

The Early Courtship of Television and Sport: The Case of Cricket, 1938-56.

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Abstract

The televising of cricket in Britain began in the pioneering days of broadcasting during the inter-War period. In a contemporary context the relationship between television and sport is now so well ingrained that it is difficult to imagine one without the other, as the income from rights fees and the exposure of sponsors and advertisers through the small screen drives the professional sports economy. This article traces a specific narrative of the early coverage of Test and County Cricket in England. Based on archival evidence held by the MCC and the BBC the article outlines how the marriage of television and cricket as a spectator sport tentatively began in 1938 and 1939, and then developed more formally in the decade after the Second World War. The history of negotiations over access to cricket, first with the public service broadcaster the BBC, and subsequently by commercial television, known as Independent Television (ITV) from 1955, reveals the origins of rights fees to sport and how competition for exclusive coverage led to regulatory intervention to ensure fairness between broadcasters. The relationship between the MCC and the County cricket clubs is explored in the context of managing the balance between television as commercial opportunity and as a threat to attendance at matches.

The early courtship of television and sport: the case of cricket, 1938-56.

It is strange, now, when television and radio coverage are so much a part of cricket's image – and its revenue – to realize how strong and recent was the opposition to it. My own experience began only in 1946 but then there was positive hostility to the broadcasting of cricket on the part of a small – but positive – minority of players and a considerable proportion of administrators.

John Arlott¹

The relationship between television and sport is now so well ingrained that it is difficult to imagine one without the other. Television drives the economy of sport in conjunction with sponsorship and sport provides the viewers for niche sports channels in an increasingly competitive global television environment. As Garry Whannel² recognised, the triangular relationship between sport, television and sponsorship began to transform the cultural nature of sport from the mid-1960s onward. Whannel characterised this tryst as 'an unholy alliance'. David Rowe³ has convincingly argued the case that televised sport mirrors the evolution of a relationship, from courtship, marriage and honeymoon, to a state of maturity that has its ups and downs but is firmly institutionalised. This article traces a particular narrative in the historical development of this metaphorical marriage, focussing on the formative years of televised cricket from early outside broadcasts in 1938 to the resumption of the British Broadcasting Corporation's television service in 1946 to the rise of commercial television, known as Independent Television (ITV), in 1955. The period is important because, as with any courtship, the two institutions had to learn about each other, produce common bonds and share aspirations. Television in Britain was experimental, developed under the institutional shadow of radio – 'true broadcasting' – and only began to realise its popular appeal after the Coronation in 1953 and the development of popular entertainment programming by ITV

from 1955.

Sport played its role in popularising television, bringing new audiences to the medium. It is therefore instructive to look at cricket, a sport that was at the height of its popularity in the immediate post-war years. However, even by the early 1950's there is evidence that the sport was facing the early stages of financial crisis. From the mid-1950's there was a steady decline in attendances and economic stability that blighted the game into the early 1960s.⁴ Although gate receipts remained the key income stream, fees from television opened up a new income stream to the sport which began to find a new lease of life through the innovation of the limited over game in a new era of television and sponsorship in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵

The focus here is on the evolution of institutional and personal relations between cricket and television that pre-empted the eventual marriage of the televisual era of sport. In particular, this archaeological survey of correspondence between the MCC, the County Cricket clubs, the BBC and commercial television points to the tentative nature of economic, social and cultural bonds between television and sport in Britain during this period. The preservation and cataloguing of correspondence on broadcasting held in the MCC archive from 1938-1956 is substantive. When coupled with information from the BBC's written archives the information enables an analysis of how the negotiation process evolved, the strategy of the cricket authorities in their dealings with television, how the introduction of competition from commercial television impacted on this process, and the regulatory issues thrown up by rights ownership and exclusive agreements. Even still, there are gaps in our knowledge about both the people and organisations involved. While personal and institutional motives can be gleaned from the content and tone of correspondence they do not help us grasp a full understanding of the wider place of cricket and television in British society. Research on how televised sport was received during this period remains under-researched.

Moreover, the emergent battle between the BBC and ITV is only partially recorded in the archival data and also requires further research and analysis.

This article is not directly concerned with the technical coverage of cricket or the development of commentary technique; both are well served in a number of autobiographies and popular histories.⁶ However, aspects of production and presentation were relevant to the negotiations and relations between the broadcasters and the MCC. The article constructs a narrative of how the MCC grew to understand and respond to television as a new popular cultural form in a new emergent era of mass communication and sports commerce. In a wider context, it helps us understand the processes of commercialisation that grew in most spectator sports during the inter-war and immediate post-war years. As Jack Williams has noted, profiteering from cricket was considered pernicious and generally against the moral code of the sport.⁷ Broadcasting began to challenge this hegemony, not least by providing a new source of revenue and promoting the sport to a wider audience. Professionalism grew apace after the war with leading players earning a comparatively 'comfortable living from cricket'.⁸ The advent of commercial broadcasting in 1954, brought further pressure on the game to financially capitalise from competition for television coverage. As the following narrative suggests it set in motion a series of economic and moral dilemmas for cricket's hierarchy to resolve and manage the rights of access for broadcasters as well as influencing the wider structure and regulation of sports broadcasting in Britain.

