

The serious and the popular: aspects of the evolution of style in the radio talk 1928-1939¹

DAVID CARDIFF*

This paper traces the early evolution of a number of techniques which are still consistently employed in Britain, in both radio and television, particularly in news, current affairs, documentary and magazine programmes. These are the straight talk, the discussion, the interview, the debate and a range of programme formats in which they were inserted. Anyone who has been exposed to these forms knows that, within each category, there are variations in style which depend upon such factors as the prestige of the programme, its subject matter and the status of the contributors. There are significant differences between a studio interview with a cabinet minister about economic policy, in the context of a serious current affairs programme, and an interview with a man-in-the-street about the effects of that policy, in the context of a popular magazine programme. In particular, those styles which distinguish the status of contributors have developed into a hierarchy of presentational rules which, while they reflect the wider social hierarchy, are at the same time symptomatic of tensions within broadcasting itself. When looked at historically, the evidence of variations in technique can be analysed as a shifting register of broadcasting strategies. The conventions reflect both the broad social outlook of the broadcasters, which were by no means confined to the BBC, and a range of motivations which were specific to their occupation; the need to achieve success in their programmes, whether judged in terms of communicating coherently or in terms of maximising the audience, the need to produce material appropriate to specific sections of the audience, the need to preserve a precarious autonomy, both for broadcasting in relation to the state and for individual BBC departments in relation to the governing bodies of the corporation, and, finally, the need to maintain a working relationship with individual contributors and other sources. In practice, these motivations often came into conflict and producers were faced with dilemmas which they attempted to resolve through a diplomacy in which questions of technique played an important part.

During the period covered by this paper there was considerable development in techniques for handling politically controversial material and there was a steady drift towards populism in the presentation of information in general. Much recent criticism of news, current affairs and factual documentary has focused on populist tendencies which may lead producers to be more concerned with attracting and holding the audience's attention than with communicating a coherent and intelligible message. In relation to controversial broadcasting, it has been argued that an obsessive concern with maintaining balance and impartiality can lead to a distortion in the definition of issues and to the allocation of an increasingly powerful rôle to professional

¹ The major source for material in this article was the BBC Written Archive Centre at Caversham.

* School of Communication, Polytechnic of Central London.

'mediators'—presenters, interviewers and chairmen—who set the agenda for discussion and prevent direct communication between outside contributors and the audience. But it is generally agreed that these are recent developments; that the populism reflects the commercialisation of culture in general and, in particular, the arrival of commercial television in 1954; that the elaboration of techniques for handling controversy dates from the breakdown of a national consensus on social and political issues which is supposed to have existed in Britain until the late 1950s. Certainly it is assumed that no such tendencies were to be found in the broadcasting of the Reithian period or in that period, lasting into the 1950s, which is held to have been haunted by the 'Reithian Ethos'. This paper will argue that, with certain important qualifications, these tendencies were present from the inception of British broadcasting. This is not simply in order to set the record straight, although some refinement of received opinions about the 'Reithian Ethos' is long overdue. Criticism of the output of today's radio and television is related to a wider argument about the political and economic basis of the mass media in Britain, in which the contrast between pre-commercial and post-commercial broadcasting acts as a crucial pivot. It is to this argument that we must return in the concluding section. But British broadcasting between 1928 and 1939 was dedicated to the ideal of public service. The Talks Department, with whose work this paper is largely concerned, took a leading though often unpopular rôle in attempting to educate and inform the public. In this rôle it was obliged to take seriously the need to attract an audience, even if its notion of that audience was unrealistic. It was in relation to a particular image of the listening public that the department's earliest interest in style developed.

The art of the spoken word

Most broadcasting was directed towards the home and the 'art' of radio talk was developed by broadcasters who held constantly in mind the image of a family audience, seated around the fireside at home. This image was celebrated in numerous articles in the *Radio Times* and in its occasional 'Home' and 'Fireside' issues. It was argued that the wireless was reinforcing family life in the face of counter-attractions such as 'picture houses, thés dansants and cabarets'. But at the same time it was widening the domestic horizon and 'making the home-staying folk citizens of the world' (J. A. R. Cairns, *Radio Times*, 12 December 1924). This conceptualisation of the audience as composed of privatised families clustered around the hearth predominated until the War. The social differentiation of the listening public was rarely referred to, although the distinction between Regional and National listeners had important policy implications. The image of the audience was cosily middle-class; its setting the suburban home or rural cottage. It was in relation to this image that radio could be seen as a force for social integration; it was a medium capable of uniting the private sphere of life with the public.

At first, the BBC had confined itself to linking its listeners to the symbolic heartland of the nation, through outside broadcasts of ceremonial state occasions and, whenever possible, through broadcasts by members of the Royal Family. But in 1928, when the government lifted its ban on the broadcasting of controversial matter, the Talks Department, under its first two directors, Hilda Matheson and Charles Siepmann, embarked upon an ambitious programme of talks on social and political issues. Hilda Matheson regarded broadcasting as a process of 'projection' and admired the Soviet Union's use of radio to diffuse its social planning. 'It is difficult to see', she wrote,

'how any political school of thought can dispense with broadcasting, since those who look forward to a dictatorship of either left or right or neither, are faced with the imperative need of securing at least an acquiescent public' (Matheson, 1933: 87). In the Britain of the early 1930s, with its deep social divisions sharpened by widespread unemployment, remedies were at least being suggested on the air, even if they were unlikely to be implemented by a National Government widely recognised as bereft of policies. The talks programme was dominated by contributions from the 'middle-of-the-road' progressive intellectuals; a group of experts, often academics, technocrats or administrators who, in this period, were politically non-aligned but were committed to improvements in the efficiency of social administration and the promotion of a planned economy. Typical of this group were figures like William Beveridge and Maynard Keynes, although some speakers were well to the left of them. Although the majority of talks were intended to 'interpret that vast field of interest and knowledge which is happily beyond the frontiers of acute current partisanship' (*BBC Handbook*, 1929: 41) individual talks often provoked criticism from the higher reaches of the BBC, from Parliament and from other external interest groups. The talks were only loosely topical and could best be described as offering an education for citizenship. But in encouraging listeners to become 'citizens of the world', Hilda Matheson did not forget that they were also 'stay-at-home folk'. She fostered the art of the spoken word as a means of domesticating the public utterance, as an attempt to soften and naturalise the intrusion of national figures into the fireside world of the family.

In outline, the art of the radio talk as it was then defined, is easily summarised. Since it was received by family groups it should be conversational in tone rather than declamatory, intimate rather than intimidating. The personality of the speaker should shine through his words. But because all broadcasting was 'live', it was agreed that talks should be scripted. Otherwise what they gained in colloquialism and personal style, they would lose in succinctness. As Briggs puts it, 'what was natural had first to become artificial before it would sound natural again' (Briggs, 1965: 126). But the very care that was taken with the scripting of talks soon gave rise to doubts about the aims of the Talks Department's editorial policy.

