THE BBC: Public Institution and Private World

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THE BBC

Public Institution and Private World

TOM BURNS

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 <i>PAST AND PRESENT</i>	1
The Creation of a Social-industrial Complex – The Westminster Connection – Control and Consensus – The Governors and the Public Interest	
2 <i>FROM PUBLIC SERVICE TO PROFESSIONALISM</i>	34
The Power of Broadcasting – The Idea of Public Service in Broadcasting – The Reithian Ethos – From Monopoly to Competition – Industrial Relations	
3 <i>SETTINGS</i>	78
Physical Setting – Social Settings – Grading – Social Distinctions – Commitment and Career – The Appointments System and Boardmanship	
4 <i>A PRIVATE WORLD</i>	122
Professionalism as a Moral Order – Against the Image of Public Service – Cryptomicrocosmos – BBC Policy and Internal Politics	
5 <i>PRESS FREEDOM AND BROADCASTING LIBERTIES</i>	155
The National Interest and the Public Good – Into Politics – The Pride and Terror of Broadcasting – Divisions and Dimensions – The Fourth Estate – From News Bulletins to ‘Yesterday’s Men’	
6 <i>THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS</i>	186
The Politics of Accommodation – Eyes, ravenous and half-shut; Mirrors, ugly and in corners; the Manufacture of Bad News from Nowhere, etc. etc. – Technical Constraints –	

	Organisational Controls – The Rhetoric and the Grammar of Broadcast Journalism – The Corporate Idea – The Adversary Stance – Beating the Clock – ‘Viewability’	
7	<i>MANAGING THE BBC</i> The Industrialisation of the BBC – A Segmented Organisation – Financial Pressures – The ‘McKinsey Reorganisation’ – The Planning Cycle – Under New Management	211
8	<i>MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATIONAL PROCESS</i> The New Managerialism – The Expropriation of Commitment – The Common Interests of Common Resources – The Conditions of Engagement as a Human Resource – Social Interaction, Skilled and Unskilled – Organisational Processes within Management – The BBC as Unfinished Business	252
	<i>Notes</i>	298
	<i>Index</i>	309

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T.B.

February 1977

Preface

This book is for the most part based on tape recordings and notes I took during some fifteen weeks spent in the BBC in 1963 and on a second period of study in 1973. It is about the BBC as I have got to know it as a working community and an occupational milieu, about the changes which have taken place during the ten years' interval between the two series of interviews, and about the continuities observable over the same period. It is about the BBC as a public institution, and as an organisation. In all these respects, the BBC is a rather special place, perhaps unique.

Yet just as the 'BBC manner', distinctive as it used to be, is nevertheless an assemblage of elements of conduct styles current in British society at large, so, in much the same way, the organisational structure, the codes of working behaviour, the way people fit their work situation, invest in commitments of different kinds, and try to steer their careers are all in one respect unique to the BBC; but the factors which are discernibly at work are common to many other milieux in which professionals and managers, clerical workers, technicians, and manual workers spend their lives. The distinctive political situation of the BBC and the way it affects the political, social and cultural life of the country can be seen in the same way as a constellation of elements visibly present in a wide variety of different contexts.

The whole study originated, as these things usually do, in the chance concurrence of my own research interests, as they were developing early in the 1960s, with an opportunity for exercising them in an appropriate and accessible setting. In 1960, the BBC had begun a series of management conferences, which still continue, at Uplands, a country house establishment near High Wycombe. Each conference lasted a fortnight, and was attended by twenty or more senior staff drawn from as wide a variety of departments and places as was feasible. The Uplands Conferences were planned and directed by Mr Oliver J. Whitley, then Controller, Staff Training and Appointments.

I was invited early on to contribute to these conferences as an 'outside speaker'. After performing the second time, in May 1961, I was asked if I would be prepared to spend a week at the next conference

in October, attending all the lectures and such other meetings as I saw fit, but especially mixing in the extra-curricular proceedings of the conference. The suggestion was attractive, but I made it clear that I had no experience of participant activities of this kind, and, in accepting the invitation, I asked for an opportunity to gain some slight acquaintance with the Corporation in its own setting. This was agreed, and I spent a week or so in September interviewing some twenty people, mostly in senior positions, in a variety of departments in Broadcasting House and Television Centre. At the end of my week at the Uplands conference in October, I delivered myself of some critical observations about the conference and about the Corporation at large which were received courteously, and I think, appreciatively, but were taken no further in discussion.

