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Historical Background: Broadcasting in the 20th Century

1

This chapter considers the development of broadcasting in the 20th century. In particular it discusses:

- The early debates about what broadcasting should be and how it should be funded.
- Clashes between the state and broadcasters
- The role of radio in the Second World War.
- The popularity of television in both the factual and entertainment areas and the most-viewed programmes in the UK and the USA.
- The impact of technological innovations, including satellite transmissions and receiver and development of multi-channel, digital radio and television.
- How radio found a new role in the television age.

The early days of broadcasting

The first scheduled transmissions in the world in a recognisable 'one to many' form of broadcasting were probably in the Netherlands, but historians have also credited the USA with setting up the first full-time radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, which went on air in time to broadcast the results of the 1920 Presidential election. Asa Briggs's authoritative account of the development of the BBC[1] describes the rapidity of the transition from the 'discovery' of the technological ability to transmit speech and music over long distances – which was described as 'radio telephony' – to fully fledged broadcast services in the UK. From the very earliest days, in addition to technical and economic issues, there were in fact questions about what broadcasting – initially of course, radio, or 'the wireless' – was *for*. Was it simply to broadcast events and material that had originated somewhere else – such as relaying an orchestra or a

play, or reading aloud words that had already been produced from the print media – or should it have a particular and unique form? (Many of the early accounts of radio listening, including those very first ones of the BBC, use the term 'listening in': the audience is characterised as eavesdroppers.) What should be its 'grammar' and conventions? How should the audience be addressed: singly or collectively? Indeed, what involvement, if any, should the audience have in the making of the programmes or their consumption? The fascinating thing about this period in broadcasting history is, of course, there were no rules and no templates from which the pioneers could work. They were literally making it up as they went along.

One aspect though was immediately apparent and beyond argument. Unlike the print media, the means of distributing the output – the wavelengths – was limited. This was especially true at night-time, as AM transmissions travel further as the upper atmosphere cools. So unless there was some control over the number and power of transmitters, the airwaves would be a cacophony of inaudible noise, as each station battled to be heard over the others. So, from the start, there was a need to control and regulate the transmissions and from this, most countries concluded that as only a relative few would be able to broadcast, those that were committed were subject to regulation not only of transmission power but of content.

Nevertheless, as radio broadcasting developed in the 1920s and 1930s, different countries with a variety of different political systems and histories adopted different approaches to the new medium, especially its ownership and control. Even in the 21st century, broadcasting in different territories can still be categorised as falling into one or more of these broad definitions:

1. Public service broadcasting (PSB), funded either by a licence fee as with the BBC, or directly through a government grant funded by general taxation, subscription by listeners/viewers and/or controlled and limited advertising. A strong element of independence and separateness from the state and its elites is essential, or the broadcasting would be better described as:
2. Financed and run directly by the state (such as in France), though often (especially post-1990) partly or wholly funded by advertising broadcasting, often proclaimed to be in the national interest, but in reality has strong links with:
3. An arm of state propaganda and control naturally favoured by, and common in, authoritarian states. Here there is little or no pretence that broadcasters have independence but that their broadcasting was under the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.
4. Run on a commercial basis and funded by advertising and sponsorship, generally 'free to air': although there may be some PSB requirements as in (1), perhaps especially in times of emergency, and requirements for accuracy, fairness balance and impartiality in news programmes and discussion of public affairs – such as in the 'Fairness Doctrine' in the USA. In

general, the aim is to maximise audiences by producing mostly popular entertainment shows and broadcasting popular sports and movies in order to produce the greatest profits for the private companies – in some countries these may be partly or wholly owned by the state.

5. Subscription services: the listener/viewer pays either a regular fee for access to certain channels – mostly by cable, or direct broadcasting by satellite (DBS), or on a pay-as-you view/listen basis. Income from this may also be supplemented by advertising.

Broadcasting in the pre- and immediately post-Second World War period tended to be mostly of the type defined in (1) above in the English-speaking countries of the British Empire and Commonwealth. For example, Australia had its ABC and Canada the CBC, both modelled very much on the BBC. Most Western European countries in the pre-and post-Fascist period tended to adopt a model described in (2), whereas of course the Fascist states in the pre-war European era and those in the Socialist/Communist post-Second World War era – up to approximately 1991 – tended to follow (3). The type described in (5) is dependent on technology – the broadcasters have to find a way of ensuring that only those who pay the required fees are able to access the material and this has tended to be via cable services or direct broadcasting by satellite. Until the beginning of the 21st century this was mainly confined to television.

The best-known development of (4) is, of course, in the USA and is often portrayed as being diametrically opposed to (1). However, many of the radio pioneers in the USA thought that the medium should remain essentially a public utility. Later, the public broadcasting system (PBS) and national public radio (NPR) used a combination of public funds and voluntary subscriptions to keep alive the idea of broadcasting as a public service.

Early clashes between the state and broadcasters

In the UK, the 1920s and 1930s were especially eventful, with clashes between organised labour, capitalism and government and, in May 1926, the only General Strike in the country's history. Radio broadcasting was still then in the hands of an amalgamation of private operators under the single British Broadcasting Company. With nearly all newspapers affected by the dispute the government was, naturally, eager to use the new medium to communicate with the population and there was pressure inside the Cabinet for a government takeover. The BBC's then General Manager, John Reith, persuaded the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, to resist this but in doing so assured him that nothing would be broadcast that would inflame the situation. Key figures supporting the strikers' cause were kept off the airwaves, but information which many trade unionists thought was helping to undermine the effectiveness of the strike *was* broadcast. This led to an enduring suspicion, even downright hostility,

towards the BBC, with some activists urging the sabotage of the transmitters of 'the government wireless'.

