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Confessions of a Monopoly: The Covert Decision Making of the Early BBC

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Abstract: One of the great business institutions of the modern era is the BBC which is now 100 years old. The authors explored letters and memoranda in the BBC's Written Archives at Caversham, which revealed much about the business tactics of those in charge of the BBC during the pre-Second World War era, and how they used the power of their monopoly to their own ends. A new market of broadcasting magazines sprang up around the radio broadcasts, creating an inter-dependency between the two media. The BBC soon launched its own magazines, and from then on, the BBC's interactions with the press media were complex, reflecting an uncomfortable blend of symbiosis and threat. Episodes between the press owners and the BBC have been uncovered, about which there has been little previous investigation, and unexpected patterns of behaviour have emerged. This archival research, using narrative history, is based upon original letters, memoranda and handwritten messages that were archived for posterity, and which report upon the actual thoughts and views of those involved at the time, revealing unexpected intrigue and machinations.

Keywords: pre-war; BBC; broadcasting; Britain; UK; decision making; monopoly; radio; Radio Times; competition; broadcasting magazines



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1. Introduction

This paper considers a tightly managed period of the BBC. Based upon insights gained from original documents held in the BBC's Written Archives at Caversham, this research highlights some of the early controversies, behind-the-scenes decision making, and defensive activities that the BBC undertook to protect its position as the UK's only public service broadcaster. What emerges is that, notwithstanding the public espousal of a high moral tone, the first General Manager John Reith, and his trusted colleagues, were prepared to adopt a surprisingly ruthless attitude in their business tactics. There was considerable governmental focus on the optimum infrastructure for broadcasting in the UK, but there were more covert activities taking place between the BBC and the magazine press, which would have an even greater impact on the development of the industry. While the monopoly of the microphone was being debated in Parliament, Reith and his colleagues were discovering the lucrative possibilities that a new magazine dominion might bring. At a time when the BBC has recently been celebrating 100 years of broadcasting, it is more important than ever to understand how it all began, and how business decisions made then still have an impact on today's complex world of corporate media.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), that we know today as a global media institution, was founded on 18 October 1922, under the name British Broadcasting Company. Since then, the BBC has been variously criticised and admired, demonised, and mythologised. At the time of its inception, the UK was reverberating with the aftershocks of the Great War, which had had a profound impact on society, economy, and culture (Marwick 1968; Daunton 2007; Hynes 2011; Spangenberg 1997). The war left a scar on the nation's psyche, and the country was in the process of rebuilding and healing. Moreover,

the early 20th century was a time of rapid technological change (Bowden and Higgins 2004), including the growth of radio broadcasting (Scott 2012; Nicholas 2012). The BBC itself was a product of these technological advancements, and it played a role in shaping how information and entertainment were disseminated (Teer-Tomaselli 2015; Potter 2022).

Naturally, scholarship and research on the BBC has been a continuum running in parallel alongside its development. The lens through which the BBC is viewed has continually evolved, as the society it serves has followed its own preoccupations and political movements (Marwick 1968; Jones 1983; Miles and Smith 2013; Polkinghorne and Taylor 2019). Depending on the observer's point of view, the BBC can be presented as innovative, conservative, patriarchal or revolutionary (Taylor 2013; Procter 2015; Harris 2021). As Mullen has observed, with such a huge output of programmes, supplemented by innumerable memoranda, letters and ephemera in the BBC archives "it is clear that one cannot simply 'let the archive speak' for itself. Which questions are made a priority depends, as always, on the motivations of the historian or other scholar" (Mullen 2021, p. 1). Hendy's "People's History" of the BBC tackles the organisation's complex relationship with the public (Hendy 2022). Medhurst meticulously scrutinises the progress of the television service (Medhurst 2022), whilst Curran and Seaton's (2018) revised work is a core text for understanding the challenges of public service broadcasting and the complexities of the political undercurrents. Briggs's monumental and comprehensive multi-volume history of broadcasting is a dominant authority in this field, even if his BBC focus led him to over-look some important developments, such as the activities of the foreign transmitters and pirate stations, which were taking place beyond the BBC. Briggs said of his own work that it was to be "first perhaps the history of the inner life of the organization . . . but second, and always of equal importance, the history of the changing place of the organization in society" (Briggs 1961, p. 4).

Commentary on the BBC's contribution to broadcasting, and its influence on its audience (Gillespie et al. 2008; Schwyter 2016; Taylor 1997), keeps pace with societal change (Hajkowski 2013). Occasionally, there is focus upon its employees and how it treats and rewards them (Murphy 2016b; Thomas 2020). These topics continue to evolve, and new insights are constantly being added to our understanding of the BBC's history and its impact on British society (Avery 2006; Scannell 1992; Seaton 2015).

