

**“The BBC will be one of the most important instruments  
in time of war”**

(Wing-Commander E.J. Hodson, Home Office Air Raid Precautions Department, 1934),  
quoted by Asa Briggs, Page 175

**To what extent was this statement vindicated between 1939  
and 1945?**

In the years of the Second World War, the importance of both keeping people accurately informed and of propaganda became clearer than at any previous time. The technology of the era was also more impressive than at any other. If Vietnam was to become known as ‘*the television war*’, the Second World War should be ‘*the radio war*’.

Yet the continued existence of the British Broadcasting Corporation was, at the start of the war, a topic of great discussion. Not only was it blamed for being out of touch with the people but was considered a waste of resources since the Prime Minister believed the populous would not even have time to listen. The ‘temporary’ expulsion of the newly-started television service from the airways during a Mickey Mouse film, (a suspension which would last until 1945, when the screens would once more come to life with the words ‘*Before we were so rudely interrupted...*’), would not be enough to persuade the government to allow radio transmissions to continue. Fears that enemy aircraft could use the transmitters as navigation beacons resulted in technicians constructing a complex network, that would create enough interference to stop this, whilst not inhibiting the transmissions. Still, it was only when it was pointed out that a method of disseminating information was needed, if the worst occurred, that the authorities reluctantly yielded. A stark difference from today, when local television and radio stations are amongst the first places occupied during a conflict.

The fact that the BBC’s future was unclear at the start of the war was not surprising. Even in 1914, there had been no national broadcaster and so this was the first occasion in which the importance of immediate nation-wide communications would be discovered. The British government had seen the use of poster propaganda in the First World War, and they were fearful of radio mainly because it does not respect national borders. What would have happened in the war of 1914 had enemy posters been available in Britain? Similarly, what would be the result if, in this war, the population was to listen to enemy radio stations? They were fearful of a backlash of public anger that could occur if German radio listening became common. The simplest way of avoiding this would have been to prohibit the ownership of wireless apparatus. Indeed, in a sense, this was only avoided thanks to the BBC’s reputation for reliability and accuracy in its news broadcasts.

The other reason for the confusion of September 1939 was that, as Hickman highlights, the BBC had been prepared well, but for the war of 1914, instead. As Briggs explains:

*'The existence of broadcasting constitutes the main difference in propaganda between this war and the last.'*

(BBC Monitoring Service's *Weekly Analysis*, 3. Jan 1940, quoted in *The BBC: The First Fifty Years*, Asa Briggs, Page 173)

Nevertheless, the BBC had already been used for disseminating information at the very start of the war, with Neville Chamberlain's radio declaration of war:

*'I am speaking to you from the Cabinet Room, at 10 Downing Street. This morning, the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note, stating that unless we heard from them, by eleven o'clock, that they were prepared, at once, to withdraw their troops from Poland; a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now, that no such undertaking has been received, and that, consequently, this country is at war with Germany.'*

(Neville Chamberlain, PM, speaking on BBC Radio, 3rd September 1939. *'BBC War Reports'*, BBC Radio Collection)

This partial acceptance did not, however, mean that the government was entirely happy with the BBC's work. The staff worked under very difficult circumstances for the entire war, the most major change being the introduction of censorship. Whilst this was not legally enforced, editors could be prosecuted if they did not follow the censor's 'advice'. Whilst this pressure gradually lessened, (especially after Winston Churchill mastered the art of using the medium to his advantage) the relationship of the BBC with those in power, it may be said, was never as good as it might otherwise have been.

The question as to whether or not censorship should occur was remedied in a way which was not contrary to the principles of freedom for which the British were fighting, nor did it leave the BBC entirely in control of itself. The Ministry of Information did not exercise its complete control over the BBC, which, in accordance with government wishes, practised self-censorship, avoiding giving any helpful information to the enemy. In this potentially precarious balance between freedom and dictatorship, the BBC survived for the majority of the time between 1939 and 1945.