Reith was keen to maintain government support and realised that if he upset ministers there would be pressure to either take over the company and run it as a state broadcasting service – as was already the case in many other countries – or, even worse in Reith's view, there would be commercial competition, and what Reith called (with pride) 'the brute force of monopoly', would be broken. He argued that competition would inevitably mean a race to the bottom in quality and content, in a bid to attract the most listeners. Reith believed that few people knew what they wanted and fewer still what was good for them, and was determined the BBC should be just ahead of the centre point of public taste, so that broadcasting would be challenging and elevating. He believed in a 'balanced' programme schedule – there would be light entertainment, but it would be almost impossible for a listener to select only the 'lollipops' from the output, because the times and days of these programmes were constantly shifted. Reith's BBC also thought that listening should not be passive – the public was expected to engage with the output. He later equated the introduction of a TV commercial network to an outbreak of smallpox. Reith's view prevailed and a monopoly company became a public monopoly corporation from the start of 1927, with Reith as its first Director-General.

Reith had realised from the start that there was bound to be trouble if the BBC operated its own news, as governments and other powerful interest groups would object to the perceived 'slant' of the bulletins. He therefore ceded control of the limited service it did provide to the national news agencies, who compiled summaries of news for the national radio service, but only in the evenings, and with no information which had not already been printed in that morning's newspapers. This also placated the powerful newspaper proprietors – who had greatly feared the impact of radio on newspaper sales. Crucially, the news was announced in strictly neutral tones and without commentary – indeed, the announcers did not even give their names until the Second World War, and then only because it was thought that, if the country was invaded and the studios taken over, the audience would be alerted to unfamiliar voices posing as BBC staff.

The power and appeal of radio

The terrible human cost of the economic Depression in the decade or so before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, and the period of Appeasement towards Nazi Germany before this, as well as the Abdication Crisis of 1936, led to many such disputes about just how 'neutral' the BBC was in its treatment of highly controversial matters of public policy and debate. However, Reith, the BBC, nor the government could limit the reception of radio waves, which respected neither geographic nor political borders. Spotting a gap in the market and a market in the gap, entrepreneurs set up

English-language entertainment-driven, commercially funded stations broadcasting from the European Continent, such as Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandy. These became hugely successful in Britain in the 1930s, especially on Sundays, which the BBC had determined should be dominated by religious programmes and 'serious' music and talk, which it thought befitting of the Lord's Day. For the working classes though, Sunday was often the only day of rest and surprisingly, these citizens sought more diversionary fare; 'the wireless' provided a cheap way of receiving entertainment, and the continental operators were happy to provide it. Such recordings as survive however indicate that even the commercial operators – who grew to be highly sophisticated, with top-notch recording studios in London, just around the corner from the BBC – were also presented by rather 'plummy' announcers and the tone was set to be 'respectable', so as to attract the middle classes, who would be in a position to buy the advertised products. Furthermore, the programme content was often integrated with its sponsorship – one of the things to which Reith was most opposed – most memorably with Radio Luxembourg's children's show *The League of Ovaltineys*.

The physical limitation on frequencies meant that even in the USA there was a large element of control and regulation, most particularly in the broadcasting of partial, biased coverage of news and current affairs. The partisanship and sensationalism of newspapers may be an important part of a free society but equally, it was widely thought, for radio, a measured and neutral approach was both necessary and desirable. Therefore, radio had the unique power of being both an entertaining and distracting medium, yet one that was thoroughly trusted. It was this power and authority of the medium that led to the extraordinary public reaction to the broadcasting of Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre production on CBS of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* on Hallowe'en night 1938. The production begins with a clear announcement that what is to follow is a drama, played by actors. However, two factors – at least one of which Orson Welles must have been very aware of – led to the confusion, and in some cases outright panic, of perhaps millions of Americans, who thought they were listening to coverage of a real invasion from space. First – and a factor which all radio producers have to bear in mind – is that audiences often tune in to a production after it has started, and in this case many did not hear the opening announcement. Second, the devices, conventions and 'grammar' of real radio reporting were used in a fictionalised context. Breathless announcers handed over to 'reporters' supposedly on the spot, interviewing 'eyewitnesses' and 'experts', just as they would for a real, dramatic news story. Whatever the intentions, the production caused a complete sensation during and immediately after its broadcast and in the coming days and weeks. At the very least, it may have been responsible for several premature deaths from heart attacks and even suicide.

The rise of a mass audience absorbing the same content at the same time in radio's so-called 'golden age' of the 1930s interested a number of academics, as well as other commentators who became concerned about the power of

radio to mould opinion and attitudes. Those on the left of the political spectrum believed that a mass audience, listening to and absorbing the same material at the same time over large distances, could be manipulated into thinking and acting in ways conducive to the state and the economic and political elites behind it. Even when the influence was thought to be rather more benign and prosaic, such as the way that women, in particular, engaged with 'soap operas' (so called because they were often sponsored by the manufacturers of detergent powders) the effects were usually regarded as undesirable; radio being used as a distracter from the individual and group's 'real' economic and political situation. Prominent in this view were those from the Frankfurt School – many of them intellectuals who fled from Nazi Germany and set up or joined research establishments in the USA. They believed that, although the USA was not an authoritarian state, the mass media acted in a more or less uniform way that supported a single, homogenous ideology and there was clearly a danger that this ideology could be used against the interests of the working classes, and indeed the wider world. In addition, some complained that the BBC was far too keen to convey the opinions and interest of other nations and peoples. It certainly did connive with the government's then policy of appeasement in the late 1930s and kept a number of prominent voices from the airwaves, including those of Winston Churchill, then in his 'wilderness years' and warning of the dangers of Nazi Germany.