Research has delved into how the BBC represented and portrayed women and gender roles throughout its history, shedding light on both progress and limitations (Murphy 2010; Murphy 2016a). Researchers have explored how the BBC shaped cultural norms, values, and practices through its programming, contributing to a broader understanding of societal changes over time (Hajkowski 2013; Burns 2016). Recent scholarship has also critiqued the BBC's historical treatment of diversity and inclusion (Bingham 2011; Hajkowski 2013; Ibrahim and Howarth 2021), analysing its representation of marginalised groups and the impact of these representations on society (Aitken 1989; Mills 2020). Researchers have investigated the relationship between the BBC and political power (Burns 2016; Mills 2020; Scannell 2005), examining how the organisation navigated political pressures (Coatman 1951; Whittington 2018; Scannell 2005) and tried to maintain editorial independence (Blumler 2016; Mills 2020).

Since 1922, the BBC has metamorphosised, born of a fusion between government control and commercial interest. John Charles Walsham Reith (subsequently made Lord Reith) was the Company's first General Manager (Briggs 1961, p. 123). Research undertaken by Taylor (2013) reveals that when broadcasters first sent their words and music across the 'ether', they did not yet know how broadcasting was to be structured, received, or even who would comprise the audience. What the British Broadcasting Company did have, though, was an idealistic vision that its purpose was to inform the population, educate the individual, and only very reluctantly entertain the masses (Reith 1924). To do this, the British Broadcasting Company provided listeners with a highly varied range of content that it hoped would encourage listeners to 'tune in'. However, at the same time, much of the early content was experimental in nature, and it was Reith's philosophy that the purpose of broadcasting should

be to provide a public service by offering instructional programmes. In his own words: “The preservation of a high moral standard is obviously of paramount importance” (Reith 1924, p. 32). Moores (2000), Scannell (1989) and Briggs (1961) all agree that during the 1920s, the BBC deliberately programmed a fragmented output in order to encourage listeners to be selective, and to thwart inattentive and continuous listening (Cain 1992).

Radio broadcasting was quickly adopted by a UK society which soon realised that for the relatively modest price of 10 shillings (Briggs 1961), a radio licence allowed them to use a radio ‘receiving’ set through which they could access news, knowledge, and most significantly, a new form of enjoyment accessible across all classes. In fact, the market for radio sets grew so rapidly that, whilst in 1922 only 36,000 radio licences were issued, by 1927 this number had increased to more than 2 million (Taylor 2013, p. 74). As a result of this spectacular rise in public interest, the British government determined broadcasting in the UK should not be under tenure and delivery of a commercial company, but should instead come under public ownership. In fact, the state view was that broadcasting was already becoming so important it should be delivered by an independent public authority with its own powers. Such powers would be derived from a Royal Charter, an instrument of incorporation issued by the monarch and granting independent legal powers to the organisation. In this case, it defined its values and objectives, and the principles and authority (<https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/charter> accessed on 1 June 2023) with which to govern its own affairs. Thus, the British Broadcasting Company evolved into the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), with which we are familiar today.

Reith remained in charge as the Director-General of the Corporation. While not unusual for the time, his role was more than just a figurehead, and he ruled the BBC with authoritarian control; a style of leadership which is autocratic in nature, and in which the individual tightly controls their own domain (Wang and Guan 2018). He was acutely aware of the delicate balance to strike when catering for the tastes and interests of society in its entirety, as was its remit under the Charter. “The common denominator of a nation is not so easily determined and . . . the individual peculiarities have to be catered for to some extent also” was how he summarised the issue (Reith 1924, pp. 122–23).

It was Reith who had the final say in what the BBC would, or would not, broadcast over British soil, and he dictated how the corporation was organised, controlled, and how it would present its public service face to the world. From 1 January 1927, broadcasting in the UK was reconfigured under the control of a single corporation, which maintained the strict monopoly control of its previous incarnation (Coase 1950). It was a monopoly that the BBC was unwilling to relinquish, and which it was prepared to defend as the sole public service broadcaster in the country.

2. Materials and Methods

This research represents an application of narrative history applied to the BBC in the form of a case study (Bell et al. 2018). Stone (1979) defines narrative history as being the organisation of materials collected with a focus of creating a single coherent story. Narrative history is essentially descriptive, and its primary focus is on the ‘person’ opposed to the circumstances and context at the time (Stone 1979). This research therefore employed narrative history, with an inductive approach (Creswell and Creswell 2018), to present and interpret the significance of business events and actions undertaken, based upon the original archived documents analysed. From this analysis, crucial connections have been made that concentrate on particular and specific actions and events, as opposed to being collective and statistical. From this approach, it has been possible to identify underlying business and management themes and arguments that are grounded in fact, but that are interpretive in nature (Stone 1979).

