



Voice of the Listener & Viewer

Championing Excellence and Diversity in Broadcasting

Autumn 2020

Bulletin 128

THE FUTURE OF PSB IN THE GOVERNMENT'S HANDS

Not since the debates of the Peacock Committee in the '90's have we seen such heated discussion about the future of public service broadcasting.

Social media cries to 'defund' the BBC abound; calls to turn all TV into subscription services are growing; speculation about the government's preferred chairs for Ofcom and the BBC is keeping columnists busy; and in the meantime, as evenings lengthen, audiences sit at home informed by the news, entertained by *Bake Off* and awaiting the return of *Strictly*, possibly oblivious to the storm which is brewing.

On it's darkest days the VLV fears that policy decisions made in the coming three years could effectively bring about an end to the public service broadcasting system as we know it. If PSB is funded by subscription, whereby those who can afford it pay, but those who can't afford it don't have access to it, VLV believes the UK and its citizens will be far poorer for it.

This has largely come about as a result of the growth of audio and video streaming services. All audiences increasingly spend more time streaming content online. Does it matter whether you watch a programme as it is broadcast or via the internet? In some ways it doesn't, but the broadcasters are losing out because they aren't as prominent online or on new hardware as they are on traditional radio and TV sets. They are losing out on advertising as well, not only because of Covid but because the rules for online advertising are more relaxed. 2003 regulation urgently needs to be updated but the government is over-stretched dealing with the Covid pandemic and negotiating trade deals. Separately the BBC is considering how to save £550 million over the next two years while maintaining the 'value' of its output.

In the midst of this storm Ofcom is conducting a PSB Review which should form the basis for future government decisions. Before Ofcom publishes, however, the immediate future of the BBC will be decided by funding negotiations which are due to begin in spring 2021. VLV would like these negotiations to be open and subject to parliamentary scrutiny, unlike those in 2010 and 2015 which led to a 30% reduction in real terms in the public funding available for UK BBC services. If the budget for UK services is reduced further, then VLV is concerned that the balancing act Tim Davie faces will be made even more difficult.

VLV's AUTUMN CONFERENCE PROGRAMME



Due to Coronavirus restrictions VLV is replacing its Autumn Conference with a series of online events when the future of British broadcasting will be debated by those who lead the industry. The first of these on 20 October featured BBC Chair Sir David Clementi, chaired by VLV past President and former Ofcom chair, Dame Colette Bowe. If you missed this excellent session, you can catch up by watching it on our website.

We are delighted that Sir Peter Bazalgette, Chairman of ITV, and Maria Kyriacou, CEO of ViacomCBS UK which owns Channel 5, will be the keynote speakers at our next event which will be held on **November 24th between 10.30am and 12.30pm**. Peter has over 40 years' media experience having served as Chairman of the Arts Council, President of the Royal Television Society and Chairman and Chief Creative Office of Endemol UK. In 2017, he led the Independent Review of the Creative Industries for the government. Prior to joining ViacomCBS, Maria was president of international at ITV Studios and became the Chair of the Creative Diversity Network in June this year.

On November 24th we will also hold a panel discussion: *Can we afford local and regional TV and radio in a global market?* As content is increasingly viewed online and broadcasting models become more global, will we lose TV and radio which reflects our lives closer to home? Local and regional TV and radio remain very popular, as does output catering for each of the nations of the UK. Will such content be incrementally diminished in the coming years in favour of content which can be marketed globally?

To book for the event on 24th November go to www.vlv.org.uk/events/vlv-autumn-conference-2020 or contact the VLV office.



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VLV represents citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and champions excellence and diversity in broadcasting. VLV is free from political, sectarian and commercial affiliations. VLV is concerned with the issues, structures, institutions and regulation that underpin the British broadcasting system and in particular to maintain the principles of public service broadcasting.

Views expressed in the bulletin are those of contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the VLV.

