

Nevertheless in discussing those characteristics which certain kinds of programme seem to me to illuminate I do not wish to suggest that they are not present in other kinds. In treating the multi-levelled, ambivalent relationship between broadcaster and listener under 'Commentary', for instance, I do not wish to imply that this relationship does not exist in varying degrees in *all* radio involving personal presentation; nor do I wish to suggest by discussing the distinctive nature of radio language under 'News and Current Affairs' that this language is of any less fundamental a significance in other kinds of programmes. As I have already remarked, the distinctions between programme categories are in any case uncertain: it was many years before the BBC was able to disentangle radio drama from its Features Department; drama is often used in educational broadcasts, many of which are closely akin to documentaries; and documentary can often shade into news and current affairs.

The difficulty of maintaining the distinctions between categories must serve to excuse the omission of a separate chapter on adverts – an omission which may seem surprising in the light of the recent development of British commercial radio at national level. But since the impact of adverts depends so much upon their ability to impersonate *other* forms of radio output, notably drama, comedy and news presentation, a chapter which attempted a comprehensive analysis of them would have become a monster that ingested every other chapter in the book. My aim has simply been to select from within a fairly broad range of output so as to gain a composite picture of radio's nature and possibilities.

Chapter 2

The history and development of radio in Britain

the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
(Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, III, ii)

Many histories of British broadcasting have been written, ranging from the detailed and scholarly (A. Briggs 1961–79; Paulu 1956, 1961, 1981; Pegg 1983; Scannell and Cardiff 1991) through the potted (Golding 1974; Parker 1977; A. Briggs 1985; Lewis and Pearlman 1986; Curran and Seaton 1991; Seymour-Ure 1991) to the subjective and anecdotal (Black 1972; Snagge and Barsley 1972). This historical sketch, and it can be no more, takes as its focus the major developments in broadcasting technology – not merely those within radio, but the arrival and subsequent evolution of its great rival, television. It considers how these developments have changed the audience's perception and use of radio over the years, and the effect this in turn has had on its programming structures, on the nature of broadcasting institutions, and on the various political arrangements that have had to be devised for them.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scientists of many nationalities, most notably the Italian Guglielmo Marconi, were attempting to transmit messages over distances, first by means of wireless telegraphy and then by wireless telephony. But it is important to realize that these were primarily envisaged as means of *point-to-point* communication (for example, ship to shore), and that when radio (or 'wireless' as it was known in the early days) was developed it was largely thought of in these terms.

In Britain the Postmaster General had been empowered to control wireless telegraphy by an Act of Parliament in 1904, and he

regarded wireless telephony, whether directed at individuals or at all and sundry, as a natural extension thereof, and therefore as also subject to his control. In fact, for most members of the political establishment it was not only the case that radio was a mere by-product of point-to-point modes of communication; there was even a suggestion of primitiveness, of a lack of refinement, about a medium which *broadcast* – addressed the world at large rather than maintained confidentiality by addressing private individuals (A. Briggs 1961: 34). In February 1920, when the Post Office gave permission to the Marconi Company to begin broadcasts to wireless enthusiasts from a transmitter in Chelmsford, it did so with a sense of unease that they would interfere with point-to-point services (Paulu 1956: 8). This unease was fuelled by the armed forces, who for a long time resisted the encroachment of broadcasting on their wavelengths on the ground that their secret messages would be overheard (Williams 1974: 32). Thus, apart from the wireless manufacturers and the few home enthusiasts with receivers, there was little appreciation of the medium's *social* possibilities. Not until 1922 did the Post Office draw a distinction between technology which addressed individuals and that which addressed all and sundry (A. Briggs 1961: 96). In that year the Marconi Company was allowed to make regular broadcasts from Writtle and shortly afterwards its London station, 2LO, was opened.

Nevertheless the Post Office still feared chaos and congestion on the wavelengths and declined to license other wireless manufacturers who wished, like Marconi, to conduct broadcasts as a way of stimulating the sale of their receivers. On the other hand it was equally reluctant to allow one manufacturer to hold a broadcasting monopoly. It therefore proposed that the leading manufacturers form a broadcasting syndicate or consortium, and as a result the British Broadcasting Company was licensed by the Post Office as a *de facto* (though not *de jure*) monopoly and began transmissions in November 1922. Its funds came from three sources: the original stock, royalties on the receivers which its member companies sold, and a portion of the revenue from broadcast receiving licences. In return for the financial risk of setting up the service the manufacturers were guaranteed protection against foreign competition.

The first general manager, later managing director, of the British Broadcasting Company was J.C.W. (later Lord) Reith, whose

Scottish Calvinist upbringing led him to see broadcasting as a high moral responsibility. Through its programmes he therefore sought to provide a comprehensive public service and quickly turned the company from a commercial enterprise into a respected national institution. Its output embraced a wide range of music, drama and comedy, a children's hour, and with the help of external advisory committees, religious and schools broadcasts. Within three years a national network had been established, and with the opening of the long-wave transmitter at Daventry in 1925 reception was available to 85 per cent of the population, many with a choice of national or regional programmes.

The population reacted to the new medium with prodigious enthusiasm. In 1923 the Post Office issued 80,000 licences, but probably four or five times as many sets were in use: in 1924 1 million licences were issued, but up to 5 million sets were in use (Black 1972: 23). In three more years the number of licences doubled, and by 1939 9 million sets existed under licence (A. Briggs 1965: 6). By 1928 radio audiences were never less than 1 million and often as high as 15 million (Black 1972: 26).

The first radio receivers were crystal sets, which were easy and cheap to make but could also be bought from the BBC, complete with two pairs of headphones, for between £2 and £4 (*ibid.*: 20–1). They soon gave way to valve receivers with loudspeakers which enabled people to listen in groups and were virtually universal by the early 1930s. It has been calculated that the average price of the cheaper radio sets – £1 to £2 in the 1920s and £5 to £6 in the 1930s – was still quite expensive for the working classes, who were slightly under-represented in the national audience until the arrival of cheap 'utility' sets in 1944 (Pegg 1983: 47–9). But open to them were the relay exchanges, basically central radio receivers which in return for a rental could be wired to loudspeakers in individual homes. It is also significant that as the new technology improved and the demand for sets grew, their prices fell. Two-valve sets which cost £17 10s. in 1923 were retailing for 5 guineas in 1925 (A. Briggs 1961: 231) – though this was still a price which was well beyond anything the working classes could afford.

