

English for Life in the UK: Episode 16, Mass Media

Welcome to Episode 16 of the podcast English for Life in the UK. This podcast is for intermediate level learners of English and is produced by a group of volunteer teachers from the St Augustine's centre in Halifax, Yorkshire, where we provide a range of support and advice to those in need and particularly to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

In normal times we run a course at our centre which is supported by this podcast but we are now recording these podcasts from our homes as a result of the virus lockdown. We hope it will be helpful for anyone wanting to improve their English and at the same time learn more about life in this country. You can find links to other episodes and the transcripts, that is the written version of these podcasts, for most of the episodes on our website www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk . If you google St Augustine's Centre Halifax you will find this. Here you can also find out more information about the centre and other support that is available at the moment. And if any of you can afford to make a donation to keep our work going during these difficult times that would be much appreciated.

Today's episode is brought to you by Christine, John and Mark, and concerns the mass media, in particular newspapers, television and radio.

[MUSIC 2:00 minutes]

- C: So this week's topic is mass media in the UK, and I think it would be helpful if we start by saying what mass media is. It's a strange term. Could, perhaps, one of you explain what it means?
- J: Yeah, the term mass media refers to a diverse array of technologies that reach a large audience via mass communication. So mainly when we talk about mass media we're talking about newspapers, cinema, television and radio.
- M: Communicating with large numbers of people, I would say. (Yeah)
- C: I see. And so, well let's look at those in turn. What about the newspapers in this country? What are the main newspapers in, well let's start with the UK. What are the main newspapers?
- M: Well I suppose I'd start by saying there are two main types of newspaper, I don't know whether you agree John? I would say there's the more serious newspapers that treat the news in depth, go into things in a lot of detail and have very considered, carefully thought out views about things. And then - those are sometimes called **broadsheets**, just because they used to be larger, it's not necessarily the case any more but they used to be a larger sheet of paper that they were on. And then you've got the, what are often called **tabloids**, and that refers to a smaller size, but as I say a lot of them are the same size these days, but they take a more simplistic view of things. They tend to have more pictures, shorter articles, more sensational articles we might say.
- J: Yeah, there is - that's an important differentiation - people will refer to the "quality press" wouldn't they or the "tabloid press". (That's right.) There's also a difference in the scope of the reporting so we have local, regional and national newspapers. So, in Halifax we have The Courier, which focuses on events in and around Calderdale. There are newspapers like The Yorkshire Post, or newspapers that are particular to Scotland, or Wales, or a specific part of the UK. And then there's national newspapers like The Daily Mirror or The Times, which would cover the whole of the UK and news from around the world as well. (Yes) [5 minutes]

- M: I would say - off the top of my head - the main tabloid newspapers, those ones that are - where they treat things a bit more - in a shorter and more sensational way - the ones that are the most common is The Mirror, The Daily Mirror it's called - The Sun, and The Star. And then at the other end, at the quality end, you've got The Times, The Guardian, The Telegraph. And then kind of in between you've got The Daily Mail, The Daily Express, and those are probably the main ones, have I missed any there?
- J: Yeah there's The Independent as well - is quite big (yes) that'll lean more towards the quality side of things, yeah.
- C: I've got the circulation figures in front of me here, and actually you haven't mentioned the paper with the highest circulation yet, because that's The Metro.
- M: Do you want to explain what that is, Christine?
- C: Yes, it's a free newspaper, and it's available - it's distributed mainly on public transport. It falls in between a tabloid and a broadsheet. Perhaps a tabloid but without the real sensational stuff I think.
- M: I suppose the other thing that we would say about the newspapers is that they tend to take a political position on things. So certainly you can identify some of those newspapers as being more conservative, more on the right wing of politics, so The Telegraph as a quality paper, The Daily Mail, The Express, to some extent The Sun you would say were more on the conservative side of politics. And then you've got those that take more of a liberal or left-wing view of things, so you'd have the Guardian, you'd have The Mirror, The Independent perhaps in that camp. And then you would have others that were maybe a little more in between like The Times. How would you describe, how would you categorise those, John?
- J: Yeah that it's interesting what Christine said about The Metro. I think that's actually owned by Lord Rothermere, who, the same person who owns The Daily Mail, The Mail on Sunday. So I think people kind of look at some of the papers like The Metro and see them as being independent or kind of even-handed, but the local newspapers as well, owned by the Johnson Trust. So one of the problems when we talk about the print media is that about 80-90% of our newspapers are owned by 3 or 4 billionaires who own the corporations behind the newspapers. So that is quite interesting, and as Mark rightly says the majority of our newspapers in their editorial stance would take a right wing or a conservative approach to reporting the news.
- C: Very interesting. So you mentioned other kinds of mass media - the television. So who would like to give an overview of television in this country?
- M: Well shall I start? I mean, I suppose these days there are lots and lots of television channels - hundreds of them. It does depend what type of television you've got and what access you've got to different channels, but I suppose if we come down to, certainly the original channels in the UK, there are probably four main channels that have been around quite a long time. Two of them are BBC channels, British Broadcasting Corporation, and that's BBC1 and BBC2 - so two BBC channels. That is publicly owned, and we might say a bit more about the BBC perhaps after this section. And then you've got ITV, so that's the Independent Television, and that is the big difference there is they're funded via advertising - so there are adverts on that channel. And then you have Channel 4, and Channel 4 has a degree of independence, although it gets some of its money through public funding. [10 minutes] And then you've got lots of other channels controlled by different companies, Sky for example, lots of American channels that you can access in this country as well.