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FROM THE CHAIRMAN, COLIN BROWNE



Welcome to our Autumn Bulletin. I hope you are all keeping well at this time of great uncertainty, with its own particular challenges.

One of the challenges for the VLV is continuing to keep our members informed and involved, in the absence of our usual conferences and events. To that end, we are putting together a series of virtual events for this Autumn. The first of these, a speech and Q&A with Sir David Clementi, the Chair of the BBC, with Dame Colette Bowe, our Past President and former Chair of Ofcom, as moderator, took place on 20 October. Thank you to those of you who attended it and asked questions. It was a very stimulating session. On 24 November, the date of our Autumn Conference, we are planning two major sessions looking at the some of the key issues facing our broadcasters.

There is certainly plenty for us to talk about. There has been much recent speculation on who the next BBC chair might be, with various names floated. The VLV believes that there needs to be an open and transparent process for appointing the chair, as set out in the BBC's Charter, involving the role being advertised, with an independent appointments panel and proper scrutiny by the Public Appointments Commissioner. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport has assured us that this will be the case.

As to whoever is appointed, we believe that the key attribute is to have a real belief in the importance to society of public service broadcasting and of the BBC's role within it. The personal political views of the chair need to be left outside the door of Broadcasting House – just as BBC journalists are required to do. This is of course happening at a time when the new Director General, Tim Davie, has just taken up the reins. He faces huge challenges, not least financial. As the VLV research showed, the BBC's revenue from the licence fee has declined by 30% in real terms over the last ten years. We wish Tim well as he tackles the formidable task of trying to balance the books while maintaining the quality and range of services that we expect of the BBC.

Indeed, as we noted in our last Bulletin all the public service broadcasters face real competitive and financial challenges at the moment, with something of a perfect storm arising from the impact of the coronavirus hitting the revenues of the commercial PSBs and competition from the video streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon, together with the rapid changes in technology.

One of the consequences of the current restrictions is that there will be no VLV Awards ceremony this year. We looked at the possibility of staging a ceremony virtually, but we have been unconvinced by those we have seen elsewhere, and we know that our members have always particularly valued the opportunity to meet the winners in person. The list of winners is published in this Bulletin. They are to be congratulated for their outstanding achievements. Let us hope we will be in a position to hold an Awards Ceremony next year, so do please let us have your nominations.

Our AGM will however go ahead, but be held virtually, on 2 December. I will really miss being able to see so many of you in person, but many of us have become more and more familiar with the joys of Zoom and similar technologies over the last few months. They do work well and are reasonably straightforward to use, so I hope as many of you as possible will join us.

Colin Browne,
Chairman of VLV

VLV AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN BROADCASTING

Covid-19 restrictions obliged us to cancel the VLV Awards for programmes broadcast during 2019 which were due to be held in April. We had hoped to celebrate them at the Autumn Conference, but that will now not be possible. Under these circumstances we have decided to publish the names of the winners in this bulletin. We are grateful to VLV members for nominating and voting for the awards which are much appreciated by those in the broadcasting industry.

The delightful Steve Punt of *The Now Show!* was due to present the winners with their vases in April at the Geological Society. We were most grateful to him for agreeing to carry out this role and hope we might be able to reinstate our normal awards ceremony on 29 April 2021.

Huge congratulations to all the winners. There was, as ever, fierce competition with many wonderful programmes and contributors to choose from.

Best TV Drama Programme

Gentleman Jack, BBC One

Best TV News and Factual Programme

Dispatches, Channel 4

Best TV Arts and Entertainment Programme

Janet Baker in Her Own Words, BBC Four

Best TV Children's Programme

FYI, Sky News

Best TV Individual Contributor

Katya Adler

Best Radio Drama

Middlemarch, Radio 4

Best Radio News and Factual Programme

PM, Radio 4

Best Radio Music and Arts Programme

Words and Music, Radio 3

Best Radio Individual Contributor

Sarah Montague

Award for International Content (VLV & IBT)

