

Pre-War UK Commercial Radio and the BBC

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On November 14, 1922, the BBC – that is to say the British Broadcasting Company, constituted in its first incarnation of a number of commercial radio set manufacturers – made its first transmission from the London station, 2LO. However, more than two years earlier, on 15 June, 1920, the celebrated Australian singer, Dame Nellie Melba, was taken to the Marconi company's Chelmsford works to take part in a 30-minute experimental broadcast. The story goes that on that day, Arthur Burrows, Marconi's Head of Publicity, later to become a key figure within the BBC and European broadcasting, took Melba outside to show her the transmission antenna rising above the building, explaining that from the top of the masts, her voice would be carried far and wide. Legend has it that at this point the great lady retorted: "Young man, if you think I am going to climb up there, you are greatly mistaken."

The point of that story is, that Melba's broadcast was organised by a commercial company, AND – over two years before the rules of British Broadcasting were set out, it was SPONSORED; it was sponsored by the popular UK newspaper *The Daily Mail*, and is rightly regarded and a key moment in the development of radio, particularly in Britain and Europe. In this paper I want to discuss the tension between the development of the BBC as Public Service Broadcaster, and non-regulated commercial competition broadcasting into the UK mostly from European transmission sites. I want to argue that a combination of an at times over-paternalistic BBC policy contributed to the success of populist radio which gained huge audience in Britain during the 1930s in particular, challenging the BBC's monopoly, and

contributing to the development of broadcasting in the UK in ways which until recently have not been fully explored. In order to put this further into context, it is important to understand that – unlike many countries – commercial radio did not begin in Britain until almost 20 years after commercial television; Legal, land-based commercial radio in Britain began in October 1973. Prior to this there had been post-war challenges to the BBC monopoly from Radio Luxembourg and during the 1960s, offshore pirate radio. The accepted perception of *pre-war* UK broadcasting history is however that the BBC's Public Service monopoly exclusively dominated radio listening. The fact that there was a major source of competition from commercial broadcasters, increasingly influenced by the US model and often sourced and sold by US agencies such as the J Walter Thompson Organisation has been widely overlooked until now.

Even before the Melba broadcast, a Dutch pioneer called Steringa Idzerda was broadcasting a series of concerts which he called *Soirees Musicales*, which he funded by both English and Dutch benefactors, and in 1922, shortly before the first BBC broadcast, the *London Illustrated News* carried a picture showing a rather idealised family sitting around a receiving set while the father figure tuned in a signal, and carrying the caption, “This is How an English Family listens to the Dutch concerts”. *The Daily Mail* always at the forefront of these developments, continued to sponsor the programmes from the Hague until 1924. Thus, it could actually be claimed that commercial broadcasting to a UK audience actually pre-dated the birth of the BBC, which, in its first incarnation, could itself be called “commercial” in the sense that the company was initially formed by a group of wireless set manufacturers whose purpose was to create a demand for their receivers.

It is also crucial to understand the opportunity offered to potential radio entrepreneurs in Britain and Europe by considering nature of wireless listening as the medium took hold during the early years; this extraordinary new medium offered not only the near-miracle of voices through the air, it was also possible to pick up those voices over remarkable distances. In Europe as in North America, it was quite a boasting rite to be able to share with a friend that you'd been listening to some far-flung station – Vienna, Paris, Berlin; indeed the BBC even published a magazine called *World Radio* which was in effect a listings guide to aid the craze of “Searching the Aether” which developed amongst keen wireless enthusiasts. So the HABIT of tuning around already existed even in those early years of the BBC. It would not be long before someone would emerge who saw the business model behind this technological fact. In Britain, that ‘someone’ was one of the most remarkable personalities in UK broadcasting. If this story has two main protagonists, one is someone almost everyone has heard of – John Reith, Managing Director, later Chairman of the BBC. The other is someone, of whom, apart from a few until recently, virtually no one had heard, and yet he was the first man in Britain to become a millionaire from radio. He bore the unlikely but wholly appropriate name of Leonard Plugge. He chose to pronounce his name “Ploojje” unless it served better in the cause of radio to say it as “Plug” – which it often did. Plugge’s first foray into commercial broadcasting came in 1925, when he persuaded Selfridges department store in London’s Oxford Street to sponsor a fashion talk, broadcast from the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The event received very little publicity, and only three letters of response from listeners were recorded. Nevertheless, Plugge persisted and over the next five years, nurtured the belief that a truly commercial competition to the BBC was possible and financially viable. In 1930

he founded the grandiosely named “International Broadcasting Company” right in the shadow of the then under-construction new headquarters of the BBC, Broadcasting House.

