

Public Issue Radio: Talks, News and Current Affairs in the Twentieth Century

Review Number:

1219

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 March, 2012

Author:

Hugh Chignell

ISBN:

9780230247390

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

264pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Jason Loviglio

Hugh Chignell's well-researched volume tells the story of the development of current affairs programming on British radio, which, we learn, is inextricably tied to the 'painfully slow development of news' programming on the BBC. To explain the significance of the separation and elaboration of these two forms of broadcasting, Chignell begins with the Victorian 'rigid class hierarchies' (p. 16) separating mere *reporters* (who dutifully wired the raw facts of unfolding events on the front lines) from highly educated *correspondents* (who sent their reflective and more subjective pieces by post) (p. 16). This sharp distinction between news and current affairs was unique to the British system and, Chignell argues, it influenced 'the shape and nature of public issue radio for the rest of the century' (p. 20).

But, like many distinctions and hierarchies of the Victorian era, the ones that shaped the origins of the BBC's approach to news and commentary were in for a series of shocks and ironic challenges throughout the 20th century. Under John Reith, the BBC's first and iconic leader, the Victorian disdain for journalism (and for the newspapers' tendency towards scandal, hyperbole, and excess) meant that what would become one of the foremost journalistic organizations of the century began with a rather anemic news operation.

Another irony, Chignell calls it an 'unintended consequence', was that the early Reithian imperative to air 'the best that has been thought and said' on the network gave a soapbox to members of Britain's cultural elite, many of whom held – and expressed – 'dangerously radical views'. Prominent figures like H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw and Leonard Woolf, 'who were variously socialist, communist, pacifist,

atheist, and who held views almost completely at odds with Reith's own beliefs', took to the air in the early days of the BBC 'Talks' (p. 28). The tug-of-war between conflicting imperatives is inevitable in any institution as large, as consequential, and as closely identified with both a government and a people as the BBC became. For 'the most famous cultural institution in the world' these struggles comprise a significant chapter of the history of the 20th century (p. 7).

The splitting of Talks and News into distinct departments began in 1935, and led to the creation of 'separate cultures and identities' whose impact can still be felt. In 1935, this separation came during a shift to conservative rule in the government and thus in the possibilities of BBC's programming. American readers of this book will perhaps be surprised to learn that the NPR (National Public Radio)'s 40 year history of fending off (and also caving in to) charges of 'left-wing bias' from conservative elements in the government and the press has a precedent at the BBC starting as early as the 1930s (p. 17). 'The BBC was under constant pressure from the government ... and the right wing press' (p. 26). Despite the very real pressure exerted from these quarters, and despite his own conservatism, Reith's refusal to back down from airing controversial broadcasts during the Great Depression provides for some dramatic scenes and challenges the stereotype of him and his network as stuffy and cautious. When summoned by Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and ordered by him to stop airing broadcasts featuring the voices and experiences of the unemployed:

Reith responded by acknowledging that the government had the power to do this but that if they did he would, 'at that time in the schedule when the talks should be given, instruct the announcer to declare that the next twenty minutes would be silent because the Government had refused to allow the unemployed to express their views'. The series continued (p. 23).

The Talks department, chivvied by political pressure and by an institutional 'anxiety' regarding the airing of controversial matters, shied away from covering some of the most urgent matters in foreign affairs and domestic affairs in the 1930s. Thus the British listening public had little exposure to the brewing calamities in Spain and Germany and, after 1935, to the voices and experiences of those at home suffering the most from the Depression. This problem was most urgent, of course, in the case of the rise of Nazi Germany. 'The tension between the growing German threat on the one hand, and the peace-making, official policy of appeasement on the other, placed the BBC in an almost impossible position' (p. 27). Remarkably, as late as early 1939, the network was fending off charges of being 'alarmist, sensational, and rumour-mongering', as regards the threat from Germany. Like so many conventions and traditions, the BBC's Arnoldian notions of culture and its reluctance to develop a full complement of news-gathering reporters, were confronted by the unprecedented urgency of the Second World War.