The colloquial style of talk was perfected by Professor John Hilton, who in 1937, gave a talk about talk in which he simultaneously employed the technique of writing for the ear and revealed its secrets. Referring to newspaper critics who had praised him for simply talking rather than reading from a script, he continued, 'Oh yes, I like that. For, of course, I read every word. If only I could pull it off every time—but you have to be at the top of your form. Yes, of course, every word's on paper even now—this—what I'm saying to you now—it's all here'. It was thought that this studied informality in speech, with its personal mode of address and carefully placed hesitations and slips of the tongue, could, if effectively done, achieve a form which transcended both ordinary speech and the written word. Hilton argued that this idiom was 'perhaps not "true to life"—but something better—truer than life' (transcript of recording). Thus the technique of writing for the ear was elevated to the status of an art and there is no doubt that Hilton himself used it most effectively. It would be a mistake to agree too easily with those critics who dismissed the Talks Department's concern with style as a mystique. It is true that Hilda Matheson could adopt a messianic tone when she argued that 'broadcasting is clearly rediscovering the spoken language, the impermanent but living tongue, as distinct from the permanent but silent print' (Matheson, 1933: 74). But her basic aim was to reach

people whose lack of literary education barred them from access to 'complicated, difficult and novel ideas' (ibid.: 75).

There were a variety of criticisms levelled at the BBC's attitude towards the spoken word. Some critics felt that, far from being a new art form, the style was simply an artificial compromise which interfered with the direct transmission of information; that there was a tendency for the aims of informing and attracting listeners to come into conflict. It was also alleged that powerful or prestigious speakers were allowed to deliver their scripts as they wished, while lesser fry were subjected to detailed criticism. The attention paid to the mode of expression could be seen as a veiled form of censorship. A style originally devised for the edification of listeners had, it was claimed, evolved into a means for exercising a subtle control over contributors. While some evidence can be found to support each of these criticisms, none of them reached to the heart of the matter. In the majority of cases, the careful attention paid to scripts signalled an anxiety about how different kinds of speaker and different categories of talk should be defined and legitimated for the public.

The tension between the need to inform and the need to attract the public presented producers with a dilemma. The style of talk perfected by Hilton was simply not a suitable medium for communicating the technical ideas which were the staple ingredients of many a talk's 'syllabus'. One talk's assistant amused himself by imagining how Einstein might deliver a talk on the stars in the approved idiom. 'Well, I suppose all of us at some time or other have—er um—looked up on a clear night and seen the stars overhead. Of course when I say "stars" I mean planets too. It would never do to leave out the planets!' It was a style which, as he pointed out, 'people of some importance can usually resist having forced upon them . . .' (Bloomfield, 1941: 84). There was an increasing tendency to draw a distinction between serious and popular categories of talk and talker. The speaker who had perfected the intimate, informal style might find himself relegated from the league of experts to the league of radio personalities. John Hilton himself began in 1933 with a serious series devoted to his own subject, industrial relations, but by the end of the decade was responsible for a kind of agony column of the air, championing the cause of the little man against the predations of confidence tricksters.

A typical example of the way in which popular and serious speakers were differentiated is afforded by an incident in relation to one of the BBC *National Lectures*. These radio lectures were instituted in 1928 and were intended, according to Reith, 'to hold the blue ribbon of broadcasting and to provide, on two or three occasions in the year, for the discussion of issues of major importance and the interpretation of new knowledge by men of distinction in the world of scholarship and affairs' (Reith to De La Mare, 16 February 1933). In 1935 it was noticed that one of these lectures, given by Lord Macmillan on 'Law and the Citizen' was to be followed within a few weeks by a talk on 'The Rule of Law' to be given by an ordinary barrister, Maurice Healy. Healy was very much a popular speaker who had contributed to a series of imaginary court cases, *Consider Your Verdict*, and had read short stories on the air. There was a minor panic when it was realised that listeners might, even after a five week interval, suppose his contribution to be as authoritative as the *National Lecture*. His producer wrote, 'Lord Macmillan's talk will be very much a lecture and I think it would be a good thing if you were to keep in mind the fact that your short address is very much a talk, full of that touching on 'I' and 'you' which comes so easily from yourself . . .' (McLaren to Healy, 6 April 1936). He wanted Healy to make it quite clear that he was talking on a subject that was near to his heart but on which he was

not an expert. Healy objected that, as a barrister, he was an expert and also baulked at being labelled in the *Radio Times* as 'a layman'. In the end he was credited as a lawyer 'speaking on this occasion as a layman'. But, from the BBC's point of view, an appropriate contrast between the two performances had been achieved. Lord Macmillan discussed 'the reign of law' as follows. 'The conception of what it embodies is the conception of certainty as opposed to arbitrariness. To know what we can lawfully do and what we cannot lawfully do; to be subject to laws constitutionally enacted and enforced . . .', etc. Healy began, 'Well, freedom is a vague word and you may well ask what I mean by freedom. For nobody is free to do exactly as he would like. The baby stretches his hand out for every toy he fancies and cries if he does not get it' (*The Listener*, 1936, vol. 15: 701 and 911).

The personal approach, with its 'I' and 'you', was by now reserved for radio personalities who offered mild diversion or solace rather than information. These speakers attracted a personal following which was to be useful to the BBC. When war broke out both Hilton and Healy were employed to boost the morale of listeners. But in the case of serious or controversial talks, the approach was very different. There was a direct antithesis to the example of Healy's talk on law in the case of talks given in 1933 by Harold Laski on *What Is The State?* Laski had first been approached by the BBC in 1928 and it was agreed at the time that, as a prominent left-winger, he would need 'careful vetting'. In the 1933 series it was felt that he had not sufficiently stressed interpretations of the rôle of the state which were opposed to his own. He was asked to insert 'some sort of statement from the "authoritarian" point of view' but also to make stylistic changes which involved 'cutting out the "I thinks" and "my views" and rephrasing in such a way that your point of view is put over impersonally' (Rendall to Laski, 30 January 1933). In fact, the use of the impersonal style became the rule for expert speakers precisely because the BBC wished to avoid the accusation that it was allowing them to use radio to promote their personal opinions. Little attempt was made to alter an expert's script in the direction of colloquial informality unless he happened to give a talk in a more popular series. For instance, Sir William Beveridge, who broadcast frequently on social and economic topics, agreed in 1937 to contribute to a light historical series of eye-witness accounts called *I Saw The Start*. His subject was the origin of labour exchanges. The producer complained that his script was stilted and 'unsuitable for an audience that wants to be talked to rather than at'. But Beveridge was 'not very easy to deal with because apparently he's used to being treated casually and having things left to him'. The producer was advised by his superior to 'do nothing more' (Cox to Barnes, 27 August 1937 and 1 September 1937).