The key to how things developed from that point were down to another of Plugge’s passion, his belief in the future of the car radio. He had installed a rather elaborate device in his own car, and set off around Europe, testing it and attracting wherever possible, potential financial interest. On one of these trips he stopped in the French fishing port of Fecamp, found that a local businessman was an amateur dabbler in radio, and struck a deal to lease air-time from him to broadcast English programmes to the “prosperous south of England” What became Radio Normandy was born, and the scene was set for ten years in which the UK airwaves became a battle zone between public service broadcasting and commercial radio interests.

This was only the start. Many more stations would soon be directly targeting the UK from various parts of the European continent. Before I explore this a little more, it is important to understand that this enterprise was aided by the BBC itself in terms of its broadcasting policy, in particular, with respect to its Sunday output, and at the heart of this in the early years was the background of the BBC's first Managing Director, John Walsham Reith. John Reith came from a strict Scottish religious background; his father was the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, and as Kenneth M. Wood has written, he believed that Sunday was an institution “which belonged to the maintenance of a Christian presence. He would defend the working man against being exploited and expose him to the best preaching which the churches could provide.” The peak years of the commercial assault on the BBC's

audience was between 1935 and 1939. To turn to the pages of the BBC's programme journal, *Radio Times* dated Sunday 7 April, 1935, is to get an idea of the opportunity handed to the commercial companies:

The BBC National Station that day opened at 10.30am, with “Weather for Farmers”. There was then a 15 minute interlude. After that the morning entertainment continued with part one of Bach's St Matthew Passion, some classical band music and a chamber recital by a string Quintet. Most of the afternoon was given over to the second part of the St Matthew Passion, followed by a talk “for the children” entitled “John and Betty's bible Story”. This took us to nearly five o'clock, when the series “Heroes of the Free Church” reached episode 10. At ten past five came “How to Read an Epistle”, prior to the most daring piece of broadcasting that day, a performance of Sheridan's “The Rivals”. After that the diet of religious talks and chamber music continued until a Religious Epilogue followed by close-down at 10.45pm.

Meanwhile, since Plugge's launch of Radio Normandy, the commercial adventure in Europe had been flourishing, focusing on this Sunday policy. The IBC took airtime from existing stations all over Europe, in Toulouse, Juan-Les-Pins, Lyons, Madrid, even Ljublyana, and experimental broadcasts from Rome. Compare a 1935 schedule from Radio Normandy to the BBC fare just quoted:

- 9.00am “The Smoking concert – a Convivial Congregation with a Cigarette and a Song on their lips” (Presented by Rizla Cigarettes)
- 9.15 “Hollywood Heroes” (Presented by the makers of Lux Toilet Soap.
- 9.30 Alfred Campoli and His Orchestra (Presented by the makers of

California Syrup of Figs)

9.45. “Extra! Music Behind the Headlines” (Records) (Presented by Preservine Soap.)

The evening Schedule included “Horlicks Picture House, “ “The Rinso Music Hall” and “Vaudeville” (Sponsored by Western Sports Pools – gambling on the Sabbath!)

To step back two years from that is to hear another major competitor Radio Luxembourg taking to the air in late 1933. Luxembourg was owned by a rival company to the IBC, initially “Radio Publicity” and subsequently “Wireless Publicity”. The station's history is extremely complex, and this is not the place to trace its tortuous history. Suffice to say that by taking over an illegal wavelength and broadcasting from a huge transmitter on the Jungleinster Plateau in Luxembourg, it was the dominant force in commercial broadcasting into the UK until the second world war, and was to be the only survivor of these heady days, in the immediate post-war years.

With the developing market, attitudes changed on both sides. In November 1928, in response to a memo relating to a continental commercial radio experiment, Reith had scribbled “My reaction is why worry when 10% of our listeners are affected? Are we so afraid of competition?” As the coming decade developed, the BBC was indeed concerned, and by the last year of peace, the matter of commercial competition to the BBC in broadcasting was being debated in the House of Commons, with, alarmingly for some, a number of MPs actually arguing for sponsorship as a means of funding broadcasting more appropriate than the licence fee. This was perhaps hardly surprising, given the remarkable success shown by commercial enterprise since 1930.

A key part of this – and a major part of the unsung story of the commercial contribution to the history of British pre-war broadcasting – was the involvement and experience of US advertising agencies, among them the giant J. Walter Thompson Organisation. JWT had been a part of the US radio revolution in terms of using the medium as an advertising tool. Thus by the time the infant UK Commercial radio industry began its development in the early 1930s, they and others like them were in a position to bring this knowledge to the new field. And as the stations grew in their aspirations, more sophisticated programmes resulted. Originally content had consisted of little more than a presenter in the remote site on the continent, playing gramophone records and reading sponsors' messages. By the mid 1930s, 'built' programmes – concerts, variety shows and later even soap operas, were recorded in London and shipped out to the stations for playing back to the UK. JWT built state-of-the-art studios in London's Bush House, studios that would, at the start of the war, be commandeered by the British Government and handed over to the BBC World Service, establishing Bush House as the home of this iconic broadcaster for decades to come.

