

The BBC and its critics: the 'radio column' in the British press in the 1930s

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This paper explores the role of radio critics in the British press in the 1930s. The role of the radio critic as a contemporary source of information about broadcasting 'outside the BBC's considerable public relations apparatus' has been briefly addressed by LeMahieu (*A Culture for Democracy*, 1988, pp. 275-6), and the radio critics of the 1930s are also mentioned in passing by Briggs (*Golden Age of Wireless*, 1965), and Pegg (*Broadcasting and Society*, 1981). However there has been little direct study of the ways in which the radio pages of the British press, in the popular newspapers in particular, articulated a vision of broadcasting in Britain in the 1930s. The introduction of regular radio pages in the inter-war newspaper and periodical press underlined the institutionalisation of radio throughout British society. Reading the radio pages was arguably as much a part of broadcasting culture in the 1930s as listening itself. And at a time when the popular press (notably Beaverbrook's *Express* newspapers) consistently attacked the BBC's monopoly and output, and even proposed themselves as alternative competitor broadcasters, the radio page was perhaps the key outlet and forum for such views.

The paper therefore explores the function of the contemporary radio critic in articulating and influencing public attitudes of listeners (and non-listeners) to the broadcasting system of the day. It addresses in particular the careers as radio critics of Collie Knox of the *Daily Mail* and Jonah Barrington of the *Daily Express*. Knox in particular became an inter-war celebrity largely on account of his radio column in the *Daily Mail*, and his trenchant criticisms of the BBC shaped much of the contemporary debate about the BBC as an unrepresentative, hidebound and elitist medium, not only in the pages of the *Daily Mail* itself but as widely purchased published collections. Jonah Barrington's radio column was, likewise, a key feature of the most popular and widely-read newspaper of the age, and again articulated widely-held attitudes to the BBC's inter-war output. The positions of other newspapers and other radio critics, such as Graham Greene and W.E. Williams, will also be addressed, to build up a picture of the scope and function of radio criticism in 1930s Britain.

The paper hopes in particular to bring out the ways in which one mass medium (the press) sought to influence public attitudes to another (the wireless) in the 1930s through its day-to-day coverage of the other's output. To what extent can we say that the radio critics of the popular press expressed the views of listeners themselves? How far did contemporary criticism of the BBC represent an attempt to shift the BBC's output in a more populist direction, or indeed underpin an attempt to challenge its monopoly status as the nation's broadcaster? Or, conversely, was it the newspapers who needed the radio pages, in order to meet their readers' own demands for more information about and discussion of radio in the 1930s?

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