

Thank-you for inviting me to do this, I'm flattered and delighted. I think it's right that we celebrate VLV's contribution over the last 30 years, how it has evolved as a major voice for the consumer interest. But also that we reflect on some of the major challenges ahead, for broadcasting and for VLV, over the next 5, 10, even 20 years.

I've been rummaging through the archives looking at old VLV bulletins and speeches and want to start at the very beginning in 1983. I was a slightly green 30 year old working then for Consumers Association and one of only two people who had the slightest interest in broadcasting policy issues – the legacy of a Masters degree at LSE where I had been taught by two brilliant academics: Hilde Himmelweit the social psychologist who had been on the Annan Committee and Bob MacKenzie, the first real TV academic and inventor of swingometer. Both in their different ways had been fascinating about the developing relationship between broadcasting and power. When I went to CA, I started to wonder about the consumer issues inherent in broadcasting policy.

In April 1983, my and CA's time was being taken up with a White Paper on Cable and Broadcasting and the firm prediction of the then Minister for IT Kenneth Baker that by the end of the decade there would be a multi-channel revolution. It was the first multi-channel revolution of many. In June that year, an obscure company called Satellite Television, which broadcast via cable systems, agreed to sell 65% of its shares to a newspaper proprietor, one Rupert Murdoch, who for some obscure reason thought he could make money out of this unheralded technology.

But it was a rather different revolution that had triggered concern for a small band of Radio 4 listeners. They had become increasingly agitated by noises coming out of the BBC that more and more radio 4 time would be given over to journalists. The pesky journalism lobby had started in the wake of the Falklands war a year earlier and was putting pressure on Richard Francis, Managing Director of BBC Radio, to give more airtime to news and current affairs.

This of course was long before 5 live, 24 hour news channels, and wall to wall online news. It was the era of real spectrum scarcity. And there was a real fear that the plays, documentaries, arts programmes and talk shows which constituted the varied schedule of Radio 4 would be shifted to local radio, leaving Radio 4 to those evil hacks.

So four writers got together and agreed to start a campaign. Someone alerted Geoffrey Cannon of the Sunday Times who wrote a single slightly vague paragraph about a campaign being launched, which prompted some supporting letters.

One of those four writers was of course Jocelyn Hay, who has I think it's fair to say been the driving force of Voice of the Listener and then VLV for most of the last 30 years. Though she can't be here today, I did spend a fascinating hour and a half on the phone to her last week going through some of those early experiences (it was supposed to be a 20 minute call because Jocelyn is not very well, but she still has more telephone stamina than I do). One of the things that emerged most clearly from speaking to her was that the BBC were clearly horror struck by this fledgling campaign supposedly on behalf of listeners which they immediately equated with another Mary Whitehouse type interfering busybody.

Reading the press release which the newly named "Voice of the Listener" put out on 11 April 1983, you can sort of see why the BBC recoiled. It quoted an earlier passing thought by Richard Francis back in January of that year when discussing the future of radio 4:

"If we would decide... to switch Woman's Hour and Afternoon Theatre, such that we have the play from 2-3 p.m. and Woman's Hour from 3-4 p.m., Woman's Hour itself would be much more flexible in accommodating the occasional visit to Parliament".

In response, this newly formed vigilante group thundered:

"The flexibility of programming which BBC journalists desire, particularly on R4, puts at risk many dramas, feature and magazine programmes on national networks. They stand in danger of being rescheduled or slipped sideways to bbc local stations on a "temporary" basis. And "temporary" has a habit of becoming permanent".

It went on: "What the Voice of the Listener wishes to ensure is that temporary considerations arising out of 'finance', 'bias' or 'change for the sake of change' should not force upon the listener national radio networks which are not what he or she wants in content or in quality."

And so, with a bit of help from that Sunday Times paragraph and the 1983 equivalent of social media – the pub and the telephone – the letters of support and the cheques started arriving. I think, though I can't be sure, that one of them was mine. I do remember sitting at my desk at CA, reading about this new group, and thinking: at last – an organisation that at least purports to speak for the public rather than vested interests.