The issue of recorded programmes brings us to areas in which commercial imperatives really did contribute to the development of British radio during the 1930s: one of these is recording, the other is audience measurement; to take recording first.

The BBC had used recording in a limited way; there was a certain commitment – almost on moral grounds – to the concept of the 'live', although the development of broadcasting to various time-zones with the inauguration of its Empire Service in December 1932 had necessitated the advancement of recording initially on steel tape

using the Marconi-Stille system for what the BBC called “bottling” of programmes. But the real advance came with the development of direct-disc recording, pioneered in the UK by a musician, Cecil Watts during the early 1930s. This was paralleled in the US by the Presto disc system, which was used to such powerful effect by Herb Morrison in his commentary on the Hindenburg disaster.

For the commercial companies in Britain, disc recording was a quick, easily transportable way of reproducing programmes, and enabled fully structured programmes to be made, on location, frequently in front of an audience, and shipped to the continental stations for play-back. A major additional advantage for companies like the IBC was that discs could be cut in multiples, thus enabling syndication across a number of stations simultaneously. There is evidence that the commercial companies were leading the way in this development, in Edward Pawley's history of engineering in the BBC:

By the early 1930s Marguerite Sound Studios [Watt's company] were taking on all kinds of recording commissions, such as advertisements for Radio Luxembourg. The first approach from the BBC came in the autumn of 1933.

This is borne out in a recorded interview in the British Library Sound Archive, with Agnes Watts', Cecil Watts widow, made in 1984:

We made records first for advertising agencies making programmes to be broadcast from Fecamp and Luxembourg; this is what aroused the BBC's interest.

As I mentioned, the other area in which commercial organisations led the way was in audience measurement. It is an interesting fact that the BBC undertook no audience measurement in any formal sense until 1936, when it formed a department, led by Robert Silvey (ironically brought into the Corporation from a commercial advertising agency.) For many in the BBC, audience measurement was an irrelevance; indeed, for some it was worse than that; as late as 1960, Lionel Fielding, in his book, "The Natural Bent" was to write that "the real degradation of the BBC started with the invention of the hellish department which is called 'listener research'." During the pre war years certainly, the Corporation's paternalistic view held that as a Public Service Broadcaster, IT understood the requirements of its listeners; the Corporation's role was to provide that audience with something slightly better than it thought it wanted. On the other hand, as the US agencies well understood, commercial organisations, particularly in a fledgling medium like radio, HAD to prove that wireless could SELL. Part of Silvey's work, apart from devising methods by which to measure BBC performance from 1936 onwards, was to monitor commercial competition, by means of income through sponsorship. In a memo from October 1937, he demonstrates that, although in relative terms, tiny, advertising revenue from radio was growing fast.

In 1934, for example, his findings from agencies showed him an approximate annual income of £30,000. The following year it had rocketed to £315,000 and by 1936 it stood at approximately £630,000. Silvey adds that "it is believed in well informed quarters that the 1937 figure may be very nearly double that of 1936." There is no doubt that audience figures claimed by commercial companies need to be taken with a

pinch of salt; these were organisations with a vested interest after all. Nonetheless, responses from listeners – particularly the young of the time – tell us that populist programmes during an age of austerity and anxiety, particularly on Sundays, for many the one day of relaxation in the working week – if one WAS working at all – found their mark. And UK Commercial Radio made millionaires of some of its pioneers, not least among them, Captain Leonard Plugge, the father of it all.

In spite of attempts by both the BBC and some parts of Government, it was in the event international conflict rather than policy that restored the BBC's monopoly – at least for the time being. The Corporation came into its own during the Second World War – while the sites of the continental stations licenced by UK commercial interests were overrun by German advances. Only Radio Luxembourg was to return after the war. The post-war BBC seemed to have learned its lesson and created a range of networks including the “Light” programme as evidence. Yet by the time of the 1960s and the popular music boom that came with it, the Corporation was once again exposed as out of touch by a glut of pirate commercial stations offshore in the north sea – and history repeated itself.

In this paper – as in some of my other writings, I've tried to draw attention to what I feel is a neglected part of British Broadcasting History. The BBC's significance in that history is undeniable and vast; it is nevertheless my suggestion that greater acknowledgement of the contribution of independent sector populist radio driven by a commercial imperative from the EARLIEST DAYS of UK radio is also an important, and thus far somewhat undervalued aspect of that history.

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