

## The Connected Histories of the BBC

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## **BBC'S ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

### **INTERVIEW 01 JOHN BIRT**

**Q:** Can you remember what the broadcasting environment was like when you first came to the BBC in the late eighties, before the internet etc ?

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**A:** Yes, well it was the era of limited numbers of channels, both on television and on radio, when I first went to work in broadcasting, working for Granada Television in Manchester. There were just two television networks, then there were three. I was one of the many people who argued for the fourth network, Channel Four, and that it should be set up in a certain way, but we had a four channel environment with all the limitations that implies and with very limited opportunity if you, virtually no opportunity, if you completely missed a television or radio programme that was pretty much it. As time went on there were video recorders, but if you hadn't recorded it then there was probably no easy way that you were going to get it if you were an ordinary member of the public. And most television and radio programmes were only ever broadcast once. Very, very few would be repeated.

**Q:** As you became Director General in the early nineties, when did you personally become aware of the

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internet?

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**A:** There were two stages on the digital journey; the first was the sheer growth of capacity which digital, firstly analogue, satellite allowed, and digital satellite. So the first phase, really, was not about the internet, it was just about the growth of capacity. The opportunity to have many, many channels, and that took a lot of the BBC's attention, how to navigate that world; it had been just a world of terrestrial broadcasting, you received your television and radio through terrestrial transmitters, a small number of people through cable. You were seeing the growth of cable on the one hand, and the advent of satellite on the other, so it became a multi-platform environment, you had to work out what to do about that. ITV decided it didn't want satellite to succeed so it wouldn't go on satellite, we made a decision to be an all-platform broadcaster, however your licence fee payers were going to receive their television, the BBC would be there for them. So that was really the first phase of the digital revolution, but the much more revolutionary phase, you just asked me about, the internet, the significance was, dawned only very slowly, I think for me, and for everybody else, and

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gradually, and incrementally, in stages. I had, do you want me to go back to that or not?

**Q:** Tell us about when you were aware of the internet?

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**A:** The first thing I would say is that I had an embryonic understanding of what digital technology meant, for a rather odd and surprising reason that, when I was at school, I went to, effectively, a grammar school in Liverpool, I did maths, further maths and physics in the sixth form, it was a school which was run by the Irish Christian Brothers, it was very good at grinding out good exam results, it got me into Oxford, but it didn't give you a good general education. The best teacher I ever had was the maths teacher in the sixth form, a man called Mr B B Cooper, he got us to read *The Times*, he read Tolstoy out to us, this was all extremely novel, and he used a teaching method which is common place now, but was wholly novel at the time, namely, asking pupils to do a project, and my project in the science sixth form was to explain digital technology.

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This is 1962, or thereabouts, computers, there are small numbers of computers, they are huge, they are in universities, they have the processing power that probably you have on your mobile device now, but they

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were, nonetheless, they used digital technology, and my job was to explain to the science sixth form what digital was, how it was different from analogue, and why it allowed technologists to do things that had hitherto not been possible. Now, that was a piece of understanding I parked, I went from, as soon as I got to university I started making movies, I went straight into Granada Television, I never worked, I barely scraped through my degree, I paid no attention to my science. But then, twenty, thirty years later, I went to Davos, to the World Economic Forum, and on a number of occasions I met somebody called Nicholas Negroponte who was a professor at Harvard, and he was actually the first person that I heard articulating the power of digital, and in a very visionary blue-skies way, and I went to not only encounter him at Davos, but I went to see him at Harvard, I used to spend a week each summer trying to expand my own horizons during the time I was the Deputy Director General in the BBC, and I still did the same when I was Director General. And he made me think and understand that what some of the significance of the new technology was likely to be, as with all futurology you get quite a lot wrong,

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although I don't think that particularly matters. One of the things that I remember was he was explaining how they were developing new kinds of paper, and when you got up in the morning instead of your newspaper coming through the door, it would be printed on this exotic new digitised paper and it would come out in your kitchen and you would read it there. So you get, when you look into the future with insight, you get some things right, but you definitely don't get everything right. But, nonetheless, it's always worthwhile because it keeps you agile and it makes you alert and aware so that when the mist clears you're more likely to do the right thing than if you hadn't engaged in what was likely to happen. So he, Nicholas Negroponte, made me alert, people in the BBC were doing things. The BBC is this vast, in some ways, uncontrollable, slightly anarchic, slightly chaotic, organisation, full of wonderfully creative people, whether they're programme makers or writers or technologists. So people were doing things slightly covertly, sometimes overtly, half-understood, so there was a certain amount of activity. But it wasn't coalescing, and it wasn't going to coalesce, into a clear proposition for the organisation