Televised Cricket Before the War

The BBC had pioneered radio coverage of cricket during the 1930s, principally through the distinctive mellow tones of the commentator Howard Marshall under the tutelage of Seymour Joly de Lotbiniere (known as 'Lobby') the Director of Outside Broadcasting from 1935.⁹ The BBC's

earliest coverage of cricket in 1928 and 1929 had been characterised by short ‘eye-witness’ accounts, but from 1935 Lobby was convinced full running commentaries on cricket were possible and Marshall covered the Test series of England and South Africa the same year. However, the relationship between the BBC and the cricketing authorities during the 1930s was largely restrained. This was in part due to the power of the Press Association.¹⁰ The immediacy of broadcasting was a distinct threat to the livelihood of the press and newspapers lobbied hard to retain their status as the primary outlet of sports news. The hours of coverage were therefore constrained and strictly enforced. Nevertheless by 1936 Lobby, assured of the appeal of cricket to listeners, set about securing more formal arrangements with the Secretary of the MCC Colonel Rowan Rait-Kerr mapping out coverage for an entire season. An agreement to pay a facility fee commensurate with the estimated appeal of any particular match was established. Coverage of three Tests against India in 1936 cost the BBC 50 guineas and for the less attractive visit of New Zealand in 1937 a fee of 25 guineas was agreed. In order to keep the fees low Lobby tried to persuade Rait-Kerr of the reciprocal enhancements broadcasting brought to the sport including ‘a beneficial effect upon public interest in County cricket in general.’¹¹ The prospect of County cricket being given an injection of interest came in the context of the 1937 Findlay Commission that revealed the game as a whole was losing £27,000 per year.¹² Herein also resided an ideological point the BBC had cultivated around its coverage of sport now applied to cricket; that broadcasting brought with it exposure and promotion.

BBC outside broadcast managers and producers were cast in a similar mould to the administrators of cricket - public school, Oxford or Cambridge educated. As Richard Holt has suggested the ‘shared experience of public school offered a splendid excuse for a new kind of exclusive sociability later on.’¹³ It was not unusual for meetings between administrators of sport and the BBC hierarchy to be conducted over a glass of sherry, lunch or dinner. Meetings and correspondence was

cordial and urbane. The BBC men were arguably more progressive in attitude regarding the promotion of sport. Radio and then television was in search of drama and excitement through sport, whereas many of the cricket traditionalists stuck to the amateur, pastoral idyll.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it was in a context of emergent convivial relations between the OB department and the MCC that the BBC's television service opened its relations with cricket.

The BBC's first television broadcast from Alexandra Palace had been transmitted to the London area in 1936 to a limited audience of 30,000 viewers. The first cricket match to be televised in England was the Lords Test between England and Australia on 28 June 1938. As with radio, the desire to cover sport drove early pioneers of the new technology to achieve amazing results from very rudimentary equipment. Engineering graduate Ian Orr Ewing orchestrated the coverage from Lords using three Marconi Emitron cameras and recalled later in life when he had turned to a career as a Tory politician, the technology was held together with 'much string and sealing wax'.¹⁵

The MCC records reveal negotiations for access to the London tests at Lords and the Oval began with approaches by a young television executive Philip Dorté toward the end of 1937. In this early phase of development television OB's operated separately to Lobby's radio OB department, but from the outset the MCC were keen 'to make one omnibus agreement to include both broadcasting and television'.¹⁶ The reference to 'broadcasting' hinted at the perceived dominance of radio in the minds of MCC administrators – reflecting the wider popular association of television as something of a 'sideshow' to the main form of broadcasting of the era. This balance did not shift until the 1950s, but would do so to dramatic effect as fears of the impact of television on first-class cricket grew exponentially as coverage increased and demands for higher facility fees followed.

Dorté, along with Michael Standing from Radio, did the reconnaissance work to ensure both radio

and television could be catered for and the BBC offered a combined facilities fee of 100 guineas – 70 for radio and 30 for television. Throughout the 1930s, and even into the 1960s, the BBC viewed payment to cover sport as remuneration for lost revenue through the use of seating areas and for access for all its equipment and transmitters. For the first televised game, cameras placed on the Mound Stand and the roof of the Main Stand gave a poor and oblique view of the wicket.¹⁷ Never, in this era of pioneering outside broadcasts from sport, did the BBC admit to paying a ‘rights’ fee – a payment for the *right* to broadcast from sport that implied economic rents for copyright. This distinction would prove key to specific political debates in the late-1940s and early-1950s regarding the revision of copyright legislation in the UK.

For their part, the MCC did have a series of concerns. Foremost was the threat of television to well established rights agreements with the newsreel company British Movietone News and also, with regard to newspapers, contractual agreements with the General Press Agency that ensured access to cricket journalists and photographers. Rait-Kerr insisted the BBC agreed to some strict rules governing what could and couldn’t be done with their transmission. In a letter to OB executive Max Muller, he insisted that ‘no film or paper reproduction of any television image will be published, sold or parted with, and that no pictorial display of televised images will be displayed in any cinema.’¹⁸

A striking feature of this paragraph is the staunch protectionist streak that runs through its general mien, and its attempt to emasculate the BBC’s fledgling service within the context of existing economic and political relations with rival media outlets. The attempt to suppress the BBC in this manner was not unusual. From the BBC’s very inception it had had to battle against the prejudice of the Press Association and newspaper proprietors who rightly feared the immediacy of radio and subsequently television. For similar reasons television also posed a threat to newsreel companies.