Radio in wartime

In 1914 the British public learned they were at war, via the newspapers, some hours after the fateful declaration. In 1939 the whole country heard the news at the same time in a 'live' broadcast by the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, from the Cabinet Room at Number 10 Downing Street. Radio now provided the ways in which political leaders and royalty could address their people simultaneously. Winston Churchill – British Prime Minister from May 1940 – adapted his style perfectly for the medium. Radio also boosted morale and helped production of armaments at home by giving airtime to comedians who could provide topical gags, mock Hitler and other leading Nazis, develop catch-phrases so beloved of the British, and in broadcasting music, both 'live' and recorded. And the broadcasts were not confined to the domestic audience: from its beginnings it was clear that radio could permeate geographical and political barriers far more effectively than any other medium. There were high hopes that radio could lead to greater understanding between peoples and reduce the likelihood of conflict – 'nation shall speak peace unto nation' as the (English translation of) BBC's motto puts it, and the Corporation began its Empire Service in 1932, connecting the citizens and leaders of the UK's far-flung territories. In the Second World War, carefully framed news and propaganda of various sorts were also broadcast overseas, to three main audiences. First, to British civilians, especially children, some of

whom were evacuated to Canada – the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret made a famous broadcast to them; second, to the potential fighting men in the British Commonwealth and Empire – notably Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the Caribbean countries – many of whom travelled thousands of miles to fight for Britain and her Allies; and, finally, and perhaps most thrillingly, to the Resistance movements and those who had been shot down or escaped from prison camps in occupied Europe. British listeners became accustomed to hearing strange and clearly coded messages. Exiled leaders, such as France's De Gaulle, were able to address their people from the BBC's studios in London and encourage them to rise up against the occupying forces.

By the end of the War the status of radio could hardly have been higher. Wartime led to the rapid development of the BBC's own, independent (although subject to official censorship during the war), news service. Radio correspondents had been in the thick of the action – indeed often on the front line or, notably in the case of Richard Dimbleby, in a bomber over Germany. The integrity of the BBC was exemplified by Dimbleby when he accompanied Allied troops as they entered Belsen concentration camp. Dimbleby's account of what he had seen seemed so extraordinary and shocking to his masters back in London that they at first declined to broadcast his report, saying they needed confirmation from other sources. Dimbleby threatened to resign unless his report was broadcast; never had the claim that 'journalism is the first draft of history' been made more forcibly.

It was also quickly realised that radio could be used to spread hatred, mistrust and divisions, as well as sapping morale of the people and military in hostile countries. During the Second World War, William Joyce, a failed actor from Britain, though with strong Irish connections and dubbed 'Lord Haw Haw' because of his aristocratic accent and sneering approach, broadcast from Germany to the UK, telling the British that their leader was a drunk, that the war was going badly and that they were being lied to, not least about civilian casualties in the blitz. Opinion surveys showed people who heard the broadcasts *did* have a markedly less positive view of the progress of the war from Britain's perspective, compared with those who had not listened. In the Cold War period (1949–89) both sides used radio for propaganda purposes.

Broadcasting as part of the rituals and routines of life

Sometimes governments with influence over public service broadcasters could 'encourage' the use of popular forms of radio, such as the daily serial or 'soap opera', in a benign way to spread important public service information. So it was that, a few years after the Second World War, BBC radio launched *The Archers*, (originally only in the English Midlands region, where it continues to be produced) to provide important agricultural information along with plot-lines about farmers and villagers in rural England for a country still subject to

food rationing. The programme lost its educational purpose in 1972 but it continues to engage a significant and much-devoted audience, most of whom are not employed on the land or indeed live in rural villages. In an increasingly urbanized – or perhaps more accurately – *sub*urbanised population, the melodramas of the story-lines involving both familiar and newer characters, linked to a supposedly more 'natural' way of living through the rhythms and routines of agrarian society, hold continued appeal and the show celebrated 60 years of national broadcasting in January 2011.

The post-war broadcast schedules tended to follow a regular pattern and sought to both support and blend in with the routines and rhythms of the everyday lives of audiences, so that, for example, weekend schedules tended to feature more entertainment and diversionary programmes than those on week (working) days, although Sundays became established as the 'natural' day for TV costume dramas. But radio, then (also) television, also helped to unite the nation and solidified the rhythms of the year through the broadcasting of state and sporting annual events and rituals. In the UK, these ranged from the rather quintessentially British (perhaps specifically *English*) annual boat race on the Thames river in the spring between teams from Oxford and Cambridge universities, followed within a month or so by the climax of the football season with the Football Association (FA) Final, the Wimbledon lawn tennis championships in early summer and the Test and County cricket matches, through to the State Opening of Parliament and national Remembrance Day commemorations in the autumn. Christmas became one of broadcasting's most important periods in the calendar. Not only did the season often produce the biggest audiences of the year but families and nations could be united through the airwaves, by linking domestic and overseas transmitters, with music request programmes for kith and kin in far-flung corners of the earth, and the annual Christmas message from the monarch, the first being in 1932; the first on television – 'live' – in 1957. Although there was some initial resistance from the establishment, broadcasting quickly came to be regarded as a vital part of state rituals such as the weddings and funerals of royalty; in Britain, the 1953 Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II becoming the 'tipping point' in the public's adoption of television.

Moreover, broadcasting did not just relay existing national rituals and cultural and sporting events: it created its own fixtures in the nation's calendar, or, in the case of the Promenade classical concerts ('the Proms') – performed in London in the late summer – the BBC 'acquired' and so saved an important cultural season, which was facing collapse. The Corporation devised competitions for writers, musicians and budding scientists; it funded its own 'house' orchestras covering both classical and 'light music' repertoires, its own choral singers, its own radio repertory drama company – and a separate one for children's plays and serials. In other words, the BBC became a patron and creator – not just a disseminator – of the arts, culture, science and debate.

Of slightly more dubious cultural value was the annual *Eurovision Song Contest*, held every spring since 1956 – which was originally devised to 'show

off' the network formed by members of the European Broadcasting Union, designed to enable easy exchange between European countries of a wide variety of television material. The contest – the butt of many jokes and much cynicism in the UK, partly due to the increasingly quixotic voting patterns – rather than bringing together the peoples and nations of the continent seemed, if anything, to magnify the cultural and political differences in Europe and produced surges of nationalistic fervour.