This differentiation of speakers and topics into the serious and the popular represented a significant shift away from the original project of the Talks Department, as defined by Hilda Matheson. There was no longer any attempt to use the informal style in order to make serious, difficult and controversial issues more accessible to the public. There were several reasons for this. First, most of the experts were busy men and were not prepared to spend a great deal of time adapting their scripts and rehearsing their performances. Second, it was felt that to personalise and popularise serious issues almost constituted a breach of decorum, that only a dispassionate, academic manner would legitimate and authenticate the content of a talk. Third, the use of the personal style came into conflict with the BBC's ethic of impartiality; impersonal speech *sounded* more neutral. The sometimes intricate diplomacy over the style of scripts was more often concerned with establishing the credentials of a speaker, with situating him in a particular relationship with the audience, than with

veiled censorship. There were occasional cases when producers, rather than admit that the BBC was censoring a talk, would object to the style in which it was expressed. This is not surprising, since style was the one area in which the producer could lay claim to a greater expertise than the contributor. To question the content of a talk delivered by a leading expert was to go beyond his professional brief. Talks producers were in fact known as 'talks assistants'—a title that implied a minimum of interference. In order to maintain good relations with contributors, it was essential to maintain this image of the producer's rôle. But as the need to attract the audience became more imperative, broadcasters began to value those contributors who were amenable to influence, who could be 'produced' though not necessarily controlled, above those whose status placed them out of editorial reach. For example, the *National Lectures* were reduced in number in 1938 because the BBC no longer felt the need to borrow the prestige of the distinguished speakers. Although the content of talks remained largely serious and heavily informative, the manner of delivery became increasingly populist. But because the popular style in the *individual* talk did not lend itself to the communication of difficult or controversial material, the producers turned to a range of other techniques which were thought to be more stimulating. These were the discussion, the debate and the interview. They had the additional advantage, where controversial matter was concerned, of ensuring that a more perfect balance between opposing viewpoints was achieved and of allowing for greater control over speakers in the studio.

Before tracing the origins of these techniques, it is necessary to sketch the historical context in which they were adopted. The two key developments in the production of talks after 1935 were an increasing caution in the handling of controversial issues and a growing tendency to popularise the format of talks. Paddy Scannell, in this issue, has touched on the reorganisation of the Talks Department at the time of the Ullswater Committee. It was recognised that in appointing Sir Richard Maconachie as Director of Talks the BBC had made a conservative choice. The shift in public concern away from domestic towards international issues, such as the Spanish Civil War, the rise of Fascism in Europe and impending war was accompanied by unprecedented Foreign Office interference in broadcasting. This resulted in the cancellation of talks from Harry Pollitt, leader of the British Communist Party, and Sir Oswald Moseley of the British Union of Fascists. (For a recent account, see Briggs, 1979: 198–201.) There is also evidence of interference on the issues of Palestine, Spain and Pacifism. The inability of the Board of Governors to withstand this pressure led to an intensification of the BBC's efforts at internal self-regulation. This was a period in which the ethic of balance and impartiality could be applied with a rigidity that was at times repugnant in its outcome. Late in 1938 a suggestion from the Talks Department that a 'reasoned statement of the Jewish point of view in recent events might be broadcast' was turned down by the Programme Board on the grounds that this was being covered adequately by news bulletins and that a talk might cause a demand for the expression of the opposite point of view (Programme Board, 1938: minutes 231 and 235).

From 1936 to 1939, talks became more 'popular' in two senses. First there was a greater attempt to represent the opinions and experiences of 'ordinary people' and in particular of working class people. Second, the format for radio talk became lighter; greater use was made of the round table discussion, of the miscellany of short talks in a magazine format and of interviewers, chairmen and presenters chosen for their qualities as broadcasters rather than for their expertise in a subject. A new kind

of professional broadcaster was emerging, who might turn his hand to a variety of jobs; for instance Howard Marshall, primarily a cricket commentator, might turn up as a reporter on social issues, an interviewer in the magazine programme *At the Black Dog* and presenter of the youth-oriented *Under Twenty Club*. These changes reflected a general lightening of BBC programmes which was brought about by a number of factors. Audience research, which started in 1936, forced producers to take the differentiation in listeners' needs and tastes more seriously. There was a growing awareness of competition from the commercial stations on the Continent. Reith's departure, early in 1938, appears to have facilitated the process of popularisation. The BBC began to respond to the reiterated public criticism, often supported by newspaper polls, that its attitude towards listeners was distant and patronising. One symptom of a change in attitude was the introduction of audience participation shows on the American model; quizzes, spelling bees and amateur 'discovery' shows. Reviewing the developments of the previous three years, the *BBC Handbook* for 1940 noted that 'rightly or wrongly, it was being urged a year or two ago that the BBC was aloof from its listening millions, offering programmes with a complacent air of "Take it or leave it". These various experiments in "Listener participation" with many others are evidence that the ice, if it ever existed, has rapidly melted. New and friendlier contacts have been established on the air' (*BBC Handbook*, 1940: 83).

The influence of entertainment values on talks can be demonstrated in the rise of the magazine programme. It was the Variety Department which first adopted this format in 1933 with *In Town Tonight*. This programme frankly appealed to 'human interest', presenting a mixture of items reflecting 'the simple, fascinating things that humble folk do, and the high points achieved by men and women of distinction' (Cannell, 1935: 8). In the selection of contributors, a contrast of personalities was aimed at—the marquess and the chimney sweep, the hawkler, the sewer-man, the fruit seller, the film star and the famous author . . . (ibid.: 7). The magazine programme in its pure form was produced by North Region in 1934. *Owt About Owt* was presented as a 'broadcast magazine', each series was a 'volume' and each programme a 'number' complete with 'cover illustration' by the Northern Studio Orchestra. *At the Black Dog* (1937), with its pub setting and genial host, could be described as the original British chat show. In 1936, the Talks Department started its own magazine, *The World Goes By*. Although it was intended to be more seriously topical than *In Town Tonight*, it was often in competition for the same speakers and rapidly developed a similarly 'human' approach. It was presented by Freddie Grisewood, one of the new breed of professional all-rounders, whose personality soon became intrinsic to the programme.

A new awareness, in the Talks Department, of the stratified nature of the audience was revealed in a memorandum on 'Talks Standards' written by Norman Luker, a senior talks assistant, in 1938. This divided the listeners into three groups. Group 'A' were the 'intelligent and well-informed', an audience which should only occasionally be catered for. Group 'B' were the 'intelligent and not so well-informed', whom Luker identified as the most important target. Pointing to the increase in secondary, university and adult education, to the huge sales of *Pelican* and *Left Book Club* publications devoted to serious issues and to the success of the new *Picture Post*, he argued that there was now a 'considerable serious-minded public anxious for mental pabulum which we are well placed to give them'. Group 'C', the largest part of the potential audience, included the 'not-so-intelligent and mostly uninformed' who, because of their 'extreme simplicity' would only listen to 'adventure' or 'personality'

talks and were well served by *In Town Tonight*, although the department should 'continue to educate unobtrusively through the personality of men like Hilton . . .' (Luker to Maconachie, 25 November 1938). It was towards the middle ground of Group 'B' that the new styles of talk were directed. Luker noted that these groups did not necessarily reflect social stratification. Group 'C' might contain customers from Harrods and Group 'B', artisans and farm labourers.

