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Television, Animals, and History: The Early Years of the BBC

Abstract

Animals have been a part of television's offerings since its inception. Yet animals are largely absent in television's histories; indeed, animals are largely absent in most histories, with history itself a practice that reproduces anthropocentrism. But animal histories remain methodologically problematic, given the kinds of records usually understood as historical evidence are not those produced by non-humans. And recent attempts to widen television's histories have adopted methods – such as oral histories – that inadvertently reinforce animal exclusion, given non-humans lack of access to human-centred notions of communication and speech. This paper begins rectifying this omission, through analysis of the BBC's early output and the purposes to which animals were put during this period. It captures how animals were enmeshed within that early experimental broadcasting, when programme-makers were still conceptualising what television was for and what attractions it could offer its viewers. That animals were drawn on as part of this process indicates how non-humans are ensnared in anthropocentric representational strategies: and that television histories have usually all but ignored animals indicates how history as a process functions to legitimise anthropocentrism.

Keywords

BBC | animal | television | history | anthropocentrism | historiography

Introduction

In 2022 the UK's BBC celebrated its centenary. It took this as an opportunity to explore in detail its own complex history, producing multiple resources and websites covering various aspects of its past. A key aim for the organisation was for this history to be as inclusive and diverse as possible, covering both production and reception of its output. So, the 'Share Your Story' initiative saw programme-makers working with secondary schools across the UK to develop output enabling children 'to share stories of their personal journeys, setbacks and successes.'¹ The public were invited to apply to be extras on

high-profile dramas as part of the ‘15 Seconds of Fame’ project.² And perhaps the most exhaustive component of the celebrations were multiple websites outlining different approaches to the BBC’s history, including an interactive timeline, a map detailing filming locations, and three sites themed around the number 100.³ These listed key figures from the Corporation’s past and present, under the headings of ‘100 Faces’, ‘100 Voices’, and ‘100 Objects’. The focus on ‘faces’ and ‘voices’ indicate the extent to which the aim was to foreground human personnel as the most important component of the organisation, given these lists were made up of programme-makers and other people who worked for or have contributed to the BBC. In particular, the ‘voices’ component, constituting many hours’ worth of oral history, aimed to bring attention to ‘the hidden stories of broadcasting’, by placing the testimonies of technicians and administration personnel as historically equivalent to that of more senior figures, such as Directors General.⁴

These initiatives indicate a BBC working to offer a variety of approaches to its own history, actively responding to criticisms that it is an organisation that is, and has been, limited in its inclusivity and diversity. This aligns with ongoing debates about history as a practice, in which ‘non-Eurocentric, postcolonial, feminist, queer and black historians have challenged the traditionally very white, andro-centric character of modern academic historical writing’.⁵ In offering a wide range of resources to be examined in various ways, alongside encouraging the public it serves to write their own histories and actively engage in the process of history-making, the BBC can be seen to be responding to concerns about its role as a public service broadcaster, and the nation- and community-building component of the remit that defines it. Yet this approach remains wedded to forms of history that situate the human as the only actor contributing to historical change and the recording of history, and therefore the only subject worth of study by history. While it is indubitable that non-human animals have faces, and perform vocalisations that could be understood as ‘voices’, the entries in these categories show the BBC understanding these terms as applicable only to humans.⁶ In doing so humans are positioned as both historical artefacts and as meaning-making subjects able of articulating that history; everything that is not human is instead put in another category, tellingly called ‘objects’. In doing so, this presentation of history conforms to, and reaffirms, anthropocentrism, ‘the view that human beings are primary and central in the order of things.’⁷

Yet the BBC’s output has always involved more than just humans. In its very first week of television broadcasting in November 1936 the BBC’s programming included *Alsations* (‘A Display by Champion Alsations from the Metropolitan and Essex Canine Society’s Show’), *Silver Fox Breeding*

(‘Four foxes will be exhibited by a representative of the Silver Fox Breeders’ Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’), and *The Zoo Today* (‘Some animals with their keepers’).⁸ These programmes, like the vast majority of early television, are lost to time, and impossible now to rewatch. But they do point to the ways in which human cultures have been, and continue to be, entangled with the more-than-human. That the BBC turned to animals so much in its first week of television broadcasting indicates something about what was assumed might function as interesting programme material, at this point when the Corporation was experimenting with what would and would not work as television. There is, then, a history to be written of the BBC, and of its television output, that moves beyond the solely human, and acknowledges the complex multispecies interplay that constitutes television’s past. Given the size and scope of such a vast project, this article instead focuses solely on the first few years of the BBC’s television broadcasting, with particular emphasis on its opening months. The aim here is to make explicit the centrality of animals to early broadcasting, and to explore why it should be that animals were drawn on so actively at that point in time. A clear aim here is to trouble the BBC’s foregrounding of ‘voices’ and ‘faces’ as relevant only to humans, and to reclaim animals which might otherwise be thought of as nothing but ‘objects’.

