

The Best Of All Possible Worlds

by Terry Baxter

Imagine a group of people sitting round a radio in Chile trying to tune into a foreign radio station to hear the news that their own government is censoring. They hit one of the BBC wavelengths in the middle of a talk which might be going something like this:

'Michael Ansell's father was a soldier too . . . Mike learnt to ride, but was not over enthusiastic. Wisely, his mother did not push him too hard, and in due course, having joined his father's regiment, he came naturally to a love of horses and riding. Serving in India, he played polo . . .' etc.

That isn't an invented example, it's an actual excerpt from a BBC script written for broadcasting to the world. It gives a taste of the programme content of the BBC's External Services, their 24-hour radio transmissions in English and 40 foreign languages to almost every part of the world except the North Pole. This broadcasting is financed from tax-payers' money, paid direct to the BBC by the Foreign Office. The news, talks, and entertainment transmitted contain propaganda just a bit more crude and just a bit less subtle than the diet the BBC feeds us on its domestic services. For this reason it gives us an extra-good chance to pinpoint exactly how those well-paid pigs in the BBC operate behind their smoke-screen of 'balance', 'responsible programmes', and 'objective reporting.'

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The scene of the crime in this case is Bush House, that monument to imperialism towering over the Strand. It's from there that programmes for the world are planned, discussed, written, recorded, and transmitted. There is a staff of 3,500, and over a dozen radio studios, yet through all the material put out, whether it's in Swahili or Spanish, the BBC manages to speak with almost exactly the same voice. This is in spite of the fact that to prepare and broadcast programmes in foreign languages they have to hire foreign personnel — many of them creative, even radical expatriates who cannot always be relied on to write stuff that is compatible with the aims of the foreign Office. The BBC get round this problem two ways. Firstly, each foreign language section is put in the charge of a highly Anglicized alien, or an Establishment-OK'd BBC chap

who can keep an eye on them and vet whatever they write in their own language. Secondly, the BBC bosses get round this problem by producing a lot of nice safe scripts centrally in English, which only need translating into the different languages and hey presto! — a ready-made programme. Thus the newsroom is all-British, producing suitable bulletins all day for distribution throughout the building. Every day a batch of current affairs and magazine talks are produced in the same way: In the morning a group of scriptwriters meet with a couple of BBC executives to decide which topics there should be scripts on today. 'Women's Lib? We did one last month . . .' 'The Crisis? Let's wait till Heath and the TUC have sorted it out and we have something positive to say . . .' The scriptwriters are 'consulted' and politely overridden; the executives have years of experience and often directives from above to help them pick out the 'Right' subjects. Then the scriptwriters are given a title, told roughly what's needed, and sent away with a deadline for the script to be brought back for vetting. (There are also freelance contributors who send in the odd script from their country homes. It's one of these scripts that the bit about playing polo in India came from. It's into that sea of pale blue sludge that I've dipped a jam-jar at random, and come up with a tiny sample — a set of scripts all written within about a week early this Autumn. They're a tiny proportion of the BBC's total output during even that one week.

But during that particular week there was quite a lot going on: there was Heath's announcement of Phase III on October 8; there was the publication of some amazing statistics showing how much prices had gone up; the Middle East War started and so did the Shrewsbury 24 trial; the Chrysler strike was in progress and the Cod War was coming to an end. There were several bombings and shootings in Northern Ireland; the IRA car bombers' were on trial; the Chile coup was only a few weeks old; and it was revealed that the British

people are eating less meat than at any time since the days of rationing.

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On the resolving of the Cod War a Current Affairs script declares: 'It is only fair to Mr Heath, the British Prime Minister, to give him full credit for an initiative which has broken through the stubborn-ness of the Icelanders.' Mr Heath makes an equally heroic appearance over the introduction of Phase III, while Chrysler strikers are mentioned only in passing.

Britain's rising prices are never mentioned without a phrase explaining that they're caused by world food prices, and the fall in meat consumption is skillfully presented as a switch to chicken — 'Now, it seems, the anaemic chicken has supplanted beef in the hearts, or rather mouths, of Britons.'

National unity is put across by stressing the 'British Character' as one whole and homogenous unit. A book review is used as an excuse for a whole series of quotations about how we (all) are 'intuitive', 'sceptical', 'courageous', 'we combine faith and shrewd self-reliance', etc. No opportunity is missed to glorify Britain and make the most of every recent 'British achievement', such as BP winning an American engineering award, or a British pop group making a successful tour abroad. And, 'English has become a tool for the world, as ubiquitous as the spanner. It no more belongs today to the English, who invented it, than does that other ingenious English invention, football.' Which is ironic coming from the BBC, who make a habit of describing Britain as 'strike-prone'; militants are 'hot-heads', revolutionaries are 'self-styled', and a phrase like 'what the Chile junta is up to' makes them sound like mischievous children.

speak...

