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BBC science: a question of control

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BBC Science: A Question of Control

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Abstract

Several times in the BBC's history, from 1928 to around 1963, the world of professional science has attempted to influence, and even control, the BBC's practices regarding science coverage. The main scientific lobbyists of the BBC were the Royal Society, the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, together with less prominent individuals and organisations. The proposals made by these bodies and individuals were consistent over several decades and from organisation to organisation, and involved the institutional world of science being given more control over the BBC's science output. These proposals (which were unsuccessful) were a threat to the BBC's autonomy.

The paper examines the background of these scientific interventions and the BBC's constitutional status as an autonomous organisation. It finds that there was a high degree of symmetry between the BBC's role as a public service broadcaster and the scientists' roles as disseminators of scientific knowledge.

The paper concludes by framing the scientists' interventions, and the BBC's response, in the light of scholarship relating to the construction of social structure through social interaction.

Introduction

A little discussed aspect of BBC history relates to several attempts by the institutional world of science to assume a measure of control over the BBC's science output during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. In fact, not only are these episodes virtually unknown, but science broadcasting itself has hardly been researched. The standard histories of

British broadcasting by Asa Briggs,[1] Burton Paulu,[2] and Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff[3] have almost nothing to say on the subject.

In this paper there is not space to discuss the interventions by the scientific world more fully, except to say that they were somewhat formulaic, typically consisted of delegations of scientists from a scientific body (such as the British Association for the Advancement of Science) calling on the BBC's Director General and proposing the all the BBC's science production be unified in a single department, with a scientist at its head and with a panel of scientists as advisors. The full story of these interventions is contained in archive documents held at the BBC, and told in my own doctoral thesis, Jones (2010).

To understand the significance of these interventions, what the scientists were trying to do this, and why their interventions were contentious, we need to look a little at the history of the BBC.

BBC Early history

The BBC began broadcasting in 1922 as the British Broadcasting Company – a coalition of radio manufacturers who arranged with the British government that only their receiving equipment could be sold in the UK. In return for this privilege, the coalition undertook to create and distribute programmes which could be listened to using its receivers.[4] Four years later the British Broadcasting Company became the British Broadcasting Corporation, after strong lobbying of the British government by John Reith. Reith was the first Managing Director of the British Broadcasting Company, and subsequently the first Director General of the British Broadcasting Corporation. He virtually invented the idea of public service broadcasting in the UK. There's a much quoted comment from Reith about the BBC's policy:

> 'It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give
> the public what we think they need – and not what they want, but few know
> what they want, and very few what they need. [...] In any case it is better to
> over-estimate the mentality of the public, than to under-estimate it.'[5]

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[1]   Briggs (1961–95)

[2]   Paulu (1956) and (1981)

[3]   Scannell and Cardiff (1991).

[4]   Scannell and Cardiff (1991), p.5

[5]   Reith (1924), p. 34

Reith associated broadcasting with empowerment. Broadcasting would help in the proper functioning of a democratic society:

> [Broadcasting] carries direct information on a hundred subjects to innumerable men and women... who will after a short time <u>be in a position to make up their own minds on many matters of vital moment,</u> matters which formerly they had either to receive according to the dictated and partial versions and opinions of others, or to ignore altogether.[6]

(It was only a few years before this, in 1918, that women in Britain had gained the right to vote – provided they were 30 years old or over and to resided in premises of a yearly value not less than £5. In 1928 women's voting age was reduced to 21, the same as for men.)

Although neither Reith nor the British government ever defined 'public service broadcasting' it soon came to be associated with certain characteristics, among which we can identify:

> High-mindedness. A mission to elevate the public's taste and knowledge.
>
> Independence from government, commerce and the market.
>
> Politically unaligned but serving 'the people'
>
> Aspiring to offer 'the best'.

Against these might be set certain less appealing characteristics which have been associated with the BBC:

> Paternalistic, even patronising
>
> Liable to capitulate to government pressure
>
> Conservative; at highest levels supports the establishment
>
> Appears arrogant. Knows what's best.

I'd like to single out and re-cast a couple of points from these lists:

1   Mission to elevate the public's taste and knowledge (for democratic reasons and others).

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[6]   Reith (1924), pp.18-19

2   Paternalism.

Now, as I hope to show, these characteristics have a lot in common with characteristics we can identify in the scientific interventions.

