests would grow and change with age, new uses were found for the medium. While television steadily colonised people's evening leisure time, radio was able to find large audiences during the day, when people were less free to abandon other activities in order to indulge their sense of sight. Breakfast time soon became radio's peak period and it still commands a larger share of the audience until early afternoon (Radio Advertising Bureau 2007).

Among the first to see that there was still a place on radio for a substantial treatment of news and current affairs was Robin Day, one of the original ITN newsreaders and later a formidable political interviewer. In 1955 and while still employed by the BBC, Day proposed a daily 'Morning Review' that would eventually take shape as the *Today* programme. His rationale was a shrewd one:

... there is a steadily increasing audience to car radios. This element must be particularly large first thing in the morning when people are motoring to work. These people cannot read while driving. Why should we not offer them comment and description that the rail or 'bus traveller can read in his newspaper?

(quoted in Donovan 1997: 3)

The *Today* programme launched in 1957, at first carrying mainly apolitical features but soon becoming 'harder' and newsier (Donovan 1997). Indeed, as part of its plans to reorganise sound broadcasting in 1970, the BBC thought of turning Radio 4 into an all-news network, while news and current affairs were also seen as the key strength of its local radio stations, which had begun to open in 1967. Moreover, with programmes like *Analysis* from 1970 and *File on Four* from 1977 (both Radio 4), the notion

of radio journalism broadened to cover all forms of current affairs that could be effectively presented through speech and sounds – not just breaking stories but ongoing and background issues, and not merely through straight reportage but in interviews, actuality, debate and commentary.

The importance of *Analysis* and *File on Four* cannot be overstated, and we will return to them later. In essence, they are extended speech programmes which focus on single issues and explore them in sufficient depth to allow a range of views to be considered and analysed, reinforced by expert comment and even summed up by the drawing of appropriate conclusions. This approach contrasts with the magazine format typified by such programmes as *Today* and *Radio Newsreel*, which cover a range of topical items within a single edition. Indeed, topicality is not a prerequisite for *Analysis* and *File on Four*, since their in-depth reporting requires an extended period of investigation and post-production before they can be broadcast.

### See it happen: the ascendancy of television news

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Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that by 1970 the major medium for 'news' in its primary, minimal sense of important events that have only just occurred was television. It permitted visual treatment and was moderated by backgrounding, analysis or commentary. Radio and newspapers could only *tell* what had happened, between them offering a limited actuality of sounds and fixed images: television could *show* it, and the number of things it could show was growing all the time. From 1963, satellite feeds brought to its bulletins images of what was occurring half a world away, and during the 1980s the replacement of film by magnetic tape and a general miniaturisation of components enabled cameras to become portable and thus capture things that had once been beyond them. Now, instead of merely telling about other lands, unusual events and remarkable experiences, the visiting traveller could *display* them.

Over the last 25 years the number of television outlets has also multiplied: two more terrestrials have launched – Channel 4 in 1982 and Channel 5 in 1997; the first cable and satellite stations appeared in 1983; and since 1996, digital television has triggered a further huge expansion on all three platforms. Television is now so abundant that a miscellany of content on any one channel is beginning to seem old-fashioned: enough channels exist to permit 'themed' or specialised content, and the prime candidate for theming is news. The sheer quantity of, and demand for, news; the reduction – often to zero – of the gap between the point at which it occurs and the point at which it can be shown; the improvements in picture quality and the growing sophistication of on-screen graphics all prompted

the growth of 'rolling news' channels like Sky News (1989), BBC World Service Television News (1991), CNN (1992) and BBC News 24 (1997).

### News and the concept of public service broadcasting

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Yet at about the same time an extraordinary paradox was emerging. The BBC's public service endeavour depends, and has always depended, on its ability to provide what the market cannot. Why, then, should the BBC speak increasingly of news being at the heart of its public service provision at the very moment when news was available on a wider range of broadcasting outlets than ever before?