Finally, the contribution of the Regional Stations, and North Region in particular, must be mentioned. Because their brief was to reflect the life of the local community, they were often more successful than the metropolitan producers in discovering the right idiom in which to reflect the opinions and experiences of ordinary people. In documentary features and in discussion programmes like *Northern Cockpit*, *Midland Parliament* or *Public Enquiry*, the regions broke new ground. But because discussion was limited to local issues, 'dangerous' controversy was avoided.

The discussion

Before 1928 there had been experiments with both scripted and unscripted discussions. The intention of the producers was not to emphasise conflict in the dialogue but to capture the quality of good 'table talk'. After the lifting of the ban on controversy in 1928, these light conversations were distinguished from what Miss Matheson referred to as 'hammer and tongs' controversial discussions. These were originally unscripted but soon gave rise to the familiar problems of lack of clarity and concision. At first the solution was seen, not in scripting but in the introduction of a third party who could mediate between the speakers and the listeners. The rôle of the third party was originally to elucidate difficult points. In relation to a discussion on science and philosophy held in 1928 Hilda Matheson suggested the inclusion of 'a "plain man" asking severly practical questions' (Matheson, 10 October 1928). Soon after this, the Director of Programmes, criticising a discussion which had drifted and contained mutual interruptions, suggested a third party 'not necessarily named as taking part in discussions but merely a voice, who would have controlled the discussion to the point of keeping the speakers to their subjects—telling them perhaps, not to speak at the same time—steering them off dangerous ground—acting in point of fact as an umpire but not taking part in the discussion itself' (R. Eckersley, 24 July 1929). At that time, interest was aroused in the Talks Department by an article in the *Berliner Tageblatt* on 'The Broadcast Tertius' which cited classical authority for such an addition to the dialogue. 'The old Romans, the well known masters of intellectual battles of flowers, had a dictum, *Tres faciunt collegium*. Such a dictum must have an appeal to the unknown and distant listener'. In practice, the third party was rarely used at the time but was to re-emerge after 1935 in the rôle of interviewer or chairman. Discussions in dialogue form continued to be scripted throughout the decade, great emphasis being placed on presenting a stimulating clash of opinions. This could be achieved either by a laborious exchange of manuscripts between speakers or by allowing one contributor to devise both sides of the argument. William Beveridge prepared a discussion with a Professor Ginsberg on the subject of The Family in 1932. He assured his producer that 'it leads up to quite a good difference of opinion between me and Ginsberg as to whether one can or should equalise opportunity for every individual (. . .). Of course we've got to make Ginsberg take it, and drill him and rehearse till we're tired. But I'm sure we can' (Beveridge to Adams, 4 March 1932).

Meanwhile, the possible entertainment value of discussions was being recognised by the Talks Department. In 1931, Hilda Matheson suggested a series to be called *Conversations in the Train*. 'The plan is that these conversations, which will be given with appropriate sound effects, shall seem to arise out of casual encounters in a train, and shall be of various subject matter which may be of topical, general or purely entertainment value' (Matheson to Eckersley, 4 December 1931). She approached literary rather than expert speakers, among them Roger Fry, Aldous Huxley, E. M. Forster and Dorothy L. Sayers. The conversations were first put on in 1932 and new series were introduced up to 1938. They were intended to be witty and it was soon discovered that writers of amusing dialogue did not necessarily make good performers, so actors were employed in their place and the programmes were produced with the co-operation of the Features and Drama Department. By 1935, a talks producer was boasting that the programmes were competing with *Music Hall* on the alternative channel and that the Variety Department was nervous at their competing entertainment value. But the hybrid form of the the programme was causing administrative problems and in 1938 it was taken over entirely by a drama producer, who announced that 'the series will in our hands deal with private and human problems rather than ones as cosmic as "Fixed Easter" or the metric system.' He planned to start with a conversation on 'Dogs' (Felton, 9 June 1938).

The 'human' treatment of issues was not to be purely the province of other departments. Early in 1937 Talks produced a number of unrehearsed and unscripted discussions under the title of *Men Talking*. They were modelled on an American series *The Chicago Round Table*. The producer hoped that 'these discussions will reveal the way people *feel* about subjects rather than a potted scientific analysis of the problem. (. . .) . . . if they are successful, listeners will recognise that the BBC is departing at one point from its general policy of passionless exposition of logical positions. This should, I believe, help listeners to regard broadcasting as more human than they usually are prepared to allow' (Wilson to Maconachie, 14 December 1936). It was decided that a regular team should be used, consisting of John Gloag and Sinclair Wood, both advertising agents, and James Whittaker, an unemployed working man and author, but in the end only Gloag was retained as a regular. He soon adopted the role of chairman and much was made of his 'nice sense of public relations'. Even when the subjects discussed were 'safe' ones, like 'Football' or 'Manners', '. . . it is very difficult for people talking naturally to avoid references to dictatorships, Hitler, Stalin, capitalists, Trade Union demagogues, puritanical spoilsports etc., but our regular participant was always able to carry off such references with a soothing one from the opposite point of view' (Wilson, 1937). The Director of Talks welcomed this series for 'speakers of the "man-in-the-street" type of intelligence'. He had recently attended conferences at Leeds and Birmingham at which the public had offered their comments on broadcasting and was sure that the 'naturalness and vigour' of treatment together with the choice of 'subjects of everyday interest' made them 'of very lively interest to the working-class listener' (Maconachie to Nicolls, 23 April 1937).

In selecting contributors for this series there was an emphasis on personality and style rather than expertise. One speaker was referred to as 'a 50-year-old journeyman bookbinder, who writes admirable short stories of Lancashire life. A robust Lancashire voice, pungent, fundamentally liberal but hard hitting about bogus or academic views of things', another as 'a young lawyer, self-consciously epigrammatic, who will be cynical about anything. A good broadcaster' (Wilson to Maconachie, 22 July 1937).