Research into the history of broadcasting has necessarily depended upon paper resources, since, before 1932, the technology to record radio programmes was not available (Street 2006, p. 117). Surviving paper archives, mainly the BBC’s Written Archive at Caversham, and some private archives, provided the researchers with sufficient secondary

material to reconstruct a history of the facts surrounding the early days of broadcasting, and to develop a degree of understanding about the context within which the programmes were created. As [Scannell and Cardiff \(1991\)](#) observe, it is the task of the historian to attempt to recapture the detail which has been lost to time. Those running the BBC in 1920s and making the key decisions of the time may be long past, but physical, printed records of what they thought, planned and actioned are contained within these archives. Many organisational papers have been retained, and most have not been redacted. As a result, the typed letters and memoranda often include additional handwritten notes and comments added by the correspondents as they bickered over decisions. Disagreements between colleagues are captured and revealed, and private agreements are also recorded. It is unlikely that those writing and annotating these documents could imagine how, 100 years into the future, their thoughts and actions would be so exposed. It is a record that invites fresh interpretation, and which might impact upon reputations when viewed retrospectively.

This research study reviewed a range of documents held at the BBC's Written Archives at Caversham, and many of these formed the primary material used for this research. The archive boxes of files searched for this study included the following files: Radio Times; Radio Times Advertisements; World-Radio; World-Radio Confidential Memos; World-Radio Relations with Technical Wireless Press; and Advertising in English by Foreign Stations.

In summary, to fully understand the importance of the archived documents, it was necessary to connect them to each other, thereby re-constructing the narrative in which certain events and actions were occurring. This helped to triangulate the findings to ensure that, even though they are subjective interpretations of events at this time, they are robust and meet the criteria of being credible, dependable and confirmable ([Lincoln and Guba 1985](#)).

3. Monopolising the Airwaves—Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The British Broadcasting Company was initially established as a commercial venture, formed in October 1922 by six, mostly British, wireless manufacturers and electrical companies. These companies had been experimenting with the new technology of radio broadcasting transmissions, under a licence from the Post Office, in accordance with the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1904 ([Hansard 1925a](#)). Now, they were banded together into a new conglomerate with six directors, each representing one of the six companies; companies that were commercially in competition with each other. Each company brought its own knowledge and patents to the new venture, which they agreed to share ([Briggs 1961](#)). The broadcasts themselves, still purely radio at this point, comprised a very limited number of programmes, many of which were sponsored by British newspapers, and broadcast by local transmitters with limited coverage. Throughout 1923 and 1924, more and more stations began broadcasting around the country including Aberdeen, Bournemouth, Belfast and Cardiff, with Swansea following in 1924 ([Currie 2001](#)). Together, these new transmitters increased coverage and so drew an increasing number of the public into its potential audience.

The BBC also received a percentage of the licence fee that had to be purchased from the Post Office by the growing band of hopeful listeners ([Cain 1992](#)). However, a more lucrative source of income came from the sale of radio receiving sets, which were only manufactured by the shareholding member companies, and moreover, were the only sets which were permitted to be licensed to receive programmes ([Briggs 1961](#)). From 14 December 1922, the BBC had a new appointee, with Reith taking the role of General Manager. It was the personal views, beliefs and decisions of this one man which became a powerful force in shaping the direction and future of British broadcasting ([Scannell and Cardiff 1991](#)).

As the phenomenon of broadcasting spread throughout the world, the airwaves became over-crowded, particularly in Europe, and the BBC had a vested interest in bringing order to the chaos so that it could broadcast uninterrupted and unimpeded. There was a profound social impact of the intrusive radio waves, succinctly captured by Hilmes' depiction ([Hilmes 1997](#)). Writing about the situation in the United States, Hilmes describes how radio was able to circumvent the physical and geographical divisions which supported

social distinctions: “Radio’s ‘immateriality’ allowed it to cross these boundaries: allowed ‘race’ music to invade the white middleclass home, vaudeville to compete with opera in the living room, risqué city humor to raise rural eyebrows, salesman and entertainers to find a place in the family circle” (Hilmes 1997, p. 15). Under pressure from them, the Union Internationale de Radiophonie (UIR) formed in April 1925 and was based in Geneva, with delegates from 10 European countries. The President was Vice-Admiral Charles Carpendale, who was in fact the Assistant General Manager of the BBC and a close colleague of Reith’s (Briggs 1961).

A Technical Committee was duly set up to investigate how the airwaves might be fairly allocated, and this was under the leadership of Captain Eckersley, the BBC’s Chief Engineer (BBC 1928, p. 285). The result was the “Plan de Genève” which allocated a certain number of exclusive wavebands to all countries, which Captain Eckersley described as providing clear guidance to create “a sane conception of National Broadcasting” (BBC 1928, p. 287). The ultimate success of this plan is subjective, but it is indisputable that the BBC succeeded in securing important positions on the Committee. This placed it in a very convenient position to influence the Committee’s decisions so that the key interests of the BBC were protected.

