# The Power of Influence: Broadcasting William Beveridge in the 1930s

## Teachers’ Notes

Primary Sources to understand responses in the period to unemployment and the development of broadcast media in Britain

Curriculum Links:

AQA History – Wars and Welfare: Britain in Transition, 1906 – 1957 (Social and cultural impact of the Depression and radio in the 1930s) and Challenge and Transformation: Britain 1851-1964 (Growth of Media, Depression, and Condition of the working classes).

Pearson Edexcel History – Route H: Democracies in Change: Britain and the USA in the twentieth century- changing quality of life and Paper 3 Option 34.2: Poverty, public health and the state in Britain, c 1780 – 1939. Depression and the Dole.

Introduction

These notes accompany the powerpoint of sources that can be used to recap on students’ knowledge of unemployment in the Great Depression. They can also be used to show how British broadcasting developed and dealt with unemployment (and the unemployed) to assist in understanding of cultural and media developments in the 1930s.

Emphasis is placed on archival sources from LSE Collections, so pointers can be given on using historical evidence and evaluating it for more depth. The sources could be combined with reference to two online databases for more understanding of unemployment and / or broadcasting in the same period.

The archival documents used consist of letters to and from William Beveridge when he was Director at LSE with staff at the BBC or John Hilton as well as official forms or advertising material created by the BBC or LSE. You can also use these sources to interrogate the nature of archives in historical evidence, the problems with such documents and how they might be used by historians.

Each slide contains some questions for the class about the source or to recap on what they have learnt on unemployment. Below is more contextual information as well as the content of each slide, which is in grey.

**The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC): Background / Warm Up**

Can introduce the BBC here and radio. Also recap on tariff reform and imperial preference.

* The BBC started broadcasting in October 1922 and John Reith became General Manager in December.
* In 1927 the BBC became a Corporation by Royal charter and Reith became Director-General.
* Hilda Matheson, and her successor Charles Siepmann, as Head of Talks wanted to address social problems in broadcasting through expert analysis in the late 20s and 30s. They had a ‘vision of the possibilities of broadcasting’ (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991).
* The Week in Westminster began in 1928 to inform newly enfranchised women about parliament and politics now that all women had a vote equal to men over the age of 21.
* In 1929 John Logie Baird broadcast images on television.

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* On 4 December 1930 William Beveridge is broadcast for the first time as an expert. He opposes the Empire Free Trade proposals (imperial preference) in a debate with Lord Beaverbrook.
* This letter (LSE Beveridge 9B/50) from Hilda Mattheson, Head of Talks, is in response to Beveridge sending her copies of letters from listeners in response to the programme that are ‘pretty equally divided between shouts of approval and shrieks of rage.’
* Mattheson called debates, such as Beaverbrook’s and Beveridge’s, ‘hammer and tongs’ discussions.

Questions:

* *What sort of source is this?*
* *What is meant by ‘hammer and tongs’ discussion’? Are there programmes that do this today?*
* Can students identify debates in the news today that have ‘polarised’ responses?
* *What was Lord Beaverbrook’s position on trade and tariff reform?*

**Beveridge and Unemployment**

You may want to introduce William Beveridge in more detail or highlight him as the architect of the Beveridge Report.

* The economic crash of 1929 led to mass unemployment in certain areas, even for those who had previously had work. Can recap here on unemployment between 1929 and 1931 and the impact in different areas and industries.
* The BBC was impersonal in approach; announcers wore dinner jackets and spoke in RP accents. Here you could pull out the potential gulf in class / understanding between working class unemployed and broadcasting.

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* William Beveridge was responsible for establishing Labour Exchanges under the Liberal Government of 1906-11 (see poster pictured).
* Beveridge had also advised on National Insurance and the first form of unemployment benefit.
* Beveridge was Director of the London School of Economics (LSE) from 1919 to 1937.
* In 1931 Beveridge gave a series of 6 talks on the history of unemployment from the 1900s to the ‘means test’. After he wrote that he wished he had ‘had the leisure to make them [the talks] more human.’

*Questions:*

* *What do you know about unemployment between 1929-31?*
* *Why would the BBC be commissioning talks on unemployment in 1931? And why ask William Beveridge?*
* What do you think Beveridge meant by making the talks ‘more human’?

**Who was listening?**

* By 1931 there were over 1,000 ‘listening groups’ and a conference for Group Leaders was held at London School of Economics (LSE) in January.
* Beveridge always asked the producers who was listening to the programmes and took great interest in the letters of response sent to LSE. He went to Liverpool to speak to unemployed people directly due to the interest in his radio talks there.
* The social distribution of radio sets is hard to calculate. 3 million households had a radio set in 1930 and by 1939 the figure had tripled with the likelihood that 75% of households had one. (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, 362).
* George Orwell wrote in The Road to Wigan Pier that: ‘Twenty million people are underfed but literally everyone in England has access to a radio; what we have lost in food we have gained in electricity’.
* Can use to recap changes in benefits and understanding or response to unemployment and unemployed by 1936. Changes in benefits, the means test etc. Also draw out why identifying the unemployed out in 1936, link to the marches etc.

