



The arrival of the digital technology and the Internet during the decade marked a new era for broadcasting. The BBC had been broadcasting in analogue since it began in 1922, but it now instigated major investment in digital broadcasting and in internet services, paving the way for even greater change in the decade to follow.

No broadcasting operation in the world is better positioned for the digital age than the BBC
Sir John Birt, Director-General, 2000

Darcy and Del Boy top the ratings

Despite the unprecedented increase in competition and the fragmentation of the market, the BBC continued to try and reach all audiences. As in the 1920s when BBC Radio started, the BBC continued to foster national identity especially via sport and national events (though the former had become harder because of the cost of broadcast rights). Television and radio coverage of the VE and VJ Day 50th anniversary commemorations in 1995 were highly acclaimed as were the broadcasts of the Olympic Games in Barcelona in 1992 and Atlanta in 1996.

Successful drama such as *Our Friends In The North*, *Pride and Prejudice* (starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle, in a fresh new script by Andrew Davies, who would go on to adapt numerous classic novels for TV), *Middlemarch* and *Ballykissangel* demonstrated the BBC's continual mastery of the costume drama, as well as creating insightful contemporary drama which held the mirror up to the moment. Other notable hits were with comedy and light entertainment shows such as *One Foot in the Grave*, *Men Behaving Badly*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *The Vicar of Dibley*, *The Fast Show*, *The Mrs Merton Show* and *Have I Got News For You*. Only *Fools and Horses* secured an audience of 24 million during Christmas 1996 - the largest single programme audience on British television since measurement of individual viewing began over twenty years ago.



Diana, Diana...

Documentary making also continued during this period, with penetrating explorations of cultural and political life such as *The House*, *The Death of Yugoslavia* and *Thatcher: The Downing Street Years*. However, the news-documentary highlight of the decade was undeniably the *Panorama* interview with Princess Diana (1995). Watched by 15 million people and regularly voted one of the most memorable interviews of all time, in it Diana talked frankly about her unhappy marriage to Prince Charles and stated her desire to be 'queen of people's hearts'. Later in the decade, nineteen million people would watch the funeral of Diana, from the largest outside broadcast ever mounted by the BBC.

Children's programming also made a quantum leap in this period, and the commissioning of the *Teletubbies* (on air 1997) changed the scale and impact of what CBBC (as the new Children's department was called) could achieve. Within ten years, *Tinky-winky*, *Dipsy*, *Laa-laa* and *Po* (as the colourful quarter of characters was called) had been sold to 120 countries and translated into 45 languages. Apart from pre-school programming, the BBC also scored notable hits with drama for older children, such as like *The Chronicles Of Narnia*, *The Borrowers* and *Just William*.

Radio highlights

BBC Radio went from strength to strength. Radio 5, the first new network for 23 years, opened in August 1990. It was designed to broadcast a mixture of education, youth and sports programmes, with a selection of World Service output. When the Gulf War broke out in 1991 Radio 4 split its two frequencies with astonishing speed to enable continuous coverage of the War on FM while scheduled Radio 4 programmes continued to be broadcast on Long Wave. Radio 4 Gulf FM, which was affectionately known as SCUD FM, was on air 17 hours a day from 17 January to 2 March.

Major internal change

Inside the BBC, there was huge change during these ten years. Sir Michael Checkland, Director-General from 1987 to 1993, and his successor John Birt, later Lord Birt, introduced a raft of new initiatives – some of them painful – to increase efficiency, to reduce staff and operating costs and to make the BBC more competitive in the tougher broadcasting environment. Although unpopular with many of the staff, it helped to make the BBC's finances more transparent.



The pace of change increased when John Birt became Director-General. A controversial restructuring split the BBC into two divisions: **BBC Broadcast** which controlled the commissioning of programmes, and **BBC Production** which made them. All BBC Radio news and current affairs moved from central London to Television Centre in west London and bi-media working was introduced. Although some of these reforms and new structures were reversed after John Birt left the BBC, his new media strategy laid the foundations for the BBC's current leading role in the digital revolution.

THE BROADCASTING ACT 1990

Although the Government confirmed the BBC as 'the cornerstone of British broadcasting', the Act heralded universal changes – and the implications for the BBC were fundamental. A quarter of all programmes had to be produced by independents. Sporting rights to 10 national events were revoked - and programme schedules would no longer be exclusive to TV Times and Radio Times.



PRODUCER CHOICE

In a changing broadcasting environment, the BBC examined new ways of producing programmes without affecting quality. A key recommendation was 'Producer Choice'. To get the best value for money, programme producers could, for the first time, hire production resources - staff, film crews, editing and programme design - from both inside and outside the BBC. It was a radical move which affected everyone in broadcasting.

PREMISES, PREMISES

The new White City building enabled the Corporation to relinquish expensive rented accommodation. But, as part of its efficiency programme, some BBC buildings had to be sold - and historical links were severed. Lime Grove was probably the saddest loss. For 41 years, it housed classics like What's My Line?, Doctor Who and Panorama. In 1996 the transmission service was also sold - the BBC's first privatisation.