Despite its range and popularity the programme diet suffered from an important deficiency imposed by a body which was a good deal more prescient about radio's potential than many others of the time: the Newspaper Proprietors' Association. As a result of the NPA's influence with the government, the BBC was

forbidden to broadcast any news bulletins before 7 pm and any commentary on public events. Nor could it broadcast news other than that which was bought from the main agencies. These restrictions were not finally thrown off until the European crisis of 1938 (Paulu 1956: 156).

Nevertheless there were some isolated portents of radio's possibilities as a news medium. In 1926 the General Strike occurred. There were virtually no newspapers and so the NPA lifted its restrictions on the way in which the BBC gathered and broadcast the news. But the BBC's reportage of the strike was compromised by the delicacy of its own position. Its Charter had not yet been granted and the government had the authority to turn it into a mouthpiece and even to requisition it altogether. Not surprisingly, then, the BBC's perspective on the events was broadly pro-government. It did not report everything, but nor did it distort, and it was never wholly associated with the government (A. Briggs 1961: 360-73). Some strikers denounced it, but many came to rely on it, and what the strike did in terms of radio was to establish the medium in the nation's life as a vital channel for the rapid dissemination of news and information.

A second event, much less important in itself yet an even more dramatic portent of radio's news potential, was the Crystal Palace fire of 1936. It occurred after the evening papers had shut down and before the morning papers appeared, and was the BBC's first 'scoop'. From the scene of the fire a young reporter named Richard Dimbleby broadcast a live telephone report against a background of shouts, firebells and the crackle of flames (Black 1972: 73; Herbert 1976: 14-15), and demonstrated that as a news medium radio is not only quicker than newspapers but more 'concrete' in the sense that it can convey the sound of what it reports.

But to return to the problems which faced the British Broadcasting Company: not only did it suffer from restrictions on its news output, but the evident popularity of its other programmes did not protect it from financial difficulties. Anomalies and loopholes in its royalty and licensing arrangements left it seriously short of revenue, and so in 1925 the government set up the Crawford Committee to consider the whole future of broadcasting. In fact the situation suited Reith, who wanted the BBC to become a public institution free from commercial pressures on the one side and political interference on the other. The Committee was of like mind and as a result of its recommendations the British

Broadcasting Corporation was set up by Royal Charter on 1 January 1927, with Reith as its first Director General.

Since then its constitution and statutory obligations as a publicly funded yet quasi-autonomous institution have remained largely unchanged. It is obliged to inform, educate and entertain; to report the proceedings of Parliament; to preserve a balance between political points of view; and in a national emergency to broadcast government messages, the source of which it is at liberty to name. It is also happy to accept two prohibitions: it may neither advertise nor editorialize. Under the terms of its Charter (conferred by the Crown) and its Licence and Agreement (its title to broadcast conferred by the government), it has a guaranteed income from receiving licences and maintains full editorial independence. Of course, as Scannell and Cardiff point out (1982: 162), it is subject to state pressures in a number of indirect ways. The Charter is renewable, and only the state can increase the licence fee. It also appoints the Board of Governors.

Soon after its foundation the Corporation underwent a rapid expansion, enhancing its output and its reputation. In 1932 it moved its headquarters into the purpose-built Broadcasting House, an act which symbolized its coming-of-age as a national institution, and in the same year began its Empire Service, the first of an interlocking range of external services whose illustrious history is recounted elsewhere (Mansell 1982). Meanwhile it had also recognized the need for a choice of domestic networks and established the National Programme, which mainly originated from London, and the Regional Programme, which drew its material primarily from six regional services and was also fed by a London key service. Both were 'mixed programme' networks and not markedly different in tone or content:

Mixed programming offered a wide and diverse range of programme materials over the course of each day and week. Typically it included news, drama, sport, religion, music (light to classical), variety or light entertainment. Not only did it cater for different social needs (education, information, entertainment), but for different sectional interests within the listening public (children, women, businessmen, farmers, fishermen, etc.).

(Scannell and Cardiff 1982: 167-8)

Reith's aim was to vary the output in such a way that the listener might be 'surprised into' an interest in a subject which she had not

previously enjoyed or even known about: the intention was always to give her 'something a little better than she thought she wanted'. Such paternalism may seem somewhat objectionable today and it did not go unchallenged even in the 1930s.

One manifestation of the BBC's broadcasting philosophy was the 'Reith Sunday', the one day when a large majority of people had the leisure to listen to the radio and craved relaxing fare. What they got, however, was a transmission which did not begin until 12.30pm and consisted only of religious services, talks and classical music. But two continental-based commercial radio stations were set up in order to take advantage of the situation. The first was Radio Normandie (founded by someone with the wonderfully apposite name of Captain Plugge), which began broadcasting from the north coast of France in 1931 and offered southern areas of Britain a diet of American-style programmes including soap operas. The second was Radio Luxembourg which opened on an unauthorized wavelength in 1933 and whose programme of mainly light music could be heard all over Britain. On Sundays the number of listeners to these stations exceeded those who stayed tuned to the BBC: it was the first sign of discontentment with the latter's domestic monopoly.

The second challenge to Reith's broadcasting philosophy came mainly from within the BBC itself, although it was doubtless strengthened by the threat from commercial radio – the demand for regular and systematic research into audience behaviour and tastes, about which virtually nothing was known other than through casual letters from listeners. Reith feared that such research would inevitably influence and even dictate broadcasting policy, that worthwhile minority programmes would be sacrificed to the popularity ratings. Nevertheless its advocates won the day and an Audience Research Department was set up in 1936. By 1938, the year of Reith's resignation, it had gathered much information about the British radio audience, including reassuring evidence of its very broad social composition.

With the outbreak of war in 1939 the BBC combined its National and Regional Programmes into a single Home Service, but in order to maintain the morale of the troops forming the British Expeditionary Force in France it introduced in 1940 the Forces Programme, predominantly an entertainment service of dance music, sport and variety which foreshadowed the Light Programme. The Forces Programme was seen merely as a temporary

expedient (Scannell and Cardiff 1982: 187): what was not appreciated at the time was that its uniformly 'light' output was the beginning of the end of Reith's mixed programming policy, which would finally disappear with the formation of Radios 1 to 4 in 1967 (Pegg 1983: 207–8). Within two years the Forces Programme was being listened to by more civilians than servicemen and attracting an audience 50 per cent larger than that of the Home Service (A. Briggs 1970: 47).