Animal Histories

Situating animals as central components of that which is typically formulated as human-only history responds to what has been dubbed ‘the animal turn’, whereby ‘animals have emerged as a more frequent focus of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences’ which has led to ‘new relationships between scholars and their subjects, and new understandings of the role of animals in the past and at present’.⁹ Noticing animals within the historical record has shown that ‘[n]on-human creatures have been present at every major event in human history’, and ‘[a]nimals have even shaped and influenced that history’.¹⁰ Key aspects of hitherto human-only history – such as exploration/invasion, war and the development of cities – have been shown not only to include animals, but to fundamentally rely on them for their outcomes.¹¹ By this argument the world is ‘co-constituted’, pointing to the necessity of ‘more-than-human histories’ that acknowledge the centrality and agency of animals in worlds and events typically understood only anthropocentrically.¹²

Writing animal histories presents particular methodological and analytical difficulties. This is because ‘the ways in which documents, records, and visual material in the collections of museums,

galleries and archives have been organized typically privileges the human over the non-human.¹³ What a moment might mean *for* an animal is rarely in the historical record, and materials that are categorised as constituting that record are of the kind that animals can typically not partake in or contribute to. Indeed, the focus on documents that foreground the linguistic (such as written materials, or interviews) normalises a logocentrism notable for what is ‘*left out*’ by it.¹⁴ In certain human cultures language persists as ‘an important means of marking boundaries’, justifying hierarchical power relationships where that language is seen ‘as proof of the soul or of civilization’.¹⁵ While serving to broaden the historical record through the inclusion of marginalised human actors, the BBC’s focus on ‘voices’ as an organising principle serves to reaffirm a logocentrism that actively renders animals mute.

Overcoming ‘the question of how we might think about animals as actors in the past’ has been one of the key challenges for those attempting to construct animal-inclusive histories.¹⁶ For while ‘[t]hinking *about* animals is a historical imperative’ it is the case that ‘thinking *like* them is hard’.¹⁷ Jakob von Uexküll distinguishes between animals’ *Merkwelt* (their ‘perception world’) and *Wirkwelt* (their ‘effect world’); that is, what they perceive around them, and the effect they have on their environment.¹⁸ While humans may be able to observe animals’ *Wirkwelt*, accessing their *Merkwelt* is much trickier. This is because while humans typically prioritise sight and sound as the key meaning-making senses, other animals may instead rely on other ways of perceiving the world, such as smell and vibrations. Indeed, this has implications for television’s depiction of animals, given the medium is one which only has access to sight and sound as tools of representation. It could be argued that as ‘[h]istorians have considerable expertise in imaginatively inhabiting past human worlds (...) it is not such a stretch to extend this to a more-than-human perspective’; the problem is one of degree rather than an absolute.¹⁹ Nevertheless, engaging with animals’ experiences and histories necessitates ‘a position of humility’²⁰ that acknowledges the limits of human perception and questions who ‘the “we” of history is’.²¹

In that vein, it should be acknowledged at the outset that this article offers a particular and situated history: it focuses on one organisation (the BBC) in one country (the UK) and at a particular moment in time (the 1930s). It is likely not possible to extrapolate the findings here to other organisations, countries, or time periods. This specificity is also important in terms of the animals under discussion. That is, human conceptualisations and treatments of animals are not uniform, agreed, or static. Indeed, one aim of work on animal history (and animal studies more widely) is to

indicate and disrupt the problematic totalising term ‘animal’ and encourage instead engagement with specific non-human beings as individuals. Jacques Derrida notes the power in the word ‘animal’, defining it as ‘an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other’; my aim in this article is precisely to indicate how television, at its outset, served as a tool by which humans reasserted ‘the right and the authority’ to conceptualise, categorise, and explain animals, as individuals and as a totalising category.²² The historical resources being drawn on here are ones made by humans for human-centred ends, and as such they function as evidence of the ways in which early television constructed particular human-animal relationships and understandings, in which animals were representational resources useful for the (human) public the BBC aimed to serve. This history, then, does not aim to make visible those animals’ *Merkwelt* and *Umwelt*, but instead indicates early television’s role precisely in denuding animals of those aspects, situating them instead as significant only inasmuch as they fulfil anthropocentric goals.