And so to the inaugural meeting in November 1983 which we're celebrating today. It was at the Westminster Cathedral conference centre, 62 attended, and there were 200 letters of apology. Just to put you in the mood of the moment, this was the BBC peak-time schedule that night (Radio Times, BBC TV). It is not completely unrecognisable

And this was the Radio 4 schedule of the day (Radio Times, BBC Radio 4). Given the media transformation in the intervening period, it is fascinating how many hardy perennials have survived.

That meeting adopted five objects of the newly formed association which are worth quoting because of their continuing relevance. As I go through them, just substitute broadcasting for radio in your minds, and you'll see what I mean.

1. To increase public awareness of the vital role played by radio in the quality of national life.
2. To promote the maintenance and improvement of broadcasting standards, both technical and artistic, throughout the United Kingdom.
3. To provide a forum for discussion between listeners and programme makers.
4. To educate and inform members about broadcasting developments.
5. To secure an assured future for radio broadcasting through the support of an appreciative and responsive audience.

30 years later – as I say, substituting broadcasting for radio – that still stands as an immensely valuable set of objectives for an independent civil society group dedicated to promoting the public interest, and reading VLV's aims and objectives today as laid out on the website, they are clearly rooted in those founding principles.

That said, I think it's also fair to say that the newly elected chairman's speech in 1983 betrayed just a hint of conservatism. There were tributes to the power and importance of radio in people's lives, but there was also a warning about the risks of competition from the explosion of new choices in home entertainment: the expansion of independent local radio stations, introduction of Channel 4, breakfast time TV, the spread of VCR ownership, and – newly announced – a new national commercial radio network. This is what Jocelyn said at the time:

“Our concern is that, while apparently creating wider choice, this explosion may ultimately destroy existing services and with them the concept of public service broadcasting as we have known it in this country for the past 60 years. BBC and Independent radio will both be affected if this choice fragments audiences to a degree which can no longer justify the costs”.

Now, as I said, and as I’m sure Jocelyn would agree, there was a slightly Reithian tone in reacting to this expansion of commercial services. However, it also contained one vital and enduring ingredient of what VLV was to become – a counterpoint to the rhetoric that deregulation is always in the public interest, and that in broadcasting as elsewhere the consumer interest lay in letting the market rip. That counterpoint has been a hugely important contribution from an organisation that has no commercial or institutional self-interest.

And the chairman’s inaugural speech contained a second strand of thinking, well ahead of its time, about the BBC and accountability to its licence payers. She said that if it were a nationalised industry such as gas, electricity or the railways – which shows how long ago this was – there would be a consumer body to watch over it. But:

“The BBC has only its appointed Council of Governors and its advisory committees.... It is this gap in collective representation which the ‘Voice of the Listener’ must try to fill. The task was, and is, formidable”.

So we saw 30 years ago a very early appreciation of two major risks to a broadcasting ecology that was built on a public interest philosophy: first, the possible consequences of going too far and too fast down the road of unchecked commercialism without appreciating the potential threat.

And second, the risk of a BBC left only to its own institutional devices and without any public accountability to its own audiences. Here were the roots of what VLV I think still represents: standing up *to* the vested interests of institutions, government, regulators and industry. And standing up *for* the best of existing structures and institutions, holding decision-makers to public account for proposed changes that could have a material impact on the welfare and enjoyment of audiences.

However, one of the problems it faced from the very beginning – as in all civil society groups – was exactly WHO were they representing? They were dismissed in some quarters as a small, elite group dominated by white, educated middle class and middle aged listeners concentrated in the South East. After some extensive research I can exclusively reveal that all was not quite what it seemed.

VoL's very first newsletter came out a few months after the inaugural meeting, in Spring 1984. It contained 5 letters from listener members. Three involved complaints about pop music on the BBC, about too much news on radio, and about wanting more children's radio. All came from the south east. But one was from a woman living in the remote rural moors of North Yorkshire. She described how the valley had been without electricity for several days the week before and continued rather lyrically:

“By battery, Radio York kept us constantly informed of local conditions; music by candlelight added a whole new, delightful dimension to winter. What might have been a period of doom and gloom became a pleasantly interesting part of life's varied tapestry”. And she ended: “I do hope that **Voice of the Listener** will not turn out to be the voice of South-East Britain, suburbia and professionalism”.

