Tradition, Nation and the Power of the Schedule
IAMHIST Conference, 16-19 July 2019
Derek Johnston - derekjohnston.phd@gmail.com

In a chapter title in his book Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty John Ellis claimed that scheduling is 'where power lies in television' (130), because of its importance in deciding what programmes are produced and how they are presented in order to fit the requirements of different broadcast slots. While it can readily be argued that this power is waning, as television continues its shift to becoming an on-demand medium, Ellis did not consider the wider issue of the power exerted by the representation of seasonal tradition through broadcast. While Paddy Scannell recognised that 'the calendrical role of broadcasting' demonstrated the BBC’s role as ‘perhaps the central agent of the national culture’ (17), this also does not acknowledge that the BBC covered multiple national cultures.

This paper will demonstrate that the BBC was responsible for disseminating a particularly English conception of culture as a national, UK-wide culture through an examination of scheduling related to traditions of Halloween and Christmas. Through an exploration of historical schedules, it shows how local traditions were initially treated as 'quaint' and even backward, while English traditions became dominant. However, as the twentieth century progressed, these traditions were themselves challenged by the popularisation of American celebrations. These conflicts between lived tradition, popular celebration and broadcast tradition created a dissonance between certain identities and the dominant identity disseminated by the BBC through its scheduling of traditions.

Good morning. This paper is about the representation of seasonal traditions through broadcast media, and how that relates to representations of national identities. It focuses on historical schedules and particularly the representation of Halloween, with some consideration of Christmas. This is primarily accomplished through an examination of listings and articles from the Radio Times and the TV Times, so is in many ways more about those paratexts and the ways that they frame these celebrations than it is about the content of the programmes themselves, although that will also be discussed.

In a chapter title in his book Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty John Ellis claimed that scheduling is 'where power lies in television',¹ because of its importance in deciding what programmes are produced and how they are presented in order to fit the requirements of different broadcast slots. Ellis also connected scheduling to its national context, pointing out that 'It is easier for outsiders to perceive the national characteristics of any television "ecology" or system. But to insiders, the population to whom they are addressed, they appear to to be a natural part of the tissue of everyday life'.² This suggests not only the way that the broadcast schedule invisibly re-presents a national culture, but also how it reinforces it. Beyond this, however, Ellis did not consider the wider issue of the power exerted by the representation of seasonal tradition through broadcast. While Paddy Scannell recognised that 'the calendrical role of broadcasting' demonstrated the BBC’s role as ‘perhaps the central agent of the national

cultural artifacts, this also does not acknowledge that the BBC covered multiple national cultures. The research of Thomas Hajkowski into BBC radio’s treatment of those different nations between 1922 and 1953 led him to claim that:

In an age of local and provincial papers on the one hand, and London or Hollywood dominated cinema on the other, the regional BBCs were the only truly "national" media in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The most powerful cultural agencies in their regions, the regional BBCs provided news, talks, and creative programming designed specifically for regional listeners, and in the process created conditions amenable to the assertion of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish identity. (pp.3-4)

Part of this assertion of identities took place through the broadcasting of seasonal events associated with those identities, to reinforce particular ideas of what those national identities actually were.

In this paper I argue that, despite these assertions of national identities within the UK, the BBC was primarily responsible for disseminating a particularly English conception of culture across the UK. I do this through an examination of scheduling related to traditions of Halloween and, to a lesser extent, Christmas. Through an exploration of historical schedules and associated articles in the listings magazines *Radio Times* and *TV Times*, it shows how local traditions were initially treated as 'quaint' and even backward, while English traditions became dominant. However, as the twentieth century progressed, these traditions were themselves challenged by the popularisation of American celebrations. These conflicts between lived tradition, popular celebration and broadcast tradition created a dissonance between certain identities and the dominant identity disseminated by the BBC through its scheduling of traditions.

What is striking about the treatment of Halloween in the *Radio Times* is that it is linked very early on with Scottishness. We need only look at Halloween night, 1925 from the Newcastle transmitter, where the programme of music to mark the evening concentrates on Scottish or Scottish-associated music. The Aberdeen transmitter similarly marked the occasion with light, popular songs projecting a romanticised image of rural Scotland, and particularly associated with love. Nothing here about horror, but then the traditional Halloween was rather more associated with superstitions about identifying people's romantic futures than is commonly remembered. Not that the scary side of the supernatural was entirely forgotten, but, as the listing for the 1924 Halloween programme from the Glasgow transmitter shows, this was kept in the background. So this might have traditionally been a night when 'His Satanic Majesty was supposed to have great latitude', but the festivities instead focused on songs, games, poems and stories in a 'usual happy and homely style'.