Chignell tracks News and Talks through the next several decades, measuring the effect of 'personal, institutional and cultural' forces on their separate, but linked, evolution into the modern versions we know today. Chignell's attention to the personal forces that shaped the news and commentary of the BBC – and later, of local, independent, and commercial broadcasters – is deftly woven into the larger institutional and cultural context. In this way, we come to know the people behind the programming as actors working within the constraints and opportunities of their place and time.

Readers unfamiliar with the dramatis personae of the BBC will be struck by the remarkable number of women, starting with Hilda Matheson, in critically important roles both in front of and behind the microphones of the BBC's public affairs programming. Matheson, chosen by Reith to be the first Director of Talks in the 1920s, epitomized the tension between cultural elitism and political radicalism that characterized the early years of the network's news and commentary. 'A political radical, a lesbian and a feminist', Matheson was also spectacularly well connected to Britain's literary elite, including Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, and Wells, and brought them before the BBC's microphones. It was Matheson who brought the 'intimate mode of address' to the BBC airwaves, supplanting the previous formal, declamatory style.

As the book moves chronologically through the 20th century, other key figures appear. Sir Richard

Maconachie, who ran the Talks Department after the split of talks and news in 1936, was another key figure in the evolution of the network's coverage of important public affairs. His horror of controversy and of the appearance of bias, along with his disdain for journalism, (all of which put him in the mainstream of the network at the time), led him to the novel solution of broadcasting interviews with newsmakers. The interview provided a way of handling potentially controversial subjects, while shaping the future direction of the BBC's coverage of news and public affairs for decades to come (p. 19).

J. B. Priestley, the popular novelist, playwright, and Second World War broadcaster also makes an appearance in these pages, though it is the import of his radio talks 'as radio' that draws Chignell's attention (p. 43). Priestley is to be remembered above all for 'the sound of his voice', the intimacy of his tone, and his 'soft Yorkshire accent, unusual of course in a BBC still dominated by southern middle-class accents' (p. 45). To an American historian of radio, the description of Priestley's contributions to wartime British radio on *Postscripts* in 1940 and 1941 evokes nothing so much as the short-lived wartime broadcasts of Eleanor Roosevelt. In particular, Priestley's political priorities evoke the 1940–1, *Pan-American Coffee Hour* broadcasts of Mrs. Roosevelt, with their emphasis on the importance of 'the people' in national life, the looking forward to a more just post-war society, and the linking of the struggle against the Germans to the larger struggle 'to bring into existence an order of society in which nobody will have far too many rooms in a house and nobody have far too few' (p. 47). There are some striking stylistic similarities as well, including the use of personal pronouns, ('I wonder how many of you feel as I do') and the easy movement back and forth from descriptions of war ('a sky belching death') to the quotidian pleasures of the home front ('the red japonica or the cherry and almond blossom'). Eleanor Roosevelt's wartime radio career was cut short too, a victim of political foes in Congress, parallel to Priestley, who saw his regular gig on *Postscripts* cut short in 1941 by Churchill, or so he believed(46–7).

The account of Priestley's unique contribution to the sound of the BBC serves as an excellent introduction to the remarkable transformation of the network during the war. Despite a rocky start, the BBC's reputation for news coverage was, by the end of the war, 'covered in glory.' The close identification between the network and Great Britain intensified during the conflict, as wartime censorship narrowed the gap between the national interest and the BBC's understanding of the public interest. During the worst of the crisis, the fortunes of the network seemed inextricable from those of the nation itself. Its coverage of D-Day, for instance, presented a challenge as daunting, in radio terms, as the invasion was in military terms. By the final year of the conflict, the BBC was the medium by which Britons came to understand the war.

Massive growth in the news staff and structural changes to the network were instrumental in this transformation. From just two reporters before the war to the 19 who covered the D-Day landing, to the new recording technology, including portable disc recorders, the BBC invested heavily in the infrastructure of news. Under A. P. Ryan, a News Division was created that merged the older Talks and News and reflected the new urgency of informing the public rather than the older Reithian imperatives of 'mixed programming', and 'uplift' (p. 49). Chignell identifies other changes, including the rise of 'radio magazine' formats, which would come to dominate the daytime schedule for many years. Also, the 'personalization' of the news, starting with Priestley's commentaries, expanded to news presenters, in the name of national security:

In the pre-war BBC, it was an article of faith that news announcers should all sound the same and remain anonymous. But anxiety over the risk of enemy impersonators taking over the airwaves led to news announcers identifying themselves ... This identification allowed for greater intimacy between listener and the announcer although it was of course true that they all sounded the same (p. 53).