There was also internal strife at the BBC. Typical of any bureaucratic organisation, BBC departments were strictly hierarchical and more or less distinct entities. As well as developing OB sports coverage in radio and television, there was also sports reportage emanating from the BBC's news department. Sports news was the domain of Angus MacKay. In 1938, he was building his own brand of broadcast sports journalism that would eventually blossom in to the post-war programme *Sports Report*. The programme's signature tune 'Out of the Blue' by Hubert Bath became a defining motif of BBC radio sports coverage from 1948. MacKay, unbeknown to Lobby and Dorté, had made an approach to the Australian team management to report from their net practice and conduct interviews for BBC News prior to the first Test at Lords. Before their arrival in England the Australians had conveyed to the MCC and through them to the OB department they were not open to any recordings while practicing for the first match. Rait-Kerr, clearly exasperated, wrote a pointed and curt letter to remind the BBC the Australians were off-limits. Lobby quickly replied and apologised for fear of souring relations even before the series had begun and conveyed his own irritation at MacKay's actions. The unfortunate breakdown in communication was a portent of stormier times between the two departments. As the BBC racing correspondent and commentator Peter Bromley later recalled of the post-War years, 'A Chinese wall soon developed between these two departments, and there was little or no co-operation and certainly no goodwill'.¹⁹

The 1938 Ashes series was one of the sporting highlights of the decade. It pitched Don Bradman's Australia against an England side fielding the young Len Hutton. As a form of entertainment the series was highly prized by the media and an expectant public. It was also commercially valuable to the MCC. The BBC transmitted up to three hours a day of each Test from Lords and the Oval. The Oval had seen a record-breaking innings by Hutton who scored 364 batting for a mammoth 13 hours. It was a stoic feat that ultimately spelt an end of timeless Test Matches where a match did

not end until a result ensued.

1939

In 1939 the BBC returned to the MCC and proposed radio coverage of some 24 matches and three television matches including the Tests against the West Indies at Lords and the Oval, as well as the annual Eton versus Harrow game. The facility fees for the televised Tests were set to increase. It seemed to the MCC that television was here to stay and, expressing a considerable change in tone, Rait-Kerr announced;

In 1938 Television of sport was experimental. The situation has now changed. The number of sets in use has increased enormously, and it is thought that the fee for televising the Test Match should not be less than 50 guineas, and for Eton v Harrow 20 guineas.²⁰

Lobby appeared agreeable, but once the news filtered through to Michael Standing he cautioned, 'we would not like to feel that, by agreeing, we are automatically raising the standard of fees to be paid on such occasions'.²¹ He was concerned the MCC were not judging the fee in relation to previous Test match coverage. Kerr's response was indefatigable suggesting, 'I believe you got in on the ground floor in 1938' and concluded 'I do not think you have any basis for assuming that the MCC Committee will not pay due regard to the circumstances of each visit, and, as you know by experience, when you pleaded for a reduction in 1937 you were met very handsomely'.²²

There were quibbles from Dorté regarding the final fee of £52 but in spite of his claim that 'Television caters only for some few thousand viewers as compared with the very much larger and more widely spread audience by our Sound service',²³ the BBC settled to meet the MCC's valuation for the Tests and discarded the idea of covering the Eton v Harrow game as a way of making savings.

The early sojourns of television in cricket were periods of accommodation and assimilation of various vested interests, between the BBC and the MCC and, in particular, within the BBC itself. Cricket could rightly claim its place as England's premier summer spectator sport with a following of millions through the press, newsreel and radio. Television's reach was limited and restricted to the London area, but by the time the BBC's service was pulled from the air in September 1939 it had made tentative inroads into fostering a new relationship with the sport.

Post-War: The threat of rediffusion

In April 1946 Dorté wrote to Rait-Kerr to announce BBC television would be re-opened on 7th June 1946. The Indian tour and first Test from Lords were targeted for coverage. The experiments of 1938 and 1939 had proven cricket could be televised successfully but had also raised the spectre of a challenge to the MCC and the Counties: the effect of broadcasting on attendances. The BBC accepted the return of televised cricket should proceed conservatively. Although they did not concur that television could 'effect' the gate, from the outset the BBC agreed not to transmit any footage before 3.00 pm thereby off-setting any possibility of dissuading fans from going to cricket. Even though entrance fees to the Lords Test's had considerably increased from pre-War gate charges of 2/- (two shillings) in 1939 to 3/6 (three shillings and sixpence) in 1946 Dorté was adamant that 'sound and television broadcasts never keep true enthusiasts away from Lords but, on the contrary, serve a useful purpose in creating and maintaining enthusiasm amongst a wide public'.²⁴ Dorté delivered the 'Corporate line' but his insistence that the BBC had the 'desire to give this country the best television service possible'²⁵ probably fell on deaf ears at the MCC. It was not the job of cricket to make television a success. Orr-Ewing eventually settled the contract over the phone agreeing to pay 125 guineas for three days of the Test and vowed not to show more than three hours of cricket per day starting no earlier than 2.30pm. Orr-Ewing remained unhappy with

the camera positions afforded at Lords – ‘too high with the result that one tended to get a slightly ‘birds-eye-view’.²⁶

