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PROGRAMME BALANCE IN SOUND BROADCASTING

THE EDITOR'S INVITATION was to describe the BBC's approach to the question of balance in its radio programmes, and the research upon which it is based. It is necessary first to say something about the situation of radio in a country where television is in an advanced stage of development. A full account would be beyond the compass of this article, but some basic data are indispensable for any serious consideration of radio programmes. There are in the United Kingdom between 15 and 16 million households and virtually all of them are equipped with radio sets, many with two or more. Exactly how many have more than one set cannot be known with certainty since one licence fee covers any number of sets in a house, but that it is a large number can be deduced from the sale of receivers, which in recent years has been running at a higher figure than ever before, largely at the present time for transistor portables. About 5 million v.h.f (f.m) sets for high-quality listening, equivalent to about a third of the total number of households, have been sold, some of them being built into television sets. The number of car radios is, for a variety of reasons, difficult to establish accurately, but there can be no doubt that it is growing rapidly and that car listeners are becoming an increasingly important part of the audience.

Some 12½ million households now have television as well as radio, leaving about 3 million dependent on radio alone. Since the advent of television, audiences for radio in the evening have for obvious reasons steadily diminished, but even at that time of

day a percentage of the television public is at any moment to be found listening to radio. This proportion has been consistently between 2 and 3%, and it means that, even when every household has a television set, radio could expect an average audience at any time during the evening of not less than 2% of the population, or about a million listeners. In the day-time, naturally, the television public listens more, and forms much the greater part of the audience for radio. When people first acquire a television set there is a tendency to listen less, even outside the hours of television broadcasting, but as the novelty wears off there is evidence that they come back to radio, and in the past 4 or 5 years the audience for radio programmes in the day-time has been steadily growing. About 27 million people now listen at some time to radio each day. It used to be thought that the television public would require from radio something different from those who possessed only a radio set, that they would turn to radio for music rather than speech, or for more serious and intellectual programmes, leaving television to be the main entertainer. But there appears to be no support for this belief. The evidence on the contrary is that the television public chooses its radio programmes, high-brow, middle-brow and low-brow, music or speech, drama, talks, quiz programmes, light entertainment and sport, in exactly the same proportions as before. This behaviour has been consistent over a long period, and there is no reason to suppose it will change.

From these essential facts we can draw some simple

conclusions. First, that radio shows no signs whatever of fading away; that the audience in the evening—when the majority of the audience are potentially available at home and the time most suited to relaxed and attentive listening—though small in comparison with the past is unlikely to average at any one moment less than a million; that the audience in the day-time is likely to grow, so long as the standard of living rises and the number of portable receivers and car radios increases, and will be to a large extent an audience on the move, listening only half attentively; and that radio, though its economy of operation and the large number of hours at its disposal enable it to give special attention to minorities, must nevertheless continue to provide a comprehensive and fully balanced programme service, not merely for those who still depend only on radio but even when every household has television.



The transistor portable radio has done much to perpetuate the popularity of sound broadcasting.

To serve its audience, radio in the United Kingdom disposes of three separate networks, the Home Service, Light Programme and Third Network, all nation-wide and all carried on both medium or long wave and v.h.f. One of these, the Home Service, can be broken down into its seven regional parts, or occasionally into smaller sub-regional or area services. All three are operated by the BBC and can therefore be planned as a unified service. At the present moment there are effectively only two and a half networks since the Third Network is only in use during the evening hours. Authorization has now been obtained to bring this Third Network into operation during the day-time, and the BBC proposes to use it for a continuous programme of good music from 7.30 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. as soon as certain contractual difficulties have been overcome. There are indications also that, before long, local broadcasting may be introduced, and though local broadcasting cannot by definition be a network it would nevertheless amount to a fourth choice for listeners.