---


Derek Johnston
derekjohnston.phd@gmail.com
That listing also shows what seems to have been the common attitude to marking Halloween. It is ‘fallen into disuse’, a thing of the past, and something that was ‘believed by the superstitious in Scotland to be a night on which the invisible world had peculiar power’. Another Radio Times article of 1924 makes even clearer what is happening here, marking out the difference between the current ‘enlightened age’ and the past, and between the Radio Times reader and those in ‘remote country places’, where superstitions may linger. In other words, sophisticated, educated people like ‘us’ can understand this as the folk celebration of ‘them’, the rural, uneducated people whose quaint traditions can make for quite a charming amusement. There is also the sense that this tradition is one that has lost its power, because it is not fully believed any more (especially by ‘us’), and so is something suitable mainly for children. Certainly much of the Halloween programming of the 1920s, 30s and 40s is to be found in programming aimed at children. At the same time, all versions of the Radio Times would include coverage of Christmas dominated by English traditions and practices, including the idea that Christmas is the time of year appropriate for ghost stories. And those programmes would largely be broadcast across the UK, rather than being replaced by a regional opt-out. If you want to think about how this operates today, maybe wonder why the London Lord Mayor’s Show is still broadcast annually on BBC1 across all of the nations.

With the introduction of commercial television in 1955, and the expansion of television and radio channels across the UK, the amount of Halloween-related programming has increased. While there is a common perception of ITV as more in-tune with modern attitudes, as ‘the people’s channel’, some of the attitudes associated with the BBC do carry over, particularly in the early days. Regional and national differences within the UK can also be exacerbated by the regional nature of ITV, meaning that ideas of difference within the UK can be contained by presenting the specific in regional programmes within the framework of the UK-wide network, as with BBC regional radio. So on 27 October 1955, Associated-Rediffusion in London presented For Hallowe’en Fun, with the listing suggesting that people may not have celebrated Halloween before. The listing is illustrated with a photograph of ‘witches’, indicating a shift towards a more American style of marking the date.

This is linked in many cases to the broadcast of American television, which has in turn (and supported by other popular culture elements) led to a shift in the idea of Halloween, taking on more of the American traditions. So dunking for apples makes way for trick or treat. Songs of a romantic Scottish idyll and the poems of Burns make way for the Strictly Come Dancing Halloween special and The X-Factor’s ‘Fright Night’. But the emphasis on scares that comes from the US Halloween is also seen in drama, including the irruption of the supernatural into series which are not normally supernatural.

This connects with the current view of Halloween as primarily an American import. A YouGov poll of 1598 adults in March 2018 had 81% of respondents state that Halloween ‘is celebrated more because of pressure from commercial entities’, as opposed to the 12% who
considered that 'it is celebrated more because it is a “proper” special occasion'. Incidentally, Halloween was considered more of a 'proper' occasion by 22% of the respondents from Scotland. Similarly, in a YouGov poll of 3365 adults in October 2017 which asked if people preferred Halloween or Guy Fawkes Night / Bonfire Night, 28% of Scottish respondents favoured Halloween, where the GB average was 15%.

Preference for Halloween also increases with youth, and amongst Labour voters! So there is still a sense that Halloween is stronger in Scotland, and Northern Ireland, and in broadcasting this is maintained with programmes such as BBC2 NI's 2013 Ulster Scots drama *Stumpy's Brae*, or 2018's *Samhain Live* coverage of Halloween celebrations in Derry on BBC2 NI, Radio Ulster, Radio Foyle and BBC Gaelige. This suggests that seasonal celebrations marked out national differences, but that they were deprecated from the centre, and have often been overridden and superseded by English traditions, such as an emphasis on Christmas rather than Halloween being the appropriate time for horror erupting into the normality of everyday programming.

However, Thomas Hajkowski's research into the policies and programming of the different nations of the UK in his book *The BBC and National Identity in Britain, 1922-1953* shows that the BBC did recognise national differences and national identities. He argues that:

In trying to define, reflect, and embody Britishness, the BBC did, in some ways, present a particular, Anglo-centric and middle-class image of "Britain." But this version of Britishness was undermined, and eventually collapsed, under the weight of increasingly confident regional broadcasters, social and political change, public opposition, and war. By the late 1930s the BBC was presenting its audiences with a pluralistic Britishness, one that reminded listeners of their common history, institutions, and values while recognizing the diversity of nations and cultures in Britain.

This included in the transmission of local holidays and celebrations, which were recognised as having significance to the specific national identities making up the UK. The book goes on to convincingly support Hajkowski’s arguments, which would rather put it at odds with my claims about how the BBC tended to reinforce an English identity through its treatment of holidays, rather than recognising national differences.