The episode ended there, but left me in the unsatisfactory position, as a student of occupations and organisations, of having glimpsed some extremely interesting situations bearing closely on my current interests but having far too little evidence on which to do more than speculate. Accordingly, some months later, I wrote to Oliver Whitley asking for permission to prosecute enquiries of the kind I had broached in the preliminary set of interviews at greater length and in more organised fashion. This appeal was received sympathetically. In April 1962, I met the Director of Administration and discussed my proposal, and my interest, with him. In August, I was told that permission for the enquiry was granted, and I arranged to carry it out during the first four months of the following year.

During the early months of 1963, I interviewed about two hundred people. They were confined to members of the staff of four sections of the Corporation, chosen to give a fairly wide array of people and functions: Technical Operations and Maintenance (Engineering), in Television Centre; Schools Broadcasting (Sound and Television); Staff Administration (including Central Establishment Office); and Light Entertainment (Television).

While these departments differ greatly from each other in many respects, they are not, of course, a representative sample of the Corporation's activities or staff. So that while, to avoid the annoyance of perpetual qualification or periphrasis, I shall speak of 'the Corporation', or aspects of it, or of 'staff', or categories of staff, I hope it will be borne in mind that the reference is always to the Corporation as it appears in, or to, those departments I know and the three hundred or so members of the Corporation I met then and later.

I should perhaps say, of the interviews themselves, that the term may be a little misleading; they followed neither the method of the professional journalist (whether accoucheur or wrestler) nor the

standardised procedures familiar in social surveys. Although I tried, by the end of a conversation, to see that I had obtained comments or facts on the points I thought relevant or interesting, I used no standard sequence or form of questions; and my ideas of what was interesting or relevant information tended to change, too. The procedure has much more in common, perhaps, with that followed by social anthropologists than with any of the research methods currently practised in sociology. What each interview, or conversation, had in common was a lengthy prefatory statement about my interests and objectives in making the enquiry. These interests and objectives can be summarised as the study of:

the different commitments in which the individual becomes involved and the ways in which he tries to meet each of them and to reconcile them,

and, secondly,

the different social systems which are built up out of these commitments – systems such as the working organisation (out of his commitment to his employer), the system of internal politics (out of commitments to fellow members of a department, to people of the same rank, to leaders or dependent followers, to fellow-professionals) and the career system (out of commitment to his own present standing and future prospects).’

There is, then, a double perspective, one individual, the other social. The same material of observation is related both to the individual’s own array of commitments and to the social systems existing within the working community of the Corporation. Such systems are defined by their explicit or implicit set of purposes.

Further, I was interested in:

The interaction of these systems, i.e. the working organisation with the political system, the career system and so forth.

All this had, in fact, been a major focus of interest in a previous study of the electronics industry, in which I had tried to ascertain the factors which seemed to facilitate, or hinder, the capacity of firms to operate effectively in conditions of rapid market and technological change.¹ But I wanted to pursue these matters further, and in the context of rather hazy notions about the widespread tendency to ‘professionalise’ jobs (particularly evident, I thought, in the Corporation, but observable in most occupational milieux).

The interviews which followed this rather lengthy introduction lasted anywhere from one to three hours. In fact, as I have said,

'conversation' or 'discussion' are less misleading terms than 'interview' for what went on. Having begun by declaring my interests fairly fully at the outset, I often followed this up by interjecting attempts at articulating half-formed impressions or interpretations which had already occurred to me, usually illustrating them at some length from previous research or other experience. In general, therefore, I followed the procedure natural to ordinary discourse, which means that the whole study was conducted in and through these interviews; almost all the interpretative and explanatory ideas put forward in this book occurred – or, often, were suggested – to me in interview, and none of them has not been discussed, developed, or amended during interviews or subsequently in talking with people who were or had been members of the Corporation.