The Americas with Simon Reeve, BBC Two

Best Comedy Programme (Radio and Television)

The Unbelievable Truth, Radio 4

Best Podcast Award

Brexitcast (now called *Newscast*)

Naomi Sargent Award

Newsround, CBBC

IDEAL QUALITIES IN A BBC CHAIR

By Will Wyatt CBE

The BBC has had some terrible chairs, George Howard comes to mind, and some strong ones, hat doffed to Christopher Bland. Those I served under were when the board was one of governors. Even then the public profile of the role was burdensome. The thoroughly decent and well meaning Stuart Young was visibly shell-shocked to find himself at the helm of an organisation that was on the front pages more days than not.

There is now a unitary board more like a large plc but the pressure is great. Thus the first quality I look for is a pair of broad shoulders, someone who has knocked about a bit in the public sphere, whether that be business, politics, journalism or the arts. On condition that any political form is left at the door.

The seas will be choppy and storms may be expected. It will need a tough-minded figure to proclaim and defend the BBC's independence. Given that the government will be making the appointment we can take it as read that the chosen one will at least set sail with the government's confidence. It essential that he or she makes good use of this to lead the BBC to a new settlement. Yet relations are unlikely to be permanently hunky-dory. Editorial rows are inevitable. Battles over both form and level of funding are likely. This is when strength of character and clarity of direction are required. I would look, also, for eloquence and public relations flair.

I would not want anyone who was learning on the job how to chair a large and international organisation. The chair must lead the board and bring the eight non-execs and the four execs to work together in common purpose. Experience as well as personality counts here. Subtlety as well as strength.

Media industry knowledge would be helpful, whether of broadcasting or online businesses, but not, I think, essential. This can be supplied by other board members as long as the chair is big enough and intelligent enough to understand what he or she does not know and how to remedy that.

If the choice were a manifestly non-metropolitan figure, alive to experiences of life in the hinterland of the United Kingdom, so much the better.

Tim Davie the new Director General was out of the stalls swiftly and appears ready to make significant change and confront shibboleths. The new chair must be his ally in this. It is harder when a chair has not chosen their own chief executive. Question and challenge him, of course, but, achieve broad agreement of destination, then support and encourage.

It ought not to need saying but, given some of what one has read, it is. The overwhelming requirement is for the appointee to be an unequivocal believer in the value of a public service broadcaster providing services freely available to the whole of the UK. Without this you don't qualify. Equally, the chair must be committed to the BBC as an impartial reporter and interpreter of the world. On these last two points, no ifs and no buts.

Will Wyatt is a VLV Patron and former Chief Executive of BBC Broadcast.

SHOULD WE BE WORRIED ABOUT CHILDREN AS CITIZENS?

By Professor Jeanette Steemers



There has never been a greater need for trustworthy, reliable news for children as citizens with rights, especially at a time of widespread concern about fake news and anxiety about Covid-19. However, a recent decision from Ofcom about *Newsround* places doubt over the BBC's and Ofcom's willingness to consult children and treat them as citizens-in-the-making.

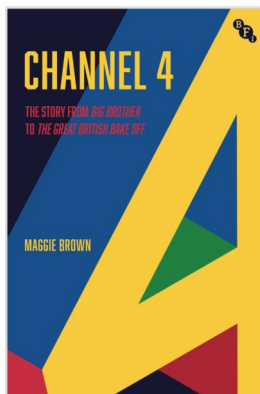
In 2013 *Newsround* was moved from BBC One to children's channel, CBBC, and bulletins were reduced to 3-5 minutes duration. Not surprisingly audiences declined, because it was no longer the place where adults and younger children could embrace news and the programme is rarely cross-promoted on mainstream BBC services or online (for example YouTube). In late 2019, the BBC asked to reduce CBBC's originated TV news quota from 85 to 35 hours a year and from three five-minute *Newsround* bulletins a day to one five-minute bulletin, citing declining audiences and its desire to increase online provision. From what we know this was driven by market considerations – audience consumption and impact figures – rather than by any consultation of children under 12. They were simply informed of the changes at the end of August 2020. Of course *Newsround* needs to evolve and better online provision is a must, but the BBC's plans lacked detail on how they are going to reach out to children. Ofcom ran a consultation in December 2019 and despite 20 published submissions from many quarters expressing concerns, the proposals have been implemented. Ofcom justified the move in a lengthy July 2020 response.

