



# Voice of the Listener & Viewer

Championing Excellence and Diversity in Broadcasting

Spring 2019

Bulletin 124

## FREE TV LICENCES FOR THE OVER 75's?



81% of VLV members who responded to a VLV questionnaire oppose the continuation of free TV licences for households which include someone aged over 75. This is because they oppose the BBC taking on the cost of what they consider to be a welfare benefit. They do not believe that the BBC should decide social policy. They consider BBC to be a broadcaster and not a department of government.

If the BBC takes on the burden of the cost of these free licences its income will be cut by approximately £750 million, 20% of its budget, and in time this will rise because the UK has an ageing population. This will completely undermine the BBC's ability to deliver the services it currently provides. It won't be a matter of efficiency savings or which services to trim; whole services are going to have to be cut.

A BBC consultation on free age related TV licences closed in February and now the BBC board will consider what to do. There are a range of options from the most severe, to stop the concession completely, to the least financially damaging, to means test the benefit and raise the age at which it is available.

Many VLV members who completed the questionnaire consider it important that some form of help is provided for the poorest elderly but they do not want the BBC to pay for the cost of this support. The problem is that few want the BBC to reduce its output. Which services should be cut? Radio 4, BBC Two, Radio 3 or CBeebies? If it is to fund the benefit as it stands all of them will have to go.

During the last BBC funding negotiations the BBC agreed this change with the government. The BBC thus finds itself in an unenviable position and this is due to the appalling method by which BBC funding negotiations are conducted - behind closed door discussions with government ministers which are agreed without any public or Parliamentary scrutiny.

VLV would like to see this process of setting BBC funding overhauled. *(continued on page 2)*

## VLV's 36<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL SPRING CONFERENCE Thursday 9th May 2019

*The Geological Society, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BG  
10.30 am - 4.00 pm*



VLV's Spring Conference will focus on whether public service broadcasting can survive current seismic changes in the media world. From educational content which can broaden our horizons to accurate information about what is happening in the world and high quality entertainment and drama: all of this can enrich our lives but in an ever more competitive media space we have to ask whether we can be sure of its future. Growth in commercial streaming platforms, 40% cuts to the BBC budget, a rise in online content which is sometimes unreliable and the migration of young people away from traditional TV: can our existing system survive?

Sessions will include a panel debate on what the BBC should do about the over 75's licence fee concession. We will hear from media strategy expert Claire Enders and Caroline Abrahams, charity director of Age UK. Age UK, like VLV, has called on the government to take back responsibility for funding the over 75's concession.

We will also look at whether the internet should be regulated in light of the government's deliberations on this issue. The DCMS Select Committee is calling on the government to impose regulation on social media companies and a compulsory code of ethics for tech companies, overseen by an independent regulator.

After lunch actress and impressionist Jan Ravens, of *Dead Ringers* fame, will present the popular VLV Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting.

To book a ticket complete the enclosed form or go to the VLV website—<http://www.vlv.org.uk/vlv-events/springconf2019.html>



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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



Given that the funding of licences for the over 75s is perhaps the most important decision the BBC has faced in recent years, it was pleasing that so many of our members responded to our questionnaire on this subject. Thank you for taking the time to do this and for adding so many insightful and interesting comments. I am constantly impressed by the knowledge, passion and commitment of our members.

The funding challenge posed by the over 75s issue comes at a particularly difficult time for the BBC. As we heard at the interesting session chaired by Alan Yentob at our Autumn Conference, the rapidly increasing competition from global streaming services – Netflix, Amazon, Apple and others – is driving up the costs of production as they compete for talent, particularly in drama. Ironically, this comes in a period when we have had some outstanding drama from all the public service broadcasters, as evidenced by the shortlist for our annual Awards.

The VLV is not against the contribution of the global players. We welcome high quality programmes and choice. However, it is very important that our national players – ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 as well as the BBC – are not squeezed out and that we do not lose the rich mix of programming, produced in the UK for UK audiences, that we have enjoyed for so many years. It is worth noting that none of the top 25 media companies globally, by scale, is British. Ensuring that the BBC is adequately funded is one way of addressing these issues.

As you will read elsewhere in this Bulletin, the VLV intends to continue its campaign to ensure that determining the right level of funding for the BBC is in future a much more transparent process and not subject to dubious last-minute deals behind closed doors. We believe there is growing support across the political spectrum for change in this respect.

