

Science, the 1930s and the BBC: competition and collaboration

Allan Jones, Department of Communication and Systems, Faculty of Mathematics and Computing, Open University, UK

The 'social relations of science' movement grew to prominence in the 1930s. Its story has been told by McGucken, MacLeod and MacLeod, and Wersky among others. The movement consisted of predominantly left-wing scientists who held that science could and should be applied to the alleviation of social problems, and that a rationally planned society was more just, and more efficient, than one operating on *laissez-faire* principles. In their view, the potential of science for social improvement was being frustrated by reactionary and vested interests. Part of their mission was to educate the public in science and rational thought. Mass media such as radio were attractive for this function. This paper looks at the social relations of science movement in relation to science broadcasting on the BBC during the 1930s. During the first half of the 1930s, several 'science and society' broadcasts were given on BBC radio, often by scientists associated with the social relations of science movement, such as physicist Patrick Blackett and mathematician Hyman Levy. These talks will be outlined, as will the BBC's 'Changing World' series of broadcasts which were a direct consequence of the economic crisis of 1930/31.

The paper will argue that despite the known liberal sympathies of many of the BBC Talks staff during the early 1930s, 'science and society' talks were regarded by them, and especially by science producer Mary Adams, with suspicion. This was not so much because these talks presented controversial politics (although there was an element of that), but because they were regarded as 'poor radio'. The paper will argue that BBC production staff used criteria for assessing broadcasts based on their own developing sense of the professionalism of public service broadcasting. The profession of broadcasting embodied, in the view of BBC staff, the distinct skill of knowing what the audience could cope with and how best to present it. This skill was the exclusive preserve of the professional broadcaster.

The developing split between the scientists' view of the role of the public service broadcaster – the promotion of science and rationality – and the BBC's view – the promotion the public interest as construed by the broadcasting profession – set the scene for a showdown during the second world war when scientific organisations attempted to secure greater influence over the BBC's science output. The paper will supply the context for this split. It will explain how science broadcasting was handled within the BBC, who the key personalities were within the BBC, and how they performed their 'gatekeeping' function. It will show how BBC staff, despite their sense of their own professional competence, drew on advice from a stable of informal and formal advisors operating on the boundary between broadcasting and science. Key figures here were the science popularisers Gerald Heard, J. G. Crowther, and Peter Ritchie Calder, and the biologist Julian Huxley. These boundary figures, in fact, helped to maintain a sense of where the boundary lay, and ensured that the BBC could maintain the appearance of independence and autonomy.

The paper will also look at how scientists viewed their role in relation to society, at their views of the dangers of irrationality and superstition (of which the rise of Nazism was an example), and at their admiration for the Soviet planned economy. It will present dissenting scientific voices – notably the biologist John R. Baker (a frequent broadcaster) who saw in the rise of the social relations of science movement a threat to scientific autonomy and impartiality. Drawing on the work of social theorists such as Gieryn and Kohler, and scholars of professionalism, such as Freidson, Abbott and Macdonald, it will present broadcasters and scientific organisations as rival institutions, competing for occupancy of the (in the 1930s) still new territory of scientific broadcasting. Although this institutional rivalry did not come to a head until the war period and after, the paper will argue that its seeds were sown in the 1930s. In this period, scientists recognised the potential of radio for disseminating a view of science as socially beneficial, and as a safeguard against contemporary ills. Despite the developing institutional competition in the 1930s, at the level of individual scientists and producers, relations were cordial, and the roles proper to each job were not disputed.

Finally, the paper will show that, despite continual charges that the BBC had an antipathy to science, and that the organisation instinctively favoured the humanities in its programme content, the BBC has always taken science seriously in its output, and science has actually been well served. Science content on the BBC was often ‘invisible’ to scientists because it tended to be integrated into general-interest programming.

This paper is based on original archival research at the BBC’s Written Archives Centre and at other archives, and tells a story that is largely unknown both to media historians and to students of the popularisation of science.

Allan Jones is a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Systems at the UK Open University. He is completing a PhD thesis on BBC radio science broadcasting from the 1920s to the 1960s.