One consequence of these populist tendencies in presentation was that the programme was not considered a suitable format for the discussion of more serious and sensitive issues. Proposals for dealing with topics such as Isolationism or Russia were turned down by the Director of Talks on the grounds that 'subjects of this importance require a different method of treatment', while a discussion of the Means Test was only acceptable because it had already received 'full dress' treatment in a formal talk (Maconachie to Wilson, 13 February 1937). Another consequence was that expert contributors became wary of taking part in the programme. Cyril Burt, the psychologist, explained to the producer that while he would try to emulate the other speakers in giving replies which were intelligible to the general audience, he would have to consider the reaction of captious colleagues who would be only too ready to criticise loose, popular statements. These reactions set a pattern which was to be repeated in relation to the much more popular and influential *Brains Trust* series during the War. The more the programme exploited the personalities of the panellists and derived its popularity from providing bizarre answers to frivolous questions, the less prepared were the Board of Governors to allow the discussion of serious and controversial issues. On the other hand, the more trivial the questions, the stronger the objections of the academic panellists like Joad and Huxley that their reputations were suffering and that free speech was being stifled. It was a vicious circle. As with the straight talk, so with the discussion, a gulf was established between popular and serious forms not only in terms of style but also in terms of content.

The interviewer

The role of the interviewer as a 'plain man' who mediated between the expert speaker and the lay public was established as early as 1933. A talks assistant who advised the Director of the new Empire Service on the range of techniques then available, recommended this as a purely educational device. 'The idea is to keep the expert on a low level so that he is intelligible to the inexperienced listeners and also to add lightness and entertainment to a serious subject by adopting the dialogue form. The ordinary man must be chosen above all for his *ability as a broadcaster*' (Rendall to Empire Programme Director, undated, 1933-35?).

The role of the interviewer in controversial broadcasts was not established until later in the decade. The BBC had generally handled controversial issues in series of straight talks, with a different point of view expressed each week. This system was defended by the Controller of Programmes, Colonel Dawnay, in his evidence to the Ullswater Committee in 1935. 'It resulted of course that each talk in a controversial series, taking it in isolation, was in fact strongly biased and very often highly tendentious. This was because the BBC were seeking to provide the balance through the preceding or the following talk which put the opposite points with equal emphasis and equal freedom' (quoted in Broadcasting Policy, document no. 5, November 1942, p. 43). Dawnay felt that the BBC would always be liable to an enormous volume of criticism from all parties until the public became educated to the point of regarding a controversial series as a whole and not in isolation, speech by speech.

Although the Committee commended the BBC's handling of controversy, discussion about the problem continued within the Corporation. In 1938, the Director of Talks wrote a memorandum justifying the use of the 'Interlocutor Technique'. This was a style of interviewing which involved the interjection of critical questions throughout the talk in order to provide an immediate element of balance. Its use was justified in quite explicit terms.

When I came here I was informed on the highest authority that 'balanced controversy' was regarded as the most important element in serious talks, and one which should be introduced to a greater extent in future. The problem then was to discover the best form in which such 'balanced controversy' could be presented to the public so as—

- (a) to allow the speaker the greatest possible freedom of speech
- (b) to forestall the tiresome charges of political bias, etc., to which our discussions of controversial subjects had too often given rise in the past.

Both these objects, in my opinion, have been achieved by the free use of the 'interlocutor technique', and cannot be achieved by any other method' (Maconachie to Nicolls, 4 March 1938).

On the same day that he received the memorandum, the Controller of Programmes wrote to the North Region Director to complain that an 'interlocutor' in one of his programmes had not intervened enough. The Director should see to it that 'the interlocutor acts as we expect an interlocutor to act, not merely asking questions but bringing out other points of view on controversial subjects' (Nicolls to North Region Director, 4 March 1938).

The debate

Before 1928 the BBC relayed a number of debates before 'live audiences' from public halls in London. The topics were non-controversial ones, such as 'Are critics taken too seriously', 'Is chivalry dead?' and 'The menace of the leisured woman'. Speakers were professional talkers, actors or well known lecturers such as Shaw, Chesterton and Bertrand Russell. For the usual reasons, the debates were scripted but sounded awkward because the distinguished speakers were unwilling to learn their lines or to rehearse. By early 1928, the difficulties with this format had become so acute that Hilda Matheson wrote to the Director of Programmes, 'The truth is we have about exhausted the supply of people of any standing who are willing to talk on our present terms'. For example, Duff Cooper had refused to take part because he 'does not want to do it, and sees no use in doing it, until we can talk about things in which people are interested' (Matheson to R. Eckersley, 21 February 1928).

After 1928, public debates were dropped in favour of studio discussions which were more in line with the favoured intimate style of broadcasting. But in 1935, a series of unscripted and completely impromptu debates before 'live audiences' on controversial subjects was introduced. The only precautions taken were to limit the non-participating audience by issuing special invitations and to take care with the selection of chairmen, who were all experienced broadcasters and were briefed 'to make good any misunderstanding that may have arisen during the course of the debate, i.e. to protect the BBC's interests if they seem to be at stake' (Adams to Healy, 4 October 1935). There is some evidence that in permitting such unwonted freedom of speech at a time when Talks were entering a cautious phase, the BBC was to some extent conducting a public relations exercise. The Head of Public Relations, Gladstone Murray, wrote: 'Bertrand Russell expressed astonishment that there was really no rehearsal or censorship. He said he had fully expected to be closely examined about what he proposed to say. The fact that he had such a free hand considerably altered his opinion of the BBC' (Gladstone Murray to Controller of Programmes, 19 November 1935). The Programme Committee also stressed the goodwill that had been gained by the absence of censorship and welcomed a new method for dealing with controversial questions. But the BBC cannot have gained the goodwill of Harold Laski who

had agreed to take part in a debate on Proportional Representation but was informed that the idea had been dropped because the Director of talks was not sure 'whether the subject is one which is really suitable for the new experimental free debates . . .' (Siepmann to Laski, 30 August 1935). In fact, as Laski realised, there had been other objections to his inclusion. The Controller of Programmes had suggested that he was not qualified to talk on the subject but could be invited to debate on 'Academic Freedom'. But as Laski had often spoken on political subjects in the past, the Director of Talks was forced to adopt an argument in relation to the style of presentation. After a minor row, Reith eventually allowed him to debate the issue of the Second Chamber with Bob Boothby M.P. and when this too was cancelled because a general election had been called, Laski could only congratulate the BBC on a technique so delicate and ingenious that he thought it deserved its victory. Even disregarding this incident, the producer, summing up her experience of the series, wrote, 'Although the absence of censorship was stressed, it was quite clear that speakers considered their obligations seriously and were most restrained in language and ideas. This attitude to broadcasting is, of course, one which is general. Speakers do in fact censor themselves before they begin to write for broadcasting and it is this moral censorship which in fact endangers the freedom of the microphone' (Adams to Maconachie, 13 March 1936).

Live debates only became successful when, with the later emphasis on popular participation, the audience was invited to join in. This was first permitted in the 1939 series, *Public Enquiry*. As might be expected, this was a North Region production and the subjects were confined to local issues. Under the chairmanship of Principal Nicholson of Hull University who, as a member of the Talks Advisory Committee, had often championed the cause of free speech in the BBC, the series became popular and, after the War, was broadcast nationally. The inclusion of ordinary people in a broadcast debate was only one example of a wider movement in the BBC to represent the common man more fully in its programmes.