Finally, I know many of our members are Radio 4 devotees and I would like to send our thanks and best wishes to Gwyneth Williams as she steps down as its controller. While the role can never be free from controversy, we knew that Gwyneth always had the best interests of the station's listeners at heart.

**Colin Browne,  
Chairman of VLV**

*(continued from page 1)*

In the past the BBC may have thought it was able to protect itself from funding raids by the government but the past two rounds of negotiations show that it has failed to do so. The 2010 and 2015 funding agreements have left BBC with a severely reduced budget. If the BBC takes on the cost of the over 75's licence fee concession as it stands, in 2020/21 its income will be 63% of what it was in 2010 without taking inflation into account, which makes it an even bleaker picture..

Along with the cost of the over 75's fee the BBC also has to now pay for the BBC World Service (£268m in 2017/18), S4C (£107m in 2017/18), BBC Monitoring (£5.5m in 2017/18), local TV (£4.7m) and contribute to Broadband rollout (£80m in 2017/18). The raids which led to these new financial responsibilities were agreed between former Secretaries of State, Jeremy Hunt and John Whittingdale, and the former Chairs of the BBC Trust, Sir Michael Lyons and Rona Fairhead. These cuts will have far-reaching impacts. As a result of them BBC services will have to be reduced; some services will have to disappear completely.

In representing the interests of citizens in the UK who benefit from BBC services and output, the VLV will be working hard in the coming months to highlight our concerns about how BBC funding is set. Our goal will be to avoid future raids on TV licence income in the next set of negotiations due in 2020 and those in the future.

## DCMS SELECT COMMITTEE: DISINFORMATION INQUIRY



The DCMS Select Committee has published its Final Report in its inquiry on disinformation, covering individuals' rights over their

privacy, how their political choices might be affected and influenced by online information, and interference in political elections both in this country and across the world, carried out by malign forces intent on causing disruption and confusion.

The report accuses Facebook of obstructing its inquiry and failing to tackle attempts by Russia to manipulate elections. Damian Collins, chair of the Committee said, 'Democracy is at risk from the malicious and relentless targeting of citizens with disinformation and personalised 'dark adverts' from unidentifiable sources, delivered through the major social media platforms we use every day.' The full report can be found on the DCMS Select Committee's website.

## IPLAYER: COMPETITION ISSUES



In December Ofcom ruled that BBC proposals to extend the time content is available on the iPlayer needed further examination

VLV has made a submission to a BBC Public Interest Consultation, saying that it supports the proposals because they represent better public value for audiences.

The BBC's proposals come at a time when it is clear that time spent by audiences watching content on video on demand platforms is increasing while live TV viewing is decreasing. The BBC faces enormous competition from streaming subscription services, especially for younger audiences, and these proposals have been developed to ensure it maintains its reach in a competitive market.

## CHANNEL 4: REGIONAL PUSH



Channel 4's decision to locate its regional HQ in Leeds is having an impact already. PACT is planning to set up an outpost in the city, UKTV is opening a technical hub and the BFI is basing its new Head of Content for the children's Contestable

Fund there.

Channel 4 is in the process of appointing a Head of Nations and Regions who will be based in Leeds and it has announced it is relocating its daytime team there. It is also overhauling its daytime schedules with plans to commission a live hour-long weekday lunchtime show which will be broadcast from its Leeds studio. By basing the show in Leeds, C4 is hoping to break out of the 'London-centric bubble'.

## CONTESTABLE FUND UPDATE



Further details of the Contestable Fund for public service content have been released.

Former BBC director of radio and VLV Patron Helen Boaden will chair Funding Panel of the Audio Content

Fund and Sam Bailey will be the Fund's Managing Director. Jackie Edwards, the BBC's former head of children's acquisitions and animation, will head the BFI-managed Young Audiences Content Fund for TV.

The TV fund will receive £19m a year and the radio fund will receive up to £1m a year, money from underspend on Digital Switchover. Both funds will work to support independent production companies to develop and produce public service content which is in market failure. The TV fund will support children's content on free to air Ofcom regulated channels and public service radio content for commercial and other radio networks, such as documentaries, comedy and drama.

## BBC DEPARTURES ANNOUNCED

Radio 4 Controller Gwyneth Williams has announced she is to retire. She said she is proud to have attracted listeners by 'smartening up, not dumbing down'. Under her watch, Radio 4 has extended its lunchtime news, changed its morning line-up to include more science programmes, created *Tweet of the Day* and commissioned successful programmes from the likes of the former British Museum director Neil MacGregor.