Children were thought to be needy and worthy of distinct programmes from early in the establishment of radio – the BBC had a *Children's Hour* (1922–61)[2] featuring stories and drama serials and younger listeners had their own entertainment programmes, as well as more 'worthy' and educational fare, from pre-school age through to adolescence. Television followed a similar development and (astonishing as it seems now) there was so much anxiety about the near-hypnotic attractiveness of the medium to younger viewers that both the BBC – from the resumption of television broadcasting after the Second World War in 1946 – and then also ITV – imposed a 'Toddlers' Truce'; an hour (6–7 p.m.) on weekdays when there were no programmes at all, in order that parents were able to prise their young children away from the sets and to bed. This was imposed until 1957, when it was abolished by both networks.

Television took hold of the public imagination and purse remarkably quickly after the Second World War. In the beginning it mostly adapted radio genres and formats – with the addition of being able to show movies although, in the UK's case, only some years after their theatrical release – but it soon developed its own conventions and 'grammar'. The control and financing of television generally followed the same pattern as had been established for radio.

The BBC's careful, deferential, unemotional and unimaginative approach to news, presented by telegenic announcers, was challenged though by the introduction of Independent Television News (ITN) in 1955. This service of national and international news bulletins for the new commercial network employed journalists as its news*casters* (not news*readers*), many of whom had come from the country's famously robust national newspapers. Their challenging, probing, persistent approach in interviews in particular, as well as their human-interest approach tone and style, combined with (unlike the partisan newspapers) impartiality and fairness, gave it both credibility and popularity.

Politicians found it hard to decide their attitude towards television: they courted it, resented it, and feared its impact on public support and voting behaviour. There was constant tension between the broadcasters and the politicians about the extent of legitimate enquiry and criticism, and for control of the 'news agenda'. Naturally, when politicians had important announcements to make to the nation, they did so on television.

In the UK, the political parties were given free airtime during and between elections, but in the USA politicians and parties had to pay for their slots, leading to a sort of arms' race, with campaigns costing hundreds of millions of

dollars and resulting in candidates without access to big financial 'war chests' and who weren't backed by wealthy individuals and/or corporations being squeezed out of the political system. The first TV US Presidential campaign debates took place in 1960. Surveys showed that those that listened to the radio relay thought that the then Vice-President, Richard Nixon, 'won' the crucial first debate; the larger audience that watched it on television favoured the relatively youthful, tanned, and extremely wealthy John F. Kennedy. Given that the final result was so close it seems likely that television may have influenced the outcome of a hugely important political contest at a time of great world tension between the nuclear superpowers. Moreover, it 'proved' to politicians and their advisors that, in the television age, image was more important than substance.

Elections and broadcasting seemed made for each other. As it happened, the first radio broadcasts – at least in the USA – were made just at the time of the 1920 US Presidential election and two years later in the UK the then British Broadcasting Company came on air just in time for that year's general election. *The Times* recounts special 'listening-in parties' parties being held,[3] with guests gathering around the set for what must have been the extraordinary, novel experience of hearing election results across the country announced to the whole nation within minutes of their declaration. By the late 1950s the TV 'election night special' became established. Not only could the reactions of the victorious and defeated be shown at the time of reckoning, and their speeches relayed from the count, but studio guests could react to this fast-changing event and, using increasingly sophisticated polling sampling and computer software, predict the eventual outcome. Indeed, the use of exit polls – which in the 21st century were to be banned in the UK on the day of the election across all media until the close of polling – led to US networks 'calling' Presidential elections even before many citizens on the west coast, with a time zone three hours behind that in the east, had even cast their vote.

In Britain, the unusually swift transfer of power when the ruling party had been defeated (often less than 18 hours after the close of polls) provided further, live and dramatic evidence of the power of the voters, with television showing history as it was being made. As a guest on BBC television's programme for the 1970 election (when the Labour government was unexpectedly defeated by the Conservatives) noted however, at that time only perhaps 20 countries in the world were able to boast of such a peaceable, democratically induced transfer of power. Much of the world, notably the huge Communist countries, China and the Soviet Union, remained closed to the prying eye of the TV news reporter and camera, but when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in November 1963 the nation's citizens coast to coast learnt of his death minutes after it had been confirmed by the local hospital. Although transatlantic satellite time was expensive and had to be pre-booked – meaning that viewers in Europe initially had little more than newsreaders intoning information gleaned from the press wires – once satellite links were scrambled the continents were united in grief for the slain President.

However, the only pictures of the assassination came (some time later) from the home movie of a bystander; never again would a US President be in a public place – no matter how much the occasion lacked news value – without TV crews being present, 'just in case'.

Television took over from the weather as the main starting point – sometimes the *whole* point – of conversations. Public discourse was moulded and stimulated by the ideas and imagination of creative programme makers who used the medium to entertain, enlighten, educate and sometimes to provoke. The British also seemed to be especially fond of catch-phrases, used in comedy and entertainment shows and some dramas, as well of course as a deliberate ploy in advertising slogans (although these would often be 'reproduced' in an ironic or facetious manner in social discourse). A society still riven by class divisions – often nuanced to an extraordinary degree – industrial disputes, and tensions caused by differences in manners, dress and accents, found a common ground in using such phrases in all manner of conversations.