OBITUARIES

DAN MASKELL Commentator 1908-1992

This former tennis player and coach was known as the 'Voice of Wimbledon'. He was the BBC's chief tennis commentator for 43 years. Broadcasting for radio since 1949, he turned his gentle, unhurried style to television in 1952. Stock remarks "Oh I Say", "Quite extraordinary", "A dream of a backhand" - became national catchphrases. His golden rule was "A second's silence is worth a minute's talk".

JOHN ARLOTT Commentator and Journalist 1914-1991

Joined the BBC as a Literary Programmes Producer in 1945. Remembered for his cricket commentaries on Test Match Special. For three decades his 'word pictures' of the game were infused with warmth and a love of language. Arlott, cricket and summer were synonymous. A colleague said, "You could smell the grass when he was talking".

BRIAN REDHEAD Broadcaster and Journalist 1929-1994

Made his first broadcast at the age of 12 - playing the clarinet on Children's Hour. Became one of radio's most compelling broadcasters. As one spearhead of the Today team, was held in great affection by listeners. His amiably gruff voice was instantly recognisable. On radio, his natural jauntiness, self-confidence and inquisitiveness was appreciated by everyone - except politicians.



VIRTUAL STUDIOS

Virtual reality is computer-distorted space. It was first used in a news studio in 1995, and then extensively afterwards - transforming a shoe box into a football pitch, bringing the Sistine Chapel to Shepherd's Bush and 'building' a set which would be too complicated or expensive to construct.

GOING DIGITAL

The BBC was at the centre of the digital revolution. Digital radio came on air in 1995 and digital television arrived via cable, satellite and terrestrial delivery systems, offering more choice to viewers and listeners.

1990

- 1 January - BBC Subscription Television created a separate company within BBC Enterprises.
- 4 January - *One Foot In The Grave* (TV).
- 10 January - *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (TV).
- 25 January - 'Funding the Future' report presented.
- 5 February - Final transmission of the time signal pips from Greenwich.
- 19 July - MPs voted to approve televising of proceedings in House of Commons.
- 27 August - Radio 5 began.
- 5 September - New White City building handed over to the BBC.
- 28 September - *Have I Got News for You* (TV).
- 3 October - *The Trials of Life* (TV).
- 1 November - Broadcasting Act received Royal Assent.

1991

- 3 January - Last issue of *The Listener* published
- 11 March - World Service Television News Service began.
- 1 April - Licence Fee increase pegged below Retail Price Index for one year.
- 15 April - BBC World Service Television launched
- 31 July - Lime Grove Studios closed.
- 31 August - Start of BBC TV Nicam stereo sound services.
- 14 October - World Service TV launched Asian Service which later became the first BBC 24-hour TV channel.

1992

- 21 January - Launch of night-time BBC TV Select Service. Radio Berkshire opened, the last of the BBC chain of local radio stations.
- 26 January - 50th anniversary of *Desert Island Discs* with PM, John Major.
- 1 March - *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (TV).
- 4 May - First foreign language World Service Television broadcast in Mandarin.
- 1 June - Start of Ukrainian Service.
- 6 July - *Eldorado* (TV).
- 14 July - DG Sir Michael Checkland announces plans for a 24-hour radio news network, a News and Current Affairs complex at TV Centre and a new Education Directorate.
- 4 September - *Between the Lines* (TV).
- 21 October - *Pole to Pole* (TV).
- 1 November - UK Gold satellite channel, jointly run with Thames Television, launched.
- 12 November - *Absolutely Fabulous* (TV).
- 20 November - *Sister Wendy's Odyssey* (TV).

1993

- 28 January - *Chef!* (TV).
- 28 February - *A Year in Provence* (TV).
- 6 June - *Lady Chatterley* (TV).
- 3 October - *Mediumwave* (Radio).
- 20 October - *Thatcher: The Downing Street Years* (TV).
- 3 November - *The Buddha of Suburbia* (TV).
- 18 November - *Goodnight Sweetheart* (TV).
- 18 November - *Life In the Freezer* (TV).
- 21 November - *To Play the King* (TV).

1994

- 12 January - *Middlemarch* (TV).
- 21 February - *Anderson Country* (Radio).
- 7 March - *Sister Wendy's Grand Tour* (TV).
- 28 March - Radio 5 Live, the BBC's 24-hour sport and news network, launched. One of the most successful media launches in recent history, the network quickly established itself.
- 21 April - *Cardiac Arrest* (TV).
- 27 July - *The Human Animal* (TV).
- 14 August - *The Great Antiques Hunt* (TV).
- 29 August - *Animal Hospital Live* (TV).
- 16 September - *Knowing Me, Knowing You... with Alan Partridge* (TV).
- 9 October - *Seaforth* (TV).
- 7 November - *Martin Chuzzlewit* (TV).
- 10 November - *The Vicar of Dibley* (TV).
- 13 November - *Just William* (TV).
- 19 November - *The National Lottery Live* (TV/Radio).
- 26 November - *Girl Friday* (TV).