But my favourite was the fifth letter from someone who described his first encounter with radio aged 7 going with his mother to have the accumulator recharged. He described how the programmes he listened to in 1947/48 still influenced his radio listening and said: “For myself and many, many other people, it is part of the family”.

He continued: “When I am not in prison, I am a cook deckhand aboard trawlers and radio plays a great part in our lives at sea”. His address was HM Prison, Kirkham, Preston. With jailed seafarers and rural Yorkshire women as part of their constituency, I think it was a touch unfair to brand this fledgling organisation as a metropolitan elite.

From the very beginning, Voice of the Listener punched above its weight. Jocelyn told me how, just a few months later in the spring of 1984, the World Service had its budget cut by the Foreign Office and VoL wanted to object. So they polled their 70 members, got a fantastic response, and she wrote to the Foreign Secretary saying that 94% of her members supported proper funding of the World Service and were concerned that he didn't appreciate its value. It was the very first VoL representation to government, which reaped immediate rewards: Jocelyn was invited to lunch at the Foreign Office. And no-one asked, 94% of what?

By the second public meeting on 30 May 1984, just a year later after its formation, VoL had truly arrived. 150 people turned up to hear the Managing Director of BBC Radio and the Director of Radio at the IBA talk about their plans for the future. In the audience, apart from senior executives of the IBA, BBC and independent local radio, were Sir Robin Day, David Jacobs and opposition spokesman on broadcasting, Merlyn Rees.

In 1985, in Jocelyn's words, "we really got cracking". March saw the announcement of the Peacock Enquiry, designed to recommend advertising for the BBC. It heralded the first of many battles between VoL and ISBA, the advertisers lobby, and the beginning of the BBC's realisation that maybe these people weren't such interfering busybodies after all. Then came the run-up to the Broadcasting Act, the battle to save the public service core of ITV, and the first of many appearances in front of parliamentary select committee.

It wasn't until 1991/2 that the organisation morphed into VLV, but even by the late 80s it had established its presence across the whole of broadcasting. During the 90s there was the battle to ensure that ITV hung on to some of its public service principles, that Channel 4 wasn't privatised, that new DTT platforms would give priority to the PSBs, that sporting listed events were preserved, and of course that the BBC Charter was renewed and its funding secured through inflation-protected increases in the licence fee. And in the run-up to the 2003 Communications Act, there was the historic, painful but hugely important and ultimately successful campaign to ensure that Ofcom had a duty to promote the interests of citizens *as well as* consumers.

Since then, there have been the PSB reviews, another Charter renewal, an economic crisis and an online and social media revolution which really has justified the word revolution. The media environment today is very different even from 10 years ago, let alone 30 – though the reach, power and variety of both bog-standard TV and bog-standard radio remain astonishingly robust.

Of course VLV was not the only campaigning group, or even necessarily the most effective. Both the Campaign for Quality Television in the 1980s and Public Voice in the 1990s were hugely influential. But it has provided a permanent and respected forum for the consumer perspective. I asked Jocelyn what she felt over those 30 years was VLV's biggest achievement. She gave me two, neither of which I expected.

The first was very specific, and relates to the BBC's enforced sale of its transmitter network in 1995/6. The money, part of the government's revenue raising drive in the 1990s, was due to go straight to the Treasury. Thanks in large measure to VLV's intervention, the department took fright at the likelihood of a judicial review. As a result, £200m went to the BBC rather than to the government's coffers.

Second, was VLV's approach to campaigning. She says, quite rightly, that "We put the consumer cause on the map and got it recognised. In those days, the thought of consultation was unknown". But her emphasis was very much on style: that VLV's achievement has been to concentrate on the quality of the evidence and quality of the argument; to show respect while not being deferential or intimidated. Firm and determined, while of course always courteous. She told me: "I've never seen the point of marching".

Well, I think those qualities will be needed in abundance as VLV faces the challenges of the next 5, 10 and 20 years. What are they? I don't want to pre-empt the session after next when we'll hearing the views of 3 vastly experienced commentators but let me briefly touch on three, not least because they all contain a dreadful echo of *déjà vu*.