There were tensions in some countries, including the UK, about the balance between national and local/regional broadcasting. John Reith forcibly merged the many local stations that his new company inherited in the early 1920s, and developed a National Programme, imposing the accents, views and attitudes of the English upper middle-classes across the nation or nation*s*. Some variety was allowed in the 'Regional Programme', which led to some ground-breaking features and documentaries, but many parts of the UK, such as in northern England and most especially in what the BBC referred to as 'the national regions' of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, continued to feel throughout the 20th century that their cultures and languages/dialects were being suppressed, or at least not being given sufficient airtime. This was partly dealt with by regional 'opt-outs' on TV and radio, the establishment of a commercial TV network based on regional franchises, a Welsh-language channel formed from a unique partnership between commercial operators and the BBC, the development of local radio on the BBC from the late 1960s and commercial (or 'independent') local radio from the early 1970s – which was generally more successful the further the location from London, and especially so in the central belt of Scotland, south Wales and in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the tensions remained between the national and the local/regional – as they did over the larger constitutional question of the proper relationship between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

Continued conflicts between broadcasters and the state

National and international radio broadcasts from the BBC infuriated the British government during the Suez Crisis of 1956. In an uncanny parallel to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the British – this time with the French, and without the support, or even knowledge, of the Americans – used a pretext to invade the Suez Canal, a hugely important conduit of oil from the Middle East

to Europe, which had been nationalised by the Egyptian President, Colonel Nasser. Like Iraq nearly 50 years later, the action divided the nation. The BBC sought to reflect opposition to the invasion but the Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, thought the Corporation should uncritically support government policy, especially after 'our boys' were sent into action, and threatened to cut the Foreign Office grant that funded the Corporation's external services. The military action quickly ended when a furious US President threatened to bring down the UK economy – the country was still hugely in debt to the Americans due to loans given during and after the Second World War. Eden resigned soon afterwards, supposedly due to ill health, and, as in the aftermath of the Iraq war, public opinion surveys indicated that it was the government's reputation that was tarnished and the broadcasters' enhanced.

Politicians, the military and (often self-appointed) 'moral guardians' constantly fretted about the impact of television, which was blamed, amongst many other things, for eroding the American public's support for the Vietnam War (1963–75). When, in February 1968, CBS TV news' main 'anchor', Walter Cronkite – whom polls had shown was the most trusted person in America – returned from visiting the front line in Vietnam and told his viewers that, in his opinion, the country was involved in a conflict which it was not winning and could not win, the then US President declared that he knew he had 'lost America' and, within a month, announced he had decided not to contest another term in office. This was a lesson not lost on the British military who, some 15 years later, in the relatively small war over the Falklands (Malvinas) Islands – British territory in the South Atlantic which was invaded by Argentina in 1982 – told broadcast journalists that they would not enable them to 'do a Vietnam', and greatly restricted access to, and broadcasting from, the front line, or from ships that had been bombed. The military successfully blocked the transmission of moving pictures until the British forces had successfully recaptured the islands. In the age of television 'live' satellite feeds, the Falklands conflict was a 'radio war'.

The British government was also concerned regarding broadcasters giving legitimacy to 'terrorists' involved in the 30-year period (1969–98) of 'The Troubles' between Britain and (Northern) Ireland. Most countries had debates about the medium's 'responsibility' for increasing licentious behaviour and use of 'bad language' – especially by the young. And there was concern for the erosion of communities and deference towards authority and institutions – secular and religious – and all manner of psychosocial phenomena.

Continued debate over the purpose and potential of television

Throughout the 1950 to the 1970s there were continued tensions over the purpose of television: was it simply a 'goggle box', there to provide light relief and entertainment, or did it have a higher purpose; to educate, inform, stimulate

debate and hold the powerful to account? Perhaps both – but who decided how much of the former compared with the latter? Overall, three main types of output attracted mass audiences and, even in many authoritarian states, tended to dominate the airwaves, certainly at peak times. These were: dramas or 'soaps', quiz shows and sport. Most television in most of the world consisted either of government-sponsored propaganda, both covert and overt, or of mass entertainment programmes. In South America *Telenovellas* or soap operas produced the highest audiences. In Asia the Japanese-made drama *Oshin* was broadcast by 26 countries, including China and India. The Hindu story *Ramayana* was so popular that riots occurred when a power cut occurred during one of the transmissions, and the opposition BJP persuaded one of its stars to stand for election. In the USA, the drama *Roots* (1977) promoted better understanding about its racist history and thus creating greater empathy by its white citizens of European origin towards African–Americans, and the sitcom *M*A*S*H* (1972–83), although ostensibly about the Korean War of the 1950s, was 'really' about the Vietnam War, which was still in progress during the first couple of seasons of the show and, through dialogue and situations which provoked laughter and tears, helped heal a very divided nation.

In the UK, the commercial broadcasters, as well as the BBC, were required to be public service broadcasters in ethos and practice – and this was specified to a large extent through particular requirements for quality and quantity of, for example, news and current affairs, and in catering for a wide variety of taste and interests. Advertising on the commercial network was limited to 'natural breaks' between and within programmes and advertisers could not sponsor the output or directly influence programme-making decisions and both the BBC and commercial channels demonstrated that they could be both educational and entertaining. Even the 'soap operas' reflected many of the changes and debates in society. Many also contained profundity and wit, not least *Coronation Street*, which began in 1960, networked from the following year and which has rarely been out of the top 10 most viewed programmes ever since. The 50th anniversary celebrations in 2010 (by then the longest-running programme of its type in the world and shown in some 35 countries) not only included many tributes from politicians, artists and other commentators, but a dramatisation – on the BBC – of its beginnings.[4] This highlighted the conflict between its writer and creator and some of the executives and shareholders at the network that produced it, Granada Television, based in Manchester, as to whether a show about 'ordinary' people, who had strong north of England accents (which had until then had mostly been heard in the national media only in a comedic context) would have resonance over the whole nation – or even be understood. It may have been designed to appeal – and certainly did appeal – to 'ordinary' working-class viewers, but it was admired by many from the cultural elites who compared its writing and performances to the best that has ever been achieved in any medium and, most impressively, the standard was achieved not just a few times in the life of the artistes and producers, but week after week.