So where do we stand with children's news? The BBC clearly read some of the submissions as it launched a *Newsround* YouTube channel in September and the single daily bulletin will now be 8 minutes instead of 5. But if *Newsround* continues to be ghettoised and is not promoted, can it really survive? Ofcom's own findings repeatedly show that broadcast TV is still regarded as the most accurate (85%) and most trustworthy (84%) source of news for older children aged 12-15, but unfortunately we will never really know about children 8-11, because they aren't consulted. As the Children's Media Foundation suggests it seems a 'shortsighted decision to simply follow the numbers game and not consider the bigger picture in which *Newsround* is a major contributor to the BBC's reputation for truth, honesty, clarity and multi-platform delivery of information'. When the BBC needs to nurture young audiences, its success in cross-promoting *Newsround* on social media and mainstream BBC is a real test of its seriousness and wish to consult children, rather than simply presenting them with a decision that grownups made.

Professor Jeanette Steemers is Professor of Culture and the Creative Industries at Kings College, London and a VLV Trustee.

NEW HISTORY OF CHANNEL 4

By Maggie Brown



When my first history of Channel 4 appeared in 2007 on its 25th birthday chairman Luke Johnson remarked that you cannot capture the truth of a broadcaster in a book.

But what you can do is look behind the screen for reasons why things happen. *A Licence to Be Different* was driven by my observation that in the urgency of making television very few people running the shows had

much recollection of its evolution or long incubation, let alone the audience.

Yet history is useful and a great teacher. Years of work on the broadcaster mean I am often able to predict its responses to challenges. For all its faults the book is routinely given to inform executives joining Channel 4. Ian Katz pounced on the definition (page 15) of Channel 4's character as "the imp in the mechanism" penned by Anthony Smith, the brain behind its creation.

The new book continues the story from 2007 to 2017 with Channel 4 agonising over its future, the impact of the 2008 devastating recession, and reluctance to part with cash cow *Big Brother*. Plans for a talk radio station were cancelled. The chief executive sacked. Commissioning editor Sarah Mulvey, who pioneered *First Cut*, committed suicide in 2010 after submitting a grievance claim alleging bullying, triggering a review of company culture.

Influential board members led by Lord Puttnam fell out with Johnson but the move online with 4OD began, as did the application of *Big Brother* filming techniques to fly on the wall documentaries which sprawl on to this day. Kevin Lygo was rejected as the next chief executive (there is never an internal successor) but leaves many legacies including a successful bid for the Paralympics in 2012, an historical game changer.

Much of book two deals with the regime of sharp creative businessman David Abraham in lock step with creative partner Jay Hunt, empress of Channel 4. He attempted to buy Channel 5 but private operator Richard Desmond wrote a cheque. As ever hot new talent continued to be lured away but *Gogglebox*, a durable hit, was born.

It includes a key timely chapter on how Channel 4 was able to ride out privatisation through too slowly accepted partial relocation from London, which is where this book ends with a degree of optimism (pre-Covid 19). Alex Mahon (outsider, as history predicts) replaced Abraham.

A failure to find new hits led on from snatching the *Great British Bake Off*, this year with *Taskmaster*.

Channel 4 is flawed but still a public service broadcaster, betting it is too small and a valued patron to producers to be worth a big row. With John Whittingdale back in Government, keen to review its public ownership all over again, we shall see.

The Story of Channel 4 from Big Brother to the Great British Bake Off, due to be published by Bloomsbury on 12 November but delayed till early 2021.

