

**A history of BBC local radio in England  
c1960 – 1980**

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A HISTORY OF BBC LOCAL RADIO IN ENGLAND  
c1960 – 1980

MATTHEW LINFOOT

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requirements of the University of Westminster for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

The story of BBC Local Radio in England, from the days of its conception around 1960, through to the launch of the first stations in 1967 and the finalisation of how to complete the chain in 1980 is a neglected area of research in media history. This thesis tells this story, using previously undocumented research from the BBC Written Archive Centre, and supplemented by oral history interviews with key participants. The approach is multi-faceted. Part of the investigation lies in gaining a greater understanding of how the BBC operated as an institution during these years. The internal culture of the BBC presents a series of complex issues, and the evolution of local radio illustrates this in many ways, in matters concerning management, autonomy, technology, the audience and finance. Linked to this are the differing notions and definitions of what 'local' meant, in terms of the original concept and the output in practice. For local radio, this had a crucial impact on station location, the size of the transmission area and the degree to which the stations were able to represent and embody their communities. This history also assesses the impact the stations made, often in contrast to the popular image and perception of local broadcasting. The original contribution to knowledge that this thesis makes is in narrating this history for the first time, and in doing so, challenging previous assumptions about the nature of local broadcasting as part of the BBC and as part of the wider community.

## DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Matthew Linfoot, hereby declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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# GLOSSARY

## ABBREVIATIONS: BBC-related

Director of Sound Broadcasting: DSB  
Assistant Director of Sound Broadcasting: ADSB  
Managing Director Radio: MDR  
Director of External Broadcasting: DEB  
Director of Engineering: DE  
Controller, Programme Organisation: CPO  
Controller, Programme Planning: CPP  
Controller, Sound Broadcasting Engineering: CSB (Eng)  
Head of Sound Broadcasting Administration: HSBA  
Establishment Officer: EO  
Head of Home Service: HHS  
Head of Light Programme: HLP  
Controller Midland Region: CMR  
Controller North Region: CNR  
Controller West Region: CWR  
Head of West Regional Programmes: HWRP  
Assistant Head of West Regional Programmes: AHWRP  
General Manager Local Radio Development: GMLRD or GMLR  
Local Radio Training Officer: LRTO  
Director-General: DG  
Director of Public Affairs: DPA  
Director of Public Relations: DPR  
Head of Talks and Documentaries Radio: HTDR  
Controller Radios One and Two: CR1&2  
Controller Radio One: CR1  
Controller Radio Two: CR2  
Controller Radio Three: CR3  
Controller Radio Four: CR4  
Controller English Regions: CER  
Head of Religious Programmes: HRPR  
Head of Recording Services Radio: HRSR  
Controller Local Radio: CLR  
Deputy General Manager Local Radio: DGMLR  
Local Radio Organiser: LRO  
Deputy Managing Director Radio: DMDR  
Local Radio Education and Programme Services Organiser: LREPSO  
Chief Assistant Radio Four: Ch Asst R4  
Network Editor (Radio) in Bristol: NER (Bristol)  
Presentation Editor Radio Four: Pres Ed R4  
Assistant Head Radio Two: AHR2  
Head of School Broadcasting Radio: HSBR  
Editor Radio News: Ed RN  
Editor News and Current Affairs Radio: ENCAR  
Network Editor Radio Birmingham: NER (Birmingham)  
Chief Assistant Radio Three: Ch Asst R3  
Head of Radio One: HR1  
Head of Current Affairs Magazine Programmes: HCAMP  
Head Further Education Radio: HFER  
Chief Assistant Radio Management (programmes): CARM (progs)  
Chief Engineer Radio Broadcasting: CERB

Assistant Chief Engineer Radio Broadcasting: ACERB  
Head of Radio Training Section: HRTS  
Deputy Editor Radio News: Dep Ed RN  
Head of Audience Research: HAR  
Head of Planning and Development, Radio: HPDR  
Head of Outside Broadcast, Sound: HOB (s)  
Town and Country Radio: TCR  
Local Radio Council: LRC  
Schools Broadcasting Council: SBC  
General Advisory Council: GAC

#### ABBREVIATIONS: Misc

Postmaster General: PMG  
Very High Frequency: VHF  
Medium Wave: MW  
Medium Frequency: MF  
Long Wave: LW  
Long Frequency: LF  
Transmission: Tx  
Association of Municipal Corporations: AMC  
South Western Broadcasting Ltd: SWB  
National Broadcasting Development Committee: NBDC  
Local Radio Association: LRA  
Television and Radio Committee: TRAC  
Workers Education Association: WEA  
Independent Local Radio: ILR  
Independent Broadcasting Authority: IBA  
National Union of Journalists: NUJ  
Association of Broadcasting Staff: ABS

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

‘Healthy national life is founded on healthy local life, and a healthy national culture springs from lively local cultures.’<sup>1</sup>

BBC Local Radio has been an integral part of BBC radio production for over 40 years, serving communities and audiences in England through a network of around 45 stations. Despite the long provenance of the service, the many millions of pounds of investment and the countless listeners, there is no history of BBC Local Radio and I want to contribute a significant body of primary research around this subject to the canon of broadcasting history. As the quote above illustrates, activity at a local level enables broadcasters to make connections with audiences, to reflect local lives for the benefit of the wider, national sensibility, in terms of society, politics and culture. In the BBC’s case, this allows it to fulfill a key aspect of its public service remit.

One of the challenges in undertaking this research is piecing together the chronology. This does not just involve putting together a time line of the significant events that determined the development of the service. There is a more evolutionary process at the heart of BBC Local Radio, which touches on programmes, production practices, staffing, the audience and relationships within the wider BBC.

I see my contribution to knowledge in the following terms. First I am telling a story that has not been told before, where BBC Local Radio is brought to the foreground and becomes the sole subject and focus. Most significantly, this is drawn almost entirely from unpublished archival material and interviews with key participants. Secondly, and looking at the bigger picture, this thesis puts Local Radio in the spotlight as a BBC service and assesses its significance in terms of three key areas: institutional policy and corporate history; the role of radio and the community; the story of broadcast techniques and production practices. Thirdly, I aim to add a much stronger element of local broadcasting to the predominantly national-focused

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot T S quoted by Frank Gillard in BBC *Serving Neighbourhood and Nations* (London: BBC Publications 1977) p 19

historiography of British broadcasting history, and to demonstrate the close connections between the two.

The thesis is divided into four sections. The first, comprising three chapters, looks at the connections between notions of community and an emerging consciousness in the media in the 1950s. I also discuss the available literature relevant to local radio, from a historiographical perspective, identifying the gaps that this research fills. Using this previously published material, I explore the social, cultural and political trends that created a set of circumstances, which allowed the emergence of local broadcasting. My argument here is that this shift in society's attitudes was reflected in an important change in the way the BBC saw its public service responsibilities, which became more geared to its diffuse and non-metropolitan audience. Chapter Three contains my key research questions and sources.

Section Two consists of three chapters, which cover the years c1955 to 1966. This is the start of the main body of the thesis, relying on my own research of primary sources. The intention here is to argue that the BBC was able to advance local radio as part of its public service remit against a backdrop of major events, such as the Pilkington Committee, 1961- 62, and discussions affecting broadcasting on a national and local level. I also show, for the first time, the significance of the BBC's closed-circuit experiments during the same period. I argue in Chapter Six that the BBC succeeded in manoeuvring itself into a position of readiness to launch local radio by the mid 1960s, despite the fact there was no guarantee that it would be given the go ahead.

Section Three is called 'Developments' and charts how local radio was finally launched, with an eight-station experiment, and how the BBC set about nurturing the service with the hope of making it permanent and creating more stations. As I shall argue, BBC Local Radio faced considerable challenges from the late 1960s through to the end of the 1970s. Some of these were political problems, caused by changes in government and policy (Chapters Eight and Nine, the arrival of Independent Local Radio and the

Annan Report). Other obstacles were internal to the BBC, such as the tensions that existed between the local Station Managers and senior management, which came to a head in the late 1970s (see Chapter Nine). Then there are the issues of how the BBC struggled with its definition of local radio, presenting it as community radio, yet never quite fulfilling the promise to everyone's satisfaction (Chapters Eight and Nine). As I argue in the thesis, there were intrinsic structural issues, which served local radio when it was just eight stations, but which created difficulties when attempts were made to expand. Crucially, problems with resources, programme quality and wavelengths caused the BBC to revisit, over and over again, how it defined local radio, what the optimum size for a station should be and how to resolve the tension between geographical coverage and community needs.

The thesis concludes in 1980, with the Third Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report. This was effectively the end point for the first, and major stage, in local radio development at the BBC, resulting in approximately 90% coverage of England by the late 1980s. The new wave of stations were characterised by their county-wide boundaries, a necessary compromise from the original concept, yet a success in many of the other objectives that the BBC set out to achieve.

There are a couple of important definitions to be made here. First, this research concentrates on BBC Local Radio. The commercial sector launched its first local radio stations in 1972, and the paths of BBC and commercial local radio have converged and diverged over the years. It is impossible – and not desirable – to separate completely one sector from the other. Nevertheless, the research concentrates on local broadcasting as a part of public service output, as it emerged from the BBC as a media institution and organisation. Although previous research has been carried out in the history of BBC Local Radio as part of the wider BBC story, as will be explored further on, research has not been conducted up to now solely on the causes, genesis and development of BBC Local Radio in its own right.

Secondly, BBC Local Radio has developed across what are now called the English Regions and Nations. Again, however, the focus of enquiry is

more precise and addresses the English aspect of local radio, with reference where necessary to the individual nations. The circumstances surrounding Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are all particular and specific to a different set of social, cultural, geographic and political considerations so that the questions and issues raised by the experience of local broadcasting in England cannot be said to be generically applicable across the borders.

## **Section One: Contexts - Media and Community in post-war Britain**

### **CHAPTER ONE: A discussion of the historical perspectives**

#### **Introduction**

'Radio Leeds will do its best to fill the need for information in a confusing age, to wipe out the pools of loneliness in the midst of a bustling city, to let the people and their servants in the City Hall get together more fruitfully to provide an audience for the music-maker, the teacher, the debater, the ordinary man in Leeds and, more important, the extraordinary man. Radio Leeds can help Leeds know itself better than ever before.'<sup>2</sup>

This is an extract from a speech made by Phil Sidey on the eve of the opening of the fifth local radio station to be launched by the BBC in June 1968. Sidey was the first Station Manager for Radio Leeds and his words captured the sense of excitement and expectation, aspiration and achievement that embodied the BBC's local radio enterprise. There were some well-chosen phrases in the speech that were used to justify and underpin the ethos of local broadcasting. It should – in keeping with all good radio – provide companionship to the listener, be a source of information and a means of communication between different parts of the population. But the context of the period in which Sidey was speaking went further, in framing these aims in language that was bold and stark. For many, the late 1960s were a 'confusing age', with accompanying social dislocation, the rebuilding of communities, the growth in technology and industry and the affluence that was brought to some (but not all). Participation in many aspects of civil life that were previously taken for granted was less common (such as voting at elections) and democracy seemed distant and unconnected. Hence the exhortation for citizens and servants to engage. Finally, and crucially, the station existed to serve a specific location, to give the city itself a voice and identity on the airwaves through the voices of its citizens. This was what put the 'local' in local radio. BBC Local Radio was

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<sup>2</sup> *Ariel* 'A Radio-Leeds Type Greeting' by Phil Sidey 12 December 12 1968 13: 12

conceived as a network of stations that would serve local populations, bound by common interests of geography, outlook and interests. These then were the aspirations, the goals that the founding fathers hoped local radio could achieve, and in a sense, this quote provides the narrative structure for the objectives of this thesis too. In the course of the research, I am setting out to argue that by launching local radio, the BBC discovered much more about itself, its own audience and its role in national and local broadcasting.

This section contains three chapters. The first is an overview of the history and related literature, which I use as the basis for the parameters of the local radio story. It begins by establishing the broad outlines of the chronology and then looks at what has already been written about the organisation of BBC radio, with particular reference to the regional structure and how the BBC's scheduling policy changed over time, in response to the perceived shift from paternalism to populism. I will then argue that changes in post-war Britain had an impact on the earning-capacity of the population, how they chose to spend their excess income and leisure time and how in turn that affected media-consumption.

The chapter then turns to planning and post-war reconstruction, and the access of regional voices to the airways, to argue that non-metropolitan representation did not begin with local broadcasting and that some notable broadcasters already had a clear perception of how to relate to their audience. I then go on to argue that the wider concerns facing communities in relation to culture, communications and technology were framed by contemporary writers at the time. From this I will argue that the gaps that existed in the landscape of localised involvement, coupled with renewed interest in culture and community and the opportunities afforded by new technologies were regarded by many at the time as things best satisfied by the creation of a new tier in broadcasting.

In the next chapter, I examine previously published work about BBC history and key points in the narrative concerning the early years of BBC Local Radio. The studies under consideration include not just histories, but primary sources too, in the form of memoirs and autobiographies. These texts are critiqued in detail to pinpoint omissions and highlight alternative



interpretations. While the primary focus rests with the BBC, the fluctuations and vicissitudes of the local commercial radio world when it impacted on the BBC are also taken into account. Instances include the launch of the commercial service and how the BBC adapted to the end of its monopoly in radio, how successive governments approached the two sectors in terms of station and wavelength apportionment. But in fact the threat, as the BBC saw it, of commercial competition underscored the whole debate concerning the introduction of local broadcasting dating back to the 1950s. So the themes raised by the existence of the independent sector are key, even if this thesis is not a history of those particular stations.

Before discussing the academic literature, it would be useful here to outline the key events in the timeline, from the early 1950s to the late 1970s, in order to see the context within which they are operating.<sup>3</sup> In 1951, local broadcasting as a modern concept was first raised as a possibility with the Beveridge Report, which recommended that the BBC carry out an experiment of local broadcasting using Very High Frequency (VHF).<sup>4</sup> Although these experiments did not occur, the BBC did develop and start to build a network of VHF transmitters to support its MF and LF radio coverage. Between 1961 and 1962 the BBC carried out a series of 'closed-circuit' (ie not broadcast) trials, to test the possibilities of local broadcasting in sites across the UK. These experiments formed part of the BBC's evidence to the Pilkington Committee, which included in its recommendations the creation of 250 local radio stations to be set up by the BBC.

It was not until December 1966 that the BBC was granted permission to have a two-year experiment with eight local radio stations in England. The first of these was Radio Leicester, which launched on 8 November 1967. In 1969, the government agreed that the BBC could continue with local radio on a permanent basis and gave permission for the creation of 12 more

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for a list of key dates

<sup>4</sup> Chronology taken from Lewis P & Booth J *The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio* (London: Macmillan 1989) pp 210 – 212; Briggs, A *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Vol V Competition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp 1013 – 1075; Crisell A *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting* (London & New York: Routledge 1997) pp 142 - 147

stations, making 20 in total. The BBC policy document *Broadcasting in the 70s* further consolidated this by proposing to dismantle the regional structure and replace it with local radio.

The incoming Conservative government halted BBC local radio expansion in 1970 and subsequently licensed a network of commercial local stations, the first two of which, LBC and Capital, went on air in October 1973. In 1974 the Crawford Committee recommended that the BBC and the IBA should do more for disenfranchised rural areas. The BBC conducted two 'mini-local' experiments in Barrow-in-Furness and Whitehaven, in 1975 and 1976 respectively. Further local radio expansion was frozen, with the BBC at 20 stations, IBA at 19 stations, pending the Annan Enquiry into Broadcasting. Its report, in 1977, proposed the transfer of local broadcasting control and regulation away from the IBA and the BBC, to a new 'Local Broadcasting Authority'. After public consultation this proposal was dropped, and the Home Office Local Radio Working Party was set up, which included representation from both the BBC and the IBA.

This Working Party published three reports. In 1978, it proposed 18 more local stations (totals: BBC 29; IBA 28). The second report in 1979 awarded the BBC one more station, and IBA 14. The third report in 1980 authorised another 36 stations, bringing the totals to: BBC – 40 stations; IBA - 68. 1980 was in a sense the watershed year for BBC Local Radio as it marked the zenith of its biggest phase of expansion, and also the period when it began to change into a more 'county-wide' service. The earlier parts of the story (from 1960 – 1970) are those referred to most frequently in this chapter, largely because this is the period, which most concerns the existing literature and previous histories.

### **The BBC's local audiences before the 1960s**

Having established the chronology covered by the existing literature and the parameters of my research period, this section argues that for local radio to emerge into the BBC's consciousness as a concept, there needed to be certain technological and cultural circumstances. As I will explain, these criteria had their roots in BBC radio's early history and the way the regional pattern accommodated local broadcasting to some degree. I will also show

how changes in society and culture in post-war Britain, with groups and individuals becoming more interested and concerned by their surroundings and place in Great Britain and the emergence of new ideas connecting community and people, contrasted with the BBC's tendency towards centralisation. Coupled with this were changes in technology, and how this made an impact on listening habits.

The pre-Second World War non-metropolitan origins of BBC radio can be traced back to the early days of the organisation in the 1920s. Originally the British Broadcasting Company oversaw a network of local, separate stations, which were connected to London by telephone links and 'simultaneous broadcasting' (or networking as it would be called today).<sup>5</sup> The nine stations were based in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Glasgow, Cardiff, Aberdeen, Bournemouth and Belfast. Each station covered about twenty miles in radius – although the exact distance depended on whether one was listening on a valve or crystal set. The focus was very much on fostering regional participation and showcasing local talent. Many of the programmes produced relied on informality, improvisations and local characters.<sup>6</sup> Each station developed close connections to their audience, by exploiting civic relationships and a creative use of participants and locations, such as programmes broadcast from the bottom of a mine, in Leeds-Bradford and a soundscape of the Thames.<sup>7</sup> Despite some of the difficulties involved, Scannell and Cardiff point out that

'the local stations had, each in their own way, adapted themselves to the areas they served, and offered not only entertainment but a public service to their community of a rather different kind to that which was taking shape in London.'<sup>8</sup>

However, as Peter Eckersley (radio pioneer and the first Chief Engineer at the BBC) recounted, local jealousies began to threaten this arrangement. For example, Sheffield complained about poor reception quality from the

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis P & Booth J *The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio* (London: Macmillan 1989) p 23

<sup>6</sup> Scannell P & Cardiff D *A Social History of British Broadcasting Vol 1 1922-1939* (Oxford: Blackwell 1991) p 309-310

<sup>7</sup> Scannell & Cardiff Op cit p 310

<sup>8</sup> Scannell & Cardiff Op cit p 314

Manchester station and instead chose to take London's 'feed' from a telephone wire, along with an opt-out for an hour's local programming each day.<sup>9</sup> Nine other relay stations followed suit, all taking output from London, rather than their nearest regional station.<sup>10</sup> Writing in 1924, Reith commented on this centralisation:

'Personally I think it is altogether unfortunate that there should be this demand for London programmes in the relay stations.....stations will, I imagine, be grouped by areas according to the characteristics, national or local, of the people and a more satisfactory service be given.'<sup>11</sup>

Reith's complaints about the added burden the relay stations placed on the London headquarters in terms of administration and cost could be seen as disingenuous. Gradually a clearer demarcation emerged between the editorial control of the staff in the London headquarters and the regional producers. Seemingly small adjustments, such as station announcers adopting anonymity and formal dress, the abandonment of many quiz shows and the reduction in spontaneity in children's programmes, combined to reinforce what Scannell and Cardiff call a 'them' and 'us' divide.<sup>12</sup> But perhaps the final drive to centralisation was Eckersley's technical breakthrough, the 'Regional Scheme'.<sup>13</sup>

This involved a powerful long-wave transmitter based at Daventry, which could broadcast a single national programme. This got round the problem of reaching remote rural areas, which would otherwise need large numbers of medium-wave transmitters. But to preserve some kind of localised output, the long-wave system also allowed for other transmitters in the Regions to provide alternative broadcasts on different wavelengths. This had the effect of supplying a supplementary service for each large locality, at certain times of the day. From 1929, national output from London was complemented by six Regional services for London and the South East, Birmingham and the Midlands, the North of England, Scotland, Wales and the West of England

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<sup>9</sup> Eckersley P *The Power Behind the Microphone* (London: Jonathan Cape 1941) p 70

<sup>10</sup> Eckersley op cit p 54

<sup>11</sup> Reith, J C W *Broadcast Over Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1924) p 63

<sup>12</sup> Scannell P & Cardiff D *A Social History of British Broadcasting Vol 1 1922-1939* (Oxford: Blackwell 1991) p 317

<sup>13</sup> Scannell & Cardiff Op cit p 318

and Northern Ireland. The only problem was, these regions were defined not by the people, places and characteristics of the geographical areas, but by the physical landscape that determined where the transmitters could be sited.<sup>14</sup> Scannell points out that the regional, and national regional, divisions were created by the BBC, which 'presumed....the unity of the culture and identity of the United Kingdom, a presumption that glossed over its many disunities.'<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Lewis & Booth argue that the regional structure enabled Reith to contend that the newly-formed British Broadcasting Corporation was not therefore a complete monopoly, because there was some diversity for the listeners, depending on where they lived.<sup>16</sup>

Scannell and Cardiff demonstrate how, in the 1930s, programme scheduling and content were subject to quite rigid controls, when they emanated from London. This extended to the style of presentation, music policy, news, talks and features. The services based in the regions enjoyed more autonomy - although this did not represent a complete choice for the listener: it was a variation of the national output. In some instances there was an opportunity to bring more familiar and local-based voices to the listeners. The North Region, in particular, pioneered mobile recording techniques, resulting in programmes from diverse locations such as a railway marshalling yard, a post office and a passenger steamer port, all featuring average, working people. Groundbreaking series included *Harry Hopeful*, *Cotton*, *Wool*, *Coal* and *Pounds*, *Shilling* and *Pence*, all of which resisted the national trend in the 1930s to portray ordinary folk as victims, or stereotypical representatives of the 'man on the street.'<sup>17</sup>

During the Second World War, the BBC's sound broadcasting structure became more centralized. At the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, the BBC had envisaged a rather austere wartime schedule with news and talks emanating from London – as the regionalised transmitters were closed down in case they inadvertently aided enemy aircraft.<sup>18</sup> But feedback from the armed forces resulted in a more informal and varied approach, with the

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<sup>14</sup> Scannell & Cardiff *ibid* p 320

<sup>15</sup> Scannell P 'The Origins of BBC Regional Policy' in Harvey S and Robins K (ed) *The Regions, the Nations and the BBC* (London: bfi Publishing 1993) p 35

<sup>16</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* p 54

<sup>17</sup> Scannell & Cardiff *ibid* p 338; 349

<sup>18</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* p 72

establishment of the Forces Programme in January 1940 to complement the Home Service.<sup>19</sup> The former was a mixture of variety, music and entertainment, intended to enliven morale and help the wartime spirit, with programmes such as *Workers' Playtime*. In a sense the war was THE national event, which unified all attention and focus and not surprisingly in broadcast terms regionalism largely took a back seat.

Lewis & Booth argue that the wartime structure created more cultural and geographical distance between the BBC and their audience.<sup>20</sup> In contrast Sian Nicholas explores the impact of some of the North Region's pre-war experimental programmes, which resulted in more opportunities for ordinary people to be heard in front of the microphone – this time for a national, not just regional, audience. Producer Geoffrey Bridson followed up his series *Harry Hopeful with Billy Welcome*, in which Wilfred Pickles met men and women in the Northern dales.<sup>21</sup> Pickles was also employed as a news reader for several months in 1942, showing that a genuine Yorkshire voice reading the news could be appreciated by the listeners.<sup>22</sup> Other programmes included *My Day's Work*, *Everyman and the War*, *Go To It* and *We Speak for Ourselves*.<sup>23</sup>

Nicholas' research shows that BBC producers during the war made a conscious effort to get regional accents and dialects on the airwaves, in discussion programmes, talks, features and even comedies such as *ITMA*.

'This kind of 'public access' continued throughout the war, as the BBC made a virtue of bringing onto the air the people of Britain from all regions, occupations and backgrounds, demonstrating to listeners across the country that they too were being heard and seeking to foster national unity by portraying a democratic Britain proud of its regional and class diversity'.<sup>24</sup>

They may not have been wholly successful, as one critic pointed out, commenting on a BBC programme: 'are all soldiers Cockneys, or all

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<sup>19</sup> Nicholas, S *Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the wartime BBC 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1996) p 51

<sup>20</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* pp 72 - 74

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas *ibid* p 233

<sup>22</sup> Pickles W *Between You and Me* (London: Werner Laurie 1949) Chapter XIII

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas *ibid* p 239

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas *ibid* p 240

Cockneys soldiers?’<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Nicholas’ research shows that, because the Regional system was temporarily dismantled, wartime broadcasting to the nation as a whole allowed the opportunity for non-metropolitan programmes – and voices – to be heard by new audiences.

After the war, the variations based in the regions restarted and the national schedule was re-organised into the Light Programme, the Home Service and the Third Programme. These networks were dictated more along the lines of the tastes of individual groups rather than communities of interest. William Haley, now the Director-General, envisaged a pyramid approach to listening, with the Third Programme at the pinnacle, the Light Programme at the base and the Home Service in the middle. The notion was that the listener would find their place somewhere on the continuum of this spectrum and that over time they might be able to aspire to shift further up the pyramid.<sup>26</sup>

Lewis & Booth reflect that there were still strong elements of pre-war paternalism here, as the BBC continued to dictate what was felt to be appropriate listening for the audience. Meanwhile, the BBC capitalised on its access to major national events and created for itself the status of the *national* broadcaster, serving as a unifying focus for the audience.<sup>27</sup> However the dilemma for the BBC regions was how to mediate their content to avoid being dominated by a national perspective. Using the 1951 Festival of Britain as an example, Chaney’s research into civic ritual in mass society highlights three potential scenarios to demonstrate a regional interpretation of events of significant interest: ‘local man visits major metropolitan event’; ‘big London orchestra visits our quaint town’; or the rather officious ‘local civic banquet held in honour of big national event, with councillors and squirearchy attending.’<sup>28</sup>

The Festival of Britain provided Chaney with several instances of how local programmes worked with the themes inherent in the event to produce relevant and interesting work, such as the West Region’s broadcast from

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<sup>25</sup> Nicholas *ibid* p 239

<sup>26</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* pp 78 - 79

<sup>27</sup> Scannell, P ‘Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept’ in Edward Buscombe (ed) *British Television: A Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) pp 53 - 54

<sup>28</sup> Chaney D ‘A symbolic mirror of ourselves: civic ritual in mass society’ *Media, Culture & Society* 1983 Vol 5 pp 119-135

the Fawley Oil Refinery or the extended series on the county of Northamptonshire made by the Midland Region. Despite this, Chaney argues that the BBC's coverage of the Festival of Britain in 1951 was less successful than, say, the Victory Parade of 1946 or even the Coronation of 1953 as a media event because the BBC was unsure what it represented. Did the Festival of Britain represent intellectual accomplishment or institutional achievement? Chaney suggests it veered towards the latter in most respects, particularly in sound output where it was treated more as a news event.<sup>29</sup>

The inference which Chaney does not draw, I would argue, is that while the lack of clear thought may have been reflected in less than imaginative output from the networks, the regions, given the right amount of space and autonomy, were able to come up with more appropriate and creative programmes for their audience. They did not always need to rely on events and occurrences outside their territory either, thus illustrating the potential that more local broadcasting could fulfill.

So the changing needs of different parts of the country presented the BBC with a challenge. It now had to reflect these developments in audience taste against the backdrop of a shifting, post-war Britain. These changes in society can be summarized as follows. The revival in the UK's economic fortunes brought a rise in real wages, up by 20% between 1951 and 1958.<sup>30</sup> This affluence resulted in greater home ownership and the corresponding focus on domestic lifestyles. This included the acquisition of new consumer products, many of which were labour-saving devices, and this in turn gave large numbers of people more free time to pursue other leisure pastimes, some home and family-based and others more group oriented in the outside community.<sup>31</sup>

Historians of the period such as Sandbrook and Hennessey detail the various pursuits that became more popular, from rambling and cycling clubs

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<sup>29</sup> Chaney *ibid* p 129

<sup>30</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* p 79

<sup>31</sup> Scannell P *Developments in Television in the UK and USA* University of Westminster lecture June 3 2008



to gardening and do-it-yourself.<sup>32</sup> In terms of domestic pastimes, a Gallup survey in 1957 found that almost nine in ten people had listened to the radio in the past week, along with two out of three watching television, while knitting, gardening, reading and needlework were all popular too.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the fifties, there were estimated to be 3,000 amateur football teams, 5,000 cinemas and almost as many dance halls.<sup>34</sup> Sandbrook notes 'It was a world of anglers, knitters and amateur footballers, poised to confront the new cultural challenges of the 1950s.'<sup>35</sup>

But what was the relevance of this to the BBC? Radio indulged these minority interests in some ways, such as the so-called 'hobby programmes' on Network Three, the re-launched subdivision of the Third Programme – which cynics soon dubbed the 'fretwork network.'<sup>36</sup> Arguably Network Three was not the right place to try and interest an audience versed in high culture with everyday hobbies and pastimes. So how else could the BBC respond to broader changes across society and culture in their existing output? From a technical perspective, the answer lay in the means of broadcast.

National broadcasting could not cater for minorities. However there was an alternative method of transmission, Very High Frequency (VHF), which made more localized broadcasting possible. VHF had several advantages over MW or LW. It was transmitted in a different way – in lay terms it travelled in straight lines and was not subject to night time deflections that reduced the capability of MW or LW. At night time, the MW signal deteriorated badly and was subject to much interference. VHF had a stronger signal but as it took up more bandwidth, there were not as many wavelengths available – and far fewer receivers to listen on. The BBC had been experimenting with VHF since 1946 and made plans for a national

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<sup>32</sup> Hennessy P *Having it So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Allen Lane 2006); Sandbrook D *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Little Brown 2006)

<sup>33</sup> Sandbrook *ibid* p 130

<sup>34</sup> Sandbrook *ibid* p 146

<sup>35</sup> Sandbrook *Ibid* p 146

<sup>36</sup> Carpenter H with research by Jennifer Doctor *The Envy of the World: Fifty Years of the BBC Third Programme and Radio 3 1946-1996* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1996) p 183

VHF network. The Beveridge Report in 1951 had recommended that the BBC begin experiments in local broadcasting using the new frequencies.<sup>37</sup> These never took place but BBC engineers continued to develop the BBC's VHF network, and completing UK coverage was a long-held BBC goal.<sup>38</sup> The three national services (Home, Light and the Third Programmes) continued to be broadcast on MW and LW, but as VHF became more available, it was used to supplement transmission. However the BBC's preferred configuration of VHF transmission (horizontal polarization) was based on fixed reception (ie aerials attached to buildings). This was not suitable for car radios or portable transistors. So despite the fact there was now a new means available for increased radio provision, it was tempered by the limited means of reception. Owners of portable radios tended to listen more to MW, while those with traditional 'fixed point' receivers had to decide whether it was worth the trouble and expense of upgrading to a VHF-capable set.

So the two technologies almost contradicted each other. VHF allowed more localized broadcasting, but the audience was slow to adapt to it and the BBC preferred to use it for other priorities. Meanwhile transistor radios turned MW into a very portable frequency, but the new, minority audience this attracted was characterized by its interests, not by location, so it could not be served by localized, VHF-transmissions. Moreover, the listeners best served by portable radios were young people, and the output they wanted to hear was pop music.<sup>39</sup> Teenagers and young people were increasingly forming their own identity and culture, which pop music played a big part in. The BBC had very little on offer for them – instead they found their outlet on stations like Radio Luxembourg, which by the late fifties was playing six hours of new material each night.<sup>40</sup> The BBC regarded popular music as too much of a minority taste for its networks – putting it in the same category as jazz music.<sup>41</sup> Lewis & Booth note the way young people began to

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<sup>37</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* p 26

<sup>38</sup> Curran C *A Seamless Robe – Broadcasting, Philosophy and Practice* (London: Collins 1979) pp 256-181

<sup>39</sup> Crisell A 'Local radio: attuned to the times or filling time with tunes?' in Franklin B and Murphy B (eds) *Local Journalism in Context* (London: Routledge 1998) p 26

<sup>40</sup> Sandbrook *ibid* p 463

<sup>41</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* p 79

appropriate their own space in private and public and music was one way of setting themselves apart physically and culturally from the older generation.<sup>42</sup> Portable radios helped this process. By definition the transistor radio could be taken anywhere – eg the bedroom, away from the parental-dominated living room – ideal for teenagers listening to pop stations.

So to summarise, these are the circumstances that sound broadcasting found itself in by the early 1960s. Originally, the BBC had used ‘old’ technology to broadcast on a local basis, but had moved away from these origins, to a structure that included a Regional stratum. Changes in technology made more localised broadcasting possible once again. However, was there a definable audience who actually wanted it? If local broadcasting was to capitalise on targeted output, there needed to be a much clearer indication of what a ‘local community’ was, and what the relationship might be with local broadcasting.

### **Constructing communities**

As I have argued, despite the existence of the regional framework, it was debatable exactly how representative the BBC’s locally produced programmes could be to indigenous audiences and how closely they could reflect their own concerns, issues and interests. At the same time there were now the technological means to expand provision, or at least re-allocate existing patterns to free up some spare capacity. This section starts by defining aspects of community from the perspective of sociological studies looking at the impact of large scale re-building and reconstruction. And linked to this, it will examine issues of accent and regional identity. Then I will turn to the ideology that could be said to lie behind some of the concepts of local broadcasting and how these were being discussed by contemporary commentators, with particular reference to ideas about community and culture. From this, I will argue that local broadcasting could only become a reality when there was a clear identification from key parts of

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<sup>42</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* p 82

society with the need to find outlets on the media for community interests. Local radio was only viable when there were local voices to be heard.

As I have identified above, there were changes in society, leisure and identity in post-war Britain. At the same time there are also broader geographical and cultural influences to take into consideration. In the late 1940s and 50s, 'planning' became the new mantra, to re-build the country after the privations and ravages of war. Regional government was supplemented by regional planning. As Colls puts it 'nationalisation and welfare were to be the new levers of unity and a battery of regionalised plans was put in place.'<sup>43</sup> Established communities were facing a fundamental threat in the face of physical demolition and reconstruction. Municipal redevelopment occurred on a massive scale, with the combined efforts of architects, planners, local politicians and contractors. During Macmillan's tenure as Minister for Housing in the early 1950s, the developers met the target of 300,000 new homes.<sup>44</sup> But that was just the beginning. Alongside suburban development, the inner cities were turned into building sites for the new craze of tower blocks. In four years, 1956 – 60, high-rise building increased from being 3% of new constructions to 16%, and would reach 26% by 1966.<sup>45</sup> Tower blocks provided a pragmatic solution to space shortage while at the same time a change in the funding arrangements brought greater subsidies for increased storeys and the opportunity for futuristic design harnessed the emerging optimism for a new technological age.<sup>46</sup> The pace of change accelerated to break neck speed, so much so that in little more than 30 years

'much of the ancient palimpsest, the mixture of public and private buildings, high streets and back lanes which has given [towns] for so long a sense of place, of physical coherence and individual community identity'<sup>47</sup>

were gone. There is a rich collection of academic work, both contemporaneous and retrospective which has viewed these tower

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<sup>43</sup> Colls, R *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002) p 316

<sup>44</sup> Hennessy P *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Penguin 2007) p 21

<sup>45</sup> Hennessy *ibid* p 493

<sup>46</sup> Hennessy *ibid* pp 493 - 4

<sup>47</sup> Clarke P quoted in Daunt M (ed) *Cambridge Urban History Vol iii* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) p xix

blocks as a challenge to social cohesion. Young and Willmott were reaching the end of their Bethnal Green research when high rises began to appear, but it was clear they were not popular: young families felt isolated, children could not play nearby, design and architecture were not conducive to friendliness and neighbourliness.<sup>48</sup> Michael Young later described how he believed local councillors were 'hood winked and out-talked by the clever architects and town-planners. They gave way.....to what they thought to be the modern fashion – the architectural and planning ideologies'.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of housing – and community - , the key pieces of legislation were the New Towns Act 1946 and the Town Development Act 1952, which established new settlements based in urban dispersal and the expansion of existing towns. These included places like Stevenage, Crawley, Basildon, Corby and Newton Aycliffe.<sup>50</sup> Researchers such as Young and Willmott<sup>51</sup> described the social upheaval brought about by the decline of inner city communities and the transplant of populations to new estates, which in turn disrupted traditional kinship networks.

But what were the alternatives, particularly since the new developments brought vastly improved basic amenities, such as hot water and indoor plumbing? Writer and journalist Ray Gosling weighed up the options in his witness testimony. The latter section of his 1980 memoir *Personal Copy* included a vivid account of the struggles to contain the slum clearances in Nottingham, particularly in the St Ann's district where Ray lived.<sup>52</sup> This happened in the very years when Radio Nottingham went on air for the first time (1968 – 71). In many ways Gosling's conclusions mirrored those of Young & Willmott after their Bethnal Green field work. They wrote

'the sense of loyalty to each other amongst the inhabitants of a place like Bethnal Green is not due to buildings. It is due far more to ties of kinship and friendship, which connect the *people* [authors' italics] of one household to the *people* of another. ....If the authorities regard that [community] spirit as a social asset worth

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<sup>48</sup> Hennessy *ibid* p 493

<sup>49</sup> Hennessy *ibid* pp 493 - 4

<sup>50</sup> Sandbrook D *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Little Brown 2006) p 177

<sup>51</sup> Young M and Willmott P *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Penguin 1957)

<sup>52</sup> Gosling R *Personal Copy* (London: Faber & Faber 1980)

preserving they will not uproot more people but build the new houses around the social groups to which they already belong.’<sup>53</sup>

Over twenty years later, Gosling echoed the sentiment, as he bemoaned the effects of redevelopment ‘we were a slum rich in life and now we’ve become a very boring, decent council house estate.’<sup>54</sup>

So these academic and eye witness accounts captured the challenges to social cohesion that existed in the post-war geophysical landscape. It is clear that there are alternative interpretations about the effects on community of redevelopment and mobility and furthermore, the available research does not attempt to gauge the impact on the notion of community spirit, which admittedly is difficult to do in retrospect. Nevertheless, post-war reconstruction and development had an impact on units of the population, from the family to the neighbourhood. The task of this research is to assess the importance of local radio in this landscape. Local broadcasting could never lay claim to altering the course of this social reconstruction, but instead, I will argue (following the Hoggart/Williams line, below), local radio could articulate that change, by providing a place where people could have a dialogue, share their experiences and concerns, debate the issues, think about the past and the future. In other words, changes in society created a need, almost a problem, that local radio could solve.

But how could the medium of radio specifically provide this solution? Colls’ work on identity and nationhood contrasts political and ‘state’ definitions of place with those moulded by geography and land.<sup>55</sup> One facet of this was the use of language and speech, which according to Colls in the 1930s and 40s was dominated by the BBC’s use of Received Pronunciation. Despite the fact that it ‘controlled so little of the territory’<sup>56</sup> its real purpose was to establish a kind of social hierarchy through teaching in schools and re-enforcement on the airwaves. ‘No less than English land,

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<sup>53</sup> Young & Willmott *ibid* p 199

<sup>54</sup> Gosling *ibid* p 218

<sup>55</sup> Colls, R *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002) pp 225 - 244

<sup>56</sup> Colls *ibid* p 232

English speech was enclosed. It became as much as means of keeping people out as bringing people in.<sup>57</sup>

As mentioned above, one of the most notable regional voices that listeners may have heard on the BBC was that of Wilfred Pickles, a newsreader from Halifax, who was employed during the Second World War and went on to present the long-running radio quiz show, *Have A Go*. Pickles' 1951 memoir argued for a less metropolitan sound to the BBC and more regionalisation.<sup>58</sup>

‘I say it is misusing the qualities of ordinary folk.....in the shape of their personalities, to try to canalize what they say into one avenue of conversation.....The trouble is that they're trying to standardize expressions and smiles just as they tried to standardize English.’<sup>59</sup>

*Have A Go* took the show to the audience, travelling the length and breadth of the country visiting pubs, clubs, village halls and factories, featuring a range of accents and popular interests: ‘You can't go wrong with real people and real life.’<sup>60</sup>

In reading these texts, I would argue that the expectations of society were beginning to shift against a backdrop of economic and industrial change. Pickles demonstrated there was still an appetite for a diverse public to be heard and seen on radio and television. The regional broadcasting model was limited in the extent to which it could reflect all the minority interests of its audience and capture the diversity of the population. So the alternative option was to invest in even more local forms of broadcasting, profiting from those social networks and kinship structures identified by the work of Young and Willmott and others. As communities began to shift and re-align, having access to local media could be seen as a possible way to re-create cohesion and bring positive benefits. The new estates might, as Gosling said, be places where ‘no one comes into the area any more to work, shop, dance or sing’<sup>61</sup> but I would argue that radio was a crucial conduit for re-discovering some of the public pleasures that had been lost. This invokes Phil Sidey's speech at the opening of the

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<sup>57</sup> Colls *ibid* p 233

<sup>58</sup> Pickles W *Sometime....Never* (London: Werner Laurie 1951) Chapter VII

<sup>59</sup> Pickles *Op cit* p 128

<sup>60</sup> Pickles *Op cit* p 116

<sup>61</sup> Gosling *ibid* p 219

chapter and his intention for Radio Leeds to help and facilitate the local population to find some of the connections that had been lost, to make sense of the changes in life and society and play their part as citizens.

### **Portrayals of 'everyday life' on television and radio**

At the same time, it is important to recognize that this appetite for the reflection of ordinary lives in the media was already being met and written about, to some extent. As Sandbrook and Hennessy among others establish, 'everyday life' underwent a wide-reaching re-definition in the post-Second World War years.<sup>62</sup> The collective impression of historians and cultural commentators suggests that the balance between working life and leisure time began to shift after 1945, so that disposable time, hobbies and recreation became a more significant factor in the equation. Everyday life began to be more noticeably written about, filmed, recorded, photographed in such a way that it became historicized.<sup>63</sup> That is not to say that these activities did not occur before (indeed dating back to Edwardian times) but there was an increase in the emphasis placed on the balance in peoples' lives between work and non-work.

There were two notable depictions of 'everyday life' in broadcasting terms, which captured the imagination of their respective audiences in a very short space of time. One was the long-running radio serial, *The Archers*, which began with a pilot in 1950 and then launched in January 1951. Despite the original intention to incorporate agricultural messages for farmers, nevertheless it set out to portray an 'everyday story of country folk'. The combination of strong characters and interesting stories suited the audience's liking for a domestic focus and a (rather romanticized) notion of rural England, so that within five years it had reached 20 million listeners.<sup>64</sup> The other example was *Coronation Street*, which started in 1960. This concerned another community, but there the focus was the industrial North of England, a great urban sprawl, not quite as nostalgia-filled but still

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<sup>62</sup> Hennessy; Sandbrook *ibid*

<sup>63</sup> Scannell P *Developments in Television in the UK and USA* University of Westminster lecture 3 June 2008

<sup>64</sup> Sandbrook *ibid* p 382



inhabited by lively, engaging characters. Again this had reached the 20 million mark in terms of viewers, in less than two years.<sup>65</sup>

These programmes demonstrated the appetite for domestic dramas that portrayed a sense of community and belonging for its fictional dwellers but also gave that same feeling to the viewers and listeners. Jordan defines 'Social Realism' as a genre, and applies this to *Coronation Street*.<sup>66</sup> For her, the storylines were rooted in personal events, which were situated in recognizable and commonplace locations to which the viewer could relate. 'These events are ostensibly about *social* [Jordan's italics] problems, they should have as one of their central concerns the setting of people in life.'<sup>67</sup> This is a crucial spur for local broadcasting, I would argue. If interest in everyday life could work in a dramatic way, imagine what the viewer or listener might have also gained from hearing real people, neighbours, friends, family, engaged in issues, dramas and interests common to all? Frank Gillard, regarded as the founding father of BBC Local Radio, summed up how the service might sound, in an oft-repeated phrase: 'aiming to present on the air, and in many different forms and through a multitude of local voices, the *running serial story* [my italics] of local life in all its aspects.'<sup>68</sup> This was very reminiscent of an 'everyday story of country folk.'

Similarly there were resonances between the picture conjured by *Coronation Street* and the work of Richard Hoggart. *The Uses of Literacy*<sup>69</sup> depicted a Northern working class lifestyle not too dissimilar from the fictional world of Weatherfield. Here too were found a warm-hearted, honest homogeneous community, with its own traditions and rituals, colourful characters and hardships. Richard Dyer points out that *Coronation Street* emerged at the same time as *The Uses of Literacy*, when there was a desire to legitimate a strand of culture that was authentically working class. He identifies four key elements from *The Uses of Literacy* that are visible in *Coronation Street*: the emphasis on common sense; the absence of politics and work; the stress on women and the strength of women; and the

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<sup>65</sup> Sandbrook op cit p 400

<sup>66</sup> Jordan M, as quoted in Cooke, L *British Television Drama: A History* (London bfi publishing 2003) p 36

<sup>67</sup> Jordan, as quoted in Cooke Op cit p 36

<sup>68</sup> *Yorkshire Post* 'Radio Station in Every City' 11 December 1963

<sup>69</sup> Hoggart, R *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Harmondsworth 1958)

perspective of nostalgia.<sup>70</sup> But alongside this picture, which Hoggart lovingly portrayed, there were the threats posed by self-improvement, education, affluence and the accompanying cheap and shallow proliferation of mass entertainment. Hoggart accepted that education could promote advancement – especially to escape financial hardship – but he did not want to see his native society disappear: ‘the steam-and-soda-and-hashed-meat smell of wash-day, or the smell of clothes drying by the fireside; the Sunday smell of the *News of the World*-mingled-with-roast-beef’ for instance.<sup>71</sup> The net effect was two-fold. By dismissing the sensationalist mass entertainments on offer Hoggart was also closely linked, by implication, to those who despised the American influence in popular culture. This included anything tainted by commercialism – which in television terms meant the cheapening of programmes broadcast by the independent companies with their quiz shows and variety nights. In radio terms, the spectre of commercial stations brought with it the inevitable pop music, which Hoggart especially railed against

‘the juke-box boys .....who spend their evenings listening in harshly-lighted milk bars to their...’nickelodeons’.....almost all are ‘vocals’ and the styles of singing much advanced beyond what is normally heard on the Light Programme of the BBC’.<sup>72</sup>

Secondly, Hoggart’s defence of the working class and their authentic experience conformed to the popular image which owed much to Chaucer, Shakespeare and Victorian sentimentality.<sup>73</sup> As cultural historian Robert Hewison puts it, at the core was ‘a sense of the personal, the concrete, the local; it is embodied in the idea of first, the family, and second, the neighbourhood.’<sup>74</sup>

Raymond Williams also made a case for reconnecting culture with politics and class.<sup>75</sup> But he put an explicit emphasis on communication, and the potential for communication *and* community (as opposed to mass

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<sup>70</sup> Cooke, L *British Television Drama: A History* (London: bfi Publishing 2003) p 36

<sup>71</sup> Hoggart *ibid* p 39

<sup>72</sup> Hoggart *ibid* p 248

<sup>73</sup> Sandbrook *ibid* p 184

<sup>74</sup> Hewison R *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-60* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1981) pp 177 - 8

<sup>75</sup> Williams R *Culture and Society 1780 – 1950* (London: Chatto & Windus 1958)

communication) as made possible by changes in society and technological advances. Here Hoggart and Williams diverged. Hoggart could be seduced by the past, with a sense of viewing the world through rose tinted glasses, yearning for a world that was on the verge of extinction. This was very much embodied in the early years of *Coronation Street*.<sup>76</sup> For Williams this was less about nostalgia for the past and more about mutual support and contributing to 'the advance of consciousness which is the common need.'<sup>77</sup> *Britain in the Sixties: Communication*, published in 1962, explored various notions of transmission and reception and the impact on the 'mass' audience. Williams concluded that the term 'the masses' was no longer appropriate, as there were now multi-form, fragmented audiences but the ownership of media broadcast and publishing had narrowed.<sup>78</sup> He proposed a greater democratic system, which would be a genuinely public service, provided there were no great broadcasting monopolies.

'The BBC has an excellent definition of Public Service Broadcasting but it exemplifies the dangers of the very large organization in which producers can become subject to administrators. The development of regional and local broadcasting could become the means of transferring control of this Public Service Broadcasting to the producers themselves, who already have the nucleus of independently regionally based companies.'<sup>79</sup>

Here was a very explicit enunciation of the potential for local radio, linking it to the BBC's core remit. In this instance, Williams concluded that education would be the best programme content, and this would include the way speech, writing and creative expression were taught, as well as training skills related to broadcast production. Hoggart's denunciation of the downside of popular culture did not include broadcast media explicitly - apparently he did not own a television set while he was writing *The Uses of Literacy*<sup>80</sup> - but in 1965, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies published a pamphlet which set out some of the contemporary debates

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<sup>76</sup> Cooke *ibid* p 36

<sup>77</sup> Williams *ibid* p 320

<sup>78</sup> Williams R *Britain in the Sixties: Communication* (London: Penguin) 1962

<sup>79</sup> Williams R *op cit* pp 126 - 7

<sup>80</sup> Corner, J 'Studying culture: reflections and assessments. An interview with Richard Hoggart' *Media, Culture & Society* 1991 Vol 13 pp 137 -151

surrounding local broadcasting.<sup>81</sup> In the introduction, Hoggart and Stuart Hall picked up where Williams left off in seeking a less institutionalised structure: 'Essentially she [the pamphlet's author, Rachel Powell] is asking us to think about creative amateurism, which is neither parish pumpery of a narrow kind nor the professionalism which is so easily a form of patronage.'<sup>82</sup>

In the pamphlet, Powell highlighted the compelling arguments for local radio. 'Socially we can use local radio as a means whereby people in a town can talk and get to know one another'.<sup>83</sup> Besides allowing a voice for democracy, promoting culture and social good, education was again at the core of the remit, in terms of training and schools broadcasts. Yet there was a sting in the tail: Powell rejected both the BBC's claim to run the service in the long term and any commercial aspirations in the short term, as this would result in centralisation and a diet of pop music. Powell ultimately envisaged a community service, where news was liberally interpreted; there were no restrictions on debate and argument, with complete local autonomy. Overall there is a discernible thread here, linking Hoggart's and Williams' core ideals. The *zeitgeist* for empowerment and inclusion had its roots in scholarly and academic thinking, as Colls puts it

'In the 1960s the new freedoms of expression and communication, the new universities and polytechnics, and that combination of affluence and welfare which was so new to human history, powered the mass search for what was authentic or in the argot for what was *real* [author's italics].'<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

In the post-war years, audiences became more interested in seeing and hearing representations of lives and communities similar to their own. Emerging theories around class, culture and communication mirrored this development. Media commentators, writers, producers, directors and so on were also considering how and when to respond to this growing interest,

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<sup>81</sup> Powell, R *The Possibilities for Local Radio* (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham University 1965)

<sup>82</sup> Powell op cit p i

<sup>83</sup> Powell op cit p 12

<sup>84</sup> Colls, R *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002) p 366

although the alignment of the various factors might be due to conditions outside their control.

In *The Uses of Literacy* Hoggart praised the 'resilience' of the working classes as witnessed in the hobbies and leisure activities, the clubs and societies. These, he argued, had helped preserve a sense of identity and avoided the pitfalls of the *lumpenproletariat*.<sup>85</sup> So, I would propose, what better way to promote these unifying experiences and continue the process of self-fulfilment than through involvement in localised radio? Even better, this could have been a means to celebrate and revive previously lost authentic cultural experiences, through the embodiment, to borrow Hewison's phrase, of family and neighbourhood. What is being witnessed here was an exploration of how academic thinking and contemporary ideas formed the backdrop to the debate that began to frame local broadcasting. It is not a complete solution to the cultural malaise that Hoggart described, but local broadcasting resonated with notions of community, belonging, personal interaction and making sense of past traditions and ways of life in the face of progress.

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<sup>85</sup> Hoggart *ibid* p 248

## **CHAPTER TWO: A discussion of the historiographical perspectives**

### **Broadcasting Histories**

In this chapter I will discuss previously published literature, which deals with BBC radio and local radio in particular, for the period of the thesis, 1960 - 1980. The works of Briggs, Lewis & Booth, Hendy and Crisell concern BBC history from an academic perspective, while those of Sidey, Purves, Trethowan etc can be classified as personal memoir and autobiography. Taken together, these works enable us to build an impression, from many perspectives, of the chronology, experiences and contributions of local radio, and what its significance is to the study of media and broadcasting history.

However, I will argue that this literature also presents significant problems, especially as none of the works provides a comprehensive evaluation of the chronological history of local radio covering the years 1960 - 1980, based on primary sources. In particular, I will demonstrate that while Briggs uses some aspects of local radio's genesis and evolution to illustrate the central themes of his argument regarding BBC history, he displays little empathy and understanding for the ecology of local radio on its own, and does not present it in a broader social and cultural context, which I have begun to explain above. Lewis & Booth do have a clear perspective for their analysis of local broadcasting history, in the context of community media. While this is very pertinent to a history of BBC Local Radio, it is chronologically incomplete and again lacks other aspects of the broadcasting and corporate ecology. Hendy's work is valuable, but largely from the perspective of Radio Four, with a strong London-centric bias.

The starting point for any history of the BBC has to be the five volumes of Asa Briggs' 'The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom'. Of particular interest are Volume I ('The Birth of Broadcasting 1923-27'), which includes an overview of how the regional pattern of broadcasting emerged, which had a long-lasting impact on the structural and organisational arrangements for radio transmission and production outside London for the

next 40 years, and Volume V ('Competition 1955-74').<sup>86</sup> Volume V identifies several key themes that shaped the BBC's development in the post-war period, including challenges to the BBC's monopoly in the form of commercial competition and restrictions imposed by shrinking resources. 'Competition' is an apposite title for the context in which Briggs deals with the arguments and events preceding the creation of BBC Local Radio in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, this also illustrates the flaw with Briggs: his use of aspects of the local radio story as part of a thematic approach, which restricts his horizons and inevitably neglects other key areas of the history.

Briggs' use of the competition analogy begins with the Pilkington Committee, which took place against the backdrop of the change in the competitive landscape caused by the arrival of independent commercial television.<sup>87</sup> If local sound broadcasting were to be given the go-ahead, Briggs argues, there were two implications: either the BBC produced it or it was given to direct commercial competitors – which would signal the loss of its sound monopoly.<sup>88</sup> Competitive challenges continued, with the arrival of pirate radio and pop music output, which wrong-footed the BBC's out-dated music offerings and provided the final impetus to re-organise the networks. Parallel to this, Briggs contextualises the creation of local radio within the regional and global spheres of broadcasting, and the competition for resources:

'Both in domestic and external broadcasting not totally dissimilar structural questions were arising about the relative share of resources to be devoted to regions and about the balance between institutional centralisation and decentralisation'.<sup>89</sup>

The climax of Volume V centres on the seismic introspective exercise of *Broadcasting in the 70s*, again occasioned by competition, partly for limited resources and partly a need to reposition radio for a new age and a new media landscape. So Briggs' examination of the genesis period of local

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<sup>86</sup> Briggs, A *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Vol 1 Broadcasting and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995); Briggs A: *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom Vol V Competition 1955 – 74* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995)

<sup>87</sup> Briggs Vol V Op cit Chapter IV

<sup>88</sup> Briggs Vol V Op cit p 630

<sup>89</sup> Briggs Vol V Op cit p 623

radio raises one of the crucial questions for this history: did the BBC enter into local broadcasting simply to prevent their commercial rivals from doing it? Was this a pre-emptive strike to hold onto the last remaining BBC monopoly – and if so, why? Or was it a move motivated by a genuine desire to represent more closely the needs and interests of the audience on a local level – something the BBC believed it could do better than commercial organisations? Briggs does not provide a definitive conclusion here so this complex question merits some lengthy and considered debate, using primary sources, during the course of the thesis.

He does, however, explore the degree to which demand for the service may have existed, which emerged through the debate and subsequent recommendations in the Pilkington Report. Briggs points out how the Committee felt it would not be acceptable for them to deny the public the opportunity to try something new. In their view, it was considered the responsibility of ‘authority’ to provide a lead to find out what the public want, without resorting to elitism or condescension.<sup>90</sup> It could be argued that introducing commercial local radio would have been an alternative, again providing choice and a new service. But as Milland shows, a significant minority of Tory MPs were not keen on the only other example of private enterprise in broadcasting available to them – that of commercial television. The programmes were regarded as low-brow and in any case the huge amounts of money being raised by advertising revenue were simply a sign of another monopoly in operation.<sup>91</sup>

In Briggs, there is some mention, though not in any detail, of the experimental stations that Gillard instituted in 1961-62.<sup>92</sup> There is a great deal of archival evidence around these trials, which will be used in later chapters to illustrate various aspects of the BBC’s evolving ethos of local broadcasting. The trials could not be publicly broadcast but tapes were made, edited and broadcast to select groups of the public. While Briggs details how one such tape helped persuade the Pilkington Committee of the

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<sup>90</sup> Briggs Vol V Op cit p 276

<sup>91</sup> Milland J ‘Courting Malvolio: The Background to the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting, 1960-62’ *Contemporary British History*, 2004 18: 2 pp 76 – 102

<sup>92</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 627



desirability of local broadcasting,<sup>93</sup> I will go further in exploring how the key concept of local radio can be traced back to these experiments, including the tricky question of the extent and appetite of public demand.

In Chapters VI and VII of Volume V, Briggs outlines the set of political circumstances that resulted in the eventual launch of the service. The thrust of Briggs' argument, from the BBC's point of view, focuses on whether and to what extent the local service could be accommodated within the regional framework. The evidence here is drawn from public pronouncements and BBC publications,<sup>94</sup> which were one forum for the debate. Briggs' strength lies in examining the minutiae of detail and nuance between these publications. One pamphlet (*Local Radio in the Public Interest: The BBC's Plan*) occupies three pages of analysis, which Briggs uses to good effect to illustrate how Gillard and the BBC Director-General Hugh Greene shifted the emphasis on different aspects of the promised virtues of local broadcasting, *vis-a-vis* wider participation in democracy, by comparing it to earlier public statements that concentrated more on the potential for widening education and skills.<sup>95</sup> However other parts of the story merit just as much close inspection. Briggs notes the shift from 'if' local radio was launched, to 'when' it was launched<sup>96</sup> but he neglects to explain how the BBC manoeuvred itself internally into a position of readiness, so it was able to launch local radio within only ten months of the government giving the go-ahead at the end of 1966. I will provide more evidence to show how important the speed of the launch of the service was in shaping the first eight stations, and the problems that resulted.

The eventual White Paper on Broadcasting in December 1966 gave the new pop music station to the BBC and with it, the go-ahead for local broadcasting, but the formula for financing and resources for local radio relied on local authorities and corporations paying for the stations.<sup>97</sup> Briggs points out the inefficiency in the wording, which prohibited raising any

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<sup>93</sup> Briggs Vol V *ibid* p 627

<sup>94</sup> For example *Yorkshire Post* 'Radio Station in Every City' December 11 1963; BBC *Local Radio in the Public Interest: The BBC's Plan* (London: BBC Publications 1966)

<sup>95</sup> Briggs Vol V *ibid* p 627

<sup>96</sup> Briggs Vol V *ibid* p 620

<sup>97</sup> Home Office *White Paper on Broadcasting* (Cmnd. 3169 HMSO 1966)

revenue by a 'subvention of the rates.'<sup>98</sup> The overall effect was to deprive the new stations of a stable financial footing. While this is part of the story, it was only one of the factors that influenced the creation and existence of the first eight stations. Briggs, and all the other published sources, significantly underestimate the precariousness of this experimental period, which I will re-address.

According to Briggs, local radio's destiny, in the years immediately after the launch of the service, 1968 – 70, was dominated, first by financial constraint, secondly by the relationship with the regions and thirdly by wavelength scarcity. These issues informed a series of internal debates which culminated with the document *Broadcasting in the 70s*, a key period which ensuing chapters will explore more fully as part of the research. The final version of *Broadcasting in the 70s* pledged to plough on with the expansion of local radio to 40 stations: 'There is a demand for local radio. We want to satisfy it over the country as a whole'.<sup>99</sup> Shortly afterwards however, the election of a Conservative government brought the future of BBC Local Radio into doubt. One of the tasks of my archival research is to explain just how it succeeded in riding this cycle of uncertainty and expansion.

Hendy's history of Radio Four provides a useful point of comparison at this stage in the story.<sup>100</sup> This provides informative and informed analysis, particularly regarding how local radio was viewed, both negatively and positively, by influential personnel within the radio directorate and the networks from 1967 onwards. Hendy also chronicles the impact local radio had on the networks. For example the way that the first local radio stations encouraged more varied and localised accents on air, and how they began to innovate programmes that allowed a degree of open access and direct questioning of participants.<sup>101</sup> Chapter 9 (*Under Siege*)<sup>102</sup> marks the crucial turning point in the relationship, with the prolonged debate about plans to complete the local radio chain – and then merge it with either Radio Two or

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<sup>98</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 640

<sup>99</sup> BBC *Broadcasting in the 70s* (London: BBC Publications 1969) p 13

<sup>100</sup> Hendy D *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007)

<sup>101</sup> Hendy Op cit p 69; p 126

<sup>102</sup> Hendy Op cit

Four. This is a critical period in the local radio story and needs to be examined in equal detail from the perspective of those running (and defending) local radio at the time. However, Hendy is preoccupied with the metropolitan centre of radio, so his history casts little light on the crucial decision-making and shifting relationships as they played out in the local stations on the ground.

Arguably the key player in the early history, Frank Gillard, does not receive as much attention as he might in any published history. His role in formulating policy in the 1950s is documented by Briggs,<sup>103</sup> but he could have explored further Gillard's working relationship with the Director of Sound Broadcasting during this period, and gone into more detail about how his own ideas of local, small scale broadcasting were evolving. As I will show, the Archive reveals a very detailed and comprehensive evolution of Gillard's thoughts and plans on the subject. Gillard as an individual deserves considerable attention, because he was the driving force behind the BBC's adoption of local broadcasting. One can delve deeper into some of the sources, including his own BBC Oral History interview<sup>104</sup> and looking further back into his career for some of his motivation.

For example one can draw out from Hannon's illuminating article about the BBC's war correspondents, of whom Gillard was one, examples of organisational and tactical approaches that will have influenced Gillard's 'campaign' for local broadcasting.<sup>105</sup> The crucial point, I would argue, is that when one compares a greater range of primary sources and oral history interviews with Briggs' own summary, it is clear that Gillard's passion for local broadcasting, his evangelical thrust, has been rather underplayed in the secondary literature. Briggs does however usefully include Gillard's pursuit and conversion of the Pilkington Committee, but even this chronology needs to be re-assessed in the light of my archival research.<sup>106</sup>

The 1960s ended with Gillard's retirement from the BBC, and his replacement by Ian Trethowan. Moving forward three years, Briggs' final

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<sup>103</sup> eg Briggs Vol V ibid Chapter V

<sup>104</sup> Gillard F BBC Oral History Interview 1NBSC 145S 14 July 1983

<sup>105</sup> Hannon B P D 'Creating the Correspondent: How the BBC reached the frontline in the Second World War' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 2008 28: 2 pp 175 – 194

<sup>106</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 630

inclusion of local radio in Volume V comes with the Crawford Report and its chastisement of the BBC and the IBA for the reduction in small-scale rural broadcasting.<sup>107</sup> Tantalizingly this is the point, 1974, where Briggs' original research into BBC history comes to a full stop, opening up the field for new scholars (although Crisell and Lewis & Booth touch on the later period – see below). Furthermore, Briggs' own disposition towards local radio has to be crucial to the way it is discussed, so it is worth pausing for a moment to consider his role in chronicling BBC history. Although, as a historian, he had a very good relationship with Frank Gillard, Briggs acknowledged his own blind spot to local radio:

"I gave every blessing that I possibly could do to Frank Gillard when he was collecting the oral history things.....I was not greatly keen, to tell you the truth, on local radio. I can't say that was a very powerful influence on me..."<sup>108</sup>

This is a significant factor in the historiography of local radio, which could be said to have been neglected or at least not given due prominence in the history books. There seems to me to be a critical difference between those individuals who understand it, its *raison d'être*, the form, functions, achievements and the contribution it has made to the world of broadcasting and to the legacy of the BBC, and those who do not. Briggs by his own admission is in the latter category. One of the central aims of this research is to re-position BBC Local Radio in a more appropriate – and prominent – context. There are also those who have been more positively disposed to local radio in their writings – and I shall come on to those in due course.

There is an alternative interpretation of local radio's formative history in Lewis & Booth's *The Invisible Medium*.<sup>109</sup> Chapter Six offers a more socio-cultural view of the establishment of local radio, beginning with the three key trends of specialization, decentralization and democratization within the context of community.<sup>110</sup> Almost immediately they flag up a word of caution when it comes to telling the narrative:

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<sup>107</sup> Home Office *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting Coverage* (Cmnd 5774 HMSO 1974)

<sup>108</sup> Briggs A Oral History Interview with David Hendy (unpublished quote) 6 May 2008

<sup>109</sup> Lewis P & Booth J *The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio* (London: Macmillan 1989)

<sup>110</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit p 89

‘The managers of radio, not usually themselves in control of events since power passed to television, have nevertheless colluded in a rewriting of history that justifies the present arrangements at any particular time.’<sup>111</sup>

Lewis & Booth suggest that this collusion stems from how the original causes and inspiration for local radio were (mis)interpreted by the founding fathers. The roots can be traced back to changing notions of localness and the realignment of traditional population groups in geographical, social and class terms, as outlined earlier. Lewis & Booth argue that these shifts in society were appropriated in the 1960s by ‘radio’, to justify local services, just at the point where sociologists were able to explode these theories as ‘myths’ of localness and community.<sup>112</sup>

This assertion requires further consideration in the course of the thesis but it is fair to say at this point that Lewis & Booth have a strong agenda in their appraisal of local radio. They believe that previous media histories were presented by the so-called ‘selective tradition’ of the broadcasting institutions, and so consequently ‘...our position is one that is generally supportive of the critique of mainstream broadcasting implied in the practice of community radio’.<sup>113</sup> Indeed in Chapter Ten, they advocate the creation of a community ‘publishing house’ to provide material for community stations. This would be entitled to a slice of the licence fee and run on public service broadcasting lines.<sup>114</sup> So in the light of this it is fair to say that Lewis & Booth have a strong overarching agenda to their history, which posits their own definitions of ‘local’ and ‘community’ as the core impetus to local radio.

This is how their narrative of ‘local’ runs. They argue that social groups were becoming aligned more in terms of age or commonality of interest (or both) than geography. Secondly the lobby for commercial radio coalesced around the term ‘local’ as well, thus bolstering the appeal and profile of the sector. According to Lewis & Booth, it was the Pilkington Committee that set the philosophy for what defined local output – ‘the material broadcast would

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<sup>111</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit p 89

<sup>112</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit p 92

<sup>113</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit p 4

<sup>114</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit p 203

be....of particular interest to the locality served by that station rather than to other localities',<sup>115</sup> although it would still need to take some network programmes too during the day. Finally, the BBC's vision emerged from documents like the aforementioned *Local Radio in the Public Interest* where it was stated there was expectation that many local organizations would get involved with local stations and make programmes, with the BBC providing training and maintaining editorial control.

Lewis & Booth then argue why the original hopes for local radio were not fulfilled by the BBC.<sup>116</sup> It was hampered by wavelength restrictions on two counts: the original service was broadcast on VHF and not everyone had the correct receiver; secondly the station coverage area was defined by the transmission feasibility rather than by a natural geographical or socially-defined community. As Briggs also observes, the service was ill-equipped financially, relying initially on local authorities for revenue, and eventually needed to rely on licence fee funding. There was a tendency towards centralization from BBC management and administration, and on the stations, a bias towards BBC journalism, rather than community access. Local radio became prone to disproportionate financial cuts over the years – and so many contributors from communities were regarded as cheap voluntary labour. And even these areas of output – evening access programmes, education and social action work – often disappeared in cutbacks at the expense of traditional news and local current affairs.<sup>117</sup>

While Lewis & Booth's observations have foundation, particularly with regard to the precarious financial situation local radio found itself in and frequency shortage, more in-depth investigation is needed to amplify their analysis, to raise questions about the genuine and realistic aspirations of local radio. The sources cited by Lewis & Booth in Chapter Six, for example, are drawn from previously published media and academic works, government papers, contemporary newspaper reports and BBC

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<sup>115</sup> Home Office *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting 1960* (Cmnd 1753 HMSO 1963) para 842

<sup>116</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit pp 95 - 96

<sup>117</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit pp 95 - 96

publications. Not one reference comes from the BBC's archive files, which contain the relevant internal papers, memos and minutes.<sup>118</sup>

There is a further critique to be made of their underlying argument. According to Lewis & Booth, if one creates a model of 'community' radio, and compares BBC Local Radio to it, the model will be found wanting. I will argue that the BBC in fact had no clear idea of what 'community' radio was, and used the term interchangeably with 'local radio'. Lewis & Booth identify one key difference between commercial stations and public service models and the community sector. In the former, listeners, they contend, are 'captured as objects' for advertisers or to be informed and entertained. Community radio wants to treat listeners as participants and subjects.<sup>119</sup> Local radio's founding fathers (both BBC and independent) evidently thought they could do both: the gap in previously published work for my research to fill is to explore the extent to which the BBC recognized this failure and the reasons for it.

Since Lewis & Booth are writing in the late 1980s, they have a broader canvas to survey and they comment on the early traumas suffered by commercial local radio when it began, as it struggled to raise sufficient advertising revenue.<sup>120</sup> But given their undoubted support for the establishment of the third 'tier' in radio broadcasting - community radio – it is legitimate to ask if they are viewing the past in the context of the contemporary situation. This is precisely the kind of approach that Briggs himself said he avoided when it came to his work: in relating culture to both society and history, one risks 'reading back into the past current fashions of description and explanation'.<sup>121</sup> He chose to concentrate on the thoughts and deeds that people had in their minds at the time and the extent to which they changed. He attempts to leave aside the agenda or issues in broadcasting at the time he is writing.<sup>122</sup>

Like Briggs, Lewis & Booth have highlighted significant milestones along the way but more work needs to be done to show the nature of how the

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<sup>118</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit pp 219 - 222

<sup>119</sup> Lewis & Booth Op cit p 7

<sup>120</sup> Lewis & Booth Ibid p 100

<sup>121</sup> Briggs A 'Problems and Possibilities in the writing of Broadcast History' *Media, Culture & Society* January 1980 Number 1 pp 5 -13

<sup>122</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid pp 5 - 13

BBC's blueprint evolved over time. What Lewis & Booth do not give enough credit for is the theory that the architects of local radio recognized the exigencies of contemporary political, cultural and social demands and worked out ways of meeting them. Briggs's in depth analysis of Greene's and Gillard's public pronouncements shows these nuances at work.<sup>123</sup> One snapshot of local radio's stated ambitions taken in isolation might not reflect the depth and breadth of the long-term strategy. There is scope to explore further Lewis & Booth's emphasis on community involvement and to the access aspirations of BBC Local Radio and ask whether this is misplaced.

One further assertion made by Lewis & Booth can be challenged here. They conclude that local radio was given the go-ahead 'as a diversion from the success of the pirates [radio stations]', the plans having been, as they put it, 'brought out of the cupboard'.<sup>124</sup> This is an over-simplistic analysis of the circumstances, cause and effect, which led to the creation of the local radio experiment, something that I argue Briggs also overlooked (see above). Undoubtedly the government debate and legislation which were needed to curtail the operations of pirate radio dovetailed with the White Paper that saw the reorganization of BBC radio, but – as I have already explained and successive chapters will show in more detail – this context and process can be traced back over a decade previously and can not be viewed in isolation with respect to one event.

There is a further element to this point, which Crisell highlights: the degree to which pirate radio could be said to have stimulated a nascent demand for alternative radio services.<sup>125</sup> He argues, citing Smith, that the pirate stations confronted the BBC's monopoly, which was translated into a community-centred aspiration for greater access to local broadcasting.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, Crisell and Starkey argue that the advent of BBC and independent (or commercial) local radio was also a challenge to the limited

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<sup>123</sup> Briggs Vol V *ibid* pp 628 - 630

<sup>124</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* p 86

<sup>125</sup> Crisell A *Understanding Radio* (London & New York: Routledge 1994) p 33; Crisell A *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting* (London & New York: Routledge 1997) pp 143 - 146

<sup>126</sup> Crisell *Understanding Radio* *Op cit*; Smith A (ed) *British Broadcasting* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles 1974) pp 151 - 152



availability of radio, because of the lack of frequencies.<sup>127</sup> But, the argument continues, the liberation of the airwaves by the use of VHF (and local radio on MW by the early 1970s) was not fully exploited by the BBC or Independent Local Radio (ILR).<sup>128</sup> As I have already argued, the audience profiting most from portable radios were younger listeners, in search of pop music, as a secondary aural experience. BBC Local Radio was not in competition with Radio One, and so its emphasis was on content for primary listening consumption, akin to Radio Four, attracting a different audience.<sup>129</sup> Even though ILR's listeners were of the younger, portable radio-owning demographic, the Sound Broadcasting Act of 1973 still required commercial stations to provide programmes with a high-value, intellectually-stimulating content.<sup>130</sup> So the issue here for further exploration is the impact of pirate radio on BBC Local Radio, in terms of providing opportunities for re-organising BBC radio services and creating new audiences, even though, on the face of it, they were actually unconnected in many ways – different listeners and dissimilar content. Elsewhere, Crisell's attention is focused on local radio's news provision in the 1970s onwards, again often in comparison with the commercial sector.<sup>131</sup> This has been an interesting – and indeed core - development, but as I will demonstrate, news services were not integral to the original design for local radio and is another example of how the intentions of the founders were moulded by events and resources over time.

### Personal Testimony

Alongside these texts from a historical viewpoint are various biographical works and personal testimonies. In a hierarchical order, these start with the memoirs of one Chairman of the Governors<sup>132</sup> and various Directors-

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<sup>127</sup> Crisell A & Starkey G 'News on local radio' in Franklin B (ed) *Local Journalism and Local Media: Making the Local News* (London: Routledge 2006) p 18

<sup>128</sup> Crisell and Starkey Op cit

<sup>129</sup> Crisell A 'Local Radio: attuned to the times, or filling time with tunes?' in Franklin B and Murphy D (ed) *Local Journalism in Context* (London: Routledge 1998) p 26

<sup>130</sup> Crisell and Starkey ibid p 18

<sup>131</sup> Crisell and Starkey ibid pp 18 - 25

<sup>132</sup> Hill, Lord Behind the Screen: The Broadcasting Memoirs of Lord Hill of Luton (London: Sidgwick and Jackson 1974)

General.<sup>133</sup> These are important for several reasons. They give the reader – and scholar – an impression of how key individuals who were leading and influencing the BBC during the crucial period of radio reorganisation viewed local radio, as a concept and as a part of the service. I will then analyse personal memoirs from several staff members with first hand knowledge of working in the early days of BBC Local Radio. All these memoirs are in the public domain, and are by definition the result of how the authors wish to chronicle certain events and their involvement in them. As Peter Burke points out, the degree to which perceptions of one or a sequence of events as witnessed by different people can be taken into account is one facet that might define cultural history.<sup>134</sup> Burke also illustrates how self-presentation in biographies has shifted the focus from a stark contrast of truth or fiction. The three narratives he offers – self-preservation within a culture; casting oneself in a type of role; portraying a life in one or more dramatic scenarios – provide the necessary critical context, with which to approach the relevant memoirs here.<sup>135</sup>

Lord Hill became Chairman of the Governors in September 1967, and his period of office covered the vital, nascent years of BBC Local Radio, which he refers to with insight and perception in his memoirs, although one can trace all three of Burke's concepts of biography within them.<sup>136</sup> As Hill arrived at the BBC from the ITA, Hugh Greene's attitude was very distrustful, and intriguingly it was Frank Gillard who suggested brokering a meeting between them to try and create a working relationship.<sup>137</sup> 1969 was a crucial year for BBC Local Radio as the 18-month experiment was drawing to a close and the government needed to decide its future. Hill was very clear about the value of the service: 'Local radio had succeeded at a moment when there was growing resistance to the dominance of London. We needed non-metropolitan broadcasting in which local feeling and

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<sup>133</sup> Greene, H C *The Third Floor Front (A View of Broadcasting in the Sixties)* (London: Bodley Head 1969); Curran C *A Seamless Robe – Broadcasting, Philosophy and Practice* (London: Collins 1979); Trethowan I *Split Screen* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1984); Milne A *DG The Memoirs of a British Broadcaster* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1988)

<sup>134</sup> Burke, P *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2004)

<sup>135</sup> Burke *ibid* p 88

<sup>136</sup> Hill, Lord *Behind the Screen: The Broadcasting Memoirs of Lord Hill of Luton* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson 1974)

<sup>137</sup> Hill *Op cit* p 73

interests could be expressed.<sup>138</sup> Through the negotiations around local radio's future – which became integral to *Broadcasting in the 70s*, and the BBC's financial position - Hill made it clear that he did indeed support and foster non-metropolitan broadcasting wherever possible. It appears from the memoirs that Hill was well placed to defend local broadcasting. He had an appreciation for the potential reach and impact of radio, maybe harking back to his days as the wartime 'Radio Doctor', although he does not explicitly say this. But as Chairman of the BBC he was in a position of great influence, defending the Corporation when necessary. Hill certainly worked hard at convincing Christopher Chataway, the first Conservative Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, of the value of BBC Local Radio and of how commercial radio would differ from it – and certainly could not replace it.<sup>139</sup> Hill's perspective is interesting because he took a policy position on local radio, which he maintained against some implacable opposition. His impact on – and his appreciation of – the issue of local broadcasting can be judged by a letter he received on his retirement from the BBC in 1972, signed by all the Station Managers from BBC Local Radio and a covering note from Ian Trethowan: 'They are all well aware that but for your own efforts in the winter of 1970/71, BBC Local Radio might no longer exist'.<sup>140</sup>

The recollections of Charles Curran and Ian Trethowan also covered relevant aspects of the local radio story from its inception to the early 1970s, while Alastair Milne touched on the story in the mid 1980s. Each had, in some respects, his own perspective, which will be addressed shortly, and each was certainly sympathetic to the ideals of local broadcasting. Yet there are omissions to the canon. The two most influential figures for the first decade – Sir Hugh Greene and Frank Gillard – are partially missing from this area of historiography. Hugh Greene did provide a slim volume of writings and extracts<sup>141</sup> which captured his zest for energy, creativity and innovation: 'I wanted to open the windows and dissipate the ivory-tower stuffiness....which still clung to some parts of the BBC. I wanted

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<sup>138</sup> Hill Op cit p 126

<sup>139</sup> Hill Op cit p 161

<sup>140</sup> Hill Op cit p 254

<sup>141</sup> Greene, H C *The Third Floor Front (A View of Broadcasting in the Sixties)* (London: Bodley Head 1969)

to encourage enterprise and the taking of risks.<sup>142</sup> That exhortation to take risks may certainly have included embarking on local broadcasting but he restricted himself to the main facts – of which noting his support for local radio was one<sup>143</sup> - yet offered little else that clarified his own role and involvement in such a tumultuous decade in broadcasting history. Frank Gillard did not leave a memoir at all, although there a number of published articles and interviews from which one can learn more about his thoughts.