C: And there are actually - I think there is now for BBC television channels. And then I think there might be a BBC children's channel as well because there's quite a number of children's television channels.

J: There's 10 national BBC television channels.

C: Are there? 10?

J: Yes and 10 national radio stations and 40 local radio stations. I've got that from the BBC website this morning so...

M: John, tell us a bit about the BBC because it's an interesting institution in this country isn't it?

J: It is- it's a public service broadcaster is the term that we'd used to describe the BBC. And it was setup, established by royal charter and is funded through the licence fee, which is paid by all UK households which have a television set. And the current licence fee for a colour television - because they still have a black and white licence which I didn't know - but if you have a colour television and you receive BBC programmes you have to pay an annual fee of £157.50. If you still have a black-and-white television it's only £53. And this raises £3.8 billion per year and that provides the bulk of the BBC's funding for all their journalists and production costs and broadcasting costs.

M: And I think I'm right in saying that the BBC has what's called a Charter where the government kind of sets out what it expects of the BBC. And it has a legal duty to provide a balanced approach (that's true) I think in terms of news the other channels as well have some responsibility to provide a degree of balance as well in television.

J: We do, I mean we saw that when we recently looked at the - when we studied the development of democracy and elections in our previous classes. Whenever we do have an election period they have to guarantee a certain amount of air space and broadcasting time to the various competing parties and things like that. And they have to be seen to be reporting the news in an even-handed and fair way. Quite often a lot of people accuse them of being biased to one side or the other in an argument, but I think generally speaking, compared to a lot of broadcast media across the world it is generally seen as being even handed, and giving a fair appraisal of the news.

M: Yeah, I think maybe that we should make clear that although it is a public service broadcast and that the government plays a role, it's very definitely is not simply a station that says what the government wants it to say. It actually has, as you say John, an important role in the democratic system in this country and has to be even handed in that and is often quite critical of the government. (Yeah) Yeah and some of it's journalism - what we might call investigative journalism, where they look into an issue in detail often is quite critical of things the government are doing. And I think maybe that's one of the things, I mean certainly there are some parts of the world where the main broadcasters are just basically in the pocket of the government and the government tell them what to say and what to broadcast. The BBC is definitely not like that.

J: Another advantage of the BBC is that unlike newspapers or commercial broadcasters, it doesn't need to rely on advertising money. So if there are any corporations or any businesses who the BBC wants to investigate it's not reliant on their money. So it can be - you know - it can be even handed and look at things critically without having to worry about taking advertising money from corporations or anything like that. Yeah, so the licence fee certainly gives it a degree of independence which is something people value about BBC.