The promotion of Everyman

The issue of the *Radio Times* for 24 March 1939 carried a supplement on 'The Man In the Street'. One article pointed out that the common man was a veteran broadcaster but that his 'Communal voice has been essentially a background voice'. He had been heard as an incidental sound effect in countless outside broadcasts. At church services, for instance, 'you heard him cough and shuffle his feet as he settled in his pew . . .' and 'you heard his loyal cheers at times of public festivity'. But, the article continued, 'there has gradually developed the notion that the Man-in-the-Street makes an excellent foreground broadcaster'. There had been a procession of London 'characters' in *In Town Tonight*. There had been the more serious representation of working people in the North Region features of D. G. Bridson and Olive Shapley. Finally, the supplement celebrated the fact that, in the 'Standing on the Corner' section of *In Town Tonight*, the interviewer Michael Standing had conducted impromptu *vox pops* with passers-by on a topical question, the Munich Crisis. Until recently the Man-in-the-Street 'was always selected well beforehand and rehearsed. Probably he spoke from a script. Impromptu broadcasts are only the very latest development in his entertainment value' (*Radio Times* 24 March 1939).

It was precisely the question of whether *vox pops* constituted a form of entertainment or a serious projection of public opinion which at that time provoked reactions at the Programme Board. One Head of Department had criticised the recent tendency

to include programme items which could not be claimed to be good broadcasting but which, like the *vox populi* in *In Town Tonight*, were supposed to be popular because they presented the undistinguished views of ordinary people'. Shortly afterwards, the Board recommended that there should be 'more emphasis on the personalities of the people interviewed and less on their views upon preselected subjects' (Programme Board, 1939: minutes 174 and 185(b)).

Although the year 1939 was a turning point in radio's portrayal of the common man, his history as a 'foreground broadcaster' was rather longer than the *Radio Times* article suggested. Several ordinary people described their occupations for the 1929 series *My Day's Work*. Some of their talks provide an illustration of the kind of varnish a conscientious talks assistant could apply to the rough surface of a working man's speech. For example, 'Bill', a dock worker, ended his talk as follows. 'Arriving at Higham Bight in the early grey of the morning I have looked at the Hulks and across the Essex shore—where stretches that strange, level country which seemed so much to fascinate Charles Dickens—and fancied in the rising mists the faces of hunted convicts and Joe Gargery and Pip and remembered that it was somewhere in this reach of the river that David Copperfield said adieu to his Mrs Peggoty and Mrs Gummidge, where little Em'ly waved her last farewell . . .' (*The Listener*, 1929, vol. 1: 68). Other talks in the series, such as the coalminer's, stuck more closely to descriptions of work and even contained muted protest at pay and conditions; but all were expressed in decorous English, with prosy evocations of local atmosphere and peppered with unlikely allusions. At some stage the ludicrous aspect of these talks must have been brought home to the producers as they ended with a spoof piece from 'a burglar' who retired to bed to read Spinoza after his night's work.

For all its absurdity, this early series was significant in that it combined, in its presentation of ordinary people, two styles which were to develop into distinct traditions. One style owed much to 'human interest' journalism, to the *Punch* tradition of cartoon proletarians and of F. Ansty's comic dialogues, *Voces Populi*. Working people were selected as characters or eccentrics, as simultaneously representative and quirky. The other style owed more to Mayhew, the social researchers of the early twentieth century and the documentary movement of the thirties; typical representatives were chosen to offer evidence of their living and working conditions and of their opinions on contemporary issues.

The 'human interest' approach was best exemplified by the growing number of magazine programmes which, as has been pointed out, prided themselves on the sheer variety and oddity of their contributors. *In Town Tonight* discovered Mrs Wheelabread, the Chocolate Lady of Kensington Gardens, Mrs Nelson, the woman chimney sweeper and the cat's meat man with his peculiar street cry. It was open to the advances of publicity-seekers like Jack Morgan, the Boy with Big Ears, whose earlier exploits included angling an invitation to 10 Downing Street from the Prime Minister's daughter on the grounds that he was 'puzzled about political happenings in the last few years' (Cannell, 1935: 162). North Region's more folksy *Owt About Owt* might offer a bill of fare consisting of 'an aerial flood-shooter, a harmonising boys' club, a well known Northern itinerant bagger of gags, an inveterate drummer, a master of mistletoe and a pantomime star' (*Script*, 7 December 1934). Even the more sober *The World Goes By*, with its emphasis on rural listeners, used 'Gipsy Petulengro' as a regular contributor. The point has already been made that this programme, which began in 1936, was representative of the 'lightening' of talks which took place after the reshuffle of 1935. During the same period, the Talks Department was taking

an interest in broadcasting 'Slices of Life'. Paul Bloomfield, a new recruit, was informed by an official that the BBC was looking for someone with journalistic experience to handle these talks. '... we want a man—someone upstanding and dignified, a gentleman by all means—but the sort of person who can go into the public bar without the conversation drying up as soon as he goes in'. Bloomfield obliged by discovering a man called Lucock, a saddler who wrote poetry. His talk was successful but Bloomfield felt that he was too much of a local celebrity and that the true 'Slice of Life' should involve 'someone who enjoyed no fame or notoriety or even any particular local reputation. Then what should he have? Simply character, I suppose. Plenitude of life'. He approached a friend, a 'Wodehouse character' and a good conversationalist, who simply offered random observations on life under the heading of *A Good Grouse*. Though this was well received by the Press, the department was clearly concerned about the level at which such items should be pitched. When Bloomfield suggested further broadcasts in this genre, the following exchange took place with Sir Richard Maconachie.

'The idea is, sir, to express the common life, without . . . as it were . . . any ulterior motive . . . , the common life, even perhaps low life . . . '.

'Not *too* low life', said the Director of talks; and that was all he did say.

Bloomfield himself was suspicious of the motives behind such broadcasts. 'I have always felt that realistic broadcasts of the "Slices of Life" nature tend to involve one in making people make an exhibition of themselves more than the results justify' (Bloomfield, 1941: 183–210). It was natural that such exercises in the representation of character and personality which had developed so easily in the Variety Department, should be treated with misgivings by a department with the didactic tradition of Talks.