There is no question, therefore, of the interviews – or rather, the records and transcripts made of them – serving as 'data', to be subjected to analysis and interpretation at a later stage. The later stages, after finishing the study, were taken up with repeated reading of my notes and playback of the recording tapes, reconciling and arranging the relevant contents, and composing all I wanted to say in a reasonably coherent and comprehensible way without losing anything of consequence and without misrepresenting it. How successful the procedure turns out to be depends, in the first place, of course, on the competence and experience of the enquirer – and of this all I can say is that I had by then carried out studies, some on similar and others on quite different lines, in some thirty industrial and non-industrial organisations. More especially, any success depends on how non-threatening and intrinsically interesting the researcher can make his enquiries appear to the people he meets. It amounts, in short, to a matter of engaging the people interviewed as willing cooperators in his enquiries – of involving them in the furtherance of the study. Hence, the constant need to make clear what I was up to, and what I was making of the information I had gathered thus far.

Some fifty or sixty of the lengthier interviews in 1963 (and all sixty in 1973) were recorded. I was also able to attend a number of meetings and outside rehearsals, and to spend some time in television studios and control rooms. The method of enquiry, in short, follows much the same lines as those of my earlier studies in industry,² except that I was able to record a much higher proportion of interviews. Yet the time I spent in the BBC in 1963 was a quite different personal experience, and not merely because I was met everywhere with civility and consideration, for this is as unfailingly present in industry as in the BBC. Most of the difference lies in the fact that people in the BBC conduct their everyday business, as well as incidental conversations and the more intense discussions of the minutiae of production and design

and editing, in an articulate, intelligent and civilised way. There is an urbanity about the Corporation which may be at its polished and uniform best among those who deal with the outside world but which permeates much of the organisation at large.

It seemed to be the prevalence, persistence and consistency of this styling of conduct rather than any distinctive features which lie behind the frequent reference to the 'BBC manner' and even the 'BBC type'; in other words, the reference was to a normative system composed of specific elements – of language, bearing, lines of talk, and social skills – which are severally present in modern British society but which in the Corporation were combined to form an organised code of conduct and values. The code allowed for sizeable differences in attitude, opinion and aspiration: indeed these differences, and the conflicts they engender, formed much of the content of the Corporation's internal business and social life. The manner, in fact, was a way of defining the 'rules of the game' according to which the internal and external business of the Corporation and all the manifold social intercourse to which this business gives rise should be conducted. The most dangerous conflicts, consequently, were those which were expressed, in almost ritualistic terms, by a deliberate departure from the BBC manner, signifying, as they did, a challenge to the 'rules of the game' themselves.

All this had a good deal of effect on the way in which the study developed in terms both of the kind of information which interviews and observation yielded and of the formulation which eventually imposed itself on the information. To begin with, I found the interviews more immediately rewarding and enjoyable than any series I had previously undertaken; but this was not merely a matter of degree – of getting more information and of quicker and better understanding of the point of the enquiry. There was a qualitative difference in the emphasis given to different factors in the organisation itself, at one extreme, and in the occupational situation of its individual members, at the other. The span of considerations seen as relevant to the topics I raised was much wider. It was as if one had moved from the world, say, of C. P. Snow's novels into that of Anthony Powell's.

So that, in the second place, the variety of loosely related interests I had begun with assumed coherence as parts of a general study of the cultural ambience of the Corporation. The BBC 'manner', that is, was the expressive aspect of a normative system, peculiar to the BBC, of behaviour and values which were not. The study therefore developed into an attempt to describe this social and cultural artefact and to explain it in terms of the organisation which sustained it and which it sustained, and in terms of the individuals who consciously or

compliantly, self-interestedly or unwillingly, became immersed in the culture of the BBC.

For convenience, I arranged the programme of interviews and observation so as to stay wholly within one department until I had heard and seen enough – i.e., until interviews began to show that little would be added to what I had already learned in that area. In each department the first interviews would be with the senior members, and thereafter I arranged meetings with the rest of the staff as they became free until I had talked with at least half of them. As soon as possible afterwards I composed notes on which I could base a general appreciation of what I had learned, and ‘reported back’ to the head of department and as many of his juniors as he chose – or I could persuade him – to invite. Meetings with Technical Operations and Maintenance, Television (Engineering) and with Schools Broadcasting (Television and Radio) took place while the study was still in progress; what I had to say was usually well received, and they proved to be extremely useful occasions in which I was able to corroborate and often amend or correct facts and inferences.