So what’s to be done? The scope for following up on this research would rely on further digging into the archives. Hajkowski performed deep and impressive research into policy documents and internal communications, but not much into the content of the *Radio Times*, whether listings or editorial. There is a potential here for developing a stronger understanding of

---

4 https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2018/03/07/most-brits-dont-think-mothers-day-proper-special-o

5 https://yougov.co.uk/opi/surveys/results#/survey/14794ac9-bd61-11e7-afdf-ffef894cffc8/question/4f86a15b-bd61-11e7-a44f-7f7055a0bd04/region


Derek Johnston
derekjohnston.phd@gmail.com
the relationship of the *Radio Times* as an official publication of the BBC, and how it related to the production and broadcast sides of the organisation. The same is then possible of the relationship between the *TV Times* and ITV. In both cases, the relationships become complicated as the listings magazines become increasingly separated from the broadcaster. In addition to this, there is clearly more research that could be undertaken into audience responses and attitudes to scheduling, particularly evidence that was not gathered by the broadcasters themselves. This could include letters to periodicals or official bodies such as councils; personal communications and diaries; and surveys and records, such as Mass Observation reports.

Without having conducted that research, it is hard for me to make specific claims supported by evidence here. However, I do want to make some initial suggestions and observations.

Firstly, to acknowledge one issue with the evidence that I have used, I have relied on the issues of the *Radio Times* and *TV Times* that I have been able to access. This has primarily been through the holdings of the Cambridge University Library, and so has been mostly limited to the London edition of these magazines, where each had regional variations. However, it is my understanding that the regional variations were more in terms of the listings than the editorial content, so the attitudes expressed in the editorial were distributed across the UK. Some variation did take place between regional editions apart from the listings themselves and some regional advertising, but it was quite limited. Tony Currie’s history of the *Radio Times* shows, for example, the covers of both London and Northern Ireland editions for 11-17th January 1948, where the only difference is that the play *Two Men of Assagh* is listed as a highlight, rather than a Johann Strauss concert from Vienna. Currie also notes that, in 1946 at least, only three-quarters of a page in each issue was reserved for a regional contribution. Admittedly, this was at a time when space was particularly limited by paper rationing, and there was clearly some variation over time. For example, the *Radio Times* covering New Year of 1947-8 had a different cover for the Scottish edition, ‘recognising the added significance of Hogmanay to listeners of that nation.’ The New Year of 1949-50 was similarly marked by a special ‘Hogmanay number’ for those in the Scotland region. And it should be recognised that the celebration of New Year, rather than simply marking it, is really more of a Scottish than English occasion, and that television may be one of the ways that this practice has spread southwards. Currie also records that regional features were absent from the *Radio Times*’ English editions from the late 1960s until 1989, suggesting that there was some localisation in the features editorial for the national editions.

---


Derek Johnston
derekjohnston.phd@gmail.com
However, offering a special issue to a region for a particular regional calendar event is where a hierarchy of celebrations begins to be established, with events marked as either worthy of recognition across the UK, or as only a side-note to the UK identity presented by the listings magazine. There are arguments to be made on each side as to whether this is in itself good or bad: having those special covers or issues acknowledges differences rather than presenting a homogenised culture, but also fails to recognise that the people engaging with those celebrations may not be covered by one regional magazine variant. Having a special cover or issue also does not avoid the issue of how the event is marked outside of that particular region; it’s all well and good if a regional variant celebrates an occasion, but what about when it is treated patronisingly in the national version?

The idea of there being a hierarchy of events is one where I think Hajkowski’s research into programming could be built upon and challenged. Major events like Hogmanay or national saints’ days could be acknowledged as points of national difference. In Northern Ireland, issues around the divided communities of the nation were exacerbated by the predominantly-Unionist stance of most of the staff, as well as by the BBC’s wider attitude of simply following the official government line about national identities. Hajkowski clearly sets out how this meant that St.Patrick’s Day was covered in ways that were conflicted and not particularly celebratory, or particularly Irish, while the 12th July was marked out as a great occasion, and indeed is celebrated to this day on BBC Northern Ireland with special coverage of the Orange parades. It’s interesting to note that the BBC website lists this as ‘Entertainment’ rather than, say, news or documentary.

So what to take away from this? The ways that national and regional identities are engaged with by broadcasting and broadcasters are varied. It is hard to argue that at many times English cultural assumptions have led to a dominant representation of and dissemination of English culture over that of the other nations of the UK. However, as Hajkowski makes clear, this does not mean that those nations have not had a chance to express their identity, only that we must also question where those identities can be expressed: for that nation alone, or for the whole UK? And how were those national expressions of culture framed by the UK-wide paratexts such as listings magazines? In other words, what I have done here is, I believe, more to point out some of the areas in which there is more research to be done.