



The age of television

In 1950 there were 12 million radio-only licences and only 350,000 combined radio and TV licences. The budget for BBC Television was a fraction of the Radio budget. But a single event transformed the popularity of television. This was the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on June 2, 1953 in Westminster Abbey. Permission had never been given before for television cameras in the Abbey. Some even felt it was wrong for people to watch such a solemn occasion while drinking tea in their front rooms. An estimated 20 million TV viewers saw the young Queen crowned, most of them outside their own homes. This was a turning point and the first time that a television audience exceeded the size of a radio audience.

So today The Queen will ascend the steps of her throne... in the sight today of a great multitude of people.

Richard Dimbleby, Coronation commentary

By 1954 there were well over three million combined sound and vision licences. The television age had arrived and in 1955 the Queen broadcast her Christmas Message on television for the first time. The mid-Fifties introduced some major TV names of the future, including David Attenborough (Zoo Quest 1954), Eamonn Andrews (This Is Your Life 1955) and Jack Warner (Dixon of Dock Green 1955). Drama successes such as The Quatermass Experiment and the controversial adaptation of Nineteen Eighty Four became talking points all over the country. In September 1955 the BBC's broadcasting monopoly came to an end when ITV was launched. The impact of competition had an instant impact on BBC Television and its share of the audience fell as low as 28% in 1957.



Innovative TV and radio formats



But the launch of many innovative programmes at the end of the Fifties reversed this decline. They included Panorama (1953), The Brains Trust (1955), Grandstand with David Coleman (1958), The Sky At Night with Patrick Moore (1957) and Monitor with Huw Weldon in 1958. A raft of new programmes like the Benny Hill Show, Your Life in Their Hands, Juke Box Jury and Whicker's World attracted large audiences and increased the BBC's share of television viewing.

Radio had some of its biggest stars in the Fifties, including Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe, Peter Sellers and Michael Bentine (The Goon Show), Kenneth Williams and Kenneth Horne (Beyond Our Ken), Ben Lyon and Bebe Daniels (Life with the Lyons) and Jimmy Edwards, June Whitfield and Dick Bentley in Take It From Here, the programme which introduced two young comedy writers, Frank Muir and Denis Norden. The enormously popular Hancock's Half-Hour started on radio in 1954 and two years later Tony Hancock's innovative style was the first comedy to be transferred from radio to television.



The Archers, one of radio's greatest successes and the longest running soap in the world, dates back to 1951. The radio drama and features departments regularly produced highly creative programmes, including the innovative poetic drama, Under Milk Wood (1954).

In the late Fifties, television introduced a series of successful children's programmes, including Blue Peter, Pinky and Perky and Lenny the Lion. The period also marked the end of the "Toddlers' Truce". This break in television broadcasts between six and seven pm was originally introduced to give parents time to get their children to bed. It ended in 1957 with the arrival of Tonight, the first topical programme to be broadcast on television every weekday. In the same year Today began on the Home Service.

THE BEVERIDGE COMMITTEE

Beveridge recommended that the BBC should remain 'the authority responsible for all broadcasting in the UK'. It should also become more accountable and give greater scope to the regions and minorities. There was controversy, however, when Selwyn Lloyd, a Tory MP, produced his own report, calling for an end to the BBC monopoly. As the debate raged, the Labour Government fell, and Selwyn Lloyd got his wish.

COMPETITION

Commercial television created great controversy. Some likened its arrival to that of the Black Death; Churchill dismissed it as 'a tuppenny Punch and Judy show'. The BBC, hampered by its reliance on a licence fee fixed by the Government, saw its audience share drop to 28%. Nevertheless, competition gave the BBC a necessary jolt, forcing it to revamp its drama and news presentations.

FOURTEEN-DAY RULE

This was a BBC wartime undertaking not to broadcast any discussions due to be debated in Parliament for a period of two weeks. The BBC now claimed the right - for the first time - to decide for itself how to present issues to the public. Few people could see why broadcasting should be treated any differently from the press and Macmillan finally suspended the rule in 1957.



OBITUARIES

GEORGE ORWELL, Author (1903-1950)

From 1941-43, he produced and commented for the BBC's Eastern Service. He saw this peddling of British 'propaganda' to a few hundred Indian intellectuals as two wasted years. Orwell modelled '1984' on censorship and bureaucracy encountered at Broadcasting House during the war. In 1944, he opined that 'I heard it on the BBC' had now come to mean 'I know it must be true'.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, Playwright (1856-1950)

Radio enthusiast, who immediately sensed the power of the microphone. He'd been a 'public speaker without publicity'. Now his voice reached millions, he gave regular talks on radio, and was a member of the BBC's Spoken English Advisory Committee. Shaw regularly criticised BBC productions - particularly his own plays. About one, he wrote, 'If the producer has not already been shot, I will pay for the cartridges'.

DYLAN THOMAS, Poet and Playwright (1914-1953)

His first poem was read on the radio in 1933 - one of the BBC's winners in a competition of 11,000 entrants - he produced radio classics, such as *Early One Morning* and *Return Journey*, despite constant personal battles with money and alcohol. Under Milk Wood, broadcast after its author's death, was described as 'one of the greatest events for the human ear'.