WHY INTERNATIONAL CONTENT ON TV MATTERS

By Mark Galloway

The surge in viewing of the public service broadcasters (PSBs) and viewing of TV news during the pandemic have demonstrated the value of PSB beyond doubt.

But broadcasters are far from complacent. There are major funding challenges. The commercial PSBs face a huge drop in annual advertising revenue and the BBC will lose an estimated £200m a year if non payment of the TV licence is decriminalised, as seems likely. The new BBC Director General Tim Davie has made it clear that in the future the BBC will do less. 'The BBC has spread itself too thinly', he recently told the DCMS Select Committee. 'We need to make choices about the best use of limited resources'.

So what will the broadcasters cut? Two genres are guaranteed a major role in any future scenario – entertainment and news. Big entertainment shows like *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The Great British Bake Off* will continue as they bring in mass audiences and public service broadcasting makes no sense if it doesn't reach large numbers of people. News will stay as it is the television genre most valued by audiences.

My fear is that international content is the genre that is the most vulnerable. It's expensive to make and it has always had to fight for its place in the schedule. I'm thinking of programmes like BBC2's *Once Upon a Time in Iraq*, Sue Perkins' recent series exploring life along both sides of the US-Mexican border and Grayson Perry's *Big American Road Trip* currently showing on Channel 4. These programmes are made for UK audiences; they take us on a journey and show us stories and issues that matter. Because they are made with a UK perspective, for a UK audience, these programmes don't sell to other territories and thus don't generate commercial revenues like the latest David Attenborough series.

Why do these programmes matter? Isn't it enough to have good quality international news? No, it isn't. Television news does a good job of covering global stories, but its range is narrow and, due to financial pressures, is narrowing even further. The big international stories of the day are covered, but these inevitably present a limited picture of what life is like for people living in other countries. And not all TV viewers watch the news. Documentaries and drama fill the gaps and they appeal to different audiences. They give us context and provide a much more realistic idea of what normal life is like in other places.

We need television to do more than just focus on war, famine and natural disasters, because a nuanced understanding of the world is essential for our future place in the world. As Brexit looms, there is a real danger that our horizons will narrow, that we will become more insular and inward looking. Global Britain needs citizens who are well informed and can engage with the world, economically, socially, culturally and politically.

Television has a unique role to play in engaging us with the world because it has the ability to reach mass audiences. Those who already have an interest in global stories and issues know where they can go

to find the information they need. But the danger is that this small proportion of the population will be super-served and the rest will be neglected. As Ofcom launches *Small Screen: Big Debate*, its consultation on the future of public service broadcasting, we hope VLV members will join IBT in making the case for a wide range of international content.

Mark Galloway is Executive Director of the International Broadcasting Trust

GOVERNMENT RADIO REVIEW

By Will Harding

The Radio and Audio Review is a joint Government and industry-led project, chaired by DCMS, bringing together radio industry stakeholders to collaborate to ensure a vibrant and healthy long term future for UK radio and audio in the face of growing competition from evolving audio forms and platforms. The Review is due to report in spring 2021.

The work of the Review is being undertaken by three Working Groups. The Devices and Automotive Group is looking at accessibility of radio in the home, in car and on the move; the Distribution and Coverage Group is assessing current and future distribution platforms including FM, DAB and online; and the Listener Group is exploring what the needs, expectations, and behaviours of listeners will be in 10-15 years, so we can anticipate how to continue to serve listeners as we have always done.

At the start of the Review, the Listener Group undertook a key piece of analysis to try to answer some of these questions, by looking at how radio listening might evolve over the long-term in the face of technological change, particularly at how consumption of live radio will change compared with other audio such as podcasts and on-demand music streaming.

The good news and headline finding is that live radio is resilient and our research suggests it will remain a very important form of audio consumption over the next 10-15 years. That said, it's clear from our research, that listening habits are changing rapidly, especially among younger listeners, and live radio faces significant challenges.