J. G. Crowther

In December 1926, a young science journalist, James Gerald Crowther, wrote to the Head of the Talks department at the BBC.
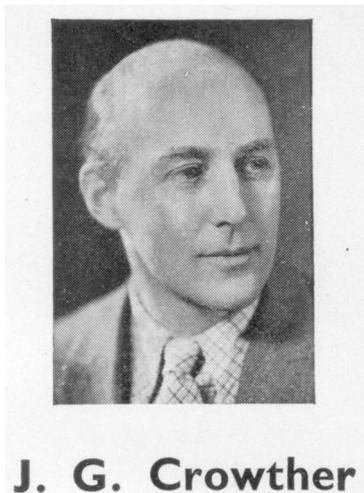
J. G. Crowther

Crowther's letter ran to 6 pages, and the following extracts indicate the tone of his letter.

> Sooner or later, the BBC will have to create a sub-department for science talks.

> It is not enough to provide series of stray talks on science. There should be sets of talks of graduated difficulty.[7]

Now, the BBC had been broadcasting science talks since its earliest days. Noted scientists such as Ernest Rutherford, William Bragg, Oliver Lodge had given broadcasts. To appreciate better what Crowther was proposing it is necessary to appreciate the departmental structure of the BBC. It was not organised by subject, as university faculty might be. There wasn't a science department, or a history department, or an arts department. Instead, departments were arranged by presentational style:

Talks

Features

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[7]   BBC Written Archives Centre J. G. Crowther file, memorandum from Crowther to Matheson 6 December 1926.

News

Schools

Crowther's proposal that science should be allocated its own department was a way of privileging science. Crowther went on to propose that science broadcasts should be under the control of someone from the scientific world, for which he proposed himself.

Crowther's letter was the first salvo in an intermittent series of interventions from the scientific world. The objective of these interventions was broadly consistent. Scientists wanted the creation of a central science department, under the control of a scientist, and taking advice from a panel of scientists. For example, here are the recommendations of a delegation from the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1943:

> A standing committee of representatives of science should be created to put forward ideas and plans for science in broadcast programmes,

> A science programme officer should be appointed to co-operate with the committee and with those responsible for the arrangement and organisation of programmes.[8]

Similar proposals came to the BBC on many occasions in the next two decades.

Like the proposals themselves, the justifications advanced for them by the scientists were strikingly consistent. Again, a foretaste comes from J. G. Crowther, this time from a book he published in 1928. It contains the following:

> The public should be made to realize that their own existence is largely the result of the application of science to the old domestic manufacturing arts,[9]

Crowther here advances the idea that the importance of science in supporting modern society places a requirement on the public to know about science.

At a conference in 1943 of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, largely instigated by Crowther, one of the scientist-speakers said:

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[8]   BBC Written Archives Centre R51/529, letter from British Association for Advancement of Science to Director General, BBC,19 November 1943.

[9]   Crowther (1928), p. 235

> If we are to avoid mistakes in social planning both during and after the war, it is important that the general public be helped to understand how evidence for or against any course of action may be rationally examined.
>
> That is to say, there should be developed a widespread education in the scientific method of attack on any problem and a familiarity with the general method of science. [10]

Some themes emerge clearly from these quotations:

Economic importance of science

Importance of science as mental discipline

Importance of scientific knowledge to responsible citizenship

Within a few months of this 1943 conference, a delegation of scientists from the British Association visited the BBC's Director General to urge the setting up of a centralised science department, for reasons largely based on the themes above. These themes recur in subsequent scientific interventions at the BBC, and they recur in many campaigns for a greater public understanding of science (see, for example, Bodmer 1985).

The last of the themes above, the importance of scientific knowledge to informed democratic citizenship, and the rather paternalistic tone of the themes, echo Reith's conception of public service broadcasting as essential to informed democratic citizenship. But whereas for the scientists that meant privileging science, for Reith (and his followers) it means using the medium of radio to bring the best of human knowledge and thought to the public.

Here, I argue, is the essence of the conflict. On the one hand there is a public service broadcaster which is confident that it knows what's best for the public, and which sees its duty to elevate the public's taste and knowledge, among other reasons, to make them better citizens. On the other hand, there is a scientific world which is confident that it knows what's best for the public, and which sees its duty as elevating the public's scientific knowledge, among other reasons, to make them better citizens.

Social worlds, professions and boundaries

The symmetry and similarity between the positions of the BBC and the scientific interventionists (and there are more examples than I have been able to discuss here)

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[10]   McClean (1943), p.301

becomes less surprising if we think of both institutions as examples of 'social worlds' competing for the same terrain – control of science broadcasting. A good deal of work on social worlds has been done by the American sociologist Anselm Strauss[11] Clarke characterises social worlds as 'groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business.'[12] Social worlds are usually associated with a primary activity, along with subsidiary activities.[13] Examples include recreational groups (for example sports teams and their followers), occupations, and social movements.[14] Social worlds characteristically have jurisdictions, and boundaries, and are often marked by disputes, both between internal factions and between worlds.[15] From a sociological point of view, one of the points of interest about social groups is that they are often defined pragmatically by action (or interaction) between members and non-members. That is too say, the activities of members of a social world can often be seen as doing the sociological work of determining the limits and functions of the group, and establishing relationships to other groups.

