PRIMORDIAL SOUP

It's hard to imagine British broadcasting before there was a BBC. As it turned out, such a thing turned out to be more or less impossible. By contrast, in America, commercial radio stations broadcasting to the general public existed by 1920, under licence from the Department of Commerce. This was an example of old-fashioned Adam Smithian capitalism functioning as it was supposed to, with supply and demand working hand in hand with technology, and ultimately the public interest. Such notions were entirely alien to the British establishment at the time. The General Post Office essentially owned the concept of radio broadcasting and they were extremely reluctant to let commercial interests anywhere near it. For the years immediately after the First World War, the only stations they allowed on air were explicitly "experimental" in nature, a toe dipped in the waters of the new technology. Most prominent of these was a licenced transmission by the Marconi company from their own radio factory - the first such in the world - of Dame Nellie Melba performing a couple of arias on factory floor.

Dame Nellie's trill was heard - by those few who had the capacity to hear it - around the country, throughout Europe, and even as far away as Newfoundland (although the best they could make out was a couple of vocal oscillations and a bit of Italian). Further experimental broadcasts were just as popular, and sales of wireless receiving sets kept growing. It really couldn't be ignored anymore: this was a new frontier for humankind. Wireless communication was here and it wasn't just for bellowing orders on the battlefield anymore.

The British armed forces begged to differ on the latter point. Claiming at all this opera and such was clogging up the airwaves and intervening with military communications, the army made the GPO withdraw all licences for commercial broadcasting and shut the whole system down in 1920. Despite this, wireless sales stayed healthy - now accompanied by dozens of letters to the GPO begging for something to actually listen to again.

Eventually the military relented, and the in 1922 the GPO were allowed to issue licences to broadcast again, and Britain got its first ever regular entertainment radio stations. First on the bandwagon was Marconi, who broadcast every Tuesday from a shed just outside Chelmsford under the call sign 2MT ("Two Emma Toc, this is Two Emma Toc, Writtle testing, Writtle testing"). Shortly afterwards came 2LO, also from Marconi, which transmitted the very first live sports broadcast: the notorious Light Heavyweight fight between Kid Lewis and champion Georges Carpentier (Carpentier retained the title by a KO achieved by smacking Lewis while the Referee was talking to him).

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Not a week later, Manchester got its own radio station via the Metropolitan Vickers Company ("Metrovick"). 2ZY came with its own specially-formed Orchestra, performing the works of then-contemporary British composers like Holst and Elgar for the wireless owners of the North. There was patently no stopping it now. Wireless broadcasting was a thing. The genie was out of his itty-bitty living space. So the GPO considered their strategy. The main (and indeed for practical purposes only) point of comparison was America, and being rugged individualists with no regard for such British concerns as rules, their burgeoning wireless industry was one hot mess of competing broadcasts jostling for position amid hundreds of transmitters and thousands of wavelengths with no regulation or co-ordination whatsoever.

This would never do. Not in Britain. Everything in its right place. Clearly what was needed was a system, some way of cleanly dividing all the airspace and doling it out fairly to those who deserve it - whilst keeping an eye on them all to make sure they don't misuse this great power. So, under GPO auspices a committee was formed of the big six wireless companies - Marconi, Metrovick, General Electric, Western Electric, British Thompson-Houston and the efficiently named British Radio Communications, plus (at the GPO's insistence) a representative of all the smaller manufacturing companies. These seven were tasked with hammering out a system of broadcasting for the future of Britain.

The talks, at first, didn't go brilliantly well, and for a while it looked like there were going to have to be two BBCs. The GPO actively prepared themselves for the necessity of writing out two separate broadcasting licences, but warned the gang of seven that two was the absolute maximum and that one was preferable by several orders of magnitude. After several months of bickering which very nearly necessitated the introduction of Marquis of Queensbury rules, a plan was finally agreed upon which would require only one licence to be issued. The licence-holder would be an entirely new company, with each of the big six companies owning one-sixth of the shares. This company would have the exclusive right to operate broadcasting stations within the United Kingdom for an initial period of two years. It would have £10,000 to play with; six grand of that would come from the Big Six companies at a grand each, the remaining four would come from the smaller manufacturing companies and, later, the dealers - any one of whom could become a company member and own at least one share for a fee of £1. The GPO breathed a sigh of relief and drew up a licence for the British Broadcasting Company.

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