And Anne Bulford, the BBC's first female deputy director-general, is set to leave the corporation after 6 years. Bulford, who took on the deputy director-general role in July 2016, joined the BBC from Channel 4 in February 2013 as

managing director of finance and operations. She is leaving to pursue a portfolio of non-executive roles.

## ITV TO LAUNCH ITS OWN SVOD?



As we go to press there is speculation that Dame Carolyn McCall, Chief Executive of ITV, is due to unveil plans to launch a joint ITV/BBC streaming video platform in a bid to create a 'British Netflix'. If this proves to be true, it could be a game-changer for UK PSB channels.

Such a move will help ITV and the BBC better compete with the global streaming giants which have disrupted the British TV market and changed viewers' expectations. Under this plan it seems likely the PSBs will stream archive sitcoms and popular entertainment shows. The new streaming service is expected to run alongside the free catch-up platforms iPlayer and ITV Hub.



## VLV AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN BROADCASTING



Attached to this mailing are ballot papers for the 2018 Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting for VLV members to complete.

The VLV Awards are an opportunity to celebrate the wealth of excellent programmes across all channels and networks broadcast in 2018, a quality and diversity reflected in the range of nominations from VLV members and, in the case of the IBT-sponsored award, from IBT members.

This year actress and impressionist Jan Ravens, of *Dead Ringers* and *Spitting Image* fame, will be presenting the awards. Last year Jan delighted us all with an ad-libbed acceptance speech when *Dead Ringers* won the award for best radio comedy.



Nominations this year include TV dramas *The Bodyguard*, *Black Earth Rising* and *Killing Eve*; ITV's *Peston on Sunday* is up against BBC Two's *Newsnight*; and Channel 4's *Random Acts* is competing with the BBC's *Upstart Crow*. Radio 5 Live's Nicky Campell is nominated for an Individual Contributor award alongside Katya Adler, Lyse Doucet, Paddy O'Connell, Ritula Shah and Edward Stourton. A full list of those nominated is available on the VLV website.

Winners say they particularly value these awards, first introduced some thirty years ago, because they are chosen by the people who matter: their listeners and viewers.

The awards this year once more include prizes for the Best Sports Programme on radio or television, sponsored by Arqiva, and for International Content sponsored by the International Broadcasting Trust. And Arqiva are again sponsoring an Award for Innovation, the recipient to be chosen by the VLV Trustees in consultation with the company. We are very grateful to both these organisations for their support.

Please could VLV members take a few minutes to vote for those programmes and individuals they have particularly appreciated.

### VLV AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN BROADCASTING 2018

Ballot papers should be returned to the VLV office by post or email by **Friday March 22nd 2019**.

## IS THERE A FUTURE FOR TRADITIONAL TV?

By Chris Mottershead

At its inception television posed a problem for broadcasters because unlike other media there was no 'point of sale', so funding came either through the TV licence fee or by selling spot advertising. As a consequence, ITV had to attract the audiences that advertisers were interested in reaching and that audience had to accept ad breaks. This arrangement underpinned the TV system in Britain until the advent of cable and satellite. These systems could transmit more programmes and subscribers were charged. Because of this direct income, the operating companies could take a different approach to programming, building audiences to support more complex dramas. Home Box Office (HBO) were probably first in this field. *The Wire* and *Sopranos* were examples of a new style of TV drama, spread over several series. This meant that these new services did not have to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

This process has been taken further with the development of digital streaming services which provide 'video on demand' and can be accessed not only in the home but via mobile devices. Netflix and Amazon are two of the leading subscription companies now providing a considerable range of programming. In the US 10 million homes have cancelled cable or satellite services since 2010. The operators of these new services have realised that to attract and keep their customers they need to produce new, exclusive dramatic content. Netflix has embarked on a major production programme. Last year (2017) they spent \$13 billion on new content which was more than all the other US broadcasters together and more than four times the amount invested by the UK PSBs.

Technological changes are changing the way we view content as well. One trend is 'binge viewing', whereby a number of episodes of a series are watched in succession. More widespread is time-shifted viewing, where viewers use video on demand to watch programmes when they choose.