- C: And of course its mission is to educate, inform and entertain.
- J: Yes it is, I believe that was Lord Reith, the founding father, that were one of his quotes wasn't it? (Yes) I think that's important to point out - is the huge variety at the BBC. Christine - you know - in Scotland they have a Gaelic broadcasting language channel, the regional programs are excellent as well, so the versatility and the range of the BBC across the UK, and across the world because also the world service is provided by the BBC.
- C: Yes, I was going to come onto that because I remember it from my travels a long time ago in different countries in the world, the BBC World Service, the radio station, was viewed very highly, highly regarded as reporting on what was happening across the world.
- J: It's highly valued by I know for example our, some of our ESOL students, they subscribe to the BBC Farsi channel, so they broadcast across Iran and the Farsi speaking world. There is an Arabic BBC channel etc etc, so quite often in parts of the world where their media isn't so even handed and free, a lot of people do look to the BBC to get a true picture perhaps of what's happening in the world. Actually saying that there's 10 national radio stations, the main to ones are Radio 1 and 2, which cover popular music. Radio 3 which covers more classical and world music. Radio 4, which is one of the radio stations that I listen to and a lot of our students listen to because there are a lot of documentaries, news, current affairs, spoken word programmes on Radio 4. Radio 5, again a lot of our students listen to, because that's the sports channel So all our young lads who come to our classes who support Liverpool and Manchester United they listen to Radio 5 for the football and rugby and the horse racing. And then there's Radio 6, which is a very popular channel, it gets about 2 million listeners a day and that focuses on alternative and rock music, things like that. And as I said there are 40 regional and local stations. So in our part of the world we listen to Radio Leeds. St Augustine's are going to be on Radio Leeds next week I believe, they look at things within the local community and follow local issues and local sporting events and things like that. And as I previously mentioned there is Gaelic language radio in Scotland and Welsh language radio in Wales.
- C: It really is a wide range of offerings.
- M: Yeah, and I suppose the other thing we should say is that the BBC has a very strong presence on the internet (indeed). The BBC news site is, I believe, one of the most visited in the world.
- C: And so what would you say are they good things about the media, the mass media in the UK?
- J: As we've mentioned, the BBC is probably the world's leading broadcaster. Its quality and its programming is admired throughout the world and very high level - high quality programming, very varied programming. There's no direct government censorship in the UK, so we have what is called a free press, so the government can't sensor or closed down newspapers if they are publishing things that the government don't like – like they do in some countries. And we have, as I say a very varied array of newspapers, magazines, websites and radio stations that cater to all different languages and different ideas and different political spectrums.
- C: And so on the other hand - what are the difficulties and problems because it's not just a rosy picture is it?
- J: No, well we did touch on that earlier, the newspapers that Mark mentioned - all the big newspapers – The Sun, The Times, The Sunday Times etc are all owned by

Rupert Murdoch for example. And the rest of them The Daily Mail, The Sunday Mail, The Metro, are owned by a guy called Lord Rothermere. The Independent, The Evening Standard and pretty much all of the local newspapers are owned by the Lebedev family, who are ex KGB Russian oligarchs etc so this is one of the things that people often criticize about the press - its dominated by billionaires, quite often from outside this country, who have a very specific political agenda, and this is reflected in the editorial content of their newspapers. It's also broadcasting again, another criticism is that broadcasting and journalism, that privately educated, wealthy males are over representative in these fields. And people would argue that our media doesn't always adequately represent the UK population due to this fact.

M: I think the other issue I pick up on is just how biased or how sensationalized some of the coverage is of events around the world. I think there is, there's been a tendency over the last few years perhaps for journalists to, some journalists, to try to find stories that will sell newspapers, because they they've got extreme examples of things or they are prying into the personal lives of individuals quite often. And there is some question about whether the media actually does treat people fairly and handle issues fairly, as opposed to, perhaps, trying to sell more of their products - their newspaper or their advertising - by actually making stories or programs that will attract large numbers of people but may not be as accurate or well thought through. But it's a difficult argument to make and it goes into some of the use of the phrase Fake News that you find sometimes these days, were people arguing actually that journalists are making up stories about events in a biased way or in a way that only gives one side of it. But of course the problem with fake news is it gives either side of the argument will tend to view the other side as not telling the whole truth so it's a complex issue and I think back to what John said earlier - the good thing about the media in this country by and large is that because there is so much of it you can find that range, there is that variety and within that there's some very high quality media and journalism.

C: Good, well that's very interesting. A lot for us to think about.

[Music 23:00 minutes]

Language Support

In this part of the podcast I unpick some of the more difficult language or phrases that are used in this episode. Today I've picked out 3 phrases.

The first one referred to some media, some television channels for example in other countries in other parts of the world that are **“in the pocket of the government”**. That means that the government can tell them exactly what to say and do. It usually means the government is funding that TV station and is controlling what it does. A pocket, as you probably know, is something you would find in trousers or a skirt or a shirt for keeping things in. But to be in the pocket of somebody means that that person is paying for you, that person is controlling what you do.

The second phrase we used in relation to the BBC in this country is that we said it was **even handed**. That means that it is fair, that it is balanced. That where there is an issue over which people disagree, that it will put both sides or all sides of that issue forward. It is fair, it is even handed.

And finally for today, Christine said, of the BBC, it is not just a **rosy picture**. If you say that something is a rosy picture, a rose is a flower a particularly beautiful, a lovely flower. So to paint a rosy picture of something is to make it seem lovely, beautiful, perfect almost. That

everything is fine about it. So when Christine said it is not just a rosy picture it is saying there are some problems. It's not perfect in this case.

That's all for this week, we hope you'll be able to join us next week when we are going to do a special episode about the current circumstances with the coronavirus and the lockdown that is currently happening in the United Kingdom, and indeed in many parts of the world. We hope you'll be able to join us for that but until then stay safe.