There was an intense fascination, and some concern, for how broadcasting was to be regulated and controlled. Within the British Parliament, the Crawford Committee, like the Sykes Committee before it, was convened to debate the future of broadcasting. Briggs describes the Sykes Committee as “the first official committee to investigate broadcasting” (Briggs 1961, p. 9). The report of the Crawford Committee, chaired by the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, was published on 5 March 1926, and its chief recommendation was that, in opposition to the system prevailing in the United States (US), in the United Kingdom (UK) there should be a broadcasting monopoly “controlled by a single authority” (Briggs 1961, p. 9). Two of the main considerations behind the decision to organise UK broadcasting along the lines of a single authority were that this was considered to be an efficient and controllable arrangement, and as Coase observes, it guarded against the perceived alternative of commercial broadcasting which operated in the US “a horror against which the monopoly was a shield” (Coase 1950, p. 195).

3.1. Supporting the Monopoly with Strategic Alliances

There existed a persistent association, in the eyes of many, between independent broadcasting companies and commercial advertising. The newspaper and magazine press were certainly concerned that broadcasting was a competitor for their potential revenues from advertising. However, to the relief of the print industry, on 14 July 1926, it was announced that the British Government intended to accept the majority of the Crawford Committee’s recommendations. As a direct consequence, on 31 December 1926, the broadcasting service was handed over to a single authority which would not be “a creature of Parliament and connected with political activity”, but rather a body which derived its power from a Royal Charter (Street 2002, pp. 34–35). The British Broadcasting Company was to become the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), with Reith staying on at the helm, but from this point onwards as Director-General (Cain 1992).

The main features of the monopoly were that the new manifestation of the BBC was to run broadcasting as a public service corporation, i.e., it would not be controlled directly by Parliament, and its broadcasting costs would be funded through revenue collected via a licence fee, rather than by commercial activities such as advertising. The value of the licence fee was determined by the Post Office, which retained a proportion of the income (12.50%), with the treasury taking a further amount (10.00% and rising by an additional 10.00% for every million licences sold). By 1928, the BBC’s income from the licence fee was GBP 1,250,000 (House of Commons 2004) and the BBC, Government and Post Office all had a vested interest in the continued success of the monopoly (Briggs 1961).

3.2. Defending the Monopoly

As a public service broadcaster, the BBC was obliged to provide a certain percentage of educational programmes. Whilst Reith and his colleagues were pleased to accept this duty and other tasks laid upon the organisation, it later transpired that the BBC was equally ready to defend its right to be the sole provider. The question of how the BBC's broadcasting mandate in the UK would be enforced had not been considered at this stage. As it turned out, the establishment of the monopoly was not the end to all challenges to the authority of the BBC, but rather, it was the beginning.

One of the first difficulties with awarding one organisation the monopoly of the airwaves was that this was a largely conceptual notion. When considering the relationship between the audience and output in the United States, the BBC's first Chief Engineer, Captain Peter Eckersley, observed that "The system is competitive; no chain of stations has a monopoly of the air. Every stimulus, every condition of operation, impels the station owner to study his public's reactions and give the public what it wants" (Eckersley 1942, p. 139). This was well understood by the BBC; in a memorandum from the BBC's Director of Publicity William Gladstone Murray to Reith, Gladstone Murray fulminated over the tactics of the Newspaper Proprietors Association (NPA), reflecting that "it stands to reason that as broadcasting enlarges its domain, the established interests will do all they can to resist its progress" (Gladstone Murray 1926, p. 1). His words were prophetic; as a consequence of cause and effect, Browne (1985, p. 3) suggests that the holder of such a monopoly must inevitably take steps to maintain its position, as the originator of the monopoly rapidly gains a 'vested interest' in its continuation. In this case, the monopoly was created by the BBC, with the protection of the British Government (Browne 1985), and the vested interest was therefore mutual.

Through the Postmaster-General, the Government gained the power, under certain circumstances, to apply direct control of the BBC, to an extent, according to a clause in its licence, but these powers were never actually invoked, and, in effect, the BBC was allowed to assume independence in its governance (Cawte 1996). In fact, as Potter explains, it was effectively part of the state infrastructure, even though it was largely left to operate without interference on a daily basis (Potter 2022). The confirmation that British broadcasting would continue to operate as a monopoly was considered to be the answer to the problematic question of how to protect the UK from the commercial disarray which was observed in the US (Street 2006). However, like the US, Continental Europe had similar models in operation, and the cooperation of private companies across Europe was to be a crucial factor in the rise of commercial broadcasting in the 1930s. As Street says, "there is no doubt that the greatest level of European participation with the British companies at this time came from French stations" (Street 2006, p. 266).