There are several threatening aspects of these trends for the PSBs. Between 2013 and 2017 3.5 million households in UK cancelled their licence fee, presumably deciding that they did not wish to watch PSB programming, but rather rely on streaming services. This is obviously very worrying for BBC. There is also the problem of whether or not to compete with Netflix. The amount they are spending commissioning content would seem to be something BBC can only match in a few series. And this is at a time when the BBC is faced with the huge cost of free television licences for the elderly. It seems the BBC may be forced to examine its position and to perhaps emphasise regional and national programming which is of less interest to the major streaming companies.

It truly is a different world from the era of three channels and no means of recording programmes in the home. In those limited conditions, television became part of national culture. How will television be developed in this new digital world?

*Chris Mottershead is a former Trustee of VLV.*

## BBC ALBA CELEBRATES ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY



BBC ALBA, the Scottish Gaelic television channel, celebrated its tenth anniversary at the end of 2018 and marked the occasion with some landmark announcements. The channel, which is available on Freeview in Scotland and digitally across the UK, was launched in September 2008 as a partnership between the BBC and Gaelic media organisation, MG ALBA. On air daily from 5pm until midnight, the channel offers a range of programming including children's, news and sport as well as culturally relevant programming about Gaelic and Scottish life.

Last year, BBC ALBA extended its children's programming broadcasting an hour each of CBeebies and CBBC in the early evening. With the continued growth of Gaelic-medium education in Scotland, this was a positive move, almost quadrupling the output of originated live-action children's programming.

An Là (The Day), the BBC ALBA news service, has always been one of the most appreciated programmes on the channel. Until now it has been on air weeknights at 8pm but in 2018 it expanded to become a 7-day service, increasing coverage from its primary newsroom in Inverness.

The most significant change in its tenth year was BBC ALBA's move to become the home of women's sport in Scotland. It announced deals with the Scottish FA and the Scottish Rugby Union and extended broadcasting of domestic games for football and rugby, showcasing the pinnacle of each sport in 2019 – with the Women's Six Nations in Rugby Union and the Women's World Cup in Football. This, along with an increase in coverage of women's shinty, led the Scottish Government to congratulate BBC ALBA.

2018 also saw the first ever BBC ALBA sketch show, *FUNC*. Creator Michael Hines (director of BBC Scotland's successful sitcom *Still Game*) brought together fresh new ideas through a BBC Writer's Room project and delivered an ambitious four-part series which has been a hit for the channel, attracting the sought-after youth audience and expanding the digital and social media reach of BBC ALBA.

With a growth in international co-productions and an increase in digital and short-form commissioning, BBC ALBA isn't just sticking to what it knows. World class music, unique documentaries and a strong voice for the under-represented parts of Scotland is BBC ALBA's bread and butter but, entering its second decade, there is a renewed confidence and relevance that puts BBC ALBA right at the centre of Scottish broadcasting.

## VLV EVENTS: AUTUMN 2018 CONFERENCE REPORT



VLV's Conference on 29th November, *Future Proofing Public Service Broadcasting*, featured some of the most high profile decision-makers in UK television.

Tim Davie, CEO of BBC Studios, set out its contribution to the UK's PSB system, making some of the best UK drama and factual content, but also delivering extra income by selling these programmes overseas. The Q&A session featured questions about free TV licences.

The second item of the day, chaired by Alan Yentob, explored whether the growth of the global giants, Netflix and Amazon, is undermining UK production. Director Peter Kosminsky, producer Sue Vertue, Cat Lewis, of Nine Lives Media, and Peter Fincham, CEO of Entertainment, formerly at ITV and the BBC, found there were no clear answers to this question, but Peter Kosminsky called for a levy to be set up on the streaming video on demand services which could help fund UK public service content.

Ian Katz, Director of Programmes at Channel 4, set out his vision for Channel 4 in the third session of the day. Ian said he wants C4 to be the 'imp in the mechanism.' He wants it to be mischievous and innovative, challenging the mainstream while providing audiences with content they enjoy. It was clear Ian has a distinct vision of what Channel 4 should be. He stressed how important it is that the public service broadcasters remain easy to find and that prominence across smart TVs for Channel 4 apps and its channels is going to be crucial.

The final panel of the day asked 'Who sets the news agenda?' after the domination of news by Brexit and events around Donald Trump for the past two years. Stewart Purvis, formerly of ITN, chaired this session, joined by Jonathan Levy of Sky News, Jamie Angus of the BBC World Service Group and Janine Gibson of BuzzFeed. All stressed that the growth of news on digital and social media platforms has changed the way people consume news, especially on mobile phones. They have a greater choice and a greater range of subjects. In the Q&A the audience expressed concerns about how the Brexit debate has been presented and questioned the balance and impartiality of coverage.