The chronological structure of the book affords Chignell an opportunity to characterize the big changes in radio formats, BBC departmental organization, and historical events that compel changes in coverage. But it also tends toward oversimplification, especially in the later chapters, which are organized around a single decade and single theme: decline in the post-war era, reinvention in the 60s, uncertainty in the 90s, and so forth. While these themes are often borne out in the excellent close readings of specific programs and presenters, they also have a tendency to narrow the complexity of influences – personal, institutional, and cultural – bearing on the changes being wrought in radio news and current affairs. In fact, the chapters

themselves often speak to this complexity, even at the cost of staying true to the theme and time period of the chapter title.

This 'schematic account', as Chignell calls it, does usefully provide signal moments or historical 'examinations' for the utility of various formats and approaches to the news and current affairs.

The radio talk had its greatest examination, and its moment of glory, in the wartime radio talks of J. B. Priestly. Much later in the century, Radio Four's *Analysis* was tested by the rise of neoliberalism, and for *At Home and Abroad* there was the greatest debacle of British foreign policy of the twentieth Century, Suez (p. 72).

The crisis over the Suez Canal helped to bring about the end of the 'notorious Fourteen Day Rule, which prohibited the coverage of issues due to be debated in parliament in the following fortnight' (p. 60). It took real historical crises, and the imperative to cover them, to jettison the decades-old traditions and hesitancy that hampered the BBC's development into a first-rate news broadcasting organization. The return of the old division between News and Talks post-war, and the exceeding caution and aversion to controversy of the Tahu Hole era, is characterized as a period of 'decline', which gives way, by the 1960s, to an era of 'reinvention'.

The 1970s, dubbed here 'The critical decade', bring us another key figure, and another of the powerful women who shaped the BBC during key moments of transformation in the network and in Britain at large. Mary Goldring, the Thatcher-esque – and perhaps Thatcherite – presenter, then lead presenter, of the current affairs program *Analysis*, epitomizes the seriousness of this era in current affairs programming. Goldring, who Chignell calls 'arguably the finest public affairs presenter of her generation,' helped to bring 'rigour' to the BBC airwaves in the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with a didactic tone and a hostility toward unions, that seemed to evoke the Iron Lady herself. As with her predecessor at *Analysis*, Ian McIntyre, Goldring was granted latitude for her editorializing in part because of the high regard in which her intellect was held, a ironic echo of the latitude granted to Matheson's left-leaning commentators of an earlier era, itself an echo of the Victorian hierarchy, which granted the privilege of 'subjectivity' to the elite correspondent but not to the workaday journalist.

The last decades of the 20th century gave rise to a whole welter of precedent-shattering experimentation and fragmentation, as commercial stations, and Independent Local Radio, in particular, would introduce new sounds to the news and current affairs airwaves in Britain, even as it put pressure on the BBC to innovate and reorganize in order to remain relevant. While these more recent changes will be more familiar to Britons than the earlier history, Chignell still manages to provide some provocative challenges to received wisdom: 'Almost every significant change in the practice of radio news gathering in the final quarter of the last century was pioneered at LBC'. Such changes include 'radio phone-ins, vox pops, rolling news, the radio telephone reportage, airborne traffic reports and parliamentary broadcasting'. Here, the influence on British broadcasting from overseas, the US in particular, might have been given more than the few mentions it receives.

Public Issue Radio: Talks, News and Current Affairs in the Twentieth Century tells an important story about the development of the world's most famous cultural institution. And it tells it in a highly readable way, linking the institution's transformations to the turbulence of the century in which it developed and which it was obliged to understand and explain to Britons and, to some extent, the rest of the world. It is a worthy addition to the growing shelf of recent work on the cultural import of the BBC, including David Hendy's *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four*, and Michele Hilmes' *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting*.⁽¹⁾

Notes

1. David Hendy, *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four* (Oxford, 2007); Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting*

(London, 2011).[Back to \(1\)](#)

I am very pleased with this accurate and fair review and I do not wish to comment further.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1219>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/8325>