The term 'programme balance' may sometimes be used in the narrow sense of impartiality between political parties or between opposing views in any controversial matter. This kind of impartiality has been the traditional policy of the BBC and may be taken for granted. The expression here is assumed to mean the attempt to include within the programme service the widest possible range of tastes and interests, and to reflect at different intellectual and cultural levels all the kinds of material which lend themselves to broadcasting, whether for majorities or minorities; to do so, moreover, not so that it can be shown simply as a statistical result at the end of a year, but in such a way that in some much more limited period—at any moment if possible but at least each day—every section of the public will feel that a reasonable choice has been offered. This is what every public service broadcasting organization that serves the whole community will try to do. It is fair to draw a distinction here between public service and commercial broadcasting organizations, since the latter, having profit as their motive, may not be under any obligation to serve all sections of the community. If there are a large number of them, as in some cities of the United States for example, they may specialize in certain types of programme activity which by definition are not balanced, like the good music or light music stations.

In the jargon of programme planning, reference is often made to vertical balance and horizontal balance.

The metaphor is derived from the display of programmes on the printed page, vertical being what you see as you run your eye up and down the column of one programme, and horizontal what you see as you compare one programme with one or more others across the page. Thus vertical balance is achieved in time sequence, horizontal balance simultaneously. Clearly, any broadcasting service that has to serve the whole public while disposing of only one network or channel, as was the case with BBC Television until this year, must achieve its balance vertically. Music and speech, light entertainment and opera, drama and current affairs, must follow one another and the different interests must await their turn. With two or more channels or networks, different interests can be satisfied simultaneously, and with enough of them it ought to be possible to please most people most of the time.

Since BBC radio has three networks for part of the day, and ultimately it is hoped for the whole day, it is principally concerned with horizontal planning. Great emphasis is laid on the variety of programmes available and special efforts are made by cross trailing from one programme network to another to encourage listeners to exercise their choice. But vertical balance is not neglected. As a result of the historical evolution of BBC radio, each of the programme services on the three networks has come to have its own special characteristic and there is no doubt that this differentiation is a convenience to listeners. It does mean, however, that though most people will sometimes select individual programmes or switch from one service to another to see what is available, there is a tendency to stay tuned for most of the time to the service which is usually found most acceptable. It is therefore important to see that each programme



The serious listener to the BBC is able to hear both quality music and drama.

service is as complete and varied as possible within its own general character.

At the head of each programme service is a chief who has full editorial responsibility for his own programmes. If each ensures that his service remains true to its general character a rough balance is automatically achieved, and it is points of detail only that require attention; for example, that music—or speech—is not being broadcast simultaneously on all three networks, or two orchestral concerts or two plays likely to interest the same audience. All three are in daily contact with one another, are fully aware of each other's plans and no radical changes are made without consultation. In practice it is the Home Service which is planned first, because it is the central service, most likely therefore to overlap with either of the others, because it carries most of the BBC's commitments and because, as the only regionalized service, its planning is far more complicated. But the Home Service has no right of way and all three services may be adjusted in the interests of overall balance. On the whole the system works well, but errors creep in. Two quiz games may be broadcast simultaneously, the same work may be included in two separate concerts, or the same star actor appear in two pre-recorded plays. Sometimes this is due to human error in a complicated organization, sometimes to last-minute changes due to *force majeure*. Listeners are not slow to tell us when

this does occur. Sometimes a theoretically perfect plan will produce three programmes at once that one listener would have liked to hear, or nothing in a whole evening that pleases another. Not even with ten choices would there be any certainty of pleasing all.

The balance of programmes is not so much a question of research as of common sense and recognition of social responsibility. But the BBC has many ways of keeping in touch with its listening public—from telephone calls and listener correspondence, about 10,000 letters a month on radio alone, through its advisory councils, through Press criticism and its many contacts throughout the country, and above all from its own Audience Research. The latter is a subject which deserves an article to itself but it can be said briefly that it is a system tested over more than 25 years which tells us just how many people listen to or view every programme every day, and the trends in listening or viewing over any given period. It tells us, for any selected programme, not only the size of the audience but how much or how little they enjoyed it. It gives us also each week the measure of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with our programmes in general. On a scale ranging from +100 for total satisfaction to -100 for total dissatisfaction, it is pleasant to record that radio has a consistent return of about +70.