*'The BBC couldn't, in wartime, be independent; it would be childish to think that there were not ultimate sanctions that the nation had to reserve for itself. But nor was the BBC dependent. It stood on a declared and understood position. It was its own man, on the terms that were possible.'*

(Desmond Hawkins, writer and broadcaster, quoted in *'What did you do in the war, Auntie?'*, BBC Books, Page 207)

The reason that their reputation grew was that the BBC was perceived as the most truthful broadcaster. It admitted to British losses and gave details of battles won by the enemy. This was most unlike any other official station of a country at war. At first, the printed press created restrictions that prevented news from being broadcast before the newspapers were published, but this stopped after paper rationing started. From then on, the news was relayed six times a day, until midnight. The main bulletin was at nine o'clock in the evening, and the reports were widely listened to, not only by approximately sixteen million Britons, but also on the occupied continent.

*'The [BBC's] news broadcasts far exceeded a thousand a week and were broadcast in 48 languages. There was evidence that the British public regarded the B.B.C. as one of its most trusty servants, and its part in the war effort could*

*hardly be over praised.'*

(A toast proposed by Mr. Brendan Braken (Minister of Information), to the BBC during the celebrations of its 21st anniversary, quoted in '*B.B.C. after the war*', an article in '*The Times*', 9th December 1943, reprinted 9th December 1997)

Yet, despite this reputation, the BBC voluntarily played down some news stories, or stressed various aspects, in order to raise the morale of the nation in times of difficulty. On 24th June 1944, at the height of the V1 bombing campaign, the BBC claimed that the southerners were not troubled by '*those beastly, vicious things*' without actually referring to the name of the bomb.

The government did, however, continue to oversee the corporation, forbidding it, for example, from mentioning the sinking of a small British boat more than once, lest the populous believed that more boats were being sunk than actually were. It is also likely that, where numbers of British casualties had to be given, these were often smaller than in reality. The censors also followed staff around but the entrance of the Americans in the war brought with it slightly more relaxed conditions. The Americans saw the practice as contrary to their moral right and so, whilst some censoring took place 'at source', any topic that did not need altering was left.

On occasion, the government intervened to censor particularly controversial programmes such as the '*Postscript*' programme, heard every Sunday after the Nine O'clock News. This programme, lasted only a few months, between June and October 1940, and despite its popularity and public protest, was withdrawn.

*'To the criticism that the BBC tended too much to orthodoxy the chairman replied that it had to be remembered that every word that went out might be heard by the enemy.'*

*'B.B.C. after the war'*, an article in '*The Times*', 9th December 1943, reprinted 9th December 1997)

In some cases, it must be added the Corporation's work was done in close collaboration with the government. This feature became most noticeable when Winston Churchill made his first speech as Prime Minister, on 1st May 1940. This politician, it has been argued, was the one who, apart from F.D. Roosevelt during the financially turbulent years of the 1930's in America, used the radio to the greatest advantage. He notably used the medium to describe Nazism as:

*'...the foulest, most soul destroying tyranny that has ever darkened and stained the pages of history'*

(Winston Churchill PM, speaking on BBC, 1st May 1940: quoted '*Chronicle of World War II*', Page 87)

The rôle of the corporation, it can already been seen, was to go far beyond the entertainment for which it had originally been set up. It was the BBC which would inform people at home and overseas, of all nationalities and pass secret messages to other countries, especially the French resistance. (It is interesting to note, in assessing the impact of the BBC and the size of its audience, that the Gestapo estimated that some ten to fifteen million Germans listened to the BBC in autumn 1944, despite the fact that the penalties for being found listening to it were high.) Its news broadcasts were

probably the most accurate available, and much of the reputation of the BBC, even today, rests upon their handling of difficult issues fifty years ago.

One of the greatest contributions of the BBC was surely made at the start of 1943. At this stage, it was reasonably clear that the British would eventually have to land in France to liberate it. The problem for the authorities was the lack of knowledge of its geography. Whilst reconnaissance flights were possible, they risked the planes being shot down and the mapping of the entire country would have been a very great burden on the already stretched resources. It was quickly realised that the knowledge would have to be found in Britain. The BBC launched an appeal in March. The next day thirty thousand and, by May, ten million photographs and postcards of France had been sent in by the public, in addition to many maps. This information was to be of significant value in the planning of the D-Day landings that would take place a year later, as well as many other campaigns in the meantime.