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because, frankly, I think we lacked an understanding and we did start to become aware of the internet. And I think one of the first mistakes we made was to, this was in a period which people don't remember now, where when you were first exposed to the internet, and as a I recall it was BBC Education that first exposed me to it. The screen you were shown, you had to sort of peer at it, it had kind of wispy print, no pictures, it didn't gleam in the way that a modern device does, it had no colour and it was just print on a page. So the thought that immediately occurred to you was, 'science journal', you know, science papers, it didn't seem to have any immediate application. So we made a mistake, which was BBC Worldwide or what it was then called, suggested that this possibly had to be thought of like magazines, it was publishing, it wasn't broadcast, and that they could take it over and they could use it because it would niche and modest and rather technical and rudimentary in its market implications. And somebody, who is one of the heroes of this story, somebody called Jeremy Mayhew, who had originally worked at The Centre, he had been special advisor to Peter Lilly in the conservative government. He'd come

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to work in Policy and Planning as an analyst and a strategist, he's then gone off to BBC Worldwide, and he was given the task at BBC Worldwide, of developing, what was to be, some rather techy news-based, text service. And we entered into a joint venture with ICL, which was to become Fujitsu eventually, it was a proper joint venture, they would supply the technological know-how, this was all very embryonic. BBC Worldwide would supply the content, it was an arrangement that didn't oblige either side to continue, or to, indeed, even, ICL would not benefit from anything that emerged from this process, it was purely experimental, and for each it was just a learning experience. And one day Jeremy, just yards away from where we're now sitting, came to present to me the first pilot work on what was turning into a BBC news

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service. And in the months since the go-ahead had been given to take us in this particular direction, that was the moment that the internet started to change, so instead of the wispy print, he suddenly was presenting something to me which was altogether more exotic, and looked very much more like the internet as we now know it. And it was a news service, and it had pictures

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and colour, and was bold and had impact. And it took me a nanosecond to see that I'd made a mistake and that this was going to be extremely powerful. And, by the way, it had ads on the page, and so A, it was plainly going to be an exciting development, and B, it had to be funded by the licence fee payer and couldn't be funded by advertising. And Jeremy was the saviour, because he'd drawn up a contract with ICL which allowed us to make that change, and he was also a good corporate animal because he made no fuss at all, we simply took the project away from him, he understood why, and we started developing news online as a public service, which was, obviously, the right thing to do. I paused for breath but still haven't answered your question. You asked me how I became aware.

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**Q:** So tell us about the trip you went on.

**A:** Every summer I went off for a week and tried to expose myself to new technology. I'd been to Japan, for instance, and looked at developing screen technologies; I used to sit in country hotels with American business school professors who would tutor me in high-finance, or in marketing and so the question

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came, 'What would be my next summer trip?' And we just had enough insight to know that there was something seriously going on in America and in California in particular. And there was a young man working in Corporate Strategy called Jamie Reeve, who was handed the task of planning the Director General's trip and escorting him to California. And he was very savvy, he had friends who were starting to work in these new internet start-ups, which none of us had really ever heard of. And he planned our trip to California, and we went to Los Angeles and San Francisco and finally Seattle, and we visited a number of internet start-ups, which were often in warehouses on side-streets and were full of, I thought of at the time, some of the cleverest, smartest, most inventive, people that I ever recall meeting. And they were the early prosthelytizers and missionaries, and the scales fell from my eyes and I began to understand, truly, the functionality, the interactivity, the potential of the medium. Because of what they had done, just learning from them, and thinking about what it meant for the BBC, and we had a very exciting few days, Jamie and I got on a flight to go on to Seattle where we were to

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00 16 57 meet Bill Gates and we were seated in slightly different parts of the plane, and I got out a big sheaf of paper, and spent the whole journey setting out, in my own mind, what I thought this meant for the BBC. And it, probably, if we found those bits of paper, it wouldn't look like it, but at that moment it felt like I understood what the right, in very general broad terms, what the internet meant for the BBC and what we needed to do. And rather immodestly I waved these bits of paper to Jamie across the plane, at the end of the day, saying, 'This is the BBC's internet strategy'.