Curran, Trethowan and Milne all clearly had an empathy with local broadcasting – although there was a difference in emphasis. When Trethowan took over as Managing Director of Radio, he was aware one of his responsibilities was the nascent chain of local radio stations ‘a group of skinny but lusty voiced infants.’<sup>144</sup> Frank Gillard sent him off to visit one of the stations, from where he returned and reported (he admitted ‘portentously’).‘.....’I have seen the future and it works.’<sup>145</sup> Milne and Curran were less explicit in their conversion to local radio – Curran recalled speaking to Gillard prior to one of his visits to see American small-scale broadcasting in the 1950s<sup>146</sup> while Milne chose examples of the positive impact of local radio, eg singling out the efforts of Radios Sheffield, Nottingham and Humberside during the 1984-85 miners’ strike.<sup>147</sup> More obvious contrasts emerged in the way these three chose to describe and highlight aspects of their work and the impact it had on local radio. Curran’s major pre-occupation was with frequencies and wavelengths – he devoted almost 25 pages to dealing with the subject, noting ‘Control of airtime dictates all other decisions. This is more than theory. It is inescapable practice.’<sup>148</sup>

Trethowan too wrestled with wavelength and frequency issues, but his style was more avuncular, as he described discussing these over lunch with Christopher Chataway and then adjourning to an office so they could figure

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<sup>142</sup> Greene *ibid* Preface

<sup>143</sup> Greene *Ibid* Chapter Two; Chapter Six

<sup>144</sup> Trethowan I *Split Screen* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1984) p 124

<sup>145</sup> Trethowan *Op cit* p 124

<sup>146</sup> Curran C *A Seamless Robe – Broadcasting, Philosophy and Practice* ( London: Collins 1979) p 156

<sup>147</sup> Milne A *DG The Memoirs of a British Broadcaster* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1988) p

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<sup>148</sup> Curran *ibid* p 184

out the logistics over a map.<sup>149</sup> His style was evidently more relaxed and informal than Curran's, but he was no less intellectual, as he discussed, for example, how an early meeting with Archbishop Temple had a profound influence on him.<sup>150</sup> Milne had less to say about local radio per se, although he established the Director-General's Study Group in 1985, which recommended revisions to the English Local Radio chain<sup>151</sup> and the re-organisation of the English regions structure.<sup>152</sup> Milne's book, again, contained contrasts to those of Trethowan and Curran. There was much more of a sense of the struggles that he faced within the hierarchy of the BBC and within the Board of Governors, plus the external political rows which tended to dominate his leadership, and indeed his memoir.

What also emerges from the memoirs and writings of BBC leaders is the relationship with the outer reaches, geographically and metaphorically speaking, of the organisation and how this began to change. While Milne may have been pre-occupied with issues to do with television, a changing (and less favourable) political landscape and new technologies, he still demonstrated an appreciation of the BBC as a whole. For example he mentioned that he made the effort to make annual visits to local and regional BBC outposts.<sup>153</sup> Trethowan offered a more perceptive analysis, which explained some of the tensions that arose between the 'centre' and the staff across the country. The example he gave was the way that BBC Governors could pay a visit to a local station and over informal meetings with staff quickly become caught up in 'simmering squabbles fomented by staff in the regions against their central managers.'<sup>154</sup> This was what they fed back to the Board of Governors, which he felt was not always constructive. Trethowan drew another interesting comparison: 'The local radio stations are an integral part of the fibre of the communities which they serve and bring the BBC much closer to the homes of the public.' Network

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<sup>149</sup> Trethowan *ibid* p 128

<sup>150</sup> Interestingly Temple was a founder member of the Workers Educational Association – which Richard Hoggart had a great interest in too.

<sup>151</sup> Milne *ibid* p 138

<sup>152</sup> Milne *ibid* p 178

<sup>153</sup> Hill also made it clear he visited all 20 of the BBC local stations during his Chairmanship. Hill, *ibid* p 276

<sup>154</sup> Trethowan *ibid* p 157

television, on the other hand, despite some diversity, still had elements of 'tablets of stone being handed down to the people from a distant mountain.'<sup>155</sup> This raises the scope for more detailed examination of how important autonomy was to the local stations, the relationship between them and central administration and how this was perceived by staff.

Next there are the memoirs and autobiographies available from those who worked much more closely at the 'coal face' of local broadcasting. This chimes with Seaton, who champions the role of the producers, the reporters, the researchers, the staff who embody the living institution that is the BBC.<sup>156</sup> She rightly revels in the idea of the creative hub, which exists in a kind of equilibrium axis between the Governors and the regulators. 'How you grow great institutions, secure and adaptable, yet looking after us, is one of the great mysteries of contemporary history.'<sup>157</sup> Likewise Sloan coins this particular vantage point the 'professional interpretation.'<sup>158</sup>

One such professional viewpoint came from Libby Purves who wrote about her career as a radio broadcaster and journalist, framed as 'true love story for radio.'<sup>159</sup> She spent seven years at Radio Oxford, first as a student volunteer, then returning after training to work as a Programmes Operation Assistant, until she resigned and became a freelance reporter in 1977. Again this was a personal memoir, which incorporated anecdotes and examples of her work with a degree of reflection and analysis about the function and achievements of radio and particularly how it operated within the BBC. Purves' descriptions of her time at Radio Oxford are illuminating for several reasons. She offered one view of the relationship between the station and the BBC's centre, contrasting neatly with the perspective offered in the other direction by the managers' and leaders' memoirs. In her account, the central directorate was 'benevolent' and really only took notice if there were adverse comments in the press: it was unlikely, she said, for most of the far-flung stations to attract such attention from the metropolis.

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<sup>155</sup> Trethowan *ibid* p 158

<sup>156</sup> Seaton J: 'Writing the History of Broadcasting' in Cannadine D (ed) *History and the Media*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2004) pp 146 - 158

<sup>157</sup> Seaton *ibid* p 158

<sup>158</sup> Sloan D W, *Perspectives on Mass Communication History* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 1991). p 10

<sup>159</sup> Purves L *Radio: A True Love Story* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2002) p 1

Consequently the local stations 'could take risks, both editorially and technically.'<sup>160</sup> Indeed she went so far as to say the BBC was 'a bit embarrassed and equivocal about local radio [so it] kept off its back.' This benefited the staff who could 'have [their] disasters in private and learn all the faster for it.'<sup>161</sup>

One outcome of this autonomy was the way that local stations made significant innovations, such as pioneering the phone-in, frequent use of radio cars and treating outside broadcasts in a creative, challenging way. According to Purves, the rest of the BBC paid little attention to these endeavours, until they too decided to experiment in the same direction.<sup>162</sup> Although the schedule was a 'curious hybrid',<sup>163</sup> there was huge scope for experimentation with content and format 'especially if it cost nothing.'<sup>164</sup> Purves described the breadth and range of the programmes she worked on and produced, from live shows to features, from morning news sequences to Christmas Day phone-ins.<sup>165</sup> The station provided an extraordinary opportunity for training and trying out and developing new skills, which prompted Purves to make a further connection. One of her series involved interviews with people who were skilled in particular crafts and jobs, many of which were dying out. It struck Purves that she too was a craftsman learning new skills, 'with my knobs and chinagraphs and razor blades.'<sup>166</sup> This notion of the radio professional as a skilled job sometimes gets overlooked in the history – and particularly in relation to local radio, which afforded so many opportunities to nurture and develop new talent.

Another – and often contrasting - account of life in a local station came from Phil Sidey, who was the founding Station Manager at Radio Leeds.<sup>167</sup> His book covered a two-year period beginning with the setting up of the station in the summer of 1968. Sidey was an unabashed controversialist and, although he had a similar perspective to Purves in some ways, he was

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<sup>160</sup> Purves Op cit p 78

<sup>161</sup> Purves Op cit p 80

<sup>162</sup> Purves Op cit p 81

<sup>163</sup> Purves Op cit p 82

<sup>164</sup> Purves Op cit p 38

<sup>165</sup> Purves Op cit pp 77 - 95

<sup>166</sup> Purves Op cit p 105

<sup>167</sup> Sidey P *Hello Mrs Butterfield* (Claverdon: Kestrel Press 1994)

more extreme in the way he expressed it. He made it clear that he was writing from memory, in the mid-1990s, 'so I can only present the 'facts' as they appear to me.'<sup>168</sup> His sole aim was to 'record the achievements of my small band of outlaws.'<sup>169</sup> But Sidey was being disingenuous when he said he was not 'firing arrows at the sheriff's men.'<sup>170</sup> In fact he had staunch views about the role of BBC management in the local radio enterprise – which contrasted strongly with Purves' - and pointed out at every opportunity his distaste for what he saw as their interference and lack of understanding.

An early example of this is the issue of newsgathering. It was originally envisaged that the stations would strike deals with local newspapers, which would become their supplier of news stories. Sidey, with a background in print journalism, saw this was unlikely to work - what newspaper would give away exclusives? - so he recruited people with a similar training to his and announced that this newsroom would gather the news independently. He cited opposition to his plan from other BBC managers and it was only the arbitration of Frank Gillard that granted Sidey permission to gather his own news.<sup>171</sup>

Another aspect of journalism which Sidey touched on was the relationship with the local press, and in this particular case the *Yorkshire Post* and *Yorkshire Evening Post* who were both, according to Sidey, 'well into a campaign to strangle Radio Leeds at birth.'<sup>172</sup> Indeed in order to get the station mentioned in the press, Sidey claimed they had to buy a greyhound called *Radio Leeds* and enter it for races, so when it won, the newspaper reports printed the name.<sup>173</sup> While this provided one, albeit entertaining, example of relations with the local press, the relationship between BBC Local Radio and local media is one that will be explored further in this thesis. A final example of the news issue for Sidey was the lack of interest shown by the central news division for any local material, despite examples of major stories which the station covered, which were of

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<sup>168</sup> Sidey Op cit p 167

<sup>169</sup> Sidey Op cit pp 167 - 168

<sup>170</sup> Sidey Op cit pp 167 - 168

<sup>171</sup> Sidey Op cit pp 37 - 39

<sup>172</sup> Sidey Op cit p 13

<sup>173</sup> Sidey Op cit p 158



interest to a national audience. 'London seldom accepted our news tip-offs and for some time refused to give any credit to Radio Leeds for the stories they did take.'<sup>174</sup>

There were two sides to Sidey's relationship with the hierarchy of the BBC. He tended to vilify the faceless departments and bureaucrats, yet humanised many of the key individuals, both within the management and influential people outside the BBC. Sidey gave examples of incidents which resulted in discussions at a high level about the way Radio Leeds was being run, such as the seven-day exercise called *Teenage Week* involving local youngsters in all aspects of production, bar news.<sup>175</sup> Sidey cited 'a spokesman from the Board of Management' who cautioned him against the enterprise, because 'our friends in Parliament are very worried.'<sup>176</sup>

These impressions contrasted with the pictures he painted of various figures of note, such as Frank Gillard, Lord Hill and Ian Trethowan, as well as politicians. These are very useful examples that give us a flavour of how these individuals were perceived from the perspective of a local station manager, despite the fact it was someone so contrary – almost manipulative – as Sidey. So while he recounted how unpopular Lord Hill was within the BBC, to Radio Leeds Hill was a welcome friend: 'I thought he might make a good ally and invited him to the station.'<sup>177</sup> On a later visit, Hill apparently gave some invaluable advice to Sidey: "Above all hang on to your autonomy."<sup>178</sup>

Throughout the memoir, Sidey adopted a vigorous, humorous style – if not actually arrogant in places.<sup>179</sup> As far as he was concerned, he was usually in the right about most confrontations, each encounter with management concluded with a joke or aside at their expense, and the final outcome was always an on-air success for the station. While this is lively and engaging, I will argue that this helped promulgate the mythologising of early local radio. The issues at stake were doubtless valid and can be

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<sup>174</sup> Sidey Op cit p 81

<sup>175</sup> Sidey Op cit pp 53 - 68

<sup>176</sup> Sidey Op cit p 56

<sup>177</sup> Sidey Op cit p 81

<sup>178</sup> Sidey Op cit p 97

<sup>179</sup> for example Sidey Op cit p 132 and the 'true' origins of the phone-in: '*It's Your Line* was certainly not the last phone-in.....that network stole from local radio'.

verified with research in the BBC Archive – which Sidey acknowledged he had not done<sup>180</sup> - but the representation of them here conforms to Burke's notion of dramatising a scenario for posterity.<sup>181</sup> This has two effects on how this memoir can be viewed as a source of history for local radio.

We are certainly aware of the autonomy that local stations had,<sup>182</sup> but Sidey's version of this suggests outright confrontation. I will argue that there were limits and contradictions to the notion of autonomy, in editorial and managerial terms. Secondly, Sidey produced copious examples of the kinds of items and features, which he popularised on the station, but many of these fell perilously close to the category of stunts and stereotypes. There were competitions for gargling on air, while 'singing' tunes or giving political speeches, there were searches for talking birds, kidnapping and ransoming local celebrities with the involvement of rag week students, even an incident when a coffin was launched off the coast of Scarborough. If one looks at how the mocking self-image of local radio had become popularised, writings such as these may have had a hand in it. Even the title of Sidey's book played to this stereotype: *'Hello Mrs Butterfield: the hilarious story of 'Radio Irreverent', the first two years of BBC Radio Leeds.'* That is not to ignore the community-focused, access side of the station, which Sidey also recollected. Apart from the previously mentioned *Teenage Week*, there was a wide range of participation from all parts of the community, including amateur musicians, sports clubs and so on. Much of it was championed by the Education Producer, with the help of Leeds University and the Workers' Educational Association. Sidey said he coined the phrase 'Walk-in-and-talk radio', to describe the notion of open access.<sup>183</sup> There were doubtless countless similar examples from other local stations across the country and over the ensuing years.

It is clear that both Sidey and Purves shared the same vision about what local radio was meant to do, and again there was the example of pioneering the phone-in – which Sidey, perhaps not surprisingly, laid claim to having

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<sup>180</sup> Sidey Op cit Preface

<sup>181</sup> Burke ibid p 88

<sup>182</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 636

<sup>183</sup> Sidey ibid p 35

invented, with programmes such as *Chatback* and *Checkpoint Leeds*.<sup>184</sup> It is interesting to note, though, that despite the fact they were at opposite ends of the staff hierarchy, Sidey and Purves both shared the same ideology and aspirations for local radio. That suggests a remarkable degree of shared vision among the pioneers. According to Sidey, he already had a fully-formed idea of the ethos of the station, while Purves picked hers up during her student volunteering days and probably had them re-enforced during her Programme Assistant training course.

Moreover, I would argue that this pioneering spirit, like Sidey's confrontational anecdotes, may have had an influence on the mythologising of local radio, which comes across in the memoirs. Both Sidey and Purves took evident pride in their work and talked about the achievements of their programmes, interspersed with critical analysis. But again, the danger for this kind of memoir was the selection of triumphs and success, usually quantified by audience response or self-congratulation. While it might not be possible to listen to and review the output in hindsight, there are other sources available, such as the BBC's Programme Review Board and other related files in the Archive, which can provide different perspectives on a range of local radio programmes.

Significantly, Sidey concluded by stating explicitly what he had been obliquely saying all along, that local broadcasting was a battle, which he and his ilk had all but lost. 'The grim business of audience numbers, and warding off commercial, political and internal.....assaults seems to have taken much of the service and so the pleasure, out of public service broadcasting.'<sup>185</sup> He did not go into the circumstances of his departure in July 1970, but he was careful to mention the successes and further achievements of his former colleagues, which Purves did too - underlining the effective training ground that local radio provided. But above all else, he left the reader with the impression that there was a gulf between stations like Leeds and senior managers in London: 'at....times it was difficult to

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<sup>184</sup> Sidey *ibid* p 129

<sup>185</sup> Sidey *ibid* p 167

keep up the pretence to my colleagues that the BBC was behind their efforts to win the experiment for the Corporation.<sup>186</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have contrasted and compared previously published media histories, in order to identify gaps that need further explanation. In particular, several fundamental issues merit closer inspection. First the question of whether the BBC launched its local radio service merely as a tactical device to stop commercial rivals from doing it first. Secondly, there is the issue of audience demand: for an area of output that was so rooted in serving its audience, how - and with what success and impact - did the BBC attempt to meet those needs and tailor its content accordingly? Coupled to this is the dilemma of how the BBC should go about inventing something that did not exist and persuade listeners that they needed it. Thirdly, there is the role played by Frank Gillard, which is central to the early history of local radio and needs to be critically assessed in this context in more detail. This also involves the relationships between the key figures in BBC management and other stakeholders, such as government Ministers.

Fourth, there are also key stages in the chronology that require more attention. For example in the post-Pilkington years, the BBC 'machine' readied itself into a position for the launch of the first local radio stations. Despite the sure-footedness and confidence of the planning, the BBC had then to deal with the precariousness of the financial settlement and the actual task of establishing the stations, which was not as straightforward as had been envisaged. Another phase requiring further enquiry is the transition period once the stations are on air – and how they grew from a point of weakness (still deemed experimental) to one of strength (permanence and expansion). Fifthly, since Briggs' history stops in the mid-1970s (and Crisell and Lewis & Booth only provide an outline of selected subsequent events), this thesis will chart the growth of BBC Local Radio into 1980 in more detail, which has not been attempted until now.

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<sup>186</sup> Sidey *ibid* p 81

In terms of tone and perspective, one could argue that Briggs' lack of interest and empathy in the subject of local radio has perhaps relegated it in terms of prominence from the narrative. While still maintaining correct historical objectivity, there is room, following a more nuanced approach, taking in relationships, human dynamics and personalities, which Briggs' rather institutionalized and at times bureaucratic narrative sometimes skirts over. As Samuel writes 'institutional histories are almost by force of necessity self-inflating and self-obsessed.'<sup>187</sup> To counter some of the bias that Lewis & Booth incorporate towards community radio, this thesis will set out how the BBC evolved its own definitions of 'localness' and how that translated into a distinctive style of programmes.

In doing so, there's a model to be drawn from Medhurst's work on broadcasting history in Wales.<sup>188</sup> As he has argued, the BBC was slow to recognise the linguistic and cultural differences that existed in Wales, as it maintained during the mid-Twentieth Century that a scattered population and difficult geophysical landscape hindered a separate broadcasting structure.<sup>189</sup> Medhurst's research into the impact of the Beveridge and Pilkington committees of enquiry on Welsh broadcasting highlights the parallels that exist with local radio. In both cases, the issue concerned giving a voice to previously underserved communities.<sup>190</sup> My research will follow a similar path, charting the interaction between the strategy of a monolithic BBC, government policy and the diffuse audience. The difference in this instance, was that the Welsh campaign for broadcasting freedom emerged from a cultural defence of national identity.<sup>191</sup> Local radio had no such proponents lobbying for a definable cause. Yet my research will explore the tensions that emerged once local radio was established, between minorities and the way the BBC acted as a *de facto* 'nation',

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<sup>187</sup> Samuel, R 'The Voice of Britain' in A. Light (ed) *Island Stories Unravelling Britain: Theatres of Memory* Vol ii (London: Verso 1998) p 172

<sup>188</sup> Medhurst J 'Minorities with a message: The Beveridge Report on Broadcasting (1949 – 51) and Wales' *Twentieth Century British History* 2008 19: 2; Medhurst J 'Television in Wales, c 1950-70' in Bailey M (ed) *Narrating Media History* (London & New York: Routledge 2009); Medhurst J "'You say a minority, Sir; we say a nation": The Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting (1960-62) and Wales' *Welsh History Review* 2004 22: 2

<sup>189</sup> Medhurst 'Minorities with a message' *ibid* p 222

<sup>190</sup> Medhurst 'Minorities with a message' *ibid*; Medhurst "'You say a minority, Sir; we say a nation": the Pilkington Committee in Broadcasting (1960-62) and Wales' *ibid*

<sup>191</sup> Medhurst 'Minorities with a message' *ibid* p 231

struggling to come to terms with the idea of autonomy and broadcasting freedom.

In terms of personal testimony, the material left by Sidey and Purves is rich in colour and useful for descriptive purposes. At the same time, it leaves several issues that merit closer inspection. One area is community interaction in terms of programming and how it is possible to contextualise this to address whether this made the impact that the BBC envisaged. This foregrounds two descriptors which were central to the service over the years – that of being ‘local’ and ‘community’ – and so it is fair to ask whether local radio lived up to one or other, both or neither of these attributes.

Next, the testimony of individuals directs the researcher towards the shared experience of the staff and the common goals or ethos behind the service. Based on the evidence of Sidey and Purves, I would argue that there was a unitary concept, which they both participated in. This research will address where this came from and whether this was a common experience.

## CHAPTER THREE: Methods, Sources and Questions

### Versions of Media History

Having explored the available historical writings in the previous chapter, I will now place them in the context of media and broadcasting studies and work out where a history of BBC Local Radio might fit, aside from being an addition to the canon. James Curran's narratives might provide a useful starting point when examining the framework.<sup>192</sup>

The first one that Curran outlines is the liberal narrative, which espouses the process of democratisation through the development of mass media. The media break from direct government control and reach true independence with the establishment of the commercial sector. Such media freedom, so the narrative goes, empowers people, and narrows the gap between the political elite and the general public, through the principles of public service broadcasting. Next is the populist narrative, which according to Curran, only evolved in the writings of media commentators in the 1980s. Yet it has its roots in the efforts of an enlightened intelligentsia, such as GM Trevelyan and Matthew Arnold, who proposed to democratise areas of knowledge and high culture with institutions supported by the state, such as workers' education associations, libraries and public service broadcasting. The reality of this, argue critics, was the reassertion of a cultural hierarchy, by a different structure – a state monopoly replacing the intellectual elite – with restricted opportunities for intervening market forces.<sup>193</sup>

With the rise of pluralism and different 'moralities' in terms of social attitudes, for example the social reforms of the 1960s concerning divorce, abortion and homosexuality, competing forces began to break away from the accepted norms. This led to the libertarian narrative (as distinct from the liberal one above) as these competing forces clashed over the way the media should be regulated, or abandoned completely. The outcome was

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<sup>192</sup> Curran J *Media and Power* (London: Routledge 2002) Chapter One. I am omitting the feminist narrative, which I do not think is relevant to this discussion.

<sup>193</sup> LeMahieu D L *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988)

greater freedom and tolerance in many respects though how long this endured is debatable.

The anthropological narrative grasps the part played by the media in forging social bonds between people and sustaining a sense of national community. It emphasises the constructed and changing nature of identity and place, leading to the aspiration of greater social inclusion. As Curran points out, these four narratives all have positive elements, which promote progress and greater freedoms. The fifth narrative argues instead that democratic involvement has been constrained, as the mass media have fallen under the influence of marketing, public relations and big business. This narrative, named as radical, suggests that the ongoing march of prosperity and choice has been halted by apathy and the re-assertion of elite control.

These narratives are not mutually exclusive, and it is not necessary to choose one or the other. They have varying degrees of applicability to the historiography of radio as related in the previous chapter. For example, the populist narrative is supported by Scannell and Cardiff's assessment that the BBC went through a period of popularisation from 1931 onwards.<sup>194</sup> They demonstrate how more output was devoted to parlour games, drama serials, variety and comedy shows, in a break from the previous sense of paternalism in programmes. As I have shown, from the wartime years onwards, there was increasing pressure on the BBC to address the needs of specific groups, in an effort to serve audiences more effectively and secure their loyalty, with varying degrees of success. Curran takes the process further, to the introduction of commercial television and says that it reached its apotheosis when commercial local radio was created.<sup>195</sup> Similarly an anthropological interpretation can be given to the evolution of BBC radio. In the late 1920s and 30s it was essentially nation-centred, despite the regional variations.<sup>196</sup> In the post-war years, the radio networks followed broad class distinctions in terms of scheduling, but with the underlying aspiration that listeners might chose to move from one network

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<sup>194</sup> Scannell P & Cardiff D *A Social History of British Broadcasting Volume One 1922-1939* (Oxford: Blackwell 1991) Chapter 11

<sup>195</sup> Curran *ibid* pp 20 - 22

<sup>196</sup> Scannell & Cardiff *ibid* Chapter 13



to the other. As Curran and Scannell have made clear, radio in its heyday was especially good at portraying a particular brand of national unity and identity by broadcasting key events, such as cup finals, major sporting events, royal occasions and so on. This became entrenched in a BBC calendar that seemed to epitomise national order and stability.<sup>197</sup>

My hypothesis is that no single media narrative can be used to explain local radio but that various facets from some of them illuminate the story. One clear goal of the research is to produce an ‘ideology,’ or ecology of local radio, which might in part be explained by concepts of media theory. For example, I will argue that there are firm roots of an ideology of local radio to be found within a liberal narrative, in particular the focus on public service broadcasting as a way of empowering the audience and providing an outlet for more demotic involvement in the output as local stakeholders. Going further, there were strong aspirational desires for local radio to harness widespread popular participation. By creating stations that had a degree of autonomy, whose airtime was devoted to responding to the immediate needs, concerns and interests of the local audience, the BBC could be said to be breaking free from any residual elite paternalism, to create so-called ‘access media’.

Conversely a radical narrative interpretation could be used to argue that the BBC was motivated more by the desire to stem commercial competition and preserve their sound broadcasting monopoly rather than to provide genuine choice and a local alternative. Equally useful may be the anthropological interpretation. As I have argued, the roots of local radio originated in the shifting needs of different and emerging communities – however these are defined. Creating local radio can be seen as one outcome of this changing landscape, which resulted in different groups of the population finding representation and ways of expression on the airwaves. In summary I intend drawing on elements from all of Curran’s narratives to conclude which, if any, best serves as a theory to underpin local radio.

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<sup>197</sup> Scannell, P ‘Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept’ in Buscombe E (ed) *British Television: A Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) pp 46 - 59

## Research Questions

This section pulls together the various strands of enquiry and summarises the critical issues for further investigation and the questions that need addressing in the course of the research. The overall objective is to re-examine the chronology of events as it appears surrounding BBC Local Radio, from c 1960 to 1980 – its gestation, birth, evolution and growth. As I have explained, previously published work has covered some aspects of the history, to varying degrees, and whilst this work does not claim to be THE definitive history, just as Briggs deliberately avoided the same claim for his *magnum opus*,<sup>198</sup> there is an explicit intention to re-position the story of local radio more centrally to the discourse and narrative of radio media history. The reason for this claim rests on the breadth and extent of the themes, narratives and ideas that local radio connects with, and which in turn yield the questions that need to be addressed.

The areas under investigation break down into various social and cultural debates of the time. These include definitions of community and ‘localness’; the desire for greater democratic involvement and empowerment; the policies of political parties, governments, regulators and the opportunities of open market competition; the impact of technology; the position(s) of the BBC towards local radio as an institution and the role of key individuals within it; the structure and operation of the local radio stations, the content of the output and its relationship to existing production strands such as news. And finally the connections that local radio as a concept and in practice had with media narratives and whether they inform each other.

In terms of social history, I have made the claim in the previous chapter that local radio was in some way connected to the prevailing debates around culture, society and communication. It provided a link that validates the arguments proposed by Williams and Hoggart in favour of greater involvement and empowerment for the audience, in terms of education, political awareness and media consumption – and even production. In the course of the research I intend to look more closely at what the evidence tells us about the impact of this new form of media.

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<sup>198</sup> Briggs A: ‘Problems and Possibilities in the writing of Broadcast History’ in *Media, Culture & Society* 1980 Number 1 pp 5 - 13

Fundamentally I want to ascertain whether local radio was actually a response or solution to the deficit that Hoggart and others identified, whether there was a cause and effect at work here that brought local radio into being. Essentially, this means the extent to which local radio was advanced by this social upheaval and to what degree local radio could justify its role as providing more cohesion for fractured communities. This extends to the geophysical location of the stations, where they were sited, the transmission areas they covered and the names they used.

As Briggs identifies, political ideology and market forces were at the heart of broadcasting history in the period under consideration and beyond. No matter what the extent of the broadcasters' or sociologists' or business sector's aspirations, the media were also a significant factor in party politics. And it did not divide neatly along party lines. For example it was a Labour government that gave the go-ahead for local broadcasting by the BBC, it was also a Labour Minister (Tony Benn) who came closest in this period to making parts of BBC radio take advertising and inventing an entirely different model for local radio.<sup>199</sup> And it was an earlier Conservative government, under Macmillan – who had already taken away the BBC's television monopoly – that pulled away from creating commercial local radio despite the opportunity to do it. So the key question is what impact the nuances, twists and turns of political agendas, manifestos and pledges had on the history. The task is also to assess where the range of influences came from at any particular time, including the lobby for commercial broadcasting from the business, local newspaper and independent television sectors, and whether events led politicians, or *vice versa*, or elements of both.

Central to the issues under consideration is the role of the BBC as an institution. This includes asking how far the BBC believed local radio was created as part of its public service ethos. This question can be extended to incorporate the structure of the organisation and how – in theory and reality – the relationship between the diffuse and scattered stations was mediated

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<sup>199</sup> Freedman D 'Modernising the BBC: Wilson's Government and Television, 1964-1966' *Contemporary British History* 2001 15:1 pp 21 - 40

with the centre. The role of key individuals, notably Frank Gillard but many others as well, needs to be addressed, to identify the impact they had on local radio and to what degree the service bears their imprint.

Returning to the notion of an ideology or ecology of local radio, assessing the look and feel of the stations and how they operated will help provide some definition to the concept. This includes the role of the Station Manager, who was given considerable autonomy within the BBC structure, the evolution of new production practices, the schedules, the style of broadcasts and the range of voices being heard on air. As already documented, many felt proud of the creativity and quality of their craftsmanship in producing local radio programmes. So was there a legacy here in terms of the aesthetic quality of what was produced and the practical considerations that this entailed in terms of new production techniques? And what could the audience expect from a service that they had never heard before?

Those best placed to translate the aspirations into programmes were of course the radio producers themselves and Scannell's interpretation of the production process in one celebrated instance is informative. In terms of speech content, broadcasters had learned from the early days of radio to avoid sermonising and 'talking at' the audience. Talk on the radio had developed into a 'conversation' – where the spoken words were directed at the audience, they understood that it was intended for them, speakers were clearly identified and did not talk over one another, and finally (in an ideal world) it was entertaining.<sup>200</sup> That was part of the 'care structure' that was invested in making these programmes, the 'intentionality' of the producers. As Scannell points out, practices have their history – what was produced was the result of experience and time and accumulated knowledge. A further research question is therefore how does the 'care structure' translate this to a 'new' practice, such as local radio and a style of broadcasting where there was no precedent?<sup>201</sup> Scannell talks about the 'phenomenology

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<sup>200</sup> Scannell, P 'The Brains Trust: A Historical Study of the Management of Liveness on Radio' in Simon Cottle (ed) *Media Organization and Production* (London: Sage 2003) pp 103 - 106

<sup>201</sup> Or if there is a near relation – local broadcasting of the 1920s – one that had slipped out of the public and BBC's consciousness.

of broadcasting'. By this he includes aspects of 'intentionality', 'dailiness', the 'technological care structure' and the meaning of 'live'.<sup>202</sup> Scannell demonstrates how life became 'historicised' in the late 1940s and 50s as 'mass culture' evolved more into separate private and public spheres, echoing Briggs' conclusion that the original revolution in 'mass entertainment' (cinema and variety shows) took place outside the home while the second revolution (radio and television) took place within.<sup>203</sup> The resulting use of radio and then television gave the audience the opportunity to see into and share everyday experiences for the first time, to make connections and confound expectations of an atomised existence. Can local radio be said to be a cause or an effect of this evolution? Certainly I will explore whether there is a correlation between this process and the beginnings of interest and discussion about reflecting everyday life on a more local level in terms of broadcast media, as they emerged in the late 1960s and beyond.

This raises two further issues. One concerns those who were brought before the microphone. While the mechanics of broadcast production may have been similar to network practices – tape recordings, live studio, outside broadcast – technology helped with newer, more portable equipment. Local radio's avowed aim was to get ordinary men and women on air – and access to portable equipment and the invention of the phone made this easier to achieve. But how practical was this aspiration and how was it received by those listening? This leads to the second question, that of programme genres and scheduling. As Scannell has demonstrated, there was an intimate and ritualised relationship between the listener and their involvement with the radio. This incorporated daily routines, the unspoken acknowledgement of the formats and conventions of what was heard, and how the listener constructed some kind of meaning. The challenge facing the listener in terms of local radio was hearing unfamiliar voices from different locations, in a non-conformist structure where the daily pattern of listening was being re-configured. For example hearing local traffic and

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<sup>202</sup> Scannell P *Radio, Television & Modern Life* (Oxford: Blackwell 1996) pp 169 - 171

<sup>203</sup> Briggs A: *Mass Entertainment – The Origins of a Modern Industry* (Adelaide: The Griffin Press 1960)

weather reports at breakfast time, listening to news items relevant to a relatively small area of the population, hearing from music or drama enthusiasts from the community. How would local radio transcend this phenomenology? Or to put it in a less abstract way, what was it about local output – the scheduling, the production values, the programme content – that made listeners switch to their local station and not a national or commercial one?

I also return to the question posed in the previous chapter, concerning the relative lack of scholarly interest in BBC Local Radio until now. There is a perception of local radio as being 'second class' broadcasting, with a penchant for trite items and uninteresting phone-ins, lampooned easily by the likes of Alan Partridge and indeed by many network presenters. Is there something within the history that explains how it acquired this reputation and whether it is deserved?

### **Sources**

Media history does not follow a specific methodology, yet there has been a debate over the years about the connections between histories of the media and other social sciences. The impetus for Briggs, Hendy, Lewis & Booth and others has been to focus not just on one or more medium of broadcasting, but also on the relevance of wider social, political, cultural, technical and economic factors. As Briggs identifies, writing about his own history of the BBC, the relationship between the media and society is not one of foreground to background: 'broadcasting registers perception and experience and the extent to which it influences them.'<sup>204</sup> Citing the emergence of multi-layered social history in the 1950s, O'Malley argues that the break with 'politically orientated, empirically dominated constitutional history into a more theoretical style of history....facilitated the emergence of studies on media and communication history.'<sup>205</sup> This helped to create a climate where questions about communications and media could develop further. As I have argued in the earlier chapters using previously published

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<sup>204</sup> Briggs A 'Problems and Possibilities in the writing of Broadcast History', *Media, Culture & Society* 1980 Number 1 January p 10

<sup>205</sup> O'Malley T 'Media History & media Studies: aspects of the development of the study of media history in the UK 1945-2000' *Media History* 2002 8: 2 p 164

sources, there are connections to be made between the BBC and certain aspects of British life, which underpin the key questions being explored in this thesis.

The main source for primary research about BBC Local Radio is the BBC's Written Archive, which contains reports, research documents, memos, letters and minutes relevant to this period. Despite the breadth and quantity of material available, there are a number of drawbacks to be acknowledged. First, it should be noted that the BBC operates a policy that prohibits access for scholars and researchers to any files post-1979. Even those files which are made available are vetted prior to reading, for legal and other reasons. This calls into question the reliability and completeness of the archive material. Marwick highlights the difference between 'witting' and 'unwitting' testimony, in the sense that varying interpretations are possible by looking at deliberate and unintentional meanings in the evidence.<sup>206</sup> Contradictions are therefore likely to be found, sometimes at face value, but also in the subtext and nuances of documents and sources. I argue that such tensions should be regarded as a matter of course for a historian, to view archival material sceptically and to interrogate them fully. As Marwick says, it is only through examining primary sources that we can be sure of learning about states of mind, motives, values, intentions and accomplishments, aside from the straightforward chronology.<sup>207</sup>

I am also following Seaton's advice to seek a clear sense of the holistic institution and so I am delving into a range of different aspects, from policy to technology, from the staff who worked on local radio making the content to the impact the service had on the wider audience.<sup>208</sup> Many of the archival files are rich in detail, providing colourful contemporary accounts, well-written and crafted papers and testimonies which enable one to hear the 'voices' of the individuals involved and get an understanding of their perspective and motives. From this it is possible to build a picture of how local radio operated within the BBC. In terms of the post-1979 embargo, this

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<sup>206</sup> Marwick A *The New Nature of History - Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2001) p 172

<sup>207</sup> Op cit p 152

<sup>208</sup> Seaton, J 'Writing the History of Broadcasting' in Cannadine D (ed) *History and the Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2004) pp 146 - 158

is obviously an inconvenience, and prevents serious research to any great depth into BBC history post-1980, but it did not pose a significant obstacle to this thesis, as I had sufficient archival documentation from which to draw an accurate picture of the story until the end of 1980, concluding with the Third Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report.

There are still two other factors to be considered. One is the tendency for BBC files to be heavily 'management' focused, so discussions concerning local radio often emanate from the Board of Management or Board of Governors minutes and their related papers. Secondly, related to this, there is a metropolitan bias in existence, so local radio is sometimes represented in the Archive as an adjunct to policy and strategy from a centralist, London-based perspective. Despite these biases, it is worth remembering Seaton's point that the BBC is very conscious of its role at the heart of public service broadcasting and this is reflected in its internal discussions and debates. In other words, one should feel confident that the issues and policies being discussed by senior managers are those concerns shared by the wider organisation and the audience.<sup>209</sup> In conducting my research, I have selected files that represent not just the management perspective but also discussions at a local level, such as minutes of the Local Radio Councils and files concerning educational and ethnic minority programmes.

The Archive also contains oral history interviews gathered by the BBC, in a project initiated by Frank Gillard, where senior management personnel have been invited to record their thoughts about their careers at the Corporation. Frank Gillard himself was interviewed twice, and his views on local broadcasting are particularly relevant here. In addition I have conducted my own interviews with key participants in the story of local broadcasting. These are with Owen Bentley, Robert McLeish, Robert Gunnell and Michael Barton. These individuals are selected for various reasons. Several were Station Managers on some of the first stations, so they have a unique insight of the period from the experimental stage in the late 1960s through to the first expansion in the mid 1970s. Bentley, as Station Manager, created the early incarnation of the Asian Network, and

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<sup>209</sup> Seaton J 'Writing the History of Broadcasting' in Cannadine D (ed) *History and the Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2004) p 156 - 7



thus has relevant experience of local radio's provision for ethnic minority programmes. McLeish subsequently became the Local Radio Training Officer, and so brings a perspective on the Local Radio Headquarters Team and how it operated. He also kept contemporary diary entries during the period, extracts from which are published in this thesis for the first time. Barton was the first, and only, Controller of Local Radio, from 1975 to 1988, and as such had vital involvement in most aspects of the management of BBC radio, local and network, at a senior level.

As with interpreting archival sources, there are questions that need addressing concerning the substance of oral history material. One advantage the historian has is the ability to piece together individual contributions to create a new, more holistic perspective.<sup>210</sup> As Briggs points out, staff members have one angle or point of view, whereas the historian has many. Seaton recognises that personal testimonies are also a vital democratizing complement to the Archive by giving voice to BBC employees from a range of backgrounds. 'Interviews animate the files, explain the real story and give you a flavour of the people and their concerns.'<sup>211</sup> This certainly helps to illustrate the pioneering spirit of local radio, but can oral history interviews be relied on as data? For example, Marwick distrusts oral history because of the fallibility of human memory.<sup>212</sup> Much has been written about the contribution of oral testimonies to social history,<sup>213</sup> and this serves as a reminder of the interdisciplinary nature of the BBC and media history. Just as Thompson says, 'oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history', so oral history evidence can be used to challenge, contradict or confirm alternative written sources.<sup>214</sup> If a witness can offer a testimony that is contemporaneous to other sources, it deserves to be treated, and interrogated, with equal value and scepticism.

One final source for the media historian might be the output, or the broadcast product. In the case of BBC Local Radio, this has not been used

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<sup>210</sup> Briggs *ibid* p 12

<sup>211</sup> Seaton *ibid* p 155

<sup>212</sup> Marwick *ibid* p 157; 166

<sup>213</sup> eg Perks R and Thomson A *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge 1998); Thompson P *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988)

<sup>214</sup> Thompson P in Perks A and Thomson A *Op cit* p 28

as part of this research, with some exceptions. The reasons for this are relatively straightforward. It would be impractical to listen to the number of programmes broadcast over the course of the first 13 years of local radio's existence and comment on them effectively. Also there is the question of access and availability. A number of programmes have been archived at a local or county level, but there is no consistency to this operation and neither has it been catalogued in a systematic way. I would also argue that other factors apart from the programmes themselves are more relevant. For example, how the output was consumed and received tells us about the intentions of the programme makers, and whether these aspirations were satisfied. As Seaton points out, the Weekly Programme Review Board minutes, in the BBC Written Archive, are a valuable source for helping the historian understand this kind of detail, and they have been consulted for this research.<sup>215</sup> Taking this point one step further, Scannell articulates the aim to 'make visible the hidden labour of production...to account for the form and content of the realized end-product as determined by the hidden life and unseen labour.'<sup>216</sup> Similarly my focus in the research is to reveal more about the processes involved in the making of the output, and how these efforts matched the aspirations of the service and the BBC. This will help me enunciate the aesthetic of local radio and the ecology of production better than analyzing the programmes themselves.

There are, however, some notable exceptions. First, there are the surviving recordings from the local broadcasting experiments of 1961 – 62, held by the National Sound Archive at the British Library.<sup>217</sup> These are crucial extracts of the early attempts to realise the potential of local broadcasting and are in effect milestone artefacts, which will be examined in some detail in subsequent sections in this chapter. Secondly I have made use of programmes that are contemporary to this history, which report local radio in one context or another. This includes recordings of the opening day of broadcasts from Radio Leicester on 8 November 1967.

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<sup>215</sup> Seaton *ibid* p 157

<sup>216</sup> Scannell P *Media and Communication* (London: Sage 2007) p 4

<sup>217</sup> National Sound Archive: *Local Broadcasting* ST 29018; *Local Broadcasting Experiment at Poole* LP 27013; *Local Radio Experiments* T 37230

## **Section Two: Origins**

### **CHAPTER FOUR: c1955 – 1960: The Pre-Experimental Period**

#### **Introduction to Section Two**

This section contains three chapters, in which I explore the major milestones in the years immediately preceding the ‘official’ beginning of BBC Local Radio. Through these events, I will set out the key debates concerning the possibility of localised broadcasting from the late 1950s to mid 1960s from both the BBC and commercial organisations and individuals. Chapter Four demonstrates how the issue of local broadcasting began to emerge more prominently in BBC strategic thinking and policy from the mid to late 1950s. These issues were aired further in front of the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting, 1961-62 (Chapter Five), during which process the BBC developed their case for the right to create local broadcasting. Running concurrently with the Pilkington Enquiry was a series of experiments in local broadcasting organised by the BBC, from April 1961 to May 1962. These were not broadcast publicly but took place on a ‘closed-circuit’ basis. Chapter Five documents for the first time in detail how important these exercises were in framing the BBC’s ideas around local broadcasting, in terms of organisation, staffing, facilities and output. These exercises also provided recorded material to be played to a whole range of notable individuals and organisations, beginning with the Pilkington Committee itself, to illustrate just what local radio, as run by the BBC, might sound like. Chapter Six assesses the period from 1962 to late 1966, when a variety of factors had an impact on the eventual White Paper proposal to go ahead with local radio in December 1966, which gave the BBC permission to begin an on-air experiment for nine local stations.

The events outlined above in turn illustrate the key arguments I wish to advance, regarding the positioning of the BBC as a potential provider of local broadcasting services and how they shaped the subsequent launch of the stations. Namely, that the BBC began to develop a strategy for the development of local broadcasting which was based partly on the dawning

realisation that the regional service was not wholly satisfactory for meeting local needs and also on the recognition that commercial competitors could exploit the gap in the market and so challenge the BBC's sound monopoly. From the late-1950s, the BBC's interest in local broadcasting increased, in terms of the vision of notable individuals, such as Frank Gillard, and in the way it gained significance as a policy objective at a strategic level. So one question to be addressed in Chapter Four is why local broadcasting emerged in this way at this time, and the degree to which external factors played a part, such as the possibility of commercial competitors establishing stations before the BBC. Secondly, and linked to this, is the question about demand. Was there an identifiable or quantifiable demand for more localised services and what impact did this have on the way the BBC, potential competitors and the government engaged with the debate?

The second chapter in this section (Chapter Five) looks at how the experimental stations of 1961-62 were used by the BBC to answer specific questions at the time: what would local broadcasting sound like? How would it be structured and operated? What were the risks and challenges involved? My response to these experiments is to ask whether they succeeded in meeting the BBC's expectations and whether the BBC's evaluations were justified, and to relate the trials back to the question of demand and the audience.

In the post-Pilkington phase (Chapter Six), the debate moves on as the landscape of broadcasting shifted for political reasons, such as the change of government in 1964, and with the arrival of pirate radio stations. The archive material in this period is analysed by me to explain why local broadcasting came back onto the agenda and what impact these other factors had on the debate. Finally, the provisions of the White Paper which proposed the start of local broadcasting need to be interpreted to understand the organisation, structure and funding of the proposed stations and how the events of the previous eight years may have shaped them.

A note on terminology. The BBC files in this period (late 1950s to early 1960s) show that the phrase 'local broadcasting' was how most BBC staff chose to describe the concept, which was in keeping with the phrase 'sound broadcasting' for non-television output. However, press cuttings show that

the word 'radio' was in much more common usage in the earlier period. Of course it is debatable whether this reflected the preferred language of the readership or was more defined by the art of subbing and the availability of space in newsprint terms. Neither is there an obvious correlation between the phrase used and the type of newspaper or publication involved. Hence the word 'radio' (in various connotations – local, network, technical etc) crops up in the *Daily Telegraph*<sup>218</sup> and *The Times*,<sup>219</sup> in the same way as it does the *Daily Mail*.<sup>220</sup> However everyday parlance may have been different. There is also one interesting observation from the Head of Audience Research, contained in the quarterly report from the Director of Sound Broadcasting in 1957, who pointed out that the public did not use the term 'sound broadcasting', but instead talked about 'radio' and the 'wireless'.<sup>221</sup> In the course of the thesis I may use the terms 'radio' and 'sound broadcasting' interchangeably, but I think there is a distinction to be observed between 'local sound broadcasting' (as used in the 1950s) and the establishment of the phrase 'local radio' from about 1965 onwards. By the time the service was created and consolidated, from 1967 onwards, it became BBC Local Radio. I will therefore reflect this shift in identity by using the right terms, relevant to the respective period.

### **Moving from 'regions' to 'local'**

The significant events in the chronology under discussion in this section include visits to the United States by Frank Gillard in 1954 and 1959 and two major BBC reports: *Area and Local Broadcasting*<sup>222</sup> in late 1959 and the *Consolidation and Development of Sound Broadcasting* the following year.<sup>223</sup> Parallel to this was the emerging interest in local broadcasting from potential competitors and the response of the government. What this section addresses are the reasons for the emergence of local broadcasting

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<sup>218</sup> Eg 'BBC Plans Expansion of VHF Radio' *Daily Telegraph* 7 December 1959

<sup>219</sup> Eg 'Aims of Radio Yorkshire' *The Times* 8 December 1959

<sup>220</sup> Eg 'Tory Blow to Commercial Radio' *Daily Mail* 13 October 1960

<sup>221</sup> BBC WAC Report from the Director of Sound Broadcasting September – December 1956 R1/93

<sup>222</sup> BBC WAC Area and Local Broadcasting Report 1 December 1959 R1/95/2

<sup>223</sup> BBC WAC Consolidation and Development of Sound Broadcasting 1960 R1/96/1

as a significant issue for debate and the possible motivations for the BBC in promoting it.

As has already been noted, the major technological breakthrough that allowed for the possibility of localised broadcasting was the VHF system. However the BBC did not initially take the initiative to use this for deviating from the national and regional structure. The problem for the BBC as they saw it was wavelength congestion. The twelve medium wave frequencies allocated to them under the Copenhagen Plan of 1948 were employed to capacity, and the combination of lax international observance and limited transmitter power resulted in poor reception and common interference.<sup>224</sup> In their evidence to the Beveridge Committee on Broadcasting, the BBC proposed using VHF to strengthen their existing output. The Beveridge Report however came up with a different idea and suggested that 'use of VHF could make it possible not merely to give the existing BBC programmes to people who now fail to get them, but to establish local stations with programmes of their own.'<sup>225</sup> The Committee went further and proposed that the BBC be obliged to carry out a series of experiments in local broadcasting 'in suitable localities, and ....leaving room for development of many local stations later if experiment proves their value.' It also mooted the idea that these stations could eventually be run by universities and voluntary bodies.<sup>226</sup> There was, however, no other pressure to pursue this idea from either the government or public demand. Neither was there any financial provision for these stations, and the BBC proceeded instead with consolidating their VHF provision for existing services.

Nevertheless, by the mid-1950s onwards, the potential for linking VHF to local broadcasting was being recognised as a potential way forward for developing future BBC services. This began to be discussed and written about in internal BBC papers and documents and commented on in the press. This shift can be attributed to the work of several key BBC

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<sup>224</sup> Curran C *A Seamless Robe – Broadcasting, Philosophy and Practice* ( London: Collins 1979) p 158

<sup>225</sup> Home Office *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting 1949* (Cmnd. 8116 HMSO 1951) pp 78-79

<sup>226</sup> Op cit

executives and the influence of one man in particular, as the next section argues.

### **Frank Gillard and developments c1954 - c1960**

Gillard's full life story merits a biography of its own, although there is a brief portrait in Leonard's Miall's *Inside the BBC: British Broadcasting Characters*.<sup>227</sup> When he died in 1998, obituaries in the national press noted his many achievements.<sup>228</sup> He was born in Devon in 1908 and after graduating from university he taught in various schools before the Second World War. During this period he gave talks on the BBC in the West Region and joined the Corporation in October 1941 as a Talks Assistant. Gillard rose to public prominence as a war correspondent, covering the ill-fated Dieppe Raid in 1942, reporting with the Eighth Army from Sicily and Salerno and then in 1944 he broadcast nightly on the progress of the liberating Allied armies from the D-Landings in Normandy through to the liberation of Paris. After the war, Gillard returned to BBC Bristol where he became the West Regional Director of Programmes, but his commentary skills were put to good use still, notably for Royal events such as Princess Elizabeth's wedding and the Coronation in 1953.<sup>229</sup> Gradually Gillard's career took him to more senior roles within the BBC hierarchy. In January 1954, the minutes of the BBC Board of Management recorded that, at the suggestion of the Director of Sound Broadcasting, Gillard was granted a two-month study visit to see university and other local stations in America.<sup>230</sup> Gillard always credited this trip, and at least one subsequent one in 1959,<sup>231</sup> with leaving a powerful and lasting impression on him and his thoughts on local broadcasting. Speaking in 1997, he recalled the first visit in the following terms:

'I judged while the BBC had little to learn from network radio systems there, the little local stations which existed in every town and city provided a much appreciated public service which up to that time was lacking in Britain. Yet this is a land where local life, traditions and culture

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<sup>227</sup> Miall, L *Inside the BBC: British Broadcasting Characters* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson 1994)

<sup>228</sup> Eg *The Independent* Obituary: Frank Gillard by Lawrence Miall 23 October 1998

<sup>229</sup> Miall *Inside the BBC: British Broadcasting Characters* ibid pp 63 - 67

<sup>230</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 25 January 1954 R2/7/1

<sup>231</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 April 1959 R1/27/1

are greatly rooted and prized. Now the BBC had shown its value as a national instrument and this was the time to prove that it could provide a corresponding service at a local level and make a substantial contribution to the enrichment of local life.<sup>232</sup>

This is obviously a fully formed and rounded analysis from the benefit of hindsight, to illustrate what he went on to help achieve. In a sense these kinds of broad statements became part of the historiography of the BBC and entered into the mythology of the organization. I would argue that the files show that Gillard's observations of local broadcasting in America may have inspired him but it took a lot more thought and experience to construct a viable system.

The starting point was not so much how to create a local service, at this stage, but more how the regional system might evolve. On his return to the UK, Gillard was seconded to act as Chief Assistant to the Director of Sound Broadcasting for a year from 1955. During this period he wrote a paper, which he hoped would stimulate a debate and begin to influence other key people at the BBC. *An Extension of Regional Broadcasting* identified how important regional origins were to national culture and 'broadcasting, which is one of the greatest instruments of our day for the nourishment of culture, must accept some responsibility for the whole plant from roots up.'<sup>233</sup> For Gillard, regional broadcasting was only 'a limited operation'<sup>234</sup> with two main functions. These were to serve the regional requirements of the domestic audience in that locality, and to represent the region to listeners across the country. Gillard acknowledged that the regions supplied specialist programmes and that they provided valuable opportunities as a training ground for staff. The element that could be exploited further was newsgathering on a more local (and non-metropolitan) basis. The facility for VHF made this possible: 'the presence of the local transmitter in each town and city...would not only increase the flow of information, it would vitalize

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<sup>232</sup> BBC Local Radio: 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Programme tx various stations and dates 1997

<sup>233</sup> BBC WAC *An Extension of Regional Broadcasting* 1955 R34/731/5 See also Briggs Vol V *ibid* pp 624-627

<sup>234</sup> BBC WAC Op cit



the community.<sup>235</sup> So Gillard suggested what Beveridge had also mooted – that VHF could be used to provide localized frequencies.

Gillard offered three options as a way forward: news programmes which local areas could broadcast to opt out of regional broadcasts at key parts of the day; local communities could produce their own bulletins; or the regions could be split into three or four smaller units. This last proposal was the one Gillard favoured.<sup>236</sup> Briggs notes that this document stopped short of a full scale network of local stations: Gillard talked more about ‘areas’ as the smaller unit within the region, but this was only the starting point for discussions about sub-divisions which became more familiar over the years.<sup>237</sup> For the time being, nothing came of Gillard’s initial ideas at managerial level. It is probably fair to say too that Gillard did not find many allies for his ideas in the higher echelons of the BBC at the time. In his BBC oral history interview, Gillard said that he came back from America to ‘preach the gospel of local radio’, but that neither Wellington (Director of Sound Broadcasting) nor Ian Jacob (Director-General) was enthusiastic.<sup>238</sup> It is not known whether Gillard took umbrage at this, or whether he simply preferred the West Country to London. But after the year-long secondment ended, Gillard returned to Bristol where he was subsequently appointed Controller of the West Region.

This regional domain gave Gillard an excellent opportunity to practise some of his ideas about targeted broadcasting. The Director of Sound Broadcasting’s Report (January to March 1956) included a note from Gillard that the new VHF transmitter in Wenvoe had allowed more detailed news broadcasts for Somerset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. There was also a special commentary on the Devon/Yorkshire County Rugby Union Championship carried on the Hessary Tor VHF transmitter. The report added that there was a positive local reaction and a demand to hear more output of this kind.<sup>239</sup> This was not just confined to the West Region. The DSB report of April to June 1959 included this from the Controller of the

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<sup>235</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>236</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>237</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 626

<sup>238</sup> BBC WAC: Oral History Interview: Frank Gillard 14 July 1983

<sup>239</sup> BBC WAC Report from the Director of Sound Broadcasting January - March 1956 R1/93/1

Midland Region: 'In one form or another the Region has undertaken a very much larger amount of local broadcasting in the last three months than at any time in the last twenty years.'<sup>240</sup> Not only were there examples of different editions of sports programmes, but *Signpost* featured separate editions representing the interests of different local government authorities.

Despite the fact that Gillard's ideas did not initially find favour, that is not to say that the BBC as an organization in the 1950s was opposed to broader development. For example a radical overhaul of the BBC's sound broadcasting structure was proposed in *The Future of Sound Broadcasting in the Domestic Services*<sup>241</sup> in March 1957. This report was the result of a working party chaired by Gillard's successor as Chief Assistant, Richard D'A Marriott, on which Gillard sat as one of the members. The gist of the report, in conceptual terms, was to move away from the paternalism of the past and 'to cater for the needs and tastes of the audience without seeking as it has perhaps too much in the past to alter and improve them.'<sup>242</sup> The report proposed keeping the existing networks with more integration and less competition and duplication between them.<sup>243</sup> Although the Regions were largely unaffected by the main aspects of the report, it did note that the use of VHF transmitters in various parts of the country 'opens up a promising development in the field of local news and information but not entertainment.'<sup>244</sup> So the practical opportunities made available by VHF transmitters, as illustrated by the examples from the West Region and elsewhere, and the policy implications from a strategic point of view were slowly becoming part of an emerging strategy.

The next stages in this development came quite quickly. In spring 1959 Gillard paid another visit to America, and a handwritten letter to D'A Marriott in the Archive outlined the situation there as he saw it.<sup>245</sup> Gillard wrote that

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<sup>240</sup> BBC WAC Director of Sound Broadcasting Report April – June 1959 R1/95/2

<sup>241</sup> BBC WAC The Future of Sound Broadcasting in the Domestic Services R1/93/1

<sup>242</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>243</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Probably the most significant element was the creation of the 'Third Network' to complement the Third Programme – which caused a public outcry and led to the creation of The Third Programme Defence Society.

<sup>244</sup> BBC WAC The Future of Sound Broadcasting in the Domestic Services R1/93/1; Gillard, in his *An Extension of Regional Broadcasting*, made it clear that entertainment provision was not a priority of regional output – it could be produced anywhere.

<sup>245</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Frank Gillard to R D'A Marriott 18 February 1959 R 34/1584/1

the networks were in a 'very shaky condition' with the result that the local stations had discovered new independence. Although they took less network material, they were in competition with one another, which resulted in large quantities of daytime music. The evening scenario was more promising as there was an assumption people watched television, so there was less frivolous music. 'There is a noticeable move on all hands to build up local personalities and to exploit local issues as a means of keeping radio alive and healthy.' He concluded 'it is only possible to believe what is seen by one's eyes and heard by one's ears – and a lot of that puts a heavy strain on one's credence!'<sup>246</sup> So it is clear that Gillard deplored the worst aspects of American radio, and the main culprit was the use of repetitive pop music by day. At the same time, he was most impressed with the focus on local news stories, and how that bonded with the audience. This theme was taken up by Wellington in his report on Sound Broadcasting in the first quarter of 1959. Commending Gillard's work in America, Wellington commented 'How many people would be content with a British version of the "uncreative stream of light music records interspersed with local information" which he [Gillard] describes in the USA?'<sup>247</sup>

While Gillard was in America, another high-level BBC working party was convened, charged with looking at area and local broadcasting. Again, it was chaired by Richard D'A Marriott, who had been promoted to Assistant Director of Sound Broadcasting. Other members included the Controller of the North Region and the Head of Audience Research. Gillard was not one of this committee but he still hoped to be of assistance. In the handwritten letter from Gillard quoted above, written in New York in February 1959, he wished D'A Marriott ('My dear Dick') luck with 'your Area and Local committee' and he offered to help with any research that may be of use while he was in the US.<sup>248</sup> Richard D'A Marriott responded in a short note: 'The committee is under weigh as you say but it is all very difficult and I sometimes despair of arriving at a sensible solution.'<sup>249</sup> D'A Marriott pointed out the relevance of overseas experiences to their way of thinking. He was

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<sup>246</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>247</sup> BBC WAC Director of Sound Broadcasting Report January – March 1959 R1/95/2

<sup>248</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Frank Gillard to R D'A Marriott 18 February 1959 R 34/1584/1

<sup>249</sup> BBC WAC Letter from R D'A Marriott to Frank Gillard 23 February 1959 R34/1584/1

interested in looking in more detail at individual communities to discover how they are adapting to radio usage. The Archive contains various versions of the committee's report, dating from 1 September 1959<sup>250</sup> to the one that was presented to the Board of Governors on 1 December 1959,<sup>251</sup> by the Director-General. D'A Marriott made it clear that the task of the working party was to look at policy and strategy for area and local broadcasting, with a particular emphasis on practical detail, which could be used for decision-making. It was known that the government was due to call an enquiry into broadcasting, to be headed by Sir Harry Pilkington, so this was one of a number of strategy initiatives to gather ideas and information about the BBC's services which might be used in evidence to the committee.

But there was another, more pressing, reason for considering this particular issue. The final version of the report stated explicitly that commercial interests were keen to exploit the absence of local broadcasting. If commercial companies were granted permission to start radio broadcasting, the BBC's monopoly on sound would be broken. But was this cause enough to start local sound broadcasting? The earlier version of the report said that the key consideration was the preservation of public service broadcasting and the only way to maintain this was to keep the sound broadcasting monopoly. This meant starting to think about a service that would be 'satisfactory' to the public, and would make the introduction of commercial broadcasting 'difficult.'<sup>252</sup> The later version of the report shifted the emphasis and accepted that commercial aspirations in local broadcasting were not the only compelling argument in favour of the BBC's involvement in it, 'real though the danger to public service broadcasting would be if the BBC monopoly in sound broadcasting were broken.'<sup>253</sup>

What both versions of the report united around was their belief that the BBC had a superior claim on this field of broadcasting. Comparisons with

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<sup>250</sup> BBC WAC Area and Local Broadcasting: Report of a Committee to DSB 1 September 1959 R34/1585/1

<sup>251</sup> BBC WAC Area and Local Broadcasting: Board of Governors Papers 1 December 1959 R1/95/2

<sup>252</sup> BBC WAC *ibid* R34/1585/1

<sup>253</sup> BBC WAC *ibid* R1/95/2

the loss of the television monopoly were not helpful as the service was in its infancy and there was only one channel. In sound broadcasting, the BBC had thirty years' experience, with three networks' worth of output. However, the committee identified two possible gaps that commercial rivals could fill: the absence of popular gramophone music and a local service.<sup>254</sup> It is fair to say that the original version of the report was the more far reaching.<sup>255</sup> Some of the arguments went forward into the final recommendations, and some did not. The case for the BBC to move into local broadcasting was comprehensive and was developed in subsequent discussions. The report acknowledged the difficulty in promoting something that did not exist but equally a commercial operation would have had to justify clamour for it too. But while there may not be evidence of a need for local broadcasting, the report did identify

'there is moreover a deep and widespread feeling ....of suspicion and resentment against metropolitanism, London-based culture, centrally-controlled policy, uniformity of taste and conformism of opinion and corresponding belief in diversity and freedom and the value of reflecting the smaller communities.'<sup>256</sup>

I would argue that this taps into an awareness of the rise in interest in 'localism' and community from a cultural and social perspective from people such as Hoggart, as outlined in Chapter One.

The working party also accepted that the BBC's regional programmes could not reflect the wide degree of local interests but that the advent of VHF made it possible to site local transmitters and develop more focused services. They advocated taking up the gauntlet of the Beveridge report, and holding four trials, in Bristol, Hull, Birmingham and Norwich. In terms of how the local structure would operate, the report envisaged around 70 stations in England. These would include large conurbations, self-contained towns, such as Nottingham or Leicester and medium sized towns that served wider areas. The stations would be equipped simply and economically, with 15 staff.

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<sup>254</sup> BBC WAC ibid R34/1585/1

<sup>255</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 35

<sup>256</sup> BBC WAC ibid p 11R34/1585/1

This basic blueprint is relevant as it was the first attempt to put down on paper some of the aims and aspirations for local broadcasting. Many of the ideas remained central to the proposition through its subsequent iterations over the years. For example, the role of the Station Manager, who – the report envisaged – would have as much freedom and independence as possible, under the Regional Controller.<sup>257</sup> On the other hand, notions of what the output might be like were less thought out. It was assumed the standard would not be as high as network programmes, and those on air were referred to as ‘performers’: there was no grasp of the professional range of roles needed for production at this stage.

Apart from the re-organisation of the networks, the biggest surprise of the report was the recommendation that the BBC should accept advertising revenue. The report suggested various alternative sources of revenue to pay for local broadcasting: local government grants, a rise in the licence fee or advertising. The first option would not raise enough income and could not be relied upon for secure financial planning year-on-year and BBC Television would claim any increase in licence fee revenue. So the report came out in favour of accepting advertising on a local system. It argued that this was not inconsistent with public service principles as adverts could be made to a high standard and it would not impair the impartiality of programmes as commercials were kept separate and there was no question of allowing sponsorship either.

Again, there was the argument about excluding the possibility of a commercial rival. If the BBC took advertising, there would be no need for commercial radio – and conversely, if the BBC did not do advertising, they would be creating a *de facto* competitor who would. While these arguments may sound like logical tautology, the report finally came out and said they could not think of any other way of paying for local broadcasting. What is interesting here is the balance between aspiration and any realistic possibility of achieving the objectives. While more or less admitting that the

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<sup>257</sup> BBC WAC ibid R34/1585/1. The status of the Station Manager remained integral to the ideals of local radio throughout but this suggested chain of command was quietly dropped within a year.

BBC did not have the funds for local services, the desire to create them forced it to address some radical solutions.

To underline the point about the threat of the commercial opposition, the report argued that if the BBC lost the sound monopoly, they might only retain about 30% of the audience, which made a £1 licence fee hard to justify. If commercial competitors then got hold of a BBC network, their sound services would be in terminal contraction and decline. For these reasons, the report's authors suggested that the BBC should stake their claim on local broadcasting and expanded network hours soon and then wait for the commercial lobby to answer. Allowing competitors to set the agenda would make any BBC response seem defensive, so it was better to be seen to be proactive. Yet, despite everything that had been said in the report, the authors said they did not want to give the impression that they were coming up with new ideas to stop anyone else from doing it!

By the time the report was presented to the Board of Governors, many of the more radical ideas had been watered down, such as network reorganization and the introduction of advertising. However, the case for the BBC laying claim to local broadcasting was accepted, with the Light Programme as the probable sustaining service. The emphasis was still clearly on the BBC's ability to do local programming better than anyone else. Any alternative would have stark consequences, as the report concluded that the BBC must make it clear to the incoming Committee of Enquiry 'that the local station is more open than anything else in the whole range of broadcasting to exploitation at the lowest level of taste and standards in the interests of commercial profit.'<sup>258</sup>

### **The run-up to Pilkington**

Hugh Carleton Greene took over as Director-General from Jacobs in January 1960 and at his first Board of Governors meeting, the recommendations of the report were accepted and it was agreed that the

'BBC should move experimentally into the field of local broadcasting and that the D-G should undertake to produce a plan

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<sup>258</sup> BBC WAC Area and Local Broadcasting: Board of Governors Papers ibid R1/95/2

for a limited experiment to be based, as far as possible, on existing BBC centres and staff, using available frequencies.'<sup>259</sup>

This was a very significant step as it marked the BBC's commitment at the highest level to start developing local broadcasting. More than this, the BBC executives were actually following two strategies. On the one hand, various aspects of policy were pulled together into a further paper, *The Consolidation and Development of Sound Broadcasting*, which set out some of the key items that would figure in the evidence for the Pilkington Committee. These included some extension in broadcasting hours for the Light and Third Programmes and the development of local broadcasting.<sup>260</sup>

At the same time, more immediate and practical steps for embarking on local broadcasting were explored by a committee set up under the Controller of Sound Broadcast Engineering. This recommended six stations for the experimental stage, rather than the original four, which could be accommodated on VHF frequencies already operated by the BBC if the Post Office would not allow them to use the range 95-97.5 Mc/s. It also suggested, since only 20% of the population had VHF receivers, that MW be used during the day to enhance the signal.<sup>261</sup>

The Director of Sound Broadcasting thought it a good idea to get started as soon as possible, with a rate of growth set at one station every two months.<sup>262</sup> If these proposals went ahead by April 1964, Sound Broadcasting would be in deficit by £6 million and spending £4 million per year more than their budget. These changes could only therefore be financed by the entire additional proceeds of a 30/- licence fee for sound. Hugh Greene went to the Director-General of the Post Office, Sir Ronald German, and asked for permission to start local broadcasting on the lines outlined above. German replied he did not feel able to allow the BBC to proceed for 'political reasons.'<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Meeting 14 January 1960 R1/28/1

<sup>260</sup> BBC WAC The Consolidation and Development of Sound Broadcasting 1960 R1/96/1

<sup>261</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>262</sup> BBC WAC Op cit 12 stations by April 1962, and another 12 by April 1964

<sup>263</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 June 1960 R1/28/1 The Board of Governors' minutes show that the BBC returned to their request to run a local broadcasting experiment over the next six months but the government was deferring all broadcast issues to the Pilkington Committee.



The evidence examined in this period begins to build a picture that can answer some of the central questions posed by these three chapters. BBC personnel at a top level were very aware that local broadcasting had the potential to fill a gap in the market which one or more commercial competitors might take advantage of and so bring to an end the BBC's monopoly in sound broadcasting. But it would be too simplistic to argue that the BBC embarked on local broadcasting solely to prevent this scenario. First, the BBC did not actually have the power or authority to start local broadcasting on its own. It needed government and Post Office approval. At the same time as preparing documentation and arguments for the Pilkington Committee, the BBC tried to circumvent the political channel by appealing directly to the Post Office for permission to start the service, almost by the back door. Curiously the BBC did not actually have the funds for a trial and it had not worked out in detail how to operate the stations.

Secondly one can interpret the internal papers from the late 1950s as showing that those advocates of local broadcasting within the BBC were exploring these arguments about the sound monopoly and commercial competitors as a way of persuading others within the Corporation of the necessity to accept this as the next logical extension of the BBC's services. So the desire to start local broadcasting was motivated to some degree by self-preservation, inspired by some radical hypothesizing about the possible outcomes of not going ahead.

However local broadcasting was still a theoretical concept, and Gillard's contribution was to flesh this out at a grass-roots level, using his observations of American radio to begin to devise a UK model. More importantly, his vision was rooted firmly in a public-service justification, which became the cornerstone of the BBC's policy. At the same time, it also provided the BBC with useful ammunition to counter arguments that they were only creating local broadcasting to stop anyone else from doing it, which would come to the fore in the public debates surrounding the Pilkington Committee's deliberations. As I will argue in the next chapter, the BBC became increasingly reliant on their public service credentials as the forces of potential commercial competition coalesced into a formidable lobby.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: 1961 – 1962: The Closed-Circuit Experiments**

### **The Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting 1961 - 1962**

The period 1961 – 1962 was very significant for the local broadcasting debate as the main issues were discussed in public, via the press and in evidence to the Committee on Broadcasting. It was also a chance for other interested bodies, such as the Musicians' Union and the Association of Municipal Authorities and local newspaper owners to have their say. Local broadcasting however was not the only topic under discussion. The enquiry also dealt with television services – the potential for 'pay-TV', a fourth television channel, extending the hours of broadcast and so on.

Briggs' analysis of the Pilkington Committee highlights one of the key elements that underpinned their deliberations: the relationship between broadcasting and cultural standards in the community.<sup>264</sup> Dennis Lawrence, the Committee's Principal Secretary, prepared the draft outline of the enquiry's main tasks before they met, which included this crucial question: should broadcasting authorities take a paternalistic role in nurturing cultural standards for society, and if so, how can they judge what the public actually want? And who, indeed, are the 'public'?<sup>265</sup> Lawrence went on to argue that the majority did not represent the public in their entirety, that there were minorities too who should be catered for. Finally, the Committee might conclude that it was not good practice to deny the public the opportunity to try something new – it was their duty in fact to give a lead, and show them what they might like, even though they did not know it yet.<sup>266</sup>

At the outset of the enquiry, one could apply this guidance to local broadcasting, as a new service which the public did not know much about nor realised they wanted, but intriguingly it could either lead the Committee towards a public service model as run by the BBC or make them lean to a commercial service. The views of one committee member might already have been known in this respect: Richard Hoggart's writings on culture and

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<sup>264</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 275

<sup>265</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 275

<sup>266</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid pp 275 - 276

the media as explored in Chapter One gave an indication of his preference for using public services for promoting cultural and social benefits.

However, much still rested on the evidence presented before them. To this end, activity within the BBC was intense. Not only was evidence being gathered and organized for the Committee, but preparations were being made to ready the Corporation to put into practice their local broadcasting scheme, should they be given the green light. Both these areas of activity were linked – one informed the other in many respects - and the paperwork in the Archive shows that projections were constantly being modified and updated.

In his BBC oral history interview, Frank Gillard gave a summary of the main events. He recalled going with Hugh Greene to see the Pilkington Committee 'early on' but 'I came out feeling it [local broadcasting] was a lost cause.'<sup>267</sup> On another occasion he remembered 'they were distinctly chilly to the BBC's local broadcasting proposals.'<sup>268</sup> The oral history interview went on to describe how the Pilkington Committee asked the Chairs of the Regional Advisory Councils to give evidence about regional broadcasting. The Chairman in the West Region asked Frank Gillard to accompany him, but again the Committee did not seem to respond to local broadcasting.

Then Gillard remembered that there was a local member of the Committee called Shields.<sup>269</sup> Gillard invited him to stay for the weekend, persuaded him of the case for local broadcasting and so Shields agreed to get it reinstated in the agenda. According to Gillard's account, he then went to Hugh Greene and pointed out that 'we'll never convince these people until we give them a demonstration of the sort of product that we are thinking of...can we get a licence to operate an experimental station?'<sup>270</sup> Hugh Greene replied that the Post Office would not allow it, which is corroborated by the Board of Governors minutes as quoted in the previous chapter.<sup>271</sup> So Gillard suggested creating dummy stations and taping everything. Greene asked how much and Gillard said £6,000 and the reply

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<sup>267</sup> BBC WAC: Oral History Interview: Frank Gillard 14 July 1983

<sup>268</sup> BBC Local Radio: 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Programme tx various 1997

<sup>269</sup> Briggs Vol V Chapter IV *ibid* This is J S Shields, head of a school in Winchester and brother of Lord Reith's first secretary

<sup>270</sup> BBC WAC: Oral History Interview: Frank Gillard *ibid*

<sup>271</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 June 1960 R1/28/1

was 'it's a deal.'<sup>272</sup> Again, on a future occasion, Gillard recalled how they hastily organized 16 'dummy stations', recorded the output and played the tapes to the Pilkington Committee, which they found 'very convincing.'<sup>273</sup>

The central facts of this account are doubtless true: the initial response of the Pilkington Committee to local broadcasting was hard to gauge<sup>274</sup> and the BBC was able to make further representations on subsequent occasions. But Gillard's order of events is too neat. For instance the taped extracts from the trial stations were played to the Committee on 20 September 1961, at which point only six exercises had taken place.<sup>275</sup> This section demonstrates how the main events shaped the BBC's policies and plans, which were evolving from a strategic point of view and how this informed the case they made to the Pilkington Committee. In doing so, I will again address questions concerning the BBC's motivation for embarking on local broadcasting, the extent to which the BBC could be said to orchestrate and lobby for their position and to what extent there could be said to be public demand for it. The main sources for research come from two documents: a report titled *The Future of Sound Broadcasting: Local Broadcasting*<sup>276</sup> which became the basis for the second report, the BBC's evidence to the Committee, *Memorandum No 12*<sup>277</sup>, submitted in February 1961.

Later that same year, the Director-General authorised a committee to be established which would pull together the work of the closed-circuit experiments so that the BBC was in readiness to launch a service if asked to do so. This committee operated under the Director of Sound Broadcasting, with D'A Marriott in the Chair, and Gillard's participation, to

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<sup>272</sup> BBC WAC Oral History Interview Frank Gillard *ibid*

<sup>273</sup> BBC Local Radio: 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Programme tx various 1997

<sup>274</sup> Eg According to R E L Wellington, the Committee had made few if any comments on sound broadcasting and it was hoped that silence equalled consent. BBC WAC Report by Director Sound Broadcasting July - September 1961, Board of Governors Papers R1/97/7. Gillard maintained that the majority of the Committee was against local broadcasting from the outset. Correspondence with Owen Bentley and the author, 21 April 2011

<sup>275</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167 p 3

<sup>276</sup> BBC WAC *The Future of Sound Broadcasting: Local Broadcasting* 25 November 1960 Board of Governors Papers R1/96/9

<sup>277</sup> BBC WAC BBC Memorandum: *The Future of Sound Broadcasting – Local Radio* February 1961 R102/43

address all aspects of policy, engineering, general administration, recruitment, training, finance and facilities.<sup>278</sup>

It is interesting to note that initially preparations by the BBC for the Committee of Enquiry were felt to be slow. Wellington said in his report for the last quarter of 1960 that no detailed arrangements had been made regarding local broadcasting because 'it does not lend itself to central planning.'<sup>279</sup> However in accepting that the general principles were clear, he said there was a need to work out practical consequences and a senior member of staff [Gillard] would be seconded to this. But by the following quarter, the report stated that preparations had been intensifying in the run-up to putting the local broadcasting case to Pilkington. At the same time, the West Region staged the first of the trial stations, on 22 March 1961. Gillard had then been asked to bring up to date the thoughts and suggestions for local broadcasting so far.<sup>280</sup>

The central aspirations and rationale for the BBC's case to run local broadcasting as explored in *The Future of Sound Broadcasting: Local Broadcasting* and *Memorandum No 12* can be traced back to the earlier papers cited above. The documents set out the BBC's case for running local broadcasting: how this would work in practice, and laid great stress on how bad it would be if the operation was conducted by commercial companies. Other scenarios were also explored. The first paper - *The Future of Sound Broadcasting*, drafted by Wellington as Director of Sound Broadcasting, – can be seen as a sounding board for the *Memorandum*. It was longer than the *Memorandum* and more far-reaching in some respects. For example, Wellington was honest about the level of demand:

'It is a characteristic of broadcasting that one can never be sure how far an extension of it into a new field will be welcomed; supply in the field of broadcasting generally comes before the demand which it creates.'<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> BBC WAC 'Announcement from the Director-General for Distribution B Subject: Local Broadcasting Committee' 30 November 1961 R102/43

<sup>279</sup> BBC WAC Report by the Director of Sound Broadcasting October – December 1960 18 January 1961 Board of Governors Papers R1/97/9

<sup>280</sup> BBC WAC Report by the Director of Sound Broadcasting January – March 1961 19 May 1961 Board of Governors Papers R1/97/9

<sup>281</sup> BBC WAC *The Future of Sound Broadcasting: Local Broadcasting* 25 November 1960 Board of Governors Papers R1/96/9

Wellington laid much stress on the commercial competition as presenting a threat to the BBC's sound monopoly. He revisited the hypothetical scenario, which the D'A Marriott Committee had also painted, whereby commercial stations could unite as a *de facto* network and take away the radio audience thus denying the BBC's claim to the licence fee. The conclusion put heavy emphasis on the BBC's pre-eminence in the world of broadcasting and why it should be given the opportunity to run local broadcasting.