This also attends to one of the problems of studying television history, which is the lack of audio-visual material from the time, especially the absence of programming. How television history might and should be done given much of the key material is missing has been repeatedly debated, with multiple methodological responses offered.²³ The programmes under discussion here do not exist in the archive, and this means those that appeared in them – whether human or non-human – are similarly absent. It has long been argued in analyses of animals in film and television that these media turn now-dead animals into audio-visual matter, ‘an uncanny transference of life from the animal to film’.²⁴ Yet here even that trace of the animal is lost. As such, this analysis draws on supplementary material to piece together its history, focussing on written material from the time such as newspaper reports and reviews, the *Radio Times*, and the BBC’s own Yearbooks. While these necessarily limit the richness of the material at hand, they are useful in indicating what it was about animals, and their usefulness for television, that those producing this written material saw as significant. They thus function as useful resources for delineating ‘the “context” without the “text”’, and the discourses within which animals, and human-animal relations, functioned at the time of the birth of broadcast television.²⁵ This means this history which is attempting to reinsert animals into a specific time and place can only do so via human-produced matter intended for human consumption. As is always the case, animals only exist in the archive inasmuch as humans deign to find them significant enough for inclusion.

Early Programmes

While television ‘officially’ began broadcasting in November 1936, the BBC had been running experimental test broadcasts since August 1932.²⁶ The main aim of these was to test the technologies being used, but they also functioned as a space for the organisation to find out what did and did not work as programme content. At the time it was very unclear what television could or should be used *for*; nor was it possible to accurately predict what potential audiences would find interesting; nor was it known who the right people were to solve these problems. The BBC Annual in 1936 notes that while ‘experiments have been going on throughout the “low-definition” period in the intricate and difficult details of programme choice and presentation’, these debates in the ‘technical field’ also sit in relationship to ‘broad questions of the artistic and social role to be played by television’.²⁷ Given persistent developments in technology, it was not clear that television would remain only able to broadcast sound and images, with the public told to ‘not be surprised if within ten years you will not only be able to see and hear your friends abroad as if they were in the room, but able, also, to shake hands with them and feel their pulses’.²⁸ Concerns about ‘eye-strain’ resulted in the suggestion that ‘During mainly aural items, such as speeches or symphony concerts, pictures will be flashed on the screen momentarily and then faded out, leaving the screen blank while the voice or the music continues’.²⁹ Given the ever-mutating technologies it is not surprising that one reviewer in 1935 noted ‘there is nobody capable of handling this new invention’.³⁰

Analysis of the experimental transmissions, however, indicate clear assumptions about what might make interesting and worthwhile content. Such material was evaluated within two contexts: that it was interesting in and of itself; and that its interesting-ness was able to be communicated via the possibilities and limitations of the existing technology. This depended primarily upon the sets viewers were using to receive the transmissions, for ‘[i]t is not so much a matter of what can be photographed as what can be shown with reasonable clarity upon the reception set’.³¹ Newspaper reports and reviews at the time point to an eclectic mix of material, offering up a revue-style smorgasbord of performers and activities. As a reviewer in 1933 noted, ‘[i]n the course of the last six months performing seals, exhibitions, conjurers, ventriloquists, song-and-dance acts, and even pantomime have been televised successfully’,³² while another in 1936 stated that, ‘[d]uring the experimental transmissions last week we were, amongst other things, given a golf lesson and a riding lesson’.³³ Notable here are the ‘performing seals’ and ‘riding lesson’; in working out what counts as

worthwhile television fodder, broadcasters turned to animals. Yet they turned to a certain category of animal, which here are ones that are trained and controlled by humans. There are clear pragmatic reasons for such a choice, given filming at a circus is likely cheaper and quicker than trying to film animals in the wild. However, such ‘performing’ animals can also be seen to conform to the logic of ‘spectacular labor’³⁴ that underpins circuses, which requires animals to behave in particular and expected ways and as a result offer pleasures demanded of them by humans. Television, then, adopted a similar expectation of animal-related excitement in its programming that had been normalised for centuries by phenomena such as circuses.