**VERA 1958**

The Vision Electronic Recording Apparatus – or VERA - was the BBC's first video-recording machine. After six years of research by BBC engineers, instant replay became a reality. VERA made her debut on Panorama - but it was also her swansong. Viewers weren't impressed by the 'fuzzy' reception. The BBC switched to Ampex, a superior American system, and television production was transformed. Live programmes became ever rarer.

VERY HIGH FREQUENCY (VHF) TRANSMISSIONS – 1955

The introduction of VHF was a breakthrough in sound broadcasting. The last in a chain of 'wireless' improvements, it allowed listeners to enjoy clear reception, overcoming problems associated with the 'cluttering' of the long and medium wavebands. Until then, interference created what one critic described as 'a background like frying sausages'.

1950

- 16 January - *Listen With Mother* (Radio).
- 12 February – European Broadcasting Union formed.
- 23 February - First televised report of General Election results.
- 21 May - Lime Grove television studios opened.
- 11 July *Andy Pandy* (TV). 27 August - First live television from the Continent. BBC outside broadcast equipment used.
- 29 September - *Come Dancing* (TV).
- 5 November - *Life with the Lyons* (Radio).

1951

- 1 January - *The Archers* (Radio).
- 28 May - *Crazy People*, later *The Goon Show*, (Radio).
- 16 July - *What's My Line* (TV) 1952
- 15 February - Funeral of King George VI broadcast on BBC Radio and Television.
- 23 October - *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* (TV).
- 15 December - *Bill and Ben the Flowerpot Men* (TV).

1953

- 1 January - National Broadcasting Councils for Scotland and Wales established.
- 2 June - Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Ceremony televised for the first time.
- 18 July - *The Quatermass Experiment* (TV).
- 20 July - *The Good Old Days* (TV).
- 11 November - First edition of *Panorama* (TV).

1954

- 25 January - *Under Milk Wood* (Radio).
- 8 April - *Sportsvision* (TV).
- 6 May - Roger Bannister's record-breaking four-minute mile shown on television.
- 6 June - First Eurovision exchange of television programmes with eight countries taking part.
- 5 July - BBC Television News and Newsreel first transmitted.
- 2 November - *Hancock's Half-Hour* (Radio).
- 12 December - *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (TV). (George Orwell)
- 21 December - *Zoo Quest* (TV).

1955

- 7 January - *The Grove Family* (TV).
- 2 May - First VHF transmitting station opened at Wrotham.
- 29 June - *Life with the Lyons* (TV).
- 9 July - *Dixon of Dock Green* (TV).
- 29 July - *This is Your Life* (TV)).
- 4 September - *The Brains Trust* (TV).
- 9 September - *The Woodentops* (TV).
- 14 September - *Crackerjack* (TV).
- 22 September – Independent Television (ITV) begins programmes in the London area.
- 10 October - Colour television test transmissions begins on 405 lines from Alexandra Palace.

1956

- 27 April - First television Ministerial broadcast (made by Anthony Eden).
- 22 May - *Billy Cotton Band Show* (TV).
- 24 May - *The Eurovision Song Contest* (TV).
- 6 July - *Hancock's Half-Hour* transferred from Radio to TV.
- 4 October - *Whack-O!* (TV).
- 18 December - Postmaster-General announced suspension of his 14- Day-Rule edict restricting reporting of issues to be debated in Parliament for an experimental period of six months.

1957

- 1 January - *My Word!* (TV).
- 16 February - *6.5 special* (TV).
- 18 February - *Tonight* (TV).
- 24 April - *The Sky At Night* (TV).
- 30 June - First ball-by-ball Test Match Special on radio.
- 25 July - Prime Minister announced 14-Day-Rule suspended indefinitely.
- 24 September - Schools TV begins.
- 30 September - Reorganisation of radio services. Network Three begins.
- 5 October - *Record Review* (Radio).
- 26 October - *Saturday Night on the Light* (TV).
- 28 October - *Today* (Radio).
- 25 December - The Queen's Christmas broadcast televised for the first time.

1958

- 2 February - *Monitor* (TV).
- 14 April - BBC Radiophonic Workshop formed.
- 5 May - Experimental television transmissions on 625 lines began.
- 7 May - *White Heather Club* (TV).
- 14 June - *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (TV).
- 1 July - *Beyond Our Ken* (TV).
- 1 October - AMPEX video-recording equipment used at Lime Grove for the first time.
- 11 October - *Grandstand* (TV).
- 16 October - *Blue Peter* with Leila Williams and Christopher Trace (TV).
- 28 October - State Opening of Parliament televised for first time.

1959

- 4 January - *Face to Face* (TV).
- 21 March - *Whicker's World* (TV).
- 3 April - *Pick of the Week* (Radio).
- 1 June - *Juke Box Jury* (TV).
- 8 October - BBC covered General Election campaign in news broadcasts for the first time.