Still earlier, in 1940, the BBC had been the method by which Sir Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for War, had called upon all those who were not yet enlisted to form 'The Local Defence Volunteers', later to become 'The Home Guard'. His reason, he stated, was '*to make assurance doubly sure*'.

A great many warnings to civilians were given by the BBC throughout the later war years, as the government increasingly realised the added benefit that arose from the overseas broadcasts given such a large foreign audience. The first of these occurred on 17th June 1943, when workers in occupied lands were warned not to work in factories that worked for the enemy. Shortly afterwards, a series of raids on these factories started.

In a broadcast on 23rd March 1944, the Romanians were warned that they should abandon the Nazis or face '*retributions*' from the allies. Even at the end of the war warnings came from those in authority. On 10th June 1945, in the final months of the battles in Europe, General Montgomery made a famous speech in which he warned Germany '*once and for all*' never again to try to fight such a war. In addition, he told German parents to relay this to their children.

Transmissions were also made in code to secret organisations. From 1942, the BBC started broadcasting the news in Morse Code every morning, for the benefit of underground newspapers on the occupied continent. More famously, on 1st June 1944, only a few days before the D-Day landings took place, the first of two quotations from the French poet Verlaine's work '*Chanson d'Automne*' (Autumn Song) were spoken:

'Les sanglots longs 'Des violons 'De l'automne	('The long sobs of autumn violins)	(Verlaine - ' <i>Chanson d'Automne</i> ' broadcast by BBC Radio, to announce D-Day, in two three-line parts 1st & 5th June 1944.)
'Blessent mon cœur 'D'une lueur 'monotone'	(Wound my heart with a monotonous languor')	(Translation by D. Smith)

For members of the French Resistance, this signalled that the Allied invasion was imminent. Over the following days, a stream of quotations and messages were given to the 175 000 listening resistance fighters. As a result, 950 railway lines were destroyed, out of the 1050 that the Allies needed to be disabled. This success rate, a little over 90%, shows how the BBC played a significant part in this action.

Another function of the company was to maintain public morale. It was mainly for this purpose that the '*BBC Forces Programme*' was set up, offering many concerts to entertain those abroad. It was in this way that stars such as Dame Vera Lynn, who had her own programme '*Sincerely Yours*', became known.

People left at home also needed reassurance, a task given to the other BBC station, '*The Home Service*'. Documentaries, probably filled with more propaganda than the news, such as '*The Lion has Wings*' which followed the Royal Air Force as it made raids on enemy territory, helped people to believe that the British were so mighty that there could be no outcome other than an allied victory.

Women working in the many factories that produced machinery and armaments for the war work found encouragement in programmes such as '*Music while you work*' and '*Have a go*'. Efficiency, it was said, was increased by 15% during the hour following the broadcast of the former, a programme of suitable music and with little talking, designed in a novel way to aid production. Factory owners across the land encouraged listening and some allowed the BBC to record the programme '*Worker's Playtime*' in the factory, giving the workers a concert and a chance to meet the stars of the day.

Morale-boosting also occurred when the then Princess Elizabeth, aged fourteen, made a broadcast on '*Children's Hour*' for children who were being evacuated. Saying that she, and her sister Margaret, knew what it was like to be away from home, she urged them to be grateful to the families who would welcome them.

In other countries, the BBC's '*V for Victory*' campaign encouraged the populous. This urged citizens to chalk the letter 'V' on every wall in occupied territory. Each time they walked past such a wall, they would remember that the British were going to win the war. The BBC started its broadcasts every morning from 1940 onwards with the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony - the first four notes form the rhythm 'di-di-di-dah' which, in Morse code, is the letter 'V'. Today, this may seem somewhat ridiculous. In the darkest days of the war, it might, however, have been a small glimmer of comfort.

The BBC was also renowned for two great, and very different, programmes. '*The Brains Trust*' was a show in which guests competed to find definitions of the word

'love' or to work out how flies land on a ceiling upside-down, without falling! *'It's That Man Again'*, the name based upon a 1939 'Daily Chronicle' headline, detailing the absurdities of Hitler, was a satirical broadcast that offered some relief from the otherwise serious news programmes. It soon became known simply as *'ITMA'* and became quite popular, especially after the phrase became Tommy Handley's (the main character's) catchphrase. Indeed, at its height, sixteen million were thought to listen. (This figure was beaten only by the Nine o'clock News which, on days when Churchill was to speak after it, attained up to seven-in-ten British listeners). Clearly, the content must have been well regulated to avoid damaging the BBC's reputation for impartiality. A more serious programme was the introduction of *'Lift Up Your Hearts'* and its successor *'Thought for the Day'* which offered some Christian comfort in a difficult time.