Horses and horse-racing, too, can be understood in relation to performance, albeit one also imbued with the context of competition. The contemporary idea of a ‘running horse’ is one that had to be developed throughout history in order to justify humans’ breeding and treatment of that animal.³⁵ The inclusion of a ‘riding lesson’ in early broadcasting attests to the medium’s educational desires, but in doing so normalises humans’ use of animals for sport. Indeed, it is notable that early television repeatedly turned to horses and horse-racing for its material. What is usually regarded as the first public display of television took place at the Metropole Cinema, London, in June 1932, where John Logie Baird demonstrated his equipment.³⁶ His chosen subject matter? The UK horse race the Epsom Derby, meaning that from the moment television entered the public realm it constituted animals as resources for its content. As one attendee later recalled, ‘[s]itting in a darkened theatre one saw a few shapeless figures of horses whizzing across a minute screen’.³⁷ Such material was useful for showing the particular selling points of television that remain key to the medium today: its ability to broadcast events as they happen, enabling audiences to experience live occurrences from afar. And references to images of trained horses recur across predictions of television’s potential. In describing his plans for the broadcasting schedule Gerald Cock, the first Director of Television at the BBC, pointed to ‘cabaret and dance band shows, lessons on horsemanship, news items, travel, and occupational talks’.³⁸ And in a 1935 article evidencing the success of Baird’s television system the illustrations explaining how the technology works shows him filming an image of a horse race.³⁹

From its very beginnings the BBC had wanted to not be bound by its indoor studios at Alexandra Palace, and instead also film in other locations. This it quickly named ‘outside broadcasting’, a term so novel that in its 1936 *Yearbook* it had to explain to the public what it meant; ‘The words “Outside Broadcast” or “O.B.” refer to a broadcast outside the B.B.C. studios, not necessarily out-of-doors; e.g. a concert in the Queen’s Hall or the commentary on the Derby

are equally outside broadcasts'.⁴⁰ In the first instance this constituted cameras being 'sent out onto the terrace at Alexandra Palace at the end of long cables, directly connected to the Control Room',⁴¹ but in 1937 the BBC bought outside broadcast equipment, 'which made television possible from practically any point within 20 miles or so of the transmitting station'.⁴² Animals in a variety of situations were regularly featured as part of these outside broadcasts. Images from the BBC's centenary website show an elephant being paraded in the grounds of the broadcaster, alongside other zoo animals, with the elephant also eating from a tray.⁴³ Another set of images indicate the BBC filmed at a circus, in which performing animals are featured; there is a photograph of an acrobat on the back of a horse, and another of a bear reading a newspaper. Here animals are placed within a context of entertainment; the image of the eating elephant also features a male and female presenter smiling gleefully at the animal's antics. And the BBC continued such outside broadcasts for some time, with animals regularly appearing. As the organisation's 1938 *Handbook* notes, material included 'Pets' Corner at the Zoo', 'sheep-dog trials' and 'lessons in horse riding'.⁴⁴

That television turned so naturally to animals as it sought to develop its communicative strategies is no surprise given the history of Western visual culture it was embedded in, in which animals have long been representational resources. This can be seen in terms of painting, where animals have for millennia been associated with religious depictions, constituents of landscapes, and symbols for all manner of human concerns.⁴⁵ Indeed, given that the oldest known human-made images – the cave paintings of Lascaux, France, dating from about 17,000 years ago – depict animals to a far greater extent than humans, it is reasonable to argue that 'the first subject matter for painting was animal'.⁴⁶ The history of visual culture which television arises from has antecedents in photography and cinema, and these too repeatedly turned to animals. However, these latter two have an extra relevant context, given they – like television – are forms of technology which are imbued within an Enlightenment discourse of exploring, cataloguing, and explaining the world and how it works. After all, often situated as a key component of cinema's invention is the work of Eadweard Muybridge, who used photography to slice time and movement into still moments, with the intention of understanding how locomotion worked. Probably the most famous of these collections of photographs is called *The Horse in Motion* (1878), undertaken to answer the question of whether a horse in movement ever has all four feet off the ground. The technology Muybridge developed to recreate animals' movement was called a zoopraxiscope, literally 'a machine for understanding

animals' movement'.⁴⁷ That the work taking place here was not merely about depiction, but rather about explanation, situates images as tools of education, enlightenment, and rationality. Television arose out of these contexts, not just as an audio-visual technology, but also as an institution. The public service remit that underpinned the BBC from its early days was possible because of these discourses, in which visual culture was perceived to be able to be a resource that could enlighten the public in a deliberative democracy. If television was to explain the world to its (human) viewers, then the non-human – such as animals – was one of its subjects. It is no surprise, then, that from its outset the medium, as it sought to work out what made 'good' television, drew on centuries of animal representation, coupled with the Enlightenment-infused discourses of photography and cinema, and pinpointed animals as likely good fodder.