Fees and camera angles would prove the least of the BBC’s problems and their rhetoric to push for ‘the public interest’ in cricket coverage could do nothing to allay fears within the game that television could impact on their income. As early as 1939 rediffusion had been raised as a potential issue. At this time Lobby had refuted any suggestion of the possible rediffusion of cricket in cinemas’ as the television coverage was so intermittent. Cinema screenings were limited in the time they could afford live broadcasts and unlike boxing or football, cricket would not be shown in its entirety. The immediate post-war years saw record crowds for cricket (2,300,910 paid to watch ‘First Class’ cricket in 1947)²⁷ and boom time in the cinema (1.6 billion admissions in 1946)²⁸ and the issue of the impact of broadcasting and rediffusion on attendances resurfaced with a vengeance as the desire for entertainment boomed in the austerity years.

Much of the pressure on the BBC came from a newly formed interest group the Association for the Protection of Copyright in Sport (APCS). The MCC were one of twenty founding members of the Association chaired by Frank Gentle, the Secretary of the Greyhound Association. The core concern of sports authorities was the impact television had on gates and income. However, there were two other major fears of the APCS: first, there was no copyright held in the televising of sport; and second, television opened the opportunity for various kinds of piracy - whether it be from the BBC, the cinema or another party. The Association took advice from an experienced copyright lawyer K. E. Shelley who worked for the Performing Rights Society. Shelley had also drafted various papers on the issue, including a confidential submission to the Beveridge Committee on Broadcasting, as well as proposing an outright ban on the televising of sport until the matter of copyright and piracy were resolved to the members satisfaction.

Copyright was updated in 1954 to include rights in the television broadcast, but in the intervening years from 1946 the APCS turned to government and the PMG to adjudicate. Unfortunately for the sports authorities the Television Advisory Committee, established by the government in 1948, was both unhelpful and inadequate in its response to the vexed issue of copyright in sports broadcasting. The lack of clear regulatory guidelines left the APCS to wage a fierce battle against the BBC with respect to ownership of rights. The tenor of their argument is revealed in a transcript of a meeting held in March 1950. During the meeting Shelley, with the support of Gentle and others like the indomitable Mirabel Topham of Aintree Racecourse who backed an outright ban on television, proposed the APCS should establish a licensing authority. This would be in the mould of music collecting agencies like the PRS with the aim of negotiating rights fees and distributing income among its members. It was argued that a collecting society would have the added advantage of preventing the BBC ‘from playing off one promoter from another’ in trying to keep facilities fees down.²⁹ Unification of licensing would, so the proposal went, produce stronger bargaining for all APCS members. The main reason for central licensing however would be to monitor the screening of televised sport in various public venues - pubs, clubs, shops, cinemas, hotels and any other place where television could be displayed to the public. This idea clearly followed the policy employed by the music industry but with one key difference: unlike rights enjoyed by musicians there were none to be had in sporting performance.

In contrast to the APCS ringleaders, Rait-Kerr was highly sceptical the sports industry could ever persuade Parliament there were underlying rights associated with the spectacle of spectator sports. He did not concur the best way forward to forcing the arm of government to side with sport was to pursue an outright ban on television. In May 1949 during a private lunch with the BBC’s Controller of Television Norman Collins, Rait-Kerr revealed he was the only member of the APCS who had

voted to continue with television contracts in the absence of clarification on copyright and, if necessary, he would resign from the Association if the policy of an outright ban persisted.³⁰ For their part, the MCC urged the BBC to make clear the need for copyright in the television broadcast and to make an undertaking to prevent any unauthorised screening of their sports coverage by third parties. The message was conveyed to the Director General and added to the Corporation's quest for copyright legislation to be reformed in their favour.

In April 1950 the PMG organised a meeting to discuss the effect of television on the attendance at sporting events. The meeting included representatives from the BBC - Collins and Lobby - with a selection of sports representatives including Rait-Kerr. Prior to the meeting Lobby had drafted a complete list of televised and scheduled broadcasts for the twelve months 1 July 1949 to 30 June 1950 that revealed the BBC had transmitted 133 outside broadcasts from sport.³¹ Most crucially, for the MCC and its relationship with the APCS, cricket accounted for 32 of these transmissions, by far the largest televised coverage of any single sport (horse racing was next with 20 broadcasts). An agreement was struck with the PMG for an experimental period of one year whereby the BBC could televise up to 100 events of various sports. This allayed immediate fears of an outright ban and also allowed a new Sports Television Advisory Committee set up by the PMG to monitor developments.

