

# BBC Handbooks, Accounts and Annual Reports, 1927-2001/2

Introduction to the  
microfilm edition  
by  
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**MICROFORM ACADEMIC PUBLISHERS**

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2003

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## **The BBC Handbooks: some observations for broadcasting historians**

The BBC has occupied a central position in British cultural life since its reputation was fully established during the Second World War. The BBC's influential role is unparalleled elsewhere in the world; focussing the nation's interest on cultural and political concerns at home and abroad. As Kumar explains:

"The striking thing is the singularity of the BBC's position, as a major component of the national culture, when compared with broadcasting organisations in other countries."

(Quoted in Curran and Gurevitch, 1977: 236)

This centrality and influence continues to draw the attention of researchers all over the world to study the BBC, its broadcasting successes and its function in British life. To understand this unique institution is to go some considerable way to understand the wider society and culture; from changing ideas about class and the monarchy to the declining influence of the church and the rise of celebrity. Confronted with the task of studying the BBC's past most researchers start with Asa Briggs' five volume *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (Briggs, 1961; 1965; 1970; 1979; 1995). There are other important and widely cited histories of the BBC (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991) which can be read in combination with the large number of autobiographies and memoirs of former BBC staff. Back issues of the *Radio Times* and *The Listener* are widely used especially by those whose interest is mainly past programmes and schedules.

The BBC has been a self-conscious organisation often feeling the need to justify its actions. Kumar explains this tendency in these terms:

"For most of its fifty-year life the BBC has lived under a more or less constant threat to its security and perhaps even its sheer survival. It has lived on the brink of one crisis or another, under the scrutiny of one commission or another, at the centre of one or another public row, at regular intervals throughout its life. "

(Quoted in Curran Gurevitch, 1977:237)

Tom Burns makes a similar point in his sociological account of the BBC in which he refers to:

"The unceasing watchfulness of government over the BBC's news and discussions programmes ... has made for recurrent outbursts of criticism of BBC policy, allegations of political bias and a continuous mumbling undertone of disquiet, suspicion or downright animosity."

(Burns, 1977: 34)

Little wonder then that the embattled BBC has felt it necessary to publish in addition to its Annual Reports and Accounts to parliament a publicly available report of what it does and why. From 1928 to 1987 (apart from a two-year break in 1953 and 1954), the BBC Handbooks (at times called Yearbook and briefly Annual<sup>1</sup>) have performed this rather defensive function. Sir Ian Jacob, a former Director General of the BBC provides us with a useful statement of the handbooks' aims:

"To provide a clear and reliable guide to the workings of the BBC, to survey the year's work in British broadcasting, and to bring together as much information about the BBC as can be assembled within the covers of a small book."

(BBC Handbook, 1955)

Most of the handbooks follow the same template – a review of the BBC's year, information on notable programmes, and other basic factual material including names of senior staff and governors, engineering developments, audience trends, the accounts, and a copy of the BBC's charter.

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<sup>1</sup> The annual publication was called the *BBC Handbook* in 1928, 1929, 1938-1942 and 1955-1987. It was called the *BBC Yearbook* in 1930-1934 and 1943-1952 and the *BBC Annual* in 1935-1937.

The BBC is a highly complex cultural institution and a daunting subject even for the serious scholar. The handbooks however, provide some of the best statements of broadcasting policy to be found anywhere – distilling as they do institutional perceptions of everything from the problems caused by the size of the Light Programme's audience (BBC Handbook, 1948) to the benefits of regional television centres (1976).

Given the absence of any commentary on the handbooks I have used Asa Briggs' five volume history to provide pointers to some of the most significant content, as, Briggs, for example, cites the handbooks regularly in Volume 2 (as do Scannell and Cardiff, 1991).

The first handbook, for 1928 is of particular interest. 380 pages in length it includes a direct statement from John Reith (the first Director General of the BBC) about the new corporation<sup>2</sup> and its Public Service policy. There are 57 pages on programmes and some of these, on radio drama, are noteworthy. The handbook is fully illustrated and together with the handbook for the following year includes some outstanding original artwork by Heath Robinson, Aubrey Hammond, Arthur Watts and other important illustrators. For those interested in audience reception, the distinction between different types of listening is well articulated. The reader is advised that there is a difference between 'universal' programmes not requiring the undivided attention of the listener, and 'speciality' programmes – talks, music, news and even variety which require more deliberate listening in the 'listening room' of the house.