We are also seeking to understand how these trends will affect listeners, including underserved audiences and vulnerable groups, through direct consultation and engagement with specialist groups and organisations. It was very helpful to discuss these issues with VLV recently and to get the benefit of their knowledge and perspective.

The Review matters because UK radio, freely-available to all, is hugely-valued and loved, and those who care about it should have a voice in safe-guarding its future. If you have any views that you would like to put forward to us directly, then please do get in touch.

Will Harding is Chair of the Listener Group of the Radio and Audio Review and Group Strategy & Development Director at Global Radio

PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING UNDER THREAT

By Professor Bob Usherwood



Populist right wing politicians across Europe are seeking, often successfully, to destroy public service broadcasting. In the UK, barely a day goes by without some government source or supporter attempting to discredit the BBC. As VLV patron Lord Puttnam told Parliament, 'the current project to undermine public service broadcasting is not new'. Sixteen years ago Dominic Cummings, classifying the corporation as 'a mortal enemy', suggested, 'undermining...the BBC's credibility; the creation of a Fox News equivalent...[and] the end of the ban on TV political advertising.' During the General Election the Brexit Party promised to 'phase out the BBC licence fee'. Soon two new news channels are expected to launch in the UK promising US-style TV news programming, fulfilling Cummings' second objective.

Additionally, government kite-flying hinted it would appoint Charles Moore, a vigorous critic of the corporation, as its next Chair and Paul Dacre, who considers it 'Drunk on 'free' money from licence fee payers', as head of Ofcom. Meanwhile minor celebrities such as actor Laurence Fox have joined the cause as cultural warriors. Fox, who called the BBC a 'corrupt organization' that should be 'defunded' recently started a political party. As 'UKIP for culture', it plans to have candidates at the next election.

Some commentators have criticised the BBC's new Director General. for his reported view on 'left-wing-comedy', observing that topical satirical shows appraise government actions not out of bias but because they frequently feature in the news. 'Due impartiality' also needs reconsideration but that is for another time.

Ofcom states: 'Public service broadcasting (PSB) has a long and proud tradition in the UK, delivering impartial and trusted news'. This brings PSBs into conflict with populist politicians and others who seek to manipulate facts and misinform. Historically, the right has tried to promote a 'fear of the other' and persuade working people that they are victims of what they label a 'liberal elite'. This technique was used in Lord Haw Haw's war-time broadcasts. Similar methods were successfully employed during the EU referendum, Brexiteers claiming that 'the political Establishment has conspired to frustrate democracy'.

Public service broadcasters and others dedicated to providing access to accurate and trustworthy information must wonder how and why so many voters were deceived by intentional misinformation and, sometimes, outright lies? Part of the answer can be found in research which reveals that the public makes greater use of least trusted information sources, such as tabloid newspapers, when seeking information on social and political issues. The press, the internet and much of the mass media are more concerned with gaining attention for advertisers, political, religious or other causes. They are 'attention seeking' rather than information organisations. Public service broadcasters, like public libraries, are part of a small number of true information organisations.

As such, they help counter the intolerant attitudes exhibited by some sections of our society, encouraged by the alt-right and those who inhabit the 'Intellectual Dark Web'. These comprise an eclectic mix of people, who detest the mainstream media, identity politics, political correctness, woke values and the academic establishment. For further information listen to *Right Click: The New Online Culture Wars* which is still available on BBC Sounds.

By providing access to knowledge, ideas, experiences both real and imaginary, public service broadcasters help counter ignorance. This benefits the individual and society and may prevent a descent from ignorance to prejudice. By learning about, or experiencing vicariously, the lives of other people and different communities individuals can become aware citizens more able to deal with debate, analysis and logical thought. This is not what the populist right want. To quote an academic paper on lifelong education, 'the frequently anti-pluralist, anti-expert and anti-elitist stance of populist parties from the political right implies an inherent antipathy towards those institutions conveying knowledge' (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02601370.2017.1343346>).