Its theme tune, as with those of other popular shows, became like trumpet calls to the nation's citizens, who gathered around the television set, which mostly had pride of place in the main living room. The TV became the electronic fireplace of the 20th century; the equivalent of the gathering of family and tribe around the fire in pre-industrial times; a place in which stories would be heard, songs would be performed and where discussions on matters of the moment would be generated and conflicts resolved. In TV's case, however, the *same* entertainments, the *same* debates and the *same* instruction and transfer of knowledge took place simultaneously in homes across the country at the *same* time. The impact of entertainment programming being seen across a nation was exemplified by the appearances of The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on the US network CBS in February 1964. So large was the audience (for the first of the three consecutive Sunday night appearances this was estimated to be 73 million, then the highest on record) and so intense the interest in the 'Fab Four' young men from England that in many American cities recorded crime fell to almost zero!

Although it is usual to discuss the medium's reception in group form, there is no doubt it was also a tremendous alleviator of loneliness, boredom and isolation – geographic and/or socially by those living on their own, out of choice or necessity and whether forcibly confined to the home through disability or other factors. The 'baby boom' generation who entered their teens and twenties from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, benefited from post-war affluence. However, many did not live in or near the big cities, so programmes featuring the latest music, fashion and dance steps could be followed through programmes such as *Ready, Steady, Go!,* broadcast early on Friday evenings from 1963–66 on the UK's commercial TV channel, which kept the youth of the country connected to the fast-changing cultural scene, wherever they might live. The BBC's *Top of the Pops* (1964–2006) did the same job for a much longer period – although arguably with less flair and zest.

Debates and controversies, as well as the 'pleasures' of entertainment programmes and dramas, could be followed in the ensuing press coverage. Some of these had a strong 'message' about aspects of society; one BBC play, *Cathy Come Home* (1966), led directly to the start of a national charity for the homeless. By the end of the 1960s, television was the main conduit through which intellectuals, artists, writers, historians and scientists, as well as entertainers, were able to obtain a mass public impossible in the pre-broadcasting age.

Television was especially effective in bringing the natural world into living rooms and, in many countries, education in the broadest sense was augmented in television (as it had been from the early days of radio) by formal education programmes, both to support school curricula, then for adult education, and in Britain, from 1971, by the Open University. This new form of distance learning, supported by written materials and some traditional lectures at weekend and summer schools, allowed many people who, for a variety of reasons, were unable to attend traditional universities to acquire a degree –

and one which was internationally respected. Moreover, the TV and radio programmes provided a first-class higher education teaching to those who were not enrolled on the course but nevertheless were able to learn about diverse subjects, from astronomy to sociology. This was broadcasting that met the highest purposes that Reith and other originators of broadcasting systems would surely have approved. Indeed, the original meaning of 'broadcasting' was to spread seeds – so broadcasting can be seen to be spreading seeds of knowledge and promoting debate, based on rational discussion, something that was also true to the spirit of the European Enlightenment.

The demands and rewards of 'the golden age of television'

Television, like radio, gobbled up material and comedians, in particular, realized that, in contrast to a career in theatrical and club performances where they could build a whole career on perhaps a thirty minutes' routine, in radio and then television they needed fresh material each week, so writers and producers became hugely important in the entertainment industry. The performers also needed to realise that, just as radio required a very different speaking style (intimate and conversational, rather than the declamatory and hectoring approach often used for public meetings), so the use of exaggerated gestures and strong vocal performances, essential to reach the back rows of a theatre audience, were completely unsuitable for television. Some, some such as Britain's Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise, took a while to realise this. Their early TV forays were a disaster. One critic wrote that a TV set could be defined as 'the box in which they buried Morecambe and Wise' – and they nearly gave up the business. But when a strike denied them their usual big stage sets and cast they were forced to work close to camera and to rely on their charm and personal relationships to engage the audience, who were watching them on a flickering black and white screen at home. They then became so successful that their Christmas TV Shows on the BBC (1969–77), by then in colour, were watched by the end of this run by half the population, including the Royal Family who, in the days before video cassette recorders, would, like millions of their subjects, organise their Christmas Day activities around the show. Eddie Braben, Morecambe and Wise's scriptwriter in this period, later talked about the pressure he felt for being responsible for the success and happiness of so many people's Christmases.

Situation comedies (sitcoms) often had the most impact both in audience ratings – and often come top in polls of the most fondly remembered television and because, in most cases, the comedy derived from the characters and situations, rather than 'gags' or visual set-ups, they had a vitality and relevance to the politics and culture of a nation. One of the most significant of these in the UK was the BBC sitcom *Till Death Do Us Part*, which ran from 1965 to 1968 and then in various forms, including a spin-off, in the 1970s and 1980s. Recorded as close as possible to transmission in order to ensure topicality, it

centred on clashes between the generations (forced by economic circumstances to live under the same roof), and discussed politics, attitudes towards race issues, immigration and other highly controversial issues at a time when society was in flux. Its use of 'strong' language and its rawness in the attitudes of its characters led to opposition by 'moral' campaigners, as well as questions in Parliament. And this was not a purely British phenomenon; there were versions in many other countries, including Germany, Brazil and Hong Kong and the USA (*All In The Family*), which was also shown in the UK.

Traditional variety shows continued to flourish for the first three decades or so of television as a mass medium. In the UK, jugglers, magicians, acrobats and ventriloquists found employment on both BBC and commercial networks, especially at the weekends, with the BBC featuring a Saturday night show, 'live' from its own television theatre – a converted former music hall (vaudeville theatre) in west London – often hosted by a 'pop' star; the old and new popular cultures often sitting uneasily with each other. The BBC gave its support and airtime to the surreal and cerebral comedy of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969–74) and the more eclectic end of the rock/folk/blues genres in *The Old Grey Whistle Test* (1971–88), but it also featured the easy-listening music and whimsical comedy of *The Val Doonican Show* (1965–86) and the singing and dancing of white singers 'blacked up' in *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (1958–78), featuring – although not limited to – the Dixieland routines (complete with period costumes) of an earlier period in the deep south of the USA. The artistes and producers said they were both baffled and hurt by suggestions that the performers used racist gestures and mannerisms, but in the end the Corporation accepted that, despite the programme's enduring popularity – it reached audiences of 18 million – in an increasingly multi-ethnic country, which was becoming more sensitive to the portrayal of racial and other minorities, it had to go.

