

**“It’s the news,
stupid”**

Jean Seaton

How war and the battle for truth shaped the BBC

“Broadcasting House was in fact dedicated to the strangest project of the war, or of any war, that is, telling the truth. Without prompting the BBC had decided that truth was more important than consolation, and, in the long run would be more effective... Truth ensures trust, but not victory, or even happiness.”¹

Impartial news that seeks to serve us is the only thing that steadies national life; this is what the BBC is for. At home and abroad, news and information are now in real time merged in the Ukrainian conflict. After decades of a kind of security, we now live in vertiginous, unstable times: the international order is topsy-turvy. Democracy is facing a tough test, by a new divisive nationalism, based on the opportunistic weaponisation of resentment against any available ‘other’.

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During wars and crises, impartial candid news is the glue that binds, the frank appraisal that prompts realistic strategy, the beast that slays fantasies and the touchstone of common facts and shared humanity. The most important thing the BBC does is tell the news as well as it can; the project is to investigate reality and show people what has happened without fear or favour. Public service news does not seek to monetise our attention, sell us to interested parties or shape us into fodder. And while the BBC may be the cornerstone, Channel 4 and ITV News are key parts of this, in an ecosystem based on the simple, but difficult to achieve, principle of reaching the widest possible audience with reliable and trusted information,

1 Fitzgerald P (2003) *Human Stories*, HarperCollins

allowing people to make up their own minds. We have never needed to ‘level up’ understanding more urgently than now.

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WAR SHAPED THE EARLY YEARS OF THE BBC

BBC values were forged in response to the first world war, and repeatedly tested by later conflicts. The corporation was founded a century ago out of revulsion against the misleading propaganda of that war, at a time when there was concern over how the invention of broadcasting would affect politics. There was even fear that voters would act not according to their material interests or ideals, but because public views could be distorted by foreign (or domestic) ideologues. This was soon after the Russian Revolution, and Bolsheviks were discovered inciting the British working class from a suburban house in Penge, so this was not an abstract concern. An alternative anxiety was that the public’s views would be bought behind their backs by ‘big business’. None of these worries seems dated now.

John Reith, the first director general and architect of the BBC as a public service, saw broadcasting as a means to share information on an equal basis, so that individuals would “be in a position to make up their own minds on many matters of vital moment”.² It was to make people’s lives richer, and their choices more intelligent and informed, so that society functioned better.

If the BBC was created, at least in part, out of a reaction to the first world war, it was only made into a recognisable and unique institution by the second world war. The government planned to take the corporation over completely as war broke out, using the danger that the BBC’s transmitters might have been used by enemy bombers to target bombing as a pretext for what would have been political control. The BBC might have become a ‘state’ broadcaster had not the ingenuity of BBC engineers solved the problem. After 1940 the government was then led by Winston Churchill, who had reason to distrust the BBC since it had treated him as a maverick and anti-appeaser and kept him off the air for 11 years. Early on, as David Hendy points out in his illuminating new history of the BBC, there was pushback when the government asked for the “selection and omission” of some items of news. The ensuing battle “was an awkward foretaste of the

2 Reith J (1924) *Broadcast Over Britain*, Hodder and Stoughton

close but fretful relationship between the BBC and the government”,³ according to Hendy. Only with a shared sense of determining what is going wrong can shared solutions emerge. “How terribly strong they must be” was the observation of a German prisoner of war in the UK when he heard appalling British defeats reported on the BBC.⁴

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DIFFICULT WATCHING – THE BBC AND BRITAIN’S ‘SMALL WARS’

The BBC then developed a set of tools that still work:

- consistency, so that different audiences were not told different stories
- cross-checking with audiences
- no preaching, but instead a ruthless insistence on giving people news they actually needed for survival.

And war always brought the BBC into confrontation with government, especially when public opinion was deeply divided, as in the Suez crisis in 1956. The Conservative government objected to the fact that, as part of a review of the British press, the BBC’s widely listened to all over the middle east Arabic service had quoted an editorial in the *Manchester Guardian*, which condemned the invasion. This was then compounded when the BBC gave the Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell a right of reply to Anthony Eden’s prime ministerial broadcast in which Gaitskell was highly critical of the invasion.⁵

This tradition of reporting the full spectrum of British opinion, on both internal and external broadcasts, was followed in the knowledge that any discrepancy would fatally undermine the BBC’s reputation for impartiality.

3 Hendy D (2022) *The BBC: A people’s history*, Profile Books

4 Briggs A (1970) *The War of Words 1939–1945: Volume 3 of the Official History of the BBC*, Oxford University Press

5 For accounts of the conflict between the BBC and the government over Suez, see Briggs A (1995) *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Competition*, vol 5, Oxford University Press, pp 75–137; Mansell G (1982) *Let Truth Be Told: 50 Years of BBC external broadcasting*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp 227–240; Rawnsley GD (1996) *Radio Diplomacy and Propaganda: The BBC and VOA in international politics, 1956–64*, Macmillan, pp 18–66. See also Webb A (2009) ‘London calling: BBC external services, Whitehall and the Cold War, 1944–57’, PhD thesis, Queen Mary, University of London.