Institutions such as the BBC, Channel Four, universities and public libraries have all demonstrated their value and values during the present pandemic/infodemic. For example, the BBC's Make a Difference and Bitesize projects increased its reputation and saw it recognised as a crucial public service, nationally and locally, on-line and on screen. Such organisations are among the most significant and democratising assets our nation possesses and must never be sacrificed for commercial or political convenience.

Neither must our values. VLV members should oppose the destruction of our PSBs by writing to MPs and local newspapers, talking to friends, persuading them to join VLV and explaining what the future might hold. Britain could become America where 'conservative talk radio is an immensely important part of the pro-Trump media ecosystem'. Technology now makes it easier for tabloid proprietors to become broadcasters, opinionated radio is now a reality; social media and the dark web are increasingly difficult to regulate. So help us expose the dangers of misrepresentation and misinformation; dangers that threaten personal and public decision making and threaten to destroy our democracy.

Bob Usherwood is a VLV Trustee and former Professor of Librarianship at the University of Sheffield.

THE RISE AND FALL OF LOCAL RADIO

By Anthony Wills



It was the BBC who in 1967 pioneered Local Radio in the United Kingdom under the inspired leadership of Frank Gillard. VLV member Michael Barton was appointed the first station manager (at BBC Radio Sheffield) and rose to become Controller, Local Radio in the 1970s, by which time the number of BBC stations had increased to 38, all run on shoestring budgets compared with their national counterparts Radios 1, 2, 3 & 4. In 1972 the Government approved the creation of Commercial (Independent) radio stations and the first of these, Capital Radio and London Broadcasting (LBC) in London, Radio Clyde in Glasgow and BRMB in Birmingham, went on air the following year. These major players were soon joined by smaller services such as Radio Hallam (Sheffield) and Swansea Sound.

It's fascinating to recall the noble aspirations of Capital Radio in its early years. Under the enlightened leadership of Sir Richard Attenborough it owned the Duke of York's Theatre in London's West End and ran its own orchestra, the Wren. But the great majority of commercial radio stations, which depended after all on advertising, focussed on pop music, often presented by former pirate radio DJs. The BBC's on the other hand were genuinely local and speech heavy. They were an invaluable source of information at times of local emergency such as flooding. Phone-ins were a cheap and popular way of filling airtime.

In due course national commercial stations were set up including Heart, Magic and Kiss. A major landmark was the arrival, in September 1992, of Classic FM, which aimed to broadcast classical music in a more approachable way than the BBC's Radio 3. In due course major players with other media interests, such as Celador and Chrysalis, opened a raft of stations up and down the land. More recently however, just like commercial television, which in the latter part of the 20th century saw a relentless series of mergers and takeovers (whatever happened to Granada and Yorkshire TV?), independent radio has come to be dominated by two companies, Global Radio and Bauer Media: between them they have hoovered up stations by offering eye-watering sums to the companies that had originally put them on air.

An important difference between Global and Bauer is that the former has, broadly, concentrated on national brands like Capital, Heart and Classic FM whereas Bauer, which is based in Hamburg, although running stations such as Jazz FM, Absolute Radio and more recently Scala Radio, has gradually, some might say covertly, acquired a portfolio of local stations to join an umbrella company called Planet Radio. Bauer's strategy became clear when earlier this year it announced that from September most of these stations would be renamed Greatest Hits Radio – not to be confused with Hits Radio or Country Hits Radio! – and be serviced from central London, with a few limited opt-outs such as the Breakfast Show, which always attracts the highest listening figures of the day.