Television transformed by technology and politics

The broadcasters' use of satellite communications and the use of increasingly lightweight cameras, video replacing film – meaning material no longer had to be developed and processed – and synchronised sound meant that reports had an increasingly 'real' feel to them and could either be sent 'live' or completed shortly before transmission. Now, the tragedies of mankind were laid bare on the evening news. Consciences were stirred, protests organised and, sometimes, politicians and military leaders were shamed into relieving suffering, and gathered round the peace table. Television provided a truly global, communal experience – an extraordinary development in human history – for everything from the viewing of the Moon landings (1969–72), to the Olympics and other international sporting events and the Live Aid pop/rock events in 1985. The impact of 'live' worldwide transmission of events did not go unnoticed by those with malign intent, and just as revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries and invaders

quickly learned that the occupation of broadcast stations provided both legitimacy and confirmation of their success, so terrorists realised that the taking of hostages, the blowing up of aircraft and the planting of bombs would have far more impact if they could be sure it would be broadcast on 'live' TV. The abduction and murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics provided the grisly and tragic proof that television did indeed have the power to show the greatest and worst aspects of humanity.

For the viewer, the most important single change was the arrival of colour television. There was rapid take-up of new sets in the late 1960s through to mid-1970s and although the move to colour did create considerable extra cost for the TV companies, public service broadcasters such as the BBC benefited from a huge increase in income through a higher colour licence imposed on all households with such a set, and commercial broadcasters were able to raise their rates as advertisers found the medium was now even more effective in selling their wares. International sales of programmes increased, especially from the USA, but some from the UK went in the reverse direction; certainly the UK television industry fared better than its movie equivalent in persuading the Americans of the value of British cultural production.

The 1970s saw the high point of television as a medium in which the population watched the same programmes at the same time. Only by the end of the decade did the domestic video cassette recorder (VCR) offer the prospect for 'time-shifted' viewing. The launch of music television (MTV) in 1981, featuring the fast-moving pop promo videos, linked by video jockeys (VJs) led to a host of imitators and challenged radio's dominance as the chief way that young people would have access to music any time of the day or night.

The UK then initiated another form of PSB. Channel 4, which began broadcasting in 1982, was designed to complement the main ITV commercial channel by providing different perspectives, forms and attitudes. This included the UK's first daily hour-long news programme. Supervised by a non-executive Board of 'the great and the good' and funded by advertising, with airtime initially sold by the regional ITV companies, who also subsidised it in its early years, it revolutionised the UK television industry because nearly all its output was commissioned from independent producers. No longer did you have to be directly employed by an ITV company or the BBC to work in television. Ironically, given that it was created by the first of the governments under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – the most right-wing since the Second World War – the station quickly became known as the most subversive anti-Thatcherite channel. Even the news, although maintaining due impartiality in strict terms, in tone and attitude had a clear leftish approach.

By the end of the decade, the BBC and ITV companies were also compelled to offer a significant portion of airtime to independent producers. ITV companies were then auctioned to the highest bidder – subject to a 'quality' test – and commercial radio was freed of its PSB obligations, with new, national stations also auctioned to the highest bidder, but all British broadcast news, on whichever channel/medium, had continued obligations to be fair, accurate and

impartial. The 1990s saw market forces, de-regulation and other political, economic and technical factors having a major impact on most broadcasting systems. By the end of the century, direct broadcasting by satellite (DBS) in the UK and a multiplicity of channels afforded by cable in the USA, including a 'rolling news' channel, CNN, meant that the dominance of the free over-the-air broadcast networks would be greatly eroded.

The most-watched TV programmes of the 20th century

Identifying the most watched TV programmes of the 20th century can provide a useful indication of the attractiveness of different types of output – of *genres* and the sort of programmes that have brought the public to the TV sets *en masse* at the same time. Such tables do not necessarily reflect the most-watched programmes week in and week out – generally in the UK, aside from the occasional sports' event, these tend to be the 'soaps' and other popular dramas – but rather tend to reflect the extraordinary pull of 'special events' (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2).[5]

Although there is a preponderance in the USA of 'live' coverage of the Super Bowl finals, supplemented by coverage of two days of a Winter Olympics, with only the final episodes of two enormously successful sitcoms and the most talk-about episode of the most successful 'soap opera' otherwise making it to the list, it is the UK that has a sporting event at the very top; a figure that is unlikely ever to be surpassed (and not just because, at the time of writing, it seems unlikely, in my opinion, that England's soccer team will ever again reach

Table 1.1 All-time most watched TV programmes in UK to 2000

	Programme	*Year*	*Audience (millions)*
1*	World Cup Final 1966	1966	32.30
2*	Funeral of Princess Diana	1997	32.10
3*	The Royal Family	1969	30.69
4	EastEnders	1986	30.15
5*	Apollo 13 splashdown	1970	28.60
6*	Royal Wedding – Prince Charles and Princess Diana	1981	28.40
7*	Royal Wedding – Princess Anne and Capt. Mark Phillips	1973	27.60
8	Coronation Street	1989	26.93
9	Only Fools and Horses	1996	24.35
10	EastEnders	1992	24.30
11	Royal Variety Performance	1965	24.20
12*	News – assassination of President Kennedy	1963	24.15

* Aggregate of audiences from BBC1 and ITV. Nos. 4, 9 and 10 were shown on BBC1; 8 and 11 on ITV.
Source: 'BFI most watched' 1950s–1990s.