'Nothing should be allowed to obscure the fact that local broadcasting cannot be separated as an issue from national broadcasting and the preservation of the BBC's monopoly which is a fundamental pre-requisite of the BBC's status as the main instrument of broadcasting.'<sup>282</sup>

In the version of the report submitted to the Board of Management, prior to the Board of Governors, the word 'public' was inserted in pencil between 'BBC's' and 'monopoly', perhaps as an effort to validate the monopoly.<sup>283</sup> The stance taken here was both provocative and grandiose. The BBC's main pitch was summarized as follows:

'A service of local news and programmes reflecting the interests of self-contained communities would be of real value in the framework of public-service broadcasting and the use of local stations, combined with the national networks, would enable the BBC to offer a more comprehensive service than has hitherto been possible in sound broadcasting.'<sup>284</sup>

The plan they put forward at this stage involved 80 to 90 stations, created at a rate of 18 per year, faster than previous papers had envisaged. They would use VHF: the use of MW was not possible due to interference, the lack of an international agreement and poor reception after dark. The annual running cost of each station would be £28,000 per year, with £17,500 for start-up capital. Each station would broadcast for two to three hours a day, and there was no standard blueprint for the schedule: the station should work with the local community who would have

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<sup>282</sup> BBC WAC op cit

<sup>283</sup> BBC WAC The BBC's Plan for Local Sound Broadcasting by R E L Wellington 3 November 1960 Board of Management Papers R2/13/3

<sup>284</sup> BBC WAC BBC Memorandum: The Future of Sound Broadcasting – Local Radio February 1961 R102/43 p 5

representatives on a local advisory council. The Station Managers would have independence in how they operated, able to turn to the Regional Controller for advice.<sup>285</sup> The BBC made it clear to Pilkington that it appreciated the audience might be small, but it was not chasing listeners for their own sake.

Various alternative structures were addressed. Stations run by local authorities would not work because they could not be impartial but it might be feasible to work with universities for educational broadcasting. Some local newspapers wanted to run local broadcasting but others were happy for the BBC to do it. The BBC cautioned against the former, as this would create a monopoly of local media where there was only one paper in the vicinity. Commercial companies running stations would need large audiences to maximize advertising revenue, which would have an impact on the type of programming they could provide. The *Memorandum* also questioned the commercial companies' figure of £30,000 annual running costs as these companies did not have at their disposal the BBC's infrastructure for organization and sustaining services. Finally the BBC argued for their retention of the sound monopoly, but in a way that laid stress on avoiding destructive and unnecessary competition to a perfectly good publicly-funded broadcasting system.

In examining evidence like the *Memorandum*, I have identified how the BBC as an organisation began to write its own narrative. Key events and aspirations were repeated which become part of the dogma. These included the Beveridge Committee's suggestion that the BBC become custodians of a local broadcasting experiment in the early 1950s, that the Corporation chose instead to use VHF to bolster the networks but in so doing created a more comprehensive coverage of transmitters that could be used for local broadcasting. The narrative promoted the BBC's roots in regional broadcasting – and before that, the existence of the original local stations in the 1920s. A research report written by the Leicester University Centre for Communication on the early years of BBC Local Radio called these

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<sup>285</sup> See Chapter Four: the line of management was now less direct and more 'dotted'.

recurring motifs 'a cliché of the Corporation's local radio publicity.'<sup>286</sup> The visits to America by Frank Gillard were often referred to, as further evidence that the BBC was not rushing into the field. The fact that the BBC had requested permission from the Post Office to start experiments, and that this had been refused, was used to validate their intentions further. These examples were not myths in the sense that they were untrue but they added a sense of tradition and longevity to the BBC's claims, which other claimants could not match. The *Memorandum* that dealt with Local Broadcasting was submitted to Pilkington in February 1961. At the Board of Management meeting on 17 April 1961 Hugh Greene noted that the Committee would return once again to local broadcasting in May so it was important to gather as much material as possible before then. The suggestion was for a 45-minute talk from Gillard with taped extracts from the Bristol station.<sup>287</sup> The Director-General was able to report back to the Board at the end of May that the case for local broadcasting had been put 'fully and satisfactorily': 'nothing had been said or implied which should deter the BBC from going ahead with further experiments and with its plans for the training of staff of which the Committee had been informed.'<sup>288</sup> Reading between the lines, the implication here was that the BBC would continue to press ahead with its intention of making local broadcasting a reality unless they were actively prevented from doing so.

On 20 September, a further playback session of material from the first six stations took place.<sup>289</sup> The following month, permission was given for Hugh Greene to make another submission, in the form of a direct letter to Sir Harry Pilkington.<sup>290</sup> Aside from the detail, the letter was a direct way of underlining the BBC's commitment to extrapolating what local broadcasting might mean in practice and reminding the Committee of the ongoing

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<sup>286</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167 p 1

<sup>287</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 17 April 1961 R2/14/2

<sup>288</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 28 May 1961 *ibid*

<sup>289</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 25 September 1961 *ibid*

<sup>290</sup> BBC WAC Letter from the Director-General to the Chairman, Committee on Broadcasting 13 October 1961 R1/97/9 The impetus for this came from the recent European Broadcasting Conference in Stockholm concerning frequency allocation. Provided the necessary VHF wavelengths were made available in time, it would be possible to cover larger geographical locations than previously thought. In practice this might mean that there would be 20 area/local stations and say 100 urban/local stations by 1970.



experiments, which would now include stations covering larger areas. The BBC argued that this would not dilute the definition of what constituted a community, nor would it affect the original financial projections.<sup>291</sup>

My conclusion is that the evidence here shows how the BBC waged an assiduous campaign to persuade the Pilkington Committee of its rightful claim to launch and run local broadcasting. This was achieved through a combination of reports and strategy documents, and by Gillard's own efforts to bring the Committee round, one-by-one in some cases, with the help of the taped extracts.<sup>292</sup>

There were, however, other parties interested in running local broadcasting. By January 1962 there were 304 commercial broadcasting companies registered with an interest in sound broadcasting.<sup>293</sup> Of these, 89 were directly linked to commercial television companies and 114 tied to newspaper publishing; some had connections to both. Another 178 had no association with either but appeared to be localized entrepreneurs looking for a business opportunity. Some of these also had overt political links. For example one of the earliest potential bidders was Radio Yorkshire, formed by Geoffrey Hirst, Conservative MP for Shipley.<sup>294</sup> The Pilkington Committee received evidence from a number of these companies. These included Bristol and West England Radio Ltd and Southern Broadcasting Co Ltd, later renamed Southdown Radio.<sup>295</sup> Another proposal came from Home Counties Newspapers Ltd, which controlled 14 local weeklies in the Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire areas and registered four subsidiaries to run stations.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> This seems to have created some confusion as the Secretary to the Board of Governors sent a follow up letter to Dennis Lawrence of the Committee in an attempt to clarify the use of language. The label 'area/local' seems to have been confused with previous limited range transmitters on VHF on the Home Service regions. So Farquharson suggested that the term 'local broadcasting' should be used to describe all of the new services, from area/local to urban/local, and 'regional broadcasting' remained the preserve of the regional Home Service. BBC WAC letter from the Secretary of the Board of Governors to D G C Lawrence esq Committee on Broadcasting 17 October 1961 R1/97/9

<sup>292</sup> Correspondence between Owen Bentley and the author 21 April 2011

<sup>293</sup> BBC WAC data from Local Broadcasting Committee 1961 - 1962 Basic Papers R102/43

<sup>294</sup> *The Times* 'Aims of Radio Yorkshire: MP on need for 'truly local' programmes 8 December 1959

<sup>295</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167

<sup>296</sup> BBC WAC op cit

Perhaps the bid that attracted the most attention came from the Pye Company in Cambridge.<sup>297</sup> This plan utilized MW and VHF by day and VHF only by night, and claimed that using the BBC's own technical data, it would be possible to accommodate over 100 stations on MW. So any town with a population over 50,000 would get a station, plus other larger towns served by VHF. Areas which would benefit from social and educational input would be a priority, such as Yorkshire and Lancashire. The type of output was not dissimilar to BBC proposals, although there was little detail about who exactly would run the stations<sup>298</sup>. The costs would be between £20 – 30,000 per year per station, with a staff of six to 15.

The BBC was questioned about the disparity between these figures and their own but it was quick to point out that Pye made no provision for the administration costs, a sustaining service, needletime and so on.<sup>299</sup> Bristol and West England Radio also produced a closed-circuit trial, which the BBC analysed internally (see below) but there was comment in the press about whether the BBC had an unfair advantage in being able to play their recordings to Pilkington.<sup>300</sup> Other potential bidders were written about at the time, such as discussions from the London County Council<sup>301</sup> and Berkshire County Council about running their own stations,<sup>302</sup> but neither of these amounted to anything concrete.

While the lines were drawn quite conclusively between the BBC and its potential commercial rivals, the press themselves were in two camps. Some newspaper owners were not in favour of local commercial radio as they felt it would affect their advertising revenue. A group of 80 newspaper proprietors made it known to Pilkington that they preferred local broadcasting under the BBC,<sup>303</sup> although those newspaper owners favouring commercial radio numbered 321 and they made a similar

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<sup>297</sup> *Sunday Times* 'The 100 Towns that could go on air' 16 October 1960

<sup>298</sup> Op cit The article talked vaguely about 'associations, the Press, universities'

<sup>299</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 25 September 1961 R2/14/3

<sup>300</sup> BBC WAC op cit

<sup>301</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 17 July 1961 R2/14/2 Subsequently the LCC agreed to back the BBC on local broadcasting and submitted this to Pilkington.

<sup>302</sup> *Berkshire Chronicle* 'Should authorities run local radio?' 1 December 1961; *Windsor*

*Express* 'County puts off any decision on local radio' 19 January 1962

<sup>303</sup> *Birmingham Post* '80 papers oppose local radio' 12 January 1961

submission.<sup>304</sup> The BBC themselves became more adept at putting their case publicly. For example when letters appeared in *The Times* from both camps in the newspaper debate, the BBC Head of Publicity promised to contact its supporters within the newspaper fraternity to respond and defend the BBC.<sup>305</sup> The BBC was also making the most of good relationships with other external supporters. In a speech to the Association of Municipal Corporations (AMC) in July 1961 the Director-General expounded the virtues of a BBC-run system, with emphasis on local partnerships, public information about local authority work and encouraging participation.<sup>306</sup> The AMC were also thanked for their supportive submission to Pilkington. Contemporary press reports illustrated how the BBC's campaign was increasingly taken into the public domain, such as the speech by Hugh Greene at the Manchester Luncheon Club in November 1960, when his arguments were tailored to the business and public sector clientele in the audience.<sup>307</sup> He reiterated the key points that a BBC-run service would not compete with local newspaper advertising, that the commercial companies had not calculated the cost of the service properly and that they were only interested in a quick profit: 'it is on local broadcasting that people who wanted to mint their own half crowns had fixed their hopes – they wanted radio for profit not for the public.'<sup>308</sup>

But coverage was not always so positive. More and more disparaging comments about local broadcasting began to emerge in this period. The phrase 'parish pump' cropped up frequently. For example the leader comment in *The Times* (19 February 1962) argued that 150 stations would reduce programmes to 'a level of triviality and mediocrity.....even if the parish pump could be kept gurgling away 365 days a year it would have no listeners.'<sup>309</sup> Another article in *The Guardian* disparaged local radio as run by the BBC. Arthur Hopcraft said the stations would run out of material in

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<sup>304</sup> Op cit

<sup>305</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 16 January 1961 R2/14/2

<sup>306</sup> BBC WAC 'Local Broadcasting and Local Authority' by Hugh Greene 20 July 1961 R102/43

<sup>307</sup> *The Times* 'No room for ITV under the BBC Umbrella' 10 November 1960

<sup>308</sup> Op cit This neat phrase is reminiscent of Roy Thomson's 'licence to print money' which is how he described his Scottish Television franchise.

<sup>309</sup> *The Times* 'On the local' 19 February 1962

six months, the BBC would not have come up with the idea if it was not for the commercial operators, and there would not be enough talent to run the stations.<sup>310</sup> The piece was accompanied by a cartoon, depicting a Station Manager on his bike with a tape recorder trying to find people to interview.

There were some interesting allegiances here. *The Times* was under the editorship of William Haley, a former Director-General of the BBC, yet he was no friend of local broadcasting. The BBC Board of Management pondered whether he realised his leader piece could be interpreted as advocating the end of the BBC's sound monopoly and the advent of commercial broadcasting.<sup>311</sup> *The Guardian* was sceptical too. But the left-leaning *Daily Herald* argued that local broadcasting would be good for restoring interest in local government and civic responsibility. There was also a lesson for the Labour Party as increased access to better news provision increased the political conscience.<sup>312</sup>

### **The closed-circuit experiments**

The sixteen trials in local broadcasting conducted during the sitting of the Pilkington Committee were a very significant exercise for the BBC.<sup>313</sup> They enabled them to test out the hypothesis that underpinned the whole concept of local radio, exploring many practical implications such as staffing, scheduling, management, technical requirements and so on. They also produced output that was recorded and could be used for lobbying purposes – beginning with the Pilkington Committee itself. The trials generated large amounts of paperwork, including evaluations and reports, which formed the material used as the basis for this section. Many of the discoveries that took place at this time helped with the long term plans for local broadcasting: indeed short term too, as there was a hope that the BBC

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<sup>310</sup> *The Guardian* 'Radio Oswaldtwistle' 23 March 1962

<sup>311</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 19 February 1962 R2/15/1

<sup>312</sup> *Daily Herald* 'Room on the air for the locals' 22 February 1962

<sup>313</sup> BBC WAC R102/52/1; R102/68/1 The trials took place as follows: 1961: 22 March, Bristol; 10 May, Portsmouth; 20 June, Norwich; 18 July, Hull; 24 August, Dundee; 5 – 11 September, Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch; 19 – 21 October, Swansea; 21 November, Wrexham; 29 November & 12 December, Portsmouth (as part of a BBC exhibition); 1962: 15 – 18 January, Durham; 15 – 17 February, London; 20 – 22 March, Dumfries; 5 – 7 April, Isle of Wight; 11 – 14 April, Vale of Evesham; 30 April, 1 – 2 May, Llyn Ac Afon. Merseyside was scheduled for the end of June but cancelled due to the publication of the Pilkington Report.

might be embarking on creating local stations for real within a very short time of the Pilkington Report.

The following sections explore the trials in detail, by looking at them in a thematic way: staffing; content; station locations; education; technical considerations. There is also a section that looks at a closed-circuit trial conducted by a commercial operator. South Western Broadcasting Ltd in Bristol produced its own dummy station in March 1962, which Frank Gillard witnessed and wrote about. This provides an interesting comparison to the BBC's operations, although it was only a single enterprise. The main sources for this section are two reports by Gillard: an interim report on local broadcasting, which covered the first eight experiments, up to November 1961,<sup>314</sup> and a further one in 1962 which was drafted just before the Pilkington Report and finalized after the first White Paper.<sup>315</sup> Other sources are also drawn on.

Despite the fact that many hours of audio were recorded over these 14 months, very little survives. There is a 45-minute compilation from the experiment in Stoke from October 1961,<sup>316</sup> a short radio news package from the Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch trials the previous month,<sup>317</sup> and a 40-minute compilation of extracts from various locations, including some of those from Stoke.<sup>318</sup> This last example is described in the British Library catalogue as being 'used by Frank Gillard in his crucial session with the Pilkington Committee' and is dated 'c September 1961', but it should be noted that it includes clips from the experiments in Durham (15 – 18 January 1962) and the Isle of Wight (5 – 7 April 1962) both of which occurred after the Pilkington Committee was played audio extracts by Frank Gillard. It is a small point but it illustrates the degree to which the audio was being assessed and updated constantly, for lobbying purposes.

The trials were organized by a cross-section of senior staff from Sound Broadcasting and the Regions. Gillard himself took an executive role, although he was more involved in the first trial since it took place in his

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<sup>314</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1

<sup>315</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 & 11 July 1962 R102/71/1

<sup>316</sup> National Sound Archive: *Local Broadcasting* ST 29018

<sup>317</sup> National Sound Archive: *Local Broadcasting Experiment at Poole* LP 27013

<sup>318</sup> National Sound Archive *Local Radio Experiments* T 37230

region. Michael Barton who worked on the station in Hull recalled: 'It was fun, it was very inventive.....and of course the man himself Frank Gillard, listening and recording everything.'<sup>319</sup> Commenting on those first experimental broadcasts in Bristol, Gillard said 'It was marvellous. I can still recall it to this day. I can hear in my ears the tones of voices of some of those contributors. At the end of the day, I knew that local radio was a certainty you know.'<sup>320</sup> Although that is a noble sentiment for posterity, this section will show that it was not necessarily so straightforward.

### **Station staffing**

There were a number of practical issues involved in running the stations, and staffing was a priority. Gillard's interim reports all assessed the numbers needed to run a station, the grades of the staff required, recruitment, the roles, the shift patterns, the skills, training requirements and so on. The trials were used as evidence to help assess these criteria and they did provide valuable lessons. However the experiments could not necessarily replicate the real conditions of an on-air station. Some aspects of the putative organisation could be put to the test in a genuinely experimental way, such as trying out various permutations of shift patterns and roles. This then raised subsequent issues that needed further thought, such as skills and training. But of course there was no time or mechanism for trying out a recruitment strategy *before* the trials got underway.

Many of the staff during the trials were seconded or had volunteered to take part, such as Michael Barton. He was a producer based in Manchester for the North Region: 'I was called up, as it were, from my Manchester production job to go to Hull, my home town. It was a lash up studio with very, very basic equipment in the Guildhall.'<sup>321</sup> Lincoln Shaw, who worked as a reporter in the Stoke trial, concurred: 'We were a small team and we all knew each other because we were volunteers from the Midland's newsroom. It was good fun.'<sup>322</sup> This captures the enthusiasm and

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<sup>319</sup> BBC Radio Four: *Archive Hour* 'Close to Home' 10 November 2007

<sup>320</sup> BBC WAC Oral History Interview: Frank Gillard 14 July 1983

<sup>321</sup> BBC Radio Four: *Archive Hour* 'Close to Home' 10 November 2007

<sup>322</sup> Op cit

innovation that the trials were trying to harness, but at the same time testing out the limits of organization and structure.

Quite a few members of staff worked on more than one experiment, so their experience was accrued. The basic template for the staffing arrangement came from the D' A Marriott report, which catered for 15 personnel.<sup>323</sup> Some pilot projects used fewer staff, such as Bristol, where it was concluded that more staff would have meant a 'richer, fuller day's broadcasting.'<sup>324</sup> Others had too many, for example Dundee, where matters were not helped by people staying on after their shifts had finished.<sup>325</sup> Gillard's conclusion was that a Station Manager needed organisational flexibility, so that he could choose whether to have, say, more staff producers and supplement them with freelance announcers or news reporters.<sup>326</sup> However a minimum, or average, staffing requirement evolved so that the posts and grades could be identified. By July 1962 it was envisaged there would be one Station Manager, one station organizer who would take on the role of scheduling, four programme assistants who were producers essentially, plus various other assistant roles, secretarial support and an engineer.<sup>327</sup> This came to 13 in total, but it made no provision for dedicated news staff.

In terms of a working pattern, the experiments explored many different permutations, though these were limited when it came to one-day trials. The longer experiments gave a greater opportunity for variety. There was no expectation at the outset to provide a full-day service – but the original goal of three hours original programming soon rose to five.<sup>328</sup> The key periods for operation were early morning, lunchtime and early evening, which made shift working inevitable. Outside of these times, the stations experimented with taking one of the networks as a sustaining service.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> BBC WAC R34/1585/1

<sup>324</sup> BBC WAC memo CWR to DSB Subject Radio Bristol 21 March 1961 R102/52/1 Vol I

<sup>325</sup> BBC WAC memo from AW Coysh to HSP 26 August 1961 Op cit

<sup>326</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1

<sup>327</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 R102/71/1

<sup>328</sup> BBC WAC memo from DSB to CWR 'Local Broadcasting Plans' 26 September 1961 Local Radio Experiments Policy 1961-1962 R102/47/1

<sup>329</sup> In Bristol, staff worked two shifts, 6.15am to 2pm, and 1pm to 7.50pm BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 R102/71/1; while in

Selection and training was something that required careful thought, ably demonstrated by the Durham trial, which came just over mid-way through the experiment, and was something of a watershed. The conclusion was that this station had not been successful, and the lessons learned pointed towards better staff organization. For instance poor training on the equipment meant the first day 'was really rather a fiasco.'<sup>330</sup> Some of the announcers were not suitable to be heard on air, and only three out of a team of 11 clearly stated they wanted to work in local radio.<sup>331</sup>

An example of the horrors heard in this trial was the item on Durham shops, recorded in a memo from the Secretary of the Local Broadcasting Committee: 'I was particularly shocked that the girl [announcer] advocated the mixing of plastic flowers to eke out the supply.'<sup>332</sup> Whether this observation is entirely serious or not, the conclusion that PA Findlay arrived at is noteworthy: 'for the future it seems to me that we should no longer put on experiments intending to show that local broadcasting works but should accept that as being proved.'<sup>333</sup> He said that instead what they needed to do in future was get the best teams possible together to work with the equipment and production. Gillard's reports stressed that local broadcasting had to have the best possible teams.

'It would not be for the burn outs, unless they could find second wind and new enthusiasm for the local medium and certainly not for those who were troublesome or difficult or who had failed to make good elsewhere at the BBC.'<sup>334</sup>

So he was setting the bar high. But to get good staff, Gillard was aware that the BBC had to pay the equivalent rates to network. By its nature, local broadcasting might well suit younger people, who were more mobile and

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London, staff worked in 12 hour shifts on a three-day rotation, BBC WAC Report on Radio London Experiment by C Max-Muller February 1962 Local Radio Experiments London 1962 R34/1644. Staff in Bournemouth tried a 14 hour day and apparently liked it, but Gillard thought it was necessary to have an 'overlap' period in the middle otherwise the burden was on the Station Manager to give continuity

<sup>330</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Secretary Local Broadcasting Committee to ADSB Subject Radio Durham 22 January 1962 Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol II R102/68/1

<sup>331</sup> BBC WAC Report on Local Broadcasting from Humphrey Baron, Belfast: Review of Radio Durham Experiment Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol II R102/68/1

<sup>332</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Secretary Local Broadcasting Committee to ADSB Subject Radio Durham 22 January 1962 Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol II R102/68/1

<sup>333</sup> Op cit

<sup>334</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1



flexible. At the same time, Gillard pointed out, it was important to look outside the BBC for potential staff. He noticed how many newspaper journalists appeared at the news conferences he held, who attended not just out of duty, but out of keenness to get involved in local radio too.<sup>335</sup>

As training was identified as vital, the BBC started to organize a specialist centre in Poole, which held two courses on the techniques of local broadcasting in January 1962. There were 12 attendees at each, whose substantive jobs ranged from talks producers, announcers, senior programmes assistants and programme organizers.<sup>336</sup> There certainly seemed to be a healthy demand too. One hundred and eighty five members of staff registered an interest in becoming a Station Manager and after interview, 47 were placed on a list of top candidates and each was invited to observe the remaining pilots.<sup>337</sup> Gillard recognized that the scale of the recruitment and training organization – should the BBC be commissioned to start local radio – would have been quite formidable: some 1,750 staff to fill all the projected stations.<sup>338</sup> But rather than be daunted by this, Gillard thought creatively: once the first stations were on air, they could become the training ground for the next wave of recruits and stations.<sup>339</sup>

The Station Manager would be pivotal to the success of local broadcasting, so it was important for the manager to be independent and be able to make quick decisions on the spot.<sup>340</sup> In addition, another key idea emerging from the experiments did take root to become a reality – the notion of a station handbook which was in effect a guidebook on how to

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<sup>335</sup> Op cit [this comment has the word 'yes' written in pencil next to it]

<sup>336</sup> BBC WAC Report from Director of Administration 31 January 1962 Board of Governors Papers R1/98/2

<sup>337</sup> BBC WAC Report by Director Sound Broadcasting October – December 1961 3 January 1962 R1/98/1 Some in the press were cynical about the motives of volunteering to run one of the new stations. Arthur Hopcraft wrote that the high demand was because of the promised salary – often £1,000 per year more than most current BBC posts had to offer. *The Guardian* 'Radio Oswaldtwistle' by Arthur Hopcraft 2 March 1962

<sup>338</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 R102/71/1

<sup>339</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1

<sup>340</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

deal with a whole raft of editorial, legal, personnel, financial and policy issues.<sup>341</sup>

### Programme content

One of the big challenges for the experiments was to prove that there was enough content to fill the schedule. As already noted, the original expectation was for three hours a day, concentrated around early morning, lunchtime and early evening. Not all the content would be directly produced by the station team – there was allowance for educational material too, as a later section will explain. By their very nature, the trials needed to experiment with programme genres and formats, to work out what might be suitable and what was not successful. One might have thought the task was most straightforward when it came to news output. However, while the Regional centres may have operated efficiently for gathering news on a wide geographic scale, no such structure existed on a local level.

The news reporter from Stoke, Lincoln Shaw, said:

‘When I arrived I was told a news service would be provided, and it turned out to be carbon copies of stories that had been in the paper the day before, brought in by an elderly freelance who thought that’s what we wanted. Of course we didn’t.’<sup>342</sup>

It also became clear that being familiar with the locality was crucial to getting good stories. In Dumfries, the output sounded too much as though the BBC had ‘come to the town’ to do programmes *about* it, not as part of the community.<sup>343</sup> The Durham project came in for criticism again over its news coverage: it missed the big story on the Monday night/Tuesday morning, which was the rise in coal productivity and the impact on miners’ wages, preferring instead to lead with the problem of dirty milk bottles.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Gillard notes that the BBC Secretary, C Shaw, was working in a first draft of the Handbook BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 R102/71/1

<sup>342</sup> BBC Radio Four: *Archive Hour* ‘Close to Home’ 10 November 2007

<sup>343</sup> BBC WAC Report on Radio Dumfries by John Gray 30 March 1962 Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol II R102/68/1

<sup>344</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Secretary Local Broadcasting Committee to ADSB Subject Radio Durham 22 January 1962 Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol II R102/68/1 There was one highlight though: ‘An amusing and racy interview with a Chester-le-Street man who keeps lions in his backyard’.

The London experiment covered three days in February 1962, and in his evaluation, Derek McAllister was pleased with the quantity of news but pointed out that a minor raid in Wallington simply would not interest the listener in Chigwell.<sup>345</sup> This threw the focus on to the paradox of scale vs relevance and the question of what exactly the optimum size for a local station should be, yet still maintaining local interest.

Gillard's November 1961 report found news had gone well, even with small stations like Norwich, which had managed to get enough stories.<sup>346</sup> He envisaged news agencies would quickly spring up where they did not already exist, to serve local stations and that opportunities for freelancers would also increase. In terms of future planning, there were various hypotheses. It might have been possible for the BBC to create a staff newsroom, working with Regional news editors. Another option would have been to work with local newspapers to provide the news. But then what would happen with a scoop? Would the paper hold onto it for their next edition? There was also the potential for listeners to contribute news items – but this idea was not tested in the experiments.

In terms of broader programming, there was a wide range of output. It became clear early on that elaborate features, such as dramas with professional actors, were unlikely to be viable for local broadcasting. That put the emphasis on live programmes or shorter, pre-recorded 'packages', which were easier and cheaper to produce. Within those boundaries the experiments were given free rein to explore a range of subjects. It is interesting to compare the first experiment in Bristol with the later one in London. The former had programmes with self-explanatory names, which attracted some criticism, such as *Your Evening Out*, which R D'A Marriot said had 'too much information'<sup>347</sup> and *What's On?*, which was 'too long a list'.<sup>348</sup> Also in Bristol, there was *Round The Town*, which featured 'too

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<sup>345</sup> BBC WAC memo from Derek McAllister to Maurice Ennals Subject: Radio London Experiment 20 February 1962 Local Radio Experiments London 1962 R34/1644/1

<sup>346</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1

<sup>347</sup> BBC WAC Comments from R D'A Marriott Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol I R102/52/1

<sup>348</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

much [local MP] Wedgewood Benn<sup>349</sup> according to D'A Marriott, and *It's My Advice* and *Thought for the Day*, both of which needed more local angles.<sup>350</sup>

The schedule for the London station demonstrated much more variety, but individual programmes still suffered from criticism. In particular, *What's On in London* was dull, *From the Council Chamber* 'failed lamentably' and *Coffee Break* did not have enough local material and there would not be enough resources for the packages. On the plus side, a community programme called *With the West Indians* was well-received, *Thought for the Day* was well-presented and *My Choice* had a good format.<sup>351</sup>

One format that often worked well involved playing music, such as requests or a guest's choice, eg in Dundee, a retired matron brought in her favourite music and talked about her life in *Looking Back*.<sup>352</sup> The difficulty here was the limited amount of needletime allowed: too many disc-based programmes would have swallowed that up in no time.<sup>353</sup> Gillard's solution was for each station to build a stock of 600 – 700 records, plus all the latest releases, so they could manage request programmes. Live music could be encouraged because the rights issues were easier to deal with, but negotiations with the Musicians' Unions would be needed over commercial discs.<sup>354</sup> There was no shortage of local notables willing to be interviewed, which was useful evidence that there was genuine support for the idea. Programmes such as a question and answer session with a local MP on the Isle of Wight for example<sup>355</sup> also bolstered the claim that local radio would enhance participation and civic duty and it played well with figures with a wider profile who might champion the cause further afield.

The tapes in the National Sound Archive include stories and items that from today's perspective could be judged uninteresting or negligible. For example, a critique of lamppost designs in Bournemouth, the Lord Mayor

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<sup>349</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>350</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>351</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>352</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>353</sup> Eg BBC WAC Memo from CWR to DSB Subject Radio Bristol 28 March 1961 Local Radio Experiments 1961 R102/52/1

<sup>354</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 R102/71/1

<sup>355</sup> BBC WAC Isle of Wight LB Exercise by News Editor West Region 8 April 1962 Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol II R102/68/1

discussing his engagement diary for this year and why he had fewer duties than his predecessor (location unknown)<sup>356</sup>. Michael Barrett, a reporter from the Potteries, picked out a personal favourite:

'I'm almost ashamed to say that on one Saturday programme we did a presentation about church activities....[which announced a change in church service times] "to allow mothers more time to prepare the Sunday lunch". My goodness, we'd be hounded out of the country if we did that today."<sup>357</sup>

On a more serious note, there are some very valuable examples too. In Hull, there was a location interview with a fish worker's wife who lived with their eight children in a two-room cottage. The reporter described their living conditions in measured, objective tones, being careful to include the dimensions of the property and asking practical questions about how she managed. It painted a very realistic picture without recourse to sentiment. The next section featured a studio interview with the Hull Corporation Housing Manager, as the announcer said "it is our policy to hear every side of both questions." [sic] The Housing Manager explained that the family, the Lowthorpes, should have put their names on the housing waiting list sooner, but in any case their street had been identified for slum clearance and would be pulled down early the following year.<sup>358</sup>

From a contemporaneous perspective this is a notable example of good journalism: robust questioning, being fair and impartial but at the same time raising a topic that resonated with aspects of what it meant to live in this area and began to explore definitions of community. Further it is also worth noting that although the surviving audio may not be wholly representative, there do not seem to be many items that carry with them a sense of place and community. A couple of exceptions are a location interview from a Welsh colliery (probably Swansea) about the threat of mechanization and a studio discussion featuring housewives in Norwich talking about how welcoming the town is to newcomers and the problems of fitting in.<sup>359</sup>

Overall, however, there is the impression that the programme-makers were

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<sup>356</sup> National Sound Archive: *Local Broadcasting* ST 29018

<sup>357</sup> BBC Radio Four: *Archive Hour* 'Close to Home' 10 November 2007 and National Sound Archive: *Local Radio Experiments* T 37230

<sup>358</sup> National Sound Archive: *Local Radio Experiments* T 37230

<sup>359</sup> Op cit

struggling to capture distinctive and coherent descriptions that rooted the experiments in their specific locations, relying instead on vague ideas of generic localness. This may have been due to the inexperience of the producers and their own lack of local knowledge. However it was not explicitly highlighted in the meticulous evaluations, by Gillard and others, either.

Some aspects of the London experiment took an alternative approach to representation, demonstrating the use of programmes for a more diverse audience, such as the aforementioned West Indian broadcast. A script is preserved in the file for the prototype show, *With the West Indians*, presented by Mr Dick Pixley who came from Jamaica and was credited with a good voice.<sup>360</sup> In this pilot, Dick had a co-presenter in the studio ('my sister Jeanie') and together they introduced news from home, an interview with a West Indian of the week, *Topical Titbits* and played new songs. Despite the fact that the exchanges were heavily scripted, there was a very informal tone to the dialogue, such as "Hey brother Dick, isn't it time you did some work? Check your old bag of tricks,"<sup>361</sup> which would have been quite challenging to audience and broadcasters alike, but validated the adventurous nature of experimenting with new ideas on the radio.

The other issue that needed attention in the course of the closed-circuit trials was the choice of a sustaining service and how to construct the output so that it flowed from one programme source to another. There was some discussion about whether the Home Service or the Light Programme was the most suitable and how to segue into the sustaining service. G Max-Muller, writing about the London experiment, thought listeners would get confused if constantly told 'we're now joining the Light': it sounded as though Radio London was the opt-out service, not one in its own right.<sup>362</sup> But a sustaining service was necessary as there were not enough programmes and resources to fill an entire schedule. Gillard concluded that the Light Programme was the most obvious choice for a daytime sustaining

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<sup>360</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Harold Rogers to HOB(s) Subject: Radio London – West Indian Programme received 24 December 1961 ibid Local Radio Experiments London 1962 R34/1644/1

<sup>361</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>362</sup> BC WAC Report on Radio London Experiment by C Max-Muller undated Local Radio Experiments London 1962 R34/1644/1

service, with possibly room for longer items from the Home in the evenings.<sup>363</sup>

### **Education**

Education covered three distinct areas: schools broadcasting, further education (which also included adult education) and higher education. The first two had their own departments within the BBC, so anything involving schools and curricula needed to be negotiated through the relevant staff. The other area relied more on links and partnerships with bodies at a local level. However, it is evident from the experiments that education provision as a whole did not meet expectation.

Schools Broadcasting already existed on the networks as nationally produced content. The Head of Schools Broadcasting thought local output could be most effective for say geography, history and local government. There were also opportunities for talks by local experts and 'star' teachers. There might even be a call for 'radio lessons' if there was an epidemic or school closure due to bad weather.<sup>364</sup> Of course there was the issue of quality: programmes had to meet existing standards, so there would have to be a Schools Producer on each station, who worked in conjunction with a local advisory council.<sup>365</sup> However by the time the experiments had started in March/April 1961, friction had emerged between the various internal bodies. The Head of Educational Broadcasting felt that the Schools Broadcasting Council was not being consulted about how the service might develop. He warned that overzealous local authorities might jeopardize the BBC's working relationship with teaching organizations, leading to 'lower standards and faulty co-ordination'.<sup>366</sup>

There was certainly a question mark over the standard of work that might be offered for broadcast. The feedback from several trials noted disappointment with the schools programmes. For example in Hull, where a

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<sup>363</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 R102/71/1

<sup>364</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Head of Schools Broadcasting to Head of Educational Broadcasting Subject: Local Broadcasting 9 September 1960 Local Radio Educational Policy R99/9/1

<sup>365</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>366</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Head of Educational Broadcasting to DSB 7 April 1961 Local Radio Educational Policy R99/9/1

schools debate on houses versus flats was pronounced '[not] worth doing': 'overall the school's programmes were sub standard and lacked polish but showed imagination.'<sup>367</sup> In this instance the output for schools was made by the Hull Education Authority.

The central problem was how to encourage and engage with outside bodies to help produce work, without either losing editorial control or exploiting them. 'With the introduction of local broadcasting, the BBC will face a lessening of their 'sound' monopoly', wrote Rodney Bennett, 'not in 'air space' but in control over broadcast materials.'<sup>368</sup> To help assess the immediate problem, in early 1962, the BBC's Further Education Unit commissioned two programmes in which they would act as consultant and hand over production to two external producers. These were Dartington Hall in Devon, which made a programme about teaching music, and Nottingham University, whose programme was about how local manufacturers were preparing for the Common Market. The two programmes were played to local people in each area and their feedback was evaluated.<sup>369</sup> The results were not terribly promising. It was agreed that the programme quality in each case was average. There were problems with casting and with technical quality. The report concluded that there was no shortage of volunteers to take part in educational work but the BBC had to provide the facilities and resources. Also partner institutions would want to be paid. One solution was offered by Gillard – to build up a library of local programmes with the help of national or regional bodies that could be loaned out.<sup>370</sup>

The absence of higher education content in the trials was noted, largely because the earlier ones took place when the local universities were on vacation.<sup>371</sup> However the experiment that took place in the Potteries was

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<sup>367</sup> BBC WAC Memo from A W Coysh to Head of North Regional Programmes Subject Radio Hull undated Local Radio Experiments 1961 R102/52/1 Vol I

<sup>368</sup> BBC WAC General Comments on Local Broadcasting by Rodney Bennett 1 June 1962 Further Education – Local Broadcasting R15/404 His underline.

<sup>369</sup> BBC WAC Local Broadcasting: A Report on Two Further Education Experimental Recordings by Jean Rowntree 22 June 1962 Local Broadcasting 1962 File 1a R15/505

<sup>370</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>371</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 R102/71/1



apparently initiated by the University of Keele.<sup>372</sup> The University College of North Staffordshire produced two programmes for broadcast. The quality was deemed to be good but the content was 'too intellectual' for the audience.<sup>373</sup>

In the absence of much useful contemporary practical evidence about the way education in its various iterations might work in relation to local broadcasting, Gillard drew up more scenarios about the various structures. For instance he suggested building relationships with key personnel at each university so that high profile research and news stories could go on air. He thought there would be room for general university news, rag weeks etc. With regard to schools output, there needed to be a Chief Education Officer in each area, with a Schools Broadcast Council advising them. Only programmes approved by a local educational authority could go on air. He hoped for two schools programmes a day and perhaps teachers seconded to the BBC too. For Further Education, there needed to be partnerships with Local Education Authorities, the Workers' Education Association and Extra Mural Departments at Universities. The BBC would help by loaning studios and airtime. However there was no mention of making BBC staff available to them.<sup>374</sup>

### **Representation and access**

The opportunities for genuine interaction with listeners were limited in the experiment, for practical reasons. Nevertheless, many of the theoretical considerations were addressed, so that they could be integrated into policy and practices at a later stage. For example, Gillard was keen to get contributors on air using the telephone – which he had heard used in America. One technique was to record their voices and play them out with a five second delay, which got around any potential legal problems.<sup>375</sup> However the Post Office in the UK needed persuading. The telephone line came under their jurisdiction and while Gillard saw great potential for phone

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<sup>372</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Director-General to Sir Ronald German Subject: Local Broadcasting Exercises 9 August 1962 Local Broadcasting Papers 1961 – 64 R78/607/1

<sup>373</sup> BBC WAC Report from Topicality Producer Midland Region to Head of Midland Regional Programmes undated Local Radio Experiments 1961 R102/52/1 Vol I

<sup>374</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1

<sup>375</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

debates and putting questions to studio guests, the Post Office were reluctant. Gillard was determined to keep pressing for it.<sup>376</sup>

Another form of access would be to allow minority groups and local figures on to programmes to put their arguments or cases forward, a kind of 'Hyde Park Corner of the Air'.<sup>377</sup> Again, guidance might be needed on how to distinguish those sects which were mainstream and reputable from those who were not. This is just one example, but it demonstrated that the BBC had still not got a clear concept of how the issue of genuine access to its airwaves was going to work in practice.

It was also apparent from the outset that local broadcasting required new ways of working, both inside the studio and outside. One of the great innovations was the way announcers might operate the broadcast desk themselves, or 'self-op' as it came to be known. This meant developing alternative equipment and designing studios that could accommodate this. The other aspect of production was having ready access to portable tape recorders and – a very exciting and important acquisition – using a radio car. The use of mobile broadcast units was familiar in the Regional centres, but there was recognition of the potential for a modified version that could be used in every local station as a means of achieving quick, direct contact with the audience. Some argued that there was no need for a radio car if there was a tape recorder to hand, but Gillard pointed out that the car brought immediacy to an event, even if it sounded rough around the edges.<sup>378</sup> Norwich provided good examples of how the equipment helped produce the type of output they were looking for. The radio car was sent to report from the Milk Marketing Board in *Night Call* although an interview at a motor factory was thought to be too long.<sup>379</sup> In the London experiment, it was pointed out that although the radio car was a great asset, it had to add

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<sup>376</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>377</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Gillard drew the line at some religious groups, commenting, possibly with tongue slightly in cheek: 'Few Station Managers would want to open up their facilities to rabid-hot gossellers who flourish in every city by making outrageously emotional appeals on vulnerable citizens of limited intelligence.'

<sup>378</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>379</sup> BBC WAC Memo from A W Coysh to head of Midlands Regional Programmes Subject Local Broadcasting Exercise: Norwich 20 June 1961 Local Radio Experiments 1961 R102/52/1 Vol I

value to the story. So there was no point reporting from the site of the Queen's visit after she had left.<sup>380</sup>

Similarly, although portable recorders themselves were not an innovation, by equipping each experiment with them and providing training for all the reporters, it meant that a 20-minute feature about a local event could be recorded in the morning, edited and played out in the lunchtime slot. The unique aspect was the way staff themselves proved adept at all these requirements: moving from typewriter, to 'panel' operation (the desk) and then to the radio car. The early stations made provision for a studio manager to operate the desk and for an engineer to go out with the reporter in the radio car but it quickly became apparent that these operations could be managed solo and the staff put to better use elsewhere.<sup>381</sup> Commenting on the Norwich experiment, A W Coysh said 'This is the kind of local broadcasting all rounder we must try to find or breed.'<sup>382</sup>

Gradually the studio layout evolved to include two desks – one intended for self-operation, one for assisted use. The other technical consideration could not actually be tested out as part of the trials: that of using wavelengths and frequencies. But the trials did demonstrate that there was interest in traffic and travel updates, particularly in London, which meant a potential audience could listen in their cars. That would require a MW frequency for a station, given that there were so few car radios equipped with VHF. This and the slowness of domestic VHF penetration made Gillard begin to wonder about getting a supplementary service on MW, at least in the daytime for the urban stations.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> BBC WAC Report from Robert Gunnell to HOB(s) Subject: The London Experiment March 1962 Local Radio Experiments London 1962 R34/1644/1

<sup>381</sup> BBC WAC Memo from CWR to DSB Subject Radio Bristol March 28 1961 Local Radio Experiments 1961 R102/52/1 Vol I and also Report from Topicality Producer Midland Region to Head of Midland Regional Programmes undated Local Radio Experiments 1961 R102/52/1 Vol I Feedback from the Stoke experiment suggested solo operation for the radio car, unless it was a woman: 'problems with handling long lengths of cable might arise'.

<sup>382</sup> BBC WAC Memo from A W Coysh to head of Midlands Regional Programmes Subject Local Broadcasting Exercise: Norwich 20 June 1961 Local Radio Experiments 1961 R102/52/1 Vol I

<sup>383</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1 only one in three or one in four homes having a VHF receiver by 1964

### Station locations

Related to the question of frequencies was the whereabouts of the stations themselves. In his interim report, Gillard went into considerable detail, discussing how stations could be broken down into sub-divisions of urban, area and rural types.<sup>384</sup> Up to a point the experiments had attempted to cover these different station definitions. It is also noticeable that trials took place in Wales and Scotland. The exercises in Dundee and Swansea were useful as urban locations and Llyn Ac Afrom brought up issues around a rural site with interesting language and identity issues. At this point there was no discussion of whether they fitted into the English local blueprint or whether they deserved separate consideration given their own national identity. There were putative plans for experiments in Londonderry and Belfast after the Merseyside trial but nothing came of them.<sup>385</sup>

By the time of the final evaluation of all the experiments, Gillard advocated creating eight stations in England in the first year. He said these should represent a diversity in terms of urban, rural, industrial and so on, but also be centres with potential for good local broadcasting that could be established quickly. Gillard suggested a good geographic spread of stations around the country, with one near London. A list of the first stations would include Bristol, Norwich and Sheffield, with Dundee, Wrexham and the Medway Towns as a follow up.<sup>386</sup> However discussions about locations concentrated largely on technical and geo-physical attributes. In the *Interim Report*, it was only Para 30 (out of 32) that finally tackled the concept of community. Gillard shied away from actually defining it, preferring instead to 'enunciate' what it *might* be [my italics]. He suggested enlisting the help of geographers and sociologists like Dudley Stamp and Lewis Mumford. From a layman's perspective, community might arise from common industry, commerce or communications. Sometimes it was apparent where local

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<sup>384</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1

<sup>385</sup> BBC WAC Report by DSB October – December 1961 3 January 1962 Board of Governors' Papers R1/98/1

<sup>386</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Committee Interim Report 21 June 1962 R102/71/1

newspapers were distributed. Where a sense of community was lacking, local broadcasting, said Gillard, should help to unify it.<sup>387</sup>

Ironically perhaps it was the problems faced by defining community in London that forced executives to pay more attention to the diversity of the audience. P A Findlay, Secretary of the Local Broadcasting Committee, thought that there were two conditions to be met in defining community. Most of the audience must spend their time living or working in that community and it should be of such a scale that the population are familiar with the events and places talked about on air.<sup>388</sup> This was difficult to establish in London but it could not be left out of the project. Findlay thought it might also be possible to target certain groups of interest, such as market traders, City business, the Port of London and so on.<sup>389</sup>

Gillard had originally envisaged a different blueprint, working from a central location in the heart of London but then devolving to smaller satellite stations around the boroughs.<sup>390</sup> Another Committee member wrote to D'A Marriott that there was plenty of cultural diversity to explore in London, but was it genuine local broadcasting or a sub-region? 'It needed the war to display that under the surface London is a heap of villages and full of the richest and most fascinating human stories in the country.'<sup>391</sup> Postgate argued that the way to deal with this effectively was to find items with universal rather than parochial interest, for example vandalism in Tottenham should be interesting for councils all over London whereas shop prices in Richmond were not.

This is a critical point. Notions of community and aspirations of how local broadcasting might reflect this are hard to find in the experiments. This may be partly because it was a practice-based exercise, where the focus was internalized within the BBC and since no one heard the output, it was hard to connect with the real audience. Certainly from the perspective of those

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<sup>387</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1

<sup>388</sup> BBC WAC Memo from P A Findlay to Members of the Local Broadcasting Committee Subject: Local Broadcasting in London 23 March 1962 Local Radio Experiments London 1962 R34/1644/1

<sup>389</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>390</sup> BBC WAC Minute 3 of the Local Broadcasting Committee 20 December 1961 Ibid

<sup>391</sup> BBC WAC Memo from R S Postgate to ADSB Subject: Reflections on the Radio London Experiment undated. Local Radio Experiments London 1962 R34/1644

working on it, it was more to do with their work experience than a sociological experiment, as Michael Barrett said:

‘Most people believed, I think it’s true to say, that local radio was just a joke. It would never happen. Who wanted it, for goodness sake? For me it was a great experience – it was a chance to break new ground, to learn more.....about broadcasting in a way that hadn’t happened yet.’<sup>392</sup>

So ideals about community-access and connections were taking longer to formulate and were much harder to evaluate. Indeed, in some quarters of the BBC there were still doubts about the validity of local broadcasting. Richard D’A Marriott was one, for example, who expressed caution after the Bristol trial, but by the second, in Portsmouth, said ‘I confess I took to it a little easier this time.’<sup>393</sup> But he did want to remind everyone how controversial this kind of programming would be. He envisaged so many letters of complaint, queries and calls that the legal department in London might have to be strengthened. Even if this kind of sentiment was intended as prevarication, Gillard took it on board and incorporated questions of policy and regulation in his plans.

One example was the role of the advisory council, which would be critical.<sup>394</sup> Their inclusion had not been a firm commitment up to this point (November 1961) but the Association of Municipal Councils was keen on them, particularly as a vehicle for local authority representation. Gillard envisaged the council as having representatives from walks of local, civic and municipal life. Their brief would be to advise the local Station Manager on general issues but not specific programme content. There would also be an advisory committee for education, religious matters, and even one for keeping an eye on naming commercial brands.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> BBC Radio Four: *Archive Hour* ‘Close to Home’ 10 November 2007

<sup>393</sup> BBC WAC Memo from ADSB to CWR Radio Portsmouth undated Local Radio Experiments 1961 R102/52/1 Vol I

<sup>394</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Local Broadcasting Interim Report 14 November 1961 R102/72/1

<sup>395</sup> Several of the pilot programmes had thrown up the issue of naming products and retailers on air (eg the Durham experiment), which was not permissible under current practice and this needed reviewing. Gillard also suggested each station record their daily output on a reel-to-reel recorder set to the lowest speed, for legal checks.

### The commercial experiment in Bristol

There was one trial that the BBC did not conduct: it was an experiment by one of the commercial companies also interested in local broadcasting, South Western Broadcasting Ltd in Bristol who produced their own dummy station in March 1961, and it makes an interesting comparison with the BBC's efforts. The press release announcing Britain's 'first ever independent local radio programme' promised a station with news, topical programmes and entertainment.<sup>396</sup> The two attractions advertised were 'top stars of showbusiness' provided by a company called Commercial Radio (London) Ltd and a news service provided by another London company, Independent Radio News Ltd.<sup>397</sup> The actual experiment took place on 30 March, only eight days after the BBC's own Bristol trial, and the Archive contains a document from Gillard with his observations and comments.<sup>398</sup> Compared to the BBC's Bristol trial, this was certainly ambitious. Instead of three hours of original programmes, SWB were aiming for 20 hours a day.<sup>399</sup> In fact large chunks of this trial were recorded music, including eight straight hours of discs. There were 'packaged' programmes too, which featured show business artists such as Charlie Drake and Eartha Kitt promoting their latest appearance or record. Other proposed programmes included a daily serial about a Bristol family *The Westons*, *Women's Page*, *Children's Magazine* and *Leisure for Learning*. Gillard thought the national news was up to BBC standard although there was not any local follow up from a radio car or live interviews.

Gillard's main critique concerned operational issues: the putative range would be 25 miles, covering a population of 50,000. Ad revenue was calculated at £3,500 per week, which even with a staff of 30 to 40 could produce a considerable profit. The station would be broadcast on MW by day and VHF by night. However Gillard thought that there would not be a big enough VHF audience to satisfy advertisers and SWB had not factored in hidden costs like using records. 'Unfortunately these points are unlikely to

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<sup>396</sup> BBC WAC Press Statement from South Western Broadcasting Limited 23 January 1961 Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol I R102/52/1

<sup>397</sup> BBC WAC memo from CWR to DSB Subject: SWB local commercial radio demo 2 April 1962 BBC WAC Local Radio Experiments 1961 Vol I R102/52/1

<sup>398</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>399</sup> BBC WAC Op cit 'enough to stagger anyone who knows his Bristol!' commented Gillard

spring to the minds of lay observers and we shall have to work very hard to make them known' he wrote.<sup>400</sup>

So it is very clear that the BBC was determined to lobby hard for its own case and exploit the weaknesses of their opposition. But it is interesting that more was not made here about the obvious difference - indeed flaw - with the SWB station: that it did not seem to be very local. The music, the entertainment, even the news provision were all London-focused. Arguments concerning community provision and the public-service nature of the BBC's proposals needed to be put across more clearly – and it was these kinds of issues that might well have appealed to the 'lay observer' more readily.

### Critical reaction

Although the closed-circuit experiments were not broadcast, they were still used as a means of publicity. Journalists were invited to come and sit in on some of the trials, and listen to output – either 'live' or to edited highlights. It was a balancing act though, as the BBC was aware of the risk of generating too much interest and excitement when the experiment might have come to nothing. Also, there was no guarantee of positive coverage. Reporting from the Stoke trial, *The Times* felt that 'the day has been a mixture of the good and the abysmal in entertainment, with the topical news and the discussions emerging as by far the most satisfactory.'<sup>401</sup> Commenting on the Durham station, *The Guardian* noted that a light music programme was interrupted to bring news from the magistrates' court in Durham where the Chair of the Bench told four drunken men they were 'not welcome in this respectable city'. This had more than a hint of the 'parish pump' about it but then it conceded 'it would be presumptuous of outsiders to criticise such material.'<sup>402</sup>

By the time of the London experiment the BBC was more aware of the risks of allowing the press too much access. It was thought that journalists had misrepresented individual items from previous experiments so Gillard

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<sup>400</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>401</sup> *The Times* 'Mixed results in Potteries radio test: is there enough material?' 20 October 1961

<sup>402</sup> *The Guardian* 'Dummy run for radio Durham: propaganda and Pilkington' 16 January 1962



suggested they be confined to a tour of facilities and the chance to hear extracts after the trial had finished.<sup>403</sup> The BBC may have had cause to be anxious. *The Guardian* gave negative coverage, hoping 'the government and the Pilkington Committee [would not] succumb to the brainwashing they're being given by Portland Place.'<sup>404</sup> Meanwhile Marsland Gander in the *Daily Telegraph* worried that there would be too much duplication with the sustaining services. However he did enjoy the energy and bustle of the London experiment, which reminded him of 2LO forty years earlier.<sup>405</sup>

One way of guaranteeing good coverage was to contribute to the debate, such as a piece Gillard wrote for *The Listener* on the eve of the London experiment.<sup>406</sup> The article rehearsed many of the arguments that were becoming familiar about local broadcasting and the interest in local affairs. He was also honest about the problems of a London station in terms of coverage and remit and suggested more than one experiment might be necessary to work out the answers. There was a list of many of the usual programme ideas with specific emphasis on the merits of municipal participation and citizenship. He concluded:

'Such a service, friendly, reliable in the closest touch with people's daily lives and interests, run as a genuine partnership between broadcasters and the community...would surely become a highly acceptable new element in British broadcasting and greatly enrich local life wherever it could be introduced.'<sup>407</sup>

The sentiments and aspirations were familiar and there was certainly a public relations dimension to Gillard's motives. But it is interesting that although the BBC was by this point half way through the experiments, it was not publicly addressing the lessons or sharing its evaluation. So phrases like 'a genuine partnership between broadcasters and the community' could be interpreted as platitudes with no real concrete examples to back them up.

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<sup>403</sup> BBC WAC Memo from ADSB to HP Subject: Local Broadcasting Exercises London 11 January 1961 Local Radio Experiments London 1962 R34/1644/1 HOB(s) also secured permission for a 'temporary hospitality cabinet' to entertain external visitors.

<sup>404</sup> *The Guardian* 'London's Own Radio' 15 February 1962

<sup>405</sup> *Daily Telegraph* 'The Spirit of 2LO Again' by Marsland Gander 19 February 1962

<sup>406</sup> *The Listener* 'A New Dimension in Radio' by Frank Gillard 15 February 1962 pp 299 - 301

<sup>407</sup> *The Listener* op cit

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that during this period, the BBC as an organisation was marshalling its evidence and putting forward its case to run local broadcasting with a logical and nuanced approach. The data demonstrates how the BBC's ideas behind local broadcasting evolved, and how it became aligned to a very public commitment to it. It was able to rely on concepts of public service broadcasting and the BBC's own heritage and tradition of serving local audiences. The BBC began to write its own historiography, constructing a narrative to posit the Corporation's *de facto* right to run local broadcasting. This was used to strengthen the BBC's arguments against allowing commercial operators to run the service but as press coverage demonstrated, that debate was by no means won.

The Pilkington Committee gave the BBC the perfect vehicle to present its case, in terms of a discursive, interrogative forum. Gillard's idea of playing the Committee extracts of what the service might sound like was a masterstroke, and he clearly worked very hard at persuading the members of the value of local broadcasting. The problem, however, was whether the reality of the experiments (which will be examined below) actually met with the theoretical notions that the BBC had based its strategy on.

The closed-circuit experiments were an unprecedented exercise at the BBC. They involved large numbers of staff and took up significant resources – not so much in capital terms but in human resources and staff hours. So it was a sign of the Corporation's commitment to the idea of local broadcasting, both internally and externally. As I have demonstrated from the evidence, it was genuinely experimental in the way the trial stations explored as many aspects of the enterprise as was practicable, from location to scheduling, from staffing to production techniques.

First, from a practical perspective, Gillard's evaluations made a very good job of gathering vast quantities of data, feedback and audio, and turning these into logical conclusions with recommendations. There was definitely a tendency to accentuate the positive, but this was in the context of learning lessons and finding solutions to problems. These were, however, for internal consumption: the BBC was wary of making their findings public,

except in the context of pressing their case to bodies like the Pilkington Committee. Secondly, however, there were some key omissions. In terms of content, the educational programming in the trials was not generally considered satisfactory and the files show a level of disagreement and tension between the internal stakeholders at the BBC. Gillard still managed to produce some positive proposals but there was not sufficient practical evidence to base this on. Thirdly, it was difficult to assess, accurately, what the demand might be and whether people could actually listen, if the service used VHF exclusively. There were doubts creeping in, and Gillard certainly began to think about MW as a daytime support, in internal documents, but this was not stated publicly.

Finally, the whole notion of what defined a community was very difficult to gauge. The experiments generated a broad and useful range of programmes but these could only be evaluated in terms of production standards. There was no mechanism to address whether they really met a demand and how a station could 'greatly enrich local life wherever it could be introduced.'<sup>408</sup> Part of the problem was station size and location: what kind of area was the optimum in order to achieve sufficiently detailed local coverage without alienating parts of the audience? The closed-circuit experiments could not accurately judge this, except in the case of London, which was readily acknowledged to be too big. Linked to this issue was the concept of access and representation. The deployment of the radio car and roving reporters with portable recorders helped to produce immediacy and connection with the audience, by taking the station out to them. Conversely, however, there was no means for allowing the audience *into* the station, to create their own output and reflect their own interests and ideas, apart from the education programmes cited above.

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<sup>408</sup> *The Listener* 'A New Dimension in Radio' by Frank Gillard 15 February 1962 pp 299 - 301

## **CHAPTER SIX: 1962 – 1966: Pirates and White Papers**

### **The Pilkington Committee's Report**

The period from July 1962 to the end of 1966 marked a key transition. Within the BBC, policy was formulated and resources were put in place that meant that the BBC could launch a service of local broadcasting. But it was reliant on getting permission from the government and on securing a satisfactory financial provision – and neither of these was certain. In fact a great deal depended on external factors that the BBC had no control over. Political ideology and the manifesto intentions of the political parties played a crucial role. In October 1964 a Labour government came to power, which changed the political landscape, most notably with the appointment of Tony Benn as Postmaster General (until July 1966). Benn's thoughts and actions had a considerable impact on discussions around local broadcasting, to which the BBC had to respond in its own debates and decisions.

The arguments for a different system of local broadcasting, organized and financed along commercial lines, re-appeared in this period with a reinvigorated lobby. Finally there were factors that could not be foreseen, which had an eventual impact on the evolution of sound broadcasting in the UK. The arrival of pirate radio stations, transmitting offshore, made a crucial contribution to public demand and expectation of radio choice. So the key questions are: when can it be said that local broadcasting became a certainty? How and when did the BBC become the choice to organize and run the service? To what degree can the BBC's dominance in this field be seen as a culmination of the work over the previous few years?

Throughout the spring of 1962 there was a growing anticipation about the Pilkington report. The BBC's experimental stations were ongoing, with more trials planned into the summer. The archival files suggest that preparations for a positive outcome were being made. For instance there were discussions about whether the BBC was making enough provision for staff

training, if they got the go-ahead.<sup>409</sup> The Local Broadcasting Committee drew up a list of proposed first stations, in consultation with the Regions.<sup>410</sup> Wellington also made it clear that even if the decision was favourable, there was much work still to be done.<sup>411</sup> The report was much delayed and finally came out on 27 June 1962. Pilkington summarized the proposal they had received for local broadcasting as providing a transmitting station for 'any community of sufficient size and with a recognizable identity.'<sup>412</sup> This would be served by VHF, with a range of about 5 miles, making 200 stations in all for complete UK coverage. However the report did not go into any detail about defining 'community' or 'local', which mirrored the low priority of the issue from the BBC's side too. The Committee accepted that they found 'little evidence of significant, spontaneous public demand' for local broadcasting. But – in a crucial statement –

'if people do not know that they are missing, they cannot be said not to want it. We have, therefore, to consider what they might be missing: that is the nature and character of the service proposed.'<sup>413</sup>

The report then weighed up the pros and cons of a BBC local broadcasting service and one run on commercial lines. If it was the latter, there would need to be a regulatory body, but there was an 'organic defect' here, referring to what they perceived as flaws in the relationship between the Independent Television Authority and the television companies, and so they did not believe one body could adequately listen to and regulate this number of stations.<sup>414</sup>

Given the range of submissions, there was an 'overwhelming mass of disinterested opinion' against commercial radio<sup>415</sup> and they also concluded that ending the BBC's sound monopoly would just create another one, in the realm of local broadcasting. Pilkington's conclusion was that

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<sup>409</sup> BBC WAC Report by the Director of Sound Broadcasting January – March 1962 28 March 1962 R1/98/3

<sup>410</sup> BBC WAC Report by the Director of Sound Broadcasting April – June 1962 27 June 1962 R1/98/5

<sup>411</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>412</sup> Home Office *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting 1960* (Cmnd 1753 HMSO 1962) p 221

<sup>413</sup> Home Office Op cit

<sup>414</sup> Home Office Op cit

<sup>415</sup> Home Office Op cit

‘one service, and one service only of local sound broadcasting should be planned; it should be provided by the BBC and it should be financed by licence fee revenue; and that the frequencies available should be so deployed as to enable it to be provided for the largest possible number of distinctive communities.’<sup>416</sup>

Because of the delay in publication Briggs says that the government had already drafted its White Paper response.<sup>417</sup> The first White Paper came out a week after Pilkington, on 4 July, and it was described as an ‘interim’ document and reserved judgment on many of the issues in the report. Regarding local broadcasting, it stated ‘the government will take cognizance of public reaction before reaching a decision.’<sup>418</sup> This was widely interpreted as a stalling strategy. *The Guardian* said that the argument about public demand was ‘specious’: the same could be said about the second BBC television channel, which the government had accepted.<sup>419</sup>

The BBC’s immediate reaction was one of reflection. The Board of Governors struck a note of cautious optimism when it said publicly that ‘the internal Local Broadcasting Committee will be kept in being. There is a great deal of information that still needs to be digested against the time when it may be possible to go ahead with the BBC’s plan.’<sup>420</sup> Internally it had to be accepted that this was a disappointing set back. The General Advisory Council was told that the BBC budget made no provision for local broadcasting as there was no imminent decision from the government.<sup>421</sup> The fact that the BBC’s proposals had been very favourably endorsed by Pilkington was some consolation and the Board of Management recognized the hard work that everyone involved in the trials had contributed to the project.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Home Office Op cit p 232

<sup>417</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid Chapter Five

<sup>418</sup> Home Office *White Paper* (Cmd 1770 HMSO 1962)

<sup>419</sup> *The Guardian* ‘Sound Radio’ by Ian Rodger 7 July 1962 Fred Mulley MP for Park Sheffield wrote in his local paper that whereas the Pilkington Report was 342 pages, the White Paper only amounted to 12: Pilkington was a well written ‘social document’ whereas the White Paper was not. *Sheffield Telegraph* ‘Westminster Commentary: A Disappointing Decision on Local Broadcasting’ 9 July 1962

<sup>420</sup> BBC WAC Paper G85.2 13 July 1962 Board of Governors Papers R1/98/3

<sup>421</sup> BBC WAC Draft General Advisory Council Memo 19 September 1962 Board of Governors Papers op cit

<sup>422</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 23 July 1962 R2/15/1

The only glimmer of hope was the suggestion that the government would listen to public response on local broadcasting. The BBC duly provided evidence for this to the Post Office. A letter from the Director-General to Sir Ronald German at the GPO set out the background to the 16 experimental stations, and dwelt on the known public response – although it was acknowledged that the output was not broadcast.<sup>423</sup> The kind of evidence cited here mainly concerned local dignitaries, elected officials, administrators and so on, who were invited to listen to the trials at each town. As the experiments had progressed, Hugh Greene noted that more and more communities had contacted the BBC asking to be included. There were other examples of public support too: the Extra Mural Department of Nottingham University organized a conference in November 1962 at which 200 people from a range of organizations heard Frank Gillard speak on behalf of the BBC. He noted that a resolution in favour of public service local radio was accepted by an overwhelming majority and this was passed on to the PMG and Nottingham MPs.<sup>424</sup> However none of this evidence made an impact on the government.

A further White Paper in December 1962 effectively put paid to any hopes of local broadcasting in the short term, saying it would ‘later review the situation in the light of other developments in broadcasting,’ although it did not discount a ‘possible latent demand for local sound services.’<sup>425</sup> In a written House of Commons answer the following spring, the Postmaster General (Bevins) said ‘I am bound to say that since the publication of the White Paper there has been precious little evidence of any demand for these services.’<sup>426</sup>

Despite the profile of the issue over the preceding few years, local broadcasting largely disappeared from the agenda for most of 1963, at least from the public’s point of view. One major change occurred within the BBC. In the summer of 1963, Wellington retired as Director of Sound Broadcasting and Frank Gillard moved from the West Region to take over,

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<sup>423</sup> BBC WAC Letter from DG to Sir Ronald German 9 August 1962 Local Broadcasting Papers 1961 – 1964 R78/607

<sup>424</sup> BBC WAC Report by DSB October – December 1962 1 January 1963 Board of Governors Papers R1/99/1

<sup>425</sup> Home Office *White Paper* (Cmnd 1893 HMSO 1962)

<sup>426</sup> Hansard House of Commons Debate 12 March 1963

with R D'A Marriott continuing at Assistant DSB. Gillard's in tray included various practical implications for sound broadcasting that the government's White Paper had given the go ahead for, such as extending the hours of network broadcasting.<sup>427</sup> But local broadcasting was not far from his thoughts. The severe winter of 1963 had reinforced the potential that localized broadcasting might fulfill. The West Region had responded as well as it could, despite its geographical size, to provide a public service of information and support and as a means of broadcasting people's stories and calls for help.<sup>428</sup> This function would become one of the core attributes for local radio in the future.

### **The BBC gets ready**

Based on the evidence in the Archive, I would argue that BBC activity around local broadcasting never entirely ceased. There were periods when energy subsided and it appeared to fall off the main agenda but it never disappeared. On becoming Director of Sound Broadcasting, Gillard prompted a more wide-ranging review of various key aspects of the local broadcasting plans.<sup>429</sup> The financial costs were reassessed, given that the impact of inflation needed to be added since the *Memorandum* to Pilkington. The shift in attitude towards using MW, which was identified during the experiments, became more pronounced and the Post Office's response to this idea was sought.<sup>430</sup> The locations for the first stations were also re-addressed - with an added emphasis on locations with potential for educational work.<sup>431</sup>

There were also two key internal papers in this period, both appearing towards the end of 1964. *The Development of Local Radio* dealt with what it called 'local independence under BBC control', in other words, how local

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<sup>427</sup> BBC WAC Report by DSB June – August 1963 17 August 1963 Board of Governors Papers R1/99/6

<sup>428</sup> BBC WAC Report by DSB December 1962 – February 1963 12 March 1963 Board of Governors Papers R/99/1

<sup>429</sup> BBC WAC Report from DSB May – July 1964 21 July 1964 Board of Governors Papers R1/100/6

<sup>430</sup> There is no indication of an immediate response but by November 1964 Gillard thinks that the PO have ruled out MW for local broadcasting BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 23 November 1964 quoted in Local Radio Policy 1964 – 1968 R102/73/1

<sup>431</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of the Board of Management 25 May 1964 R2/17/2



radio could be run by the BBC but at the same time preserving the right degree of independence.<sup>432</sup> The paper outlined the attributes and working practices for the Station Managers and the autonomy they would have in scheduling, administration and station operation. However they would still be required to enlist as much support as possible from their community by being 'courageous in making airtime available to appropriate local interests.'<sup>433</sup> Editorial control, however, remained with the Station Manager, and therefore the BBC. The advisory council structure was restated, although simplified slightly from previous models, with one general output council and one for educational broadcasting. There was a crucial difference between the remit for these two councils. The educational council would play a bigger role in programme making and prescribing the extent and range of educational output on the station. The general advisory council's remit was harder to define: it certainly would not have executive powers but it would be a forum to discuss programme issues and controversies. The report concluded by proposing a broad-based pilot scheme on VHF, with nine stations in a range of locations, covering conurbations, medium-sized towns, small cities, rural areas and so on. One key statement was introduced here which cropped up in public communications subsequently. Since the stations would not be playing pop music, they would not attract huge audiences to start with and so 'wildfire success should not be expected.'<sup>434</sup> Minutes of the Board of Governors show that this paper resulted from discussions between Gillard, the Director-General, the Chairman of Governors and the new PMG, Tony Benn and that this document was intended for Ministerial attention.<sup>435</sup>

Aspects of this and the second paper, *The Control of Local Broadcasting*, were familiar and can trace their roots back to earlier documents, such as the *Memorandum* sent to Pilkington. But they had also been updated to take into account new circumstances. For example, *The Control of Local Broadcasting* looked at the various different models of how local radio might

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<sup>432</sup> BBC WAC Paper: The Development of Local Radio 26 November 1964 Board of Governors Papers R1/100/7

<sup>433</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>434</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>435</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 8 December 1964 R1/32/1

be financed and organized.<sup>436</sup> But now that pirate radio had arrived, Gillard could argue that this kind of output would be what commercial stations would sound like. There were the familiar arguments about costs, and how commercial stations underestimated the 'extras', such as administration, central support services and sustaining output, which the BBC could provide at no extra burden. Gillard called into question whether these stations would capture enough listeners to raise sufficient ad revenue. The next model was familiar too - that of a public authority, non-BBC station. This arose because some argued that the BBC was too monolithic and too centralized. So the alternative would be to license independent bodies such as local authorities or universities or combinations of groups. However the financial arrangements were not clear. Could the revenue be raised by advertising, but with a 'not for profit' objective? It might be possible to raise funds by subscription or grant but Gillard did not think sufficient moneys would be available at that time. He called into question how a municipal-run station could be impartial or independent, which was why the Association of Municipal Corporations had always supported the BBC's plans for local radio. Stations on the rates, Gillard said 'are just as crazy as would be the thought of a local newspaper supported from a municipal exchequer.'<sup>437</sup>

Finally he explored the BBC Local Radio model: note that the word 'radio' was being used more and more from this point onwards. Here he incorporated some of the discussion from *The Development of Local Radio* by emphasizing how BBC-run stations would not be totally independent but could have a high degree of autonomy, under the auspices of the Station Manager and the advisory council structure. Gillard stressed how the use of local input and support made it 'our station' not a 'BBC station.'<sup>438</sup> He asked the Board of Management to consider, on reading this paper, whether it might be possible for a non-BBC station run by a local body to use BBC material; to revisit the terms that might be needed for the Station Manager's autonomy and what the machinery could be for local participation in running a station.

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<sup>436</sup> BBC WAC Paper: The Control of Local Broadcasting 18 November 1964 Local Radio Policy 1964 – 1968 R102/73/1

<sup>437</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>438</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

My interpretation of the documents is that they demonstrated a clear line of progression from the issues that arose during the closed-circuit experiments, with Gillard and BBC management further enunciating their strategy for how local radio might work in practice. The papers were important because they grappled with concepts surrounding representation, audience access, finance and the various stakeholders. Yet it was debatable whether the BBC had found concrete solutions to the problems these posed.

### **External interests**

As discussed above, there were moments when events and factors emanating from outside the BBC acted as stimuli to the debate. One of these was the area of education. This emerged in 1963 through conversations and correspondence between Harold Wilson, then Leader of the Opposition, and the Director-General about the potential for local broadcasting and education.<sup>439</sup> Then towards the end of December 1963, Bevens sounded out in the House of Commons the idea that local broadcasting could play a role in adult education provision. Gillard acknowledged this was ‘as unexpected as it was gratifying’<sup>440</sup> and admitted that the experiments had not given as much prominence to this as they might but in hindsight there was great potential. He ordered a re-examination of plans for local broadcasting, including staffing and equipment to allow for more adult education output; calculations were made for the cost of equipment and resources, and discussions were arranged with educational bodies and possible partners, to share the cost.<sup>441</sup>

Thoughts around how this educational potential could be harnessed were aired in two articles written for the *Yorkshire Post* in December of that year, to coincide with Parliamentary debates about the licence fee and the BBC

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<sup>439</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 21 October 1963 R2/16/3

<sup>440</sup> BBC WAC Report by DSB September – December 1963 1 January 1964 Board of Governors Papers 1964 R1/100/1 See also Board of Management Minutes 9 December 1963: an informal conversation between DSB and Dennis Lawrence of the Post Office confirmed that the ‘current’ education debate was the most effective argument for local broadcasting.

<sup>441</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

Charter.<sup>442</sup> Hugh Greene's piece, 'Universities of the Air', started from the basis that there had been a shift in educational expectations since Pilkington, and proposed a rather radical idea, that the government allow the BBC to have six trial stations in places with higher and adult education support. During the day, the stations would carry the kinds of output the BBC had already outlined to Pilkington. By night, the service would carry educational programmes on behalf of educational trustees, WEA, universities and so on.<sup>443</sup> The following day, the *Yorkshire Post* carried an article from Gillard, which expanded more on the local radio aspect of the enterprise. Considering that the piece was being published in a regional newspaper, it is interesting that there was a comment about how the service would not be in competition with local papers but how they would work together and complement each other.<sup>444</sup>

These articles were examples of how the BBC – and Gillard in particular – continued the lobbying process, deftly refining their arguments to changing circumstances. This lobbying also included appearances at events and playing the tapes from the experiments. As the Leicester University Report put it 'he [Gillard] developed a familiar reputation from the assiduity with which he cultivated the conference circuit of educational and local government bodies.'<sup>445</sup>

There was however an alternative voice whose activities gathered momentum in the mid-1960s. The National Broadcasting Development Committee [NBDC], which had campaigned for commercial television in the 1950s, started lobbying the Conservative government for permission to carry out local commercial trials.<sup>446</sup> The arrival of pirate radio stations such as Radios Caroline and London added further weight to this impetus. As the *Observer* put it, Radio Caroline re-ignited a debate about commercial radio, which was seemingly dead and buried.<sup>447</sup> The commercial lobby recognized the popularity of these predominantly pop music stations, which highlighted that there was a gap in the legitimate, on-shore market. Here was an

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<sup>442</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>443</sup> *Yorkshire Post* 'Universities of the Air' by Hugh Carleton Greene 10 December 1963

<sup>444</sup> *Yorkshire Post* 'Radio Station in Every City' by Frank Gillard 11 December 1963

<sup>445</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication Ibid p 16

<sup>446</sup> *Sunday Times* 'The rest of the iceberg' 17 May 1964

<sup>447</sup> *Observer* 'Whose finger on the mike' [sic] by John Ardagh and Rudolf Klein 7 June 1964

opportunity for free market enterprise and the press observed how the opposing cases for local broadcasting had begun to coalesce along party political lines.<sup>448</sup>

In fact pirate radio was a double-bind for the NBDC. It was proving very popular but commercial companies had to be wary of stepping into their shoes. They were trying to prove the case for an alternative to BBC local broadcasting – but that did not mean pop music all day: it would not amount to a local service. And it was also one of the key arguments the BBC had against them – that pop music was the only way to maximize listeners to raise advertising revenue – so another reason to distance themselves from the pirate station model. There were also some who thought that pirate radio was a good indicator of what local radio would be like. There was, as Crisell points out, a local angle to the pirate stations: they adopted names relating to locations, such as Radio Kent and Radio Essex, and publicised local events and activities.<sup>449</sup> Certainly the NBDC thought that Radio Caroline exposed the metropolitan bias of the BBC.<sup>450</sup> What most people agreed on was that pirate radio proved there was a demand for pop music among young listeners.<sup>451</sup>

As the 1964 General Election loomed, the best the BBC and the commercial companies could get was a hint that a re-elected Conservative Government might allow some limited trials in local broadcasting.<sup>452</sup> At the same time, the government sidestepped the issue of the pirates, saying they needed to wait until the end of the year when a draft convention by the Council of Europe would be ready, to co-ordinate action across international waters.<sup>453</sup> This was seen as prevarication by some commentators: a ‘repugnant’ holding statement, signifying a ‘clammy dead hand.’<sup>454</sup> On the eve of the Election, *The Times* reported that the NBDC tried to establish the viewpoint of each party on the issue of commercial local radio.<sup>455</sup> The

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<sup>448</sup> *Sunday Times* ‘BBC to fight for its own local stations’ 31 May 1964

<sup>449</sup> Crisell A ‘Local Radio: attuned to the times or filling time with tunes?’ in Franklin B and Murphy D (eds) *Local Journalism in Context* (London: Routledge 1998) p 25

<sup>450</sup> *The Times* 6 October 1964

<sup>451</sup> Op cit

<sup>452</sup> *Daily Sketch* ‘Bevins gives new hope for Home Town Radio’ 3 June 1964

<sup>453</sup> Op cit

<sup>454</sup> *The Economist* ‘Unsound’ 6 June 1964

<sup>455</sup> *The Times* 6 October 1964

Labour Party was firmly opposed, but did favour the rapid expansion of non-profit making local broadcasting. The Conservative Party seemed indecisive, preferring to consult all interested bodies on re-election. The Liberal Party was in favour of local broadcasting, and not all of it commercial.

An article in the *Observer* by John Ardagh and Rudolf Klein posed one of the pivotal questions: 'is local broadcasting desirable because it provides a means of reaching a new mass audience or because it is a way of satisfying minority interests?'<sup>456</sup> After weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the two advocates for local radio, Ardagh and Klein suggested a middle course, something that would guarantee independence, which the BBC scored badly on, and guaranteed diversity without commercial pressures. One option would be a partnership with local authorities and universities, who could take advertising revenue. Or it might be possible to cap the amount of dividends paid out to a commercial station, in the same way that there was a maximum amount payable to shareholders in football teams. They argued there were various permutations, but the crucial thing was to exploit this new means of communication to the full.

This follows on from an earlier contribution in the *Observer* from Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall who also wanted to use this powerful tool in broadcasting to best effect.<sup>457</sup> However their view was wholly opposed to commercial exploitation, put in very vivid terms. 'Of course commercial radio would pour out tripe all day. Most people seem to want tripe. Why should OUR [their capitals] licence fee be used to provide it?'<sup>458</sup> The problem as they saw it, was that the best forms of organization for mass communication had not yet been found.