The working class isn't poor, and in fact workers have never been that badly off — even in Victorian times their life

is described as one of 'hard work, poverty and hope.' A series claiming to be about 'typical Londoners' features a bank manager and the chef at the Savoy.

'Mr Heath has charted an acceptable middle course... Changes and reforms do take place in the unions; the government does make headway in its battle against inflation. Progress is too slow for some people; too fast for others. Nobody is completely satisfied; but then nobody is completely dissatisfied.' The appearance of class struggle in this country is, then an illusion.

We are all one big happy family and, on the rare occasion that someone is worse off, it's a very unfortunate oversight: 'The schizophrenic is the man at the bottom of the heap, where he is suffocating to death without anyone noticing it, much less intending it.'

truth...

In this one week, the BBC thought it worthwhile to issue scripts on: 'The Centenary of Landseer,' 'Horse Brasses', the 'Stately Homes Boom'; 'Memorial Gala for John Cranko'; reviews of several London art exhibitions; and 'The Cecils of Hatfield House.'

There are even special programmes devoted to 'New Ideas' — new products on the British market. But it's hard to see how many overseas listeners could find a use for a rotating polystyrene desk-tidy cum calendar or for a special horse-feed dispenser designed by an cavalry officer to automatically feed your steed at set intervals if you are 'away at weekends'.

The inclusion of this kind of material alongside more crucial or cruel topics manages to neutralize and trivialize what might otherwise be disruptive news. One script starts: 'This is not going to be a talk about inflation, but one cannot mention the subject of great works of art without, alas, referring to the soaring prices in the international art market.'

And in the current affairs talks transmitted during the week in question, there was not one mention of the con-

tinuing struggle in Northern Ireland, on the continuing bomb panic in London, or on the IRA or Shrewsbury trials.

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The message is clear: Britain doesn't have any problems except for the ones that are being dealt with really well. The inadequacy of the National Health Service is never mentioned except when they can do a talk about the new Health Ombudsman and how he will clear up any complaints or injustices the public suffer. Noise pollution is never mentioned until they want to announce that 'in recent years hundreds of inspectors have been learning about noise control in courses at British universities and polytechnics.' Rail strikes are met by the British public with 'good humour', bombings with 'calm'; even the Middle East conflict will end 'soon'. Everything has a happy ending — in fact everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Why do no undesirable statements or disruptive sentiments slip through?

There are those who come in to work for the BBC with vaguely 'left-wing' tendencies. At first they might write some things which are not acceptable. When the script is vetted, their editor frowns, explains that this bit just isn't on because it's 'irrelevant' or 'unbalanced' or 'not objective'. A hundred examples could be given of this process at work — but any one example could lose somebody their job. (A nice feature of the BBC is that they put a clause on all their contracts forbidding staff to reveal or publicize any information about what goes on inside its walls.)

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Anyway, the script that has been found unacceptable has to be altered or re-written. That means more work, more hassle. Pretty quickly, the writer gets an idea of what will be accepted and what will have to be re-written. Sometimes the writer will continue trying to put forward what he believes,

will go through daily tussles and never get promoted. But most often he will be ambitious, or lazy, or has a wife and kids, and he will play along and write what's acceptable. After a few months doing this, it becomes second nature, and after a few years, he begins to believe that what he is writing is the truth. It is by this process of assimilation that the BBC manages to turn out hours of consistently reactionary broadcasting maintaining the facade of a liberal establishment, and without hardly ever having to resort to overt censorship.

No one, not even the BBC, is sure how many overseas listeners tune in to their external broadcasts. In many places, which badly need news from the outside world, reception is poor or people don't own radios. The fact that it is banned as 'communist' by some regimes gives an idea of exactly how right-wing those regimes are — and at the same time makes it hard to find out how many people listen. Those that do listen may be quite capable of discarding much of it.

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The fact is that their need for a voice from the outside world remains unmet. As does our need for a non-repressive broadcasting system in this country. Because the man who today writes about the unions for the Turkish programme service could be writing tomorrow about the unions for the World at One. The BBC, with its proud claims of independence from the government, lets staff slip from the directly government-financed section into the public-financed section and back again without needing to make any distinction. The BBC ethos, reactionary inertia and self-censorship, operate as effectively when it's not directly dependent on the government as when it is. The message that reaches those Chileans is the same message as is pumped to us, on five radio wavelengths and two TV channels every day. Life is very good in the capitalist world, if only we all pulled our weight, and let our leaders get on with it.