**British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)**

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a British public service broadcaster, comprising television, radio and other electronic media outlets whose primary mission is to serve public needs for information and entertainment. Established by Royal Charter in 1922, the BBC is the world’s oldest broadcaster headquartered at Broadcasting House in Westminster, London. It is also among the largest broadcasters in the world employing an estimated 35, 402 staff, comprising both fixed, term and part time workers. Operating under an Agreement with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the work of the BBC is primarily funded by an annual television licensing fee paid by companies and British households that use any type of equipment to receive or record live broadcasts. The BBC's domestic broadcasting services are financed by television licenses and the Government sets the level of the license fee which is also used to fund the BBC's television, radio, and online services that cover UK, nationally. This also funds the BBC World Service, that broadcasts internationally in 28 languages and provides radio, television and online services in [Arabic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic) and [Persian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_language), reaching an average of 210 million people a week.

The BBC has a governing body called the BBC Trust which issues a service license to every BBC service and sets the key direction through four strategic objectives for the BBC. It works to uphold the independence and standards of the Corporation. As a body it is separate from the BBC Executive body that manages the key delivery of BBC’s services and is led by the Director-General. This entry discusses the growth and evolution of the BBC from a radio company to a globally influential broadcaster. In the process, it also traces it many milestones and controversies that have contributed to its expansion and reputation.

# Founding years: Establishing a presence

Renowned for its high journalistic standards, the BBC plays an important role in the lives of British people as well as loyal listeners around the world. Colloquially referred to as Auntie Beeb or The Beeb, it has been described as the most visible international identity of any British institution. It is a curious behemoth, being a conglomerate while remaining in the public sector with a worldwide reputation for its programs and reportage. John Reith, a Scottish Calvinist, appointed General Manager in 1922, a few weeks after its first official broadcast, set what is known as the Reithian directives and which the BBC still follows—inform, educate and entertain.

From the beginning Reith was keen that the BBC remained a public service entity rather than a corporate or commercial one. The 1926 general strike in the United Kingdom proved to be a turning point in the growth of the BBC. Called by the General Council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) it was an unsuccessful attempt to force the government to implement better working conditions and wage protection for the beleaguered coal miners. The government was ready and ensured that essential services were not hit but the production and printing of newspapers was affected in a way that left the BBC as the main source of news. There was a bit a tussle between Winston Churchill, who wanted to use the broadcasting prowess of the BBC to best advantage, and, Reith who wanted to postulate an impartial character to the BBC. The coverage of the miners by the BBC impressed the public who had no idea that broadcasts from the Labor Party had been banned by government orders. The miners nicknamed the BBC the ‘BFC’ for British Falsehood Company. Official BBC Historian and Professor of Media History, Jean Seaton, has described this as the start of “modern propaganda in its British form (Curran & Seaton, 2003).” Churchill remained one of the BBC’s fiercest critics, and much had been written about his battle with the entity. Feeling excluded from the airwaves prior to World War II, Churchill “complained that he had been very badly treated...and that he was always muzzled by the BBC (Robinson, 2012).” This has largely been considered the motive behind the Television Act 1954 that permitted the creation of ITV, Britain’s first commercial network, which is today considered a competitor.

In its long and distinguished history, this was the earliest controversy the BBC faced but it certainly was not the last. Arguments over its impartiality has risen since 1927, the time it became a public body. During the cold war, the BBC had MI5 (United Kingdom's domestic counterintelligence and security agency and is part of its intelligence machinery) officers vetting applications. As a 2006 report in The Observer said, various secret files showed that when the conflict with the Nazis was at its zenith, the BBC was infused by anti-communist suspicion bordering on paranoia to remove so called subversives. Documents later made public, by MI5 show that folk singer Ewan MacColl and his wife and theatre producer, Joan Littlewood, had been banned. Scholars have compared this to the CBS newsroom at the height of McCarthyism in the US.

Reith’s legacy is not without its fair share of quibbles either. In her 2006 book, *My Father—Reith of the BBC,* Marista Leishman, his daughter, said that he banned the playing of jazz music on the BBC, writing a diary entry that said, “Germany has banned hot jazz and I’m sorry that we should be behind in dealing with this filthy product of modernity (Leishman, 2006).” This had little impact on the prominence of Jazz which as a 2019 survey showed was beating classical music in audience preferences. During the war, there was strict censoring of music from axis nations. Today the organization has an extremely strict stance on editorializing matters whether on air or on social media. In 1933, Bartlett's on-air commentary on the Nation’s Disarmament Conference invoked intense criticism leading to his resignation.