The announcement that historic stations such as Swansea Sound and York's Minster Radio would lose their identities, and become offshoots of a metropolitan operation, generated dismay amongst their listeners. To take one example this writer knows well, Spirit FM (based in Chichester) was admired for its involvement with and support of local sports and cultural events, and its team of reporters and presenters commanded loyal respect and affection from listeners. When in September, after 24 years, the station suddenly lost its identity and became a mere offshoot of a London-based operation (with all of its presenters and most of its staff having their contracts terminated) there was a real feeling of loss among the West Sussex community.... over 9,000 people signed a petition, which was supported by local councils. Spirit FM now broadcasts the same computer-generated music as its sister stations up and down the land, usually played back to back in groups of three unidentified tracks, with deliberately minimal presenter input.

At the time of the announcement Bauer's Group Managing Director Radio stated, 'Listeners from all corners of the nations will benefit from the local news and information they value and from having local teams support on-air and off-air initiatives'. Yet within weeks Bauer applied to Ofcom to broaden its geographical boundaries in line with 2018 Ofcom guidelines whereby larger 'local' areas were allowed for commercial radio, following a government consultation. VLV opposed this move at the time because we believed it would undermine the 'localness' of radio.

The cash-strapped BBC, meanwhile, seems convinced that radio's future lies in podcasts and on-demand listening, so rather than increasing investment in its local stations it is cutting back on their news gathering and axing the evening specialist music programmes that have been such a distinctive feature of their output.

One shouldn't however forget the hundreds of small-scale community radio stations transmitting across the United Kingdom. Maybe there is a job waiting for Alan Partridge after all.

Anthony Wills worked for BBC Radio 2 in the 1980s and 90s and is now a VLV Trustee

VLV AGM

The 18th Annual General Meeting of Voice of the Listener and Viewer Ltd will be held on Wednesday, 2 December 2020 at 10.30am, remotely, via Zoom because of the restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Further details of how to join the meeting will be circulated with the agenda and papers.

Nominations and resolutions should be sent to the Chairman at VLV, The Old Rectory Business Centre, Springhead Road, Northfleet, Kent, DA11 8HN, not less than 3 days and not more than 21 days before the AGM. Papers for the AGM will be emailed in advance and copies by post will be available on request by contacting Sarah Stapylton Smith at the VLV office.

NOMINATIONS FOR THE VLV AWARDS 2020

We hope we will be able to celebrate the VLV awards for programmes broadcast in 2020 in person at next year's Spring Conference on 29 April 2021, Covid-19 restrictions allowing. If not, we will try to produce an online ceremony.

Nomination forms for the awards, covering programmes across the whole of 2020, are included with this Bulletin. We have changed the title of the Radio Awards to Audio Awards to allow podcasts to be included. And in addition to the usual categories, to recognise the peculiar circumstances of 2020, we are introducing a new award for Best Lockdown Initiative or Programme - Television or Audio.

The VLV awards celebrate the contribution made by high-quality public service programmes and presenters. We are keen that a wide range of broadcasters should be nominated and we encourage members to nominate programmes from several broadcasters where possible. The awards are unique in giving a voice to our membership, something greatly valued by those who win them.

VLV AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN BROADCASTING 2020

**Ballot papers should be returned to the VLV
office by post or email by
Monday 11 January 2021**

Diary Dates

VLV's Autumn Conference

**Tuesday 24
November 2020
10.30am-12.30pm
Online**

VLV AGM

**Wednesday
2 December 2020
10.30am-11.30am
Online**

**VLV's 37th Spring
Conference
Thursday
April 29th 2021**

*The Geological Society,
Piccadilly, London W1J 0BG*

**VLV will announce other events
during the coming months -
watch email alerts and the
website for details.**

Keeping up to date

VLV will be sending out regular updates by email - so please ensure that Sarah Stapylton Smith in the VLV office has your up-to-date email address or else keep looking at the website at www.vlv.org.uk



NEW SUBSCRIPTION / DONATION / CHANGE OF ADDRESS* (delete as appropriate)

VLV Subscription - Individual £30 Joint (two at same address) £45 Student e-membership £10

Please make cheques payable to VLV and send to The Old Rectory Business Centre, Springhead Road, Northfleet, Kent DA11 8HN or pay online at www.vlv.org.uk

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