Stars and Performers

Early television's exploration of its possibilities often centred on working out who could and could not function as a 'face' of the medium, and what kinds of personalities would serve well as television 'stars'. While the BBC had been broadcasting via radio for a number of years, it was not assumed that those who had been successful on that medium would necessarily transfer easily to the new one. Dismissing the potential for many radio personalities, once critic argued, '[s]ome of them are either not good-lookers or they could never look the part. And with television the artists must definitely be good-lookers or look the part. Television stars may therefore be hard to find. They may even have to be "made"'.⁴⁸ Evident here – albeit in problematic language – is the necessity for this new kind of star to offer particular visual pleasures (even though these are assumed, rather than made explicit), indicating the extent to which television's visual nature was seen to be its primary component and attraction. The concern over stars and presenters recurred, with one critic summing up their viewing of the BBC's first week of transmission thus: 'Important lessons should be learned by the B.B.C. after the first week of official television programmes from Alexandra Palace, which ended on Saturday. I watched practically every transmission, and an acute shortage of front-rank artists was apparent'.⁴⁹

However, it was assumed early on – by both programme-makers and critics – that one group would function well in front of the camera and had the potential to be the kinds of stars seemingly required: animals. Predicting what would work on the new medium, one reviewer discussing the

experimental broadcasts of 1936 asserted that '[n]ovelty acts of all kinds, such as jugglers, conjurors, cyclists and cartoonists, but especially those featuring animals, undoubtedly will find a large place in the BBC's new television programmes'.⁵⁰ This statement responds to their pleasure in viewing 'Dixon and Pal, a popular music turn featuring a sea lion, [which] was one of the very first novelty acts to face the old television beam'.⁵¹ Similarly reporting on the 1936 experimental transmissions, another reviewer discussed animals brought into the television studio from the local zoo, in which '[a] young chimpanzee, who was the star, showed how elegantly he could drink milk from a cup'.⁵² Notable here is how in both cases animals are understood as suitable for television not because of their intrinsic animal-ness or their display of 'natural' behaviours, but precisely because they are able to 'perform' in ways that humans find unthreatening. From the outset of television, animals were called on to perform, and human audiences were offered such performances as appropriate ways for animals to be constructed for anthropocentric pleasure. Animals' stardom, then – and the assumption that animals could function as stars in this new medium – was predicated on human empowerment over animals, and a denial of animal specificity or agency. Here animals are funny, amusing, objects to be impressed by and coo over, and sit within a long history in which they have been required by humans to be 'cute'.⁵³ That this understanding of animals was embedded in television from the outset is further evidenced in a 1933 article reporting on television experimentations and the earliest forms of technology, where the photograph accompanying the piece shows the camera-person's chosen topic to televise to be 'a seal playing the saxophone at Broadcasting House'.⁵⁴

Animals remained constructed as resources useful for attracting human audiences to television for some time. Radiolympia was an annual exhibition and trade fair in the 1930s showcasing the newest kinds of radio technology to interested companies and consumers. Television was also on display, sometimes to the annoyance of radio fans who bemoaned the 'seemingly endless queue of "viewers"'.⁵⁵ For the 1937 event the BBC demonstrated the attractions of its outside broadcasting capabilities through the use of animals, with one previewer excitedly reporting: 'The afternoon programmes should be particularly interesting, because the B.B.C. will have its television outside broadcast van at the Zoo, and will each day give a twenty minutes' programme, in which animals and their keepers will be the chief actors'.⁵⁶ A year later, discussing the BBC's broadcasting, a reporter for the *New York Times* attested to animals' ability to be the kinds of stars television needed:

From eagles to horses, from butterflies to fish there are endless “actors” ideal for television, according to tests at the electric cameras in London. Programs with animal interest are labelled “excellent.”

For example, it is pointed out that telecasts afford a close view of birds unobtainable outside the zoo. Despite the fact that the cameras ignore color, butterflies have proved highly interesting on the screen because the pattern and movement of the wings provided ample recompense.⁵⁷

The quotation marks around ‘actors’ attends to an uncertainty about how at this time it is appropriate to understand what animals ‘do’ on television, and how best to categorise their contribution. But clearly animals are here being understood as useful for the medium because of their visual qualities, and how these align with the technological capabilities at the time. Television offers audiences a ‘close view’; that is, something likely impossible or difficult to achieve in everyday life. However, it also indicates the extent to which, even at this early stage, animals were categorised as objects useful for human observation, that are ‘interesting’ inasmuch as they offer particular visual qualities.