The serious presentation of 'everyman' can be traced in various early talks on social issues which included working people, often as a democratic twist to the tail end of a series dominated by experts or reporters. By presenting such contributors as typical representatives of their occupation or class, the BBC laid itself open to criticism from government and Parliament. Paddy Scannell has described how evidence from unemployed speakers in the 1934 series *Time To Spare* became a matter of public dispute and provoked governmental pressure on the BBC. In the same year the notorious broadcast of William Ferrie occurred. Ferrie, a representative of the National Union of Vehicle Builders, had been asked to speak in a series on *The National Character* as 'a working man'. In the previous week, Sir Herbert Austin had talked about 'The Effects of Modern Industry on the National Character'. He had stressed recent improvements in working conditions and in the standard of living and foresaw an improvement in the mental life of the nation. 'Mechanisation is relieving the brain of the old tediums and giving it new stimulus. The slaves of metal labour, while the mind of man directs' (*The Listener*, 1934, vol. 11: 410). Ferrie wanted to oppose this argument but the BBC objected to parts of his script in which he referred to the economic exploitation of the working class, rejected calls for equality of sacrifice in the national interest, referred to the rise of Fascism in Europe and Britain and claimed that his work-mates were looking to Russia for a solution. One portion objected to read; 'The dissatisfaction of the workers with their lot is growing. The limitations imposed on us educationally and culturally is making us increasingly determined not to tolerate a social system which denies us the opportunity to develop our material and cultural existence . . .' (*Daily Herald*, 6 March 1934). When the producers asked

him to remove the offending passages, Ferrie apparently complied, but on the night of the actual broadcast he abandoned his script and instead delivered a protest at the way in which his talk had been censored. In an era of live broadcasting, this was the realisation of one of the BBCs persistent nightmares. Its critics seized upon the incident as evidence for the censorship they had long suspected, while the BBC itself interpreted Ferrie's action as a breach of trust. In the following week, a 'working woman' offered a pointedly balanced judgement on the national character. 'I believe we're a good deal happier than our mothers were in their day. That doesn't mean to say that things couldn't be better, or that the lot of the British working woman is a bed of roses (. . .). After all we're all human, and I don't believe there's very much difference between us, rich or poor. The thing that matters is not money or education, but character. The great thing is to be independent and capable of looking after yourself. Facing up to things—that's character' (*The Listener*, 1934, vol. 11: 491). Internally, the BBC justified the censorship on the grounds that parts of Ferrie's talk were irrelevant to the subject and were overtly propagandist. There was a place for extreme views in a series in which a variety of speakers were asked to put forward what were clearly labelled as personal opinions. For instance, the *Whither Britain?* series, broadcast in the same year, included at least one Moscow-oriented contribution. But in this case Ferrie had been asked to give a *representative* point of view.

After 1935, although working people, often with radical opinions, were given access to the microphone, they were more likely to be heard in one of the new discussion programmes, like *Men Talking*. These did not raise the same problems as straight talks since the issue discussed tended to be low key and opinions were clearly established as personal and could be balanced by other speakers. The function of reflecting typical working class life was increasingly taken over by documentary features.

One of the first programmes to use ordinary people to voice opinions was *Northern Cockpit*, produced from North Region in 1935. In format, it was a half-way house between the talk and the discussion and was introduced as 'a sort of radio parliament in which social problems are not so much debated as elucidated by means of relevant statements'. Each programme was a symposium of short talks on a subject of regional interest. Topics included 'Back to the Land', 'Cotton', 'Canvassing', 'Problems of Dialect in the North' and 'The Servant Problem'. What is striking about the scripts is the way in which experts and ordinary people contribute on an equal footing. The programme on Canvassing included a housewife, her husband, a canvasser, a sales manager and an economist. Each was given equal weight. The economist was not used to shape the argument or to comment on the other contributions, but simply to supply a wider perspective. Given the limitations of the subjects, fairly extreme views could be expressed. In the programme on 'The Servant Problem', a middle-class housewife advocated the communal organisation of housing estates, with communal creches, common kitchens, no personal servants, but special 'sitters-in' to hold the baby when its parents went to the common cinema. Her aim was to free all those women who wished to do other things from the bondage of household work. This contributor was described internally as 'almost communist in political theory, but fundamentally conventional' (Wilson to Maconachie, June 1937).

The inclusion of working-class speakers in *Men Talking* created certain difficulties. A listening group in Morecambe had complained that, in a discussion on education, all the speakers appeared to belong to the same minority group and evidently did not have children in state schools. The producer admitted that 'this question of working classes is very difficult indeed. We know very few broadcasters who would fulfil the

rôle without sounding like *In Town Tonight* or the *Punch* idea of the working man' (Luker to Gibson, 11 October 1937). He reported that the chairman of the discussion 'was astonished when I told him about the storm of protest about the middle class atmosphere of the discussion. At first he was suspicious that this was due to what he calls "the inverted snobbery of left-wing intellectuals", but I (...) persuaded him that there was much more to it than this and that we must in the next few talks at any rate, have an unlettered voice' (Luker to Maconachie, 13 October 1937). After the next broadcast it was agreed that 'there appeared to be "the common touch" which was so lamentably lacking in the previous broadcast' (Education Officer, Leeds, 18 October 1937). But the regular contributors now complained that the quality of the conversation had suffered as a result. The producer wondered 'shall we as an experiment one week let all this about the common touch go hang and just have three good talkers in the studio ...?' (Luker to Quigley, 26 October 1937). In the end it was agreed that, while it was absurd to have 'men with "thousand-a-year voices" discussing the details of a family budget', there were few working-class speakers who could live up to the standard of conversation set by the middle-class regulars. One exception was an unemployed miner and county councillor who was, according to the chairman 'a splendid character' who provided for listeners a 'valuable illustration of the way people can live their lives in economic adversity' (Gloag, notes on series, October/December 1937).

Northern Cockpit was specifically for Northern listeners and *Men Talking* was originally intended for the unemployed. With the emphasis on public participation in broadcasting in the late 1930s there was an increase in programmes directed at specific constituencies, such as women (e.g. *For You Madam*) and youth (*The Under Twenty Club* and *To Start You Talking*). The programmes for youth made a feature of inviting representative young people to participate both as presenters and in discussions with guest experts. But the experts were soon dropped on the advice of the listeners. As one of them put it, 'we like the Under Twenty people best because with them we seem to have a common feeling; they seem to express more or less what we feel about things, not what we're told by the experts' (quoted in Madge *et al.*, 1945). Charles Madge, one of the founders of Mass Observation, took an interest in the programmes and in 1945 contributed to a book about them. He argued that the usual radio discussion between experts 'befogs as much or much more than it clarifies (...). The best way of escaping from it is to provide, in the discussion, for the exchange of concrete social experience. Such an exchange fosters an outlook that is practical, empirical, objective' (Madge *et al.*, 1945). This notion that social experience could be used as the basis for exploring political or philosophical topics gained some influence in Talks in the late thirties and the War. It can be associated, in particular, with the work of the producer Christopher Salmon.

Salmon was a philosopher by training and had been involved in adult education. As early as 1936 he had suggested a series in which 'the higher reaches of philosophical experience could be made relevant to the common experience' (Salmon to Maconachie, 12 October 1936). Later, he attempted to use broadcasts of the common experience to elucidate what he saw as the unarticulated values of the community '... we still know lamentably little about the ideals of working class experience with the splendid amount of life and humanity which has been poured into it ...'. He thought of broadcasting 'as a means by which the community's experience, lived as it is at different levels, can be brought to expression and given a useful currency in society' (Salmon to Barnes, 18 July 1941).