Thereafter, I composed a lengthy ‘working report’ on the whole study. This went to the BBC late in 1964. By that time Oliver Whitley, who had throughout been sympathetic and extremely helpful, had been appointed Chief Assistant to the Director General, and all subsequent dealings were with the Director of Administration and his immediate subordinates. It was quickly made clear to me that their sole interest in the report was in preventing its publication. In this they were able to rely, as they were entitled to do, on the undertaking I had given not to publish anything based on the study without the consent (which did not necessarily mean the approval) of the Corporation. Not only so, but the Administration Division went to what seemed to me at the time insulting lengths in trying to prevent what I am sure they would have called ‘leakages’, asking that I should guarantee that none of my ‘personal’ professional colleagues to whom I might show the report would allow the report ‘in whole or in part [to] get out, be published or pass beyond these people other than in their private professional capacities’ – and this, I may add, at the same time as commending the report itself:

‘... speaking for myself, and I think for those who have also read it, it is certainly interesting and, more than interesting, fascinating. It is also reasonable and balanced, but within its own restricted confines only and provided that you do not take these words as meaning agreement with everything in it.’

The one reason advanced for refusing consent was that the BBC was

receiving hostile treatment from 'certain newspapers', and that the report could be used as 'a stick to beat it with'.

The whole business remains a puzzle. And the later developments which led not only to a removal of the embargo but to a complete reversal of attitudes, to the point of inviting me to return and, exactly ten years later, to repeat the study, increases the mystery rather than lessens it; because, for the life of me, I am still unable to see anything in that working report which, however ingeniously and maliciously quotations from it were stitched together by some enterprising journalist, could have been half as damaging as, say, the 'disclosures' sold to the press by a Director immediately on his retiring, or the perennial flow of innuendos and hearsay reports which appear in gossip columns and are even printed as news about the internal affairs of the BBC.

'Corporation paranoia', the phrase which has occurred most frequently in the few discussions I've been drawn into about the episode, explains nothing. It is, indeed, meaningless. Nor is it helpful, though perhaps it is a little reassuring, to know that the experience I had fits a common, even international, tradition. Over a quarter of a century ago, Paul Lazarsfeld, the first social scientist of any note to interest himself in broadcasting as a subject of study, wrote:

'If there is any one institutional disease to which the media of mass communications seem particularly subject, it is a nervous reaction to criticism. As a student of mass media I have been continually struck and occasionally puzzled by this reaction, for it is the media themselves which so vigorously defend principles guaranteeing the right to criticize.'³

Lazarsfeld offered no explanation of this state of affairs beyond the suggestion that one part of the explanation might be that this kind of criticism had not achieved any formal standing as a legitimate field of academic or any other sort of enquiry. There is perhaps some substance in this. The situation is very different now, but at that time I did experience extraordinary difficulty in making clear to officials in Administration who were not the subject of interviews, and had either to be told of what I was doing or be shown the results, just what the purpose and point of it all was. The provenance and purpose of the study were well known, of course, to Oliver Whitley, who did fully understand what I was about and was sympathetic to the undertaking, believing as he did that public corporations like the BBC had public obligations, one of which was certainly to permit, and possibly encourage, investigation into their organisational structure and operating procedures, and into the assumptions, beliefs and values of the people who worked in them and who controlled them.

All this is much in accordance with a tradition which used to be

thought of as centrally important in British public affairs, and was held in high regard in Europe. Perhaps the best testimony to this, having regard to the time (1917), the nationality (German), and the weight of authority now carried by his writings, is a passage from one of a series of articles Max Weber wrote for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on the governmental problems which would face his country after the war:

'The integrity of British officialdom and the public's high level of political sophistication are founded on . . . the parliamentary right of enquiry, the mere existence of which will force the administrative chiefs to account for their actions in such a way as to make its use unnecessary . . . This maturity is reflected not in votes of no-confidence, indictments of ministers and similar spectacles of French-Italian unorganised parliamentarism, but in the fact that the nation keeps itself informed about the conduct of its affairs by the bureaucracy.'⁵

Even when they were being written, the words were being disproved by developments which diluted and dissipated this particular accountability and information system almost into nothingness; but Weber's final point was that 'ultimately the bureaucracy can only gain by such a development', and it is this belief that Oliver Whitley shared.

On the other hand, of course, criticism and accountability on these lines and at this level are matters of parliamentary right – whether the right is exercised or not – and it is nowadays improbable that any government department or public corporation created by Parliament which might be (and sometimes, even now, actually is) held answerable in some comparable fashion to Parliament would accept, let alone invite, critical investigation by other agencies or individuals – unless the gain to itself was visible.