A Yearbook from this early period also highlights the lacunae contained in these documents. In March 1930, an early experiment in the synchronisation of sound and vision took place and a 'televisor' was installed at No 10 Downing Street so that the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, could watch. "It was a great success and the Prime Minister was delighted" (Briggs, 1965). This was clearly a moment of great significance in the history of the mass media. Briggs also notes the animosity towards television in the BBC with early television programmes being ignored in the *Radio Times*:

"The gracelessness of this attitude is also revealed in the BBC Yearbook for 1931 where no reference is made to the historic date of 30 March 1930." (Briggs, 1965: 550)

This is a reminder that although the handbooks are detailed and highly informative across the range of broadcasting issues, they need to be treated with some caution. The broadcasting historian, Andrew Crisell, offers these words of warning with reference to the categorisation of programmes in the handbooks:

"The handbooks hover uncertainly between objective, factual account and PR document. The facts and figures about programme content can be deceptive. One feels, for instance, that it sometimes suits the BBC to categorise programmes in a certain way – perhaps by referring to them as 'documentary' or 'serious drama' but that the categories would be open to challenge."

(Andrew Crisell interviewed January 15, 2003)

This problem should not deter the researcher from using the BBC's own classifications, at least as a useful starting point. In the case of religious programming, the handbooks can be used not only to articulate the *official* policy on religious programming but also to chart its demise. Briggs comments on religious policy in the 1930s using the handbooks as his source:

"Successive BBC handbooks sought to define what was often extremely elusive, the attempt to place broadcasting within 'the mainstream of the Christian tradition'. In 1932 for example, the handbook reaffirmed that 'broadcast services are not the occasion for sectarian propaganda. All denominations alike welcome the opportunity of the great audience which wireless affords and are content to preach

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<sup>2</sup> The British Broadcasting Company became the British Broadcasting Corporation on January 1, 1927.

the gospel of Christ on its universal terms of love and charity to all men, to dwell rather on that which unites them than on that which divides." (BBC Yearbook 1932, quoted in Briggs, 1965: 236)

A fuller statement by Iremonger, Head of BBC Religious Programming, appeared in the BBC Annual of 1935. Similar statements of religious policy occur throughout the handbooks that also afford a way of evaluating the BBC's commitment to this cause. The independent researcher, Nigel Holmes has used the handbooks to chart the secularisation of output:

"As I delved through half a century of BBC Handbooks and Annual Reports the story of a staggeringly steep change in attitude to religion became all too apparent. In the ten years to 1997/8 the total number of hours transmitted on BBC 1 and 2 increased by a half, yet the number of hours of religious programmes declined by a third." (Nigel Holmes, January 10, 2003)

It is possible that with the application of Crisell's critique of the classification of programming, the decline might well be even greater as the label 'religious programming' was stretched to include other programmes with an ethical focus.

The Second World War was of course a momentous time for the BBC as it was for the country. In some senses it also established and entrenched the place of the institution at the heart of British cultural and political life. One of the reasons for this was the reputation of BBC news reports for accuracy and independence, a reputation enhanced by the journalism of men like Frank Gillard, Wynford Vaughan Thomas and Richard Dimbleby. The wartime handbooks provide insight into the thinking of the BBC and the government on issues of truth and propaganda and Harold Nicolson's<sup>3</sup> statement in the 1941 handbook is a good illustration of the official view. He calls himself a 'democratic propagandist' and argues that this form of propaganda is based on three principles:

"The first of these principles is that truthfulness is more effective than untruthfulness and honesty more enduring than cunning. The second is that there does exist a difference between 'right' and 'wrong', and that this difference is readily appreciated by the vast majority of mankind. And the third is that most people know the distinction between foolishness and sense." (BBC Handbook, 1941:32)

The same handbook includes a short article by Robert Silvey on 'Listening in 1940'. Once again it would be dangerous to see these audience statistics as the whole picture. While it was no doubt true (or at least justifiable) to say that 5,800,000 people listened to 'American Commentary' on alternate Saturdays it is also true that over 6 million people in Britain listened regularly to 'Lord Haw Haw's' fascist propaganda on Radio Hamburg (Briggs, 1970). It goes without saying that there is no mention of Lord Haw Haw in the handbooks.