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* There were ‘wireless clubs’ and listener groups, mainly formed of working-class people who clubbed together for a wireless in the early 1930s.
* After giving his talks on unemployment in 1931, such was the interest in the topic that Beveridge went in person to address the Liverpool listening group.
* By 1936, the year of this letter, the BBC was carrying out audience research.

In this letter (LSE Beveridge 9B / 53) BBC producer Roger Wilson is inviting Beveridge to speak on ‘unemployment insurance’ as part of a new series called ‘This Was News’.

*Questions:*

* *Who is the audience identified for these programmes?*
* *Search ‘This was News’ on the Radio Times archive site* [*https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/*](https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/)*. What other issues were covered?*
* *What had changed around unemployment and benefits between 1931 and 1936?*

**Social Survey: Changes in Family Life**

This was possibly the first mass survey through use of broadcast media in Britain. Can compare it to the Great British Class survey in 2012-13: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21953364> (also ran with LSE academics).

William Beveridge wrote:

‘This family investigation by the B.B.C. [. . .] is a sober attempt to see if with the help of listeners we can construct a new kind of instrument for social science.’

William Beveridge (1932), *Changes in Family Life*, London, 65-66.

You could also compare or use this survey to introduce the Mass Observation project of the late 1930s or compare it to Seerbohm Rowntree’s 2nd study of York in *Poverty and Progress* or the Booth Maps: <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/>

From a contemporary point of view, you could introduce the Great British Class Survey which made with the BBC and academics from LSE in 2013: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21953364>

The British Social Attitudes website might be useful from a sociological point of view: <http://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/british-social-attitudes/>

Can also bring in a link to the changing role of women here.

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* In 1931/32 LSE academics presented a series ‘Changes in Family Life’, accompanied by a social survey that listeners could fill in (LSE Beveridge 9A 6 /4).
* Beveridge gave four of the talks, the other three were dialogues with Mrs J. L. Abramson (Labour Party), Mrs Eleanor Barton (Women’s Co-operative Guild), Dr Hugh Dalton (Economics, LSE) and Professor Morris Ginsberg (Sociology, LSE).
* This series was commissioned by the Changing World, the BBC’s Adult Education service.
* Beveridge encouraged listeners to send off for the Form through *The Radio Times.*
* Much of the press attacked the programme for social surveying and political bias. Despite this, 50,000 Family Forms were requested and 12,000 returned to the LSE.

*Questions:*

*Why might much of the print media accuse the BBC of bias?*

*What was the impact of unemployment on family life? Where there any other social changes taking place at this time?*

*What other social surveys do you know about? Are they useful to a historian? If so, how?*

**School Broadcasts**

You can use this slide and the next to ask students what they think about films / documentaries they have seen relating to their studies. Compare (or ask them to) their reactions with the students from the 1930s.

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Beveridge was regularly asked to speak on the schools’ programmes (usually for sixth forms) from 1935.

Mary Somerville had become the first Director of School Broadcasts in 1929. (LSE Beveridge 9\_B52\_3)

*In the letter to the right, can you see any historical terms or areas that you learn about today?*

*Depression, trade cycles etc*

**School Responses to Beveridge’s Talk in 1935**

Four very different responses from sixth forms at schools.

**Early Television Broadcasts**

The cost of a television set in 1937 was around 17 times the average workers weekly wage, meaning only wealthier people had them in their homes with some bought for clubs.

The early television service was based at Alexandra Palace in North London and only had a radius of around 40km so just served London and the immediate SouthEast England area around London.

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The BBC television service started broadcasting for a few hours a day in November 1936. The range of transmission was limited to 40km from the television studios in North London.

Television sets were very expensive but by the outbreak of war in 1939, around 18,000 had been made and sold.

On 25 February 1937, Beveridge spoke on unemployment with economist John Hilton. They used charts and film footage to illustrate their conversation.

Archives all: LSE Beveridge 9B/53/1

**Unemployment on Screen**

Hilton had presented and written a programme aimed at the unemployed called ‘This and That’ on radio since 1933. He presented a television programme on current affairs from November 1936. And broadcast until his death in 1943.

Could bring in the Bolton Worktown archive in here – particularly the photographs of work.

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John Hilton was an economist at the University of Cambridge who stressed the social stress of economic developments or issues, such as unemployment. Hilton had come from a working class background in the mill towns of Bolton and Bury.

Photographs of Bolton in the 1930s can be found here: https://boltonworktown.co.uk

In his letter to Beveridge, Hilton refers to a film on employment and rearmament.