It is widely agreed that the BBC's performance during the Second World War was impressive. At home it was a means of social cohesion, and abroad it was generally regarded as an island of truthfulness amid a sea of rumour and propaganda. But to the media student the war is of greater interest as a time when radio at last came into its own as a rapid news medium, a role it has maintained even in an age of television. The BBC's 9pm news bulletin commanded huge and avid audiences and it was under pressure of war that the techniques of news broadcasting evolved from the early days of straight bulletin delivery into something like the blend of reading, correspondents' reports and sound actuality that we are familiar with today. The gathering of news became better organized and from 1944 the BBC began to employ its own foreign correspondents. Bulletins were supplemented by extended news programmes such as *Radio Newsreel*, which began in 1940, and new production techniques were adopted such as the association of comment with fact and the insertion of actuality into news broadcasts. But the catalyst to all this was technology: sound recording was vastly improved during the war. As Asa Briggs points out (1970: 325–6) the recording of news and talks acquired a special importance from about 1941 onwards. It removed the need to bring broadcasters into studios which were at risk from air raids, provided reserve material, allowed more outside reporting, made programme exports easier, served the needs of the monitoring service, and enabled producers to anticipate any problems of censorship which might arise with the War Office.

Ironically it was the Germans who pioneered the developments in recording technology, but they made much less imaginative use of it on the air than did the British. BBC reporters like Richard Dimbleby were given the same battle training as the soldiers and sent back front-line dispatches using portable disc-recorders and skilful editing to bring commentary and actuality closer together. The news programme *War Report*, which began on D-Day, 6 June

1944, made extensive use of recorded actuality and commanded regular audiences of between 10 and 15 million in Britain alone (A. Briggs 1970: 662). Such actuality has remained an integral part of radio news, a way of guaranteeing its immediacy and truth to life.

Well before the war ended the popularity of the Forces Programme made it clear that there could be no simple reversion to the peacetime system of two substantially similar mixed programme networks. Consequently in 1945 the Director General of the BBC, William Haley, announced the plan of a new tripartite system which had long been in preparation. The Home Service was to continue as a basic London service which a federation of regional services – Scottish, Northern, Midland, Welsh, West and Northern Irish – could draw upon; the Forces Programme was to be superseded by the very similar Light Programme which replaced it without a break on 29 July 1945; and the Third Programme, an unashamedly ‘highbrow’ network devoted to the arts, serious discussion and experiment, began broadcasting on 29 September 1946.

Taken as a whole, the three networks represented an ingenious reconciliation of popular demand and the old Reithian seriousness of purpose, a compromise of streamed and mixed programming which was to work fairly well for the next ten or fifteen years. As Haley pointed out, the old mixed programme concept had presented the listener with certain problems:

Before the war the system was to confront him with the necessity for pendulum-like leaps. The listener was deliberately plunged from one extreme to the other. The devotees of Berlin (Irving) were suddenly confronted with Bach. Many listeners were won for higher things in this way, but many were irretrievably lost. For the weakness of the process was that so many intolerances were set up.

(cit. Smith 1974: 83)

Hence although mixed programming was not to be abandoned (in an age without television many people still found it desirable as well as possible to *listen*), within each network the *range* of programmes was narrowed and a certain uniformity of tone created. Moreover a complementary relationship was established between the Light and the Home and between the Home and the Third which gave the plan an edifying cultural purpose.

It rests on the conception of the community as a broadly based pyramid slowly aspiring upwards. This pyramid is served by three main Programmes, differentiated but broadly overlapping in levels and interest, each Programme leading on to the other, the listener being induced through the years increasingly to discriminate in favour of the things that are more worth-while. Each Programme at any given moment must be ahead of its public, but not so much as to lose their confidence. The listener must be led from good to better by curiosity, liking, and a growth of understanding. As the standards of the education and culture of the community rise so should the programme pyramid rise as a whole.

(cit. *ibid.*)

It was during the war and for the ten years or so after it that radio enjoyed its heyday, providing programmes of distinction in every genre to audiences of many millions. This was the period of what were regarded as radiogenic ‘features’ programmes – programmes of a factual, often documentary, nature but partly created through imaginative scripting which blended narration, actuality, dramatic dialogue and sound effects. It was also the period of *Children’s Hour* and *Radio Newsreel*; of talks programmes such as *Letter from America*; of discussions and debates such as *The Brains Trust* and *Any Questions?*; of radio magazines like *Woman’s Hour*; of drama – not only ‘classical’ plays but popular serials like *Dick Barton* and *The Archers*; of light entertainment such as *ITMA* and *Workers’ Playtime*; and of a vast output of classical and popular music both on record and performed by innumerable orchestras including the BBC’s own.

What was to end radio’s pre-eminence was, of course, television, which had been pioneered by John Logie Baird and others during the 1920s. The BBC began test transmissions in 1930 and six years later opened a regular service for a few thousand viewers in the London area, using both the Baird and EMI systems. The service was stopped by the war, but even when it resumed in 1946 television was commonly thought of as ‘radio with added vision’ rather than as a medium which was fundamentally different. Before the war Reith had thought of ‘integrating’ radio and television (A. Briggs 1965: 608) and in 1949 Haley wrote in the *BBC Quarterly*: ‘television is an extension of [radio] broadcasting. That is the crucial point . . . [television and

radio] are complementary expressions within the same medium. They are part of one whole' (cit. Paulu 1981: 54). This naive misconception was to have prolonged and negative effects on certain aspects of television production:

When BBC Television began it was inevitable, if not very appropriate, that one of its departments should be called Television Talks. This department dealt, in effect, with anything that was not drama, light entertainment, sport or news. The name continued in use for a long time and is an indication of how difficult the BBC found it to come to terms with the fundamental difference between radio and television, how many of the concepts of radio were taken over and imposed on television and how little the top echelons of the television service understood the new medium.

(Hood 1975: 40)

This insistence on seeing television in terms of radio not only provoked sensational resignations among the more perceptive members of the television service, it dominated the presentation of television news until 1955, when the BBC was finally forced to make changes by the competition from ITN (Smith 1976: 148-9). Nevertheless the post-war rise of television was inexorable and two major events of the 1950s were seen, accurately, as marking its arrival as the major mass medium and less accurately as portending the very extinction of radio, whose blindness was regarded by many as an unequivocal disadvantage.

The first event was the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. The way in which it was covered by television would be impressive even today. Over 20 million people (56 per cent of the population) watched the service in Westminster Abbey, far outnumbering listeners in almost every part of the country (A. Briggs 1979: 466-7).