**Q:** Presumably then Bill Gates was thinking about cable and broadband.

00 17 25 **A:** It's hard to remember what he was thinking about, but he was beginning to think about the internet, I think Microsoft and Jamie may have a better recollection than me, one thing I think I do remember was that he offered to put us, the BBC's embryonic online service, on the internet browser and kind of made a decision there and then and went ahead with it. But I think Microsoft was itself slower than others to recognise the importance of the internet, and of course caught up rapidly.

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**Q:** And you became friends with him?

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**A:** I don't want to claim we were friends, but I would, on a number of other occasions, he would bring together a lot of people that were, sorry let me start that again.

Every summer Bill Gates would organise a small conference of people who were Microsoft customers or potential partners, and we all came together in the magnificent setting of Seattle, we all ended up having dinner in his home, and we were exposed, we just didn't hear from Microsoft, it was a chance for everybody to set their own insights on the table. And there some of, not only the leaders, a lot of America's business leaders were there, and indeed there were some others like me from other parts of the world, but predominantly American business leaders. There were also people who had thought a lot about the new technology and where it was going. And of course you were exposed to Microsoft itself, and how it ran itself and how it conducted its business, and I was very, very impressed by what I found. So to me it was a fantastic learning experience, and I'd come back to the BBC afterwards, and it would help fuel my own insight and understanding on where we needed to drive. So we

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became very well connected, we were the first organisation in the UK to use the Microsoft desktop, and somebody called Rodney Baker-Bates negotiated that deal and we were very much the pilot scheme. So, these things don't happen overnight, they happened incrementally and gradually, but we were starting to expose ourselves to some of the world's leading thinkers, we were early adapters, we were early in our understanding of some of the things. You could always be quicker, but we were in the right ball park, broadly doing the right things, and acquiring the learning to do more of the right things.

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**Q:** How was it coming back to the BBC after the trips to America and Microsoft? What did you do with what you had learned?

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**A:** I have to say that all these other organisations thought that the BBC was fantastic, it wasn't that they were looking down their nose at us and saying, 'My God, you don't know what's going on in the world', they saw us, correctly, as the world's most important broadcaster and content creator. Coming back to the BBC, at the point where the digital penny was dropping, I'm afraid I had taken the BBC through a

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really difficult journey of modernisation and making it a lot more efficient than it had been, a lot of staff were lost in that process; 10,000 people left the BBC in that period. It was fundamentally restructured, we professionalised the support functions and so on, that was a very difficult journey for the BBC, and what, naturally, they most wanted to hear was, 'Phew it's all over and we can rest', and then suddenly the Director General was saying, 'Hey no, there's a new thing and it's called digital, and it's really revolutionary, and it's going to change our lives, and we need to understand it and we need a strategy'. And so there was a sort of, 'Oh my God he's at it again', feeling in the organisation and for some it was, sort of, amused weariness, for others there was some hostility and then from others there was a fear that this new venture would suck money away from existing services. And I had a serious dispute with my Chairman at the time, Marmaduke Hussey, who himself, though he had strongly encouraged the reform process, nonetheless felt that it was time to let the BBC settle down and have a rest. He was deeply sceptical that there was anything in this new technology, he would lecture me about how

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he used to be the Managing Editor of *The Times*, and he would lecture me about how he'd told Rupert Murdoch that you should forget these new technologies, they meant nothing, and you didn't have to pay any attention to them, and so on and so forth. So he was very irritated by what I was doing, but this period didn't last all that long, we did some things which worked extremely well, we had 'movers and shakers' parties in the council chamber, Jamie Reeve and others, people would come and show off their favourite websites, generally speaking from America and other sides of the world; it was just at the beginning where you could order sushi, there were a small number of restaurants that had gone online, so you could order sushi and pizza. These were things, people would laugh at it now, but it was so novel, we had big screens in the council chambers, and proper microphones so everybody could hear what was going on, so we were ordering the pizza and sushi online and guess what, twenty minutes later somebody would arrive with the sushi and pizza. And this was seen as absolutely amazing, but this is such a smart, sharp organisation that it just doesn't take a moment for

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people to see the implications of it. So, I think, these kind of insights spread like wildfire across the BBC and, again, you don't get everything right immediately, but people starting running with the ball. So the period of resistance did not last very long.