A radical third alternative from *The Economist* suggested the BBC carry a pop music station on a national frequency, which carried advertising. The revenue would be used for local stations. Commercial rivals would also be granted licences, along with community services on a subscription basis. These could be short-term licences and it would soon be clear if there were

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<sup>456</sup> *Observer* 'Whose finger on the mike' [sic] 7 June 1964

<sup>457</sup> *Observer* 'Against Commercial Radio' letter from Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall 31 May 1964

<sup>458</sup> Op cit

enough support for local radio, either BBC or commercial or community-run.<sup>459</sup>

### **The Labour Governments**

Harold Wilson took office in October 1964 and Tony Benn was appointed Postmaster General. The next few months marked a noticeable rise in expectation that there might be a breakthrough of some kind in local broadcasting. Also in October, the NBDC reformed as the Local Radio Association (LRA). Lewis & Booth argue that this was a tactical move by supporters of commercial radio to distance themselves from the Conservative Party, now in opposition, and from any hint of cosy up to the illegal operations of the pirates. By inserting the word 'local' into the name, it reinforced notions of decentralization and neighbourhood.<sup>460</sup> The LRA began to lobby once more, urging the PMG to start a frequency allocation plan for towns with a population over 50,000. Their submission stressed that local commercial stations would not have a diet of pop music.<sup>461</sup> In early 1965, Gillard announced he was re-activating the Local Broadcasting Working Party, headed by R D'A Marriott. Its first task was to review all the earlier reports and recommendations and bring them up to date.<sup>462</sup>

Much of the new energy in the prospects for local broadcasting came from Tony Benn. His diaries noted that the BBC was the top priority for policy decisions that he asked his GPO directorate to look into, and one of the key issues for the Corporation was local broadcasting.<sup>463</sup> Compared to the previous administration, Benn brought with him a whirlwind of ideas. He was scathing about Reginald Bevins, his predecessor, who he described as 'part time in the job.'<sup>464</sup> There was certainly an air of stasis surrounding the Conservative administration regarding local broadcasting. In a conversation with Gillard in December 1963, Lawrence of the GPO said that local

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<sup>459</sup> *The Economist* 'Unsound' 6 June 1964

<sup>460</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* Chapter 6

<sup>461</sup> *Yorkshire Post* 'PMG heard case for local radio' 22 January 1965

<sup>462</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 12 January 1965 R2/18/1

<sup>463</sup> Benn *T Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963 – 1967* (London: Hutchinson 1967)

<sup>464</sup> Benn *Op cit* p 173

broadcasting had fallen by the wayside because the government could not face up to the commercial issue.<sup>465</sup>

While a raised profile and sense of expectancy surrounding local radio may have been welcomed by the BBC, it soon became clear that Benn had some radical ideas which would not suit the Corporation. In fact in the next two years there was a see-saw of fortunes and more than once it looked as though local radio would be sanctioned as a commercial operation. Benn saw the BBC finances as the main sticking point and he was keen to explore alternative ways of raising revenue and ending the BBC's sound monopoly.<sup>466</sup> One can spot some of the tensions in exchanges such as these from the Board of Management minutes. At a seminar in Birmingham, Dennis Lawrence declined to give the GPO's position on local broadcasting, which worried Gillard and made him think there were things going on behind the scenes he was unaware of.<sup>467</sup>

At the heart of the debate was a clash of ideologies: Benn did not have much respect for the BBC as an institution, which he called 'wildly right wing',<sup>468</sup> so his interpretation of what a public service broadcaster should do was at odds with the BBC's view of its role. Another diary entry criticised the BBC for not growing and developing and accused it of letting the 'rest of broadcast outlets ...go to crude commercial organizations.'<sup>469</sup> In May 1965 Benn proposed a review of sound broadcasting options. This posed yet another delay for getting a decision. Gillard was reported in the press as being disillusioned: 'you begin to lose heart',<sup>470</sup> he said. However a hint of Benn's intentions came in a Common's statement in May 1965: 'If, as I hope, broadcasting develops with a multiplicity of new channels and stations, the problem of some form of real accountability will arise. It might be necessary to create new institutions and authorities to meet this need.'<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 3 December 1963 R2/16/3

<sup>466</sup> Benn *ibid* p 183; 191; 257

<sup>467</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 27 February 1965 R2/18/1 Lawrence subsequently clarified that his reticence was merely Civil Service protocol, *op cit* 8 March 1965

<sup>468</sup> Benn *ibid* p 183

<sup>469</sup> Benn *ibid* p 410

<sup>470</sup> *Yorkshire Post* 'Setback for local broadcasting: government survey means delay' 18 March 1965

<sup>471</sup> *Daily Mail* 'Will the town halls tackle local radio?' by John Stevenson 17 May 1965



Benn was therefore interested by a proposal from Manchester City Council in May 1965 for permission to run a local station. Gillard's reaction was initially negative, quoted in the press as calling it 'very dangerous' because of the ambiguity over who would run the station and how to avoid party political propaganda.<sup>472</sup>

But he overcame his reluctance and agreed to join Benn and others at a meeting in Manchester to discuss it further. The antipathy to the BBC stemmed from a perception that places like Manchester were not receiving enough BBC coverage.<sup>473</sup> According to the report Gillard gave the Board of Management, the PMG outlined several scenarios: a BBC-run station, one run by a commercial company and a third option, a local trust or corporation. All of these would have been familiar to the Board, but Benn went further when he talked about raising revenue from multiple sources, and about the possibility of the BBC acting as a 'publisher', sub-contracting broadcasting time to an education authority or another body. He suggested the BBC might build a station and then hand it over to a trust or local authority. It was agreed that all parties would work up more details and that the BBC would co-operate informally.<sup>474</sup> Optimism rose again for the prospect of local radio in the autumn of 1965. The Board of Management discussed a paper outlining plans for nine experimental stations and talked confidently of getting a long advance warning period: 'an amber stage' and 'a green stage'.<sup>475</sup> Unbeknownst to the Board, at the beginning of November the PMG was hoping to secure support at the Broadcast Committee in the Cabinet Office for his plan for local broadcasting based on non-profit making trusts with a special national advisory council.<sup>476</sup> A report in the *Daily Express* confirmed the speculation that there would be an announcement on local radio in the New Year but no one knew how it was to be financed or run.<sup>477</sup>

So in this period of great uncertainty it was with some justification that the *New Statesman* pondered whether Gillard was fighting the wrong

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<sup>472</sup> Op cit

<sup>473</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 24 May 1965 R2/18/3

<sup>474</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>475</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 18 October 1965 R2/18/4

<sup>476</sup> Benn *ibid* p 342

<sup>477</sup> *Daily Express* 'Benn tunes into town radio plan' 17 December 1965

battle.<sup>478</sup> The article painted a flattering portrait of the Director of Sound Broadcasting, saying he 'has all the charm of a successful and popular sports master', and describing his reputation for executive brilliance and his passion for local radio. It argued that there were 'seismic indications' that the BBC would not get local radio and that Benn would give it to the commercial competitors. Gillard, it suggested, was not prepared for this defeat. He should therefore concentrate on planning for national radio, suggesting a pop station, or more light music programmes by day. The battle as they saw it was to get 'radio self-respect back before the commercial rivals start.'<sup>479</sup>

In the face of renewed supposition that commercial companies might be awarded local radio in the spring of 1966, Hugh Greene proposed rallying newspapers and MPs favourable to the BBC cause as in the days of Pilkington.<sup>480</sup> But the key to the solution for the BBC was buried in the *New Statesman* piece: the PMG was becoming increasingly concerned with how to replace pirate radio and looked to the BBC for an answer. If finance was the problem, then he would push for advertising on BBC networks because the government would not accept a licence fee increase. According to Benn's diaries, the Director-General came to see him on 25 February and accepted that the BBC could manage for two years without a licence fee increase.<sup>481</sup> This effectively put a stop to talk of advertising revenue on the BBC.<sup>482</sup> But at the same time, Hugh Greene was still voicing reluctance about having a pop music station without some extra money to pay for it.

Shortly afterwards, the BBC set out their case for local broadcasting in the pamphlet *Local Radio in the Public Interest*.<sup>483</sup> There were several objectives in mind. The first section, titled 'Is it wanted?' argued that there

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<sup>478</sup> *New Statesman* 'Have a go, Gillard' by Magnus Turnstile 1 January 1966 The author's name was a nom de plume: Gillard responded to the article by asking him for a face-to-face meeting. Board of Management Minutes 24 January 1966 R2/19/1

<sup>479</sup> Op cit

<sup>480</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 3 January 1966 R2/19/1

<sup>481</sup> Benn ibid p 393

<sup>482</sup> Briggs ibid p 541 Briggs suggests that Harold Wilson knew all along that the Labour Party was very divided over the issue anyway.

<sup>483</sup> BBC *Local Radio in the Public Interest: the BBC's plan* (London: BBC Publications, 1966) Although the author was anonymous, it was very likely to have been Gillard as it bore a close resemblance to papers he had previously written. Eg BBC WAC Paper: The Control of Local Broadcasting 18 November 1964 Local Radio Policy 1964 – 1968 R102/73/1

was a need for local broadcasting. As Briggs points out, there was also a discernible change in tone here, entrenching local radio more firmly in the principles of public service broadcasting by emphasising the merits of building and supporting local democracy.<sup>484</sup> The pamphlet cited low turnouts at elections and how community life could be ‘flabby and underdeveloped.’<sup>485</sup> The argument for local radio was placed squarely within the framework of the BBC’s international, national and regional obligations, which it had carried out successfully over the years. However, with reference to the regions, ‘long experience of regional and area broadcasting has convinced the corporation that a station addressing a plurality of local groupings is continually at a serious disadvantage.’<sup>486</sup> This document also painted the picture of the BBC’s history and heritage in local broadcasting, going back to the 1920s, so the inference was that the Corporation had experience in this field, which commercial competitors did not, and that if it was not for the technological problems of wavelength congestion, the BBC would have continued with a local system rather than the regional one that developed.

Subsequent sections addressed how the stations would sound, including educational content, a mixture of speech with music from sustaining services, public information programmes and those directed at immigrants. Above all, they would not be ‘an amplified jukebox.’<sup>487</sup> Local radio could also best serve the plurality of a diverse audience more effectively than regional radio: ‘the basic purpose of a local station is not to reach the maximum number of listeners regardless of all other considerations but rather to give the fullest possible service to a community of people holding the maximum number of interests in common.’<sup>488</sup>

Indeed two sections were titled ‘our station’ and ‘local participation’, and they underlined the autonomy that a station and its manager would have from the larger organization and the opportunities for local involvement, including the advisory council structure. Despite the invitation for

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<sup>484</sup> Briggs Vol V ibid p 632

<sup>485</sup> ‘*Local Radio in the Public Interest*’ ibid p 1

<sup>486</sup> Op cit p 4

<sup>487</sup> Op cit p 6

<sup>488</sup> Op cit p 6

community-made programmes, it was stressed that the station staff would maintain editorial control over standards. This was a very confident document, which was vigorous in its belief that the BBC should run local broadcasting. Since the Pilkington Report had given the BBC its blessing, the pamphlet spoke of waiting for the BBC to be 'authorised' to run local radio.<sup>489</sup> The offer to run the nine pilots was similarly stated as an indication of how confident the BBC was of its plan.

The pamphlet came out in the midst of a maelstrom of speculation, claims and counter claim. Some press commentators were turning into 'nay sayers,' arguing that no one wanted local radio. An article in *The Times* said there was little evidence of a need for it. The assumption was that people were private and preferred to keep their lives to themselves: 'they do not want busybodies and bores busily working the parish pump or the parish microphone.'<sup>490</sup> A further example of the fractious level of debate came with a public discussion hosted by TRAC (the Television and Radio Committee) at Caxton Hall in London on 24 February 1966. Gillard attended on behalf of the BBC along with Roy Shaw, who was the Director of Extra Mural Studies at the University of Keele, and Stuart Hall from the University of Birmingham. John Gorst appeared for the Local Radio Association.

Press accounts of the meeting portrayed a mixed event with both sides of the argument under fire. According to John Woodeforde in the *Sunday Telegraph*, John Gorst did not make a convincing case for the commercial alternative and the biggest applause came for a lady from the audience who said there was no demand for local radio. Meanwhile in response to Gillard's quote about the 'serial story of everyday life', Woodforde wrote: 'I have nothing against serial stories but wonder what chance a civic, true one would stand against even *The Dales* and *The Archers*.'<sup>491</sup> Gillard's own account to the Board of Management was rather different, although he concurred it was 'an unhappy experience'. From his perspective the meeting was anti-BBC, packed with LRA supporters.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> Op cit p 1

<sup>490</sup> *The Times* 'The Parish Mike' [sic] 5 March 1966

<sup>491</sup> *Sunday Telegraph* 'Who wants local radio?' by John Woodeforde 27 February 1966

<sup>492</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 28 February 1966 R2/19/1

To add to the uncertainty a General Election was called for 31 March, which as Benn wrote in his diary, effectively postponed any decision on local broadcasting.<sup>493</sup> However, there was a feeling that local radio would be introduced at some point, whoever won the election.<sup>494</sup> In fact there was an interesting distinction opening up: the 'need' or case for local radio emerged as different from the 'demand' for the service. Commentators and proponents could rightly claim that the case was proven, even if the demand was not. Gillard could always fall back on this assertion that local broadcasting would not be a 'wildfire success',<sup>495</sup> since it was acceptable for a public service not to be motivated by earning the biggest audience. For the LRA, this was more of a problem. An article by John Gorst in the *Financial Times* in August 22 tried to steer a middle ground for commercial local radio, arguing that the alternatives were unworkable.<sup>496</sup> He sensed that there was a groundswell in favour of non-profit making trusts, but these organizations would still have to appeal to the biggest audience to get sufficient revenue, which would undermine the whole principle. What was crucial was setting up local radio on a workable basis, otherwise the audience would not listen, the stations would fail and that would be the end of it. As he saw it the biggest danger was 'second rate programme companies [chasing] third rate Station Managers with minority programmes for non-existent audiences.'<sup>497</sup>

There was a flurry of stories about commercial radio being introduced to replace pirate stations in August<sup>498</sup> but by November, a note in the Board of Management Minutes said that an open meeting for the LRA had 'fallen rather flat.'<sup>499</sup> Several factors had emerged which began to change the picture. At the end of June, Tony Benn was moved to the Ministry of Technology and Edward Short became PMG. Towards the end of his

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<sup>493</sup> Benn *ibid* p 394

<sup>494</sup> Eg *The Guardian* 'White paper on radio' by Anne Duchene 5 March 1966

<sup>495</sup> BBC WAC Paper: The Development of Local Radio 26 November 1964 Board of Governors Papers R1/100/7

<sup>496</sup> *Financial Times* 'Who should operate local radio?' by John Gorst 22 August 1966

<sup>497</sup> Op cit

<sup>498</sup> Eg *The Sun* 'Britain Gets 200 pop stations' 5 August 1966 The rumour was said to have been started by Hugh Jenkins (MP Putney, Labour) according to Board of Management Minutes 15 August 1966 R2/19/5

<sup>499</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 14 November R2/19/7

tenure, Benn had stalled any decisions on local broadcasting, for example rejecting the Manchester City Corporation proposals for their own station, saying it was up to Parliament to decide the principles of local radio first. The details of organization and finance were the priority.<sup>500</sup> Edward Short also deferred to the government review on broadcasting, but he dropped hints that the government would certainly maintain the principles of public service broadcasting in any proposals.<sup>501</sup>

In July 1966, the BBC was given private assurances that it would be given permission to proceed with local radio, subject to details. A report from Hugh Greene of a meeting with the PMG suggested that the exact scale of the experiment, as it was being called, were to be decided, but Manchester should be one of the locations, working in some kind of partnership with the City Council.<sup>502</sup> On 29 July, Hugh Greene wrote to the Chairman, Lord Normanbrook, to inform him that the Ministerial Committee on Broadcasting had confirmed the experiment, although there was disagreement about how much control the PMG would have over names nominated for the local broadcasting councils, as the advisory councils would be known.<sup>503</sup>

What is not clear is how the stations would be paid for. The BBC had publicly pledged in *Local Radio in the Public Interest* that they could finance a local radio pilot without increasing the licence fee. From an ideological point of view, the PMG was keen to involve local authorities as a means of exploring the permutations of public body partnerships. This could also extend to universities. So this left room for these authorities to contribute as much finance as possible to the setting up of the stations. The exact details would be published in the White Paper, but meanwhile the BBC started to liaise with the Association of Municipal Councils about possible locations.

By November, the Director-General was able to write to H G Lillicrap, Director of Radio Services at the GPO, to tell him of the timetable for the

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<sup>500</sup> *The Guardian* 'Manchester Radio Off' 2 July 1966

<sup>501</sup> *The Times* 'Public service principles for local broadcasting' 7 July 1966 He made a similar quote in October, according to the *Financial Times* 'More hints on local broadcasting' 27 October 1966

<sup>502</sup> BBC WAC Report from DG on meeting with PMG 19 July 1966 Local Broadcasting Papers 1965-1968 R78/608/1

<sup>503</sup> BBC WAC Letter from DG to Chairman 29 July 1966 R78/608/1 *ibid*

first stations.<sup>504</sup> Discussions were underway with the Town Clerk in Manchester about estimated costs and sources of revenue but he pointed out that there was a need to match the practicalities of broadcasting with the financial support available in this and other locations.<sup>505</sup> A further memo to the GPO outlined the current estimates of costs, which stood at a capital start-up of £30,000 – £35,000, depending on the transmission radius, and operating costs of £53,000 per station. But the memo also pointed out that revenue (ie running) costs started before the station went on air, which spread the burden out, and there were also central charges to be incorporated, such as music copyright payments, library charges and training. Despite this, Gillard was confident 'money will flow in.'<sup>506</sup>

The timing of the White Paper was geared to the Marine Offences Bill, which would outlaw pirate radio stations. But it was clear that local radio was not the replacement. Even as far back as March, Tony Benn had argued in a House of Commons debate that 'if it is thought that by towing Radio Caroline up the Manchester Ship Canal one has somehow met the deep need for that great conurbation for a sense of communication between different people in that area it is a mistake.'<sup>507</sup> The replacement for pirate radio came about as a result of the reorganisation of the BBC's radio networks, into Radios One, Two, Three and Four. The creation of local radio was a by-product.

What was remarkable at this stage was that these discussions and preparations are kept out of the public eye. A misleading report in *The Times* in late November suggested that the government would propose a network of 250 local stations run by public bodies which would take advertising and be run by an independent radio authority, and would also run a national pop channel.<sup>508</sup> There were a few references in the Board of Governors minutes and the meetings of the Board of Management to local broadcasting, but these were mainly about further lobbying or gathering of

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<sup>504</sup> BBC WAC Letter from DG to H G Lillicrap 17 November 1966 R78/608/1 *ibid* Two stations would go on air within nine months of the go ahead, and four more within 15 months

<sup>505</sup> BBC WAC Letter from DG to H G Lillicrap 17 November 1966 *op cit*

<sup>506</sup> BBC WAC Memo from DSB to H G Lillicrap 28 November 1966 R78/608/1 *ibid*

<sup>507</sup> House of Commons Debate March 3 1966

<sup>508</sup> *The Times* 'Cabinet Plan for local radio stations' 29 November 1966

supporters.<sup>509</sup> Certainly the groundwork for local broadcasting was in place by the time the White Paper was finally published on 20 December 1966. This was the culmination of five years' debate and discussion that finally made local broadcasting a reality. As a statement of intent, it included a clear view of some aspects of the service. The government wanted it to be genuinely 'local' in character: it even quoted the relevant section from the July 1962 White Paper, demonstrating a shared viewpoint with the Conservative government.<sup>510</sup> However the government believed that 'this objective is incompatible with commercial broadcasting' but they did not rule out advertising as a way of raising revenue as long as public service principles came first.<sup>511</sup> The ideological concept continued:

'The government believe that local radio organized and produced as a public service would be most likely to realize those social purposes to the full and would at its best prove an integrating and educative force in the life of the local community.'<sup>512</sup>

Having authorized the BBC to run the nine station experiment, the ambiguities arose on a practical level, concerning financial support. The White Paper, as foreseen, ruled out licence fee money and instead envisaged 'local sources of funding (but not subvention of the rates) from local authorities and other bodies.'<sup>513</sup> Finally the White Paper made it clear that the government could change its mind after the end of the experimental period and that this was neither a permanent service nor a commitment for the BBC to run it.<sup>514</sup>

Press reaction was largely negative. The leader in the *Evening Standard* was very critical, calling it a 'confused and indecisive document', especially with regard to financing the service.<sup>515</sup> It pointed out that since local authorities and other bodies were publicly funded at source, the money raised for local radio, however this was done, was still effectively public money. It argued it would have made more sense to have a service run by

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<sup>509</sup> Eg Board of Management Minutes November 7 1966 DSB reports that the NUJ are anxious to press the claim for BBC run stations to the PMG BBC WAC R2/19/7

<sup>510</sup> Home Office *White Paper* (Cmnd 3169 HMSO 1966) para 33

<sup>511</sup> Home Office Op cit para 34

<sup>512</sup> Home Office Op cit para 36

<sup>513</sup> Home Office Op cit para 41

<sup>514</sup> Home Office Op cit para 42

<sup>515</sup> *Evening Standard* 20 December 1966



private enterprise. *The Scotsman* pointed out that the terrain of the Highlands meant VHF was virtually unusable, so a promise by the PMG to have a Scottish station as one of the first nine was worthless.<sup>516</sup> And it pointed out if this was a genuine experiment, why were not commercial companies allowed to trial stations too?

## Conclusion

In this section, comprising this and the previous two chapters, I have used archival and other evidence to uncover a number of crucial aspects in the story of local broadcasting and started to build a picture of the way the genesis of the stations emerged from the BBC between 1955 and 1966. I have demonstrated that the motivation for moving into this area came from several different factors, which combined in varying degrees to move the project along. As I have argued, it was due in part to the observations of Frank Gillard and his perceptions of local broadcasting in America, which gave him ideas of how a similar service might work in the UK. From his perspective, local broadcasting put right the structural weaknesses of the BBC's regional system, and he harnessed arguments around public service broadcasting as a way of demonstrating the role it could play.

Approaching the subject from a different perspective, senior management at the BBC was aware that if commercial operators started local broadcasting, this would end its monopoly. The files show clearly that the BBC was aware of the danger and appreciated that they did not want to be seen to embark on local radio simply as a reactive or defensive measure. However, it took some time for the strategic implications to be formulated, and even longer for the practical ones. The threat of commercial competition was definitely a factor, but as has already been made clear, the BBC did not have control over its own destiny: all it could do was make a good case.

By the early 1960s, when the BBC was making a strong public commitment to local broadcasting, it was gathering more evidence and ideas about how this would work in practice, to support their case. But

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<sup>516</sup> *The Scotsman* 'Local broadcasting given go ahead' 21 December 1966

again, despite the approval of the Pilkington Committee, the final decision rested with the government. The closed-circuit experiments had produced many different programme ideas but interaction with the audience did not exist, so it became more of a production exercise. Nor was there a definite projection of what 'community' really meant and how the local service would identify with it, to allow genuine access. However there were many other valuable lessons, and it is remarkable to see how Gillard managed to draw so many recommendations together from such a disparate amount of evidence, and how single-minded he was in his ultimate goal.

In this chapter, I have argued that the vicissitudes of the years following Pilkington could have caused other organizations to lose heart but the BBC, with Gillard in a key role, pursued local radio doggedly, by continuing to steer their arguments to meet current circumstances. If press reports were to be believed, local radio could well have emerged in a very different format. I would argue that the fact that the alternative, commercial-based strategies were not as coherently organised aided the BBC's cause. The BBC's claim was backed up by dint of its experience and a pedigree in public service that it was hard to deny, thus persuading the Labour government that there was a need for local radio, despite the fact that a demand was hard to prove. By Spring 1966, it was clear that local radio would happen, in some format. Again, if press reports were to be believed, general opinion was on the side of local broadcasting following a public service ethos rather than being a commercial operation. Certainly the main debating points, as illustrated by the BBC's *Local Radio in the Public Interest*, continued to highlight the potential that local radio offered communities. This negated any suggestion that local radio might be a replacement for pirate radio. However, it was the need to legislate for the outlawing of pirate radio that provided the circumstances to introduce measures that re-organised the BBC networks and to create the local radio experiment at the same time. By July 1966, the BBC's long preparations and its ability to appear amenable to shifting circumstances secured the prize of launching local radio.

There were still many unresolved questions and challenges. Not least of these was the financial settlement, based not on licence fee income but on

a model involving local authority subsidy and grants. Having rejected forms of commercial funding and using the licence fee, the government and the BBC were forced to adopt this alternative model. The White Paper set the framework for the experiment and as the next chapter shows, the flaws in this provision would soon be exposed.

## **Section Three: Developments**

### **CHAPTER SEVEN: 1967 – 1969: Going on Air**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter covers the period from the government go ahead to create the local radio experiment in December 1966, through the launch of the first eight stations in 1967-68 and the subsequent evaluation which was concluded with the Minister of Posts and Telecommunication's decision in August 1969 to grant the BBC a permanent local service. The key themes explored break down into three main areas: preparing for launch; the first eight stations, and the evaluation process for the experiment. In addition to reflecting back to questions already raised earlier, in this chapter I will put forward the arguments about the choice of locations for the first stations, the efficacy of this selection process and the role of the local authorities and other bodies. Secondly there is the issue of the financial subsidy for the stations, how this worked in practice and whether it was judged to be a success. I will also argue that various factors determined how the stations sounded on air, influencing the content and how they operated.

I assess the impact of the VHF-only transmission on the available audience and how listeners responded to the service. In particular, there is the fundamental question of whether the first stations managed to live up to their aspirations to engage the local communities and provide genuine access for interested people to get involved. I will also examine the reaction of the wider community, in terms of how the stations were received within the BBC, in the national press, the government and those proposing alternatives to BBC Local Radio. Finally I will highlight the factors that determined the government's decision to proceed with a permanent service of local radio run by the BBC, at the same time arguing that the evaluation process itself was not without limitations.

#### **Who would like a station?**

As the previous chapter outlined, the period leading up to the White Paper in December 1966 involved last minute changes surrounding the framework

within which local radio was to be established. The principles laid out by the government were intended to be used as working guidelines for the BBC to interpret and put into practice, as a means of establishing the service, all under the guise of an experiment. As I will argue, there were flaws and ambiguities in the rubric, which presented particular challenges to the BBC, especially in terms of managing the financial aspects. Despite this, it is important to note the speed with which the Corporation was able to get local radio on air: the first stations launched less than a year after the publication of the White Paper, which was a considerable feat. As previous chapters have made clear, this was due to the efforts of Frank Gillard and his team in organising various elements within the BBC into a state of preparedness. At the Board of Governors meeting on 12 January 1967, the Director-General spoke of the 'war book' that was ready and the progress of necessary staff arrangements.<sup>517</sup> The phrase 'war book' captures the sense that this has been a long-running and tactically-driven campaign.

It is also worth noting another perceptible shift from late 1966 onwards, in the way that decisions were made. The files show that there was a considerable amount of consultation and referral to the PMG and his staff around key areas. The PMG had the final say on three important points: the locations of the stations, the appointment of the Local Broadcasting Advisory Councils and the frequencies on which they broadcast. On all three points there was extensive collaboration with the BBC, particularly in the first two areas.

The BBC also had to work in partnership with local authorities, which were, in most cases, providing a large amount of the running costs. The Corporation's independence regarding all other matters, from the appointment of staff to the content of the output, was maintained. Yet this was significant as it demonstrated awareness within the BBC that local broadcasting could only succeed if they were open and willing to explore working relationships with others, where they were not always the dominant partner. It is probably fair to speculate that since the BBC had endured so many years of negotiation and speculation about the very possibility of

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<sup>517</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 12 January 1967 R1/35/1

getting local radio on air, once the prize was in sight, they were happy to do whatever they needed to keep their grasp on it. There is an example of this in a memo from Gillard to the Controllers of the Regions, dated 11 November 1966. He said the 'White Paper is swinging violently' and the suggestion was that 'we might have to operate in circumstances which none of us have previously envisaged which would require a very high degree of cooperation on the part of the entire community'. Therefore it was necessary to choose areas where the population would back the BBC enthusiastically.<sup>518</sup> So the necessity for some *realpolitik* was beginning to emerge, especially in relation to the choice of locations for the first stations. As the memo above suggested, the BBC faced some complex dilemmas. This was after all an experiment, and the BBC had to make this a success in order to secure a future in local broadcasting. Where the first stations would be sited was of paramount importance in determining the outcome.

These locations would need to demonstrate genuine enthusiasm for the project, and an engagement with the ideals of community involvement. The main channel for gauging potential support was through the local authorities, and the BBC and the Association of Municipal Councils (AMC) organised a joint meeting to be held on 27 January 1967 for representatives to express an interest. As Gillard wrote in a paper for the Board of Governors: 'Certainly no local station could be set up under this scheme without the strong support of the local authority.'<sup>519</sup> However, enthusiasm was not, on its own, sufficient to get a station. The provisions of the White Paper called for the stations to be funded by local authority subsidy, so local authorities had to pledge financial support as well.

This required further clarification, which was one of the main discussion points at a meeting with the PMG two days before the BBC/AMC conference. The White Paper said that there would be no 'subvention from the rates'<sup>520</sup> (ie there could be no specific levy as part of the rates that went towards a local radio station) and the PMG emphasized that this had to be

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<sup>518</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Frank Gillard to Controllers 11 November 1966 Local Radio Policy 1964-68 R102/73

<sup>519</sup> BBC WAC Report by DSB 17 January 1967 G8/67 in Board of Governors Papers R1/103/1

<sup>520</sup> Home Office *White Paper on Broadcasting* (Cmnd 3169 HMSO 1966) para 41

interpreted literally.<sup>521</sup> However, if stations were awarded on the basis of the highest bid, there was a danger that the selection process would become, effectively, an auction.<sup>522</sup> The BBC looked around for ways of deflecting this impression. Hugh Greene thought one way of mediating this was to put more emphasis on the ability of local authorities to provide premises. Gillard broadened this out to include various other factors governing station selection at the meeting with the PMG on 25 January. The key criteria were to be 'geographic location, definable community, substantial financial support and local enthusiasm.'<sup>523</sup> Other areas that would be taken into consideration included the availability of vacant premises and the potential for news provision from local sources.<sup>524</sup> The PMG attempted to weigh up the relative importance of these factors: '...though the prospect of substantial local financial support was an important factor in the choice of localities, the over-riding immediate need was a service which would convincingly demonstrate the value of local radio.'<sup>525</sup>

Later in the same meeting, the PMG again extolled the 'value' of the service, firmly predicated in terms of public service: 'No doubt there will be difficulties of detail: but the important thing now is to demonstrate through the value of local radio organised and produced as a public service.'<sup>526</sup> The difficulty was how to translate this concept into practice for the 200 delegates representing 80 local authorities in England and Wales when they assembled in Broadcasting House on 27 January 1967. The Conference was co-chaired by Hugh Greene and Sir Mark Henig, who was Chairman of the AMC. It was made clear at the outset that the conference was an exploratory one, to try and address various questions and issues, to set out

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<sup>521</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of Meeting Held 25 January 1967 between PMG, AMC, BBC Local Radio Experiments Policy 1966-69 R102/46

<sup>522</sup> see for example BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 12 January 1967. The Director-General admitted selection would depend on who could pay for a station. The Chairman advised making it clear the decision was shouldered more by the PMG to avoid the BBC bearing any responsibility for this deduction. R1/35/1

<sup>523</sup> BBC WAC Points from Meeting with PMG 25 January 1967 Local Broadcasting Paper 1965-68 R78/608

<sup>524</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>525</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of Meeting Held 25 January 1967 between PMG, AMC, BBC Local Radio Experiments Policy 1966-69 R102/46

<sup>526</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

the timetable ahead and to invite expressions of interest in having a station. It was not, however, a conference to make any decisions.<sup>527</sup>

Frank Gillard outlined how the stations would operate, using points drawn mainly from *Local Radio in the Public Interest*,<sup>528</sup> emphasizing that they would not be pop stations, but rather ‘a local newspaper of the air, exploiting the depth, detail and directness of the radio medium.’<sup>529</sup> Obviously the most pressing issue for the delegates was that of finance. The Director-General announced at the conference that the BBC would meet the capital start-up costs, estimated at £35,000 per site, of all the stations, and underwrite the running costs for the last months of the financial year 1967-68, because local authority budgets were already set. He hoped that the subsequent running costs, £1,000 a week or £56,000 a year, would come from local authorities.<sup>530</sup>

Given the ban on raising revenue directly from the rates, how could local authorities raise funds? Delegates discussed the possibility of programme sponsorship but the BBC ruled this out as it would compromise editorial independence. The tone of the minutes suggested that the gauntlet was thrown down to the local authorities to come up with creative ways of finding other sources of income if they wanted a station. Michael Barton, who was later appointed the first Station Manager at Radio Sheffield, recalls Frank Gillard “working the crowd like Jeffrey Archer running a charity auction” in an effort to drum up support.<sup>531</sup>

In terms of the station selection process, Frank Gillard elaborated on the criteria explored at the meeting with the PMG two days previously, which included the aspiration to get stations in a variety of different locations, such as a farming community, a cathedral town, a coastal site, industrial cities and so on. It was hoped that the first three stations would be chosen by the end of February and the remainder would be selected by early April. Gillard stressed that no decisions had been made at this point so it was up to local authorities to make their applications as soon as possible. The conference

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<sup>527</sup> BBC WAC Conference on Local Sound Broadcasting 27 January 1967 Local Radio Evaluation (Interim) Major Policy 1967-69 R102/41

<sup>528</sup> *Local Radio in the Public Interest: the BBC's Plan* ibid

<sup>529</sup> BBC WAC Conference on Local Sound Broadcasting 27 January 1967 ibid

<sup>530</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>531</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 17 December 2007



was certainly an important exercise for the BBC in promoting the legitimacy of its right to run local radio and as a means of creating an environment for consultation and partnership. However my research in the files shows an alternative side to the public pronouncements.

In terms of possible locations, there was continual naming internally of the potential front-runners. Hugh Greene speculated at various times in early 1967 on which locations would be successful, suggesting Manchester and Norwich to the Board of Management and then Manchester, Hull, Stoke and Bristol to the PMG.<sup>532</sup> In fact even before the conference, at least 12 local authorities made enquiries to the BBC and Frank Gillard went so far as to say Manchester would be the first choice 'of all.'<sup>533</sup>

### **'A three-stage Dutch auction'**

Despite the fact that the BBC/AMC conference had succeeded in galvanizing interest in local radio from the delegates, it was harder for many of them to persuade their colleagues in town halls across the country to translate this into definite promises of money. In a handwritten note written in February 1967, Frank Gillard admitted to feeling 'a bit punctured' when the Town Clerk of Hull called to say his Council would not be giving a firm financial undertaking.<sup>534</sup> Another indication of caution came on the same day. A briefing note from the Head of Secretariat for use around the forthcoming Parliamentary debate on Broadcasting made it clear that there were enough firm offers to meet the initial stage for three stations and 'it is already certain that when the additional six localities are chosen they be chosen from a considerably larger number of applicant communities that are as keen and optimistic as the BBC is about the experiment.' However the words 'it is already certain' have been crossed out in ink and replaced

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<sup>532</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 2 January 1967 & 9 January 1967 R2/20/1; BBC WAC Minutes of Meeting Held 25 January 1967 between PMG, AMC, BBC Local Radio Experiments Policy 1966-69 R102/46

<sup>533</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 2 January 1967 R2/20/1 Presumably given the track record of Manchester with the previous attempt at a 'municipal' radio station under the aegis of Tony Benn

<sup>534</sup> BBC WAC Note from DSB (recipient unknown) 10 February 1967 Local Broadcasting Papers 1965-68 R78/608

with 'there is every expectation', in Gillard's handwriting.<sup>535</sup> Towards the end of February, the picture had improved a little and Gillard was able to report to Hugh Greene that there were eight local authorities willing to provide the full operating costs of a station: Leeds, Blackburn, Sheffield, Gateshead, Leicester, Stoke, Liverpool and Pontypridd.<sup>536</sup> Leicester had even gone one step further and offered to pay the capital costs too. Nottingham and Brighton had undertaken to meet a substantial proportion of the costs and to help raise the rest locally, while Edinburgh, Manchester and Swansea had made formal applications without any financial pledges.<sup>537</sup> Although there were other selection criteria, which will be further explored below, I would make the point here that at this stage no bid got over the first hurdle unless a firm financial commitment was there.<sup>538</sup>

The choice of the first three stations was relatively straightforward as far as the BBC was concerned: (in alphabetical order) Leicester, Liverpool, Sheffield.<sup>539</sup> This was agreed by the PMG on 6 March 1967 and announced in Parliament the following day.<sup>540</sup> However the field for the next six stations was narrowing. Manchester was still hesitant, Bristol and Norwich had made no bid, Hull had pulled out, Swansea and Edinburgh were keen but there was no financial support.<sup>541</sup> That barely left enough applicants to make up the nine stations required. There was some good news with an offer from Durham, which would cover a population of 1.2million on a county-basis – an added bonus for the experiment. However the Gateshead bid began to look untenable as none of the other authorities in the Tyneside/Wearside area were prepared to participate.<sup>542</sup> By the end of March there were still not enough clear contenders from which to choose

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<sup>535</sup> BBC WAC Briefing for the Debate on Broadcasting 10 February 1967 Local Broadcasting Papers 1965-68 R78/608 *ibid*

<sup>536</sup> BBC WAC FG to DG Local Broadcasting: A Progress Report February 22 1967 Local Broadcasting Papers 1965-68 R78/608 Though it was pointed out that Pontypridd was unlikely to raise the money on its own and could not be taken seriously, and also Pontypridd had not attended the BBC/AMC Conference.

<sup>537</sup> BBC WAC *op cit* Manchester was fully expected to come up with the money

<sup>538</sup> BBC WAC Note from DSB to DG which discounted Edinburgh from consideration due to a lack of financial support (undated) *ibid*

<sup>539</sup> See Appendix A Key Dates for the PMG's announcements of the proposed stations

<sup>540</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 9 March 1967 R1/35/1

<sup>541</sup> BBC WAC *op cit*

<sup>542</sup> BBC WAC Note of meeting between PMG and BBC 6 March 1967 Local Broadcasting Papers 1965-68 R78/608

the last six stations, so the PMG could only announce four more, in the House of Commons: Brighton, Manchester, Nottingham and Stoke.<sup>543</sup> The gloss put on this was that it would allow more applicants to come forward and that the BBC had plenty to do for now: this was not a delay.<sup>544</sup>

The Board of Management were told that it was hoped that one of the remaining two stations might be Teesside - a newly constituted county borough which would only come into existence after the local elections in May; the GLC were lobbying hard for a London station and Leeds and Blackburn were both in reserve too.<sup>545</sup> But the local elections in May brought a change in the balance of power for several local authorities, which caused more problems for the stations already chosen. Leicester and Nottingham both went to a Conservative majority, as did Manchester, and these threatened to withdraw all offers of support for a local station made under previous administrations. Blackburn also looked less feasible as it went to 'no overall control'.<sup>546</sup> By the time the PMG met Gillard and Greene again on 27 June to make the final selection, there was very little choice. Leeds had re-entered the race, despite having a new Conservative council, and the second choice fell to either Durham or Lincoln.<sup>547</sup>

What is crucial here is that the BBC's position on funding had begun to shift. Blackburn was told that if they could pledge £35,000 then they could get a station, despite the fact that the AMC was very opposed to this site.<sup>548</sup> Shortly after, Gillard made it clear that the BBC would underwrite the running costs as well as the capital costs of the final station – either Durham or Lincoln – depending on which produced a firm bid first.<sup>549</sup> He also admitted to the Board of Management that while eight stations would be acceptable to the Government, any fewer than this would not be. It seems

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<sup>543</sup> BBC WAC Hansard Oral answers columns 1899-1901 23 March 1967 *ibid*

<sup>544</sup> BBC WAC Report from FG 11 April 1967 G38/67 Board of Governors Papers R1/103/2

<sup>545</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 3 April 1967 R2/20/3. It seems the PMG had decided he was keen to see a London station after all, but one based in a borough rather than a GLC-wide operation. Gillard was less enthusiastic as there was no sign of any financial support, but nevertheless he agreed to meet representatives, as 'they show signs of militancy' BBC WAC Report by DSB 11 April 1967 G38/67 Board of Governors Papers R1/103/2

<sup>546</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 15 May 1967 R2/20/4

<sup>547</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 12 June 1967 R2/20/4

<sup>548</sup> BBC WAC Note by FG: Local Radio position 31 May 1967 Local Broadcasting Papers 1956-68 R78/608

<sup>549</sup> BBC WAC FG to DG note 9 June 1967 *op cit*

too that the PMG put extra pressure on the BBC to guarantee enough stations by paying for one itself.<sup>550</sup> Leeds and Durham were formally announced as the final two stations on 4 July, and shortly after, Manchester narrowly voted to withdraw their offer of financial support. On the BBC's advice, the PMG made it clear that Manchester would not be replaced and that the experiment was still perfectly valid with eight instead of nine stations.<sup>551</sup> Internally there were sighs of relief that the BBC could now concentrate on launching the new stations – indeed the resources from Manchester were diverted to Durham, including the recently appointed Station Manager.<sup>552</sup>

Publicly however, this was not represented in such a positive light. In fact the financial aspect of the selection process was likened to 'an astonishing three stage Dutch auction' in an article by Anthony Cowdy in the *Sunday Times* on 9 July.<sup>553</sup> Aside from the structural problem of eliciting local authority contributions without allowing them to use the rates, the main criticism was leveled at the haste with which the bidding process was conducted. According to Cowdy, the first three successful bidders all promised the full amount and were duly awarded their stations. In the second round, only Stoke had the full amount – Brighton and Nottingham pledged half the money with promises to find the remainder from other sources. But Cowdy suggested that Brighton would have got the station at any price while Nottingham – given the proximity to Leicester – needed to promise a lot more. The local elections thinned out the remaining competitors, and Leeds finally got their station, having offered £25,000 over two years.<sup>554</sup> Cowdy's piece was by no means wholly negative – he was hopeful the stations would still be a success and pointed to the brimming confidence of the new station manager.

It is inescapable, however, that the financial aspect of the selection process highlighted some of the shortcomings of the experiment. Four years later, the University of Leicester report called the method of selection

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<sup>550</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 5 June 1967 R2/20/4

<sup>551</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 10 July 1967 R2/20/5

<sup>552</sup> BBC WAC op cit

<sup>553</sup> *Sunday Times* 'How Home Town Radio was sold short' by Anthony Cowdy 9 July 1967

<sup>554</sup> Op cit

'confused and frenzied.'<sup>555</sup> I would also argue that the ability to pay was in danger of eclipsing all other factors, especially the role of proactive and genuine community-involvement in the chosen locations.

### **Other factors in the selection process**

As I have made clear, there was undoubtedly a rather limited choice of locations. The enthusiasm of the January BBC/AMC conference had worn off, when financial and political considerations started to interfere on a local level. There is a whole file in the BBC Written Archive containing letters of interest from 83 different local authorities and councils, some received before and some after the conference.<sup>556</sup> The number of serious - as in, coming with financial backing - bids was then greatly reduced and this in turn was skewed by a geographic imbalance. Most of the offers came from the North, such as Lancashire and Yorkshire, and the Midlands; only one came from southern England and none from Wales and Scotland.

Despite the precarious position of the financial situation, it is clear that the BBC was wholly committed to the experiment, having dedicated over 100 staff to it, and begun the process of resource allocation.<sup>557</sup> What this section will argue is the degree to which the BBC had to play a fine balancing act: there was a genuine investigation into a whole range of factors that affected the potential for running a radio station, yet at the same time they had to fight a rear guard action just to persuade some applicants to stay in the race. My conclusion is that by the time the first stations went on air in November 1967 the BBC was lucky to have kept all eight participants in the experiment at all.

The care and diligence with which the selection process was treated was demonstrated by a paper from Donald Edwards in February 1967, who earlier that month had been appointed the General Manager of Local Radio Development – part of a small HQ team.<sup>558</sup> He visited both Leicester and Nottingham and drew up an exhaustive list of comparable factors.

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<sup>555</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167 p 29

<sup>556</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Individual Cases Vol II 1965-70 R102/69/1

<sup>557</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 10 July 1967 R2/20/5

<sup>558</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Donald Edwards to FG 22 February 1967 Local Broadcasting Papers 1965-68 R78/608

Presumably this was to try and differentiate between two potential locations, which were in close geographic proximity. The criteria included the financial aspects of course, the political make-up of the council, the availability of VHF, possible premises, news arrangements, the attitude of the local press and the reception the BBC might receive generally among the community.

What seems to be missing from the list is any attempt to gauge the potential for community involvement or the identification of interested groups and societies. Instead, Donald Edwards listed material suitable for radio content, such as local personalities, sports clubs and universities.<sup>559</sup> Edwards concluded that Leicester won in terms of finance, having promised full running costs and capital costs, news provision and the fact that a BBC presence here would break new ground.

However, just to illustrate how much volatility there was in the situation, many of Edward's findings turned out to be incorrect. He was confident that all parties on Leicester and Nottingham City Councils would support a station, even if the balance of power shifted after the local elections. As I will show shortly, this was not to be the case. Edwards thought that the local press, the Leicester Mercury and the Nottingham Journal, would be supportive – again, not an accurate prediction.

One aspect of the process was that by relying on local authorities to make so much of the running, there was a key element of self-selection. The BBC clearly did not want to site a station in a hostile environment and having a sympathetic local environment would ease the establishment and help build working relationships. Again, the hand of Gillard was evident in this, as Michael Barton acknowledged 'that was a very deft move.....it got local authorities engaged from the very beginning. If he was going to seek support after two years, how better to get them onside from day one.'<sup>560</sup>

It would be difficult to postulate whether Gillard was actually happy with this arrangement but he certainly made the best of nurturing partnerships with anyone who could support local broadcasting into the next stage. Out of the seven stations that had been announced by May 1967, only two of

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<sup>559</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>560</sup> Michael Barton quoted in Stoller T *Sounds of your life: The History of Independent Radio in the UK* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing Ltd, 2010) p 22

the local authorities remained in Labour control: Sheffield and Stoke. However each locality was subject to variations of political make-up, personalities and attitudes and it took a while for the BBC to discover how the changes might affect the commitment to local radio, as Gillard reported to the Board of Management on 15 May.<sup>561</sup>

As has already been described, the change in political control eventually took Manchester out of the bidding for a station. For a short time, Leicester's position looked precarious too.<sup>562</sup> The problems here actually went further back to when the decision was made to submit an application. Both the Labour and Conservative groups held their meetings in private to get a quick resolution, possibly to get a head start over a bid from Nottingham, and did not hold any public consultation. This haste proved to be the source for the long-running opposition to Radio Leicester championed by the *Leicester Mercury*, believing it was a *fait accompli* that ignored the wishes of ordinary rate-payers.<sup>563</sup> By the time the Board of Governors met on 15 June, the problems in Leicester had been resolved.<sup>564</sup>

A month later it was reported that Nottingham too had nearly pulled out, but the local council voted by a very narrow margin to continue.<sup>565</sup> It is clear that the BBC had to hold its nerve in this difficult time to maintain the momentum and recruit enough stations to make the experiment viable. There were indirect benefits to the selection process as local authorities, usually in the form of the Town Clerk, got to know their Station Manager and established good working relationships that would bear fruit two years hence.

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<sup>561</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 15 May 1967 R2/20/4 This also seems to have been a factor in postponing the announcement of the final two stations which had been due at the end of May.

<sup>562</sup> BBC WAC Report by DSB 4 July 1967 G73/67 Board of Governors Papers R1/103/4

<sup>563</sup> BBC WAC Op cit; BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167

<sup>564</sup> Owen Bentley email correspondence with the author 5 May 2011 Donald Edwards and Maurice Ennals, Station Manager-designate, paid a quiet visit to the leader of the Conservative Group to brief him about the steps the BBC had already undertaken to prepare for local radio and he in turn managed to keep his caucus meeting on side. The clandestine meeting apparently took place in the old BBC regional studio, a disused mortuary, and was arranged by Roland Orton, who ran a news agency and went on to supply news and sport for Radio Leicester

<sup>565</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors minutes 13 July 1967 R1/35/1

But there were still some potentially very serious flaws in the arrangement. One was the financial provision. Even though local authorities had pledged money, there were no guarantees that they were able to find it every year. There were promises to raise money from other sources locally, but again, nothing was signed and delivered. In a paper to the Board of Governors, Gillard admitted that ‘The financial basis for local radio under the White Paper proposals causes continuing anxiety because it seems to hold out little long term prospect.’<sup>566</sup> It was a theme that would recur often in the next two years. Secondly, there was an uneven geographic spread in the experimental stations, with nothing in the south of England apart from Brighton. This could have had serious implications for the impact local radio might have made in the first few years. But it was mitigated to a degree by the variety that existed within the eight stations: from a seaside town (Brighton) to a rural county (Durham), from a relatively recent municipal creation (Stoke-on-Trent) to a conglomerate of communities (Merseyside).

The opening of Radio Leicester on 8 November 1967 provided good opportunities for publicity and paved the way for a successful launch of the first stage of the service.<sup>567</sup> However the issue of finance was never far from the agenda. In a pre-recorded interview on *World at One* on Radio Four, the PMG said he had not ruled out advertising as a means of revenue for the BBC. He said the alternative – using the licence fee for local radio – was unfair as people were paying for a service they could not receive.<sup>568</sup> This was also one of the points that the PMG made in his speech when he officially opened the station, on air, at 1pm on the same day.

“Frankly I don’t know whether we can finance a station in the way that we’ve suggested. Part of the experiment is to find out. But if it can’t be financed in this way, we won’t hesitate to look at the alternatives.”<sup>569</sup>

These references to the financial issue were picked up by the press. *The Sun* called this a ‘veiled threat to the BBC’<sup>570</sup> while *The Daily Telegraph*

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<sup>566</sup> BBC WAC Report by Director of Radio 12 October 1967 G101/67 Board of Governors Papers R1/103/6 Note: Gillard’s title had changed from Director of Sound Broadcasting to Managing Director of Radio in July 1967

<sup>567</sup> Radio Sheffield followed on 15 November and Radio Merseyside on 22 November

<sup>568</sup> BBC WAC Transcript of interview with PMG and William Davies, *World at One*, BBC Radio Four 8 November 1967 Local Broadcasting Papers 1965-68 R78/608

<sup>569</sup> BBC Radio Leicester Opening Day tx 8 November 1967



suggested that Sir Mark Henig (Chairman of the AMC and Lord Mayor of Leicester) was, embarrassingly for the BBC, personally in favour of commercials on radio.<sup>571</sup> However the PMG's speech gave more weight to the community value attached to the station, in particular the role of the local broadcasting council which was "widely representative of the local community including I'm happy to say some very young people."<sup>572</sup>

However there were some moments of drama for the opening day: a few demonstrators outside the station from the Free Radio Association protested against the BBC's monopoly and someone made an anonymous bomb threat to the newsroom, which did not succeed in stopping any of the output.<sup>573</sup> None of this dampened the sense of achievement at the BBC. The Director-General described the opening as having gone 'extremely well and smoothly'<sup>574</sup> while the Chairman, who went to the opening of Radio Merseyside, later received a letter from the PMG expressing gratitude for the way the BBC had contributed to the successful launch of the experiment.<sup>575</sup>

As this section has demonstrated, the selection process for the first stations was fraught with some potential problems. The greatest challenge, that of securing the financial support of local authorities, was a structural imposition of the legislation, which had to be embraced. Gillard and his team, to their credit, made the most of this opportunity as a way of encouraging the support and interest of local authorities, which would prove a useful relationship once the stations were on air. The problem with the financial prerequisite was that this effectively limited potential applicants to the bare minimum, and risked jeopardizing the whole experiment. It was all very well to claim this funding arrangement was part of the trial, but it was self-defeating if it actively prevented participation. This was reinforced by the eventual outcome where the BBC had to subsidize all, or part, of the running costs for several stations in order to get them on air.

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<sup>570</sup> *The Sun* 9 November 1967

<sup>571</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* 'Bomb Hoax at Local Radio Debut' 9 November 1967 No one else seems to have picked up on Henig's views

<sup>572</sup> BBC Radio Leicester Opening Day *ibid*

<sup>573</sup> *Daily Express* 'The first local station tunes in on bomb alarm' 9 November 1967

<sup>574</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 November 1967 R1/35/1

<sup>575</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors minutes 30 November 1967 *op cit*

The BBC evidently was conscientious about exploring other criteria that could have a bearing on whether a locality should get a station, but, apart from the fact these all took second place to the financial issue, the chronology shows that these factors often shifted and were not wholly reliable. Perhaps more revealingly, there is no evidence that the BBC really managed to do any research about specific groups or associations or communities that could contribute to make one of the experimental stations a success. The accelerated timescale was probably one limiting factor, however the notion of wider consultation does not seem to be addressed at all in any of the files. So by the end of 1967, with three stations on air and five more in the advanced stages of preparation, the confidence with which the BBC has launched the service belies some potentially damaging and jeopardizing factors.

### **The first eight stations, 1967 - 1969**

Following the successful launch of the first three stations, the remaining five were all on air by July 1968.<sup>576</sup> Practical arrangements for getting the stations on air were looked after by the Local Radio Committee, which was reconvened in January 1967, with D'A Marriott (Assistant Director of Sound Broadcasting) in the Chair. The main tasks facing the committee included recruiting and training staff, revising the station handbook, organising premises and all the technical facilities, including equipping the studios and sorting out transmitter arrangements, as well as thinking about the provision of news services. Given the pressing schedule, it is not surprising that D'A Marriott reported to the committee that: 'to meet this timetable would require special efforts from all concerned and some of the normal administrative processes might have to be short-circuited.'<sup>577</sup>

As has been covered in previous chapters, the BBC had invested considerable resources in planning how to create stations from scratch and much of this information and preparation came in useful, such as using editorial and policy guidelines already drawn up as a basis for the final

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<sup>576</sup> Radio Nottingham went 'live' on 31 January 1968, Radio Brighton on 14 February, Radio Stoke-on-Trent launched on 14 March, Radio Leeds on 24 June and Radio Durham on 3 July.

<sup>577</sup> BBC WAC Committee meeting minutes 2 January 1967 Local Radio Committee Minutes R102/45

station handbook. Some areas did not go completely to plan. To staff the stations, initially with 16 per site, would require recruiting around 130 personnel. The 1961-62 exercises had helped to identify, and indeed train, suitable people, especially for the Station Manager role, but there was concern that not enough potential managers were coming forward.<sup>578</sup>

One of those who had been involved with the earlier exercises and who was singled out for the Station Manager route was Michael Barton, who describes himself going to Sheffield as 'Frank's outrider'.<sup>579</sup> Robert Gunnell also had previous experience from the London experiment and had been through the Poole training scheme in 1962. He was asked to apply for Stoke-on-Trent as their manager but declined as he didn't know the area, but he was selected to run Radio Brighton – which was his hometown.<sup>580</sup> That did not mean there were not enough staff to choose from for the remaining posts: Hugh Pierce reported there were 137 applicants for jobs on the first three stations,<sup>581</sup> and Gillard told the Board of Governors there were 100 people interested in working on the Manchester station, even though it did not materialize.<sup>582</sup>

There is a very useful contemporary study in the Archive from a post graduate student at the University of Oxford, E Helen Evans, who looked at the application data and in some cases interviewed successful candidates for jobs in BBC Local Radio during the experimental period.<sup>583</sup> Her analysis showed that the BBC treated job selection, in effect, as part of the experimental process. Those from within the Corporation had a variety of backgrounds: studio managers, secretarial, radio production. One aspect that emerges from my interviews with long-serving staff was the usefulness of diverse production skills. Through his experience at the World Service, Owen Bentley was able to drive a desk and present or announce programmes. This combination helped him become a Programme Assistant at Radio Stoke-on-Trent.<sup>584</sup> Similarly Robert Gunnell was multi-skilled in

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<sup>578</sup> BBC WAC Committee meeting minutes 6 April 1967 Op cit

<sup>579</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 17 December 2007

<sup>580</sup> Robert Gunnell interview with the author 28 July 2010

<sup>581</sup> BBC WAC Committee minutes 6 April op cit

<sup>582</sup> BBC WAC Report by DSB Board of Governors minutes 3 July 1967 R1/35/1

<sup>583</sup> BBC WAC Personnel Selection in Local Radio R102/49/1

<sup>584</sup> Owen Bentley interview with author 19 July 2010

various production capacities, including as a producer of Talks, Features and as a reporter/presenter too.<sup>585</sup> So while it is not feasible to argue that BBC Local Radio invented multi-skilling as such, it was able to take staff who were used to operating a range of equipment and put them into new production practices. It also guaranteed that the new recruits would not baulk at being asked to perform a variety of tasks.

The majority of new staff were young (under 30) and Evans put much emphasis on being fit and healthy as the working conditions, with constant deadlines and long hours, were likely to be tough. A third of the new intake came from outside the BBC. According to Evans, many applicants were attracted by the pioneering spirit of the venture, and this enthusiasm may have made up for what some lacked in experience and maturity. But Evans applauded the flexibility with which the BBC Board's system adapted their requirements to the available applicants.<sup>586</sup>

The next step for the new recruits was training. Initially news and sports material were gathered from local news agencies, with several exceptions. Radio Merseyside used the 'blacks'<sup>587</sup> from the *Liverpool News* and employed a Chief News Assistant, Rex Bawden, later to become the Station Manager, to produce the news.<sup>588</sup> Radio Leeds also sourced their own news with the help of three extra posts. The Local Radio Committee was told this was due to there being no suitable news agency in the area.<sup>589</sup> It is interesting that the money for these three extra news staff in Leeds could be found so readily. Leicester, Nottingham, Brighton and Sheffield had contracts with local agencies and Durham made their 'own arrangements'.<sup>590</sup>

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<sup>585</sup> Robert Gunnell interview with author 28 July 2010

<sup>586</sup> BBC WAC Personnel Selection in Local Radio *ibid*

<sup>587</sup> The 'blacks' were the carbon copies of stories written by the newspaper journalists

<sup>588</sup> BBC WAC Personnel Selection in Local Radio *ibid*

<sup>589</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Committee minutes 21 September 1967 *ibid* Phil Sidey, the Leeds Station Manager, offered a different explanation, in his usual pugnacious style, which involved throwing what he calls 'a coldly structured tantrum' in front of Gillard and threatening to resign. His version of the argument centred on whether local newspapers or their agencies would share stories with the station and give them scoops or breaking news. Sidey *ibid* pp 15 - 16

<sup>590</sup> BBC WAC Report on the Local Radio Experiment 21 March 1969 G41/69 Board of Governors Papers R1/105/1

The selection of staff obviously had an impact on the types of programmes that were made. Essentially the schedule was a blank canvas: the only steer was the necessity to provide local news and information programmes at breakfast, lunchtime and in the early evenings, with more specific, community-focused content dotted around. This would add up to four or five hours a day, with the remaining 12 hours output coming from one or more of the networks.<sup>591</sup> One important influence on what the locally-produced programmes might sound like was the training course the BBC sent staff on. Owen Bentley remembers that this tended to teach 'old' or traditional BBC skills, such as feature or package making. There was little about how to run an Outside Broadcast but every station was drilled in a 'breakfast-type' show.<sup>592</sup>

Station schedules began with a breakfast show, which also took some of the *Today* programme from Radio Four. Then the station would switch to Radio Two or Four, and return for a 30-minute programme aimed at women or housewives. There would be a local lunchtime news programme, back to network for most of the afternoon, and then an early evening news programme, which pre-dated the 'drivetime' concept. The night time schedule was then given over to a wide variety of minority programmes, many of them made by community groups, colleges, WEAs, or individuals.

The schedules for the early years of local radio emerged with a remarkable degree of homogeneity, despite attitudes like Robert Gunnell's in Brighton, who said he had decided to be "bloody-minded": "I'm not going to look at anybody else's schedule until this one opens.....I'm not going to be influenced by what went on in Sheffield or Merseyside."<sup>593</sup> Yet as Hugh Pierce told the researchers from Leicester University: "We train a highly intellectual group of broadcasters and send them out to run their own stations and it's amazing how many of them come up with the name 'Coffee Break' for their women's programme."<sup>594</sup>

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<sup>591</sup> BBC *BBC Local Radio: Some Questions Answered* (London: BBC Publications, 1967)

<sup>592</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*

<sup>593</sup> Robert Gunnell *ibid*

<sup>594</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167 P 214

Where there was some diversity, it came from specialist programmes like *Down to earth* for gardeners; *Jazz Quarter*, *George and Harry* (78rpm records) (all from Leicester) to *We're ordinary Sheffield workmen* (a history programme from Sheffield) and *Insight and Outlook* (a Christian magazine) and *Bird's Eye View* (for women) for Durham. Owen Bentley recalls a particular minority programme at Stoke: *The Esperanto family Robinson*, which involved a local headmaster recording conversations with his family in Esperanto, in a soap opera style, in their front room on an old Ferrograph machine, which Bentley then edited down.<sup>595</sup> However, Owen realized that this wide variety of programmes raised problems for the station and for the listener: "What we didn't realize was that that's no way to build an audience, nothing fed into each other, you had to switch on at a particular time for something."<sup>596</sup>

With so much of the schedule relying on segmented, 'built' programmes aimed at quite specific audiences, the initial impetus was to try and build up better local publicity for each station and its schedule. However this was one area that had not been thought through adequately, how to promote the stations. There was only a small financial allocation: prior to the launch, each station received £500 for local publicity and then, later, a further £500. But what was given with one hand was effectively taken with the other as there was a strong directive from Hugh Greene banning anyone at the BBC from taking out adverts in newspapers and paying for them with licence payers' money. After some heated exchanges between the Station Managers, Donald Edwards and Frank Gillard, the rule was slightly relaxed to allow press ads which 'familiarise the public with the local station's wavelength.'<sup>597</sup> To this day, Robert Gunnell remembers the BBC's publicity efforts as 'a total disgrace.'<sup>598</sup> But he found an ingenious solution with the creation of an independent 'Friends of Radio Brighton' supporters' club

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<sup>595</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*

<sup>596</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*

<sup>597</sup> BBC WAC Even pleading a special case for Radio Leicester, because of the Mass Communication Research by the University of Leicester taking place there, to help publicise the station to improve market research fell on deaf ears. Memo from DR to ADR 20 December 1967 Local Radio Policy 1964-68 R102/73

<sup>598</sup> Robert Gunnell *ibid* SORBA was to play a significant role in future events, most notably regarding the campaign against the Annan report.

(SORBA) when the station launched, which took on the cheerleading role, at no cost to the licence payer.<sup>599</sup>

As the minutes from the Local Radio Committee demonstrated, a limited structure emerged to support the eight stations once they were on air. The decision was also taken that this team would be centrally-based, under the management of the Radio Directorate, rather than fitting into the residual regional structure.<sup>600</sup> This was a key strategic point: even though the Station Managers were to be given great autonomy, there had to be some semblance of accountability. But how this relationship was to work in practice took time to develop. The HQ team was led by Donald Edwards, who was given the title General Manager, Local Radio Development. Edwards had already had a long and distinguished career, and was currently Editor for News and Current Affairs.<sup>601</sup> There were three other posts: Bill Coysh, veteran of the West Region and the previous experiments, was responsible for training; education co-ordination was organised by A Langford and Hugh Pierce was the general administrator. Edwards left in February 1968, to become Managing Editor of ITN. Hugh Pierce was promoted to take over, but this appointment was unusual as he was a lawyer by training and had no broadcast experience.<sup>602</sup> However, it is generally agreed that it was an excellent choice as he steered local radio development and expansion into the mid-1970s with great tact and diplomacy.<sup>603</sup>

However there were practical limitations as to what the HQ team could do. It was only a small team, and since they were based in London, they could not hear any of the output, except by driving round the country or requesting tapes. Programme logs and schedules were sent to London, but more often than not, this was for bureaucratic reasons rather than helping

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<sup>599</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 18 December 1967 R2/20/6

<sup>600</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Committee minutes 2 February 1967 *ibid* The Local Radio Committee disbanded in April 1968, handing over its affairs to the HQ Team, whose members were all on the Committee anyway.

<sup>601</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>602</sup> Owen Bentley interview with author *ibid*

<sup>603</sup> Op cit Ian Trethowan paid him a glowing tribute in his Oral History interview: "one of the gentlest, nicest, most civilized men I think that I remember in the BBC and he was quite marvellous in the way that he nourished the staff of the local stations." BBC WAC Oral History Interview: Ian Trethowan 2 March 1983

shape the editorial content. This left the stations to work largely on their own. Neither Robert Gunnell nor Owen Bentley recalls much contact with the HQ team in the early years. However, one very important direct link was maintained. Frank Gillard visited all eight of the stations, an occasion which was very well received by the staff. "He was an incredibly boosting presence", recalls Owen Bentley, "He'd be there, sitting, listening.....if you could say he was reserved and friendly that sounds like a contradiction, but that's how I remember him."<sup>604</sup>

The other aspect of the support and guiding structure that needed to be established was the Local Radio Councils.<sup>605</sup> The relationship between the LRCs and the BBC also took time to become established and would have a significant impact on events in the coming years. According to the BBC publication *BBC Local Radio: Some Questions Answered*, each council would have around 12 members, representing all aspects of the community, including women, education, industry, commerce, religion and sport. The delegates would not, however be there to represent sectional interests, but they would 'play a fully formative part in the development of the station' in programme policy, content and finance, and have a 'maximum voice in the direction of the station.'<sup>606</sup> There was a fine balance to be achieved in how the councils operated with their Station Manager, as it was made clear that the BBC retained complete and final editorial control on the content. It was hoped the relationship would be based on 'commonsense and goodwill'.<sup>607</sup>

There was another element to this, however. The members were all appointed by the Postmaster General, not the BBC, thus presenting a sense of neutrality and independence. Although the BBC played quite a prominent role in helping to suggest and nominate members and chairs, there was still a strong sense of separation between the LRCs and the BBC. This changed in 1970 when the Post Office relinquished appointment rights and the LRCs became a purely BBC operation. It is noticeable how the staff perceived this distinction: Owen Bentley is very clear about when

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<sup>604</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*

<sup>605</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167 Note that the word 'advisory' which had originally been inserted into the title was dropped to avoid confusion with the other BBC advisory councils.

<sup>606</sup> BBC *BBC Local Radio: Some Questions Answered* (London: BBC Publications, 1967) p 6

<sup>607</sup> BBC Op cit



the LRC (during his time at Radio Stoke-on-Trent) was an *external* body and how this had changed when he was at Radio Oxford in the early 70s and the LRC had become *internal* to the BBC.<sup>608</sup>

### VHF and relay

One of the biggest concerns for everyone involved in the experiment was how the audience was supposed to listen. The argument about the lack of available medium wave frequencies and the necessity of using VHF was often repeated and the public was encouraged to invest in VHF sets. Initially the audience responded favourably, with *The Sun* reporting that electrical dealers in Leicester had posted an increase of 300% in VHF set sales and waiting lists for more expensive models.<sup>609</sup> This was backed up by the national picture: the trade journal, *Electrical and Radio Trading*, said that VHF sets now accounted for one third of all sets, up from one fifth, and the total sold would reach 1,000,000 by 1970.<sup>610</sup> Despite these encouraging statistics, there was a large degree of uncertainty about who was listening – which was limited by the determining factor of access to VHF. In Stoke, Owen Bentley recalls the window displays in the shops of the VHF sets but he does not think there were enough people prepared to buy them, despite the fact that industrial prosperity and employment in the potteries, steelworks and mines was high.<sup>611</sup>

There was however another way of hearing the output – via the relay arrangements with television companies such as Rediffusion, who provided television and radio output via wired networks. The types of developments that carried relay services were newly built housing estates and tower blocks, which tended by definition to be local authority-owned housing. This put a different emphasis on the type of local radio listener. Owen Bentley had an early suspicion that “most likely the audience were the council house audience, they were the ones most likely to listen.”<sup>612</sup>

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<sup>608</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*

<sup>609</sup> *The Sun* ‘Local Radio Pioneers Score a Hit’ 25 January 1968

<sup>610</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 10 February 1968 R2/22/1

<sup>611</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*

<sup>612</sup> *Op cit*

However this diversity in the listenership was not necessarily reflected in the output, as a Programme Assistant at Radio Leicester opined, in 1971. She knew there were many council estate listeners to her women's programme but the volunteers who wanted to get involved were from a different social background. 'When I started a listener's recipe thing I used to get fantastic dinner dishes and what I wanted was something cheap and good and solid for high tea because I felt they were the people really listening.'<sup>613</sup>

One of the most long-lasting legacies of the experiment was the eventual reversal of the VHF/MW position. The BBC's view that MW was not usable for multiple stations and that only VHF would work was not shared by the increasingly vocal lobby who had their own ideas for commercially-funded local radio. There was no doubt that the situation was very complex and that views tended to be entrenched, based on whose scientific findings one chose to follow. From the BBC's point of view, there was also the complication of international agreements and administrative proceedings. Those opposing the status quo and advocating more inventive use of medium wave had their own reports to back them up, such as the Pye proposals for 100 stations on MW, as presented to the Pilkington Committee.<sup>614</sup> What seems fairly clear towards the end of the 1960s is that the lay person could be forgiven for not really being able to disentangle either viewpoint from reality or conjecture.<sup>615</sup>

As was the case before the White Paper and at the start of the local radio experiment, the main proponents arguing for greater use of medium wave were the Local Radio Association, which had now been joined by the television presenter, Hughie Green, who had co-founded a company, the Commercial Broadcasting Consultants in 1966.<sup>616</sup> In Spring 1968, Green began to capture press attention regularly with his conviction that almost any city could have a medium wave station.<sup>617</sup> At about the same time, Paul

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<sup>613</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167 p 113

<sup>614</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167

<sup>615</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>616</sup> Stoller *ibid* p 20

<sup>617</sup> eg *Daily Mail* 13 March 1968

Bryan, the shadow spokesman responsible for broadcasting, proposed a plan for 100 commercial stations on medium wave.<sup>618</sup> The PMG retaliated in the House of Commons, arguing that Bryan's costing of the stations was unrealistic and a motion condemning the plan was signed by 100 Labour MPs.<sup>619</sup> The press were also divided on the Tory plans: *The Economist* was dubious and thought it was only viable in large towns while *New Society* liked the Tory idea that regional and local newspapers would be allowed to share the running of them.<sup>620</sup>

The continuing argument in favour of increased use of MW demonstrated that the arrival of BBC Local Radio on VHF had not put an end to the debate. Moreover the BBC was beginning to find itself on the back foot: it had to defend the use of VHF when it was clear there was not enough research into who and how many could listen. The very fact it was on VHF also militated against using licence fee money to pay for it, as there was a clear argument that if not everyone could hear, why should they subsidise it? And then the BBC was faced with some awkward decisions about how to develop the service further with more stations, if it could not prove the case for VHF.

But it is worth noting that slowly there were signs within the BBC that VHF was not all that they wished it could be. Phil Sidey in a piece for the BBC in-house journal *Ariel* wrote frankly about the disadvantages of VHF.<sup>621</sup> Within twelve months, the BBC had to make a significant doctrinal shift in its approach to the use and re-allocation of medium wave for local radio. This was also bound up, inextricably, with looming financial problems. But as far as the first stations were concerned, the use of VHF was a decision they had no choice over and was clearly a handicap to understanding who their audience was and encouraging people to listen.

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<sup>618</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 3 March R2/22/1

<sup>619</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 17 March *ibid*

<sup>620</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes March 3 *ibid* There was a nice irony highlighted by the BBC's Head of Publicity who noted that Paul Bryan's daughter was doing work experience at Radio Leeds and she was quoted as saying the BBC stations offered more variety than a commercial station could. Board of Management minutes 14 April *ibid*

<sup>621</sup> *Ariel* 'A Radio Leeds-type greeting' by Phil Sidey 13: 12 12 December 1968 See also Donald Edwards *Daily Mail* 13 March 1968

## Critical Reaction

This section looks at the various responses to the local radio experiment while it was under way. This can be gauged from several sources. The role of the press was significant, particularly the relationship on a local level with a station, which was an indicator in many ways of the success of the venture in engaging with the community. The BBC also continued to use its own mechanisms to present a picture of the service, to illustrate from its perspective what it was achieving. As I will demonstrate, this tended to fulfill the BBC's need to promulgate their continued right to run local broadcasting. Then there were some interesting examples of BBC staff members who promoted their work in local radio, which may have had a different impact. In particular this involved Phil Sidey in Leeds who was very adept at getting press attention for his station. However the image that came across may not have entirely been the same one that the BBC at the centre was trying to create. The assessment for the experiment will be explored further on, but it is important to remember that right from the beginning of the stations, the BBC and the Post Office were keenly aware of the public commitment they had made to gauge its success. Therefore all the aspects listed above that contributed to the picture of the public response and reaction to local radio could prove significant, to some degree or other, in providing evidence to back the experiment.

Once the eight stations were launched, there were a number of editorial pieces in the national press that presented 'behind the scenes' type views of 'a day in the life of a local radio station.'<sup>622</sup> Some of the coverage was less mainstream: for example *The Listener* published quite a few pieces on local radio, which had a more limited distribution than a Fleet Street daily.<sup>623</sup> However there was a useful function to both types of coverage. Because of the nature of the experiment, the majority of the country could not hear local radio and had no idea what it was like. So full page spreads with

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<sup>622</sup> eg *The Illustrated London News* 'A Good Day for Radio' by Michael Billington 22 June 1968; *The Sun* 'This birthday baby will grow old gracefully' by Allan Hall 8 November 1968

<sup>623</sup> eg *The Listener* 'Backing Brighton' by Wilfred De'Ath 29 February 1968; *The Listener* 'Radio Sheffield' by Jack Thompson 4 April 1968

photographs and plenty of quotes and samples of local colour painted a much-needed picture.

Reading articles such as 'Backing Brighton' from *The Listener* or 'A Good Day for Radio' in *The Illustrated London News* serves as a reminder of how new and different the service was. So there was usually an explanation of the different staff roles involved, the types of programmes and the style of news and presentation and how that contrasted with the more familiar BBC presentation, or 'fuddy duddy Auntie' as it was called.<sup>624</sup> The point was often also made about the 'professionalism and manifest enthusiasm' of the staff<sup>625</sup> and their dedication to finding local stories and personalities. On the other side, the typically negative points about local radio were the problems of VHF and finding the audience, the issue of funding and finance, and the degree to which the output was too parochial.<sup>626</sup>

One of the by-products of this type of coverage at this period was how the image of local radio began to be cast. Phrases such as 'parish pump' and 'toy town' radio had cropped up in the past, when local broadcasting was more theoretical than real. But now there were actual stations with programmes that these adjectives could be applied to, it gave them more reality. Hence the output of Radio Leicester on its first anniversary was described as 'VHF parish pump.'<sup>627</sup> However there was some nuance to this. This description seemed to be derived from the amount of civic hall activity and output, which – though 'desperately boring' at times – seemed to be justified by raising the awareness of local affairs.<sup>628</sup>

Getting coverage in newspapers in the locality of a BBC station proved more problematic. This issue had been a subject of discussion in the period of station selection, so it was known to be a key factor. The situation in the late 1960s regarding the position of the local press was very different from today. As Owen Bentley describes it "[the local press] was the power in the land, the local newspaper then."<sup>629</sup> Circulation was much higher<sup>630</sup> so they

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<sup>624</sup> *The Listener* 'Backing Brighton' by Wilfred De'Ath 29 February 1968

<sup>625</sup> *The Illustrated London News* 'A Good Day for Radio' by Michael Billington 22 June 1968

<sup>626</sup> eg *The Illustrated London News* 'A Good Day for Radio' by Michael Billington 22 June 1968

<sup>627</sup> *The Sun* 'This birthday baby will grow old gracefully' by Allan Hall 8 November 1968

<sup>628</sup> Op cit

<sup>629</sup> Owen Bentley ibid

were far more established and had a more loyal audience than the newcomer stations. There was no immediate financial threat as BBC Local Radio did not take any of their advertising revenue. The only possible clash of interest might be over news provision, but as has been illustrated above, press agencies supplied most stations and in one case, the paper group worked very closely with the station. Gillard was always at pains to point out how different the two media were and how one was not a threat to the other but rather a complement. Local radio, he wrote, is 'a source of news and [a] safety valve. It does not replace the newspaper but supplements it with something no newspaper can print – the personality of the human voice.'<sup>631</sup>

Why then did the local press response vary so much, from co-operation, such as in Merseyside, to outright hostility, in Leeds and Leicester? John Tupholme was the editor of the *Stoke Sentinel* and he provided a useful barometer of feeling in a BBC television documentary from 1968. He extended wishes of goodwill towards Radio Stoke and made it clear they were not in competition for news stories. While he voiced criticism of the financial funding arrangements for local radio, he made it clear that he was not in favour of the commercial alternatives.<sup>632</sup> Owen Bentley, who was based at Radio Stoke at the time, has a different recollection: he felt the support from the *Stoke Sentinel* was very poor, and laments the wasted opportunities for exploiting the station output as interesting press copy rather than the papers merely printing programme listings and nothing more.<sup>633</sup>

The poor relationship between Radio Leicester and the *Leicester Mercury* was well known and aroused national comment, such as 'Only the high Tory *Leicester Mercury* wages unqualified war.'<sup>634</sup> The *Mercury's* hostility came from the way that the decision to fund the station was made by the City Council. Although the paper eventually agreed to carry listings

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<sup>630</sup> Bentley estimates the *Leicester Mercury* and the *Stoke Sentinel* were probably selling 100,000 copies a week in this period Op cit

<sup>631</sup> BBC *BBC Local Radio: Some Questions Answered* (London: BBC Publications, 1967) p11

<sup>632</sup> BBC Television 'Home Town Radio' tx 8 November 1968

<sup>633</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*; Robert Gunnell says his station's relationship with the *Brighton Argus* was 'pretty good' though he always had a feeling that they just 'got away with it'. Robert Gunnell *ibid*

<sup>634</sup> *Sunday Times* 9 July 1967; see also 'Home Town Radio' BBC Television tx November 8 1968;

information, it stayed generally aloof afterwards and only commented if it could cause embarrassment over financial and political issues.<sup>635</sup> It also carried letters from readers about the station, including one who suggested the following programme schedules, in a wry reflection on the station and what the resident perceived as a cosy relationship with the City Council:

‘8am: Songs of Praise from the Leicester City Council chamber  
4pm: Traffic Island Discs: each week a ratepayer is asked which eight City Councillors he would take with him if he were cast away to a traffic island.

5pm: Going for a Song: a brief history of compulsory purchase.’<sup>636</sup>

It is not surprising therefore that the BBC was keen to put across its own perspective on how the experiments were doing. There were two key publications. *BBC Local Radio – Some Questions Answered*, published just prior to the launch of Radio Leicester in October 1967 served as an introduction to the service for the general public.<sup>637</sup> It rehearsed many of the familiar arguments, including the BBC’s long-standing involvement in local broadcasting, and how the experiment came about following the 1966 White Paper. It then went on to outline the type of service that would be heard, how the stations would be run and how one could listen. This was very much a public information booklet, reaching out to the licence payer in general, most of whom could not hear local radio.

About a year later, another publication revisited the experimental stations and documented in some detail their achievements. *This is Local Radio: The BBC Experiment at Work* was an even more forthright example of the BBC promoting the work of the stations to the widest possible audience.<sup>638</sup> This time there was a double purpose. In his introduction, Hugh Pierce, by this time the General Manager of Local Radio Development, made it clear that the information in the booklet was aimed at those in areas without stations who might like one, yet there was also clearly more than a nod

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<sup>635</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167 p 68

<sup>636</sup> as quoted in BBC WAC Paper by R R Thornton (Town Clerk of Leicester) to the Annual Conference of the Society of Town Clerks June 1968 Local Radio Policy 1964-69 R102/73

<sup>637</sup> BBC *BBC Local Radio: Some Questions Answered* (London: BBC Publications 1967)

<sup>638</sup> BBC *This is Local Radio: The BBC Experiment at Work* (London: BBC Publications no date)

towards the assessment process being led by the government.<sup>639</sup> An overtly positive spin was put on all aspects of the organisation, including the take up of VHF sets and the method of financing, which Pierce somewhat disingenuously said ‘...has not brought with it any unusual pressures and has created no special problems.’<sup>640</sup> While the spirit of this statement was accurate, it ignores the fact that local authority subsidies might not continue to support local radio after the experiment. The ensuing pages listed, station by station, the accomplishments of the experiment so far. Interestingly the focus here was less about the programmes the stations produced: it also included examples of how the stations and their staff went out into the locality and got involved with communities.