The second major event, which followed a prolonged public debate about the BBC's broadcasting monopoly, was the establishment in 1955 of a second, commercial television network under the regulation of the Independent Television Authority. The debate centred on television but was ultimately of relevance to radio too. Those who favoured the continuance of the BBC's monopoly argued that competition would force down standards and indeed threaten its very existence as a public service. When ITV came on the air the BBC's Director General, Ian Jacob, complained:

It may be argued that the BBC is in a position to ignore the relative size of its audience and that it is not obliged to compete with Independent Television. But, to some extent, it must compete for its audiences, or its audiences will diminish beyond that level at which the Corporation could continue to claim that it is the national broadcasting authority. This is the situation into which the Corporation has been placed by competition.

(cit. Paulu 1981: 42)

In being forced to compete for large audiences the BBC might neglect its duty to provide programmes for minorities. But the arguments against monopoly were also powerful and most tellingly summarized by Sir Frederick Ogilvie, a former Director General of the BBC: 'Freedom is choice. And monopoly of broadcasting is inevitably the negation of freedom, no matter how efficiently it is run' (cit. Smith 1974: 85).

Still, faced with competition from first one and then two television networks, radio went into a long decline that some thought would prove terminal. Between 1949 and 1958 the BBC's average evening radio audience dropped from nearly 9 million to less than 3.5 million, three-quarters of whom were people without television sets (Paulu 1961: 155). Though television was clearly the major cause, there were problems within radio's tripartite programme network. First the element of overlap was too broad, especially between the Home and the Light. *ITMA*, for instance, was broadcast on the Home (A. Briggs 1979: 58). This meant that in so far as each network lacked a separate identity its hold on listener loyalty was weakened. In search of a particular kind of programme, a listener might find herself scanning the schedules of at least two of the three networks.

One consequence of the overlap was that the Light was too serious for some listeners, for whom Radio Luxembourg was again becoming a more attractive alternative. At the other extreme, the Third Programme was regarded by many as absurdly recherché, an exclusive club for highbrows and intellectuals. During the first fifteen years of its existence it averaged only 2 per cent of the total radio audience (Paulu 1961: 156). But from time to time attempts were made to mend matters. In 1957 its output was cut from five and a half hours per day to three and a half hours, the two-hour space it cleared being given over to an educational concept known as 'Network Three'. In tones at once humorous

and sad one retired features producer remembered Network Three as merely a part of radio's twilight gimmickry. 'This emerged as specialist listening for every kind of minority interest from Buchmanism to bee-keeping: it soon became known as the Fretwork Network and attracted even fewer listeners than the Third Programme itself' (Bridson 1971: 232).

The year 1964, when pirate broadcasters came on the air and television provided yet more competition in the form of BBC 2, marked BBC radio's lowest ebb. The Third Programme was again dismembered, becoming the Music Programme during the daytime, Study Session between 6 and 7.30 pm on weekdays, the Sports Service on Saturday afternoons, and a truncation of its former self during the evenings. But more significant was the end of two radio 'institutions', both made redundant by the visual appeal of television: the Features Department (Bridson 1971: 288-304; Snagge and Barsley 1972: 177) and *Children's Hour*.

Nevertheless three developments in broadcasting technology had already taken place and although two of these were to guarantee radio's future, in the case of the most important one it was not the BBC which was the first to exploit its potential. Perhaps the least important, although aesthetically very satisfying, was the development of stereophonic sound. The first test transmissions in stereo took place in 1958, the first regular broadcasts in 1966, and stereo is now a commonplace but vital feature of radio, particularly in 'simulcasts' during which an orchestra or group is televised while, for those who lack stereo television sets, its music can be simultaneously and more richly heard on the radio.

Rather more important was the opening in 1955 of the first two VHF transmitters at Wrotham in Kent. One of the transmitters also used frequency modulation (FM), which provided listeners with freedom from all kinds of interference; 'but the future role of VHF was to reintroduce low-power programming for very specific audiences, a return in an age of television to the first broadcasting patterns of 1922' (A. Briggs 1979: 561-2). In other words, it is VHF which has made possible the extensive development of local radio - a fact which underlay one of the first policy decisions taken by the IBA in 1973 (Baron 1975: 76).

But the most important development in broadcasting technology occurred much earlier - in 1947 - and applied not to radio transmitters but to receivers: the manufacture of the first transistor (Goldhamer 1971: 901). By replacing the old wireless valve, which

was large, costly and consumed much primary power, the transistor allowed radios to be constructed which used less power, were more reliable, and most important of all, were much cheaper and smaller - small enough to be carried around in a hand or a pocket. In a word, what the transistor would achieve was a revolution in the way radio was used, something which was recognized by Frank Gillard of the BBC:

The transistor has made the radio into the truly ubiquitous mass medium. Radio is no longer something to which you necessarily have to go. Radio goes with you. So it becomes a personal service. You come to count on it . . . to give you a certain service at a certain hour, wherever you might happen to be. Consequently the usefulness of the medium is enormously enhanced, and those in charge of sound in the years ahead must increasingly take this service function into account . . . in planning their programme output.

(Gillard 1964: 8)

Not only did the transistor allow the listener to take her radio anywhere, for it was no longer a fixture of the home or factory but could go with her to the seaside or out into the country; it greatly extended the number of things she could do *while* listening, such as working out in the garden or even driving her car. At the beginning of the 1960s only 4 per cent of all British cars carried radios (Paulu 1961: 155), but the 1970s saw an enormous growth in the number of car radios, which began to be fitted as standard equipment. By 1978 68 per cent of Britain's radio sets were either portable or mobile (Paulu 1981: 350), and by 1990 85 per cent of British cars were fitted with radios, over half of which were used whenever the car was driven (Seymour-Ure 1991: 4). But it was at the beginning of the 1960s that the transistor revolution began, so that at the very time when radio had lost its pre-eminence and seemed, indeed, to be facing extinction it discovered a new and apparently irreducible advantage in its very limitation. As a secondary medium it could be carried around and its messages absorbed in a way not possible even with portable television.

It is, of course, important to realize that while the transistor greatly *extended* radio's role as a secondary medium it did not *create* it. Listeners had always been able to use radio as an accompaniment to other activities, but they had come to use it almost exclusively in this way as a consequence of television, for

television had replaced radio as the main leisure medium. Previously the husband in the factory and the wife back home in the kitchen may well have done their jobs while accompanied by *Music While You Work*, but in the evening they would have sat down to do little or nothing except listen to the radio. Now their evenings would be spent watching television. This meant that in so far as radio continued to be heard it was seldom heard as anything *other* than an accompaniment to other activities; and it is highly likely that among the vast majority who used the radio in this way was a substantial number for whom it became little more than a background noise.