The BBC has been criticized as being a supporting of elite views long before the 2019 Naga Munchetty controversy where the celebrated presenter of programs like BBC Breakfast News, was reprimanded for her comments on racism. In 1965, The War Game, a British pseudo-documentary film on nuclear war and its devastation, written and directed by Peter Watkins was withdrawn because its contents were deemed much too alarming to be broadcast. In 1967, it won an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature. Despite such complains, the BBC remains one of the most trusted sources of news in the UK. For example, during major incidents with global ramifications like the 2005 London Bombings, audience turn overwhelmingly to the BBC.

While these incidents may seem very against the spirit of unbiased reporting that the BBC adopts, impartiality, for the BBC, is extremely important. Reith, in his book Broadcast Over Britain (1924), had mentioned that persuading the public about concepts of impartiality would not be easy but it was extremely necessary. These views are amply supported by the director general, Tony Hall, who believes that in the present context, we must also consider how the venerable conventions of journalism work under the pressures and demands that changing times bring. Perhaps, the 1940 explosion that rocked the building while Bruce Belfrage read the 9 pm news is an indicator of the way the organization values news and audiences. Seven BBC staff members were killed. Audiences heard the explosion as Belfrage paused for a moment in the dust covered studio before completing the bulletin.

The BBC has grown not just nationally but internationally as well with its World Service. The BBC News is the largest news gathering procedure in the world. This system provides service to network services like the BBC News service and BBC World News. To reach audiences and increase its reach, the corporation has applications, podcasts and its famed BBC Mobile as well as the usual email and other digital alerts.

To ensure seamless service, the BBC has built a strong online presence that includes an easy to search archive and a well updated website which has grown from the BBC Networking Club, its first online service launched on 11 May 1994. BBC figures say that this is Europe’s most popular site, visited by millions in the UK alone. The site is funded by licensing fee, but advertisers can display ads that can be viewed from audiences out the UK and Europe.

# Constituting international services

The worlds largest international broadcasting service, BBC World Service, is owned and operated by the BBC. Funded by the profits of BBC Studios, UK’s television license fee and limited advertising, the BBC broadcasts in over 40 languages, reaching an average of 210 million people, per week, via television, radio and online a week (via TV, radio and online). This licensing free has often been criticized by other broadcasters as being unfair advantage that prevents fair competition. This service that broadcasts 24 hours, was inaugurated 19 December 1932 as the BBC Empire Service. At the outset, not much was expected from this and Reith had his doubts thinking that they may not be very intriguing. The first disruptions to the service happened in 1985 due to protests when workers rallied against the British government's decision to ban the documentary featuring an interview with Martin McGuinness, the Irish republican Sinn Féin politician who was the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland from May 2007 to January 2017 but the project reconvened and recent figures show that it returned profits amounting to £210.5m to the BBC.

Today the BBC World Service encompasses a 24-hour English global radio network and other services in 27 other languages. Most of these programs are available on the BBC website and mobile applications. As its website says, its primary role is to use BBC brands and shows to build its reputation audiences and champion British creativity globally. The UK government allocated the service £289 million (over a five-year period ending in 2020) and in its largest expansion since the 1940s, in November 2016, the BBC announced that it would start broadcasting in languages like Amharic and Igbo.  During 2017, figures from the BBC showed that the BBC Natural History, premium drama and local adaptations of hit UK shows were globally its most popular programs. Besides, the impact of Planet Earth II, Sherlock and Doctor Foster can be felt in different parts of the world. For example, Norwegians are very fond of Father Brown and DCI Banks is very prominent in Sweden. News is at the core of BBC’s identity. The Global News podcast is broadcast twice a day and figures from the BBC show that it was downloaded more than 300 million times.

In Africa, the BBC World Service website lists 80 FM stations broadcasting content from the UK, South Arica, Ascension Island, Cyprus and the BBC Atlantic Relay Station with much of the schedule focusing on Africa specific programs like Africa, Have Your Say and Focus Africa.

In Asia, the largest audiences are in those listening in the languages of English, Hindi, Urdu, Nepali, Bengali, Sinhala, Tamil, Marathi and other major languages of South Asia. In these areas, BBC broadcasters are very beloved names. But censorship in countries of Russia, Iran, Iraq, Burma and China have often seen BBC World services, especially programs cast in English and Mandarin being jammed. In a 2012 World Service submission to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee inquiry into the FCO’s Performance and Finances, the BBC, had included a section on media freedom and noted that “concerns have been growing about the global threat to impartial and independent news through censorship and intimidation”. Strict censorship at the BBC existed during the World War II when nothing could be added to pre-decided news casts. Its wide radio channels across Europe was used to transmit American broadcasts across Europe.

# Strong regional broadcasting

When the second World War broke out, the BBC replaced its national regional programming with a single channel called the BBC Home Service. The BBC’s international broadcasts are popular but as a broadcasting organization it also has a very strong focus on regional programming. In the document Extending Choice, its preliminary contribution to the public debate, the Corporation unambiguously stated that the BBC is the British Broadcasting Corporation; not to be mistaken as the London Broadcasting Corporation. It made clear that keeping in touch with the views, changing tastes and priorities of audiences throughout the UK was imperative and that programming had to reflect the diversity that different regions and cultures in the country had.