There were two problems with the establishment of the broadcasting monopoly: The first was, as Browne observes, that "monopolies tend to attract challengers" (Browne 1985, p. 3). There was a simple route open to any challenger of a broadcasting monopoly; all they had to do was find a suitable location from which to transmit their broadcasts that was outside the jurisdiction of the target country, but close enough to reach the desired and protected audience (Browne 1985). This prefigures what happened in the 1930s, when the International Broadcasting Company (IBC), a legitimate business concern, exploited this loophole by doing exactly that. The IBC bought airtime from a radio station in Normandy with a powerful transmitter, from which it could broadcast its own programmes in the direction of an English audience (Taylor 2013). While not exactly legal, this could not easily be prevented under UK Law. The second problem was that, clearly, it was a particular feature of wireless broadcasting that the medium carrying the content, the radio waves, could not be confined to national borders, or as Captain Eckersley phrased it, "wireless waves flip across frontiers with persistent disregard for regulation" (Eckersley 1942, p. 143). The result, as described by Gorman, was a "state of frequency chaos" (Gorman 2009, p. 145). The problem was not only that broadcasts travelled over borders, but that the reach of powerful transmitters could also be quite extensive. As Cawte describes it, a 'fog of war'

developed in which “foreign language broadcasts, and counter broadcasts aiming to ‘jam’ them, were being transmitted from long, and medium-wave stations of ever-increasing power” (Cawte 1996, p. 9).

In the BBC’s favour was the fact that it was the state-sanctioned monopolist, and, with the support of the Post Office, it was able to raise revenue to pay for its expenses from the licence fee. This effectively skewed the marketplace in the BBC’s favour, but as Browne observes, the very fact that the terms of the Charter did not allow the BBC to broadcast advertisements meant there was no barrier to entry for a challenger to capitalise on this tempting market opportunity (Browne 1985).

3.3. Extending the Monopoly

As radio broadcasts gained popularity, a new market of broadcasting magazines sprang up around them, with some publishers absorbing radio into their existing portfolio as technical and scientific magazines, and others jumping, as it were, onto this attractive new bandwagon (Taylor 2013). When the BBC began life in 1922, ‘broadcasting’ meant radio broadcasting, although television was in fact also being developed during this period behind the scenes as early as 1926 (Cain 1992; Medhurst 2022). The magazines were able to fill in the gaps left by an aural medium and provide the photographs and stories about the radio stars that the audience craved (Taylor 2013). There was an inherent interdependency between the two media, and, as the BBC launched its own magazines, in order to control its public image, its interactions with the press media became complex, reflecting an uncomfortable blend of symbiosis and threat (Taylor 2013).

The BBC, and Reith in particular, quickly realised that printed words and pictures held a power from which the new ephemeral medium could benefit. An alliance was therefore formed between the old and the new; radio broadcasting depending on magazines to advertise its programmes and exchange ideas about its output, whilst the magazine industry was presented with a whole new area of interest and a market with a voracious appetite. Although keen to maintain the public image of the BBC, Reith was prepared to make occasional personal appearances in certain favoured ‘rival’ magazines, but he also rigidly controlled the public printed image of the BBC (Taylor 2013). For example, Reith avoided the BBC’s announcers being accorded star or celebrity status by insisting that they remain anonymous (Gorham 1948).

All the limitations of the new medium, the momentary nature of it, and the lack of any visual element, could be more than compensated for by the magazines. The BBC’s magazines were something of an unexpected gift; they helped the BBC shore up the monopoly, giving it a mouthpiece through which it could control the message, free from the constraints of the Royal Charter. Briggs describes how Reith saw the magazine as “a medium of more detailed and familiar communication between the broadcaster and their audience than was possible or desirable by wireless itself” (Briggs 1961, pp. 296–97). The magazines also provided a welcome source of independent income, again, free from the treasury’s grasp (Taylor 2013). In other words, the BBC recognised how a magazine could augment and enhance its offering as a broadcaster, and later, how this could supplement its finances.

On 28 September 1923, less than a year after the British Broadcasting Company had been formed, the first issue of the *Radio Times* was published, and thus the BBC entered the commercial market as a publisher of magazines. At the beginning of its transmissions, the BBC had depended upon the national and local press to advertise its programmes, but the space allotted to the details of daily programmes was extremely limited. In 1923, *The Times* allowed just two inches of type for this purpose (Currie 2001). In January 1923, the NPA made a decision which was to prove pivotal in the future relationships between the press and the BBC; the NPA staged a boycott after Reith refused to pay for ‘advertising’ for the BBC programmes. However, this rebounded when the daily press discovered their circulation figures were adversely affected by the absence of radio programme details, and after forty days the boycott was abandoned (Briggs 1961). The crisis had, however, given

Reith the idea of publishing the programme details themselves through an official magazine. The BBC was anything but naïve about the publicity possibilities of its new publication.