In these circumstances, then, Haley's tripartite cultural pyramid was suspect in theory as well as in practice, for it presupposed *listeners* at a time when the radio audience consisted increasingly of 'hearers'. In an age of television, Radio Luxembourg's diet of continuous light music made much more sense, and the evidence suggests that between 1945 and 1955 radio audiences were moving in the opposite direction from that which Haley had hoped for – from the serious and demanding to the light and entertaining (Paulu 1956: 380; A. Briggs 1979: 558). By 1955 Radio Luxembourg was claiming an average evening audience larger than the Home's (Paulu 1956: 360–1), and it is not surprising that during this period Luxembourg was much more in touch with developments in popular music than was the BBC (A. Briggs 1979: 759).

But Luxembourg was unable to take full advantage of the new lease of life, this time as a mainly secondary medium, which the transistor gave to radio during the 1960s; for Luxembourg was confined to evening transmissions and a weak signal. Instead, the initiative was seized by a number of 'pirate' radio stations which began to broadcast almost round the clock from various ships and forts in British coastal waters. Inspired by Radio Luxembourg and even more by US radio, the pirates were unashamedly commercial operations and informed by a realization almost totally lacking at the BBC – that the transistor, at once radio's salvation and its curse, meant that the listener could take her set almost anywhere and listen to it almost all the time; but that since she would almost certainly be doing something else while she listened she would often treat it as little more than 'background'. Continuous pop music was the ideal form of output.

The first of the pirates, Radio Caroline, began broadcasting from a ship off the Essex coast in March 1964, and by 1967 no fewer than

nine ships and forts were on the air. Caroline and a nearby ship broadcasting as Radio London were the slickest and most professional and reached the largest population, and their impact was sensational. A Gallup Poll found that in its first three weeks Caroline gained 7 million listeners from a potential audience of only 20 million (Harris 1970: 8). Though these estimates are not regarded as reliable (Chapman 1992: 44–5), it was claimed that within a year the total daily audience for pirate radio was between 10 and 15 million, and that by early 1966 the audience for this and for Radio Luxembourg was over 24 million (Harris 1970: 31, 53).

The BBC's findings were much more sober but no less eloquent. Within its transmission area Caroline commanded an audience about one-third that of the Light Programme; 70 per cent of its listeners were under 30 years old and treated it largely as background listening. Since there was no appreciable decline in the Light Programme's audience it was clear that Caroline and the other pirates were meeting a youthful need for radio that the BBC had neglected (Silvey 1974: 212–13).

The BBC was not totally to blame for this state of affairs: the amount of recorded music it could play was severely restricted by a long-standing agreement with the Musicians' Union. The pirates, on the other hand, observed no restrictions and paid no royalties on the records they played. But their fundamental act of piracy was their usurpation of frequencies, for which they were finally forced off the air by the government's Marine Broadcasting (Offences) Act in August 1967.

Nevertheless their consequences were considerable. The BBC's response to the demand they had identified was to turn one of the two frequencies which the Light Programme had occupied into a continuous pop music network named Radio 1. It began broadcasting in September 1967. Meanwhile the Light, Third and Home continued as mixed programme networks and were renamed Radios 2, 3 and 4 respectively. Audience size was now as important a criterion in moulding the BBC's radio policy as its duty to cater to a wide range of tastes, and Ian Jacob's fears about the threat to its broadcasting monopoly had proved well founded!

But although the pirates had been sunk, BBC radio's worst enemy remained. In the very same year, 1967, the introduction of colour transmissions on BBC 2 was a reminder, if one were needed, that television was now the major mass medium and that in order to survive radio must seek out, and largely confine itself

to, those things it could do best. These were spelt out in the BBC's pamphlet *Broadcasting in the Seventies* (1969), which announced a radical new plan for network radio.

The pamphlet began by acknowledging that radio had yielded to television as the main focus of attention and was now treated by the listener as secondary to her other activities. It therefore echoed Gillard's view of radio's new role as a 'service function', the listener relying upon it to fulfil certain requirements at certain times. Since she may not be listening too closely the old mixed programme pattern, with its sudden changes and pleasant surprises, was inherently unsuited to such a role. What was needed instead was a more uniform and predictable kind of content, an uninterrupted supply of music, perhaps, or of information: 'experience, both in this country and abroad, suggests that many listeners now expect radio to be based on a different principle – that of the specialised network, offering a continuous stream of one particular type of programme, meeting one particular interest' (BBC 1969: 3). Moreover since the programmes would all be of one type the divisions between them would become less important and the programme concept itself give way to more extended sequences.

Broadcasting in the Seventies wrote the epitaph on the Reithian principle of tempting the listener to unexpectedly beneficial or pleasurable types of programme. Henceforth the BBC's duty to provide a comprehensive public service would be fulfilled not in any one network alone but through the networks as a whole – a point conceded in the *BBC Handbook 1978* (BBC 1977: 264). In April 1970 Radio 2 became a network for continuous 'middle-of-the-road' music, while Radio 3 lost many of its speech programmes to Radio 4 and devoted a larger share of its output to classical music. Both networks retained some vestiges of mixed programming, notably sport, but only Radio 4 survived in something like its old form: it continued to carry a number of general entertainment programmes, but also specialized to some extent in informational or 'spoken word' output – news and current affairs.

It is important to recognize that radio's new role was forced upon it not simply by the ascendancy of television but by its own technological sophistication. So numerous and portable had transistor sets become that the Post Office could no longer keep track of them in order to collect the licence fee. Bowing to the millions of radio owners who evaded it, the government abolished radio-only

licences in 1971. But as Smith points out (1974: 128) this weakened the position of radio *vis-à-vis* television in the BBC because there was no longer a sum of money raised specifically for it: it was therefore being 'carried' by its more successful and glamorous partner. However, notwithstanding the creation of BBC Radio 5 in 1990 the largely specialized pattern of network radio has remained ever since, and there is no evidence that its audiences wish it otherwise. Between 1980 and 1982 there were some stealthy moves towards mixed programming on Radio 1 (Wade 1983a: 9). They cost the network three-quarters of a million listeners (Wade 1983b: 7).