One recurring theme emerged from these two illustrations. This was the way that the BBC started to write a script for itself that showcased the benefits to the community of local radio. This included the role the station was establishing for itself in times of bad weather;<sup>641</sup> examples of social support for listeners who were underprivileged and with special needs; events where stations welcomed the audience into their ‘world’ and got good responses in return, eg an open day at Radio Nottingham that attracted 3,000 visitors. The BBC was keen to paint the picture that each station was uniquely attached to the locality and the focus was about connecting with communities, although the pamphlet did not use this kind of terminology.

Apart from press coverage, there was the issue of how best to promote the work of local radio on the wider BBC radio output. Programmes such as *Woman’s Hour*, *Today*, *Home This Afternoon*, *Roundabout* and *Late Night Extra* were initially the best outlets for locally produced material.<sup>642</sup> The problem however that then emerged was the type of pieces that were taken. Samples of local radio packages used by *Today* during 1969 included topics such as ‘vicar turns detective’; ‘allergic to chicken’; ‘square tomatoes’; ‘talking budgie’. There were some more serious pieces too, including one

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<sup>639</sup> BBC Op cit p 1

<sup>640</sup> BBC Op cit p 2

<sup>641</sup> eg heavy floods in Leicester in July 1968; the snow storms in Brighton in December 1967 and in Merseyside in February 1968

<sup>642</sup> BBC WAC Paper: ‘Use of Local Radio material on network broadcasts’ 20 December 1967  
Local Broadcasting 1964-76 R34/1408



on widowhood for *Woman's Hour* and immigration and the miners' strike for *Today*.<sup>643</sup> As Owen Bentley identifies, network radio was more interested in the 'quirky' output, and thus local radio got a reputation for dealing with the bizarre. "The epithet 'toy town' radio was used a lot in the rest of the BBC about us" which many in local radio began to resent, says Bentley.<sup>644</sup>

There was a more concerted attempt to showcase the work of local radio on Radio Four with the commissioning of a series of programmes by Gerald Mansell (Controller of Radio Four) called *The Local Sound*, to be broadcast in Spring 1969. His concept was to produce 'self-portraits in sound', showing the lives and activities of the staff in local stations, 'enabling the network audience to get a close-up picture of what a local station is all about.'<sup>645</sup> However, as the Audience Research Reports for the individual programmes highlighted there was not enough variety. Listeners were confused about the central concept: for example the Radio Sheffield edition – was it about the staff or the city or the community?<sup>646</sup> Where there was content about the output itself, audience research was quite dismissive: 'it merely confirmed their worst suspicions that local radio was trivial, parochial and inward-looking.'<sup>647</sup>

After five programmes had been made, with three still to go, CFO Clarke, the Editor of General Talks, Radio, attempted to summarise the audience feedback so far, but he could barely contain his own antipathy to the enterprise. He thought the failure of the listeners to engage in local affairs was 'inevitable' and while he tried to compliment the 'enthusiasm' of the local producers, he felt the programmes were 'too disjointed, with too much trumpeting of the station's own work.'<sup>648</sup> Clarke basically thought the series was a mistake and said that making any more similar programmes

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<sup>643</sup> BBC WAC various memos Local Broadcasting 1964-76 ibid

<sup>644</sup> Owen Bentley ibid

<sup>645</sup> BBC WAC memo from CR4 to Local Radio Development Manager 23 September 1968 Talks Local Radio Stations R51/1,170 1968-69

<sup>646</sup> BBC WAC Audience Research Report 'The Local Sound' BBC Radio Sheffield 13 January 1969 Talks Local Radio Stations ibid

<sup>647</sup> BBC WAC Audience Research Report 'The Local Sound' BBC Radio Leicester 15 January 1969 Talks Local Radio Stations ibid

<sup>648</sup> BBC WAC memo from Editor General Talks to MDR 24 February 1969 Talks Local Radio Stations ibid Each programme was produced locally by the individual station which would have accounted for great variations in styles and techniques which probably further confused the Radio Four audience.

‘might irritate more listeners than it would win over to the cause.....I think it would be preferable for other programmes to use contributions but on a truly selective basis so that Local Radio does not get associated with the mediocre.’<sup>649</sup>

The episode very clearly illustrates some of the internal tensions that existed around local radio. There was a serious lack of appreciation about what the stations were trying to achieve and who their audience was, because as Gillard pointed out in his response to Clarke’s memo, what he [Gillard] had wanted was a ‘magazine collection of the best items from the past quarter or half year.....network is missing some good radio.’<sup>650</sup> Gerald Mansell clearly could not translate what local radio was about for his audience or station, and dismissed the notion of the magazine format as ‘space fillers.....a rag bag type of programme.’<sup>651</sup>

As Owen Bentley and others have highlighted, the problem of the image of the local stations and their output was part of the reason that other elements of the BBC may not have taken it seriously. “We didn’t mind being parish pump because people are interested and they gather round their parish pump. ‘Toy town’ makes it sound not very good.”<sup>652</sup> Some of the local content was undoubtedly of a ‘quirky’ nature but in many cases this was just one small component of a schedule that had varying shades of the serious and entertaining. National exposure for the lighter items probably gave them undue prominence. This was further underlined by one Station Manager in particular, Phil Sidey, who proved very adept at getting himself a great deal of attention for his station, Radio Leeds, by writing articles for the press. The difficulty was that it tended to be the more frivolous items that caught the most attention, such as gargling a tune with beer.<sup>653</sup> Sidey fostered the nickname ‘Radio Irreverent’ for the station – indeed the first words heard on

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<sup>649</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>650</sup> BBC WAC memo from MDR to Head of Talks and Current Affairs 28 February 1969 Talks Local Radio Stations ibid

<sup>651</sup> BBC WAC memo from Chairman Policy Study Group to MDR 10 March 1969 Talks Local Radio Stations ibid Gillard appended a rather forlorn postscript, handwritten, to the bottom of this memo ‘I’m sorry that nobody will really accept my argument.’ Op cit

<sup>652</sup> Robert McLeish ibid

<sup>653</sup> *The Times* ‘Local Radio Success for BBC’ 12 May 1969 The beer gargling was not singled out as a success, but rather as ‘bordering on sheer lunacy’.

air were “Radio Leeds? It’s a bloody waste of time!”<sup>654</sup> Underlying the self-promotion however were some serious points about what Sidey was trying to achieve in Leeds, with a strong emphasis on community involvement. Every year, the station handed itself over to the city’s teenagers to take over all the programmes for a week (except news), and managed to get over 1,000 young voices on the air.<sup>655</sup> Elsewhere Sidey talked about the range of contributors, from the Lord Mayor to a woman who had had a back street abortion.<sup>656</sup> There was a strong emphasis on news, with Leeds placed prominently (ie first) in the running order. Hence the programme names *Leeds and the World* and *Leeds and the World at One*.<sup>657</sup>

However, Sidey was very aware that it was the frivolous items that got the station noticed: ‘Radio Leeds gains most publicity from its irreverent idiocies which inspired the *Daily Mail* to take a column....to claim we gave out ‘pure goonery seven hours a day.’”<sup>658</sup> Owen recalls that many others in local radio were less pleased with Sidey’s antics, feeling they did not help their cause: “you could take budgerigars too far.”

“Was he a good thing for Local Radio? Probably [he] was, but others were making better programmes and resented him but local radio needed someone like him to bang the drum, even if the gong was a bit tarnished by his silliness sometimes.”<sup>659</sup>

The combative nature of Sidey’s personality did not help matters either. In his article for *Ariel*, he made it clear that he saw local radio as a fight, whose opponents are not just outside the BBC, but inside as well – ‘those who say that Leeds disrupts the smooth running of the BBC.’<sup>660</sup> This sense of mutual distrust was never far from the surface, as witnessed in the incident of the Fabian pamphlet. This was the long article Sidey had written for the Fabian Society about local radio, which he hoped to publish without alerting the BBC first. Frank Gillard inevitably found out and referred the

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<sup>654</sup> BBC *This is Local Radio: The BBC Experiment at Work* (London: BBC Publications no date)

<sup>655</sup> *New Society* ‘Radio Teen’ by Phil Sidey 20 March 1968

<sup>656</sup> *Ariel* ‘A Radio-Leeds type greeting’ by Phil Sidey 12 December 1968 Vol 13 No 12

<sup>657</sup> BBC *This is Local Radio: The BBC Experiment at Work* *ibid*

<sup>658</sup> *Ariel* *ibid*

<sup>659</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*

<sup>660</sup> *Ariel* *ibid*

matter to the Board of Management for their approval. Eventually a re-written version of the pamphlet was published in the *New Statesman*.<sup>661</sup>

'Your Radio or Theirs'<sup>662</sup> was a very considered and eloquent analysis of the future for local radio in all its forms. In contrast to the sometimes celebratory and self-justifying pieces that typified local radio journalism, this marked an important step forwards in the assessment process that posed significant questions about funding, relationships between government (local and national) and the BBC (also local and national), wavelengths and content. Sidey was still very much opposed to commercial radio, but he could see that many factors such as needletime and wavelength restrictions hampered developments on all sides. What was also evident was the sense that Sidey – through his experience of running the station – had begun to appreciate just what it meant to work with his local community and how this could be translated into some kind of ethos.

'We claim to be a 'walk-in-and-talk' station and it surprises many callers to find that it is not an empty advertising slogan. We like involvement. We ran 'participation broadcasting' before it became a political cliché.'<sup>663</sup>

Sidey set out the choices for the future of local radio, which were the status quo of local authority funding; taking advertising or using the licence fee. He favoured the licence fee – but the wider discussion in the article and the points that Sidey raised were those that would dominate the debate determining the success or failure of the BBC experiment and what should happen next.

### **The Evaluation**

In this section I will argue that the evaluation process that took place in 1969 provided the evidence that the government needed to make its

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<sup>661</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes January 20; March 3; March 31 April 21 1969 R2/22/1 and Sidey, P *Hello Mrs Butterfield* (Claverdon: Kestrel 1994) pp 93-99. Apart from variations in the chronology of negotiations, the main difference is one of motive, however nuanced. Sidey suggests he was being gagged by the BBC (although not Gillard, who he said acted honourably) and the Board who were worried about some aspects of the pamphlet that might exacerbate relations with the Conservative Party and the commercial radio lobby. Sidey of course would not submit to any editing of his work.

<sup>662</sup> *New Statesman* 'Your Radio or Theirs' by Phil Sidey 11 April 1969 reprinted in Sidey, P *Hello Mrs Butterfield* (Claverdon: Kestrel 1994)

<sup>663</sup> As quoted in Sidey, P *Hello Mrs Butterfield* (Claverdon: Kestrel 1994) p 111

decision to allow the BBC to continue with local radio. The narrative becomes complex at this point as running concurrently with the government's investigation into local radio, the BBC was also addressing all its radio operations as part of the broader review which was to become published as *Broadcasting in the 70s*. It had an impact on the local radio evaluation in terms of financial implications for the BBC and for the broader strategy of radio expansion.

On Monday 11 November 1968 John Stonehouse, who had become Postmaster General in August of that year, following the brief tenure of Roy Mason, replied to a written question about local radio: "I am encouraged to believe from the results of their work....that local radio [has] a valuable part to play in promoting public awareness and in consequence public participation."<sup>664</sup> He would not be drawn on the specifics of the review process other than to stress the benefits of local radio to the democratic process, noting that the press tended to ignore the municipal debates. In fact the BBC and the PO had already drawn up the outline for the review process in three proposal papers. These included establishing the general objectives of the review and the information that would be needed in the form of evidence.<sup>665</sup>

The BBC had until mid-May 1969 to submit their report to the Post Office and the PMG hoped to have an interim decision before the summer recess.<sup>666</sup> John Stonehouse promised to visit all the stations<sup>667</sup> and in February 1969 he met all the chairmen of the LRCs.<sup>668</sup> Sources of external evidence included the AMC, who supported the experiment and proposed

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<sup>664</sup> Hansard Vol 773 No 10 'Broadcasting (Local Stations)' 11 November 1968

<sup>665</sup> BBC WAC BB/CM/883 The Review of the Experiment in Local Radio: Method and Measures Local Radio Evaluation (Interim) Major Policy 1967-69 R102/41

<sup>666</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Dennis Lawrence, Post Office to Frank Gillard 25 March 1969 Local Broadcasting Evaluation: Major Policy Aspect 1968-69 R102/54 This had a knock-on effect on the evidence-gathering process. The BBC was asked to reduce the size of their report to six pages of foolscap, plus a more detailed breakdown of the financial and programme information. It also meant the list of organisations to be approached for submissions, including local authorities, universities, clubs and societies was greatly reduced too.

<sup>667</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Denis Lawrence, Post Office to Frank Gillard 25 March 1969 Local Broadcasting Evaluation: Major Policy Aspect 1968-69 R102/54

<sup>668</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of Meeting with LRC Chairmen, PMG, DG, MDR and LRDM February 5 1969 Local Broadcasting Papers 1968-69 R78/609

50 or so stations to be run by the BBC.<sup>669</sup> The general public was invited by advertisements to send in their comments. The Post Office was surprised by the response, which numbered several thousands, over 95% of which were resolutely in favour of retaining BBC Local Radio.<sup>670</sup> Other organisations agreed, including NALGO and the Newspaper Society. The Musicians Union gave qualified support: they were against commercial radio but felt their members had been underemployed in local radio.<sup>671</sup> The BBC was very keen to conduct their own audience research to assess how many listeners the local stations had and what impact they were having. The research took the form of surveys of 1,000 people in each experimental area.<sup>672</sup> The main objectives were to establish the distribution of listening facilities (ie how many could hear VHF, either by a set or a radio relay), how often they heard local radio compared to other services and what they thought of it.

The preliminary results of this research were pulled together and used for the BBC's submission to the Post Office, while the fuller surveys presented something of a problem for the BBC. In terms of facilities for listening, the report established that around 1,665,000 people could hear VHF – the majority through a VHF set, and the remainder via radio relay (a small proportion had both). Interestingly the report suggested there was only a small growth in VHF receiver ownership in the first year, despite stories in the press from industry sources about VHF set popularity.<sup>673</sup>

Roughly 25% of the population in an editorial area of the experiment listened regularly to their station. Another 25% had heard their station at

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<sup>669</sup> BBC WAC Report from AMC to PMG: Feedback on Local Radio Experiment 19 May 1969  
ibid

<sup>670</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167

<sup>671</sup> BBC WAC Op cit The Leicester University report pointed out that the line up of supporters was similar to the divisions at the time of the Pilkington Report, the only difference being that Equity had changed sides and now supported commercial radio

<sup>672</sup> BBC WAC An Audience Research Report Local Broadcasting 1967-69 Local Radio Experiments Policy 1961-62 [sic] R102/47 The first stations (Leicester, Nottingham, Merseyside and Sheffield) had three surveys each; the newer stations (Leeds, Stoke-on-Trent, Brighton and Durham) only had one survey with a follow-up postal enquiry of VHF set owners.

<sup>673</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

some time, while 50% had never listened.<sup>674</sup> In terms of listener profile, males were slightly higher than females, with an age profile that was middle-aged and above, though not necessarily retired. In social terms, the listeners tended to be in the bottom groups of the three social status scales (class, education and occupation), although interestingly these groups were less likely to have access to a VHF set.

The most popular programmes were the breakfast magazines, sports, record request and pop music shows. The surveys revealed that more than 50% of an area's population were interested to some degree in local radio as an idea, and an even larger proportion rejected the idea that local affairs were of insufficient interest to warrant a local station. The measure of performance rating averaged over 60% for 'excellent' or 'quite good' in any given area, with only 12% settling for 'poor' or local radio as a 'failure'.<sup>675</sup> The report concluded that consensus was perhaps hard to find across the eight locations, but overall, the 'prevailing attitudes are highly favourable.' Where there were noticeable problems, these were ascribed to difficulties with reception (Leeds and Durham especially) and perhaps in a local reluctance to embrace innovation.<sup>676</sup>

### **The BBC's submission**

In May 1969, Frank Gillard put forward the BBC's case to the Board of Management, as it would be presented to the PMG.<sup>677</sup> Regarding finance, the BBC conceded that the running costs had become greater than anticipated, with Merseyside reaching £65,000 per year. Therefore the projected budget for future stations might be as much as £80 – 100,000. The success of the programmes was gauged by strong local news, access to politicians and coverage of local democracy in particular, and the

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<sup>674</sup> BBC WAC Op cit In terms of individual stations, Nottingham, Leicester, Stoke-on-Trent and Merseyside all commanded a regular listenership of between 31-34% of their available audience. Durham was the lowest, with just 11%.

<sup>675</sup> BBC WAC Op cit When asked to list adjectives that might describe their station, the most common ones were 'interesting, entertaining, free and easy, responsible, enterprising and educational.' At the bottom of the list were some pejorative terms, which received far fewer endorsements, such as 'trivial, dull, high-brow, too-serious.'

<sup>676</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>677</sup> BBC WAC The Local Radio Experiment Evaluation G61/69 Local Broadcasting 1969-70 R78/610

abundance of material. Other areas singled out for attention were education, where the potential was only just beginning to be exploited, music, drama and religious programmes. The report highlighted the preliminary audience research results from Leicester, Nottingham, Sheffield and Merseyside, extracting all the positive statistics about frequency of listening and programme penetration. The conclusion the BBC reached was that, not surprisingly, 'Local Radio provides a real service to local democracy and one which gives enrichment to local life.' It hoped that it would be allowed to provide a permanent service, 'based on satisfactory financial arrangements.'<sup>678</sup> It is perhaps an anti-climax that this culmination of so many years of effort and resources should be reduced to an oversimplified and overwhelmingly positive document. It has to be remembered that the BBC were also submitting supplementary evidence too but alongside this there was also continued lobbying to the government about how they might expand local radio (and pay for it), which will be looked at in the next section.

But it is also worth addressing the question of whether the evaluation was investigating the right questions. Two factors were emerging that demonstrated that sticking rigidly to the criteria of the White Paper in making the assessment was disingenuous. The first issue concerned the realistic impact of the stations' community involvement. Much was made about the putative role of local radio 'to make local life more interesting' and how it would become 'a missionary instrument.....to build up a better community feeling'.<sup>679</sup> Note the use of the word 'build' here, which marked a transition from the notion of reflecting a community's identity. However this was very hard to assess or quantify as part of the experiment – it was an aspiration, but could it be genuinely measured? The researchers at the University of Leicester, in their report, which was only published in 1971, after the key decisions were made and after a change of government, highlighted this omission from the evaluation, and attempted their own assessment based on their research. This involved surveys in Leicester,

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<sup>678</sup> BBC WAC BBC WAC The Local Radio Experiment Evaluation G61/69 Local Broadcasting 1969-70 R78/610

<sup>679</sup> BBC WAC Frank Gillard at the Estimates Sub-Committee, House of Commons 10 March 1969 Local Radio Policy 1969-71 R102/48



Stoke-on-Trent and Brighton with voluntary organisations about their relationship with local radio.<sup>680</sup> There were various angles to this, such as comparing local press and radio in terms of ease of gaining publicity and the readiness with which local stations were willing to get involved. The evidence suggested that organisations were willing to use local radio, and that it had a more adaptable nature than newspapers. But at the same time, there was a difference between supplying materials to local stations and whether the radio staff actually came out of the studio to engage with the needs of the audience.

It is noticeable that much of the BBC's evidence and public pronouncements championed how the stations had interacted with their local community organisations, but there was not much from the opposite perspective. One measure was the active participation of community groups in actually making programmes. However, the Leicester research found in their sample that only one in five organisations had got involved in the programme-making side.<sup>681</sup> Another, broader, interpretation might be the diversity of 'new' voices heard on air. Again, however, the social benefits were less clear to the Leicester researchers, who found that local radio gave disproportionate access to contributors from higher social classes, which was not breaking new ground.<sup>682</sup>

The Leicester Report concluded that while local radio had found an audience, it tended to be more favourably received and used by those already heavily involved in the community. Radio Leicester was proven to provide a good means of publicising community activities, but for others, it became a *substitute* for participation and involvement.<sup>683</sup> The conclusions, though rather laboured in the report, did accept that the period of evaluation was too short given that the BBC had created a service from scratch and was trying to build an audience out of nothing. As Donald Edwards said in a lunchtime lecture: "Let me be frank. Nobody in Leicester, Sheffield or anywhere else stormed the town hall to demand a station. They never

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<sup>680</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167

<sup>681</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>682</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>683</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

do.”<sup>684</sup> It also acknowledged that the staff themselves could be put in a difficult position when it came to embracing their community. As one employee at Radio Leicester told the researchers:

“I certainly feel as a professional broadcaster there should never be a complete association.....I wouldn’t like there to be a complete joining of the people so that they knew you personally. I think they’d lose respect for you.”<sup>685</sup>

The attitude of the staff and the relative success, or not, of community involvement was a recurring topic in the oral history interviews. All four interviewees, who had held senior positions in the first, experimental stations attested to the value of working with their community. Owen Bentley is typical: “One thing we all believed in was that we were the facilitators for that particular community. We were not there to be top presenters ourselves. We were there to get local people on air.”<sup>686</sup>

These views make an interesting complement to the Leicester Report: here, BBC staff aspired to bringing the community into the station, yet they did not have any accurate measure of their success, other than the fact that local radio continued beyond the experiment. It is also worth pointing out that the work of the stations did not fit neatly into a pre- and post-experiment timeline. It was continuous, and what was started at one end bore fruit at the other. In fact Michael Barton recalled that Radio Sheffield’s earliest output was not as ‘local’ as people perhaps thought, something that even Gillard noticed.<sup>687</sup> The other significant factor that influenced – and probably overshadowed – the evaluation process was the political dimension. The future of local radio had become a party political issue.

### **Local radio and the licence fee**

In March 1969, the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, condemned Conservative plans for 100 commercial radio stations as “irresponsible, ill-

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<sup>684</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio by Donald Edwards BBC Lunchtime Lectures Sixth Series No 4 24 January 1968 P 6 Press Cuttings P90

<sup>685</sup> BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 p 115 R9/1,167

<sup>686</sup> Owen Bentley *ibid*

<sup>687</sup> Michael Barton *ibid*

considered and unwise,” declaring this “squalid commercialism” would not satisfy the community interests in the same way BBC Local Radio could.<sup>688</sup>

Days later in the House of Commons, he declared that the local radio experiment was ‘extremely interesting’ and that ‘we must all review it coolly and without ideological bias’,<sup>689</sup> seemingly forgetting his earlier, more politicised words. The hopes of conducting a neutral evaluation were fading fast as the parties adopted stronger ideological lines on the debate.

In May, in an article for the *Financial Times*,<sup>690</sup> David Watt drew up comparisons between what he called the ‘New Model’ Tories who wanted to allow people what they wanted at no cost, and the Labour/old style Tory allegiance to public service values with a degree of paternalism. For him, the ideological questions came down to ‘should people have to pay for something they cannot hear?’: he thought not. He was also dubious about the audience’s desire for culturally nurturing radio. Watt concluded that commercial radio was feasible, but that it would not fulfill doctrinal or social functions.

The BBC was also keenly aware of where their support lay. In a memo from Hugh Pierce to the Controller of Information Services, all the MPs who had appeared on local radio were listed and which were pro- or anti- the service or pro-commercial radio.<sup>691</sup> The response from the Controller was that MPs were split on party lines in their attitude to local radio.<sup>692</sup> With an election looming, there was increased pressure to reach an early decision about BBC Local Radio, without making it seem overtly political. While it was still unclear throughout 1969 whether a Conservative government would actually remove or close down the existing stations,<sup>693</sup> pressure for more BBC stations increased, both inside and outside the Corporation.

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<sup>688</sup> *The Observer* 16 March 1969

<sup>689</sup> Hansard House of Commons debate 20 March 1969

<sup>690</sup> *The Financial Times* ‘A Doctrinaire Issue’ by David Watt 23 May 1969

<sup>691</sup> BBC WAC Memo from LRDM to Controller Information Services 5 March 1969 Local Broadcasting Papers 1968-69 R78/609 Apparently Eric Heffer, MP for Walton, always required a fee for an interview on Radio Merseyside and Viscount Lambton, who appeared on Radio Durham, demonstrated such ‘aristocratic reserve’ that it was not clear if he was for or against local radio.

<sup>692</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Controller Information Services to DPA 6 March 1969 Op cit

<sup>693</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 5 May 1969 it was noted that Conservative Central Office were determined to end the BBC’s radio monopoly at the very least. R2/22

Plans for at least 40 stations began to emerge in the Press,<sup>694</sup> which not surprisingly led to accusations that the BBC's main objective was to stop commercial radio. John Gorst, Secretary of the Local Radio Association, was quoted as saying this was a plot between the government and the BBC.<sup>695</sup> The BBC took this very seriously and the Secretary to the BBC, Tony Whitby, prepared a memo for the Director of Public Affairs which set out six points to rebut the assertion that the BBC were 'spiking the commercial radio guns.'<sup>696</sup> Curiously these were based not around concepts of public service broadcasting or connecting with communities, nor around economic viability and serving diverse audiences. The memo relied instead on the well-worn chronology of the BBC's past engagement in the local broadcasting debate, from the 1920s onwards. This seemed to suggest that this was not so much an ideological debate any more, rather just a case of 'we were here first.'

But the one great question mark that hung over the BBC was – if it wanted to expand its local radio service, how was it going to pay for it? Six months into the experiment, Gillard prepared papers for the Boards of Governors and Management, which set out the current funding situation and the options available to the BBC.<sup>697</sup> With only roughly 50% of the running costs expected from local authorities and other organisations, it was inescapable that the financial arrangements had been a disappointment.<sup>698</sup>

Gillard rehearsed the various alternative methods of financing local radio and concluded that the only option left was that of using the licence fee.<sup>699</sup> But how could this be justified when so many people could not hear it? Gillard argued that subsidising minorities was a well-established part of democracy. Local radio would probably benefit urban areas first, but

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<sup>694</sup> eg *The Times* '40 new radio stations may oust regions' 9 May 1969

<sup>695</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 12 May 1969 R2/22

<sup>696</sup> BBC WAC memo from The Secretary to DPA 24 June 1969 Local Broadcasting Papers 1969-70 R78/610

<sup>697</sup> BBC WAC The Financing of Local Radio 9 May 1968 G61/68 Board of Governor Papers R1/104; BM (68) 47 29 April 1968 Local Radio Policy 1964-68 R102/73 At this point, the BBC had spent £281,614 in non-recurring capital expenditure to establish the stations. The total running costs were £528,000 of which £273,946 was guaranteed by local sources.

<sup>698</sup> BBC WAC The Financing of Local Radio G61.68 op cit Note that the guarantee of revenue did not necessarily mean the BBC would receive it. Neither Leeds nor Durham were included in the calculation for expected income either.

<sup>699</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

traditionally, city dwellers had already subsidized rural populations over the years, so there was no harm in reversing the equation. While Gillard won over the Board of Governors on the principle that the BBC should be financing local radio, there was no obvious means of achieving this.<sup>700</sup> Nevertheless he was tasked with coming up with a plan for creating £4million worth of savings to raise the necessary funds.

Reluctantly Gillard produced a paper, which went through various options, including cutting back network hours, axing a national station altogether (prime candidate: Radio Three), replacing all Regional output and making large numbers of staff redundant.<sup>701</sup> The scenario Gillard painted was, for him, uncharacteristically bleak, concluding with a doomsday prophecy, that while the BBC had to make every effort to remain in charge of local radio 'I am sure that the plan examined in this paper, if it were proceeded with, would create consternation among the staff and the greatest storm of external criticism the BBC has ever known.'<sup>702</sup>

I would argue that what the paper essentially revealed was the extent to which the local radio project had evolved without actually being fully integrated into the broader strategy and long-term financial planning of the BBC. While Gillard was asked to come back in February of the following year with a firm plan, it was noted by the Governors that the McKinsey Report might unearth more savings.<sup>703</sup> The BBC Chairman, Lord Hill, had invited McKinsey Consultants to look into the financial efficiency of BBC Radio. An interim report was produced in September 1968, and the final one in February 1970. Their conclusions about where savings might be made became integral to another working party, this time internal, under Gerald Mansell, who was the Chief of Home Service. The Mansell Policy Study Group findings formed the basis of the document *Broadcasting in the 70s*, which set out the pattern for the development of BBC Radio in the coming decade.<sup>704</sup>

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<sup>700</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors minutes 16 May R1/36

<sup>701</sup> BBC WAC Financing Local Radio from Existing Revenue 3 July 1968 G95/68 R1/104

<sup>702</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>703</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors minutes 11 July 1968 R1/36

<sup>704</sup> Hendy D *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007) pp 52

These studies were undoubtedly the most significant factors for the BBC in securing a short to medium term financial future for local radio, and re-positioning the service into the heart of long-term strategic development, alongside network radio. By late 1968, early 1969, it was Mansell's Policy Study Group, which was formulating the means for local radio expansion, down to the details of how many stations and where they would be. These core decisions needed to be made internally and then proffered to the Post Office, in supplement to the evidence about the evaluation, as a means of securing the next stage of development. Interestingly, the combination of the financial and wavelength factors refocused attention onto station area, as a practical means to the end of getting sufficient national coverage to justify using licence money. The determining factors around serving communities again seemed to be losing ground. For example, the interim McKinsey report concentrated on broadcast size and although it ruled out large-scale area sites, their concept of 20 to 40 stations still risked downgrading the sense of community, as Marriott warned Gillard in January 1969.<sup>705</sup> The Mansell Policy Study Group developed the McKinsey station formula, drawing up a list of 32 new stations (making 40 in total). It argued these should be introduced by 1974, with the first 15 being financed by BBC sources, through savings etc, and the remainder being paid for by government money, such as cutting licence fee evasion and looking for state subsidy of educational programmes.<sup>706</sup> The Policy Study Group then produced a financial plan, which rested on two key planks. First the reorganization of BBC frequencies brought about by the disappearance of the regional system. This would improve network services and release medium wave for local radio for use during daytime. Secondly, the proposal to develop up to 38 more local stations over a five-year period, by raising the money from licence fee increases.<sup>707</sup>

The Board of Management noted that the incorporation of medium wave for local radio was a 'radical departure from previous doctrine', so it was

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<sup>705</sup> BBC WAC memo from ADR to MDR 31 January 1969 Local Radio Policy 1969-91 R102/48

<sup>706</sup> BBC WAC Third Progress Report of the Policy Study Group Board of Management minutes 24 April 1969 R2/22

<sup>707</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of Special Meeting 12 & 13 May 1969 to consider the Final Report of the Policy Study Group Board of Management Minutes R2/22

suggested that it might only be proposed to the PMG as a second choice, after VHF. These proposals were backed by the Board of Governors on 29 May,<sup>708</sup> and less than a week later, a full set of proposals was sent to the Post Office, outlining the BBC's desired development plan, in the hope that they would be authorized to continue with local radio.<sup>709</sup>

The paper stressed that the 40 or so stations would not be of the size of Radio Brighton as this would require over 150 'town stations' with a cost of £12 -15 million. Instead the BBC was looking at stations that covered major conurbations and some rural areas. The PMG was also asked to allow daytime medium wave frequencies to supplement the new stations, on the understanding that these would be redistributed, existing wavelengths, not new ones. The point was also made that if commercial radio was introduced in the future, on MW, it was only fair that the BBC could protect its competitive advantage. This certainly seemed like a pre-emptive move, but one that would find a sympathetic ear in the government. Finally there was the question of finance. Given that the current method did not work, the BBC suggested a 'mixed economy'. The licence fee would pay for the first four or five hours a day and the local authorities and others could contribute, in kind or cash, to augment the output. There would be no question of advertising or sponsorship.<sup>710</sup>

Although the PMG was not ready to announce his final decision on the experiment, there were meetings between the Post Office and the BBC about which stations would be proposed in the first phase and the names they would take.<sup>711</sup> The Board of Management were told that the Post Office had been impressed with the logic and cohesion of the BBC case, although Charles Curran warned his colleagues of the amount of work needed to implement the setting up of new stations.<sup>712</sup> The BBC plans for 40 stations were officially unveiled with the publication of *Broadcasting in the 70s* on 10 July 1969, along with other proposals concerning the rationalisation of the

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<sup>708</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors minutes 29 May 1969 R1/37

<sup>709</sup> BBC WAC The BBC's Local Radio Proposals 2 June 1969 (sent to PMG with covering letter from Chairman 6 June 1969) Local Radio Policy 1969-71 R102/48

<sup>710</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>711</sup> BBC WAC personal note between MDR and DG 26 June 1969 ibid

<sup>712</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 16 June 1969 R2/22

four networks, the regrouping the television regions, the scaling back of the radio regions, and the disbanding of some BBC orchestras.

Clearly the momentum was moving closer towards a final decision on local radio, with John Stonehouse (PMG) telling the House of Commons during the debate on *Broadcasting in the 70s* on 22 July that “there is no doubt that the experiment as been a very great success....,it has opened up a new means of communication.”<sup>713</sup> Robert McLeish wrote in his diary that this signaled government approval for ‘this kind of community broadcasting.’<sup>714</sup>

On August 4, the Chairman, the Director-General, and the PMG met Harold Wilson who told them of the decision to allow the BBC to develop local radio ‘as quickly as was reasonable in the light of financial and other considerations.’ He also asked the BBC not to dissolve any of its orchestras.<sup>715</sup> However the Cabinet had not agreed to a licence fee increase, but after further negotiations, a compromise was struck that saw the BBC promised a 10/- increase by April 1971, in return for their commitment to expand local radio: 12 stations immediately and 20 more over the next seven years. It would also save the orchestras, despite the fact that the BBC would be in deficit by 1974 to the tune of £4 million.<sup>716</sup> On 1 August, the post of PMG was re-designated Minister of Posts and Telecommunications and on 14 August, John Stonehouse officially announced his decision on the BBC’s plans, stating:

‘The overwhelming weight of public opinion in the areas of the local radio experiment has considered that it has been a success and has confirmed the government’s expectations that, organised and financed as a public service, local radio would become a valuable force in the life of the community.’<sup>717</sup>

Frank Gillard wrote to Hugh Pierce, who was on holiday in Ireland, thanking him for all his work, saying ‘It might be better, it might be worse.

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<sup>713</sup> As quoted in BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community 1971* R9/1,167 p 77

<sup>714</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 22 July 1969

<sup>715</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 5 August 1969 R2/22 1-5

<sup>716</sup> Briggs, A Vol V ibid Chapter VIII

<sup>717</sup> BBC WAC Press Release: Decision on Radio and Television: Local Radio: Licence Fees; BBC Plans by PMG Local Radio Policy 1969-71 R102/48



But on the local radio front, it's a triumph'.<sup>718</sup> For Robert McLeish – also on holiday - the news meant quite a dramatic upheaval, as he had already been offered, and accepted, the role of Local Radio Training Officer should the new stations get the go ahead.

'A telegramme arrived from Gerald [Northcott].....PMG announces success of LR. 20 stations by the end of next year....so if I'm going to do the training it's going to be high speed action. Where to live, house hunt, schools for the children, organise courses.'<sup>719</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the BBC realised its long-dreamt ambition in launching the service of local broadcasting in eight locations. However the grounds on which local radio itself could be called a success was less certain. First there was the number of experimental stations: the BBC had to accept eight rather than nine, and the process of location selection itself had been fraught with difficulty. Some of the factors were due to external political problems outside the BBC's control. The financial settlement, using local authority funding, also had the effect of limiting the final choice of stations, so in the end the BBC was extremely fortunate to have enough stations to proceed with.

I have also used the archival evidence to demonstrate the strengths and the weaknesses of the content of the first output. The years of planning and preparation and the structure that Gillard put in place meant that the new stations could produce at least the minimum amount of programmes at key parts of the day. The Station Managers quickly identified the types of situations most suitable for local broadcasting: daily issues such as news, travel, civic affairs and emergency conditions caused by bad weather.

However I have also argued that there were structural problems too, inherent in the system, which would require further attention. For example the means of reception meant that VHF transmission was not universally accessible, and so a large part of the audience could not hear its local station. The schedules themselves were initially created around specialist programmes, trying to cater for interest, minority and community groups in

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<sup>718</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Frank Gillard to Hugh Pierce 14 August 1969 Local Radio Policy op cit

<sup>719</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 14 August 1969

an area. This had the effect of segmenting the audience rather than uniting it. Furthermore, while this type of output could be described, generically, as community material, there was a lack of hard evidence to prove that local radio was actually moving beyond reflecting communities of interest, and having a proactive effect in building and fostering them too.

I have also discussed how difficult the relationship was between the new stations and the established radio networks, and how this resulted in an unflattering portrayal of local output as trivial and 'parish pump'. The roots of this mutual distrust would have repercussions in future years, but in fact, as the evaluation process also demonstrated, the BBC had neglected to incorporate local radio as part of its coordinated financial and strategic planning for radio as a whole. The realisation that local authority funding was not sustainable for the status quo, let alone more stations, was one aspect of this.

It is fair to say that local radio's very existence proved the BBC had won a hard-fought victory but eight stations did not make a complete network. Even with the go-ahead to launch another twelve, the issues that I have highlighted above made the future for the service precarious for some years to come. Furthermore, in agreeing the next stage of expansion, the stakeholders seemed to have lost sight of the true origins of local radio and the connection with granular, local communities. The argument was tied up more and more with numbers vs costs, wavelengths vs coverage, a motif that would recur in the ensuing decade.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: 1970 – 1976: Under Threat**

### **Introduction**

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the Postmaster General's decision in August 1969 to grant the BBC a permanent local service resulted in the BBC being given permission to increase the number of stations from eight to twenty. Despite this, the future for local radio was far from secure. The BBC faced considerable financial challenges, and there were the continuing obstacles presented by frequencies and wavelengths and difficulties with reception. But the biggest challenge was the election of a Conservative government in June 1970, who came to power committed to the introduction of a commercial radio service of some description. As I will show, this posed a threat to BBC Local Radio, which almost resulted in its demise.

One of the arguments I will put forward in this chapter is the BBC's continuing ability to adapt to changing circumstances, which helped local radio's survival, both in terms of securing governmental acceptance, and in how it succeeded in differentiating itself from the new commercial rival. The prevailing themes in the local broadcasting story are witnessed once again, in terms of government policy, wavelengths and frequencies and the definition and nature of what the service was intended to provide to its audience.

Two pivotal government enquiries during the first half of the 1970s provided the scope for this introspection and analysis. The Crawford Enquiry (1973-74) was designed to explore the provision of radio and television services in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and rural England. This latter area naturally called into question the size and focus of the BBC Local Radio offering and enabled the BBC to consider how local audiences could be served in the national regions too. The second committee of enquiry into broadcasting, chaired by Lord Annan, had a broader remit, but again the BBC had to provide evidence about the efficacy and validity of local radio, as well as plans for its future development.

Running parallel to these inquiries, the Managing Director of Radio, Ian Trethowan, commissioned his own internal appraisal of the future of local

radio, under the auspices of Maurice Ennals, who was the Station Manager at Radio Solent. His weighty and in depth findings, which were circulated in November 1975, were another opportunity for the BBC to set out the options for the growth of the service.

As I have previously demonstrated, the future for BBC Local Radio by the end of the 1960s was increasingly becoming tied to party politics. The Labour government were happy to secure its future with a further 12 stations, but the end of their term in office meant the introduction of commercial radio was inevitable. So a key question is how the BBC responded to this and in particular when the strategy shifted its focus from dealing with commercial radio *if* it became a reality, to *when*. In conjunction with this are the reasons behind the BBC's continued support and determination to continue the service in the face of significant odds. During negotiations with Christopher Chataway (the Conservative Minister for Posts and Telecommunications) in late 1970/early 1971, BBC Local Radio could have become a bartering tool in the wider broadcasting picture, yet the BBC team held fast to their conviction for preserving the service – why was this?

Once the immediate future was secured, the process of review and strategic positioning continued, so the question is what were the objectives, and were these driven by political considerations: the need to create distance from the new commercial stations or the desire to 'complete the chain' of BBC stations? With two government inquiries and an extensive internal review, there is the question of whether the period from 1970-75 were watershed years, which set the tone and agenda for the next five years, and which settled the question once and for all about local radio's ultimate continuation.

### **Twelve new stations 1970 - 1972**

This section concerns the dramatic events, which saw a swift change in the fortunes of BBC Local Radio, from planning for expansion one minute to fighting for survival the next. A key moment in the changing political climate happened on 3 March 1969, when Paul Bryan, opposition spokesman on Post Office affairs, told the Conservative Monday Club that a future Tory

government would introduce 100 or more commercial stations, supervised by a revamped Independent Television Authority.<sup>720</sup> Press reaction and the feedback from observers were rather lukewarm. For example the director of the Newspaper Society, William G Ridd, responded that local radio should be run by the BBC, though he agreed with Bryan that should commercial radio happen, local papers must be allowed to have a stake.<sup>721</sup> There was scepticism about the inevitable amount of pop music that commercial stations would broadcast, whether it was technically feasible to have 100 stations on MW and indeed nervousness from backbench Conservative MPs who feared the American example of local radio where market forces reduced quality.<sup>722</sup>

Ian Trethowan<sup>723</sup> identified several opportunities in the Bryan plan. The Conservatives seemed happy for the BBC to remain in the local radio field, if they could find the money to pay for it. There was also some doubt as to whether Bryan would force the BBC to give up wavelengths they had already got for their local stations. Trethowan's strategy was to extract pledges from the Tories to give the BBC some guarantees about the future of local radio. Next Trethowan wanted to emphasise that the licence fee had been used for years to subsidise broadcasting in rural areas, so the concentration of local radio for the time being in urban centres was not unduly disproportionate.<sup>724</sup>

Bearing these factors in mind, the subsequent plans and discussions around the next phase of BBC Local Radio evolution demonstrated the need to secure stations in centres of high population. This could be interpreted as a *de facto* acceptance that commercial radio was an inevitability, and a pre-emptive strike to make the establishment of commercial stations in these financially lucrative locations much harder.

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<sup>720</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 17 March 1969 R2/22/2

<sup>721</sup> *Sunderland Echo* 4 March 1969

<sup>722</sup> *New Society* 'Money in the Air' 6 March 1969; *The Star (Sheffield)* 7 March; *The Economist* 'Pie in the Sky' 8 March 1969

<sup>723</sup> Managing Director, Radio Designate – due to take over at the end of 1969, on Frank Gillard's retirement

<sup>724</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Ian Trethowan to Director, Public Affairs Subject: Paul Bryan's Interview on Radio Leeds 21 April 1969 Local Broadcasting Papers 1968-1969 R78/609

These factors were amplified in the BBC's submission to the PMG, which followed their evaluation report of the local radio experiment. The case was made, quite explicitly, for the BBC to continue with the expansion of local radio, with a prime motive of completing coverage of England as quickly as possible.<sup>725</sup> Ian Trethowan underlined the point in his BBC oral history interview: "The expansion of local radio was quite frankly in order to get as many stations on the ground before the election."<sup>726</sup> The BBC stated that the Conservative Party policy for a network of commercial stations on MW made it necessary for them to 'propose protection of the competitive situation of BBC local stations in advance, by giving them a MW supplement', to complement VHF.<sup>727</sup> Provision for these MW frequencies would be found by re-deploying the Regional opt out wavelengths.

A second expedient was necessitated by the size and scale of the local stations. It was clear that the original intention for 'town radio' stations (along the lines of Radio Brighton) would mean 150 or so stations, costing around £12-15 million. '...the BBC does not think this type of broadcasting is in keeping with current and likely future trends in the field of local government'.<sup>728</sup> The BBC's plan, based on such a scenario would create around 40 stations covering the major conurbations, similar to Radio Merseyside. This of course also meant that the BBC stations would occupy the most lucrative sites in terms of advertising revenue. These 40 stations would yield 90% coverage of the total England population on VHF.<sup>729</sup>

Various internal documents listed the permutations of proposed station locations to achieve the maximum coverage. Names that cropped up regularly were London, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle (or Tyneside), Hull (or Humberside), Bristol, Southampton, Oxford, Derby, Plymouth and Chelmsford. Mansell made it clear that in securing these locations 'we will

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<sup>725</sup> BBC WAC Paper 'The BBC's Local Radio Proposals' G74.69 2 June 1969 Board of Governor's Papers R1/105

<sup>726</sup> BBC WAC Oral History interview with Ian Trethowan 2 March 1983

<sup>727</sup> BBC WAC Paper 'The BBC's Local Radio Proposals' G74.69 2 June 1969 Ibid p 6

<sup>728</sup> BBC WAC Op cit p 2 This was a reference to the Redcliffe-Maud Commission on Local Government, which, though it had not published its final report by this stage, was proposing the replacement of the borough and county borough system of government with unitary authorities.

<sup>729</sup> BBC WAC Op cit The addition of the MW supplement for these stations would provide a favourable comparison to the Regional MW system, which covered 98% of the audience during the day but only 70% at night.

be in occupation of all the “commanding heights”. Other sites are ‘less tactically sensitive from the point of view of pre-empting a potential competitor so the list can be altered.’<sup>730</sup>

The final decision on the next wave of the stations emerged after the Postmaster General accepted the BBC’s case to keep and run the service.<sup>731</sup> The final list for the next 12 stations announced at the end of November 1969 was: Birmingham, Blackburn, Bristol, Chatham (to serve the Medway towns), Derby, Hull (to serve Humberside), London, Manchester, Middlesbrough (to serve Teesside), Newcastle (to serve Tyneside), Oxford and Southampton (to serve Solent). A further 20 stations would bring the total to 40, and these would be financed by an increase in the licence fee, due in April 1971.<sup>732</sup> Press reaction was mixed. The *Hull Daily Mail* quoted Paul Bryan saying that a Conservative government would close down existing BBC Local Radio stations, except where they were not economically viable, ie to give commercial radio a clear run.<sup>733</sup>

Once the question of the locations was settled, there were two preoccupations remaining. One was the speed with which the new stations could be opened and the other concerned some internal disquiet about the size and nature of the 12 additions. There were several factors influencing the pace of the next roll-out. One was an issue of infra-structure. Under the proposals laid out in *Broadcasting in the 70s*, the Regional opt-outs would be withdrawn by April 1970, which would allow financial savings and staff re-deployment for the new local radio stations. The first new stations would then start broadcasting by the end of September that year.<sup>734</sup> There was also the implicit imperative for the BBC that in establishing their new stations it would be harder for a future Conservative government to dismantle them. However, delays in the timetable occurred because of

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<sup>730</sup> eg BBC WAC Memo from G E Mansell to Frank Gillard 1 July 1969 Subject: ‘Local Radio Development’ Local Radio Policy 1969-1971 R102/48 There was a proposal to close Radio Durham and create a wider Teesside station instead (based at Middlesbrough). Frank Gillard thought the closure of Radio Durham would be too controversial Note by MDR BM (69) 73 Ibid. However the station was eventually closed in August 1972 and its transmission area covered by Radio Carlisle, Radio Newcastle and Radio Teesside.

<sup>731</sup> See the previous chapter

<sup>732</sup> BBC WAC Hansard Parliamentary Debates 24 November 1969 Vol 792 No 21 Local Broadcasting Papers 1969-1970 R78/610

<sup>733</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 1 December 1969 R2/22/5

<sup>734</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 29 September 1969 R2/22/5

wrangles over the redeployment of the Regional MW frequencies to supplement BBC Local Radio.<sup>735</sup> By February, it seemed likely that the first stations would not now open until the end of 1970, and these would be VHF only to begin with.<sup>736</sup> Despite the inconvenience for listeners who would have an interrupted service between the end of the English Regional opt outs on MW, scheduled for 29 August 1970, and the start of new local radio stations, there was some crumb of comfort. The Director of Engineering thought that the redeployed MW frequencies would make it much harder for commercial radio to get established.<sup>737</sup>

The other source of discussion concerned the definition of the new stations. Despite the assurance with which the BBC conceived of the non-metropolitan broadcast areas, *The Guardian* was already noting disquiet in July 1969. The newspaper pointed out that staff in the original eight stations were cautious about the expansion as the proposed stations were more 'area' than local, with the result of less flexibility.<sup>738</sup> The main concern involved enlarging the editorial areas, which included existing as well as new stations. In a meeting with Trethowan on 10 September 1969, the managers of Radios Sheffield and Brighton made it known they were unhappy with their new editorial areas, which they felt were a step away from the original local radio concept.<sup>739</sup>

The issue of station size and focus also became a factor when it came to naming the new stations. Most were agreed upon, to signify the area that each station covered. So Radio Solent was agreeable for the Southampton

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<sup>735</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 15 January 1970 R1/38/1

<sup>736</sup> BBC WAC Memo Subject: 'Local Radio on MF' No Author 2 February 1970 Local Radio Policy 1969-1971 R102/48

<sup>737</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 15 January 1970; 23 April 1970 *ibid*

<sup>738</sup> *The Guardian* 'Tune into the swap shops and stork talk' by John Cunningham July 19 1969 As part of the reorganisation outlined in *Broadcasting in the 70s*, it was proposed that a new post, Controller English Regions, should be created and this would take responsibility for managing the local radio stations, while the Managing Director of Radio retained control of local radio policy. The HQ team remained in London. Pat Beech, Controller of the Midland Region, was appointed the first Controller, English Regions (ER), but the transition was uneasy.

<sup>739</sup> BBC WAC memo from Local Radio Development Manager (Hugh Pierce) to the Chairman (through Ian Trethowan) Subject: Local Radio October 8 1969 Local Radio Policy 1969-1971 R102/48 There was also concern that the financial settlement for stations, £80,000 on average per station per year for programmes, was insufficient and would impede production of the more creative (and more satisfying) elements of the schedule



station, Medway for Chatham and Teesside for Middlesborough.<sup>740</sup> But Birmingham became emblematic of a deeper struggle. Pat Beech, as Controller of English Regions, would not sanction the station name Radio Birmingham as he felt this was too restrictive. For him, the principle of a 'district' station was already established, with Solent and Teesside, so he proposed Radio West Midlands or West Midlands Radio.<sup>741</sup>

Robert McLeish, who had by this time taken up his appointment as the Head of Local Radio Training in London, took the opposite view. For him, the experiment had been a success because it was focussed on small, real communities. "We wanted them [the stations] to be small. Our phrase was 'where will we broadcast? Where the buses run.'"<sup>742</sup> McLeish's view was that Beech was too entrenched in a regional mindset, as he noted in his diary entry for January 19 1970: 'I agree for Radio Birmingham NOT [his caps] trying to cover the whole of the Black Country and Coventry. Pat Beech must be steered away from the area idea'.<sup>743</sup>

McLeish made strenuous representations to Beech, who was evidently very annoyed with McLeish's continued intransigence: 'we are making the most of our limited means and he [McLeish] must come to terms with it.'<sup>744</sup> McLeish obviously won the argument, as he recorded:

'And to do battle to call Radio Birmingham that and not Heart of England or West of England. I think the battle has been won and I think Pat Beech as been told that Local Radio is city radio and not regional.'<sup>745</sup>

### **Fighting for survival**

Despite the technical obstacles and some internal dissent, BBC Local Radio's future looked relatively secure in the Spring of 1970. A licence fee increase was promised for April the following year, and that would help build the remaining stations needed to cover England. There were also

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<sup>740</sup> BBC WAC memo from Hugh Pierce to Controller English Regions Subject: Nomenclature: New Local Radio stations 11 January 1970 Local Radio Policy 1969-1971 R102/48

<sup>741</sup> BBC WAC memo from Pat Beech to Hugh Pierce 16 February 1970 Local Radio Policy 1969-1971 R102/48

<sup>742</sup> Robert McLeish interview with author 11 August 2010

<sup>743</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 19 January 1970

<sup>744</sup> BBC WAC memo from Pat Beech to Hugh Pierce 24 February 1970 Local Radio Policy 1969-1971 R102/48 McLeish responded: 'regional and area radio be consigned to the bin' Op cit

<sup>745</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry March 6 1970

discussions about how local radio might operate in Scotland and Wales.<sup>746</sup> So the BBC could be forgiven for a mood of optimism regarding its services. On 18 May 1970 Harold Wilson announced a general election, to take place exactly a month thence, and his Labour government enjoyed a small lead in the opinion polls, which was expected to grow as the campaign progressed.<sup>747</sup> However, a late surge for the Conservatives, which was not picked up by the polls, gave them a 30-seat majority. The next surprise in broadcasting circles was the appointment of the new Minister for Posts and Telecommunications. The expectation was for Paul Bryan, who had shadowed the role, to be given the job.<sup>748</sup> Instead it went to Christopher Chataway, and it fell to him to implement the Conservative pledge to introduce commercial radio to the UK.<sup>749</sup>

From the BBC's perspective, although it had anticipated the eventual arrival of commercial radio, it had not expected it so soon – at least, not until it had had a chance to complete this phase of its local radio plans. There was immediate press speculation about the speed with which the Conservative government could implement commercial radio but in response Charles Curran, the BBC Director-General, told the Board of Governors that the transition from the regional system to local radio was half complete and it was impossible to stop now.<sup>750</sup> The BBC's initial hope was that the new administration would respect the agreement reached by the previous administration over the re-distribution of MW frequencies to the new stations, but Dennis Lawrence at the Ministry confirmed that these arrangements were now suspended.<sup>751</sup>

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<sup>746</sup> for example BBC WAC memo from MDR to Director of Engineering Subject: Local Radio Future Development April 2 1970 Local Radio Policy 1969-1971 R102/48

<sup>747</sup> Sandbrook, D White Heat: *A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties 1964-70* (London: Little, Brown, 2006) pp 726-741

<sup>748</sup> The Report from Leicester University Centre for Communication speculated that Bryan was too closely identified with some of the lobby groups advocating commercial radio. BBC WAC Op cit; BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167

<sup>749</sup> Chataway had been a Commonwealth gold medal winning athlete, and then a successful current affairs reporter for both ITN and BBC. In his political career, Chataway was leader of the Inner London Education Authority, but he declined the position of Sports Minister in the new Heath government, and was given Posts and Telecommunications instead. Despite his experience in broadcasting, this was an unexpected move.

<sup>750</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 22 June 1970 R2/23/1

<sup>751</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 29 June 1970 op cit

The next line of defence was to get agreement that the BBC could at least proceed with the planned 12 new stations even though Trethowan would have preferred guarantees on the *next* 20 stations before ending Regional opts.<sup>752</sup> A formal meeting took place on 1 July 1970, between Lord Hill (BBC Chairman), Trethowan and the Minister. The BBC was presented with three scenarios that could occur with the introduction of commercial radio:

- a completely commercial system for local radio, with the BBC only running networks
- a mixed system: some places having BBC Local Radio, some having commercial stations and some having both
- the BBC would be allowed to go ahead with its plans for 40 local stations and a system of commercial local radio would develop side by side.<sup>753</sup>

The Chairman countered that the BBC had already set out their case for four networks and local radio in *Broadcasting in the 70s*: plans for the next 12 stations were far advanced, with the recruitment of staff, the procurement of premises and so on. While he appreciated the government might wish the pace of growth to be slowed down, he hoped the BBC would be allowed to proceed as they had planned. The next issue was one of finance. Trethowan's argument was that the majority of the cost of local radio was really subsumed in the domestic news service.<sup>754</sup> But however it was presented, the BBC still faced a deficit of £7million by April 1971, which is when they had expected a licence fee increase.<sup>755</sup> The government asked for more details about the financial aspect of local radio expansion. Meanwhile Chataway began to make visits to the BBC's local radio operation to see for himself how it worked. Robert McLeish recorded Chataway's visit to local radio HQ at the Langham, Portland Place on 10 July.

'I was with him for one and a half hours with Hugh P and Ian T. His questions were clearly aimed at establishing we had gone in

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<sup>752</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>753</sup> BBC WAC Note of meeting with Minister 1 July 1970 R78/610

<sup>754</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>755</sup> BBC WAC Note of meeting with Minister 1 July 1970 ibid

[deliberately] setting up the new 12 stations. He was very pleasant but obviously thought that the development would be unpopular with his government. He has to persuade the government of our view.<sup>756</sup>

On 5 August, a press release from Minpostel (the Ministry) announced that the BBC could proceed with the next 12 stations, since preparations were so far advanced. But there were significant caveats: these - and the original eight stations - would operate on VHF only, and 'there can be no commitment at this time on the future of BBC Local Radio in the longer term.'<sup>757</sup> So while this gave the BBC some glimmer of hope, it might only be a temporary reprieve.

Trethowan made it clear in his BBC oral history interview that the stations were opened "at breakneck speed" and he paid tribute to "the people concerned [who] did a marvellous job in getting them set up, several of them within a matter of months."<sup>758</sup> In fact eight of the twelve opened by the end of 1970.<sup>759</sup> But was the *de facto* presence of these new stations enough to guarantee BBC Local Radio would survive? Whichever way the influence lay, I would argue that the ability of senior BBC management to persuade, negotiate and nurture relationships at a high political level was once again crucial in putting forward the case for local radio. Michael Barton suggests that Trethowan himself was a critical factor: his own politics were Conservative, and he was a former colleague of Chataway.<sup>760</sup> One other aspect that benefited the BBC was the fact that, despite the manifesto commitment to introduce commercial radio, there was not actually a concrete plan. This led to much press speculation about how it might work, and this uncertainty tended to reflect well on the BBC. *The Guardian* advocated genuine community radio as run by the BBC.<sup>761</sup> A more unexpected bonus came with a leader in *The Times*, criticising decisions made for the sake of political doctrine and rejecting commercial radio, which

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<sup>756</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 10 July 1970

<sup>757</sup> BBC WAC Press Release from Minpostel 5 August 1970 Local Broadcasting Papers 1969-1970 R78/610

<sup>758</sup> BBC WAC Oral History interview with Ian Trethowan 2 March 1983

<sup>759</sup> Bristol 4 September; Manchester 10 September; London 6 October; Oxford 29 October; Birmingham 7 November; Medway 18 December; Solent 31 December; Teeside 31 December

<sup>760</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>761</sup> *The Guardian* leader comment 'Radio for the parish pump' 7 August 1970

it said would 'provide a staple diet of outdated pop relieved by snippets of local news'.<sup>762</sup>

However there was no room for complacency. Gradually a template for commercial radio began to emerge. In a speech to the Advertising Association, the Minister was reported as saying that a community of around 250,000 was needed for a viable station, which meant around 40 or 50 stations.<sup>763</sup> On those sorts of figures, frequency availability for a mixed BBC and commercial system began to look increasingly unlikely. By the end of November, press reports were so disturbing about the Minister's intention to hand over the BBC's local radio stations to commercial interests that Trethowan wrote to all Station Managers to get the message across to staff that it was perfectly possible to run both, competing local radio systems.<sup>764</sup> Robert McLeish noted in his diary on 26 November that Chataway had told TUC delegates of his commercial radio plans, to sell off BBC Local Radio to private interests. 'I just don't see it but Hugh said it would be quite easy.'<sup>765</sup> By the beginning of December, it was clear that the BBC would be forced to defend their position in a frantic bid for the survival not only of local radio, but also of Radio One: the government wanted its national wavelength too.

The Board of Management was under no illusion that this was a very grave challenge. What was not clear was the exact motivation. If it was simply an expedient to enable commercial radio to happen, that was 'disreputable'. If it was about finance, why not come out and challenge the BBC's own figures?<sup>766</sup> Robert McLeish summed up the staff's view: '[this is a] negation of the conservative cry for competition. And we're not going to run them [local radio stations] for two years just to have them taken over in 1972.'<sup>767</sup> There was a lengthy series of discussions about the way forward. It was a mixture of briefings and official meetings, though as the *Financial Times* pointed out, Chataway's preferred method of informal conversations with different groups painted a picture of indecision at the heart of

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<sup>762</sup> *The Times* leader: 'Parish pump radio' 10 September 1970

<sup>763</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 26 October 1970 R2/22/5

<sup>764</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 7 December 1970 op cit

<sup>765</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 26 November 1970

<sup>766</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 7 December 1970 op cit

<sup>767</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 30 November 1970

government, as they were often leaked to the press adding to the confusion.<sup>768</sup>

Ian Trethowan's oral history account of the way negotiations were conducted gave credence to this *ad hoc* approach. When Chataway told Trethowan over lunch that he was planning to take away local radio and Radio One from the BBC in order to redistribute the frequencies to commercial radio, Trethowan began his charm offensive. "So after lunch we went back to his office and pored over maps and everything else and, indeed, it was proved that the frequencies were not an insuperable problem."<sup>769</sup> This is, however, rather a truncated version of events, for in truth the argument went on for several months before it was won. The Boards of Management and Governors considered various papers that explored the doomsday scenario of losing either the MW frequencies freed up by the end of regional opts or an entire MW network. The latter threat would most likely mean the loss of Radio One, which the BBC was unwilling to accept, given that the pop music station was a point of entry for young listeners to the BBC.<sup>770</sup>

As the arguments progressed, it was clear though that the BBC was winning the battle for hearts and minds in the outside world, especially in the provincial press. This indicated a significant turn around, from initial hostility (or at the very least apathy) towards local radio when it started, to a situation where most provincial press reports in December 1970 deplored the threat to remove local radio from the BBC. *The Express and Star* in Shropshire was typical, arguing that giving local radio to the commercial lobby simply created another monopoly. Newspapers, it said, had developed perfectly well, competing alongside profit free outlets.<sup>771</sup>

After his meeting with the Minister on 8 December, which Hill reported involved discussions of 'a frank and at times vigorous character', immediate

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<sup>768</sup> *The Financial Times* 'Mr Chataway's New Year Resolutions' by Arthur Sandles 23 December 1970

<sup>769</sup> BBC WAC Oral History interview with Ian Trethowan 2 March 1983

<sup>770</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 17 December 1970 R2/23/5

<sup>771</sup> *Express and Star Leader* 18 December 1970; others expressing similar sentiments *Coventry Evening Telegraph* 'Local Radio Rumour' 18 December 1970; *Western Mail* 'Local radio doubts' 22 December 1970; *Dursley Gazette* 2 January 1971 Trethowan praised the Press Relations team for the skilful way they handled publicity around the debate. Board of Management Minutes 4 January 1971 R2/24/1

fears about the removal of BBC Local Radio were allayed, especially as Hill convinced Chataway that a 10/- increase in the licence fee next April would be sufficient to carry on.<sup>772</sup> What Hill and Trethowan seemed able to do was separate out Chataway's main objectives and tackle them one by one. Chataway's primary concern was to create, somehow, a commercial radio framework that was technically and financially viable. That was partly why he had the Radio One's MW frequency in his sights, because a national commercial station would make a quick profit.<sup>773</sup> A paper by J Redmond, BBC Director of Engineering, detailed several ways of sharing spectrum availability between the BBC and commercial stations. The key to the BBC's negotiations with the Minister was to answer his twin concerns that there were not enough frequencies to share between the BBC and commercial stations, allowing for the existing 20 stations (plus a couple of new ones) and 50 or so commercial ones on MW. This plan would also guarantee the future of Radio One on MW.<sup>774</sup>

A crucial meeting between the BBC delegation and the Minister on 21 December 1970 set out the main arguments very clearly.<sup>775</sup> For the BBC, Hill stressed that the current situation created uncertainty that was damaging to the morale of local radio staff. As far as finance was concerned, the BBC could manage to support 20 stations with a £7.0.0 licence fee. He said that their research into frequencies proved that it was possible for the BBC stations and a commercial system of local radio to exist side by side, in fair competition. On the issue of a national commercial station, Hill said that any suggestion of removing the Radio One MW frequencies would upset the 45% of young listeners who came to the BBC via the pop music station, and reminded the Minister how the BBC already employed more musicians than they needed because they were not allowed to close any orchestras.

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<sup>772</sup> BBC WAC Memo from the Chairman 10 December 1970 Board of Governors Papers R1/106

<sup>773</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>774</sup> BBC WAC BBC and Commercial Local Radio: Feasibilities note by Director of Engineering 17 December 1970 Board of Governors Papers R1/106

<sup>775</sup> BBC WAC Note of a meeting held at the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications 21 December 1970 Board of Governors Papers R1/107

The Minister responded that uncertainty was inevitable as the government had yet to reach their decision, but a £7.0.0 licence might be possible from July 1971. In terms of the structure of commercial radio, Chataway was considering a national network with a central authority collecting revenues that might be distributed to local, commercial stations. He reminded the meeting that Tony Benn, when PMG, had considered creating a version of Radio One that carried advertising. In terms of competition, Chataway argued that charging all licence fee payers for 20 local stations was equally unfair. So instead, he preferred the idea of a commercial network to compete with the BBC at a national level. At the close of the meeting, the BBC agreed to review the effects of a £7.0.0 licence from next July.<sup>776</sup>

And where exactly was the commercial lobby during this fraught period? There were two main interest groups, represented by the Local Radio Association (headed by John Gorst) and the Commercial Broadcasting Consultants (Hughie Green). Interestingly neither group wanted Radio One to close.<sup>777</sup> John Gorst argued that this would simply create a commercial monopoly – a national station supplying material for local stations. There were no accurate statistics about how much advertising revenue commercial stations could rely on, nor how they would manage to secure adequate agreements with the Musicians Union and the Performing Rights Society.<sup>778</sup> And on the issue of frequencies, the Local Radio Association agreed with the BBC that it was possible to have commercial and BBC stations side by side, on MW, without any need to forfeit wavebands.<sup>779</sup> To add another fly in the ointment, there was the issue of regulation. The ITA had said it was happy to take commercial local radio into its remit, but it also wanted to own and lease out the transmitting facilities too, as it did with television. This would add another financial burden to any commercial radio

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<sup>776</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>777</sup> *Sunday Times* 'Advertisers may sponsor local radio shows' by John Whale 3 January 1970; *The Times* letter from John Gorst 2 January 1971

<sup>778</sup> *Financial Times* op cit; *Sunday Times* 3 January 1971

<sup>779</sup> *The Times* 'The Case for Local Radio' 4 January 1971



licence, reducing the scope for profitability, discouraging would-be operators still further.<sup>780</sup>

Lord Hill's memoir, written in 1974 using his own diaries, bears out the sequence of events which emerges from the Archive. Hill was aware in his book that the BBC had to counter the broadcasting doctrine that Chataway was formulating, which relied heavily on what Hill identified as Heath's notion that the BBC should 'do dull and serious stuff' and leave the commercial service with light entertainment.<sup>781</sup> For Hill, it was important to gain the upper hand in terms of press coverage, so that the government and the licence payer understood the point that 'Local radio was a logical extension of the BBC's services, not something additional to be removed without consequences. The move into local radio was an integral part of the development of non-metropolitan broadcasting.'<sup>782</sup>

There was no precise indication at what point the BBC won over the Minister and persuaded him of their case, but by the end of January 1971 press reports were surfacing quoting reliable sources that the BBC would be allowed to keep local radio and Radio One in the forthcoming White Paper.<sup>783</sup> In some respects, the respite was only temporary. The White Paper, in March 1971, promised 60 commercial, local stations alongside the BBC's 20.<sup>784</sup> MW would be available to both. The rationale behind allowing the BBC to continue with local radio was based on the BBC's public service credentials and their ability to serve 'minorities', which the White Paper acknowledged commercial radio could not do. The Corporation 'will attach first importance to serving a wide variety of minority audiences, including local schools and colleges', and so success would not be measured purely in terms of listener numbers, in comparison with commercial radio.<sup>785</sup>

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<sup>780</sup> BBC WAC Op cit; BBC WAC Leicester University Centre for Communication *Local Radio and the Community* 1971 R9/1,167

<sup>781</sup> Hill, Lord *Behind the Screen: The Broadcasting Memoirs of Lord Hill of Luton* (London Sidgwick and Jackson 1974) p 167

<sup>782</sup> Op cit p 166

<sup>783</sup> *The Guardian* 'BBC Local Radio and pop reprieve' 17 February 1971

<sup>784</sup> The remaining BBC stations opened as follows: Newcastle 2 January; Blackburn 26 January; Humberside 25 February; Derby 29 April 1971.

<sup>785</sup> Home Office *White Paper An Alternative Service of Radio Broadcasting* (Cmnd 4636 HMSO 1971) p 6

The BBC's reaction was one of relief, despite the fact that, for the foreseeable future, the number of BBC stations was restricted to 20. It did mean that the BBC could enact the principle of *Broadcasting in the 70s*, by ceasing regional opts, although some area news and weather broadcasts would remain on VHF for those areas without local radio.<sup>786</sup> At the same time, the BBC noted the careful words about serving minority groups and although it would heed this intention, it would not ignore the larger audience either: 'the BBC does not mean to allow itself to be elbowed out of the way in peak listening hours.'<sup>787</sup> The White Paper made it clear that commercial radio would start on MW and VHF and that the BBC would 'eventually' get 60% coverage on MW by daytime. In other words, the IBA came first and the BBC second.<sup>788</sup>

### **The Crawford Enquiry: Rural Affairs**

The period from mid-1972 onwards provided several opportunities to review current achievements and reflect on future growth. The focus came from three structures of enquiry: those chaired by Crawford and Annan, and one internal audit led by Maurice Ennals. This section concerns the first investigation, the Crawford Enquiry. This was significant because the remit was the provision of broadcasting for rural areas; events in the preceding years had focussed attention in the opposite direction, towards urban audiences, many of whom were arguably rather well served by the 20 BBC local stations. The Crawford Enquiry provided the stimulus for a discussion about how to expand local radio in the future and address sections of the audience not currently being served. These debates may well have occurred anyway, in some form or other, but a committee of enquiry naturally provided a forum for the BBC to demonstrate their public service credentials through their achievements and aspirations. There was also the hope that the government might well act on the recommendations of the enquiry and provide sufficient resources for the BBC to progress their

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<sup>786</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors minutes 22 April 1971 R1/39/1

<sup>787</sup> BBC WAC Paper 'The BBC and Commercial Radio' 17 May 1971 No author ('Not for attribution') Local Broadcasting Part Five R78/611

<sup>788</sup> BBC WAC Report by Managing Director of Radio July 1970 - June 1971 24 June 1971 G.70/71 Board of Governors Paper R1/107

objectives. The main questions that need addressing here are to identify how the BBC envisaged local radio evolving in the future, how the service would exist in a changed radio landscape and what changes might be necessary to achieve the desired end result.

The Crawford Committee on Broadcasting was set up in May 1973 to explore several aspects of broadcasting in the UK, including examining plans from the BBC and IBA concerning television and radio coverage of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and rural England. The BBC provided evidence in the form of memoranda and hosted visits from Sir Stewart Crawford and his committee in the Spring of 1974. Also during this period, the first two independent stations, Capital and LBC, opened (in October 1973). So Ian Trethowan's initial appraisal of the situation facing local radio was predicated with one eye on Crawford and one on the impending commercial competition. In a paper he prepared for the Governors, Trethowan conducted a survey of the current position, looking at programme policy, station management, competition and staffing.<sup>789</sup> Evaluating the success of the stations was, as usual, a tricky assessment. The two main criteria - audience size and relationships with the community were difficult to assess but Trethowan was confident enough to suggest that those stations, which did well in both categories (Sheffield, Leicester, Nottingham), did so because they served smaller communities. However it was difficult to achieve more when the number of stations was stalled at 20 rather than 40. And the existing stations were under pressure to increase, not decrease, their transmission area.<sup>790</sup> The Crawford Committee provided the BBC with an opportunity to address its local radio plans across the UK, but it had to be guided by several factors. One was cost; and one was the reaction of the government, which was wedded to the idea, enshrined in the 1971 White Paper, that BBC Local Radio and commercial, independent radio would co-exist side by side but not, except in a few cases, like London, overlap in the same locations.<sup>791</sup>

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<sup>789</sup> BBC WAC Report on Local Radio by MDR 25 April 1973 G.58/73 Board of Governors Papers G1/109

<sup>790</sup> BBC WAC op cit eg Leeds opening up to Bradford, Solent taking in Bournemouth

<sup>791</sup> BBC WAC Draft Paper on the Crawford Enquiry by Ian Trethowan 18 May 1973 Crawford Study Group R102/42 It was also noted that the other national 'regions' (Scotland, Wales and

So in order to find more individuality and uniqueness in local radio, this meant re-discovering the 'authenticity' of the community voice and community service and making sure that local radio was different from either Radio One or Two or a commercial service. To this end, Trethowan began to employ a different nomenclature. 'There is much to be said for using the phrase 'community radio'', Trethowan argued, as

'local radio has come to be associated in the minds of some people with the town radio of our early stations....community radio describes our wider purpose: to use radio flexibility and relative cheapness to provide more broadcasting for smaller communities than could possibly be achieved by television.'<sup>792</sup>

This approach had the twin benefits of improving provision for rural areas and at the same time steering clear of the urban locations, which would become populated by ILRs.<sup>793</sup> But how many stations would be needed and what would they cost? Trethowan's initial approach was to identify 100 or so communities who might have a claim to a local station.<sup>794</sup> Having incorporated the financial restrictions, he could then propose a plan for limited expansion as a step towards the ultimate goal.

One other aspect of his scheme that began to emerge was the idea that not every station needed to be the same size. For example, while Plymouth or Exeter might warrant a local station of the traditional pattern, Barnstaple or Torbay could operate as a small satellite, a single studio producing one or two hours a day.<sup>795</sup> This concept was not entirely new: in many ways it was the logical progression of 'unmanned' self-operated studios that many of the original Station Managers had set up in town halls and neighbouring outposts.<sup>796</sup> So the BBC concluded that their preliminary evidence to

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Northern Ireland) would be devising their own proposals to Crawford, which may or may not be based on the English Local Radio model.

<sup>792</sup> BBC WAC op cit

<sup>793</sup> BBC WAC op cit areas often cited as being underserved by local radio included Devon, Cornwall, East Anglia, parts of Kent, the west Marches.

<sup>794</sup> BBC WAC Draft Paper on the Crawford Enquiry by Ian Trethowan 18 May 1973 Crawford Study Group R102/42 *ibid* In this period, Trethowan (and others at the BBC) used the plan devised by Derek Senior in his Memorandum of Dissent to the Redcliffe-Maud Report as a template for possible locations. Senior's scheme involved 35 regions and 148 districts.

<sup>795</sup> BBC WAC op cit. Trethowan said this idea was not new but had been played down to prevent commercial operators from using it as they tried to fund 60 new stations.

<sup>796</sup> Michael Barton interview with author 17 December 2007; Owen Bentley interview with author 19 July 2010

Crawford would be based on a proposal for 30 stations (mostly in England but some in the national regions), some of which might be smaller operations. This phase would be a step towards the ultimate goal of 100 stations across the whole UK, so that the BBC did not 'fall short of the requirements of an important moment in broadcasting history'.<sup>797</sup> The Board of Governors agreed this approach, noting Trethowan's emphasis on the point that the line of development lay in community radio [underlined in the minutes] and his suggestion that if the BBC had to trade in one of the national networks to achieve this, then this could only be exchanged for 'nothing less than a nationally available service'.<sup>798</sup> [ditto]

In preparation for the BBC's memoranda of evidence, Trethowan and the Chief Engineer for Radio Broadcasting produced several papers, which fleshed out ideas about the exact locations for the proposed arrangement of stations.<sup>799</sup> A shorter list of 30 stations<sup>800</sup> was produced as the basis to explore the idea of satellite stations and how possible combinations might be used, with a main station in the larger town and a small studio in the outlying neighbourhood.<sup>801</sup> These proposals were further elaborated on in the memorandum that was submitted to Crawford in August 1973. This gave more detail and examples about how each area of England might be better served with satellite stations.<sup>802</sup>

The list now numbered 35 in total, with 12 of them duplicating ILR proposed sites. However the BBC pointed out that the 1971 White Paper could be interpreted as allowing this overlap because although both

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<sup>797</sup> BBC WAC Draft Paper on the Crawford Enquiry by Ian Trethowan 18 May 1973 Crawford Study Group R102/42 *ibid*

<sup>798</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors minutes 7 June 1973 R1/41/2

<sup>799</sup> BBC WAC 'Development of BBC Local Radio and Community Radio' Crawford Study Group R102/42 Interestingly they used the list for 146 stations in England cited in the 1962 *Interim Report of the Local Broadcasting Committee* as the starting point.

<sup>800</sup> The English locations were Ashford; Bournemouth; Cambridge; Chelmsford; Coventry; Exeter; Gloucester; Guildford; Hereford/Worcester; Ipswich; Lincoln; Northampton; Norwich; Peterborough; Plymouth; Preston; Reading; Shrewsbury; St Albans; Swindon; Taunton; York.

<sup>801</sup> BBC WAC *ibid*

<sup>802</sup> BBC WAC Memorandum No 2: The BBC in the English Regions: Community Radio in Rural England 1973 Crawford Study Group R102/42 For example in the Vale of York the main station could be sited at York, with a small satellite in the far north, on the Teesside border and/or with one at Scarborough. In the very poorly served east of England, the BBC would like main stations at Lincoln, Cambridge, Peterborough, Norwich, Bedford, Ipswich and Chelmsford. Smaller stations could operate in Kings Lynn, Lowestoft and possibly Southend.

services provided news coverage for the same areas, the content of the rest of the output was sufficiently different to constitute choice for the listener.<sup>803</sup> Then there was the issue of cost. At 1973 prices, a station cost £140-150,000 a year to run. A satellite station could be as little as £30,000. The list of proposed stations the BBC was submitting would cost £4million, but there was no discussion of where exactly this money might be found, as this was not within the bounds of the enquiry.

Other important contributions to the Crawford Committee came from the Chairmen of the English Regional Advisory Councils and from the Local Radio Councils.<sup>804</sup> Their report talked about 'white areas': rural parts where there was no MW service (since the end of the regional opts) and minimal VHF. So their principal aim for radio was to eliminate these 'white areas' to give better coverage to the whole of England.<sup>805</sup> The next stage in the development in this region would be for 'branch' office-type studios in places like Whitehaven in Cumbria.<sup>806</sup>

Despite appearing to be in sympathy with the overall aims of the BBC's local radio proposals, a few cracks began to emerge. Michael Swann, the new Chairman of the BBC wrote to the Regional Advisory Council Chairs thanking them for their contribution to Crawford, but pointing out that their belief that the reflection of 'life, interests and character of the whole country' came primarily from the broadcast networks was based on a misunderstanding. The BBC's aim was to serve the local community first, precisely to move away from the bias that meant coverage from London and the South East informed rural populations of their local news.<sup>807</sup>

The start of ILR in October 1973 probably preoccupied the press more than the Crawford Enquiry. For Frank Gillard, now retired, writing in *The*

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<sup>803</sup> BBC WAC op cit

<sup>804</sup> BBC WAC Memorandum by the Chairmen of the English Regional Councils August 1973  
ibid

<sup>805</sup> BBC WAC ibid Each of the eight Chairs submitted their own appendix to the report, and most of them were preoccupied with television coverage. However the Chairman of the North East Regional Advisory Council commented that the three stations in his area (Newcastle, Teesside and Carlisle) were correctly located as these were the 'base' cities used by the rural population for shopping, sport, entertainment etc.