In the end, the government did not carry through its threats to take over the BBC during the Suez crisis and the BBC reaffirmed the principle that broadcasts overseas could not be modified for the sake of political convenience. To young British soldiers about to risk their lives, hearing that a large section of the British public thought the enterprise morally wrong and practically doomed, must have felt unsettling. Nevertheless, it firmly established the superiority of strategic broadcast objectives over tactical political warfare as the surest way of retaining an audience over the long term.

Suez cemented the BBC's reputation for independence and its credibility. The Cold War led to a huge evolution in BBC broadcasting abroad. It was greeted with gratitude all over the Eastern bloc after the fall of the Berlin Wall. But each of the wars and conflicts that followed produced their own clash with government.

The 30 years of conflict at home in Northern Ireland tested the BBC and brought it into sharp opposition with successive governments. BBC journalists wanted to hold power to account across the board, bringing them into repeated clashes with governments who wanted to deny legitimacy to armed and locally powerful groups. Sticking to its principles, the BBC accumulated a wide cross-community audience in Northern Ireland by being first, fastest and best at the news people needed to navigate in a place at war with itself. The BBC translated raw information into ideas and programmes, and learnt how to deal with defeat, setback, loss and how to be candid. But tensions ran high, culminating in Margaret Thatcher's 1987 'broadcasting ban', when the government forbade the broadcasting of the voices of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and other militant groups. This was both absurd and damaged the BBC, the World Service, the government and the nation at home and abroad.⁶

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Similarly, there were claims during the Falklands War in 1982 that the BBC was not patriotic enough, not willing to talk about 'our' troops. And so it went on, with disputes 20 years later over what was reported about Tony Blair's reasons for going to war in Iraq subsequently leading to the

6 See Seaton J (2016) *'Pinkoes and Traitors': The BBC and the nation 1974–1987*, Profile Books, chapter 3

resignation of a director general. Through all this the BBC continued as far as it could to report what was happening; not what the government wanted to be happening, not even what seemed the most likely thing to be happening, but what was actually going on.

THE BATTLE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Does this still work in an age when people are fodder for algorithms that draw them into “conspiracy theories which provide a bottomless well of distraction for a community of believers”, in the words of Barack Obama’s speechwriter Ben Rhodes:⁷ Too few have the presence of mind of Orwell’s Winston Smith from *1984*, as he contemplated: “The sacred principles of *ingsoc*, *newspeak*, *doublethink*, the mutability of the past ... He felt as though he were wandering in the forests of the sea bottom, lost in a monstrous world where he himself was the monster.”⁸ Propagandists have merely learnt what advertisers understood very well and viral advertising provides. In these new conditions, does truth work? The answer may be that as in witch crazes in the 17th century, or tulip or dot-com investment manias in the 18th and 20th centuries, or the belief in fascism and communist regimes, people do get swept away. But reality remains and we need new, ingenious, at-scale ways of describing it.

We are in a long-drawn-out battle for understanding, the consequences of which are hugely consequential. The unknowing and widespread sharing of wrong information, the knowing creation of misleading information, the deliberate, hostile, spreading of malignly intended wrong information and the mere destabilisation of certainty – all of these are very successful, from anti-vaxxers to climate change deniers to conspiracy theories, to weird views about celebrities. If you add feelings to the brew, personally held, apparently private and identity-driven emotional attachments, potentially manipulated and driven by propaganda, then the capacity to apprehend reality may indeed be destabilised. In the face of this problem, the public service broadcasting model – which has news at its centre but which unpacks and reflects on events creatively through drama, comedy and storytelling in the public interest – is an even more potent instrument for a more rational future.

7 Rhodes R (2021) *After the Fall: Being American in the world we made*, Random House, p 153

8 Orwell G (1949) *1984*, Secker & Warburg

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We need to battle on all these fronts, at a time when there is a real kinetic war going on that is reshaping the world. The day Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, 24 February 2022, is as pivotal a date as 3 September 1939 or 11 September 2001. In this environment, dis-, mis- and mal-information cannot be tackled by preaching or manipulation (although they can indeed be manipulated). Rational policy, of the kind pursued both in the Second World War and the Cold War, would be to hang on to the benefits of public service broadcasting news like mad, and indeed to unleash its imaginative scope to get beside audiences. The BBC should not be cut; it should be bigger.

While in the past it might have been possible to see the BBC's international offer as a ‘nice to have’, developments in the international situation make it a clear necessity. There is a market failure internationally for trusted, sincerely built and accurate news and information. Yet the BBC audience abroad has doubled.⁹ The BBC is one carefully built institution with some heft in this space and the right values in place ready to grow.