Another major development of the last thirty years has been in local radio. Though the natural heir to the VHF transmitters which had been opened since the 1950s, local radio seems also to have been inspired by the offshore pirates (Harris 1970: 43, 84). Indeed it may not be too fanciful to suggest that the pirates helped in two ways to awaken the latent demand for a service which had been technically feasible for about ten years. First they were in some sense 'local' themselves. None of them broadcast over an area larger than the Home Counties, many of them publicized local events and aroused local loyalties, and a few, such as Radio London and Radio Essex, took local names. Second, although they afforded no broadcasting access to actual members of the public, they broke the BBC's virtual monopoly of radio to fulfil a demand which it had neglected, and so in that sense assumed a public 'voice'. Perhaps, then, they helped to foster what Anthony Smith describes as

the growth of a public demand that radio (and indeed broadcasting in general) should become a means of 'two-way' communication, that it should no longer remain the exclusive platform of the BBC and its invited guests. Local radio seemed to be a means by which some kind of 'right to broadcast' could be created, within the general framework of the BBC [It] was to become a forum for the whole of the cultural life of a community.

(Smith 1974: 151)

After a successful experiment in 1963–4 the BBC opened its first local radio station at Leicester in 1967 and followed up with many others during the 1970s and 1980s, using them ultimately as a replacement for regional radio, which was discontinued in 1983. In the light of Smith's remarks it is not surprising that the phone-in

has been a staple of local radio and it was first heard on BBC Radio Nottingham in 1968. It has been a genuinely new broadcasting technique in giving the radio listener her own voice on the air.

Local radio was not a BBC preserve for very long. In 1972 the ITA was renamed the Independent Broadcasting Authority and empowered by the Conservative government to license a national spread of independent local radio (ILR) stations. The IBA was a corporate, government-established body rather like the BBC's Board of Governors. It selected and gave contracts to the programme companies, but owned and operated the transmission facilities – for which the companies paid a rent – and regulated the balance and advertising content of their output. As on ITV the advertisers merely bought time-slots, not programmes, since sponsorship was not allowed. The first stations, Capital Radio and the all-news London Broadcasting Company, opened in London in 1973, and there are presently over fifty spread fairly evenly across Britain.

ILR has had a chequered history. Although some stations have been profitable others have shown losses, and there have been closures and mergers. The causes of its difficulties have been both general and specific. First, the gradual establishment of ILR in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with a number of technological and institutional developments in both the sound and visual media that posed a challenge not just to the commercial stations but to radio as a whole. Since 1974 teletext has enabled us to obtain visual updates on the news from our television screens without having to wait for radio bulletins. Video cassettes, video games and home computers have come to provide domestic alternatives to simply 'listening to the radio', and another threat to radio listening exists *inside* many receivers: the cassette recorder. Radio-cassetting and 'time-shift' listening mean that programmes can be heard and re-heard which would otherwise have been missed; but the cassette facility also means that many who would formerly have been radio listeners are now listeners to commercial tapes.

There has also been a vast increase in the amount of television that can be watched. Restrictions on transmission hours were lifted in 1972, and by 1990 it was possible to watch television round the clock. But Breakfast Television, which began in 1983 on both BBC and ITV, was of particular significance to radio because it struck at what had always been the latter's peak listening time.

In the last quarter of that year it caused a 10 per cent drop in the amount of time per week which the average person spent listening to the radio (BBC 1984: 45).

As well as the extension of transmission hours there has been a proliferation of television channels. ITV's Channel 4 went to air in 1982, and from the mid-1980s cable television franchises were being allocated by a newly formed Cable Authority. To date, business has been slow but cable offers important long-term prospects in interactive media. More spectacular, though hardly more successful, has been the arrival of satellite television. Sky TV began transmissions with four channels in 1989 and was followed a year later by British Satellite Broadcasting. Burdened by the enormous start-up costs the latter collapsed in February 1991 and was absorbed by its rival, which relaunched as BSkyB. It is perhaps testimony to the range of programming offered by the four terrestrial channels that satellite television has not so far tempted the British public in very large numbers; but the inevitable effect of this, as of all the other developments, has been to spread the media audience ever more thinly.

There have also been more specific reasons why ILR has not done as well as was expected. First, recurrent economic recession during the 1970s and 1980s affected advertising revenues. Second, the stations suffered until the mid-1980s from an over-regulation by the IBA which was both editorial and technological. Under the Act of 1973 it imposed certain public service obligations, notably to provide a 'balance of programming' and a full news service (Barnard 1989: 74–5). As we have seen, in a television age programming 'balance', which implies some degree of variety, is more than most people require from radio, and very few who listened to ILR enjoyed the variety as such, merely differing elements of it. This meant that an audience emerged which lacked sufficient identity for many advertisers to target (*ibid.*: 80–1). The balance of programming was thus doubly expensive – costly to produce in itself, and the more so in that it failed to interest enough advertisers. It also meant that each commercial station was required to honour a public service principle at *local* level which most of its explicitly public service competitors, namely BBC Radios 1, 2 and 3, had individually abandoned at *national* level.

The public service obligations placed on ILR were inappropriate not simply because television was the main medium, but for reasons of technology. The original Reithian case for providing a

radio service that offered something to everyone and maintained a political balance was the shortage of wavelengths: sound broadcasting was a scarce national resource, and so the few stations which existed should each cater to the full range of listener needs and tastes. But this case had been weakened by the arrival of FM, which created much more room on the spectrum – room for a multitude of stations, each of which could offer its own specialized output, and (like newspapers) its own political ‘line’.

Despite this the IBA put its stations into a technological strait-jacket too. It required their studios and equipment to conform to unnecessarily high technical standards and charged big transmitter rents at a time when the real costs of broadcasting were falling and it was becoming a relatively simple matter for almost anyone to set up a radio studio and go to air. For only a few thousand pounds an individual could install a radio station in his bedroom and transmit to the neighbourhood, and it is perhaps not surprising that this fuelled a growing dissatisfaction with the existing BBC/ILR duopoly. Among the complaints were that it was a professionals’ closed shop; that it denied the public genuine access to the airwaves; and that it offered a lack of real choice, neglecting ethnic minorities, special interest groups and the smaller communities. Those specific to local radio were that most of the commercial output, notably rock music, was not locally originated and that the BBC stations were grievously underfunded.

During the 1980s the legal consequence of this dissatisfaction was a growth of ‘in-house’ radio stations – campus radio in colleges and universities, hospital radio serving one or a whole network of sites, even stations serving large housing developments such as Radio Thamesmead in south-east London. The government permitted these because they were piped to closed communities: they did not, in effect, broadcast.