Part of the reason was historical and political. In the primordial days of broadcasting scarcity, news was not high on the BBC's agenda, and by today's standards it was relatively uncritical of the government's conduct during both the General Strike and the Second World War (Thompson 1990: 258; Starkey 2007: 128–30). Yet because it never acted merely as the government's mouth-piece, the Corporation acquired a reputation for the balance and integrity of its reportage during both. In recent years it has come to seem only reasonable that a body which is publicly funded and seeks to serve the nation as a whole should stake its reputation on an ability to tell the truth about the world in as impartial and authoritative a way as possible. It has generally sought to do so by offering more *perspective* – more context and analysis – than its televisual rivals, who are primarily preoccupied with news *actuality*, with the sight and sound of events. This is the 'mission to explain' that was formulated by John Birt, who coordinated the BBC's news and current affairs departments from 1987. He 'emphasised the need to give news stories a methodically researched analytical context in order to provide more journalistic depth and superior understanding' (Born 2005: 57).

Because of the attacks on the BBC by the Conservative government during the 1980s, this is sometimes characterised as a retreat into self-justification and a timorousness about interpreting political events as news. Moreover, Birt's centralisation of news and current affairs was seen as making the BBC more, not less vulnerable (McNair 2003: 105–10). Particularly after he became Director General in 1993, Birt acquired numerous critics, and his successor, Greg Dyke, found he had inherited 'a deeply unhappy organisation' (Dyke 2004: 139). One of the most frequent charges against Birt was that in the form of a new internal accounting system called 'producer choice', he hugely increased bureaucracy at the expense of programme making. Dyke managed to reduce some of the bureaucracy and left office in 2004, riding a wave of support from the staff. Without doubt, though, the most influential Director General of all has been the BBC's first

and longest-serving, John Reith, whose job was to establish an arm's length relationship between the Corporation and successive governments, a feat he managed through 11 turbulent years until 1938.

### **A combustible relationship: the BBC, the government and reportage of the news**

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Crucial to this relationship is a need to be independent of government yet avoid antagonising it so much that the next licence fee is set at a punitively low level. It is arguable that in 1926, the year before incorporation, Reith was too supportive of the government, siding with them against the strikers (Thompson 1990: 258). He asserted that since both the government and the BBC were 'for the people' the BBC should be 'for' the government too. The Second World War presented the BBC with few qualms about the ethics of supporting the war effort, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill's radio broadcasts were important motivators for a public under siege from Hitler's Germany – particularly at the time of the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk in occupied France. Many historians consider them to have been crucial in influencing the United States to enter the war as our ally. (We will consider the development of international radio journalism in a later chapter, but it is worth noting here that once war was declared a number of American correspondents in Europe, among them Egbert (Ed) Roscoe Murrow, vividly described the build-up of the German war machine and the aerial bombardments of London. Their reports for the American networks also helped convince a reticent American public that they should abandon their neutrality and join in the fight against the Nazis (Crook 1998: 91–2).)

It was through the BBC that the future French President, General Charles de Gaulle was able to broadcast rallying calls to his occupied compatriots (Kuhn 1995: 86–9). However, institutional contexts and people's expectations change over time, and nearly 40 years later Margaret Thatcher complained that the BBC's coverage of the Falklands War was insufficiently 'patriotic' (MacGregor 1997: 134). The path between patriotism and neutrality is a difficult one to tread, as Greg Dyke found out in 2003, yet most broadcast journalists identify the ability to be impartial as essential to their survival – and their credibility (Sheridan Burns 2002: 11–12). The path is as difficult to tread in radio as in television, but there are some fundamental differences between the two.

### **How radio's news coverage is better than television's**

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One problem for television is that it is not the most efficient or effective medium for practising journalism, and it was inevitable that it should have

developed in different ways over its own, briefer history. Because, like radio, it operates in time, it is able to communicate much less information, and of a rather less complex nature, than newspapers and books, which operate in space. A newspaper is capable of carrying many more words than can be uttered in a conventional radio or television bulletin. But television's pictures create a further difficulty. Contextualisation – the attempt to explain and analyse – is a verbal process that deals largely in abstractions, and the pictures it accompanies, even if of little more than the newsreader or reporter, have a tendency to distract the viewer. Moreover, if it qualifies or conflicts with the pictures, the viewer is tempted to ignore it and credit the pictures: we tend to trust what we can see rather more than what we hear (Crisell 2006: 60–4). Yet not only must contextualisation support the pictures: it must be slowed down in order to give us the opportunity to view them, thus further reducing the amount of detail and degree of complexity it can carry.