<sup>806</sup> BBC WAC ibid The Whitehaven example was also cited in Memorandum No 2 and would become a reality in November 1974

<sup>807</sup> BBC WAC Response from Chairman of BBC to the Memorandum from the English Regional Councils 2 October 1973 Crawford Study Group ibid

*Listener*, the arrival of commercial radio was not a problem, except where it might affect staff recruitment and retention, especially for those with good news journalism skills.<sup>808</sup> However, it was indirectly the issue of personnel that troubled him most: the one aspect of local radio that was not working was the way it made use of the community and got participants and contributors making programmes and on the air. Despite one or two successful examples of the 'open door' concept, such as Radio London's *Platform* and Radio Bristol's *Access*, more needed to be done, otherwise local radio could lose touch with the grassroots. But the station as a 'reflector' of the local community was not enough for Gillard: for him, it needed to start being a counsellor: 'a missing link in the total aid service available to the citizen.'<sup>809</sup> Certainly Gillard's repeated use of the term 'community' and the encouragement for more participation chimes with Trethowan's concepts, even though he did not get involved in the question of station size or location in this article.

By the Spring of 1974, the Crawford Committee were touring round the country to hear evidence in person, from Station Managers, LRC chairs and some Regional Advisory Council members too. Crawford visited sites ranging from Leeds to Norwich, Plymouth and Bristol, Newcastle and Carlisle, as well as cities in Scotland and Wales. Records of these meetings show that the unified approach of the BBC was sometimes difficult to maintain. The local stations already in existence had a clear idea of how best to serve their communities. In some cases, this meant that the idea of satellite studios could work well. The Station Manager of Humberside demonstrated that his string of small studios in Cleethorpes, Barton, Grimsby, Scunthorpe and Goole - all modest operations made possible with some local authority support - had helped build a more granular audience.<sup>810</sup> Granularity – a more immediate and direct connection which small stations, or their satellite operations, could achieve – was evidently

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<sup>808</sup> *The Listener* 'Frank Gillard Gives his opinion on BBC Local Radio – which he helped to create' 11 October 1973

<sup>809</sup> Op cit

<sup>810</sup> BBC WAC Note on Meeting between BBC and the Crawford Committee by GMLR 13 February 1974 Crawford Study Group ibid

proof that the BBC was succeeding in terms of community and some degree of access.

However in the North West, Crawford seemed keen to enlarge Radio Carlisle to include the whole of Cumbria, along the lines of the new unitary authority. The BBC demurred, on the grounds that this would dilute the community ideal, preferring their solution outlined in the memorandum for a station in southern Cumbria, perhaps in Lancaster or Kendal, and for satellite studios for other areas. Crawford, apparently, was not pleased.<sup>811</sup>

The BBC restated their case to Crawford in an addendum to the original memorandum in May 1974. The main addition was a request to run 12 or so experimental stations in remote locations on a small scale. Some of these could be linked to existing stations, others could re-broadcast material from the residual regional opts in the Plymouth and Norwich areas. The paper stressed that these were only short term, intermediary steps towards a more substantial network of community stations.<sup>812</sup>

During the Crawford process, the political landscape had changed, with the general election in February 1974, which saw Harold Wilson returned to office. The committee continued with their work until it was concluded but there was already speculation by March that this would be a prelude to a more far-reaching enquiry into broadcasting in the future.<sup>813</sup> In fact, within a few weeks, Home Secretary Roy Jenkins announced in a written reply to the House of Commons the inauguration of a committee into the future of broadcasting, chaired by Lord Annan.<sup>814</sup>

The Crawford Report was published on 21 November 1974, but its recommendations regarding the BBC's English local radio proposals proved something of a pyrrhic victory. The Committee said that the BBC should be allowed to extend their service of local radio stations in order to increase

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<sup>811</sup> BBC WAC Note by Director of Public Affairs on Visits of the Crawford Committee 4 April 1974 Crawford Study Group *ibid*

<sup>812</sup> BBC WAC Addendum to BBC Memorandum No 2 13 May 1974 Crawford Study Group *ibid* The paper included a list of potential sites and costings.

<sup>813</sup> BBC WAC Update by Colin Shaw [The Secretary of the BBC] 20 March 1974 Crawford Study Group *ibid*

<sup>814</sup> Briggs, A *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Vol V Competition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p 995 This committee had originally been planned under the previous Labour administration in 1970 but the Heath government scrapped it on coming into office. The Home Secretary had assumed the powers for broadcasting once enjoyed by the Minister for Posts and Telecommunications.



coverage for the rural population, using satellite transmitters where appropriate. It accepted the BBC's idea that they should pilot a dozen small satellite stations, on lower power MW, in rural parts of England. And the report urged that both the BBC and IBA avoid any duplication of sites when it came to extending local radio throughout the UK, including revising the sites of ILRs already announced, if they overlapped with BBC stations.<sup>815</sup>

Michael Barton (now General Manager of Local Radio) sent a memo to all local radio managers informing them that the Crawford recommendations regarding local radio would be passed over to the Annan committee. This would be a disappointment, especially to staff hoping for career progression. But Barton was still keen to conduct experiments into satellite stations and he would be convening a working party shortly.<sup>816</sup>

In fact two experiments with satellite stations subsequently took place from 10 - 17 September 1975 (Barrow) and from 13 September for three weeks in 1976 (Whitehaven). In the Barrow-in-Furness trial, the studio originated local material for key parts of the day - early morning, lunchtime and early evening.<sup>817</sup> The output was not broadcast, but played to visitors to the civic centre and to patients in the local hospital, on a closed circuit. Feedback from listeners to these trials showed support for the idea of a local station, which participants said they would listen to. Respondents commented that the early programme and lunchtime show were better than anticipated.

The Whitehaven experiment looked at a different concept: a small community station producing about 30 minutes a day for a low population area.<sup>818</sup> These would be supported by a parent station broadcasting near by and opting out for the local output once a day. This pilot was also different in that the output was transmitted live, from 1 – 1.30pm each weekday, and

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<sup>815</sup> Home Office *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting Coverage* (Cmnd 5774 HMSO 1974)

<sup>816</sup> BBC WAC memo from GMLR to Stations Managers 27 November 1974 Crawford Study Group *ibid* In the event, all of Crawford's Recommendations were deferred to Annan, with the exception of the Welsh language television station which went to another working party. See Briggs Vol V *ibid* p 996

<sup>817</sup> BBC WAC Listening Report: Local Radio : Radio Barrow Experiment R9/883

<sup>818</sup> BBC WAC Listening Report: Local Radio: Radio West Cumbria Experiment R9/887 The transmission area covered Whitehaven and Workington, both remote and isolated locations on the west coast of Cumbria.

repeated at 4.30pm. There was also a Sunday morning phone-in programme at 11am. The sorts of items included in the pilot were discussions on housing for the elderly, orienteering, what's on and a talent competition.<sup>819</sup> The audience research was conducted by street interviews. Those who heard the programmes thought them interesting, informative, useful and of high value to the community.

Despite the fact that the content might sound rather trivial to the outside observer, as Gillian Reynolds pointed out in the *Daily Telegraph*, small-scale issues were still relevant to local listeners, especially as many local radio breakfast shows were overtaking the *Today* programme on Radio Four.<sup>820</sup> Her piece highlighted the way the West Cumbrian experiment had an 'access' element to it, which might make this kind of community station useful in, say, a new housing estate. Trethowan certainly seemed pleased with the results in Barrow, and told the Board of Governors that he hoped to mount a similar experiment in Taunton.<sup>821</sup>

Although it was not to have the same impact on BBC strategy as other committees of enquiry into broadcasting, I would argue that the Crawford Report was significant as it provided a focus for the next stage of local radio expansion, with a list of potential sites and various permutations. This impetus was to serve rural populations. Politically, this made sense, as it was a means of differentiation with commercial stations. It also had a strategic benefit, because satellite and small-scale stations could be located in remote, under-served communities. It was also something of a U-turn from the policy of just a few years before of populating urban areas as quickly as possible.

Crawford took the BBC at its word and recommended that local radio be expanded in rural areas as a priority. Yet was there a risk that this only had a short-term benefit? If the BBC had adopted rural expansion as a matter of principle, it would have had two knock-on effects: the abandonment of urban sites to commercial stations and the risk that to cover rural populations, station size in territorial terms would have increased, not

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<sup>819</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Contributors included Edna Englan who composed a poem a day and Ron Lithcoe – a virtuoso of the Jewish harp for 40 years – played 'Turkey in the Straw'

<sup>820</sup> *Daily Telegraph* 'Getting Local Opinions Aired' by Gillian Reynolds 22 September 1976

<sup>821</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 22 July 1976 R1/44/2

decreased. Station Managers also commented that they thought small stations would be an expensive way of broadcasting.<sup>822</sup> These were dilemmas that the BBC returned to within a very short period.

### **Annan: c1975 - 1976**

This section explores the next government enquiry, the Annan Committee, and its impact on the continuing debate about local radio and its future. The terms of reference for the Annan Committee were more far reaching than those given to Crawford. Put simply, this was 'to consider the future of broadcasting services in the United Kingdom.'<sup>823</sup> The BBC's evidence was more detailed than that supplied to Crawford. There was to some degree an element of repetition in the material supplied to Annan, but a new factor was taken into consideration: the arrival of independent commercial radio. In this section I will argue that the Annan enquiry and the launch of Independent Local Radio both had a significant impact on the BBC's strategy of local radio, particularly when it came to mediating the twin dilemmas of area covered and community definition.

But the broadcasting landscape had changed in another direction too. Since the early 1970s there were new lobby groups arguing for more diversity, openness and democratic access to the means of broadcasting. The Free Communication Group, the '76 Group and the ACTT all campaigned for a more accountable system.<sup>824</sup> An example of this was Nicholas Garnham who argued in 1971 that local radio should come from the grassroots, using local human resources and financed by public money.<sup>825</sup> Part of the Annan committee's brief was to assess these demands for increased public accountability and to recommend a system that better reflected the political and cultural diversity of the UK.<sup>826</sup>

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<sup>822</sup> BBC WAC Minutes Local Radio Management Conference 19 – 21 November 1976 Local Radio Conferences R78/4185

<sup>823</sup> Briggs Vol V *ibid* p 996

<sup>824</sup> O'Malley, T *Closedown? The BBC and Government Broadcasting Policy 1979 – 92* (London: Pluto Press 1994) p 3

<sup>825</sup> Local Radio Workshop *Nothing Local About it: London's Local Radio* (London: COMEDIA 1983) p 19

<sup>826</sup> O'Malley *ibid*

Given the breadth of the Annan enquiry and the wide-ranging sources of evidence, it took place over a much longer timescale than the previous committee – from late 1974 to 1976. The findings were not published until 1977. Submissions, as usual, took the form of papers and oral evidence and visits, but the potential significance of Annan's findings meant that the enquiry hung over many strategy and policy debates like a spectre. Station Managers were told at their conference in October 1974 that the Annan enquiry would have an impact on broadcasting into the 1980s.<sup>827</sup> One reason for this was the understanding that Annan would be hearing views from those outside the BBC arguing it should be broken up, to restrict its creativity and (perceived) political influence. While expressions of loyalty from managers and their staff were welcome, the delegates were urged not to 'knock' commercial competitors unnecessarily, but to find a positive approach for Annan. 'We mustn't', said Trethowan, 'adopt a 'we're here because we're here' attitude.'<sup>828</sup>

The Archive files show that the BBC's management migrated their evidence smoothly from one enquiry to the next. On 19 December 1974 Trethowan presented to the Board of Governors a draft *Memorandum on Local Radio*, which bore much similarity to the earlier memorandum prepared for Crawford.<sup>829</sup> There were some differences in emphasis that emerged. Notable was the awareness of local Station Managers that they needed to be more distinct from both Radio Two and any commercial stations, and to this end, there was a desire from them to increase the number of hours of original broadcasting. A nice descriptive turn of phrase was used to capture the differentiation: local radio was described as 'Radio Four-type content' with 'Radio Two-type presentation'.<sup>830</sup>

There was a continued emphasis on the way the stations served their local communities. In addition to the now familiar examples of local radio's

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<sup>827</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of Local Radio Station Managers Conference 16 October 1974 R78/2543

<sup>828</sup> BBC WAC *ibid*

<sup>829</sup> BBC WAC Draft BBC Memorandum: Local Radio Board of Governors Minutes 19 December 1974 R1/42/2; compared with Report on Local Radio by MDR 25 April 1973 G.58/73 Board of Governors Papers G1/109

<sup>830</sup> BBC WAC Draft BBC Memorandum: Local Radio Board of Governors Minutes 19 December 1973 R1/42/2 Op Cit

service during bad weather, there was the recent power-supply crisis, where stations were able to give warnings of electricity cuts to families, industry, schools etc.<sup>831</sup> However, there was a noticeable shift of focus on the news gathering aspect of local information, whereby Station Managers could call on the resources of the central BBC. To this end, a local radio news desk had been established in the Radio Newsroom in London. And of course the news 'traffic' went the other way: local radio had supplied to the networks coverage of the Lofthouse Colliery disaster (Leeds), the Cod War (Humberside), the Seaspeed Hovercraft sinking (Solent) and two general elections in 1974.<sup>832</sup> However, this paper still had to address the tricky issue of how local radio was to develop in the future.

The dilemma was how to interpret the BBC's public service remit: did that mean serving the maximum audience and trying to cover all communities, or serving those areas that commercial stations would ignore?<sup>833</sup> The revised final section of the paper argued that the BBC should be allowed to carry out Crawford's recommendations for up to 12 smaller stations, costing around £50,000 each, with a staff of seven, to serve rural areas.<sup>834</sup> One concrete way forward was the creation of an internal BBC working party to re-draw the local radio map of England, with the various options for coverage. This became the Ennals Report, which will be covered in a subsequent section.

A paper presented by Trethowan in March 1975 to the General Advisory Council provided the opportunity for an update on Annan's progress. This seemed to reflect well on local radio. Asked on the BBC Two programme *In Vision* by William Hardcastle, which aspects of the enquiry had surprised him so far, Lord Annan replied:

"Well one of the things you know which we have become fascinated by is the development of local radio. This is something which I suspect is

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<sup>831</sup> BBC WAC Op Cit

<sup>832</sup> BBC WAC Op Cit

<sup>833</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of Local Radio Station Managers Conference 16 October 1974 R78/2543

<sup>834</sup> BBC WAC Addendum to BBC Draft Memorandum: Local Radio 23 December 1974 Board of Governors Minutes R1/42/2 In fact six months later Trethowan told the Board that he was planning to implement two closed circuit experiments in Barrow and Whitehaven for minimal cost, which Annan was welcome to come and watch. Board of Governors Minutes 3 July 1975 R1/43/1

going to boom and is a different kind of animal in the broadcasting world to anything that we have encountered in the centre.”<sup>835</sup>

By this stage, Annan had visited several stations outside London, and noticed how local broadcasting differed, with “much more ad-libbing, much more done on a shoe-string,” commending local radio as “generally an extraordinary and exciting development.”<sup>836</sup> Although Annan’s enthusiasm for local radio was widely noted, this might not be shared by its own staff, which once again faced being mired in a period of uncertainty.

### **1975: Taking stock of commercial competition**

In his report to the Board in July 1975, Trethowan was able to end on one, very positive note. BBC Local Radio was given the ultimate accolade: it was now to be considered equally, as one of the BBC’s five radio services. This was in part due to the way that the stations had met the challenge of ILR: ‘The local stations’ ability to stand up to direct commercial competition has been one of the year’s landmarks.’<sup>837</sup> It was a fine tribute to pay, yet meeting the challenge of ILR was not simply based on audience numbers, it was felt in other ways too. Even before any commercial stations opened, BBC managers were looking for ways of establishing a clear difference in the output.

Although the 1971 White Paper stipulated that BBC Local Radio should give first priority to minority programmes, Trethowan was not going to let commercial radio have a clear field in pop and entertainment.<sup>838</sup> He envisaged Radios One and Two competing in these areas. Meanwhile, local radio would concentrate on what it did best: minority programmes, news and information, and providing a community service which was distinctive and local: ‘the courage of our public service convictions’ as Trethowan put it.<sup>839</sup> Another potential impact for local radio might be on staffing. Trethowan predicted that commercial radio might encounter the same skills shortages

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<sup>835</sup> BBC WAC GAC Paper ‘Local Radio’ 27 March 1975 Local Broadcasting Part Five R78/611

<sup>836</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>837</sup> BBC WAC Report by the Managing Director of Radio, July 1974-June 1975 G.145/75 Board of Governors Minutes 3 July 1975 R1/43/1

<sup>838</sup> BBC WAC Report by the Managing Director of Radio, July 1970-June 1971 G.70/71 Board of Governors Papers R1/107

<sup>839</sup> BBC WAC Op cit p 13

that local radio had dealt with, in 1968/69, and 1970/71.<sup>840</sup> The BBC of course was able to rely on internal appointments and attachments - one third of staff for the 12 'new' stations came from the old Regions, for instance - but the advent of commercial radio gave rise to the possibility of 'poaching'. The previous year in fact, the Station Manager of Radio Leicester had resigned to join a commercial group.<sup>841</sup> Trethowan also recognised that local radio staff must be given opportunities to progress their careers in the other direction: 29 staff moved from local radio to regional television or network radio between 1971-73.<sup>842</sup>

Another effect of commercial competition might also have been felt in terms of contributors. BBC Local Radio relied heavily on the calibre of '[those] local people [who] feel such an identity with their local stations that they will help it for nothing or at worst minimal fees.'<sup>843</sup> Also in 1971, Trethowan had pledged that the BBC 'only got involved' in the issue of commercial radio 'when it was introduced at the BBC's expense.'<sup>844</sup> Otherwise, it stayed out of the debate. Events showed that this was rather a disingenuous remark. As the first ILR stations (Capital Radio and LBC in London) prepared to go on air, the preliminary skirmishes with the BBC concerned publicity. Advertising the BBC's local services had long been an uneasy topic; in 1973 the Vice Chair of the Governors commented that LBC's and Capital's poster ads outshone anything produced on behalf of Radio London.<sup>845</sup> The BBC countered with a half page ad in the *Evening Standard*, which apparently raised morale with staff at the London station.<sup>846</sup> This was followed by the distribution of a broadsheet to commuters promoting Radio London.<sup>847</sup> Since two out of the first three

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<sup>840</sup> BBC WAC Report on Local Radio by Managing Director of Radio G.58/73 25 April 1973 Board of Governors Papers R1/109

<sup>841</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 13 November 1972 R2/25/4 The minutes suggested that 'special salaries' might be given to staff who are made 'outside offers'. This is difficult to verify as access to personnel files in the Archive is heavily restricted.

<sup>842</sup> BBC WAC Report on Local Radio by Managing Director of Radio G.58/73 *ibid*

<sup>843</sup> BBC WAC Report by the Managing Director of Radio, July 1970-June 1971 G.70/71 Board of Governors Papers R1/107 Trethowan described this as a 'rather charming situation.'

<sup>844</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>845</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 18 October 1973 R1/41/3

<sup>846</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 29 October 1973 R2/26/4

<sup>847</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 10 October 1973 *ibid*. It was originally targeted at railway stations, but this was changed to underground stations 'so as not to antagonize commuters'. *Ibid* 17 December 1973

commercial stations were in a location with an existing BBC station,<sup>848</sup> the attention fell inevitably on Radio London.

One journalist acknowledged that producing community radio in London was difficult, given the diversity of the population. However 'its [Radio London's] small and athletic staff seem to have acquired a very good sense indeed of what might be of interest to Londoners.'<sup>849</sup> Sean Day-Lewis, writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, observed how under-resourced the BBC station seemed to be. One staff member told how 'the fund of loyalty and goodwill cannot be tapped very much longer.'<sup>850</sup> Day-Lewis' theory was that 'local radio was a political device designed to abort commercial radio and is now an embarrassment.'<sup>851</sup> The only way to disprove this was to provide adequate resources for innovative, creative programmes to give it a new sense of purpose. In comparison, Capital Radio's debut was deemed good, professionally and technically.<sup>852</sup> However LBC fared less well, soon drawing criticism from the press as being less a news station and more a 'chat network.'<sup>853</sup>

By the end of 1974, the Managing Director of Radio could report that BBC local radio listening was slightly higher than the previous year, despite the fact that there were now nine commercial stations, eight of them operating with adjacent BBC ones.<sup>854</sup> The following year, BBC figures again showed that commercial radio had not made the expected impact and in fact the BBC Local Radio audience had reached two million listeners.<sup>855</sup> Non-metropolitan centres such as Oxford were showing the biggest

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<sup>848</sup> The next ILR station was in Glasgow, with no BBC Local Radio presence

<sup>849</sup> BBC WAC David Wade in *The Times*, quoted in Board of Management Minutes 12 November 1973 *ibid*

<sup>850</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* 'When capital is starved of income' by Sean Day-Lewis 16 April 1973

<sup>851</sup> *Op cit*

<sup>852</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 18 October 1973 R1/41/3

<sup>853</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 15 October 1973, citing articles in the *Observer* and *Sunday Telegraph* R2/26/4 The problem with audience measurement at this point was the fact that the BBC and the IBA used their own methods, so it was difficult to measure 'like with like'. Hence when the BBC claimed that the weekly patronage of commercial radio in September 1974 was smaller than that of Radio Three and BBC Local Radio, the IBA issued an angry denial, accusing the BBC of 'cooking' their figures. BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 23 & 30 September *ibid*

<sup>854</sup> BBC WAC Draft Memorandum: Local Radio G.183/74 19 December 1974 Board of Governors Minutes R1/42/2

<sup>855</sup> BBC WAC Report by Managing Director of Radio G.145/75 3 July 1975 Board of Governors Minutes R1/43/1



increases, but so too were places like Sheffield, Newcastle and Merseyside, where commercial competition now existed.<sup>856</sup> Trethowan also believed that BBC stations had improved the quality of their output as a result of independent radio.

### **The Ennals Report**

This section examines what became known as the Ennals Report. Its compilation overlapped with the ongoing Annan enquiry and was able to feed into the BBC's subsequent submission, as well as help inform internal policy on local radio expansion in the future. It also signalled a change in direction in many ways, especially away from the urgency for rural expansion. Local radio veteran Maurice Ennals was seconded from his role as Station Manager, Radio Solent, to write the report that Trethowan had mooted at the Station Managers conference in October 1974.<sup>857</sup>

Judging by the correspondence in the files, Ennals took this task very seriously, and spent more than the allotted six months on it.<sup>858</sup> His brief was to survey the progress of BBC Local Radio so far, to examine the present boundaries and make recommendations about future development.<sup>859</sup> It did not include examining frequency or technical issues, nor finance. The re-organisation of local government, the Crawford Report and the current Committee on the Future of Broadcasting all provided a framework for Ennals' investigation, in terms of recent discussions about boundaries, communities and strategic goals. Although this was essentially a one-man task (apart from secretarial support), Ennals called upon members of the headquarters team for help and advice over the next few months.<sup>860</sup>

Ennals clearly pursued the project with forensic zeal: he visited all the existing stations and nearly twenty other sites, which had the potential to

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<sup>856</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>857</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of Local Radio Station Managers Conference 16 October 1974 R78/2543

<sup>858</sup> BBC WAC See file Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion R102/22

<sup>859</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Station Manager Solent to General Manager Local Radio 16 January 1975 Subject: Local Radio Project Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion R102/22

<sup>860</sup> BBC WAC Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion *ibid*, especially Robert McLeish (Head of Local Radio Training) and Peter Redhouse, formerly Station Manager at Radio London and now Deputy General Manager, Local Radio

host a local station.<sup>861</sup> The problem, however, was that there was an expectation of ‘absolutes’: people wanted concrete answers to questions, specific solutions to the problems. This was illustrated by a contribution from Robert McLeish, who was pretty dogmatic about the size and definition of stations. In a memo in April 1975, he declared boldly that the golden rule should be: ‘the smaller the station, the better’, because audience research proved that they were more closely identified in terms of patronage and participation.<sup>862</sup> At the same time, he conceded there were varying factors about defining a community, such as social make up and the difference between rural and urban areas. Then there was the issue of the satellite station. McLeish warned against the idea that a station with its own transmitter had to be held accountable to a ‘parent’ station. This, said McLeish, was where the regional system had fallen down. He said stations were accountable to their own community first, not to the Station Manager of a bigger station up the road.<sup>863</sup>

Ennals began to produce drafts of the report from July 1975, highlighting his main recommendations. Ennals identified three distinct categories of proposals: the first list of absolute priority was new stations; then a list for station expansion in the present economic climate and a list of ideal developments in the future.<sup>864</sup> There was also a map, which he and McLeish drew up, to illustrate how the broadcast locations in the UK would look.<sup>865</sup> In brief, Ennals thought that the early stations had over extended themselves and produced too much output of low quality.<sup>866</sup> It had been a mistake to take news from agencies and newspapers at the beginning, and not develop local newsrooms on station sooner. Now that better relations

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<sup>861</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Maurice Ennals to GMLR 15 July 1975 Subject: Local Radio Project Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion *ibid*; in the final report, Ennals calculated he had had 200 appointments with 248 people from all walks of life, he’d visited 98 main centres of population in 44 counties.

<sup>862</sup> BBC WAC Memo from LRTO to Maurice Ennals 1 April 1975 Subject: Local Radio Project *ibid*

<sup>863</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>864</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Maurice Ennals to GMLR 15 July 1975 Subject: Local Radio Project Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion *ibid*

<sup>865</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011. According to Michael Barton, Ennal’s starting point was in fact the Diocesan map of England. He thought there was a strong correlation between the Church of England and the relationship between Bishops, Suffragans and community. Ennals was a committed Christian.

<sup>866</sup> BBC WAC A Study Paper by Manager, Radio Solent 25 November 1975 Local Broadcasting Part Five R78/611

were established with News and Current Affairs centrally, Ennals proposed expanding the news teams on stations and encouraging attachments with London.

Ennals found great concern about the lack of a publicity budget on all stations, and much criticism of the way programmes were billed in the *Radio Times*. Similarly, audience research was under funded, and required more investment, especially in those areas where listenership was growing and in where new stations might open. One interesting comment concerned relations between the local staff and management in London. Ennals described the attitude of some Corporation staff at the beginning of local radio as 'cynical and unhelpful.'<sup>867</sup> It was only when local stations began to make inroads into network audiences that senior managers took notice, although local staff still believed there was not full confidence in their work from London. In the second half of the report, Ennals moved on to the more contemporary issues that he had picked up on in his research. He concluded that 'there is indisputable evidence that a sizeable proportion of people living in the present local radio areas (possibly excluding Birmingham, London and Manchester) feel involved with the station and a loyalty towards it.'<sup>868</sup> *Broadcasting in the 70s* had made the new stations larger than necessary, which was understandable due to the economic circumstances, but it was now time to return to the early ideals of local radio.

Then Ennals focussed on the question of definitions. Several names were being used: satellite stations, community, even mini. He suggested that they should assume all stations were 'community', and then he attempted to clarify the nomenclature. There were small stations, which could be sited close together, but which were independent of larger stations. Satellite stations were linked to a main station, carrying their output for most of the day apart from a few hours of original programming. The term 'mini' station was unhelpful and could be dropped. The next issue concerned whether the BBC and ILR could operate in the same areas.

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<sup>867</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>868</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Allan Shaw, Station Manager at Radio Manchester, challenged this comment and asked that it should never be published. Memo to GMLR 2 January 1976 Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion R102/22

Although there was a mood that welcomed competition with the IBA,<sup>869</sup> there was a school of thought that said the BBC stood a better chance if they suggested locations not being used for commercial radio.

Ennals was quite adamant that BBC Local Radio should not just appeal to minorities but should reach as many listeners as possible. These views obviously influenced his thinking about future developments. Ennals was clear about the main aim of BBC Local Radio up until now: 'to give the fullest possible service to a community of people holding the maximum number of interests in common and to be an integral part of that community.'<sup>870</sup> Obviously there were economies of scale at work that would determine how small a viable station could be, but for Ennals there needed to be a definable area with a sizable population, and a significant proportion of those inhabitants enjoying 'common interests and loyalties and aspirations.'<sup>871</sup> In answer to the question 'what do you mean by a local station?', Ennals posed his own question: 'If the station covering such and such an area gave a list of the chemists open late this evening would it really mean something and be of help to the audience? If the answer is yes, then it's a local station.'<sup>872</sup>

That sounded fine in theory, but should the BBC be focussing on existing communities or building new ones, and would rural areas have priority over urban places? Again, Ennals managed to come up with a definitive answer. He rejected Crawford's recommendations about serving wider rural areas – arguing that county-wide stations would be too diluted. He was clear that serving established communities was better, particularly as there was a higher audience appreciation rating.<sup>873</sup> However he did accept there was a case for some small station experiments in areas where there was no pre-existing community, such as a new town.

Finally, Ennals thought the BBC should not decide future locations solely on rural or urban criteria. First and foremost, it was about merit, and this would definitely include urban areas. Furthermore, he added that it would

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<sup>869</sup> BBC WAC A Study Paper by Manager, Radio Solent *ibid* 'let the IBA keep up with the BBC, not the other way round'

<sup>870</sup> BBC WAC Op cit para 57

<sup>871</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>872</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>873</sup> BBC WAC Op cit para 75

be a mistake to abandon the conurbations to the IBA as a matter of principle. In drawing up his list of new stations, Ennals wrote that he took a number of further factors into consideration, including areas which lost Regional radio and still had no local service; locations that were not planned to get a commercial station; places just outside the editorial area of an existing station; locations where there was a real desire for local radio; areas seriously affected by local government reorganisation. In total, he recommended opening seven new main stations, twenty-one smaller ones, nineteen satellite stations and 35 studios (some staffed, some not).<sup>874</sup> In addition, Ennals made a number of proposals to alter existing stations,<sup>875</sup> and his report, if executed in full, would have brought the total of BBC local stations to 66, covering 97% of England.

The response to Ennals report was largely enthusiastic from within local radio staff. Alan Holden (Station Manager at Radio London) saw a draft and wrote to Michael Barton saying it would 'answer the abolitionists and the mindless expansion brigade and left room for advance if the financial situation permits.'<sup>876</sup> The comments about stand-alone satellite stations were well received: George Sigsworth at Radio Derby agreed they would be in danger of becoming little more than remote studios if attached to a main station.<sup>877</sup> Potentially the most divisive issue was the post-Crawford change in direction away from automatically favouring rural areas. Again, this found favour with many station managers. Rex Bawden, from Merseyside, firmly supported new stations for large and often deprived urban communities before remote rural ones. Bawden reported that Ennals' own private expression of this policy was succinctly put: 'people before cows.'<sup>878</sup>

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<sup>874</sup> See appendices for full list

<sup>875</sup> BBC WAC Op cit, such as closing Radio Blackburn (to be replaced by a new station at Preston); enlarging the transmission area of Brighton to include Lewes and the southern half of mid-Sussex; renaming Medway as West Kent, to cover the districts of Dartford, Gillingham through to Sevenoaks and creating a Radio East Kent at Canterbury for the Thanet and south coast areas.

<sup>876</sup> BBC WAC Handwritten letter from Station Manager Radio London to GMLR 15 July 1975 Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion R102/22

<sup>877</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Station Manager Radio Derby to GMLR and Maurice Ennals 2 January 1976 Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion R102/22

<sup>878</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Station Manager Radio Merseyside to GMLR 15 January 1976 Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion R102/22

So what would the BBC do with Maurice Ennals' exhaustive study? In February 1976, Howard Newby, the new Managing Director of Radio, proposed the following course of action. The Ennals lists needed to be assessed by the engineering department to see how much could be implemented. The recommendations would also be costed and re-presented to the Annan committee. However, also prior to submission to Annan, it appeared that the categorisations of proposed stations would be re-prioritised taking into consideration commercial competition and the BBC's commitment to provide broadcasting services to rural England in the light of the Crawford report.<sup>879</sup> So it seemed that some of the proposals were being effectively 'watered down', an example of political triangulation.

Ennals' optimism also received a further blow when the engineering staff had had a chance to read the report. The initial, rather grumpy response, began by stating some 'facts of life' about transmitter coverage.<sup>880</sup> Ennals' proposals to increase current transmission areas were not feasible because increasing the power of MW transmitters did not extend audibility or coverage. It was possible to increase the power of VHF transmitters, but that was not the proposal. Secondly, the map Ennals had produced was for editorial areas, whereas transmitter patches did not always correspond, especially as night-time coverage was often reduced on MW. Despite this, the Ennals Report and the map for expansion provided a much-needed template for the remainder of the decade in the next stages of local radio development.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the period covered by this chapter marked a critical moment for the BBC and its plans for local radio. As I have demonstrated, a central plank of the BBC's radio strategy, *Broadcasting in the 70s* was

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<sup>879</sup> BBC WAC Memo from MDR to CER, CERB, GMLR, DGMLR, Maurice Ennals 25 February 1976 Subject: The Extension of BBC Local Radio Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion R102/22

<sup>880</sup> BBC WAC Memo from D E Todd (Deputy Director of Engineering) to CERB, MDR, GMLR 4 March 1976 Ennals Report on Local Radio Expansion R102/22 His irritation stemmed from the fact the Ennals Report was over an inch thick and he had only been given six days to read it and comment: he needed several weeks. The fact that no BBC engineers took part in Ennals' research may also have been a factor.

predicated on replacing the regional structure with a network of local radio stations. The prospect of commercial stations, brought forward by an unexpected change in government, made the enactment and completion of this scheme all the more vital. While the expansion of BBC Local Radio into the most desirable geographical areas would not necessarily stop commercial radio, it was a brazen attempt to make it less attractive. The BBC was forced to defend both its local stations and Radio One in the face of considerable political will. Its success in seeing off the threat came down to several factors. First, *Broadcasting in the 70s* and the strategy it was based on was robust and well-rehearsed. The experience of the first eight local stations, the way they operated, the production structure and the evaluation process had been enough to convince the BBC and outside observers that this was a viable system to be continued and expanded. The government's plans for commercial radio did not have a comparable structure or identity, relying on political dogma rather than broadcasting experience.

Secondly, the BBC waged a very successful counter-offensive. Led by the persuasive and determined triumvirate of Hill, Curran and Trethowan, each argument put forward by Chataway was rebutted and countered with an alternative. The files show that the BBC team were clear about identifying the Minister's motives and dealing with each one precisely. Although the script about the BBC's traditional involvement in the area of local broadcasting was revived from time to time<sup>881</sup>, the narrative here was now more contemporary. But it was not just the upper echelons of BBC management who helped secure the victory. The local radio service continued to operate throughout this turbulent time, despite the uncertainty about job security and the future. Dedicated teams opened new stations and built on the success of the old ones. A testament to this achievement was the positive press coverage the BBC received during the crisis, which reflected how the stations and the whole enterprise were being received.

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<sup>881</sup> eg BBC WAC Note of a meeting held at the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications 21 December 1970 Board of Governors Papers R1/107

Indeed, the *New Statesman* and the *Economist* praised on the way the BBC handled the whole affair with the government.<sup>882</sup>

There was a price to the BBC's resolve. In seeing off the government's demands, it had to accept a less than satisfactory licence fee settlement and the reorganisation of frequencies that went further than *Broadcasting in the 70s*.<sup>883</sup> Even though an additional twelve stations became the limit of expansion for the time being, BBC Local Radio continued on the process of strategic and conceptual evolution in the light of political enquiries and internal audits. The report from Leicester University into local radio (quoted elsewhere in this thesis) was published in February 1971. Some sections of the press chose to dwell on the negative aspects, while others extracted the positives.<sup>884</sup> One result that was inescapable however was the report's conclusion that the BBC did not have a clear idea of what constituted 'community radio' in relation to local radio, nor how to measure its success.

Though it is not possible to see any link between the report and subsequent events, this chapter has shown that in the mid-1970s, Trethowan and his staff began to try and engage more fully with what community radio might be defined as, and how this could inform the next wave of expansion. Interestingly, the word 'community' barely registered during the *Broadcasting in the 70s* debates, but during the periods of Crawford and Annan, it acquired new significance and would become more prominent as the decade progressed. By the mid-1970s, there was still no settled view of what 'community' meant to local radio, but there were consistent, strategic and practical attempts to engage with the idea, mirrored by discussions going on in the wider broadcasting world. The ultimate goal was to achieve full coverage of England: the dilemma was identifying a model for local radio that was technically and financially viable and still remained true to the principles of serving local communities.

Submissions to the Annan Committee continued into Spring 1976. In February, Michael Barton and colleagues made a presentation to the

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<sup>882</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors minutes 8 February 1970 ibid

<sup>883</sup> The BBC was willing to accept these consequences but it was aware that critics thought that the BBC had conveniently 'found' extra frequencies which it otherwise would not want to yield up. BBC WAC op cit

<sup>884</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* 'Local Radio success an illusion say researchers' 25 February 1971; *The Guardian* 'Good start by local radio says report' February 25 1971



committee, which was well received. Annan was apparently particularly impressed with the visual elements comparing Radio Sheffield's output with that of Radio Hallam.<sup>885</sup> However rumours were beginning to circulate that some members of the Annan Committee had a question mark over BBC Local Radio's future. Removing it from the BBC would, in one stroke, solve the BBC's financial problems.<sup>886</sup> By July, these stories were gaining enough credence to start affecting morale on the stations.<sup>887</sup> The outcome of the Annan Report is the starting point for the next chapter of the thesis, which heralded yet another turbulent period in the story of BBC Local Radio.

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<sup>885</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 1 March 1976 R2/29/1

<sup>886</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>887</sup> BBC WAC Report by Managing Director of Radio G.146/76 Board of Governors Minutes 22 July 1976 R1/44

## **CHAPTER NINE: 1977 – 1980: Completing the Chain**

### **Introduction**

This chapter analyses the period of local radio development, from 1977 to 1980. I will argue that these years brought intense struggles and debates about the ethos of the service into the forefront, and set the parameters for the next phase of local radio growth in the coming decade. The first hurdle was the report of the Annan Committee, which once again threatened the very existence of BBC Local Radio. The determination with which the stations fought back was very reminiscent of the battles with the Conservative government in the early 1970s. Although the resulting White Paper on Broadcasting allayed the BBC's worst fears, and established a more orderly and transparent way of dealing with the future deployment of frequencies and the siting of new stations, in conjunction with the IBA, it still left the problem of how to pay for future growth – in other words, how to complete the chain.

The last few years of the 1970s witnessed an almost frenetic compilation of reports and consultations within the Radio directorate to determine the future path of local radio and the networks. Underpinning all of these was the belief that there was not enough revenue to pay for all four networks and more local stations. A complex series of scenarios was rehearsed and debated, most of them predicated on the idea that one network would be used (or sacrificed in the opinion of some) as a sustaining service for local radio. As one can imagine, this was not a popular idea. This also brought into sharp relief the content of the existing stations and how it should interpret its role. Aubrey Singer, the Managing Director of Radio,<sup>888</sup> made it very clear that he expected local radio to cut its cloth much more closely, and to reduce the hours of its output in order to improve quality. As will be illustrated, this produced significant opposition from the Local Radio Councils, and others. Finally, a strategy emerged by the close of 1979 that

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<sup>888</sup> Aubrey Singer succeeded Ian Trethowan in June 1978

established the principles by which the local radio chain of stations was to be completed. This did not produce the number of stations originally anticipated but it did at least achieve a respectable coverage of the English population.

The crucial points I will argue in this chapter are first that the BBC succeeded in seeing off the threat posed by Annan's recommendations by a combination of grassroots protest and higher level lobbying. Having secured a future for local radio, the next issue for the BBC was how to complete the chain. As previous chapters have illustrated, it is possible to trace through the 1970s the way in which the BBC began to incorporate local radio more closely to its central planning strategy. So one of the key arguments of this chapter will be that this was to be achieved by an intricate set of internal policy documents and a struggle to identify, at last, just what constituted a local station, the optimum size and how it could reflect its own community. I will argue that the outcome was the best possible result in the circumstances, but also that internal divisions and erratic management were just as damaging as the external factors in determining the result. In addition to this, there were two potentially damaging confrontations with BBC management at this time, one involving Station Managers and the other, the LRC Chairs. One of the purposes of this chapter is to look at how these came about and weigh up the relative importance of them and the impact these events may have had on future policy and the relationship between local radio and the corporate centre.

Finally, it is important to address how and why the BBC settled on the eventual pattern of local radio, which allowed it to achieve the long-held goal of completing more stations. The Third Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report in December 1980 brought about the conclusion to the first phase of the local radio project. I will argue that this represented a compromise on the original intentions, but at the same time, it constituted a realistic outcome as local and community radio embarked in the new decade.

### **Annan and the BBC's response**

As early as 1976, there were rumours about the outcome of Annan, and a suspicion that the Committee might recommend the removal of control of local radio from the BBC. At a Station Managers' conference in November, Charles Curran, the Director General, gave a pre-emptive speech that called such a proposal 'incomprehensible.'<sup>889</sup> The proposals that the BBC had made to Annan for new stations would only cost 50 pence per licence: 'a relative fleabite in our total economy.'<sup>890</sup> Losing local radio, Curran went on, would only make a small net saving in financial terms, but the damage from the loss of the peripheral positives, such as local newsgathering and grassroots community connections, would be incalculable.

Interestingly, managers urged Curran to go public with this defence of local radio, but Curran preferred to keep his powder dry until the report was published. But he was able to reassure the staff that the BBC would fight any attempt to remove local radio from the Corporation, and he felt their chances of success were high. Great emphasis was placed on the potential support of MPs, whose relationship with their local stations had been nurtured over recent years and who appreciated the value of this almost unfettered access to their constituents. However, Howard Newby, the Managing Director of Radio, pointed out that although MPs might appreciate how local radio was 'an instrument of citizenship in a parliamentary democracy', the public at large might not be interested who actually owned it.<sup>891</sup>

There was a useful exercise during the conference where Station Managers, in small breakout groups, discussed various pressing issues. These included operational questions, such as programme content and staffing. But several groups addressed more fundamental points, such as 'Strategy and Tactics for 1977', and 'Arguments against removing Local Radio from the BBC'. The kinds of points that these groups raised would help form the groundwork for any future campaign. None of the key strengths of BBC Local Radio that they identified were particularly new.

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<sup>889</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of a Local Radio Station Managers' Conference 19 – 21 November 1976 in Local Radio Conferences R78/4185

<sup>890</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>891</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

There were the usual factors relating to the efficiencies the BBC offered, the autonomy of local radio, how it was cheaper to run than commercial operations, the independence of the BBC and how it matched the mood for devolution in contemporary society.<sup>892</sup> More debatable was the way that these arguments should be deployed, and in what sequence. For the time being, Station Managers were urged not to harass their local MPs just yet, nor knock commercial competitors. However, there would be some 'discreet' publicity and promotion to remind the public of the benefits of local radio.<sup>893</sup>

In February 1977, just a month before publication, stories about the demise of BBC Local Radio were once again circulating.<sup>894</sup> Meanwhile, the BBC prepared the 'discreet' publicity mentioned the previous year at the Station Managers' Conference. This was the publication of a glossy, 66-page booklet, *Serving Neighbourhood and Nations*,<sup>895</sup> which retailed for 30 pence. In a contrast to previous BBC publications concerning local radio, this pamphlet was attractively presented, with lots of colourful illustrations and images. However, like the forerunners, there was nothing especially covert about its intentions. Divided up into sections outlining the history of the BBC's association with local radio, the benefits it brought to the public, and the day-to-day work of each station, this was a public relations exercise.

However, it must be said that it was rather repetitious,<sup>896</sup> and notably, from page 28 onwards, local radio was suddenly termed 'community radio'. From this point, the text focused on the BBC's proposals to the Annan Committee for future expansion. The book showed a map of the current 20 stations, calling it 'Community Broadcasting' and listed an additional 26 locations, which their engineers said would be technically feasible.<sup>897</sup>

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<sup>892</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>893</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>894</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 17 February 1977 R1/45/1 Commenting on one story in the *Sunday Times*, predicting the removal of local radio from BBC and IBA control, the Chairman of Governors rejected this as 'politically unacceptable.'

<sup>895</sup> BBC *Serving Neighbourhood and Nations* (London: BBC Publications 1977)

<sup>896</sup> The example of Radio Humberside's breaking of the Flixborough factory explosion in 1974 was featured several times BBC Op cit

<sup>897</sup> These were: Alnwick; Aylesbury; Barnstaple; Barrow; Basingstoke; Cambridge; Canterbury; Chelmsford; Coventry; Dorchester; Exeter; Gloucester; Guildford; Ipswich;

The use of the term community radio was an example of confused thinking by the BBC. On the one hand, it was a genuine attempt to define clearly what the function of local radio was. And on the other, it was perhaps aimed at stealing the clothes of the emerging, external lobby campaigning for non-BBC community radio. But the BBC had a well-established brand identity in local radio, and interchanging the two terms blurred the distinctions.

The arguments that the BBC deployed about the financial efficiency of local radio in the booklet were not accepted at face value by commentators. The BBC's claim that the current service cost just 35 pence from each licence, less than the price of a pint, was picked up by *The Economist*.<sup>898</sup> Given the rumours about the Annan Report, surely the BBC would not mind losing such a drain on their resources?<sup>899</sup> Howard Newby replied to *The Economist* saying that the BBC 'would mind a great deal. The existing 20 BBC stations had successfully demonstrated the part they could play in the communities they served; without this grassroots radio the networks themselves would be poorer.'<sup>900</sup>

But the article did have one point that the BBC was not in a position to respond to. It was true that the BBC had not applied to the Home Office for more radio wavelengths, despite identifying potential locations. It appeared that work on the frequency plan, emanating from the Ennals Report, had stalled in July 1976, ostensibly because the transmitter ranges did not match the social needs of the areas. It was not clear when a new set of proposals would be ready.<sup>901</sup>

The Annan Report, published on 25 March, did indeed confirm the BBC's worst fears. The first line of Chapter 14 stated bluntly 'At present local radio

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Lincoln; Luton; Norwich; Northampton; Peterborough; Plymouth; Shrewsbury; Swindon; Taunton; Truro; Warwickshire; York. BBC Op cit

<sup>898</sup> *The Economist* 'Beeb wants more' 5 March 1977

<sup>899</sup> *The Economist* Op cit

<sup>900</sup> *The Economist* 8 March 1977

<sup>901</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of a Local Radio Station Managers' Conference 19 – 21 November 1976 in Local Radio Conferences R78/4185; also Memo from J Redmond (Chief Engineer) to MDR saying that although it was technically feasible to provide wavelengths for more than 60 stations each for the BBC and IBA on MF, night coverage would be poor; there could be no more than 40 stations each on VHF 23 February 1977

is in a mess.<sup>902</sup> Annan argued that there were not enough frequencies for both the BBC and commercial radio to reach more than 90% of the population, and under the current systems, urban areas were over-served and rural populations deprived.<sup>903</sup> He also criticised some aspects of commercial radio, for what he called 'pop and prattle', which were needed for ILR to get established quickly.<sup>904</sup> Annan's solution, as predicted by many, was to remove local radio from both the BBC and the IBA, and instead create a separate local radio broadcasting authority, with advertising as the main source of funding, but working with some non-profit trusts too. But not all of Annan's committee agreed with him. Two members, Tom Jackson and Marghanita Laski, penned separate minority notes, Jackson arguing for the status quo, and Laski preferring non-profit-making organisations to run local radio.<sup>905</sup>

Although the Annan Report was published on 25 March, it was not until 14 April that the BBC held a press conference, which focussed on their objections to the proposals around local radio, followed by a keynote speech by the Director-General designate (Trethowan) two days later to newspaper editors in Cambridge.<sup>906</sup> In the interim, there had been much press comment, a good deal of it favourable, at least in part, to the BBC. One piece of note was a leader in *The Times*, which represented something of a U-turn on their previous stance.<sup>907</sup> Arguing that commercial radio was still too financially unstable to rely on ad revenue, their conclusion was that local radio should just be left alone. However the delay that occurred in getting the BBC's main objections in front of the public – and opinion formers - was an unfortunate one. At a local level, stations and their councils marshalled their forces quickly and effectively, but a suspicion arose that at a higher level, the BBC was dragging its heels. This would have negative consequences shortly. In his diary, Robert McLeish noted his contribution, involving a meeting with the Broadcasting Panel at Church

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<sup>902</sup> Home Office *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting* (Cmnd 6753 HMSO 1977) Chapter 14

<sup>903</sup> Home Office Op cit

<sup>904</sup> Home Office Op cit

<sup>905</sup> Home Office Op cit

<sup>906</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 4 April 1977 R2/30

<sup>907</sup> *The Times* 'Future of Local Broadcasting' 15 April 1977

House, on 31 March. 'They almost welcome the Annan proposal on LR....If I have done nothing more than reverse the Church of England's party line in local radio ... it will have been a worthwhile day.'<sup>908</sup>

BBC management concentrated on several key elements of the Annan Report, to rebut the main proposal. The press release of 14 April highlighted the first of these, Annan's assertion that there were not enough frequencies.<sup>909</sup> The BBC argued that its research proved there was room for 85 stations on lower power MF (65 of these in England), as well as the 60 stations that the IBA proposed. Between 45 and 55 of these 65 could be operated on VHF as well. The press release went on to list the 26 locations already identified in *Serving Neighbourhood and Nations*, as well as a further nineteen.<sup>910</sup>

BBC management was confident that Annan was weak about his grasp of frequencies and finance.<sup>911</sup> This was highlighted when Annan was the Fleming Lecturer at the Royal Institution on 28 April. His performance was described in the minutes of the Board of Management meeting, rather scathingly, as 'a second rate polemic; an ego-trip, a mountebank's piece, mean-spirited in its attack on named individuals.'<sup>912</sup> Despite the underlying animosity here, in putting together its response to the Report, the BBC decided it was best to congratulate Annan on points of agreement, such as his espousal of public service broadcasting, but to attack the detail.<sup>913</sup>

Submissions from all interested parties to the post-Annan consultation were given a deadline of 1 July.<sup>914</sup> The BBC put forward three papers.<sup>915</sup>

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<sup>908</sup> Robert McLeish diary entry 31 March 1977

<sup>909</sup> BBC WAC BBC Press Release 14 April 1977 in Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part One R92/33

<sup>910</sup> BBC WAC Op cit. The 19 were: Blackpool; Bournemouth; Bradford; Burnley; Chester; Crawley; Doncaster; Eastbourne; Hereford; Huddersfield; Isle of Wight; Lancaster; Portsmouth; Reading; Salisbury; Sunderland; Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells; Whitehaven; Wigan

<sup>911</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 25 April 1977 ibid

<sup>912</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 2 May 1977 ibid The quote is attributed to 'DG and others' so the exact origin of the words is not clear

<sup>913</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>914</sup> BBC WAC Conference of Local Radio Managers to Discuss the Annan Report in Local Broadcasting R78/1385

<sup>915</sup> BBC WAC Committee on the Future of Broadcasting Papers G.121, 127, 123/77 in Board of Governors Minutes 23 June 1977 R1/45 and Radio Management Registry Annan Report – Local Radio R92/30. The papers underwent various drafts; much repetition was removed from earlier versions and criticism of Annan himself toned down. The Governors commended



The first paper highlighted areas where Annan displayed empathy with the principles of public service broadcasting and the Corporation's interpretation of editorial independence. It did, however, reject Annan's view that plurality of services on a national, regional and local level could be administered by different regulatory authorities.<sup>916</sup>

The second paper dealt exclusively with local radio, and rebutted Annan's arguments one by one.<sup>917</sup> The paper made it clear that Annan had not appreciated the nuances and differences in the BBC's approach to community broadcasting. Nor had he understood the system of autonomy that allowed local decisions to be made and the way in which minority interest programmes, and educational output could sit side-by-side with popular request shows.<sup>918</sup> The key proposal for an independent local radio broadcasting authority was carefully unpicked. The BBC argued that it was not clear how non-profit trusts could be financed, and how it would be possible to avoid the pressures of high advertising revenues in heavily-populated urban areas. The appendices also covered other aspects of local broadcasting that Annan had not fully understood, such as educational programmes, which would end under his proposals, and the differences in audience demographics between the BBC and ILR.

Many similar arguments were played out in public. There was an exchange of articles in *The Listener* between John Thompson of the IBA and Michael Barton. The former wrote a panegyric to the Annan report, commending it as 'surely one of the most elegant, luculent documents to be produced under official colours in this generation.'<sup>919</sup> Thompson extracted from the Report all the examples of praise that Annan paid to the IBA and ILR. What appealed to Thompson was the free market endorsement for local radio, which would not regulate on size or content. He rather

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the final version of paper two in particular for the way it rejected Annan's case against Local Radio.

<sup>916</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Annan used the phrase 'local broadcasting is a different animal from network broadcasting and needs a different sort of keeper. Home Office ibid

<sup>917</sup> BBC WAC ibid

<sup>918</sup> Annan was also critical that the BBC seemed to be ignoring the National Regions in the proposals it made for the expansion of local radio, using the Ennals report as the template. The BBC countered that it was necessary to complete coverage of England first, to replace the loss of regional broadcasting, but that it had plans for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

<sup>919</sup> *The Listener* 7 April 1977

sidestepped the issue of the new authority, which of course would replace the IBA as regulator of ILR, looking forward instead to something exciting and new, 'radio in jeans as it were.....informality combined with style, purpose and talent.'<sup>920</sup> Barton's riposte focussed on several key specifics. Referencing Jackson's note of dissent, Barton re-iterated the point that public service broadcasting would not have to maximise its audience just to secure revenue.<sup>921</sup> While diversity of ownership was possible, and welcome, this could be achieved locally, rather than nationally, and this plurality was the best way to secure equal access for all to the airwaves.

Another lobby group had entered into the debate by this point, the Community Communications Group (COMCOM), which launched in February 1977, to campaign for a change in broadcasting policy, allowing greater access for community organisations to the methods of production and transmission. COMCOM had submitted evidence to the Enquiry and they were broadly in favour of the report, except they would go further in ensuring accountability and they were against any profit-raising aspects of public broadcasting.<sup>922</sup> In 1976, the Labour government had set up several small-scale cable radio stations, in Swindon, Basildon and Thamesmead, amongst others. The presence of these operations, and the work of COMCOM and similar groups could be seen to have had an influence on the BBC, such as its espousal of the term 'community radio' in *Serving Neighbourhood and Nations*, and in the small-scale broadcasting trials in Whitehaven and Barrow.

Meanwhile the BBC's campaign to counter the Report's proposals progressed during the Spring of 1977 at various levels. Aside from public pronouncements to encourage debate and raise awareness, there was the lobbying of MPs. Even before the Annan Report was published, Station Managers were drawing up lists of which MPs to target.<sup>923</sup> An example of

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<sup>920</sup> *The Listener* Op cit Interestingly not everyone in ILR shared Thompson's enthusiasm for Annan. Capital's John Whitney was particularly stung by the 'pop and prattle' comment and rejected the LRBA idea as 'pie in the sky'. *Daily Telegraph* 'Local Point of View' 11 April 1977

<sup>921</sup> *The Listener* 21 April 1977

<sup>922</sup> Lewis P *Whose Media? The Annan Report and After: A Citizen's Guide to Radio and Television* (London: Consumers' Association 1978) pp 80 - 81

<sup>923</sup> eg BBC WAC Memo from Peter Redhouse identifying groups of Conservative MPs grouped around the stations 11 November 1977 in Radio Management Registry Annan Report – Local Radio R92/30

this was the cross-party meeting held for Staffordshire and South Cheshire members at the House of Commons on 19 May.<sup>924</sup>

Possibly the most influential voices of support were heard in the Broadcasting Debate in the Commons, on 23 May 1977. Willie Whitelaw, speaking as Shadow Home Secretary, strongly repudiated the Annan local radio authority.<sup>925</sup> He used his own BBC local station, Radio Carlisle, as an example of a successful relationship between the community, the BBC and Members of Parliament. He concluded that his constituents would be furious if they lost this form of local radio. As far as Whitelaw was concerned, a commercial service would pursue the biggest audiences to secure advertisers as their priority. His view was that there was room for both sectors to expand under the current structure, as and when the necessary resources were available. Michael Barton is clear that the weight of Whitelaw's intervention, and that of other MPs, cannot be underestimated.<sup>926</sup> Their support at this critical time was a validation of one important concept of local radio, that of improving the democratic dialogue between electors and their representatives. At a higher level, it once again proved the long-term success of the charm offensive and old-boy network as nurtured by Trethowan and others.

But what about the progress of the campaign on a local level? It is evident from the files that the stations mobilised quickly. The staff was, after all, fighting for its livelihood. Centrally the BBC management gave credit to the speed of the reaction and praised their morale.<sup>927</sup> An example of the kind of fight back being planned came from Radio Brighton, or rather SORBA, the 'Friends of Radio Brighton' supporters club. Station Manager Robert Gunnell sent a draft of a leaflet to Newby and Barton, which asked 'What is the future for local radio?'<sup>928</sup> The document attempted to be non-

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<sup>924</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Station Manager Radio Stoke to MDR and GMLR May 1977 in Radio Management Registry Annan Report – Local Radio R92/30

<sup>925</sup> BBC WAC House of Commons Debate on Broadcasting Hansard Cols 1037-1040 23 May 1977 quoted in Radio Management Registry Annan Report – Local Radio R92/30

<sup>926</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>927</sup> BBC WAC memo from GMLR to all Station Managers 31 March 1977 in Radio Management Registry Annan Report – Local Radio *ibid*; Conference of Local Radio Station Managers to discuss the Annan Report 6 April 1977 Local Broadcasting *ibid*

<sup>928</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Station Manager Radio Brighton to MDR and GMLR 29 March 1977 in Radio Management Registry *op cit*

partisan, setting out all of the pro and anti Annan arguments, including the issues of frequencies and funding. However the text made much of Tom Jackson's minority report, quoting from it how 'a BBC bereft of its regional and local services is like a tree without roots.'<sup>929</sup> Similar leaflets were produced up and down the country, but soon, however, dissent emerged from local staff and the LRCs about the way that the BBC was seen to be handling the crisis.

A staff meeting at Radio Merseyside heard speakers who thought that the BBC's evidence to Annan had not been properly represented, showing that executives in London were still ignorant of what local radio did.<sup>930</sup>

Then there were the views of the LRCs. The Chair Elect of Radio Leicester's Council, Rachel Root, engaged in a correspondence with the BBC Chair, Michael Swann, arguing that the BBC did not do enough to counter Annan and promote the work of local radio on its own television channels and elsewhere.<sup>931</sup> Swann's reply defended the BBC's actions to date, arguing that they had deliberately delayed the April press conference to make it more effective and that the most useful responses were coming from local sources, not the centre, which could be seen as counter-productive.<sup>932</sup> Clearly there was a paucity of clear communication, producing an atmosphere of mutual distrust between BBC management and the local stations. As Michael Barton points out, compared to the forthright defence from Willie Whitelaw and other voices outside the BBC, the lack of a clear commitment from within, to save and expand local radio, was deeply un-nerving to staff across the country.<sup>933</sup> This came to a head on 29 June, during a 45-minute telephone 'hook-up' between Newby and the 20 Station Managers. During the conversation, Newby re-iterated that in the future money would be tight, given the uncertainty about the level of the

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<sup>929</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>930</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Station Manager Radio Merseyside to MDR and CC'd to GMLR and all Station Managers 29 March 1977 in Radio Management Registry ibid

<sup>931</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Rachel Root to Sir Michael Swann 27 May 1977 in Radio Management Registry ibid

<sup>932</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Michael Swann to Rachel Root 1 June 1977 in Radio Management Registry ibid

<sup>933</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011 To balance this out, McLeish records in his diary a visit to Radio Humberside by Swann who 'talks about Annan in a very relaxed and friendly way.....reassuring everyone about the BBC fighting Annan. A very successful visit.' Robert McLeish diary entry 29 April 1977

next licence fee settlement. If the rise was only of a small level, there would have to be what Newby called 'a holding operation'. This was interpreted by five managers as meaning a halt to expansion.<sup>934</sup> According to an account of events in *The Observer*, eight of the Station Managers subsequently met at a hotel in Coventry and drafted a letter to Sir Charles Curran, which ten others also put their names to.<sup>935</sup> The resulting letter brought out into the open the unease the managers evidently felt about the BBC's intentions for local radio, which they called an 'equivocal attitude'.<sup>936</sup> The interpretation they gave to Newby's remarks was that even if the government gave the go-head for local radio expansion, after the Annan consultation, the BBC might still choose not to do so. In a grandiose statement, the signatories described themselves as 'we, who have created local radio', and as such, they had the right to demand local radio expansion, which it said the BBC could afford from re-allocating other funds.<sup>937</sup>

The letter was met with varying degrees of admonishment. The Managing Director of Radio wrote to the Station Managers and to the Chairs of the LRCs saying that there was a misunderstanding in the telephone conversation. Although finances were difficult to predict, the BBC's commitment to local radio was firm, as publicly stated by the Director-General and the Chairman.<sup>938</sup> Douglas Muggerridge, who replied first on Curran's behalf (as he was on leave at the time), expressed astonishment, and told them that if the note went public it would 'destroy' all hopes of local radio expansion.<sup>939</sup>

He spoke too soon. *The Observer* picked up the story on 7 August ('BBC local radio men threaten revolt'), and the spin they put on the issue was that

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<sup>934</sup> BBC WAC Minutes from the MDR's Management Group Meeting 9 August 1977 in Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part One R92/33

<sup>935</sup> *The Observer* 'BBC local radio men threaten revolt' 7 August 1977 The two Station Managers who did not sign the letter were from Blackburn and Stoke – the reason is not clear but possibly they were on leave at the time.

<sup>936</sup> BBC WAC letter to the DG from the Station Managers 22 July 1977 in Local and Community Radio Development Policy *ibid*

<sup>937</sup> BBC WAC Op cit This paragraph has an exclamation mark in pencil next to it, in the file copy.

<sup>938</sup> BBC WAC letter from MDR to all Station Managers 8 August 1977 in Local Broadcasting Part Six R78/1385; letter from MDR to LRC Chairs 8 August 1977 in Local and Community Radio Development *ibid*

<sup>939</sup> BBC WAC letter from Director of Programmes Radio to all Local Radio Station Managers 27 July 1977 in Local Broadcasting Part Six *ibid*

the 20 Station Managers would consider coming out in favour of Annan's independent local radio authority.<sup>940</sup> 'This amounts to sedition within the Corporation', said the article, quoting a BBC source. Apparently a further conference was planned at the Post House Hotel in Coventry for the next stage of the intrigue. Newby's hasty intervention, calling a meeting for 17 August, and an address by Trethowan, as Director-General designate, calmed the situation and the subsequent rendezvous was cancelled.

The crisis aired some deep-seated grievances among the managers, but I would argue it also forced Newby to come up with a strategy for the next stages in local radio expansion, should the government reject Annan's arguments. A press release from the BBC after the 18 August meeting announced that a new working party would be established under Michael Barton to investigate the way forward, and Management and Station Managers were once again united in their opposition to any attempt to remove local radio from the BBC.<sup>941</sup>

### **The Way Forward**

Despite the internal turmoil, there was a temporary respite for the BBC in that the spectre of a new independent authority for local radio, a key proposal of the Annan Report, was beginning to recede from view. On 25 August, Newby and Michael Barton had a meeting with Home Office minister Lord Harris.<sup>942</sup> Harris made it clear that the government would not be formulating its post-Annan policy until after the party conference season, but that his main consideration was the licence fee. He stressed that the BBC could not count on a 'reasonable increase' and that the expansion of BBC Local Radio would be questioned by all political parties. However, this was based more on pressures to keep the licence fee low rather than animosity at the size of the BBC in general. The net result might be the freezing of BBC expansion and a rise in ILR numbers. Whatever the outcome was, said Barton, the important thing was to plan coherently and consistently for the future, not just the BBC but the IBA as well. Newby and

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<sup>940</sup> *The Observer* *ibid*

<sup>941</sup> BBC WAC Press release on Local Radio 18 August in Local Broadcasting Part Six *ibid*

<sup>942</sup> BBC WAC Account of a meeting with Lord Harris by Howard Newby 25 August 1977 in Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part 1 1974-1977 R92/33

Barton came away from the meeting convinced that the idea of Annan's Local Radio Broadcasting Authority 'has become rather ghostly'.<sup>943</sup>

This hiatus in the political decision-making progress gave Newby and Barton a chance to engage in the next round of planning, report-writing and consultation. As had been promised to the Station Managers, the BBC Local Radio Development Group was set up by Newby in late August.<sup>944</sup> The group was tasked with deciding on the location of the next 10 stations, using the Ennals Report as the starting point, but also bearing in mind the Crawford Report recommendations so that the stations were geographically dispersed around England. The group would make recommendations about equipment, studios, a timetable for training and recruitment and produce a short list of which stations would be launched first.<sup>945</sup>

One other factor was introduced into the mix. There was the question of whether it was tenable for the BBC and the IBA to continue to avoid duplication in the siting of new stations. If Annan's new broadcasting authority was dropped, how might the allocation of frequencies be supervised? This was the issue that Trethowan put to Home Secretary Merlyn Rees in July, suggesting some kind of joint committee, which included representatives from the BBC and the IBA under the auspices of a respected civil servant such as Sir Stewart Crawford or Peter Lillicrap.<sup>946</sup> Evidently this idea began to carry some credence as the BBC Local Radio Development Group bore in mind during their deliberations that there was the possibility of consensus, rather than competition, in the choice of locations.

The resulting report from the Development Group was in fact a sizable piece of work (170 pages), which contained a lot of detail and probably went much further than the original concept intended. A summary of the report was put together and this was evaluated by a further working party, before

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<sup>943</sup> BBC WAC op cit

<sup>944</sup> BBC WAC Memo from MDR to all Station Managers 26 August 1977 Subject: BBC Local Radio Development Group *ibid* Members included Maurice Ennals (as Chair), John Saunders and Robert McLeish from the HQ Team, Tom Beeley, Station Manager of Nottingham as well as operational and management representatives.

<sup>945</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>946</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 18 July 1977 R2/30/2

going to the Board of Management in February 1978.<sup>947</sup> The final version that Newby put together for the Board of Governors became known as *The Way Forward*.<sup>948</sup>

The key differences between the Local Radio Development Group's Report and *The Way Forward* concerned the scale of ambition. The former envisaged 37 new stations, mainly of what they termed 'type B'.<sup>949</sup> The authors also recommended that local radio should be known in future as Community Radio. This was a significant step, allied to the use of the title in *Serving Neighbourhood and Nations*. However, there was not a clear rationale in the report as to why the name change was necessary. In terms of frequency planning, the report embraced the notion of joint allocation with the IBA, to help complete coverage more quickly.<sup>950</sup> In terms of the priority for the next wave of station locations, the Development Group made two sets of recommendations, depending on how many the government might authorise and what the BBC could afford.<sup>951</sup>

The resulting deliberations might have seemed to be obsessed with detail, but at the heart of the discussion was the central concept of what local radio stood for and how stations were to be defined. There was also a new dimension – the relationship with network radio, with the increasing importance being given to the idea of a sustaining service, which the local stations could opt into. This could mean using one of the existing networks as the sustaining service, which would in reality result in its extinction in the current form. Not surprisingly, the respective Controllers had strong opinions on the subject.

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<sup>947</sup> BBC WAC Summary of the Report of the Local Radio Development Group 29 November 1977 in Local Broadcasting Part Six R78/1385/2; also Board of Management Minutes February 13 1978 R2/31/1

<sup>948</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 March 1978 Paper: Local Radio Development – The Way Forward G.59/78 R1/241/1

<sup>949</sup> BBC WAC A Station = 40 staff broadcasting 12 hours a day, 7 days a week; B = 20/6/7' C = 8/2/7; D = 3/30mins/5 Summary of the Report of the Local Radio Development Group ibid

<sup>950</sup> BBC WAC Op cit The group also suggested that the Home Office could set a population target, so the BBC and IBA could distribute their stations more evenly. eg the IBA could launch five stations in urban areas, the BBC ten stations in low population, high priority areas

<sup>951</sup> BBC WAC The first five stations would be in Lincoln, Shrewsbury, Norwich, Exeter and Northampton, with alternatives drawn from Swindon, Gloucester, York, Truro, Canterbury, Peterborough and Cambridge Op cit



Commenting on the report in January 1978, the Chief Engineer, Radio Broadcasting, J D MacEwan, cast doubt on the key philosophies in play.<sup>952</sup> The problem as he saw it was that the local stations suffered from 'grade inflation'. In theory, they all began as B types in 1967/8, but quickly expanded their output and augmented their staff, so that they resembled B+ or even A types. MacEwan argued it was time to 'control, limit or even restrict' the stations, especially when it came to their ability to opt in at will.<sup>953</sup> A group headed by the Director of Programme, Radio evaluated the paper, suggesting that the first six stations should be (in order of priority): Lincoln, Shrewsbury, Truro, York, Taunton and Northampton. Station premises should be in main shopping areas or precincts. On the subject of the sustaining service, the group suggested some kind of area syndication, whereby neighbouring stations could share programmes at key parts of the day.

The group's deliberations shaped much of *The Way Forward*, which Newby presented to the Board of Management on 27 February<sup>954</sup> and to the Board of Governors on 16 March.<sup>955</sup> The Board of Management broadly accepted the recommendations (see below) although Barton voiced reservations about what he saw as an interpretation of local radio that was more regional than local. To the Board of Governors, Newby went through the recent chronology which led the BBC to the pressing problem of determining the rate and timing of new local radio stations, if the government's expected White Paper gave the go ahead.

The first issue was finance: the Local Radio Development Group proposed 37 new stations but there was no inclusion in the current budget for any expansion.<sup>956</sup> Muggeridge's fallback position was two type B stations, (Shrewsbury and Lincoln) but even these would cost £1m in capital

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<sup>952</sup> BBC WAC Report from CERB to DPR 9 January 1978 Subject: Local Radio Development Group in Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part Two January – August 1978 R92/34

<sup>953</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>954</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 27 February 1978 R2/31/1

<sup>955</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 March 1978 R1/241/1

<sup>956</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes *ibid*: Fifty pence on the new licence would pay for the 37 new stations; a 20 pence increase would allow the 12 stations identified by the DPR's group as priority: the six stations cited above, plus Cambridge, Exeter, Swindon, Gloucester, Barnstaple and Guildford

costs, which might not be politically acceptable. So Newby came up with a cheaper option: small stations in the south west at Barnstaple, Truro and Exeter (which were type C); turn Radio Blackburn into Radio Lancashire; launch a small station in Taunton as an opt out for Radio Bristol and possibly start Radios Shrewsbury and Lincoln as 14 man (sic) stations as a prelude to a full type B service.<sup>957</sup>

Newby also accepted the Evaluation Group's endorsement/amendment to the Development Group's various other recommendations. His way forward, as it were, was to announce this short-term plan, if the White Paper was favourable. At the same time, he recognised that it was important both in terms of public commitment and staff morale to be seen to have a more substantial plan for development beyond this stage. This strategic position based on *realpolitik* was accepted by the Board, who proposed a sub-group of their own number to assess the recommendations, and to report back. Their material would also be used for a response to the White Paper.<sup>958</sup>

The crucial point at this juncture was that while BBC management were dealing with the practical problems of how to expand the service, it was not tackling the more intrinsic issues, which MacEwan had raised about the aggrandisement of the existing stations and concerns relating to the quality and quantity of the output. In other words, there was a need for consistency across the original 20 stations and the next wave of development, both in terms of size and scheduling, which were still not being addressed. A potential struggle over autonomy and independence had been exacerbated by the confrontation over the way the BBC dealt with the Annan Report in the summer of 1977. This had demonstrated the gulf that existed between management's perception of how local radio operated and how this was being effectively communicated and appreciated across the country. The test would come when the Development Group succeeded in producing a concrete plan.

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<sup>957</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes *ibid*

<sup>958</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors *ibid* The sub group comprised of George Howard; Stella Clarke and Lord Allen. Lord Allen withdrew shortly after the group started; Howard and Clarke completed the task alone.

### **The Governors' Sub-group**

As this phase of local radio expansion planning drew to a close, there was a significant change in personnel at the helm. Howard Newby retired from the Corporation in June 1978, and was replaced by Aubrey Singer. The appointment of Singer as Managing Director of Radio was likely to cause some concern, given that his previous role was Controller of BBC Two Television. Nevertheless, there are examples of memos in the files demonstrating how keen he was to grasp the fundamental issues in local radio, as well as visiting sites to meet staff and see for himself how it worked.<sup>959</sup> However, as I will argue in this chapter, Singer's management style and indeed temperament were quite different from those of his predecessors, which resulted in some notable confrontations and a less coherent strategy to local radio's problems. The BBC expected the government's White Paper in June or July,<sup>960</sup> so meanwhile the Governors' Sub-group set to work interviewing senior staff, LRC chairs, visiting every local radio station and compiling their evidence.<sup>961</sup>

The resulting paper was, rather like the Local Radio Development Group's report, very extensive in its conclusions, and in fact disagreed with some of the first group's recommendations.<sup>962</sup> The most fundamental conclusion for the sub-group was that the BBC must either continue to expand local radio, or think about closing it down. For Clarke and Howard, the service was core to the BBC's philosophy and co-dependent on other forms of broadcasting: '[local radio] is complementary to network radio; neither can achieve its full potential without the other.'<sup>963</sup> Taking a lead from the LRC chairs, and contradicting the earlier Development Group Report, this paper preferred the service to retain the name 'local radio', rather than be re-named community radio, arguing that the original title was now more recognisable and a strong BBC brand identity.

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<sup>959</sup> BBC WAC eg Memo from MDR designate to CLR Subject: Radio Wearside 19 April 1978 in Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part Two 1978 R92/34

<sup>960</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 10 April 1978 R2/31/1

<sup>961</sup> BBC WAC File: Local Radio: Board of Governors' Sub-group R78/1388 The meetings with LRC chairs and senior radio management have been documented in previous chapters.

<sup>962</sup> BBC WAC Report of the Local Radio Group of Governors G.145/78 July 1978 R78/1388

<sup>963</sup> BBC WAC op cit

The two Governors suggested that the rate of expansion should be five stations per year until the coverage of England was complete, in the late 1980s. However they counselled against naming exact locations too far in advance or even a final total, as this would be restrictive. Whilst not commenting on the exact order of stations, the report said priority should be given to virgin territories, such as East Anglia and the South West. In terms of station types, they should all aim to be type B, although some could start as smaller, type C satellite stations. In terms of output, the stations should be heard 24 hours a day, with six hours being locally produced for type B, twelve for A and two for C. Part of the extra content could be generated by a 'Newsfax' service, available continuously from 2pm to 6am each day.<sup>964</sup> The cost would only be the same as one type A station. In effect, this was the Governors' version of a sustaining service.

In terms of monitoring local radio quality, the Governors were aware that there was a need for greater supervision, particularly the use of access programmes. However they did not want to restrict Station Managers' autonomy in any way. The financial provision for this expansion was quite vague but the report reckoned capital costs could range from £2 - £3million a year for five years, but they were convinced that total growth could be paid for with 30 pence per licence. In conclusion, Clarke and Howard restated their view that 'for the BBC to survive in the next ten years, a strong local service must be allied to a strong network presence.'<sup>965</sup> The Board of Governors broadly endorsed the report, although there were some dissenting voices questioning the need to commit £27million to future expansion.<sup>966</sup> Howard and Clarke also agreed that there was room for more control from the centre, to keep managers producing a fixed number of hours.<sup>967</sup>

The White Paper was published on 26 July and, to all round relief at the BBC, it did not suggest creating a separate independent local radio authority. Instead, the Home Office proposed a working party with BBC and

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<sup>964</sup> This was akin to Radio London's *Rush Hour* programme: a presenter-led sequence covering news, traffic, sport, interviews. This could be widened to include material from all the local stations. BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>965</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>966</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 20 July 1978 R2/241/3

<sup>967</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

IBA representatives to allocate frequencies in future. This effectively gave them a free hand in deciding how many stations they wanted, depending on what they could afford.<sup>968</sup> Unfortunately for the BBC, the White Paper said nothing about the future prospects for the licence fee, which made it difficult to make firm development plans.<sup>969</sup> Nonetheless, the BBC welcomed the White Paper as an opportunity to fill in the large gaps left when development had been halted at 20 stations.<sup>970</sup> A press release on 27 July listed the eighteen sites where the BBC hoped to launch local stations, in alphabetical order.<sup>971</sup> An accompanying quote from Michael Barton raised the hope that this would be completed by the late 1980s, although the rate of progress would be determined by the availability of resources.

### **The First Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report**

There were three Home Office Reports, beginning in late 1978 and ending in 1980. These effectively set the pattern for the immediate growth of local radio, both for the BBC and the IBA. Running parallel to these discussions was yet another round of working parties and papers, to try and solve the issues of paying for the service, where the stations would be situated and how to make them more efficient in terms of hours of output and whether a sustaining service should be used. This was somewhat ironic: after several years of being frozen at twenty stations, the BBC now had the green light to expand, but it did not necessarily have the means to do so.

The terms of reference for the Working Party were to make an efficient use of the frequencies available, to cover as much of the population as possible – with priority given to those areas not currently served and those deprived of social amenities. It was also hoped that it would be feasible to experiment with associate or twinned stations, perhaps on a non-profit making basis, an idea that bore a strong resemblance to one of Annan's

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<sup>968</sup> *Broadcast* 'Local Radio – the big boom starts now' 31 July 1978

<sup>969</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 10 August 1978 R1/241/3

<sup>970</sup> BBC WAC Paper: Response to the White Paper on the Future of Broadcasting 26 July 1978 Board of Governors *ibid*

<sup>971</sup> BBC WAC BBC Press Release 27 July 1978 in *Local and Community Radio Development Part Two 1978 R92/34*. The stations listed were: Alnwick; Barnstaple; Barrow; Cambridge; Canterbury; Dorchester; Exeter; Gloucester; Guildford; Lincoln; Northampton; Norwich; Plymouth; Shrewsbury; Swindon; Taunton; Truro; York

recommendations.<sup>972</sup> Lord Harris, speaking after the first meeting of the Working Party, picked up this theme of duality, which he contrasted to the monopolistic way that the local press operated. Ultimately, Harris said, he would like to see areas with both a commercial and a BBC station.<sup>973</sup>

Michael Barton comments on the speed with which the first Working Party operated: they held meetings through August and September and were able to produce the first report by the end of October.<sup>974</sup> Part of the reason for the alacrity in the decision-making was the fact that the BBC and the IBA had already got their shortlists of new stations ready.<sup>975</sup> There were only two duplicates on the IBA list – Norwich and Exeter, which it seemed plausible to come to an agreement over.<sup>976</sup> Strategically, the BBC was interested in larger editorial areas than the IBA, so they could cover more of the population. The IBA was more concerned with smaller stations in densely populated towns and cities, to make them attractive to commercial consortia bidding for licences.<sup>977</sup>

Despite these differences, Michael Barton recalls that this period witnessed a period of much closer working relations with the IBA.<sup>978</sup> For example, the issue of both parties wanting stations in Exeter and Norwich was settled amicably – the IBA took the former, where it hoped to arrange a twinning operation with Torbay, and the BBC accepted the latter.<sup>979</sup>

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<sup>972</sup> BBC WAC News Release from Home Office: Extension of Local Radio 8 September 1978 in Home Office Local Radio Working Party General R102/19 The Working Party was chaired by Shirley Littler, the Assistant Under Secretary of State for the Home Office Broadcasting Department. The BBC was represented variously by the Managing Director of Radio, his deputy, the Controller of Local Radio and the Director of Engineering. The IBA contingent consisted of John Thompson, Director of Radio, and their heads of engineering and planning

<sup>973</sup> *The Times* 9 September 1978

<sup>974</sup> BBC WAC Memo from CLR to All Managers Subject: Home Office Working Party 15 August 1978 *ibid* One reason may have been that a General Election was expected so the BBC and the IBA wanted to get some decisions made quickly in case there was a change of government. The BBC's extensive preparations and planning also helped. Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>975</sup> BBC WAC Op cit. The BBC's list was Barnstaple; Lincoln; Shrewsbury; Truro; Taunton; York; Northampton; Cambridge; Barrow; Norwich; Exeter; Swindon

<sup>976</sup> BBC WAC Note from Director of Engineering 7 September 1978 *ibid* However, the IBA objected to the BBC proposing Cambridge, Northampton and Swindon as they (the IBA) hoped to launch commercial stations there at a later date.