First, of course, the BBC. As usual, the knives are out and are being sharpened, but the enemies are greater in number and more powerful than ever. News publishers struggling to make money resent a high quality, free online service. Commercial TV companies encouraging us to pay for television resent a high quality commercial-free TV service.

There are the long-standing accusations about crowding out, left-wing bias, unfair taxation, dumbing down, waste, bureaucracy and incompetence. There are more calls being made on the licence fee after the top-slicing dam was breached for the first time.

And then there are the proposed solutions. Share the licence fee, privatise radios 1 and 2, downsize the TV service, turn it into a subscription service. And just in case you thought the advertising argument had gone away, nearly 30 years after Peacock, here's a quote from Baroness Buscombe at the Westminster Media Forum last Thursday:

"It's probably time to reopen the debate on advertising on BBC channels, given we now know from recent polls that a majority of viewers believe the BBC licence fee should be reduced. Whilst its online video platform and news service is widely celebrated, and rightly so, its broadcast channels largely remain in a status quo, failing to offer the plurality, variety and democracy of received content that today's consumer demands. This is evidenced by my

favourite example, Dad's Army, first aired between 1968 and 1977, [which] remains peak viewing on Saturday night."

And then there's the challenge to the whole philosophy of PSB. What is it, do we need in the multimedia social media age, why should we sustain it? If you think that argument has gone away, here is Baroness Buscombe again:

"I have to say, you ask most people out there what PSB is, they haven't a clue. What does PSB really mean in 2013? Is it Dad's Army? What purpose does it serve? Should some channels continue to enjoy entitlement to special treatment on the basis of delivering PSB? Channel 4 is a particular example where in my view searching questions should be asked, given the channel has become a one stop shop for voyeurism."

So Channel 4 beware – the ghosts of tormentors past are still with us.

And finally, what of the whole notion of broadcasting? The Treasury made £2.3 billion from 4G mobile phone operators after auctioning spectrum that was freed up by the switch to digital TV. There is likely to be another sale within five years, and it's quite possible that terrestrial TV spectrum will be squeezed again. German public service broadcasters are already planning for a world where there will be no over the air transmission. At an advisory meeting recently for the Oxford Media Convention, there appeared to be widespread consensus that the future of television was IPTV – TV via broadband and wireless, bypassing terrestrial transmission.

Even if terrestrial is not abandoned it could become the poor relation, the straggler in a two-tier system in which the first tier higher quality involves annual access subscriptions even for the public service channels. So those battles that were fought when digital loomed onto the horizon – for universality, for high quality TV free at the point of use, and against a two-tier system – could be emerging all over again.

Where does that leave VLV? The answer is more important than ever. Not just in continuing to make the public interest case, but in getting the balance right in its approach: not appearing to have heads stuck in the sand or blindly lobbying for the status quo; but starting from a clearly stated set of principles, derived from that meeting 30 years ago, making reasoned arguments rooted in the public interest, from doing research where possible, and promoting ideas for research from others when not.

It is exactly 20 years since Jocelyn asked me and Ivor Gaber to conduct a quick analysis of five days' worth of broadcast news across the networks. Ten years later, that became a serious longitudinal study, funded by the industry. And 10 years after that, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, it has become the most extensive and rigorous longitudinal analysis of broadcast news in the UK, going back to 1978.

So VLV can set agendas as well as campaign. Most important of all, it can provide a public space, fora like these where questions are not dominated by major industry players seeking to press home their own corporate advantage, and where policy makers, advisers, industry figures and consumer groups can take part in a different kind of debate with a different set of objectives.

I have mentioned three big issues for the future, there will be others. It's a huge challenge for a small, underfunded group and it will need energy, determination, lots of dedicated volunteer work and probably thick skins. But VLV has shown that a powerful civil society voice is both necessary and profoundly important for advancing arguments that are rarely heard elsewhere.

And it's shown that after 30 years it is still capable of getting through the doors of parliamentary select committees, BBC chairmen and DGs, chief executives, senior civil servants and heads of the key regulatory bodies to promote an agenda which is based neither on corporate self-interest nor institutional survival. And I hope we will all be here in 20 years' time to celebrate more achievements in advancing those goals and toasting VLV's golden anniversary.

Thank-you.