The handbooks from the war years suggest a BBC refreshingly diverted from self-examination and concerned mainly with the priorities of broadcasting at home and abroad in the difficult circumstances of war. The contents page of the 1942 handbook shows the emphasis on the external service and its broadcasts to the rest of the world; after the introduction the first seven sections of the handbook cover overseas broadcasts. We are reminded of the seven and a half hours of daily broadcasts to the USA at a time before it had entered the war and the motive for that effort is given away in the 1942 handbook:

"All night long the BBC studios are filled with people scorning sleep in order to broadcast to North America... they know that they are doing something to further the cause of Anglo-American understanding, on which the future of the world depends." (BBC Handbook, 1942)

The introduction of commercial television in Britain in 1955 had a momentous effect on the Corporation and this is reflected in the handbooks for the late 1950s. Here is a fairly direct assessment:

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<sup>3</sup> A junior minister in the Ministry of Information who then joined the Board of Governors.

"The introduction of commercial television in September 1955 did not, in the Corporation's opinion, alter in any way the BBC's obligations to the public. It has, however, had a material effect on the BBC's operations, chiefly in the form of additional costs."

(BBC Handbook, 1957 quoted in Briggs, 1995).

Again, using the handbooks, Briggs shows how competition led to programme costs per hour more than doubling between 1954-5 and 1957-8 and reaching a peak in 1959-60 (Briggs, 1995: 18). Despite the competition and evidence of increased costs, the actual word "competition" was shunned, and Briggs notes in typically studious manner that it appears "only twice in the handbook for 1957 and not at all in the handbook for 1958". (Briggs, Vol. 5:18).

The handbook for 1959 provides us with another good example of the discrepancy between the official view and reality. This handbook described *Six-Five Special*, an innovative youth programme and an important departure for the BBC as "a national institution equally enjoyed by the parents". But this glowing assessment contrasts sharply with the judgement of Cecil McGivern (Controller of Television) who is quoted as saying that the programme was "unacceptable" and "apart from the general chaos there were too many girls who wore very abbreviated skirts...". We also read of "terrible phoney spirituals being sung during a wretched skiffle contest" (Briggs, 1995: 204). The contrast between the views expressed by senior staff responsible for the production of *Six-Five Special* and the official view could hardly be greater. Once again the all important tensions within the Corporation are revealed by a close study of the handbooks together with the unofficial views of its staff.

Arguably the 1960s were the golden age of BBC television – original, courageous and popular throughout the range of genres. The handbooks for this period reflect some of this confidence. The 1966 edition for example is a well designed and unapologetic review with some serious and enlightened content. The first of the five articles with which it begins is 'The BBC: Focus of Controversy' and it addresses directly the many illiberal voices ranged against the Corporation. This account goes so far as to quote the manifesto of the Viewers and Listeners Association as follows:

- 1 We men and women of Britain believe in a Christian way of life.
- 2 We want it for our children and our country.
- 3 We deplore the present-day attempts to belittle or destroy it, and in particular we object to the propaganda of disbelief, doubt, and dirt that the BBC pours into millions of homes through the television screen.
- 4 Crime, violence, illegitimacy, and venereal disease are steadily increasing, yet the BBC employs people whose ideas and advice pander to the lowest in human nature, and accompany this with a stream of suggestive and erotic plays which present promiscuity, infidelity, and drinking as normal and inevitable.

(BBC Handbook, 1966)

The astute researcher can learn more than one lesson from this short article. It reminds us of the language and strength of feeling of the time but also says something about the BBC and attitudes at the top to the reactionary critique. It takes a certain amount of self-belief for a state-funded enterprise to begin a review of the year with the words of its fiercest critics. The manifesto of the Viewers and Listeners Association would not have been quoted unless the author of the article (which was anonymous) thought they were self evidently absurd.

The handbook for 1968, lavishly illustrated, celebrated 40 years of the BBC and did so by quoting statistics on audience size. This contrasted with *The BBC Record's* more tentative description of 1967 as the 'year of decisions' prompted no doubt by the appointment in July of that year of Lord Hill, formerly Chairman of the ITA as Chairman of the Board of Governors. As Briggs says, this was a major shock to the BBC and perceived by Greene as an insult:

"... yet it was not mentioned in the BBC Handbook for 1968 except that the name of Hill now appeared in the place of Normanbrook at the head of the list of members of the Board of Governors. Nor did Hill figure in the BBC handbook for 1969 in an article by Greene called 'The BBC since 1958'. In that same edition of the handbook however Hill was given the privilege of writing the first words, a 'Foreword... '."

(Briggs, 1995: 594)

Hugh Carleton Greene reviewed his Director-Generalship in the BBC handbook for 1969 in an article entitled 'The BBC since 1958'. Briggs notes that Greene devoted one 'precious paragraph' out of twelve to *That Was the Week That Was*. Greene defends the highly controversial programme that was to expose him to so much criticism.