On the matter of piracy, the BBC reiterated their conviction that there was no genuine threat to the MCC - there was a scarcity of equipment, cinemas were already full and had no need to show cricket to boost audiences, only certain portions of a match could be relayed and there were issues of copyright in sound that would require clearance. In spite of the BBC's advice, the MCC remained cautious and concerned that cinemas would take advantage of the rising popularity in television. It was known, through the APCS, that cinemas had been lobbying the Government for access to a dedicated wavelength that would provide television pictures exclusively to cinemas. The

1950 Cup Final had been screened in selected Rank cinemas and Rait-Kerr also referred Peter Dimmock to an episode in 1949 where a Scottish football fan who had travelled to see an international match against England, could not gain entry, and proceeded to pay a local resident 10/- (ten shillings) to watch the game on their television set. The story appeared on a BBC news bulletin and did not amuse the sports authorities. Rait-Kerr warned, 'You will appreciate that this sort of thing is precisely what we are anxious to avoid: in view of the fact that it has received so much publicity'.³² There was a suggestion in the BBC response of internal annoyance at the news item, but they knew they were put on warning.

It would not be long before the MCC's fears of unlicensed rediffusion would come to fruition. Rait-Kerr caught wind of the public transmission of the televised match between the MCC and South Africa in May 1951 at a 'tele-cinema' installed in the South Bank Exhibition in London as part of the Festival of Britain. Clips of cricket had been shown to illustrate the potential of 'tele-cinema' and the place of sport in the 'British way of life'. Rait-Kerr wrote to Lobby demanding an explanation with a threat to withdraw from television for the remainder of the season 'unless we can receive a definite assurance that this will not recur'.³³ Lobby admitted he had been approached by the Festival organiser J. P. Ralph but had referred them to the APCS to gain approval that, he had to concede, may have been 'an error of judgement rather than a breach of faith'.³⁴ He had also written to the exhibitors to ask them to desist. The involvement of the APCS, and the lack of objection from its secretary Herbert Perkins, without sanction from the MCC annoyed Rait-Kerr. He was clearly perturbed and announced he was not tied to the opinion's of the APCS and suggested the news the exhibition charged 2/6 (two shillings and sixpence) for entry represented 'a very disturbing situation'.³⁵ The actions of the BBC, APCS and the Festival were viewed as being 'entirely antagonistic to the clauses in our contract with the BBC'.³⁶ It subsequently transpired the Exhibition was exempt from the television license and the MCC conceded to short excerpts of ten

minutes in any one day for exhibition purposes.

The various episodes involving the APCS, issues over the control of copyright, fears of rediffusion and piracy brought to light the sensitivity of the MCC to the BBC's desire to televise the sport and the confused malaise to the whole issue. Confiding his concerns about the APCS to Brian Castor Secretary of Surrey, Rait-Kerr wrote:

I find the attitude of the Association extremely hard to understand; on the one hand they are continuously talking about bans on home viewing while on the other they are presenting opportunities for commercial showing on a velvet cushion.³⁷

Castor agreed that the APCS had an attitude that was 'casual to the point of insolence' and that 'it almost makes one feel that cricket should leave the Association'. The depth of the MCC's suspicion of the Associations motives endured throughout the mid-1950's to the point where they undermined most of its actions to build solidarity around collective licensing which never proved workable.

Cricket's relationship with the BBC seemed to benefit, certainly financially, through the new exposure it received from television. The BBC had paid what it thought was a premium for Test cricket and had tried to help promote the game by covering county matches. But negotiations in 1952 brought to head once more the prickly issue of just how much the sport was worth. With the onset of new transmitters across the country and the consequent rapid expansion of television licenses (1.5 million by the end of 1951) the MCC believed in an indexed linked facility fee related to the number of viewers. 450,000 viewers had watched England against the West Indies in the first days play from Lords in 1950, 475,000 for the first day of the Oval Test.³⁸ The suggestion rankled with the BBC and in January 1952 Lobby wrote:

From all that you say it really looks as though the Cricketing Authorities are not too anxious

for broadcasting and still less for television, so that their chief concern is to get as much money out of the BBC as they can, ie. In the words of the economist they want to ‘charge all that the traffic will bear and rather more’.³⁹

The BBC were happy to pay a fee of £50 per day for Test cricket, but any more would mean reduced coverage as the cost of the BBCs total television output had risen to £2.5 million in 1951 and yet income earned from television licenses was only £750,000. Rait-Kerr and his ally Castor took great exception to the charge of greed and contrary to the usual image of Lobby as ‘the politest man in the BBC’ it was suggested his letter ‘might be Gilbert Harding writing’⁴⁰ – considered by many ‘the rudest man in Britain’. Other counties were consulted and while most concurred with the MCC’s view the secretary of Yorkshire, John Nash, felt ‘it would not be in the best interests of cricket if any disagreement over the fees should lead to the non-televising of Test Matches’.⁴¹ Rait-Kerr responded to Lobby questioning why ‘those organisations who have helped the BBC in the past should now be frozen under conditions which are constantly changing’.⁴² The MCC ultimately settled for a facility fee of £50 per day but also introduced a new charge called a ‘programme fee’ of £15 per every hour of programming. Cordial relations ensued and the BBC appeared to be winning the battle in persuading the cricket authorities to help foster televised sport where other governing bodies still ran scared. Rait-Kerr stepped down as the secretary of the MCC later in 1952 and as his new successor Ronnie Aird took control another era of television lay on the horizon.