The limitations of television news can be circumvented in one of two ways. The first is to run extended bulletins, a solution favoured by Channel 4. These allow individual items to be more fully explained and analysed, even if not to the extent that is possible in a newspaper. But such bulletins demand a considerable commitment from the viewer. There are, of course, specialist channels which in theory allow the viewer to watch news round the clock, but their content consists of repeated and only slowly evolving bulletins – the 'rolling news' that presupposes the brief, often intermittent viewing that is much more typical of our time.

The second possibility is to minimise the distracting and protracting effect of the pictures by, in a sense, carrying fewer of them. Television must always show pictures, of course, but bulletins could carry much less footage of the news events themselves and instead show 'talking heads' – those who report, analyse and discuss them. This would, in effect, make *what is seen* subordinate to *what is said*, and in the old days of unwieldy cameras and relative broadcasting scarcity, this is what television often did. But at a time when scores of channels are competing for the fragile attention of the viewer, this is no longer a realistic option. Television must increasingly fall back on what sales folk would describe as its 'unique selling proposition': the provision of interesting – if possible exciting – pictures (Crisell 2006: 166–9). Even though the BBC is obliged to provide material that the market will not provide, and so to that extent is relieved of the need to compete, its discursive news and current affairs programmes, such as *Newsnight* and *Panorama*, have been pushed to the edges of the schedule. Moreover, *Panorama*, once the flagship of BBC's television current affairs output, has in recent years become much more pictorial and rather less discursive and analytical.

We therefore arrive at a remarkable fact. If an in-depth coverage of news and current affairs is at the heart of the BBC's public service endeavour – if

the contextualisation, discussion and analysis that are collectively described as its 'mission to explain' are what distinguishes it from other broadcasters – then this endeavour is performed not so much by television as by the less popular medium of *radio*. It is perhaps no accident that for the radio provision of such things, the BBC has no serious rival.

Why should words alone be able to do more justice to news and current affairs than words combined with pictures? Words can describe both the physical, visible events that pictures show (indeed they often have to describe what the pictures refer to, since pictures are not always self-explanatory) and the context and significance of these events. But in their latter function, words benefit from the *absence* of pictures, since pictures introduce an irrelevant and distracting concreteness into what is in essence an abstract discourse. It is, of course, true that we are mostly seeing *something* while we are listening to the radio: we do not necessarily listen with our eyes closed. But the unrelatedness of what we are seeing to what we are hearing makes it much easier for us to focus on abstractions and concepts when they are aired on the radio than when we encounter them on television (Crisell 2004b: 7–10).

### How radio became central to the BBC's public service mission

At the very time that TV channels began to multiply, it was recognised within the BBC that news and current affairs are at least as much a matter of issues, ideas and significances as of visible occurrences, and that radio is better equipped to deal with them than television. From the 1980s the Corporation renewed its attempts to convert Radio 4 into an all-news network, and during the 1991 Gulf War provided a continuous if temporary news service on the station's FM frequencies (Starkey 2004a: 26). Then in 1994 it launched the populist news and sport network, Radio 5 Live. Even as a mixed programming station, Radio 4's daily output includes the *Today* programme from 0600 to 0900, *The World at One* from 1300 to 1330, *PM* from 1700 to 1800, an extended news bulletin from 1800 to 1830 and *The World Tonight* from 2200 to 2245. Moreover, its weekly output embraces a range of specialised current affairs in such programmes as *Farming Today*, *Money Box*, *File on Four*, *Analysis*, *From Our Own Correspondent*, *In Business* and *Law in Action*. There is nothing like this quantity of news and current affairs in the mainstream television networks, and even in the all-news channels, nothing like the amount of commentary, explanation and discussion that these programmes afford. It is precisely because they would make dull viewing that they are so effective on radio. Moreover, they help to ensure that the BBC enjoys the continuing protection of those arbiters of the licence fee, the politicians. It gives them considerable publicity, whether by

reporting them or allowing them frequent opportunities to be heard, and although in the late afternoon and evening radio commands much smaller audiences than television, it is popular with the professional middle classes whom politicians need to reach because they are the nation's opinion formers.