<sup>977</sup> BBC WAC Notes on a meeting of the Home Office Local Radio Working Party by Michael Barton 6 September 1978 *ibid*

<sup>978</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 17 December 2007

<sup>979</sup> BBC WAC Notes on a meeting of the Home Office Local Radio Working Party by Michael Barton 6 September 1978 *ibid*. The official version in the files credits this compromise to

The first report was published on 24 October 1978, announcing nine stations each for the BBC and the IBA.<sup>980</sup> In accordance with the criteria established when the Working Party was set up, the Report stated that these stations were the most efficient use of the frequencies, to get as much population coverage as possible (obviously a nod in the BBC's direction), prioritising areas not currently served and with high social deprivation.<sup>981</sup> The Report also made clear that it was intended to avoid any direct duplication – consequently the IBA's proposed station at Preston was omitted from the list.<sup>982</sup> At a news conference a few days later, Singer confirmed four of these stations would go ahead: Barrow, Lincoln, Norwich and Taunton. The remainder would depend on any future licence fee settlement.<sup>983</sup>

The focus shifted once again to a series of consultations and working parties within the BBC. There was, however, a noticeable change in the purpose of this stage in the strategic planning. Whereas Newby had been preoccupied with listing and prioritising the stations he hoped to open, Singer was more concerned with being realistic about local radio's long-term prospects. In other words, he did not want to start on a wave of expansion only to discover the money was running out, the chain left uncompleted and commercial radio outpacing the BBC.<sup>984</sup>

He therefore shifted the emphasis in two crucial directions. First onto the potential of the sustaining service, as a means of reducing the amount of original, local output and making it possible to develop new stations. This

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Singer; off the record, Barton says that he [Barton] tossed a coin for the stations. Barton Interview with author *ibid*

<sup>980</sup> BBC WAC Home Office Press Release Subject: Home Secretary Announces Locations for 18 Additional Local Radio Stations 24 October 1978 *ibid*. The BBC's nine stations were: Barrow; Cambridge; Lincoln; Northampton; Norwich; Shrewsbury; Taunton; Truro; York. The IBA's list comprised: Aberdeen/Inverness\*; Bournemouth; Cardiff; Chelmsford/Southend\*; Coventry; Dundee/Perth\*; Exeter/Torbay\*; Gloucester; Peterborough \*sites suitable for twinned or associate stations.

<sup>981</sup> BBC WAC Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report on Local Radio October 1978 in Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part Three September 1978-May 1979 R92/35

<sup>982</sup> BBC WAC Op cit The Report accepted that there would inevitably be some overlap on the margins, such as the IBA's Bournemouth station, which sat on the fringes of BBC Radio Solent; ditto with Coventry (IBA) and Birmingham (BBC).

<sup>983</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 30 October 1978 R2/31/3

<sup>984</sup> BBC WAC Note from the Managing Director of Radio 30 November 1978 in Radio Services Policy Part Two R78/1170

would mean, however, that instead of local radio maintaining its autonomy to *opt in* whenever it chose, it would become an *opt out* service – a crucial development. Secondly, he addressed the quality, and quantity of existing local radio output. Both moves raised the prospect for another serious confrontation between the stations and the management.

### **Town and Country Radio**

At the end of 1978 a paper was put together for the General Advisory Council, which attempted to put a more positive gloss on the achievements of BBC radio and the plans for the coming decade.<sup>985</sup> According to the paper, radio was entering something of a renaissance, flourishing in the renewed interest in British culture and the arts. Meanwhile, local radio would continue to put the emphasis on involvement in community affairs and access programmes, promoting interaction with listeners, groups and organisations. It was hoped the new stations would open by 1980/81. As proposed earlier, these new stations would broadcast for shorter periods, taking output from a sustaining service or perhaps a neighbouring station. The paper then postulated various ways a sustaining service might operate, broadcasting news, drama and music, perhaps taking contributions from London departments and regional centres. Above all, said the paper, 'it must be more relevant and attractive than Radio Two.'<sup>986</sup>

However, it also argued that an element of quality control needed to be applied to local radio output as well. There was room for the production to be improved, the style of presentation to be polished and more attention paid to the weekends. In terms of costs, setting up the sustaining service, along with more local radio stations might prove uneconomic. So Singer suggested a more viable plan: creating a sustaining service that was in fact already a network, which the local stations would opt out of for their own programmes. And his proposal for this was Radio Two.

Singer launched a planning exercise with Radio Management so they would know what the options were by the time the licence fee was known,

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<sup>985</sup> BBC WAC Radio Programme Policy Paper GAC Paper 556 7 December 1978 in Radio Services Policy Part Two R78/1170

<sup>986</sup> BBC WAC Op cit



perhaps by the end of 1979.<sup>987</sup> This signalled one of those periods when there were several different strands of policy-making all producing documents which related to one another. Some of the ideas being floated would get taken up and pursued further, others would not.

There were three strands to the discussions. The Radio Consultancy Report explored the long-term prospects for BBC radio based on various scenarios of licence fee growth.<sup>988</sup> Meanwhile, Michael Starks, the Chief Assistant, Radio Management, was drawing up his own report, which would go to the Board of Management, along with the Radio Consultancy Study. Starks' paper, *Radio Programme Policy*, attempted to set some priorities for radio as a whole. These included augmenting network transmitter capacity, replacing and refurbishing existing equipment, creating a sustaining service for local radio for 16-18 hours a day and launching between 40 and 60 new stations, at a rate of five a year.<sup>989</sup> Since the picture of radio was being appraised holistically, it was clear that some senior managers and programme makers were not keen for local radio to command so many resources. The Controller of Radio Four, Monica Sims, questioned the role of local radio, arguing her network had lost listeners to it.<sup>990</sup> In addition, Singer and his deputy, Muggeridge, persisted with their view that local radio's autonomy needed to be reined in, despite Barton's warnings that this would cut it off from its roots. Starks' paper was redrafted and submitted to the Board of Management, along with the Consultancy Study.<sup>991</sup>

Just three days later, a new administration was swept to power, a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher. While the political and economic uncertainty continued, there was yet more hiatus in making any firm decisions. The new Home Secretary, Willie Whitelaw, was a known

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<sup>987</sup> BBC WAC Note from the Managing Director of Radio 30 November 1978 in Radio Services Policy Part Two R78/1170

<sup>988</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of the Radio Development Group 3 April 1978 in Radio Services Policy April 1979-July 1979 R92/70; also Board of Management Minutes 9 April R2/32 eg If there was 5% growth in real terms, then the BBC could achieve all its desired developments, including the increase in local radio, during the 1980s. If there were only 2%, then radio would decline or at best stagnate, unless a better licence fee settlement, and a greater apportionment for radio, was achieved.

<sup>989</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of the Radio Development Group 3 April 1978 in Radio Services Policy April 1979-July 1979 R92/70 *ibid*

<sup>990</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>991</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 9 April R2/32

friend to local radio and keen for both BBC and ILR expansion. Mrs Thatcher on the other hand was also on record voicing her opposition to more BBC stations.<sup>992</sup>

Meanwhile, a third paper entered the forum for debate. This was the *Future of Radio*, commissioned by the Managing Director of Radio from a working party called the Future Policy Group. This was presented purely as an advisory document but it advanced one key aspect of the discussion, the sustaining service, to the next level.<sup>993</sup> The report proposed the radical alternative, based apparently on a Swedish model. Radio Two would remain in its own right, not as a sustaining service, and local radio would broadcast in what it called 'windows' of six hours within this. The name of this would be Town and Country Radio (TCR).<sup>994</sup> The authors of the report acknowledged there would be opposition from the local stations to this proposal. But the report's sympathies clearly lay elsewhere:

'richer fare involves the recognition that the inward-looking tendencies of the British....could be irretrievably accentuated by an over-concentration on parish pump matters and a neglect of subjects and feelings that made and make Britain a great nation.'<sup>995</sup>

In other words, forget local, think national. Singer obviously seemed taken with this idea, and circulated a paper based on *The Future Of Radio* for further consultation later that month.<sup>996</sup> One small detail emerged more prominently in this version – the assumption that Radio Four would gain listeners from local radio under the TCR arrangement. However, somewhat contradicting this, Singer then apparently gave brief consideration to using Radio Four as the sustaining service for TCR, as opposed to Radio Two.<sup>997</sup>

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<sup>992</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 14 May 1979 R2/32

<sup>993</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Paper The Future of Radio BM (79) 100 June 1979 in Radio Services Policy April 1979-July 1979 R92/70

<sup>994</sup> In a sample schedule for Radio Warwick, local programmes would go out at 7.20 – 8.30am in the morning, between 12noon and 1pm and 4.50pm – 6pm for Drivetime. There would be an hour for 'Minority Time' at 8pm and then a late show at 10pm. The remainder of the output would consist of Radio Two material, with the possibility of a MW/VHF split at times, to allow ball-by-ball sports commentary for example. BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>995</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>996</sup> BBC WAC Paper Radio in the Late Eighties 12 June 1979 in Radio Services Policy April 1979 – July 1979 R92/70

<sup>997</sup> BBC WAC Memo from MDR to Controller Radio Four 22 June 1979 Radio Services Policy op cit

Although, as shall be explored in a later section, the concept of TCR was largely just one in a long series of schemes that did not progress from the drawing board,<sup>998</sup> I would argue that it did help to cement several key developments. One was the realisation that more audience research was needed, to work out exactly the relationship between local radio listening patterns and the networks and ILR.<sup>999</sup> Secondly, it became increasingly clear that any progression in local radio development needed to consider the National Regions, to allow sufficient resources to create some kind of local radio programme there and maintain equity across the UK.<sup>1000</sup> Finally, as the next sub-section explores, Singer began to act on the critical implication of a sustaining service (if it ever came about), that the balance of power held by local radio as an opt in operation had to change. In other words, he made a move to reassert his authority and curb the stations' autonomy.

### **The cut in hours: 'for most people, reality is local'**

The following episode reveals quite a lot of the character of Aubrey Singer, and demonstrates once again how significant the personalities of BBC management were to the way that key decisions were made and policy was formulated. If it can be said that local radio was fashioned in the shape of its avuncular and charming founder Frank Gillard, then it is not surprising that Singer's antithetical approach produced a more confrontational atmosphere. Michael Barton recalls that Singer took some time to convert to the ideals of local radio and even when he accepted – and defended – the need for it, he found it difficult to stick to a consistent policy, tending to vacillate from one course to another.<sup>1001</sup> This meant that when he did determine to pursue a course of action, it was handled in a rather abrasive and direct way, as the

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<sup>998</sup> For example Starks, Barton and J Dutot (Head of Planning and Development Radio) compiled a response to the TCR plan but a memo from Starks suggested they were trying to stall the idea by going through the scheme in forensic detail, reassuring Singer that they were genuinely considering it, but at the same time looking for obvious flaws. BBC WAC Memo from CARM to CLR and HPDR [no date] op cit

<sup>999</sup> BBC WAC Paper: Radio Listening Patterns 17 July 1979 op cit

<sup>1000</sup> Michael Barton says that the BBC's inability to persuade the Nations to use some kind of local radio model hindered the argument for more resources for local radio across the whole UK. Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>1001</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 17 December 2007 and 8 June 2011

cut in hours demonstrated, even though the concept underpinning it might have been justified.

As I have argued in the previous section, there were good managerial grounds for steering local radio away from some of its excessive hours of output and improving content. Even Michael Barton acknowledges this.<sup>1002</sup> The problem was the manner in which this was to be achieved. In Spring 1979, relations between Singer and his local Station Managers were certainly frosty. Sandra Chalmers (Radio Stoke) had written a memo to Singer (copied to all managers) about a meeting the North West managers had held in March.<sup>1003</sup> They had voiced their disappointment with the slowing down of local radio development, questioned the need for a sustaining service, and produced some alternative areas for investment instead, including the development of an Audio Service and extending the Regional News Service.

Singer's reply was stinging. He rebuked the North West managers for making decisions 'in ignorance of the present situation.'<sup>1004</sup> He restated the Board of Governors' policy, for five new stations a year, pending the identification of financial resources: 'lobbying from Sandbach [the location of the meeting] is definitely counter-productive'. Singer went further, outlining what would become his agenda for forcing change on the Station Managers. He said their real fear was the use of a sustaining service, with mandatory windows and no control over scheduling. He reminded them that managers had simply extended their hours of output, and as a result 'local radio programming had indeed been stretched and much programming had become time-filling and banal.'<sup>1005</sup> Although he conceded they were no further forward with the sustaining service, he still believed it would add value by allowing managers the opportunity to improve the quality of a reduced local output.<sup>1006</sup>

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<sup>1002</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>1003</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Station Manager Radio Stoke to MDR April 10 1979 in Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part Three September 1978 – May 1979 R92/35

<sup>1004</sup> BBC WAC Memo from MDR to all station managers 17 April 1979 Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part Three September 1978 – May 1979 *ibid*

<sup>1005</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1006</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Finally, they were reminded not to hold meetings without first informing him and ideally offering Singer (or his deputy Muggeridge) an invitation, otherwise they would

Singer's mind was made up. On 1 May, he wrote to Trethowan outlining his plan to tell Station Managers that he wanted them to cut their output and improve the quality.<sup>1007</sup> While he ultimately still wanted a sustaining service 'I do see this as the first stage of making this an opt-out rather than opt-in service.'<sup>1008</sup> The Station Managers were told of the cuts on 6 June and the Chairs of the LRCs were given a presentation by Singer at their conference at Brandon Hall, Warwickshire two days later. The session at the LRC conference at which Singer unveiled his plans was, by all accounts, lively.<sup>1009</sup> Singer's main proposal was to reduce the output by 25% for each station, by restricting the hours of local output to between 6.30am to 6.30pm. There would be no savings made in programme budgets, as Singer intended to invest just as much as before.<sup>1010</sup> After pressure from the Chairs, Singer made some exemptions for Radios Merseyside, Birmingham, Manchester and London, and accepted that each manager could argue for slight variations based on local needs for special events.<sup>1011</sup>

Whilst the Station Managers were reported to have accepted the proposals,<sup>1012</sup> the Chairs met Singer's presentation with dismay. They were particularly upset with the claim that programmes were 'banal and underproduced', and they viewed this as an attack on the stations, not an attempt to strengthen them.<sup>1013</sup> Rachel Root, Chair of Radio Leicester's

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invite themselves 'if nobody else has the courtesy to do so.' He also suggested that any regional meetings be held in London, so the HQ team could attend: 'after all, it is the isolation of a Local Radio manager that brings about the intense insecurity of local radio.'

<sup>1007</sup> BBC WAC Memo from MDR to DG May 1 1979 Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part Three September 1978 – May 1979 *ibid*

<sup>1008</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Interestingly, there's a suggestion in the files that Michael Barton might have voiced some hesitation about the way this was being proposed. A memo from Singer reiterated the reasons for the cut in hours (again he called the programmes 'infilling and banal', reaching 'geriatric audiences'), and suggested going for a 25-30% cut to start with, but settling for the lower figure if there was any resistance. The memo ended bluntly, asking Barton to 'make this a priority.' Memo from MDR to CLR May 15 1979 *ibid*

<sup>1009</sup> BBC WAC see accounts of the meeting in Local Radio Conferences R78/4185; Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165

<sup>1010</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 14 June 1979 R1/46/3 According to McLeish's diary, Singer's original proposal was for mandatory cuts between 2-4pm, taking Radio Two or Radio London. But after the hostile reaction, Singer backtracked the next day and proposed the 6.30am-6.30pm limit. Robert McLeish diary entries 7 – 9 June 1978

<sup>1011</sup> BBC WAC Notes for LRC Chairs 7 June 1979 in Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165 Robert McLeish diary entry 8 June: 'Why penalize success leaving the expensive 'biggies' untouched?'

<sup>1012</sup> BBC WAC Op cit; Board of Governors Minutes 14 June *ibid*

<sup>1013</sup> BBC WAC Outline response by the Chairmen of the BBC LRCs 9 June 1979 in Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165

LRC, wrote to Michael Swann asking what criteria Singer would use to judge whether the cut in hours was a success, and requesting a meeting between the Chairs and the Governors.<sup>1014</sup>

Although Singer had warned the Board of Management about the proposed cut in hours,<sup>1015</sup> the Board of Governors found themselves dragged into the whole affair once they had received letters from the LRC Chairs post-Brandon Hall.<sup>1016</sup> Singer was called to account, and produced a paper on the subject. Whilst the Board supported the plan in principle, they were critical of the manner in which Singer had communicated this, describing it as ‘a little provocative.’<sup>1017</sup> The word ‘banal’ in particular was recognised to have upset the LRC Chairs, which, as has been illustrated, Singer used frequently. Even the Director-General declared he would not have used the word either, despite accepting the need for forthright language.<sup>1018</sup>

The Station Managers were more accommodating towards the reduction in hours, but they resented Singer’s style of management. McLeish described the reduction in hours as ‘a piece of crass timing and bad management.’<sup>1019</sup> Owen Bentley recalls that many Station Managers resented Singer’s way of doing things: Singer got upset if people did not do what they were told, and the world of local radio was not used to being told what to do.<sup>1020</sup> As for the quality of the programmes, Michael Barton thinks the issue was more to do with “underfunding, or the lack of creative vigour from a manager....the problem was Singer was listening as an outsider.”<sup>1021</sup> Regarding the cut in hours, Bentley says “We hated it [but] we did part of it, anyhow.”<sup>1022</sup>

There was an ironic illustration of the impact of the cuts in the minutes of the Weekly Programme Review Board. On 27 June, Singer praised *Jazz Review*, from Radio Humberside, but Station Manager David Challis pointed

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<sup>1014</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Rachel Root to Michael Swann 11 June 1979 Op cit

<sup>1015</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 4 June 1979 R2/32/2

<sup>1016</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 14 June 1979 R1/46/3

<sup>1017</sup> BBC Op cit

<sup>1018</sup> BBC Op cit Singer said in his defence he was being ‘tactful’.

<sup>1019</sup> Robert McLeish diary entry 7 June 1978

<sup>1020</sup> Owen Bentley interview with the author 19 July 2010 “[Singer] was quite centralist”

<sup>1021</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>1022</sup> Op cit

out this programme would be axed under the cuts.<sup>1023</sup> A similar example occurred in August, this time with Radio Bristol's *Jazz Tempo*: good critical feedback from the Board, but dropped due to the restriction in hours.<sup>1024</sup>

The correspondence from the LRCs objecting to the cut in hours continued through to the end of the year. The main thrust of the resistance came from defending minority and community programmes, which were broadcast in the evenings, and so were most at risk from the 6.30pm cut-off. Janet Kitchin from Humberside argued that the winter was a particularly bad time to sacrifice these types of programmes, since so many elderly, housebound and handicapped [sic] listeners relied on local radio in the evenings.<sup>1025</sup> The Chair of Radio Brighton's LRC pointed out that the cuts put at risk those programmes which were most closely linked to the listeners, ie access output and co-produced shows, made with universities or other partners.<sup>1026</sup>

The stakes were raised even higher when petitions began to be gathered. Rachel Root sent one to Michael Swann containing 4,164 signatures from listeners in the Radio Leicester area protesting against the cuts. She quoted GK Chesterton, in defiance, 'For most people, reality is local.'<sup>1027</sup> In December, the Radio Leeds LRC had gathered a petition of 15,575 signatures, explicitly supporting the notion of autonomy, and rejecting any suggestion of a centrally-imposed sustaining service.<sup>1028</sup> This letter, and others like it, demonstrated the sense of betrayal they felt by the BBC over Annan. Local radio supporters argued that they had united in opposition to Annan at the BBC's behest: 'we did as we were bid and Annan was overwhelmingly defeated.'<sup>1029</sup> Moreover, this treachery was multiplied by the hypocrisy of the BBC in the LRC's eyes by reneging on everything they had told Annan about the BBC's commitment to preserving

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<sup>1023</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board Minutes 27 June 1979

<sup>1024</sup> BBC WAC Op cit 15 August 1979

<sup>1025</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Janet Kitchin, Humberside LRC to Michael Swann 12 June 1979 in Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165

<sup>1026</sup> BBC WAC Letter from R Hinton to Michael Swann 4 July 1979 *ibid* He used the word 'decimate' to describe the impact

<sup>1027</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Rachel Root to Michael Swann 6 September 1979 *ibid*

<sup>1028</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Graham Cook to Michael Swann 28 December 1979 *ibid*

<sup>1029</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Radio Carlisle NUJ/ABA Joint Cttee [unsigned] to Michael Swann 31 July 1979 *ibid*

autonomy and independence for their stations.<sup>1030</sup> The best the BBC could offer in response were slightly patronising statements about 'the loyalty and dedication to local radio by the station staff and members of the LRC and by listeners.'<sup>1031</sup>

### **The Second Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report**

Disagreement about the exact number of stations the BBC should be publicly aiming for continued to rumble on. Singer was content to accept 45 stations on MW, with the potential for a further 20 on VHF, but only if necessary.<sup>1032</sup> Writing to Michael Swann, George Howard made it clear he totally opposed limiting the stations to 45. As his and Clarke's report the previous year had identified, there were at least 65 communities in England that merited a station.<sup>1033</sup> He urged Swann to seek a postponement of the next Home Office Working Party meeting, partly because of the imminent General Election, but also because he was worried that the BBC was being forced to make irrevocable decisions. There was, however, another element to the division in opinion. Howard sensed that Singer and other managers were anxious about having a large number of stations, because they did not want to have to deal with 65 Station Managers and 65 LRC Chairs 'ganging up on the BBC.'<sup>1034</sup> In fact, Singer said as much when he wrote to Howard and Clarke on 29 May.<sup>1035</sup> He again stressed his view that much of the output was 'banal and serving the elderly', and warned that more stations would mean the Board would become a regulatory authority keeping track of 150,000 hours of output. Singer's view was clearly that a more modest scheme of around 45 stations was the only way forward, even if it was editorially less satisfying. It would allow relatively early coverage of

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<sup>1030</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Graham Cook to Michael Swann ibid

<sup>1031</sup> BBC WAC Letter from JF Wilkinson (on behalf of the BBC Chair) to Mrs Fleming, Sheffield LRC 9 August 1979 ibid

<sup>1032</sup> 45 stations would secure 95% coverage of England. These would be type B stations ideally, which would be most effective in combating ILR competition. As has already been noted, some of the Governors (notably Howard and Clarke) were pushing for the 65+ plan. BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 30 April 1979 R2/32

<sup>1033</sup> BBC WAC Letter from George Howard to Michael Swann 1 May 1979 in Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165

<sup>1034</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1035</sup> BBC WAC Letter from MDR to George Howard and Stella Clarke 29 May 1979 in Local and Community Radio Development Policy Part Three September 1978 – May 1979 R92/35



England, help maintain the networks and keep in touch with the grassroots. He concluded with a typically blunt appraisal. In his professional view, 'too grandiose a plan would jeopardise the whole structure.'<sup>1036</sup>

A further element to the second Report was the problem of London. The Working Party asked the BBC and the IBA to submit proposals for the way they might consider using frequencies in the capital and plan for further station expansion there.<sup>1037</sup> The issue of London had already been noted and discussed by the Governor's Sub-Group, who suggested using the London station as a 'Newsfax' sustaining service.<sup>1038</sup> The Pitt Mansfield Report recommended ways for engaging more closely with London's population through the use of mobile studios and establishing an ethnic station.<sup>1039</sup>

Both these studies demonstrated support for local radio in London but in contrasting ways. So what were the problems? The Board of Governors considered that although Radio London produced some good material, in a mix of news, music, information and community output, listening penetration was unlikely to get any higher than the current 1.3%.<sup>1040</sup> The main issue as they saw it was competition from other stations and the fact that London was so large, compared to the standard local radio transmission area.<sup>1041</sup> The Board heard that Singer's Radio Management team believed a sustaining service might be possible using network material to supplement it, but discussions centred on whether local radio could ever effectively serve London, and whether it would be better catered for with smaller community stations. But then there was disagreement about whether these were communities of interest or of geography: the idea that London consists of small villages. In essence, these debates were a microcosm of the central conundrum facing local radio: what was the right size and definition for a community? It was obvious that consensus on the London issue was

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<sup>1036</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1037</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Paper BM (79) 86 BBC Local Radio in London 17 May 1979 in Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165; also Board of Governors Paper G.141/79 in R1/46/3

<sup>1038</sup> BBC WAC Report of the Local Radio Group of Governors G.145/78 July 1978 R78/1388

<sup>1039</sup> See Chapter Ten

<sup>1040</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 31 May 1979 R1/46/3

<sup>1041</sup> This included not just the two commercial stations and the BBC networks but also more than 20 unlicensed stations.

unlikely to be reached either, so the Board proposed making some general requests to the Home Office which would not amount to a firm commitment. These included raising the future potential for four or five localised services in London at some unspecified time in the future, and therefore to apply for two new MW and VHF frequencies.<sup>1042</sup>

The change in government had created a delay in the proceedings in the Working Party, but it turned out to be only brief. On 11 June, Shirley Littler wrote from the Home Office to Singer to circulate the new Home Secretary's thoughts on the process.<sup>1043</sup> Willie Whitelaw agreed to continue the second report, planning for the further expansion of local radio. He further proposed publishing the report to allow for public consultation before he made his final decision. However, the Home Secretary anticipated a 'marked disparity' between the development of BBC and ILR stations in this and future stages.<sup>1044</sup> Littler went on:

'Douglas Muggeridge and I agreed on Thursday that there seems to be no point arousing expectations which the BBC is not certain of being able to fulfil.....A dignified note of financial realism will, I am sure, be welcomed by the public.'<sup>1045</sup>

So Singer was in effect being told that given the financial uncertainty, and the fact that progress on the next nine stations was very slow, there was no expectation for more BBC local stations in the report. Furthermore, there was a shift away from the policy of the previous government, which had hoped, eventually, for two local radio stations per area. Whitelaw's terms of reference were revised to so that the priority was covering the UK as soon as possible, accepting duplication with existing stations only if it was inevitable. This must have been troubling for the BBC: the government was basically going to allow the IBA to continue with its local radio expansion plans and the BBC, unable to afford to participate, had to sit by and watch.

The Second Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report was published the following month, and contained few surprises in the light of

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<sup>1042</sup> BBC WAC *ibid* in addition to 720 MW, which was intended to boost Radio Four in London

<sup>1043</sup> BBC WAC Letter from Shirley Littler to Aubrey Singer 11 June 1979 in Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165

<sup>1044</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1045</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

recent discussions.<sup>1046</sup> While acknowledging there was still work to be done on frequency planning, the Working Party decided to proceed with making recommendations for more stations, to keep the momentum going and in line with public feeling. A recap on the progress of those stations announced by the first report revealed that, although the BBC hoped to open stations in Norwich and Lincoln sometime in 1980, work on the other seven was delayed by discussions about finance. By comparison, the IBA had advertised contracts for eight of their nine stations, and received over 50 applications for seven of them.<sup>1047</sup>

On an optimistic note, the report was able to confirm the BBC's ultimate intention of completing the transition from regional to local as set out in *Broadcasting in the 70s*. In terms of the core recommendations, the BBC's proposals were very limited. They asked for a MW opt out for services in Aberdeen and Londonderry and for the necessary frequencies to turn regional radio in Plymouth into a full local service, using existing stations. The Report acknowledged that the BBC might want to add to this list in the future when the financial situation was clearer. The IBA produced a list of 15 stations for approval; three of these (Leicester, Leeds and Bristol) were in existing BBC locations, but the report accepted the duplication.<sup>1048</sup>

The publication of the report was an unfortunate acknowledgement that the BBC could not go any further with local radio, and this further fanned the flames of passion already aroused over the cut in hours debacle. The General Secretary of the ABS union wrote to the Secretary of the Working Party that he was 'horrified' by the report and the abdication of the BBC to the future of local radio.<sup>1049</sup> He said it was 'laughable' that the BBC Governors supposedly decided the priority for new stations, but actually they could not determine anything until the licence fee was settled.

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<sup>1046</sup> BBC WAC Home Office Local Radio Working Party Second Report July 1979 in Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165

<sup>1047</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1048</sup> BBC WAC Op cit the IBA list was: Ayr, Barnsley, Bristol, Bury St Edmunds, Canterbury/Dover, Guildford, Leeds, Leicester, Londonderry, Luton/Bedford, Newport, Preston/Blackpool, Swindon. Worcester/Hereford and Wrexham/Deeside.

<sup>1049</sup> BBC WAC Letter from D A Hearn to Mr Matthews 6 August 1979 Local Broadcasting 1979 ibid

In November, Whitelaw confirmed the new stations, which had been proposed in the report<sup>1050</sup>, including the BBC's Plymouth operation. A few days later, Whitelaw announced the next licence fee increase, a rise of £9, to £34 for a colour television. This was set to last for at least two years.<sup>1051</sup> The BBC had hoped for an increase to more than £40 in order to implement all their planned developments, including new local radio stations.<sup>1052</sup>

### **Lane End and the Green Paper**

By the time the Second Home Office report was published, there were already some doubts over the Town and Country concept. This was due in part to a report on listening patterns, commissioned by Aubrey Singer. This new information heralded the next wave of working parties, plans and strategies, as Radio Management edged, very slowly, towards some kind of consensus. These came together at a weekend conference for Controllers and senior managers in Lane End, High Wycombe, at the end of September 1979, which attempted to set a course for the Third Home Office report. A report on listening patterns, produced by Granville Williams and Derek Anderson, of the Radio Consultancy, showed that BBC Local Radio listeners tuned in for two hours a day, compared to 2.5 hours for Radio Two and 1.5 hours for Radio Four.<sup>1053</sup> While it was not possible to say exactly how many listeners ILR had taken from BBC Local Radio, it appeared that 1 – 2% of the audience switched from Radio Two to BBC Local Radio, and about the same from Radio Four. Perhaps more significantly, local radio brought in new listeners to the BBC. BBC Local Radio had gained by 1 or 2% every three or four years; so another ten new stations might add 4% in total by the mid-eighties. So the report's authors suggested that completing the local radio chain in England would add a significant new audience. The risk was creating too many new services (such as TCR), which would

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<sup>1050</sup> BBC WAC Home Office Press Release 15 November 1979 in Home Office Local Radio Working Party General R102/19 All the ILR stations were given the go ahead, except Canterbury/Dover, which required further consultation

<sup>1051</sup> *The Times* 'BBC raises TV colour licences to £34 with promise of two-year limit' 24 November 1979

<sup>1052</sup> *The Times* '£40 licence was needed for BBC's development plans' 28 November 1979

<sup>1053</sup> BBC WAC Presentation to Radio Management Meeting 17 July 1979 in Radio Services Policy April 1979 – July 1979 R92/70

effectively sub-divide the audience and cause internal competition, rather than add new listeners.

Singer, at the presentation of the report, expressed satisfaction with the findings, and summarised a choice of proposals.<sup>1054</sup> These were keeping the status quo for the networks and expanding local radio to a total of 45 stations; the affiliation of smaller stations to their nearest larger one and reducing the total from 45 to 35, with some regional opt outs to cover the south west, east Anglia and perhaps the south east too. In terms of the sustaining service, this could be created from existing material and broadcast throughout the UK, with English local radio opting out for their services and the National Regions doing likewise.

Singer then asked all the Controllers to write a paper with their views on these proposals or any alternatives they could suggest.<sup>1055</sup> These papers were to be presented at the upcoming conference at Lane End. Meanwhile, at least one participant at the Radio Management meeting came away with the impression that although a reconfiguration of the networks might be a possibility, TCR was receding from view, and local radio were emerging much stronger.<sup>1056</sup> To lay the ground for debate at Lane End, Michael Starks also prepared a paper called *Radio's Development Plans: An Alternative Approach*.<sup>1057</sup>

This paper cemented local radio's position still further. It accepted that there was no question of withdrawing altogether from local radio and that priority had to be given to augmenting it, and improving reception, to stop ILR from becoming the 'first' local radio service. Even more importantly, the paper said that funding for the networks was not sacrosanct if it meant postponing the completion of the chain by 1990.<sup>1058</sup> The paper then went on elaborate on the key platforms for the next stage in local radio growth, which were the number of stations and the size; the number of hours they

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<sup>1054</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of MDR's Radio Management Meeting 17 July 1979 in Radio Services Policy Part Two 1978 – 1979 R78/1170

<sup>1055</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1056</sup> BBC WAC Memo from the Assistant Head of the Secretariat to the Secretary 20 July 1979 in *ibid*

<sup>1057</sup> BBC WAC Paper: Radio's Development Plans: An Alternative Approach in Radio Services Policy August 1979 – December 1979 R92/71

<sup>1058</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

would broadcast and the options for the sustaining service and how to define the networks. After months of debate (and more to come), these were important steps forward in helping to conceptualise how local radio would look in the future. Most importantly, there was an acceptance that some stations would cover whole counties, and therefore there would be fewer than originally intended.

There were several arguments the BBC could use to counter the impression that local radio was moving away from, rather than closer to, the audience. Stations could be called after the county, but actually based in a major town or city, such as Radio Suffolk, based in Ipswich, rather than Radio Ipswich. These created more points of difference with ILR and helped the problem of duplication. It also proved the BBC was just as committed to rural areas, as well as urban ones. The paper welcomed other agencies, organisations or community groups who wanted to get involved in local broadcasting alongside the BBC. In terms of output hours, the paper proposed making the cut in hours permanent, on the grounds of cost, especially when it came to starting new stations. However this left the problem of how to fill the gaps in the schedule. Having established that using network material from elsewhere on the dial did not suit the audience, this meant it was necessary to produce purpose-made work. The paper weighed up the relevant advantages and disadvantages of creating regional-type networks of stations to share material but the cost seemed to rule this out. The other option was to transform a network into a local radio sustaining service, but this had to be done as part of a reconfiguration of all four networks, rather than just a merger with one and leaving the others untouched. This paper was presented to the assembled network controllers and other senior management figures at the beginning of the Lane End conference, along with Granville William's analysis of listening habits.<sup>1059</sup>

After presentations of the other long-term options available, the conference was steered towards making decisions about those items closer in the timescale, over which there was some control. The priorities they

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<sup>1059</sup> BBC WAC Notes on a weekend conference held at Lane End Conference Centre High Wycombe 28 – 30 September 1979 in Radio Services Policy August – December 1979 R92/71

established were: a list of local radio stations which the BBC hoped to open in the 1980s, with some restriction of hours and a sustaining service; a bid for Radio Four on VHF in the National Regions; and the transition of local radio onto VHF stereo.<sup>1060</sup>

Singer summarised the conference's key decisions as agreeing that change would be gradual and evolutionary, that the experiment to reduce local radio hours would continue. Local managers would be briefed accordingly and *ad hoc* working groups would concentrate on the finer points of detail. Within a month, Singer had written up the Lane End decisions and discussions into a policy document, which would ultimately go to both Boards. He called this *A Radio Management Green Paper*.<sup>1061</sup> Singer stressed that this should not be seen as *Broadcasting in the 80s*: it was not intended to signal a major transformation but rather a step-by-step approach. The timescale of this document was April 1980 to April 1984, and came under four headings: Local Radio in England; National Regional Radio; Network Radio and Educational Programmes. What was significant in this paper was the degree to which several important factors had changed and the emphasis had moved since Lane End.

For example, while using Radio Four as the sustaining service was ruled out completely, because Singer acknowledged how important the network was in terms of national broadcasting and news and current affairs, the paper still accepted that local radio could build its audience at the expense of Radio Four. Secondly, the number of daily broadcast hours for local stations, especially the larger ones, seemed to have been pared down to ten. In addition, the rate of growth appeared to have slowed, under Singer's estimation, to nine new stations over the next four years, none of which would be allowed to broadcast more than six hours a day. He calculated that with some alteration to the boundaries of existing stations, the BBC

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<sup>1060</sup> BBC WAC Ibid. Michael Starks' list for the next wave of local radio stations was: (1980) Lincoln, Norwich; (1981) Barrow, Cambridge, Taunton; (1982) Northampton, Shrewsbury, York; (1983) Truro, Plymouth, London – re-structuring; (1984) Dorchester; Ipswich; Worcester; (1985) Coventry, Gloucester, Luton; (1986) Canterbury, Exeter, Swindon; (1987) Chelmsford, Guildford. Thereafter: Basingstoke and other, unidentified stations. Discussions about Radio London's future centred on providing a nine-hour-a-day basic service followed by a daily three hour ethnic station.

<sup>1061</sup> BBC WAC Paper: *A Radio Management Green Paper* 26 October 1979 in Radio Services Policy August – December 1979 R92/71

could claim to have achieved 90% coverage by the mid-1980s. In terms of the sustaining service, Radio Two looked like the most likely option as the main source of material. To supplement this, there would be syndicated output from the other network production departments. Once Radio Two ceased to be a network, Radio London, Singer proposed, would close and merge with it, and the redundant staff would be re-deployed. There was a clear indication in the paper that local radio's previous autonomy would be reduced and that it was expected to work much more closely, and efficiently, with network radio.

However, despite the paper's air of decisiveness, Michael Barton was alarmed. Writing to Starks, Barton complained that the arguments had been moved considerably since the Lane End conference, to the detriment of local radio.<sup>1062</sup> The sustaining service, Barton argued, looked like a 'dress rehearsal for Town and Country Radio' after all, because if Radio Two were to provide syndicated programmes in the way Singer proposed, local stations would end up simultaneously broadcasting them and this would require the aforementioned 'windows.'<sup>1063</sup> In other words, Town and Country Radio. Meanwhile, the financial economies in the *Green Paper* had shifted away from the networks and back onto local radio, and the size of the new stations would cover larger population areas, making fewer hours untenable.

The *Green Paper* then formed the basis of a report for both Boards. This contained even more details on the key policy decisions.<sup>1064</sup> In particular, the report addressed how the BBC could afford to achieve 90% coverage of England. Still to be opened were the nine stations authorised by the first Home Office report, along with the Plymouth opt. The paper also proposed extending the transmission areas of existing stations, which, the report acknowledged, would be 'county' stations.<sup>1065</sup> To help make local radio

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<sup>1062</sup> BBC WAC Memo from CLR to CARM (Programmes) 26 October 1979 Subject: Green Paper in Radio Services Policy August – December 1979 R92/71

<sup>1063</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1064</sup> BBC WAC Paper G.295/79 Radio Programme Policy 12 December 1979 in Radio Services Policy August – December 1979 R92/71

<sup>1065</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Expansions would include Medway (to cover Canterbury and south east Kent), Brighton (to include Eastbourne and Hastings), Blackburn (to become a Lancashire station) and Newcastle (to take in more of Northumberland).



expansion 'self-financing', the experiment to reduce local radio hours would continue, with greater cuts, although these would be negotiated on a case-by-case basis with the Controller. There would also be savings from finally closing down regional broadcasts in East Anglia and the South West when the new stations in Norwich, Cambridge, Truro and Plymouth opened. However, when asked whether local radio might be renamed 'County Radio', Singer replied in the negative.<sup>1066</sup>

### **The Third Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report**

In 1979, as local radio finally stood on the verge of achieving the long-desired completion, the BBC published another promotional pamphlet. This time, it took the name *Local Radio: Action Stations*,<sup>1067</sup> signifying a sense of dynamism and energy, moving forward into the new decade. In his foreword, Singer conjured up an image of 2.5 million daily listeners who were connected not just to the station, but to a wider community:

'as neighbour speaks to neighbour, grasping the challenge of home town broadcasting, BBC Local Radio had become one of the family.....the thriving roots of an expanding network of radio, offering an increasingly diverse service to the nation as a whole.'<sup>1068</sup>

Unlike its predecessor, *Serving Neighbourhood and Nations*, this booklet was more focussed, concentrating in particular on the virtues of connecting rural communities, where communications were elusive and transport links under threat. It backed this up with extracts from a report by the National Council for Social Services, *The Right To Know*, which underlined the disenfranchisement of those living in the countryside and the benefits provided by local radio.<sup>1069</sup> These included providing practical information and support, where they could receive help and advice and as a focal point for people without any other means of contact. A paragraph from Maurice Ennals reiterated the point and cited the Crawford Report to further support the BBC's work. It was an interesting switch in focus because of course the

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<sup>1066</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of a meeting of the Radio Programme Policy Committee 20 December 1979 in Radio Services Policy August – December 1979 R92/71

<sup>1067</sup> BBC *Local Radio: Action Stations* (London: BBC Publications 1979)

<sup>1068</sup> BBC Op cit p 2

<sup>1069</sup> BBC Op cit

new county stations would be the priority area for future growth, to complete the chain, and so the BBC was making a virtue out of necessity.

Elsewhere the pamphlet made the usual points about the way stations operated, the LRCs, minority programmes and so on. No mention was made of the recent battles about reduced hours and there was no confusion over the name of the service: the words 'local radio' were used throughout. Each station had a section to promote their own highlights, and again there was a more forward-looking optimism in many of the entries, such as Radio Merseyside, where work was starting on their new premises. A ten-minute promotional film also called *BBC Local Radio: Action Stations* was produced shortly afterwards, further promoting the work of local radio.<sup>1070</sup> The examples used here had a visual element to them, such as the way local radio covered fast-moving events like the Toxteth riots or those that brought different elements of BBC services together, for instance the opening of the Humber Bridge by the Queen. The film concluded by talking confidently about the imminent completion of local radio development to cover 90% of England. As the narrator said, 'Community means something when you tune into your BBC action stations.'<sup>1071</sup>

The move towards county radio was formalised by the third Home Office Working Party report, which was published in December 1980. In the interim, there had been some modification to the proposals of the Second Report, again along the lines of county-wide provision, with the South West service becoming Radio Devon, based in Plymouth.<sup>1072</sup> Interestingly, the working party faced some paradoxes. While the report reminded interested parties that their remit concerned frequency allocation and not the editorial policy or staffing implications of new stations, it devoted a substantial section to the community radio lobby. After discussing various aspects of the evidence presented to them, mainly from COMCOM, the working party decided not to deploy frequencies away from the IBA or the BBC on the grounds that there was no proven demand for the kind of community services COMCOM proposed. Although they conceded they were open to

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<sup>1070</sup> *BBC Local Radio: Action Stations* film (BBC Local Radio Publicity 1981)

<sup>1071</sup> BBC Op cit

<sup>1072</sup> Home Office *Local Radio Working Party – Third Report* (HMSO 1980) This BBC proposal was approved by Whitelaw on 7 August.

future developments in the area, it sounded like a decision made on regulatory, rather than technical, grounds.

However, as far as the BBC and IBA were concerned, the working party made it clear that once their approval was given, it was the respective broadcasting authorities' responsibility to create their own stations. This was the mechanism that allowed the BBC to achieve its goal of comprehensive coverage of England, but at the same time re-define some of the boundaries of local radio, both technically and editorially. By the time the report was published, two new stations had finally opened – Radio Norfolk in September of that year, and Radio Lincolnshire in November.<sup>1073</sup> As Singer's *Green Paper* the previous year had outlined, the BBC's priority for the next stage of local radio expansion was those stations covering Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire, Devon and Cornwall. The report recognised, and accepted, that this represented a modification on the BBC's earlier aspirations, as submitted to the working party for the first report. Accordingly, the BBC submitted their aim to open new services which would take their total to 38.<sup>1074</sup> In addition, the BBC requested that the frequency plan should allow possible developments in Swindon, Dorchester and the Thames Valley and some modifications to existing coverage.<sup>1075</sup>

According to the report, the BBC was committed to spending £8 million over the next three years for the refurbishment and opening of new local radio stations, some of which was derived by the cut in hours: ten hours for existing stations, new stations limited to six. Although the ultimate goal for the BBC was 38 stations by the mid -1980s, there was no firm commitment to a timetable due to financial planning limitations under the current two-year fixed licence fee. The IBA proposed 25 more areas for licensing, including some in the National Regions, which would take them to 75% coverage of the whole UK, by 1987.

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<sup>1073</sup> Home Office Op cit

<sup>1074</sup> Home Office Op cit New stations were proposed in Chelmsford (serving Essex), Coventry (for Nuneaton, Rugby and Warwick), Gloucester (Gloucestershire), Guildford (parts of Surrey), Hereford and Worcester, Ipswich (Suffolk) and Luton (Bedfordshire).

<sup>1075</sup> Home Office Op cit These included a VHF relay for north Northumberland, and a MW extension for Derby and Leicester, and satellite stations for south east Kent and east Sussex.

The working party, on behalf of the government, approved the requests from both authorities. Their main issue, as they saw it, was whether the new stations should be given both MW and VHF frequencies, given continued limitations on availability. Whilst there was no problem with meeting MW frequency requests, following the most recent international conference on radio wavelengths in Geneva in 1979, VHF usage needed further consideration because of spectrum restrictions. However this was an area for international, and UK government, discussion and decision.

Until further notice, the working party proposed continuing with joint MW and VHF allocation. They also noted that the proposed new stations avoided duplication but this would not be the case in the future. Finally the working party assumed they would continue their work on frequency planning and pursue the topic of London local radio further, which was still unresolved.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that in order for BBC Local Radio to achieve 90% coverage of England, it had to overcome several crucial obstacles as well as re-address some fundamental principles underpinning the concept of local broadcasting. The campaign by the BBC to marshal the forces of persuasion and lobbying successfully rejected the proposal in the Annan Report to remove local radio from their, and IBA, control. The operation owed a debt in no small measure to the ability of local stations and the LRCs to mobilise their supporters and listeners in defence of the service. Ironically this period witnessed tensions in this relationship, which came to a head shortly afterwards.

Crucially, two key attributes of local radio were changed in the process. In order to secure financial savings and improve the output, restrictions were imposed on the hours of broadcast for locally produced material. This was a direct revision of the principle of autonomy, which had previously operated without hindrance. While the Station Managers eventually accepted this, the LRCs did not, which brought confrontation out into the open, and merely served to convince Singer and his management team this was the right course of action.

I would argue these were watershed moments for the course of local radio development. Even though the debate about a sustaining service was no further forward, and therefore the degree to which local radio output could be centrally determined was still unclear, getting the Station Managers to accept the principle of reduced hours shifted the balance of power in the relationship. Moreover, this suggested a willingness to compromise local radio's community aspirations. Imposing a night-time cull on local output hit minority programmes hardest; presumably Singer's willingness to sacrifice evening shows also meant to his ears these were the ones most likely to be 'banal' and to appeal to the 'geriatric' audience.<sup>1076</sup> Station Managers still retained the ability to re-shape their remaining schedules to accommodate minority programmes where they could, and they would never admit publicly to down-grading their importance, yet it was an important shift in perceptions that local radio could not sustain its original ambitions and still hope to achieve complete expansion.

The challenge by the LRC chairs, which happened in the full glare of the listening public, emphasised how awkward the BBC's position was. They did not have the finances to progress any further with growth, and when they did attempt to make decisions, the local radio lobby, empowered by the Annan episode, was only too willing to cross swords. It exposed the paradox at the heart of the local radio enterprise: stakeholders who believed they had more claim to ownership than the broadcasters. If there was to be any kind of future growth, the BBC had to ensure that subsequent stations owed more loyalty to the centre than to elsewhere.

Once the Annan recommendations had been rejected, the creation of the Home Office Local Radio Working Party provided the forum and the means by which the BBC and the IBA could agree frequency allocation for the next wave of stations. This was the opportunity to achieve comprehensive coverage. However the BBC was hampered by other, internal factors. There was no financial provision for expansion; the exact editorial areas and size of the stations needed further discussion; the relationship between the

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<sup>1076</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 9 April 1979 DG: 'Ten minutes of Radio Solent on a Saturday morning is all I can bear.' MDR: 'What do you expect for £12 an hour?' R2/32/1

station staffs and central management needed clarification, and that between local radio and network radio. As I have argued, through a series of complex policy documents and discussion papers, running parallel to the three Home Office Reports, the BBC's position became clearer and a strategy emerged. In conjunction with this, various schemes were drawn up for a sustaining service, which would have had the effect of unifying local radio and again exerting more central influence in the pattern of broadcasting. While this sustaining service idea was never launched, the debate forced local radio to recognise its responsibilities in terms of how it operated with network radio and to take a more holistic view of the service.

Moreover, the final group of stations agreed in the third Home Office report were defined by their coverage of a county-size area, rather than the originally intended town or community focus. While this effectively enabled coverage of the English population, it was a dilution of one of the founding principles of local radio. Given the number of interested parties involved within the BBC and the many conflicting views and opinions, the course of action followed was probably the most realistic given the financial circumstances. The BBC was committed to completing the chain somehow, and this was the best solution on offer, though by no means ideal. Yet paradoxically, the Annan debacle had demonstrated the strength of connection that grassroots supporters and listeners felt to their local station: a validation in fact of the original focus on smaller transmission areas.

## **Section Four**

### **CHAPTER TEN: The Station**

#### **Introduction**

This section contains one chapter, in which I will examine the development of the station itself, identifying key elements of the organisation. The first part of the chapter focuses on the Station Manager and the staff, exploring in particular the role that the manager played in developing the station, the importance of individual dynamism and personality and the collective weight they could wield as a group. The next section addresses the output of the stations, which continued to evolve since the initial attempts at scheduling during the experimental phase. It is possible to trace the development from the traditional 'built' programme format to more 'sequence' based output, as stations tried to produce more hours of locally-made content. This also included programmes aimed at minorities and specialist audiences (including minority ethnic groups), and the role of education programmes. The Local Radio Councils formed a key component of the local radio organisation, as one of the main safeguards that monitored stations' autonomy and benchmarked community involvement. The membership and composition of the councils was an issue that generated interest and concern throughout the 1970s and the Chairs of the LRCs became particularly embroiled at crucial points in the local radio story, which in turn raised questions about their role. The relationship between the station and the wider BBC is another integral element to the equation. At the heart of the local radio structure was the HQ team. Although this was small, it played a vital part in steering the strategic development of the service, acting as a conduit between the Managing Director of Radio and the wider radio management. The relationship with this latter group, dominated by the Controllers and the senior managers of the networks, was of fundamental importance, as a barometer of the empathy or otherwise which was felt towards local radio and its objectives by the BBC as an organisation.

So in this chapter, I will argue first that the multiplication of stations challenged the limits of the idea that the model could be replicated in every

location, on the same basis. The first eight stations were intended to be relatively simple operations with a small number of output hours, yet by the time the twentieth station was opened, staff levels and programme hours had risen. As the methods of production developed, and the audience expectations matured and changed, the original assumptions about the type of content that local radio would produce had to be modified. I will argue, using examples from the range of output, including phone-ins, educational programmes and minority and specialist shows, that one consequence of expansion was an increasingly homogenised, routine product. Secondly, I will argue that the structure and hierarchy of the expanding local radio 'family' also had an impact on the way it operated. The concept of autonomy, enshrined in the experiment, created pressures and tensions when multiplied by more Station Managers, who combined to create a formidable lobby. This, I will argue, brought it ultimately into conflict with other parts of the BBC, most notably network radio. I will also make the point that this tension brought into focus the role of the HQ team: were these managers intended to exert influence over the stations, to create consistency, or did they see their job as preserving independence?

### **The Station Manager and the Staff**

In April 1973, Trethowan was able to reflect on the current state of the stations. The number had increased to twenty and the audience had doubled since local radio had been broadcast on medium wave in the past twelve months.<sup>1077</sup> Statistically, it was an impressive development over the past five years: there were now 600 staff working across the stations, producing 1,200 hours of output a week, with a budget of £3.3m.<sup>1078</sup> This was all the more noteworthy given the recent past, with a period of deep uncertainty, a restriction on resources and the impact this had on the quality of some programmes. Inevitably this had taken its toll: 'their present must hold something of their recent past.' he wrote.<sup>1079</sup> But, Trethowan went on to say, the enthusiasm of the staff helped to compensate for some of the

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<sup>1077</sup> BBC WAC Report on Local Radio by Managing Director of Radio G.58/73 25 April 1973 Board of Governors Papers R1/109

<sup>1078</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1079</sup> BBC WAC Op cit



amateurism on air, and good relations with local communities were still the foundation of each station. Numerically, the station staff had definitely grown. By 1973/4, the average number of staff per station was 30.25, with some significantly higher, such as London with 53, Birmingham with 41.<sup>1080</sup> The most important post, in terms of seniority, was the Station Manager, whose key duties involved programme organisation, staff and administration management, public relations and publicity.<sup>1081</sup> Obviously individual managers were able to interpret their role as they saw fit, in the context of their own station and, as the example of Phil Sidey at Radio Leeds has already illustrated, they wielded considerable influence.<sup>1082</sup> Owen Bentley says “Stations reflected their managers.”<sup>1083</sup> For him, autonomy meant that he could take risks and be experimental. The example Bentley gives is the *Asian Network*, which he started at Radio Leicester, initially as a ‘stripped’ five nights a week news and information programme. There were cost implications, but he decided not to seek permission from Michael Barton (then Controller of Local Radio) beforehand: “You did things first.....you didn’t always wait for the money. Because if you waited for the money, you’d wait forever.” But Bentley’s enterprising spirit was not shared by all his colleagues. He suggests that resources and opportunities were available but some managers preferred to be cautious and frugal and this had an impact on their station. Consequently when Bentley arrived at Radio Leicester, as Station Manager in December 1975, he found the station in a poor state: “atrophied” as he puts it.<sup>1084</sup> Previous managers had not made bids for extra funds or equipment or staff, unlike Oxford, Nottingham and Sheffield, which were looking very healthy.

The central hypothesis about the extent of the Station Manager’s influence was the correlation between the imprint of his/her personality and the socio-ethnographic composition of the locality. Bentley accepts that

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<sup>1080</sup> BBC WAC Op cit appendix

<sup>1081</sup> BBC WAC BBC Local Radio Handbook R102/53/1 (Although no author is credited, it is likely this was a task carried out by the HQ team.) June 1970

<sup>1082</sup> Interestingly Radio Leeds was still being described as ‘the house that Sidey built’ within the higher echelons of the BBC nearly ten years after his departure. This was a reference to the station’s continued reputation for its community work. BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board minutes 5 July 1978

<sup>1083</sup> Owen Bentley interview with the author 19 July 2010

<sup>1084</sup> Bentley Op cit

“locality and community determined that it would be different in different areas.” But “I think the stations were different more because the managers were different rather than the areas.”<sup>1085</sup> The underlying issue was one of autonomy, the principle that was a cornerstone of the local radio foundation, and how this was interpreted by the managers. For many, this was a *modus operandi*, a way of interpreting the guidance of how to run a station and fulfil the objectives of local radio. There were countless innovations and developments in programme-making, such as Bentley’s example of the *Asian Network*, and the impression this created was that it was the independent decisions of managers that helped produce much of the vibrancy and creativity of local radio output. As I have illustrated, by the end of the 1970s, the issue of autonomy became an increasing source of disagreement. By the time Aubrey Singer told the Station Managers that they would have to reduce their output by 25% in 1979,<sup>1086</sup> there had been a notable shift in the balance of power: most managers were not so naïve that they could not see the reality of their situation. They realised they could apply the cut in hours flexibly, depending on their audience needs and accepted that, in Singer’s words, ‘the time of open-ended local radio was over.’<sup>1087</sup> Bentley sums this up: “the history of local radio and the managers is the BBC gradually pulling them back into the fold, all the way through into the 1980s really.”<sup>1088</sup>

Other job roles on the station included the programme organiser, who had principal responsibility for the day-to-day operation and maintaining programme standards, and the education producer, who initiated, devised and produced programmes of an educational nature, but also contributed to other parts of the station.<sup>1089</sup> There was the general programmes producer and the news editor, who oversaw all news output and current affairs. As well as organising news coverage within the station, there was also a duty

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<sup>1085</sup> Bentley Op cit

<sup>1086</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 11 June 1979 R2/32/1

<sup>1087</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management minutes 16 July 1979 MDR said there were some less sympathetic managers, who he called ‘electronic almoners’: the meaning here is rather opaque.

<sup>1088</sup> Owen Bentley interview with the author *ibid*. Bentley opines that in his day, it was a great period to be a manager and that today, the Managing Editors as they are called are really micro-managed.

<sup>1089</sup> BBC WAC BBC Local Radio Handbook *ibid*

to serve the area and network news desks with any relevant material. The station assistant helped in the preparation of programmes and could be called on to deputise for a producer. Other posts included two engineers, an administrative assistant, programme secretaries and a receptionist.

Despite this clear delineation of roles and the structure that supported the staff within the station, the first years of the 1970s were dominated more by external influences, which had the potential to undermine the smooth running of the stations. References to low staff morale during the Chataway crisis period were frequent in the minutes of the Boards of Management and Governors.<sup>1090</sup> The mood among the staff in local radio noticeably improved when their long-term future was secured after the White Paper in 1971. Trethowan described how they were 'pretty buoyant by beating off the government' and how impressed he was, at a recent meeting, by the range of ages and backgrounds among the staff, and by their professional self-confidence.<sup>1091</sup>

The creation of the next twelve stations had contributed to this new sense of optimism as it had opened up the opportunities for career development, which BBC Governor Dame Mary Green enquired about on a visit to Radio Brighton.<sup>1092</sup> Staff from the original eight stations were able to apply for jobs, at higher grades, in the new stations, bringing with them their experience and ideas. In fact this became a noticeable issue as the number of staff moving on amounted to what was called 'an exodus.'<sup>1093</sup> Owen Bentley was one such beneficiary, promoted from Radio Stoke-on-Trent to help launch Radio Oxford. His experience at the previous station helped enormously, although Oxford presented a different set of challenges and needs.<sup>1094</sup> The staff at Oxford was more highly trained, with a greater variety of skills and interests. More noticeable was the availability of

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<sup>1090</sup> eg BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes February 11 1971; September 23 1971 *ibid*

<sup>1091</sup> BBC WAC Report by the Managing Director of Radio 24 June 1971 G.70/71 Board of Governors Papers R1/107

<sup>1092</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 24 September 1970 *ibid*

<sup>1093</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Papers Report by the Managing Director of Radio 24 June 1970 G.71/70 R1/106

<sup>1094</sup> Owen Bentley interview with author *ibid*

freelancers and contributors. At Stoke, it had been a struggle to find them; now at Oxford, it was hard to keep them away.<sup>1095</sup>

This was one of the constant dilemmas about pushing for the further expansion of local radio: the question of recruitment and the supply of skilled staff. A report in 1977 calculated that the next wave of growth would require 250 producers, so it was suggested that a training scheme should be devised with the BBC Journalism Training Unit.<sup>1096</sup> However, many managers were unsympathetic, saying the JTU course tended to recruit graduates whose main focus was *Panorama* rather than local radio.<sup>1097</sup> In June 1978, the Station Manager of Radio Bristol said he had eight vacancies for editorial staff, out of a workforce of 34.<sup>1098</sup>

One of the problems was the perceived inflexibility of the BBC's pay structure, which the commercial sector was not bound by. This also affected the 'on air' talent too. For example, Radio Merseyside's presenter Billy Butler was poached by Radio City, which opened in Liverpool in 1974, for £8,500 per year, plus a car and personal appearance fees. Aubrey Singer said he was distressed about Merseyside's loss and asked to be personally informed in future, in case the London management could help.<sup>1099</sup> Another acknowledged issue was the way that BBC local stations preferred those with 'all round' skills rather than personality presenters to work on the stations. There was a perennial debate about whether local radio should be fostering more celebrity DJs, like commercial radio.<sup>1100</sup>

### **The programmes**

In May 1972 Hugh Pierce sent a memo to all the managers of the local stations. He had been on an 800-mile car journey around England in order

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<sup>1095</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1096</sup> BBC WAC Summary of the Report of the Local Radio Development Group 29 November 1977 Local Broadcasting Part Six R78/1385

<sup>1097</sup> BBC WAC Minutes from the Local Radio Management Conference November 1976 Local Radio Conferences R78/4185

<sup>1098</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board 21 June 1978 *ibid*

<sup>1099</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board 29 November 1978 *ibid*

<sup>1100</sup> BBC WAC Minutes from the Local Radio Management Conference November 1976 Local Radio Conferences R78/4185

to listen to as much of the output as possible, which he recorded,<sup>1101</sup> and his observations were being circulated.<sup>1102</sup> His first impression was the improvement in technical standards, although there were some errors still occurring, which were often magnified by 'prolix apologies.'<sup>1103</sup>

The local elements were particularly good, such as news, information, local election coverage, even the softer pieces. However, there was still room to be more 'compassionate and human' in places, and he was anxious about the constant invitations to 'telephone in' when many listeners did not have phones.<sup>1104</sup> Pierce was obviously aware of the potential disparity in the audience: there was a tendency for stations to employ what he called 'your young presenters' but he was worried that they did not do enough to address older listeners.<sup>1105</sup> Presentation was also a bugbear in Pierce's feedback. One presenter kept referring to how tired he was. Many music and request shows tended to 'sag': 'The worse DJs have elsewhere been described as apes with a pile of discs....we have just a few fellows in local radio who are trying to ape the apes!'<sup>1106</sup> He was pleased to hear some good female voices on air 'clear, authoritative, pleasant and still feminine.' But 'I also heard some record programmes being presented as if by diffident waitresses.'<sup>1107</sup> The most remarkable and compelling programme Pierce heard on his road trip was one aimed at blind listeners, but he worried that the general audience would miss this as so many specialist shows went out at off peak times.

Pierce's findings were a useful benchmark of the achievements and challenges felt by local stations by the early 1970s. This section explores these in more detail, looking at general programming, the development of minority output and the role of education producers.

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<sup>1101</sup> HQ Staff were all issued with a Blaupunkt radio cassette recorder for the car which enabled them to record programmes while on the road. Robert McLeish interview with the author 11 August 2010

<sup>1102</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Hugh Pierce to All Managers Subject: A Listening Trip 19 May 1972 He notes the experience was 'very exhausting'. Management: Local Radio Programmes General R102/76

<sup>1103</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1104</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1105</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1106</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1107</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

As earlier chapters have identified, one of the main problems for local radio was the fact that the stations tended to produce more output than originally intended, on limited resources. So the question here is how this was addressed or solved. Also, many local radio programmes during the experimental period tended to be ‘compartmentalised’: specialist, ‘built’ programmes featuring large amounts of pre-recorded material. This was resource-intensive, so how did the schedules adapt to ease the burden? Another issue relates to the core objective of the service: the involvement of the community and active listener participation. Did the stations manage to achieve this goal and how was this reflected on the airwaves? And finally what did the audience think of the programmes they heard? Were they having an impact on the local population, especially as the means of reception took on a dramatic improvement once local radio could be heard on medium wave?

### **The shift to sequence programmes**

Those working for local stations in the early to mid-1970s talk about one of their principal preoccupations: ‘filling in the schedule’.<sup>1108</sup> For example, when Radio Oxford was set up in 1970, it took just two years to “fill in the mid morning” according to Owen Bentley: in other words, produce enough local material to replace most of the sustaining service. Sheffield was another station, which had grown successfully, broadcasting in both the morning and afternoon.<sup>1109</sup> Yet when Owen Bentley arrived at Radio Leicester in 1975, he discovered that it had not developed as the other stations had. “It was stuck in a time warp of the first two years.”<sup>1110</sup> A startling example of this was the fact that Leicester had not started to produce its own programmes in the mid-mornings and afternoons. Bentley’s explanation for this was the lack of managerial entrepreneurship in bidding for extra funds to get more staff and resources. This disparity illustrated one of the downsides of autonomy: a lack of consistency across stations. As Trethowan pointed out to the Governors in 1973, the minimum requirement

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<sup>1108</sup> Owen; McLeish *ibid*

<sup>1109</sup> Michael Barton interview with author 17 December 2007

<sup>1110</sup> Owen Bentley interview with author *ibid*

for local output was originally only four hours a day, but now it was important to establish local radio's own identity and presence, especially as the market place was becoming more crowded.<sup>1111</sup> London and Manchester, he noted, were producing 15 to 16 hours a day.<sup>1112</sup>

The relationship between the *quantity* of the output and its *quality* was already being discussed and would become a source of contention in subsequent years. One issue with expanding the number of programmes was of course what they would consist of and how they would be produced. 'Built' or pre-recorded programmes relied on considerable production costs. They also led to a schedule that was segmented and difficult for the listener to navigate. The solution was the development of sequence programmes: these were shows that were presented live, though they could include pre-recorded elements, such as packages or interviews, anchored by named presenters and lasting at least an hour, usually longer. Robert McLeish recalls his introduction to the concept of the sequence: "The first person I ever heard use the phrase 'we're not going to do [built] programmes' was John Musgrave in 1970 when he opened Radio Blackburn."<sup>1113</sup> McLeish also noticed an interesting correlation between the type of premises a station occupied and the output. For example, Radio Blackburn was housed in a former car showroom, with a vast area of open space. This was converted into open plan offices, which McLeish thinks helped foster new production techniques, such as pooling ideas and central planning, which in turn helped to create successful sequence programmes.<sup>1114</sup>

By contrast, stations that occupied buildings where they were spread over separate floors and individual offices tended to rely more on old fashioned built programmes, as the staff were engaged in their own output, segregated from each other. Robert Gunnell corroborates this impression. Radio Brighton was originally housed in a tall, Regency building in the town centre, a warren of offices and stairs. And Gunnell's interpretation of what local radio should be was a reflection of the Home Service pattern, "not

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<sup>1111</sup> BBC WAC Report from The Managing Director of Radio 25 April 1973 G.58/73 Board of Governors Papers R1/109

<sup>1112</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1113</sup> Robert McLeish interview with the author 11 August 2010

<sup>1114</sup> Robert McLeish *ibid*

programmes that run for three hours". So he concentrated on individual programmes made by producers who were working in their separate offices.<sup>1115</sup> McLeish gives credit to John Musgrave for creating the sequence station: "he had open-plan offices and an open schedule – [there was] something very similar about the two."<sup>1116</sup>

The Weekly Programme Review Board minutes from the late 1970s provide an illustration of the difficulties of moving from traditional built programmes to sequence output.<sup>1117</sup> Examples from sequence programmes, heard in isolation, did not hold the attention of the Review Board, despite the fact that they were topical, often news-driven shows, trying to demonstrate what local radio was about. Owen Bentley recalls from his appearances at the Board, representing Radio Leicester, that sequence programmes 'meant nothing to network people – who were largely feature-makers.'<sup>1118</sup> On the other hand, features and documentaries did not always appeal either: they were criticised for bad presentation and being too parochial.<sup>1119</sup> So it was a fine line for the Station Managers to tread, but the sample was a useful snapshot of the direction programmes were heading.

For example, Sheffield's contribution from the morning sequence was generally well received by the Board, although some felt that the news could be more up-to-date and the item on a mediaeval loo was unintentionally funny.<sup>1120</sup> In terms of news and current affairs, Station Managers were appreciative of the newly formed Regional News Service from London, which greatly supported the early bulletins. However, trying to weave national, regional and local news together was not easy, especially in the morning programme. Radio Oxford's attempt at local news, with the

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<sup>1115</sup> Robert Gunnell interview with the author 28 July 2010 Robert McLeish says that Radio Brighton was the last of the early stations to finally move to sequence programmes.

<sup>1116</sup> Robert McLeish *ibid*

<sup>1117</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board Minutes May 1978 – December 1979 In May 1978, the Managing Director of Radio Aubrey Singer decided to invite managers from local radio stations (two at a time) to the Weekly Programme Review Board, which up until then had only discussed network programmes.

<sup>1118</sup> Owen Bentley interview with author *ibid*

<sup>1119</sup> eg BBC WAC Radio Birmingham's submission about folk music, which was deplored by the Controller of Radio Three for the 'ghastly' local accent and 'council house English' of the speakers Weekly Programme Board of Review Minutes 7 June 1978 *ibid*

<sup>1120</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board Minutes 2 August 1978 *ibid*



programme *Oxford AM*, was dubbed 'thin gruel' by the MDR, in comparison to Radio Four's *Today*.<sup>1121</sup>

One of the staples of local radio sequence programming was the phone-in, which became increasingly popular from the early 1970s. One important factor that helped promote it was the arrival of medium wave, which had a massive impact on the audience's ability to hear their local station at last.<sup>1122</sup> Owen Bentley recalls the day that Radio Oxford began transmitting on MW: the mid-morning phone-in was suddenly inundated with calls.<sup>1123</sup> The phone-in, however, was not universally popular, and BBC was conscious that it needed to be treated carefully. Programme organisers from local stations weighed up the value of them at a conference in April 1975.<sup>1124</sup> Originally, the appeal for listeners to call in was for fairly innocuous means: to request a disc or perhaps offer an item for a swap. Gradually phone-in programmes were used more for listeners to vent a grievance or to hold a local decision-maker to account. The programme organisers discussed whether the phone-in could genuinely be considered a 'catalyst for change.'<sup>1125</sup> One format that had the potential for making an impact was the so-called 'agony call', where people phoned in with their problems. Programmes that were thought not to be successful were those involving quasi-professional people running 'obscure community help schemes', who used language that put off listeners from calling in.<sup>1126</sup> Phone-ins often caught the attention of the press, usually with a negative reaction. The most frequent complaint was that phone-ins were a 'cheap and easy way of filling air time.'<sup>1127</sup> Peter Fiddick in *The Guardian* wrote: 'We're just getting the populace to make their own programmes at the

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<sup>1121</sup> BBC WAC 13 December 1978 op cit

<sup>1122</sup> Trethowan suggested that across the then 19 stations, this had doubled the audience  
BBC WAC Report by the Managing Director of Radio 25 April 1973 ibid

<sup>1123</sup> Owen Bentley ibid

<sup>1124</sup> BBC WAC Paper: Community and Access Programmes on BBC Local Radio [no author]  
April 1975 Programmes for Minorities 1972-1979 R102/78

<sup>1125</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1126</sup> BBC WAC Op cit Words such as 'motivation', 'incentives', 'facilities' and 'concepts' were cited as deterrents to participation.

<sup>1127</sup> *The Times* 'Diary' 23 October 1973

expense of their own phone bills and if they listen to the rubbish it's their own stupid faults.'<sup>1128</sup>

One example was Radio London's daily lunchtime show, *Call In*, which usually featured a news-driven agenda. Since it went out in London, it was listened to by journalists and commentators and often found itself at the centre of controversy. In November 1974, Ronald Butt wrote in *The Times* drawing attention to a recent edition featuring a consultant psychologist from King's College Hospital discussing sexual matters. He dismissed the programme as 'sexual prurience', arguing the callers' 'real problem is a kind of public exhibitionism'.<sup>1129</sup> In a riposte in *The Times*, Dame Mary Green defended the phone-in: 'listeners puzzled by the intricacies of the law, unsure of their rights as consumers, bewildered by their personal problems have found the advice practical and helpful.'<sup>1130</sup>

Some stations submitted phone-in programmes for the Programme Review Board. *Sunday Cross Talk* from Radio Leicester was criticised for its lack of structure and character, although the Deputy General Manager of Local Radio defended it.<sup>1131</sup> Radio London's Robbie Vincent, the presenter of *Call-In*, was praised for being an asset to the station: classless, distinctive, [with a] great rapport', although this time the DMLR confessed to 'a slight sense of unease' whenever he heard him.<sup>1132</sup>

These examples demonstrated the dilemma for sequence programmes like these. Despite the apparent ease with which the phone-in could fill air-time, it still required good production skills to avoid the pitfalls of libel, unintentional advertising, attracting accusations of bias or just being plain boring.<sup>1133</sup> The BBC Local Radio Handbook contained some advice on how to run a phone-in programme, but it tended to be more interested in the

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<sup>1128</sup> quoted in BBC WAC Paper: Community and Access Programmes on BBC Local Radio  
ibid

<sup>1129</sup> *The Times* 28 November 1974

<sup>1130</sup> *The Times* letter from Dame Mary Green November 16 1974 Interestingly, the paper made no mention of her BBC connection. Privately, Trethowan did advise the management at Radio London to steer clear of sexual matters at lunchtime.

<sup>1131</sup> BBC WAC 13 September 1978 op cit

<sup>1132</sup> BBC WAC 25 April 1979 op cit

<sup>1133</sup> According to BBC lawyer Glen Del Medico, former Conservative Cabinet Minister Reginald Maudling was awarded damages after a Radio London phone-in BBC WAC Minutes from the Local Radio Management Conference November 1976 Local Radio Conferences R78/4185

mechanical than editorial aspects. For example, it pointed out that telephone conversations could not be broadcast without the consent of participants and speakers were encouraged to enunciate clearly and keep the mouthpiece above the level of the chin.<sup>1134</sup> Apart from these useful bits of advice, there was no further guidance on how to construct a phone-in in this edition of the handbook, dated 1970.

So I would argue that the phone-in was a paradoxical programme device. On the one hand it had the potential to be democratise the audience and allow genuine and immediate interaction. It was a good example of an instrument of the access that the BBC often asserted local radio was trying to achieve. Yet at the same time, the BBC was wary of the true potential of the format. The BBC seemed susceptible to press criticism, and more comfortable with the phone-in as a means of giving advice by a BBC-selected contributor or expert and the presenter kept the role of arbiter. There was also a reluctance to devise or learn about the production skills necessary to produce a good phone-in.

Another snapshot of local radio output from a Station Manager Conference in 1976 provided an interesting, though rather downbeat, assessment of how it was facing up the challenge of more ILR stations.<sup>1135</sup> The feeling of the managers was that their commercial neighbours had better presenters, with a 'brighter, younger, modern sound.'<sup>1136</sup> There was some community content but it was usually surrounded by music and of course it was aimed at a younger audience, 15 – 35 year olds. The impression the conference gave was that the managers felt insecure: they were concentrating on older listeners, following their minority programmes brief, but not attracting new listeners. Although news and sport on local radio had been strengthened of late, there was a feeling that the output had not really adjusted to meet the arrival of commercial radio. So by the mid-1970s, in terms of its mainstream, daytime output, BBC Local Radio was struggling to find its identity. It did not seem entirely comfortable with pursuing vigorously the older, C2-D listener.

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<sup>1134</sup> BBC WAC BBC Local Radio Handbook Controller Local Radio R102/53

<sup>1135</sup> BBC WAC Minutes from the Local Radio Management Conference November 1976 Local Radio Conferences R78/4185

<sup>1136</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

Two audience surveys from the 1970s, from Radios Leeds and London, further highlighted the paradox faced by the BBC in positioning itself next to ILR.<sup>1137</sup> The type of listener to both stations was similar: older rather than younger, although in Radio Leeds' case, there were occasional listeners from the younger demographic who tuned in for specific programmes, such as sports coverage. The older listeners complained if there was too much pop music, whereas the younger audience wanted more. In London, there was appreciation for Capital Radio's 'cheerfulness, friendliness and pop music' as a key attraction.<sup>1138</sup> Record requests and music shows on Radio London were judged the most popular, along with phone-ins, news, quiz shows and panel games.

Local radio struggled with an indecisiveness about fully embracing its natural audience, the older demographic. On the one hand, it was worried that it would never find newer, younger listeners unless it competed with the pop music and glamour of commercial radio. On the other, local radio was vulnerable to criticism from within the BBC that the types of programmes that they did make for their audience were not of a good enough standard. Station Managers would argue that this diverse approach was precisely what their autonomy allowed them to do: to understand and serve their own local audience with an appropriate schedule. First, the danger with this strategy, I would argue, was over-ambition: the risk of spreading the programmes too thinly, producing too much content and not satisfying everyone. Secondly, it was obviously difficult to persuade senior management and network staff that local radio was attaining a high enough standard.

### **Minority programmes**

The BBC Local Radio Handbook contained some guidance for how the local station should address community and access programmes. Provided there was no attempt to promote a political party, any group, association or organisation could be offered airtime. There were other safeguards too,

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<sup>1137</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio: Radio London August 1975 Listening Report LR/75/395 R9/881; Local Radio: Radio Leeds October 1979 Listening Report R9/906

<sup>1138</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio: Radio London August 1975 op cit

such as a ban on stirring up racialism [sic], or broadcasting obscenity or indecent material.<sup>1139</sup> These guidelines amounted to one side, double-spaced, of A4 paper, compared to more than twice that given over to instructions in the same handbook on how to use the telephone. This is either an indication of the considerable autonomy given to community broadcasting or a lack of engagement with what it entailed. This section will explore two aspects of minority programmes, those that can be grouped in terms of an ethnic minority audience and those pertinent to other, definable communities.

The original stations tended to serve easily identifiable groups, notably blind listeners, in their first attempts at minority programmes. An audit in 1970 listed programmes for 'the blind' on Radios Birmingham (*Foresight*), Leeds (*Contact*), Leicester (*Sound Guide*), Nottingham (*Wednesday Club*), Oxford and Stoke (*Your View*) and Bristol (*Insight*).<sup>1140</sup> A parallel development was in programmes compiled by outside organisations. These tended to be either enthusiasts (keen amateurs), or external bodies and organisations. An example of the first category was Radio London's *Platform* programme, where local interest groups could take to the airwaves. This often provided good press coverage. In 1972, a naturist group from Kent took over the programme. This made a good story for the *Evening Standard*, which heralded 'the first nude radio show'. Station Manager Peter Redhouse was quoted as saying that if they were extolling the virtues of naturism, then they should certainly take their clothes off in the studio.<sup>1141</sup> While this group may have been viewed as harmless fun, another *Platform* programme, featuring the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, produced a less light-hearted response. There was still some nervousness at allowing unfettered access to the airwaves. Replying to the *Daily Mail's* condemnation of their appearance, *Platform's* producer Jeremy Eccles provided a complete *apologia* in advance: 'Obviously these kinds of

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<sup>1139</sup> BBC WAC BBC Local Radio Handbook Section dated June 1973 R102/53

<sup>1140</sup> BBC WAC Memo for MDR 3 December 1970 Management: Local Radio Programmes General R102/76

<sup>1141</sup> *Evening Standard* 'First Nude Radio Show' 24 August 1972 It was also one of the first programmes due to go out on the newly installed MW, thus gaining the station even more valuable publicity.

programmes are bound to offend some listeners. But this is a serious programme and there is no question of trying to recruit homosexuals.’<sup>1142</sup>

Another aspect of editorial control concerned the quality of access programmes. At the Weekly Programme Review Board in March 1979, Radio Medway’s *Periscope*, which had been made by a committee of dockyard union members, was criticised for its ‘appalling presenter.’<sup>1143</sup> The Deputy General Manager of Local Radio defended it, saying the informality and lack of a professional approach was a strength. The Head of Further Education Radio said the programme needed a producer. The following week, a discussion programme by the volunteer bureau in Brighton heard by the Board, was deemed by some members to suffer from a lack of focus: was it about the ethics of volunteering or a call to get involved? Aubrey Singer wanted more professional input, whereas Robert Gunnell argued then it would not be genuine access programming. The Managing Director countered that it was not sufficient for the BBC just to serve a community, it needed to serve it with the best of broadcasting.<sup>1144</sup>

I would argue that these examples show the limits of BBC Local Radio’s ability to fully engage with the principles of community access broadcasting. The BBC’s mechanism for exerting final editorial control seemed to be in conflict with its desire to allow access. This was exacerbated by the lack of any clear policy or programme guidelines to facilitate genuine audience-made programmes. Nor were there any specific criteria aimed at achieving comprehensive representation, hence this comment from Marghanita Laski, the prominent journalist and broadcaster. As a member of the Annan Committee, she was on a visit to the training facilities at the BBC premises at the Langham, Great Portland Street and heard about the work of local radio and community groups. Turning to Robert McLeish, the Local Radio Training Officer, she observed: “You say you provide something for everyone. What do you do for the upper classes?”<sup>1145</sup>

On the other hand, given the strain that available resources were under, this volunteer workforce was very useful, and the BBC exploited it on their

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<sup>1142</sup> *Daily Mail* ‘Homosexuals get own BBC programme’ 25 August 1972

<sup>1143</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board Minutes 14 March 1979

<sup>1144</sup> BBC WAC 28 March 1979 *ibid*

<sup>1145</sup> Robert McLeish interview with the author 11 August 2010

own terms. Radio London enjoyed the benefits of having outside groups staff the station marquee at publicity events such as the City Show.<sup>1146</sup> There were also plentiful examples of successful partnerships with external bodies, such as Radio Nottingham's *Union Scene* and *About Your Business*, made by trades unions and the Chamber of Commerce, respectively.<sup>1147</sup> Perhaps an even greater handicap was the lack of resources to enable external bodies to make good quality programmes, which yet again made local radio vulnerable to accusations of low standards from others within the organisation.