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50 million Americans now use the BBC's news each week,¹⁰ and 56 per cent of them find it ‘trustworthy’, far higher than for their domestic news providers. Meanwhile the international audience for the BBC since 2018 has doubled,¹¹ and there has recently been a huge growth of visitors to the BBC's enhanced Russian and Ukrainian news sites. All this would make a compelling national case for the UK government to double down in supporting the BBC and all public service broadcasting as a matter of national and international interest.

9 Advanced Television (2021) ‘BBC: international audience doubled in 10 years’, Advanced Television website, 24 November 2021. <https://advanced-television.com/2021/11/24/bbc-audience-has-doubled-in-last-10-years/>

10 Braw E (2021) ‘The United States needs a BBC’, FP website, 28 January 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/28/bbc-partisan-news-united-states-polarization/>

11 Digital reach outside of the UK has grown by 23 per cent year on year. See: BBC Media Centre (2021) ‘BBC on track to reach half a billion people globally ahead of its centenary in 2022’, press release. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/2021/bbc-reaches-record-global-audience>

Of course, it is not simple. The challenges the BBC faces abroad are considerable. In the case of South Asia, as the UK has a large domestic population with South Asian roots and connections, these problems rebound at home as well as in the region. Home-grown nationalism in India, amplified by audiences and communities here at a distance from conditions back in South Asia, rebounds into the UK in ways that influence political calculations unexpectedly. Different perspectives on national interest, different sets of long-term strategic alliances with Russia (in India) and China (in Pakistan) and a sense that the Ukrainian war is a “white war” (the language of some Indian journalists, not mine), all contribute to a sense that the BBC’s coverage is from a ‘biased’ Western viewpoint. South Asian countries have very limited reporting capacity from overseas, which also plays into a layered information space, where the comfortable assumptions we might share of the injustice and savagery of the Russian invasion are challenged. But the region is also subject to an extensive, subtle and energetic Russian mal-information drive.¹²

ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE ‘CULTURE WAR’

So is the government’s battle with public service broadcasters just part of a wider story? The slashing of the funds for the BBC by nearly 25 per cent over the past decade, with more swingeing cuts to come, the inevitable emaciation of overseas reporting (just when we need to understand the world better), the apparent casual cancelling of the licence fee by the culture secretary Nadine Dorries on Twitter, the fiddling with public appointments to the chair of Ofcom and the BBC and Channel 4 boards, the promise to sell off Channel 4 – are these just the cut and thrust of normal political interaction? After all, the BBC is always in trouble when the opposition is weak, when a government has been in power for a long time and when there is a sharp ideological shift (as there was when Mrs Thatcher became prime minister). Questioning the power of government, the BBC (and other public service broadcasters) look like the opposition if they do not have an opposition to shelter behind.

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12 Miller C (2022) ‘Who’s behind #IStandWithPutin?’, *Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/russian-propaganda-zelensky-information-war/629475/>

And importantly, for the first time, the deliberately provoked clash with government is really not at all about ‘the thing’ or a dispute at all. For the current government, even mighty institutions like the BBC – ones that have variably but powerfully represented the best of us – are just chaff, fuel for the fire of winning. Attacking the BBC repeatedly, flamed by a press that has direct commercial interest in a smaller BBC, diminishing the BBC financially repeatedly cutting BBC revenues over decade in power, by not giving interviews and unsuccessfully attempting to avoid press scrutiny by turning No 10 into a shambolic press centre, by fiddling politically with appointments across the whole public service media system, by castigating the BBC as being opposed to “hard-working British people”, as the culture secretary Nadine Dorries did in parliament,¹³ are carefully plotted but essentially arbitrary eye-catching distractions, intended as a new front in the culture wars. Dorries, rather adroitly, managed to turn her intended privatisation of Channel 4 into a battle against the ‘left’, against whom she was battling to ‘save’ the channel. It is a policy of summoning up dragons to slay – and in doing so casually vandalising institutions. Of course, the Conservative party is a machine, as Andrew Gamble pointed out many years ago,¹⁴ for winning power above any notion of ideological consistency.

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This is quite a different order of threat than the BBC has faced before in its 100-year history. Yet during the coronavirus pandemic, when it mattered to people, BBC audiences rocketed. Now, when everyday life will become more insecure and uncertain, the BBC and its news is necessary. All wars are information wars.

Jean Seaton is professor of media history at the University of Westminster, director of the Orwell Foundation and has written widely on broadcasting and media history. She is a founding member of the British Broadcasting Challenge.

13 17th January 2022

14 See Gamble A (1974) *The Conservative Nation*, Routledge. See also the contemporary discussion of these ideas in: *Political Quarterly* (2021) 92:3, pp385–585.