### Some historical erosions of the public service ideal

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This was as important in past decades as it is today, for if the BBC is to survive, it must have a critical mass of support behind it. Reith firmly established public service broadcasting as aloof from commercial pressures and, thanks largely to its position as a monopoly, untroubled by audience ratings. By at first not challenging the press over the provision of news, he bought some time during which the BBC was able to become better established. However, in the 1930s the popularity of the continental stations, particularly on Sundays, was unsettling for the BBC since it prompted some criticism from the press but not enough to cause a change in direction. Perhaps it was at this time that Reith formed the opinion that commercial broadcasting is akin to 'dog racing, smallpox and the bubonic plague' (Crisell 2002: 86). He was largely right in perceiving it as popular, downmarket, potentially lucrative and 'infectious' among audiences. Yet even without commercial radio, the BBC would have to change and with Reith's departure, the process began.

The Second World War killed off the continental commercial stations, but among the tens of thousands of young soldiers stationed away from home it also created a craving for entertainment, and the launch of the Forces Programme in 1940 at the government's request was an early post-Reithian concession to populism. It was not to be the only one. Successive Director Generals had their own views on audience ratings, and in answer to the challenge of the 1960s offshore pirates, the Light Programme that had replaced the Forces Programme was renamed Radio 2 in 1967 and was joined by a new pop music service for youth, Radio 1.

There also followed a period of considerable ratings success for BBC television, which seemed to suggest that audience figures had assumed greater importance in the Corporation's thinking. In 1985, press attacks on the BBC, led by withering editorials in *The Times*, resulted in the setting up of an inquiry into the Corporation's funding by the Peacock Committee. Its definition of public service broadcasting (PSB) identified eight key principles:

- availability to the whole population
- relevance to all tastes and interests
- provision for minorities, especially those who are disadvantaged
- a special relationship to the national identity
- distance from vested interests

- licence fee funding
- aiming for quality rather than large audiences
- a set of guidelines within which to work (Harrison 2006: 227–8).

Despite the definitive terms in which the Peacock Committee reported to government (Peacock Committee 1986), its legacy lasted only a short while. During his period as Director General, it allowed John Birt to be relatively resistant to populism and his diversion of funds into news and current affairs bolstered the practice of journalism within the Corporation. However, Greg Dyke's instincts were rather different, and he was criticised for taking some of the BBC's television output downmarket. So the debate reignited early in the new millennium. Even during the recent period in which the BBC Charter was being reviewed (before being extended for another ten years from 2007), there were loud calls for Radio 1 to be privatised, funded from advertising and even to be run by the state-owned television broadcaster Channel 4. Radio 1, it was claimed, was one service that the market certainly *could* provide. Meanwhile, what had 'the market' – that is, the commercial sector – been doing?

### The development of commercial radio in Britain

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Despite the success of commercial radio in the United States and elsewhere, it was not until 1973 that 'independent' radio, as it was called, launched in the United Kingdom, and even then only as a local operation. This was the culmination of a long-fought campaign by those on the political right and a small number of entrepreneurs keen to profit from sound advertising on a relatively modest investment. Since 1927, the latter had been denied the chance to make money out of radio, even though the medium proved to be big business in the United States. They were constantly reminded of the opportunity they were missing by the 7,000 or so commercial stations which were thriving on the far side of the Atlantic. Today's talk of 'spectrum pricing', which means that every frequency on the broadcast radio bands has a value that someone could realise, contrasts sharply with the twentieth-century notion of those frequencies as a scarce public resource. The continental stations of the 1930s and some of the offshore pirates of the 1960s had made considerable amounts of money out of radio. The logistical difficulties of broadcasting from foreign countries or the high seas had limited their profitability, but legal transmissions from British soil seemed to promise easier profits, perhaps even matching those that had been made by the companies that had launched 'independent' television.

Some of the 1960s pirates had campaigned against the 1967 Marine Broadcasting (Offences) Act, which was introduced to starve them of advertising,



make it illegal to supply them from the mainland and prevent British citizens from working for them, but they failed to mobilise enough public support to defeat the legislation and most of the stations closed down just before the Act came into force. However, in 1970 a new Swiss-owned station, Radio Northsea International, ran a vigorous on-air campaign against the Labour government of the time. Broadcasting during a closely-fought general election under the name Radio Caroline International, it is thought to have swung some key marginal constituencies in southeast England to the Conservatives because it was the first time that under 21s had a vote (Street 2002: 112). The Conservative Party's manifesto included a clear commitment to introduce legal commercial radio (up to 60 stations), and its accession to power was a key moment in the history of radio in the United Kingdom – a victory for ideologues and entrepreneurs alike.