1995

- 1 January - *Cold Comfort Farm* (TV).
- 11 January - *The Private Life of Plants* (TV).
- 27 January - *Dangerfield* (TV).
- 5 February - *The Buccaneers* (TV).
- 18 February - *Bomber* (TV).
- 26 March - *Hamish Macbeth* (TV).
- 1 April - *Bugs* (TV).
- 24 April - Chris Evans became presenter for the Radio One Breakfast Show.
- 2 May - *What Did You Do in the War, Auntie?* (TV).
- 6 May - *Anne Frank Remembered* (TV).
- 24 June - *Saturday Night Armistice* (TV).
- 13 September - *The People's Century* (TV).
- 24 September - *Pride and Prejudice* (TV).
- 5 November - *The Final Cut* (TV).
- 13 November - *The Thin Blue Line* (TV).
- TV and Radio coverage of the 50th anniversary VE and VJ Day commemorations.

1996

- The BBC granted its seventh Royal Charter.
- May - BBC sets out its vision for the digital future with 'Extending Choice in the Digital Age'. Argues for more free-to-air services paid for by the licence fee.
- 24 May - Radio 3 launched Through the Night, becoming a 24-hour service.
- 7 June - Director-General John Birt announces a major re-structuring of the BBC to separate commissioning from production. Creates BBC Broadcast to commission programmes made by BBC Production, extending the principle of the internal market. Operational from October 1996.
- 1 May - BBC granted its seventh Royal Charter and Agreement to come into force 1st January 1997 until 31st December 2006.
- 5 November - BBC lays the foundations for a closer relationship with audiences in its first annual Statement of Promises to Viewers and Listeners.
- 13 November - Third edition of Producer Guidelines issued. BBC Chairman calls it "the most comprehensive code of ethics in broadcasting".
- Christmas: Christmas edition of *Only Fools and Horses* seen by 24 million, the largest audience recorded for the last two decades.

1997

- BBC celebrates its 75th birthday. The Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela are among those who pay tribute to the BBC.
- February - A consultation document: the BBC's Digital Service Proposition, invited comments from the public about a new option in viewing - a digital television service, including widescreen television, additional programme choice, digital radio and a 24-hour news channel.
- 14 February - BBC launches public consultation on its plans for digital services.
- 28 February - Sale completed of BBC's home transmission business to Castle Transmission Services for £244 million. This money will be invested in the BBC's transition to the digital age. 500 BBC staff transferred.
- 17 March - BBC Worldwide signs joint venture agreement with Flextech plc to launch UK Gold family of channels. Followed up later in the year by a partnership with Discovery to develop new channels and services including *Animal Planet*.
- 6 September - Over 19 million people watch the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, on BBC One, the largest outside broadcast ever mounted by the BBC.
- 15 October - BBC issues second annual Statement of Promises to strengthen its relationship with audiences.
- 9 November - Launch of BBC News 24, round-the-clock news channel available on analogue cable and on BBC One at night-time.
- BBC News Online rapidly builds up massive audience of web-users.

1998

- 20 February - Governors give go ahead for BBC Resources Ltd., a wholly-owned subsidiary of the BBC, like BBC Worldwide.
- 23 September - Launch of BBC Choice as a digital channel to offer complementary output to BBC One and Two and to give viewers a second chance to see programmes missed first time around. This is the first new general BBC channel since BBC2 was launched in 1964. BBC takes responsibility for the Parliamentary Channel and launches BBC Parliament.
- 1 October - The BBC is at the centre of the digital revolution. Digital Audio Broadcasting and Digital Television are now on air with digital television available via cable, satellite and through an aerial. By this time the BBC's public service non-subscription digital channels - News 24, BBC Choice, digital text, BBC Knowledge and BBC Parliament - were available through each delivery system and funded by the licence fee.
- 15 November - Public launch of digital terrestrial television in the UK. BBC Research & Development were a key part in the team which delivered the technical infrastructure for this service.
- 3 December - Publication of *The BBC Beyond 2000* which explains how the BBC sees its vision in the digital age as the world's most creative and trusted broadcaster and programme-maker.
- 10 December - Governors approve £20 million investment in the nations in response to devolution in Scotland, Wales & Northern Ireland. 15 December – Government announces licence fee will rise according to a five-year formula settlement. Television licence fees go up to £101.00 for a colour licence and to £33.50 for a black and white licence from 1 April 1999.

1999

- 20 May - Launch of Digital Ceefax service, the digital replacement for analogue Teletext.
- 27 & 28 May - BBC Music Live Festival attracts over 200,000 in 40 venues around Glasgow.
- 1 June - Launch of BBC Knowledge on digital television brings together learning programmes for all ages.
- 11 August - 12 million viewers watch the total eclipse of the sun.
- 4 October - *Walking with Dinosaurs* (TV).
- 1 November - Greg Dyke joins BBC as Director-General designate.
- 16 December - BBC News announces deal to supply news to Vodafone Airtouch mobile phones via new WAP technology.