Sound recordings of all the sessions at the conference are available on the VLV website.

# THE BBC, BREXIT AND THE BIAS AGAINST UNDERSTANDING

By Professor Bob Usherwood



VLV members, including me, respect and appreciate the BBC and it was therefore concerning to see so much criticism aimed at the corporation at the VLV Autumn Conference. The subject of the criticism was its coverage of Brexit. The BBC's Charter demands that such issues 'are treated with due impartiality in...news and other output dealing with matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy.' However, many experts believe that its interpretation of this requirement is causing the BBC to frustrate its viewers and listeners.

Alan Rusbridger, former Editor in Chief of *The Guardian* and Principal of Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford, believes that impartiality is 'complicated by the way the apparent centre of gravity has been so effectively dragged rightwards by the relentlessly Europhobic newspapers' - a situation now magnified by the newspaper reviews that are integral to rolling news and some current affairs programmes. As a result we hear 'less from...the rational centre or from the Michael Gove-despised 'experts'. Entire programmes are so obsessed with the splits within one tribe that other voices...are pushed to the margins or remain unheard.'

For Robert Peston, impartial journalism is about 'weighing the evidence and saying on the balance of probabilities...this is the truth.' He argues that the BBC did not do this during the Brexit campaign, but 'put people on with diametrically opposed views [without giving] viewers and listeners any help in assessing which one was the loony and which one was the genius'. 'Balance', as interpreted by the BBC, means that the loony minority are given equal billing with the evidence-based majority.

Professor Chris Grey illustrates how this affects public opinion. He told *PMP Magazine*: 'I gave several public talks where audience members believed that the economic evidence was equally split, with as much to be said on one side as the other'. This was despite the vast majority of experts, including economists employed by the Government, predicting that Brexit will be economically damaging. Grey says that: 'almost all of the factual arguments made by the Leave campaign were untrue...but 'balance' required the BBC...to treat them as being as valid as the opposing arguments.' He argues the BBC should have reported the claim that Brexit would provide £350m a week for the NHS 'in the same way as it would...report claims that the earth was flat are untrue.'

It is unhelpful to accuse the BBC of deliberate bias but Nick Robinson's astonishing claim that the Brexit 'war was over', the disproportionate amount of airtime given to Nigel Farage, Fiona Bruce's sloppy knowledge of opinion polls and other matters have led many to question its standpoint. So too has Andrew Neil, a regular host on BBC political programmes, who, echoing the Leave EU

founder, Arron Banks, called the journalist Carole Cadwalladr, who helped expose the Cambridge Analytica scandal, a 'mad cat woman'.

I tend to the view expressed by John Birt that the bias in television journalism is: 'Not against any particular party or point of view - it is a bias against understanding.'

The BBC's treatment of Brexit was described by a member at the VLV Conference, as 'middle brow-semi depth which never allows for a deep investigation of anything'. This is not so much about impartiality as editorial decisions, which nowadays seem to be more concerned with ratings than dealing with issues that matter. Instead of facilitating endless confrontational interviews, the BBC should respect its audiences and not treat them as if they had limited intellectual aspirations.

It should also question audiences and their assumptions. I no longer watch *Question Time*, which has abandoned promoting serious debate, preferring bear-pit TV which encourages bigots of every persuasion to have their 15 seconds of fame. This probably attracts larger audiences, but it does not help viewers understand complicated issues. Fortunately, Anita Anand who presents Radio 4's *Any Answers*, the programme that follows *Question Time*'s radio predecessor *Any Questions*, is prepared to courteously discourage factually-challenged contributors.

Competition for ratings also appears to influence the choice of panelists, with 'colourful characters' given preference. How else might we explain UKIP being represented, usually by Nigel Farage, 'on *Question Time* in...24% of the programmes since 2010, compared with just 7% for the Green Party?' (Grey *ibid*). To quote from Jeremy Paxman's MacTaggart Lecture in 2007, broadcasters 'should spend less time measuring audiences and more time enlightening them'.

Disturbingly, many in the population have been ignored by the BBC's Brexit coverage. In the referendum, 17,419,742 voted to leave and 16,141,241 voted to remain. However, although there has been continuous coverage of 'leavers', little interest is shown in the nearly 13 million people who did not vote or their reasons for abstaining. This is something worth remembering when the mantra about 'the will of the people' is repeated. This is one of several issues that have not been properly examined but there are many others. Further examples can be found in Nick Cohen's article "How the BBC Lost the Plot on Brexit", (<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/07/12/how-the-bbc-lost-the-plot-on-brexit/>).