ITV and the Competition for Televised Rights to Cricket

The BBC’s monopoly on television was broken by the Conservative government of the early-1950s. The Television Act (1954) established the first commercial television franchises in Britain. The arrival of commercial operators, to be heavily regulated by the newly formed Independent Television Authority (ITA), posed some serious but altogether different issues for both the BBC

and governing bodies of sport. Flush from the success of televising the Coronation in 1953 - orchestrated by Lobby and Dimmock - the BBC OB department were confident of their abilities to maintain strong links with sport and determined to ensure they had access to the key sporting events. The OB department's proactive approach to the threat of ITV ran contrary to other parts of the BBC that were more complacent in attitude. Dimmock, in particular, was adamant the BBC should seek to extend their contracts with sport, where possible up to three years. For the MCC, the expected arrival of commercial television and a new competitor to the BBC delivered an incisive bargaining tool with which to negotiate higher fees. In 1954 county games had cost the BBC a facility fee of £20 per day with the additional 'programme fee' of £15 per day. In 1955 with ITV on the horizon the MCC advised counties to look towards an aggregate fee of £60 per day. More broadly, the MCC's thinking about the new television environment was upbeat. Prior to an executive committee meeting of the APCS on 7 February 1955 Aird prepared a statement on the MCC's policy on televised cricket in which he expressed the view that the existing practice of restricting hours of coverage may not be the best way forward and relaxing this policy could 'pay dividends'. But the economic benefit was not the only consideration there was also the realisation that 'the shop window advertisement and publicity do in fact bring in the customers'.⁴³ Aird now found himself in the thick of the new era of television, he had been invited by Lord Aberdare to join a new ITA Sports Advisory Committee to advise the new commercial franchises on sporting matters as well as acting as the MCC's representative on the APCS. But his main concern remained the good of cricket:

While the more money we can get from the BBC for televising cricket the better, I have always maintained that money from the BBC is not the answer to our problem and that it is the spectators in the County Grounds that we want and that is what is good for the game. I still hold this view and believe that this can only be obtained by publicity and the building up of personalities.⁴⁴

The winds of commercialisation in cricket had taken a new turn in the post-war years with new agents like Bagenal Harvey negotiating endorsements for sports stars, such as Dennis Compton's association with Brylcreem. However not all cricketers had the modern approach. On being invited to appear in an ITV programme on the history of Lords, the self-effacing former England batsman Jack Hobbs, then 73, declined, explaining 'I dread all the fuss etc. connected with a television broadcast.'⁴⁵

In March 1955 Harvey in partnership with the Hulton Press had approached the MCC with a view to becoming the intermediary between the programme contractor (BBC or ITV) and the sports promoter. His new company, Hulton Visual Productions was a visionary idea, possibly ahead of its time, and provoked a defensive response from the APCS who wanted to establish its own company to negotiate with broadcasters. Aird was not impressed by either. The value of television revenue was becoming too great to relinquish any rewards to a third party. Nevertheless, in a letter to the Lancashire secretary Geoffrey Howard he revealed the personal stress and overpowering sense of responsibility imposed by television negotiations:

I spend a great deal of time and have sleepless nights over the problem of television and the entry of the ITA into the field will obviously complicate matters a good deal and the idea of a full cricket liaison officer would at any rate be welcomed by me.⁴⁶

By the end of the century commercial managers were commonplace in governing bodies of sport. Howard had suggested Aird consider employing a negotiator on a salary of £50 a year but in the mid-1950s the MCC Committee were not convinced the role was necessary or appropriate.⁴⁷

As early as autumn 1954 the MCC began to receive notifications of intent from the new ITV

franchises. Philip Dorté, had left his job as a television manager with the BBC and now spearheaded contractual negotiations for the Associated Broadcasting Development Company that had been set up by the BBC's former Controller of Television Norman Collins and was chasing the ITA weekend franchise for the London area. Collins would ultimately join forces with impresario Lew Grade to form the franchise Associated Television (ATV) but not all the new commercial companies could draw on such talented and experienced broadcasters. The weekday franchise was held by Associated Rediffusion (AR), formed by Associated Newspapers and the transport company British Electric Traction. AR soon clumsily handled their public relations with various governing bodies by announcing to the press they had secured coverage of certain sports, when in fact no contracts had been signed. Among the announcements for agreements to athletics and boxing, Ken Johnstone their Head of Sports also revealed extensive plans to cover the 1956 Ashes Series in England. This was news to Aird who told *The Observer* he had seen 'some AR people, but we haven't negotiated with them so far'.⁴⁸ The premature and over eager pronouncements vindicated the view held by Aird that 'the majority of those acting for the new commercial companies are completely new to the job and are generally unaware of the situation so far as the television of cricket is concerned'.⁴⁹ ITV representatives had also begun to approach Counties in the south east, the midlands and the north west. The MCC were happy to let counties negotiate individual deals but proffered advice on previous dealings with the BBC and suggested Club chairmen come to an agreed policy on the way forward.