### **'Pure amateursville': ethnic programmes**

The second category of minority programmes concerned the provision for the ethnic minority populations in the local radio areas. By the time local radio got started, there was already a few years' experience in making programmes for an Asian audience on network radio.<sup>1148</sup> This did not stop local stations from making their own programmes, but by 1970, it was clear that network radio would quite like to hand over responsibility for their output to local radio. As Pat Beech, Controller of English Regions, pointed out, this was not without significant problems. First, it was counter to the local radio concept to ask stations to broadcast a centrally-produced programme in a mandatory way. Secondly, the main ethnic minority programme in question, Radio Four's *Make Yourself At Home*, was a request show, and this would not fit into local schedules, given the variations in dialect and language, the problems with finding the records and the risk of duplicating existing shows on local radio.<sup>1149</sup> Hugh Pierce, in

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<sup>1146</sup> BBC WAC Paper: Community and Access Programmes on BBC Local Radio [no author] April 1975 Programmes for Minorities 1972-1979 R102/78

<sup>1147</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1148</sup> BBC WAC Paper: Community and Access Programmes on BBC Local Radio [no author] April 1975 Programmes for Minorities 1972-1979 R102/38 In July 1965, 161 representatives from these communities had come to a BBC conference designed to hear their views on broadcasting and to establish what were known as 'race relations.' The BBC decided to produce specific programmes aimed at an Asian audience, and to help this, established an Immigrant Programmes Advisory Committee, which subsequently became the Asian Programmes Advisory Committee in 1974 The BBC decided in 1965 not to produce special programmes for the West Indian community.

<sup>1149</sup> BBC WAC Memo from CER to DPR Subject: Make Yourself at Home 11 May 1970 Programmes for Minorities 1972-1979 R102/38 MYH was broadcast on a Sunday morning and network chiefs obviously wanted to move it.

handwritten comments on Beech's memo, made his position even more forthright. He was totally against centrally-produced programmes and in any case it would eat into the needletime allowance.<sup>1150</sup> However the ongoing debate had a useful outcome as it prompted regular and detailed audits of the kinds of programmes each station was producing for ethnic minorities. These were very useful as they began to show the attitudes of the stations towards the diverse populations in their areas. And the files also demonstrated how the disparate elements of minority broadcasting began to coalesce into a coherent service that catered for large numbers of listeners.

For those stations that catered for their minority populations, there were several types of programme in the first list compiled in 1970. Some were aimed at recent immigrants, to help them integrate and understand British life and culture. Typical of these was Radio London's *New Londoners*, produced by a Jamaican, Louis Marriott but aimed at Asians, Caribbeans, Africans and those from eastern Europe.<sup>1151</sup> Radio Sheffield had a programme made by the local community relations officer, along similar lines, for Asians. This was partly in Urdu and Bengali, and was broadcast at 6.30pm on a Saturday, when apparently groups of listeners would enjoy the programme on a communal basis, sometimes up to 100 at a time.<sup>1152</sup>

Then there were programmes that were more explicitly educative or instructive. Some of these used material made by English by Radio – often a ten or fifteen-minute segment of a longer programme which included some English language work. *Nawrang* was one such programme on Radio Nottingham, and on Radio Leicester, *Tony and his friends*, aimed at primary school children. Radio London had a variation on this theme, with *University of Brixton*, centred around a West Indian family in Brixton called the Plummers whose friends and neighbours would drop in for advice and information. What was important to the stations was being able to target output to the needs of their respective audiences.

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<sup>1150</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1151</sup> BBC WAC List of programmes for Immigrants and reactions of managers compiled by Harold Williams, Assistant Head Local Radio Development 12 December 1970 ibid

<sup>1152</sup> BBC WAC Op cit



It was not just programmes for the larger minority groups that aroused interest. In 1973, an MP asked the BBC Chairman what local radio was doing for eastern Europeans, such as Ukrainians, Latvians and Estonians. Hugh Pierce was able to reply that Radios Birmingham, Blackburn, Derby, Leicester, Manchester and Stoke catered for their east European communities, but broadcasting in their own languages was not viable.<sup>1153</sup> By the mid 1970s, Radio Leeds had a show for its Jewish listeners (*Jacob's Ladder*), there were many more programmes broadcast in Asian languages and there was more syndication of programmes. Most notable was the Radio London series, *University of Brixton*, which was heard in Oxford, Manchester and three other areas.<sup>1154</sup> This concept of sharing was formalised with an experiment from the newly-formed Asian Programmes Unit in Birmingham, who made two pilot programmes, specifically aimed at Asian women with children, to help with English language needs and social awareness.<sup>1155</sup> The intention was that they could be used by stations either as stand-alone programmes or integrated into existing output.

Despite these innovations, local programme organisers began to report some of the tensions they were experiencing as they worked with their local communities. For example in Nottingham, there was jealousy between the West Indian group and the Asian one, each making their own programmes. The latter had some wealthy supporters who managed to pay their presenter a fee. By contrast, the West Indian programme just had free use of the facilities.<sup>1156</sup> Reports that local programme organisers had to sort out factional disputes were common and their feelings of insecurity in not understanding what was being said in foreign languages was a frequent concern.<sup>1157</sup>

Provision for ethnic audiences was all very well but what about the white audience, did they feel left out? Radio Leeds reported that they had piloted

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<sup>1153</sup> BBC WAC Memo from GMLR to MDR Subject: Broadcasting in Ukrainian 31 July 1973

ibid

<sup>1154</sup> BBC WAC Programmes for Immigrants on Local Radio October 18 1972 ibid

<sup>1155</sup> BBC WAC Aide-memoire of meeting Subject: Asian Programmes and Local Radio 5 September 1974 ibid

<sup>1156</sup> BBC WAC Programmes for West Indian Audiences and thoughts on Immigrant Provision from Local Radio Education and Programme Services Organiser [John Saunders] to GMLR 8 June 1976 ibid

<sup>1157</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

their new programme, *Calypso*, six times in order to prove it would 'not damage race relations by being too fiery or black powerish in a way that would alienate the native Yorkshireman.'<sup>1158</sup> Then there were those stations which did not produce any output for immigrant listeners. Robert Gunnell in Brighton argued that 'integration is the word', adding there were few immigrants in the town, apart from in colleges and restaurants.<sup>1159</sup> Radio Merseyside submitted that there were no racial problems in their area and that they had never done, nor planned to do special programmes.<sup>1160</sup>

So provision of output for ethnic minorities was another example of how the local radio structure was flexible enough, through individual autonomy, to allow a range of interpretations of responsibility. From 1976 onwards, there was an annual conference to discuss racial minorities, with representatives from the stations and from the Asian Advisory Council. This was an indication that centrally the BBC was attempting to co-ordinate its provision to make sure it accurately reflected local needs and demands and not just the prejudices of the Station Manager. By this point too, there was a shift towards more integration across the output, so that stories relevant to different communities could be covered in news bulletins. This would solve what was perceived as the problem of 'ghettoised' programmes: built output that required extra resources and brought issues of accountability and inter-group conflicts.<sup>1161</sup>

However, this raised the need to recruit more staff from immigrant communities. Such candidates required more training, especially in journalism skills, and again, where would the money come from? The point was further underlined in the Asian Programmes Advisory Council's evidence to Annan, when they spoke of freelance Asian presenters who

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<sup>1158</sup> BBC WAC op cit

<sup>1159</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Station Manager Radio Brighton Subject: General Advisory Council Meeting 29 September 1970 *ibid*

<sup>1160</sup> BBC WAC List of programmes for Immigrants and reactions of managers compiled by Harold Williams, Assistant HLRD 12 December 1970 *ibid* Station Manager Rex Bawden added: 'I see no joy at all about doing a programme in any foreign tongue – except Welsh possibly.'

<sup>1161</sup> BBC WAC Memo from DGMLR to DPA Subject: Broadcasting to Racial Minorities 5 July 1976 *ibid*

were prone to 'slant' or bias the content of their broadcasts.<sup>1162</sup> The allegation was rejected by the BBC, but the potential problem was clearly there, unless more was done to encourage and train potential staff from ethnic backgrounds. There was a danger of course that the BBC could have been perceived as being white liberal, or even imperialist in the way it conducted its broadcast policies for communities. Statements such as this, regarding recruiting from ethnic minorities, did not help: 'It may be that journalism is not a profession that holds many attractions for Asians and black people.'<sup>1163</sup> Indeed, the paper this quote is drawn from has as its title *The broadcasting problems associated with black and Asian minorities*, ie it posits difficulties to be overcome rather than the accomplishment of achievements so far.

A report by the Commission for Racial Equality in 1978 further praised BBC Local Radio for its strategy on minority programmes, especially in reaching Asian listeners. But there was still work to be done: they recommended that there be greater diversity of representation on the LRCs, that the location of any new stations reflected the concentration of ethnic populations and that English language teaching programmes like *Take Away English* were monitored for their effectiveness.<sup>1164</sup> This last point had already been taken up by Owen Bentley at Radio Leicester. In his view, English-teaching programmes were a means of drawing Asian listeners into a station, but once they were listening to the general output, these kinds of broadcasts could be phased out. He had statistics to back this up. Of the 72% of Asians who listened to Leicester's Asian programmes, 12% moved on to mainstream output. The survey also showed an appetite for more news from the Asian sub-continent.<sup>1165</sup> Bentley put his ideas into practice in Leicester when he launched the *Asian Network*, which started as a nightly news and information programme in 1977.<sup>1166</sup>

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<sup>1162</sup> BBC WAC GAC Paper 518 The Broadcasting Problems Associated with Asian and Black Minorities in the UK 6 April 1977 Programmes for Minorities 1972-1979 *ibid*

<sup>1163</sup> BBC WAC *Op cit*

<sup>1164</sup> BBC WAC Recommendations of the Report on Ethnic Minority Broadcasting by the CRE May 1978 *ibid*

<sup>1165</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Ethnic Minority Programmes Conference 28 September 1977 *ibid*

<sup>1166</sup> Owen Bentley interview with the author *ibid*

When he appeared at the Weekly Programme Review Board in 1978, he was able to show that 83% of the local Asian audience listened to their *Asian Network* programmes.<sup>1167</sup> The Board were less impressed when they heard an extract of the 6.30pm programme. The Head of School Broadcasting (Radio) could not follow the interviews as there were too many 'would-be' contributors; the Head of Recording Services (Radio) thought it would irritate the local English population. MDR summed it up as 'pure amateursville'.<sup>1168</sup> Faint praise came from the Presentation Editor of Radio Four, who thought the Asian music was better than anything produced on the Network, which 'sounded like it had been recorded on chapattis'.<sup>1169</sup> On the other hand, *Black Londoners* on Radio London, presented by Alex Pascall was something of a success. The Editor of News and Current Affairs (Radio) said it sounded 'charming, amiable and friendly'. It was taken seriously by the Black community and was the only evening programme to show up in Audience Research reports.<sup>1170</sup> Today, Bentley is sanguine about the response he received. He calls the Programme Review Boards 'a poser's paradise', consisting of heavy-weight intellectuals such as George Fischer. 'A lot of us felt patronised, but Local Radio gave as good as it got'.<sup>1171</sup>

There was a logical extension to the point about the concentration of ethnic minority populations in certain areas, drawing on the CRE's report and the success of programmes like *Black Londoners*. The next step would be a station focussed solely on its ethnic audience. This was one proposal put forward for the future of Radio London by Tim Pitt and Frank Mansfield in their report: *London Radio Community Study*.<sup>1172</sup> Their remit in drawing up the study, in 1978, was to establish a map of London that identified key

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<sup>1167</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board Minutes 19 July 1978 He also told the Board that links between the BBC and the Asian community were consolidated after the National Front started to win 20% of the vote in local elections.

<sup>1168</sup> BBC Op cit Bentley recalls 'Pure amateursville' coming from Jenny Abramsky, as Head of News and Current Affairs, but says that it sounded like something Aubrey Singer would say. Owen Bentley *ibid* The minutes credit the phrase to Singer.

<sup>1169</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1170</sup> BBC WAC Op cit 21 February 1979 On 12 September, another Radio London programme, 'You don't have to be Jewish' was discussed. MDR felt that the Jewish community was fully integrated and did not need its own programmes. *Ibid*

<sup>1171</sup> Owen Bentley interview with the author *ibid*

<sup>1172</sup> BBC WAC London Radio Community Study December 1978 Local Broadcasting 1979 R78/1165 The report is also referred to in BBC files as the Pitt Mansfield Report.

communities, work out how these could best be served by local radio, including setting up new or additional stations, and the relationship this might have to Radio London as it currently existed. It is important to remember that their research was as a direct result of the Annan Enquiry and also formed part of the BBC's contribution to the Home Office Local Radio Working Party.

Pitt and Mansfield had three main recommendations, some elements of which seem remarkably prescient in hindsight. First they suggested that the BBC embark on a tour of small communities in London, broadcasting from a mobile caravan, or what they called a radio circus. Secondly, there should be an experimental ethnic station for all of London, both black and brown, as they put it. It would broadcast in native languages by day (for Asian listeners) and in English by night, for black Londoners. Other minorities could be catered for at weekends. The proposed station would also make use of the bases established under the mobile broadcasting scheme, so there were links in geographic as well ethnic communities. Finally, Pitt and Mansfield proposed the long-term development of non-profit making community radio stations, evolving from the radio circus idea, under BBC patronage.<sup>1173</sup> This was inspired by the arguments put forward by the Community Communications Group and others. There were two existing experiments of cable broadcasting, Radio Basildon and Radio Thamesmead, which impressed Pitt and Mansfield and they envisaged such stations as following a quasi-BBC local model.<sup>1174</sup>

These ideas could be seen as the apotheosis of local radio's aspirations to reflect and engage with their communities of interest, geography and ethnicity. Yet at the same time I would argue that the Plan did not deal with the problems encountered by stations as they tried to cater for their ethnic minority audience. As I have demonstrated with the examples in this section, local radio could not resolve several challenges. The BBC's approach, historically, had been to homogenise ethnic minority programming under one concept, which was not consistent with how local radio approached the different audiences on an individual station basis.

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<sup>1173</sup> BBC WAC Op Cit

<sup>1174</sup> Indeed Radio Thamesmead took Radio Medway as its sustaining service.

What worked in one area would not necessarily translate to another, although the syndication of some programmes was successful. Secondly there was the issue of what these programmes were intended to achieve. Some stations interpreted their role as the facilitators of assimilation: to quote Annan, to 'introduce newcomers to the life and morals of this country which reflect their own cultures and which enable others to understand and appreciate their cultures.'<sup>1175</sup> Others preferred to keep ethnic minority programmes in separate parts of the schedule, often linked to English language teaching, and above all, not interfering with the listening habits of the indigenous audience. I would argue that the BBC lacked a consistent approach to ethnic minority programmes, just as it did to shows for other specialist groups. There were undoubtedly pockets of excellence but again, the lack of resources and criticisms about the quality of the output further inhibited a concerted approach. Ironically the Pitt Mansfield report showed remarkable forward thinking in suggesting ideas such as more focussed-community radio, stations emerging from ethnic minority groups and mobile broadcasting units, which would all emerge in subsequent decades.

### **'Flatulence and jam-making': education programmes**

Education programming, like ethnic minority output, had its roots with other areas of the BBC. Yet it differed in the way it was organised, with a clearer structure of staffing and resources, established at the outset. However, as I will argue in this section, that did not mean education was immune to the same issues that affected the minority output. The goals and aspirations for educational output still had an uneasy relationship, in the long-term, with the day-to-day function of the station. As I have outlined in Chapter Six, when local radio started, the Schools Broadcasting Council delegated their responsibility for education output to the Local Education Advisory Panels, who took on the commissioning role.<sup>1176</sup> Each station had an Education Organiser or Producer, who liaised with their panel and helped make programmes, and organised secondments for teachers. The material produced was intended both for schools and aimed at adults and those in

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<sup>1175</sup> BBC WAC quoted in London Radio Community Study *ibid* p 15

<sup>1176</sup> BBC WAC BBC Local Radio Handbook R102/53

further education. FE provision came under the remit of the BBC's Further Education Advisory Council (FEAC).

Looking back at the start of local radio in 1967, Hal Bethell, the BBC Local Radio Organiser, working as part of the HQ team, wrote 'words such as participation, access, involvement...came to have a new certainty and stature in our speculations and beliefs.'<sup>1177</sup> So the theory at least was that educational programming had emerged from the same conceptual framework as minority and specialist output, and initially it was treated in the same way, as a separate part of the schedule aimed at a dedicated audience. For example, the Spring Term output for education programmes (for schools and FE) produced by the twenty stations in 1972 involved 164 series.<sup>1178</sup> Subjects ranged from the *Development of Pop Music* (Radio Birmingham) to the problems of pollution (*Locusts on the Earth* made by the University of Sussex for Radio Brighton). There were quizzes (*We Are the Champions*, Radio Leicester), Saturday morning children's shows (*Shindig*, Radio London; *Calico Pie*, Radio Bristol), and more rigorous expositions, such as *The Beaver of Wirksworth* from Radio Derby, about DH Lawrence.

In terms of further enabling the ideals of access and participation, to use Bethell's terms, there were regular secondment arrangements established with local education authorities. According to lists in the files, most producers had at least one full-time or part-time teacher working with them each term.<sup>1179</sup> Hal Bethell promoted the work of local radio in education, to the Controller of Education Broadcasting in 1972.<sup>1180</sup> He felt that local radio's strengths lay in a range of subjects: history, geography, economics, social conditions; and these were not restricted by the boundaries of the stations, they embraced national interests too.

Local stations were also pooling resources, to produce a syndicated series each year, for which they all contributed one programme.<sup>1181</sup> Bethell

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<sup>1177</sup> Bethell H *Education and BBC Local Radio: A Combined Operation* (BBC Publication 1972) p 4

<sup>1178</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Education Output Spring Term 1972 Educational Programmes General 1964-1981 R102/7

<sup>1179</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1180</sup> BBC WAC Note by Hal Bethell to Controller Education Broadcasting 25 April 1972 Local Radio Policy Part Four 1969 R103/93

<sup>1181</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Education Output Spring Term 1972 Educational Programmes General 1964-1981 R102/7 ibid

went so far as to claim that local radio could even be viewed as an educational venture in its entirety, as it concerned a great deal of output aimed at minority audiences.<sup>1182</sup> This was an ambitious statement, but statistically, education on local radio was responsible for a sizeable part of the daily output, it brought in a significant audience and it was a practical example of working with the varied communities in a station location, in many cases.<sup>1183</sup>

However, I would argue that Bethell's grand statement also exposed a weakness: was it desirable to create such a large part of the output dedicated solely to education, which appealed only to a segmented audience? In 1973, Bethell was clearly having concerns about this area of broadcasting. He felt too much emphasis had been placed on traditional forms of adult education, represented perhaps by organisations such as the Workers Education Association.<sup>1184</sup> Bethell proposed to broaden the definition of what might be considered adult education programmes, so that it could be spread throughout the schedule. The examples he chose included some that demonstrated the type of partnership he wanted to foster with outside organisations, such as *Vote Metropolitan* from Radio Leeds, made by the extra mural department at the University of Leeds about the reform of local government. There were also less obvious, more tangential interpretations of education, what he termed might be in 'unconventional guises',<sup>1185</sup> such as *I wanna hold your hand* (Radio Birmingham), about intermediate bridge playing; *Prelude* (Radio Brighton), classical concert previews and the ubiquitous *University of Brixton*, which was now being exploited for its educational value.<sup>1186</sup>

The achievements of the education producers, within just a few years, were undoubtedly remarkable: in 1973 alone, 180 series, 100 weekly hours of output and over 80 secondments.<sup>1187</sup> This brought with it, however,

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<sup>1182</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1183</sup> For example: in Radio Merseyside, 700 schools listened regularly; over 200 teachers had received radio production training; 500 educational programmes were broadcast in one school year. Taken from Bethell ibid

<sup>1184</sup> BBC WAC Paper by Hal Bethell The Further Education Role of Local Radio 2 April 1973  
ibid

<sup>1185</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1186</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1187</sup> BBC WAC Untitled paper by Hal Bethell 30 March 1973 ibid



greater risks. There was a sense that there was too much emphasis on the number of programmes being made, as a quantity, and not enough thought going into the process and what the objectives were. Bethell therefore proposed a reduced pace, so that the output could be more targeted. He wanted to concentrate on more integration and partnerships with the community, and to do this, the station had to live up to four key criteria. It needed to be 'accessible, approachable, amenable, attainable.'<sup>1188</sup> I would argue that by the mid-1970s, Bethell was trying to re-position local radio's educational role, to distance it from the rigours of curricula-driven demands associated with the SBC, and to broaden the definition as a means of underpinning local radio's community aspirations. As he wrote 'local radio has a social purpose and we [ie educational producers] have a fitness for that purpose.'<sup>1189</sup>

This proved a difficult balance to get right, as illustrated in 1978 when Robert Gunnell took one of his educational series to the Weekly Programme Review Board. It included items such as a feature by a 78-year old producer about boy chimney sweeps and a package on music teaching in schools.<sup>1190</sup> While the Controller Radio Three liked the programme, Network Editor (Radio) Bristol could not see the educational value. Gunnell pointed out that Brighton was no longer syllabus based, but concerned more with broad themes, which might be appropriate to Further Education. Peter Redhouse, for the HQ team, concurred that only 5% of stations were now producing material for the schools curriculum.

The decline in the distinctiveness of education programmes continued towards the end of the 1970s, when perhaps the balance was going too far in the other direction. Stations were under increasing pressure to make savings, and one common solution was to redeploy the education producer's effort to other parts of the schedule. This is illustrated by an exchange of correspondence between John Saunders, who had taken over from Hal Bethell in the HQ team, and now had the title Local Radio Education and Programme Services Organiser, and Ted Gorton (Station

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<sup>1188</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1189</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1190</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board Minutes 12 July 1978

Manager, Radio Oxford), whom he suspected of such a manoeuvre.<sup>1191</sup>

Saunders felt the BBC had been publicly embarrassed at two conferences recently, when it was stated that Radio Oxford did nothing educational any longer. On telephoning Radio Oxford, Saunders was told they had not had an educational producer for two years! Saunders reminded Gorton that each station did have an education post, and asked 'if the daily presentation of a mixture of topical and useful hints is the way we ought to be using our educational producers?'<sup>1192</sup>

Gorton reminded Saunders of the Weekly Programme Review Board's comments on Oxford's morning programme (which Hugh Phillips, their education producer, worked on) as 'excellent', especially their radio doctor diagnosing ailments for listeners. As far as Gorton was concerned, this range of output ('everything from serious illness to jam-making') was all educational programming.<sup>1193</sup> Saunders reiterated that it was his job 'in co-ordinating the educational output of the local radio stations ensuring that standards are maintained.'<sup>1194</sup> While he accepted that what constituted educational output had a wide interpretation, 'diagnosing flatulence and the reasons for jam not setting are not educational programmes, regardless of how loudly you may shout they are.'<sup>1195</sup> Presumably Gorton was not the only Station Manager who was interpreting educational deployment in very liberal way. Despite these affirmations on an internal level, Saunders was aware that local radio had to adapt to changing circumstances.

In a paper for the Chairmen of the Local Radio Councils, he looked at prospects for education on local radio in the 1980s.<sup>1196</sup> Saunders again stressed the need for education producers to get out of the studios and meet people, particularly in community areas with most needs. But there was a dilemma here. One of the most urgent problems was growing

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<sup>1191</sup> BBC WAC Educational Programmes General 1964-1981 R102/7

<sup>1192</sup> BBC WAC Memo from John Saunders to Ted Gorton (cc Controller Local Radio) 29 August 1979 *ibid*

<sup>1193</sup> BBC WAC Memo from Ted Gorton to John Saunders (cc CLR) 2 October 1979 *ibid*

<sup>1194</sup> BBC WAC Memo from John Saunders to Ted Gorton (cc CLR) 9 October 1979 *ibid* 'May I say in passing that I am not used to remarks as insulting as those contained in your reply and don't take them personally.'

<sup>1195</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1196</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of a Meeting of a Conference for LRC Chairs 8-9 June 1979 Local Radio Conferences R78/4185

unemployment among young people. However, they were not BBC Local Radio's target audience and tended to listen to ILR instead. The Chairs suggested facilitating programmes made by young people for young people.<sup>1197</sup> But there was an even more fundamental problem, as illustrated by the Radio Oxford debacle. How was it possible to recognise educational material when it was integrated into daytime output? As Saunders saw it, the answer was to make educational programmes more popular to a wider audience. What was the point of spending a lot of money on them if no one listened?<sup>1198</sup> Plus of course there was the argument that future stations were likely to be smaller and unable to sustain output on a similar scale, so education needed to be re-appraised.

### **The Local Radio Councils**

The role of the Local Radio Councils, established in 1967, was integral to the BBC's concept of local radio: a conduit to encourage maximum community involvement, a sounding board for different groups, and a means of consultation between the station staff and listener representatives. The key questions to be addressed here are how effective this role was and whether the reality matched the theory. Several ingredients were fundamental to the equation: whether the councils' interpretation of their function coincided with the BBC's original intention; the effectiveness of the relationship with the station, and the corresponding affiliation with the community they were intended to represent. Therefore the issue of membership composition became a significant factor.

As an earlier chapter explored, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications wrote to the Secretary of the BBC in November 1970 asking if they would take over the appointments process for the LRCs.<sup>1199</sup> The Government's rationale was that this brought the LRCs into line with the other BBC advisory councils, which were appointed by the BBC without any external input.<sup>1200</sup> Interestingly, the Minister wanted to preserve some

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<sup>1197</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1198</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1199</sup> BBC WAC Board of Management Minutes 16 November 1970 R2/23/5

<sup>1200</sup> BBC WAC Appointment of BBC Local Radio Councils G.133/70 November 1970 Board of Governors Papers R1/106

suggestion of autonomy, and so was keen to avoid a scenario where a Station Manager could 'fix' his own council. The solution was for the BBC Board of Governors to have final approval of council members.<sup>1201</sup> From a procedural perspective, the change in the process was noticeable in the minutes of the Board of Governors, when, from January 1971 onwards, papers began appearing with 'appointments for membership of LRCs' requiring their approval.<sup>1202</sup> An audit from 1972 illustrated the activity of the LRCs, which included the twelve new stations.<sup>1203</sup> Two major concerns tended to arise: the composition of the Councils and how they interacted with their local station. The latter problem was identified as a remnant of the Ministerial appointment system, where one or two LRC Chairs thought they had executive powers to run the stations.<sup>1204</sup> Interestingly Trethowan told the Board of one instance where a Chair advised him of a Station Manager who was being overbearing with his staff and local community. Further evidence supported this, and the manager was moved.<sup>1205</sup> Generally Chairs were meant to meet their manager once every two months. They would also see the senior Radio directorate team four times a year, as access to the Managing Director was enshrined early on.<sup>1206</sup>

As a means of communication between the manager and listeners, the LRC structure was largely felt to be successful. There were numerous examples of consultations, playback sessions, and listener panels. Many stations also used their LRCs as a way of accessing other groups in the community, such as music practitioners for Radio Durham and consumer groups for Radio Leicester and local support services in Nottingham. There were, however, some grumbles about the mechanics of participation. Radio Brighton reported that LRC members would not listen to programmes when asked, nor visit the station when invited. Radio Humberside thought LRC

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<sup>1201</sup> BBC WAC Op cit The impact of this change has already been observed elsewhere, as Owen Bentley distinguishes between the period when the LRCs were government appointed and then when they became 'ours'. Owen Bentley interview with the author ibid

<sup>1202</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Councils, Appointments to Membership G.118/71 17 October 1971 Board of Governors Papers R1/107

<sup>1203</sup> BBC WAC BBC Local Radio Councils: Summary of Activities 1972 G3/73 Board of Governors Papers R1/109

<sup>1204</sup> BBC WAC Report on Local Radio by Managing Director of Radio 25 April 1973 G.58/73 Board of Governors Papers R1/109

<sup>1205</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1206</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

meetings were too 'cosy' and Radio Medway observed that younger members felt intimidated by older ones.<sup>1207</sup> The issue at the heart of this was often membership composition. The Director of Public Affairs told the Board of Governors that since the BBC had taken over responsibility for appointments, efforts had been made to achieve a balance in the range of nominees. Generally vacancies were publicised locally, to allow self-nomination; in addition a Station Manager would liaise with institutions and organisations for their own recommendations, to fill an *ad hoc* quota. This system, it was hoped, would achieve a balance.<sup>1208</sup> To prove this, it was noted that when Leeds advertised for members they had 60 applications and now their LRC had a bus driver and a housewife.<sup>1209</sup> Elsewhere, other examples of successful minority representation on an LRC included 'a blind student at Sheffield University – David Blunkett.'<sup>1210</sup>

I would argue that this was a rather reductive assessment of the diversity of representation. The Board of Governors were in a good position to reflect on the composition of the Councils, as they ratified the appointments, but their observations, as recorded in the minutes, betray a non-scientific form of equal opportunities monitoring. For example, in September 1973, the Governors started to pursue their theme for widening the membership of the LRCs to include 'more educated bus conductors and perhaps fewer educationalists.'<sup>1211</sup> A few months later, the presence of a bus driver on the Radio Leeds LRC (presumably the one already mentioned earlier that year) 'did not go unnoticed or unappreciated.'<sup>1212</sup> This theme became something of a running joke in the minutes. In 1974 'the Vice-Chair particularly welcomed the inclusion of a driver (though of ambulances not buses)',<sup>1213</sup> and the following year, new members for Radio Nottingham's LRC included 'if not a bus driver, at least the wife of a bus driver.'<sup>1214</sup>

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<sup>1207</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1208</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1209</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1210</sup> BBC WAC Local Radio Councils, Appointments to Membership G.118/71 17 October 1971 Board of Governors Papers R1/107

<sup>1211</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 20 September 1973 R1/41/2

<sup>1212</sup> BBC WAC ibid 13 December R1/41/3

<sup>1213</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 4 April 1974 R1/42/1 Which LRC this referred to was not recorded.

<sup>1214</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 24 April 1975 R1/43/1

At the risk of exhausting the point, it is clear from the minutes that this 'bus driver' became a metaphor for the Governors of their quest for wider representation. When Michael Barton appeared before them in 1978, they again reminded him of the need for Local Radio Council appointments to reflect more bus drivers and fewer educationalists.<sup>1215</sup> Other groups were mentioned too of course. The ratio of male to female members was noted and the Board made it clear they expected equal numbers to be achieved across all Councils within a few years.<sup>1216</sup> The Governors also made frequent, specific recommendations, such as to look for a Sikh in Medway,<sup>1217</sup> and more agricultural (ie non-urban) representation in Brighton.<sup>1218</sup> Although from time to time it was noted that the right quota of members was being achieved,<sup>1219</sup> the problem was that appointments generally lasted three years, so there was a continuous cycle and the balance was offset again. Hence by the late 1970s, the minutes still recorded reminders for Michael Barton to find more women, Asians and West Indians.<sup>1220</sup>

I would argue that this issue highlights another central tension for the local radio structure. The LRCs were intended, among other things, to foster wider representation of the communities in the output. Yet there was no guarantee that their own membership could be identified with the broad diversity of the audience, or was representative of a particular locality. The Board of Governors took it upon itself to try and monitor the composition of the Councils, but it was difficult to balance formal guidelines or strict criteria with the requirements of each individual location.

From the perspective of the Station Manager, the LRC could prove very useful, as a conduit for feedback and support and to boost morale. Robert McLeish witnessed this as part of the HQ Team. Generally the LRCs were supportive of the stations – critical where necessary but also strong

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<sup>1215</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 February 1978 R1/241/1

<sup>1216</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 June 1974 R1/42/2

<sup>1217</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 6 October 1977 R1/45/3

<sup>1218</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 February 1978 R1/241/1

<sup>1219</sup> BBC WAC Governors noted with 'pleasure and some mock apprehension' more and more women being appointed to LRCs. Board of Governors Minutes 24 October 1974 R1/42/2

<sup>1220</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 16 November 1978 R1/241/4

champions for them on important issues.<sup>1221</sup> Owen Bentley concurs. When he ran Radio Leicester, they were “a tremendous support....they were a useful tool.....they work like a drip on a stone.”<sup>1222</sup> The advisory panels were also very useful in securing extra funds and attachments – Bentley cites his Religious Advisory Panel as an example, which set up secondments with young curates. There was, however, a more incendiary use for the LRCs, who were not afraid to turn their fire-power onto Senior Managers at the BBC. Michael Barton’s description of them as “a tinder box waiting to be struck”<sup>1223</sup> was especially apt with the episode concerning the proposal to reduce the hours of output in 1979. For the LRCs, the issue came down to two substantial points of disagreement. Aubrey Singer explained to the Chairs that a reduction in hours was necessary to maintain and improve the current standard of programmes.<sup>1224</sup> Some Chairs interpreted this as a rebuke, since the LRCs had been one of the main arbiters of quality on behalf of their stations. Mrs Fleming, Sheffield’s Chair, asked Singer to explain to her how she should go back to her Council to tell them ‘their taste in programmes was not high enough and why the station’s output would be obliged to give them less of what they very much liked.’<sup>1225</sup>

Secondly, besides being the defenders of quality, the Councils also thought they were standing up for their manager’s autonomy. Their definition of this was the manager’s prerogative to decide the content and duration of their output depending on their budget.<sup>1226</sup> As Singer told the Board of Governors ‘clearly one or two Chairmen did not understand that the limits within which managers make decisions have existed since the beginning of local radio.’<sup>1227</sup> He further accused them of behaving like ‘a

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<sup>1221</sup> Robert McLeish interview with the author *ibid*

<sup>1222</sup> Owen Bentley interview with the author *ibid*

<sup>1223</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>1224</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of a Meeting with LRC Chairs 8-9 June 1978 Local Radio Conferences R78/4185

<sup>1225</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1226</sup> In fact the LRC Chairs had submitted evidence to Annan suggesting that the autonomy of local radio should be increased rather than reversed, without separating from the BBC. BBC WAC Local Radio: The BBC’s Response to the Government White Paper: A Note Prepared by Local Radio Council Chairmen [no date] in Local Radio: Board of Governors Sub-Group R78/1388 In response, Annan proposed abolishing LRCs altogether.

<sup>1227</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of the Board of Governors 14 June 1979 R1/46/3

second Board of Governors', of misunderstanding the nature of autonomy and not appreciating the political pressure the BBC was under.<sup>1228</sup>

It took some time to pour balm on troubled waters. In July, Singer undertook a week-long tour of the stations, to explain the situation to each of them. But Singer was determined that they should not act like 'a powerful advisory committee'. Individually, he called them 'charming'; collectively they were 'formidable'.<sup>1229</sup> His solution was to divide the stations into regional groups. That way, the LRCs would only operate in small clusters, not as one big group. The Chairman of the BBC Governors used the analogy of a university to explain the current structure. Autonomous faculties proliferated new courses and indulged in expensive empire building until the Vice-Chancellor insisted on centralising new projects in the interests of quality and cost.<sup>1230</sup> Singer picked up this parallel the following month, July 1979, when he talked, optimistically, about having re-asserted central authority over the LRCs.<sup>1231</sup>

I would argue there were inherent paradoxes in the LRC structure and organisation. Their usefulness to the BBC rested largely on an effective working relationship with the local station, as a means of gauging listener opinion and supporting the Station Manager with external relations. In times of crisis, as the post-Annan Report episode demonstrated, they could produce a powerful and vocal lobby group. Their effective reach was tempered, however, by the degree to which the Councils accurately reflected the diversity of their local community, something that the Board of Governors monitored, as part of their approval role. The LRCs were also kept at arms length by the wider BBC. They existed to support local radio and give it credibility with communities and the audience. The LRCs were consulted about strategy and policy, on a need to know basis, but when they attempted to become more involved in decision-making, their influence was judged to be destabilising. At this, higher level, of BBC politics, there was a strict acceptance of what 'advisory' meant in practice.

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<sup>1228</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1229</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1230</sup> BBC WAC Board of Governors Minutes 14 June 1979 R1/46/3

<sup>1231</sup> The relationship between Singer and the LRCs was never repaired. 'Aubrey hated them' says Michael Barton *ibid*



### **The wider BBC**

This section considers the relationship between the local stations and the HQ team based in London, and the engagement with other areas of the BBC, most notably with the radio networks. My purpose here is to explore the difficult balance between autonomy on the one hand, and the degree to which it was possible, and desirable, to manage the stations from the centre.

Regarding the HQ team, the task facing Hugh Pierce and his small staff, once the go ahead was given for a permanent service, was to prepare and launch the next wave of stations. Primarily responsible for the training of staff was Robert McLeish, transferred from his role as Programme Organiser at Radio Nottingham. His role, from 1970, was to prepare the teams who were launching the next 12 stations with the necessary radio skills. He recorded in his diary how frustrating this was at times, especially at the beginning.

‘Today [January 19 1970] was to have been the start of training in my original forecast...but we have not even advertised for the PAs [programme assistants] or SAs [station assistants]. One trouble is that there is no one in overall charge. Hugh does marvellously but building department, planning and installation are responsible to senior engineers who control the expenditure. The most junior person who can control the whole project is the DG!’<sup>1232</sup>

The key point that McLeish noted at the time was how the expansion and development of local radio were being driven more by the mechanics of the infrastructure rather than the needs of programme makers:

‘The control of information is poor in the BBC....in the present expansion of local radio – the information on which decisions are based is almost entirely engineering and financial. Programmes hardly come into it. What a pity that managers were not in on the planning for the next stage, only engineers.’<sup>1233</sup>

The training course was structured with one team doing practical work in the mornings, both stations having theory lectures in the afternoon and then

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<sup>1232</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 19 January 1970

<sup>1233</sup> Robert McLeish *ibid* 12 March 1970 McLeish organised the training courses in pairs, so two stations teams were taught at once. The order was determined by the sequence of station launch.

the second group doing their practice in the evenings. Examples of theoretical classes included an induction into the BBC as an organisation, with information on the Charter, the licence fee, various departments and the resources available to local radio.<sup>1234</sup> There were practical sessions where equipment operation was taught, such as using the studio desk or panel, the portable Uher recorder, patching jack fields and so on. McLeish and his trainers also played lots of examples of output from around the world, to illustrate production values and to initiate a discussion about the 'local radio sound':

'Local radio examples on the Queen's visit, the Brisbane link-up and so on. I've always known they were thought to be too cloying and over emotional – this is by network people listening to them. I've always been of the view that you shouldn't listen to local radio too objectively. It's essentially subjective.'<sup>1235</sup>

This is an important area as the training was really the only opportunity for many of the new local radio personnel to learn about what made local radio so different and the mentality necessary to produce it, what McLeish called 'a different kind of humanity.'<sup>1236</sup>

The work of McLeish and his team was one crucial way that links were maintained with the centre. The training process established the formats and genre of local output and the production techniques available to the staff, and taught them how the equipment was to be used. There was an element of uniformity in this: all stations were using the same technical facilities and following similar programme formulae. The unknown quantity was the quality of the output. As has already been illustrated, efforts by Hugh Pierce, Hal Bethell and others were made to keep monitoring this.

There was still, however, another relationship that required further mediation. As a previous chapter demonstrated, the method for sharing content between local radio and the networks had not exactly been a success. Network output was still carried by the stations as a quasi-sustaining service, even though there were strenuous efforts to 'fill in' the

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<sup>1234</sup> Robert McLeish interview with the author 11 August 1970

<sup>1235</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 6 March 1970 It is not clear who exactly McLeish was playing these extracts to as this entry precedes the training period.

<sup>1236</sup> Robert McLeish Op cit

schedule with more locally-made programmes. For most stations, Radio Two or Four (and sometimes One) was the output of choice, since it seemed most in keeping with their listeners.<sup>1237</sup> In 1978, there was a very frank assessment of the relationship from the network executives when they met the Howard/Clarke sub-committee of the Governors who were looking into the role of local radio.<sup>1238</sup> What was interesting at this point were the attitudes that came across, which betrayed some deep seated prejudice. The executives present included the Controllers of the networks, and also Donald Muggeridge, Aubrey Singer's deputy. The suspicions about local radio stemmed from the fear that it would lay claim to resources that rightfully belonged to network radio. Executives such as David Hatch, George Fischer and Ian McIntyre would only support local radio continuing provided it was not at the expense of reducing funding for network stations.<sup>1239</sup> Coupled with this was an obvious resentment about the freedoms that local radio operated under. This was expressed by David Hatch, who wanted to reduce the managers' autonomy, a sentiment that was very popular with the meeting. There was talk about local radio 'aping' network, and being over ambitious. At this point, Muggeridge said that he, too, agreed, and that their autonomy was about to be restricted with the proposed cut in hours.<sup>1240</sup> He also said that it would be 'politically disastrous' to lose a network in order to develop local radio.

There were some allies for local radio from the radio directorate. Ronald Mason was an advocate, arguing that it was dangerous for the BBC not to be in local broadcasting, a point echoed by Charles McLelland (Controller of Radio One and Two). However, the issue was how to progress the service when there was no money available. Peter Woon suggested concentrating on small satellite stations, perhaps using cheap local authority premises or

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<sup>1237</sup> In 1972 Stephen Hearst, Controller of Radio Three, wrote to Hugh Pierce: 'Far, far be it from me to wish to undermine the independence of Station Managers but their almost total boycott of Radio Three's output other than news bulletins smacks of a philistinism that we should not view with detached calm. There are one or two quite decent tunes we play from time to time you know, that one could whistle quite easily.' BBC WAC Memo from Controller Radio Three to GMRD (cc'd MDR, C 1 & 2, C 4) Subject: Network Usage by Local Radio 29 September 1971 in Management Local Radio General R102/76

<sup>1238</sup> BBC WAC Minutes of a meeting of the Local Radio Group of the Board of Governors 22 June 1978 in Local Radio: Board of Governors Sub Group R78/1388

<sup>1239</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1240</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

even Portakabins to get new stations opened.<sup>1241</sup> It was also pointed out that Radio One and local radio should work more closely in tandem, as together this combination was a more effective competition to ILR. At the close of the meeting, Stella Clarke observed in a conciliatory tone that the views of the networks about local radio were shifting, from one of opposition to acceptance.<sup>1242</sup>

The views expressed at the Weekly Programme Review Board at about the same time, as I have already demonstrated above, showed a similar robust approach.<sup>1243</sup> However by 1979, each station had had at least one opportunity for their programmes to be played and there was a gradual sense from the minutes that network staff were becoming more familiar with the kind of local radio output being made.<sup>1244</sup> Discussions tended to broaden away from specific examples to a wider concept of local radio's role. In January 1979, Aubrey Singer stressed to the Board that he wanted to make sure local radio did not become 'homogenised', but retained its distinctive programme mix.<sup>1245</sup> Later that month he elaborated on the theme, stressing that local radio was essential to the BBC's public service standards, as a counter-balance to network radio's role in music, drama, news and information.<sup>1246</sup> Yet there was still a misapprehension about the local radio ecology. The Channel Assistant, Radio Four's assumption that BBC Local Radio should compete with ILR was soundly rejected by Singer. This was not financially or politically desirable, and in any case, Radio One or Two were ahead in audience terms in most ILR areas. ENCAR and the Editor of Radio News both assumed Radio Four benefited when there was bad weather, but again, MDR was emphatic: 'Radio Four does not have the best reports, local radio does.'<sup>1247</sup>

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<sup>1241</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1242</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

<sup>1243</sup> BBC WAC Weekly Programme Review Board Minutes ibid

<sup>1244</sup> Michael Barton, Controller of Local Radio, took responsibility for selecting the programmes, to get a more 'random' approach.

<sup>1245</sup> BBC WAC ibid 3 January 1979

<sup>1246</sup> BBC WAC ibid 31 January 1979

<sup>1247</sup> BBC WAC Op cit

## Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that one major element of local radio's infrastructure, the workforce, had begun to adapt to the changing circumstances that came with expansion. With this growth came new demands on the conceptual framework that underpinned the original stations. On the one hand, there were more Station Managers, who combined to create a significant voice within BBC radio. The principle of autonomy had a useful function by allowing managers a degree of innovation and independence in the way they ran their stations and created the output. The problem arose when this collective lobby appeared to be an oppositional force within the BBC. The only course was to divide and rule the Station Managers and gradually erode their autonomy.

I would also argue that the pioneering spirit of the staff on the original stations exploited the creative freedoms that autonomy brought them, especially when this was backed up by sufficient resources. The period of growth, particularly under astute Station Managers, was profitable for many, in that there were opportunities for promotion and exploring new territories. However, autonomy also brought with it a lack of consistency, with some managers failing to capitalise on the available opportunities. In terms of output, a balance had to be struck between individual expressions of radio pertinent to that community and limits on resources and time.

The impetus towards increasing the hours of output to fill the schedules was unsustainable using the resource-heavy 'built' formats, so new approaches to programme-making emerged. Meanwhile programmes for education, ethnic minority and specialist groups were intended to remain a core part of the output: they were regarded as a *raison d'être* for the whole enterprise. So local radio could definitely demonstrate that their output served their communities, by giving them news programmes, minority and special interest output and work of an educational level. They also provided opportunities for listener interaction, such as the phone-in.

But I would argue that challenges remained. Paradoxically, educational programmes achieved many of the objectives of local radio: they were clearly targeted to an audience, there were plentiful opportunities for

partnerships,<sup>1248</sup> they enabled strong listener participation and interaction and even audience-made programmes. Yet it was not sustainable, for two reasons. First, local radio was in danger of becoming a schools service, broadcasting curricula-driven material to a narrow audience. Further and adult education output was less distinct, and the quality more variable. So there had to be a more refined approach at balancing the needs of education within the schedule as a whole. Secondly, local radio and the way the stations operated tended to be driven more by resources, especially during the economically-turbulent 1970s. The same applied to the educational authorities, polytechnics and colleges. Having dedicated education-producing staff became a luxury, which Station Managers had to exploit in other ways. Local radio was struggling to be all things to all people, and the role of education output was one element that could be sacrificed.<sup>1249</sup>

BBC Local Radio reached an important landmark when it was recognised as one of the *de facto* networks, when Michael Barton was given the title Controller of Local Radio in September 1977. However, as I have argued, the attitudes of the respective staff in both network and local radio were at times entrenched and acceptance of the mutual benefits of each other was a more long-term project. It took some time for the mutual suspicion to subside. Part of the problem came from the lack of empathy for local radio output, which I have argued was influenced by a number of factors, including the shift from built to sequence programmes, the production values attached to education and specialist material and the deployment of available resources.

But as McLeish's quote illustrates, that local radio was largely subjective, I would argue it goes deeper than this, and becomes an issue of how one can objectify what local radio was set up to do. And a large part of this was due to structural determinants, such as the questions of autonomy, staff

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<sup>1248</sup> eg Radio Manchester's Job Week when partnerships with a range of organisations uncovered 268 previously unknown vacancies and resulted in 848 enquiries from the public. BBC WAC Report by the Managing Director of Radio Board of Governors Minutes 22 July 1976 R1/44/1

<sup>1249</sup> The next wave of stations in the early 1980s, such as Radios Norfolk and Lincolnshire, launched without a dedicated Education Producer post. Owen Bentley correspondence with the author 18 July 2011

management and governance. Most of these were established in the early period of local radio development, and the subsequent expansion of the 1970s revealed that these attributes needed to be redefined. It is understandable that the tensions which I have outlined in this chapter resulted in a fair degree of frustration, as McLeish recorded in June 1978, just after the struggle over the Annan report:

‘The vision of local radio’s future fades as there’s talk of operating stations for two or three hours a day from ‘Portakabins’ in a garden of suburban houses, the programmes being sustained by a ‘rolling news’ service from Radio London. That’s not what I joined for.’<sup>1250</sup>

As I have argued in the early chapters in this thesis, the BBC managed to create the right environment and structure that meant it was ready to move into local radio once the various external factors (over which it had no control) were favourable. By the end of the period covered by my research, the political and technical context (Annan aside) readily facilitated the completion of the local radio project, but it was factors within the BBC that almost derailed it, as Michael Barton observed: “the internal stresses were much greater than the external ones.”<sup>1251</sup> This forms a key part of my concluding arguments in the Conclusion.

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<sup>1250</sup> Robert McLeish diary entry 6 June 1978

<sup>1251</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 17 December 2007

## CONCLUSION

This history of BBC Local Radio in England between 1960 and 1980 has produced a rich and thought-provoking picture of one aspect of broadcasting that has previously been neglected in media historiography. In the course of these chapters I have elaborated on the arguments surrounding the gestation and birth of the service, its struggle for survival and the various permutations that were explored to achieve completion of coverage. This thesis makes a significant contribution to media historiography in setting out a history of BBC Local Radio in England, based on primary sources, which has so far been missing from the canon. I have also presented arguments about the tensions that existed within local radio – how it was defined, structured and operated - and between it and the wider culture of the BBC and beyond. In addition, I have presented evidence to show that BBC Local Radio achieved a great deal, in terms of the art of radio and as a valuable service for licence fee payers, which has not always been given due recognition. In this chapter I will discuss my findings in more detail and elaborate on the contribution to knowledge that this thesis puts forward.

My first contribution is to show that BBC Local Radio came about because of a concatenation of factors, events and changing ideology, which the BBC was able to influence, shape and ultimately benefit from. It was therefore a more complex scenario, in contrast to the previous deductions that the BBC started local radio purely as a response to the threat of commercial competition or as a result of the prohibition of offshore pirate radio. Frank Gillard identified a set of circumstances, which posed a dilemma: society was becoming more interested and engaged in its surroundings, its political, cultural and social lives on a local level, but it lacked the means for turning this into a meaningful dialogue. As the BBC proposed in 1966 'Local Radio would provide this missing link of communication.'<sup>1252</sup> Network radio was not equipped to achieve this, but the

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<sup>1252</sup> BBC *Local Radio in the Public Interest: the BBC's plan* (London: BBC Publications, 1966) p 2



BBC, in this very period, was also engaged in a root and branch discussion about the nature of public service broadcasting.<sup>1253</sup> Gillard's solution to the problem was a service of local broadcasting. As I have argued, this marked a shift in the cultural landscape of broadcasting in post-war Britain, from paternalism towards populism, still engaged in nurturing the greater good of the audience but less 'top-down' and more empowering.

The argument is often advanced that the BBC initiated local radio to prevent commercial operators from doing so, but as I have demonstrated this was too simplistic an analysis of cause and effect. Developments in technology enabled more targeted and localised broadcasting; there was the political will to allow greater participation in smaller units of media and a realisation that there was a tendency for the metropolitan centre in London to dominate. The BBC could not start local radio solely to stymie commercial opposition because it did not have the political power to do so and it relied on the government to come up with a funding solution. Nor was the local radio conveniently introduced, as Lewis & Booth suggest, to help detract from the purging of pirate radio.<sup>1254</sup>

In the course of the thesis, I have argued that the BBC engaged in a concerted and coordinated operation for local radio, despite the fact it was not guaranteed to succeed. This is part of the contribution to knowledge: I have established an understanding of the way the BBC operated as an institution in the 1960s as it devised and developed a viable structure from scratch. The experimental, closed-circuit stations, 1961 – 1962, provided vital material and information about the staff, the equipment and the programmes. Under Gillard's leadership, the BBC was in a position of readiness, when the political circumstances fell into place, to launch the service. The BBC could lobby and influence but had no direct control over various external factors, notably the political desire to eradicate pirate radio, which enabled the shake-up of BBC radio, and the government's rejection

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<sup>1253</sup> Tracey M *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998) Chapter Four

<sup>1254</sup> Lewis P & Booth J *The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio* (London: Macmillan 1989) p 86

of the business sector's preference to start commercial radio instead. But the BBC had successfully honed and refined its plans, claiming a provenance in local broadcasting dating back to the 1920s, which their would-be competitors lacked and marshalling an impressive, supporting lobby group.

The BBC's next task was to ensure the success of the first eight experimental stations, between 1967-1969. I have argued that the role of the personnel and staff was pivotal. Gillard was rightfully regarded as the 'godfather' of local radio: it was his passion and grasp of the potential, which helped keep the momentum going through to the end of the 1960s. But more than that, the staff members I have interviewed all bear witness to Gillard's emollient style of management and the way he encouraged and nurtured them and fostered local radio's development. The staff on the original stations personified Gillard's pioneering spirit, yet at the same time there was an ambiguity that was inherent in the whole local radio enterprise within the BBC. This constitutes my next contribution to knowledge, explaining the contradictions and tensions that existed within BBC Local Radio and the BBC in general.

On the one hand, the Corporation believed itself to be big enough to allow freedom within its many parts. Yet on the other, there were limits to this autonomy, which meant the Reithian DNA of the BBC was reluctant to accommodate the shift towards a less-centralised, freethinking structure. If Gillard represented the nexus between the twin ideologies of paternalism and populism, then Singer was the technocrat, more confrontational in style and less inclined towards diversity. Yet this paradox was enshrined in local radio's framework, in the shape of the Station Manager's autonomy, designed to give the stations the notion of independence. I have argued that this concept benefited the first eight stations and allowed the pioneering spirit to flourish. The programmes reflected the creative possibilities that opened up with stations designed to serve different groups and sections of a local population. This process was helped by innovative production techniques and new approaches to programme styles. The problem arose when the first eight stations grew to 20, and beyond. It is fair to argue that

the local radio model was not replicable in every sense. One reason was managerial. Eight autonomous Station Managers were containable, 20 or more were not, as witnessed by the collective strength emboldened in the post-Annan debacle. Singer made sure that central control was gradually re-asserted. Another reason was a balance between the demands of quality and quantity in the on-air content. The Station Managers pursued quantity – filling-in the schedules - at the expense, in many cases, of standards. Quality suffered because resources were over-stretched. Singer was able to use this as a means of further restricting autonomy by imposing the cut in hours. The repeated use of the term ‘banal’ by Singer, I would argue, was a blatant denunciation designed to assert his stamp and authority.

In drawing out the deeper implications of this, we can incorporate Henders’ work on cantonisation, ie the practice of asymmetrical decentralisation, along territorial and/or cultural lines.<sup>1255</sup> Her theory that territorial autonomy arrangements can release tensions in culturally plural states is applicable to the structure of local radio. Each station was in effect a canton of the BBC, with its own autonomy. The problem for the BBC was being comfortable with the resulting plurality, as the multiplication of the original model began to produce more variations and differences than initially anticipated. As Henders points out, cantonisation settlements are not ‘static constitutional configurations’:<sup>1256</sup> local radio in this context was a profound iteration for the BBC which connected it more securely than ever to its roots, in terms of audience, and to its historical origins. Medhurst provides another comparison with his arguments that the BBC had difficulty recognising the national and cultural identity of Wales, as a national region, in its broadcasting provision.<sup>1257</sup> His research shows the tensions that existed between a territorial minority, who were exploring expressions of an emerging political and cultural nationhood, and the reluctance of the BBC to cede control. The contrast with local radio lies in the fact that there were no

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<sup>1255</sup> Henders J ‘Cantonisation: Historical Paths to Territorial Autonomy for Regional Cultural Communities’ in *Nation and Nationalism* 2004 3: 4

<sup>1256</sup> Henders Op cit p 536

<sup>1257</sup> Medhurst J ‘Minorities with a message: the Beveridge Report on Broadcasting (1949-51) and Wales’ *Twentieth Century British History* 2008 19: 2 pp 217-233

language differences at stake, and there were no broader issues concerning national identity.

My conclusion is, therefore, that the first 20 local stations succeeded, through their output and the work of the staff, in persuading enough people within and outside the BBC that local radio was a worthwhile endeavour and merited expansion. In fact my research shows that the ability of the BBC to negotiate with its political allies and finesse opinion, in the press and the Establishment, proved crucial in securing local radio's survival when it was under threat.

Despite this, the problem the BBC faced was how to pay for the completion of the chain, once the ideological battle was won. The licence fee established the principle of universality, ie if everyone paid for a service they should be entitled to receive it. But financial constraints, especially at crucial times throughout the 1970s set a limit on how much revenue the BBC could expect and therefore on the number of stations they could launch. One of Frank Gillard's main objectives for local radio was to foster genuine relationships with the various communities and encourage local voices to participate on air, even to the extent of making their own programmes. My research has shown that this was a valid aspiration but one that was difficult to translate into practice, and the clarification of these definitions of 'local' and 'community' is my next contribution. The first eight stations, unfettered by too many restrictions, achieved a range of programmes that represented the diversity of the audience. However, the concept of access programmes, ie those made by the listeners themselves, was harder to translate into practice. Again, I would conclude that this was another example of the ambiguities that the BBC struggled with: how to engage external bodies and groups without exploiting them, but at the same time without handing over editorial control. My research shows that there was a paucity of guidance for the stations in how to operate with their local communities and the result of this was the difficulty in accurately assessing whether the relationship was producing something worthwhile.

The challenge was amplified by the expansion of local radio: I have shown that the eventual pattern of local radio development, determined

largely by the available resources, resulted in fewer stations covering larger geographical areas than originally intended. This was the dilemma local radio faced: how to stay connected when it was spread over a wider area.

Furthermore, the evidence in the Archive shows there was a 'routinisation' of many aspects of the specialist and ethnic minority output, whereby they risked becoming homogenised and losing their local, defining characteristics. I argue that the BBC's own uncertainty about how to define its community aspirations was reflected in the way the term itself was deployed. Trethowan tried to re-label local radio as 'community radio' in the early 1970s, but the lack of clarity and clear understanding of the phrase made it difficult to apply. Ironically, it was the emergence of an external grassroots community media lobby during the 1970s that helped coalesce the BBC's thinking more accurately. The BBC made attempts to engage with more practical iterations of granular local broadcasting, such as the Whitehaven and Barrow experiments and exploring some attributes of the Pitt Mansfield Report. This was also reflected in the plans for completing the chain, by using satellite stations attached to main stations and so on. The BBC made the right choice in keeping 'Local Radio' as a brand, yet the tension remained going into the 1980s of wanting to maximise the audience while staying true to the public service remit, exacerbated by the next wave of stations being based more on county boundaries. However, I have also demonstrated that in the 1970s, stations were able to produce a wide range of programmes that succeeded in reflecting their audiences, and enabled participation to some degree. The results of audience research and the loyalty of listeners in times of crisis proved that the 'need' for local radio had indeed been turned into a 'demand'. Taking the above points into consideration, I argue that to judge BBC Local Radio purely on its community aspirations, as Lewis & Booth would like, is only a selective approach.<sup>1258</sup> The relationship between local radio, the audience and their communities is a much more complex story. Just as local radio has many iterations and differences across the country, so too does whatever concept underlies 'community radio.' I would argue that BBC Local Radio deserves

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<sup>1258</sup> Lewis P & Booth J *ibid* p 95 - 96

to be considered on its own terms and definitions rather than compared to something it is not. The irony here is that the BBC trumpeted its own pedigree in local broadcasting, going back to the relay stations of the 1920s. But in many ways, as Scannell argues, these first stations succeeded more in becoming an integral part of the local community, working with civic authorities, businesses, cultural groups and so on. Scannell has a point when he writes 'Broadcasting, in its beginnings, was in many ways more genuinely local than BBC local radio is today.'<sup>1259</sup> Of course these relay stations operated on much smaller areas, but arguably the BBC's own aspirations, in 1966, contained the seeds of its failure to provide community radio: 'the basic purpose of a local station is .....to give the fullest possible service to a community of people holding the maximum number of interests in common.'<sup>1260</sup> That may have been possible with 150 stations, but not with 40.

My next contribution is to assert that there is an aesthetic of BBC Local Radio. One of the challenges that local radio had to face was its image. As I have illustrated, local broadcasting was easily lampooned for dealing with the trivial and mundane. The most frequent adjective that was used to describe it was 'parish pump,' yet I have demonstrated that this was not a wholly negative term. It simply meant that local radio was doing its job, reporting on local affairs and issues. The problem was more one of representation to a wider audience: the diversity and breadth of content rendered it difficult to objectify and the types of examples that were selected and heard by a wider audience, or picked up the headline writers, tended to be the quirky and amusing and seemingly trivial. Added to this was the question of quality: given the amount of output that was produced by the late 1970s, it is understandable that technically and editorially programmes were sometimes less than excellent. McLeish wrote in a memorable phrase 'I've always been of the view that you shouldn't listen to local radio too

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<sup>1259</sup> Scannell P 'The Origins of BBC Regional Policy' in Harvey S and Robins K (ed) *The Regions, the Nations and the BBC* (London: bfi Publishing 1993) p 29

<sup>1260</sup> BBC *Local Radio in the Public Interest: the BBC's plan* (London: BBC Publications 1966) p 6

objectively. It's essentially subjective.'<sup>1261</sup> Local radio should not be judged against a set of centrally determined criteria but instead on the grounds of what it meant to the listener, hearing the output in their own home or neighbourhood. Other formulae attempted to capture this, talking about where the buses run,<sup>1262</sup> hearing chemist opening times,<sup>1263</sup> and the serial story of local life.<sup>1264</sup> The problem that the BBC encountered centrally was the difficulty in translating the concept into reality. So local radio, on so many levels, could claim its own aesthetic, which was different from other parts of the BBC's output. This aesthetic was created out of production practices, whereby staff performed a range of tasks and skills not found in the same combination elsewhere. There was a hybrid mix of programmes in the schedule, incorporating sequence and built output, designed to meet different needs of a cross-section of the community. And it was packaged in a unique way: the phrase 'Radio Four type content with Radio Two type presentation'<sup>1265</sup> seemed apt. I would argue that this aesthetic has been largely overlooked, and supplanted instead by a mythology of local radio. This mythology relied on the image of local stations as promoted by the likes of Phil Sidey, which is part-worthy, part self-mythologising and also further fuelled the national impression of local radio's quirks and idiosyncrasies.

Furthermore, applying Scannell's 'phenomenology of broadcasting',<sup>1266</sup> we can see that local radio's output became an integral part of the listener's daily routine, reinforced by the principal concern of the listener: hearing programmes that were local or more immediate to their needs. This was an intrinsic part to the local radio dialogue, or 'conversation' to use Scannell's term,<sup>1267</sup> because of the circularity that existed, at least in theory, allowing

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<sup>1261</sup> Robert McLeish Diary entry 6 March 1970

<sup>1262</sup> Robert McLeish interview with the author 11 August 2010

<sup>1263</sup> BBC WAC A Study Paper by Manager, Radio Solent November 25 1975 Local Broadcasting Part Five R78/611

<sup>1264</sup> *The Listener* Frank Gillard gives his opinion of BBC Local Radio – which he helped to create by Frank Gillard 11 October 1973

<sup>1265</sup> BBC WAC Draft BBC Memorandum: Local Radio Board of Governors Minutes 19 December 1973 R1/42/2

<sup>1266</sup> Scannell P *Radio, Television & Modern Life* (Oxford: Blackwell 1996) pp 169 - 171

<sup>1267</sup> Scannell, P 'The Brains Trust: A Historical Study of the Management of Liveness on Radio' in Simon Cottle (ed) *Media Organization and Production* (London: Sage 2003) pp 103 - 107

listeners and the audience to get directly involved in responding to the output and contributing to it too. The different types of production techniques, the new kinds of programmes, and the direct approach encouraging audience involvement all became part of the local radio aesthetic.

Ironically there was a further dichotomy at the heart of local radio for the BBC. As I have argued, it was grounded in the principles of public service broadcasting; in Reith's words 'the formation of an informed and reasoned public opinion as an essential part of the political process in a mass democratic society.'<sup>1268</sup> As Scannell points out, the BBC's monopoly was based on the belief that its mandate came from a shared social, cultural and political consensus for the moral uplift of the masses.<sup>1269</sup> But local radio challenged this – it was more democratic than top-down in its theoretical consensus, appealing directly to the audience to participate, to abandon the paternalism of the past. No wonder the BBC found it hard to put this into practice.

So do Curran's narratives of media theory, which I outlined in Chapter Two, help interpret local radio? Curran's narratives in fact embody the conceptual tension at the heart of local radio.<sup>1270</sup> On the one hand, the BBC promoted the empowerment of the audience, as an example of the liberal narrative, while on the other, it was reluctant to cede its editorial monopoly by allowing complete community access to programmes, which is in the tradition of the radical narrative. Obviously none of the narratives conveniently explains the relationship between local radio and the BBC and the wider broadcasting landscape. This goes to prove, in a sense, how significant and mould-breaking the service was and is, as it has transcended so many aspects of the traditional thinking about media theory. What the local radio story tells us, I would argue, is how the BBC was able to respond to a different set of critical arguments and new social and cultural circumstances, which is in keeping with Curran's view that the

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<sup>1268</sup> Lord Reith quoted in Scannell, P 'Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept' in Edward Buscombe (ed) *British Television: A Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) p 48

<sup>1269</sup> Scannell (2000) *ibid*

<sup>1270</sup> Curran J *Media and Power* (London: Routledge 2002) Chapter One



narratives can be revised under the scrutiny of new research findings.<sup>1271</sup> One of the nearest equivalents to local radio might be the development of national regional broadcasting, which Medhurst, using the history of television in Wales, argues falls into Curran's anthropological narrative.<sup>1272</sup> Despite the fact that local radio was attempting to define and build identity and a sense of place, it did not operate as a cultural construct of national identity when it was being established. Of all the narratives, the liberal one would appear to offer the best fit, in terms of aiming to reduce the gap between the broadcasting elite and the general public and promote greater inclusiveness by the tone and style of the output. Yet the end result fails to match, completely, with the theory, so there is a flaw with the liberal narrative interpretation in that it does not allow for audience reaction. Curran would argue that consumer satisfaction is not the central criterion because it does not take into account issues of quality and ignores the broadcasters' role in promoting equality in the first place.<sup>1273</sup> So instead, I would argue it is a question of degree rather than absolutes.

To conclude therefore, I would argue that local radio at the end of the 1970s was truthful to the original intentions of the founding fathers even if the compromises caused by financial, structural and administrative issues meant the final outcome was less satisfactory. If local radio at the beginning, in Gillard's vision, was designed to respond to a problem posed by society, the process of completing the chain produced a different set of challenges. This thesis has put the case that BBC Local Radio has made a significant contribution to the life of the country and to the BBC itself. In terms of an organisation, the organic structure that evolved from the different stations, the networks of staff, partners and stakeholders and significantly the audience created a lasting impact, which was manifold throughout the country. The programmes that local radio produced, covering a wide range of subjects, and reflecting the needs of democracy,

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<sup>1271</sup> Curran J 'Narratives of Media History Revisited' in Bailey M ed *Narrating Media History* (London: Routledge 2009)

<sup>1272</sup> Medhurst J 'Television in Wales c 1950-70' in Bailey M (ed) *Narrating Media History* (London & New York: Routledge 2009)

<sup>1273</sup> Curran 'Narrative of Media History Revisited' *ibid* p 12

society and culture, geography, minority interest, education, not to mention day-to-day news and information, were rooted firmly in the public service broadcasting tradition. Owen Bentley, after a year or two at Radio Stoke-on-Trent addressed the function of local radio “What motivated me was that I was helping in the creation of an educated, informed, strong local democracy. That’s what I thought BBC Local Radio was there for.”<sup>1274</sup>

This was a complex area for local radio, fulfilling the aspiration to build, or unify or somehow change communities, and the one that is most difficult to quantify. Michael Barton says, “a good station will build and define community,”<sup>1275</sup> because society is mobile and the audience is looking for some sense of belonging and endorsement. Elements of this can be found in the work of the original stations but it is a nebulous concept that lacks concrete evidence and is something that merits further research. As such, there is evidence to suggest that Lewis & Booth had grounds for asserting the ‘selective traditions’ by which media institutions constructed their own histories.<sup>1276</sup> In this context, the narrative that local radio created communities can be viewed as part of the mythology that comes from the memories of those who worked in it. However the net result of BBC Local Radio, as this thesis demonstrates, was that the social, public service broadcasting and institutional gains outweighed the deficits.

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<sup>1274</sup> Owen Bentley interview with the author 19 July 2010

<sup>1275</sup> Michael Barton interview with the author 8 June 2011

<sup>1276</sup> Lewis & Booth *ibid* p 4

## APPENDIX A

### Key Dates relevant to the thesis

**Spring 1954:** Frank Gillard's two-month study visit to the United States

**1955:** Frank Gillard seconded as Chief Assistant to the Director of Sound Broadcasting. BBC Report: *An Extension of Regional Broadcasting*

**1956:** Frank Gillard appointed Controller of the West Region

**1957:** BBC Paper *The Future of Sound Broadcasting in the Domestic Services*

**Spring 1958:** Frank Gillard visits the United States

**1959:** BBC Working Party chaired by Richard D'A Marriott; BBC Paper *Area and Local Broadcasting*

**January 1960:** Hugh Carlton-Greene becomes Director-General of the BBC; BBC Governors agree that the BBC should experiment in local broadcasting

**November 1960:** BBC Report: *The Future of Sound Broadcasting: Local Broadcasting*

**1961 – 1962:** Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting

**April 1961 – May 1962:** BBC organizes closed-circuit experiments:

**1961:** 22 March, Bristol; 10 May, Portsmouth; 20 June, Norwich; 18 July, Hull; 24 August, Dundee; 5 – 11 September, Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch; 19 – 21 October, Swansea; 21 November, Wrexham; 29 November & 12 December, Portsmouth (as part of a BBC exhibition)

**1962:** 15 – 18 January, Durham; 15 – 17 February, London; 20 – 22 March, Dumfries; 5 – 7 April, Isle of Wight; 11 – 14 April, Vale of Evesham; 30 April, 1 – 2 May, Llyn Ac Afrom.

**January 1962:** BBC starts a training course for local broadcasting production techniques in Poole

**30 March 1962:** Bristol closed-circuit experiment by South Western Broadcasting Ltd

**27 June 1962:** Publication of the Pilkington Committee's Report on Broadcasting

**July 1962:** Government White Paper (Cmnd 1770)

**December 1962:** Government White Paper (Cmnd 1893)

**Summer 1963:** Frank Gillard becomes Director of Sound Broadcasting

**1964:** Radio Caroline starts broadcasting from the North Sea. The Local Radio Association is formed campaigning for local commercial radio.

**October 1964:** Labour Government elected; Tony Benn appointed Postmaster General

**November 1964:** BBC Papers *The Development of Local Radio; The Control of Local Broadcasting*

**1966:** BBC Publication *Local Radio in the Public Interest*

**June 1966:** Edward Short becomes Postmaster General

**December 1966:** Government White Paper (Cmnd 3169)

**27 January 1967:** Joint meeting chaired by BBC and Association of Municipal Councils for local authorities and public bodies interested in running a local station held at Broadcasting House, London

**February 1967:** Donald Edwards appointed General Manager, Local Radio Development

**7 March 1967:** Postmaster General announces names of the first three BBC Local Radio stations: Leicester, Liverpool, Sheffield

**23 March 1967:** Postmaster General announces names of the next four BBC Local Radio stations: Brighton, Manchester, Nottingham, Stoke (Manchester subsequently withdrew)

**4 July 1967:** Postmaster General announces the last two BBC Local Radio stations: Durham and Leeds

**September 1967:** Lord Hill appointed BBC Chairman

**8 November 1967:** Radio Leicester goes on air

**15 November 1967:** Radio Sheffield goes on air

**22 November 1967:** Radio Merseyside goes on air

**31 January 1968:** Radio Nottingham goes on air

**1968:** Roy Mason appointed Postmaster General; followed by John Stonehouse later the same year

**February 1968:** Hugh Pierce appointed General Manager, Local Radio Development

**14 February 1968:** Radio Brighton goes on air

**14 March 1968:** Radio Stoke-on-Trent goes on air

**24 June 1968:** Radio Leeds goes on air

**3 July 1968:** Radio Durham goes on air

**July 1968:** Frank Gillard re-designated as Managing Director of Radio

**October 1968:** BBC pamphlet published: *BBC Local Radio – Some Questions Answered*

**1969:** BBC pamphlet published: *This is Local Radio: The BBC Experiment at Work*

**April 1969:** Charles Curran appointed Director-General

**10 July 1969:** BBC published *Broadcasting in the 70s*

**1 August 1969:** Postmaster General re-designated Minister of Posts and Telecommunications

**14 August 1969:** John Stonehouse, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, authorises expansion of BBC Local Radio

**November 1969:** A further 12 BBC Local Radio stations announced: Birmingham, Blackburn, Bristol, Chatham/Medway, Derby, Hull/Humberside, London, Manchester, Middlesboro/Teeside, Newcastle, Oxford and Southampton/Solent

**1970:** Frank Gillard retires from the BBC; Ian Trethowan appointed Managing Director of Radio

**June 1970:** Conservative Government elected. Christopher Chataway appointed Minister of Posts and Telecommunications

**5 August 1970:** Chataway allows BBC to continue with expansion of local radio to 20 stations but no guarantees for future growth

**4 September 1970:** Radio Bristol goes on air

**10 September 1970:** Radio Manchester goes on air

**6 October 1970:** Radio London goes on air

**29 October 1970:** Radio Oxford goes on air

**7 November 1970:** Radio Birmingham goes on air

**18 December 1970:** Radio Medway goes on air

**31 December 1970:** Radio Solent goes on air

**31 December 1970:** Radio Teeside goes on air

**2 January 1971:** Radio Newcastle goes on air

**26 January 1971:** Radio Blackburn goes on air

**25 February 1971:** Radio Humberside goes on air

**March 1971:** Government White Paper proposing 60 local commercial stations alongside the BBC's 20 stations. MW to be available to both.

**29 April 1971:** Radio Derby goes on air

**1972:** Radio Durham closed

**May 1973:** Crawford Committee on Broadcasting set up

**October 1973:** First commercial stations go on air: Capital and LBC

**24 November 1973:** Radio Carlisle goes on air

**February 1974:** Labour Government elected; Roy Jenkins appointed Home Secretary (assuming powers of broadcasting policy)

**21 November 1974:** Crawford Report published

**Autumn 1974 - Autumn 1976:** Annan Enquiry into Broadcasting

**January – November 1975:** Maurice Ennals (Radio Solent) compiles the Ennals Report

**1975:** Michael Barton appointed General Manager Local Radio

**10 – 17 September 1975:** Barrow-in-Furness experiment in small scale local radio

**January 1976:** Howard Newby appointed Managing Director of Radio

**13 – 20 September 1976:** Whitehaven experiment

**25 March 1977:** Annan Report published, recommending the creation of a Local Radio Broadcasting Authority to run both BBC and commercial local radio

**22 July 1977:** Letter from 18 Station Managers to the Director-General criticizing the BBC's response to Annan

**September 1977:** Michael Barton re-designated Controller of Local Radio

**October 1977:** Ian Trethowan appointed Director-General

**June 1978:** Aubrey Singer appointed Managing Director of Radio

**July 1978:** White Paper published which includes the creation of the Home Office Local Radio Working Party (Cmnd 7294)

**October 1978:** First Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report: nine stations each for BBC and IBA

**June 1979:** Aubrey Singer announces the cut in Local Radio hours

**July 1979:** Second Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report: 14 stations for the IBA, one for BBC

**September 1980:** Radio Norfolk goes on air

**November 1980:** Radio Lincolnshire goes on air

**December 1980:** Third Home Office Local Radio Working Party Report: 11 more stations for the BBC; 25 for the IBA

## APPENDIX B

### The Ennals Report: List of Recommended Stations

#### Priority List One:

New Station	Type
Alnwick	Satellite
Aylesbury	Small independent
Barrow	Satellite
Cambridge	Small independent
Canterbury	Main
Chelmsford	Main
Coventry	Satellite
Exeter	Small independent
Gloucester	Small independent
Guildford	Main
Hereford	Small independent
Ipswich	Small independent
Lincoln	Small independent
Luton	Small independent
Northampton	Main
Norwich	Main
Plymouth	Small independent
Preston (to replace Radio Blackburn)	Main
Shrewsbury	Small independent
Swindon	Small independent
Truro	Small independent
Worcester	Small independent
York	Small independent

#### Priority List Two:

New Station	Type
Barnstaple	Small independent
Basingstoke	Small independent
Bradford	Satellite
Burnley	Satellite
Chester	Satellite
Crawley	Small independent
Dorchester	Small independent
Eastbourne (or Hastings)	Satellite
Huddersfield	Small independent
Isle of Wight	Satellite
King's Lynn	Satellite
Lancaster	Satellite
Peterborough	Small independent
Reading	Main
Salisbury	Small independent
Taunton	Satellite
Wigan	Satellite

Priority List Three:

<b>Station</b>	<b>Type</b>
Blackpool	Satellite
Bournemouth	Satellite
Doncaster	Satellite
Portsmouth	Satellite
Sunderland	Satellite
Tonbridge / Tunbridge Wells	Satellite
Whitehaven	Satellite

Reserve List:

<b>Station</b>	<b>Type</b>
Milton Keynes	Satellite
Colchester	Satellite
Southend	Satellite
Barnard Castle	Satellite
Bedford	Satellite
Bolton / Bury	Satellite
Oldham / Rochdale	Satellite
Chesterfield	Satellite
Chichester	Small independent
Scarborough	Satellite

Taken from BBC WAC A Study Paper by Manager, Radio Solent 25 November 1975  
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R9: Audience Research  
R15: Further Education  
R32: Parliamentary Questions  
R34: Policy  
R51: Talks  
R53: Technical General  
R78: Management Registry (incl Board of Management Papers)  
R92: Radio Management Registry  
R99: Educational Broadcasting Registry  
R101: Central Registry Management  
R102: Controller Local Radio  
R103: Education  
P: Press Cuttings

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