Effectively, however, the BBC had begun a new operation in a market-driven environment in which its competitors did not share the same advantages. This clash with the NPA was not the only occasion on which the owners and publishers of competitive magazines cried foul. There was general and widespread condemnation of the perceived unfairness of the BBC's privileged position (Briggs 1965). The memoranda in the BBC files reveal that the BBC was deemed to be treading a very fine line between asserting its right to deliver a public service to the UK public, and unfairly using the advantages of its broadcasting monopoly, funded by the licence fee, to undermine and outstrip all competition.

An example of this is demonstrated by the reaction to a proposal in 1925 that the *Radio Times* was in need of a redesign. The broadcasting magazine market was closely inter-connected, and word soon circulated, as evidenced by the reaction from the other magazines' proprietors, most notably John Scott-Taggart, Editor-in-Chief of the Radio Press Ltd. His letter to Gladstone Murray, held in the archives, complained that such an alteration would result in unfavourable comparisons with those magazines published (such as his own *Wireless Weekly*) by private enterprise which did not receive "any of the advantages of a monopoly programme and extraordinary publicity through the microphone" (Scott-Taggart 1925a, p. 1). Scott-Taggart's fear was that potential advertisers would prefer to place their advertisements in a more visually attractive *Radio Times*.

Both the broadcasting magazine owners and the radio manufacturing industry were deeply unhappy about the BBC's unwelcome incursion into the publication markets, to the extent that the BBC found it politic to reassure them (some of whom were shareholders in the then-British Broadcasting Company) by agreeing that the *Radio Times* would neither carry advertisements for separate component wireless parts, nor carry detailed technical articles which would compete with the technical wireless press (Briggs 1961; Currie 2001). However, as Harold Evans, former editor of *The Sunday Times*, observed, "a newspaper can no more be designed in isolation from commercial influences on the press than it can from the demands of journalism" (Evans 1976, p. 42). So it was with the *Radio Times*, and the founding companies of the BBC duly filled the pages of the *Radio Times* with advertisements of their own products. Undeterred by Scott-Taggart's opposition, the BBC continued with its plans for a new look for the *Radio Times*.

3.4. Exercising the Power of the Monopoly

Their entry into the magazine market reveals much about the BBC's attitudes toward its competitors. At no point did the BBC hold a Charter for a monopoly in the broadcasting magazines market, and it had no remit for public service through magazines. However, the broadcasting monopoly undoubtedly provided the BBC with an advantage in its commercial publication activities, which meant that the two elements of broadcasting and magazines were interconnected in a mutually beneficial relationship (Taylor 2013). Together, they formed the basis of the BBC's authority, and a challenge towards either one represented a threat to all of its interests. It is important to appreciate that the *Radio Times* became a publishing phenomenon, as Briggs explains, with the circulation figure passing one million by 1928, and the resulting profits contributing hugely to the BBC's operations (Briggs 1961). This is key to understanding the *Radio Times*' importance to the BBC, and to Reith.

The *Radio Times* was not the only magazine published by the BBC as, in addition, *The Listener* was launched in 1929, featuring reprints of the BBC's Talks, and *World-Radio* was first published in 1925 under the name *Radio Supplement* (Cain 1992). In contrast to the other two titles, *World-Radio* was a very technical publication, concerned chiefly with the narrow field of broadcasts from primarily state-run broadcasting organisations abroad. Due to a particular confluence of circumstances, however, it became an important piece in the power play between the BBC and the proprietors of the other broadcasting magazines (Taylor 2013).

The curiously hyphenated *World-Radio* magazine started life as the *Radio Supplement*, and mirrored the *Radio Times*, in that its primary purpose was a programme listening magazine, but for foreign programmes. The idea for it had first been mooted in 1925, a couple of years after the *Radio Times* had been launched. *World-Radio* was published largely in recognition of the fact that foreign broadcasts had attracted the public's attention and 'distance listening' had become a very popular pastime. Rather than focusing on programmes broadcast in English, and sponsored by commercial ventures, the magazine catered for 'listening in' to foreign national broadcasts, which had become a widespread, and mildly competitive, hobby (BBC 1929). With the UK's island status came a comparatively isolated mentality, and by crossing the airwaves without restriction, radio broadcasting effectively connected the UK with Continental Europe for the first time, bringing overseas voices directly into the UK home. The magazines were responsive to this interest in foreign radio stations, with many weekly features which helped listeners to track down the details of stations they had picked up but could not satisfactorily identify.