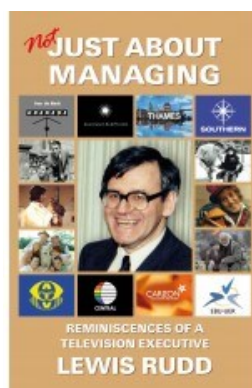
When I was growing up, regular access to the BBC, which then radiated public service values, educated me and provided a foundation for citizenship. I still treasure the BBC, but its Brexit coverage indicates that the bad is driving out the good. It seems to have lost confidence in its core values and become confused about how to defend them. As a result viewers and listeners have been denied the opportunity to fully understand one of the most important issues of the day.

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



## NOT JUST ABOUT MANAGING

By Lewis Rudd



I decided to go for this rather cheeky reference to Theresa May's Downing Street promise on becoming Prime Minister as my book's title, both to make clear that programme executives do more than you might think, and also to indicate that the book is light-hearted in tone.

The initial pieces, which I had written for the magazine of the Cinema and Television

Veterans, resulted in the publisher suggesting that they could be expanded with further chapters into a book. So it is not a chronological autobiography, but deals with different aspects of a varied career at ITV. Although I was mainly involved with children's programmes, I got into the area by chance in 1966 – read the fourth chapter to find out more – having started as one of Granada's first batch of graduate trainees in 1959.

So the book's different sections are themes rather than periods of my career – managing directors and other bosses I worked for, relationships with the on-screen talent, why everyone wants to win awards and how they go about it, how you get the money together for an expensive project, and the problems of taste and decency.

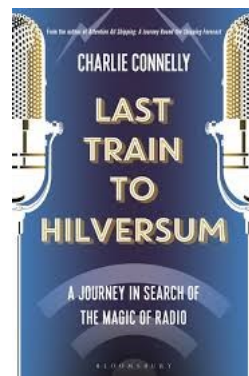
I also look at some things in closer detail: how the old ITV networking system worked, including the challenges facing the so-called regional companies (and also my theory of why Southern and Westward lost their franchises in 1981); dealing with such different personalities as the frequently inebriated Labour cabinet minister George Brown and the very nervous Harry Corbett when he and Sooty moved from the BBC to Thames TV; and working out how to create a pool of child actors in the Midlands to work on Central's programmes – which to my surprise eventually produced a stream of adult Oscar and Bafta winners. There is also a story about the problem of the Canadian actress Genevieve Bujold's cleavage, when she starred opposite Alec Guinness in Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. I give a snapshot of the characters who worked on ITV's flagship current affairs programme *This Week* in the 1960s, and how the television careers of four of the Pythons and Sir David Jason were launched by the children's sketch show *Do Not Adjust Your Set*.

Other programmes which I write about my role in initiating include *Magpie* and *Rainbow* at Thames, *Worzel Gummidge* at Southern, *Press Gang* and *Wise Up* at Central, and *Goodnight Mister Tom* at Carlton. And there are also the ones that got away - including *Grange Hill* and *The Wombles*.

I hope this gives a tempting flavour of the book – if you want to buy it, you can get it from the website of Kaleidoscope Publishing – [www.tvbrain.info](http://www.tvbrain.info) – or from Amazon or by ordering from any good bookshop.

## BOOK REVIEW: LAST TRAIN TO HILVERSUM

by Anthony Wills



Charlie Connelly is a new name to me – my fault, not his – but any book devoted exclusively to radio is bound to catch my eye. *Last Train To Hilversum* is a fascinating exploration of the world of the wireless, though anyone looking for the modern equivalent of Asa Briggs's monumental *History Of Broadcasting* will be disappointed. Connelly's

selection of radio landmarks is eclectic to say the least and by no means chronological, which may intrigue or infuriate the reader. There are major omissions – no mention of BBC Radio 3 for example, in fact 'live' music of any kind, be it classical, jazz, folk or world, is simply not covered, which is strange, as radio is and always has been the supreme medium for music, and not just commercial pop.