One of his first exercises in this vein was a series of talks called *Everyman And The Crisis* which were put out in the weeks following the Munich Crisis of 1938. These were intended to show the impact of the crisis upon the individual conscience by using people whom recent events had placed in some sort of moral dilemma; examples of what was required included 'A young man who didn't know whether he ought to honour the Peace Pledge. . . . An unemployed man to whom war would mean full employment . . .' and even 'A lady with ample pets who didn't know whether to destroy them or not' (note of conversation between Salmon and Last, 11 October 1938). As a result of these not altogether promising proposals, a remarkable set of documents were produced. The talks were delivered anonymously in groups of three, with five second intervals between them and a minimal announcement. According to Salmon, with this austere method of presentation the talks sounded unusually sincere and spontaneous. Certainly the printed scripts reveal an interesting range of reactions and one particularly moving and dignified contribution from a German woman married to an Englishman. But with the coming of war, this kind of talk became routinised into a stock formula for offering moral parables to the public. In 1940, Salmon produced a similar series, *Everyman And The War*. While the crisis broadcasts were open-ended and discursive, a genuine attempt to reflect public opinion, this series was strictly propagandist. The aim was expressed in the following terms. 'It matters now, and is going to matter, what the common man and common woman thinks. I think we could help the people at home enormously by letting them hear what some of the best common men and women do think.' Possible contributions included 'A man and a woman now working overtime in munitions or aircraft work . . . a coalminer responding to Bevin's appeal . . . A woman with a baby in arms whose country it is one day going to be . . . a blind man who knows what makes a free world even though he can't see it with his eyes'. The proposal for the series was annotated, 'This is first rate and dead in line with Ministry of Information policy. Let's go ahead' (Salmon to Maconachie, 28 May 1940). The 'People's War' produced a dramatic increase in the representation of the common man in all forms of radio, but the use that was made of him was often manipulative rather than reflective or enquiring.

Conclusion

At one level, this paper has simply attempted to trace the origins of a number of techniques which have now become standard practice in British broadcasting and to place their development in a historical context. At the same time, an argument runs through the paper about the relationship between serious and popular forms of communication. A number of generalisations could be made about this relationship.

First, popular styles of presentation, originally intended to attract and inform a wide and differentiated audience, in practice came to be regarded as unsuitable vehicles for serious and controversial subjects. In part this reflected a diffidence in the broadcasters; a sense of the integrity both of the subject matter and of the speakers who delivered it, which was to be expected in people of their class and educational background. But the practice was also consonant with the BBC's policy on the broadcasting of controversial matter. The net effect of the differentiation of styles was not simply that serious, controversial talks were delivered in a dispassionate and 'neutral' manner, but that they remained inaccessible to a large proportion of the audience. One can discern a 'not in front of the children' attitude underlying the refusal to

allow more accessible programmes like *Men Talking* to cover contentious issues. There was a departure from the public service ideal in the notion that the unintelligent and uniformed section of the community were 'well served' by a programme like *In Town Tonight*.

Second, in programmes which were 'popular' in the sense that they were representative of the people, a similar dichotomy arose. Serious attempts to reflect the experience and opinions of members of the working class tended to provoke strong critical reactions, especially when these representations conflicted with dominant definitions of the condition of the people. These difficulties could be avoided by exploiting the 'human interest' value of working people, emphasising character at the expense of experience, or by decontextualising the opinions of the man-in-the-street by the use of trivial *vox pops*. The taxi-driver and playwright Herbert Hodge, one of the few regular working-class broadcasters of the late thirties offered a perceptive, though by no means radical, criticism of these practices, in a letter to his producer. 'And have you ever considered a series treating working class life as *natural*—instead of quaint? (. . .) Battersea Bridge Road is being repaired and as I write, everybody's dashing out with baths and boxes and perambulators to get wood blocks for their winter fires. There's nothing extraordinary about it. It's the thing to do. But the middle-class commentator either denounces it as a crime; or weeps over the wrongs of the noble proletariat compelled to get their living in this way; or treats it as a quaint custom of the Battersea aborigines' (Hodge to Salmon, 28 September 1937).

Third, devices which were intended to control the presentation of controversy, such as the discussion and debate and the use of 'interlocutors' and chairmen, tended to break the thread of rational discourse. During and immediately after the War, the discussion almost displaced the straight talk as the means for handling controversy. Critics at that time were well aware that this technique tended to obfuscate the issues and that broadcasters appeared to be valuing the form of the clash of ideas over its content (see, for instance, Woodruff, 1946). It has recently been suggested by Kumar (1977) that these tendencies are of much more recent origin. It is true that a new style of aggressive interviewing developed in the late fifties but the tradition was much older. It is interesting that Kumar relates these developments to the break up of a political consensus in the same period. The late thirties were also a period of intense ideological conflict in Britain and the BBC, aware of pressure from the Government, introduced these techniques precisely so that the control and balance of opinions could be seen to operate within its programmes.

One should be cautious in making comparisons between the BBC's output of talks in the 1930s and contemporary coverage, in radio and television, of social and political issues. Talks programmes were listened to by a small minority, they were only loosely topical and significant 'actors' in the political sphere, such as government ministers, members of Parliament and trades union officials rarely, if ever, took part in them. Broadcasting had scarcely begun to usurp the dominant rôle of the press in shaping public opinion. Nevertheless, there are significant parallels between the forms of presentation adopted for talks programmes during the populist phase of the late 1930s and forms of presentation which have been of concern to critics of contemporary broadcasting. Both Kumar (1977) and Elliott (1972) have claimed that broadcasters have become preoccupied with the form at the expense of the content of communication. Others have pointed to a conflict between 'human interest' values in presentation and the need to provide a coherent account of social and political issues. There has been a tendency among British media sociologists to claim that the trivialisation and

decontextualisation of these issues is the outcome of the influence of market forces on programming in a period of competitive broadcasting. It is thus argued that a connection can be established between the economic control of broadcasting and the ideological form of its output. In the 1930s competition with commercial radio stations was a marginal influence on the process of popularisation described in this paper. It was only on Sundays that Radio Luxembourg drew significantly from the BBC's audience. The stylistic innovation in talks reflected the problems faced by broadcasters who were committed to an ideal of public service but were becoming increasingly aware of the differentiated structure of their public. If the more populist programmes failed to give adequate coverage to the most important issues of the day, it was not because producers felt that the public would not be interested in these issues. It was because the popular treatment of serious, controversial issues came into conflict with the BBC's policy on the broadcasting of controversial matter. The differentiation of the serious and the popular described in this paper had as much to do with the relationship between broadcasting and the state as with the relationship between broadcasting and the public.

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