### **'Public service' and news in the commercial context**

Under the Sound Broadcasting Act 1972, Independent Local Radio (ILR) was given a public service duty analogous to that of the BBC to provide 'material of range and balance', including adequate news (Barnard 1989: 74–5). The first two stations, Capital Radio and the London Broadcasting Company (LBC), opened in London, but while the former followed the prescription of the Act, the latter, whose full title was LBC News Radio, was exceptionally required to supply the metropolis with an all-news and information service. For the other local stations that would follow, LBC also operated a networked news service, Independent Radio News (IRN), which was conceived along the lines of Independent Television News and which the stations were required to fund through an annual subsidy. The first commercial radio regulator, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), would allow only the best resourced of the local stations to produce their own news: the others were obliged to broadcast a live three-minute bulletin from IRN, followed by their own local bulletins (Crisell and Starkey 2006: 19).

The public service duty that was imposed on commercial radio soon proved insupportable. Local stations lacked the money to provide 'material of range and balance' that was of adequate quality. Moreover, such a duty was archaically premised on an era in which radio, and not television, was the primary supplier of the public's informational and cultural needs. By forcing the stations to offer a range of material, the IBA also reduced their income because they could not deliver audiences that advertisers could clearly identify. There were other reasons why those great expectations of instant profits failed to materialise: national brands were slow to perceive the potential of advertising on a purely local medium. Its coverage was at first limited to the larger conurbations – London, Birmingham, Manchester,

Glasgow and Liverpool – and a handful of smaller cities and towns, such as Sheffield, Portsmouth and Swansea. In another ideological tussle, the Conservatives ceded power to Labour in 1974. The incoming government, though disinclined to close down those ILR stations that had begun broadcasting and proved popular in their own areas, prevented the fledgling network from expanding beyond 19 stations and thus delayed by several years the development of national coverage.

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### **Farewell to public service: the dawn of deregulation**

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The one thing that the stations could profitably broadcast was pop music, and for the next ten years or more this was the element that was used to package all the other prescribed material – ‘meaningful speech’, news, religious output and items of community interest. Merely to enable the stations to survive, the IBA was gradually obliged to relax its grip. Against increasing competition from pirate operators, it allowed them to stream more of their output and take programme sponsorship. Then at the end of the 1980s they were encouraged to yield identifiable audiences to prospective advertisers by splitting their frequencies, transmitting chart music on FM and, in most cases, golden oldies on AM. This was a reaction to the IBA’s ‘use it or lose it’ decree, a hasty attempt to ensure that their previously simulcast services became alternatives to each other. Only one, Liverpool’s Radio City, chose to assign its AM frequency to speech.

As well as authorising the launch of stations at national and regional level, the Broadcasting Act of 1990 at last relieved independent radio of its residual public service duty and allowed it to ‘chase the market’: local stations were no longer obliged even to carry local news (Radio Authority 1995: 13). Yet in practice many of the stations continued to broadcast news or some form of current affairs and still do. Between 1973 and 1991 Independent Radio News remained in the hands of LBC, but during the 1990s their connection was severed and IRN incurred competition from Network News and Reuters Radio News, whose clients included its own London stations and the national Virgin Radio. IRN’s current competitor is Sky News Radio, later taken not only by Virgin but, ironically, by LBC on both its frequencies.

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### **The survival of news and current affairs on commercial radio**

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If the general supply of broadcast news is more than equal to demand, and if the 1990 Broadcasting Act imposed no specific obligation on the independent stations to do so, why do most of them continue to carry news and current affairs in one form or another? One answer is that since the staple

diet of these stations is recorded music and recorded adverts, news and current affairs provide, along with the presenters' voices, a salutary reminder that radio is fundamentally a *live* medium – that it differs from CDs and similar media in its potential for spontaneity, novelty and unpredictability. Moreover, not only is the music broadcast by these stations not live, it is not local. Hence news and current affairs are also a means of affirming the localness – and at network level even the 'nationalness' – of stations that otherwise carry little other than music of a deracinated, international character.

The challenge for independent radio is how to distinguish such output from the strong and traditional news and current affairs agenda of the BBC – and, indeed, how to make it as entertaining as the music for which most of its listeners have tuned in. The tendency of its news coverage has been to give more prominence to 'human interest' stories and to expand into the associated areas of show business and leisure. Classic FM, for instance, whose main aim is to adapt classical music to the norms of popular culture (Crisell 1994: 76–9), focuses on news of what is happening in the world of the arts and entertainment, while the news bulletins of Virgin Radio (which was rebranded in 2008) contain a large admixture of music and sports items.