However, illegal developments made a bigger impact. For a time, an old-style offshore pirate, Laser 558, lured listeners from Radio 1 by minimizing disc-jockey chatter; but much more significant was the developing concept of ‘community radio’ (CR). The CR movement was a direct response to the inadequacies of local radio (Lewis and Booth 1989: 105), and by the middle of the decade some fifty community stations, mostly catering for ethnic groups, could be heard across Britain, reinstating themselves almost as quickly as the Home Office could shut them down. In contrast to the legitimate ILR stations they had low set-up costs. In 1984 the

IBA would not allow Viking Radio to transmit to Hull until it had spent £200,000 on bringing its studios and equipment up to a certain standard: meanwhile a pirate station in London was broadcasting successfully on equipment costing one-twentieth of that sum (Webster 1984: 1). Moreover, since the pirates were not bound to provide a balance of programming, they could more easily yield targeted audiences to their advertisers.

In 1985, when the Home Office seemed about to legalize twenty-one of the CR stations on an experimental basis, the IBA at last moved to ease the plight of its licensees. It relaxed restrictions on station ownership, on the sponsorship of programming, and on editorial ‘balance’ (the output of most ILR stations has now flattened out into a Top 40 and capsule news format). And it also allowed stations to split their frequencies in order to target audiences more closely, a practice sometimes known as ‘narrow-casting’. In 1988–9 alone, eighteen ILR stations split their frequencies (Wroe 1989: 23), mostly pounding out rock and contemporary hits on FM and comforting their maturer listeners with golden oldies or soft melodies on the medium wave.

The IBA also responded to pressure, most of it coming from the CR movement, to widen lawful access to the air. In 1989–90 it licensed a wave of twenty-one ‘incremental’ stations within existing ILR areas in order to serve niche markets of various kinds – ethnic groups (for example, Spectrum Radio in London); special interest groups (for example, Jazz FM, also in London); and small geographical areas (for example, Wear FM in Sunderland) (Donovan 1992: 134).

However, by the end of the decade the rate of technological change in both television and radio was such that the government needed to devise a whole new broadcasting framework. Television had also become much more flexible: in technical terms production was cheaper and easier than ever before, and thanks to cable and satellite there were many more channels to be watched. The government’s overall task for both radio and television was therefore to facilitate that greater access to the airwaves which technology had made possible, yet also to regulate output that partly transcended national frontiers. And within this overall task there were particular issues to be addressed: the future of the BBC’s licence fee; the destruction of two monopolies – the BBC’s of national radio and ITV’s of television advertising; the preservation of programme standards (this, apparently, something of an

afterthought!); and the need to ensure diversity of broadcasting output and to cater for specialized and minority tastes.

Although the 1990 Broadcasting Act dealt at length with television it also made major changes to radio. The BBC was left pretty much alone, though still held to its increasingly tenuous 'public service' obligations. (In 1986 the government had appointed the Peacock Committee to consider such options as allowing the BBC to take advertising and the privatization of Radio 1, but had been dissuaded from both.) The IBA, however, was split into the Independent Television Commission and the Radio Authority, which was intended to be a much looser regulator than its predecessor. ILR was relieved of its vestigial public service obligations, notably the need to provide 'balance', and the individual stations were allowed to operate their own transmission facilities instead of leasing them from the Authority. Many more stations are likely to be launched within the next few years.

However, the real change was at national level: three new stations were to be licensed here, one on FM, the other two on medium-wave frequencies the BBC had been forced to vacate. Accordingly Classic FM, Britain's first home-based national commercial station, came on air in September 1992, to be followed eight months later by Virgin 1215 with a diet of 1960s to 1980s rock music. Another independent national station, whose output must be speech-based, is expected to join them in about 1995, and each licence will run for eight years. The Radio Authority also intends to license five new regional stations which should go to air by the end of 1994 (Wroe 1992: 15).

Despite all this, the outlook for independent radio remains uncertain. For the listener the logic of greater competition is to encourage diversity, but will the increase in stations merely have that baffling but all-too-frequent effect of producing more of the same? National commercial radio may thrive, but is just as likely to do so by taking audiences – and advertising – from the local stations (whose output is in any case hardly 'local') as by generating new listeners. The incrementals have never seen anything other than hard times, although valiant Wear FM took the Sony 'Radio Station of the Year' Award in 1992 for its community spirit and innovative programming.

A more sombre sign of the times was the death of Radio Luxembourg in 1991, crowded out of the pop scene first by Radio 1 and then by the superior FM signal of ILR. There are other signs

that radio listening may be near saturation-point. Between 1985 and 1990 total radio output in Britain increased by 65 per cent, yet average weekly listening during the same period increased by only 17 per cent (Nicholson-Lord 1991: 4). Nevertheless since 1989 the Ireland-based Atlantic 252 has attracted large British audiences to the long wave, perhaps confounding the experts' prediction that the medium-wave Virgin 1215 will not thrive unless it can move to FM.

As many media analysts have pointed out (for example, MacCabe and Stewart 1986; Smith 1990), the really intriguing question is what will become of the BBC. Its recent activities in radio suggest an organization both vigorous and optimistic. By 1990 it had switched its four major networks to FM and created another, Radio 5, on medium wave.

Not only has the BBC retained a mixed programming network, Radio 4, for its loyal and by no means tiny band of adherents who wish to listen to the radio and not simply hear it; for a short time it attempted to provide another in Radio 5, which offered such things as sports commentary, magazines and schools broadcasts. Radio 5 could be seen either as a brave attempt to reinstate old listening practices or as a foolish anachronism. Radio 4, partly drawing on its glorious past, eats its cake and has it: it offers mixed programming, yet manages to project a coherent identity as a spoken word/news and current affairs network. Radio 5, however, had no glorious past: it was known as a child of base pragmatism, 'conceived in response to the Government's radio policy . . . which required the BBC to end simulcasting . . . and give listeners more choice' (Donovan 1992: 218). Consequently it was – or was seen to be – little more than a dumping ground for a number of programmes that did not fit into any of the other networks and was relaunched as a popular news and sports channel in March 1994.

If they are to be judged by their popularity, Radios 1 and 2 are easily the BBC's biggest assets, yet there is a plan to distinguish them from the many other pop music stations by increasing their spoken word output in the realms of the arts, religion, consumer issues and social action (Dugdale 1993: 13). Similarly BBC Local Radio aims to become more speech-based and minorities-focused in order to complement music-based ILR. Implicit in these plans is a partial and interesting redefinition of the old public service concept, for what is being mooted is not simply a greater variety of

content that faintly echoes the mixed programming of the past, but the 'public service' of giving out information on matters of social importance, such as how to find a job or where to get treatment for drug addiction.