There is another reason why television may have at this early stage turned so readily to animals for its stars, and this is because of the difficulty of attracting existing (human) stars to appear on the medium. There were several reasons for this; as one reviewer in 1936 noted, ‘[s]tars of stage and screen seem unwilling to be televised for the fees offered’, and while some performers would be willing to appear on radio ‘because of the publicity obtained (...) the same inducement does not at present apply to television as the viewing audience is so small’.⁵⁸ There was thus little incentive for those who could bring their existing prestige and glamour to television to do so. When radio began ‘some professionals recoiled at the prospect of working with a BBC staff only just beginning to learn their craft’, and there remained a comparable nervousness amongst seasoned performers towards this newer medium.⁵⁹ In addition, the BBC for some time had difficulty in attracting variety stars from music-hall to appear in its programmes because of a concern that, once an act had been seen by large audiences via broadcasting, there would be little incentive for audiences to go to the theatre to see them. Broadcasting was thus seen by many in the live arena as having the potential to destroy their business, and some theatre managers and performers’ agents banned their acts from appearing.⁶⁰ Using animals largely avoids these problems. Animals were – and continue to be – a useful resource for television content, then, because they are available, they are cheap, and they can’t say ‘no’.

The Zoo and the ‘Zoo Man’

One place the BBC turned to repeatedly during this time to access animals was London Zoo. The broadcaster had done so during its experimental broadcasts, with one reviewer disgruntled that what they described as would have been an ‘attractive feature’ in which ‘[s]ix animals from the Zoo, including an alligator, a boa constrictor, and a chimpanzee, were to have been transported to Alexandra Palace to take part in the afternoon test transmission’ had been cancelled for technical reasons.⁶¹ The person bringing the animals was David Seth-Smith, one of the earliest stars of broadcasting who was one of the few to successfully manage the transition from radio to television. Introducing him to television’s audiences, a 1936 edition of the *Radio Times* states that:

David Seth-Smith is the Curator of Mammals and Birds at the London Zoological Gardens. He buys specimens, discusses questions of food with the Superintendent, and has various activities at Whipsnade.⁶² His first broadcast was in 1932, when he gave three talks on animals in captivity. Nearly three years ago he became the Zoo Man of London’s *Children’s Hour*, and he has been a regular contributor to the *Radio Times* Children’s Page ever since it began.⁶³

Seth-Smith’s contributions to *Children’s Hour* amounted by 1935 to weekly appearances, making him a very established presence and well-known voice for listeners. The variety of programmes he contributed to appears to indicate considerable skills in appealing to multiple audiences, for while he was a regular presence on children’s broadcasting, he is also lauded as a more ‘serious’ presenter, appealing to adults. The 1936 BBC Annual notes that ‘The semi-instructive entertaining talk is highly popular, and among the broadcasters in specialized subjects, who are now firmly established, were Commander Stephen King-Hall, David Seth-Smith (“The Zoo Man”), and Commander R. T. Gould (“The Star Gazer”).⁶⁴

Here radio is shown to be developing personalities associated with certain topics, offering voices of expertise that explain matters likely beyond the knowledge of most listeners. In doing so the organisation reveals the role it played – and continues to play – in discourses of education, given its public service remit. The period 1928-1936 can be seen as ‘the heyday of the

BBC's early involvement in adult education', whereby broadcasting was understood as a 'powerful new tool' for 'human progress' through the dissemination of science and scientific approaches.⁶⁵ The BBC itself made clear it understood education as a key aspect of the social and cultural contribution it could make, with a chapter of its 1935 *Radio Year-Book* titled 'Broadcast Education' stating:

It is most certain that if there is virtue and education in kindling imagination, in establishing expectations of truth, in bringing to the many contacts and influences hitherto confined to the few, in provoking among listeners a wider range of sympathies and understanding, then broadcasting has a great service to render.⁶⁶

While the BBC at this time can be seen to have formal links with educational institutions such as the Board of Education and the National Union of Teachers in order to develop curriculum-based materials it defined as 'educational', it also saw much of its output as more broadly 'educative', which it saw as something achievable more broadly across its programming.⁶⁷ It therefore took 'seriously its potential for disseminating knowledge on a scale never attempted (or deemed possible) before'.⁶⁸