I suspect that neither Oliver Whitley's beliefs nor his understanding of the object of the study were shared by his immediate colleagues and superiors. More than once I had to try to make it clear to them that I was not acting as a voluntary and unpaid industrial consultant, which, to revert to Paul Lazarsfeld's remarks, had by then become an understandable and acceptable role; but I was not sure that I had succeeded. And brief as they were, some of the comments on the report, which came exclusively from senior officials in the Administration Directorate who were responsible for 'personnel' matters, reflected some polite puzzlement about the usefulness I thought the work could have for the Corporation's management. If there was no identifiable slot between unpaid consultant and remote (and therefore, presumably, ineffectual) don into which they could fit me, and if, as seemed evident from the report, I was not concerned with making recommendations, giving advice, or even providing the kind of information which management

could use to mend whatever needed mending, what the hell was I doing in the BBC? And if the only answer was that I, like any other busybody, was merely satisfying my own curiosity, I suppose it could have seemed positively irresponsible actually to sanction publication of the report (or something based on it), knowing that it could certainly do the BBC no good and might just possibly do it harm. Since I had been good enough to provide a gag for myself by undertaking not to publish without 'the consent, which did not necessarily mean approval', of the BBC, the correct administrative decision was obvious.

After 1970 the situation changed. The entire Board of Management had been replaced by 1973 and it is quite possible to attribute the very different attitude I encountered in 1972 to the ability of the Director General and others, with nobody on the premises having to defend the previous decision, to take an entirely fresh look, and to see that perhaps too much fuss had been made of a relatively unimportant matter. The whole climate had changed, too, in that a sizeable volume of writings had been published on broadcasting and the press, many by broadcasters and journalists, which had commanded widespread and serious attention. At all events, when, in 1972, I had occasion to write to the Director General, I reopened the question of using the material I had collected in 1963 in writing a rather more general essay on the BBC. Not only was assent forthcoming to this proposal but with it came an invitation from the Director General to spend some time again in the Corporation so that I could 'brief' myself on recent developments. This was totally unexpected, and despite the underlying changes in the situation which I have remarked on, and which I believe contributed to the turnaround, was rather handsome. There was, after all, no new and positive reason why the repeated refusals of earlier years should have been reversed; it was easier, in fact, merely to uphold those decisions. There must be few chief executives, and none that I know, who would have done so without any compelling reason other than what must be construed as fairmindedness.

Clearing sufficient time meant a further delay, but eventually, almost exactly ten years after the end of the 1963 study, I spent six or seven weeks interviewing about sixty people, more than half of them senior BBC officials, and collecting other material.

I have thought it proper to relate, as briefly as I could, the history of this piece of writing largely because too many people know part of that history for me to ignore it completely. So I have had to run the risk of parading what were, after all, rather slight frustrations and difficulties partly to explain how what began as a short piece of research, and is still a minor one, took over ten years to see the light of day, and partly to forestall some misconstructions which might otherwise be put on the behaviour of officials, past and present, in the BBC.

Over and above all this, what remains true now, as it was ten years earlier, is my indebtedness to all the BBC people I interviewed. This is meant as more than the usual polite gesture of acknowledgement. Without saddling them with responsibility for the ideas contained in this essay, or for its arrangement and presentation, I have nevertheless to make it clear that their part in this study is much more considerable than is usual in such affairs. The liberal use of quotations in most chapters makes this even clearer. Furthermore, earlier versions both of the first working report and of this essay have been read by and discussed with senior members of the departments in which the earlier study was, for the most part, carried out, and with senior officials more recently. Their comments and criticisms have of course been of the greatest value. In no case have I been asked to remove or dilute passages which seemed to them hostile or unjust, although where I have thought what I had written was wrong, I have corrected it.

I have, throughout, refrained from using the names of present members of the BBC and have tried to ensure that when I have used quotations from recordings of what they said, neither they or anybody they may have mentioned is identifiable – or, that, if they are, they have no objection. Ensuring this has meant that I have sent copies of their quoted utterances to everybody whose words I have used (with one or two exceptions in the case of people of whose names I have no record, because they were interviewed more or less by chance). Consent was readily given in all cases of the 1963 interviews and in all but two or three of the 1973 series; in these few instances, the quotation has been deleted, or reduced to a remark incorporated in my own text.