Nevertheless the strategy looks risky, for a likely consequence of reducing the music content of these networks is a drop in the numbers of listeners, perhaps below a point where the imposition of a universal licence fee can be justified. If a radio listener (or even more pertinently, a television viewer) spends all or most of her time tuned to the commercial stations, why should she be expected to pay licence money to support the BBC?

Which brings us neatly to the momentous year of 1996, when the BBC's Charter is due for renewal and the whole question of its funding arrangements to be reviewed. If by that time the BBC's decreasing share of the market – a decrease which is inevitable given the proliferation of radio and television channels – has indeed reached a point at which the licence fee can no longer be defended, how else can the Corporation be funded as a public service institution? If it were allowed to take commercials, the need to maximize audiences for advertisers would soon overshadow the need to offer a range of programming. If it were to be funded by subscription, would enough subscribers be found in a nation used to 'free' radio and 'free' ITV to pay for a range of public service output which is bound to be expensive?

But if the uncertain outlook for broadcasting institutions is largely a result of technological advances, it is at least certain that these will make the actual business of listening to the radio yet more pleasurable – and easier – than ever before. The development of digital audio broadcasting (DAB), a process in which the signal is digitally encoded at the station and then decoded by the radio set so that transmission noise is eliminated, promises a vast improvement in the quality of reception, to the point where radio music will sound as good as the music of a domestic CD player (Croft 1991: 13).

More important, however, is the recent development of the radio data system (RDS), since it is likely to modify the way in which the listener uses the medium. RDS exploits the large bandwidth of FM broadcasts to transmit data as an inaudible signal along with the output. It is an automatic tuning system which without pre-programming selects the strongest signal carrying the broadcast the listener wants, irrespective of the

frequency. Thus if a motorist were driving the 237 miles from Exeter to Sheffield and wished to listen to BBC Radio 2 throughout her journey, she would have to do no more than select that station at the outset, even though the radio would automatically tune to seven frequencies in the course of the journey. A display panel on the receiver will give her the name of the station she is listening to, and if she wishes it and pre-sets the radio accordingly, announcements will interrupt the Radio 2 broadcast with local travel information.

By removing any need to re-tune, RDS would appear, then, to strengthen yet further that station loyalty which has always been much more characteristic of radio listeners than of television viewers. Whereas the latter will frequently change channels in search of programmes they like, the typical listener keeps her radio fixed to one particular channel, reaching only for the on-off button. There seem to be two main reasons for this. The first is that because she is only half-listening to it she is much more tolerant of those parts of the output she does not particularly like: the radio is just a background to some other activity. The second reason is that re-tuning a radio set, normally a matter of carefully turning a knob, has always daunted audiences to a much greater extent than merely jabbing the channel-select button on their television sets (Brown 1990: 15).

However, RDS also offers another facility – a choice not simply of stations but of *output*: the listener can push a button for news, current affairs, rock, classical music, drama or whatever, and the radio will search among the stations for her choice. Thus a much more likely consequence of this technology is that it will *weaken* station loyalty by allowing the listener to shop around even more than push-button tuning would. It could replace loyalty to one particular station by an even stronger loyalty to one particular kind of output.

Though RDS has been on the market for some years – it was first incorporated into car radios by Volvo in 1988 (Donovan 1992: 218) – it has made slow progress, partly because it can more than double the cost of a cheap radio set. But the long-term likelihood is that it will become a standard feature; and if it stimulates a greater autonomy in the listener, or encourages the stations to compete even harder for her attention, that can only be a good thing.

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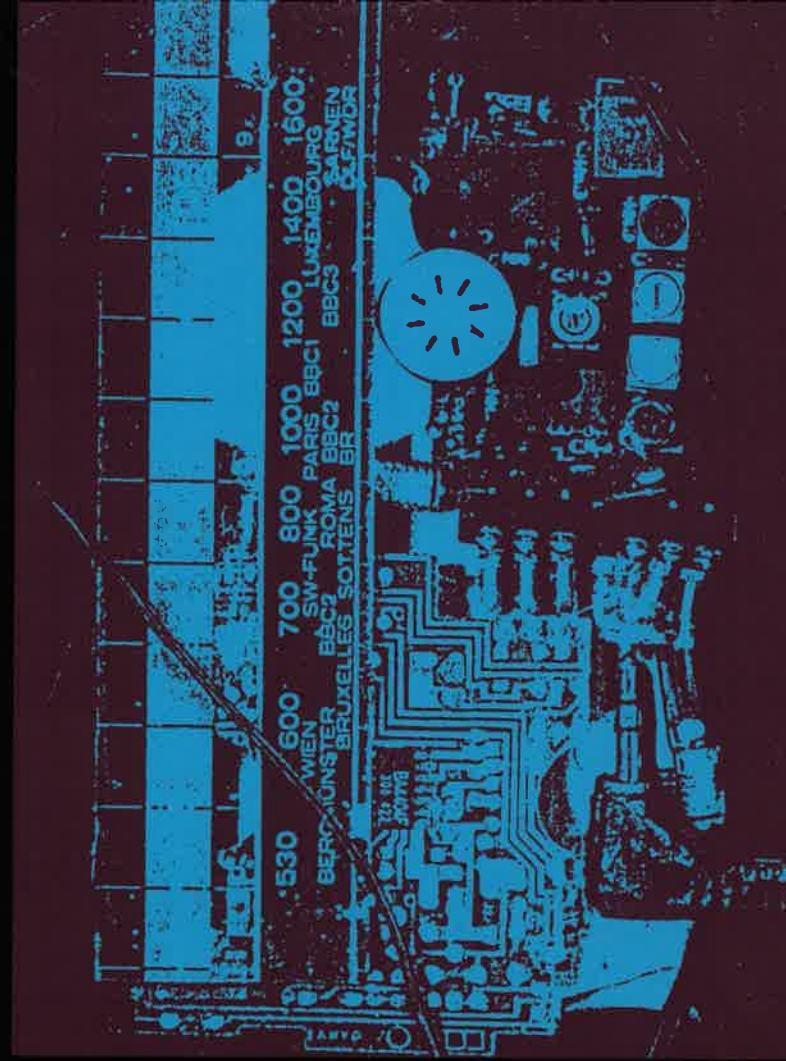
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Andrew **CRISELL**