There are certainly practical reasons of proximity, availability and cost which would have meant the BBC would have found it advantageous to turn to the zoo, and the Zoo Man, for educational content. But this decision also relies on and reasserts human-animal relationships centred on zoos and zoo animals. Although humans have kept animals for a variety of reasons for centuries, zoos represent a particular formulation. While they may attempt to be seen as 'not a place for the entertainment of people but for the preservation of animals', they are 'at their most basic level (...) for people and not for animals'.⁶⁹ Even though they ostensibly function merely as menageries of animals, it is their very existence, and what this indicates about (particular) humans' propensity to explore, colonise, capture, control, explain and display that is their most normalised consequence. This means that what zoos do in practice is function as institutions that create contemporary notions of the human, by collecting and displaying that which it is not, and evidencing and celebrating particular kinds of human activities. It is the case that 'animals do not need zoos; humans do'.⁷⁰ The primary ways in which humans are invited to engage with zoo animals is through looking. Zoos are constructed as places where humans can safely observe those animals, via a form of 'zooveillance' which represents normalised human power over animals, and the transformation of animals into objects to be viewed.⁷¹

Television similarly represents a significant shift in that which could and could not be viewed, and where it could be viewed from. The excitement about television was – and continues to be – the possibility of witnessing far-off events as they happen, greatly expanding the ocular knowledge of those who view it. The zoo, and the animals in it, align neatly with this possibility; indeed, zoos come out of the very same history in which technology, education, and humans' desire for knowledge and explanation become formalised in institutions such as the BBC. And the 'Zoo Man' therefore functions as a useful intermediary between these connected institutions, able to transport the human-centred understandings of animals from the zoo to the television studio, and therefore to viewing audiences. That this kind of material was assumed to be able to function well for television is evident in that while the first few months of television largely constituted one-off programmes, only four were categorised as 'serial' appearing weekly or sometimes multiple times a week.⁷² These were: *Picture Page* ('A Magazine Programme of Topical and General Interest')⁷³; *Starlight* (performances from stars of stage and screen, often featuring Hollywood couple Bebe Daniels and Ben Lyon); *London Characters* (featuring people from that city with interesting skills or stories, such as 'John Snuggs, the Troubadour' who appeared on screen 'Demonstrating Paper Tearing With his Partner Accordionist')⁷⁴, and *Friends from the Zoo*, with David Seth-Smith.

The zoo remained a key component of broadcasting for many years. In 1938 *The Tatler and Bystander* magazine devoted a whole page to a picture-based report titled 'The Zoo Goes to Alexandra Palace', stating that 'Since television has become a regular feature, one of the most interesting and popular turns has been the performance given by the inmates of the London Zoo'.⁷⁵ The images show Seth-Smith alongside various animals, including 'Lady, a collie, who has been acting as foster-mother to some eight-weeks-old tiger cubs, whose own mother would have nothing to do with them', a sloth captioned as being 'in his favourite position', and polecats looking at the camera with accompanying text asserting they are asking, 'What are you doing?'. The images and captions interpellate human readers of the magazine in powerful ways, whereby these animals are situated as having agency, personality, and consciousness, yet are simultaneously offered up as pleasurable objects for the visual consumption of readers. The interplay of animal-ness and human conceptualisations of entertainment and celebrity is indicated in the page's final image, captioned as '[t]he lovely Viennese actress Vicki Lister, who will shortly be appearing in a new play in London, recently paid a visit to the Zoo, and was seen by the camera trying to teach the new game, Katch-o, to Jackie, the star "Chimp"'. The image shows Jackie rather awkwardly being positioned to face the camera, holding the game's

equipment aloft, as Lister smiles to the camera, crouching slightly in order that the image's framing works comfortably. Here an animal is enmeshed within the decidedly human realm of promotion, enabling Lister to advertise the upcoming play via images likely to be of interest to newspapers and periodicals. There is no indication this final image has anything to do with the BBC, television, or Seth-Smith, and the fact that the magazine sees it as appropriate to include it in the feature supposedly about broadcasting indicates how zoo animals circulated in regimes of entertainment, and that there is a perceived alignment between the use of animals for promotion and their appearance on the BBC's television broadcasting.