This 'social world' type of approach has influenced thinking on, for example, professions, which can be viewed as types of social world. Work on professions has often attempted to pin down the essential characteristics that differentiate professions from non-professions.[16] The work of Abbott (1988), though, looks to the activities of professionals as a pragmatic 'definition' of the profession. I mention professions here because I see broadcasting, especially public service broadcasting, as inititing the creation of a new profession, that of the professional broadcaster (for example, BBC producer).

One of the most important assets of a profession is its jurisdiction. This is the area of activity over which it holds a monopoly, or aspires to hold a monopoly. To have professional jurisdiction over a particular field is to deny it to others: 'one profession's jurisdiction preempts another's.'[17] To some extent, professions compete for jurisdictions; and jurisdictions are apt to change as time passes. Technology can create new jurisdictions, which can be competed for (broadcasting, for instance). A

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[11]   For example Strauss (1993).

[12]   Clarke (1991), p. 131, quoted in Strauss (1993), p. 212.

[13]   Strauss (1993), p.212.

[14]   Strauss (1993), p. 160.

[15]   Strauss (1993), pp. 214–5.

[16]   Macdonald (1995), p. 1; Collins (1990), p.18.; Freidson (1983), p. 22.

[17]   Abbott (1988), p. 87.

profession cannot take its jurisdiction for granted. Abbott says that 'jurisdictional boundaries are perpetually in dispute.'[18] Thus, although professions are largely independent of market forces, they are not without competitors.[19]

Turning to scientists, I want to interpret their interventions not in the light of work on professions but in terms of Gieryn's (1995, 1999) work on the pragmatic definition of science. I do this because the scientific interventionists argued their case on the behalf of science, rather than an particular professional or specialist group within science. However, my approach is more even-handed than this suggests because Gieryn acknowledges the influence of Abbott's work on professions on his own thinking about the boundary of science.

In Gieryn's work, science is metaphorically understood to be a zone on a map of intellectual terrain, with a boundary marking it off from other activities, for example engineering or religion. The border delineates science, just as the border of France on an atlas represents the geographical, cultural and political entity of that name. (Science's boundary has been as variable as many geo-political boundaries.)

The location of the scientific boundary in Gieryn's metaphor is not determined by essential or unique 'internal' features of scientific method, but by 'boundary work'. Boundary work is the resolving of local conflicts about the positioning of the boundary. It occurs as people 'contend for, legitimate or challenge the cognitive authority of science – and the credibility, prestige, power and material resources that attend such a privileged position.'[20] Gieryn's work thus belongs to a pragmatically based branch of social science in which interactions between people are seen as the cause of social structure.[21] It belongs to the same type of analysis as Abbott's work on professions (and both can be subsumed under the 'social worlds' approach of Strauss and others).

In relation to Gieryn's cartographic metaphor, science popularisation is one type of boundary work. It is a way of advertising the existence and location of a boundary, and is a way of ensuring that as many people as possible understand who occupies the sites of epistemic authority, and how far the site extends.

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[18]   Abbott (1988), p. 2.

[19]   Macdonald (1995), p. 34.

[20]   Gieryn (1995), p. 405.

[21]   Maines (1993), p.xiv.

In conclusion, then, I should like to propose the following way of thinking about the scientific interventions at the BBC.

From the point of view of the BBC staff producers (many of whom were by training scientists) the issue was one of guarding professional jurisdiction over all aspects of broadcasting, not just science. From this point of view, no special consideration is owed to science, even if, as the scientists claimed, it is fundamental to the conduct of modern life. Furthermore, by retaining responsibility for all aspects of broadcasting, the broadcasting profession presents itself as serving the cause of democratic citizenship by providing the right diet of news, culture, instruction, and so on.

From the point of view of the scientists, the issue was one of co-opting a widespread and highly regarded medium to tell the right story about science - a story that would clarify for listeners what made science special, that would engender the civic virtues that follow from the promotion of a scientific world view, and that would emphasise the central importance of science to modern life. The telling of this story was properly the business of scientists (rather than broadcasters) because scientists were already engaged in this activity through other forms of science popularisation, such as print.

Between these two points of view there is no obvious resolution, and, as I mentioned earlier, this dispute continued for many years. In the end, a kind of truce was declared, but that is outside the scope of this presentation and is covered in my doctoral thesis (Jones 2010).

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