Other entertainment was obtained from instructional programmes such as *'Kitchen Front'*. This followed the news at eight in the morning, and, for five minutes, distributed recipes that could be made with rationed products. This, as with modern equivalents, was one of the shows with the greatest audience. Without it, many would have been at a loss to know how to cook with so few available products, in such small quantities. In a similar style *'The Radio Allotment'* offered practical gardening tips to help produce as much food as possible and *'The Radio Doctor'* helped keep the nation fit.

Outside of Europe, the use of the BBC was limited. Whilst the *Empire Service*, as it was known, did broadcast across the globe, it had a relatively small audience and no particular reputation. In addition, since the theory of worldwide transmission, was only just being understood, signals were often poor. Nevertheless, General Montgomery, the first commander to really understand the importance of being able to speak to all of his troops simultaneously, often had his speeches recorded by a BBC correspondent (there was always one attached to him) and broadcast. This was deemed so important that on an occasion when Montgomery wanted to speak but Frank Gillard's radio had broken, a telephone was used to file a foreign correspondent's report for broadcast for the first time.

There was one other task that the BBC was allotted at this time: this was that it should produce programming for the many 'black' radio stations. These were set up by the Political Warfare Executive, and were channels based in the United Kingdom, that broadcast in the languages of occupied lands and pretended to be from these countries. The theory was that the population would listen and believe the station's broadcasts. If these were subtle enough, it should have been possible slowly to de-moralise the German people, upon whom the Wehrmacht relied for support. They had varying success rates but the BBC, together with the PWE, showed itself to be among the best. Occasionally, Churchill was called a *'flat-footed bastard son of a Jew'* on the BBC's *'Soldatensender'* (Soldiers' Channel). This station is known to have worried Goebbels, since he wrote in a diary that it sometimes could be heard on the same frequency as the official *'Deutschlander'* (German Man). (The station heard would have been dependent upon the rotation of the listener's set). During one broadcast on a different British-based channel *'Gustav Siegfried Eins'* the director of the campaign, Sefton Delmer, was heard pretending to be a Prussian patriot who had become disillusioned with the Nazi regime. To stop the Germans employing the same tactics in their fight against the British, the BBC newscasters started to give their names before their

broadcast, so that their voices would become well-known by the public.

Whilst this was, indeed a great change in the BBC's rôle compared to its pre-war situation, perhaps the most significant was the modernisation of the company, which had hardly changed its attitudes since Sir John Reith, the first Director-General, set down some very strict rules. It was during the war years, for example, that regional accents, such as J.B. Priestly's prominent Yorkshire tones, first started to replace the corporation's universal '*Plumb-in-Mouth*' southern accent. This surely played a part in making the news broadcast appear more friendly and realistic to listeners.

In conclusion, the BBC's obviously successful rôle in the war in Europe has led to no subsequent war being fought without the media's close attention, attempting to spread the truth about the events, as far as their respective governments will allow. It is equally clear that the importance of the BBC greatly increased as the war years passed, a result of the increased confidence of both the government and the population in the service.

The government of 1939 would, therefore, have done well to heed the prophecy of the Home Office that had been made some five years previously, as quoted in the title of this work. The statement, it can be seen, is indeed vindicated by all the evidence that I have been able to collect. The range of ways in which its resources could be pooled, from school's programming to news, from entertainment to propaganda, must have made it a most useful asset to Britain's fight during the Second World War.

Indeed, in attempting to close this essay concisely, one could not state the situation any more succinctly than was affirmed in the recent '*Images of War*' series of magazines, which were produced in association with the Imperial War Museum:

*'It [the BBC] kept the peoples of occupied Europe honestly informed and maintained morale. Its contribution remains too great to quantify'*

*( 'Images of War - The War in Perspective' '64: Selling the War',  
Marshall Cavendish Partworks, 1996)*