**Q:** Jamie Reeve described the following three years as a pure battle, so things were still tough.

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**A:** I think that is always the case; I think the issue is, 'Is the cup half full or is it half empty?' If you were involved in large organisations it just goes with the territory that all change threatens somebody, there will be proper scepticism, there will be conservatism. There will be all sorts of emotions and vested interests in play, and so possibly for Jamie, as a young man, this was his first exposure to how organisations resist change. It wasn't mine so I don't, I certainly do remember it as being not, it was, or course, like all journeys, it had some pain and there was some real resistance. And we made some mistakes along the way from which we had to recover, but you always do in these circumstances.

**Q:** Tell us about the Hever conferences. This was a time when the organisation took the implications in the round, and changed itself all at once, which is pretty

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unusual.

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**A:** We set off on the journey, I guess, this may not be the right way of thinking about it, but the first phase was about the multi-channel revolution, the second phase was understanding what a website was and how potent that was going to be, and the third phase was an early understanding of what we now understand what digital technology could do. I think we did appreciate, we came to appreciate the multiple opportunities, the holistic opportunities, that digital technology offered. We foresaw streaming, we foresaw the emergence of different kinds of devices, we had some sense, we didn't foresee Facebook, we didn't articulate it in those terms, but we did understand the opportunity to create communities. The way that individuals could discover each other as well, in a sense, create their own media experience, we saw how the barriers between television and radio would start to disappear. That all of what we thought of as separate media experiences would converge into one. Now I think we had quite profound insights about what was going to happen, and when I read some of the things that we wrote and said at the time, I think they were very farsighted. But, of

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course, you don't necessarily carry that immediately into absolutely the right actions, it takes you a while. But I think what I would say about that exercise, which involved, importantly, Ed Richards who is now, as we speak, is and has been for some time, is the Chief Executive of Ofcom, and he did it with an extremely talented and able team, is that the important thing for organisations is to do that, is to look into the future, try to understand all the things in play, where they might lead. You're not going to get it right 100%, but what it does is it helps you understand the potential, what may happen, it helps you understand what direction to start travelling in. And if you're broadly travelling in the right direction you can speed up and go faster, if you make, as you do, some, and this is not just true of digital, I've been involved in a lot of organisational strategies, you do get some things wrong, but the important thing is to be agile enough when that happens, to be able to withdraw and adapt and adjust and do those things. So I think what that work did, it was kind of like a big piece of mapping, it said, 'This is where it could all go, these are all the sorts of things that could happen', and the BBC's got to be ready for that journey and understand

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how to structure and organise itself and where its services could go, and has to acquire new capabilities and so on. So I think it's best seen in that light, as preparing the BBC for the journey, this was late nineties, so this is preparing the BBC for the journey that it, in the end, very successfully went on, after I ceased to be Director General.

**Q:** When I read the papers I remember the criticism of the amount of money being paid to consultants, and I think that was something thrown at you quite a lot. When I talked to Jamie he said McKinseys helped a lot in getting that insight and those figures.

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**A:** We drove it. I mean, it wasn't that McKinsey had, McKinsey did not have the sort of, all the understanding on the shelf, and then said, you know, 'Here BBC, this is our understanding', but they themselves were, McKinsey had, has, lots of extremely able people, and they are a resource to be used in those circumstances, they will, you don't have the numbers at the top to do that by yourself. We had the talent at the top, but not the numbers, and we needed to turn to McKinsey to help us with that.

**Q:** You mentioned mistakes a few times, and that

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mistakes were inevitably made. Are there any more you can recall that are worth mentioning?

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**A:** Well even now there are some involving individuals that I wouldn't feel able to mention, where you don't, at some points we didn't appoint, we appointed people to jobs that were too challenging for them, or they didn't have the right skill set. But not, I've told you about the most important mistake that we were able to pull back from.

**Q:** Given that you came to visit Future Media quite recently, to see what people were currently doing, what impression did it make on you in terms of what the organisation's doing? And then, what do you think the BBC should be doing for the digital and internet world?