Table 1.2 All-time most watched TV programmes in USA to 2000

	Programme	*Year*	*Audience (household/millions)*
1	M*A*S*H (last episode)	1983	50.15
2	XV11 Winter Olympics 2nd Wed.	1994	45.69
3	Super Bowl XXX	1996	44.15
4	Super Bowl XXV111	1994	42.86
5	Cheers (last episode)	1993	42.36
6	Super Bowl XXX1	1997	42.00
7	Super Bowl XXV11	1993	41.99
8	XV11 Winter Olympics – 2nd Fri.	1994	41.54
9	Super Bowl XX	1986	41.49
10	Dallas (Who Shot JR?)	1980	41.47
11	Super Bowl XV11	1983	40.48
12	Super Bowl XV1	1982	40.02

Source: Nielsen Media Research, 1961–1999.

the final of a world tournament). Aside from that World Cup Final, four from the UK chart are aggregate figures from 'live' coverage of events – a brace of royal weddings, the funeral of Princess Diana, the dramatic Apollo 13 splashdown, when the American astronauts were in mortal peril, plus the (never repeated) documentary on the Royal Family, one sitcom and three 'soap' episodes. Perhaps surprisingly, according to these figures, only one Christmas Day show makes the list – the 1986 episode of *EastEnders*. The latest date for a top-12 rated programme was 1996 (USA) and 1997 for the UK, but in the latter case this was for the extraordinary circumstances of the funeral of Princess Diana and, despite the ever growing coverage of TV and the ownership of sets, half of the most-watched programmes date from 1973 or earlier. Further audience figures, comparing those at the peak of television's 'golden age' with figures from thirty years later, are discussed in Chapter 3.

Radio finds a new role

In the meantime, the senior broadcast medium needed to find a new role, purpose and attraction in the latter part of the 20th century. Fortunately, two developments provided salvation. First, the invention of the transistor radio meant that the medium could now be truly heard 'anytime, anywhere'. Second, was the development of a new form of popular music – rock 'n' roll – and the post-war affluence in the west, which created new identities and patterns of consumption. The radio companies developed formats that could accompany daytime activities and provide companionship, whilst at night-time many geared themselves towards teenagers and young people. In the USA, network programming with a full and varied schedule of programmes,

gave way to locally based (although the 50,000 watt clear-channel stations could be heard over much of the continent after dark) mostly music-based services, hosted by high-energy disc jockeys; so program*mes* were largely replaced by program*ming* of a single genre. Unlicensed radio from international waters broadcast to many European countries from 1958, such stations peaking in the British case in the period of 1964–70 but not finally extinguished until 1990, and to New Zealand from 1966 to 1970. Both north and south of the equator the 'pop pirates' led to the breaking of monopolies and to licensed commercial radio. Nevertheless, public service broadcasters, such as the BBC, maintained high-quality, well-produced radio news and current affairs, documentaries, music concerts, comedy, quizzes and drama – with the 'mixed speech' network, Radio 4, continuing to achieve a mass audience, indeed becoming the most listened-to station in London – the most competitive radio market in Europe. Radio was still the entry point for many people to types of music, drama, science and philosophy, which might otherwise have remained closed to them. BBC radio continued to nurture writers, producers and performers, with many (especially in the comedy sketch-shows and sitcoms' genres) transferring shows first established on radio to television – where the financial rewards were greater.

The lack of representation of 'ordinary people' though exercised many, including BBC radio producer Charles Parker, who, from the late 1950s, produced a series of ground-breaking documentaries on various aspects of the lives of working people and those – such as 'travelling people' – whose experiences and perspectives are hardly ever reflected on mainstream media. The work of Charles Parker and his associates continues to inspire radio producers and educationalists – there is an annual prize for radio-feature making in his name, and his archive, contained in Birmingham Central Library, receives many appreciative visitors. The talk-back or radio phone-in type of programme took off in the 1970s, becoming a staple of most local radio stations and seemingly provided radio with a democratic flavour, often lacking in television.

Mirroring the much later development of digital audio broadcasting (DAB), broadcasts on FM from the mid-1950s and then the advent of stereo, greatly improved the listening experience, as well as enabling many new stations to take to the air. The early development of FM in many countries – including the USA – meant that a greater variety of 'voices', music and opinions, especially those of African–Americans, were given airtime, but gradually, as FM listening matched then overtook AM, most of the stations became incorporated into the mainstream. In the UK, the 'rationing' of recorded music on licensed stations forced the broadcasters to seek new, unsigned talent, or bring in established artists to record new material in specially recorded sessions. This enabled DJs such as John Peel on BBC Radio 1 to provide a much wider range of material for his listeners than was usual on commercial stations, which tended to rely on records from artists who were already successful. As will be argued in Chapter 4, the death of radio, so often predicted from the beginnings

of television, was to be disproven not only in the latter part of the 20th century, but well into the 21st.

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2. It continued until 1964 under the title *For The Young*.
3. The Times (16 November, 1922) *Broadcasting Results – Listening-In Parties*, p.12.
4. (BBC, 2010) *The Road to Coronation Street,* first transmitted BBC4 and BBC HD, 16 September.
5. There is a problem of inconsistency with the different methods of ratings: the USA continues to quote the numbers of *households* from their sample viewing particular programmes, and ranked in order of percentage of TV-owning households tuned in to the programme, whilst Britain quotes the *total* audience. Not only that, but Britain's ratings aggregate the total viewing audiences when either the same programme is being simulcast, the same event is being covered, or – as in the case of no.12 – when they are news broadcasts on the same approximate time period following the same event (the assassination of President Kennedy). The figures from the USA do not take into account any of these factors, but as there is not the 'tradition' of simulcasting the same programme and there is more likely to be exclusivity in the coverage of sporting events, there could well be higher figures and a change in the rankings if, for example, news programmes across the networks had been amalgamated. This might also have skewed the eras represented in the ratings; the UK's includes programmes from 1963–97; whilst in the USA the earliest show represented is in 1982.

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