Whilst *World-Radio* represented the BBC's stake in the foreign programme listening experience, there was no overt commercial angle to this activity, at this point in time, although, inevitably, new magazines presented potential new advertising opportunities. In fact, the *Radio Times* had been carrying a feature page providing details of foreign programmes for a number of months in a condensed form (BBC 1928). It was launched on 17 July 1925 (BBC 1925) and its first issue sententiously proclaimed the BBC's intention "to bear its part in the development of this new instrument of international comity" (BBC 1928, p. 339). This represents one of the first intimations that the BBC was quite attracted to the idea that it had a role on the world stage as a unifying force.

As revealed in Gladstone Murray's (1926) memorandum to Reith, however, it is possibly closer to the truth that, now aware of the nation's interest in distance listening, the BBC felt that it needed to make a power grab for publicising the foreign radio broadcasts before a competitor did. Gladstone Murray (1925) had been urging Reith since April 1925 to consider how the BBC intended to handle the public interest in programmes broadcast by European countries. This then became urgent because one of the technical wireless magazines, *Wireless Weekly*, published by Scott-Taggart's Radio Press Ltd., had begun printing details of foreign programmes on a weekly basis.

Relations between Scott-Taggart and the BBC had been tense since the previous argument over the *Radio Times*' redesign, but they became increasingly antagonistic over the issue of *Wireless Weekly*'s intention to pre-empt the BBC printing foreign programme listings in *World-Radio*. Scott-Taggart wrote directly to Reith, and this time he copied in the Directors of the BBC, to accuse them of using a privileged position to create a situation which was "unfair in the extreme" (Scott-Taggart 1925b, p. 1). This sense that a power was being abused was a highly contentious issue which many of the technical and wireless press had felt ever since the BBC entered the magazine market with the publication of the *Radio Times*. The question was not just about circulation sales, but also about the more lucrative advertising opportunities which would come with printing the details for foreign programmes, just at the point when it had become a new trend.

3.5. Exploiting the Monopoly

Scott-Taggart objected to the fact that the BBC intended to use the "exclusive publicity" which it alone could command, and listed the BBC's unfair advantages, including their access to microphone publicity and their state-aided revenue. As Scott-Taggart said, it was the radio audience that was effectively allowing the BBC to compete, and win, in the magazine market. Furthermore, he summarised the key injustice with devastating clarity: "You are already taking, I suppose, nearly £100,000 a year out of the industry in advertising by virtue of a competition which we have all considered grossly unfair from the start" (Scott-Taggart 1925c, p. 1). For comparison, GBP 100,000 would equate to approximately GBP 5–6 million today, and the turnover of the *Radio Times* is currently in the region of GBP

5 million (www.zoominfo.com/c/radio-times/31998311 accessed on 1 June 2023) with a weekly circulation of ~500,000 copies (www.pressgazette.co.uk).

Ominously, Scott-Taggart was so incensed that he declared he was prepared to join forces with others similarly injured to “break down a monopoly if it exceeds its right sphere”. He pointed out that the BBC was “acting in direct opposition to its own avowed policy of being a public utility concern” (Scott-Taggart 1925c, p. 1). Here, Scott-Taggart was attacking the BBC on its weak side because it was well understood that the BBC had not been set up as a monopoly broadcaster; with any concept that it could use its advantages to reach into established commercial markets such as the magazine sector (Street 2006).

It is apparent from the archives that Reith was sufficiently disturbed by this letter to demand of Gladstone Murray an overview of this situation and his part in it, because although the actual request is missing from the archived file, Gladstone’s Murray’s response makes it clear that Reith was displeased. The whole correspondence, both the internal discussion, and the exchange of letters with Scott-Taggart, provide an interesting insight into the BBC’s business tactics. Scott-Taggart was told that the BBC intended to publish anyway; his requests for compensation were actually derided, and moreover, he was threatened with legal action if he continued to use the title “Which Station Was That?” for one of his features, on the basis that it was a title used in the *Radio Supplement*, and later *World-Radio* (Gladstone Murray 1926, p. 1).

3.6. Using the Monopoly to Disrupt the Market

The aggressive tactics by the BBC were compounded by the fact that, in parallel to this altercation with Scott-Taggart, it was trying to establish an exclusive deal with Radio International Publicity Services (RIPS) which would prevent RIPS from undertaking any further negotiations and/or contracts with Scott-Taggart. Such a move would ensure that only the BBC would hold the contract for foreign programme material, as RIPS held the UK publication rights to foreign broadcast programme details, which had been gathered station by station in the early 1920s, thanks to the immense prescience by one of the RIPS directors, Captain Leonard Plugge. His fellow RIPS director Albert E. Leonard pleaded with the BBC to “deal tenderly with [Scott-Taggart], if only because he has a bitter tongue and the BBC has nothing to gain by antagonising 400,000 readers of ‘Wireless Weekly’” (Leonard 1926, p. 1). However, the BBC was not to be deterred in its plan to become—and remain—the sole publisher of the foreign broadcast details.