In independent radio's coverage of current affairs two trends are discernible. One is a shift from 'political' to softer issues. The other is move away from the 'broadcasterly' modes of reportage and documentary to more audience-focused discussions. One of the first of the national licences that were permitted by the 1990 Broadcasting Act was for an all-speech station, perhaps on the assumption that the speech would consist of informed narrative and debate about political and cultural matters. In the event, the licence was awarded to Talk Radio UK, which launched in February 1995. After an early and unsuccessful experiment with 'shock jocks', it later became Talk Radio and, from January 2000, talkSPORT. But talkSPORT and stations that mix music with a relatively high speech content, such as the regional chain branded as 'Century FM', tend to offer demotic argument and gossip about current issues rather than informed commentary and explanation. Studio guests who have a measure of knowledge or expertise are sometimes present, but while requiring research into the issues that might be discussed and those controversial aspects that will move the discussion along, the journalism needed for such content does not involve much straight reportage, analysis or actuality. Century FM in northeast England, for instance, offers what it terms 'the Century Issue', which is described on its website as:

An in-depth news feature focusing on topical issues facing people across the North East. Tune in three times a day for a full round up of listener reaction, opinions, texts and calls as the Century FM News Team takes you through all the day's headlines.

([www.100centuryfm.com](http://www.100centuryfm.com))

The primary focus here is on *listeners* – on what preoccupies them – rather than on the informers, who, it is promised, merely ‘take you through the headlines’ rather than descend into dry and detailed backgrounding. And the listeners have a double stake in the content because they can not only hear others like themselves expressing the enthusiasms, anxieties and aversions that they share, but also have a multi-media opportunity to make their own contribution to the discussion. Hence for independent radio, news is packaged not so much as a ‘mission to explain’ but as another form of gratification that will capture and hold audiences, and thus advertisers.

### **Other ways to skin the cat: radio, news and propaganda**

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The differences between the BBC and the independent sector are important, but fortunately not matters of life and death. The ideological battle fought on British soil over what institutional form radio should take contrasts sharply with the way the medium was treated in a number of other countries. Since the first telegraphic messages of the Russian communists, radio’s potential as a propaganda tool has been widely perceived. De Gaulle’s broadcasts across the English Channel to France were countered by misinformation transmitted back to Britain by the Nazis. This featured the voice of William Joyce, who became popularly characterised as ‘Lord Haw Haw’. But examples abound even in peacetime. During the ‘Cold War’, which lasted from 1945 to 1990 and followed the division of Europe into two armed camps, one supported by the USA and the other by the Soviet Union, radio was used as a propaganda tool on both sides of the divide (Starkey 2007: 119–20). Propaganda is the antithesis of good journalism: it masquerades as disinterested fact but is intended to serve a particular ideological purpose and we shall consider later under what circumstances, if any, it might be acceptable.

### **Radio journalism under the British broadcasting divide**

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We have seen that radio journalism has exploited technological advance in order to fulfil a human need. Yet despite the ubiquity of print journalism at the beginning of the last century, its development has been relatively slow. A combination of newspaper interests and establishment conservatism delayed the integration of journalism with the new medium of radio, but once ‘radio journalism’ became established it proved more than capable of responding to our need for news and information about the world that lies beyond our own experience. We have also noted how institutional factors and competing ideologies have ensured that contemporary radio broadcasting is

underpinned by two philosophies that are not simply different but fundamentally incompatible (Crisell 2006: 42). The first is the 'public service' philosophy, which regards broadcasting as a common cultural resource that should be as widely accessible as possible and paid for by a tax on all owners of broadcast receivers (in the United Kingdom, of television sets not radios). This philosophy is embodied in the BBC and its aim is to provide the broadest range of content, even that which might not be economically justified in terms of the numbers who want it or could not otherwise afford it. The second philosophy, that of independent radio (and television), is that broadcasting is primarily a market whose products are bought and sold – sold by broadcasters and bought either by audiences or advertisers. As we explore in greater depth the nature and practice of radio journalism, this philosophical divide will underpin our discussion.