He begins with some impressive statistics: 90% of the adult population listens to radio every week, an average of 21.3 hours per person. But to follow that up by claiming that 'radio is completely free' is surely wide of the mark? Around 25% of the BBC licence fee income goes to radio while commercial broadcasting is paid for by advertising and sponsorship. He notes that digital take-up has now passed the 50% mark; the future *is* digital, which he (and I) are old enough to somewhat regret. You can hazard a guess at Connelly's age when he recounts receiving a thank-you postcard from the *Listen With Mother* office (for younger readers, that's the equivalent of a *Blue Peter* badge!). As a child he'd lock himself away in his room scanning the airwaves of an old Roberts portable - and that's where he encountered Hilversum.

In fact Hilversum is saved for the penultimate chapter of the book. Connelly now embarks on an idiosyncratic tour of the extraordinary world of radio. He adopts a scattergun approach, so that immediately after the invention of the Electraphone in 1895 we spend three (yes, really) chapters in the company of Radio 4 continuity announcer Corrie Corfield, including 18 pages on the Shipping Forecast. Later there's a chapter on Charlotte Green's BBC career, which included reading the football results. Fair enough, but continuity announcers are almost extinct. After that it's back to the history lesson and the fascinating story of Marconi, who is one of the better-known characters in the broadcasting annals. Apart from him you will I'm sure enjoy finding out about such extraordinary characters as Peter Eckersley, Sheila Borrett, Beatrice Harrison, Hilda Matheson, Olive Shapley, Teddy Wakeham, Leonard Plugge, Tommy Woodruffe, Jessie Brandon and Father Ronald Knox.

(continued on page 8)

(continued from page 7)

One of the joys of the book is that Connelly actually travels to the (sometimes far-flung) places where major broadcasting breakthroughs took place. He visits the site of the Chelmsford studio where in 1920 Dame Nellie Melba was invited – for a fee of £1,000! – to perform live on air for Marconi's MZX wireless transmitters. He goes to Fecamp, home of Radio Normandy, the first offshore commercial radio station to be beamed to the UK in 1931. He attempts to locate a wartime pill box just outside Bexhill where Spike Milligan spent part of his national service. He finds Lord Reith's grave near Aviemore. Coming up to date he travels to Utsira in Norway for the Shipping Forecast and Wester Ross in Scotland to meet the manager of Two Lochs Radio, the UK's smallest commercial station. He spends a day with Cerys Matthews on 6 Music and a night with Dotun Abebayo on Radio 5 Live.

And so, at last, to Hilversum, a 35 minute train ride from Amsterdam, and Media Park where Connelly finds the Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision. A veritable treasure trove certainly, but not a place where he finds his own personal completion. In a moving finale he heads back to his childhood home in rural West Dorset where his lifelong love affair with radio began.

*Last Train To Hilversum*, published by Bloomsbury 2019.

*Anthony Wills is a Trustee of VLV.*

## PATRICK McINTOSH CYCLES TO JAPAN



In May former VLV Trustee, Patrick McIntosh, will start a momentous journey, cycling from Twickenham to the Rugby World Cup in Japan. He is doing the trip to raise awareness and money for the fight against cancer.

In 2015 Patrick walked to the South Pole with polar explorer Conrad Dickinson, two years after being treated for bowel, skin and prostate cancer. They did the trip unsupported, carrying all their own supplies and equipment.

Through the KMG Foundation Patrick has been hugely supportive of VLV, funding our work to maintain public service broadcasting in the UK. He considers broadcasting to be a crucial means to engage the public about health issues. We are all very grateful to him for his support and wish him the best of luck during his new adventure. You can donate to support Patrick's fundraising at [www.justgiving.com/fundraising/kmgfoundation](http://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/kmgfoundation).

### Keeping up to date

VLV will be sending out regular updates by email - so please ensure that Sarah Stapylton Smith has your up-to-date email address or else keep looking at the website at [www.vlv.org.uk](http://www.vlv.org.uk)

## Diary Dates

### VLV's 36th Spring Conference

and

### The VLV Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting 2018

**Thursday 9 May 2019**

*The Geological Society,  
Piccadilly, London W1J 0BG  
10.30 am - 4.00 pm*

To book: go to [www.vlv.org.uk](http://www.vlv.org.uk) or use the enclosed form.

The conference will be followed by  
**The VLV Members forum**

### VLV's 36th Autumn Conference

**Wednesday 20th November 2019**

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

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

### VLV AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN BROADCASTING 2018

Ballot papers should be returned to the VLV office by post or email by **Friday 22nd March**



## 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](http://www.vlv.org.uk)

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