What is clear from various memoranda in the archives is that, even after it was re-named and relaunched, *World-Radio* still did not make a profit (BBC 1926). Although it had a much smaller circulation, *World-Radio* effectively defended the commercial interest of the *Radio Times* by preventing other publishers from producing a rival listing magazine under the guise of being a foreign programmes guide. The BBC’s drive to fight off competition was therefore solely a result of the magazine’s strategic importance to them in the battle over publicising foreign programmes, and the correlative effect of protecting future developments of the *Radio Times*.

The argument with Scott-Taggart was the prelude to further problems for the BBC in this area, and the publication of *World-Radio* continued to be troubled. Scott-Taggart was not alone in realising that the BBC was moving into new territory with hostile intent. When the intention of the BBC to publish a foreign radio stations listings magazine became more widely known, questions were asked in the House of Commons, as recorded in Hansard. The Liberal MP for Hackney South, Captain Garro-Jones, asked whether the Postmaster-General was aware that the BBC proposed to produce a “journal known as the Continental Radio Times”. Garro-Jones’ purpose was to discover the following:

Whether the terms of the agreement between the British Broadcasting Company and [the Postmaster-General] admit of the carrying on of a newspaper and publishing business; and what it is proposed should be done with the profits from this journal? (Hansard 1925b, p. 1).

It was Viscount Wolmer, the Assistant Postmaster-General, who answered and, conceding that the BBC would indeed be publishing a journal which he said would be known as the *Radio Supplement*, he was nevertheless firm in his assertion that “the issue of such a periodical will not be contrary to the terms of the agreement between the company and the General Post Office”. He would not be drawn on the question of the accruing profits, saying this was being discussed with the broadcasting organisations. The BBC followed this discussion closely as is evidenced by the letters held in the archives (Phillips 1925, p. 1).

During this period, the BBC had a number of important publications from which to draw income: *The Listener* (a successful concern), *World-Radio* (much less so), and also a series of supplementary publications including the *Handbooks*, *Yearbooks* and *Annuals*; concert programmes; and a whole range of pamphlets and ephemera. When considered together, these carried large numbers of advertisements relating to the radio market, from loudspeakers and batteries to entire radio sets. However, the BBC’s position over advertising remained anomalous. In 1926, it set up a department for the purpose of selling advertising space, and by 1929 it had three major magazine publications with pages full of advertisements (Murphy 2011). Yet, it claimed that it did not allow advertising from the microphone—except when promoting itself and its own publications, as discussed in the internal memoranda (Brown 1923). In other words, the BBC did not accept payment from commercial companies to advertise their products over the airwaves. These are very narrow distinctions on which to claim such a moral stance. As Chignell observes, “the BBC has been a self-conscious organisation often feeling the need to justify its actions” (Chignell 2008, p. 1), and whilst this could be considered to apply to many of the BBC’s activities, advertising stands above all others in this regard.

4. Conclusions

The early years for the BBC were eventful; as the immense power and impact of broadcasting became clear, the British government moved to ensure that this phenomenon came under one authority. The UK Government was anxious to avoid the example in the US, where independent, mostly privately owned, broadcasting stations financed themselves through an income derived from advertising. The BBC’s own role in advertising, and the perceived unfairness of the operating model, was to become a source of complaint—and also of defence.

It was the BBC’s unanticipated entry into the publications field which upset the balance. The BBC having its own advertising department had formed no part of the original plan when it was formed by the six radio manufacturers. It enabled the BBC to create two separate business models, i.e., broadcasting and publishing, which were to run on a very different basis, the former being funded by licence fees, and the latter being funded from the profits derived from advertising. On occasion, these two very different ideologies under which the BBC operated betrayed it into shocking double standards and aggressive tactics.

There was clearly a logical sense in creating a monopoly to ensure that public sector broadcasting in the UK was free from political and commercial influence. However, this also created a broadcasting and media leviathan which had a momentum of its own, and which, being funded by a combination of a licence fee and advertising revenue, was able to outstrip the competition through unfair means. How could private sector broadcasters and publishers hope to compete on a commercial basis with an organisation that would promote its own magazines through its broadcasting, and promote its own broadcasting through its magazines? Yet, challengers to this status quo did emerge, and some succeeded in threatening the BBC’s position as the broadcaster of choice. In the 1930s, the BBC faced very real competition from independent companies buying airtime from overseas radio stations and beaming their lively and entertaining programmes directly into British homes; they even advertised their programmes in similarly independent, and attractive, magazines. The level of synergy from these two activities cannot be underestimated, and the resulting disruptive influence distorted existing markets. The BBC today may claim to be independent of advertising, but the truth is that so many of its activities, evidenced

by the *Radio Times*, have a history of doing just that, and using advertising as a weapon to strengthen its own position through financial gain.

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