The handbooks from the 1970s include some useful, general statements of policy. For example, Lord Hill marked the 50th anniversary of the BBC (1972) with an article on the importance of an independent BBC. He reminded us that the BBC would fight for its independence again if necessary as it had been forced to in the past. This must be seen in the context of the controversy over a programme broadcast a year earlier, *Yesterday's Men*, which had offended senior Labour politicians and led to wide ranging attacks on the Corporation and a limited apology.

The handbook for 1973 contains a particularly interesting article by Charles Curran, who had replaced Carleton Greene as Director General in which he articulates a more pluralist vision of the BBC and its audiences, and denies any sort of manipulative or culturally arbitrating role. Both Hill and Curran (and Greene previously) wrote thoughtfully about the BBC and broadcasting and their statements can be read in the handbooks.

The handbook for 1976 contains a particularly informative and well illustrated programme review section that includes radio and television, regional output and the World Service. It acts as an indispensable guide to the full range of BBC output. The same handbook also acts to remind us of the retrenchment in the BBC brought about by the financial crisis of the early and mid-1970s.

The theme of 'dumbing down' has been an expression used frequently in recent years, but has been a subject for debate within the BBC for much of its history. In 1984 Granada's critically acclaimed *Jewel in the Crown* was countered on the BBC by the notorious American import *The Thorn Birds*. The 1985 handbook goes some way to mix the usual defensiveness with an acceptance of the criticisms of the time:

The series was much criticised for wooden stereotyping of many characters, for thin writing and implausible melodrama and its placing in the schedules... But the series had a narrative drive that proved compulsive. It drew enormous audiences.

(BBC Handbook, 1985)

By 1987 – the date of the final handbook – they had become little more than a well designed and stylishly illustrated Annual Report and Accounts, and it is not surprising that the decision was made to publish one document rather than two.

Looking at the handbooks overall as a collection, there can be little doubt that those dating from the 1930s are of particular value (and indeed rarity – many library collections lack the handbooks published as BBC Annual for 1935-1937).

In their Art Deco design and didactic content they lack the tentativeness of post-war handbooks as Andrew Crisell states:

One occasional and unexpected benefit of the old patrician days was that risks were sometimes taken, the tastes of the audience first flouted and then won over, and debate stirred up.

(Andrew Crisell interview January 15, 2003)



Undoubtedly one of the most important qualities of the handbooks is the way they connect the researcher to a distant time and culture. In their design, illustrations and advertisements, content and mode of address, they help us to have a greater sense of the historical and cultural moment under study. With their mass of detail, they provide an uncritical but frequently used guide to the BBC during the last century. Used in combination with academic sources the handbooks can be invaluable.

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April 2003

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## BBC Handbooks, Accounts and Annual Reports (1927-20021/2)

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### **BBC AUDIENCE RESEARCH REPORTS**

Part I of the collection, covering the period 1936-c.1950, presents the early research of the BBC's pioneering Listener Research Department (LRD) into wireless listening in Britain nationwide and at a regional level. From the controversial founding of the Department in 1936, this first part takes in the turbulent years of the Second World War through to the early post-war period leading up to the launch of Britain's first national television channel. This part reproduces the entire available collection of weekly Audience Summaries, together with the weekly, then daily, Listening Barometers. Also included are the Audience Reaction Reports on specific programmes and Special Reports on particular themes or issues for the period, as well as some key policy documents produced by the LRD during these years, tracing the early development of what has come to be known as market research within the BBC.

During the Second World War, listener research took on a new urgency as the BBC became an indispensable part of life on the Home Front. The LRD's wartime audience research, reproduced here for the first time, provides crucial insights into the listening habits and cultural preferences of the British people at this time, as well as detailed listener responses to some of the key radio programmes and personalities of the era, from ITMA and The Brain's Trust to Winston Churchill and William Joyce, the voice of Nazi propaganda better known as Lord Haw-Haw. Through its special reports on topics ranging from news readers' accents and evening listening habits to listeners' views about Russia, this first part provides a unique and revealing window onto the behaviour, attitudes and preoccupations of the British people at a key moment in their history.

This part in the collection, which is published with an introduction by Sian Nicholas of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, is of particular value to students and researchers in history, in mass observation, and in media and communications studies, and is an indispensable source of information for those with an interest in everyday life in wartime Britain.

It is anticipated that the complete collection of Audience Research Reports of the BBC, 1936-1997, from the holdings of the BBC Written Archives Centre, will appear over a period of 4-5 years (30-40 reels p.a.), and can be acquired either as individual parts or on standing order.

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