Recently, the organization announced that nearly 450 jobs in its English regional TV news and current affairs, local radio and online news were to be cut. New program changes are also on the anvil. The magazine program Inside Out will be replaced by 30-minute investigative episodes made in Newcastle, London, Birmingham, Leeds, Bristol and Norwich.

**Important milestones**

CNN has described The BBC as “one of the biggest commissioners of content in the world and an important global launching pad for seminal shows and creators from Dr. Who to Phoebe Waller-Bridge (Gold, 2020).” With 75 bureaus in the world, the BBC has many milestones to its credit beginning from its first broadcast in 1922 to its television launched in 1936 but suspended till 1939 for World War II. Its live broadcast of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II was watched by more than 27 million people. It was among the earliest broadcasters in 1948 to televise the Olympic. In July 1985, the BBC Live Aid concerts was among the largest satellite linkups with an estimated global viewership of 400 million viewers. In 1951, The Archers, the worlds longest running drama with over 19,200 episodes was aired. In the EastEnders, on air since 1985, the BBC used concepts of entertainment and education to talk about AIDS and its aftermath. The BBC aired in color in 1967. In a recent report, Ofcom said that the BBC must do much more to ensure relevance to audiences used to YouTube and social media for news.

Young people are an important aspect of the BBC and few organizations have done as much as the BBC to bring computers, coding and programming to young people in the UK. In 2015, BBC launched the Make it Digital, a major UK-wide initiative focused on encouraging young people to create digital products. Aimed at addressing the severe digital skills shortage, the project ensured that school students in England and Wales received a micro:bit, a pocket-sized codable computer, developed by the BBC to become more active media consumers. Created in conjunction with 29 other organizations, the BBC worked with Computing at School to equip teachers with the skills to use micro:bit effectively in classrooms.

In keeping with the times, on April 2020, it announced that it will provide daily programming comprising quizzes, articles and podcasts and other children's lessons to help students with schoolwork during this lockdown. The BBC has tied up with companies like the Royal Shakespeare Company and Puffin Books to support education in the UK. This is among the largest education efforts the BBC has ever initiated.

It is following and seeking out audiences online and on social media. The BBCs approach to social media has been visual and through the BBC shorts, short 15 seconds videos about trending stories, the organization plans to draw viewers to Instagram, Twitter and Tumbler. A 2019 Ofcom report has stated that audiences on social media seek out the BBC as a reliable and authoritative source of news often giving BBC news and stories more likes and shares than its nearest competitor, The Guardian. Comments online are almost always extremely positive. Audiences vent about current affairs rather than the stories posted on social media. As its presence on social media show, the BBC is greatly valued for its documentaries and humanistic coverage of issues. Their famed impartiality is present online as well and personal views and editorializing are not allowed online as well. It has a very strict approach to trolls especially in the sports section. They clearly state that they will block offenders and report issues to the authorities, in a special move to maintain and ensure equality in the coverage of sports including women’s sports.

**Criticisms of relevance**

In 2020, the BBC turned 98. Critics say that institution needs radical transformation to stay relevant. Its licensing model, the corporation’s oldest source of income, is considered an anachronism and recent controversies like the gender pay gap controversy where records showed that only men were the highest wage earners have certainly not helped. A Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (University of Oxford) stated in a report that the BBC accounted for 31 per cent of scheduled television viewing but only 1.5 per cent viewers engaged with its digital media components.

Yet the BBC’s in-depth reporting, holding officials accountable, investigative journalism, creative programming and reflecting the diversity of the country is more important than ever, in an extremely polarized and uncivil world. Politics is more populist, and streaming services and over the top media platforms are posing a serious challenge to the ways, audiences consume news. Is the BBC still relevant and how is it poised to handle the disruptions of the digital age? The BBC set the standards for public service broadcasting globally and its losses provide impetus to those opposed to the public service model of broadcasting. In its early years, its competition was the concert halls and other media like theatre and the recording companies. Today its closest competitors are CNN, ITV, Channel 4, Sky PLC and Viacom.

Once accused of dismally underserving minorities, the organization has emerged a strong believer and supporter of diversity. The BBC announced in June, this year, that it plans to spend $124m in more diverse programming. Now the corporation has a rule that that all new programming must have at least 20 percent diverse talent starting in April 2021. Apprenticeship programs have been expanded to appeal to those from all backgrounds and include 10% differently abled people. Emphasizing their dedication to diversity and representation, the BBC Director General has also, recently, made clear that strength of the BBC lies its breadth and reach in the UK which puts them in a unique position to lead and show by example how to address and work with the demands of changing times and effect true and lasting social change.

*Paromita Pain*

Further Readings

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