The MCC's initial dealings with ITV companies were anything but sanguine when compared to the BBC's key negotiators, Lobby and Dimmock. In August 1955 Dimmock was confident enough to pronounce the BBC's 'cordial relations with sporting authorities are now beginning to appear as important factors in the battle for sports coverage'.⁵⁰ Indeed by 1956 it would be fair to suggest the MCC had nothing but disdain for the annoyance some ITV representatives had caused. Aird

referred to them as ‘these wretched people’.⁵¹ The assessment may have been harsh and was more a reflection of the social and cultural divisions of the executives of the MCC with the brash, young producers of ITV. But it also reflected the genuine confused state of ITV’s approach to sport, where on occasion relatively vast sums of money had been promised, only to be changed or reneged the following week. On one occasion in 1956 Graydon of ATV offered £500 a day for coverage of the Australians in their warm up matches against the counties only for the offer to collapse to £50 the day before settling on £80 per hour.⁵² The franchise structure of ITV also confused matters and when the MCC looked at imposing a limit in the radius of transmissions in order to safeguard attendance at matches not covered by certain regions it soon transpired some viewers were able to pick up signals outside their notional regional boundaries (viewers in Bristol could watch programmes from the South East from the Croydon transmitter).⁵³

The 1956 Ashes Series: Issues of Exclusivity

Negotiations for county games were of minor consideration when compared to the broadcaster’s desire to televise the Test matches. The negotiations for the 1956 Ashes Series against the Australians would prove pivotal in the future shape of televised Test cricket which, until the arrival of interest from satellite television in the 1990s gave the BBC a near-forty-year monopoly on the coverage of the game. Ironically, the BBC’s dominance of televised cricket for the latter half of the Twentieth Century began with government intervention to prevent exclusive contracts for major sporting occasions. The 1954 Act had reserved the right of government to ensure non-exclusivity for national sporting events. But until negotiations for the 1956 Tests began the ruling had not been tested and there was no clear and precise definition of what was considered a ‘national event’. In February 1955 Dimmock had written a personal letter to Aird while on holiday in Switzerland suggesting the BBC were agreeable to a non-exclusive three year deal but would ‘entertain the idea of a *very* much larger fee in return for no restrictions on the hours’ of coverage.⁵⁴ The BBC had

paid £1000 per Test in 1953, £2000 per Test in 1954 and were prepared to go to £3000 per Test in 1955. After the Test series with Pakistan in 1955 the option of a three year deal with the BBC remained and Aird wrote to the PMG, Dr Charles Hill, in October 1955 seeking clarification on the question of ‘national events’⁵⁵ The MCC’s fears were confirmed by the PMG that Test cricket would be considered a ‘national event’ and should be made available on a non-exclusive basis. The PMG had delayed his decision until after taking council from the APCS. Aird believed this would severely reduce the value of rights fees, a concern that prevailed for decades in cricket’s hierarchy and ultimately led the England and Wales Cricket Board to successfully lobby for the removal of Test cricket from the ‘listed events’ under the 1996 Broadcasting Act. Aird summarised dealings with the PMG, the BBC and ITV to County secretaries in a memorandum later that month to suggest the MCC Committee agree to a three-year deal with the BBC. Castor of Surrey, who had hoped competition and the prospect of inflated hikes in the value of fees for Test matches were on the horizon, wrote exasperated at the news and, as he perceived it, the general lack of clarity in the matter.⁵⁶

Shortly after the ruling, on 2 November 1955, Sir William Becher of AR offered the MCC an unprecedented £1500 per day for exclusive rights to all five England Tests against the Australians, a total of £37,500. The fee, unprecedented in any sport at the time would have been incredibly tempting, not least because of rising salary and bonus demands from leading players like Jim Laker and Alec Bedser.⁵⁷ The offer was also higher than the combined gross gate receipts of all County clubs.⁵⁸ The balance of commercial power was changing. However, within days of receiving the offer from AR, Dimmock produced the BBC’s offer of £30,000 per annum at £6000 per test. The MCC Committee decided to enter into a three-year exclusive deal with the BBC with the proviso that there could be possible simultaneous transmissions with ITV thereby conforming to Section 7 of the 1954 Act.⁵⁹ Aird wrote to Becher confirming the unfortunate news their bid had been

rejected. Although the deal was considered exclusive, it did not preclude ITV gaining coverage outside the hours of BBC transmissions. The reason for the MCC's unusual decision to take the lower offer was twofold: 1) anxiety regarding the duplication of equipment; 2) it was considered a 'duty to viewers to ensure that during the times when the television of a Test Match was taking place a nation-wide coverage would be effected'.⁶⁰ The federal structure had undermined ITV and the BBC's insistence on serving the nation had won-out. Not bowed by the news, ITV's Robert Fraser questioned the MCC's exclusive contract, alluding to discussions in Parliament on the matter and gesturing complete surprise at the decision.⁶¹ ITV moved on other fronts, Lord Aberdare of the ITA Sports Advisory Committee wrote to Aird expressing his sorrow at the 'lack of certainty' regarding 'national events'⁶² to which Aird responded:

I think what has arisen out of the negotiations for the televising of Test Matches will turn out to be a good thing because it has brought to a head something about which there seemed to be uncertainty, and although it is causing a certain amount of trouble for ourselves I feel it may be helpful to others in the end.⁶³

In December 1955 the PMG confirmed his decision after further meetings with the APCS and consultation with the BBC and ITA. His conclusion on the Tests was that 'the public will expect them to be broadcast by both the BBC and ITA'.⁶⁴ Aird wrote back thanking the PMG for clarifying the matter but felt mystified that the restricted audience of the ITV regions could be seen to be in the public interest. The BBC was 'national' but ITV, at this time, was not.⁶⁵ The upshot was the negation of the BBC contract and new suggestions as to how much both the BBC and ITV were prepared to pay. Aird had various meetings with Dimmock and ITV representatives early in 1956 before Lobby, now Assistant Controller of Television Programming complained the BBC could not pay £30,000 for a non-exclusive contract neither would it entertain the idea of a joint fee with a commercial television company. His view remained the BBC had the public's genuine concerns at

heart and ITV were at fault for what had occurred. Aird met Lobby on 8 February 1956, and on the same day recommended to the Test Match Ground Secretaries they accept the BBC's original offer as no resolution to the issue of sharing coverage, both in principal and logistically, seemed possible. On the 14 February Aird wrote to ITV with an ultimatum that informed of the MCC's decision to go with the BBC but with a suggestion a joint fee of £40,000 - to be haggled out by the BBC and ITV independently of the MCC - was a possibility.⁶⁶ ITV declined and effectively lost its first big love match with sport on Valentines Day.

Conclusion

Cricket's early dalliance with television was uncertain and tentative, but relations were cordial and urbane. The impression of intransigence given in John Arlott's recollections of the BBC's early relationship with cricket seem overstated when compared to the written correspondence. Arlott was at the front line of broadcasting and was therefore more likely to collide with cricket's traditionalists.

There were some key issues to be resolved as the courtship blossomed. As an emergent cultural form it took time for television to formalize its grammar of sport. Cricket was invariably live and unpredictable in terms of play and technology. The MCC's strict ruling on the scheduled hours of coverage meant the BBC could not always guarantee any play at all when rain or bad light stopped play. Mounting pressure from sport to control broadcasting rights of access to sport led to a wholesale review of copyright by the British Government. The end of BBC television's monopoly in 1955 further complicated the issue of access, with the PMG eager to avoid exclusive contracts to sport. Nevertheless, the BBC, and subsequently ITV, recognised the popularity of cricket in the immediate post-war years. The BBC's pre-war courtship with the MCC clearly gave it a head start in terms of developing essential links with the governing body and the county grounds. Evidence

from the MCC archives suggests the shared social and cultural background of the key protagonists (Old Etonian's and Oxbridge educated) enabled a relationship to blossom between the BBC OB Department and senior management of cricket. Although there were occasional differences of opinion the BBC did much to foster these relationships and characters such as Lobby and Dimmock applied their charm to persuade the MCC of the promotional virtue of broadcasting and its wider public value. Some County grounds became more accommodating to broadcasting, even soliciting advice from the BBC on ground improvements and the construction of broadcasting facilities.

The argument of public value did not always hold sway with Rait-Kerr or Aird. Their concern was the impact television had on the volume of spectators watching county matches. The MCC circulated pro-formas requesting information on attendances and the perceived impact of television to the counties. The forms were dutifully completed and returned for assessment by the MCC. The survey revealed nothing conclusive, there were other factors at play, not least the weather, other sports and entertainments. Other threats, like rediffusion, never materialised to any significant degree. The idea of live sport in cinemas was stillborn, the rapid domestic uptake of television in 1953 plus the launch of ITV saw to that.

The BBC's insistence on making fees correspond to the quality of the fixture awoke the MCC to the commercial value of cricket to television. This was a business opportunity that hitherto did not exist. Some of the advice the MCC received from the County Test grounds, especially Surrey's Brian Castor who managed The Oval, pushed for a maximalist approach to valuing the facility and programme fees. This was a significant departure in attitude to the commercialisation of the sport. Backed by the County secretary's both Rait-Kerr and Aird set about standardizing a system of payments that reflected a truer value of the sport to broadcasting. However, it would take expanded coverage, long-term exclusive contracts and competition from commercial television for the facility

fee to rise to a significant commercial level. Until a broadcasting right was established, neither side of the negotiation table could know for sure what the value of televised sport was, or who owned the final output. Where other governing bodies strongly resisted television the MCC did appear to embrace its promotional value. It railed against the APCS when calls for an outright ban threatened to undermine its own commercial plans. The non-exclusivity ruling of the PMG also chastened the true commercial value of televised cricket. In the end, what the MCC papers reveal is the lack of professionalism and the fractured nature of the ITV franchises that enabled the BBC to gain its predominant position in the coverage of the sport from 1956. It was a process that ultimately made BBC Television synonymous with cricket for more than forty years until the shackles of regulation were released once more in the 1990s.

NOTES

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