Questions:

Historian Asa Briggs wrote that ‘John Hilton, indeed, not only knew how to talk about the unemployed but to them.’ (Briggs, 1965: 41). What does Briggs mean by this?

Why might Hilton’s background make a difference to how he spoke to the unemployed?

Why would a film on rearmament be relevant to a programme on unemployment in 1937?

**Women at the BBC**

Can link to changing role of women in society here as well as employment issues, such as the marriage bar and methods to create more jobs for men. Of interest could be this website on women pioneers at the BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/100-voices/pioneering-women>

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* Beveridge worked with a number of women at the BBC such as Hilda Matheson, the first Talks Director, Mary Somerville in School Broadcasts and Mary Adams, producer for the television service.
* The marriage bar did not appear to apply to these women: Somerville and Adams were both married with small children in the 1930s.
* All women were very well connected with intellectuals and academics.

*Questions:*

*What was the general situation for married women in professions in the 1930s? Why was this?*

*Why do you think the BBC was different? Or were the women different?*

**Broadcast appeal for academic refugees from Nazism**

The Society for Protection of Science and Learning was formed from the Academic Assistance Council, which Beveridge had co-founded in 1933 to support academics sacked by the Nazi government. It began with a massive fundraising appeal in the Albert Hall in 1933 with the star guest of Albert Einstein, who gave a lecture and an appeal.

Might need to bring in some background on international politics here. Particularly around the Nuremburg Laws put in place in Nazi Germany in 1935: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/winter/nuremberg.html>

Beveridge broadcast his appeal on 27 February 1937 (LSE Beveridge 9A/46/6). He had asked Winston Churchill to do it as a non-political cause.

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A few days after his television broadcast, William Beveridge made a radio appeal as ‘The Week’s Good Cause’ for The Society for Protection of Science and Learning. The appeal was published in this leaflet.

In this broadcast, Beveridge said that ‘we have to deal with the results of political action, but our business is assistance, not politics or propaganda.’

*Questions:*

*Why was Beveridge positioning the cause as not political?*

*What laws had affected Jewish academics in Nazi Germany?*

*Beveridge stresses ‘the question is not a Jewish one’. Why do you think he does this?*

**Broadcasting: Power and Influence**

Can use this slide to think about potential role of radio during war as well as link to Beveridge Report.

William Beveridge broadcast the outlines of plans for ‘social security’ on the BBC December 1942. The broadcast is available on the BBC Archive and is 15 minutes long and gives a chance for the students to hear Beveridge speak:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/sir-william-beveridge-announcement/zn4qrj6>

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Over nine million radios had been sold by 1939. It is estimated that 75% of homes had one.

Beveridge continued to regularly broadcast during World War Two, including presenting a series ‘This is Freedom’ in January to February 1940. He also appeared on panel shows like Any Questions and The Brains Trust.

*Questions:*

*Asa Briggs refers to the 1930s as the ‘golden age of wireless’. Why is this?*

*Why do you think did William Beveridge, John Hilton and other academic experts regularly broadcast for the BBC?*

*How did radio impact the culture of the 1930s?*

**Online Resources that can be used for contextual information:**

The National Archives, Cabinet Papers on Interwar Unemployment Insurance: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/interwar-unemployment-insurance.htm>

The Worktown online archive of photographs and archive documents of Bolton, some from Mass Observation, in the late 1930s: <https://boltonworktown.co.uk>

The BBC Radio Times Genome Project has searchable listings of the Radio Times 1923 – 2009. N.B. This is not necessarily what was broadcast but what was listed for broadcast: <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk>

Pathe News Reel can give a different perspective to the BBC, bring in the use of news in the cinema and is free to view on its site or on youtube. For example: <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/british-depression> or

<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/minister-speaks-on-unemployment/query/unemployment>

BBC Archive website has collections of material and links to collections of archive material on i-Player: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive>

**Secondary sources on broadcasting referred to:**

Asa Briggs (1965), *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Vol III. The Golden Age of Wireless,* London: Oxford University Press.

Mark Pegg (1983), *Broadcasting and Society 1918 – 1939*, London: Croon & Canberra.

Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff (1991), *A Social History of British Broadcasting. Vol 1. 1922-39. Serving the Nation*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

*Pioneering Women. 100 voices at the BBC* (2018): <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/100-voices/pioneering-women> [accessed 14 August 2019]. Written by Kate Murphy, Bournemouth University and Jeannine Baker, Macquarie University (Sydney), with additional material by Emma Sandon (Birkbeck, University of London), Kate Terkanian (Bournemouth University), Helen Wood (University of Leicester), Lucy Robinson (University of Sussex), Sejal Sutaria (Grinnell College, USA), David Butler (University of Manchester) and Martha Kearney (BBC). Web Editor, John Escolme (BBC), Web Production, Mike Hammond (BBC).