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**A:** Well I spent half a day last week with Future Media, and I was deeply impressed and very proud, and indeed, moved; I had a lump in my throat at one point. When you, I felt paternal. It's like watching your children grow up, and you feel very, very proud, and I was absolutely dazzled by the scale of the work, all these little groups with a clear task that they were working on and trying to develop, and their dedication. And the thing that always moves you in the BBC, which

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is the people of talent and ability working together for the public good, and I was really impressed, and I can't conceive that there is another organisation in the world with such a large concentration of creative technologists that's working on such a wide front, to understand, still, all the wonderful opportunities that the technologies continue to provide us, to improve the service for the BBC's licence fee payer to really explore the world's best archive, which goes back for the best part of 100 years to help people, conforms services, in different ways to make the licence fee payers make their own contribution to the BBC. And people are thinking really hard about all these things in very ambitious and bold and intelligent ways. So I was really impressed, and the answer to the question is, I can't conceive of anybody doing better than that at the moment, there may be things that I'm missing, but I felt I left that series of meetings thinking the BBC is in very, very healthy condition here and it is where it should be, absolutely at the spearhead, making sure that it works on behalf of its licence fee payers to provide the best possible services.

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**Q:** When you had the first sense of the importance of

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the internet and it moved into becoming a reality for the BBC, the BBC was steeped in the broadcast culture so give us a little bit about the resistance from the traditional broadcasters.

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**A:** The BBC is not homogenous, it's a very diverse organisation and at one end there were creative people working in areas like drama or entertainment who had a very set idea about the work and what they wanted to do, and perfectly understandably, just wanted to focus on that. At the other end there were sharp young things who'd picked it up from their friends and started to understand what the importance of new technology was going to be. And then there was the middle where people were in transition, and of course, there were some people who were dinosaurish about it at all levels and all places. But that's what you'd expect, and that was true of other reforms or changes in the BBC, and by the way, in other large organisations, this is not unique to the BBC, it's true of large organisations, it's inherent in human nature to want your own cosy nest, if you're doing something you love, to be continued, to be allowed to do it without anybody bothering you or pestering you and asking you to do things in a different

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way. But these changes gradually infuse people, more young people come in, they convert others, and over time you see the slow, gradual conversion of pretty much the whole of the organisation. Even as we speak, there's probably one or two dinosaurs here somewhere or other.

**Q:** What about the discussions you had to have with the government to bring the internet into their understanding of broadcasting?

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**A:** That is a good question, and I should have picked up when you asked me if there was anything we hadn't discussed. The same thing happened in government, happened in the organisation, which was it took a while for people to crack on to the importance of all of this. So we struggled a bit getting permissions at the beginning to provide new services, things which were so obvious to us were here to stay, we were given conditional go-aheads for a year, and so on and so forth. But the penny was dropping everywhere, so these were temporary hiccups, really, the one thing I remember, which would be typical, was that we put in the budget for BBC World Service, which the FCO, the Foreign Office, had to approve. We put in a modest

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sum of money to help develop the early internet services for BBC World Service and the Foreign Office struck that line out of the budget. But not forever. So you try again the following year and you end up making progress.

**Q:** I heard you had to persuade the government and the DCMS that this was something here to stay and that, in fact, the BBC would be able to deliver it almost at no extra cost. Am I right?

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**A:** Well, there were different stages. The first stage was when hardly anybody understood what this was about, so you had a problem getting buy-in, and then there was a later stage where, suddenly, people began to understand its importance. Government began to see that there was a national interest here in becoming a digital-savvy nation, and they understood that the BBC could be absolutely key to help driving early take-up of digital technologies within the UK. And so, by the time, as I was coming towards the end of my 13 years at the BBC, and that the last thing I did was to negotiate the new licence fee settlement, which turned out to be a historic licence fee settlement, the best in the BBC's history with the Blair government. An

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important part of that licence fee settlement , only one part, and certainly not the whole thing, was an understanding that the BBC needed to be properly funded for this digital journey. And that was an unprecedented settlement, it was generous, it was RPI plus, and it lasted seven years, and it gave a real fillip, after twenty years of adversity in licence fee income, suddenly the BBC had a real dynamic and it came at the right moment, around 2000, and helped the BBC to go on, what became, a very successful digital journey. And, might I say, that is one of the things that Tony Blair doesn't get credit for. That licence fee settlement, the government had set up an independent commission, under the chairmanship of Gavin Davis, to recommend on the licence fee, he recommended a figure, the Secretary of State recommended to Number 10 a reduced figure. And Tony Blair, in the end, agreed a figure higher than even the Independent Commission recommended, and that became the basis of the BBC's funding during the best part of the next ten years. Not many say many nice things about Tony Blair.