Animals on Television

The examples above attest to the ways in which animals were drawn upon by early television in the UK, and how quickly they became a part of normal, everyday broadcasting. Evident here is the extent to which animals are drawn upon for particular characteristics, and how these are seen to align with both television's technological capabilities, and assumptions about what constitutes 'good' broadcasting, defined both aesthetically and in terms of public value. That the significance of animals is absent in most histories of the time attests to the ways in which non-humans are routinely erased from stories of the past. This is especially the case with topics such as the birth of broadcasting, which is instead usually used to tell tales of human endeavour, within discourses of 'civilisation' and 'progress'. Indeed, the reduction of animals to objects to be used for the ocular pleasure of humans is a useful way to reassert notions of human superiority, with broadcasting constructed to appeal to a notion of an interested, thoughtful, engaged viewer. As one reviewer in 1936 noted,

In my family, many of the programmes, and those we have enjoyed best, have been followed by an immediate application to books of reference for more information on the subject illustrated. To take three of many instances, a brief exhibition of living specimens from the Zoo led to an exciting chase through the encyclopædia after the history of the loris, the flying squirrel and the chimpanzee.⁷⁶

The movement from broadcasting to the encyclopaedia represents an alignment in the understanding of animals as a topic of interest to humans, and here television conforms to notions of

human-animal relations that had hitherto been encapsulated and embodied in tomes such as reference books.

The analysis offered here is, as noted, only partial, and dependent upon the resources that are available to access that history. They do indicate that television quickly found a use for particular animals in particular contexts for particular purposes, and repeatedly turned to them as it sought to explore what this thing called ‘television’ was and could be used for. Without implying simplistic notions of historical linearity or cause-and-effect, it is telling that the purposes to which contemporary broadcasting puts animals remain largely comparable to those at the medium’s origins. While a broadcaster such as the BBC is much less likely nowadays to show animal-related programming from zoos and circuses,⁷⁷ it continues to offer up animals as visual resources for human pleasure in ‘landmark’⁷⁸ natural history documentaries such as the *Planet Earth* and *Blue Planet* series,⁷⁹ and more domestic wildlife programmes such as *Springwatch* (BBC2, 2005-) and *Autumnwatch* (BBC2, 2006-2022). Yet given how central animals have been to television they remain largely absent in the histories that are written about it; indeed, in its centenary celebrations in which the BBC aimed to offer different ways of understanding its past in order to be more inclusive and less patriarchal, it can be seen that it remains wedded to a human-only notion of history and history-making.

Animals, therefore, persist as embedded within television’s content, meaning and pleasures, yet erased from how television is talked about. Yet acknowledging how entwined humans and animals are in television not only reshapes how the history being analysed here can be understood, but points to wider societal expectations for animals that inform television’s use of them and which television, in turn, normalises. That animals have routinely been expected to fulfil particular kinds of roles for humans can be shown in two final examples from the BBC’s early output. First, in October 1936, a newspaper reported that sheep dogs were to be televised at Alexandra Park as part of the BBC’s experimental broadcasts. The report states that ‘[t]hree prize-winning dogs will be gathering, driving and penning’, and that ‘[t]his will be among the most difficult feats yet attempted by television’ due to the nature of the ‘rapidly-moving dogs’.⁸⁰ Yet in order for the event to function as good television, sheep were being brought to Alexandra Palace from Southampton, for ‘London sheep could not be used for the demonstration as they were said to be “too tame”’.⁸¹ To be too ‘tame’ is to fail to function as required by humans for this technology of television, and thus those London sheep become absent in terms of television. To be televised, an animals must behave as humans, and human broadcasting, requires.

The second example concerns the BBC's very first Christmas, in 1936. Clearly keen to align itself with sets of festive traditions, television that week was awash with Christmas-themed programming, such as broadcasts of carols, a variety show called *Christmas Party*, and a performance of *Scrooge*.⁸² And animals appear here too, though in quite a different way. Firstly, on Tuesday December 22 1936 the BBC broadcast *Animals All!*, a programme which, according to that week's *Radio Times*, featured Mary the Ape, Joe Arthur and his Goose, Gilmore's White Poodle and his Cat, Tarzan, the Human Ape, and Claud Zola's Horse.⁸³ This turns out, according to the *Annual* for that year, to be 'a programme by Animal Impersonators from the Pantomimes', and a photograph shows the performer Florence Mayo alongside what is captioned as 'Felix the Horse', which is a pantomime horse constituting two humans in a costume.⁸⁴ Secondly, at 3pm on Christmas Day the BBC broadcast *The Christmas Turkey – A Demonstration of Carving*, by B.J. Hulbert. This may well be the first cookery programme on television and - like most cookery programmes - it includes animals, dead, as meat. In instructing viewers on the correct way to carve their festive bird, the BBC here brings together tradition, education, consumption, and human empowerment over animals. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that the history outlined here shows that animals have always been food for television.

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Biography

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