

## **‘Delivering a fatal blow to British industry’: the BBC and television in the 1930s**

This paper, based primarily on archival research at the BBC’s written archives at Caversham and the Post Office Archives in London, will consider the development of British television in the 1930s. It will look, in particular, at the ways in which the key players (the BBC, Baird Television, Marconi-EMI and the Post Office) were embroiled in debates which drew on notions of Britishness, questions of national pride and patriotism at a time of economic and political volatility.

The paper will firstly provide an outline of the relationship between the BBC and the Baird Television Company in the mid to late 1920s - an often fragile relationship which laid the foundations for increased tensions during the 1930s. The BBC’s attitude towards television development will be explored in this paper as part of the wider themes noted above.

The ‘threat’ of the US and the perceived antipathy of the BBC towards British scientific advance raised its head in the early 1930s. By this time, EMI and Marconi were developing their electronic method of television and this naturally caught the attention of the BBC. From this point on, the debate over which system was best – the mechanical (Baird) or the electronic (EMI or Marconi-EMI after the two companies merged in March 1934) – dominated television development. Asa Briggs has compared the debate with the debate over railway gauges during the expansion of the railway system. In November 1932, EMI offered the BBC and the Post Office a demonstration of its high-definition system – the quality was obviously superior in picture terms. The EMI files at the BBC Written Archives Centre, show that there was a ‘cosier’ and amiable relationship between the BBC and EMI and this, rightly irritated Baird who remonstrated when he heard that the BBC were considering allowing EMI space to install their own broadcasting equipment at Broadcasting House in London. Sections of the press, members of the public, Members of Parliament and supporters of the Baird Company clamoured to accuse the BBC of an American bias. The American interests of EMI (in the form of its links with the Radio Corporation of America, RCA) would be damaging for British industry and the development of television was a matter of British national pride. Sydney Moseley, a journalist and keen Baird advocate, accused the BBC of not fulfilling its duty to the country. Writing to the Post Office, Moseley suggested that by supporting developments at EMI, the BBC would be letting the Americans in through the back door. What is then interesting is that the Post Office then tried to put pressure on the BBC to delay the installation of EMI apparatus at Broadcasting House, but to no avail.

The two key strands in the paper, therefore, are (a) an exploration of the BBC’s attitude towards television and the accusations that the BBC, in its dealings with the Baird Television Company in particular was acting in an un-patriotic manner which was detrimental to British industry during a period of depression and (b) a discourse of pro-Britishness and anti-Americanism which emerged from debates over television’s early development.

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